

Support for European Volunteering in the Western Balkans through Accreditation

Besides the fifteenth anniversary of the SALTO YOUTH network, SALTO SEE has another, smaller anniversary this year: ten years of accreditation of EVS organisations in the Western Balkans. Accreditation is a means to foster quality in European volunteering. A lot of resources and reflection have gone into this part of our work. What has it changed?

European volunteering in a changing region

European volunteers in the Western Balkans have contributed to the development of youth organisations and their local communities. The impact seems to be greatest with regard to non-formal learning and the capacity to use it in youth work and volunteering as well as intercultural understanding and competences. In a region where international mobility among youth is comparatively limited, European volunteers have played an important role by bringing their experiences, habits and values from other parts of Europe closer to the people in their host organisation and community. Equally, young people from the Balkans, deciding, often without much support from their direct social environment, to volunteer in another European country, have

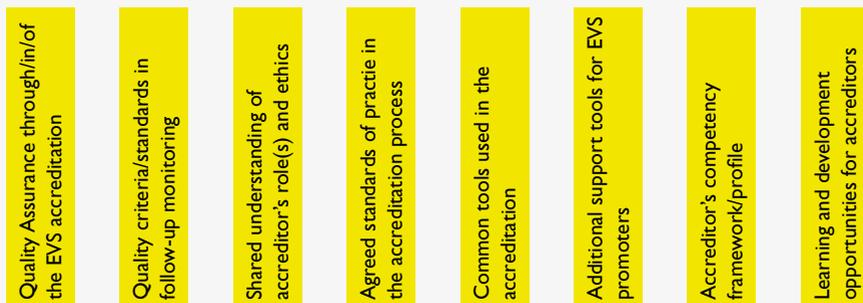
“ Even if Europe is so ‘modern’ there are a lot of stereotypes, old fashioned opinions and a lot of things to change. It needs people to be critical, to ask, to be interested and creative enough to have ideas...EVS gave me the opportunity to find out that I want to support these changes!”

(EVS volunteer in Albania)

brought back new experiences and know-how and the initiative and motivation to promote changes in their home environment. European volunteering has thus been contributing to opening up societies and promoting European integration of a region that wants to move closer to the European Union and is in the process of doing so.

Less than a decade ago, the Western Balkans was a region that seemed far away, pictures of the recent wars and conflicts that had torn the region apart were dominant in many people's minds. The region attracted mainly the most adventurous of European youth, who did not shy away from taking the perceived risk to move into unknown territory. Some organisations did offer a great hosting environment, but there was no quality check in place and unless volunteers knew their receiving organisation in advance, they could not be sure of what they might find. For organisations in the region wishing to host or send volunteers, possibilities to receive support were limited. Today, laws regulating volunteering and the residence of volunteers from abroad are in place and volunteers who come to the Balkans are all kinds of young people, eager to

Quality Assurance through/in/ of the EVS accreditation



Values promoted through EVS (accreditation)

Created by Darko Markovic for National Agency staff training on EVS accreditation, Ljubljana, December 2013

contribute and learn for their own personal and professional advancement. Challenges still exist, as everywhere, but one can safely state that the conditions for European volunteering offered by organisations in the Western Balkan countries today are as good, country specific and diverse as anywhere across Europe.

Role of SALTO SEE: support for quality in EVS through accreditation

The Western Balkans was the first region of the Programme's neighbouring partner countries where accreditation (in 2006) and the EVS training cycle for volunteers (in 2007) were introduced in a systematic way. These support measures were established in parallel with the possibility for organisations in the SEE region to apply directly for project grants in Brussels. The message was clear: youth organisations were offered participation in the Programme on a more equal footing to project promoters in Programme countries, but they had to show as well that with some support they were able to implement quality projects.

Accreditation is the first step to ensuring that organisations fulfil minimum standards required for receiving or sending volunteers or for coordinating EVS projects. It also carries an important support function. The system of accreditation put in place by SALTO SEE builds on the principle that the experts (accreditors) should come from the applicant's country, and keeps in mind the importance of giving the accreditation a European dimension. Our aim has been to ensure that standards applied in Programme countries are also applied in the SEE region. First, knowledge of how to accredit an applicant organisation was built: Experienced youth workers from SEE countries accompanied accreditors coming from various Programme countries and National Agencies, informing them about the regional and local context while learning from them about the process of accreditation.

Shortly afterwards, roles were changed for good: Every applicant is accredited by an accreditator from their own country, or exceptionally from a neighbouring country, who also visits the organisation. Accreditation is carried out in pairs, with close communication between the accreditator from the country of the applicant and a second accreditator who comes from a Programme country

and looks at the application from a distance; more with the eyes of a volunteer from abroad, as well as SALTO SEE. In 2006, this systematically transnational approach to accreditation was a new concept and it has proved to be a challenge and a strength. Annual meetings of accreditors serve to discuss and harmonise perspectives and develop a joint code of understanding, which is written down in a set of guidelines. A detailed checklist that every accreditor needs to complete during the process ensures that the same elements are considered in every accreditation process. As a support tool, every applicant for EVS accreditation receives the handbook »Hopscotch to Quality in EVS« (SALTO SEE, 2009, www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/resources/seepublications/hopscotchevs/). A new edition (Hopscotch 2.0) in line with recent Programme developments, trends and research outcomes will be published by SALTO SEE in 2015.

