

# The Politics of Volunteer Involvement: Historical Institutional Pathways, Critical Junctures, and Contemporary Events Affecting Volunteering in Austria, Lithuania, Portugal, and Slovakia

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## Summary

This article adopts the term *popular engagement* from Evers/von Essen (2019) to consider volunteer involvement across a spectrum of activities from volunteering to civic action. It uses a historical institutional perspective to understand how popular engagement in Austria, Lithuania, Portugal, and Slovakia spans the political and civic/public spheres and represents contested and consensual public opinions. It highlights that political processes and societal events can perpetuate popular engagement's evolutionary path or function as critical branching points. One example is the European Year of Volunteering (EYV 2011), which, particularly in Lithuania, changed the trajectory of national volunteering policy and its institutionalisation with new frameworks for volunteering and clearer ownership of the volunteering agenda. The key questions addressed are how historical legacies and institutional traditions shape civil society, what key moments or events, such as war and democratisation, EYV 2011, and humanitarian crises, have triggered shifts in the institutionalised path, and how political institutions responded. Overall, even when facing similar critical junctures, they have not reacted similarly because of the unique origins of each civil society and the contemporary relationship with the state. The concluding section outlines volunteering and political trends in each country and suggests future research.

Keywords: Civic Action, Critical Junctures, Democratic Participation, European Year of Volunteering 2011, Historical Institutional Theory, Volunteering, Path-Dependency: Popular Engagement

## 1. Introduction

Volunteering and civic action are intertwined yet often considered distinct. Evers/von Essen (2019) suggest the term *popular engagement* to avoid distinguishing between *volunteering* as an individual private and morally motivated action to help others and *civic action* as a collective, public, and politically motivated action to bring about social change. This article adopts these three terms to analyse volunteer involvement as popular engagement enacted across the political sphere of deliberation and decision-making to the civic/public spheres of association as civil society and ranging from contested to consensual public opinion (see Evers/von Essen 2019: Figure 1). Individuals' worldviews and cultural contexts shape popular engagement; these evolve through continuous interactions with institutions. Institutions are procedures, beliefs, norms, routines, and conventions embedded in the organisational structure of the political sphere and reflect power relations that individuals may accept as given or actively contest (Hall/Taylor 1996: 938).

This article presents a unique mix of European Union (EU) nations: the 'established' Austria and Portugal and the 'newcomers' Lithuania and Slovakia. All four are smaller EU nations in population, land size, and contribution to the EU gross domestic product (Eurostat 2023). Table 1 shows volunteering and active citizenship participation rates in 2015 and 2022. It illustrates country-level similarities, such as decreasing participation in organisation-based volunteering, and differences, such as higher active citizenship or civic action, which includes signing petitions, protesting, and running for office in the 'established' Austria and Portugal, but with Slovakia catching up. Lithuanian government state-CSO initiatives to raise popular engagement by youth and older adults (2015–2018) may explain the organisation-based volunteering increase and its decline as support waned. This article argues that such volunteer involvement statistics reflect a country's unique path dependency, evolutionary transformation and trajectory, and *branching point* responses to critical political and historical junctures.

	Organisation-based Volunteering		Direct Volunteering		Active Citizenship	
	2015 (2018)	2022	2015 (2018)	2022	2015	2022
<b>Austria</b>	28.3%	25.8%	11.9%	12.0%	11.9%	12.0%
<b>Lithuania</b>	16.3%	7.5%	6.3%	5.7%	6.3%	5.7%
<b>Portugal*</b>	6.4%	7.3%	9.9%	9.3%	9.9%	9.3%
<b>Slovakia</b>	8.3%	7.5%	2.8%	4.1%	2.8%	4.1%

Table 1: Organisation-based and Direct Volunteering 2015 (\* Portugal 2018) and 2022 (International Labour Organisation, n.d.) and Active Citizenship 2015 and 2022 (Eurostat, 2024)

This article considers institutional frameworks and policy-driven impacts, not the actions of social actors (Evers/von Essen 2019). First, it shows the historical development of institutions and political traditions in shaping each nation's volunteering landscape. It uses a historical institutional perspective to consider the self-reinforcing path dependency and events that force a shift or branching in that path. Second, the article identifies trends in each country and then synthesises them to identify future research directions required to support volunteer involvement by policymakers and practitioners proactively.

