

European Voluntary Service in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus: How to feed a hippo?

Few words about (pre)history

Already for over 10 years, SALTO Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre (EECA) supports development of European Voluntary Service in the region commonly known as Eastern Europe and the Caucasus (with different political name in Erasmus+, under two separate entities: Eastern Partnership Countries and Russian Federation). While the first EVS volunteers appeared in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine already 15 years ago, until 2007 the numbers were very low, with maximum a dozen volunteers per year in each country. That was also a period when our Resource Centre prioritised contact building between organisations and first networking seminars took place, such as “EVS 4U” in 2004, “Yth 2” in 2005 and 2006, “Train to EVS” as well as “EastWestEVS” in 2006.

When the Youth in Action programme was starting, our region entered it with already well developed network of partners. Moreover, the newly established action 3 targeting partner countries, helped to recognise importance of such cooperation. The number of EVS projects with Eastern Europe and the Caucasus increased rapidly and soon reached a few hundred volunteers hosted and sent. Beside high numbers of EVS volunteers, this practically meant tens of

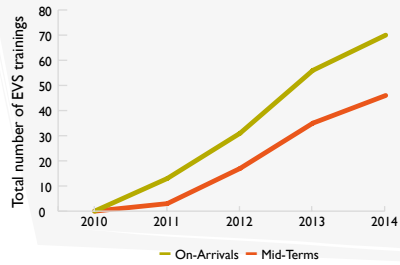
organisations from the region involved in EVS projects, hundreds of coordinators and mentors. Other needs for support in EVS became clear: Annual, international trainings for EVS coordinators were established under the flagship course “EastWestEVS”. Throughout the years, over 100 coordinators from the region and another 100 from programme countries were trained on how to organise EVS projects with all the specifics of such cooperation. Several partnership building seminars, study visits and thematic trainings were organised where many EVS coordinators could find project partners and develop their own competences. Finally after a few years of lobbying the European Commission, since 2011 our Resource Centre became responsible for the EVS Training Cycle, EVA Accreditations and more support for EVS organisations

EVS training cycle

The most urgent challenge was to identify trainers who could run EVS trainings; equip them with a common understanding of the process and build a recognised identity. Luckily the process did not start from scratch. Already between 2007 and 2010, our Resource Centre cooperated with many organisations and persons

from the region experienced in EVS, to support on-arrival and mid-term trainings for volunteers. During these 4 years we have brought together volunteers for 99 EVS trainings. But only from 2011 were the responsibilities to offer such trainings removed from hosting organisations themselves and given to SALTO EECA. Today, the EVS trainers' pool includes 18 trainers coming from almost all countries of the region (www.salto-youth.net/eeca_evs_trainers). The pool meets every year to synchronise the concept of EVS trainings. Additionally each year members of the pool have the chance to take part in different European capacity building activities to learn from and influence the European youth training field. Due to the number of volunteers and geographical size of the region, the training cycle was divided into 3 sub-regions, so volunteers in Caucasus have their cycle in Georgia, in Eastern Europe they gather in Ukraine and separately there are trainings in Russia. On average we organise 15 on-arrival trainings and 12 mid-term meetings each year, with 6 to 25 participants in each. This allows us to cover all several hundred EVS volunteers coming to the region annually. In total, after 4 years of running the EVS training cycle in the region, we managed to organise 70 on-arrivals and 46 mid-terms.

Cumulative number of harmonised EVS trainings in EECA until end of 2014



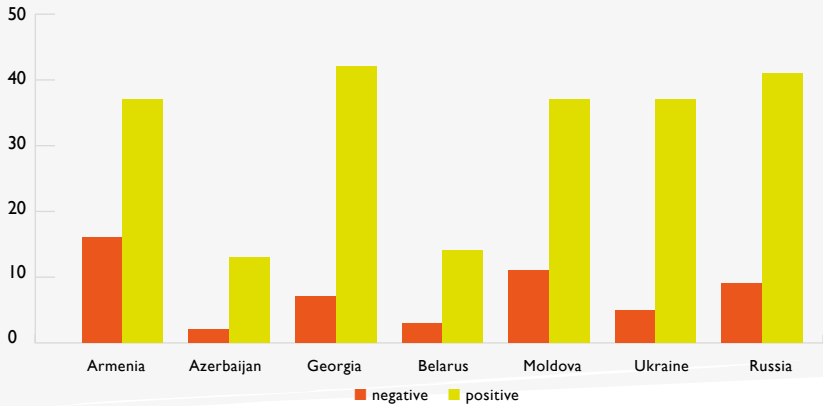
Together with EVS trainings organised before 2011 in a decentralised way, it makes over 200 trainings for over 3000 EVS volunteers!

