

The Future of Volunteering in Europe: Findings from Mapping Approaches to Research, Policy and Practice Across Nations

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Summary

This article will summarise and discuss the main findings from the previous articles of the *Voluntaris* Special Issue *Contemporary Volunteering Study and Research in Europe*, helping to map where practice and studies are located across Europe and how volunteer involvement is conceptually positioned, clarifying the theories and methods applied. It will seek to enable further practice collaborations, theory building and development of research methods for the study of volunteer involvement.

Keywords: Volunteer Involvement, Volunteering, Research, Europe

1. Introduction

Since we began the endeavour of putting together this publication in 2023, times have grown more uncertain, and while the role of volunteer involvement in maintaining social solidarity, civic engagement, and democratic resilience remains recognised across Europe, political attention is lacking. This was most notable when the call for a European Year of Volunteers in 2025 was not widely endorsed by the EU institutions. Despite the forthcoming UN International Year of Volunteers 2026 (IVY 2026), the decision not to promote volunteer involvement across Europe with a special year of attention, and the increased foci on global trade challenges and rearmament, make the prospect for a new European updated common and shared understanding of volunteer involvement in the next decade less likely. However, we argue that the need to continue strengthening knowledge of volunteer involvement remains undiminished and are hopeful that IVY 2026 will prove to be a catalyst for that.

For this Special Issue of *Voluntaris*, the Editors set out to do things differently to the way that traditional academic publications are published, bridging national contexts, academic disciplines, professional boundaries and divides, and to make a difference, across Europe, for academics and practitioners alike. We set out knowing that mapping volunteer involvement and volunteer involvement research would be challenging, as the concept of volunteering remains poorly charted, with even the question of what exactly is volunteering still remaining unanswered, which was confirmed by co-authors in all topical articles (see for example Cnaan et al. 1996; Wilson 2000; Meijs et al. 2003; Ellis Paine 2010; Grotz/Leonard 2022).

As we explained in the Introduction to this Special Issue, we did not put this together as a standard academic publication, but as a deliberate attempt to bring together academics and practitioners in a novel way as co-authors on complex topics offering perspectives on the diversity of volunteer engagement across the continent. We are delighted that 25 authors, including the editors, from eleven nations contributed. They approached their topics in different ways offering a range of perspectives. We ended up with more academics than practitioners as co-authors, and involved fewer nations than we had hoped, something we would like to improve on next time, as we realise that many voices are still absent in the publication, illustrating the challenge of inclusive involvement. However, we received detailed reports from twelve nations; Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, and the UK.

However, to gather different perspectives, co-authors have drawn not only on related academic publications (e.g. Grandi et al. 2019; Grubb 2021; Harding 2012), but they have cited and assessed national and international grey literature, documents created by governments, voluntary organisations, and other practitioner bodies (e.g. *Freiwilligenengesetz*, n. d.; The Platform of Volunteer Centres and Organisations 2020; International Labour Organisation 2021). These offer access to areas and knowledge not sufficiently and critically explored as recommended by Rochester (2013) or compared across Europe (e.g. V-Calc 2025). In the future, even more critical reflections on such grey literature would be recommended.

That all being said, our approach has helped to identify many gaps in knowledge and a dearth of effective, systematic and ongoing cross-European academic, policy and practice collaboration regarding volunteer involvement. Sticking with the map making metaphor, by locating knowledge across Europe we exposed significant empty parts of the map.

2. Understanding volunteer involvement in a changing Europe

The repeatedly expressed desire of the European Commission for a co-ordinated and shared effort to strengthen volunteer involvement comes without a binding

definition. It also exists in parallel with the Commission's explicit commitment to member states' own powers over organising and developing the idea of an environment for volunteer involvement. This has been expressed in 2011 to coincide with the 'European Year of Voluntary Activities promoting Active Citizenship' and currently remains unchanged:

