

United or Divided We Stand? Perspectives on the EU's Challenges

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Youth Participation in the EU: Empowering European Youth through Volunteering

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Introduction

This paper is of particular interest for youth empowerment through participation within the youth programmes in the European Union, as the “article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union provides for European Union action to be aimed at encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe¹”.

Webster defines “empower” as

1. give official authority or legal power to,
2. enable,
3. promote the self-actualization or influence.²

In the article the definition of youth empowerment refers mainly to "promoting the self actualization or influence.³ According to Cargo and Jennings, “youth empowerment involves a collective, democratic, and pro-social process of engagement.”⁴ There is a clear correlation between the youth participation and EU decision-making process as young people get actively involved in issues that

¹ Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on encouraging new and effective forms of participation of all young people in democratic life in Europe 2011/C 169/01,
[http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42011Y0609\(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42011Y0609(01))

² Examining "Empowerment": A How-To Guide for the Youth Development Professional,
<http://www.joe.org/joe/1998december/a1.php>

³ Examining "Empowerment": A How-To Guide for the Youth Development Professional,
<http://www.joe.org/joe/1998december/a1.php>

⁴ Matthew Morton and Paul Montgomery, Protocol for a systematic review: Youth empowerment programs for improving self-efficacy and self-esteem of adolescents, 2010, p.3.

directly affect them. Young Europeans can make an invaluable contribution to local communities and be empowered, when they participate in international youth exchanges or volunteering activities. Essentially, youth participation is related to active citizenship, empowerment and active involvement in society at local, regional, national or European levels. Moreover, empowerment, engagement and inclusiveness have been defined as the key principles supporting youth participation. Empowerment allows the youth for a personal development and gain new skills, while active engagement would help young people to address their concerns in order to make a change in a society or local community. Implementing a principle of inclusiveness would ensure an ability of participation of all young people.⁵

The examples in the article focus on the youth in the EU, it is important to note that the empowerment process is useful for children, teachers, organisations and society as well. This article is aimed at those people and organisations who work with young people.

Recognition of Volunteering Activities in the EU

Within the adoption of the White Paper on Youth (2001), the EU Member States recognized a volunteering as a key element of the EU youth policy in 2002.⁶ The European Commission White Paper (2001) was a basis to develop an Open

⁵ Youth participation and engagement explained, <http://yerp.yacvic.org.au/get-started/involve-young-people/youth-participation-and-engagement-explained>

⁶ The Power of Volunteering, Coyote magazine, no.17, Council of Europe and the EU, July 2011, p.13, http://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/1017981/1667873/coyote_17_web.pdf/b68bd393-a013-49fe-a72d-90adcc57eb12

Method Coordination (OMC) focusing on active citizenship of young people. The OMC defined four key priorities: promoting youth participation, information, voluntary activities and better knowledge and understanding of youth.⁷ In line with the White Paper, the EU proposed more mobility for young people in Europe with new forms of voluntary activities and opportunities under the European Voluntary Service (EVS).⁸ In September 2007, the Communication from the Commission entitled "Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society" highlighted the need to recognize the active involvement of young people in society, including voluntary activities such as the European Voluntary Service.⁹

Furthermore, the Resolution of the European Parliament (A6-0070/2008) on the role of volunteering in contributing to economic and social cohesion “encourages the EU Member States and regional and local authorities to recognise the value of volunteering in promoting social and economic cohesion.”¹⁰

The European Youth Pact and the White Paper on Youth - “A New Impetus for European Youth” (2001) highlight that volunteering has been recognized as a tool

⁷ Commission Staff Working Paper - Impact Assessment on Youth Actions - *accompanying the document: Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a single Education, Training, Youth and Sport Programme for the period 2014 - 2020*, SEC(2011) 1402 final, vol.3, Brussels, 23/11/2011, p.9,

<http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&t=PDF&f=ST+17188+2011+ADD+3>

⁸ Communication from the Commission to the Council on European policies concerning youth - Addressing the concerns of young people in Europe - implementing the European Youth Pact and promoting active citizenship - Communication from Mr. Figel' in association with Mr. Špidla {SEC (2005) 693}/* COM/2005/0206 final */

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52005DC0206>

⁹ European Commission, Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society, 05/09/2007, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=URISERV:c11103>

¹⁰ European Parliament resolution of 22 April 2008 on the role of volunteering in contributing to economic and social cohesion (2007/2149(INI))

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P6-TA-2008-0131&language=EN>

for the youth empowerment and especially of those that have disadvantaged background.¹¹

Finally, the European Year of Volunteering 2011 was a great occasion to raise awareness of volunteering and contribution to the society by the millions of volunteers in the EU:

“Volunteering is a core expression of civic participation and democracy, putting European values such as solidarity and non discrimination into action and contributing to the harmonious development of our societies.”¹²

Today, according to Eurobarometer recent data, one fourth of the young Europeans take part in voluntary activities. 27% of youth involved in volunteering has received formal recognition for this activity.¹³ Regarding participation of young people in organisations, it has decreased in 2014 - only 49% of respondents have participated over the last 12 months in at least one organisation.

Impact of the EU Youth Programmes on Young People

Volunteering activities through the EU youth programmes has a particular impact on young people. As a result, many of former participants of EU youth programmes were encouraged to get more active to carry out their own initiatives and new activities at local or regional levels. Furthermore, having been involved in youth activities help to foster youth's creativity and upgrade their skills. It goes

¹¹ The Power of Volunteering, Coyote magazine, no.17, Council of Europe and the EU, July 2011, p.15, http://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/1017981/1667873/coyote_17_web.pdf/b68bd393-a013-49fe-a72d-90adcc57eb12

¹² Proposal for a Council Decision on the European Year of Volunteering (2011), COM(2009) 254 final, p.2, 03/06/2009, Brussels, http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/doc828_en.pdf

¹³ New Eurobarometer Survey on young people reveals decreasing involvement in out-of-school activities http://ec.europa.eu/youth/news/2015/0422-eurobarometer_en.htm

without saying that most of innovative ideas and new projects come from the active and empowered youth.

According to the statistics, the Youth in Action (2007-2013) successfully empowered more than 130 000 young people and youth workers every year to benefit from non-formal learning activities and foster their participation in society across and beyond the EU.¹⁴ Over the four years 2007-2010 of the Programme, more than 527 000 persons (390 000 young people and 137 000 youth workers) took part in the international and local projects within the Youth in Action.¹⁵ Moreover, the Youth in Action involved around 20 000 different youth relevant promoters such as youth organisations, informal groups of young people, public bodies every year.¹⁶ Overall, since 1989, the EU youth programmes offered the opportunities for over 1.9 million young people and youth workers.¹⁷

Studies on the impact of youth programmes on youth prove that the participation in the EU youth programmes help to gain new skills and develop new attitudes. In addition, the participation helps young people to foster a self-development, and become more self-confident and independent. Regarding the further issues, volunteering and participation in youth related projects and activities allow young people to become more tolerant and open for new cultures. Organising international projects might be regarded as a unique opportunity for the youth to

¹⁴ The Impact of the European Voluntary Service, p.1,
http://ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/evs-impact_en.pdf

¹⁵ The Impact of the European Voluntary Service, p.4,
http://ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/evs-impact_en.pdf

¹⁶ The Impact of the European Voluntary Service, p.4,
http://ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/evs-impact_en.pdf

¹⁷ Commission Staff Working Paper - Impact Assessment on Youth Actions - *accompanying the document: Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a single Education, Training, Youth and Sport Programme for the period 2014 - 2020*, SEC(2011) 1402 final, vol.3, Brussels, 23/11/2011, p.9,
<http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&t=PDF&f=ST+17188+2011+ADD+3>

experience different European cultures, understand cultural differences and overcome prejudices related to any social groups, minorities, immigrants, and people with disadvantaged background.¹⁸

The good practices and the positive impact of the EU youth programmes are also illustrated by the high numbers of participants' positive feedback. Almost 95% of former participants of the Youth in Action programme agreed that their interpersonal and social competences were upgraded. Near 80% of them acknowledged that they developed a civic competence by participating in the project.¹⁹

One of the most popular youth projects are the youth exchanges. Over the years, the EU increased the funding for the youth exchanges.

