

# The Volunteering Policy Environment in the European Union: An Overview

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## Introduction

Volunteering, grounded in compassion, solidarity and free civic engagement, is a core expression of European values: human dignity, democracy, peace and social justice. It enables people to shape their communities and the Europe they strive for directly, strengthening social cohesion, supporting vulnerable groups, advancing environmental and social goals, and complementing public services, especially in times of crisis. In a Europe with increasing societal polarisation, mistrust between sectors and a shrinking civic space, the power and potential of volunteering as a counterbalance is essential.

The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the growing impact of climate-related emergencies have made this contribution visible as never before, showing volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations and volunteer infrastructure entities as indispensable actors of resilience and recovery. Yet the volunteering environment across Europe remains fragmented, with approaches in the different Member States differing widely on definitions, rights, protections and support structures as well as public appreciation and awarding value to the efforts of volunteers, their organisations and support structures. Furthermore, an uneven and sector-specific approach at the EU level creates additional shortcomings and gaps.

With 2026 as the UN's International Volunteer Year 2026 (IVY2026) and the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the EU Youth and Solidarity Programmes, the year offers a crucial opportunity to address this and to assert a European vision of volunteering as a democratic, rights-based, free and conscious act, embedded in civic space and grounded in multilateralism and peace. It is a moment to call on European Institutions and Member States to foster inclusive, enabling policies, to protect volunteers and humanitarian workers, and ensure that volunteer contributions are properly recognised, measured and supported.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief examines the current EU policy environment for volunteering in the context of general volunteering trends such as blurred lines between value-based volunteering and civic engagement that actively undermine democracy, changing engagement models, funding pressures and shrinking civic space. It identifies key structural gaps and challenges, and offers a civil society perspective to strengthen volunteering as inclusive, accessible and sustainable civic engagement. It also argues for a more coherent and ambitious European approach that recognises volunteering as a cross-cutting policy issue and invests in solidarity, democracy and social resilience across all Member States.

## 1. The current EU Policy Environment for Volunteering

The inclusion of volunteering in policy frameworks at the EU Level remains uneven and largely sector-specific, failing to provide a cross-cutting approach to volunteering and civic engagement across the European Union. This fragmented approach results in the neglect of key areas of the sector, such as infrastructure, sustainability, protection and support. In the current EU policy environment, volunteering is addressed only in a few sectors, where it aligns with predefined objectives, such as these:

### 1.1 The EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027)

The EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027) places volunteering within a wider agenda of youth participation, engagement and empowerment, explicitly mentioning volunteering, solidarity and youth participation as key objectives. Here, the European Solidarity Corps Programme (ESC) is particularly relevant because it is entirely dedicated to volunteering and solidarity-based initiatives, recognising volunteering as an expression of European solidarity, providing structured opportunities for volunteering initiatives, while promoting inclusion and contributing to social cohesion across Member States. The Erasmus+ programme complements this by financing non-formal learning, mobility, and participation projects, in which volunteering and civic engagement are core implementation methods.

### 1.2 Civil Protection

Civil protection is primarily a national and local competence within the European Union, and relies heavily on volunteers and volunteer-based infrastructure, making preparedness, crisis response and resilience in Europe fundamentally volunteer-driven. Despite the voluntary nature of this field, the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) does not foresee direct funding for volunteering programmes per se. Volunteer-based organisations are, however, among the beneficiaries of the programme. UCPM support for capacity-building, equipment and knowledge-sharing indirectly strengthens volunteer-based civil protection capacities. There is, however, limited integration between EU civil protection mechanisms and broader volunteering infrastructures.

In 2026, DGECHO (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations) and DGENV (Directorate-General for Environment) are increasingly collaborating on resilience and preparedness issues in the EU, particularly regarding climate-related disaster and risk reduction, which are central to the EU's preparedness and resilience strategy. This cooperation, envisioned in the Preparedness Union Strategy, takes on an all-hazards, whole-of-society approach, emphasising the importance of a cross-sectoral approach to preparedness and resilience, with the involvement of different actors, including public authorities, local communities, civil society and, naturally, the volunteering dimension.

### 1.3 EU initiatives that engage volunteers in EU policy implementation

EU initiatives that engage volunteers in EU policy implementation and awareness, such as the Climate Pact Ambassadors, are welcome but can lack a greater impact when they are not part of a broader and more comprehensive strategy. In this case, for example, concerning how volunteers of all ages and backgrounds can contribute to combating climate change and what EU support and recognition can be in place for that.

## 1.4 The recognition of non-formal and informal learning

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning within the European Skills Agenda is fundamental for the acknowledgement and validation of learning acquired through volunteering as key to skills development and employability. Through the European Skills Agenda, and in coordination with other frameworks, such as the European Qualifications Framework and Europass, validation and recognition of skills acquired outside formal systems, including those acquired through volunteering, is possible and enables volunteering-acquired skills to be turned into visible qualifications and documented competencies.

