

Eastern Europe and the Caucasus
REGIONAL CONSULTATIONS
on Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps
June - July 2021

The consultations were held with a diversity of youth work stakeholders in each of the 7 countries of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus neighbouring partner region. Participants were mainly representatives of the organisations active in Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes. Nevertheless, projects coordinators from active organisations, not active in the programmes were also participating. Local and national authorities, municipalities, ministries, youth councils representatives were involved to a limited extend.

The consultation process included online focus groups in national languages, with one exception where feedback was gathered with anonymous online form. Each meeting was facilitated by local youth work trainer. Most of the meetings were also translated, so representatives of the SALTO Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre as well as the reporter could be involved.

The consultations were prepared and followed by SALTO Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centres in the frames of interregional cooperation with other regional SALTOs. Consultations with the same general aim were performed in other neighbouring partner regions of South East Europe as well in South Mediterranean.

Part 1

Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps (ESC)
in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus (EECA) - current role and realities
(cross-country synthesis)

- In most EECA countries, Erasmus+ and ESC are widely perceived as important contributors to increased quality of youth work and youth policy development at national level;
- In some countries, Erasmus+ and ESC are additionally perceived as unique opportunities for international cooperation and exchange of experiences due to the acute lack of international cooperation programmes and broader restrictions on international cooperation at country level (e.g. government restrictions on NGOs, foreign funding or international travel);

- In all EECA countries, the intercultural learning and peaceful dialogue character of Erasmus+ projects is seen as having great value and unique offering of Erasmus+
- The added value of Erasmus+ and ESC rests in its different character and profile in comparison with local and national programmes and structures - e.g in Russia, youth projects are large-scale and Erasmus+ provides a more hands-on experience, in Belarus, youth trainings are short-term and Erasmus+ provides a more long-term opportunity for youth learning;
- In all EECA countries, both Erasmus+ and ESC are considered useful and efficient tools in increasing young people's soft skills and employability and active citizenship;
- In most EECA countries, youth work is not perceived as an attractive career choice for young people and Erasmus+ and ESC provide an important motivational factor in increasing the attractiveness of the sector to future youth workers and youth policy experts;
- All existing cooperation formats are deemed useful - youth exchanges and volunteering for young people, training and capacity-building for youth organisations;
- Most EECA countries indicate the absence of direct support to local organisations and projects in order to assure greater quality of youth work and youth programmes at local and national level;
- The most important features of Erasmus+ are international cooperation and mobility, flexibility in providing a range of support formats and transversal character of skills and capacities developed (e.g. soft skills, project management, financial management etc.);
- National-level restrictions make a substantial difference in Erasmus+ experiences between EECA countries - especially countries with restrictions on NGOs and foreign funding have a much more limited access to many aspects of the programme;
- Issues of diversity and inclusion in Erasmus+ and ESC participation are vital to the programmes' success in EECA - respondents from all countries of the region highlighted challenges in participation among young people with fewer opportunities and the need for greater support to widen participation to all social and geographical groups and communities;
- Issues of youth policy reform, such as institutionalisation of youth work and recognition of non-formal learning are very important for sustainability and impact of Erasmus+ and ESC projects in all EECA countries;

Part 2

SALTO Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre – contribution and experiences (cross-country synthesis)

- SALTO EECA's contribution to youth work and youth policy in EECA countries is seen universally positively across all EECA countries;
- SALTO website remains the single most recognisable point of contact and resource in broader sense;
- Partnership search functions, such as OTLAS, are seen as essential and very important and needed for youth organisations and young people in EECA countries;
- In a similar vein, toolbox and online resources such as manuals and toolkits are seen as very important and used widely by youth workers in EECA countries;
- Trainers Online for Youth is a functionality that remains less known but still deemed important;
- Dissemination of information and promotion of both Erasmus+ and ESC programmes are seen as vital and much needed in all countries of the region;
- The pandemic has highlighted the importance of online tools and accessibility of digital resources, and SALTO's offering gained importance over the last two years due to a wealth of online opportunities;
- SALTO's prioritisation of inclusion and active citizenship are seen as very important and largely in line with local and national needs across all EECA countries;
- Youth organisations across all EECA countries highlighted the need for greater availability of SALTO opportunities and projects in their countries and the need for capacity-building at all levels;

Part 3

Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus - needs and expectations (cross-country synthesis)