Youth Exchanges in figures:

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010
Number of participants	48 721	52 605	48 886	54 146

Source: European Commission, Youth Exchanges: Mutual Understanding, 2012.

The number of participants in youth exchanges has been increasing annually as well. It means that the EU successfully manages to empower more and more young people across and beyond Europe.

Furthermore, the new Erasmus+ programme also has a great potential to contribute for youth empowerment through the mobility, as well as through joint projects on

¹⁸ Quality Impact of the Youth in Action Programme Report of the 2010 Survey, http://ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/2010-youth-impact-survey_en.pdf

¹⁹ Quality Impact of the Youth in Action Programme Report of the 2010 Survey, p.9, http://ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/2010-youth-impact-survey_en.pdf

citizenship education, volunteering and youth exchanges.²⁰ The Erasmus+ programme supports innovative youth projects and activities that promote both formal and non-learning and education at all levels and for all age groups.²¹

Finally, the EU Youth Strategy (2010-2018) highlights the importance to promote young people's participation in civil society and representative democracy.²² The EU Youth Strategy defines proposes initiatives in the areas of voluntary activities and participation.²³ It also includes an engagement in dialogue with young people, support youth organisations, promotion of participation by under-represented groups of young people, youth organisations, and other civil society organisations and new ways of "learning to participate".²⁴

European Voluntary Service - a Tool to Empower Young Europeans

One of the most well-known EU youth programmes under the Erasmus+ is the European Voluntary Service (EVS). The pilot EVS was launched in 1996 with a goal to enhance active citizenship, solidarity and mutual understanding among young people through unpaid voluntary work.²⁵ A European Voluntary Service programme was built on the successful pilot action and established in July 1998. Since 1996 and until the end of the Youth in Action programme close to 90 000

²⁰ Education Ministers adopt a declaration to tackle intolerance, discrimination and radicalisation, 17 March 2015,

<https://eu2015.lv/news/media-releases/964-education-ministers-release-declaration-to-tackle-intolerance-discrimination-and-radicalisation>

²¹ European Commission, Strategic framework – Education & Training 2020,

http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/index_en.htm

²² European Commission, European Youth: Participation in Democratic Life, Flash Eurobarometer 375, Report, May 2013, http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/reports/flash375_en.pdf

²³ EU Youth Strategy,

http://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth_strategy/index_en.htm

²⁴ European Commission, Participation in Civil Society,

http://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth_strategy/civil_society_en.htm

²⁵ European Voluntary Service – fact sheet, P.1,

http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/youth/library/documents/evs/Facts_on_EVS.pdf

young people went abroad as EVS volunteers. In 2014, the first year of the Erasmus+ programme, there were an additional 10 000. It is estimated that at the end of 2015, it can be expected that more than 100 000 young people will have been given the opportunity to volunteer abroad through EVS.²⁶

The programme is known for its effectiveness to facilitate young people's social integration and empower volunteers to contribute actively in civil society. For many volunteers the participation in a European Voluntary Service project gave an invaluable opportunity to gain professional experience and increase their further opportunities in education and employability. All project participants who took part in the study on EVS, come up with a the same conclusion that "voluntary work is a chance for intellectual development, gaining experience, learning foreign languages and cultures."²⁷ The assessment of the first programme's years was quite successful and proved the need of this type of international projects in Europe. Former EVS volunteers sum their experiences up as "you get to a higher intellectual level", "I moved from [European studies] theory to practice" or "the main reasons why many volunteers choose to participate in EVS projects is to get to know other countries."²⁸ The impact study on EVS reflects that the EU youth projects are a right instrument to empower the youth and involve them in active

²⁶ Data from the consultation with an EU official from the DG EAC, 29/11/2015, Brussels

²⁷ Dominik Mytkowski, Impact study on Action 2 (European Voluntary Service) of the YOUTH Programme in Poland, p.4,
<http://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/1017981/1668255/Mytkowski.pdf/be61c751-1890-4dac-b75c-520b20328f00>

²⁸ Dominik Mytkowski, Impact study on Action 2 (European Voluntary Service) of the YOUTH Programme in Poland, p.4,
<http://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/1017981/1668255/Mytkowski.pdf/be61c751-1890-4dac-b75c-520b20328f00>

participation.²⁹ As a result, over the years, the EU increased its budget for the EU youth programmes, including the EVS.