When it comes to volunteering, each country has different notions, definitions and traditions. Volunteering is defined as all forms of voluntary activity, whether formal or informal. Volunteers act under their own free will, according to their own choices and motivations and do not seek financial gain. Volunteering is a journey of solidarity and a way for individuals and associations to identify and address human, social or environmental needs and concerns. Volunteering is often carried out in support of a non-profit organisation or community-based initiative. (European Commission 2011)

This presents a fundamental contradiction, which has been exposed clearly throughout this entire publication, with contributions from different contexts and nations. We have not found a connected European research and practice community. Instead, we found that language, contexts, constructs, and approaches surrounding volunteer involvement varies greatly across countries. In parts, the Commission recognises this contradiction, through its effects on national differences in volunteer involvement practice and active volunteer involvement. Citing work that collects information for the Commission (GHK 2010), it acknowledges that the involvement of an estimated 100 million Europeans "varies widely across the EU". The information collected in 2010 appeared incomplete then and not sufficiently reflective of the broad diversity of volunteer involvement, yet there have been no efforts to comprehensively gather such information since.

In 2011 the European Commission (2011: 3) identified seven challenges for volunteer involvement:

- Lack of a clear legal framework;
- Lack of national strategies for promoting voluntary activities;
- Financial constraints;
- Mismatch between supply and demand;
- Lack of recognition;
- Tax obstacles;
- Insufficient data.

More than ten years later, in March 2024, five of those seven topics were still independently identified by members of the European Coalition for Volunteering

Evidence and Research (ECVER) collaboration when they came together convened by the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) to discuss this publication. ECVER partners from across Europe shared that they are exploring the question of legal frameworks for volunteer involvement, reviewing national strategies on volunteer involvement infrastructure, considering volunteer involvement in political and historical contexts, considering motivations linking them to demand, and exploring the data situation. Unfortunately, two questions raised in 2011 – financial constraints, now exacerbated by the current reorientation on military spending and economic competitiveness, and the question of tax obstacles – remained beyond the remit of this publication.

3. Findings

In the five topical articles, co-authors present findings on volunteer's motivation, volunteer involvement infrastructure, laws relating to volunteer involvement, how constructs affect measurements and how histories affect policies, with a range of case study examples.

3.1 Motivations

In the first topical article on motivations, five co-authors, predominantly academics, from five nations, Croatia, Poland, Sweden, UK and the Netherlands, explored why individuals become involved in volunteering. The authors described four distinctly different contexts: earthquake relief in Croatia 2020, the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Poland 2022, hybrid settings in Sweden, and international faith-based volunteer tourism. The co-authors note that despite the obvious diversity of contexts there have been “remarkably few comparative analyses of motivations of volunteers and there exists hardly any pan-European research”. While we assume that humans share fundamental motivations for their volunteer involvement such as philanthropy and mutual aid (Beveridge 1948), individual nations and organisations interpret those motivations to suit particular aims and ideologies. The article suggests that exploring the question of values would help understand the issue of motivation further.

3.2 Infrastructure

In the second substantive article on volunteer involvement infrastructure organisations, four co-authors, two practitioners and two academics, from four nations, Slovakia, Portugal, Germany, and Sweden, explored volunteer involvement infrastructure in the form of intermediary organisations such as volunteer centres. Volunteer centres are found to have a wide range of functions supporting volunteer involvement with great potential for driving improvements such as greater inclusion. However, authors note that volunteer involvement varies greatly across

Europe, suggesting that this is a result of historical, cultural, and political diversity. They also recognise that positions like state support for such infrastructure is constantly shifting, leaving it particularly vulnerable to political change.

3.3 Law

In this article, four co-authors, all academics, from three nations, considered the legal status of volunteer involvement, focusing on the ‘duty of care’ of volunteer involving organisations and third parties as well as volunteer liability, in Ireland, the Netherlands, and Czech Republic. They recognise a general awareness of European Member States’ governments but note different approaches, such as developing strategies, new laws, or adapting existing laws. Authors recognise that despite the global call by the United Nations for additional support during the International Year of the Volunteer 2026, there seems little prospect of a coordinated European response to the differences in the legal status of volunteer involvement in members states, including for online volunteering. They suggest that a coordinated response is even more needed as recent developments in volunteering include less formal engagement from the citizen perspective and, in contrast, increased formal involvement of non-volunteering organisations such as companies, e.g. corporate volunteering, and educational institutes e.g. service learning. Authors point out that those developments are testing the current legal concepts and require attention.

