

Cooperation with neighbouring partner countries within the European youth programmes: recommendations for the new programmes 2021 - 2027

During the Business meeting held in Helsinki, 8 - 11 October 2019, the network of National Agencies in charge of the youth field of the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps discussed the outcomes and proposals made by the Consultative Meeting on Co-operation with Neighbouring Partner Countries, which took place in Ljubljana, 19 - 20 September 2019. The network welcomed the outcomes of the Consultative meeting and adopted the document with recommendations as follows:

KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

1. Feedback received from organisations based in the Partner regions suggests that organisations in the Partner regions have been facing some difficulties using the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme and find it increasingly difficult to find partners and financial support for projects. An analysis of data about the cooperation with the different regions has confirmed that overall, with slight variations, the **cooperation with the Partner regions has been stagnating¹**.
2. According to the perception of organisations from partner regions, **there is generally less interest among organisations in Programme countries in cooperation with neighbouring partner countries**. Nowadays, it seems that many youth organisations from EU countries do not see or understand any reason for cooperating particularly with partners from the EU neighbourhood. **Different budget limitations** for the cooperation with neighbouring regions (like KA1 25% limit, limited access to grants within the Capacity Building in the field of youth etc.) as well as bureaucratic difficulties related to visa regimes and/or residence permits further demotivate EU organisations from cooperation.
3. **The structural framework of stakeholders responsible for youth cooperation with neighbouring partner countries is rather complex**. Several EC Directorates and structures are directly involved: different units in DG Education and Culture (EAC), DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR), the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), Erasmus+ youth and European Solidarity Corps National Agencies, SALTOs etc. In the neighbouring regions, National Erasmus+ Offices as well as EU Delegations (for instance with their Youth Ambassadors initiative) play an important role. It is also worth mentioning the national ministries responsible for youth in these countries and their potential in developing youth cooperation with the EU.
4. **The fragmented approach in the European youth programmes is ineffective**. Erasmus+ youth KA1 opportunities play a key role complemented by volunteering opportunities of the European Solidarity Corps. Both opportunities are not indicating any specific aims nor priorities for cooperation with neighbouring partner countries. Possibilities within KA3 are limited and rarely used by organisations from neighbouring countries, while Strategic Partnerships are open for participation only to a very limited extent.

On the other hand, the regional “Youth Windows” under Erasmus+ KA2, Capacity building in the field of youth, offer opportunities according to very specific aims and frameworks that are also different for each region. This means that the approach taken under Capacity building is not only different but also inconsistent with the rather general approach taken by the other parts of the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes that are open for Partner countries.

¹ Working paper: Statistical analysis about cooperation with the four neighbouring partner regions (SALTO SEE and SALTO EECA, October 2018): <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/resources/npcstatistics2014-2017/>

GREAT POTENTIAL

The European youth programmes have an impact on both, the neighbouring partner regions and Programme / Participating countries. The cooperation with neighbouring partner countries contributes to the development of key issues that are of importance for young people, youth work and youth policy.

This cooperation also contributes to the development of communities and the relations between the European Union and its neighbouring countries. A focus on the neighbouring regions enhances the impact of the programmes and creates more spaces for dialogue and cooperation based on mutual needs and interests.

Experience gained since 2000 and various surveys undertaken by the regional SALTOs have shown that the European youth programmes represent important tools for youth work development in the different regions. In most of the neighbouring countries the programmes are unique tools for the organisations to experiment with non-formal learning, to build young people's and youth workers' competencies, to foster intercultural learning, to increase their level of awareness about Europe and to include youth with fewer opportunities into their work. The European Solidarity Corps' Quality Label (like the EVS accreditation before) provides opportunities for small NGOs to be recognised on an international level and to gain access to specific training. The programmes have been the engines for creating new networks, training youth workers and trainers and increasing the recognition of youth work.