The non-formal education within volunteering activities is seen as an important means for empowering young people in order to upgrade their personal, social and professional skills. The EVS programme partner organisations offer a broad range of non-profit activities mainly in the social, cultural or environmental fields. Therefore, there has been seen a big potential to develop existing projects or even to create new ones. As a result, the European Voluntary Service might be seen as a complement to formal education that give an invaluable opportunity to young people to take a more active role in society at local, regional, national or European levels.

Local EVS projects are very unique in terms of providing the best opportunities for EVS volunteers' integration into the local community. The EVS provides a great potential for local communities to benefit from new initiatives and innovative ideas from EVS volunteer. The EVS projects can be very beneficial for different actors in local communities. "A successful voluntary service project should empower a young person to broaden his/her horizons as a European citizen serving a local community."³⁰

Like the other EU youth programmes, the EVS equally presented very positive impact on young people. Almost 80% of young volunteers appreciated their

²⁹ Dominik Mytkowski, Impact study on Action 2 (European Voluntary Service) of the YOUTH Programme in Poland, p.4,
<http://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/1017981/1668255/Mytkowski.pdf/be61c751-1890-4dac-b75c-520b20328f00>

³⁰ Volunteers' perception of the Impact of the European Voluntary Service in their lives. A study developed by the Structure of Operational Support for the European Voluntary Service, Brussels, September 1999, p.9,
https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-91/Study%20on%20the%20impact%20of%20EVS.pdf

increased competence in communicating in foreign languages. More than 40% of them took into consideration social and civic competences.³¹ Regarding the impact on future educational and professional perspectives, 90% of respondents were planning to engage in further education opportunities (formal, non-formal, vocational).³²

To sum up, the European Voluntary Service with a big success promotes young people's active citizenship and participation through intercultural non-formal learning activities in which empowered young volunteers are the key actors.³³ EVS is one of the important achievements of the EU that fosters a self-actualization and empowers a young people.

The European Voluntary Service will be celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2016.

Conclusion

The EU successfully set up a legal framework of the EU youth policies to implement youth programmes. Over the years, the importance and recognition of the EU youth policies have been increased as one of the key priorities. Today the

³¹ Volunteers' perception of the Impact of the European Voluntary Service in their lives. A study developed by the Structure of Operational Support for the European Voluntary Service, Brussels, September 1999, p.2,

http://ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/evs-impact_en.pdf

³² Volunteers' perception of the Impact of the European Voluntary Service in their lives. A study developed by the Structure of Operational Support for the European Voluntary Service, Brussels, September 1999, p.2,

http://ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/evs-impact_en.pdf

³³ Volunteers' perception of the Impact of the European Voluntary Service in their lives. A study developed by the Structure of Operational Support for the European Voluntary Service, Brussels, September 1999, p.11,

https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-91/Study%20on%20the%20impact%20of%20EVS.pdf

EU acknowledges the importance of youth empowerment through youth programmes.

The further development of the EU youth programmes such as Youth in Action, EVS or Erasmus allow a better implementation of the Programmes in order to enable a higher number of young people. Many youth projects and initiatives are organised by volunteers who have a great capacity to enable other peer participants through informal education:

“The positive correlation between participation in youth work and non-formal learning and achievement in formal education, one of the key results highlighted in the recent study on Youth Work in the EU.”³⁴

Investing in young people means investing into the EU’s future. Only active, empowered and skilled young Europeans can bring innovative ideas and positive changes in our society. Volunteering is the most powerful tool to release each young person’s potential.

³⁴ European Commission, European Education, Training and Youth Forum 2014, Report, Future priorities of the ET 2020 Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training and Synergies with Youth Policy, December 2014, p.6, http://ec.europa.eu/education/events/2014/doc/etyf-report_en.pdf