3.4 Measurement and Data

For this article, seven co-authors, with a background both as academics and practitioners, from seven countries explored the need to measure volunteer involvement. They argue that without measurement volunteering is not recognised, and ‘does not exist’. The authors specifically argue for measurement of currently uncaptured forms of volunteering, in addition to statistics currently collected by Member States. The article presents five of these currently uncaptured forms of volunteering including alternative ‘third spaces’, crises, issue-raising, occasional involvement and third parties. In some cases, those are outside the classical membership or service domain. Following their reasoning, the proclaimed shortage of volunteers might also be interpreted as mainly a shortage in some volunteer involvement ‘industries’.

3.5 Politics

In this article, four co-authors, two practitioners and two academics, explored the political nature of volunteer involvement in Austria, Lithuania, Portugal, and Slovakia. They use a historical institutional perspective to describe and discuss volunteer involvement in those national contexts. They argue that the different current

and future national responses are determined by national histories, for example that volunteering is affected by historical political legacies such as post-Soviet democratisation and social welfare traditions, but also that volunteering can be a driver for social justice and reform.

4. Common themes

There are two common themes present in the contributions for this Special Issue:

- volunteer involvement can be found everywhere in Europe in a great variety of contexts, however
- there is simply no agreement about how volunteer involvement should be constructed and researched.

4.1 Similarities

Volunteer involvement is ubiquitous. It can be found in each European Member State, in many diverse forms. In the five topical articles, the impacts of current volunteer involvement have been broadly described as positive on societies and on individuals. The case studies presented point to the role of volunteer involvement in crises, for example in Croatia and Poland, as well as everyday service provision or promoting agency across different contexts like in Germany.

4.2 Differences

As expected, co-authors also have identified differences, from motivations to history: “Motivations differ between types and fields of volunteering and change in interaction with other volunteers and organisations” and “historical legacies manifest in funding mechanisms and patterns of volunteer involvement in civil society”.

These similarities and differences mean that in volunteer involvement research we need to differentiate between the many ways volunteer involvement is enacted by people and the many ways it is understood by policy makers. The way volunteer involvement is understood also directly influences what is recognised and may be measured and valued, as the co-authors in the article on measurements point out. This poses interesting challenges for measuring, infrastructure, and policy makers. In this context, little attention seems to have been paid to social inequality and to negative effects of volunteer involvement beyond the question of liability.

4.3 Theories and approaches

Article authors had been asked to identify theories and approaches in volunteering research. In the article on motivations, the authors suggest that while the Volunteer Functions Inventory (Clary et al. 1998) is currently still the most important

framework, it is being questioned, and the authors go on to describe alternative approaches. Article Six on politics considers institutional frameworks and policy-driven impacts, not the actions of social actors (Evers/von Essen 2019), illustrating how historical development of institutions and political traditions have been and are shaping each nation's volunteering landscape.

4.4 Trends

Article authors had been asked to identify trends across Europe. Across the articles, the co-authors have been able to point to perceived or actual directions of travel for a number of topics in different contexts. They suggest that much is made of popular topics of volunteering, often without sufficient critical examination. In response, they advise caution and suggest more research and broader insights. For example, the co-authors in the article on the role of individual motivations of volunteers, remind us that when we consider European trends, we need to be very cautious. The real stories from diverse contexts can easily be hidden behind big, seemingly representative numbers, and hint at the risk in using them uncritically. The article on the role of intermediary organisations, highlights the need to go beyond matching volunteers to opportunities, service-learning, the role of digital developments, crises management, older adults and loneliness, and advocacy – all this in the context of a desire to measure the impact of volunteer involvement across the European Union, which has led and is likely to lead to more initiatives and funding to enable such measurements. One example is the V-CALC (2025) project, which enabled 800 volunteer managers and coordinators to be trained to collect data to measure and understand the impact of their volunteers.