At the same time, experience also indicates that the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries offers an added value and dimension for the partners based in Programme countries. According to reports from youth workers from Programme / Participating countries, partnerships and projects involving partners from neighbouring regions foster intercultural learning, awareness and respect of pluralism and diversity, critical thinking as well as a stronger interest in democratic citizenship and human rights issues. This is due to cultural differences and/or a particular interest in the political dimension of the youth cooperation, as these projects tend to address many issues that are currently discussed in our societies. Finally, an external view on the EU contributes to raising youth workers' and young people's awareness of the specificities as well as the recognition of the benefits offered by the EU.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Regarding the Programmes:

The current programmes offer various possibilities for cooperation with neighbouring partner regions without, however, providing an overall framework and aims². To give more meaning to the cooperation with neighbouring partner regions, it would be important to **establish a clear framework for this cooperation, including specific aims and objectives, and potentially also priorities, for both programmes, Erasmus and the European Solidarity Corps.**

Under the current programmes, National Agencies have rather high flexibility in spending their budget (mainly under Key Action 1 and ESC) on cooperation with neighbouring partner regions. Past programmes, however, most notably Youth in Action, have placed the cooperation with partner countries in a more specific framework (under a separate Action), which included separate objectives for this cooperation, a clear budget allocation and management.

Such a framework, which includes visible allocation of funds as well specific objectives and criteria for the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries, has the potential to increase the transparency, visibility,

² We are aware other EU frameworks for cooperation with neighbouring regions exist, such as EU4Youth or other regional Youth Windows for cooperation with specific neighbouring regions or countries.

meaning and impact of this cooperation, not only in terms of learning opportunities for young people but also in terms of needed development of youth work and youth policies in NPC.

To increase the impact of the Programmes in the neighbouring partner regions, in the new Programmes, the cooperation with these regions should be clearly financially recognised and all National Agencies should be encouraged to spend a relevant part of their budget on this cooperation. Any definition of framework or budgetary allocation should, however, provide enough flexibility to respond to National Agencies' specific situations and concerns.

Based on the experiences with the current Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme, **we see the need to bring back an identity to the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries and to foster a more effective and meaningful approach to this part of the programme, and we therefore suggest to define a minimum level of funds to be allocated on co-operation with partner countries in the future Erasmus+: Youth in Action.** This approach would also encourage all National Agencies to deal with the cooperation with partner regions in a more conscious and active way.

We support the fact that the European Solidarity Corps is generally open to all participating and partner countries without setting any financial limitations for the support of projects with partner countries. This approach should be extended also to future Erasmus +: Youth in Action.

In any case, the funds calculated for the support of projects with partner countries **should take into account only participants and partners from partner countries as is currently the case in the European Solidarity Corps, and not all participants and all partners in the projects.**

Projects with neighbouring partner countries should have an identity and relevance for the partner regions. Factors to be considered in this context include relevant/balanced participation of project partners and participants from Programme and Partner countries in a project as well as the topics addressed.

Furthermore, a defined framework (in terms of aims, budget, structure etc.) would make it possible to **establish specific success indicators** and to measure the impact and success rates of the cooperation. This could enable the countries involved, as well as the Erasmus programme as a whole, to politically capitalise their investments in international youth cooperation. The number of indicators should be limited to key but diverse aspects of the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries. Indicators should be connected to established objectives within the framework for cooperation with neighbouring partner countries and could be quantitative (i.e. based on data from E+ Link) as well as qualitative (i.e. based on final reports and/or RAY research).

The essential opportunities for cooperation offered by the current programmes should be kept after 2020 and the following features should be specifically strengthened:

Cooperation and Small Scale Partnerships should be unconditionally open for neighbouring partner countries (current restrictions should be lifted) as they represent one of the major **tools for enhancing capacity building, youth work and youth policy development** and are therefore an important tool for stimulating developments in the partner regions.

The **regional Youth Windows** should be kept to offer regular Erasmus: Youth in Action Actions at the centralised level, in order to enable beneficiaries from neighbouring partner countries to take ownership by applying directly for and coordinating projects. National Agencies and SALTOs should be able to influence the objectives and priorities defined for these Windows. Decentralisation of funds made available under the Windows and project management should be considered.

