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Social cohesion à la Macron

Is a compulsory civic service the right way forward to prevent the disintegration of a society?

Read this interview in German or Russian.

In Germany, there is currently a debate about introducing compulsory social service, which is supposed to strengthen social cohesion. France's President Emmanuel Macron is also currently working on introducing such a service. What is Macron striving for?

The riots in the suburbs in 2005 were assessed as being a sign of the disintegration of society and, as a reaction to that, a voluntary civic service was introduced in 2009. 125,000 young French men and women performed this service in 2017, not least because of the high level of youth unemployment in France.

Macron's new 'Service National Universel' (Universal National Service) is also meant to strengthen cohesion in society and – in contrast to 2009 – increase resilience to threats from terrorism and other dangers at the same time. The latest plan envisages an obligatory four week 'cohesion phase' at the age of around 16.

In communal accommodation, young people from all social levels are to experience living together in a community for the first two weeks and to find out about each other via sport and first aid exercises. Finally they are meant to engage in small groups in different ways – according to their personal preference.

This programme is essentially meant to take place during holiday time. Potentially this would apply to around 700,000 to 800,000 young French men and women each year. It is scheduled to start in mid-2019, with a phasing in process which should cover a whole generation born in one year only by 2026. If necessary, the constitution would also be changed.

In a voluntary second phase, citizens can do some service up to their 25th year during a period of three to twelve months. They can do so in very different areas, for instance, national defence, environmental protection, social services and duties in the educational system or in

the area of culture. The existing 'civic service' is also a possible option for this second phase.

The proposals, which were crafted in working groups and presented in June 2018, will be open for comments in a comprehensive consultation process including various youth organisations, parent and teacher associations as well as territorial administrations by the end of October.

Wasn't the original idea a short term obligatory military service?

As the election campaigner Emmanuel Macron set out his original idea on 18 March 2017, he actually talked about a compulsory, one month military service for men and women between 18 and 21 years old. Two months later that even became three to six months in front of the French military. Then, he had justified the need for such a service by referring to the increasing threats to France, including from attacks by radical Islamists.

However, the aim is not to reinvent military service for all, but to communicate to France's youth an understanding of the significance of national defence and the upcoming battles in social, environmental and cultural policy. The 'Service National Universel' should be the time when 'the Republic makes it clear to young people that a commitment to the community is the best way to self-fulfilment and is the basis for strengthened national solidarity'.

How did society and politicians react to these proposals? And what do those affected by them say?

Right at the start the reactions ranged from cautious to critical. Both the military and educational institutions were sceptical and student unions were openly hostile to this initiative. First, it was about the issue of the financing, the foreseeable difficulties with housing and the availability of trained and sufficient support staff. Estimates for the costs without the expenditure on infrastructure come to between €1.7bn and €4bn. The opposition attacked the proposal as half-baked and preferred the extension of already existing offerings.

Particularly severe criticism came from the youth and student organisations. In early June, fifteen of them came out against the compulsory service in a joint text. The project – bearing the hallmarks of President Macron – seemed paternalistic to them and not flexible enough for the different needs and proclivities of young people. Even the initially announced military nature of the service was criticised as not being very appropriate for strengthening cohesion across social boundaries.

However, a representative poll among 15 to 25 year olds found that 63 per cent agreed with the introduction of the 'Service National Universel' and even 55 per cent approved of its compulsory nature. The consultations, which run until the end of October, allow room for adaptations and an accommodation vis à vis the misgivings of youth organisations.

So is it too early yet to say whether the idea will be a success or not?

There are still major doubts as to whether the assumed gain for cohesion in society justifies the expense. A four week period of shared 'free time' – those young French people with successful school records will hardly say that they are ready for more – does not suggest that it does. That is why the second phase of the 'Service National Universel' will be used above all by those who already take up the offer of the 'civic service'.



Stefan Dehnert
Paris

Stefan Dehnert is director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Paris office.
He previously worked in Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo.