Voluntaris

Zeitschrift für Freiwilligendienste und zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement
*Journal of Volunteer Services and Civic Engagement*

Special Issue

Gabriella Civico | Anna Domaradzka
Jurgen Grotz | Lucas Meijs (Eds.)

# Contemporary Volunteering Study and Research in Europe

Nomos

# Sonderband
# Special Issue

Voluntaris – Zeitschrift für Freiwilligendienste und
zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement /
Voluntaris – Journal of Voluntary Services and Civic Engagement




## Editorial Office:

Voluntaris, Hochschule Düsseldorf, Fachbereich Sozial- & Kulturwissenschaften,
c/o Prof. Dr. Christoph Gille, Münsterstraße 156, 40476 Düsseldorf
Redaktionsassistenz: Florian Khalil, redaktion@voluntaris.de

Gabriella Civico | Anna Domaradzka | Jurgen Grotz
Lucas Meijs (Eds.)

# Contemporary Volunteering Study and Research in Europe

Nomos

*The European Commission support for the production of this document does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*


**The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek** lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de

1st Edition 2025



Published by
Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG
Waldseestraße 3–5 | 76530 Baden-Baden
www.nomos.de

Production of the printed version:
Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG
Waldseestraße 3–5 | 76530 Baden-Baden

ISBN 978-3-7560-2246-5 (Print)
ISBN 978-3-7489-4898-8 (ePDF)

DOI https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748948988

Online Version
Nomos eLibrary

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION



## ARTICLES

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

**Gabriella Civico**
Director | Centre for European Volunteering | Brussels, Belgium | gabriella.civico@cev.be

**Anna Domaradzka**
Director | Robert Zajonc Institute for Social Studies | University of Warsaw | Poland | anna.domaradzka@uw.edu.pl

**Jurgen Grotz**
Director | Institute for Volunteering Research | University of East Anglia, UK | J.Grotz@uea.ac.uk

**Lucas Meijs**
Professor Strategic Philanthropy and Volunteering | Rotterdam School of Management Erasmus University | The Netherlands | lmeijs@rsm.nl

**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 (Krasnopolskaya/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.

## References

Butcher, J., & Einolf, C. J., eds. (2017). *Perspectives on Volunteering: Voices from the South*. Cham.

Cnaan, R. A., Handy, F., & Wadsworth, M. (1996). Defining who is a volunteer: Conceptual and empirical considerations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 25(3), pp. 364–383.

Cnaan, R. A., & Handy, F. (2005). Towards understanding episodic volunteering. *Vrijwillige Inzet Onderzocht*, 2(1), pp. 29–35.

Dekker, P., & Halman, L. (2003). *The Values of Volunteering: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. New York.

Domaradzka, A. (2024). VII. 4 Osteuropa. In: *Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement und Freiwilligendienste*. Nomos, pp. 717–726

Enjolras, B. (2021). Explaining the varieties of volunteering in Europe: A capability approach. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 32(6), pp. 1187–1212.

Grotz, J., & Leonard, R. (2022). *Volunteer Involvement: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Cham.

Guidi, R., Fonović, K., & Cappadozzi, T., eds. (2021). *Accounting for the Varieties of Volunteering: New Global Statistical Standards Tested.* Cham.

Hart, D., & Sulik, M. J. (2014). The social construction of volunteering. In: Padilla-Walker, L. M., & Carlo, G. (eds.), *Prosocial Development: A Multidimensional Approach*, New York, pp. 393–409.

Hummel, S., Pfirter, L., Roth, J., & Strachwitz, R. G. (2020). *Understanding Civil Society in Europe*. Berlin.

Hustinx, L., & Lammertyn, F. (2003). Collective and reflexive styles of volunteering: A sociological modernization perspective. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 14, pp. 167–187.

Hustinx, L., Cnaan, R. A., & Handy, F. (2010). Navigating theories of volunteering: A hybrid map for a complex phenomenon. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 40(4), pp. 410–434.

Krasnopolskaya, I. I., Guseva, I. D., Meijs, L. C. P. M., & Cnaan, R. A. (2022). Determinants of Episodic Volunteer Satisfaction. *Monit. Obs. Mneniya Ekon. I Sotsial'nye Peremenyi*, 2, pp. 384–408.

Kulik, L. (2021). Multifaceted volunteering: The volunteering experience in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in light of volunteering styles. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 21(1), pp. 1222–1242.

Locke, M., & Grotz, J., eds. (2022). *Volunteering, Research and the Test of Experience: A Critical Celebration for the 25th Anniversary of the Institute for Volunteering Research*. Norwich.

Meijs, L. C. et al. (2003). All in the eyes of the beholder? Perceptions of volunteering across eight countries. In: Dekker, P. & Halman, L. (eds.), *The Values of Volunteering. Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies*. Boston, pp. 19–34.

Mikheieva, O., & Kuznetsova, I. (2024). War-time volunteering and population displacement: From spontaneous help to organised volunteering in post-2014 Ukraine. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 15(1), pp. 74–91.

Morse, E. (2015). *The Dark Side of Volunteering: When Helping Might Hurt*. Richmond.

Musick, M. A., & Wilson, J. (2008). *Volunteers: A Social Profile*. Bloomington.

Nakamura, J. S. et al. (2025). Understanding who volunteers globally through an examination of demographic variation in volunteering across 22 countries. *Scientific Reports*, 15(1), 25299.

Paciarotti, C., Cesaroni, A., & Bevilacqua, M. (2018). The management of spontaneous volunteers: A successful model from a flood emergency in Italy. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 31, pp. 260–274.

Rochester, C. et al. (2010). Making sense of volunteering: Perspectives, principles and definitions. *Volunteering and Society in the 21st Century*, pp. 9–23.

Salamon, L. M., Sokolowski, S. W., & Haddock, M. A. (2011). *Measuring the Economic Value of Volunteer Work Globally: Concepts, Estimates, and a Roadmap to the Future.* Baltimore.

Schreier, C., ed. (2015). *25 Years After. Mapping Civil Society in the Visegrá* d *Countries.* Berlin.

Talbot, A. (2015). The negative impacts of volunteering: A qualitative case study of one UK Scout group. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 6(2), pp. 209–220.

Voicu, B., & Voicu, M. (2009). Volunteers and volunteering in Central and Eastern Europe. *Sociológia*, 41(6), pp. 539–563.

Whittaker, J., McLennan, B., & Handmer, J. (2015). A review of informal volunteerism in emergencies and disasters: Definition, opportunities and challenges. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 13, pp. 358–368.

Wilson, J. (2000). Volunteering. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(1), pp. 215–240.

Wnuk, A., Oleksy, T., Domaradzka, A. (2021). Prosociality and endorsement of liberty: Communal and individual predictors of attitudes towards surveillance technologies. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 125(2021), 106938.

## Acknowledgements

We wish to thank all the many volunteers, those who involve volunteers and make volunteer involvement happen, as well as the numerous other professionals and individuals whose activities and views have inspired us to publish this Special Issue. Particular thanks go to the members of the "European Coalition for Volunteering Evidence & Research" (ECVER) and the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV), who took time to discuss this publication and contribute their valuable inputs.

## Funding

This Article is part of a Special Issue whose publication has been supported by the Citizens Equality Rights and Values fund of the European Union.

# ARTICLES

## Motivations Behind Volunteering in Europe: The Personal Values Perspective

**Paul Dekker**
Professor | Department of Sociology | Tilburg University | The Netherlands | Paul.Dekker@tilburguniversity.edu

**with**

**Anna Domaradzka**
Associate Professor | Robert Zajonc Institute for Social Studies | University of Warsaw | Poland | Anna.Domaradzka@uw.edu.pl

**Antonia Matković Puljek**
Expert Associate | Croatian Volunteer Development Centre | Croatia | Antonia@udruga-mi.hr

**Konstantinos Tomazos**
Senior Lecturer | Strathclyde Business School | University of Strathclyde | United Kingdom | K.Tomazos@strath.ac.uk

**Johan von Essen**
Professor in worldview research | Marie Cederschiöld University College | Sweden | Johan.Von-Essen@mchs.se

**Summary**

This paper explores the motivations behind volunteering in Europe, distinguishing between the reasons volunteers give for their involvement and the underlying mental drivers rooted in personal values. Drawing on the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) and four mini-case studies, it confirms that expressing altruistic and humanitarian values remains a primary motivator, while highlighting the complex interplay between self- and other-directed motivations. Despite the significance of this topic, comparative research across Europe remains sparse. To address this gap, the paper analyses pan-European value trends using Schwartz's value framework and European Social Survey data from 2002 to 2024. The findings suggest weak but consistent positive relationships between volunteering and values like benevolence and universalism, and a negative relationship with power values. While some individualistic values show ambivalent effects, fears of value change undermining volunteering appear overstated. The paper cautions against overgeneralizing research findings for volunteer management and emphasises the importance of context-specific insights. Rather than chasing broad trends, volunteer-involving organisations may benefit from targeting niche motivations. The paper concludes by advocating for more coordinated and comparable data collection on volunteer motivations across Europe, emphasizing the potential of small-scale, practice-based research supported by shared instruments and open data repositories.

Keywords: Volunteering, Motivation, Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), Values, European Social Survey

## 1. Introduction

This article explores why individuals across Europe volunteer, focusing on their motivations. At first sight, an overview of the motivations of individuals is a self-evident way to answer the question 'Why (do people) volunteer?', but it is not. First of all, the why-question could also be answered with references to traditions and culture (people are supposed to volunteer), to circumstances (they slip into volunteering after a request for help that they cannot refuse), or to individual resources that make volunteering easier (Musick/Wilson 2008: 39–398; Smith et al. 2016; Dekker/Halman 2003). Secondly, it is not that clear what motivations are (Peters 2015). Do we mean the reasons that people give (are aware of or use as rationalisations and think are adequate to present as legitimisation of their actions) or the 'real' motivators or drivers of volunteering behind what people are saying? And if so, what kind of drivers do we include? Probably not circumstantial factors, but more the psychological drivers, but still: are we looking for specific motivations for volunteering or also for personality traits and values that increase the chance of volunteering? And if we look for explicit reasons or mental drivers: are we trying to shed light on why people started volunteering or why they continue to do so? Motivations tend to change from conscious specific motives to start an activity to less conscious processes of following habits and obligations felt towards other volunteers or the organisation, which then develop into a 'volunteer role identity' (Van Ingen/Wilson 2017): Long-time volunteers might volunteer basically because they are volunteers, it is part of who they are without specific reasons.

Enough troubling thoughts. In this article, we will focus on reasons that volunteers (involved in formal volunteering) give for their involvement and on the values that might stimulate volunteering. We will remain agnostic about the final meaning of what people say. Reasons might, as such, be seen as motivations (how do people motivate/explain what they are doing?) or as indicators for motivations as (unconscious) mental drivers.

Section 5.2 briefly presents research perspectives on volunteer motivations, and section 5.3 offers examples of how volunteers motivate their involvement in four practices in Europe. Section 5.4 moves from reasons of volunteers to values in the population. We focus on differences in values between volunteers and non-volunteers and try to discover trends by analysing European Social Survey data. In section 5.5, we conclude with a summary and considerations for further research and implications for policy.

## 2. Research on motivations to volunteer

There are a lot of categorisations of motivations to volunteer, more or less embedded in theoretical thinking and empirically supported. Popular dichotomies distinguish intrinsic versus extrinsic (Degli Antoni 2009), altruistic versus egoistic (Lemmon/

Wayne 2015), individualistic versus conformist (Wuthnow 1998), self-oriented versus other-oriented (Stukas et al. 2016), and autonomous versus controlled motivations (Güntert et al. 2022).

