

Understanding Volunteering in Europe: Mapping Approaches to Research, Policy and Practice across Nations

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Summary

This Special Issue of *Voluntaris* is the result of the collaborative efforts of both researchers and practitioners convened by the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV), co-financed by the EU Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values fund. It attempts to plot a comprehensive and inclusive map of volunteering studies and research in Europe. The selected topics: motivation, infrastructure, law, impact measurement, and politics, cover both traditional and new aspects of volunteer involvement. Each thematic article includes a discussion of theories, three to four country-specific perspectives, an analysis of European trends, and a final synthesis. This comparative lens highlights both national specificities and transnational convergences, inspiring a wide platform for future practice exchange, research and policy development. We strive to ensure that the theoretical and empirical discussions are grounded in practical realities, and that insights from volunteer management, policy development, and civil society action are integrated with academic analysis.

Keywords: Volunteering, Europe, Research, Volunteer Involvement, Trends

1. Introduction

We believe that mapping contemporary volunteering study and research in Europe can offer a cause for optimism as there is much accumulated knowledge and a rich debate, but we recognise there is also cause for concern.

This Special Issue of *Voluntaris* is a collaborative endeavour convened by the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV), co-financed by the EU Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values fund (CERV). It is the result of the collaborative efforts of both researchers and practitioners. It is an output of the first meeting of the CEV convened European Coalition for Volunteering Evidence and Research (ECVER) held in March 2024.

CEV, as the leading organisation for this Special Issue, plays a crucial role in promoting volunteering across Europe. With its broad network of national and regional volunteer centres, CEV facilitates know-how exchange, supports policy development, and advocates for a better volunteering environment. Its strategic position allows it to bridge the gap between research and practice, making it uniquely positioned to lead this initiative.

CEV's involvement was crucial to ensure that this Special Issue reflects practical concerns and policy debates, from volunteer rights and legal protections to the role of volunteering in crises and changing motivation patterns. It also provided us with access to a wide range of practitioners whose insights enriched the academic analysis.

This Special Issue's aim is to serve not only scholarly reflection but also efforts related to advocacy and capacity-building in the volunteering field. We hope that with this open access publication we provide a much-needed resource for practitioners, policymakers and researchers alike, fostering a more inclusive, informed, and interconnected volunteer ecosystem in Europe.

2. Understanding volunteering in a changing Europe

Volunteering in Europe is shaped by the evolving political, socio-economic, and cultural contexts of our diverse continent (Enjolras 2021; Dekker/Halman 2003; Locke/Grotz 2022). From climate activism to refugee aid, and from neighbourhood support networks to digital forms of engagement, volunteer involvement since the year 2000 has expanded both in scope and complexity. As volunteering diversifies, there is a need for ongoing reflection and analysis. In Europe, a growing body of research is developing in specific national or disciplinary contexts, hence the need for a more integrated and comparative understanding of volunteering across Europe, covering both theoretical reflection and everyday practice, bridging academic perspective with practitioners' insights (Grotz/Leonard 2022; Hustinx/Cnaan/Handy 2010) and acknowledging the unique aspects of such a diverse environment.

For this reason, under the initiative of the CEV and through the included articles we seek to map current approaches to the study of volunteer involvement across different disciplines and national contexts in Europe. The aim is to offer researchers, policymakers, and practitioners a wider view of the continent-wide processes and enhance theoretical reflection on how European volunteering can be studied and analysed. As editors, we strived to ensure the diversity of perspectives and methodological approaches to offer readers insights into the complexity of the field and inspire further studies. As well as mapping the current landscape and identifying contemporary developments in the field, this Special Issue responds to these priorities by helping us to see what is missing, for example the areas where theory is underdeveloped, where data is lacking or where some voices are absent.

Each article brings together academics and practitioners as co-authors from different European regions, reflecting the diversity of volunteer involvement across the continent. This structure helps to highlight regional specificities and identify similarities and trends. The articles are organised around critical themes that we believe underpin the volunteering ecosystem: volunteer motivations; the infrastructure that supports it; legal frameworks; the measurable impact of volunteering; and political contexts. Each contribution includes comparative country cases, theoretical discussions, and analyses of trends.

In this introductory section, we provide a conceptual overview of volunteering and its study in Europe, outline the main methodological and theoretical approaches, and explore how to integrate research with practice. We also offer an initial mapping of the interdisciplinary landscape in European volunteering research and identify the need for such analysis in today's Europe. Additionally, we reflect on future directions and key questions that can shape an evolving research agenda on volunteering.

While volunteering in Europe shares many common features, including a broad commitment to solidarity, active citizenship, and social cohesion, regional variations are significant. In Northern Europe, institutionalised forms of volunteering are often supported by strong welfare states and a well-developed civil society infrastructure. In contrast, Southern and Eastern Europe experience more episodic (Cnaan/ Handy 2005) and less embedded (sometimes called informal or non-formal) volunteer activities, often as responses to socio-political or economic crises (Krasnopol'skaya/Guseva/Meijs/Cnaan 2022; Domaradzka/Kołodziejczyk 2023; Korolczuk/Jacobsson 2017; Paciarotti/Cesaroni/Bevilacqua 2018).

In the last decade, digital transformation has contributed to reshaping the volunteering landscape. From online platforms matching volunteers to roles and tasks, to virtual and micro-volunteering, digital technologies are broadening the opportunities for engagement, while also presenting new questions about “slacktivism” (Morozov 2009), inclusion, or data privacy (Tadic 2022; Wnuk et al. 2021).

Simultaneously, demographic shifts leading to ageing populations across Europe, generational value shifts, and increasing diversity due to migration influence who volunteers and why (Nakamura et al. 2025). There is a growing interest in intergenerational volunteering, the role of migrants/refugees as volunteers, and the potential of volunteering to facilitate integration and empowerment (Carlà 2023).

Another trend is the rising importance all over Europe (Meijs et al. 2021) of third-party involvement (Haski-Leventhal et al. 2010) both in the secondary model through companies such as corporate volunteering or educational institutes such as community service or service learning, as in the intermediary model through National Days of Service, Family volunteering or Voluntourism (Brudney et al 2019).

Climate change and sustainability are also emerging as key areas of involvement, especially among European youth. Environmental volunteering and climate activism are on the rise and often intersect with broader movements for social and environmental justice. Mass protests related to Climate Strike (Gorman 2021) or Women Strike (Szczepańska/Marchlewska 2023), as well as mobilisation for refugees' causes show the potential for volunteer involvement to drive both local solutions and systemic change.

Volunteering is also responding to rising polarisation and democratic backsliding in parts of Europe. In such contexts, volunteering may serve as a counterforce to alienation and fragmentation by strengthening community bonds, promoting civic participation, and defending democratic norms. However, the darker side of volunteer involvement and its potentially negative impacts on individuals or communities also requires our attention (Morse 2015; Talbot 2015; Grotz/Leonard 2022).

3. Volunteer studies in Europe

Volunteering defies simple definition (Wilson 2000; Rochester et al. 2010; Guidi Fonović/Cappadozzi, 2021). While most observers agree on the core components of a definition (based on free will, unpaid or not for financial gain, and intended to make a difference), meanings and practices around volunteering differ across countries, disciplines, and contexts (Musick/Wilson 2008; Meijs et al. 2003). Legal definitions of volunteering vary widely, often reflecting a nation's laws, social welfare systems, and cultural norms. Similarly, the terminology – “volunteering”, “civic engagement”, “community action”, or “solidarity work” – signals different conceptual underpinnings and political orientations (Cnaan/Handy/Wadsworth 1996; Hart/Sulik 2014).

At the heart of this diversity is the distinction between formal and informal volunteering. Formal volunteering, typically conducted through organisations, is easier to study, regulate, and support. Informal volunteering, such as neighbourhood support or spontaneous grassroots mobilisations, often escapes institutional frameworks but is crucial to social cohesion and wellbeing (Domaradzka 2025). In many European contexts, recent crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Kulik 2021), the war in Ukraine (Mikheieva/Kuznetsova 2024) and climate emergencies (Whittaker/McLennan/Handmer 2015) highlighted the significance of both forms, illustrating how volunteering in all its variety and diversity quickly adapts to societal needs.

Volunteering also operates on multiple levels: micro (individual), meso (organisation, community), and macro (nation, sector). It intersects with macro processes related to education, employment, welfare services, migration, aging, or digital transformation. Therefore, understanding the drivers and consequences of volunteer involvement requires a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from fields like sociology, political science, law, psychology, public administration, and economics, among others

(Hustinx/Lammertyn 2003). Therefore, it is no surprise that volunteer studies in Europe span a wide range of academic disciplines. Sociologists focus on patterns of participation, social capital, and civic engagement. Political scientists explore the relationship between volunteering and democracy, citizenship, or populism. Economists assess the economic value of volunteer labour and its implications for public services (Salamon/Sokolowski/Haddock 2011). Legal scholars examine frameworks that define and regulate volunteer activity. Psychologists delve into individual motivations, identify formation, and well-being. Anthropologists and geographers analyse local cultures of giving and community-building practices. On the meso or organisational level, new forms of volunteer involvement involve two or even more organisations in which the recruitment of the volunteers is done by a different organisation, as in corporate volunteering (Brudney et al. 2019).

When collecting data on volunteering, one encounters a fragmented field of study. Most research is confined within ‘disciplinary silos’ or limited by national boundaries. This makes it hard to compare data across countries and regions and to study some trends in time. As a result, there is a noticeable lack of comparative studies and theoretical generalisation, particularly concerning newer forms of volunteer involvement such as citizen science, or digitally enabled crisis response and recovery efforts.

On a cross-national level, the European research landscape is uneven. Some countries have a well-established tradition of volunteer studies with dedicated research centres and data infrastructure. Others have growing but less institutionalised research fields (Butcher/Einolf 2017; Voicu/Voicu 2009; Domaradzka 2024; Hummel et al. 2020; Schreier 2016). This imbalance risks skewing European debates towards dominant models and overlooking valuable local insights.

This diversity reflects the complexity of human prosocial behaviour. However, it presents some challenges in understanding even basic concepts across disciplines or countries. What counts as ‘volunteering’ in one legal framework or cultural context may not in another. Methodologies also vary from large-scale surveys and econometric analyses to ethnographic fieldwork and action research. This makes synthesis difficult and may discourage interdisciplinary collaboration. Comparisons over time are often challenging when even regular measurements tend to change their parameters and definitions. On the other hand, the European reality might be better reflecting the diversity of volunteering globally than the enforced homogeneity in a context like the United States.

We hope that this Special Issue will help to fill this gap by mapping diverse practices and positioning them within a coherent European framework. We consciously included contributions from underrepresented regions to correct existing asymmetry. By including diverse case studies and perspectives, we contribute to a more pluralistic understanding of volunteering in Europe. Furthermore, we hope to support

the development of new research capacities by fostering collaborations that bridge the gaps in access to data and local know-how.

The structure of the Special Issue reflects an ambitious and much needed attempt to plot a comprehensive and inclusive map of volunteering studies and research in Europe. Each thematic article includes an introduction, discussion of theories, three to four country-specific perspectives, an analysis of European trends, and a final synthesis. This structural consistency is aimed at facilitating comparability and identification of broader patterns.

The involvement of both academics and practitioners in the authorship of each article was a deliberate editorial choice. It means that the theoretical and empirical discussions are grounded in practical realities, and that insights from volunteer management, policy development, and civil society action are integrated with academic analysis. This co-production of knowledge was an important part of our process.

The selected topics: motivation, infrastructure, law, impact measurement, and politics, cover both traditional and new aspects of volunteer involvement. Each article functions as a standalone resource while contributing to the overall goal of this Special Issue. We hope that this comparative lens highlights both national specificities and transnational convergences, inspiring a wide platform for future practice exchange, research and policy development.

In the first paper, Dekker and colleagues discuss the role of individual motivations of volunteers. The article reflects on what motivates people to volunteer and how these motivations can inform both research and practice. It distinguishes between two dimensions of motivation: the explicit reasons volunteers give for their activities and the deeper, value-based psychological drivers that influence their propensity to volunteer. Using the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), the article confirms that expressing altruistic and humanitarian values remains a central motivation. However, case studies show that self-directed and other-directed motivations often intertwine. The authors also note that despite the importance of motivation, there is a notable lack of comparative and pan-European research in this area. To explore broader trends, the article uses Schwartz's basic human values and finds weak but consistent correlations: values like benevolence and universalism are positively associated with volunteering, while power values are negatively related. These findings suggest that changes in societal values over time may not be as threatening to volunteering as sometimes assumed. While tradition appears to be declining as a motivating value, universalism and benevolence may be gaining influence, with mixed implications for self-direction. The author warns against assuming that majority trends apply universally and suggests that targeting niche motivations may be more effective for some organisations. Instead of using motivational research prescriptively, it

may be more useful as contextual information to guide discussions, challenge pessimistic narratives about changing values, and inspire localised, practice-specific research.

