



PRESS RELEASE

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Public thematic report

UNIVERSAL NATIONAL SERVICE

A measure available to young people from the age of 15, the Universal National Service (SNU), was tested in 13 departments in 2019, before being rolled out nationwide. Its gradual extension, originally intended to result in an extension to an entire age group by 2024, was severely disrupted by the health crisis. Every year since then, the number of participants in cohesion stays has fallen far short of the target set in the initial budget act. These difficulties reveal the absence of a clear timeframe for the measure, as well as insufficient planning of the resources needed to ramp it up. This report looks at how the measure has been implemented since 2019. At the end of its investigation, the Court notes that the conditions for implementing the measure are unsatisfactory and that its development has not been accompanied by a clarification of its objectives, which remain uncertain.

A measure with objectives that remain uncertain

Implemented nationwide from 2019, the SNU is divided into three successive phases: a 12-day 'cohesion stay', a public-interest mission, and finally an involvement in a public association or institution. The SNU remains based on voluntary service; only the public-interest mission is compulsory, in principle, for young volunteers who have completed a cohesion stay, who, under the French National Service Code, commit to "participate in a public interest mission". The objectives assigned to the SNU revolve around the concepts of national resilience, national cohesion, engagement, guidance and integration of young people. To date, they remain uncertain and poorly understood, particularly among young people. While the participants are satisfied with their experience, in terms of social diversity and commitment, the measure's ambitions have not been achieved.

Unsatisfactory institutional and budgetary management

Since 2019, there have been many changes in the management of the measure by the government and the central administrations involved, and the inter-ministerial nature of the measure has not been consolidated. The strategy for mobilising local players, local authorities and associations has yet to be defined. The budget is covered by programme 163 ('Youth and associative sector') which comes under the Ministry of National Education and Youth (MENJ), rising from €30 million in 2020 to €160 million in 2024 in the initial budget act (LFI). However, the budget actually used each year has been significantly lower than set out in the **initial budget act**. The cost of the SNU corresponds mainly to the cohesion stays, in particular the accommodation, catering and supervision of the young people. However, the calculation of the cost per young person prepared by the MENJ has significant shortcomings. In addition, the estimate, close to €2,300 per young person for 2021 and 2022, does not take into account a number of costs. These include the administrative costs of the MENJ, but also the costs supported by other ministries, in particular the Ministry of the Armed Forces, mainly for the

Defence and Remembrance Day, and the internal security forces. According to the Court of Accounts, if the corresponding costs are taken into account, the cost per young person will be close to €2,900 for 2022. This figure, which covers only the cohesion stay, is incomplete.

Rapid expansion forced through despite major difficulties in deployment

The deployment of the SNU has encountered a number of difficulties, particularly with regard to the accommodation of minors and the recruitment and remuneration of supervisors, exacerbated by the health crisis. These difficulties are the result of the ramp-up of the SNU and the significant constraints it has created, without the appropriate tools and resources having been put in place as the roll-out progressed. This situation of disorganisation is disrupting the organisation of public procurement and leading to additional costs. The cohesion stays were only possible thanks to the commitment of administrative staff, both at central and decentralised levels, as well as the measure's partners, particularly associations. Against this backdrop, the additional staffing levels already in place or planned for in 2024 are insufficient to absorb the additional workload.

A measure still lacking stability and with an outlooking need of clarification

The funds allocated to the SNU represent 18% of programme 163 in the initial increase act for 2024, with a target of 80,000 young people. The public finance programming act for the years 2023-2027 provides for an increase in these allocations, which is not compatible with the widespread roll-out of the SNU to an entire age group (i.e. around 850,000 young people) by 2027. Extending the measure raises major operational issues, both in terms of accommodation capacity and supervision of young people, which have not yet been resolved. The creation of permanent centers hosting cohesion stays throughout the year could simplify the management of the measure and streamline certain costs. However, this has not been decided upon nor sufficiently planned. According to the ministry responsible for youth, the estimated cost of extending the SNU to an entire age group, in its current configuration, is €2 billion. However, this figure focuses on the first phase of the measure and is therefore not an assessment of its overall cost. The annual operating costs of the SNU are more likely to be between €3.5 and €5 billion, not including future investment costs. The budgetary restrictions in effect in 2024 make exhaustive budgetary monitoring of current costs all the more necessary, as well as a comprehensive projection in the event of the system being rolled out more broadly.

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