We further ask to investigate possibilities to implement local projects in neighbouring partner regions, possibly in the context of the Youth Windows, provided such an investment is well defined within the

established framework, the projects have clear link to European youth programmes and there is proper management and monitoring in place.

TCA/NET activities focusing on cooperation with neighbouring partner countries should be encouraged and follow a longer-term, strategic perspective allowing to reach in-depth results and to sustain outcomes. National Agencies should be encouraged to include them when defining their TCA/NET objectives and budgets. TCA/NET activities should be open for neighbouring partner countries wherever suitable. The development of new partnerships involving new and small organisations should be systematically supported by specific support activities within a long-term networking strategy.

Finally, we suggest to look into possibilities to step up **support for neighbouring partner countries that have shown high political interest to cooperate with the EU**, potentially in cooperation with national ministries in those countries, based on positive experiences with support structures in the different regions (such as Meda youth units, SEE Contact Points, EECA Info Centres).

2. Regarding communication between different stakeholders in supporting this cooperation, in particular National Agencies, SALTOs and the European Commission:

Different actors are involved in designing and implementing cooperation with neighbouring partner countries at different levels (different DGs - DG EAC, DG NEAR - and units in the European Commission, EACEA, National Agencies, SALTOs, Erasmus+ offices and EU Delegations in partner countries, EU4Youth support team etc.).

We ask the European Commission to provide opportunities for communication in this broader institutional framework in order to share information, build connections and create synergies, best in regional settings, as they are specific to each neighbouring partner region.

We also see the need to develop regular communication between the EACEA and National Agencies/SALTOs/European Commission in order to share information about project applications and assessments at centralised and decentralised levels, developments in the regions etc.

In particular, we see the need to strengthen the communication between National Agencies, the European Commission, SALTOs and other stakeholders in the field of youth cooperation with neighbouring partner regions. To this end, we propose to **establish regular consultative meetings focusing on cooperation with neighbouring partner countries involving the European Commission, National Agencies and SALTOs**. These meetings should be self-organised by the network of National Agencies and SALTOs and have the purpose **to review, monitor and guide the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries in view of developing a strategic approach** for this part of the programmes.

Periodically, other stakeholders should be invited to broaden the consultation process (such as organisations, experts, ministries from neighbouring partner countries, other institutions etc.). Guidelines from the consultative meetings should be implemented at different levels, in particular through SALTO work plans, TCA/NET, KMST etc.

To ensure efficient implementation of this process, **a clear mandate for the regional SALTOs is needed**. This mandate could include support by regional SALTOs to NAs in the implementation of monitoring of approved projects taking place in partner regions as well as the implementation of capacity-building activities within KMST for NA staff, including study visits in partner regions. The regional SALTOs should be sufficiently supported in order to carry out these tasks.

National Agencies should nominate (a) contact person / persons for the cooperation with neighbouring partner countries.

ANNEX

1. THE CONTEXT OF EUROMED

The Cooperation between EU and South Mediterranean countries finds its roots in the Barcelona process that kicked off the long-term strategy and cooperation among the both side of Mediterranean Sea. The **Barcelona Process** was the result of the political initiative of originally 27 partners to provide a framework for strengthened dialogue and comprehensive cooperation in the Mediterranean region. Since the enlargement of the European Union in May 2004 this process involved 25 member states of the European Union as well as 10 Mediterranean partner countries: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine Territories, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey (that afterwards became pre-accession country). The third chapter of the declaration proposed a permanent dialogue between young people from both sides of the Mediterranean Sea. This should help to foster mutual understanding among the people, to integrate young people into social and professional life, and to contribute to the process of democratization of the civil society. The Barcelona Process was re-launched in 2008 as the **Union for the Mediterranean** that promotes economic integration across 15 neighbours to the EU's south in North Africa, the Middle East and the Balkan region. It is an opportunity to make relations more operational with the new regional and sub-regional projects and with higher relevance for those living in the region. Projects address areas such as economy, environment, energy, health, migration, education and social affairs.

