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Research Report

RAY-SOC

2022 – 2023

RESEARCH-BASED ANALYSIS OF THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS

Special Programmatic Study

The *European Solidarity Corps* joined the European youth programmes during the 2014–2020 programme generation. It is being continued under the same name in the 2021–2027 programme generation. The RAY Network, short for *Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of European Youth Programmes*, carried by the National Agencies of the European youth programmes and their research partners in more than 30 countries*, has conducted monitoring and analysis surveys of the European youth programmes since 2008, and will continue to do so in the years to come.

The regular monitoring of the *European Solidarity Corps* will commence in 2023 and has been preceded by two programmatic studies (Akarçeşme & Fennes, 2020; Strecker & Eick, 2023). This report contains the key findings of the second programmatic study.

The research work underpinning this report was designed and implemented by the Generation and Educational Science Institute, based in Vienna, and Youth Policy Labs, based in Berlin, in cooperation with the RAY Network.

This study was co-funded within the Transnational Networking Activities (NET) of the European Solidarity Corps. This report reflects the views only of its authors, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use, which may be made of the information contained therein.

* 31 countries in 2023: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey.

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Where available, national research reports can be requested from the respective National Agencies and their research partners

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EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS

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Research Report

RAY-SOC

Research-based analysis of the European Solidarity Corps

Special Programmatic Study

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INTRODUCTION

1.1   Context of the Study

The European Solidarity Corps was first announced as a new EU Youth Programme in 2016 and funded its first beneficiaries in the years 2018–2019. In 2021, a second programme generation was introduced, with an operating time of seven years until 2027. We, the RAY-Network (Research-based analysis of European Youth Programmes) [1], aim to contribute to quality assurance and quality development in the implementation of the European Youth Programmes and have a long history of conducting monitoring surveys on the Erasmus+/ Youth programme (RAY-MON). We conducted an initial study for the Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of the European Solidarity Corps in the context of a consultancy process commissioned by the European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre (Akarçeşme & Fennes, 2020). As the monitoring of the European Solidarity Corps through surveys could not start before 2023, we decided to implement a second thematic study on the European Solidarity Corps to gain earlier insights on the programme.

Thus, we conducted a special programmatic study on the European Solidarity Corps Programme in 2022–2023. This study aims to explore the implementation and development of the European Solidarity Corps from 2018 to 2022, including socio-political changes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine, and to contribute to the improvement of the programme and its further implementation. Our focus is on the Solidarity Activities strand, including Volunteering Projects (team and individual volunteering) and Solidarity Projects; the strand and actions that National Agencies are in charge of implementing. Other strands and actions are mainly referred to for context.

Our report offers findings from 13 stakeholder interviews[2], intertwined with insights from desk research and previously published literature snapshots (Strecker & Pitschmann, 2022a and b). Interviewed stakeholders include representatives from National Agencies (6), umbrella and beneficiary organisations (5) and support structures (2). The interviews focussed on main characteristics and assets of the programme, challenges, the programme's development over time, and future perspectives. In particular, they aimed to identify needs and potential for improvements, facilitating the development of recommendations for future revisions and better support.

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1   https://www.researchyouth.net

2   Please note quotes and extracts from interviews have been edited to improve readability.

1.2   Research Partners

The research partners of this project are the 32 RAY Network partners with responsibility for the European Solidarity Corps: Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-France, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey. This thematic study was, however, conducted at transnational level, and gathers data from only a selection of the partner countries.

1.3   Aim and objectives

1.3.1   Overall aim of the research project

Our research project aims to explore the implementation and impact of the European Solidarity Corps during the years 2018–2022 and to contribute to the improvement of the programme and its further implementation.

1.3.2   Key objectives of the research project

The key objectives of this research project are to explore:
● The main values and characteristics of the programme for programme stakeholders, such as National Agencies, as well as umbrella and beneficiary organisations and support structures promoting the programme;
● The structural composition of the programme, including assets and key challenges for programme stakeholders, such as National Agencies, as well as umbrella and beneficiary organisations and support structures promoting the programme;
● The conceptual composition of the programme, including assets and key challenges for programme stakeholders, such as National Agencies, as well as umbrella and beneficiary organisations and support structures promoting the programme;
● The implementation of the programme, including assets and key challenges for programme stakeholders, such as National Agencies, as well as umbrella and beneficiary organisations and support structures promoting the programme;

- The development of the programme over time, including content developments as well as socio-political developments influencing the programme implementation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine;
- The responses developed to the challenges arising from these socio-political developments, and the cooperation between National Agencies and beneficiaries in this regard;
- The inclusion of Youth With Fewer Opportunities (YWFO) in volunteering activities and Solidarity Projects, including assets and key challenges of the programme.

1.4 Main research questions

1.4.1 Core research questions of the project

The core research questions of the project are:
- How have programme stakeholders, including National Agencies, programme beneficiaries and support structures, experienced the content and implementation of the programme during the past five years?
- What are the effects of socio-political developments on the implementation and content of the programme and its key stakeholders, and what measures have been developed to respond to these effects?
- Which recommendations should be implemented to strengthen the future implementation and further development of the European Solidarity Corps?

1.4.2 Underpinning research questions of the project

The underpinning research questions of the project are:
- What are the main values and characteristics of the programme for programme stakeholders?
- What challenges and needs have stakeholders been facing during their engagement in the programme?
- What assets, challenges and needs of the programme do stakeholders perceive when it comes to inclusion of Youth With Fewer Opportunities (YWFO)?
- How have programme stakeholders experienced the programme on a structural, conceptual and implementation level since its introduction in 2018?

- What assets, challenges and needs are perceived when it comes to communication among the programme stakeholders?
- What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and other socio-political developments on the programme's implementation and contents and what implications do these effects have for the future of the programme?
- Which responses were developed to address the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and other socio-political developments, and how did they shape and/or change the cooperation between National Agencies and beneficiaries?
- What are suggestions for improvements by programme stakeholders to strengthen the programme's implementation going forward?

1.5 Research design, instruments and implementation

In order to answer the abovementioned research questions, we have conducted semi-structured expert interviews with stakeholders (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). We developed respective guidelines in relation to the research questions, thereby setting the agenda but still guaranteeing the interviewees the opportunity to enfold their own views and opinions on the research topics after their own fashion.

Overall, we interviewed 13 stakeholders involved in the European Solidarity Corps, comprising the following: six representatives from National Agencies, five umbrella and beneficiary organisations, and two supporting structures. Findings from the interviews are intertwined with insights from literature reviews and desk research, and the perspectives of other stakeholders (e. g. the European Commission, the Council of Europe, further umbrella and beneficiary organisations) are quoted from publicly available documents.
The interviews were conducted via video call. In agreement with the interviewees, we recorded the interviews and summarised them in respect to the research questions. The written summaries served as the main source for analysis, whereas we used the oral recordings as secondary material for confirmation and extraction of direct quotes.
We analysed the expert interviews using an inductive approach, meaning that categories and variables relevant to the research questions were developed along the themes and issues brought up by the interviewees themselves. Together with

the open-mindedness of the interview process, this analytical approach ensures the main principle of openness, which is one quality criteria of qualitative research (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2014, p. 21ff.).

Qualitative research aims to shed light on the complexity of phenomena. To use a metaphor, applying qualitative research is drilling deep into the ground to find out what is underneath the surface instead of sketching a map of the landscape. For instance, if our research report discusses the impression of stakeholders that young people's interest in volunteerism decreased after the pandemic, the qualitative approach of this study asks which variables might have influenced their interest in volunteering and thus led to a decrease, instead of providing information on the development of raw application numbers pre- and post-pandemic. Against the background of this scientific angle, the scope of this study is explorative, aiming to share insights on how different stakeholders related to the European Solidarity Corps perceive and thus act towards the programme in their respective context. A quantitative research approach towards the programme is developed through surveys with project leaders and participants. These surveys will be applied to the European Solidarity Corps for the first time in 2023 (RAY-SOC monitoring surveys).

1.6   Structure of the research report

The report is structured according to the key objectives of the project. The main topics are "Assets and main features of the European Solidarity Corps", "Challenges and needs", "Youth With Fewer Opportunities (YWFO)" and "Development over time and future perspectives". Of course, these differentiations are rather analytical and in reality do overlap – for example, needs of the different stakeholders are strongly linked to YWFO, and what is viewed as an asset from one perspective can easily be seen as a challenge from another. Respectively, the different sections reference each other when there are connections and complexities relevant to gain an understanding of the European Solidarity Corp's big picture.

After the presentation of the research findings, we summarise key observations in the conclusion and deduce recommendations for programme improvement.

2

ASSETS AND MAIN FEATURES OF THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS

"It's the only programme, it's really the only programme in Europe, which funds the costs for everyone"

— (support structure)

The European Solidarity Corps in its current curriculum pursues the general objective to "enhance the engagement of young people and organisations in accessible and high-quality solidarity activities, primarily volunteering, as a means to strengthen cohesion, solidarity, democracy, European identity and active citizenship in the Union and beyond, addressing societal and humanitarian challenges on the ground, with a particular focus on the promotion of sustainable development, social inclusion and equal opportunities." (European Commission 2023, p. 6). Beyond the general objective, the European Solidarity Corps differentiates a more specific objective that puts young people, especially young people with fewer opportunities, in the driver's seat by aiming to provide them with "easily accessible opportunities for engagement in solidarity activities that induce positive societal changes in the Union and beyond, while improving and properly validating their competences, as well as facilitating their continuous engagement as active citizens". With its emphasis on young people expressing solidarity by volunteering, the programme is consequentially embedded in the EU Youth Strategy as well as in the EU policy framework for volunteering. In order to achieve its objectives, the European Solidarity Corps currently provides four actions targeting young people between 18 and 35 which can be applied for: Volunteering projects, Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas, Solidarity Projects and the Humanitarian Aid Volunteering projects. Additionally, a wide range of quality and support measures accompany these activities, aiming to ensure a high level of quality (ibid., p. 6ff.).

Against the backdrop of these descriptions offered by the European Commission, in this chapter we ask how relevant stakeholders engaged in the European Solidarity Corps perceive the programme. What understanding of the European Solidarity Corps did organisations gain by experiencing its implementation over the course of the last years? How does their perspective on the main and distinctive features of the programme correspond to the European Commission's goals and intentions as described in the programme guide?

This section is mainly structured according to the relevance systems of the interviewed stakeholders – meaning that characteristics and assets described in this section are extracted from and prepared according to the logic of the interviews. In doing so, we do not primarily assess the main characteristics as they are outlined in the programme guide. There are, of course, overlaps, when the interviewees highlight some of the programme guides' characteristics.

2.1 Juggling with words: Solidarity and the 'European Solidarity Corps'

Since the European Solidarity Corps was first announced in 2016 by former European Commission President Juncker, a great deal of discussion evolved around the understanding and definition of solidarity within the youth work field in Europe. As the RAY-research on the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps during its first years states, "it has been a significant challenge so far to develop a common understanding about the concept of solidarity". As a consequence, "many organisations had difficulties to identify and describe the solidarity aspect of their projects in their applications even though their project ideas were fit for the programme." (Akarçeşme & Fennes, 2020, p. 21). Other research has confirmed this confusion, showing how national definitions in Member States lack "any cross-border dimension of solidarity activities" (European Commission, 2020, p. 39) and in some cases even directly contradict or stand in conflict to the programme's official definition of solidarity.

Several interviewees reflect on how the name "European Solidarity Corps" continues to provoke suspicion among people detached from the programme, in particular because of the military connotation of the term 'corps'. An interviewee from a supporting structure considers the offer of trainings and material around the meanings of solidarity the main content work they have to do and that will continue in the future. In particular, new National Agency staff needs to engage with the concept to be able to work with it and detect it in applications less apt in naming their solidarity component. In comparison to the initial pleas to change the name also recalled in these interviews, most stakeholders seem to have made their peace with the name. One acknowledges that changing it now would be counterproductive, as the European Solidarity Corps has already become an established brand.

Complementary to the organisations' struggle to link the concept of solidarity to their work, some National Agencies were facing similar issues when promoting the European Solidarity Corps within their national youth work field. In some national contexts, the trouble explaining the idea of solidarity in the programme arose because the term already implied a specific connotation that does not resemble the spirit of the European Solidarity Corps. For example, one National Agency talked about the proximity of solidarity to religion in their national context, which in combination with the term 'corps' gave the impression of raising a religious army. As a result, some National Agencies simply settled for promoting the European Solidarity Corps as a European volunteering programme, also because it was seen as more comprehensible to the uninformed recipient.

Against such national realities, it is not surprising that efforts on the European level to clarify the solidarity concept did not seem to get much recognition at first. For example, the European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre commissioned the '4thoughts' project: a study to gather insights into the various understandings of the term solidarity among practitioners, politicians, researchers and young people in order to establish a shared concept within the field of youth work in Europe (Baclija Knoch & Nicodemi, 2020). When asking the interviewees about their understanding of solidarity in our current research, they rarely referred to the project results explicitly; if they did, they considered it as too incomprehensible for practitioners.

Only one National Agency staff mentions using an infograph from the SALTO 4Thought document (Baclija Knoch & Nicodemi, 2020) for explaining the concept of solidarity, but agrees with the other National Agency interviewees that this document was too dense and far-removed from young people's and organisations' realities to be really useful. Nevertheless, research on European Solidarity Corps' Networking Activities (NET) showed that beneficiary organisations constantly implemented network activities around the topics of the concept of solidarity from 2020–2022, indicating a joint effort to develop a shared understanding and underlining its importance to the field of practice (see Kurki, 2023, p. 17).

This concept is further supported by the general notion of solidarity for the interviewed stakeholders, which remained positive. The personal definition offered by the respondents often linked to '4thoughts' cornerstones and supporting concepts like empathy, active citizenship and strengthening communities, showing their overall positive attitude towards the solidarity idea. To some, the idea of solidarity within the programme was clarified over time. To others, the existing ambiguity of the concept was no longer considered an obstacle but an asset, as it does not narrow down the thematic focus and allows young people to introduce topics they care for in the projects. After all, for some interviewees

the emphasis on solidarity even seems to be the striking aspect of the European Solidarity Corps and a characteristic that distinguishes it from other programmes on European level.

2.2   Connotations of solidarity: the European idea and solidarity

Highlighting solidarity is not only valued because of the positive take on the idea itself. Instead, promotion of solidarity is partly seen as an asset because it is rooted in the very European idea. The European Solidarity Corps speaks to the strong interconnection of the European Union and the concept of solidarity by enabling young people to experience this shared sense of solidarity:

> *In the ideal of the European union, how it was born to end the wars by creating stronger links between people and understanding and exchanges. [...] the ideal created a programme like this where solidarity is centred especially for young people like to bring to grow a new generation that has this ideal.*
> *(beneficiary/umbrella organisation)*

The perspective on solidarity as a European value is also found in the programme guide of the European Solidarity Corps (European Commission, 2023, p. 4). By comparing the rationale of the programme with the perception of the interviewees, it can be concluded that the cause of the European Solidarity Corps is transferred successfully to the stakeholders in the field of youth work and volunteering in Europe. This confirms the findings of the study on the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps during its first year, which already stated in 2020, that "[m]any stakeholders, especially the National Agencies, welcome the programme's explicit focus on solidarity, in particular in the face of current political developments (...) putting solidarity as a European value in the very centre of the programme" (Akarçeşme & Fennes, 2020, p. 19).

2.3   The European Solidarity Corps: an inclusive programme

One of the main characteristics of the programme identified by the interviewed stakeholders is its inclusive dimension, which has also been one of the programme priorities since 2021. The European Solidarity Corps establishes a structural framework that aims explicitly to reach out to Youth With Fewer Opportunities (YWFO). This is

well regarded among the stakeholders of the programme, as they highlight several times in the interviews. Another indicator "that inclusion is a firm part of the programme" (Kurki, 2023, p. 18) are the stable numbers of network activities hosted around the topic of inclusion in 2020–2022. The stakeholders identify different target groups for whom the corps can be especially beneficial: firstly, the programme is more accessible than comparable national volunteering programmes to young people who are not fluent in the official national language but in English. Secondly, beneficiary organisations report a high outcome for participants with disabilities on a personal development and occupational level. Thirdly, a unique characteristic of the programme is the opportunity to volunteer free of charge that enables young people with less economic resources to participate.

> *I think one of the best features and why I really like the programme and I would even defend it if it's super bureaucratic is it's the only programme, it's really the only programme in Europe which funds the costs for everyone. You don't need to be part of an organisation, you don't need to have a certain education or skills or competences to be part of it. And I think that's really unique in the programme. It's really open for everyone, if you overcome these bureaucratical borders or if you find someone to help you to overcome it. But I think that's really unique.*
> *(support structure)*

As the quote indicates, the structural framework to inclusion within the European Solidarity Corps is highly valued, whereas its implementation seems to present some obstacles. More insight into the challenge of inclusion is provided below (see Youth With Fewer Opportunities). As an interim conclusion, it can be stated that the inclusive approach is both a primary characteristic, but also a significant challenge, of the European Solidarity Corps. The upcoming monitoring survey of the European Solidarity Corps will give further insights into the barriers encountered by programme participants.

2.4   The European Solidarity Corps: a programme of learning or community impact?

The strong emphasis on the solidarity aspect of the programme begs the question: which goal is served by pursuing solidarity within the European Solidarity Corps? Is it about the impact that enacting solidarity has for the communities

in which the volunteering is taking place? Or is it rather about the volunteers to whom embracing solidarity can be an experience for learning and personal development? In the programme guide, the European Commission makes an argument for both goals when it defines 'Volunteering in the Corps' as its first important characteristic:

66 *As one of the most visible manifestation [sic!] of solidarity, volunteering provides young people with the opportunity to take part in activities that address identified needs within local communities and contribute to overcoming important societal challenges on the ground."*

66 *Volunteering also enables young people to acquire useful experience, skills and competences for their personal, educational, social, cultural, civic and professional development, thereby improving their employability and active citizenship. Activities supported under volunteering constitute a rich experience in a non-formal and informal learning context, which enhances young people's competences."*
(European Commission, 2023, p. 8).

But no matter how clearly both effects for the community and the volunteers are highlighted in the programme guide, the reception among the stakeholders remains ambiguous and at times even controversial. The perception varies between a very strong emphasis on the social impact that is connected to a critique on volunteercenteredness in the programmes on the one hand, and an understanding of the European Solidarity Corps as a learning opportunity for young people without much consideration of its contribution to society on the other. Interestingly, in most interviews the perception of the European Solidarity Corp is framed in comparison to its predecessor, the European Voluntary Service. Two cases exemplify the aforementioned positions:

One interviewee from a beneficiary/umbrella organisation reports that they were not so engaged in the European Voluntary Service, because it did not align with their philosophy and policy around volunteering:

66 *The European Voluntary Service was a learning programme. And we don't believe and we didn't believe that volunteering should be a learning programme. Volunteering is not mainly about the person who is volunteering, it is mainly about the cause, the public interest, the common good that the volunteer is contributing to."*
(beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

Therefore, the organisation experienced the shift from the European Voluntary Service to the European Solidarity Corps as a welcome change that was disruptive in its programmatic agenda-setting. Consequentially, the organisation increased their engagement since the implementation of the new programmes, participating not only in the individual volunteering activities, but also in the team volunteering strand.