By far the most important theoretical framework to investigate the motivations of volunteers is the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) developed by Clary et al. (1998; Musick/Wilson 2008: 56–65; Kals et al. 2021; Wilson/Son 2022; Zhou/Kodama Muscente 2023). It distinguishes six primary functions to be served by volunteering:

1. values function: express altruistic and humanitarian concerns.

2. understanding function: develop knowledge and practice new skills.

3. social function: gain social approval and develop relationships with others.

4. career function: gain experiences and contacts useful for a job or career.

5. protective function: reduce negative feelings and deal with personal problems.

6. enhancement function: develop as a person and enhance self-esteem.

These functions are supposed to play an important role in volunteering, but Clary et al. do not claim that the list is exhaustive. VFI uses thirty items to measure the above six functions and has been used in many studies in diverse cultural and organisational settings with good results with regard to the dimensionality and scalability of the items (Dunn et al. 2016). Among the repeated findings are that the career function is more important for young volunteers, and that the values function is the most important (and career and social functions overall least important) for volunteers' satisfaction, commitment, and intention to continue (Zhou/Kodama Muscente 2023).

VFI has been questioned for its coherence and theoretical basis, as well as for biases in the measurement. This is because VFI items may suggest benefits that respondents would not otherwise have considered but might confirm 'out of either acquiescence or social conformism' (Chacón et al. 2011: 55; Wilson/Son 2022). Also, VFI (and similar lists offering good reasons) may overestimate the number of motivations[1] as well as underestimate what is actually important to volunteers. In particular, the values function, measured with a few general pro-social statements, has been found inadequate to measure the major concerns and ideals of volunteers.

This has led to the construction of extended VFIs, for instance for environmental volunteers (Lind/Lundberg 2024) and volunteers in sports (Angosto et al. 2021). Another trend is combining VFI with other approaches, for instance the

1 Vecina/Marzana (2019) found in the same volunteers' sample more than 90% indicating social and protective motivations while using VFI, but only 3% according to answers to open-ended questions.

Self-Determination Theory, which distinguishes between more and less intrinsic/autonomous motivations, claiming that more self-determination contributes to more commitment and satisfaction (Güntert et al. 2022). Other authors combine VFI with measurements of values (Stukas et al. 2016; Meijers et al. 2024) and indicators of community-attachment (Kals et al. 2021). Religion can be added as a combination of values and community, and the field of explicit reasons is sometimes supplemented by adding measurements of personality traits and 'implicit pro-social motivations' (Aydinsli et al. 2016).

Almost all VFI-studies – exceptions are Niebuur et al. (2019) and Lockstone-Binney et al. (2022) – focus on volunteers only. This goes without saying if one considers motivations as reasons for doing something but makes no sense when one looks at motivations as mental drivers that increase the chance that somebody volunteers. In that case, a comparison of volunteers and non-volunteers is needed. This has been done by adapting VFI, but many of its items are explicitly referring to volunteering and remain highly hypothetical for those not volunteering.[2]

An alternative is to use measurements of more general 'pro-social' dispositions and values related to altruism and solidarity (Dekker/Halman 2003). This research might result in describing the characteristic value profile of volunteers as 'a syndrome of generosity mixed with civic engagement and concern for the common good' (Reed/Selbee 2003: 103), but overall, direct relationships between volunteering and values turn out to be rather weak (Dekker/Halman 2003). However, some non-relationships can be 'positive' as well in this field, for instance the finding that 'individualising' values (stressing individual autonomy and self-expressive values) are not negative for volunteering. They might even be positive: "being intensely committed to self-realisation and material pleasure did not seem to be incompatible with doing volunteer work ... ... people who were the most individualistic were also the most likely to value doing things to help others" (Wuthnow 1991: 22). This American finding is echoed in later quantitative research in European countries: "contrary to our initial expectations, those individuals displaying hedonistic or achievement values are in fact more likely to volunteer in formal organisations than others" (Plagnol/Huppert 2010: 164).

Measurements of values play a role in research as indicators of motivational broad goals of individuals but also as indicators of cultures that might stimulate or discourage volunteering (Inglehart 2003; Hustinx et al. 2015). The basic values of Schwarz (2010; Plagnol/Huppert 2010; see further Section 5.4) are commonly used for that purpose.

2 Cary et al. (1998) tested their measurement instrument also on non-volunteers, instructed with "... please indicate how important or accurate each of the following reasons for volunteering would be for you". Niebuur et al. (2019) rephrase statements ('volunteering makes me happy' as a statement for volunteers becomes 'volunteering would make me happy' for non-volunteers).

Meta-studies of motivations to volunteer research suggest a growing measurement diversity (Chen et al. 2022), while VFI is still the hard core of psychological research of volunteers. Given this common core, it is remarkable that very little comparative and almost no longitudinal empirical research has been done. Most research concerns limited groups of volunteers: working for the same organisation or in the same field or with the same background (students and pensioners are popular, among students there is also some research with convenience samples). This might have to do with the diversity of the population (difficult to sample) and perhaps also with the focus of research on recruiting and retaining volunteers for specific organisations.

## 3. Motivations of volunteers in four practices

In this section, we explore the motivations of volunteers in four specific practices. The texts boil down findings from mainly qualitative research among volunteers in new or exceptional circumstances, which might support reflecting on why-questions.

### 3.1 Volunteers during the earthquake relief efforts in Croatia

*Antonia Matković Puljek*

The devastating earthquake that hit Croatia's Sisak-Moslavina County in 2020 triggered a wave of volunteers willing to help citizens in need. The Croatian Volunteer Development Centre conducted a survey aimed to examine attitudes and experiences of volunteers included in earthquake relief efforts (DKolectiv 2021). The research was conducted in 2021, while most volunteers were still on site. Their answers to open-ended questions shed light on the diverse motivations behind their participation:

- *Solidarity* with those affected stood out as a primary motivator to start volunteering for most volunteers. Many were driven by their own values and beliefs and the sense of community. They also wanted to set an example for others and feel useful in a time of crisis.
- In maintaining volunteers' initial motivation, *emotional rewards* played an important role. Respondents often described happiness and fulfilment they experienced from helping others and from being part of a collective effort. They were generally satisfied with their involvement and contribution and would recommend crisis volunteering to others.
- *Social interactions* were another powerful motivator. Many valued the teamwork and camaraderie that was built during the relief efforts. Not only have they formed bonds with fellow volunteers and coordinators, but they also connected with the earthquake-affected population. For some, these connections became a main factor to commit to long-term volunteering instead of offering only one-time help.

Despite strong motivations shown by the surveyed volunteers, we identified several challenges in the volunteering process that hindered their efforts, such as inadequate coordination, inefficient task allocation and poor communication among organisations that were involved. Volunteers were also very critical about authorities and their slow and inadequate response, noting that much of the burden of this crisis fell on civil society organisations and informal initiatives. For many, however, this distrust in public institutions also served as a powerful motivator to step in where formal structures failed. Some volunteers continued their efforts months after the earthquake, motivated by a sense of duty and the belief that the broader public had forgotten about Sisak-Moslavina County. They felt that without their involvement, affected communities would be left without adequate help for the recovery efforts.

This research demonstrated that volunteers were driven by strong motivations to help during the earthquake crisis. However, national research on volunteering (DKolectiv, n. d.) shows that sustaining this enthusiasm is challenging – only about eleven percent of the population volunteers at least once a year. To build a more resilient community capable of responding to future challenges, it is important to find ways to sustain these motivations beyond moments of crisis and promote ongoing engagement in everyday support to those in need.

## 3.2 Volunteers during the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Poland[3]

*Anna Domaradzka*

In the initial stage of the Ukrainian refugee crisis in February 2022, over half of the Polish adult population engaged in different forms of giving and volunteering in response to the mass forced migration from Ukraine caused by the full-scale invasion of the country by Russia. Out of this group, 59 % organised collections of money and goods, 44 % engaged in direct volunteering, 39 % helped people to settle in, and 20 % hosted refugees (Roszczyńska et al. 2023). Shortly after the war in Ukraine began, people who helped refugees identified more strongly with Ukrainians and had more friends involved in providing help than those who did not help. After two years, people who continued to provide assistance had a higher level of identification with refugees, had parents who were more socially involved, talked more often with their families and friends, and showed higher trust in strangers.

When questioned in interviews (Trochymiak/Wróblewska 2024, Domaradzka et al. 2025), the volunteers referred to three main types of motivation driving their involvement:

3 This text is based on surveys (waves in 2022, 2023, 2024) and interviews in reception centres in Warsaw (2022), conducted by A. Domaradzka, E. Domaradzka, M. Roszczyńska, A. Rychwalska, M. Trochymiak, N. Wróblewska and A. Żbikowska at the Institute for Social Studies at the University of Warsaw (Domaradzka et al. 2025; Trochymiak/Wróblewska 2024).

- *Moral obligation*. Volunteers frequently mentioned feelings of moral obligation, based on the belief that it is natural to step in and help when dramatic events cause human suffering. Helping others in difficult situations was understood as a 'moral duty' or it was presented as fulfilling a personal 'need to help', which arose in reaction to the misfortune of others.
- *Reclaiming agency*. The second most frequent motivation was the need 'to do something' and gain a level of control in the face of the insecurity caused by the crisis. Here, the motivation was related to one's own well-being, which was threatened by the war erupting so close to the Polish border. Engaging in concrete efforts and seeing their results was a way to overcome the feeling of helplessness, restore the sense of meaning and reduce anxiety among volunteers.
- *Professional duty*. Some volunteers also mentioned the aspect of challenging themselves, seeing the crisis as an opportunity to put their skills in action and use them for the benefit of others. This sense of duty was linked with professional skills that volunteers were motivated to employ to 'get the job done' despite difficult circumstances.

The collective response to the crisis demonstrates how deeply personal, moral, and professional motivations intersect, revealing the profound impact of identification with war victims and social network engagement in emergency volunteering.

## 3.3 Volunteers in hybrid settings in Sweden

*Johan von Essen*

To explore new volunteer realities in Swedish society, the focus is on volunteers in hybrid organisations where one can expect to find professionalisation, blurred borders to other societal spheres, other forms of affiliation than membership, welfare orientation, and an apolitical view on volunteering. For this reason, in-depth interviews were conducted with police volunteers, corporate volunteers, and volunteers in a highly professionalised volunteer organisation producing welfare services (von Essen 2020). Three main motivations emerge from the interviews:

- The most frequent answer, when asked about motives for volunteering, is that *it makes it possible to produce something without being paid*. As actions categorised as unpaid work, they are independent of formal hierarchies and labour law relationships.
- Another central motive was that volunteering is *the outcome of an engagement*. However, it did not concern any engagement, but specifically being good to somebody or acting for a good cause. No one mentioned any ideology, political conviction, or referred to the broader society when they elaborated on engagement as a

motive for unpaid work. Instead, they emphasised another aspect of engagement: its specific function as an expression of themselves as persons.

- *To act for the benefit of the 'other' w*as a third important motive to volunteer. Some interviewees added that unpaid work must be performed for the benefit of someone outside their own private sphere, otherwise it does not count as free choice. For example, nursing or taking care of elderly parents is not categorised as unpaid work because it is perceived as either too natural or too imperative to be deliberate or driven by free choice.

Freedom and goodness are the two organising principles in the structure of motives for unpaid work in hybrid settings in Swedish society. That their efforts are voluntary and for the good of others imply that being engaged in volunteering affirms that they are autonomous subjects and allows them to express themselves as moral actors. Volunteering is then framed so that being engaged in and carrying out such efforts is to stand out as an individual and as a good person in contrast to the norm of gainful employment in the materialistic society and to the natural inclination of man to act in self-interest.