- All EECA countries reported multiple needs in developing youth work and youth policy, possibly exceeding possibilities and resources at Erasmus+ and ESC disposal;
- Most needs pertain to the support for youth work and quality of youth work provision at local and national level in EECA countries - support to youth centres, youth organisations and other groups implementing youth work projects;
- All EECA countries reported the need to develop the capacity of youth workers and to internationalise the sector by allowing for exchange of expertise and sharing of good practice across borders;
- SALTO is seen as an important advocate of EECA youth organisations and young people and this role should continue;
- Most EECA countries report the need for more direct support to youth organisations and youth workers at local and national level, including supporting core costs, capacity-building and local programmes;

Part 4

Countries specific findings

ARMENIA

Part 1 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - current role and realities

- Key impact of Erasmus+ is on youth work;
- Adapting international best practice is key and very valuable to the Armenian youth sector;
- Developing youth work in Armenia and institutionalisation of youth work are key priorities and Erasmus+ helps a lot with this;
- Erasmus+ is key for stability and development of CSOs;
- Current challenge: organisations need to link the international level (Erasmus+) with local links and impact, this does not always work due to many reasons including capacity and restricted funding;
- Erasmus+ makes young people more autonomous, increases their confidence and skills, this is a unique feature that cannot be replaced by national or local schemes;
- Erasmus+ was instrumental in developing youth work in Armenia - youth worker training abroad is sometimes the only option; Erasmus+ helped Armenia and Armenians understand what youth work is;

Part 2 - SALTO EECA - contribution and experiences

- SALTO tools are used by youth workers organising youth camps in Armenia;
- Regular updates - newsletters - are helpful;
- ESC coordinators meetings work much better face-to-face, not online;
- MySALTO functionalities are appreciated, as is the training calendar, events, tools and the ETS Competence Model for Trainers;
- Linking trainers is considered a useful function - good for professionalisation of the sector;
- SALTO website is a great resource because it can be accessed in the regions, and not only in cities;

Part 3 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - needs and expectations

- Country-wide development of youth work is key for the youth work sector;
- New methods and tools are always welcome, so more training would be great; more face to face trainings rather than online;
- SALTO, Erasmus+ and ESC social media visibility could be improved - Armenian young people find information mostly online;
- There are younger youth workers - we need to make sure we can reach them via the channels they use (not always Facebook or Instagram);
- Job-shadowing is very important for youth workers and youth work sector;

AZERBAIJAN

Part 1 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - current role and realities

- Intercultural exchange is important to the youth work sector in Azerbaijan;
- Azerbaijani young people meeting their peers from other countries is very important;
- Baku youth has most access to Erasmus+ and ESC at the moment;
- Education and languages are an important barrier, as mostly higher education students and English-speakers apply;

Part 2 - SALTO EECA - contribution and experiences

- SALTO is a useful resource for Azerbaijani youth organisations;
- SALTO website is used by youth workers - tools, networking opportunities and calendar all deemed useful;
- SALTO partnership search Otlas is the most widely used function;

Part 3 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - needs and expectations

- More regional outreach outside Baku and big cities is needed to promote the programme and include Azerbaijani youth from all backgrounds;
- More support for youth with fewer opportunities is needed to make the programme more inclusive to groups like orphans, IDPs;
- More language support is needed for non-English speaking youth;
- More local projects would help build interest in the Programme;
- Longer project management perspective is needed - e.g. longer deadlines for applications and reporting;
- Azerbaijan needs new, skilled leaders and managers in the youth sector, requiring more capacity-building and training, especially project management, financial management;
- Key new themes: increasing employability of youth, social entrepreneurship, social inclusion;
- Inclusion of young people with disabilities - how can we actually involve them, the problems start at home/community, so we need to reach out to them first;
- More information on the (ESC) accreditation process;

BELARUS

Part 1 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - current role and realities

- Mobility opportunities are very important for Belarusian youth - they open their minds and instil European values;
- Erasmus+ is a unique opportunity for Belarusian youth and NGOs as there are no alternatives in terms of mobility and learning internationally;
- Non-formal learning approaches are very good in developing soft skills and confidence of young people;
- Erasmus+ and ESC help develop civil society in Belarus - it is now under immense pressure from the government and this help is priceless;
- Many youth work training opportunities in Belarus are very short-term (1-2 days) and Erasmus+ is a good quality alternative with longer learning programmes and greater impact;
- National limits on NGOs and financial operations makes cooperation difficult in some formats, notably in hosting projects and mobilities in Belarus;
- Belarus is not a popular international partner, not many countries know they can work with us;
- Foreign agent legislation made cooperation even more challenging recently;
- Many payments in Belarus are made in cash and the Erasmus+ and ESC rules are not adjusted to this;

