

SUBCOMMITTEE IV ON FLANKING AND HORIZONTAL POLICIES

EEA EFTA Comment

on the Commission proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down the legal framework of the European Solidarity Corps and amending Regulations (EU) No 1288/2013, (EU) No 1293/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1305/2013, (EU) No 1306/2013 and Decision No 1313/2013/EU

Introduction

1. The EEA EFTA States – Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway – welcome the European Commission’s proposal for a Regulation laying down the framework for a European Solidarity Corps (ESC). With their strong tradition in volunteering and their longstanding participation in the European Voluntary Service (EVS) through Erasmus+, they attach major importance to the opportunity of being granted the possibility to participate in the ESC.
2. The EEA EFTA States would like to use this Comment to explain their understanding of the framework within which such participation should take place, and to address some concerns regarding the splitting of the EVS and the future quality of Erasmus+. The EEA EFTA States would also like to draw attention to the adverse consequences of delayed incorporation of this important act into the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA Agreement).

EEA framework for participation in the ESC

3. Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway participate in the Internal Market of the European Union through the EEA Agreement. They also cooperate with the EU in a range of areas beyond the four freedoms such as education, training and youth. The Erasmus+ Programme (including the EVS) – in which all three EEA EFTA States participate – is central to this cooperation.
4. The EEA EFTA States understand that decisions on the adoption by the EEA EFTA States of EU legal acts are taken in the EEA Joint Committee once the acts have been adopted by the EU. The Joint Committee consists of representatives of both the EU and the EEA EFTA States. The legal acts are incorporated into an annex or protocol to the EEA Agreement, and their substantive provisions apply in the same way as they would for any EU Member State. The EEA EFTA States understand that their possible participation in the ESC should take place by extending the EEA framework to include cooperation in the ESC. This understanding follows from the two arguments detailed below.

5. First, the Commission proposal amends two legal acts that have already been included in Protocol 31 to the EEA Agreement – Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 on the Erasmus+ Programme and Decision No 1313/2013/EU on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism. In particular, the substantial amendments made to the Erasmus+ Regulation and the proposed redeployment of EUR 179.7 million away from the Programme to the Solidarity Corps have created an unexpected situation for the EEA EFTA States, which had negotiated participation in Erasmus+ on the premise that the EVS would form an integral part of that Programme. In accordance with Article 81(c) EEA, decisions that directly or indirectly affect programmes or other actions in which the EEA EFTA States participate must be taken in accordance with institutional provisions and decision-making procedures in the EEA Agreement. The EEA EFTA States thus have a legitimate expectation that a legal act that so radically affects a programme in which they participate must be treated within the framework of the EEA Agreement.
6. Second, the substance of the ESC clearly falls within Part VI of the EEA Agreement on cooperation outside the four freedoms. Article 78 EEA states that the Contracting Parties “shall strengthen and broaden cooperation in the framework of the Community’s activities” in fields such as the environment, education, training and youth, and social policy. With education and vocational training forming the legal basis of the proposal, and with the two main objectives being the creation of opportunities for engagement in solidarity activities for young people and the addressing of concrete, unmet societal needs, there is clearly an overlap with the areas of cooperation under the EEA Agreement.

Concerns over the splitting of the EVS and the quality of Erasmus+

7. The Commission proposal as it stands would, as of 2018, lead to a split of the EVS. While a small part of today’s EVS would remain within Erasmus+, a larger part would be redeployed to the ESC. This creates a range of concerns, which the EEA EFTA States would like to address below.
8. First, the redeployment of funds to the ESC could lead to the disappearance of the established brand name “EVS” and confusion for both the volunteers and the organisations involved. Ultimately, it could also negatively affect the results achieved over the last 20 years, where the opening up of the Youth in Action Programme towards the EEA, candidate countries and neighbouring areas has brought strength and momentum.
9. Second, the EEA EFTA States are concerned that the proposal as it stands could lead to a reduction in the quality of Erasmus+ and the EVS. The suggested Erasmus+ 2018 Work Programme and budget would lead to a substantial cut for the EVS, reducing the budget by over 50%. In addition, the EVS might lose its ability to recruit volunteers from the EU Member States, which would be focusing on the ESC instead.

Consequences of delayed incorporation into the EEA Agreement

10. Thanks to their participation in Erasmus+ and the EVS, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway have become attractive destinations over the years for young volunteers

from all over Europe, who have contributed to the activities of local NGOs, public services and communities throughout the EEA EFTA States. The EEA EFTA States are, in turn, convinced that their volunteers have done their share in inspiring and contributing to the work of their host organisations throughout Europe.

11. Decisions on the participation of the EEA EFTA States in EU legal acts of relevance to the EEA are taken in the EEA Joint Committee once they have been adopted by the EU. Such a decision with regard to the ESC should, in the opinion of the EEA EFTA States, be taken within the shortest delay in order to avoid any adverse consequences on the participation of the EEA EFTA States. Two such consequences are laid out below.
12. First, the national agencies in the EEA EFTA States have skilled and competent employees working with youth mobility and, over the years, NGOs have established a solid relationship with and knowledge of the EVS. If there is a lack of opportunity to participate in the ESC over a certain period through the delayed incorporation of this act into the EEA Agreement, these competences could be lost, which in turn could lead to less efficient implementation of the ESC once the EEA EFTA States become a part of the Programme.
13. The second obvious consequence of delayed participation is the fact that volunteers from the EEA EFTA States would suffer from the redirection of funds away from the EVS, whilst not being able to benefit from the new volunteering opportunities created by the ESC from the beginning. Letting too much time pass after the starting gun has been fired might lead to volunteering opportunities in Europe losing their popularity among potential volunteers from the EEA EFTA States.
14. EEA EFTA participation should therefore be addressed in a swift manner once the act has been adopted on the EU side, in order to avoid the loss of crucial competences built up through the EVS over the years.

Conclusion

15. Through their participation in Erasmus+ and the EVS, the EEA EFTA States have become both attractive destinations for and reliable suppliers of volunteers. The EEA EFTA States welcome the opportunity to participate in the ESC and highlight that this participation should, in their opinion, take place within the framework of the EEA Agreement. In addition, it is crucial to allow for the final act to be incorporated into the EEA Agreement swiftly, in order to avoid any adverse consequences on volunteering in the EEA EFTA States.