## 1.5 Intergenerational Fairness & Solidarity

Intergenerational Fairness & Solidarity is a new and emerging policy focus for the EU. A strategy on Intergenerational Fairness is expected to be published in March 2026, bringing additional initiatives beyond the current limited scope of the European Solidarity Corps Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas Call for Proposals that has this as a priority in 2026. In addition the **platform on “Participation and volunteering after working life”**, proposed by the German Presidency of the EU in October 2020 could bring economic and social benefits as part of active ageing opportunities; increase the productivity of a growing demographic of skilled and experienced older people as well as delay reliance on state support for social care and medical attention due to decreased health and well-being as a result of inactivity. The establishment of this Platform would enable more people from diverse age groups to access volunteering that is more and more accessible to people of all ages and, in turn, ensure active participation in an increasingly polarised society characterised by increasing levels of misinformation and hate speech.

## 1.6 A Statistical Lens on Volunteering

For a **statistical lens on volunteering** in Europe, Eurobarometer surveys and Eurostat’s data from EU-SILC modules are used at the EU level. Volunteering and social participation questions are included when selected as the focus of that year’s EU-SILC module. The Flash Eurobarometer of 2022 focused on youth volunteering rather than all age demographics engaged as volunteers. Some member states also regularly measure volunteer engagement and impact, whilst others do so on a more *ad hoc* basis and others not at all.

Other policy areas and funding programmes under the current MFF 2021-2027, such as the **European Pillar of Social Rights** and the **Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV)**, can indirectly support volunteering and civic engagement. In these cases, volunteering is not explicitly recognised as a distinct focus, but mostly as a pathway for participation, social inclusion, and skill development. As a result, the support remains fragmented and does not concretely address volunteering-specific needs, such as support structures, access or protection of volunteers.

## 2. Key Gaps

### 2.1 Absence of a coherent, cross-sectoral EU framework for volunteering

As demonstrated above, there is no overarching framework at the EU level for volunteering. Most often, volunteering is viewed as a tool or mechanism to achieve wider policy objectives. As such, responsibility and support for volunteering is dispersed across policy areas such as youth, social policy, democracy and civil protection, which in turn results in fragmentation and limited policy coherence.

### 2.2 Over-reliance on a youth-centred understanding of volunteering

Partly as a result of the fragmented policy representation of volunteering, EU policy places a strong emphasis on youth volunteering, particularly through the European Solidarity Corps. As this is the only EU funding programme dedicated specifically to volunteering and solidarity activities, it results in a narrow understanding of volunteering as an exclusively or mainly youth-oriented activity, which is far from the reality across the Union. *(An issue for the EP CULT Committee to address).*

### 2.3 Insufficient support for volunteering infrastructure and capacity

Permanent, stable, structural funding for civil society, to enable organised civil society participation in dialogue and advocacy on all European policy-making thematic priorities, is fundamental. However, civil society at large, and the volunteering field in particular, is increasingly supported mainly through project-based and time-limited funds, rarely ensuring structural support for the organisations and infrastructures that recruit, train, coordinate and safeguard volunteers, including in the resilience and preparedness policy field. *(An issue for the EP BUDG and LIBE Committees to address).*

### 2.4 Validation of learning acquired through volunteering

The opportunities for and awareness of the possibilities for the recognition and validation of skills and competences acquired through volunteering are inconsistent at the MS level across all stakeholder groups, limiting their integration into education, employment and lifelong learning pathways. *(An issue for the EP EMPL Committee to address).*

### 2.5 Intergenerational Fairness and Solidarity

This remains an unaddressed ambition, and its achievement is fundamental to ensure the needs of all generations are met, while also ensuring that these do not negatively affect future generations. The fundamentally overarching character of intergenerational fairness and solidarity makes it a topic that must be addressed across different policy areas, for which reason it is essential that volunteering is one of its pillars as a lifelong learning process and an invaluable tool in bridging intergenerational gaps. In this context, it would be of benefit to pilot a platform on “Participation and volunteering after working life” in order to better understand its potential contribution in bringing economic and social benefits as part of active ageing opportunities as well as increasing the productivity of a growing demographic of skilled and experienced older people and delaying reliance on state support for social care and medical attention due to decreased health and well being as a result of inactivity. *(An issue for the EP EMPL and CULT Committees to address).*