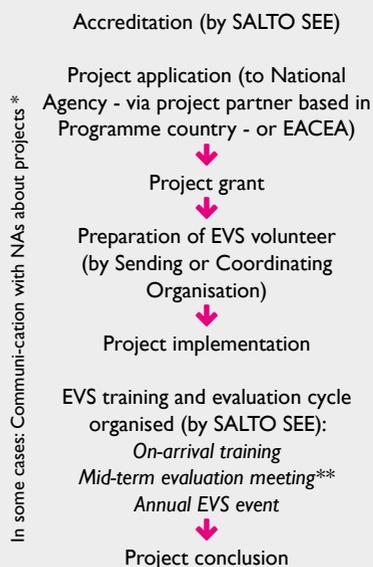
A framework for supporting quality in EVS beyond accreditation

Importantly, accreditation is only one element of a framework supporting EVS projects in the Western Balkans. The EVS volunteer training cycle (today essentially on-arrival and mid-term training for long-term volunteers) offers support to volunteers and serves to collect feedback about the overall satisfaction of volunteers with their project, its strengths and shortcomings, which SALTO SEE follows up in further contact with hosting or sending organisations. Where deemed necessary, organisations applying for accreditation are systematically advised to look for training opportunities at European or national level. Contact Points for the Programme nominated by SALTO SEE play an essential role: Since 2005 they have offered advice, information and training for organisations at the national level, with increasing professionalism, forming the backbone of the support offered for the Programme in the Western Balkan countries. This has been even more successful where they can count on additional governmental support (currently existing or under discussion for 2015 in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Main challenges and strengths

A particular challenge of supporting quality in EVS in a partner region is the lack of continued contact with the applicant organisation. Given the fact that the Erasmus+ programme in the youth field is managed largely in a decentralised way through National Agencies, and partially in a centralised way via the Commission's Executive Agency, communication between the different actors involved in the process, from accreditation to project application and implementation, (National Agencies or EACEA - in charge of projects; and SALTO SEE - in charge of EVS accreditation for the Western Balkans) is a rather challenging task. This is why SALTO SEE is likely to give more attention to accreditation in the Western Balkan region than National Agencies

Overview of the process of EVS projects in the Western Balkans



(*) Some NAs contact SALTO SEE for or with information regarding submitted or selected projects.
(**) For projects with a service of 6 months or longer.

in some Programme countries: Accreditation is the only occasion for systematically checking an organisation and for offering advice on how to further develop their potential.

Given the increasing expectations under the Erasmus+ programme of what EVS organisations should offer to their European volunteers, especially in the context of support for learning for employability, the support currently offered to EVS promoters in the SEE region needs to be adapted and extended.

The main strength of our system of accreditation lies in the experience and attitude of the accreditors; their joint wish to motivate organisations to host and send European volunteers and to prove that quality EVS projects can be offered in this region. Most accreditors have worked with SALTO SEE since the introduction of accreditation in the Western Balkans and have been actively contributing to the youth work development in their countries. Accreditation is only a small part of their involvement. Continuous and structured exchange within the pool of accreditors as well as within the larger pool of SALTO SEE multipliers, supported by jointly developed tools for accreditation, has offered a valued framework for regional (Western Balkans) and European exchange – both equally important – promoting the increase of know-how and a joint understanding that is applied in accreditation, but also in various other contexts and roles.

Current questions to be tackled include, how to deal with new target groups of applicants for EVS? Do we and should we apply different standards in different countries (of the SEE region)? And how to ensure that accreditors that are new to the pool are well informed about the shared knowledge of the pool.

Harmonising EVS accreditation at European level

Since 2013, SALTO SEE has had the opportunity to use its experience in the Western Balkans at European level, by coordinating a National Agency working group on EVS accreditation as well as two staff trainings on this topic. The aim of this process is to harmonise accreditation across

the participating countries, respecting at the same time different accreditation standards and practices and reflecting the diversity of volunteering and youth work in Europe and beyond.

The process so far has reconfirmed, maybe surprisingly strongly, that National Agencies indeed share a joint understanding of what represents quality in EVS and of the role that accreditation has in this context. Joint tools for accreditation are being developed. On the other hand, there is equally strong agreement that it is undesirable (and quite likely impossible) to define minimum standards at European level to be fulfilled by organisations applying for EVS accreditation. A difficult tension to manage remains in the need to increase the number of European volunteers while ensuring that they find themselves in safe and prepared environments offering the potential for positive and framed learning-service.

Together with the other support tools offered, accreditation has played an important role in promoting the quality of EVS projects in the Western Balkan region. The fact that the specific approach to accreditation applied in the »mini-cosmos« of the Western Balkans has allowed SALTO SEE to bring their experience to the European level is not a matter of course. Usually, we work in the opposite direction: trying to bring experience, knowledge and know-how from the European level, or from EU countries, to the SEE region, or to involve actors from the countries of this region into European processes. It is great to see that European integration can work both ways.

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