The South Med Region involved in Erasmus+ Programme (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Palestine, Egypt, Israel, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan) is very diverse, and, for this reason, it is very difficult to provide a unique picture from Maghreb (west) to Mashreq (east). In general, SALTO Euromed can observe, from the findings and from an internal survey, that in the last 5 years, the Euro Mediterranean cooperation has had a strong braking. The reasons are several: the unstable geopolitical context in some of the South Med countries, the economic crisis, but also the terror attacks on both sides of Mediterranean shores. All these factors contributed to create an atmosphere of insecurity and unsafety that affected the cooperation among NGOs and prevented developments of the programme. The social fragility and political instability are provoking in many South Mediterranean countries (as Jordan or Egypt) the implementation of strict legal and economical procedures for NGOs that are lowering their possibilities for international cooperation. In Jordan, for example, a recent law is asking for specific approval from Ministry of Interior before receiving any amount of money from outside the country or to declare well in advance the names of participants in any national or international gathering.

Due to the described frame of incertitude and fragility, the organizations in the South Mediterranean region (especially the new ones) are facing problems to find partners for Erasmus+ youth projects and in case of negative experiences, they normally try to find other kinds of grants available at national level by international donors. We have to acknowledge that the presence in most of the South Mediterranean countries of big donors as GIZ in Palestine or Lebanon, Oxfam in Jordan, offers options for other grants that do not imply international cooperation, therefore lower the internal risks to be checked by the security receiving foreign money.

In the last year, many organizations expressed their frustration due the difficulty to enter in relationships with reliable partners from programme countries and they are advocating for more opportunities for building partnership (this is especially needed in the new frame of the Solidarity Corps). Some organizations, especially in Mashreq, withdrew their interest to the European youth programmes when they verified that project budgets are simply not enough in their national context. There are anyway few organizations in South Med that have created solid networks in Europe and they apply for most of the calls. The newcomers are prevented to enter in the process due to lack of information and also, due to lack of support in understanding the programmes and for establishing solid partnerships. From the last Euro Med IV Evaluation, it is also clear that youth lost trust in civil society as an actor of change, and they do not trust big NGOs that seem to promote projects in small and close circles and do not really provide opportunities to young people living in rural areas or not enrolled in formal education.

In these last years, SALTO EuroMed has identified specific trends in projects and activities realised in the Euro Med framework:

- Youth Empowerment: providing tools for preventing violent radicalization, youth participation in civic life, Human Rights, environmental issues from local to worldwide impact;
- Youth Workers focus: role of youth workers, tools for improving their skills, recognition of youth work at national level;
- Partnership Building Activities: how to create partnerships and use Erasmus+ Youth and the Solidarity Corps opportunities;
- Quality Label for the Solidarity Corps as a tool to increase the quality and visibility of organisations.

Geopolitical frame:

- **Terrorist attacks:** in the last years, the terrorist attacks that happened both in the South Med region as in Europe had a negative impact on the implementation of the programme. In fact, these violent acts increased the level of fears of youth organization (as all of civil society) to mobilize and realize project in South Mediterranean area seen as dangerous and unsafe. In Tunisia, after the terrorist attacks at Hammamet, for a long time the very active NGOs were suffering from the isolations and the lack of partnerships. The EVS projects were suspended in some cases by unilateral decision of sending organization. This situation is slowly going to be normalized, but still the perception is that South Med countries are dangerous is remaining. On the other hand, the terrorist attacks in Europe have increased the difficulty in requesting visas for young participants in activities coming from South Med countries.
- **Youth Radicalization:** Radicalization is a very sensitive topic that touches both sides of the cooperation. Many young people from Programme Countries and South Med Countries (as Jordan or Tunisia) left their country for going to fight to Syria. This phenomenon increased the level of control of the national authorities about youth and about cooperation with foreign programmes. Some governments as Jordan started to be less open to international programme and hosting activities could be difficult if not with due regard and cooperation of Ministries.
- **Syrian War and Refugees Crisis:** The well-known situation in Syria and the increased number of Syrian refugees caused two issues: In Europe, the fear of new migrants that leads to restricted rules for the visa, but also more social tension in some South Med countries as Lebanon. The Syrian crisis was for sure a big moment of solidarity, but then turned out to be a reason for more rigid control of the states on civil society.
- **After Arab Spring Effect:** The Arab Spring was for sure an interesting moment of uprising for youth but brought at the same time more instability in South Med countries. Some NGOs in Programme Countries were afraid to cooperate, even if fascinated by the process. The political changes brought in some countries like Egypt were relevant for the youth, but not sustainable for a long time.