4.5 Policy and Practice suggestions

Article authors had been asked to identify policy and practice suggestions from the available literature. They identified an abundance of policy and practice guidance and suggestions from diverse volunteer involvement contexts, expressing a range of perspectives as to what should be done and how, often following trends identified above, of which we should be wary of. Across the five topical articles we have not found one common theme that would logically connect them. Instead, they make us realise that, unfortunately, such policy and practice guidance is not widely taught or accepted, or critically reviewed across Europe.

5. Discussion

Volunteering in Europe is a complex phenomenon. In the topical articles, co-authors suggested that volunteer involvement is dependent on values, which vary greatly and are subject to change across Europe. They also suggest that volunteer involvement infrastructure, while very effective in supporting volunteer

involvement, is subject to the whims of political change, and that laws on volunteer involvement directly reflect the complex yet greatly variable relationships between civil society and nation states. Also, authors suggest that there is little hope to measure and compare volunteer involvement across Europe, as there are broad differences on how it is conceptualised. Finally, authors argue that the way that volunteering is understood and enacted is affected by the distinctly different histories of European nations. This opens up avenues for European research focussing on the diversity of volunteering.

Unlike the proactive friendship initiatives in the 1960s, which brought together old enemies and the investments in EU enlargement, recently there has been no dedicated, systematic, and policy-driven effort to close the gap in the understanding of volunteer involvement across Europe. In the discussion below we will look at three main questions:

- What does it mean that academics, practitioners, and policy makers do not agree on what volunteer involvement actually is?
- What does it imply that volunteer involvement is affected differently in countries depending on their distinct histories?
- Whose voices do we take into account when discussing volunteering and why?

5.1 The consequences of different constructs by academics, practitioners, and policy makers

In the topical articles contributing to this publication we have seen volunteer involvement constructed in different ways, from ‘unpaid work’ (ILO 2011) to ‘social movements’ (Della Porta 2022), with the concept of ‘active belonging’ to a community in the background. Indeed, the most common theme across all five topical articles was that volunteer involvement is constructed differently irrespective of the context. Nations can adopt responses that match their cultures and historical developments. In Sweden, volunteer involvement is perceived and organised differently, compared to Germany, which is again different to Lithuania or Slovakia. This is not a problem in itself, on the contrary it might be seen as a strength of volunteer involvement in Europe. However, it becomes problematic when such differences clash with a desire for standardisation, for measuring and for volunteering across borders. Crucially, the difference seems to severely restrict easy learning from each other, reducing the prospect of Europe-wide innovation and improvement of volunteer involvement. From a research perspective, however, this means that, taken together, the European experiences are a natural innovation experiment, as everything happens somewhere.

The evidence gathered for this Special Issue appears to suggest that those differences are increasing and the gaps in volunteer involvement practices between nations might be widening. There are different ways to interpret this. If this gap is indeed widening, it may contribute to the forces that drive Europe apart, rather than bringing it together. Rather than offering bonding capital for Europe or at least bridging capital between nations, a chasm might widen (Putnam 2000). On the other hand, the increasing gap could be seen as a strength of European pluralism. For either perspective, it might still be helpful to have at least a shared definition based on the lowest common acceptable denominators and a comprehensive typology which will offer shared reference points. This could strengthen bonds and enable evaluation and learning without posing a threat to pluralism.

5.2 The consequences of different histories

The article on politics addressed an issue that appears underexplored in Europe and the general research: the role of national histories on policies towards volunteer involvement. This seems particularly relevant if considered together with governments' ideological positions on the role of the State and civil liberties. It cannot come as a surprise that even the word 'volunteering' is perceived differently in societies where individuals were forced to volunteer as 'subbotnik' (unpaid weekend work) compared to where it is seen as an 'Ehrenamt' (honourable activity). However, it is hard to overestimate how deep and far-reaching the differences are if we include religious and other social histories. Yet this historic gap might be addressed by a concerted effort with shared initiatives creating new shared histories. Given the focus on young people in many Member States, bringing them together might be a good starting point for long-term, systematic, and sustained investment in volunteer involvement. It may also prove that the contextual factors are more important for academics than for practitioners. Focusing on collaborative actions rather than on creating formal frameworks should allow us to build bridges and foundations for new shared definitions.