## 3.4 Faith-based volunteer tourists in party-tourism destinations

*Konstantinos Tomazos*

In studying Faith-Based Volunteer Tourism (FBVT) through the lens of street aid volunteers, the deeper existential and esoteric aspects of this form of tourism come into view. Such volunteers exemplify values such as service, compassion, and community by participating in patrol groups within the night-time economy, offering support to individuals who are heavily intoxicated. FBVT groups address a critical service gap, intervening in situations that might otherwise escalate to require medical or police involvement.

As part of this broader trend, Christian volunteer tourists travel to international party destinations with the goal of making a positive impact. Interviews with twelve Faith Based Volunteer Tourists uncovered six key motivations to participate: values, altruism, social, enjoyment, team building and generativity (see Tomazos 2024 for further references):

- *Religion*. The opportunity to express one's religious values and/or extend religious values and beliefs to another. It was virtually impossible to separate religion and the act of helping others in the context of street aid volunteer tourism (often called voluntourism). The participants were working and talking to people about the error of their ways and trying to help them to get onto the same path as themselves.

- *Altruism*. Participants consistently highlighted altruism as a key motivator. This was expressed through helping others, supporting causes, and serving the community. Altruism in the study manifested as purposeful actions aimed at benefiting others or society, transcending mere good intentions.
- *Social*. Volunteers also look for personal rewards like fulfilment or belonging. Rather than diminishing the ethical value of volunteering, this motivation can enhance sustained engagement and a cycle of goodwill. Especially in a Western context, modern volunteering reflects a shift from collective, community-focused efforts to a more individualised, reflexive approach (Inglehart 2003). Individuals increasingly seek causes that resonate with their identities and values, framing volunteering as a personal journey rather than a collective responsibility.
- *Enjoyment*. Permits the volunteers to have fun while engaging and being active.
- *Team Building*. The opportunity to have an impact within a team towards a common goal.
- *Generativity*. The opportunity to contribute to society, help future generations and/or express concern for the welfare of others.

My study of the interviews highlights the interconnectedness of these motivations and suggests that while religion and spirituality may be the primary drivers, the personal and social benefits of volunteering are also integral to the overall experience.

The balance between altruism and egoism also reflects the broader spectrum of human behaviour. We are complex beings, and our motivations often involve multiple layers. The desire to do good in the world is rarely devoid of personal context, and that's part of what makes volunteering so compelling. It highlights our shared humanity – the idea that helping others is a fundamental aspect of who we are, whether that help comes from a place of pure altruism or involves personal gain. My study underscores the importance of recognising the complex interplay between these motivations and how they work together to create a meaningful and transformative volunteer experience.

## 3.5 Interim conclusion across the four cases

The main motivations mentioned above mirror the enhancement, understanding, social and in particular values function of the VFI – with a glimmer of the protection function, as not following the appeal of values would probably hurt one's self. In addition to that, the motivations of volunteers in the four cases might have two things in common: stressing personal freedom (it is my choice to engage and recognise a duty) and opposing something (failing authorities, religious obligations, normal work, the daily self).

## 4. European trends

There are studies about the diversity and developments of volunteering in Europe (Damian 2019, Meijs/Hendriks 2022), but they tell us little about the motivations of volunteers. There are some cross-national studies about reasons to volunteer for specific segments of volunteers. An example is Grönlund et al. (2011) using convenience samples of volunteering students from five European (and eight other) countries to investigate how motives differ between cultures. In accordance with two of their hypotheses, the authors find for instance "Students from countries with high individualism scores rated resume-building motives higher compared to those from countries with lower individualism scores. Students from countries with the dominant cultural value of egalitarianism rated altruistic motives higher compared to students from other countries" (Grönlund et al. 2011: 102).

Another example is Principi et al. (2013), who compare older volunteers in three European countries and note "that higher levels of motivation in a given country may not be an indicator of more participation. According to the present study, Italian older volunteers are much more motivated than Dutch ones, whereas volunteering at an older age is particularly more widespread in the Netherlands, than in Germany and in particular in Italy" (729).

There are two studies with a broader selection of countries and samples of all volunteers. They use the second wave of the European Values Study (early 1990s), to the best of our knowledge the only pan-European large-scale population survey with questions for volunteering respondents about their 'reasons for doing voluntary work'.[4] Dekker/Van den Broek (1998) use data from eleven West European (and two North American) countries and investigate the correlates of reasons indicating compassion and sense of duty (seen as traditional motives) and reasons indicating personal satisfaction and gaining skills (seen as self-directed/modern motives). They find no relationship between reasons and the level of modernisation of the countries and limited evidence for modernisation of motives at the individual level (Dekker/Halman 2003).

Hustinx et al. (2015) use data from 17 European countries to investigate differences in reasons to volunteer related to religiosity, value patterns, and non-profit sector regimes. Their findings are diverse and nuanced. For instance, at the individual level religiosity is positively related to altruistic reasons and negatively to self-oriented reasons, but at the country level there is only a negative relationship to self-oriented reasons. Altruistic reasoning does not decline when countries are more secular.

4 14 reasons are presented, from 'religious beliefs' and 'to help give disadvantaged people hope and dignity' to 'for social reasons, to meet people' and 'did not want to, but could not refuse'.

From these kinds of findings, one can speculate about trends in motivations. The process of secularisation probably strengthens self-directed motivations but does not have to weaken altruistic motivations as secular sources of altruism might offer compensation.

To get a fuller and less speculative picture of trends, we need data about real changes, but as said, longitudinal research of motivations is missing for Europe. To shed some light on changes, we have to move from reasons of volunteers to values as possible drivers. I will explore values of volunteers and non-volunteers in two modules of the European Social Survey (ESS), the first one (2002/2003) and the most recent one (2023/2004, as far as available in February 2025). The modules differ in questions about volunteering. In 2002/2003 the question was: 'For each of the voluntary organisations I will now mention, please use this card to tell me whether any of these things apply to you now or in the last twelve months, and, if so, which.' One of the options is 'Done voluntary (unpaid) work for such an organisation'. Presented are eleven types/fields of voluntary organisations, and as number twelve 'any other voluntary organisation such as/similar to the ones I've just mentioned'. Respondents who indicated to have volunteered in at least one case are considered to be volunteers, the others as non-volunteers. In 2023/2004 the best available question was: '... still thinking about different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong, during the last twelve months, have you done any of the following?' with one of the options being 'volunteered for a not-for-profit or charitable organisation'. Our comparison might be somewhat biased by the different questions (volunteers in sports and other leisure organisations are explicitly addressed in 2002/2003 but might feel excluded in the civic action perspective of 2023/2004).

However, the two modules have (almost) identical questions about values: the 21-item Human Values Scale or Portrait Values Questionnaire, designed by Schwartz to categorize respondents according to their basic values (Schwartz 2010; Davidov et al. 2008). The question is: 'Now I will briefly describe some people. Please listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you. Use this card for your answer', with the options on the card being: 'Very much like me / Like me / Somewhat like me / A little like me / Not like me / Not like me at all / options to refuse an answer or say I don't know'. The people presented are he or she, in accordance with the (assumed) gender of the respondent. Two examples: 'Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to him/her. He/She likes to do things in his/her own original way' and 'It is important to him/her to live in secure surroundings. He/She

avoids anything that might endanger his safety.' The resulting 21 'portraits' present 21 value-indicators that cover ten basic values (see Table 5.1).[5]

For 16 European countries we have data about volunteering and values in both modules (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, and Slovenia). The average of the national percentages of volunteers was 18 % in 2002/2003 (from 5 % in Poland to 37 % in Norway) and 22 % in 2023/2004 (from 5 % in Hungary to 42 % in Norway). The average change per country was 6 percentage points and there is no way to decide how much of this is real change and how much the consequence of different questioning.

To get a full picture of possible drivers, table 5.1 presents information about all 21 value measurements, and not the ten basic values they are supposed to indicate. The first numbered column shows the estimated European population change in values (volunteers and non-volunteers in the 16 countries) on a 100 points scale between 2002/2003 and 2023/2004. The largest changes are an increase of 'to help people and care for others' well-being' (+5) and 'to seek fun and things that give pleasure' (+4); the largest decrease shows 'to do what is told and follow rules' (-3). Columns 2 and 3 show differences in values between volunteers and non-volunteers per module. If there are significant differences in both periods, they are in the same direction. The biggest difference is that volunteers put a higher value than non-volunteers on 'to think new ideas and being creative' (+4, +5) and on 'to try new and different things in life' (+3, +5), and a lower value on 'to live in secure and safe surroundings (-3, -4). Overall, the value changes and differences are rather small (max. 5 on 0-100-scales). Looking at the basic values, volunteers score on average consistently (all constituent values in both periods) higher on universalism, benevolence, and stimulation, and lower on security.

Columns 4 and 5 show the unique statistical effects of values on the probability of volunteering in both periods: the findings are not only adjusted for country differences but also for the effects of the other values.[6] The direction of significant effects (positive or negative) is visible as well as their rank order between brackets: 1 is the most important discriminating value and 13 (2023/2004) or 14 (2002/2003) is the least important. The rank orders differ, but not extremely. In both periods, 'to think of new

5 There is no room here to go further into the relationships between the values, but the ten basic values can be structured in two dimensions and roughly four categories: self-enhancement (achievement and power) versus self-transcendence (universalism and benevolence), and openness to change (self-direction and stimulation) versus conservation (conformity, security, and traditional). Hedonism is related to both openness to change and self-enhancement (Davidov et al. 2008; Schwartz 2010).

6 This explains differences between columns 2 and 4 and between 3 and 5. Ignoring other values, in both periods volunteers score a little bit higher in columns 2 and 3 on the second universalism value (equality), but adjusting for other value differences, this indicator does not discriminate between volunteers and non-volunteers (column 5 and 6).

ideas and being creative' is the most important positive value, but in 2002/2003 'to be humble and modest, not draw attention' is more important, but negative (taking the effects of other values into account).

**Table 1 Values and volunteering**

| | | Differences in values[a] | | | Effects of values on volunteering[b] | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Basic value[a] | Measurements: It is important … | 1. 2023/4 -2002/3 | 2. Vol – non-vol in 2002/3 | 3. Vol – non-vol in 2023/4 | 4. 2002/3 | 5. 2023/4 | 6. Future[c] |
| Universalism | … to understand different people | 2 | 2 | 4 | + (8) | + (3) | ++[d] |
| | … that people are treated equally and have equal opportunities | 3 | 1 | 2 | | | |
| | … to care for nature and environment | 1 | 2 | 3 | + (11) | + (5) | + |
| Benevolence | … to help people and care for others' well-being | 5 | 3 | 3 | + (3) | + (4) | + |
| | … to be loyal to friends and devote to people close | 3 | 1 | 2 | | + (10) | + |
| Conformism | … to do what is told and follow rules | -3 | -2 | -2 | - (9) | | |
| | … to behave properly | 1 | | -1 | + (14) | | |
| Tradition | … to be humble and modest, not draw attention | 3 | -3 | -1 | - (1) | - (7) | – |
| | … to follow traditions and customs | -2 | 2 | | + (6) | + (13) | – –[d] |
| Security | … to live in secure and safe surroundings | | -3 | -4 | - (5) | - (2) | |
| | … that government is strong and ensures safety | 1 | -3 | -2 | - (4) | - (8) | – |
| Power | … to be rich, have money and expensive things | -2 | -2 | -2 | - (7) | - (6) | + |
| | … to get respect from others | | | | | | |
| Achievement | … to show abilities and be admired | -1 | | | | | |
| | … to be successful and that people recognise achievements | -2 | | | | | |
| Hedonism | … to seek fun and things that give pleasure | 4 | | 1 | | - (12) | – –[d] |
| | … to have a good time | 3 | | | - (12) | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Stimulation | … to try new and different things in life | -1 | 3 | 5 | + (10) | + (9) | – |
| | … to seek adventures and have an exciting life | 3 | 2 | 4 | | + (11) | ++[d] |
| Self-determination | … to think new ideas and being creative | 1 | 4 | 5 | + (2) | + (1) | + |
| | … to make own decisions and be free | 2 | | 1 | - (13) | | |
| Increase of Nagelkerke pseudo $r^2$ by adding values to countries | | | | | .026 | .039 | |

a Statistically significant ($p<0.05$) differences on 0-100 scales between 2023/4 and 2002/3 and between Volunteers and non-volunteers (adjusted for countries).

b Direction of statistically significant ($p<0.05$) effects of values on the chance to volunteer (adjusted for countries and other values) and between brackets the rank order of the strength of the effect (according to Wald statistics).

c Guesstimate of the future impact of the value on volunteering by combining the direction of the value change and the effect of the value on volunteering in at least 2023/4.

d See note 6: + + = positive impact increases; – – = negative impact increases or positive impact decreases.

Source: European Social Survey 1 (2002-2003) & 11 (2023-2024)

The results in columns 2 to 5 are from separate analyses for 2002/2003 and for 2023/2004 because the measurement of volunteering is quite different. If we ignore this difference, we can speculate about trends or the future impact of values. We expect a positive trend when a value with a positive effect becomes more popular or a value with a negative effect becomes less popular; and the other way around for negative trends. Combining the change in column 1 and the signs in columns 4 and 5 (5 only if there is no significant difference in 2002/2003), we get seven positive and five negative trends in motivation. In four cases the sign is double because the effect of the value on volunteering differs significantly between 2002/2003 and 2023/2004.[7] For example, the increasingly popular value 'to understand different people' has a positive effect on volunteering and in 2023/2004 more than in 2002/2003 and gets for that reason a '++'; 'to follow traditions and customs' is becoming less popular and its effect on volunteering is decreasing and gets a '– –'.

Summarizing the "guesstimates" of Table 5.1 in terms of basic values, one might expect that universalism and benevolence will strengthen as drivers of volunteering, and tradition will work less positively and more negatively. The impact of other basic values is unclear because value-indicators have no or only partial effects, or effects are opposed (the stimulation values: both have a positive effect on volunteering but one is getting less popular and the other more popular).

7 Ignoring the difference in measuring volunteering for a moment, multivariate analyses of the combined modules, four values*year significant interaction effects suggest changes: understand different people and seek adventure have a stronger positive effect in 2023/4; follow traditions has a weaker positive effect and seek fun has a stronger negative effect in 2023/4.

The effects of values on volunteering appear to be small (small differences between volunteers and non-volunteers and low Nagelkerke coefficients in the last row of columns 4 and 5). Moreover, our statistical effects say as such nothing about causality. A pseudo-panel study of ESS modules by Vega-Tinoco et al. (2024) shows bi-directional relationships between civic participation and Schwartz-values, with some evidence that the impact of participation on values is stronger than vice versa.

The results are largely in line with other findings in analyses of other ESS data. Both Schwartz (2010) and Plagnol/Huppert (2010) report positive associations of pro-social behaviour indicators with benevolence (focus on welfare for ingroup) and universalism (focus on welfare for all). Besides, Schwarz (2010) finds power and security inhibit pro-social behaviour and effects of conformity depending on the kind of behaviour. As quoted before, Plagnol/Huppert (2010) find positive associations between volunteering and hedonistic or achievement values.

## 5. Conclusion

Motivations to volunteer can refer to reasons volunteers give for their activities and to mental drivers of people's propensity to volunteer. Reasons of volunteers have often been investigated with the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI). Expressing altruistic and humanitarian values is found to be the most important function of volunteering. This also emerges from the four small case studies in section 5.3. These studies also show a strong intertwining of other- and self-directed motivations.

There have been remarkably few comparative analyses of motivations of volunteers and there exists hardly any pan-European research. To say something about European trends, we focused on motivations in the sense of mental drivers, i.e. values in the population that might stimulate people to volunteer. We used Schwartz's measures of basic values and found some weak relationships in line with earlier research on pro-social behaviour: benevolence and universalism are positively related, and power values are negatively related to volunteering. The impact of other individualistic values is ambivalent. Taking differences between 2002 and 2024 as trends, one may expect fewer benefits for volunteering from valuing tradition, but a growing positive impact of universalism and benevolence, and mixed effects of self-directed values. These estimates are statistically weak, but strong enough to counter 'panicky' assumptions about strongly negative consequences of value change in Europe.

I hope that the preceding sections have offered some useful reflections on motivations and insights into findings of earlier research, as well as fresh food for thoughts in regard to most important motivations for volunteers (from the four mini case studies in section 5.3) and the future of the values of volunteering in Europe (from the quantitative exploration in section 5.4).

But what can we practically do with this in volunteer policymaking and management? I do not cherish the hopes of Zhou/Kodama Mucente (2023: 1350), who conclude their article on volunteer motives by stating: "We hope that this meta-analysis, which is the first of its kind, will provide future volunteer managers with accessible and valuable insight into volunteer motives that can directly translate into improved practices and better organisational outcomes." This does not seem feasible, and attempts to directly apply conclusions from research in other or across settings seem risky. Motivations differ between types and fields of volunteering and change in interaction with other volunteers and organisations.

The biggest risk is taking research findings of majorities or general trends as applicable in all settings. Just as it will often be more profitable for a political party to be the sole representative of a minority preference than to share a majority preference with others, it may be better for a volunteer-involving organisation to go against trends, focus on a minority and look for a niche. Research, as presented here, is more likely to be useful as environmental information, especially to dispel popular assumptions about changes (such as negative values change), or as inspiration to do one's own practical research (for instance using VFI to start internal discussions about what is important for volunteers and for the organisation).

Some final thoughts about future research: As regards values motivating to volunteer in the population, ESS seems to be a good source with its Schwartz-values battery. However, it would be nice if questions concerning volunteering or variants of pro-social behaviour were asked more broadly. The current ESS-question about volunteering as a form of civic action (see section 5.4) tilts towards politically inspired activities.

For further research on motivations of volunteers in Europe, population surveys with a battery of questions for volunteers only (as in EVS 1990; see section 5.4) are an option but remain expensive, therefore the information on what volunteers do inevitably remains very limited. What seems more promising is some coordinating action directed to projects researching volunteers in different settings (organisations, events, groups). They could be made more comparable with a core list of questions for surveys for volunteers (VFI with more values), a few optional open-ended questions, and enriched with information about the setting. Archiving such data in an open repository would make it accessible for policymakers and managers, who might learn more from small research in similar practices elsewhere in Europe than from research about general trends across Europe.

## Acknowledgments

We thank our friends and colleagues, particularly those involved in the practice of volunteering, who read and suggested improvements to this article.

## Funding

This Article is part of a Special Issue whose publication has been supported by the Citizens Equality Rights and Values fund of the European Union. Polish National Science Centre grant no. 2018/30/E/HS6/00379.

## References

Angosto, S., Bang, H., Bravo, G.A., Díaz-Suárez, A., & López-Gullón, J.M. (2021). Motivations and future intentions in sport event volunteering: A systematic review. *Sustainability*, 13, 12454.

Aydinli, A. et al. (2016). A cross-cultural study of explicit and implicit motivation for long-term volunteering. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 45(2), pp. 375–396.

Chacón, F., Pérez, T., Flores, J., & Vecina, M. L. (2011). Motives for volunteering: Categorization of volunteers' motivations using open-ended questions. *Psychology in Spain*, 15(1), pp. 48–56.

Chen, J., Wang, C., & Tang, Y. (2022). Knowledge mapping of volunteer motivation: A bibliometric analysis and cross-cultural comparative study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 883150.

Clary, E. G. et al. (1998). Understanding and assessing the motivations of volunteers: A functional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(6), pp. 1516–1530.

Damian, E. (2019). Formal volunteering in Europe: Evidence across nations and time. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 53(4), pp. 385–409.

Davidov, E., Schmidt, P., & Schwartz, S. H. (2008). Bringing values back in: The adequacy of the European Social Survey to measure values in 20 countries. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 72(3), pp. 420–445.

Degli Antoni, G. (2009). Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivations to volunteer and social capital formation. *Kyklos*, 62(3), pp. 359–370.

Dekker, P., & Halman, L. (2003). Volunteering and values: An introduction. In: Dekker, P., & Halman, L. (eds.): *The Values of Volunteering: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. New York, pp. 1–17.

Dekker, P., & Van den Broek, A. (1998). Civil society in comparative perspective: Involvement in voluntary associations in North America and Western Europe. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 9, pp. 11–38.

DKolectiv (2021). Results of the research "Experiences of volunteering in the post-earthquake crisis in the Sisak-Moslavina County"'. Volonterski Centar Split. Available from: https://www.docdroid.net/cHeTOM9/rezultati-istrazivanja-iskustva-volontiranja-u-krizi-nakon-potresa-na-podrucju-smz-pdf [Accessed 28.08.2025].

DKolectiv (n. d.). Rezultati istraživanja o volonterstvu u Republici Hrvatskoj. Available from: https://dkolektiv.hr/storage/documents/publications/rezultati-istrazivanja-o-volonterstvu-u-republici-hrvatskoj.pdf [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Domaradzka, A., Żbikowska, A., & Domaradzka, E. (2025). Between emergent leadership and corporate supervision: Volunteer management in refugee reception points. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.70000.

Dunn, J., Chambers, S. K., & Hyde, M. K. (2016). Systematic review of motives for episodic volunteering. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 27, pp. 425–464.

von Essen, J. (2020). The art of making sense of volunteering. In: Askeland, H., Espedal, G., Jelstad Løvaas, B., & Sirris, S. (eds.): *Understanding Values work. Institutional Perspectives in Organisations and Leadership*. London/New York, pp. 245–264.

Grönlund, H. et al. (2011). Cultural values and volunteering: A cross-cultural comparison of students' motivation to volunteer in 13 countries. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 9, pp. 87–106.

Güntert, S. T., Wehner, T., & Mieg, H. A. (2022). *Organisational, Motivational, and Cultural Contexts of Volunteering: The European View*. Cham.

Hustinx, L., Van Rossem, R., Handy, F., Cnaan, R. (2015). A cross-national examination of the motivation to volunteer. In: Hustinx, L., von Essen, J., Haers, J., & Mels, S. (eds.): *Religion and Volunteering*. Cham, pp. 97–120.

van Ingen, E., & Wilson, J. (2017). I volunteer, therefore I am? Factors affecting volunteer role identity. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 46(1), pp. 29–46.

Inglehart, R. (2003). Modernization and volunteering. In: Dekker, P., & Halman, L. (eds.): *The Values of Volunteering: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. New York, pp. 55–70.

Kals, E., Strubel, I. T., & Güntert. S. T. (2021). Gemeinsinn und Solidarität: Motivation und Wirkung von Freiwilligenarbeit. *Bibliothek – Forschung und Praxis*, 45(1), pp. 14–25.

Lemmon, G., & Wayne, S. J. (2015). Underlying motives of organisational citizenship behavior: Comparing egoistic and altruistic motivations. *Journal of Leadership & Organisational Studies*, 22(2), pp. 129–148.