This article first outlines the historical institutional lens used to understand the environment in which popular engagement exists, then proceeds as follows. The overview of each country introduces the historical context of volunteering. It highlights events that create shifts in its evolutionary path and act as critical branching points. Next, for each country, the key questions are how historical legacies and institutional traditions shape volunteering's trajectory, what key moments or events, such as 2011's European Year of Volunteering (EYV 2011), have triggered shifts in the trajectory, and how political institutions have responded. The concluding section briefly outlines popular engagement trends in each country and suggests future research.

## 2. Institutional legacies and civil society: A historical institutionalist perspective

Historical institutionalism provides a valuable theoretical framework for examining how political structures and institutional arrangements shape volunteer involvement over time (Della Porta 2022; Evers/von Essen 2019; Guidi 2021). This approach is particularly pertinent for understanding how volunteering and civil society evolve under different national and supranational conditions, including Europeanisation and shifting welfare state regimes (Meyer et al. 2020). Through individual and institutional actions and power relations, traditions of volunteering and, arguably, civic action emerge, continually undergoing de- and re-institutionalisation processes (Hustinx 2010, in Guidi 2021: 753). These processes create a historical response path to social problems. Social actors from inside and outside the field of, for example, volunteering, de- and re-construct traditions along a stable self-perpetuating path; alternatively, they may reach a *branching point* and head into a new tradition (Guidi 2021: 756; Hall/Taylor 1996: 942). Therefore, historical institutional pathways may be incremental transformations or sudden significant shifts in the evolutionary path.

A central concept of historical institutionalism is path dependence, which describes how institutions evolve through the “dynamics of self-reinforcing or positive feedback processes in a political system” (Pierson/Skocpol 2002: 6). The social origins of state-civil society relations – a corporatist, statist, or liberal model

– continue to shape how civil society organisations (CSOs) operate today (Meyer et al. 2020). These historical legacies manifest in funding mechanisms and patterns of volunteer involvement in civil society. However, institutional change can occur through crises as *branching points* that allow new policies and institutional designs to take hold (Della Porta 2022). Critical junctures, such as military conflicts or humanitarian crises, catalyse institutional transformation by disrupting established self-reinforcing practices and prompting new state-civil society relations. The COVID-19 pandemic (2020-23) exemplifies such a critical juncture, reshaping funding priorities, volunteer mobilisation strategies, and regulatory frameworks (Della Porta 2022).

Although not exclusively, popular engagement occurs predominantly in civil society (the third, independent, or voluntary sector) in voluntary, private, self-governing, non-profit-distributing, and formally or informally organised entities (Franco et al. 2005). Describing the historical context is essential to studies explaining volunteer involvement, as this article shows, especially for Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries with institutional paths and junctures markedly different from established Western European nations. Research on popular engagement pays insufficient attention to contextual factors influencing individuals' actions and behaviours (Evers/von Essen 2019) and, consequently, misses how political actors, structures, and institutional settings configure the environment where volunteering thrives or stagnates (e.g. welfare and other rolling crises, including COVID-19, public service reforms, and new regulatory regimes; Della Porta 2022).

Internal and external political events and crises can de- and re-institutionalise volunteering involvement, such as joining the European Union, being an international charitable donor, and experiencing political crises (Kameråde et al. 2016). How CSOs mobilise volunteers when crises arise, such as a pandemic, political regime change, or geopolitical tensions, reflects the prevailing institutional structures that support or curtail popular engagement (Meyer et al. 2020). Actions taken by political institutions and policymakers during these junctures are catalysts that transform institutionalised volunteering practices, acting as a branching point to alter existing path dependency (Della Porta 2022).

Overall, historical institutionalism explains how self-reinforcing institutional processes and abrupt *branching points* converge to shape civil society and, importantly, individuals' popular engagement actions and behaviour. The following section considers the four nations and the stable and critical events that de- and re-institutionalise the volunteering field.

### 3. Historical Background

#### 3.1 Austria

Austria has slipped from geographic, religious, political, and economic power to be one of the smaller EU nations. The ‘first’ Austrian Republic started after century-long Habsburg rule across Europe (1438–1806). Without aristocratic rulers, the rural population’s allegiances fell to the stable Catholic Church and its allied conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) (Neumayr/Schneider et al. 2017); urban working classes turned to labour movements and their allied Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) (Heitzmann & Simsa 2004). Social welfare became a state responsibility, creating a hybrid model of civil society: service delivery from a corporatist model alongside highly expressive volunteering in a social democratic model (Neumayr/Schneider et al. 2017).