## 2.6 Weak data, knowledge and evidence about trends, rates and impact

There is no comprehensive, up-to-date EU-wide data framework for volunteering, limiting the visibility of volunteering's contribution to EU objectives and weakening the evidence base for policy development. This means that European volunteering data isn't collected regularly or annually and isn't always complete. As an example, the Flash Eurobarometer of 2022 only focused on youth volunteering, missing data on the majority of volunteering taking place in the EU. Furthermore, Eurostat's data from EU-SILC modules on volunteering and social participation questions are not included every year, appearing only when selected as the focus of that year's module, without clarity on when and why that will be. Volunteering must be measured to be recognised, but current definitions often exclude innovative forms of civic engagement. Traditional metrics focus on hours and numbers, overlooking the quality and impact of volunteering. New, informal, and hybrid forms of volunteering, blending lifestyle, activism, and community action, are often missed in surveys, despite their public value. Formal definitions limit access to resources and recognition. A broader, real-time, grassroots-based measurement approach, leveraging AI, could better capture evolving volunteer energy and its societal impact across diverse, dynamic contexts. *(An issue for the EP LIBE, CULT and EMPL Committees to address).*

## 3. Looking ahead: Volunteering in the Next EU Policy Cycle

This section examines the transversal nature of volunteering by positioning it in the next EU policy cycle. For that reason, several Commission portfolios have been considered, reflecting the transversal nature of volunteering and solidarity, and the increasing overlap between the social, democratic and resilience agendas that sustain the EU's political priorities. The analysis groups Commissioners according to the primary roles volunteering is assigned in emerging EU strategies, while recognising that some portfolios contribute to more than one function.

### 3.1 Volunteering as a social inclusion and equality infrastructure

Volunteering is a fundamental aspect of Europe's social inclusion and equality identities. It enables people of all ages and backgrounds to participate, learn, contribute, and access rights on equal terms, thereby advancing the priorities of Commissioners Mînzatu (education, social economy, skills and youth), Micallef (equality, intergenerational fairness, youth, culture and sport) and Lahbib (international partnerships, resilience and preparedness). As such, EU programmes and strategies must treat volunteering as essential infrastructure for equality, not as an optional by-product of learning mobility.

#### 3.1.1 Keeping solidarity and equality at the core of Erasmus+ and the ESC

The Erasmus+ framework has proven crucial in promoting learning mobility, skills development and youth engagement. The merging of the ESC programme with the Erasmus+ programme in the next MFF 2028-2034 is a cause of concern among civil society as it risks diluting the ESC's distinctive mission: promoting solidarity and volunteering as central to active citizenship, social inclusion and democracy in Europe.

To protect equality and access, it is essential that the new Erasmus+ Regulation maintains a clear legal and budgetary distinction for volunteering and solidarity, with a dedicated strand and earmarked funding for ESC volunteering activities. A fivefold increase of the ESC budget, as advocated by CEV, would directly enhance the quality, accessibility and inclusiveness of EU-funded youth volunteering, particularly for those needing additional support and resources to participate on equal terms.<sup>1</sup>

The ESC must be recognised as a mission-driven solidarity and volunteering programme, including through clarity on operating grants for transnational EU networks, structured stakeholder involvement in programme design and implementation, and simplified administrative procedures proportionate to the capacities of small and grassroots organisations. Only then can Erasmus+ and the ESC fully contribute to the Commissioners' shared objectives on inclusion, equality, social rights and preparedness.

### 3.1.2 Volunteering for intergenerational fairness and social inclusion

Intergenerational fairness and solidarity are central to addressing Europe's demographic reality of an ageing population alongside persistent youth unemployment. While the initiative for an EU Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness is most welcome, it must integrate volunteering and solidarity as one of its pillars. Volunteering creates structured opportunities for reciprocal exchange between generations, enabling knowledge transfer, skills development and meaningful participation in a spirit of collaboration.<sup>2</sup> Intergenerational fairness can only be achieved when every generation is able to participate, contribute and benefit on equal terms, and a European Strategy must actively promote this principle.

Volunteering is able to operationalise intergenerational fairness as a lived practice through volunteer-based intergenerational mentorship programmes, supporting Commissioner Micallef's mandate on youth, equality and intergenerational fairness and intersecting with Commissioner Mînzatu's focus on skills, education and youth transitions. Volunteering activities can promote intergenerational solidarity and cooperation, creating value and benefiting different generations, in different ways, such as the acquisition of knowledge, experience and enhanced self-esteem.<sup>3</sup> The proposal for the ESC Centralised Actions (VTHPA) to focus on Intergenerational Fairness is a good and welcome step in the right direction. The proposal for a digital platform on "Participation and volunteering after working life", providing incentives and information for older persons to engage in crossborder volunteering, that was made in the German Presidency Council Conclusions on "Human Rights, Participation and Well-Being of Older Persons in the Era of Digitalisation" of 9 October 2020, still however, lacks progress towards even a feasibility study, pilot action or stakeholder consultation on the matter. Such a platform would enable intergenerational volunteering opportunities, which could enable intergenerational networking, best practices exchanges, provide tools and other information on specific topics, such as funding opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Building Blocks for a More Impactful European Solidarity Corps post 2028, November 2025, [https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/files/ugd/3ec99c\\_a2e8643fb7da463398ffe357f8f03335.pdf](https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/files/ugd/3ec99c_a2e8643fb7da463398ffe357f8f03335.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> CESES, Policy Position on Intergenerational Collaboration, 2024, [https://www.ceses.eu/files/ugd/39078c\\_3b5aaed2196346fd954be08f5cfb7a04.pdf](https://www.ceses.eu/files/ugd/39078c_3b5aaed2196346fd954be08f5cfb7a04.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Green Paper on Ageing: Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations, 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0050>