In contrast, an interviewee from another beneficiary/umbrella organisation does not notice much difference between the European Voluntary Service and its successor programme at all. Having been an EVS volunteer, this interviewee sees little structural differences and highlights the continuity in the volunteer experience: "to me as a volunteer I think the experience is the same. [...] between the EVS and ESC yes." (beneficiary/ umbrella organisation)[3] In line with this observation, the interviewee highlights the effects of participation on the volunteers and neglects the impact of the volunteering interventions on communities. These learning effects, however, are still shaped by experiencing and enacting solidarity and are therefore promoting solidarity in society, as several interviewees argue.

Against this scope, the Quality Label application is being criticised by some interviewees for focussing too much on the learning impact the volunteering has on the volunteers, saying that some organisations struggle to describe this impact and therefore to take part in the programme (see Promotion).

As already mentioned, the general objective of the European Solidarity Corps is to "enhance [...] volunteering, as a means to strengthen cohesion, solidarity, democracy, European identity and active citizenship in the Union [...]" (European Commission 2023, p. 6). The approach to volunteering as a solidarity motor may differ, as one lies in strengthening solidarity and its related values and concepts within communities and the other one lies in strengthening these values within the participants themselves. After all, both approaches aim to meet the objectives established by the European Commission.

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3   Please note that no European Solidarity Corps volunteers have been interviewed in this study. Statements around the programme participation of young people always rely on the intermediation of other stakeholders. For further research, it would be interesting to compare the stakeholder perception to the participant's experiences with their first-hand perspective.

2.5 The European Solidarity Corps: a youth or a volunteering programme?

The different approaches have further consequences for the perception of additional characteristics of the programme. As a youth programme, only young people between 18 and 30 years can participate in the European Solidarity Corps, with the Humanitarian Aid Volunteering projects having an age limit of up to 35 years. This characteristic is acknowledged and criticised from both angles but with different arguments.

Interviewees who tend to regard the European Solidarity Corps as a learning programme appreciate the European Solidarity Corps being a youth programme, because in their perspective, it is the single 'youth-only', and even more importantly: 'all-youth' programme at the European level. Stakeholders advocating for the learning approach to volunteering emphasise the opportunities for personal and educational development, but argue that these benefits would also be fruitful for young people well under 18 years. Thus, they voice the request that the age limit should be reduced to enable more young people to have meaningful experiences. This request can already be found in the study on the first year of the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps, where it is pointed out that the age limitation not only excludes individual youth, but also entire organisations whose target groups are exclusively young people below 18 years (Akarçeşme & Fennes, 2020, p. 21f.). Furthermore, the participation in Erasmus+ activities is already possible from 13 years onwards, and the interviewees see no valid reason to differentiate between the two programmes with regard to age limitations except for the responsibility of supervising underage participants.

On the contrary, organisations mainly valuing the social impact of volunteering argue that it is not the minimum age limit that should be suspended, but the maximum. 'Not only young people want to be volunteers!', they argue, and advocate for turning the European Solidarity Corps into an all-out volunteering programme with access for the general public. This plea ties partly to the 2022 Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union, which call for exploring inter-generational volunteering as a new trend to contribute to "challenges faced by an ageing society as well as a way of engaging young people in an inter-generational dialogue, facilitating inter-generational knowledge-transfer and improving social cohe-

sion" (Council of the European Union, 2022, p. 20). Connected to this, the interviewed stakeholders question the European Solidarity Corps' affiliation with the European Youth Strategy and call for a policy framework that strengthens the ties with the volunteering sector rather than with the youth sector.

2.6 Activity strands as assets of variety

As already mentioned, the interviewees were often keen on comparing the European Solidarity Corps with the European Voluntary Service. Through this comparison, it was only natural that the arguments concerning the programme evolved around the individual long-term volunteering activities. Especially in consideration of the context of comparison (the interviewees discussed the European Solidarity Corps and the European Voluntary Service in order to exemplify the general goals and objectives of the programmes), it becomes evident that the individual voluntary activities are recognised as the default activity format in the European Solidarity Corps, whereas the other actions and strands (Volunteering Teams, Solidarity Projects, Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas and Humanitarian Aid Volunteering) are seen rather as add-ons to the main format. Hence, they are not mentioned as much as the individual volunteering in the interviews, and are consequentially only touched upon in this research report. Not all interviewees seemed to know all actions, and grasping the diversity of actions and strands also appeared to present a challenge, adding to the complexities that organisations and youth have to deal with when first engaging with the programme (see Confusing diversity of actions and strands). Nevertheless, when the other actions were discussed, they were seen as an invaluable strength to diversify the programme beneficiaries. This is because the variety of activities speaks to more organisations with different profiles who can all find their cup of tea within the European Solidarity Corps.

Solidarity Projects, for example, were valued for their potential for groups of young people. Already before the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps, relevant stakeholders in the field of youth work in Europe regarded Solidarity Projects as a huge asset of the programme: "Priority for funding should be given to Solidarity Projects since these have the most potential to reach out to disadvantaged young people and have a concrete impact at local level." (European Youth

Forum 2018, p. 8). Five years after the European Solidarity Corps was launched, Solidarity Projects were still valued as youth-led projects with a focus on local community impact. Especially the possibility for young people to directly apply for and receive a project fund is cherished as a gesture of trust towards European youth, which carries an empowering impetus. Issues around thresholds, and thus inclusiveness of this Action, are discussed further below (see Youth With Fewer Opportunities).

Team volunteering activities are highlighted by organisations who are active in implementing workcamps and now have the opportunity to apply for proper funding opportunities matching their activities. A Polish study on Volunteering Team projects pointed out that this activity strand is furthermore used to "stage occasional events that complemented their daily operations" (Jeżowski & Jastrzębska-Żebrowska, 2020, p. 61). In this, they fulfil an important role in supporting youth and volunteering organisations. This might require flexibility for ad-hoc applications for projects with a shorter duration, which would also support a future potential an interviewee mentioned: it is suggested to place more focus on implementing Volunteering Teams projects in regions that suffer from the aftermath of natural catastrophes, not to provide immediate response intervention, but to be present for after-care. This step, it is argued, would present a huge benefit to the European Union in terms of visibility and acknowledgement. The potential of crisis response from young

people is also highlighted by the Council of the European Union, as they identify young people to be "at the heart of solidarity-motivated activities to respond to the needs of their communities in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic" (Council of the European Union 2022, p. 3).

When the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid strand was introduced to the European Solidarity Corps in 2021, it was a welcome surprise to many of the interviewed stakeholders. The value of the new strand is seen in the unification of European volunteering activities under one legal framework, which in turn helps increase the visibility of the whole programme and lowers the threshold for participants to join follow-up activities once they are in the European volunteering cosmos.

In this section we take a closer look at the stakeholders' views on current challenges and needs in the context of the European Solidarity Corps. As already shown in the previous sections, some of the challenges and needs identified in the first RAY study on the European Solidarity Corps (Akarçeşme & Fennes, 2020) seem to have been overcome by now. Nevertheless, we link the current findings to our and other researchers' publications and show which issues remain or have only been partly tackled. Moreover, we identify additional issues that became evident in this study.

3

CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

"I really believe that The European Solidarity Corps would make an impact (...) It's here, but they do nothing to really implement it."

— (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

We begin this section with reflections on contradictions affecting the programme, both with regard to other EU policies and internally, within the programme. Afterwards we look at two major groups of challenges, likely explaining other obstacles and unaddressed needs that arise around the implementation and the inclusiveness of the programme: funding and complexities. The main part of this section is dedicated to the implementation, while issues related to YWFO are treated in a separate chapter (see Youth With Fewer Opportunities).

All interviewed stakeholders agree that the idea behind the European Solidarity Corps is good and has great potential, but that its implementation needs improvement. To quote one of our interviewees: "I really believe that it [The European Solidarity Corps] would make an impact (...) It's here, but they do nothing to really implement it." (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

3.1   Contradictions

Different stakeholders mention certain contradictions around the European Solidarity Corps over the course of the interviews. For some, it seems contradictory that the European Union funds for-profit organisations through a volunteering programme. Others see contradictions between EU policies and the European Solidarity Corps, as the latter puts solidarity into the spotlight, while many EU poli-

cies are not perceived as solidarity at all. This view links to the reflections on European solidarity we shared in our second literature snapshot on the European Solidarity Corps (Strecker & Pitschmann, 2022a). Further contradictions arise around funding climate-change related projects and organisations through the European Solidarity Corps, without a coherent equivalent in European policies. National policies and volunteering schemes are not necessarily less in conflict with the Programme's values. According to another study in some countries, "in the context of the recent refugee crisis, some national volunteering schemes (…) even started promoting national identity and solidarity, thus somewhat conflicting with the purpose of the European Solidarity Corps" (European Commission, 2020, p. 39).

Further discrepancies appear within the programme itself. Funded organisations and projects can have completely opposing aims and objectives; they can fight for sustainability or not be sustainable at all. To give just one example, the European Solidarity Corps funds organisations and projects offering and fighting institutional care. The now discontinued Traineeships & Jobs were also very contradictory in this sense, and it was repeatedly cautioned that they should not be abused as a means to substitute real work opportunities (Akarçeşme & Fennes, 2020; EC, 2020, p. 41f.). The addition of the strand "Volunteering under the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps" (European Commission, 2023, p. 10) added new contradictions and complexities, as this strand breaks in many senses with the programme's logic. For example, it included access requirements which added further to the level of complexities (see below), while at the same time reproducing colonial structures by only funding sending organisations rather than offering cooperation at eye level.

On another level, it has also been criticised that a contradiction exists between the official discourse (the aim behind programmes and policies), and their concrete implementation and impact. Creating a programme and then not funding it sufficiently, not engaging as much as possible in its promotion and the sustainability of its outcomes, and not ensuring the best possible monitoring are only some examples of this discrepancy. "I think that Europe is forgetting the European Solidarity Corps more and more and more and more." (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

Several stakeholders express the impression that the European Solidarity Corps, and likely other programmes and policies, are launched in combination with an official discourse of supporting vulnerable youth, reducing youth unemployment, fostering the green transition etc., but that the programmes are then designed from the top down: disconnected from young people's realities and challenges and struggling to achieve the official objectives.

Those stakeholders involved in feedback processes with the European Commission in particular reflected on these contradictions, also visible in the justifications as to why certain feedback cannot be implemented. One of our interviewees highlighted that funding decisions are political acts. Arguing that something is not possible because there is not enough allocated funding is therefore a fallacy, as it requires political will to move the money and enable proposed changes (see Stakeholder contribution to programme development). This links to the next two subsections and their interrelation: funding and complexity.

3.2   Funding

Funding for the European Solidarity Corps was identified as insufficient in previous research (European Commission, 2020a) and is a recurrent issue in all interviews. Interviewees from one National Agency recalled that when the European Solidarity Corps was first established, its budget was impressive as compared to the European Voluntary Services and could attract organisations. As a higher percentage of the budget was spent and additional organisations applied over the years, more applications had to be rejected, and the funding available to organisations with a Quality Label decreased. At the time of this research, all stakeholders agreed that the budget for the European Solidarity Corps is in general too low, with the exception of Solidarity Projects.

How a lack of funding and additional paperwork related to funding for YWFO hamper the inclusiveness of the programme is a topic in another section (see Programme's funding for inclusion and YWFO). Here we give visibility to the stakeholders' reflections on how the lack of funding and the lack of flexibility regarding the existing funding make it very difficult for the European Solidarity Corps to achieve its aims.

❝ *The budget is really tight for volunteering. Not for the solidarity projects, for the volunteer-ing it's really super tight. (…) There are only a few National Agencies who have budget*

left and at the same time you have a Erasmus+ programme which has plenty of money not knowing what to do with it. And to have that under the EU youth programmes it's, you know, you have a starving Solidarity Corps and a fat Erasmus+, you know it's a bit tricky, because also because the bodies are one, I don't know any agency who doesn't have both in the house, so that's a challenge." (support structure)

The comparison of the two European Youth Programmes is complex given their different strands, actions, target groups, milestones and budgets[4]. What can be stated is that in the years 2018 to 2020, the European Solidarity Corps' annual budget made up about 5,5 % of the Erasmus+ annual budget. In the programme generation 2021–2027 both budgets were increased, but the budget for the Solidarity Corps not to the same extent. Currently the European Solidarity Corps's budget stands at about 4 % of the amount Erasmus+ is receiving.

The consequences of the lack of funding are manifold. Several stakeholders describe how National Agency staff holds back on the promotion of Solidarity Projects and the promotion of the programme towards potential newcomer organisations to have enough money for the organisations going through the laborious process of applying for a Quality Label. The general worry is that these organisations would quit the programme if they did not receive a minimum amount of funding. The same is true for the budget for TCA and NET activities, although a stakeholder expresses the belief that National Agency staff is not always aware of how they could use this money to promote the programme. For example, they could use it for efforts to reach hard-to-reach youth. Reallocating the money elsewhere can result in missing out on a potential way to increase the programme's inclusiveness.

Some stakeholders describe further strategies to reduce the number of funded organisations by
- Being particularly strict in the granting of Quality Labels;

- Asking organisations to seek partners from countries where they know more money is available;
- Postponing organisations' applications by encouraging them to first engage in other activities (e. g. training activities through Erasmus+)

To summarise, we conclude that due to the lack of funding certain assets of the programme are
- Hard to reach (inclusion, strategic development plans by organisations);
- Purposely underdeveloped (Solidarity Projects, reach of newcomer organisations);
- Unintentionally dismissed (use of TCA/NET money to reach hard-to-reach target groups).

The amount of funding missing depends on national realities; in particular how well-known the European Solidarity Corps has become in the meantime and how many (if any) national alternatives to fund similar activities and projects exist. This means, however, that particularly those countries with little or no national funding and who did a very good job in promoting the European Solidarity Corps are now forced to reject more applications or to encourage applicants to "only partner" with an organisation from another country. When only "partnering" these organisations receive fewer means as a result, and it gives them less autonomy in the design of their project and activities and also reduces their options in seeking new partnerships.

Underfunding also affects the organisations selected for funding by the European Solidarity Corps programme, often forcing them to seek co-financing for their activities. The lack of funds leads to conflicts between organisations about the financial distribution, obviously not fostering the development of positive and sustainable partnerships. Apart from increased funding, the stakeholder argues here that fostering "real long-term cooperation" was the solution, as partners were then more likely to seek a fair distribution of their means. Some stakeholders partially attribute a decrease in third country[5] participation to

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4   For more information on the current programme see: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/erasmus-performance_en and https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-overview/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en. For the previous programme generation the same information can be found at: https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20230331134432/https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-overview/erasmus-performance_en and https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20230331134457/https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-overview/european-solidarity-corps-performance_en#m-ff-2014-2020--european-solidarity-corps.

5   The European Solidarity Corps' Programme Guide (2023, p. 15) refers to "third countries" when referring to non-EU countries that are still eligible to participate in certain ways in the programme. In concrete it states in footnote 17: "Entities from EU Member States and people legally residing in them can fully take part in all the Actions of the European Solidarity Corps. In addition, in accordance with article 13 of the Regulation, the following third countries can be associated to the programme subject to agreements between the European Union and those countries: members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) which are members of the European Economic Area (EEA); acceding countries, candidate countries

the lack of funding for them (see Development Of beneficiary profiles).

Moreover, restrictions to avoid double-funding make it difficult for organisations to organise joint training activities for their volunteers. Their accommodation at a distant training venue cannot be funded in parallel to funding the accommodation at the host organisation's location, although the rent of the flat is not on hold while the volunteer is abroad for the training.
Certain organisations and young people seem to prefer to apply with their projects or to engage in volunteering elsewhere, with a lower bureaucratic threshold. In national contexts where no local alternatives exist, volunteering is then only accessible to an elite, who are able to overcome the bureaucratic hurdles of the European Solidarity Corps.

Regarding participants, stakeholders agree in general that the pocket money is not enough, in particular for certain cities. While this likely fosters the factual exclusion of YWFO (see Programme's funding for inclusion of YWFO), a lack of funding makes the programme less attractive in comparison to other volunteering programmes and negatively impacts the participants' experiences, not allowing them to make full use of their time abroad. With the rising inflation in the wake of the Russian war on Ukraine, these issues have become even worse, also showing the lack of flexibility in funding (see development over time and future perspectives).

As shown in another section (see Development Over Time), the inflexibility of the European Solidarity Corps funding became particularly visible during the pandemic. The example of a sudden increase in participants' mental health issues in particular shows that flexibility in funding is always needed, not only in times of crisis or for YWFO. Inflexibility in funding affects the resilience and inclusiveness of the programme drastically.

3.3   Complexity

Another challenge expressed in most interviews are complexities within and around the European Solidarity Corps programme. Complex concepts, but also the pure diversity of actions lacking well-defined names make it difficult

for newcomer in particular to engage in the programme. For more experienced stakeholders, the complexities and changes over time hamper the programme's promotion. Another complexity relates to the (non-) participatory character of the programme. The variety of structures (advisory boards, steering groups, public consultations etc.) makes it difficult for stakeholders to grasp their options to participate in the future development of the programme and leads some to question whether the programme is meant to be participatory at all (see Stakeholder contribution to programme development). In the following, we take a closer look at some complex concepts and how the diversity of actions can lead to confusion.

3.3.1   Complex concepts

In several of our interviews it appeared that certain concepts related to the European Solidarity Corps are difficult to grasp, because of their level of complexity. The previously mentioned issues around the concept of Solidarity and the name European Solidarity Corps (see Juggling With Words: Solidarity And The 'European Solidarity Corps') are examples of such complexity.

For organisations, further complex concepts related to the European Solidarity Corps arise when beginning the application. Several stakeholders describe how organisations struggle to grasp the concept of Youth With Fewer Opportunities (see Young People With Fewer Opportunities). No matter how organisations understand the concept, they are still able to complete their application. An issue that seems to provoke more headaches to applying organisations is the concept of impact. The general tenor among National Agencies and supporting structures seems to be that the programme is having a huge impact on different levels, in particular young participants and local communities but also organisations and, mainly in contexts with weak structures, the youth field and other related sectors. Similarly, the study on removing obstacles to cross-border solidarity activities (European Commission 2020b, p. 27) highlighted the major importance of the European Solidarity Corps for countries with small/little developed and particularly without "national-level schemes supporting cross-border volunteering activities among young people", arguing that in the latter "the European Solidarity Corps is the only structured cross-border volunteering programme offering funding for young persons." However, the interviewed stakeholders perceive the impact as little visible in general and new applicant organisations often struggle to

envision their impact and describe it in the corresponding section of their application, requiring support by National Agency staff.

Envisioning and best fostering potential impact also seems to be an issue for the European Union itself. Several stakeholders share success stories around the European Solidarity Corps and describe positive reactions of people who first hear about the programme, even expressing that this was the best programme. Nevertheless, this potential is, according to several stakeholders, not used, for example to improve young people's attitudes towards the European Union – another example of potentials that are not completely used.