After World War II, parliamentary democracy returned as the ‘second’ republic. Surviving CSOs resumed as institutional and ideological partners of the political parties and church (Heitzmann & Simsa 2004). Independent CSOs emerged to counter the political-ideological polarisation, for example the Federation of Austrian Scientific Societies, or advocate social justice and provide crisis relief, such as the Volkshilfe. In 1954, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) created a ‘Third Camp’ as a right-wing alternative to the ÖVP and SPÖ. However, the pattern of ideological alignment dominated into the 1970s and 1980s when the “new social movements” (Dolezal/Hutter 2007: Note 6) institutionalised as CSOs or political parties, including the Greens. Austria’s “party dominated political culture” (Hadj Abdou/Rosenberger 2019: 392) and CSOs’ ideological alignment make it difficult for ‘independent’ CSOs (Neumayr/Pennerstorfer et al. 2017). However, disenchantment with political parties and the church (Hofer 2015) and reactive popular engagement, such as assisting Ukrainian refugees, improve their prospects.

#### 3.2 Lithuania

Lithuania’s volunteering tradition reflects a historical legacy from the Soviet period. Early in the transition, recollections of being a ‘subbotnik’, performing unpaid weekend work, caused strong resistance among older generations (Juknevičius/Savicka 2003; Pranaitytė 2024). As CSOs’ visibility increased and public awareness of popular engagement expanded, volunteering gained acceptance (Petreikienė/Bučiušienė 2024; Staliūnas et al. 2021). During the Lithuanian Perestroika, a movement for political reform between 1988 and 1992, volunteering emerged in association-based initiatives and newly founded organisational structures to restore and strengthen civic action and national independence. Shifts from Soviet traditions towards open worldviews, aided by emerging CSOs and evolving legal frameworks, have meant greater social acceptance of volunteering. Younger

generations, motivated by both altruism and practical benefits, have contributed to increasing involvement (Table 1). These reflect stable but continual transformations in Lithuania, from mistrust rooted in earlier Soviet practices to gradual shifts towards volunteering's acceptance as an institutionalised civil society practice.

At the same time, crucial junctures have repeatedly altered Lithuania's popular engagement. The end of Soviet rule suddenly introduced new political parties with normative expectations and enthusiasm for civic action tempered by mistrust (Grigaliūnas 2012). Legislative reforms – most notably the 2011 Law on Volunteering – marked a pivotal juncture: they supplied a legal framework for previously undefined forms of volunteering, clarified the rights and obligations of volunteers and host organisations, and anchored these arrangements more firmly in the values of active citizenship and the relevant regulatory architecture. Further policy support emerged through youth-focused programs and accreditation rules (Acus 2018). Volunteering in large CSOs, particularly social services, sports, and cultural activities and events, grew between 2009 and 2015. Economic crises and sudden geopolitical security concerns triggered local and national institutions to mobilise civilian resources (Pranaitytė 2024). Traditions of informal, mistrusted relationships were disrupted and branched into more institutionalised and formalised frameworks.

### 3.3 Portugal

Portugal celebrated 50 years of democracy in 2024, a period of political stability (Chamusca 2024) with complicated relations between civil society and political institutions. Civil society portrays traditions of the Catholic Church, self-help and mutuality, authoritarianism, and the emergent welfare state (Franco et al. 2005). Despite state-church segregation of powers, the Catholic Church holds a central spiritual and institutional role in welfare service delivery, alleviating pressure on state-run programs (Alves de Matos 2021; Franco et al. 2005). Traditional and normative conceptions guide Catholic volunteering and appear apolitical and disengaged from politically motivated civic action (Alves de Matos 2021), reflecting the terminology of Evers/von Essen (2019).

Portugal's volunteer involvement in service provision follows its pathway from authoritarianism to democracy after the 1974 coup (Fernandes 2015). In urban and rural areas, civic action countered the previous regime's elite exclusionary structures with popular engagement serving mutual interests, including parents, workers, and neighbourhood associations. CSOs received political support, such as establishing the Private Institutions of Social Solidarity in 1979, to institutionalise their role and structure (Ferreira 2015; Franco et al. 2005).