<sup>4</sup> Commission Staff Working Document Green paper on ageing - Public consultation Synopsis report, 2021, [https://futurium.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-10/SWD\\_2021\\_282\\_F1\\_STAFF\\_WORKING\\_PAPER\\_EN\\_V2\\_P1\\_1507809.pdf](https://futurium.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-10/SWD_2021_282_F1_STAFF_WORKING_PAPER_EN_V2_P1_1507809.pdf)

### 3.1.3 Volunteering, gender equality and inclusive leadership

Gender mainstreaming in volunteering policies and practice helps ensure that organisations and programmes create safe, accessible environments where women and marginalised genders can participate, lead and thrive. Gender-diverse leadership in volunteering organisations brings varied perspectives, innovative ideas and more effective responses to community needs. When gender equality is not prioritised in this sector, the benefits of diverse leadership and inclusive decision-making are lost, and broader societal inequalities are reinforced.

Addressing the structural barriers that limit women's access to leadership roles in civil society requires comprehensive strategies and concrete measures, such as the proactive promotion of underrepresented genders into decision-making positions, targeted training and mentorship programmes, and accountability mechanisms for gender equality within organisations. By embedding gender equality and diversity in volunteering infrastructure, the EU can advance its broader equality objectives while strengthening civil society, which directly supports Commissioner Lahbib's equality mandate and intersects with Commissioner Minzatu's focus on inclusive participation in education, youth, culture and the social economy.

CEV was able to work intensively on this across different member states as part of its CERV operating grant in 2025, through the implementation of 31 training sessions on Gender Equality in CSO leadership (Boards), reaching more than 800 people across 12 EU member states. Without a current operating grant, however, this momentum is at risk of being lost.

### 3.1.4 Investing in volunteering as equality infrastructure

To fully realise volunteering's potential as a social inclusion and equality infrastructure, EU Institutions and Member States must ensure stable, long-term and sustainable funding for civil society and volunteer infrastructure organisations. These organisations create the conditions for safe, inclusive, accessible and meaningful volunteer engagement across generations, genders and backgrounds. The daily practice of solidarity between people of all ages, genders and backgrounds must be valued, supported, recognised and celebrated. Only then can volunteering fully underpin an inclusive, fair and equal Europe and function as a robust social and equality infrastructure across all relevant EU policies and programmes.

Recognition of skills and competences acquired through volunteering, for example via micro-credentials and other validation and learning recognition tools, is also essential to reinforce volunteering as a lifelong learning pathway, particularly for people with fewer opportunities, and strengthens its contribution to employability and social mobility.

## 3.2 Volunteering as democratic participation and civic space

Volunteering is a practical embodiment of democratic participation and a cornerstone of a healthy civic space. It enables people to organise, deliberate, and act together for the common good, and connects institutions with communities in ways that formal politics alone cannot achieve. Recognising volunteering as democratic participation and civic space infrastructure is therefore essential to the mandates of Commissioners McGrath (justice, rule of law, civic freedoms and the European Democracy Shield) and Šuica (democracy, demography and citizen participation), and

must be reflected in the design and implementation of the European Democracy Shield, the EU Civil Society Strategy and the upcoming AgoraEU funding programme.

### 3.2.1 Volunteering in the European Democracy Shield

Volunteering organisations stand ready to work in partnership with EU institutions to ensure that the European Democracy Shield is a credible, effective and inclusive response to democratic challenges. The Democracy Shield is a key tool for safeguarding democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, but it can only succeed if it reflects volunteers' experiences and recognises their daily contribution to democratic life. Volunteer-involving and volunteer infrastructure organisations must therefore be actively and meaningfully involved from the outset, through co-creation of priorities, design of measures and ongoing implementation and monitoring.

