



**Laura Massoli**

**Director of the Italian Office for  
Universal Civil Service**

## **YOUTH PARTICIPATION, ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP, AND ITALIAN-FRENCH COOPERATION WITHIN THE EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK: A POLICY ANALYSIS OF THE ITALIAN UNIVERSAL CIVIL SERVICE**

Across Europe, youth engagement has become a central concern for public policy. Declining participation in traditional democratic processes, increasing social and territorial inequalities, and a widening gap between young people and public institutions have pushed governments to reconsider how participation is encouraged, sustained, and made meaningful. In this context, there is renewed attention to policy instruments capable of combining social contribution, learning opportunities, and responsibility within structured and recognizable frameworks. Civil service schemes have increasingly emerged as one of the responses to this challenge, offering forms of engagement grounded in experience rather than representation alone.

Rather than relying exclusively on consultation mechanisms or symbolic participation, civil service programmes provide young people with direct exposure to public action. Through service-based experiences, participants engage with concrete social needs, interact with public administrations and community organizations, and develop a practical understanding of citizenship through everyday activities. This experiential approach has gained relevance in a policy environment where participation is expected not only to be inclusive, but also to generate social value, strengthen institutional trust, and contribute to democratic resilience.

Within this European debate, the Italian Universal Civil Service stands out as one of the most structured national experiences in the field of youth engagement. Moreover, Italian Civil Service refers to unarmed and non-violent defence of the Homeland, education, peace among peoples and the promotion of the founding values of the Italian Republic, through actions for communities and the territories. It is clearly not embedded within youth policies but represents a unique tool for fostering active citizenships, civic engagement and education.

Anchored in a clear legal and institutional framework and implemented at scale across the national territory, the programme combines central coordination with strong territorial involvement. Beyond its national relevance, the Universal Civil Service has also become a point of reference for international policy learning and bilateral cooperation, particularly in the context of enhanced Italian-French relations under the Quirinal Treaty. This article examines the Italian Universal Civil Service as a public policy instrument, focusing on its governance, participation dynamics, evaluative perspectives, and its role within broader European and Italian-French cooperation frameworks.

## 1. Beyond youth engagement

Universal civil service places young people in direct contact with public action, social needs, and community-based initiatives and operate as a genuine “gymnasiums of citizenship.” They foster civic learning, responsibility, and institutional trust through everyday practice rather than abstract ideals. Participation is thus framed not only as a right to be heard, but as a shared responsibility grounded in service, competence-building, and social contribution.

In this context, the Italian Universal Civil Service (*Servizio civile universale* - hereinafter defined as SCU) represents a unique opportunity for young people to get activated and oriented by serving public communities and policies. Rooted in a clear legal framework and supported by a multi-level governance structure, the SCU has progressively evolved from an alternative to compulsory military service into a strategic tool for youth participation, social cohesion, and territorial development, being one of the most articulated and consolidated experiences at EU level. Its recent expansion—significantly reinforced by investments from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (hereinafter defined as PNRR).

Beyond its domestic dimension, the SCU has also become a reference point for international policy learning and bilateral cooperation. A notable example is the Italian-French Civil Service developed within the framework of the Quirinal Treaty.

Against this backdrop, this article analyzes the Italian Universal Civil Service as a public policy instrument, focusing on its institutional architecture, participation dynamics, recent quantitative expansion, and evaluative perspectives. Particular attention is devoted to its role within the evolving framework of Italian-French cooperation, in order to assess how civil service schemes can simultaneously contribute to youth engagement, democratic resilience, and bilateral policy innovation in Europe.

## 2. The Universal Civil Service: An Italian model of civil commitment

The SCU is legally and philosophically rooted in the recognition of conscientious objection to military service, first recognized in Italy by Law No. 772 of 1972. This historical passage marked the beginning of an alternative vision of the "Defense of the Homeland" (*Difesa della Patria*), understood not as a military obligation but as a duty of social solidarity and non-violent civil commitment. Following the suspension of compulsory conscription in 2005, the institution underwent a radical metamorphosis, shifting from a mandatory alternative to a fully voluntary professional and civic opportunity. The definitive turning point occurred with Legislative Decree No. 40 of 2017, which established the "Universal" Civil Service. The term "universal" signifies a vocation for inclusivity and a guarantee of access.