Important statistics:

- The most active Programme countries: Germany, Spain, Italy, Turkey, France.
- Other programmes available in the region and granting projects for youth work development: ENI programme, Anna Lindt Foundation (especially for projects linking culture and youth), British Council in countries such as Egypt.

2. THE CONTEXT OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

Overall, the implementation of the Programmes in the Partner countries of the WB region has been stagnating over the years. The trend goes towards more sending, rather than hosting in the countries of the region. There are only little or very moderate differences between the countries of the region regarding their participation in the Programmes, which in terms of numbers of projects and participants largely correspond to the population of the countries.

Since the start of the Berlin process in 2014 and the new Enlargement strategy of the European Union of 2018, at European level more political attention has been given again to the situation in the Western Balkan region, but this has not been transferred to Erasmus+ or the European Solidarity Corps in any noticeable way. In the frame of this renewed political attention, the focus, in particular in the youth field, has been placed on the need to invest in reconciliation, regional cooperation and promoting good neighbourly relations between the countries of the region, which are still fragile and conflictual, as a prerequisite for EU accession.

The Regional Youth Cooperation Office for the Western Balkans, an intergovernmental organisation supporting youth exchanges and other forms of cooperation between youth organisations, schools and young people of the countries of the WB-6 (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Serbia) was founded in 2016 and has since then received increasing political and financial support (from various sources including the EC). The European Commission subsequently also made reconciliation the single focus of the Western Balkans Youth Window in 2019.

Focusing on the relations between the neighbouring countries and on the question of “Where are we and what do we need as a region” has become a trend among NGOs in the region. This has developed in parallel to the focus on the relations and the situation inside the EU in those countries and, arguably, might be understood, at least partially, as a reaction to it.

Furthermore, what should be noted is the fluidity and division of the Western Balkan region in terms of structural and political frameworks (membership of countries in the EU, Erasmus+, ESC...), which has its consequences on how different Programmes are and can be used, financial support available, etc.

Relevant political frameworks are: (1) European Youth Strategy: Although it focuses on the EU, arguably, some of its objectives and priorities could be extended into cooperation with the WB Partner countries based on their perspective of future accession to the EU. (2) EU Enlargement Strategy 2018: A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf), does not relate much to youth, but lists several potential areas for support, which could be more strongly pursued in the youth work field.

A brief look at statistics

Within KA1, the budget spent on the cooperation with NPC increased by about 12% since 2014. At the same time:

- There has been a slight decrease in the overall number of projects as well as number of participants of around 10% with the WB region since 2015;
- Only 21% of the participants in projects with the WB actually came from the region;
- Only 18% of the participants in projects with the WB took part in activities implemented in a Partner country of the region;
- The general trend in different types of projects within KA1 was
 - Stable or positive for Youth Exchanges in all countries;
 - Mostly stable for Volunteering Projects overall, but with very heterogeneous trends in each country. Overall, increasingly more organisations are sending than hosting.
 - Decreasing for Mobility of Youth Workers in all countries.

Over one third of all projects with the Western Balkans have been granted by the Italian, Turkish and German National Agencies. Any change in “behaviour” of any of those National Agencies would have a dramatic effect on the cooperation with the region.

Beneficiaries’ perspective

The feedback below represents the outcomes of a survey based on the responses of 113 organisations in the WB Partner countries, including Serbia, carried out in 2019. The profile of the organisations that responded to the survey can be considered typical for the beneficiaries of the programmes in the region: Around 70% are youth organisations or NGOs working mainly with young people, over half are small organisations with 5 or less members of staff or working only with volunteers, only ¼ has over 10 members of staff working for the organisation.