Part 2 - SALTO EECA - contribution and experiences

- SALTO most useful as information provider and network;
- Many SALTO tools are useful: calendar, resources, partner search (Otlas), as well as resources developed by the SALTO Network (toolkits and manuals);
- SALTO EECA is a good promoter of our interests and role in European networks already;

Part 3 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - needs and expectations

- Any and every help is needed now that Belarus society and civil society organisations are under pressure from the state and government;
- We need to develop and train a new generation of youth workers independent of state and repressions;
- NGOs need all sort of support, and as they are being closed, informal and individual help is also needed;
- More exchanges are needed, including mobility opportunities abroad;

GEORGIA

Part 1 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - current role and realities

- Erasmus+ is important and appreciated by the youth sector as the biggest international opportunity for youth workers and youth organisations;
- Erasmus+ changes you mentally and makes you a better person;
- If you look back at instances of discrimination and violence in Georgia - it would not take place if there was more education and more exchange;
- The beauty is in differences, Erasmus+ is great in promoting intercultural learning;
- There's a recent development/challenge - Covid-related costs are not properly reimbursed, pre-travel tests cost a lot and this is not being covered by the programme;
- Geographical accessibility is a problem, Erasmus+ and ESC are primarily accessible to youth in Tbilisi, Batumi and Kutaisi - e.g. only have 3 NGOs in Khobi, we need more support locally to promote the programme;
- Inclusion and disability access is a challenge, and general Inclusion is lacking;
- There is no agreement about limits on participation - projects are different and some can be attended several times;

Part 2 - SALTO EECA - contribution and experiences

- SALTO website is widely used by both youth workers and youth organisations;
- Partner search functionality Otlas is particularly welcome;
- Some channels like Instagram are not so popular and should be better promoted;
- SALTO Awards is also not very well known and could be promoted more intensely;
- It would be great to include more (Georgian) national-level contents on the website;

Part 3 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - needs and expectations

- Financial support is a key issue - we need to formulate our requests clearly;
- Erasmus+ and ESC need to reach out to young people outside the big cities;
- For young people and youth organisations working with disability issues - Erasmus+ is very important and a key platform for inclusion;
- Erasmus+ lacks flexibility with regards to disability and inclusion - if a project does not consider expenses related to disability from the start, then there is no chance to add this later;
- Erasmus+ should have a more efficient limit/registration system, so that people do not abuse the system and new participants can benefit (e.g. Erasmus+ credit mobility has a limitation in BA and MA programmes - you can only spend 12 months on a mobility)
- Reimbursement management is not very inclusive - young people have to pay first, then be reimbursed, this is not possible for all Georgian youth;

MOLDOVA

Part 1 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - current role and realities

- Young people benefit greatly in both personal and professional terms from all mobility formats;
- We need to intensify promotion and inclusion across all of Moldova;
- Young people who benefit from Erasmus+ and ESC projects are instantly 'recognisable' locally as they become more active and conscious citizens;
- Hosting projects, both short-term mobilities and longer-term placements is a great capacity-building opportunity for Moldovan youth organisations;
- Learning benefits and outcomes differ depending on young person's personality this is why it is good that they have a wide range of experiences to choose from - e.g. both short and long-term;
- Cultural barriers can be a problem, and dealing with national and ethnic stereotypes can be difficult, but Erasmus+ is great at reducing cultural distance;

Part 2 - SALTO EECA - contribution and experiences

- There is an acute lack of quality youth worker training in Moldova so Erasmus+ trainings are greatly appreciated;
- Local partnership is not a problem - some Moldovan NGOs have many local contacts;
- Key challenge - problems in international partnership cannot be easily resolved;
- As part of management challenges, financial issues are not easy to resolve either - as there is no detailed guidance, some partners decide to be honest, some not - some partners charge too much for partnership as if it were a privilege, not an equal relationship;

Part 3 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - needs and expectations

- Municipalities need to invest in youth workers and coordinators;
- Moldova needs a better mapping of active NGOs - some partners keep meeting the same people, SALTO could help with this;
- We need to know what a youth worker should do to attract young people to their youth centre - European good practice will help greatly with this;
- Young people need good quality spaces to meet, and a youth worker is not an attractive career - mobility opportunities can help improve this;
- There are many information campaigns but this is only information; what is missing is active assistance; we need to work with young people where they are;
- Youth centres have to be able to apply for funds directly - they need resources;
- More opportunities for both mobility and volunteering are needed;