The end of the ‘golden years’ of neoliberalism and state-civil society co-governance of social welfare was a critical point. The Global Financial Crisis (2008–2012) caused the imposition of extreme austerity measures on Portugal (see Alves de Matos 2021; Ferreira 2015). Church-affiliated networks mobilised volunteers to deliver welfare services to counter the government’s inability to do so. Responsibility for social service provision increasingly devolved to church-related charities, reinforcing reliance on existing faith-based structures (Alves de Matos 2021). As they coped with falling governmental services, limited resources, and growing demands, CSOs experienced considerable pressure to address rising needs, with the Church’s long-standing societal credibility consolidating volunteer-led support for vulnerable communities.

### 3.4 Slovakia

Slovakia’s historical background shows that branching points or junctures disrupt the volunteering involvement pathway (Brozmanová Gregorová et al. 2009). A tradition of volunteering during the 19th century emerged through church-affiliated organisations, and, with the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1939), conditions for freedom of association CSOs were improved. After World War II, a socialist regime emerged and took control of all independent organisations, significantly limiting popular engagement. After the 1989 Velvet Revolution, a convergence of volunteering and civic action, a new era of volunteering began. The fall of the socialist regime reopened space for civil society and created new CSOs. However, changing political leadership and ideology from 1994 created critical junctures that shaped Slovakia’s path to volunteer involvement today (Murray Svidronova/Brozmanova Gregorova 2025).

Slovakia’s pathway along democratisation in the early 1990s established and strengthened new political institutions and influenced public engagement and civil society. Mečiar’s government (1994–1998) was hostile to independent initiatives and imposed restrictions on CSOs. Fico’s later governments (2006–2010, 2012–2018) often framed CSOs as foreign agents and unworthy of public trust (Mesežnikov 2019). The rise of radical parties, including Kotleba’s far-right party “People’s Party Our Slovakia“ (2016), deepened this narrative, naming CSOs as George Soros organisations to infer the pursuit of personal over organisational goals. The path dependency of a repressed civil society faced a critical juncture with the overlay of EU policies, especially from 2007 to 2011. The new mechanisms fostered volunteer involvement by developing civil society, including independent CSOs, and the legal framework, including the Government Council for Non-Government Organisations (2002) and the Volunteer Act (2011) (Murray Svidronova/Brozmanova Gregorova 2025).

## 4. Country-level trends

### 4.1 Austria

The politically driven austerity from neoliberalism in the 1990s and the 1995 EU membership harmed service delivery and state-CSO relations (Neumayr/Pennerstorfer et al. 2017), particularly the association of independent welfare ('BAG') members: Caritas, Diakonie, Hilfswerk, Red Cross, and Volkshilfe. Service demand and social disillusionment blended civic action with volunteering. Following the 1980s peace movements and volunteer-led CSOs to assist war refugees from former Yugoslavia, later Bosnia, the 1990s saw civic action turn to environmentalism and anti-racism (Dolezal/Hutter 2007). The 2000s started with protests against the FPÖ-ÖVP coalition and ended with student-led protests ('Unibrennt') demanding wide-ranging social reforms.

EYV 2011 bolstered community-level volunteering "despite or perhaps because of ... political disenchantment" (Hofer 2015: 192). As if revisiting the 1980s, the 'refugee crisis' around 2015 saw mainly pro-refugee but some anti-refugee demonstrations and political party involvement supporting both sides (Hadj Abdou/Rosenberger 2019). The ÖVP-FPÖ government weakened state-CSO cooperation, changed policy directions, reduced funding (Pennerstorfer/Zierer 2018), and restricted freedom of expression, association, and assembly (CIVICUS 2018). CIVICUS's 'narrow' rating of 2018 reverted to 'open' in 2020. However, during COVID-19, Austria's government imposed strict restrictions, including the right to protest the restrictions (CIVICUS 2025), which further inflamed contested discourses, as did consultation and funding for the politically aligned, not partisan, CSOs (Simsa 2022). As in the 1980s, the 2022 Ukrainian War ignited popular engagement, including refugee support.