Overall, the outcomes of the survey show that beneficiaries highly appreciate all the opportunities offered by the Programmes, in particular those under the Western Balkans Youth Window. To complement the above figures (relating only to KA1), beneficiaries were specifically asked to relate their responses to the decentralised and centralised levels of the Programme that are open to them.

Main benefits of Erasmus+: Youth in Action/ESC for beneficiaries

Western Balkan organisations find extrinsic benefits in Erasmus+/ESC Actions, which are transversal to them, in particular that they provide opportunities for:

- intercultural learning of young people,
- developing key competencies of young people,
- empowering young people with fewer opportunities, and
- establishing long-term international partnerships.

Relevance of the Programmes and of different Actions

Western Balkan organisations estimate that Erasmus+/ESC meet their own working priorities to a high extent (more than 75%). Organisations in all WB Partner countries also consider that the priorities of the Programmes are highly relevant for and corresponding to the national priorities of their country in the field of youth (more than 80%).

On the other hand, for the vast majority, Erasmus+/ESC funding represents less than 25% of their income. Organisations are aware that support from Erasmus+/ESC is insecure (and to a large part not depending on their input) and that they need to look for and rely on other sources of support. The limited possibilities to apply as well as high rejection rates (for reasons that are often incomprehensible for them) make it hard for organisations to feel as “owners” of their involvement in either Programme.

All the Actions of the Erasmus+ Programme are significantly relevant for Western Balkan organisations, and **the level of relevance of the different Actions is comparable. The most relevant Action for the Western Balkan organisations is Capacity Building.** Besides the benefits associated to this Action, it may meet part of their reported needs: thematic autonomy and higher funding. It is the only Erasmus+ Action to which Western Balkan organisations can apply directly. In addition, Capacity Building is homogeneously appraised by all the different categories of organisations, except for the group of organisations run by volunteers only.

There is also a clear propensity in the organisations from the Western Balkan region to think that participating in the centralised procedure provides better chances to receive funding than participating in the decentralised procedure. This is also very relevant when studying the current trends. It indicates that the Western Balkans Youth Window has not only provided a complementary source of funding for youth projects, but it has substituted, at least partially, the decentralised procedure.

Accessibility of the Programmes

Almost two thirds of the organisations that responded to the survey think that the Programme/s has/have become more accessible over the years. (However, those who faced difficulties also participated less in the survey as a whole.) By far the greatest percentage of organisations agree about two reasons for a greater accessibility of the Programme:

- an increased access to information and support measures, and
- the possibility to include more activities under one project.

The three most often listed reasons why the Programme has become less accessible are:

- It has become more difficult to find interested partners from Programme countries;
- the Programme rules and processes have become more complex and
- the projects in which the organizations were partners were not approved by the National Agencies.

How to make the Programmes more relevant and accessible?

Beneficiaries suggest that:

- The Programmes should also target different themes and/or priorities;
- There should be more funds available and a larger number of projects approved;
- The Programmes should provide greater access to potential applicants through:
 - more Actions open for the WB countries
 - more deadlines per year,
 - simplified procedures, especially for small organisations
- The Programmes should be more inclusive and accessible for young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, and grassroots youth organisations;
- There is a need to invest in information.

Support offered by SALTO SEE

The services provided by SALTO SEE are perceived as helpful or very helpful. The resources that are more frequently used are the information and publications provided and participation in support activities. The services of the Contact Points and the Volunteering related activities are less used, which is likely conditioned by the fact that they can only be accessed or demanded by specific organisations. No component of the appraisal of SALTO measures shows significant differences between the Western Balkan countries (except for the Contact Points component, which has a lower appraisal in some countries than others).

Programme promotion, relevance, visibility

A challenge that has been particularly noted by SALTO SEE and its Contact Points in the countries of the region is the increasing difficulty to promote the Programme, due to its increasing fragmentation into essentially KA1 (with a bit of KA3 and Strategic Partnerships), Capacity Building (Western Balkans Youth Window) and ESC with their different aims, ways of functioning and possibilities to engage. This fragmented nature of the Programme/s has made it increasingly more difficult to explain the opportunities they offer to potential beneficiaries and stakeholders.