Currently, the SCU is a voluntary choice for young people aged 18 to 28 (including foreign citizens regularly residing in Italy) to dedicate 8 to 12 months of their lives to community service. It is grounded in the constitutional principles of political, economic, and social solidarity (Art. 2), equality (Art. 3), and the duty to contribute to the progress of society (Art. 4), embodying a modern form of non-armed defence through the protection of cultural, environmental, and social heritage<sup>1</sup>.

This complex framework brings SCU beyond a simple youth policy; in fact, SCU stands out as an instrument which merges training, active citizenship, peace education and unarmed defence of the Nation. Moreover, the SCU is an articulated public policy governed by multilevel architecture. The State acts as the primary guarantor and coordinator through the Department for Youth Policies and Universal Civil Service of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. A fundamental operational role is played by a vast network of over 460 accredited entities and 18,000 hosting organizations, including municipalities and third-sector associations.

This system is regulated through a three-year programming framework, that define the government's strategic objectives. For the volunteers, the experience includes a weekly commitment of 25 hours and a structured training path divided into:

1. *General Training*: Focused on constitutional values, active citizenship, and peace education.
2. *Specific Training*: Centred on the technical skills required for the specific project sector. As of May 2025, volunteers receive a monthly allowance of €519.47, ensuring that the service remains accessible to youth from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Additionally and since 2023, a national legislation (Law No. 74/2023) has introduced a 15% reserve of posts in public service examinations for those who complete the SCU without demerit. This feature has given further relevance to the SCU initiative.

### 3. Quantitative analysis: a decade of expansion (2015-2024)

Evidence from the data collected by the Department, which will be included in 2025 SCU Report but also available online in a specific section of the website<sup>2</sup>, will illustrate a policy that will have successfully scaled up to meet unprecedented demand. Between 2015 and 2024, the system managed a growth phase that more than doubled the available positions.

- **The NRRP impact:** Mission 5 of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) allocated approximately **€650 million** to the SCU<sup>3</sup>. This extraordinary investment allowed for record-breaking calls: the 2022 call offered **71,550 positions**, followed by similarly high volumes in 2023 and 2024. The NRRP fund was given taking into consideration the empowerment capability of the SCU as an instrument for developing soft skills and active citizenship.
- **Participation dynamics:** Despite the increase in supply, demand has remained consistently higher. In 2024 call<sup>4</sup>, applications reached a historical record of **135,057**, indicating that for every available spot, there are nearly two applicants. This gap underscores the structural relevance of the SCU in the transition from education to the labour market.
- **Territorial trends:** Although the SCU is widely a national policy, widespread all-around Italy, there are significant geographical differences. In fact, a significant concentration of demand is observed in Southern Italy and the Islands, particularly in Campania and Sicily. In these regions, the SCU acts not only as a civic pathway but also as a vital tool for social inclusion and youth activation in territories with fewer employment opportunities.

### 4. Innovation and specialization: digital, green, and labor policies

Since 2022, the SCU has also evolved through thematic experimental programs strongly in line with strategic topics for the international and EU agenda:

- **Digital Civil Service:** Launched to support the PNRR goals, this program forms "digital facilitators" to assist citizens, particularly the elderly, in accessing online public services. By late 2024, this initiative had trained more the 9000 digital facilitators.