3.3.2 Confusing diversity of actions and strands

Beyond the level of concepts, further complexities arise in relation to the sheer diversity of programme strands, actions and funding options. All stakeholders at points mention or display a lack of understanding of all the aspects included in the programme. Many stakeholders believe that others lack knowledge about the programme. Several of them believe that young people are often only aware of the programme strand or action they directly participated in; organisations are said to be familiar with only one form of volunteering and ignore options for additional funding (for example for preparatory visits); and some National Agency staff seems to either not know or not provide correct information about all funding options and eligible target groups, namely companies.

Particularly those interviewees who had been involved with the European Voluntary Service in the past often use this as their point of comparison and describe the European Solidarity Corps as bigger than the European Voluntary Service, but also more confusing. Some stakeholders express the belief that the European Voluntary Service is still better known than the European Solidarity Corps, which is then sometimes falsely reduced to a programme for individual volunteering (see Activity strands as assets of variety). However, other stakeholders consider the diversity of strands and actions as an asset and see the potential for spill-over effects from one strand to another. For now, this potential is not being fully developed, and the different formats and strands' names are not intuitive and contribute to the confusion rather than the attraction. An example is the "team volunteering" format within

Volunteering Projects standing next to the strand "Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas".

Solidarity Projects are no exception of the confusion previously described. Research for SALTO Solidarity has shown a general confusion about the names and a belief that Solidarity Projects were all projects completed within the European Solidarity Corps, not only a specific type:

66 *According to the Programme Guide, a coach is a person who supports young people in so-called solidarity projects. It is a particular type of project led by a group of young people and implemented locally for a period of maximum 12 months. However, as the whole programme is called European Solidarity Corps, many beneficiaries consider all projects implemented in the frame of it as "solidarity projects". Therefore, coaches are often confused with mentors in volunteering projects, or persons supporting individual young people."*
(Pintea, Ples & Markovic, 2023)

Offering young people between 18 and 30 the opportunity to develop and carry out their own project in a local community, Solidarity Projects do not include international exchanges at all, as the young participants neither travel abroad nor receive international volunteers in their context. One National Agency staff member mentioned issues when these young people receive invitations to events to share their intercultural experiences through the Programme, because their actual experiences are very different from those of young people participating in other actions. While Solidarity Projects could be attractive for different target groups thanks to these differences, few youngsters might expect to find such an option within the Programme, making additional and other promotion strategies necessary (see Promotion).

The very hands-on local approach of the Solidarity Projects together with the detailed design required for the application, also lead to a certain contradiction. The groups of young people apply with everything needed to start the project, but they then have to wait for several months to be actually able to do so. While long waiting periods are generally perceived as not particularly suitable for the needs of young people, these delays seem to be met with more understanding when it comes to actions that require cross-border mobility. Several National Agencies were, however, already struggling to complete their selection processes in the little time available, so rolling admissions or quicker resolutions are

not imaginable for them. More schematic applications, only requiring a general idea rather than a detailed project description, could be a solution, but would likely encounter internal resistance due to existing distrust among several National Agency staffs.

In particular, National Agency staff describes resistance and legal barriers to the funding of youth-led projects. In some national contexts, it is simply impossible to transfer money for a project to an individual young person without an organisational context. In others, young people are encouraged to apply with an organisation and receive their money through the organisation's bank account, with the argument that this helps them to avoid issues with taxes. Here it also seems that other National Agency staff, for example finance officers, do not like the idea of giving money directly to young people and call for stricter controls of their expenses. This is nonsense in the eyes of several National Agency interviewees, because such monitoring would further increase the already disproportional workload for the National Agency staff. It would also unnecessarily increase the threshold to participating since the Solidarity Projects already receive a rather small amount of money. Moreover, several interviewees perceive the risk of abuses as low, considering young people very cautious in the use of the money. One National Agency staff even describes supporting young people in finding ways to spend any remaining money once they have completed all planned activities:

66 *Young people are really really really careful with the money, in the end they are like 'we still have this money' you know they are really careful on using the money and then we try to figure out together 'OK how could you use this?' and we don't you know 'you are not returning anything to us because you did what you promised' but they're really careful on like we have to encourage 'you can also have some fun you know? Have some team party or something' so, I'm not afraid."* (National Agency)

Another National Agency staffer describes her discussions with colleagues, arguing that even if a project did not complete its aims, it could still have an important impact on the young people's development and the local community. This is, however, not clearly spelled out in the programme guide, the description of which mentions unexpected situations and the search for solutions, but not explicitly the option to fail:

66 *In particular, young people managing the project could absorb in practice the concept of social entrepreneurship by creating new products or services that benefit local community or society in general and address important societal challenges. By putting their own ideas into practice, meeting unexpected situations and finding solutions for them, trying out innovative and creative measures, young people will learn new skills and develop their capacities, express their own creativity and take responsibility for their action. They will boost their self-esteem, autonomy and motivation to learn. Participation in managing and implementing a solidarity project could be also a first step into self-employment or setting up organisations in the solidarity, non-profit or youth sectors."*
(European Commission 2023, p. 44)

This makes it more difficult for National Agency staff to convince the other staff that failure is an option. If the guide was more explicit on the topic, it could simply be said: "See, here it's stated, it's OK if they make mistakes. Even if it doesn't work, it works" (National Agency). In the eyes of this stakeholder, the very existence of Solidarity Projects shows that the EU believes in their young citizens, trusting them to best use the money.

Changes over time like the discontinuation of Traineeships and Jobs or the addition of the Humanitarian Aid Volunteering strand further add to this confusion and make the Programme more difficult to grasp (see Development over time and future perspectives). The Humanitarian Aid Volunteering strand is particularly disruptive in this sense. It comes with a different age limit and entry requirements for young people, a different definition of volunteers, and it only works with sending organisations, departing from the premise of the European Solidarity Corps as an exchange programme open for all young people from 18 to 30 years. This is linked to contradictions as was shown above (see Contradictions).

The magnitude of options and changing requirements make it particularly difficult for newcomers to understand the programme and their participation may be discouraged completely, especially when alternative programmes exist in the national context. In spite of the huge range of options, the European Solidarity Corps is in many national realities not making full use of this potential. This results in most stakeholders complaining at some point about the difficulties in reaching other beneficiaries; for example, green organisations, and even call for an increase

in diversity and variety (see Promotion). In some national contexts the number of rejections due to not meeting the requirements is perceived as too high. This is likely frustrating for all involved: National Agency staff, organisations, and young people applying for a Solidarity Project or otherwise being involved in an application.

Stakeholders engaged in the promotion of the European Solidarity Corps describe how they struggle to explain all the different strands and formats and criticise a lack of explanatory material offered by the European Commission, as they have to develop all the materials themselves. This is particularly true for the Humanitarian Aid Volunteering strand, because an executive agency is in charge of implementing this strand, and the National Agencies only engage in its promotion. The internal discussions about Solidarity Projects mentioned above furthermore show that the importance of the European Commission's involvement in the development of promotional material is not only related to workload and efficiency, but also to another level of authority than material developed by other stakeholders. Many stakeholders agree that the European Commission's engagement in the promotion of the European Solidarity Corps is very low and mostly reduced to simply stating that the programme exists, without giving further explanations about the different opportunities it offers or addressing potential target groups directly (see Lack of Promotion).

3.4   Implementation

In this section, we will dive into the practicalities and describe the multiple challenges and unanswered needs our interviewees identified in the context of the European Solidarity Corps. Here we will offer direct insights into ideas whenever possible and recommendations on how to tackle the identified issues, often building on what the stakeholders themselves mentioned.

Among all interviewed stakeholders appears the common pattern of considering the European Solidarity Corps a good idea and a programme with huge potential to achieve positive change and have a positive impact on communities and youth. Nevertheless, all stakeholders criticise the implementation of the programme. Some believe that the programme works but could be improved, and others question its ability to achieve the set objectives, in particular regarding inclusion (see Youth With Fewer Opportunities).

❝ *Sometimes the ideas are really good in theory, but then there are some practical things that kind of delude the idea."*
(beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

❝ *Don't take me wrong. Overall I think it's a positive thing. The European Solidarity Corps is a good example and that we can be proud in the EU that we have such an activity. Even though we have it, it needs to be improved."*
(beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

Asked for concrete challenges, several stakeholders identify long lists, and one mentions 14 distinct challenges, concluding when asked for further challenges that the list is never complete: "The main challenges I mentioned. There are for sure many more." (support structure)
In the following, we take a closer look at challenges regarding flexibility, IT tools, feedback mechanisms, excessive workloads and promotion. Challenges linked to national authorities are mainly mentioned in relation to YWFO and are therefore a topic in their section (see Youth With Fewer Opportunities).

3.4.1   Flexibility and IT tools

A main challenge mentioned by almost all interviewees is the perception that the programme is too bureaucratic and too inflexible. The lack of flexibility is repeatedly mentioned with regard to the funding requirements and related paperwork (see Funding), but this issue is also indicated regarding the quick adaptation to sudden changes in society; for example, allowing for ad-hoc applications and adaptations to react to sudden crises like the COVID-19 pandemic or helping in the aftermath of a natural catastrophe (see development over time and future perspectives).

Another recurrent issue relates to the non-functioning IT tools affecting all levels (youth, organisations, National Agencies, European Commission). This issue is so often stated and well-known that it is sometimes rather quickly dismissed, but as one stakeholder highlights, it increases the threshold for participation considerably and comes with a significant additional workload for National Agencies and EC support. The consequences of this problem are enormous, provoking other challenges that cannot be tackled completely without overcoming the IT tool challenge.

According to the account of one stakeholder, it seems that almost every young person needs to get in touch with the support to be able to complete their inscription to the portal, leading many to simply stop trying. Moreover, National Agencies have to continuously check and require manual corrections; for instance, regarding the insurance that should automatically cover all volunteers once they are moved from the applicant to the beneficiary module. One National Agency interviewee expresses admiration for organisations continuing in the programme after all the technical issues they encountered.

When the Russian war on Ukraine began, another issue became visible, as National Agencies were not able to quickly retrieve data on volunteers from their country currently volunteering in Ukraine, nor could they see directly how many volunteers from Ukraine were in their country at this point in time. This problem meant they had to manually reach out to all their organisations and ask for this data, slowing the process immensely and making quick attention to the affected volunteers almost impossible.

It seems paradoxical that an EU which emerged in the digital transition is having such immense and massive IT problems with a programme that even has digitalisation as one of four priorities: "It sounds very easy, but it's not and it's not since almost five years" (support structure). This issue links to the next challenge: feedback loops.

3.4.2   Ineffective feedback loops

IT tools have been among the most feedbacked issues from the very start of the Programme, making their ongoing dysfunctionality particularly frustrating for stakeholders who cannot understand why they are not fixed. Feedback loops seem ineffective, and stakeholders have the impression that their feedback is not dealt with, while not receiving any explanation or insights into the processes explaining why the reported problems persist (see Stakeholder contribution to programme development). One interviewed stakeholder with a long experience of giving feedback through different channels, identifies several issues that turn the feedback loops less efficient:

- No direct dialogue: There are several different structures in place to give feedback, but the staff working on these structures only collects the feedback and then passes it on to the affected colleagues. There is no direct dialogue between the feedback givers and recipients, so they cannot, for example, ask for clarification when feedback is not clear.

- Misunderstandings: Feedback is often either very hands-on or formulated in a very polite way, making it difficult for staff working at a meta level to understand what the issue is actually about.
- False solutions: Staff lacks an overview of processes and can believe that an issue was already tackled when the repair mechanisms are actually not eligible to fix the problem or do not produce the intended effects. For example, funding for the promotion of the programme towards hard-to-reach profiles is available through TCA/NET funding, but is not effectively used in this way as National Agencies are overworked and prefer to use this funding to partially level out the lack of funding for organisations (see Funding).
- Staff turnover: Staff changes repeatedly, and feedback is not efficiently passed on to the new staff, so it has to be repeated over and over again.

Overall, it can be said that the efficient improvement of the programme through feedback is a challenge in itself. Processes are slow, ineffective, and a true dialogue is missing.

3.4.3   Excessive workload

The challenges already described have a major effect on the workload of National Agency staff, but also engaging organisations. While the latter can decide not to engage any longer in the Programme or perceive the funding as particularly insufficient because of this additional workload, National Agency staff can come to prioritise tasks. In particular the non-functioning IT tools increase the workload so much that several National Agency interviewees mention not having the resources for any 'extras' (e. g. TCA/NET activities) or describe working extra-hours even on the weekends during the selection phases. This also means that National Agencies do not have the time to work on a more strategic impact on their national youth sector, and not all National Agencies engage to the same degree with the programme priorities. For example, inclusion is not given the same priority across the board, leading to important differences in the inclusiveness of the programme depending on the national context. The impression gleaned from several interviews is that the situation has become worse over time (see Development over time and future perspectives).

Another recurrent issue contributing to the excessive workload is the confusion surrounding the different organisational roles. This problem already becomes visible in the terminology used, as many stakeholders speak of "sending and hosting organisations", despite the fact that the programme officially distinguishes "supporting and hosting organisations", the former including sending and coordinating organisations. This distinction is less intuitive for many people and complicates the identification of sending organisations, since these cannot be specifically filtered out in the portal. Confusion about roles affects young people; for example, applying at a host organisation without a supporting organisation and then requiring support in finding one, and organisations themselves. One stakeholder remembers the case of a coordinating organisation taking up the role of a sending organisation, because they did not know the difference between roles.

Several stakeholders express the impression that sending organisations only exist on paper, and several argue that host organisations take up the role to support their volunteers in the preparation of their stay abroad and even in the aftercare, although this is trickier for them to achieve. Some stakeholders from umbrella organisations explain the minimal involvement of sending organisations, also when it comes to the low amount of funding they receive. The same logic is applied to mentors, arguing that incentives are too low to foster real involvement. Another umbrella organisation mentions the disproportionate effort it takes to apply for a Quality Label in order to be able to become a sending organisation, making it barely feasible for some of the organisations from their network to take on this role, although they could easily offer the required support to volunteers and would be ready to do so.

While some stakeholders believe that sending organisations could be abolished completely by officially assigning the related tasks to the host organisations, others suggest that sending organisations be strengthened, making their role clearer and facilitating their distinction. A main argument for the latter is that in particular YWFO require more support and therefore need a strong sending organisation. In the current situation, this approach paradoxically leads to the further exclusion of YWFO, as hosting organisations are discouraged to select them without a strong sending organisation to support them (see Factual exclusion).

3.4.4 Lack of support

Another issue affecting organisations is the lack of support they receive. Because no monitoring data is available for beneficiaries, they cannot build on such data, and transparency in the selection of applications as well as feedback on rejections highly depends on the concrete National Agencies' abilities. In comparison to Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps offers little support for organisations. Specifically, no equivalent playground for organisational capacity building exists for them. Some National Agency staff react to this lacking component by encouraging potential applicant organisations to first participate in Erasmus+ activities, although they do not identify as youth work organisations. The more remote an organisation sees itself from youth work, the less likely they are to make meaningful use of this option. One National Agency interviewee mentions how this issue became a growing challenge as they reach more and more non-youth work organisations through the European Solidarity Corps. Nevertheless, one interviewee mentions the existence of good-quality online trainings, which organisations are not making use of, the reasons for which require further exploration.

Currently, the tendency seems to be that the responsibility for reaching and best attending to volunteers lies with the organisations. Furthermore, organisations are in charge of inclusiveness by attracting and selecting YWFO and have to support their volunteers while receiving insufficient funding (see Factual exclusion). Moreover, the impact on local communities and the sustainability of this impact over time is also seen as a responsibility of the involved organisations. One interviewee calls for further integration of international volunteers within the local context and ongoing projects, avoiding standalone projects, to tackle this issue. It seems that organisations are the equivalent to a 'Swiss army knife' in the context of the European Solidarity Corps: an all-in-one device suitable for every purpose. Several stakeholders reflect on this critically, comparing the organisations' work with being in the trenches, requesting that specifically issues like inclusiveness should not be uniquely burdened onto the shoulders of organisations (see Factual exclusion) or highlighting the support needs of organisations themselves. This is currently particularly visible as many organisations were severely affected by the pandemic and are still struggling to get back on their feet. Some organisations even disappeared completely as a result of the Russian war on Ukraine.

According to one stakeholder, the effort to engage in the Programme is particularly disproportional for newcomers, as they are not familiar with the EU's working mechanisms and tools and first have to grasp the programme's logic. Small organisations are repeatedly identified in interviews as unable to meet the administrative requirements to join the programme, leading to their factual exclusion: "It's an impossible task to do" (National Agency). One stakeholder highlights that given the activities smaller organisations perform, they are usually eligible for less funding, making the workload they have to undergo to receive the funding even more disproportionate.

Some ideas to better support organisations, beyond the call for increased funding already expressed, are:
- Offer networking opportunities for hosting organisations across Europe so they can share experiences and best practices;
- Connect to local realities: focus on local support systems that the organisations can draw upon (i. e. cooperation with local psychologists and social workers);
- Create a network among funded organisations as a support system (i. e. provide opportunities to learn from each others' youth work practices, champion the option to 'hand over' volunteers to organisations which are more suitable to host YWFO with specific problems);
- Lower the threshold to receiving at least a little initial funding to better engage newcomer and in particular small organisations;
- Offer small organisations administrative support.

Notably, these ideas not only build on offering further trainings to enable each participating organisation to meet the long list of responsibilities, but also on local and international networking, supporting organisations by getting them in touch with other agents who can support their volunteers with certain issues rather than expecting them to deal with everything alone. Fostering networking, in particular among "inclusion-focussed organisations", was also a main recommendation from the Salto Solidarity research on mentoring and coaching (Pintea, Ples & Markovic, 2023, p. 104). Note that this approach would not increase the responsibility of the European Commission in the attendance of volunteers; several stakeholders request, however, that the European Commission engage more in the Programme's promotion (see Promotion). The idea that only some organisations are fit to host youth

with specific problems is further discussed below (see Youth With Fewer Opportunities).

3.4.5 Promotion

Promotion is a critical element to increase the visibility and outreach of the Programme, increasing its impact and inclusiveness. As in the previous section, the level of concreteness allows a very hands-on approach, offering insights into how different National Agencies proceed and additional recommendations expressed by the interviewed stakeholders or deduced from their input.

According to a study by the European Commission (2020b, p. 64), "the lack of dissemination and promotion of information at a systemic level is one of the key problems facing the volunteering/solidarity sector in Europe. (…) one of the key obstacles to cross-border volunteering and solidarity activities is a lack of information and awareness among young people regarding the opportunities available to them." National information on available volunteering opportunities is in most countries split over "several sources" and "usually not integrated into a single system" (p. 30).

Promotion by the European Commission was criticised as insufficient by several interviewees. Some said that the Programme hardly appears in the European Commission's social media channels, and one stakeholder claimed that it is now difficult to even find the Programme on the official website. Others criticised the content of the promotion:

> **"** *The Commission always mentions European Solidarity Corps but it's really one sentence and perhaps they can do a bit more (laughs) to really take their time a few seconds more to explain that 'you can apply' and 'it's working in this way' but really briefly. Because they just mention that it exists and that's all."*
> *(beneficiary/umbrella organisation)*

The visibility of the programme was one of the major challenges identified in our initial study (Akarçeşme & Fennes, 2020). In this study, stakeholders seemed to prioritise other challenges as more worrying, although it is mentioned that issues with promotion persist. In comparing the initial promotion of the Programme with the current situation, staff from one National Agency highlighted how they could initially attract organisations rather easily by highlighting the additional funding available in comparison to the European Voluntary Service. However, as shown above

(see Funding), the budget is no longer considered sufficient, so their promotion strategy had to change, now highlighting more content-related arguments like the opportunity to express solidarity by participating in the programme.