3. THE CONTEXT OF EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND RUSSIAN FEDERATION

The neighbouring regions of Eastern Partnership countries and Russian Federation are very diverse in their political, social and economic development. The different levels of development have significant influence over the European Youth programmes. SALTO Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre tries to adopt their activities and initiatives to this diverse environment, having direct and individual, country by country approach.

In many regards, the fast development that could be observed in Youth in Action slowed down in Erasmus+ and the situation is in stagnation. Despite various measures taken to promote the Programme and reach new organisations / groups, usually the experienced organisations with established partnerships continue involvement. Hopefully, since the Solidarity Corps is settled now, it can give new impetus for cooperation.

New organisations in the region usually have problems to find partners for projects and after a few tries, give up (this also relates to partner search for the volunteering accreditations / quality label, as the partners needs to play not only a sending role, but also take responsibility of applying for grants). Organisations from partner countries usually hear from their counterparts in programme/participating countries that they either already have stable partners in the region, or there is no money in National Agencies to grant projects with neighbouring countries. Limited interest in cooperation with Eastern neighbouring countries is also reflected in little or no interest of National Agencies to cooperate within TCA / NET budgets. In the past, when the structure of the programme required spendings and reporting concerning the neighbouring regions (either within action 3 of Youth in Action or Eastern Partnership Youth Window at decentralised level), the interest from National Agencies to offer seminars and trainings was much higher. Practically, the enthusiasm from Youth in Action changed to "professionalisation" of a limited number of organisations in the region that usually occupy / use most of the available resources.

SALTO EECA cooperates with several groups of experts from the region, including Solidarity Corps trainers and accreditors as well as representatives of the official Info Centres. Every year since 2011 the Resource Centre organises meetings of coordinators of volunteering projects in every country of the region. All these meetings and reflections (including outcomes of the mid-term statistics of the Erasmus+ Youth available at www.salto-youth.net/EECA_stats), allow to identify following issues shaping the implementation of both European youth programmes in Eastern Partnership countries and Russia:

- Political developments in GEORGIA, UKRAINE and MOLDOVA led to association agreement with the EU that allowed for **visa free travels. This also turned into increased opportunities to travel thanks to low cost airlines as well as simplified procedures to find work or studies in the EU.** Many young people from those countries can much more easily find their ways to travel to or live in the EU and the European youth programmes are not the only window to the world anymore.
- The western orientation of the 3 mentioned countries led to **conflicts on their territories** backed up by Russia. Georgia lost control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the same happened with Transnistria in Moldova. Recently Ukraine suffered losing control over Crimea and eastern Donbass region. These conflicts generate the picture of instability and insecurity in the region. Of course the perception of the region changes according to the actual situation, but after the Georgian-Russian war in 2008 and now during the Ukrainian-Russian war since 2014 we could observe a decline in the number of youth projects and the fact that sending activities periodically prevail over the hosting ones. Even though the situation in ARMENIA has different reasons, but it results in very similar outcomes.
- Nevertheless, the western orientation of the societies in the 4 mentioned countries leads to **great development of the civil society as well as increase in non-governmental organisations, including many youth associations.** Moldova, Armenia and Georgia are relatively small countries, having in total ca. 10 million population, but partnering in 50-60% of all activities of Erasmus+ Youth with the region. Together with Ukraine (ca. 43 million population), these 4 countries are responsible for about 80% of all projects and the ratio is growing from year to year. The youth policies developed by these countries

are heavily based on European practices, especially from the Council of Europe (with the big role of the EU-CoE Youth Partnership). Quite often the practices developed by EU member states that have undergone the transformation from totalitarian, communist regimes into democratic states serves as examples for development. Erasmus+ Youth has definitely a great role in shaping the infrastructure of youth work in these countries, contributing to the budgets of many youth organisations as well as developing competences of youth workers.