The European Democracy Shield must be able to adapt to evolving realities such as democratic backsliding, polarisation and shrinking civic space, as well as the growing frequency & intensity of natural and human-made crises. Moreover, it should explicitly promote and actively protect a safe and enabling environment for volunteering as a key pillar of democracy, cohesion, participation and civic engagement, and provide direct, accessible and long-term structural support to volunteers and their organisations. Strengthening the European Solidarity Corps as a values-based volunteering instrument should be a starting point and central component of this approach, ensuring that solidarity and participation are protected across the Union, but more must be done beyond this flagship youth volunteering funding programme to fully harness volunteering's potential as a key component of the European Democracy Shield.

Transparency and actionability are also essential features of the European Democracy Shield, in line with Commissioner McGrath's focus on effective rule-of-law instruments. Early warning systems designed to identify emerging threats to democracy must be developed and implemented with the active involvement of volunteering organisations, which are often the first to detect and react to local-level pressures on rights, participation and civic freedoms. They are also at the forefront of prevention actions, and volunteers play a vital role in addressing misinformation and disinformation in communities.

The role of volunteers in designing and delivering civic education, media literacy and critical thinking programmes to people of all ages and social & economic situations should be valued and supported. Responses to these threats must be carefully designed so as not to undermine freedom of association, expression or peaceful assembly, and the European Democracy Shield should safeguard civic freedoms for volunteers while supporting their contributions to democratic resilience.

The European Centre for Democratic Resilience is a new hub for exchange between EU institutions, Member States, and civil society to empower, protect, and promote strong and resilient democracies across the EU. The Centre is a core component of the European Democracy Shield, which defines a broad, society-wide approach to strengthening democracy. With the launch of the Centre, the European Union takes a further step to reinforce democratic resilience, protect the integrity of public debate and strengthen trust in Europe's democratic systems. Volunteers need to be part of this process and in particular, be represented in the associated Stakeholder Platform.

### 3.2.2 Volunteering and the EU Civil Society Strategy

Civil society organisations and volunteers are a vital pillar of European democracy, promoting human rights, the rule of law and active citizenship, and ensuring that diverse communities, including vulnerable groups, are heard and represented. The proposed EU Civil Society Strategy is a critical opportunity, relevant to both Commissioners McGrath and Šuica, to acknowledge and support this role in the context of democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space. Volunteering must be treated as a strategic priority and a horizontal focus within this strategy, recognising its contribution to democratic resilience, civic engagement and social cohesion across all policy areas.

A meaningful Civil Society Strategy must be grounded in the realities and needs of civil society actors, including volunteer-based and volunteer-led organisations. In line with Commissioner McGrath's mandate on justice and civic space, it should include systematic civic space impact assessments of all legislative and regulatory proposals to ensure that EU policies support, rather than restrict, civic space for both formal and informal volunteers. There must be clear guidelines in place to prevent and respond to deterioration of civic space, including structured engagement with national and regional authorities, and a comprehensive, multi-layered EU protection system for human rights defenders, environmental defenders, and civil society organisations.

Stable and substantial financial support is also indispensable in line with Commissioner Šuica's goal of meaningful citizen participation. The new MFF should include directly managed programmes dedicated to civil society and civic space, with increased, accessible operating grants that explicitly recognise advocacy and watchdog actions as legitimate activities. A binding agreement on civil dialogue between the European Commission, Parliament and Council is needed to establish regular, structured engagement with independent civil society throughout the policy cycle, and provisions on civil dialogue should be embedded in the EU's Better Regulation toolbox. The upcoming DG JUST Civil Society Platform should function as a permanent mechanism for systematic, transversal and multi-level dialogue between the European Commission and values-based civil society organisations. Member States should be encouraged to develop formal, transparent and inclusive frameworks for civil dialogue and to remove obstacles to cross-border cooperation of non-profit organisations, including through a European Cross-Border Association Directive.

### 3.2.3 Volunteering in AgoraEU and democratic programmes

The recognition of cultural actors, media stakeholders and civil society organisations as key to European democracy, and the proposed increase in the overall budget and in the CERV+ strand under AgoraEU, are positive steps that align with Commissioner Šuica's focus on citizen participation and remembrance, and with Commissioner McGrath's attention to civic freedoms and rule-of-law culture. However, merging Creative Europe and CERV into a single framework raises concerns about whether each strand will receive sufficient and balanced support, especially in the absence of clear methods, budget allocations and safeguards for cross-strand collaboration.

It is encouraging that the proposed AgoraEU regulation continues to acknowledge volunteering through the terminology of "voluntary work", providing a strong foundation for advocacy efforts aimed at maintaining and strengthening its visibility.

To fulfil its democratic aims, AgoraEU must continue to support civil society advocacy and watchdog activities, many of which are carried out by volunteers, and provide structured spaces for civil dialogue. Maintaining meaningful civil dialogue structures is essential for delivering on Commissioner Šuica's citizen participation mandate and for enabling volunteers and their organisations to contribute substantively to EU policies.