In general, it seems that National Agencies are rather confident that they have developed useful promotion strategies, despite the fact that these have yet to show their impact as many activities had to be interrupted during the pandemic. That certain organisations, in particular newcomers from other sectors, are not participating, is less ascribed to a lack of visibility and more to the high bureaucratic threshold, the lack of funding, and attractive alternative programmes (see Lack of Support). Moreover, when examining other volunteering programmes, it becomes apparent that the alternatives are often better known and less bureaucratic, thus reducing the attractiveness of the programme. The lack of funding seems to further contribute to a decreased sense of urgency to promote the programme, as an increase in applications would either increase the rejections or decrease the funding for activities further (see Funding).

One stakeholder from a beneficiary/umbrella organisation argued that the European Solidarity Corps has become a well-known brand in the field. However, not all its strands, actions and funding opportunities are equally visible, and challenges in reaching and engaging certain beneficiaries seem to persist in many contexts. In several countries, it seems that the organisations participating in the European Solidarity Corps are mainly the same ones that had already participated in the EVS, and that it is particularly difficult to reach non-youth work organisations. Even National Agency staff expressing that they reach more non-youth work organisations than the EVS describe a potential for expansion here. An interviewee from an umbrella organisation criticises the National Agencies' promotion strategies as focussing too much on the youth sector and not conducting optimal outreach to non-youth work, voluntary organisations and communities. Another interviewee from an umbrella organisation reflects on the Quality Label approach putting more emphasis on volunteer learning than on impact on the local community. They explain that non-typical organisations, like food banks, struggle to identify volunteer learning because this is not how they usually view their work (see the European Solidarity Corps: a programme of learning or community impact?). According to this interviewee, National Agencies deal with these issues very differently, and while some offer very good support, others tend to dismiss organisations struggling with this aspect as not suited for the programme, rather than supporting them better in the process. Further research could explore which issues appear in which contexts. "It's not a particularly welcoming programme at the moment for newcomers." (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

Another target group repeatedly identified as challenging to reach is youth. While several stakeholders see issues mainly regarding YWFO or even certain subgroups of YWFO, others are less optimistic in reaching youth in general. One stakeholder refers to a general lack of visibility of the European Union and the existing programmes. Another criticises the hardly self-explanatory programme name: "Nobody knows what it's about when they first hear it." (support structure, adapted).

66 *I don't think that on the ground people know that European Solidarity Corps exist. This is the challenge of Europe actually since its creation that it's not famous enough for citizens and even less the programmes. (...) Once we're working in this field yes, but I think a nor-mal person in the street or even at schools, they're not talking about it." (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)*

Several stakeholders highlight that promotion towards youth is more difficult than reaching organisations. While many organisations can be reached through networks and remain active in the programme once they have joined, young people have to be tackled anew over and over again. This challenge requires different promotion channels and strategies. At the level of National Agencies, the main strategies to reach youth consist of working with multipliers, fostering peer-to-peer promotion (and related networks like Europeers), and using social media. Stakeholders working with peer-to-peer promotion highlight, however, the limitations of this approach. It is difficult for them to gain peers from certain backgrounds, and they struggle to identify spaces to allow their peers to meet potential participants. In particular, school and university settings are only of limited use for the age group and particular subgroups of potential beneficiaries.

This issue points to a need for more target-group specific promotion, both regarding organisations and youth. Existing promotion strategies in National Agencies appear to be, however, often rather at random, and only one National Agency mentioned a systemic distinction of target groups for their promotion. The concrete approach seems to depend more on the individual staff's background and priorities than on a (national or European) strategy. For example, a former teacher highlights the promotion in schools; a staffer with a long personal history of volunteering focusses on hands-on activities, and a staff member coming from an NGO focuses on the promotion through existing networks of NGOs. While all these ideas have a high potential of impact and the adaptation to the national context is absolutely necessary, the impression arises that promotion is not very strategic and more dependent on the concrete staff's background than insights into good practices, research evidence or overarching strategies.

Several National Agency interviewees describe promotion activities specifically reaching out to potential beneficiaries who are typically harder to reach. Those promotion strategies include:

- Working with existing national networks as multipliers;
- Sharing promotional material through social media;
- Thematic promotion events presenting the different European programmes the National Agency works on in relation to the topic (e. g. sustainability);
- Collaborating with schools for promotion in general and to gain them as supporting organisations for Solidarity Projects;
- Hands-on volunteering activities linked to topics of interest for young people (e. g. tree planting) to promote the programme in the course of the event;
- Contacting individual organisations working with certain target groups (e. g. migrants, youth with disabilities) to gain them for the programme and organising promotion activities for their users;
- Fostering peer-to-peer promotion.

4

YOUTH WITH FEWER OPPORTUNITIES

"At least in paper the programme is inclusive. Sometimes it works"

— (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

This section puts the spotlight onto Youth With Fewer Opportunities (YWFO). In previous sections we have already shown that inclusiveness and in particular the reach of YWFO is one of the main features of the programme (see The European Solidarity Corps: an inclusive programme). Inclusion and diversity are one of the four main programme priorities (just as for Erasmus+), the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy fosters inclusion and the SALTO Resource Center Inclusion & Diversity has been developing different training courses and materials for this objective. Nevertheless, inclusion remains a main challenge, for youth and organisations in general and specifically for YWFO. According to a study by the European Commission (2020b, p. 73), this is true for the whole volunteering sector because "volunteering is still widely considered as an occupation for the upper/more affluent classes, and that people with fewer opportunities are under-represented in volunteering sector". in the same study, 31 % of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "The European Solidarity Corps programme is not set up to support people with fewer opportunities" (p. 80).

Bureaucratic barriers and the high thresholds to participation in the different formats of the European Solidarity Corps affect all young people – but YWFO even more so – and the excessive paperwork increases even further when additional funding for inclusiveness is required, questioning the programme's potential to ever meet its aims. While all interviewed stakeholders agree on the general issue, there are varying levels of appreciation in their assessments; some aspects are considered to be improving and others as getting worse:

> *Including Young People With Fewer Opportunities is a great vision, the in-practice support is incompatible to that vision." (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)*

> *At least in paper (the programme is inclusive) sometimes it works"*
> *(beneficiary/umbrella organisation)*

Just as in the previous section, it appears once again that the ideas on inclusion are in principle good and that the programme (except for Humanitarian Aid Volunteering) is particularly accessible and open to all youth without any additional requirements. Nevertheless, the concrete implementation keeps the programme from fully developing this potential.

Following a similar approach as in the previous section, we look at the main challenges around the inclusion of YWFO as they appeared in our interviews, putting them in relation to official documents and research publications. We begin with the definition of YWFO and show how its complexity is difficult to grasp and makes the monitoring of the inclusiveness of the programme hard to nearly impossible. Afterwards, we look at issues around the funding for YWFO within the programme. Then we move on to further structural barriers, e. g. issues with social welfare benefits when becoming a volunteer or the accessibility of certain cities, organisations and even the European Solidarity Corps' portal. In the next subsection we shed light on issues with the promotion and the outreach of YWFO. In the last subsection, we share insights from our interviewees into factual exclusion that is happening within the European Solidarity Corps against the backdrop of the previously described barriers. Here we show, for example, how the idea that YWFO needs special support and the impression that the programme does not offer this support, lead organisations to not include YWFO and National Agencies and umbrella organisations to discourage them from doing so. While the interviewees justify this factual exclusion with the lack of resources and a fear of not giving the necessary support to participants, it shows that the European Solidarity Corps has a long way to go in achieving its aim to be inclusive and open for everybody in the age group. From our analyses, we have deduced some ideas on how this objective could be better supported.

4.1 Definition of Youth With Fewer Opportunities

First things first: Who are Young People With Fewer Opportunities? The current programme guide (European Commission, 2023, p. 6f.) offers a definition, closely aligned with the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy (European Commission, 2014, p. 7), but with slightly different names and interchanging the order of economic and social obstacles:

66 *Young people with fewer opportunities are young people who are at a disadvantage compared to their peers because they face one or more exclusion factors and obstacles. The list of barriers, spelt out below, is not exhaustive and is meant to provide a reference in taking action with a view to increasing accessibility and outreach to disadvantaged groups:*

Disabilities: This includes physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder someone's full and effective participation in society on the same footing as others.

Health problems: Barriers may result from health issues including severe illnesses, chronic diseases, or any other physical or mental health-related situation that prevents from participating in the programmes.

Barriers linked to education and training systems: Individuals performing poorly in education and training systems for various reasons and for early school-leavers, NEETs (people not in education, employment or training), and low-qualified adults may face barriers. Although other factors may play a role, these educational difficulties, while they may also be linked to personal circumstances, mostly result from an educational system which creates structural limitations and/or does not fully take into account the individual's particular needs.

Individuals can also face barriers to participation when the structure of curricula makes it difficult to undertake an educational or training mobility abroad as part of their studies.

Cultural differences: While cultural differences may be perceived as barriers by people from any backgrounds, they can particularly affect people with fewer opportunities. Such differences may represent significant barriers to learning in general, all the more for people with a migrant or refugee background – especially newly-ar-

rived migrants, people belonging to a national or ethnic minority, sign language users, people with linguistic adaptation and cultural inclusion difficulties, etc. Being exposed to foreign languages and cultural differences when taking part in any kind of programme activities may put off individuals and somehow limit the benefits of their participation. And such cultural differences may even prevent potential participants from applying for support through the programmes, thereby representing an entry barrier altogether.

Social barriers: Social adjustment difficulties such as limited social competences, anti-social or high-risk behaviours, (ex-)offenders, (ex-)drug or alcohol abusers, or social marginalisation may represent a barrier. Other social barriers can stem from family circumstances; for instance, being the first in the family to access higher education or being a parent (especially a single parent), a caregiver, a breadwinner or an orphan, or having lived or currently living in institutional care.

Economic barriers: Economic disadvantage such as a low standard of living, low income, learners who need to work to support themselves, dependence on the social welfare system, in long-term unemployment, precarious situations or poverty, being homeless, in debt or with financial problems, etc., may represent a barrier.

Barriers linked to discrimination: linked to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, beliefs, sexual orientation, disability, or intersectional factors (a combination of one or several of the mentioned discrimination barriers).

Geographical barriers: living in remote or rural areas, on small islands or in peripheral/outermost regions, in urban suburbs, in less serviced areas (limited public transport, poor facilities), etc., may constitute a barrier. Other difficulties may derive from the limited transferability of services (in particular support to people with fewer opportunities) that need to be "mobile" together with the participants when going to a far place or, all the more, abroad." (p. 6f.)

In the annex glossary of the programme guide, a shorter and slightly different definition of 'Youth With Fewer Opportunities' is given, elaborating further on the idea of discrimination. This term is somewhat hidden within the social obstacles in the long definitions, along with mentioning migration backgrounds on the same level as the examples taken from obstacles' names:

individuals who for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, a migrant background, or for reasons such as disability and educational difficulties or for any other reasons, including those that can give rise to discrimination under article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental rights of the European Union, face various obstacles compared to their peers" (European Commission, 2023, p. 105).

SALTO Inclusion & Diversity displays a similar definition, also based on obstacles: namely social, economic and geographical obstacles, as well as disabilities, educational difficulties, cultural differences, and health problems. In addition, the definition includes a link to responsibility and agency in stating that "young people with fewer opportunities are young people who, largely due to their personal situation and sometimes also due to the choices they make, face different and/or more difficult obstacles in their lives than other young people." (SALTO Inclusion & Diversity, Who are we talking about?) This phrasing alludes to a graduation in the level of difficulty young people face, no longer distinguishing between those who do not face any to those who face one or several obstacles, while also highlighting the different realities and experiences of youth within each category.

The European Commission's annual report for 2018–2019 gives the definition of YWFO a slightly different twist, highlighting their increased need for support in comparison to other youth: "People with fewer opportunities – individuals who need additional support due to the fact that they are at a disadvantage compared to their peers because of various obstacles." (European Commission, 2020a, p. 29). Considering that the identification of YWFO is mainly used in the programme in order to designate additional resources, this definition comes with the circular argument that the youth eligible for additional support, are indeed the young people requiring additional support. This attempt to simplify the complexity of the definition would require, hence, additional guidelines to identify the additional support needs in order to be practically useful.

This list could be continued, but the examples already show that there is not one unique definition of YWFO in use, although a certain common ground can be identified. All definitions share the ambition to include everybody who should be included, precisely by leaving the definition of the latter very open. The definition's breadth can be positive, allowing different actors to adapt to their local realities and giving options to be as inclusive as possible in considering youth eligible for further support. The explicitly mentioned obstacles or barriers with their non-exhaustive lists can then be seen as guidelines to identify the most relevant target groups. Organisations are currently asked to indicate their reach of YWFO in their application, and the programme guide mentions the inclusion of YWFO within the award criteria (European Commission, 2023, p. 64). The breadth of the definition can then be a handicap in itself, as the non-exhaustive lists leave a broad scope for including youth facing rather low and very high obstacles, giving rise to biased answers. This issue brings into question the usefulness of this specific indicator for enhancing the inclusiveness of the programme. In the initial RAY study, we found a tendency to indicate a higher number of YWFO in the applications than after completion of the activities, potentially hinting at a certain optimism in reaching these youth or a bias to indicate reaching a higher amount of YWFO in order to receive the funding (Akarçeşme & Fennes, 2020).

Issues with the definition of YWFO have also been a topic in the interviews for this study. One of the stakeholders believes that organisations tend to underestimate their reach of YWFO in general. The National Agency therefore offers training courses to help them identify these youth, rather than focussing on actually better reaching and working with them. Another stakeholder believes that organisations answer the question haphazardly. At times they indicate reaching fewer and at times more YWFO than they actually reach, because they either do not know enough about their participants' backgrounds or understand the definition in different ways. For both stakeholders, the main challenge is thus to support organisations in understanding the definition and identifying the YWFO they reach. This issue with understanding the definition is also supported by previous research on coaching and mentoring in the European Solidarity Corps, in which "[u]nderstanding the concept of young people with fewer opportunities according to the programme guide" was identified as essential for quality coaching and a core competence for mentors (Pintea, Ples & Markovic, 2023, p. 82, 104).

None of the interviewed stakeholders mentioned a complete definition or each of the seven groups of obstacles in our interviews. Nevertheless, several made direct reference to certain obstacles and most mentioned more than one profile of YWFO, even if they only focus on one profile in their work. One obstacle that is rather easy to identify and address seems to be 'geographical obstacles', and in particular the subgroup of youth

living in remote areas. One stakeholder argues that organisations struggle with knowledge on mental health issues or family problems of their participants, but it is easy for them to identify youth from remote areas, leading them to focus on those in their answers. Another layer to this reasoning might exist, as another National Agency interviewee mentions that youth from remote areas are easily reached and engaged in activities because they welcome the chance to visit the capital, for example. Youth from remote areas are thus not only easy to identify, but also rather easy to engage. In contrast, youth with a disability, young parents, young people living in foster care or receiving social welfare should ideally be similarly easy to identify, but may be much more difficult to engage and involve in the programme. Furthermore, additional funding necessary to attend to these groups is likely much more difficult to predict than the funding required for the transportation and accommodation of rural youth. A consequence of the lack of reliability of the organisations' indications regarding their reach of YWFO is that it cannot be assessed how inclusive the programme or its different strands and actions actually are, or how this inclusiveness has developed over time. Moreover, as the indicator only asks for YWFO in general, there is no data at all regarding different target groups within this group, making it impossible to know which youth is particularly hard to reach or factually excluded from the programme.

Beyond the definition of YWFO themselves, an issue emerges with the definition of the target line: in other words, how many YWFO is it necessary to reach. The annual target share of YWFO is defined at 30 % for both programme generations, which was outperformed for 2018–19, while data for the current programme generation is currently not yet available (European Commission, Programme performance overview). In the annual report on 2018–2019, the European Commission (2020a, p. 32) claims that participants with fewer opportunities represent 46 % of the participants on average, with Denmark reaching the lowest share (7 %) and Portugal the highest (76 %). In the comparison of action types, it was the now discontinued Traineeships and Jobs that reached the highest share of participants with fewer opportunities (57 % on average), followed by volunteering (46 %). Note that no data for Solidarity Projects was available (p. 36).

In the study at hand, such disparities are confirmed. While one stakeholder criticises that the majority of participants are not YWFO and that youth with disabilities are underrep-

resented in the programme in comparison to their share of the eligible age group, another stakeholder believes that reaching 30 to 40 % of YWFO according to organisations' applications is quite high for a programme open to everybody, despite the fact that there is still work to be done. Another National Agency interviewee also refers to the expenditures for YWFO to estimate that they reach a rather high share, but doubts that all profiles are reached equally well. While this stakeholder identifies youth with disabilities as being less included, another National Agency interviewee claims to specifically focus on organisations working with people with disabilities and homeless people to ensure their inclusion. The latter believes that YWFO make up over 50 % of the applications at this National Agency. This statistic indicates that huge differences between national contexts exist and that a common understanding of what would be a desirable target line is missing.

4.2 Programme's funding for inclusion of YWFO

The European Solidarity Corps offers additional funding for the inclusion of Youth With Fewer Opportunities (YWFO). However, as was already shown in the section on complexities, many organisations and at times even National Agency staff do not know about all the funding options Furthermore, receiving this funding comes with additional paperwork, increasing the bureaucratic threshold even more:

> **❝** *[that not more organisations seek including as many YWFO as possible] is kind of disappointing but it's difficult you know practically to engage in this let me call it this practical paperwork and mess that is coming with this (...) If it was easier to do it, probably more people would be able to do it.*
> *(beneficiary/umbrella organisation)*

Several stakeholders claim, furthermore, that the additional funding is not enough and does not cover the increase of other costs, for example the higher rent for an accessible flat or the additional transport costs for youth from remote areas. The general idea seems to be that organisations have to dedicate more resources to attending YWFO than they receive, so the incentive for organisations not usually working with this youth is low. One stakeholder criticises that the funding cannot cover staff costs, though the workload for staff increases significantly when attending YWFO: "The structure of the European Solidarity Corps makes

it almost impossible to include Young People With Fewer Opportunities because of the lack of funding." (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

These issues with funding for inclusion add on top to the already described general issues with funding that affect YWFO just as much or even more than other youth. In particular youth with few economic resources cannot afford, for example, to take part in the programme when the pocket money is too low to cover the costs of daily living. While other youth may have resources to draw upon, certain YWFO might be factually excluded from the programme through this underfunding. One stakeholder mentions how organisations jump in to support YWFO, for example buying them laptops or covering their phone costs, as they are also more likely to arrive without the devices necessary for work. This increases the costs for organisations attending YWFO further, while a lack of resources could also affect the experience negatively.