Lind, L. & Lundberg, E. (2024). Why are you cleaning beaches? A study on motivations of volunteer beach cleaners. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, pp. 1–23, DOI: 10.1080/09640568.2024.2409963.

Lockstone-Binney, L. et al. (2022). Growing the volunteer pool: Identifying non-volunteers most likely to volunteer. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 33(4), pp. 777–794.

Meijeren, M., Lubbers, M., & Scheepers, P. (2024). Assessing the 'why' in volunteering for refugees: Exploring volunteer motivations. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 35(1), pp. 129–139.

Meijs, L., & Hendriks, P., with Dobreva, A. (2021). *New Trends in the Development of Volunteering in the European Union*. The European Economic and Social Committee. Brussels.

Musick, M., & Wilson, J. (2008). *Volunteers: A Social Profile*. Bloomington.

Niebuur, J., Liefbroer, A. C., Steverink, N., & Smidt, N. (2019). The Dutch comparative scale for assessing volunteer motivations among volunteers and non-volunteers: An adaptation of the volunteer functions inventory. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(24), 5047.

Peters, R. S. (2015 [1958]). *The Concept of Motivation*. London/New York.

Plagnol, A. C., & Huppert, F. A. (2010). Happy to help? Exploring the factors associated with variations in rates of volunteering across Europe. *Social Indicators Research*, 97, pp. 157–176.

Principi, A., Warburton, J., Schippers, J., & Rosa, M. D. (2013). The role of work status on European older volunteers' motivation. *Research on Aging*, 35(6), pp. 710–735.

Reed, P. & L. K. Selbee (2003). Do people who volunteer have a distinctive ethos? In: Dekker, P., & Halman, L. (eds.): *The Values of Volunteering*. New York, pp. 91–110.

Roszczyńska, M., Wnuk, A., Oleksy, T., Domaradzka, A. (2023). Wsparcie udzielane uchodźczyniom i uchodźcom z Ukrainy: czynniki zaangażowania i wycofania oraz koszty i korzyści niesienia pomocy [Support provided to refugees from Ukraine: factors of engagement, withdrawal, costs and benefits of providing assistance], In: M. Rymsza (ed): *W stronę środowiskowych usług społecznych: deinstytucjonalizacja praktyk pomocowych w Polsce i Europie* [Towards community-based social services: deinstitutionalization of assistance practices in Poland and Europe], 225-240.

Schwartz, S. H. (2010). Basic values: How they motivate and inhibit prosocial behavior, In: Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (eds.): *Prosocial Motives, Emotions, and Behavior: The Better Angels of Our Nature*. American Psychological Association, pp. 221–241.

Smith, D. H. et al. (2016). Conducive motivations and psychological influences on volunteering. In: Smith, D. H., Stebbins, R. A., & Grotz, J. (eds.): *The Palgrave Handbook of Volunteering, Civic Participation, and Nonprofit Associations, Volume 1*. London/New York, pp. 702–751.

Stukas, A. A., Snyder, M., & Clary, E. G. (2016). Understanding and encouraging volunteerism and community involvement. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 156(3), pp. 243–255.

Tomazos, K. (2024). Angels of the night: Exploring street-aid volunteer tourists and faith-based volunteer tourism. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 49(4), pp. 683–698.

Trochymiak, M. R., & Wróblewska, N. (2024). Frontline of refugee reception policy: Warsaw reception centers during the 2022 Ukrainian crisis. *Nonprofit Policy Forum,* https://doi.org/10.1515/npf-2023-0082.

Vecina, M. L., & Marzana, D. (2019). Motivations for volunteering: Do motivation questionnaires measure what actually drives volunteers? *TPM: Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology*, 26(4), pp. 573–587.

Vega-Tinoco, A., Sánchez-García, J., Gil-Lacruz, M., Sierra Berdejo, M. J., & Gil-Lacruz, A. I. (2024). Human values, civic participation, and wellbeing: Analysis on their relationship among older Europeans. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1346730.

Wilson, J. (2012). Volunteerism research: A review essay. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 41(2), pp. 176–212.

Wilson, J., & Son, J. (2022). Volunteer Motivations. In: List, R. A., Anheier, H. K., & Toepler, S. (eds.): *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*. Cham, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-99675-2_9550-1.

Wuthnow, R. (1991). *Acts of compassion: Caring for others and helping ourselves*. Princeton.

Zhou, S., & Kodama Muscente, K. (2023). Meta-analysis of volunteer motives using the volunteer functions inventory to predict volunteer satisfaction, commitment, and behavior. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 52(5), pp. 1331–1356.

# The Role of Intermediary Organisations as an Essential Element of the Volunteering Infrastructure

**Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová**
Director | UMB Engage – University Centre for Community Partnerships, Matej Bel University | Banská Bystrica, Slovakia | alzbeta.gregorova@umb.sk

**Inês Gonçalves**
Volunteer Program Technician | Área Social e de Desenvolvimento | Programa de Voluntariado Fundação Eugénio de Almeida | Évora, Portugal | ines.goncalves@fea.pt

**Wolfgang Krell**
Managing Director | Freiwilligen-Zentrum Augsburg | Germany | krell@freiwilligen-zentrum-augsburg.de

**Aron Schoug**
Senior Lecturer | Stockholm University | Sweden | aron.schoug@edu.su.se

**Summary**
This paper examines the crucial role of intermediary organisations – commonly referred to as volunteer centres – as integral components of the volunteering infrastructure across Europe. Drawing on insights from Germany, Portugal, Slovakia, and Sweden, it examines how these organisations support, promote, and develop volunteering at local, regional, and national levels. The study highlights how volunteer centres have evolved from basic volunteer matching services into dynamic entities engaged in policy advocacy, community development, digital innovation, and education. Despite differences, common trends include the shift toward capacity building, inclusive and flexible forms of volunteering, digital engagement, and strengthened roles in crisis response and democratic renewal. The authors argue that volunteer centres are not only facilitators of volunteering but also strategic actors in promoting social inclusion, civic participation, and community resilience. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the role of volunteer centres. The analysis is grounded in expert knowledge, literature review, and collaborative reflection by co-authors with extensive experience in volunteering infrastructure development.

Keywords: Volunteering, Volunteer Centre, Intermediary Organisation, European, Trend

## 1. Introduction

Volunteering is a formidable force and a crucial component of the social fabric. Globally, it remains a significant driver in shaping and propelling development. Volunteering is pivotal for civil society, nurturing social inclusion, active citizenship, and community empowerment (United Nations Volunteers 2021). The term 'volunteering' is broad, encompassing an extensive range of organised and unorganised activities across diverse contexts and cultures for the general public,

"including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor" (United Nations Volunteers 2021: 16). Enabling individuals and organisations to engage in volunteer activities, ensuring that volunteering opportunities are accessible to all people, and harnessing the potential of volunteering for all involved stakeholders requires a broad range of support systems, networks, and resources, collectively known as volunteering infrastructure.

Volunteering infrastructure comprises various interconnected elements that create an ecosystem of support for volunteering. These elements encompass organisations, networks, resources, and systems facilitating volunteering engagement (Grubb 2021). Grandi/Lough/Bannister (2019) mention three key elements to operationalise the definition of volunteering infrastructure:

1. The *enabling environment* encompasses policies, laws, and other legal instruments that define, regulate, protect, and/or incentivise volunteering.
2. *Support structures* refer to organisations and networks that directly assist volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations. They also include networks and coordinating bodies such as volunteer centres, umbrella organisations, and related networks.
3. *Implementation capacities* encompass crucial resources that enable and sustain volunteering, such as funding mechanisms, institutionalised channels of communication for consulting policymakers, mechanisms for data collection and knowledge sharing to document the scale and impact of volunteering, and established good practice standards.

The nature and scope of volunteering infrastructure vary considerably across countries and regions based on historical, cultural, and political factors. As Grandi/Lough/Bannister (2019) state, while volunteering infrastructure exhibits some similarities globally, it has also developed differently to accommodate divergent needs, demands, expectations, and contexts. Research has shown that a well-developed volunteering infrastructure is key to promoting and sustaining volunteering (Howard/Burns 2015). These support systems help volunteers find suitable opportunities and develop the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute effectively (Rutherford et al. 2019). Additionally, they play a crucial role in advocating for the recognition and value of volunteering, thereby enhancing its societal impact. As stated in the publication Volunteering Infrastructure in Europe, first published by the European Volunteer Centre (CEV) in 2012, and regularly updated since then, the question of the infrastructure supporting volunteering is often overlooked, since it is usually 'behind the scenes' and not immediately visible to individual volunteers or the beneficiaries of volunteering efforts. However, it is crucial for

the long-term sustainability of volunteering, for maintaining high standards, and for attracting and retaining volunteers.

The essential component of volunteer infrastructure is intermediary organisations, which play a vital role in supporting and promoting volunteering. Contemporary volunteer action is likely involved in relevant re-intermediation processes. Intermediary organisations are crucial in bridging the gap between individual volunteers, grassroots initiatives, and larger societal structures (Guidi 2021). In this study, the term 'intermediary organisation' is applied to various names used in different countries that not only engage and retain volunteers, like any other volunteer-involving organisation, but also "promote and support volunteering for any organisation that needs volunteers, at least in theory, and not for their use" (van de Bos 2014: 69). Intermediary organisations in volunteering can have different names in particular countries. Mostly, the terms used are 'volunteer centre', 'agency for voluntary/volunteer service', 'volunteer bank', 'volunteer bureau', 'voluntary action centre', 'voluntary/volunteering support centre', 'voluntary/volunteering network centre', 'volunteer agency', 'voluntary service centre', 'volunteer platform' and others. In this paper, we use the terms 'volunteer centre' or 'intermediary organisation'.

## 2. Definition and functions of volunteer centres

Several publications map the history and state of volunteer centres, primarily in particular countries: Ellis (1989) in the USA, Osborne (1999) in the UK, Palma/Paganin (2002) in Italy; Ebert et al. (2002) in Germany, Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2012) in Slovakia, Lorentzen/Henriksen (2014) in Norway and Denmark, and van de Bos (2014) in several countries.

Volunteer centres were a new organisational form that emerged in the United States in the early 1930s. In the following period, the quantity and quality developed under social circumstances. Their activities responded to social demands and fulfilled various tasks. The mission of volunteer centres has always been to contribute to the development of democracy and civic participation in improving the quality of life (Ellis 1989). In Western Europe, since the 1970s governments and nonprofit organisations in many countries have considered developing volunteering policies a necessity, particularly concerning recruitment. The establishment of volunteer centres is a vital component of this process (van de Bos 2014). In post-communist countries, the process of developing volunteer centres began as part of rebuilding the civil society space after the 1990s.

Ellis (1989: x) defines a volunteer centre as a:

- Conceptual entity: an expression of a community-wide vision of volunteerism that is inclusive of diverse people and causes.

- Physical space: where various stakeholder groups can convene in a spirit of mutual concern for supporting volunteers.
- Focal point for coordinating and elevating the visibility of volunteer efforts.

Frič/Pospíšilová (2010) view a volunteer centre as an entity that operates as a mediator between volunteers and organisations, connecting the supply and demand for volunteers. According to Hustinx/Lammertyn (2003), volunteer centres are volunteer agencies that purposefully search for the optimal match between the needs of volunteers and the activities offered by the organisation. As van de Bos (2014) notes, the original purpose of establishing volunteer centres was to assist organisations in addressing their volunteer shortages. Over time, this objective expanded to include initiatives that promote and encourage volunteering, increasing the benefits of the diverse stakeholders invested in volunteer involvement.