The second paper by Brozmanová and colleagues deals with the role of volunteer involvement infrastructure. Across Europe, intermediary organisations such as volunteer centres are undergoing significant structural transformations, leading to a renewed emphasis on the role of institutions within the volunteering landscape (Guidi 2021). Considering these changes, several key policy and practice directions emerge that can strengthen the role of volunteer centres in supporting civic life. Governments are encouraged to recognise the strategic importance of these centres by institutionalising them within national and local policy frameworks. The authors believe that such integration would bolster civic engagement, enhance responses to crises, and promote social inclusion. In addition, inclusive and flexible models of volunteering should be developed to respond to the diverse needs and motivations of individuals, particularly those from underrepresented or marginalised groups. According to the authors, investments in digital infrastructure and digital competencies can make volunteering more accessible through online and hybrid formats, enabling broader participation. Furthermore, the authors underline the need for the incorporation of volunteer centres into formal crisis management systems to improve community resilience and facilitate more coordinated and effective volunteer mobilisation during emergencies. Beyond their traditional functions, volunteer centres can also become dynamic hubs of democratic learning and civic participation, contributing to solidarity, empowerment, and social cohesion.

The third paper by Breen and colleagues explores the complex relationship between volunteer involvement and legal frameworks across Europe, emphasising the need for clear, supportive legislation to distinguish volunteering from exploitative unpaid labour and to protect both volunteers and beneficiaries. It reviews past and ongoing efforts by European and international bodies, such as the European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers, the UN, and the Council of Europe, to promote enabling legal environments. The authors argue that national legal frameworks are essential for ensuring the safety, rights, and responsibilities of volunteers while maintaining flexibility for organisations of varying sizes. Drawing on comparative case studies from Ireland, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic, the article analyses different national approaches to defining volunteers, regulating volunteer organisations, and balancing rights with legal responsibilities. It concludes with a typology of legal models and policy recommendations aimed at creating fit-for-purpose laws that both protect and empower volunteers in an evolving civic landscape.

The fourth paper deals with the complex issue of measuring volunteering impact. Fonović and colleagues critique traditional approaches to measuring volunteering, particularly those based on rigid definitions and quantitative indicators like hours

contributed or formal organisational involvement. They argue that such metrics overlook the evolving, hybrid, and often informal forms of volunteer involvement emerging across Europe. The authors emphasise the need to recognise volunteering as a dynamic, expressive, and relational practice that increasingly intersects with lifestyle, political engagement, and civic innovation. They highlight the limitations of institutional definitions, which can exclude innovative or non-traditional forms of participation, and call for more inclusive, qualitative, and future-oriented measurement frameworks. The article ultimately advocates for expanding the boundaries of what counts as volunteering to better capture its diverse and transformative role in society.

In the final paper on the politics of volunteer involvement, Biermann and colleagues illustrate how volunteering is shaped by historical legacies and political transformations, which have lasting effects on both public attitudes and institutional frameworks. Across the four studied countries (Austria, Lithuania, Portugal, and Slovakia) volunteering is defined by the interactions between historical, political, economic, and cultural factors, often intensifying in times of crisis, which act as catalysts for civic engagement. The authors underline that the institutional structures and legislative reforms are essential in supporting sustainable engagement by defining volunteer roles and protections, fostering trust and participation. They argue that generational differences also play a role, with younger cohorts generally more open to volunteering for personal and social reasons, compared to older generations who are more influenced by past socio-political contexts.

4. Towards a European research agenda on volunteering

One of the overarching goals of this Special Issue is to lay the groundwork for a European research agenda on volunteering. This requires more than compiling existing knowledge, and involves identifying gaps, methodological challenges, and policy-relevant questions that can guide future studies.