- On the other end, **countries with predominantly anti-European politics**, like AZERBAIJAN, BELARUS and RUSSIA are each year implementing very limited number of projects. Of course Russia, with its large population of over 146 million people, has huge potential, but its internal situation, same as in two other countries, prevents the youth to associate and build international relations. There are only few youth organisations in Belarus and Azerbaijan and the number in Russia is significantly decreasing due to pressure from authorities. The situation in these countries makes the international youth cooperation difficult also from the technical point of view. Visa regimes (with temporary visa waiver for EU citizens in Belarus) as well as almost impossible bank transfers to organisations in the mentioned countries, restrain the programme/participating countries organisations from cooperation.
- From the perspective of organisations in Eastern Partnership countries and Russia, it seems that there is generally **less interest in cooperation with neighbouring partner countries**. We suppose, this might be actually an outcome of the previous youth programmes and general developments in the east. It seems that many youth organisations in European Union do not perceive the organisations from partner countries as something different or specific. Still, few years ago many youth workers would value the positive discrimination of the organisations from partner countries, underlying the need to support democratisation, transformation and people to people contacts. Nowadays, it seems many youth organisations from EU does not see or understand any reason to cooperate particularly with partners from outside the EU and cooperation is established on the basis of common interests. Probably it is a good sign of unifying Europe, where geography plays less and less role, but with all the restrictions mentioned above it simply leads to decrease or stagnation in youth cooperation with the region.
- **Diversity of incoherent opportunities makes it difficult to understand, promote and make use of.** Transformation of European Voluntary Service (EVS) into European Solidarity Corps brought practically no changes in the formats of cooperation and possibilities for young people from Eastern Partnership countries and Russia, but faced a significant loss in visibility and recognition of European volunteering. This also includes confusion in programme/participating countries, where many organisations still believe that partner countries are not included into the new programme. Introduction of Eastern Partnership Youth Window that is operated only at centralised level and part of a different programme EU4Youth causes another confusion. Generally, the programme is well rated and brings projects of a high value, but at the same time builds strong contrast among the elite organisations that benefit from it and small organisations that are unable to be involved.

In any case, both European youth programmes are highly assessed by experts in youth work from the region. Participants of the little survey from May 2019 rated both European youth programmes as **excellent or very good**. Both programmes are answering the needs of local youth on **average level**. The main schemes of cooperation, where youth organisations and young people from the region can benefit from are the 3 basic ones: volunteering, youth exchanges and youth worker mobilities, but Youth Window within KA2 also plays a significant role. The main programme countries organisations that cooperate with partners from Eastern Partnership countries and Russia are **Poland, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia and Italy**.

The European youth programmes are offering a wide range of youth opportunities in the region. There are also several other opportunities for grants in the youth field available across the region with the most important:

- European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe;

- national granting schemes of different EU member states (usually as international developmental aid);
- national funds within national youth programmes (but with very limited funds).

Among the **BEST developments** so far in the context of cooperation with Eastern Partnership countries and Russia within the European youth programmes the experts identify:

- introduction of volunteering accreditation / quality label and harmonised training cycle in the partner countries;
- bigger budgets and no financial limits within European Solidarity Corps;
- short term volunteering opportunities with no one-time in life limit;
- development of informational and promotional networks, such as SALTO EECA's Info Centres;
- relaunch of Eastern Partnership Youth Window, but unfortunately with no possibility to apply for the KA1 projects;
- constant work on quality in youth projects;
- direct involvement of young people as owners of their projects (projects with youth, not for youth);
- digitalisation trends in youth work.

What are the **WORST developments** our experts could identify:

- inclusion of youth non-formal education (Youth in Action programme) into the broad Erasmus+;
- re-branding of EVS into European Solidarity Corps;
- lack of coherence between National Agencies, SALTOs and the European Commission on long-term strategic development of the programmes;
- development of too many and user unfriendly digital tools to manage the projects;
- long break between 1st and 2nd Eastern Partnership Youth Window;
- managing the European youth programmes in a way that serves participant's consumer attitude;
- growing exclusivity / elitism of the European youth programmes.

(end)