Volunteer centres operate on various levels: globally, through the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE), whose history dates back to the 1970s, currently serving as the connective tissue to a global network of volunteer leaders, nonprofit organisations, businesses, and national leadership organisations that share a belief in the power of volunteering with members in more than 100 countries all over the world (International Association for Volunteer Effort 2025); at the European level, through the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) (until July 1, 2020 known as the European Volunteer Centre), which was established in 1992 and is a European network of over 60 organisations dedicated to the promotion of and support to volunteers and volunteering in Europe (Centre for European Volunteering 2025); and at the national level, through dozens of national volunteer centres, many of which are members of IAVE and/or CEV as well as locally through a network of numerous volunteer centres across regions and communities.

Volunteer centres currently fulfil several functions, and the nature of the activities that underpin these functions as well as the presence of individual functions can vary considerably from country to country and even within particular organisations. Van de Bos/Meijs (2008) describe volunteer centres as organisations that promote, stimulate, and develop volunteering, often at the local level, through the following means:

- Volunteer support: connecting individuals who want to volunteer with organisations that need volunteer effort.
- Management support: consulting with and supporting volunteer-involving organisations to enhance the attractiveness and appeal of their activities to prospective volunteers.
- Community support: facilitating conditions and supporting initiatives that enhance volunteer effort and citizen involvement in the community.

Penberthy/Forster (2004) listed the following six core functions of volunteer centres: brokerage, marketing volunteering, good practice development, developing volunteering opportunities, policy response, and campaigning and strategic development of volunteering. Later, van de Bos (2014) redefined these main functions to present a comprehensive and current summary of the services, tasks, and functions of intermediary organisations.

Intermediary organisations occupy a meso-level position between macro-level (governments, international bodies) and micro-level (individual volunteers). They ensure the volunteering ecosystem operates smoothly by aligning policies, resources, and personal participation with societal needs. The changing face of volunteering is reflected in the work of several authors (Brudney/Gazley 2006; Hustinx/Lammertyn 2003; Koolen-Maas et al. 2023; Thibault 2020), and so is the role of volunteer centres in the volunteering ecosystem at all levels: volunteer support, management support, and community support. In the following sections, we provide examples from four countries in the European community to illustrate different developments of intermediary organisations, approaches, and adaptations to these changes.

## 3. Methods

For the study, we selected countries from different parts of Europe where volunteer centres are anchored in the various volunteer traditions and movements. Our aim was not to provide an exhaustive analysis but rather to use the examples of these countries to identify different models of the emergence and functioning of volunteer centres and their responses to ongoing transformations in volunteer engagement and global trends. The text is the result of the joint work of the authors, who met in three co-creation sessions. At the first meeting, they defined the study's purpose and clarified the production process. After elaborating on the initial versions of the country studies, the authors convened a second joint meeting to discuss the current status and trends of each country as well as their similarities and differences. After the first meeting, the country studies were revised. Then, the co-authors met for a follow-up meeting to explore trends across Europe and formulate collaborative suggestions for policy and practice. The authors of the country reports and studies each have more than twenty years of experience supporting the development of volunteering infrastructure and volunteer centres in their respective countries and are familiar with both policies and trends in volunteering. They have developed the analysis and reflection based on their expert knowledge and a literature review.

## 4. Volunteer centres in four different countries

### 4.1 Germany

Volunteer-involving organisations understand themselves as infrastructure facilities for promoting volunteering. The most crucial legal form is the association, which is easy and inexpensive to establish and manage (Karnick/Simonson/Hagen 2022). In Germany, large welfare organisations in the social sector, such as the Red Cross, Caritas, and Diakonia, play a significant role (Freise 2024).

Germany has a federal structure, meaning responsibilities are shared between the federal government, the states ('Länder') and local authorities. Since the 1990s, local organisations have developed at the municipal level to promote volunteering, with some targeting different groups but performing similar tasks. These local organisations provide advice, training, and support to local actors, as well as coordination and networking, to encourage participation and promote volunteer involvement. They also identify new needs and organisational development, develop volunteering programmes, and encourage volunteering. (Jakob/Röbke 2010). Recently, promoting democracy and crisis resilience has also been emphasised (Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement 2024).

At the municipal level, the most important organisations for promoting volunteering are volunteer centres, mutual-help contact centres, senior citizens' offices, community foundations, mother-and-family centres, and multi-generational centres. "In general, volunteer centres differ from other volunteer support infrastructures in that they offer a broad range of services to promote civic engagement, promote volunteering in all population groups (regardless of age and social background), are active in all areas of civic engagement, and work neutrally – not supporting special organising institutions" (Krell 2012: 80). Volunteer centres, in particular, are well researched in Germany, thanks to the research work carried out regularly over the past 20 years by Speck and Backhaus-Maul (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2002; Speck/Backhaus-Maul/Friedrich/Krohn 2012; Speck/Backhaus-Maul/Krohn 2021).

There are currently more than 400 volunteer agencies in Germany. In recent years, the number of local authorities has increased, but almost two-thirds of volunteer centres are still run by nongovernmental organisations. Most volunteer centres view themselves as local actors, collaborating with local authorities to foster engagement and promote local networking. Digitalisation, integration of migrants, strengthening democracy, inclusion, and climate protection are new issues for the future (Speck/Backhaus-Maul/Krohn 2021).

At the state level, there are civic engagement networks in each of the individual federal states, as well as state associations of the local organisations mentioned

above. At the federal level, the Federal Network for Civic Engagement ('Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement'), founded in 2002, is the leading player (Klein 2024). Since 2020, the state organisation, the German Foundation for Civic Engagement and Volunteering ('Deutsche Stiftung für Engagement und Ehrenamt'), has been added as a well-funded actor (Holze/Peranic 2024). For many years, local infrastructure organisations have collaborated to form national umbrella organisations that work together in the Network for the Promotion of Volunteering and publish joint positions.

## 4.2 Portugal

The importance of formal and qualified volunteering has been growing in Portugal. The European Year of Volunteering in 2011 helped to shape national policies that structured and enhanced the sector. These European policies are reflected in Portugal through support for local projects and strengthening international volunteering networks, facilitating access to funding and training opportunities for volunteers and organisations.

In Portugal, volunteer intermediary organisations play a crucial role in promoting and coordinating volunteer activities at national, regional, and local levels. These entities facilitate the connection between volunteers and organisations needing support, ensuring an effective response to community needs. One example is the Local Volunteer Banks created on the recommendation of the National Commission for the International Year of Volunteers (2001), which have been a reality since 2002. In 2023, there were 183 active Local Volunteer Banks, and their role was crucial in consolidating and expanding volunteering.

The National Council for the Promotion of Volunteering (NCPV) was created in 1999 by Decree-Law 389/99 to promote and develop volunteering in Portugal. This body operated under the authority of the Ministry of Labour and Solidarity and included representatives from various ministries, regional governments, and CSOs. The primary responsibilities of this body were to issue the Volunteer ID Card, promote initiatives on the value of volunteering, provide technical support to organisations promoting volunteering, and monitor the implementation of legislation related to volunteering in Portugal. The NCPV was abolished in 2017, and its responsibilities were transferred to CASES by Decree-Law 39/2017. CASES maintains the role of NCPV and plays a central role in promoting and developing volunteering in Portugal. It manages the Portugal Voluntário platform, which facilitates contact between volunteers and organisations, and coordinates the Local Volunteer Banks, which promote, organise and deepen volunteering at a local level. Although CASES is the main governmental body responsible for volunteering, the Portuguese Volunteer Confederation (CPV) is the central actor in civil society, playing a key role in promoting and supporting volunteering in Portugal. CPV is

the main representative body of volunteers and volunteering organisations in Portugal, contributing to uphold their rights and interests. CPV also engages in advocacy efforts to influence public policies that affect volunteering, bridging the gap between civil society and public institutions and runs the Portuguese Volunteering Capital Competition focused on facilitating volunteer support at the local level.

### 4.3 Slovakia

In Slovakia, a new chapter on the development of volunteering was written after 1989. Several projects since the 1990s have supported the establishment and operation of volunteer centres.

The first volunteer centre in Slovakia was established in 1998 as the National Volunteer Centre under the leadership of the Slovak Academic and Information Agency – Service Centre for the Third Sector (SAIA – SCTS). Under its branches, it has created a network of volunteer centres throughout Slovakia. However, the SAIA – SCTS Volunteer Centre project ended in September 2002, after an unsuccessful search for financial resources to continue its operation despite the public recognition these activities had gained (Brozmanová Gregorová et al. 2012).

The oldest volunteer centre in Slovakia is the Centre for Volunteering in Banská Bystrica, established in 2000. Currently, there are eight regional volunteer centres in Slovakia, except one, all of which are associated with the Platform of Volunteer Centres and Organisations (PDCO). PDCO was established in 2011 as a resource centre for volunteering, and later it became a national volunteer centre. Its primary purpose is to support the creation of an enabling environment for volunteering development. PDCO is providing a national database of volunteering opportunities in collaboration with regional centres, conducting national volunteer awards, participating in the development of policies and strategies for volunteering, conducting research on volunteering, offering volunteer management training, and engaging in activities to promote volunteering and building the capacities of volunteer centres and volunteer-involving organisations.

For the first time, the concept of volunteer centres and the need for their support as intermediary organisations was officially introduced in Slovakia through the Programme for the Development of Volunteering and Volunteer Centres, adopted by a government resolution in 2013. This document highlights the importance of supporting volunteer centres as a vital component of the volunteering infrastructure and underscores the need for a financial mechanism to assist them.

Volunteer centres in Slovakia were established primarily by individuals and members of other nongovernmental organisations who responded to a social need in the region. The establishment of the centres in some areas was also significantly supported by the PDCO. In 2021, the volunteer centres, under the leadership of the

PDCO, developed the Quality Standards for Volunteer Centres, which define three levels of functioning of the volunteer centres and the main functions that organisations with the status of a volunteer centre should fulfil. The volunteer centres, in cooperation with PDCO, are also involved in several joint projects in the field of volunteering, bringing innovation into this area, which is also based on intensive international collaboration.

Public policy in the field of volunteering is shaped from below. The initiative in this area has been taken in recent years by PDCO, which, in cooperation with the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development, has successfully implemented several changes concerning the development of volunteering infrastructure.

## 4.4 Sweden

Intermediary organisations such as volunteer centres have traditionally played a peripheral role in Swedish volunteering. Instead, the central volunteer infrastructure has been the popular movements such as the labour, temperance, free church, and sports movements. Each of these movements consists of numerous associations with overlapping membership bases, through which the vast majority of volunteering in Sweden is carried out. These democratically governed associations have local, regional, and national branches, each run by a voluntary board of directors. This system (required for public funding and legitimacy), as well as a sense of duty to serve the movement, functions as an infrastructure of volunteer involvement, with the members as a recruitment base and a wide range of positions and tasks open for these members (Henriksen/Strømsnes/Svedberg 2019). In addition, state-funded umbrella organisations, such as the study associations (Åberg 2013; Harding 2012, 2013) and the Swedish Sports Confederation (Fahlén/Stenling 2016), support volunteering involvement through capacity building for the respective movements and their associations.

Although this traditional member and movement-based infrastructure remains a predominant mechanism for supporting volunteering in Sweden, its dominance is no longer as absolute as it was in the 1900s (Hvenmark 2008; Robertsson 2021), reflecting a shift from collective to individualised forms of volunteering that has for a long time been observed in international research (Hustinx/Lammertyn 2003). Fewer people are affiliated with popular movements, so they are unsure which associations to approach when they want to volunteer. They often prefer more flexible and immediate forms of volunteering (Henriksen/Strømsnes/Svedberg 2019).