Biermann and colleagues' findings suggest that contextual and historical institutional approaches are more insightful than binary frameworks distinguishing politicised from non-politicised volunteering. In their opinion, future research should further explore how historical legacies and political institutions support or inhibit volunteering e.g. post-EU accession dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe, investigate local-level volunteering and analyse how political actors use volunteering to compensate for governance gaps or legitimise their policy roles (Hjort/Beswick 2020). The authors underline that we need to address how volunteering can reproduce social inequalities, especially within traditional institutions like churches (Alves de Matos 2021).

On the other hand, Fonović and colleagues argue that the “definition power” of formal frameworks can unintentionally restrict access to resources and exclude emerging forms of civic participation. To address this, they call for a shift in measurement practices – from national statistics agencies to grassroots-level organisations – emphasising the need for inclusive, real-time data collection. They propose leveraging AI and the EU Directive on altruistic data to better capture diverse volunteer energy and motivations, ensuring that policy and practice are informed by the lived realities of those shaping the public good in dynamic and evolving ways.

The article of Dekker and colleagues advocates for improved coordination of research across Europe, focusing on comparative case studies within various volunteer settings. It recommends developing a shared survey framework – including standardised questions on motivations and contextual information – archived in an open-access repository. Such an approach could offer practical insights for policymakers and managers instead of generalisations based on large-scale surveys.

Breen and colleagues recommend that policymakers prioritise the integration of volunteering, both formal and informal, into national strategies and legal frameworks. They call for improved data collection at all levels to support evidence-based regulation and to better recognise diverse and evolving forms of volunteering, including spontaneous and corporate-enabled models. The EU should play a leading role by encouraging Member States to assess and reform legal barriers, promote inclusive policies, and develop flexible frameworks that protect volunteers and facilitate civic engagement. Additionally, the authors urge the creation of knowledge-sharing platforms and advocate for a renewed EU-level statement on the broader value of volunteering beyond youth programmes.

In the closing article, authors identify a growing need to develop inclusive and flexible models of volunteering that respond to the diverse needs and motivations of individuals, particularly those from underrepresented or marginalised groups. Encouraging collaboration between educational institutions and volunteer centres is also vital, because these partnerships can help promote service-learning opportunities and contribute to the civic development of young people, who represent a crucial demographic for sustaining future volunteer involvement. The digital transformation of volunteering also necessitates robust investment in digital infrastructure and digital competencies. Finally, sustained support is essential for advocacy, capacity building, and the professionalisation of the volunteer centre sector. These elements are critical for ensuring that volunteer centres remain capable of adapting to societal changes and continue to serve as nodes in the civic infrastructure.

To summarise, key priorities for developing European research agenda on volunteering include:

- Promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and joint funding mechanisms;
- Developing and promoting European knowledge exchange platforms and centres;
- Discussing common definitions and typologies that allow for wider comparison;
- Enhancing data collection and access, particularly in under-researched countries;
- Deepening knowledge on different forms of volunteer involvement;
- Investigating the intersection of volunteering and politics, migration, climate change, digitalisation, and social inequality;
- Exploring the volunteer experiences, to understand the resulting well-being or burnout;
- Developing methods and theories.

5. Conclusion

The landscape of volunteering in Europe remains diverse and dynamic. It is shaped by different historical legacies, shifting cultural norms, unstable political systems, and pressing societal needs. Studying this landscape requires tools that are also diverse and capable of capturing complexity and dynamics.

This Special Issue of *Voluntaris* offers a step in this direction. Through its collaborative format, interdisciplinary orientation, and cross-national scope, it not only maps current practice but hopes to inspire future research and action. Our goal was to create a useful resource for practitioners, policymakers and scholars alike. We hope that those committed to understanding and strengthening volunteer involvement in all its forms will be able to locate the issues and understand their own role better, based on the presented articles.

In a time of growing uncertainty, volunteering remains a much-needed platform for social solidarity, civic engagement, and democratic resilience. Understanding how and why people volunteer, under what conditions, and with what effects, is not just an academic exercise, it is also an important socio-political imperative. This publication invites all stakeholders to take part in this collective effort and to continue building a knowledge base supporting sustainable and impactful volunteer practices.

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