- **Environmental Civil Service:** Focused on the green transition, this program involves almost 4000 volunteers across three cycles, focusing on biodiversity protection and sustainability education.
- **Agricultural Civil Service:** is a thematic extension of the Civil Service and aims to engage young people in social agriculture, land conservation, and support for rural communities. The first cycle, starting in 2024, allowed over 1,000 volunteers to be deployed by January 2026 and implemented 22 programs across 82 projects. The call for applications, published in September, saw a boom in participation: over 4,600 applications, especially from Sardinia, Campania, Calabria, and Basilicata.
- **Professional recognition (the 15% Reserve):** A landmark legislative change (Law No. 74/2023) established a 15% reserve of posts in public service examinations for those who complete the SCU without demerit. Additionally, this reservation was later extended to include participants of the National Civil Service. Furthermore, an internal survey conducted in 2024 indicates that 12% of volunteer operators have already utilized this right to enter administrative careers, consolidating the SCU's role as an active labour policy<sup>5</sup>.
- **Skills certification:** The introduction of Open Badges, aligned with European frameworks (*DigComp* and *GreenComp*), ensures that the "soft skills" acquired, such as problem-solving and teamwork, are transparent and verifiable for future employers.

## 5. The Italian-French axis: the Quirinal Treaty as a catalyst

The signing of the Quirinal Treaty in 2021<sup>6</sup> inaugurated a new era of bilateral cooperation. Article 9 specifically identifies youth, education and culture as strategic areas for shared European belonging, leading to the institutionalization of the Italian-French Civil Service.

Following a Declaration of Intent signed in Paris in February 2022, a joint governance model was established. It involves the Italian-French Youth Council, whose meetings (Rome 2023, Paris 2025) have worked to harmonize the Italian SCU with the French *Service Civique*.

The Italian-French Civil Service is more than a mobility program; it is a laboratory for European citizenship. Unlike academic exchanges, it focuses on "solidarity in action". Volunteers develop deep intercultural competencies, learning to navigate different administrative systems and social models. This "lived citizenship" fosters a shared European identity grounded in the daily management of community needs and social challenges.

## 6. International perspectives and policy learning (OECD)

The institutional architecture of the Italian Universal Civil Service (SCU) has progressively consolidated its relevance within the international scientific debate, establishing itself as a benchmark paradigm in the comparative analysis of public policies. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has included Italy in its comparative research on civic service and youth volunteering programmes across OECD member states and the European Union<sup>7</sup>. This systematic analysis situates the Italian experience within a broader landscape of national approaches to youth engagement, providing a critical focus on multi-level governance arrangements, inclusive participation mechanisms, and strategic policy objectives. Consequently, it offers an empirical foundation for cross-national policy learning among Member States.

Beyond this broad comparative perspective, the OECD has conducted a dedicated analytical exercise specifically focusing on Italy's Universal Civil Service<sup>8</sup>. This initiative was implemented under the European Union's Technical Support Instrument (TSI), a programme designed to provide strategic expertise to Member States for the design and execution of structural reforms. Within the TSI framework, the OECD provided specialized guidance on monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, emphasizing the imperative of generating "robust evidence" to assess not only quantitative participation volumes, which involve a national mobilization base of approximately 50,000 to 60,000 volunteer operators supported by a network of over 10,000 accredited entities but, more crucially, the tangible outcomes in terms of skills development, civic attitudes and territorial impact.

According to the OECD methodological frameworks developed through the TSI project and the Global Hope Network analysis of international best practices, the efficacy of the SCU is currently measured through its transition toward evidence-based policymaking, structured around three fundamental analytical dimensions:

- 1. Human capital development and employability:** The emphasis on the formalization and certification of soft skills transforms the year of service into a strategic asset for the school-to-work transition. OECD data highlights how such structured programmes act as catalysts for labor market integration, effectively mitigating the information asymmetries that often penalize NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) profiles.
- 2. Civil attitudes and democratic resilience:** The programme is analyzed as a driver of active citizenship that enhances institutional trust and social cohesion, key elements for European democratic stability, in alignment with the cooperation objectives outlined in the Quirinal Treaty.

**3. Social impact and territoriality:** Consistent with OECD evaluation guidelines and the YouthWiki profile for Italy<sup>9</sup>, the SCU functions as a "value multiplier" within local communities according to the Global Hope Network analysis<sup>10</sup>. It provides concrete responses to complex social needs and strengthens the communal fabric through a logic of subsidiary proximity.