Another issue with the funding for inclusiveness is a lack of flexibility. While this is considered a general challenge, it applies particularly to YWFO, as it is very difficult for organisations to identify from the start the amount of additional funding a concrete young person with fewer opportunities requires. Several stakeholders mention an improvement in this as organisations can by now apply for additional funding after the selection of their applicants. Quick adaptations are, however, still considered difficult as became evident when mental health issues increased in the wake of the pandemic and the war (see Pandemic effects on participant level).

In a nutshell, the following changes to the funding would help turning the programme more inclusive:
- Increase the funding (both generic and inclusion specific);
- Decrease the amount of paperwork;
- Communicate funding options better;
- Offer flexible funding to adapt when new challenges arise;
- Offer funding for all additional costs, including staff;
- Share and foster best practices.

4.3   Thresholds

A main issue appearing repeatedly in all interviews are the high thresholds that can prevent youth and organisations from taking part in the programme. This affects the outreach and impact of the Programme in general and particularly its inclusiveness. All the challenges tackled above contribute to these thresholds and increase them (see Challenges and needs).

Overall, the high administrative burden, complexities, English-only materials and non-functioning IT tools represent a high threshold for young people just as much as for organisations.

66 *The programme it requires a lot of coaching and mentors to make young people to do it. But it should be so easy that they're empowered themselves. I think this that you need help to do it, is already an error, there is a mistake. (support structure)*

Previous research has identified the "poor Several stakeholders claim, furthermore, that the additional funding is not sufficient and does not cover the increase in other costs; for example, the higher rent for an accessible flat or the additional transport costs for youth from remote areas. The general idea seems to be that organisations have to dedicate more resources to attending YWFO than they receive, so the incentive is low for organisations not usually working with this youth. One stakeholder criticises that the funding cannot cover staff costs, though the workload for staff increases significantly when attending YWFO: "The structure of the European Solidarity Corps makes it almost impossible to include Young People With Fewer Opportunities because of the lack of funding." (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

Previous research has identified the "poor command of foreign languages" as "among the most common reasons for their [young people's and organisations'] reluctance to engage in cross-border volunteering activities" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 74). In the same study, "79 % of programme participant organisations agreed/strongly agreed with the statement that the Online Linguistic Support (OLS) provided by the European Solidarity Corps programme does not prepare participants sufficiently for their cross-border mobility" (European Commis-

sion, 2020b, p. 83). Our stakeholders mentioned that in some national contexts where local funding alternatives exist, Solidarity Projects becomes more attractive for young people with a migration background who are more fluent in English than in the local languages. Some prefer to apply to the European Solidarity Corps despite all its other requirements just because of the English application process. This observation shows, nevertheless, how important language barriers are and how likely the English-only approach in the European Solidarity Corps increases the threshold for many other young people (and likely also organisations) to participate – an issue easily addressed through translations as in Erasmus+. What is disempowering for some young people, because they have to seek additional support, directly excludes others with less chances to access support.

Recommendations to tackle these challenges are:
● Prepare short and concise overviews explaining the main programme features and actions;
● Translate material to other languages, including non-official languages spoken by youth with a migration background;
● Lower the administrative burden;
● Make access to the youth portal easier;
● Ensure that IT tools function properly.

Several stakeholders mention issues with the age limit from 18 to 30. This limit excludes both younger and older youth and makes the promotion of the programme through schools less inclusive, as many young people are no longer in schools when they turn 18, but younger youth are little interested in a programme they cannot yet take part in. Aligning the age limits with those from Erasmus+ could also lower the complexities of understanding the two different youth programmes. However, several stakeholders also discuss options for further distinctions in age limits for different actions or target groups (see The European Solidarity Corps: a youth or a volunteering programme?).

Comparing the different actions analysed in this report, namely Solidarity Projects and volunteering activities (individual and team volunteering), many stakeholders perceive in particular that Solidarity Projects come with a very high threshold, as the project design and thus all related administrative steps are on the young people's shoulders. Though the action does not include cross-border mobility (see Confusing diversity of actions and strands), and the funding for Solidarity Projects is rather small, young people have to go through a procedure similar to that for organi-

sations, with long legal documents only available in English. This is a direct contradiction to the expressed hope that this action would make the Programme more inclusive (see The European Solidarity Corps: an inclusive programme). Previous research on coaching of Solidarity Projects has shown that some coaches take on a very strong role, sometimes even writing the application for the young people and reducing the youth-led character of this type of project (Pintea, Ples & Markovic, 2023). These coaches argued that without their involvement "the project would never get approval" (p. 81) and that in particular YWFO struggle simply to meet all the requirements. This shows that the high administrative burden stands in conflict with the youth-led approach, particularly excluding YWFO. The same report states that not all young people know about the possibility to get a coach (p. 82), that no lists of coaches or measures to match youth and coaches are available and that "young people are expected to reach out to a coach themselves" (p. 82). All this points to further issues with the inclusiveness of the programme because the necessary support is not equally accessible for everyone. Once again, the interviewees in the study at hand see great potential in Solidarity Projects that is not utilised to its fullest. The idea of Solidarity Projects is praised, not only for inclusiveness but also to empower young people to develop their own youth-led projects. The concrete implementation is, however, disempowering as the threshold for participation is very high. In some national contexts it seems that the informal groups of young people applying for Solidarity Projects mainly consist of young people who were already active before and simply apply to achieve funding for activities they are carrying out anyway.

In another study, "91 % of the organisations surveyed agreed with the statement that it is hard for young people to gather together and initiate a solidarity project on their own, without the support of an organisation" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 79). Many National Agencies encourage young people to seek the support of organisations or reach out to schools to engage them in supporting Solidarity Projects. In other contexts, such attempts are seen more critically, arguing that this could make the projects less youth-led and therefore undermine the objective. Several interviewees share further ideas on how to reduce the threshold to participating in Solidarity Projects (for a discussion of the latter see also Confusing Diversity of Actions and Strands):
● Reducing the administrative burden, in particular shortening and translating the legal documents to national languages;

- Only requiring project ideas for an application, allowing young people to design the details of the projects once the funding is granted with the support of their National Agency or an organisation.

One of the interviewed stakeholders expresses the belief that if the bureaucratic burden was lowered, Solidarity Projects could actually become the most inclusive format of the European Solidarity Corps, precisely because they allow young people to work in their local community and do not require international mobility – which can be off-putting and scary in particular for some YWFO. Team volunteering is often perceived as the most inclusive action by National Agency staff, partly as a result of allowing local youth to join the international teams without requiring them to be mobile and go abroad. One National Agency expresses the idea that this format is particularly meant for YWFO, so they reject team volunteering that does not include them. In the eyes of this stakeholder this should be turned into a generic requirement in all countries, so no non-inclusive team volunteering could take place within the European Solidarity Corps. No matter if Solidarity Projects or team volunteering become the most inclusive actions of the Programme, fostering inclusion in one place does not mean that efforts to make the other actions more inclusive can cease. Inclusion means that YWFO should be able to participate in all activity types.

A beneficiary organisation working with young people with disabilities argued that team volunteering is not at all possible for them, as they already struggle to find accessible flats for one or two volunteers at once. It would be nearly impossible to find enough flats for a bigger group of youth with reduced mobility. This shows that even if team volunteering could be the most inclusive action, limitations in the number of accessible placements persist.

Mobility as a threshold to participating in the programme resonates with the recommendation of one stakeholder to offer more local opportunities for volunteering experiences, including individual volunteering. The threshold to participating would be lower if young people did not have to travel abroad, and they might at the time be more interested in volunteering for their local community. Again, special caution is needed to prevent developing a version of 'light' participation for YWFO, relegating them to these options rather than ensuring that all youth have the chance to take part in any action.

Regarding individual volunteering, the threshold seems to depend as well on the concrete description of the offer, as one stakeholder believes that there are offers that look like "job descriptions" and thus exclude youth with less qualifications. Having specific projects only addressing YWFO seems to be in several contexts one strategy to increase their participation. One stakeholder cautions, nevertheless, that projects specifically aiming at YWFO can be good for some youth but bad for others. The individuality of each young person has to be considered, and their needs cannot be generalised. In this context, the worry is expressed that the programme is moving towards more generic approaches in reaching out to and working with young people, rather than offering individualised solutions.

To visualise the different thresholds better, the image of staircases fits well:

FIGURE 1
Activity Types and Thresholds
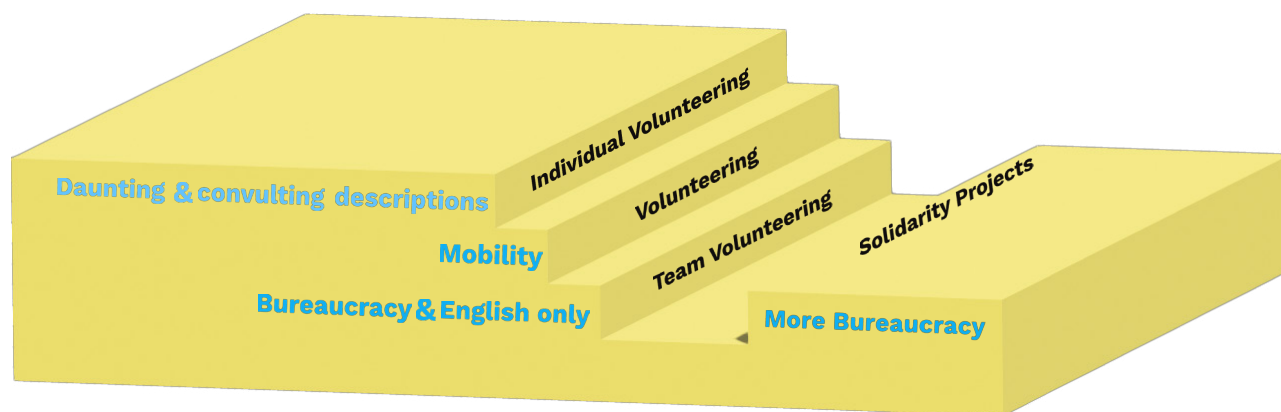
Source: Authors' own elaboration

While figure 1 depicts the different thresholds our stakeholders mentioned for the displayed activity types, we have to keep in mind that what is a threshold for some, can be an obstacle or even a reward for others. Mobility, for example, is certainly very attractive for many young people, but can be a high threshold for youth with certain disabilities and an insurmountable obstacle for a refugee not legally allowed to cross borders. The solution is then not necessarily to demolish the stairs, but to offer additional support for those who want to climb them and alternative options for those who cannot currently envision crossing them, but would still like to take part.

Yet again, caution is needed when working on the accessibility of the programme. As one interviewed stakeholder warned, alternative forms of participations should be available, but should not be imposed onto volunteers, just as YWFO should not be pushed towards one action type only, merely because it is more accessible for them. For example, if a volunteer wants to volunteer remotely from their place of residence as an online volunteer, this could be an option making it possible for certain youth to become a part of the programme, such as young parents who would otherwise not join. However, youth who require high levels of support to make mobility possible should not be pushed into online volunteering with the argument that the necessary support is difficult or impossible. The latter is particularly true for youth with disabilities who are, according to an interviewee, way too often pushed into online formats to allow their participation, for example in formal education, rather than making the necessary changes to make our society truly accessible for them. One of the interviewed stakeholders comments on a debate on age limits in this regard, mentioning organisations asking for an increase of the upper age limit to 35 years for youth with disabilities to compensate for the additional access barriers. The interviewee highlights, however, that the ideal solution should not be compensation but real change. Ideally, all youth would have the same chances to take part in the programme within the same age limit, so no compensatory extensions would be necessary. Currently, the programme reproduces the society's exclusion of YWFO, offering them fewer opportunities to take part in the programme. Once this changes, the programme could become a model for other programmes and society as a whole.

The following quote also reminds us that when examining this topic, we have to avoid idealising YWFO in any way. Just as other youth, their experience in the programme might be only margin-

ally fruitful. Their inclusion into the programme should not be fostered because it can have a bigger impact on them and the communities; it should be fostered because they have the same right to take part.

" *When you give the opportunity to young disabled people to do it, they will take the opportunity and they will grab it and yeah they will make the most out of it. Of course not all of our volunteers were successful. We had also some not so great examples, but OK that's fine. (...) But overall the percentage is very good. (...) Most often we see that these people evolve and get really much from it and use this project for very good options opportunities afterwards." (beneficiary/umbrella organisation, adapted)*

4.4   Structural barriers

Above we have shown the different thresholds young people can encounter when considering taking part in the Programme's actions. In this section we focus on even stronger exclusions, namely on structural barriers hindering some YWFO to take part in the Programme. Three profiles mainly affected are: youth with disabilities, youth depending on social welfare, and youth with difficulties crossing borders. While the focus is on these barriers in the following, the measures proposed to address them could also lower the thresholds for all youth in general to take part in the programme.

Both the Council Recommendation of 20 November 2008 on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union and the EU Youth Strategy for 2019–2027 encourage "Member States to promote the engagement of youth in solidarity activities, and to review and remove legal and administrative barriers to cross-border solidarity as well as improving the recognition of such experiences" (EC 2020b, p. 15). However, according to previous research "the Recommendation was deemed insufficiently ambitious, lacking concrete measures and connections to other EU programmes and to instruments such as Erasmus+" (EC 2020b, p. 102) and according to insights from the stakeholders interviewed for this study, the mentioned issues continue.

Regarding youth with disabilities, our stakeholders criticised that the European Solidarity Corps portal and the available information material are not accessible, screen-readers are not working, information videos are not translated into sign languages, no easy-to-read information is available, and important documents are only avail-

able in English. Fixing several of the measures mentioned would lower the access threshold for young people in general. Easy-to-read information, translations into national languages, and a more user-friendly, simplified application procedure make sense for everybody and all strands and actions.

At the level of organisations, rather few placements for young people with disabilities are available (see also European Commission, 2020a), since many organisations and their offices are not accessible themselves. Further, those who could offer an accessible working environment struggle to find accessible flats for their volunteers.

❝ *The majority of volunteers are not disadvantaged young people even though the programme has this base. I think it's still hard. I know in one case it took me 5 years to find a project for a young person with a disability. (…) I would say I was really into the field and knew organisations, so it was not that… (…) I think that's still the practice." (support structure)*

Previous research has identified people with disabilities as being particularly excluded from volunteering programmes. "In the UK, one in 10 people who have never volunteered claimed that a disability or illness has prevented them from doing so. Mental and physical health problems were the most commonly identified reasons for a lack of opportunities among people who did not participate in EVS" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 78). This previous research also identified issues with the health insurance covering the costs of "chronic illnesses or disabilities" (p. 79), further contributing to the exclusion of affected youth. "In some instances, low awareness on the part of local authorities about EU legislation concerning health and social insurance regulations for volunteers was also identified as a challenge to cross-border volunteering" (European Commission, 2020b, p. 65). Considering the legal recognition of degrees of disability, this group is relatively easy to identify, allowing a comparison of shares of youth with disabilities in the eligible population and the participants. For other YWFO this is much more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. One stakeholder believes, although there are no statistics in this respect, that there are fewer placements for YWFO in general and that this deficit partially explains why they participate less.

Youth depending on social welfare face additional barriers to joining the programme (European Commission, 2020b). One stakeholder believes that the programme is not attractive for young people who would have to give up benefits that are higher than the financial support they would receive through the programme. This deterrent links back to the low pocket money, which is not considered enough for many European cities and regions (see Funding). A stakeholder from a National Agency mentions how young people have actually lost their right to receive social welfare again after interrupting it to temporarily become a volunteer. It is theoretically possible to get back on social welfare once the volunteering experience ends, but it depends on every individual case and requires the affected youth and organisations to get in touch with the young people's case managers to ensure they do not lose their benefits. This requirement increases the workload and the threshold to participation further. In other national contexts, in particular in countries whose volunteering tradition is still developing (see mapping European Commission 2020b, p. 22), it might be very difficult or even impossible to get back into the welfare system after the volunteer experience – factually excluding this youth.

Youth with difficulties crossing borders are young people with a precarious residence status; for example, many refugees and young people from third countries who need to apply for a visa to be able to complete their volunteering. While the first group can at least participate in domestic activities offered by the European Solidarity Corps in their country of residence, the latter are often factually excluded or very limited in their choice of host countries (see also Tahmaz, 2021). Issues with a visa depend on the legal framework for international volunteers, which in most countries is non-existent. In some national contexts, international volunteers have to apply for work visas and/or need a permanent residence permit for volunteering activities longer than three months (European Commission, 2020b). According to interviewed stakeholders, visa issues have become worse over the last years. The topic is recurrent in almost all interviews. Several stakeholders describe negative experiences with volunteers having to reduce their stay from one year to three months or less because their visa was not issued earlier. As this frustration can turn the whole volunteering experience more negative for the volunteer and the organisation, an increasing number of organisations are deciding against applicants from countries with known visa issues, factually excluding them from the programme. Attending preparatory activities before the actual start of the volunteering, e. g. trainings in the host country, is a step even harder to reach. These activities are principally intended for YWFO to

enable them a smoother start into their volunteering; but due to such obstacles, youth from third countries cannot receive the same support as other YWFO within the programme. It is noteworthy that youth from third countries are not directly mentioned within the definition of YWFO and are thus not directly eligible for additional funding, despite the fact that our stakeholders have shown clearly how a visa issue can be an important obstacle to their life chances and the participation in this programme.

❝ *[There is] the need to address visa challenges of volunteers taking part in the ESC that are not part of the Schengen countries (...) In some cases they [organisations] decide not to go with it which is extremely sad but I've seen this many times that how this process can go on and on and on (...) it's just bureaucratically a nightmare and you also don't know how long it will take for it to be successful or to be solved (...) yeah it is effectively discrimination but at the end of the day it is not something I can blame them on because if you know that this is something that the country you're living in is not giving this opportunity to really make sure that this person is going to be able to come this is going to be a horrible experience for the organisation but especially for the volunteer. I've seen it myself (...) [a volunteer from another programme] had to wait 5 6 months while their volunteering had started already and it's a horrible process to go through so it's not something I can blame them on." (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)*

All in all, it seems that in particular national administration is not in sync with the EU programme, making the inclusion of certain profiles of YWFO very difficult or even impossible.
Summarising, the following recommendations have been mentioned:
- More accessible materials and portal (translations, easy-to-read, screen-readers, etc.);
- Preference to organisations with accessible offices and encouraging others to become more accessible;
- Promotion of accessible housing;
- Better and unified legal recognition of volunteers;
- Unified legal framework for volunteering (European Commission, 2020b);
- Fast-track visa for volunteers from third countries;
- Solution for volunteers with precarious residence status (e. g. refugees);
- Unified guarantee that a volunteer can get back on social welfare or other benefits they interrupted for their participation.

4.5   Lack of promotion

The lack of promotion towards certain organisations and youth in general has already been a topic above (see Promotion). The issues stated there apply even more so to YWFO.

This lack of awareness correlates with socio-economic differences among young people, with persons from disadvantaged background often reported as being less informed and aware about volunteering opportunities and the benefits of volunteering. Correspondingly, knowledge of volunteering opportunities among people from rural regions or less affluent families is significantly lower than that among young persons from urban and more affluent backgrounds. (European Commission, 2020b, p. 64f.)