### 3.2.4 Investing in volunteering as democratic infrastructure

Democracy depends on a vibrant democratic culture that is actively upheld, promoted and celebrated in everyday life. Volunteering is one of the most tangible ways in which citizens participate in and shape democratic societies, from local neighbourhood initiatives to transnational solidarity actions. Strengthening values-based volunteering, protecting civic freedoms and ensuring a safe and enabling civic space are therefore essential investments in Europe's long-term democratic resilience.

By embedding volunteering in the European Democracy Shield, the EU Civil Society Strategy and AgoraEU, and by recognising volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations and volunteer infrastructure organisations as indispensable democratic actors, the European Union can ensure that democratic participation is accessible, meaningful and effective for all.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, it will reinforce the mandates of Commissioners McGrath and Šuica, and anchor democracy not only in institutions and laws, but also in the lived experiences, relationships and solidarity that volunteering makes possible every day across Europe.

## 3.3 Volunteering as resilience, preparedness and solidarity

Volunteering is a core component of Europe's resilience, preparedness and solidarity infrastructure. It connects institutions with communities: facilitating prevention and resilience activities; enabling rapid and trusted responses to crises, and supporting long-term recovery and peacebuilding. Recognising volunteering as such directly serves the mandates of Commissioner Hadja Lahbib (international partnerships, humanitarian aid, resilience and preparedness) and Commissioner Jozef Sikela (implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, including through UN-related initiatives), and must be reflected in both internal and external EU policies and funding frameworks.

### 3.3.1 Volunteering in EU civil protection, preparedness and crisis response

The growing frequency and complexity of natural, technological and societal crises demand coordinated, inclusive and sustainable responses that fully integrate civil society and, in particular, the volunteering sector. Volunteers are often first on the ground, trusted by local communities and essential partners in resilience building, response and recovery. A strengthened Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), that includes specific capacity-building measures for volunteer-involving civil society organisations is therefore critical to Europe's preparedness and resilience. Furthermore, a genuine whole-of-society approach requires that civil society and volunteer-involving organisations are systematically involved in the management and advisory structures of the Union Civil Protection Knowledge Network.

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<sup>5</sup>PAVE - Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe, 2011,  
[https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/\\_files/ugd/3ec99c\\_38c7cd0ec9b4490fbd96230430959e35.pdf](https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/_files/ugd/3ec99c_38c7cd0ec9b4490fbd96230430959e35.pdf)

Long-term, sustainable funding is indispensable for CSOs active on civil protection and preparedness at local, national and EU levels in order to maintain stable organisational capacities, enable continuous volunteer training and ensure readiness between crises. The role and contribution of volunteers in this field should be explicitly recognised as a fundamental expression of European solidarity, with a significant role to play in resilience and preparedness actions, firmly linked to Commissioner Lahbib's responsibility for crisis preparedness and humanitarian response.

A whole-of-society approach should also be mainstreamed across all EU funding instruments related to crisis management, such as the UCPM, humanitarian aid programmes, Horizon Europe and other relevant instruments, so that local communities, CSOs and volunteers are treated as equal partners, strengthening operational capacities and enhancing democratic legitimacy, social cohesion and civic engagement around crisis response and preparedness.

### 3.3.2 Volunteering, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

Under Commissioner Sikela's mandate to ensure that the EU promotes the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, volunteering represents a critical implementation mechanism, especially in the context of the International Volunteer Year 2026 (IVY2026). Volunteers contribute directly to the achievement of many SDGs, including inter alia those related to poverty reduction, health, education, climate action, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and peace, justice and strong institutions. Recognising volunteering in EU frameworks for SDGs implementation would help connect UN-level commitments with practical, community-based action. Also in this context, EU funding is crucial for sustaining this contribution of volunteering. Accessible and predictable funding streams across programmes such as Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps, AgoraEU, the Civil Protection Mechanism, Horizon Europe, humanitarian aid and other external instruments can provide the stability that volunteering organisations need to plan long-term contributions to resilience, reduced fragility and peacebuilding. Aligning these funding programmes with SDG priorities, and ensuring that volunteering is recognised as an eligible and valued modality across them, will maximise the EU's impact on the 2030 Agenda.

### 3.3.3 Volunteering as a contributor to the European Skills Agenda

Volunteering as a space for developing skills in an informal learning context is fundamental to promoting the validation of this type of learning. By offering accessible, practice-based learning opportunities for people of all ages, including those most distant from formal education or the labour market, volunteering enables the development of key, transversal and technical competences. To realise the full potential of volunteering as a contributor to the European Skills agenda, it is fundamental that it is integrated into skills and lifelong learning frameworks at the EU level. This implies a great coordination across sectors in pursuit of formal recognition, as well as supporting volunteer-involving organisations as non-formal learning providers. In this way, Commissioner Mînzatu's agenda on upskilling and reskilling, youth empowerment and a stronger social economy is directly advanced by treating volunteering as part of the skills development ecosystem.

### 3.3.4 Volunteering as a contributor to Health and Well-being

Volunteering is a proven contributor to health and well-being and an effective means to combat feelings of loneliness and exclusion, and, in this context, volunteer-involving organisations and civil society more generally have a recognised role in areas such as awareness raising, providing direct support and engagement across sectors.<sup>6</sup> The explicit integration of volunteering into the EU and Member States strategies on mental health, loneliness and healthy ageing, in line with Commissioner Mînzatu's responsibilities for youth, skills, social inclusion and community-based participation, is fundamental, and Commission Várhelyi's responsibilities for the EU's Public

Health policies, especially regarding EU Health systems, public health campaigns and other areas that frequently depend on volunteers (e.g. patient support groups, health NGOs, blood donation, palliative care, public information campaigns).

## 4. Moving towards a more enabling EU policy environment for volunteering

Despite some recognition of the role of volunteering in achieving key EU priorities, such as democratic participation, social cohesion, wellbeing and crisis preparedness and response, EU policy frameworks fall short in fostering an enabling environment for volunteering across Europe. As shown, the policy recognition and support for volunteering remain fragmented without a coordinated approach and are largely project-based. To unlock the full potential of volunteering, a more coherent and enabling policy framework is needed at the EU level.

### 4.1 A Proposal for an MEP IVY 2026 Volunteering Statement

An MEP Statement on Volunteering would represent a clear political statement recognising the role and impact of volunteering in the EU's democratic, social and territorial objectives. It would contribute to bridging the gaps in the current policy environment for volunteering, offering an effective way to consolidate political intent and set a common direction by creating an overarching framework for volunteering in Europe.

An MEP Statement, while non-binding, expresses a clear political position, allowing the European Parliament to influence the agenda-setting and policymaking across EU institutions. In this case, the statement would express a cross-cutting vision for volunteering, enabling the recognition and celebration of different cultural and legal contexts for volunteering in Europe, while identifying the key needed improvements and identifying common principles and expectations at the EU level.

An MEP Statement would:

- Provide visible political recognition of volunteering as a fundamental mechanism to achieve EU objectives that is based in EU values;
- Strengthen volunteering as a form of civic engagement and active participation, fundamental for a thriving democracy, social cohesion and solidarity;
- Recognise volunteering as a structural component of European preparedness and resilience;
- Provide political guidance for a more coherent and enabling policy environment for volunteering, both at EU and Member State levels;
- Reinforce the EU's commitment to civic engagement and a vibrant civil society.

<sup>6</sup> Understanding and Addressing Loneliness Among Young People Handbook for Volunteer Involving Organisations and Volunteer Mentors, 2024, [https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/\\_files/ugd/3ec99c\\_3229d6f8ddaa4a77b4d57b712c21e440.pdf](https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/_files/ugd/3ec99c_3229d6f8ddaa4a77b4d57b712c21e440.pdf)

The Statement should explicitly acknowledge the **cross-sectoral nature of volunteering**, as well as the importance of understanding solidarity as a horizontal priority in Europe, particularly in what concerns the reshaping of the Erasmus+ and AGORA EU programmes under the proposed MFF 2028-2034. This would address and celebrate the contribution of volunteering and volunteers in areas such as youth policy, social inclusion, democratic participation, civil protection, community resilience and development, while also contributing to recognising volunteering's contribution to the European Social model, to resilience, peace, cohesion and prosperity. This resolution should thus recognise volunteering across the life course and in diverse forms, including community-based, intergenerational or crisis-related volunteering.

Drawing on the core pillars of the EU Civil Society Strategy:

- **Strengthen effective engagement of Civil Society as partners in governance** is an essential step in recognising civil society as an essential partner in shaping and implementing EU policies. In this context, a statement on volunteering must recognise and reiterate the importance of volunteering in strengthening democratic resilience, civic engagement and social cohesion.
- **Supporting & Protecting Civil Society** implies creating and fostering an enabling legal, administrative and regulatory environment, contributing to a thriving civic space and, in turn, a healthy democracy. This necessarily implies the creation of conditions for civil society organisations and citizens alike to participate freely, safely and meaningfully in democratic life. An MEP statement on volunteering must create and foster an enabling and safe environment for volunteers to act and support their communities, putting into practice EU values, ensuring their safety and well-being in any circumstance and context.
- **Ensuring adequate, sustainable and transparent funding for civil society** is fundamental to ensure Civil Society Organisations are able to carry out their work and engage decision makers in their efforts to contribute to healthy and democratic societies. Only by being provided stable, structural and long-term funding can civil society have the stability necessary to operate effectively and independently. Long-term, sustainable funding is necessary to maintain stable organisational capacities and invest in volunteer training, coordination and infrastructure, ensuring that volunteers and organisations alike contribute more effectively to social cohesion and democratic participation. At the same time, ensuring transparency and flexibility in funding frameworks also allows grassroots, volunteer-led, and volunteer-engaging initiatives to more easily benefit from these mechanisms.