The strengthening of these evaluation frameworks via the TSI supports the positioning of the Universal Civil Service as a mature public policy instrument. Such an evolution not only facilitates the continuous improvement of the programme but also actively contributes to the international exchange of knowledge, aligning the Italian model with the most advanced global trends in policy monitoring. In this sense, the technical cooperation between Italy and France finds a common language in the OECD's methodological rigor, elevating the SCU to a strategic pillar for the definition of new global standards for youth participation and active citizenship.

In December 2025, the Department launched an interactive tool<sup>11</sup> that provides real-time, transparent data on participation, sectors, and territorial impact, further aligning the SCU with the highest international standards of evidence-based policymaking.

## 7. Strategic outlook and future challenges

Despite its successes, the SCU faces critical challenges for the post-PNRR era:

- 1. Financial sustainability:** Maintaining the threshold of 50-60,000 positions annually will require a transition from extraordinary PNRR funds to a stable national budgetary commitment. In this respect, the 2026 budgetary law is in line with the above-mentioned financial requirement, although a longer-term financial programme is required to provide for consolidation and maturity to the SCU.
- 2. Quality assurance:** As the program scales, monitoring the educational quality of thousands of diverse projects remains a logistical challenge.
- 3. Territorial equity:** Efforts must continue to balance the high demand in the South with the availability of high-quality projects across the entire national territory.

In conclusion, the Italian Universal Civil Service has consolidated its position as a mature and strategic public policy instrument. By evolving from its roots in conscientious objection to a modern framework of digital and green engagement, it offers a concrete response to the contemporary crisis of youth participation.

The bilateral dimension with France, fostered by the Quirinal Treaty, demonstrates that civil service can be the engine of a more profound, "bottom-up" European integration. Investing in the SCU represent a strategic commitment in the democratic resilience of European societies. It transforms the energy and idealistic engagement of youth into tangible social capital, ensuring that the future of Europe is built through active, responsible, and intercultural citizenship.

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#### Footnotes

- [1] Legislative Decree No. 40/2017, *Institutional Reform of the Universal Civic Service*.
- [2] The data can be viewed on the dashboard: <https://www.politichegiovanili.gov.it/servizio-civile/i-neri-del-servizio-civile-universale/>.
- [3] PNRR Mission 5, Component 1, Investment 4: *Strengthening the Universal Civil Service*: <https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/content/sogei-ng/it/en/Interventi/investimenti/servizio-civile-universale.html>.
- [4] The Call for applications for 62,459 volunteers to be employed in Universal Civil Service projects, published on December 18, 2024, and closed on February 27, 2025: <https://www.politichegiovanili.gov.it/media/tm5pz2j5/report-dol-bando-ordinario.pdf>.
- [5] *Più competenze, occupazione e attivismo civico - Indagine sugli operatori volontari a 12 mesi dalla conclusione dell'esperienza di servizio civile*, <https://www.politichegiovanili.gov.it/servizio-civile/servizio-civile-in-cifre/indagine-post-scu-2024/>.
- [6] Available for online consultation: <https://it.ambafrance.org/LE-TRAITE-DU-QUIRINAL>.
- [7] Gagliardi, P., O. Pérez-Raynaud and A. Robinson (2024), "Promoting youth volunteering and civic service engagement: A stocktake of national programmes across OECD countries", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 77, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/39659e6a-en>.
- [8] OECD (2024), *Guidance for a Monitoring and Evaluation System for Italy's Universal Civil Service*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a8b73d4b-en>.
- [9] European Commission/EACEA/YouthWiki (2024), *Italy: Youth volunteering at national level*: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/italy/24-youth-volunteering-at-national-level>.
- [10] Global Hope Network (2024), *Youth Empowerment: International Best Practices Guide*: <https://globalhope.network/publications/youth-empowerment-international-best-practices-guide-2/>.
- [11] Refer to note 2.