As shown above (see Promotion), the European Commission hardly engages in promotion at all, and promotion strategies at the National Agency level seem to depend mainly on the concrete staff in charge. Further, there is no overarching strategy, no generic material, no sharing of best practices etc. Reaching youth for concrete activities is mainly left up to the funded organisations. One of our interviewees expresses that inclusiveness is in general a burden placed onto the organisations: they have to reach the young people and attend to them with insufficient support from the other levels (see Lack of Support). In the eyes of this stakeholder, to make the programme truly inclusive, all levels would need to engage more, in particular the European Commission:

❝ *Sometimes I wish the Commission would support it a bit more. In the sense also to have it more visible in their promotion."*
(support structure)

The interviewed stakeholders criticise the fact that promotional material hardly ever displays YWFO. There has been a certain positive change, but the few exceptions are less visible than the usual promotional material. Even if promotion reaches YWFO, if the material does not include the message 'This is for you! You can participate', they are not actually being reached. One stakeholder discusses this a bit further regarding sign language translations. When asking for such translations, the answer was that very few people speak international sign language so it makes no sense to translate into it. While the former is true, the latter is a fallacy for this stakeholder. Sign language translations are not only about reaching people who can understand it, but also about showing that sign language speakers are welcome

in the programme and that the programme strives for inclusion. As long as promotion material is more focussed on how many people can understand it and does not consider the message it conveys to everyone, the whole approach cannot be called inclusive.

❝*So yeah this project is kind of inclusive. There's a lot of provisions for personal assistance, for access needs for a lot of stuff. Not perfectly, but a lot is possible. And people don't know it. National Agencies don't know it or don't know it properly, they don't want to support because I don't know. (...) How many stories have you heard about disabled volunteers? (...) disabled people don't get the information, this doesn't reach to them, we try our best, but even the material they produce their reports, their videos don't have disabled people, you see advertisement about how fantastic is this and that but you don't see disabled people on the posters on the videos (...) We need to push to also show the diversity. And this is not only young people but to show to organisations and to national agencies to say look your audience is not only young people without disabilities but you know this people also can do it."* (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

Revisiting the general promotion strategies to reach young people (see Promotion), namely the work with multipliers, peer-to-peer promotion and social media, additional issues in reaching YWFO become visible. Considering the age limit of 18, few young people remain in educational institutions when they become eligible to participate, and particularly "early school-leavers", "school dropouts", and "lowly or non-qualified persons" (to quote again the SALTO definition) have long since left the institutions. Peer-to-peer promotion would, in the eyes of several stakeholders, work ideally with YWFO who took part in the programme and promote it to other youth with a similar profile. Nevertheless, one of our stakeholders working on peer-to-peer promotion explained that as difficult as it is to reach these young people through the programme, reaching them to further engage in promotion activities is even more of a challenge.

The work with organisations dealing with specific subgroups of YWFO can make the promotion more tailor-made. One National Agency is currently seeking the engagement of organisations working with youth with a migration background to better reach these individuals. Another National Agency interviewee mentioned the work with specialised centres and institutions caring for people with disabilities. This is, however, viewed with

skepticism by an interviewee from a beneficiary/ umbrella organisation criticising institutional care and would, in the eyes of this stakeholder, foster exclusion rather than making the programme more inclusive. This perspective indicates that not all organisations and services working with a specific target group may be indicated for this promotion. In the case of youth receiving social welfare benefits, rather than only reaching out to their case officers once a young person expressed an interest in becoming a volunteer, the social welfare services could also be used as multipliers. Apart from encouraging more YWFO to take part in the programme, this support could also decrease the issues this youth encounters when wishing to participate, as their case officers would be more aware of the programme.

Considering the lack of available placements and the overall heavy workload for National Agency staff, it seems comprehensible that they do not engage further in the promotion of the programme towards youth who would be difficult to match with an organisation. Nevertheless, as logical as all these different tendencies appear, taken together they make the programme less and less inclusive, factually excluding many potential participants (see Factual exclusion).

Recommendations to improve the promotion towards YWFO are:
- Develop an EU strategy to reach YWFO and share related material and good practice examples with National Agencies and other relevant stakeholders;
- Prepare more inclusive promotion material, displaying YWFO and clearly conveying the message "This programme is for you. You can apply.";
- Seek multipliers to promote the programme, e. g. schools, youth work organisations, municipalities, sports clubs, services assisting youth with special needs (e. g. disabilities, social welfare receivers, etc.), NGOs and associations working with specific profiles (e. g. deaf community, migration backgrounds);
- Foster peer-to-peer promotion, and multiply efforts and incentives to gain YWFO for this promotion;
- Use and encourage the multipliers to use different channels (social media, face-to-face, etc.) to share the available material.

4.6   Factual exclusion

The overall analysis of our interviews shows various tendencies that can lead to the factual exclusion of some YWFO – in direct opposition to the European Solidarity Corps programme's aims. From the accounts of several stakeholders, we can deduce that currently it is in the hands of organisations to identify, reach and attend to YWFO. One stakeholder highlights that the responsibility for inclusion should not be the sole burden of organisations. Another interviewee questions if it is the organisations' role to be able to attend YWFO or if other agents should get involved when their support is needed. For any programme to be truly inclusive, the responsibility for inclusion should not be delegated to one level only, seeking instead a true engagement on all levels.

❝ *With the approach to the Quality Label, everything is put on the organisations, also more responsibility for inclusiveness. There are great organisations doing excellent work, but you can't leave this solely to the organisations." (support structure)*

Considering the described issues in reaching YWFO, one National Agency interviewee believes that organisations assess their options in reaching out to them before they even apply to the programme and do not include them if they think it is too difficult. This means that support options have to be communicated early on to prospective applicant organisations, and National Agencies may not receive a full picture of the existing support needs.

At the same time, the stakeholders agree that YWFO require additional support not everybody can offer and that the financial support the organisations can apply for does not actually cover the related costs. The idea of additional support is, as shown above, mentioned in the European Commission's annual report for 2018–2019 (2020a, p. 29) as an element of the definition of YWFO, showing that it lies at the very core of the understanding of this term. National Agencies and umbrella organisations mention repeatedly that organisations should be advised not to include YWFO they are not confident to be able to attend properly, profiles they have not worked with before, or those who do not have a strong supporting organisation to help them. However, insisting on the importance of the supporting organisation in doing so is tricky in and of itself. We have seen above that the current system leads to many applications without supporting organisations resulting in National Agencies and host organisations having to support young applicants here (see Excessive Workload). In a context where it is already difficult to find a supporting organisation, insisting on a particularly good supporting organisation can lead to the further exclusion of YWFO rather than ensuring their best support. One National Agency interviewee asks host organisations to be ready to take over the supporting organisation's role and to react to any crisis, for the experiences of the pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine have shown that anything can happen and that supporting organisations can disappear suddenly. Another National Agency interviewee recommends an increased recognition of organisations rejecting applicants they believe to be unable to attend properly.

The general idea seems to be that an organisation that cannot offer the best support should not take a certain person in. Previous research has also indicated that about one third of organisations have doubts regarding the capacity of YWFOs to volunteer (European Commission, 2020, p. 73). If organisations are already in doubt if YWFO would be useful volunteers for them, they receive an additional push to reject these youth when their own ability to attend them properly is put into doubt and the shortcomings of the additional funding are highlighted. Against this backdrop, it does not seem surprising that many organisations prefer not to reach out to YWFO or to only focus on certain rather easy-to-deal-with profiles; for example, youth from remote areas. Ideally, there would be other organisations able to offer all young people the necessary support and a good experience. In reality, no such organisations exist, or way too few, so these decisions factually exclude many potential volunteers and leave them without an opportunity to live this experience at all.

❝ *If organisations have two applicants, one of them a YPWFO, they are more likely to choose the other person. For this, the organisations cannot be blamed necessarily, because they work against the background of limited resources and therefore might choose the person which needs less support." (National Agencies)*

For an organisation working mainly with YWFO, this scenario is painful:

❝ *This is painful you know. To think about it. Commission pays money they have this possibility and people who are responsible to make it happen they have no idea about it and they don't do it." (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)*

Schematically, we can say that the described structures translate into the following messages organisations receive currently regarding YWFO (Fig. 2):

FIGURE 2 **Messages Fostering Exclusion**

"YWFO need special support."

"YOU have to give this support."

"The additional funding is insufficient."

"If you can't offer the support, don't take them."

EXCLUSION
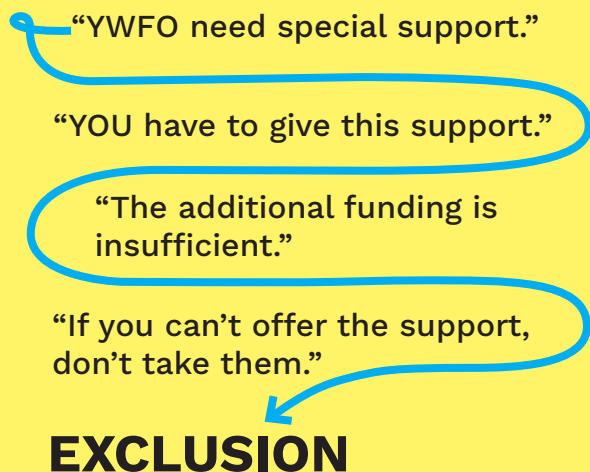
Source: Authors' own elaboration

In order to see how this tendency could be changed, a closer look at each message can be helpful.

"Youth with fewer opportunities need special support."

All interviewed stakeholders seem to agree on this message. However, a beneficiary organisation working mainly with people with disabilities is aware that this generic message without any concrete specification of which support is needed can scare organisations. The interviewees from this organisation believe that many organisations shy away from choosing applicants with a disability, because they are afraid to not know how to attend them well and how to support them best.

❝ *We need to work more with them [National Agencies, organisations] to make sure that they will know how to what is the support need, that they will prioritise these cases. In many countries, this is not the case and this is unfortunate."* *(beneficiary/umbrella organisation)*

The quote includes two main ideas that go beyond the generic message of a special support need: 1) YWFO should be prioritised and 2) organisations need to know the support need. While this depends on every case, organisations like the interviewed present themselves as ready to offer

support in this need analysis. If such an analysis would happen automatically for any young person applying to the programme, organisations would not even have to reach out to an organisation to support them in this needs analysis. They would receive the needs analysis together with the application. With such support the initial message could be turned into:

"This applicant requires additional support with x,y,z. These people have analysed the concrete support needs and explain them to you."

"YOU have to give this support."

As shown above, the workload and responsibility for organisations is currently very high as they are, among other tasks, the main responsible for attending YWFO without meaningful support and funding (see Lack of support). Several interviewees call for a better distribution of responsibilities and workload, a stronger engagement of the EC in the promotion of the programme, vbetter support of organisations, including trainings but also the work with local and international networks already prepared to attend youth with special needs. Main recommendations are to:

- Increase the funding for organisations;
- Increase the visibility of the European Solidarity Corps for YWFO;
- Increase the role of supporting organisations and the cooperation between supporting and hosting organisation;
- Ensure a better preparation of YWFO before their volunteering;
- Assess the special needs in advance of the volunteering, and inform the host organisation so they can prepare;
- Offer support (e. g. trainings) to help organisations adapt to the realities of YWFO and acquire the knowledge and skills to support them;
- Work with local support systems (e. g. social worker, psychologists) to attend YWFO's needs;
- Promote the sharing of best practices;
- Create and foster international networks for organisations that allow them to support each other (also in reaching participants) and to ensure applicants find suitable placements within the network even if the organisation receiving the application does not feel fit to take them.

If these ideas were applied and all levels got more involved in the support of YWFO, the initial message could turn into:

> ### "All of us together will give this support."

"The additional funding is insufficient."

Moving on to the next message, all interviewed stakeholders share the impression that the funding for inclusion is insufficient and comes with additional paperwork that increases the workload for applying organisations further. Nevertheless, several of the interviewed stakeholders do not seem to know all funding options and some express the idea that organisations and National Agencies do not know about them either and do not inform properly. If support needs would be analysed from the start, the funding available to attend the identified needs of an applicant could be ascribed automatically to the organisations selecting this youth, eliminating additional applications and paperwork completely. While this does not necessarily turn the existing funding sufficient, it would change the message towards organisations and making the mismatch between support needs and funding visible for each case could also allow for further advocacy to receive this funding. It could also become possible to create an additional pot for funding youth whose support needs are analysed to be higher than what is available, allowing to increase the available funding exceptionally further to turn the programme as inclusive as possible. All of this could happen even before an organisation selects the applicant, so no additional workload for the organisation emerges at all. The message for them could then be:

> ### "This is the additional funding you receive to offer the support."

"If you can't offer the support, don't take them."

Finally, the message that organisations should not select participants they are not confident to be able to support would then disappear completely or turn into:

> ### "Get in touch if you need support in determining if you can accommodate this youth."

Such a new message would also include the prioritisation idea within the selection process, rather than discouraging organisations to pick certain youth. Of course, for some organisations

it would still remain impossible to attend certain youth, for example young people with disabilities their offices are not accessible for. However, they could be able to include others and making their lack of accessibility more visible could also encourage them to tackle it.

The overall scheme would then look like this (Fig. 3):

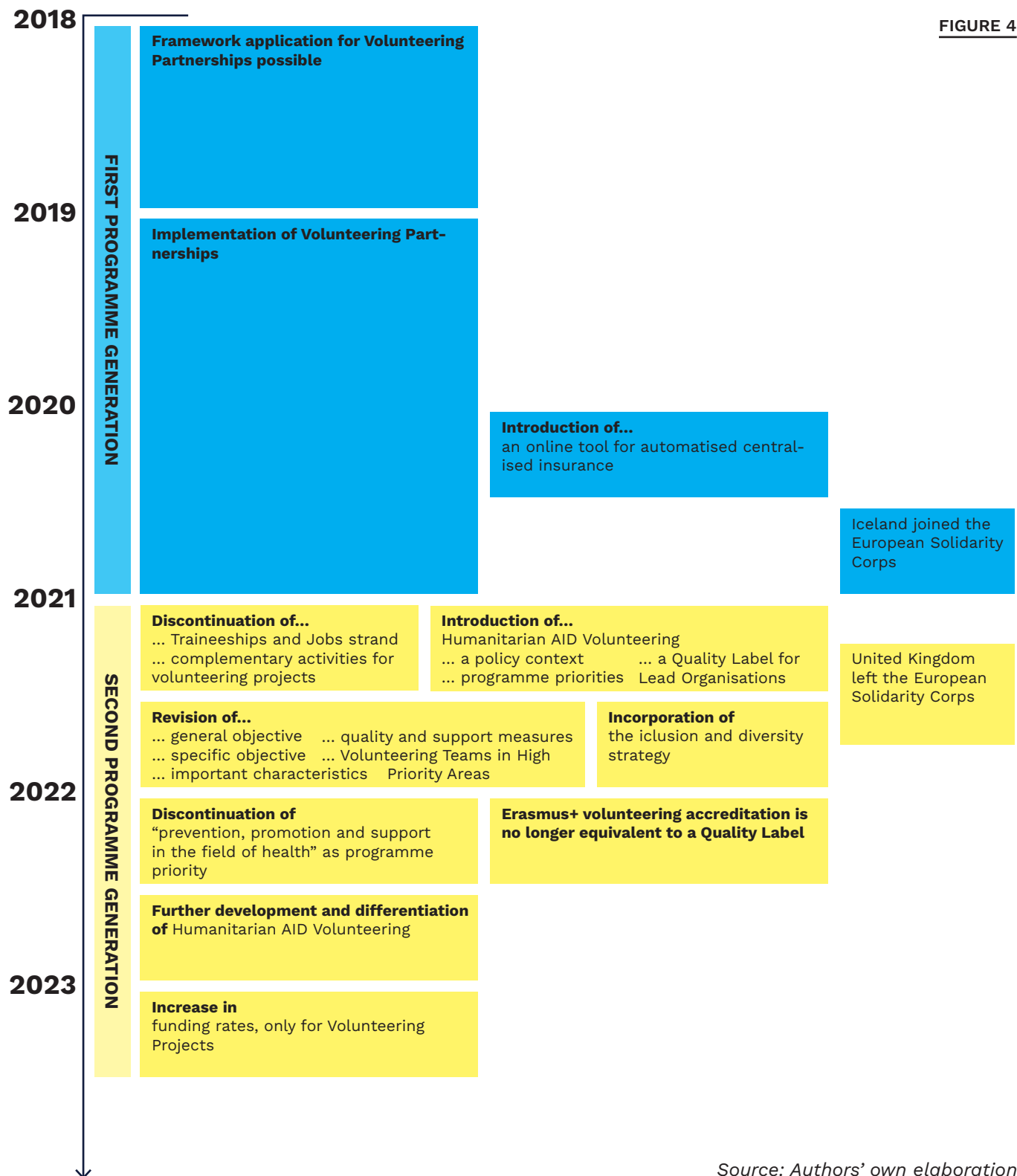FIGURE 3 **Messages Fostering Inclusion**
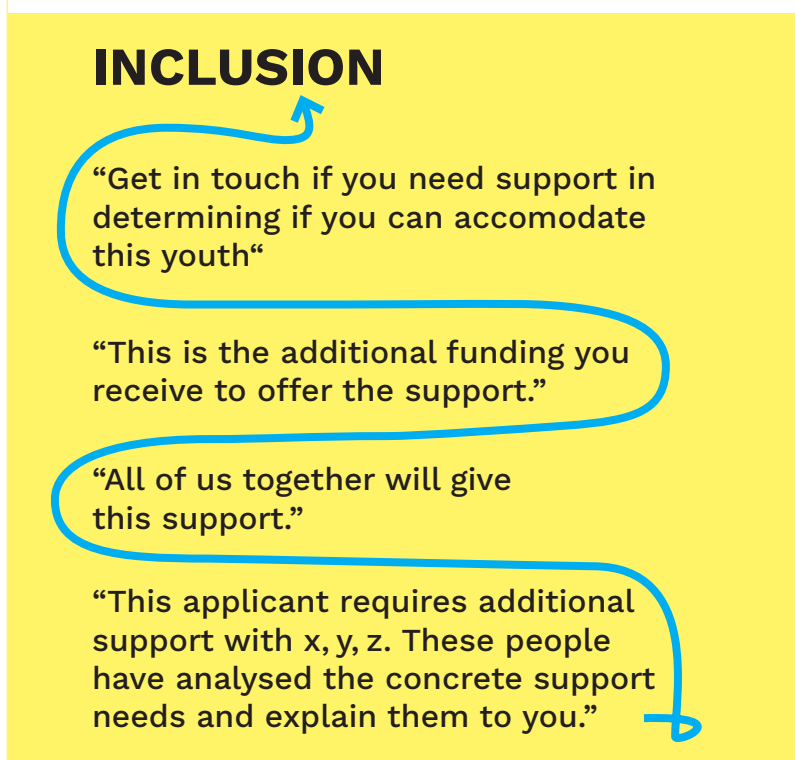
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Note that in this scheme the expression YWFO has disappeared as their identification as such would no longer be necessary, given that each applicant would receive their individual support needs analysis. These analyses would also allow the programme to monitor its inclusiveness much better. Besides, this less categorical approach could also allow for more flexibility in the adaptation when needs arise, as the increase of mental health issues among volunteers mentioned in many of our interviews. In this sense, we could add to the initial message the word "currently" ("This applicant currently requires additional support with x, y, z."), to highlight that these needs can change and options for a revision of the support need analysis could be included.