The celebration of **IVY2026 and the 30 years of European Youth and Solidarity Programmes** offers a timely political moment to advance such a statement, providing visibility and momentum for a renewed EU-level commitment to volunteering, while anchoring the statement in a broader narrative of solidarity, participation, and shared responsibility, aligned with the strategic priorities set for the European Union in accordance with the MFF 2028-2034.

## 5. Annexes and Further Reading

### [PAVE - Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe, 2011](#)

The EYV 2011 Alliance Policy Agenda on Volunteering in Europe (P.A.V.E) provides recommendations for a more efficient and effective European policy framework to support and promote volunteers, volunteering, volunteer-involving organisations and their partners. The P.A.V.E. recommendations promote and support volunteering as a demonstration of European values, providing a vehicle for active citizenship and contributing to economic and social capital growth.

### [BEV 2030 - Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030, 2021](#)

This Blueprint for European Volunteering serves as guidance to stakeholders concerned with volunteering, regarding the steps that need to be taken for volunteering to reach its true potential. It acknowledges that there are different cultural and legal contexts for volunteering in Europe and takes into account that the outcomes of the suggestions included will vary according to this variety of circumstances and different volunteer profiles, but stresses that common values and aspects of quality indicators should be common throughout. The Blueprint is organised around 5 thematic concepts: Independent and inclusive engagement; New volunteers and methods; Empowerment; Appreciation of contribution; Resources & Coordination.

### [Volunteering: The Keys to Unlocking the Potential, 2024](#)

The “Volunteering: The Keys to Unlocking the Potential” Policy Statement builds on BEV2030 and the “Vote Volunteer Vision” campaign developed for the EP elections 2024. The document is useful for all stakeholders to strengthen volunteering outreach, inspire volunteering impact and celebrate volunteering & volunteers, leading to growth in the value of volunteering in Europe.

### [Building Blocks for a More Impactful European Solidarity Corps post 2028, 2025](#)

A coalition of Civil Society Organisations engaging with the European Solidarity Corps Programme developed the Building Blocks for a More Impactful European Solidarity Corps post 2028, as a joint initiative to respond to the EC Public consultation on the Multiannual Financial Framework, specifically on the proposed Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the Erasmus+ programme for the period 2028-2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/817 and (EU) 2021/888. This initiative builds on the inputs submitted for the 2024 evaluation of the European Solidarity Corps Programme, on the “Building Blocks for a More Impactful European Solidarity Corps” of May 2025, as well as on the work done in collaboration with the SNAC and in the framework of the ESC Resource Centre Advisory Group.

### [eQval Guide: European Quality Standards in the Validation of Learning Outcomes from Volunteering, 2025](#)

The "Guide to the European Quality Standards in Validation of Learning Outcomes from Volunteering" was created as part of the Erasmus+ Project eQval - European Quality Standards in Validation of Learning from Volunteering. The guide offers a clear path for volunteers, volunteer organisations, universities, VET providers, and employers across Europe to formally acknowledge and make the most of the crucial competencies gained through volunteering. The eQval project (2023-2025) aimed at defining and promoting across Europe the first European Quality Standards in Validation of Learning from Volunteering.

### [Understanding and Addressing Loneliness Among Young People Handbook for Volunteer Involving Organisations and Volunteer Mentors, 2024](#)

The handbook aims to support and empower Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) working with young volunteers to better understand and more effectively address the issues of loneliness, isolation and exclusion among young people. The handbook focuses on the importance of creating a supportive environment within volunteering organisations, where young volunteers not only contribute to society but also gain emotional support and social skills to help them overcome feelings of loneliness and social exclusion.

The Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering Project (2022 -2024) was developed in response to the growing distress caused by loneliness and isolation among young people across Europe. The main objective of the participating organisations was to, through this project, raise awareness about the importance of volunteering as one of the potential ways to prevent and reduce social isolation and loneliness among young people.

### [Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering Policy Recommendations, 2024](#)

Based on evidence in favour of volunteering programmes as an effective means to alleviate the feeling of loneliness and exclusion in young people, collected through the Stop Loneliness, Start Volunteering Erasmus+ Project, specific recommendations for policymakers were developed, emphasising the importance of creating and supporting volunteering programmes that foster social inclusion of youths. Additionally, these recommendations are intended to guide the organisations involved in the volunteering programmes, helping them to implement effective strategies that address the social needs of young people through volunteering initiatives.