The current Austrian political sphere is troubled. Following the unprecedented delay in appointing a government due to the failed ÖVP-SPÖ-Neos coalition negotiations, the President facilitated ÖVP-FPÖ talks. Civic action responded against the President and, as in the 2000s, the FPÖ and their stance on many fronts, including the Ukraine War, Islam, nationalism, and anti-wokeism. Ultimately, the ÖVP-FPÖ negotiations failed, with an ÖVP-SPÖ-Neos coalition established. As in other EU nations, a far-right ideology, particularly around immigration, is filtering into conservative politics and compounded by May 2025 austerity measures.

The historical blurring of civil action and volunteering and contested over consensual discourses continues to affect political democracy in Austria as an EU member. CSOs express concerns that Austrian civil society will further divide along pro- and anti-government stances, making some CSOs and their volunteers 'partisans' (Bogorin et al. 2019). FPÖ leader involvement in co-founding the pan-European right-wing 'Patriots for Europe' in the political sphere mirrors the local

public/associating sphere, for example, the online Freiland Magazin and its related Öxit (Austrian-EU-Exit) movement. Relatedly, CSOs are concerned about access to ‘quality’ news and retaining an open “online and offline” civil society (Bogorin et al. 2019: 31). After the 2024 election, prominent CSOs formed the Austrian Civil Society Network (ÖNZ) to protect democracy and civil society.

Recent legislation (Freiwilligengesetz 2023) aims to improve volunteering’s public/associating standing and include a social service year. Austria requires an ‘open’ institutional environment. Traditions of CSO ideological alignment with political parties mean that the more hostile and extreme political positions become, the more contested civil society and volunteer involvement will be.

Austria’s volunteer involvement has increased (Eurostat 2024); however, organisation-based volunteering is dropping as informal or direct volunteering rises (Table 1). Underneath these top-level trends are subtle demographic differences that influence the type of individuals and the activities and contexts they choose. For example, for direct volunteering (see Table 1), second generation migrants are much more involved than the first generation (Göttlinger/Kronsteiner-Mann 2023: 17; 60). However, on the spectrum of *popular engagement*, direct volunteering appears as private action, particularly household help, rather than for social change (Göttlinger/Kronsteiner-Mann 2023: 74). Overall, direct volunteering is almost equally undertaken between men and women, but hidden gendered patterns in the areas of activity may exist (Göttlinger/Kronsteiner-Mann 2023: 55–57).

## 4.2 Lithuania

Volunteering policy in Lithuania is structured around two distinct institutional layers. The first relates to developing the legal framework with the Law on Volunteering coinciding with EYV 2011. A path dependency of Europeanisation evolved from responding to EU policy and European Commission recommendations (Grigaliūnas 2012; Acus 2018). However, the legislative draughting process largely excluded key state institutions, reflecting a reactive rather than initiative-taking strategic commitment (Andriukaityte 2025). The subsequent revision in 2023–2024 aimed to clarify ambiguous provisions and introduce adaptable frameworks to accommodate diverse implementation contexts. While policymakers were more accessible than before, the most active participants were CSOs, particularly social and educational coalitions and individual advocacy groups, who played a pivotal role in identifying issues, shaping policy debates, and proposing legislative improvements.

The second institutional layer relates to the involvement of political institutions, especially in response to crises. Between 2019 and 2024, volunteering was a salient issue in the political sphere because of geopolitical emergencies, particularly

the Ukrainian War. The public/associating sphere reception of war refugees coincided with national defence mobilisation in paramilitary organisations, such as the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union. The political-institutional portrayal of volunteer involvement is an essential and reactive societal response rather than a long-term proactive policy goal.

Current Lithuanian public policy does not prioritise volunteer involvement. Short- and long-form political party electoral programs for the 2023 municipal elections and the 2024 parliamentary elections, based on data from the Central Electoral Commission of Lithuania (n. d.) reveal that volunteering is not a central policy issue. Some references to volunteering appear in specific contexts, such as animal welfare, youth engagement, and elderly care. However, these are supplementary measures rather than integral solutions to broader societal challenges. Consequently, political institutions do not perceive volunteering as a comprehensive mechanism for addressing social, economic, or cultural issues.