5

DEVELOPMENT OVER TIME AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

In this section we deal with the developments of the European Solidarity Corps since it was first introduced in 2018 and its perception by the stakeholders concerned with the programme. We consider legal changes in the programme guides, together with developments undergone by beneficiary organisations and socio-political factors that influenced the implementation of the programme. The changes between the annual programme guides serve as reference points to contextualise the stakeholders' attitudes and opinions which are the focal point of our analysis. To do so, we developed an overview of the major developments within the European Solidarity Corps by comparing the annual documents with each other (European Commission, 2018, 2019, 2020s, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2023):

FIGURE 4

2018

FIRST PROGRAMME GENERATION

Framework application for Volunteering Partnerships possible

2019

Implementation of Volunteering Partnerships

2020

Introduction of...
an online tool for automatised centralised insurance

Iceland joined the European Solidarity Corps

2021

SECOND PROGRAMME GENERATION

Discontinuation of...
... Traineeships and Jobs strand
... complementary activities for volunteering projects

Introduction of...
Humanitarian AID Volunteering
... a policy context   ... a Quality Label for
... programme priorities   Lead Organisations

United Kingdom left the European Solidarity Corps

Revision of...
... general objective   ... quality and support measures
... specific objective   ... Volunteering Teams in High
... important characteristics   Priority Areas

Incorporation of
the iclusion and diversity strategy

2022

Discontinuation of
"prevention, promotion and support in the field of health" as programme priority

Erasmus+ volunteering accreditation is no longer equivalent to a Quality Label

Further development and differentiation of Humanitarian AID Volunteering

2023

Increase in
funding rates, only for Volunteering Projects

Source: Authors' own elaboration

5.1 General attitudes towards the European Solidarity Corps over time

When the European Solidarity Corps was first announced in 2016, it came as a surprise for most stakeholders already involved in the European field of youth work, including many National Agencies and organisations in the field of practice. The initial reception of this news was received rather negatively for two reasons: firstly, the stakeholders felt overwhelmed and not involved in this big decision; secondly, the European Voluntary Service as the predecessor of the European Solidarity Corps was widely cherished within the field of youth work in Europe, causing its replacement by a new programme to seem like a negative development at first sight.

This attitude improved once the stakeholders got to know the European Solidarity Corps a little better. Two arguments which particularly stood out were the increased programme size, both financially and activity-wise, that lead to more opportunities for young people and organisations to participate, plus the emphasis on solidarity. Furthermore, they learned to cherish the stand-alone status of the European Solidarity Corps that separated European volunteering from other Erasmus+ activities. Over time, national agencies implementing and beneficiary organisations participating in the programme became familiar with its structure and more versatile in navigating the programme. In parallel, the development of the programme itself was valued, too, as initial issues in the programme structure, which were once even described as a "mess" (beneficiary/umbrella organisation), gradually levelled out.

Organisations from the volunteering sector valued the European Solidarity Corps right from the beginning. Some organisations explicitly had not engaged in the European Voluntary Service, because in their perception the focus relied too much on the individual volunteer rather than on community impact. For them, the introduction of the European Solidarity Corps came as a paradigm change that prompted them to engage in the programme.

Taking a look into the future, most interviewed stakeholders would like to see the European Solidarity Corps remain steady in its values and core structure and see it grow, regardless of the several issues still existing in the programme. These issues do not usurp the general intent of the Corps and should therefore be tackled rather than taken as an incentive to abandon the programme or re-integrate it into Erasmus+. To some interviewees, the latter would mean reducing it to a youth policy and learning-only programme again.

5.2 Development of the Quality Label

In the 2020 programme guide, the quality label is defined as an "organisation's entry ticket for the European Solidarity Corps" (European Commission 2020c, p. 16). The Quality Label certifies that an organisation obtains the motivation and capacity to implement activities that align with the principles of the European Solidarity Corps. It is obligatory for organisations to possess a Quality Label in order to participate in the programme. There are different Quality Labels for organisations performing a host role and a support role, with a Quality Label for the lead role and a specific Quality Label for Humanitarian Aid Volunteering being added to the process in 2021. Once granted, the Quality Label is valid for the course of a whole programme generation, with transition arrangements in-between the programme generations from 2018–2020 and 2021–2027 in place.

Overall, the Quality Label approach is seen as a good idea on a conceptual level. Beneficiary organisations report that after acquiring the Quality Label, applications for grants became much easier. In fact, the introduction of the Quality Label for lead organisations aimed specifically at lowering the threshold for accessing funding for Volunteering Projects. National Agencies, on the contrary, complained about new obstacles created by the introduction of Quality Labels, because of the lack of relevant knowledge about the beneficiary organisations. Because beneficiary organisations now apply for an annual grant request instead of singular projects, National Agencies have less information about concrete activities happening at a certain moment; for example, if an organisation is struggling to find partners or participants for their activities or if they are simply planning to implement their activities at a later phase of the programme generation. Thus, National Agencies are less capable of supporting struggling organisations than they were in the past, for example, when they were acting as matchmaker. The issue of matchmaking increases in significance as the role of a supporting organisation is not financially attractive against the background of the workload involved when executing the task to a full extent (see Excessive workload).

The Quality Label organisations database, which was established as a platform to find project partners, is mentioned neither by beneficiaries nor by National Agencies as a beneficial factor. The same applies to the European Solidarity Corps Portal's database for finding project participants. Instead, it is criticised that the programmes IT tools are still not working properly in 2023 (see Flexibility and IT tools).

5.3   Discontinuation of Traineeships and Jobs

When the European Solidarity Corps transformed from the old programme generation (2018–2020) to the new (2021–2027), one Action strand did not continue: Since 2021, the European Solidarity Corps does not fund Traineeship and Job activities anymore. The vast majority of interviewed stakeholders welcomed this development as a shift of emphasis towards a more solidarity and volunteering-focused programme. In the words of a support structure representative, "the programme became a volunteering programme" (support structure). Others note that the first programme generation was rather messy as a result of mixing up volunteering and occupational training, and that losing the Traineeship and Job strand made the European Solidarity Corps more coherent and comprehensible. Only one interviewee criticises the discontinuation, arguing that the traineeship and job strand was both an ideal way to support YWFO in finding their way into the labour market and in addressing a specific area of personal development which cannot be achieved by volunteering alone.

5.4   Adding Humanitarian Aid Volunteering

While one Action strand was abandoned, another was added. As already mentioned above (see Activity strands as assets of variety), the introduction of the Humanitarian Aid Volunteering strand, which was formerly the stand-alone programme EU Aid Volunteers, was regarded as further promotion of European volunteering under the umbrella of one legal framework. The transfer of the Action strand into the European Solidarity Corps was perceived as a flawed process, leaving coordination structures between relevant actors, the establishment of relevant training courses, and provision of useful material for beneficiaries up for improvement until today.

Also on a conceptual level, the unification of European volunteering under one legal framework can only go so far. It is noted that due to diverging regulations, such as the age limit for and requirements of volunteers, imbalances within the European Solidarity Corps arose. Furthermore, the fact that the new Action strand is only a sending programme gives the impression of reproducing colonial structures and power imbalances.

5.5   Development of beneficiary profiles

Regarding the profile of beneficiaries, several trends are reported by the interviewed stakeholders. As a disclaimer, it has to be stated that this report does not support the described developments with evidence provided by analysis of actual register data. However, the reported trends still hold some credibility due to the expert status of the interviewees.

First, it is observed that over the years more non-youth organisations applied for a Quality Label from the European Solidarity Corps. This increase indicates the success of National Agencies and the European Commission in promoting the programme both within the European field of youth work and beyond. At the same time, the increasing presence of non-youth organisations in the European Solidarity Corps realm simultaneously increases the demand for training and support for beneficiaries, as those organisations often lack the access to training options Erasmus+ provides to youth organisation staff. Secondly, one National Agency representative reports the tendency of less municipalities applying for funding. Why this is the case and whether this trend applies to more than this specific national context, needs to be further elaborated on in future research. Thirdly, it is stated that organisations and young people from fewer countries participate in the European Solidarity Corps. This trend is assigned to several causes: The United Kingdom dropped out in 2021 due to Brexit; Russian and Ukrainian organisations are participating less since February 2022 because of the Russian invasion; and the participation of organisations from Egypt, Belarus, Lybia, Syria and Israel is reported to be affected by politically unstable systems. Also, some stakeholders explain a decrease in third country participation due to the lack of funding for them (see Funding). The decrease in participating countries is not only interpreted on the level of organisations and young people having less opportunities to experience volunteering and mobility, but also as a

phenomenon that effectively lowers the impact on peace education through volunteering and therefore the social effect of the programme in general.

5.6 Stakeholder contribution to programme development

The interviewees reflections on their participation in the programme development and its effectiveness were rather ambiguous. Some stakeholders have the impression that their contribution had an influence and some do not, sometimes even to the extent of questioning if the programme is participatory at all:

❝ *Don't say it's [the programme is] participatory, when it's actually not." (National Agency)*

The latter perspective is partially ascribed to organisational approaches to feedback management within the European Solidarity Corps and with the European Commission that lead to confusion and stakeholders having to give the same feedback repeatedly (see Ineffective feedback loops). The stakeholders' perception of having minimal influence is furthermore closely linked to their experiences with the European Solidarity Corps' development over its short history and questions the European Union's official stance towards the Participation Strategy etc.

Many of the interviewed stakeholders have been involved in advisory or consultation processes or have published statements to contribute to the improvement of the European Solidarity Corps. The general impression is that feedback is often disregarded and that important decisions are motivated sheerly by political will, rather than including relevant stakeholders or using research evidence to develop them. While this criticism may be applicable to other EU programmes and policies, it is particularly relevant to the European Solidarity Corps, given the history of its abrupt introduction amidst the anniversary celebrations of the European Voluntary Service. Additionally, important decisions like the end of the Traineeships & Jobs strand or the inclusion of the Humanitarian Aid Volunteering strand were made without involving the interviewed stakeholders. This lack of transparency in decision-making processes is a concern for various stakeholders, including National Agencies. Some express feeling left out in the quality development of the European Solidarity Corps. Several interviewees convey uncertainty about the European Solidarity Corps' future and difficulty in predicting it. Rather

than participating in the programme's democratic development and improvement, creating a sense of ownership and belonging, many of these stakeholders have felt rather ignored. They are striving to make the best of a programme they cannot shape and whose future is beyond their realm of influence.

However, many interviewees maintained an optimistic outlook. They express hopes that the programme will improve, that their feedback will be taken into account, and that participation in the programme development will become more accessible over time. This sentiment was not limited to beneficiary organisations, but also extended to young people and in particular YWFO: "We need to make sure that disabled people are involved in the design also" (beneficiary/umbrella organisation). One stakeholder believes that the European Solidarity Corps is likely more open to suggestions for positive change, precisely because it is a young programme and less established than Erasmus+.

❝ *I am a positive person I am an optimistic person so I think it will get better and better and more and more people will do it and it will be more successful and more inclusive but we need to fight. make sure it's going into the right direction." (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)*

Particularly noteworthy is how stakeholders working on the inclusion of certain target groups plays an essential role in ensuring that changes lead to improvements and do not cause negative side-effects for others. Close collaboration with relevant stakeholders could lower the workload of staff developing the programme, ensuring better implementation from the start and, consequently, enhancing its overall impact.

5.7 Pandemic

When discussing the European Solidarity Corps' development over time, there are both internal factors, such as the discontinuation and introduction of programme strands, and external factors at play. The following sections will concern such external factors, starting with indisputably one of the most influential developments not only for the European Solidarity Corps, but for societies in general: the Coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic impacted the European Solidarity Corps on many levels, namely the participant, organisational and structural level.

5.7.1 Pandemic effects on organisational and structural level

Both umbrella organisations and National Agencies observe that organisations working with youth and volunteers have been heavily affected by the pandemic's impact on the European youth sector[6]. Even with the suspension of contact restrictions and a shared sense that the Coronavirus pandemic is over, organisations are still busy dealing with the aftermath and the ongoing process of recovering. National Agencies report that organisations are thus more concerned with themselves and less open to making new contacts and brokering partnerships necessary for certain activities within the programme, such as NET activities.

On a bureaucratic level, stakeholders have criticised an increased threshold for visa applications. While the European Solidarity Corps continued to accept Quality Label and project applications during the pandemic, the tendency of countries to close their borders created practical obstacles for young people seeking to participate. Interestingly enough, it has been reported that these visa issues prevail even after pandemic restriction policies ceased to exist, and were actually a problematic issue for international volunteering and mobility even before COVID-19 hit (European Commission, 2020b). One interviewee from an umbrella organisation complains about their branch organisations having to dedicate about 40 hours before finally receiving a valid visa for one volunteer.

Against the background of this enormous additional workload, some organisations seem to circumvent the problem by simply no longer selecting participants from countries with a 'weak' passport status. Exclusion of participants rooted in the outbreak of the pandemic also happened because some young people who were initially prevented from international volunteering by temporary border restriction policies exceeded the European Solidarity Corps age limit by turning 30 before these policies were abolished or expired. Thus, interested youth who were at the brink of the age limit when the pandemic hit were then structurally excluded from taking part in the programme for good. For youth organisations hosting, supporting and promoting European

Solidarity Corps activities, format changes to online volunteering and constant uncertainty as to whether or not planned activities were actually allowed to take place or had to be cancelled last minute caused frustration among participants and lowered their engagement. Additionally, the structural implementation of online volunteering led to further exclusion and put livelihoods in jeopardy, as funding and support for participants in online activities were inadequate as compared to their counterparts engaged in offline endeavors. Some stakeholders report volunteers giving up their jobs and accommodations in expectation of participating in an activity abroad, but when they were given the chance to volunteer online instead, they did not receive sufficient finances to also make ends meet in their own country.

Despite these difficulties, online volunteering also presented some upsides. Stakeholders described an air of flexibility and support and a spirit of collaborative effort among beneficiaries and National Agencies to make the programme work under the new circumstances. A study on e-volunteering within the European Solidarity Corps during the pandemic in Poland highlights that "volunteers continued to fulfil the needs of the local community. These needs changed as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, and so did the means to fulfil them" (Jeżowski & Poszytek, 2022, p. 3). Stakeholders convey the general sentiment that in times of contact and mobility restrictions, online volunteering was an adequate substitute to make at least some sort of volunteering experience possible. Nevertheless, online volunteering is not seen as a suitable alternative to fully replace the analogue participation in volunteering activities. These experiences thrive on direct interpersonal connections and a shared sense of community, solidarity and belonging. Additionally, interviewees have expressed concerns about the risk of deviating from the promotion of inclusion within the programme when introducing online volunteering as a general alternative to physical volunteering. This shift might lead to organisations offering online activities to people with disabilities rather than ensuring that placements are accessible or providing funding for personal assistants to accompany the participants abroad. Consequentially, some stakeholders recommend against further pursuing the implementation of online volunteering as a stand-alone activity at all. If, in accordance with the Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union 2022, which suggests that online volunteering can be used "as a comple-

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6   Among other reports, common conditions that hinder organisations involved in the European Youth Programmes during the pandemic are analysed in the transnational report of case studies within the research project RAY-COR (see Horta & Pitschmann, 2022, p. 11ff.). For a literature snapshot on the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the volunteering sector in general, see Strecker & Pitschmann 2020.

ment to physical mobility or even as a stand-alone format" (Council of the European Union, 2022, p. 20), it should be treated as an option that volunteers can choose willingly, rather than being imposed by National Agencies or beneficiaries as the easiest way of facilitating volunteering without having to allocate additional funds and efforts.

5.7.2   Pandemic effects on participant level

After the pandemic, the interviewed stakeholders observed a lower-than-expected level of interest among young people to participate in the European Solidarity Corps. This observation aligns with research findings of the study on European Solidarity Corps' Network Activities (see Kurki 2023, p. 22). It emerges against the background of divergent expectations, as National Agencies and beneficiary organisations had assumed that once mobility restrictions were lifted, young people would want to become as mobile as possible again. Yet, in some national contexts, the contrary seems to be the case. The rationale given by the stakeholders is that because of the pandemic, young people are now more concerned with making up for lost time in education and vocational qualifications rather than participating in the European Solidarity Corps, which is not seen as beneficial in this regard. Although this study lacks the means to verify these statements with quantitative data on the evolution of application rates, it should be noted that this perception is commonly held among various actors engaged in diverse areas of the programme, including National Agencies and beneficiaries. It is also worth mentioning that difficulties in finding volunteers already existed pre-pandemic. Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, a study on Volunteering Teams projects carried out by Polish organisations from 2018–2020 found that recruitment of volunteers was by far the biggest obstacle in implementing activities (see Jeżowski & Jastrzębska-Żebrowska, 2020, p. 56).

A study on the social, economic and mental health impact of COVID-19 on young people in Europe commissioned by the European Youth Forum on the effects of the pandemic on mental health of young people found that "[n]early two-thirds of young people may be affected by mental health and wellbeing issues throughout the pandemic", which also carry the risk of long-term effects on a psychological, educational and occupational level (Moxon, Bacalso & Șerban, 2021, p. 24). The study further explores policy responses to mental health developments and concludes that "there is no substantial Europe-wide response" (p. 29). The same applies to the European Solidarity Corps, even though the Council of Europe highlights "the importance of ensuring the security, safety and physical and mental health of all participants at all times" (Council of Europe, 2022 p. 6). While the interviewed stakeholders observe an increase in young people with mental health issues participating in the programme, beneficiary organisations are often left on their own to handle the responsibility of providing adequate support. For some organisations, this task presents a challenge, both because they do not have the competencies, concepts and structures to deal with mental health issues regularly, and because they are sometimes not aware of these issues beforehand. In some cases, mental health problems only became apparent during the volunteering activity, making it impossible for organisations to adequately prepare and sensibly select participants in advance. Nevertheless, beneficiary organisations were well aware of the topic during the pandemic and tried to tackle these issues within in their own capacities: the study on European Solidarity Corps' Network Activities shows that in 2020, a number of NET-activities were carried out around the topic of support for mental health (Kurki 2023, p. 6). Beyond training on mental health issues, organisations struggled to respond to their volunteers' arising needs, because they lacked a flexible option to receive additional funding once a mental health problem became visible. This problem shows in the end that flexibility in funding is always needed, not only in times of crisis or for YWFO, but that it has a drastic impact on the overall resilience and inclusiveness of the programme.

Yet, the European Solidarity Corps does not need to be a programme ill-equipped to support young people with mental health issues. In fact, youth work in Europe has proven to be helpful for youth navigating their way through the pandemic (see Böhler, Karsten, Pitschmann 2020, p. 11), and the European Solidarity Corps can still provide similar support. While the social function of the programme was mostly on hold during lockdown measures, the European Solidarity Corps now has the potential to help young people recovering from feelings of anxiety and isolation by facilitating meaningful experiences and fostering connections with other people and communities. To achieve this aim, it is essential to establish adequate support mechanisms for beneficiary organisations.