This development has given rise to new volunteering infrastructure and intermediary organisations. For example, during the 1990s, many municipalities and associations established volunteer centres that connected volunteers with beneficiaries,

such as the elderly and people with disabilities (Wijkström 2017; Leonard/Johansson 2008). The National Board of Health and Welfare 2007 survey showed 69 volunteer centres in Sweden. Just under half were run by municipalities, while the rest were run by nongovernmental associations or other actors, with approximately 2,000 active volunteers (Socialstyrelsen, 2007). This survey has not been followed up, so we do not know how many volunteer centres exist today, or how many volunteers they coordinate. However, the Swedish Federation of Volunteer Centres, founded in 2012, has 27 members, operating at the local level and run mainly by nongovernmental associations. Ideally, each volunteer centre has an employed coordinator responsible for recruiting, placing, training, and nurturing volunteers, as well as acknowledging their efforts (Sveriges Frivilligcentraler 2025).

Since 2002, Sweden has also had a nationwide digital matching service connecting volunteers with volunteer-involving organisations, run by the association The Volunteer Bureau ('Volontärbyrån') (Essen 2019). In 2023, 196 new associations were registered on the website. Yearly, around 2,500 assignments (both short-term and long-term) are published. Furthermore, 7,312 people from 255 municipalities used the service to find assignments, ending in 11,779 expressions of interest. In addition to matchmaking, Volontärbyrån also engages in capacity building for associations, providing 79 courses, workshops, and lectures during the same year (Volontärbyrån 2025). Many associations, including those from traditional popular movements, utilise this infrastructure. However, a relatively large portion of the registered associations work within the area of social welfare, which, during most of the 1900s, has been seen as the state's responsibility and, therefore, not a priority for popular movements or a task for volunteers. Notably, Volontärbyrån is part of the Forum for Voluntary Social Work. This umbrella organisation supports and represents member associations in the field (Johansson/Johansson 2012) and is the only Swedish member of the CEV.

In conclusion, volunteering in Sweden is supported by two parallel infrastructures: the traditional infrastructure based on loyal membership in a popular movement, and the new infrastructure based on intermediary organisations such as local volunteer centres and the nationwide digital matchmaking service. Although these organisations help many volunteers to find volunteer placements, most volunteers and associations seem to manage without them, considering that more than four million Swedes volunteer and 260,000 non-profit associations need volunteers (Henriksen/Strømsnes/Svedberg 2019). The two infrastructures should also not be viewed as mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary and interacting in the sector's development within a changing society (Wijkström/Zimmer 2011; Wijkström 2007).

## 5. Emerging trends in volunteer centres in Europe

Although volunteer centres, as a type of intermediary organisation, are a marginal phenomenon in some countries, such as Sweden – especially compared to other kinds of volunteer infrastructure organisations and movements – in others, they are essential stakeholders in the development of volunteering at the local, regional, and national levels. Volunteer centres have undergone quantitative and qualitative changes in European countries in recent years, as documented in the studies presented and reflected in the survey by Grandi/Lough/Bannister (2019). As entities, they are part of social structures shaped by economic, political, social, and cultural changes. These changes subsequently have an impact on the form and nature of volunteering. If volunteer centres want to respond to these trends and fulfil their mission, they must inevitably change their functions or the way they operate. Research in the field of volunteering has long pointed to the changing nature of volunteering at the micro, meso, and macro levels (Hustinx/Lammertyn 2003; Inglehart 2003; Haski-Leventhal/ Meijs/Hustinx 2010; Dunn/Chambers/Hyde 2016; Henriksen/Strømsnes/Svedberg 2018; Grandi/Lough/Bannister 2019; Rochester 2021; Cnaan et al. 2022; Heley/Yarker/Jones 2022). In the next section, we analyse how volunteer centres, as a key element of the volunteering infrastructure, are responding or should respond to some of these trends.

### 5.1 From matching to development agencies

Intermediary organisations have been established in different contexts in the countries analysed. Still, it is possible to identify common tendencies in their later development. At their emergence, informal or unorganised volunteer activities were more typical of the countries analysed. In the context of organisations, people's engagement was based more on a membership approach and a traditional style of engagement (Hustinx/ Lammertyn 2003). The emergence of volunteer centres responded to the need to support a managed, organised, or formal kind of volunteering, particularly in welfare service organisations, and later in other types, and people who sought volunteering opportunities or were interested in volunteering. National surveys in many European countries have shown that many people are interested in volunteering but are unsure about where to go or whom to contact (Brozmanová Gregorová et al. 2012; Leister/Opinion 2024; Simonson et al. 2021). That was the point at which the volunteer centres movement started. The potential of people willing to volunteer has always been a significant cause for volunteer centres to promote their work.

As the volunteering policy at the European and national levels evolved, so did the role of intermediary organisations and their functions in supporting volunteering, in the context of changing patterns of volunteering. In many countries, volunteer centres have started to focus on capacity building, advocacy, policy-making and

community development. Thanks to the activities of volunteer centres in developing volunteering policy, the role of national, regional, and local authorities has evolved in supporting volunteering. A few years ago, no volunteer policy existed in many European countries, but thanks to intermediary organisations, it began to become part of public policy on various levels. Over the past two decades, legislation and national policies specific to volunteering have, on average, expanded and consolidated globally (Grandi/Lough/ Bannister 2019). Volunteer centres are essential in promoting volunteering and supporting volunteer management, which has become an integral part of their work, emphasising their role in supporting volunteer-involving organisations and fostering innovation. Their support focuses on managing the shift from duty-based or membership volunteering towards more individualised motivations. It requires organisations engaging volunteers to adapt their strategies and balance adapting to volunteers' changing needs while focusing on community impact and organisational mission. As reflected by Koolen-Maas et al. (2023), by viewing volunteering as a human-made, renewable resource that can be cultivated and replenished, and offering different typologies of this resource, we can move beyond the idea of volunteering as a uniform resource. Volunteer centres should focus on creating a healthy, sustainable volunteer environment comprising multiple volunteer resources, stakeholders, and institutional arrangements to ensure the vigorous growth of all volunteer resources.

## 5.2 Volunteer centres as drivers of inclusive and flexible volunteer opportunities

The 2022 State of the World's Volunteerism Report concluded that while volunteering offers diverse pathways to civic participation, access remains unequal (UNV 2021). According to Enjolras (2021), a more equal distribution of resources increases individual capabilities to volunteer. Inclusive volunteering involves creating and adapting to an environment where people with different disadvantages can work alongside those without disadvantages to develop their community (Valková/ Koňasová/Marková 2016). Kearney (2003) points out that volunteering offers tangible benefits for people facing social exclusion, including access to social relationships, opportunities for empowerment, gaining and developing skills, for mental wellbeing, and the satisfaction of making a difference to others or society. Volunteering also allows people who are often invisible in society to influence how others perceive them. Meanwhile, inclusive volunteering can also be seen as a way to recruit more volunteers, especially from groups that are currently underrepresented in volunteering.

At the same time, the pandemic has drawn attention to new trends in volunteering, which are gaining popularity among young people and have escalated during COVID-19 (Dunn/Chambers/Hyde 2016). These include 'episodic' volunteering

(Cnaan et al. 2022) and micro-volunteering (Heley/Yarker/Jones 2022), which have been lauded for their potential to better incorporate individuals with limited time and mobility into the volunteer landscape. The last 20 years have also shown the rise of new parties to organise and host episodic volunteering. Haski-Leventhal/Meijs/Hustinx (2010) presented the third-party model in volunteering, where events are supported by new volunteer-involving organisations, such as companies (corporate volunteering), educational institutions (community service or service-learning), and social benefit organisations (volunteering for welfare benefits).

The changing nature of volunteering engagements, however, transforms the relations within and between participants and beneficiaries. This has implications for both organisations that rely on volunteer input and for those who receive this voluntary activity. Volunteer-involving organisations need to be more flexible in meeting the diverse demands of potential volunteers. Volunteer centres should promote and support volunteer-involving organisations in adapting to these changes and fostering flexibility by connecting people from different backgrounds to build more resilient communities.

## 5.3 Service-learning and the role of volunteer centres

One of the tasks of the volunteer centres is to promote quality volunteering and educate children and youth about it. Thus, they need to cooperate closely with formal education institutions such as schools, which are not only knowledge institutions but also key actors in preserving democratic values, fostering critical thinking, and promoting solidarity. Perpetuating democratic life in Europe and enhancing democratic competences are high priorities for the European Commission, posing a significant challenge for education institutions (Council of Europe 2018). Additionally, the UNESCO report "Reimagining our futures together" highlights the importance of solidarity and democratic values in educating future active and responsible citizens (International Commission on the Futures of Education 2021). However, ensuring that students develop the competencies for democratic culture requires more than traditional classroom teaching – it demands active, experiential learning approaches that connect academic knowledge with real-world societal challenges. Research studies demonstrate the potential of service-learning in developing democratic competencies in secondary education (Brozmanová Gregorová et al. 2024), and civic outcomes of service-learning are well-documented globally. From the perspective of volunteer centres, service-learning can be seen not only as an innovative method of teaching and learning but also as a tool for educating children and youth to be active citizens of society. For volunteer centres, this can be a way to attract more young people to volunteer and bring a philosophy of volunteerism into the formal education system.

## 5.4 Volunteer centres in digital spaces

The rise of digital platforms presents both additional complexity and opportunities (Ackermann/Manatschal 2018). The potential of online modes of volunteer engagement has been the subject of considerable interest, investment, and critique within practitioner, academic, and policy circles over the past decade. Much of this discourse has centred on the capacity of virtual technologies to address many of those traditional barriers to volunteering and to expand the volunteer base. Virtual volunteering is also well-suited for people seeking flexibility, including those in remote locations and with mobility issues, as well as those unable to commit to rigid schedules due to work and family commitments (Heley/Yarker/Jones 2022; Grubb 2021).

Volunteer centres must now mediate between traditional face-to-face volunteering and new forms of online engagement (Kapsammer et al. 2017; Thomas et al. 2019). New skills and approaches are also required to manage volunteers effectively. This may include utilising digital tools for communication, coordination, and training, and ensuring that online volunteering opportunities are meaningful, inclusive, and impactful (Kapsammer et al. 2017). Supporting accountable digital empowerment in volunteering organisations is one of the key ways to increase the potential of volunteering. However, care must be taken to ensure that differences in access to digital tools and data don't lead to further inequalities in access to volunteering or volunteer support (Centre for European Volunteering 2019). The role of digital platforms in making volunteering more accessible is a potential future function for volunteer centres. Digitalisation can also be a solution to manage volunteer centres better, oversee volunteers, and facilitate connections between volunteers and opportunities.

## 5.5 Volunteer centres in crisis management

The spontaneous volunteers are the first ones on the scene of any crisis, so they are the most experienced people in the local area, but they have to be organised. However, it is essential to acknowledge that volunteer support should not substitute the need for skilled professionals in crises; volunteers should operate under proper supervision and guidance. Volunteer centres can play a significant role during crises, as central hubs for coordinating volunteer efforts and distributing resources. Volunteer centres often work closely with local authorities and emergency response teams during emergencies to identify the most pressing needs and mobilise volunteers accordingly. In disaster management, community response is essential to the extent that sometimes the absence of institutional resources forces the community to mobilise to cope with the effects of the disaster (Marenco-Escuderos et al. 2020). While volunteer centres have big potential in crisis management, they are not yet fully recognised or integrated into the crisis management

system in many European countries. The tasks of volunteer centres in crisis management involve recruiting, training, and deploying volunteers to provide immediate assistance, such as distributing food and water, providing first aid, and offering emotional support to affected individuals. Volunteer centres may also provide training for volunteer-involving organisations and support to volunteers, ensuring they are adequately prepared to assist in relief efforts. The potential role of volunteer centres also includes managing risks and emphasising the importance of quality standards in volunteer management to ensure a safe environment for both volunteers and recipients.