RUSSIA

Part 1 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - current role and realities

- Erasmus+ and ESC are important opportunities for youth and the youth sector;
- It is important for Russian organisations and institutions to see how youth policy and youth work are dealt with in other countries;
- Young people gain invaluable skills and experiences while abroad and on Erasmus+ projects taking place in Russia;
- Youth policy and youth work at federal level in Russia are often based on mass-event approaches: summits, conferences, big gatherings of people; Erasmus+ offers a more individual approach, smaller groups and often a more profound experience;
- Erasmus+ recognize and takes into account the educational aspects of youth work, unlike events oriented development in the field;
- Official and legal limits on cooperation and funding from foreign sources (foreign agent law) are an obstacle to some cooperation formats;
- Working with European Union partners is sometimes met with suspicion, but we need to keep international links alive and Erasmus+ is the biggest platform to do this;
- Training opportunities abroad are useful and much needed, but very competitive so it is very hard to get in;
- It seems that most Erasmus+ opportunities are still only open to a narrow 'elite' and some people participate in numerous projects;
- Generational gap is an issue - many youth work officials are much older than young people and cannot adequately identify their needs - Erasmus+ is more flexible and appropriate in this respect;

Part 2 - SALTO EECA - contribution and experiences

- SALTO website is a popular resource;
- SALTO Toolbox is particularly popular;
- The use of local social networks (vkontakte) and SALTO groups operating there are a very useful networking resource;
- Especially during the pandemic, online resources are key;
- Erasmus Alumni is an interesting and needed format;
- ESC coordinators meetings are useful, but short;
- Youth participation is a key theme for Russia and Russian youth organisations, and it's great that SALTO is promoting it, but we need more support for it;

Part 3 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - needs and expectations

- We need more capacity-building and training opportunities for youth workers - youth work is not a desired professional path and we need to enhance career prospects and opportunities;
- Volunteering is an emerging field in Russia, we need to raise general awareness of volunteering and provide local/national volunteering opportunities too, it would be great if Erasmus+ and SALTO could help with this;

- We need more coordinator meetings, possibly thematic and regional as well;
- Youth information in Russia is not working well - we need to strengthen dissemination of information and promotion of Erasmus+ and ESC to new groups;

UKRAINE

Part 1 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - current role and realities

- Key areas of youth mobility impact: languages, skills development, intercultural learning;
- Travel in itself is an important part of 'Europeanisation' - young people need to travel and Erasmus+ is a great opportunity for this;
- Most Erasmus+ skills and opportunities are very versatile and transferable - e.g. project management is important of course but also 'life management', the programme allows young people to become more independent, confident and active in all areas of life;
- Volunteering experience is key in labour market integration and seen by many employers as a very important asset;
- Youth cooperation and youth work is a practical sector, so development opportunities need to be hands-on, not theoretical - this is a gap that Erasmus+ addresses very well!
- Some partners and organisations feel that Ukraine is not treated equally as it is a partner country and it is outside the EU;
- Some challenges are purely local and specific to Ukraine, e.g. Erasmus+ HE projects need to be registered as technical assistance, this is a burdensome process and slows projects down;

Part 2 - SALTO EECA - contribution and experiences

- SALTO EECA is a good advocate of our interests;
- Partners in the EU don't always understand our realities, and SALTO helps to 'translate' them to the wider world;
- SALTO resources are popular and widely used, and the website is very useful;
- Partner search is useful as Ukraine is very big and it is not always easy to meet in person and at face-to-face events;

Part 3 - Erasmus+ and ESC in EECA - needs and expectations

- Collecting and disseminating resources is a key role for SALTO and it should focus on this;
- SALTO's role is not always clear to local youth organisations, so it's hard to generate recommendations - SALTO should state its mission and activities clearly;
- More active assistance in solving financial challenges, supporting Ukrainian NGOs would be very helpful;
- Active support to sending organisations (ESC) is needed;
- Support to NGOs (Erasmus+) in terms of capacity development is also needed;
- Labour market edge needs to be a clear focus - e.g. programmes supporting language skills and team cooperation;
- Ukraine is considering opening its Erasmus+ NA and fully integrating with the programme - much help will be required with this task and SALTO can provide some of it;