From a historical-institutionalist perspective, state authorities and right-wing political parties have fostered popular engagement through hybrid formations that combine paramilitary functions with voluntary civic activity, such as the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union, thereby reinforcing a path-dependent trajectory shaped by the security imperatives of the interwar period (1918–1939). This state-CSO structure, including children- and youth-orientated organisations, has been activated in crises ranging from pandemic policing to border defence amid increased migration (Rogulis 2025). Notable is Russia's aggression against Ukraine serving as a critical juncture, prompting a surge from 8,000 to 16,000 members of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union (2024). However, this second institutional layer remains reactive despite national defence being an essential public service with rooted consensual political and public/associating sphere support. It does not alter the established path dependency but reinforces volunteer involvement as service-delivery or crisis response, not an enduring popular engagement phenomenon. Consequently, although the Riflemen's Union underscores the importance of volunteering, it simultaneously reveals the fragmented character of Lithuania's volunteering policy.

A notable trend in Lithuania is the steady decline of post-Soviet scepticism towards volunteering as obligatory civic labour (Pranaitytė 2024). Two key institutional dynamics are now shaping volunteering's development (Andriukaityte 2025; Acus 2018). First, institutional policies increasingly promote organisation-based and crisis-related volunteering. Second, the transfer of service delivery to CSOs encourages volunteer involvement. These incremental developments illustrate how institutional layering through political and governance structures has expanded volunteering, particularly in crisis contexts such as military volunteering.

### 4.3 Portugal

Underneath Portugal's political stability is discontent, nurturing the progressive rise in popularity of the right-wing CHEGA party and echoing far-right discourses across Europe (Chamusca 2024). CHEGA's May 2025 electoral success breaks a 50-year socialist or conservative history and, potentially, a conservative minority government (Ministério da Administração Interna 2025).

Portugal has relatively low mobilisation in organisation-based volunteering (Table 1). Specifically for volunteer involvement, a critical branching point occurred in 1998 with the enactment of Law 71/98 (Diário da República 1998): it aligned Portugal with broader EU policy frameworks by explicitly defining volunteering as an expression of active citizenship, reflecting Evers/von Essen's term *public engagement* (2019). It offered a new perception of volunteering and heralded public institutional support led by the Ministry of Labour and Solidarity and the National Volunteering Promotion Council (CNPV; Conselho Nacional para a Promoção do Voluntariado). In parallel, the 1999 State Plan on Volunteering (Diário da República 1999) formalised and legitimised voluntary initiatives (Ferreira 2015). More recently, national, regional, and local governments are aligning their strategies with the Blueprint for Volunteering in Europe (#BEV2030), including collaborative networking, the needed grassroots digitalisation of volunteering, and developing transnational co-operations (European Youth Portal 2025).

On the other hand, Portugal shows significant mobilisation when facing critical political, economic, and humanitarian junctures (Accornero/Ramos Pinto 2022). The social movements, including left-wing and trade union protests against the austerity measures between 2010 and 2012, and alternative housing reform CSOs and platforms like 'Stop Evictions', energised civil society (Accornero/Ramos Pinto 2022). The movements were contentious and contested and a branching point towards civic action.

Despite the branching, even newly established CSOs operate in welfare service delivery alongside the traditional church-affiliated CSOs and follow the same institutionalised path. CSOs rarely institutionalise themselves for social reform as lobby or pressure groups in the political sphere but remain local and informal associations, possibly a legacy of prior authoritarian state-CSO relations (Accornero/Ramos Pinto 2022). COVID-19 and the reception of Ukrainian War refugees since 2022 exemplify volunteers' cornerstone position in crisis social welfare service provision.

Consequently, volunteering is often a mechanism to fill state gaps, especially in times of crisis and critical challenges. The discourse of volunteers being a substitute for paid workers ignores volunteering's relational qualities in the public/associating sphere and, notably in the Portuguese context, misses the value of

complementing professional/paid work in service delivery (Franco et al. 2005). Countering this discourse, major CSOs, including the CNPV and the Antonio Sergio Cooperative for Social Development (CASES), continue along the 1998 branching point with initiatives reinforcing volunteering within a culture of cooperative and active citizenship and social entrepreneurship.

Volunteering in Portugal embodies multiple paradoxes, oscillating between claims of political neutrality and underlying political implications, influenced by historical legacies, socio-political contexts, and contemporary crises. While state institutions typically support volunteering, it is primarily a mechanism for filling gaps left by insufficient state provision. Portugal's volunteer landscape reflects the continuity of its Catholic heritage and struggles for democracy in the service-delivery model. However, it is branching out as it aligns with EU frameworks and ideals of popular engagement.