5.3 Countering the data conundrum with inclusive methods

The European volunteer involvement data and evidence conundrum arises from the lack of a shared understanding which leads to a lack of comparable data which in turn can hamper efforts to achieve a shared understanding. The work of the European funded V-Calc project illustrated how the attempts to standardise measures are fraught with difficulties. To address this conundrum, we can first turn to strengthening the bonds across nations by gaining shared understanding. Based on a shared understanding, we can develop initiatives grounded in common values, respectful of differences in laws and volunteer involvement infrastructures. This could lead to introducing outcome measures acceptable and suitable for all, and

stable financial support for sustainable data collection methods. This is how we might overcome the challenge of complexity identified in this Special Issue.

6. Conclusion

Mapping contemporary volunteering studies in Europe has offered us cause for optimism as there is much accumulated knowledge and a rich debate. However, it also raised much cause for concern.

We have found many examples of research into volunteering in a wide range of contexts. Even as dispersed as they are and often more locally relevant, the studies we found offer a rich source of data and debate which should be formally reviewed and made easily accessible in future research. That would enable everyone to learn from the many findings we already have, avoid repetition of work and help us to build on the theoretical foundations that are already established. As academics, practitioners, and policy makers continue to undertake research, they sometimes address questions of direct concern for particular academic disciplines or specific policy goals. We are confident that these efforts will continue, albeit we would welcome more co-ordination and collaboration especially reaching across disciplines and national borders, as well as better use of the findings already available.

Regarding our concerns, however, doing nothing or little should not be an option. The consequences of not addressing questions raised by the many co-authors in this work could be genuinely disastrous. Davis and Davis (2024) illustrate this in the documentary about Putnam's seminal and well-promoted work, which seems to have left US civil society with the grim prospect of 'join or die'.

More than two decades have passed since volunteer involvement emerged on the international policy agenda, and more than one decade has passed since Europe turned its attention to it in 2011. However, the sobering conclusion of this Special Issue is that despite having identified challenges and knowledge gaps a decade ago, there are still no agreed shared concepts to underpin a clear or consistent legal framework for volunteering involvement in Europe. Neither is there any meaningful agreement on the size or content of national strategies, successful activities to increase supply of volunteer activities, or better national recognition of volunteer involvement. Some blame this on a lack of reliable data and evidence, whereas others see this differently, blaming the absence of shared knowledge and understanding for the absence of data.

If we want to address this, we will need an inclusive and co-ordinated research and practice-oriented effort to understand volunteer involvement. Such an effort also aligns with a desire of the EU Institutions to strengthen volunteer involvement during and in the wake of the International Years of Volunteers 2026. In practice, this will require a strategic and resourced response to the three specific questions

we discussed in this article, stopping the widening chasms and lack of bonding capital, building bridging capital with new histories, and overcoming the data conundrum.

To address the chasm between the various interpretations of volunteer involvement by nations and organisations, we need a common phrase book in which the meanings of the key terms relating to volunteer involvement are explained in different languages. We could also benefit from a clear definition that recognises volunteers' individual agency and clarify types of activities and involvement that fall under that definition. We cannot expect that everybody will accept or adopt all those meanings and translations, but they would at least provide common reference points. They would be the grid references on the empty areas of our map of volunteer involvement in Europe. We then need pan-European initiatives, possibly focused on young people, which might offer more sustainable involvement, to develop shared values and practices for volunteer involvement across different national contexts. This can only be achieved through a process of ongoing dialogue seeking mutual understanding. In the same way that cities established partnerships and disabled veterans from different nations sought reconciliation after the Second World War, volunteer-involving organisations, and volunteer infrastructure organisations may seek active partnerships and pan-European initiatives. CEV would be uniquely placed to organise such activities and critically examine and measure the outcome in cooperation with the emerging pan-European research community.

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