5.8   Russian war on Ukraine

The Russian war on the Ukraine is another socio-political development relevant to the programme. The 2023 programme guide directly acknowledged the war by making "Relief for persons fleeing armed conflicts and other victims of natural of man-made disasters" one of the annual priorities for Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas. In addition, at an implementation level, National Agencies reacted quickly to adjust to the new reality, i. e. by counselling volunteers from Russia who did not want to return home, as interviewees report.

However, the swift response of National Agencies was restrained by the IT tools at hand. They were unable to quickly retrieve data on volunteers from their country presently volunteering in Ukraine, nor could they directly determine the number of Ukrainian volunteers currently in their country. This meant they had to manually reach out to all their organisations and ask for this data, slowing the process immensely and making immediate support for the affected volunteers almost impossible (see Flexibility and IT tools).

Indirect consequences of the war have not been tackled swiftly, either. One of the most criticised issues of the programme is the European Commission's failure to adjust its funding rates in response to rising inflation. This leads to participants struggling to support themselves while volunteering, while others are prevented from participating at all, because they cannot afford to cover the costs by themselves. While the structural conditions for volunteering in the European Solidarity Corps are getting worse, the interest in participating is anticipated to rise. Some interviewees express their conviction that there is a growing interest among individuals to actively engage and convey solidarity through volunteering, particularly in light of the emergence of political solidarity movements in the wake of the war.

5.9   Developments on national level

National political dynamics also played a role in shaping the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps at the country level. One interviewee reports, for example, that some organisations from the United Kingdom set up subsidiary offices in Ireland in order to participate in the European Solidarity Corps even after Brexit. Another interviewee mentions the nationalistic tendency of their government, which impacts both organisations (i. e. financially and at the staff level) and participants, as the attractiveness of this country as a volunteering destination for foreign youth decreases. However, it has to be pointed out that in this study, such insights are multifaceted and must be carefully interpreted. Further research is needed to provide a structured approach to mapping political developments in countries participating in the programme and the influence such developments have on national programme implementation.

5.10   2022: The European Year of Youth

It was the declared goal of the European Commission to dedicate the year 2022 to young people by "empowering those who have dedicated so much to others" (Council of Europe 2022, p. 2). Interestingly enough, the European Year of Youth was only mentioned once in all the conducted interviews. What the silence of the other stakeholder indicated, is solidified by this one statement: the European Year of Youth did not have any influence on the European Solidarity Corps whatsoever, as the opportunity to promote the programme along with the other European youth initiatives that emerged in 2022 have not been taken.

❝*I think that during the European Year of Youth they should have done more to promote the European Solidarity Corps and it was not the case. (…) Nothing on the Solidarity Corps (…) the European Year of Youth is finished and now what will happen to all the initiatives? So I think we need to think about the sustainability as well."* (beneficiary/umbrella organisation)

6

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1   Summary and recommendations

In the conclusion of this report, we summarise the findings presented in relation to the main and underlying research questions. Specifically, we tackle the question of which recommendations and suggestions for improvement should be adopted to strengthen the future implementation and development of the European Solidarity Corps, addressing the identified challenges comprehensively.

How have programme stakeholders, including National Agencies, programme beneficiaries and support structures, experienced the content and implementation of the programme during the past five years?

In spite of initial difficulties, in particular for those individuals who had been active in the European Voluntary Service, the European Solidarity Corps was soon welcomed by all interviewed stakeholders as a good idea and viewed as a great opportunity for European youth. Nevertheless, the implementation of this idea is still seen as insufficient, and a variety of challenges and potentials for improvement are identified.

What are the main values and characteristics of the programme for programme stakeholders?

Solidarity is identified as a main characteristic and asset of the programme. Although its definition is still tricky and adds to the complexities that make the programme difficult for newcomers to grasp, stakeholders now embrace the idea of a broad and ambiguous definition as an advantage in itself. Impact is expected to manifest across all levels, including volunteers, communities, organisations, the involved sectors and the participating countries in general. This impact will materialise as stakeholders experience meaningful promotion of European values and the overarching European concept through the programme. However, the main focus is controversial, as exemplified by the opposing opinions voiced by stakeholders, with some framing it as a youth programme and others viewing it as a volunteering programme. These divergent perspectives carry significant implications for the recommendations and future prospects that stakeholders envision. Those who focus more on personal development and learning of volunteers call for a decrease in the lower age limit, and those who highlight the impact on community and society advocate for the elimination of the upper age limit. While it may not be necessary or even feasible to develop a definitive understanding of the programme as either a youth or a volunteering programme, clarifying the dual nature and its limitations could foster joint efforts to strengthen the programme's future development and, potentially, the development of other complementary programmes dedicated to the age groups currently excluded.

The programme's strands and actions are generally praised for their diversity and potential to attract a broader variety of beneficiaries than Erasmus+, for example. It is argued that more organisations, as well as more young people could find their cup of tea within the European Solidarity Corps. Specifically, Solidarity Projects garnered very positive feedback for expressing trust in European youth and empowering them by funding their youth-led projects. Nevertheless, the overall impression from different stakeholders is that the programme is currently failing to reach all the potential beneficiaries it should attract – a main challenge that raises questions about the programme's ability to meet its objectives.

What challenges and needs have stakeholders been facing during their involvement in the programme?

Stakeholders describe challenges on 1) a conceptual level (contradictions and complexities); 2) a structural level (insufficient funding, excessive bureaucracy, lack of flexibility, ineffective feedback mechanisms and the division of responsibilities), and 3) a practical level (issues with IT tools and promotion). These challenges give rise to a variety of needs and collectively explain the issues with the programme's implementation, outreach, and inclusiveness.

In many national contexts, the programme's potential to reach further beneficiaries is immense. The interviewed stakeholders mention a variety of reasons influencing the programme's outreach and inclusiveness, many of which are intertwined and reciprocal. Reaching and engaging newcomers in the programme seems to be particularly challenging, in part because its complexities are difficult to grasp, the promotion needs improvement, and the bureaucratic and language thresholds are high. Against the backdrop of a general lack of funding, it is repeatedly argued that the effort required to take part in the programme is disproportionate to the funding organisations can expect to receive. Moreover, it seems that although the programme is open to organisa-

tions from beyond the youth work sector, these struggle to adapt to the programme's logic. At the same time, some stakeholders generally perceive EU funding as requiring applicants to adhere to a specific logic in order to submit a successful application.

The responsibility for the programme's success seems to lie heavily on organisations, because they are in charge of reaching participants, identifying YWFO and their needs, selecting and attending to volunteers, and achieving meaningful and sustainable community impact. The high thresholds, combined with this concentration of responsibility, lead to a long list of support needs related to both organisations and youth. It is repeatedly stated that young people are disempowered as they often cannot even apply to the programme without coaching and support. Regarding organisations, the European Solidarity Corps offers less support options, for example for competence development, than Erasmus+, additionally explaining why non-youth-work organisations in particular are facing more difficulties.

IT tools should facilitate the digital administration of the programme for National Agencies, organisations and youth. However, as technical issues persist, processes require excessive efforts that affect the outreach of the programme twofold: first of all, by encouraging organisations and youth to drop out and secondly, by leaving National Agencies less resources to foster the promotion and outreach of the programme because they have to create time-consuming work-arounds. The struggles faced in sustaining the programme may also explain the underdevelopment of other programme potentials, such as bolstering the strategic impact on national youth and volunteering sectors.

Throughout the report, visibility has been given to different suggestions and recommendations for improvement. Main recommendations were:
- Increased funding;
- Improved IT tools;
- Reduced bureaucratic threshold (translations, more flexibility, less paperwork) in particular for initial funding for small newcomer organisations;
- Additional administrative support, particularly for small organisations;
- Overarching evidence-based promotion strategy and promotional material to be adapted to local contexts;
- Creation of networks of participating organisations;

- Increased sharing of good practices, experiences and mutual support among organisations
- Involvement of local support structures for the attention of volunteers and participants (e. g. local social workers);
- Joint approach to matching volunteers and organisations;
- More effective feedback mechanisms.

What assets, challenges and needs of the programme do stakeholders perceive when it comes to inclusion of Youth With Fewer Opportunities (YWFO)?

The inclusivity of YWFO is regarded as both a primary feature and a foremost challenge of the programme. While the programme possesses great potential, its current implementation does not fully leverage this potential. In its design, the programme aims to be particularly inclusive, with different strands and actions intended to facilitate the engagement of YWFO. Nevertheless, all stakeholders are convinced that the outreach to YWFO is not as good as it could be. Specifically, certain profiles of YWFO are hardly reached and that there are insufficient placements for these youth. National realities seem to vary immensely in this regard. However, a common understanding of what constitutes a desirable target line is missing.

It is difficult to assess the inclusiveness of the programme, as data on the ongoing programme generation is not yet available, and the indicator used is based on the organisations' own assessment of their levels of outreach to YWFO. According to several stakeholders, this is not an accurate reflection of reality, with organisations struggling to identify YWFO.

Our analyses have shown three main issues with the inclusion of YWFO: 1) structural barriers prevent some YWFO from participating (youth with disabilities, dependency on social welfare, or legal difficulties with crossing borders), 2) promotion is not inclusive and 3) the current system discourages organisations from selecting YWFO.

Structural barriers seem to stem mainly from a lack of alignment between national administrations and the EU programme, as well as a lack of accessibility to the programme's tools and materials. The promotion will remain less inclusive as

long as YWFO are less visible in the promotional material and few YWFO participate in peer-to-peer promotion schemes. The factual exclusion of YWFO can be attributed to certain structural obstacles. These barriers, when coupled with the recognition that these youth require special support, can discourage organisations from including them. Ideally, organisations unable to offer the necessary support would decline YWFO applicants, while those capable of doing so would accept them. However, as long as organisations are solely responsible for accommodating YWFO and do not receive the necessary support to do so, there will not be enough placements for these youth, resulting in their practical exclusion. The structural obstacles essentially amplify the programme's issues in general: funding for inclusiveness is even less sufficient and, moreover, less well-known. The paperwork required to facilitate YWFO and request the funding for inclusion adds to the already described excessive bureaucracy and lack of flexibility. In addition, the concentration of responsibility on organisations compounds their already heavy workload and also places the onus on them for ensuring inclusiveness in outreach and attention to YWFO.

Beyond the more specific recommendations given in the different sections of this report, additional key suggestions for improvement are:

- Increase the funding (both generic and inclusion-specific);
- Communicate funding options more effectively;
- Offer flexible funding to be able to adapt when new challenges arise;
- Increase the accessibility of materials, the portal, organisations and placements (translations, easy-to-read material, screen-readers, accessible offices and housing);
- Create an improved and unified legal recognition of volunteers, eliminating structural barriers for welfare beneficiaries, refugees and youth with disabilities;
- Reduce the administrative burden;
- Share responsibilities.

Possible ways to reduce the excessive workload and concentration of responsibilities on organisations include:
- automatic assessment of the support needs of potential volunteers
- Automatic allocation of sufficient funding to attend these needs;
- Stronger engagement of all levels in the development of an inclusive promotion strat-

egy and the development of inclusive promotion materials;
- Stronger engagement of networks and local support structures in the support needed for YWFO.

Considering that some YWFO may also be less likely to take part in the programme, because their personal living conditions make it difficult for them to go abroad or to volunteer full-time, some stakeholders also recommend more flexibility regarding the forms of volunteering, championing for example online volunteering. Others caution that special care is needed to offer meaningful alternatives and to not impose any alternative or push certain youth to a concrete action type only. For the programme to be inclusive, all youth needs to have the same options and opportunities to take part in all its actions.

How have programme stakeholders experienced the programme on a structural, conceptual and implementation level since its introduction in 2018?

In this report, we have analysed the programme's development over time starting with a comparison of the annual programme guides. A first recommendation in this regard is to clearly communicate the changes that have been made from one programme guide to the next, which could be in the form of an initial "What's new?" section in the programme guide or an accompanying document. Such a quick overview would save organisations that are already well-informed about the previous guides valuable time in their adaptation to the changes.

The primary changes discussed in our interviews were the end of Traineeship and Job activities, the introduction of Humanitarian Aid Volunteering, and the expansion of the Quality Label approach. The latter was largely welcomed by the interviewed stakeholders, albeit with some flaws identified in its implementation. This aligns with the previously described belief that the idea was promising, but the execution falls short of its full potential. The decision to discontinue Traineeships and Jobs was also well accepted by a majority of interviewed stakeholders, who feel that the emphasis is now more clearer focussed on solidarity and volunteering. The introduction of the Humanitarian Aid Volunteering strand came up less often as a topic in our interviews, likely because this study focussed on the Actions implemented through National Agencies. Nevertheless, several issues with the implementation

of this strand were mentioned, and its different logic seems to contribute to the complexity and contradictions around the programme. The diversity of strands and actions is, however, also an asset, allowing more potential beneficiaries to take part. Another benefit is the potential for spill-over effects from one strand to another.

On the level of beneficiaries, both a positive and a negative trend are observed: 1) more non-youth work organisations are reached, although an important potential to reach even more remains. The stronger presence of non-youth work organisations comes with new challenges and an increased demand for training and support. 2) A negative trend applies to the number of participating countries, as organisations and youth from fewer countries are participating in the programme, due to political changes, instabilities and funding issues. Similarly, youth from certain third countries are increasingly excluded from the programme, as visa applications have become so difficult in some national contexts that several organisations simply no longer select them. Even if selected, they may not receive the visa in time to participate or only be able to complete a much shorter time abroad than originally intended. This decrease not only reduces the opportunities of young people and organisations to benefit directly from the programme, but is also said to reduce the EUs overall impact on these countries, particularly their peace education.

Overall, the main conclusion remains that the programme's implementation must be improved in order to fully unlock its potential. The attitudes described by the interviewed stakeholders tended, however, to become more optimistic over the course of the interviews. This change became particularly visible when we asked for future perspectives in the interviews, as all stakeholders expressed their desire for the programme to continue in the future. Several interviewees saw advantages in it being a stand-alone programme and called for increased funding and the opportunity for it to expand. Many stakeholders, who identified as optimists, expressed the hope for gradual, continuous improvement and growth. They believe in overcoming all the identified challenges and making the programme increasingly inclusive over time. To foster the programme's improvement, a more effective use of participation tools is needed, allowing relevant stakeholders to contribute to the programme's development more efficiently. A more participatory approach could also reduce the perception that EU programmes are designed from top down, disconnected from young people's realities. This change would also

help to ensure that the programme's objectives are fully achieved.

What are the effects of socio-political developments on the implementation and content of the programme and its key stakeholders, and what measures have been developed to respond to these effects?

The primary socio-political changes in the course of the programme's rather short history have been the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine, compounded by the economic crisis, inflation and increase in energy costs they ushered in. As shown in the different sections of this report, the programme struggled to react to these changes. In particular, the lack of flexibility in its funding negatively impacted its resilience. Adjustments to pocket money to account for rising inflation, for instance, took a very long time and are still perceived as insufficient. Better technical tools could enable organisations to offer quicker support in the future, making it possible, for example, to identify volunteers in or from a certain country with just one click. New support needs, such as the increase in mental health issues among volunteers, could be tackled more effectively if the responsibility for attending to volunteers was not placed solely on organisations. Also, an important lesson from the several crises is the insight that new needs can arise at any time, making more flexible funding and better-established support networks crucial assets.

What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and other socio-political developments on the programme's implementation and contents and what implications do these effects have for the future of the programme?

Which responses were developed to address the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and other socio-political developments and how did they shape and/or change the cooperation between National Agencies and beneficiaries?

A main response to the COVID-19 pandemic mentioned in our interviews was the rise of online activities. While the idea of online volunteering did not convince the majority of the stakeholders and disappeared quickly once contact restrictions were lifted, online support offers were maintained or promptly reinstated with the onset of the Russian war on Ukraine. However, in light of the Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union (2022), online volunteering could nevertheless gain further importance in the future. Based on the interviewed stakeholders' accounts, it is important to highlight that online alternatives should always be an additional option volunteers can choose. It should not be used as an easier option that allows YWFO to take part in the programme without allocating sufficient funds.

Several of the interviewees highlighted how the consequences of the socio-political changes continue to affect potential beneficiaries. Many organisations are still struggling to recover and make ends meet in the current environment of increased costs. This struggle may also partially explain a decreased interest in partnerships and networking activities. The numbers of young applicants have also been reported to be down, possibly because young people are busy making up for lost time in education and professional plans. While these issues might level out on their own over time, proactive support could also further improve the programme's resilience and its positive impact on beneficiaries.

6.2   Research outlook

Like any research project, this study comes with certain limitations. First of all, the focus was on actions implemented through National Agencies, so the Humanitarian Aid Volunteering and the Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas were only secondary topics in this report. Similarly, the pool of interviewed stakeholders did not include young people themselves, and most stakeholders had been actively involved in the programme. Consequently, the views of non-participating organisations are less represented. Future research could engage different interviewees, namely young people and organisations not participating in the programme and compare perspectives.

The selection of interviewees limited, moreover, the insights into Solidarity Projects. No young people were interviewed, and the selected organisations had not yet been involved in supporting Solidarity Projects. Staff from National Agencies mentioned a variety of challenges related to this action type, cherishing its empowering nature and uniqueness. Further research focussing on the perspectives of young people involved in Solidarity Projects could provide additional insights into both challenges and potential benefits.

Specifically, when it comes to examining the outreach of the programme and the diverse beneficiary profiles, a quantitative study and register data analysis could prove valuable. However, in the wake of the General Data Protection Regulation changes, RAY encountered diverse problems in conducting such research. These obstacles have hampered external monitoring and thus the evidence-based improvement of the programme further.

Several of the challenges identified in this study could be explored more deeply in future research. For instance, the provision of and use of capacity building activities could be further studied to determine what offers are missing, which organisations do and do not make use of the existing offers, and the underlying reasons behind the varying levels of engagement. The issue of outreach towards non-youth work organisations is repeatedly identified as a challenge, and future research could shed light on the thresholds preventing them from participating and the support needs that, if addressed, could facilitate their integration. Similarly, the inclusiveness of the programme warrants further detailed investigation. Over time, it is important to be able to better identify which YWFO are reached, pinpoint those who are least reached, and devise strategies for their improved inclusion.

Finally, national research can also provide insights into processes that may appear to be rather country-specific. These insights could include such trends as a decrease in the participation of municipalities, the impact on the national youth or volunteering sector, or the influence of national political developments on the programme's implementation. By delving into these country-specific aspects, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the programme's dynamics and adapt strategies accordingly.

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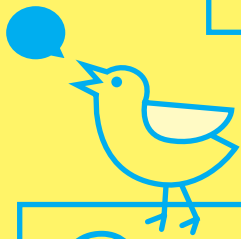
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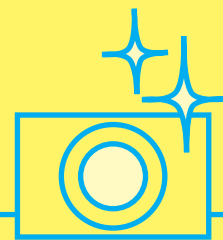
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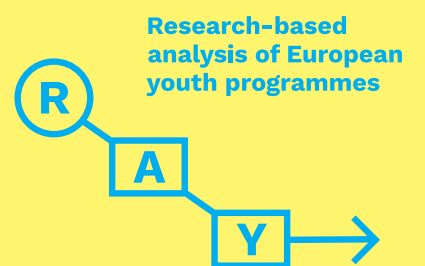
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