#### 4.4 Slovakia

Although the COVID-19 period restricted volunteering activities, civil society adapted to new ways to volunteer (Gazibara et al. 2023). The government welcomed cooperation with volunteers during COVID-19 testing but issued confusing instructions regarding remuneration (The Platform of Volunteer Centres and Organisations 2020). Instead of explicit support, political discourse shifted towards populist strategies, misinformation, and conspiracies (Koper 2023). In 2022, the government amended the Volunteering Act to limit the Ministry of the Interior's financial support to accredited CSOs, promoting long-term volunteering and improving volunteer management.

The outbreak of the Ukrainian War in February 2022 triggered Slovakia's first refugee crisis. Sharing a 730 km border with Ukraine, the resident Ukrainian population increased from 2.75 percent in 2020 to 5.74 percent in 2023 (Ministry of Interior Slovak Republic 2023). The crisis sparked significant political and public support, leading to exceptional mobilisation and solidarity within civil society, including CSOs, volunteers, and informal groups (Brozmanová Gregorová et al. 2023). Volunteers assisted at borders, information points, and railway stations; provided transport and accommodation; and played a key role in crisis management and refugee integration. Slovak CSOs contributed valuable expertise from international partnerships. The Slovak government strongly supported Ukraine, offering military aid and condemning Russian aggression.

Since the 2024 elections, the government's stance on Ukraine has been unclear, shifting towards a more pro-Russian direction after the 2023 elections (Mesežnikov 2022). Compared to previous periods, the 2024 campaign increased sharpness, radicalism, and assertiveness in political communication (Koper

2023). Coalition partners adopted totalitarian or pro-Russian positions, opposing the EU, Ukraine, and the media while expressing negative attitudes towards CSOs. As in 2022, changes to the Volunteering Act in 2024 and 2025 affect CSO accreditation and volunteer activities. These are the latest in a series of measures starting with the earlier Fico government's actions against CSOs – such as cancelling subsidies and threatening organisations providing crisis lines, mental health services, or support for people with disabilities – while favouring public and commercial service providers. The 2024 and 2025 election campaigns featured hostile “Not a cent to NGOs!”-slogans. Paradoxically, despite this hostility, the government relies on CSOs' professional capacities and expertise, often for free or minimal fees (Murray Svidroňová/Brozmanová Gregorová 2025).

Despite pressures, CSOs remain key in mobilising citizens. The first protest by the “Not in Our City”-initiative took place in February 2025, drawing up to 100,000 participants nationwide, expressing concerns about the Fico government's policies. European volunteering trends highlight civil society's growing importance amid political changes. In Slovakia, legislative shifts follow the trend with funding mechanisms and accreditation for long-term volunteering. The Slovak Volunteering Act aligns with European recommendations like the European Voluntary Service Charter and White Paper on Volunteering, which support sustained volunteering and enhance hosting organisations' capacities.

## 5. Conclusion

This article examines the institutional and historical influences that shape volunteer involvement within four distinct political contexts. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the four countries have faced some broadly similar transformations, such as democratisation, the diminishing role of the Catholic Church, post-neoliberal welfare state reforms, and expanding supra-state institutions. The historical trajectories highlight recurring patterns and reflect how specific political pathways, such as collaboration with government crisis agencies or the influence of EU institutions, shape volunteering. Austria and Slovakia exhibited unusual dynamics: political parties and various volunteer groups either reinforced or challenged institutional structures. Volunteering in Portugal is a service-delivery tradition with path dependency on political institutional failure. In contrast, Lithuania is still creating a path of self-reinforcing institutions. This article shows that categorising European volunteering involvement by cultural or geographical distinctions, contrasting Southern, Western, and Eastern Europe, or established and newcomer EU status, are less convincing analytical concepts.

## 5.1 Austria

Austria consistently maintains above-average EU volunteer involvement rates (International Labour Organisation, n. d.). It remains institutionally and ideologically aligned with political parties and the church, but these paths are wavering. Protecting an open society, notably with freedoms of association, expression, religion, and movement, falls to civil society. However, 88 percent of CSOs operate without paid staff (Neumayr/Pennerstorfer et al. 2017: 291); therefore, the onus lies with larger CSOs, especially the BAG members, despite their financial dependency and historical alignments. Austria's openness to volunteering and civic action will continue to vacillate as institutions seek new powers and individuals their freedoms.

