

Recognising and promoting cross-border voluntary activities in the EU

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The European Parliament adopted by 603 votes to 23, with 63 abstentions, a resolution in response to the Commission communication entitled “Recognising and promoting cross-border voluntary activities in the EU”.

The resolution recalls that ‘volunteering’ means activities which are undertaken voluntarily on the basis of a person’s own free choice and motivation, and **without concern for financial gain and for a non-profit cause**. Given that volunteering is an informal learning experience suitable for persons of all ages, Members invite the **Member States, who do not have a clear or adequate legal framework for volunteers, to put one in place**.

Member States are also called upon to:

- draw up national strategies to promote the growth of volunteering activities, including the recognition of the rights of volunteers,
- ensure quality, protection and equal access for everyone;
- devote more attention to this sector in their future policy-making, programmes and financing;
- pay particular attention to disadvantaged young people and young people with fewer opportunities (especially people with disabilities) ;
- make volunteering accessible to immigrants and minorities as an essential element in encouraging their integration and social inclusion ;
- ensure that volunteering becomes more widely recognised and less hampered by barriers of all kinds.

Recalling that volunteering reduces the risk of social exclusion, Parliament considers it essential to attract all social groups to such activities, especially people with disabilities.

Volunteers and the European Neighbourhood Policy: Parliament notes the benefits arising from cooperation between volunteers from the European Union’s Member States and third countries and points out that such cooperation is particularly important in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy. It calls on the Council and the Commission to continue to make progress in the negotiations towards easier visa regimes for non-EU citizens wishing to enter the EU for the purpose of volunteering, provided they fulfil the criteria to perform volunteering activities and to implement the provisions of [Council Directive 2004/114/EC](#) on the conditions of admission of third-country nationals for the purposes of studies. **The purpose would be to simplify the procedures for the granting of visas for those wishing to undertake voluntary activities as part of the EU neighbourhood policy** (as opposed to abolishing them as suggested by the committee responsible). Parliament encourages the Member States to recognise the benefits of participating in cross-border volunteer activities to provide citizens with new skills.

Volunteering and participative exchange: Parliament notes that volunteering involves citizens in economically, socially and ecologically sustainable local and cross-border development and can often **ensure the swift provision of aid when disasters occur**. It also plays a role in fostering solidarity, active citizenship and inter-cultural learning, providing volunteers with the opportunity to learn the language and culture of the country in which they work, thereby strengthening social cohesion and participative democracy. Parliament notes that **volunteering increases people's tolerance**, creates human and social

capital and plays a vital role in the empowerment of socially excluded groups. It emphasises the need to provide access to as wide a range of volunteering opportunities as possible and encourages the Commission to make European programmes more inclusive and open to all age groups.

Enhance the quality of voluntary action: Parliament asks the Commission to strengthen the capacity of organizations and volunteer centers to provide information and training. The Commission should publish a report identifying barriers to cross-border volunteering, such as age limits in the insurance and, where appropriate, legislative proposals.

To enhance the quality of volunteer work, the resolution stresses the following:

- the need to ensure that high-quality volunteering is developed, both nationally and at cross-border level, through a structured framework of comprehensive information and **appropriate training** for volunteers;
- promoting training programmes and develop guides and materials on the management of volunteers and schemes to motivate people to engage in cross-border volunteering activities;
- **promoting the use of volunteer time as matching funding for European projects**, particularly in cross-border initiatives;
- developing international volunteering initiatives and programmes that extend beyond EU borders and draws attention to the successful examples and practices already implemented in certain Member States for this purpose;
- promoting training programmes and develop guides and materials on the management of volunteers and schemes to motivate people to engage in cross-border volunteering activities;
- improving information networks in order to make everyone aware of volunteering opportunities, tackle barriers to participation, enhance access to volunteering best practice and promote cooperation across borders;
- encouraging the Member States to adopt the use of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work and the United Nations Handbook on Non-Profit Organisations with a view to making available comparable statistics and data on the subject.

Parliament proposes that a centralised EU portal be created, in cooperation with organisations and associations working in this sector and in particular their European networks, to include a best practice volunteer resources bank and a section on cross-border volunteering, with information on the programmes available, their costs and the conditions for participation.

Volunteering and senior citizens: Members note that older people who engage in volunteering find it easier to make the transition from work to retirement. It stresses the importance of providing information, adequate funding and support for senior citizens wishing to volunteer in another EU country. They note that volunteering contributes to integration, social inclusion and social innovation, and can also contribute to poverty reduction, thus helping to achieve economic and social cohesion. Members point out that volunteering also promotes solidarity between generations by encouraging cooperation between young people and senior citizens, and that it contributes to **active ageing**. Members call on the Commission and the Member States to give a high profile to volunteering in sport, particularly at the grassroots level, to acknowledge the important role played by volunteer-led sporting organisations in strengthening culture, etc.

Recognition of volunteering: Parliament supports the Commission's proposal to establish a '**European Skills Passport**', so that the skills acquired through volunteering may be officially recognised, both for professional and learning purposes. For Members, this Passport should not be a series of new separate certificates but, rather, a comprehensive document listing all practical experience, training and soft and vocational skills acquired through life-long learning, including those gained through volunteering, if desired by the volunteer. The resolution suggests therefore including the skills acquired through volunteering in the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) for students.

The Commission is called upon to:

- consider developing a similar calculation and recognition system for skills acquired through volunteering for adults who are not at university;
- make the European Skills Passport a reality as soon as possible;
- address in the 'European Skills Passport' the need for a cohesive and transferable approach to proper screening and vetting of volunteers who work with children and/or vulnerable members of society.

Member States are urged to:

- develop mechanisms for **validating non-formal and formal learning outcomes**, which will improve the value and transferability of the skills acquired outside formal education, facilitating in particular the acquisition of additional ECTS credits at university thanks to volunteering, and a standardised mechanism for recognising the skills acquired through volunteering in the ECTS;
- explore ways of **eliminating the tax obstacles** that volunteers encounter when participating in cross-border activities;
- support employee volunteering and employer-supported volunteering also in the context of corporate social responsibility.

The resolution proposes that a training and **qualifications framework for volunteer coaches** be established and incorporated into the European Qualifications Framework in order to improve the mobility of volunteer coaches and enhance the transferability of skills and competences developed through volunteering.

European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps: the resolution supports the Commission's proposal to create a 'European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps', which will increase the participation of volunteers in solidarity actions in the context of the EU's humanitarian aid policy. It calls on the Commission also to take existing structures into consideration and actively to incorporate these from the outset when establishing this voluntary corps and emphasises that the duplication of organisations in the area of civil protection is not desirable and should be avoided.

Removing technical barriers: Members urge the national, regional and local authorities and the EU to ensure adequate and stable funding and to simplify administrative procedures, including tax incentives, for the organisations involved in volunteering work, including all the relevant associations and networks, particularly for small associations with limited resources, with a view to enhancing their roles, activities and achievements for the benefit of society. They call, therefore, for the **concept of grants to associations to be clarified so that association funding is not confused with state aid**, which could hinder competition in the financial sector. The Commission is called upon to propose a mechanism to allow Member States wishing to strengthen civil society to exempt from VAT all or most of the activities and transactions carried out by voluntary non-profit-making organisations. At least the smaller non-profit-making organisations should be covered by such a mechanism.

Member States are called upon to:

- ensure legal certainty for volunteers, not least with regard to insurance issues;
- review their cross-border tax and social security arrangements in connection with cross-border volunteering, so as to ensure that they do not create additional barriers to such activity and that cross-border volunteers are able to receive the social security benefits to which they are entitled under Regulation (EC) No 2004/883;

- ensure that volunteering **must not be an alternative to or a substitute for regular, paid work** and must not, under any circumstances, constitute a reason for governments failing to fulfil their social obligations;
- promote and implement national schemes for cross-border volunteering in order to contribute to its development across the EU.

European financing for voluntary work: Parliament calls on the Commission to ensure that funding is guaranteed for volunteering projects and for the structures organised by voluntary activities in the EU.

It also calls on the Commission to:

- ensure that information on available funding and the relevant programmes is freely available to volunteer-led projects;
- ensure that adequate funding is provided for programmes in various policy areas to support cross-border volunteering activities, for particular attention to be paid to financial support for volunteering infrastructure.

Members ask the Commission to **allocate adequate resources to the creation of a European Volunteer Centre Development Fund** aimed at developing infrastructure to support volunteering.

European Statute: Members call on the Commission to propose a European Statute for Associations to give them the legal framework within which to operate, reduce the administrative costs associated with cross-border volunteering activities and establish voluntary structures at a European level which encourage mobility of volunteers in the EU. They propose that a cross-border network of voluntary organisations in the various Member States should be set up by coordinating the existing voluntary organisations and call for the promotion of volunteer work in EU policies.

Voluntary work and the European Year: Parliament recommends that the Commission and the Member States maintain a continuity between 2011 and future years by strongly integrating the volunteering dimension, which is an expression of active citizenship that promotes social integration, including that of older citizens, within both the European Year for Active Ageing (2012) and the proposed European Year of Citizens (2013).