EVS accreditations

Five years ago the EVS accreditation process was a novelty in our region. It started already at the end of 2010, as the first accreditations were required from organisations from February 2011. Three big waves of accreditation visits were organised by our Resource Centre with the support of almost 30 EVS experts (among them youth workers, EVS trainers and accreditors



Number of positive and negative EVS accreditations in EECA (10 Feb. 2015)



from programme countries and National Agencies officers). During November and December 2010, we managed to accredit ca. 100 organisations in all 7 countries. From 2011 the accreditors group was reformulated and for the first time experts from the region joined it. Today they make over half of the team, which in total counts 26 EVS experts coming from different fields (www.salto-youth.net/eeca_evs_accreditors). The accreditors' group meets annually to harmonise understanding of qualities expected from receiving and sending organisations. Moreover, members of the group take part in European meetings focusing on EVS accreditation, in order to actively shape it. We understand accreditation not only as a check of organisations' capacities to be involved in EVS, but also as a support process where organisations can benefit from consultancy and increase their knowledge.

Therefore it

takes time, especially where the mentoring process is run on-line following an on-the-spot visit. On average one accreditation takes place about every 3 months in our region. During 5 years of accrediting organisations in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, we managed to accredit 466 organisations, so almost 100 per year. Over 90% of organisations are visited, which in such a vast territory, that spans over 12000 km and 10 different time zones, is our great value. Today, at the end of the standard period of 3 years accreditation from Youth in Action finished for many organisations in our region (2011-2014), we have 221 positive organisations active in EVS. Almost half of them were (re) accredited already under Erasmus+ (see more: www.salto-youth.net/eeca_accreditation_stats)

More support for EVS organisations

Beside the EVS accreditations and trainings, which are the basics for well functioning of EVS projects anywhere, our SALTO EECA Resource Centre additionally offers a set of different supporting measures, such as:

- EVS events: Organised since 2011 annually in 3-4 different "blank spots" of our region, so the ex-EVS volunteers can not only meet to reflect and evaluate own experiences abroad, but also to promote the programme and volunteering (see the

Watch the movie:
[www.salto-youth.net/
 Train_Adventure](http://www.salto-youth.net/Train_Adventure)



campaign here: www.flickr.com/photos/evsevents/. In 2014 for example, the events took place in Goris (south Armenia), Akhalsikhe (central Georgia), Ivano-Frankivsk (western Ukraine), Kazan (Tatarstan Republic of Russian Federation). All those cities have very high potential to be involved in EVS, yet there were almost no EVS volunteers hosted or sent.

- EVS coordinators meetings: Offered on national level in each of 7 countries in the region. Since 2011, EVS coordinators have been meeting to discuss challenges and particularities of EVS projects in their own countries, to learn from each others' good practices, to network and build trust and support. The meetings are unique activities where EVS coordinators can communicate in their mother tongues.
- International trainings for EVS mentors: Organised together with Polish and French National Agencies of the Erasmus+: Youth In Action Programme, where each time up to 30 EVS mentors from 7 countries of the region can raise their competences in learning facilitation and mentoring.
- Participation of EVS coordinators in international trainings like SOHO etc: Each year up to 20 EVS coordinators from the region have the chance to participate in such international trainings organised by National Agencies and the SALTO network.
- Seminars for contact making and partnership building as well as study visits organised every year for EVS coordinators from the East and the West. Such events allow coordinators to meet together,



to build common understanding of EVS principles and to experience EVS projects in the realities of countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

Perspectives for further development

We have to understand that the 7 countries that the SALTO EECA Resource Centre works with are very different in social, economical, cultural and political development. It is worth noting that the population of the region itself is half that of the European Union and there are millions of young people and tens of thousands of youth organisations. We would identify the main challenges and opportunities we see for development of European Voluntary Service in the East as...

Opportunities

1. Young, vibrant, active youth: after the fall of the Soviet Union, populations of the newly independent republics had to take things into their hands. Dissolution of State-run, centralised service providers pushed people towards self-organisation. Today's young people are the children of those times. Far from a demanding attitude, they are positively oriented towards the future and actively shaping it (at least on community level).
2. Lack of inflexible structures and patterns: different to many old European countries, the paths for development and competence recognition remain open. Practically speaking, what you are actually able to do is what matters and not so much what diploma you possess. Of course social connections count a lot (in common with state structures), but social advancement is much easier as many competences are well recognised and demanded. Volunteering opportunities and youth organisations offer a huge possibility to gain them.

Challenges

1. (Geo)political instability: beside the current invasion in Ukraine, our region has witnessed several disputed lands that from time to time destabilise the situation (such as Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia or Karabakh). Moreover political developments in some of the countries lead to restrictions in human rights and the decline of civil society.
2. Lack of recognition: in most countries of the region there are either no laws on volunteering or the regulations are very vague. Practically, this brings lots of problems when trying to organise visas or residence permits for EVS volunteers, or to work with international grants in foreign currencies, etc.
3. Underdevelopment of youth work sector: where most organisations are dependent on grants and their local level fundraising capacities are very limited. The lack of systematic support from authorities prevents many organisations from having long-term strategies and limits the professionalisation of youth work.

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