## 5.2 Lithuania

Due to historical developments and the traditionally limited scope of volunteering, Lithuanian political institutions have shown scant interest in popular engagement. EU-driven norms and funding spur greater alignment with EU practices. However, crises accelerate volunteer involvement and elevate the discourse around popular engagement's national importance. In particular, Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has resulted in heightened institutional support for volunteering, mainly linked to national defence. The result is a more coherent volunteer landscape, buttressed by government initiatives and Europeanization processes.

## 5.3 Portugal

Unlike Austria and Lithuania, with responses to the geopolitical crisis at a national level, volunteering action and policies in Portugal align with European and global trends. These promote more inclusive opportunities, digital volunteering with more significant social impact, and increased involvement of public institutions (notably in service delivery). At the same time, during the 2008–2012 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, Portugal experienced a significant intensification of volunteering involvement, particularly through Church-affiliated organisations (e.g. Caritas and the Misericórdias). The turn to a right-wing government may reinforce the authoritarian state-CSO relations path and block volunteering in the public/associating sphere and civic action in the political sphere.

## 5.4 Slovakia

The Slovak political environment raises concerns about CSO independence and protection. During the recent electoral period, politicians acted antagonistically, accusing CSOs of negatively influencing social and political discourse. A recent amendment proposal to the Law on Non-Governmental Organisations would

require publishing the names of individuals in CSOs receiving public funds, threatening organisational freedom. Additionally, funding from tax assignment, a key resource for CSOs and volunteer support in Slovakia, was at risk of abolition or reduction, with only large-scale protests from the third sector preventing this. These developments indicate increasing political attempts to control and limit civil society's independence, posing serious risks to its free functioning.

## 6. Directions for future research

This article shows how popular engagement determines, and is determined by, institutional politics and historical factors. Therefore, reflecting on institutional legacies and civil society to explain volunteer involvement is more analytically fruitful than using a binary politicised versus non-politicised lens. The four countries illustrate how volunteer involvement has a history of path dependency with events that have, or will, shift that path. Of particular research interest is how these forces support or prevent popular engagement; for example, studying CEE countries' responses to EU accession (Meyer et al. 2020). Similarly, a country's response to crises may also alter its demographic profile, such as increasing the proportion of non-nationals, which will have age and generational flow-on effects that current research is not tracking.

One possible avenue is investigating an emerging trend of growing youth volunteering in Lithuania and Portugal, which appears to be the result of responses to crises and institutional policies already discussed. Extant research uses normative concepts of volunteering as private and morally motivated aligning with national policies (e.g. national defence, crisis response, migrant integration) or local public welfare initiatives, rather than a more politically informed volunteering for social change.

A critical direction emerging from Portugal is the need for research at the local volunteering level, utilising methods that partner with educational institutions and philanthropic and cultural foundations to support and underpin nation-level research. At the same time, creating incentives, such as tax benefits or certification of acquired skills and recognition of volunteering, can have diverse political motives warranting investigation: offering needed protection of volunteers, in the case of Portugal, but limiting freedom of association, as in Slovakia.

Political parties strategically use volunteering to address failures in service provision. Less investigated is how political institutions legitimise their authority in specific policy areas (Hjort/Beswick 2021). Volunteering pushes social justice and reform and supports democracy, which is currently evident in Austria, Lithuania, and Slovakia. What historical political legacies, such as Slovakia's and Lithuania's post-Soviet democratisation and social welfare traditions, determine popular

engagement and the ability to change expected trajectories is open to investigation. Similarly, there is a gap in understanding how social movements evolve into institutionalised CSOs, as in Austria and Lithuania, changing their political position and turning activists into volunteers. Also open is how volunteering perpetuates inequalities hidden beneath the normative ‘feel good’ discourses of civil society and the churches (Alves de Matos 2021), based on their historical institutionalisation in society. Finally, the historical pathways of the four countries in this article open the way to further research into the interactions between the political and public associating spheres and contested and consensual discourse (Evers/von Essen 2019) as case studies of other nations.

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