## 5.6 Volunteer centres as promoting democracy

In the face of growing challenges to democracy, including declining civic participation, social fragmentation, and the spread of misinformation, volunteer centres play an essential role in fostering a sense of community and democracy. They promote cooperation, participation and solidarity. Macro-structural indicators of democracy and horizontal social capital (social trust) are positively associated with volunteer rates (Enjolras 2021). Volunteer centres should not only focus on tasks but also encourage volunteers to think about the purpose of their engagement. Volunteer centres should promote democracy, and they can serve as a basic school of democracy. Through volunteer engagement, people learn how to discuss different interests, find common ground, and compromise on various interests.

## 5.7 Addressing loneliness and mental health by volunteering

Volunteer centres may serve as essential institutions in addressing the escalating issues of loneliness and mental health. Volunteer efforts can provide people with opportunities for social interaction, enhance mental well-being, and foster a sense of belonging. Volunteer centres can connect people with volunteer opportunities that align with their interests and skills. Furthermore, participation in volunteer work fosters the establishment of social networks and offers opportunities for companionship, which is essential for mental well-being and combating social isolation (Stukas et al. 2016). Volunteer centres may provide workshops and training courses that equip volunteers with the skills to offer assistance and encouragement to others, thereby promoting empathy and fostering supportive communities. Volunteer centres may collaborate with local mental health groups and healthcare providers to establish programs that specifically address the mental health requirements of volunteers and the people they assist. Volunteer centres are well positioned to significantly improve societal well-being and create more resilient, connected communities by recognising and utilising the therapeutic potential of volunteerism (Librett et al. 2005).

### 5.8 Volunteer centres as advocates for strategic volunteer policy

Recognition of volunteering and its importance is a political question. Volunteer centres can promote suitable volunteering strategies and volunteer public policy. Volunteer centres should actively advocate for policies that support and encourage local, regional, and national volunteering. Volunteer centres can work with government agencies, non-profit organisations, for-profit companies, academia, the media, and other stakeholders to develop comprehensive volunteer strategies that address societal challenges and promote civic engagement. Recent global health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have brought into sharp focus the indispensable contributions of volunteers in bolstering societal resilience and providing critical support to vulnerable populations, thereby underscoring the need for robust and adaptable volunteer policies. These actions entail lobbying legislators, funding, educating the public about the benefits of volunteerism, and collaborating to create a volunteer-friendly legal and regulatory environment. In this effort, we can also see an essential element in the networking of volunteer centres, supporting the implementation of volunteer policies from the European to the local level, and vice versa.

We agree with Brudney/Meijs (2013) that by recognising the existence of a broader volunteer environment, the volunteer centres should advocate for the addition of a wider dimension to traditional volunteer management: volunteer-environment management, which refers to the collaborative implementation of policies for sustaining and strengthening, or rebuilding a healthy, thriving volunteer environment. The extent to which volunteering will be an answer to society's challenges (national, regional, global) depends on how much policy makers will recognise its importance, acknowledge its roots and potential among its residents, and build stimulating frameworks for its noble growth (Šimunković, 2022).

## 6. Conclusion

Across Europe, intermediary organisations are undergoing structural transformations, resulting in a renewed emphasis on the role of institutions within this landscape (Guidi 2021). Considering the evolving roles and emerging trends of European volunteer centres, several policy and practice recommendations can be proposed. First, governments should recognise the strategic importance of volunteer centres and institutionalise them within national and local policy frameworks to bolster civic engagement, crisis response, and social inclusion. Second, support is needed to develop inclusive and flexible volunteering models that cater to the diverse needs and motivations of underrepresented groups. Third, fostering partnerships between educational institutions and volunteer centres is essential to promote civic engagement among youth. Fourth, investing in digital infrastructure and competencies is necessary to enable meaningful and accessible online and

hybrid forms of volunteering. Fifth, integrating volunteer centres into formal crisis management systems should be prioritised to enhance community resilience and coordinate volunteer mobilisation. Finally, sustained support for advocacy, capacity building, and professionalisation within volunteer centres is critical. By implementing this recommendations in practice, volunteer centres can play a crucial role in cultivating inclusive, flexible, and digitally enabled volunteering environments that respond to evolving societal needs and individual motivations. Moreover, they can serve as hubs of democratic learning and civic participation, fostering solidarity, empowerment, and social cohesion. Consequently, they can be increasingly recognised as not only facilitators of volunteering but also vital contributors to broader societal resilience and democratic renewal.

## Acknowledgements

We want to thank the practitioners who gave us feedback on the paper, namely: Dominika Hradiská from the Platform of Volunteer Centres and Organisations in Slovakia, Anna Snell and Johan Dahlén from the Volontärbyrånin Sweden, Agnieszka Lissowska-Lewkowicz from the Volunteer Centre Warsaw in Poland and Rita Marques from Centre for European Volunteering in Belgium.

## Funding

The work in this paper was supported by the Ministry of Education, Science, Development, and Youth within the project VEGA no. 1/0449/23, titled "Volunteering in Slovakia during the Crisis." as well as the Citizens Equality Rights and Values fund of the European Union.

## References

Åberg, P. (2013). Managing expectations, demands and myths: Swedish study associations caught between civil society, the state and the market. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 24(3), pp. 537–558, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-012-9271-3.

Ackermann, K., & Manatschal, A. (2018). Online volunteering as a means to overcome unequal participation? The profiles of online and offline volunteers compared. *New Media & Society*, 20(12), pp. 4453–4472, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818775698.

van den Bos, C. M. (2014). *Using Volunteering Infrastructure to Build Civil Society.* Doctoral dissertation. Erasmus University Rotterdam, Available from: https://repub.eur.nl/pub/50610 [Accessed 28.08.2025].

van den Bos, C. M., & Meijs, L. (2008). Using volunteer centers to build civil society in Europe. Paper presented at the ARNOVA Conference. Philadelphia.

Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement (2024). Engagementfördernde Infrastruktur. Policy Paper zur Bundes-Engagementstrategie. Berlin.

Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (2002). *Freiwilligenagenturen in Deutschland. Ergebnisse einer Erhebung der Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Freiwilligenagenturen* (BAGFA). Schriftenreihe 227. Berlin.

Brozmanová Gregorová, A. et al. (2012). *Dobrovoľníctvo na Slovensku – výskumné reflexie.* Bratislava.

Brozmanová Gregorová, A. et al. (2024). The impact of service-learning on secondary school students' social and civic competencies, and engagement and motivation in school – perspectives from Europe. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 12(1), https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.127553.

Brudney, J., & Gazley, B. (2006). Moving ahead or falling behind? Volunteer promotion and data collection. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 16(3), pp. 259–276, https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.106.

Brudney, J., & Meijs, L. (2013). Our common commons: Policies for sustaining volunteer energy. *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, 4(1), pp. 29–45, https://doi.org/10.1515/npf-2012-0004.

Centre for European Volunteering (2019). *Guidelines for Online Volunteering.* Brussels. Available from: https://df2253af-c034-4026-aac2-5d1c91f60490.filesusr.com/ugd/3ec99c_0ee09c8d7b7a4715bc1fdd5d66086378.pdf [Accessed 10.06.2025].

Centre for European Volunteering (2025): About Us. Available from: https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/about-us [Accessed 06.02.2025].

Cnaan, R. A. et al. (2022). You thought that this would be easy? Seeking an understanding of episodic volunteering. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 33, pp. 415–427, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00329-7.

Council of Europe (2018): *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture.* Strasbourg.

Dunn, J., Chambers, S., & Hyde, M. K. (2016). Systematic review of motives for episodic volunteering. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 27(1), pp. 425–464, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-015-9548-4.

Ebert, O., Hartnuß, B., Rahn, E., & Schaaf-Derichs, C. (2002). *Freiwilligenagenturen in Deutschland.* Stuttgart.

Ellis, S. (1989). *Volunteer Centers: Gearing Up for the 1990s*. Alexandria. Available from: https://www.energizeinc.com/sites/default/files/volctrs.pdf [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Enjolras, B. (2021). Explaining the varieties of volunteering in Europe: A capability approach. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations,* 32, pp. 1187–1212, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00347-5.

von Essen, J. (2019). The shifting meanings of popular engagement in Swedish society. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 30(1), pp. 29–40, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00089-5.

European Volunteer Centre (2012). *Volunteering Infrastructure in Europe*. Brussels. Available from: https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-Infrastructure-in-Europe.pdf [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Fahlén, J., & Stenling, C. (2016). Sport policy in Sweden. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 8(3), pp. 515–531, https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2015.1063530.

Freise, M. (2024). Die Infrastrukturen zivilgesellschaftlichen Engagements. In: Gille, C., Walter, A., Brombach, H., Haas, B., & Vetter, N. (eds.): *Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement und Freiwilligendienste.* Baden-Baden, pp. 245–257.

Frič, P., & Pospíšilová, T. (2010). *Vzorce a hodnoty dobrovolnictví v české společnosti na začátku 21. století.* Prague.

Grandi, F. L., Lough, B. J., & Bannister, T. (2019). The state of volunteering infrastructure globally. *Voluntaris*, 7(1), pp. 22–43, https://doi.org/10.5771/2196-3886-2019-1-22.

Grubb, A. (2021). Avoiding intimacy: An ethnographic study of beneficent boundaries in virtual voluntary social work. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 33(1), pp. 72–85, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00350-w.

Guidi, R. (2021). Reintermediating voluntary action: The path-dependent pluralization of the Italian volunteering field. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 33(4), pp. 752–765, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00386-y.

Harding, T. (2012). How to establish a study association: Isomorphic pressures on new CSOs entering a neo-corporative adult education field in Sweden. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 23(1), pp. 182–203, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-011-9186-4.

Harding, T. (2013). Faith-based organisations and the secular state: The establishment of a Muslim study association in Sweden. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs,* 33(3), pp. 341–355, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2013.863077.

Haski-Leventhal, D., Meijs, L. C. P. M., & Hustinx, L. (2010). The third-party model: Enhancing volunteering through governments, corporations and educational institutes. *Journal of Social Policy*, 39(1), pp. 139–158, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279409990377.

Heley, J., Yarker, S., & Jones, L. (2022). Volunteering in the bath? The rise of microvolunteering and implications for policy. *Policy Studies*, 43(1), pp. 76–89, https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2019.1645324.

Henriksen, L. S., Strømsnes, K., & Svedberg, L. (2019). *Civic Engagement in Scandinavia: Volunteering, Informal Help and Giving in Denmark, Norway and Sweden*. Cham, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98717-0.

Holze, J., & Peranic, K. (2024). Engagementförderung auf Bundesebene. Einblicke in eine erweiterte Engagement-Governance. In: Gille, C., Walter, A., Brombach, H., Haas, B., & Vetter, N. (eds.): *Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement und Freiwilligendienste.* Baden-Baden, pp. 615–622.

Howard, J., & Burns, D. (2015). Volunteering for development within the new ecosystem of international development. *IDS Bulletin*, 46(5) pp. 5–16, https://doi.org/10.1111/1759-5436.12171.

Hustinx, L., Lammertyn, F. (2003). Collective and reflexive styles of volunteering: A sociological modernization perspective. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 14(2), pp. 167–187, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023956006684.

Hvenmark, J. (2008). *Reconsidering Membership: A Study of Individual Members' Formal Affiliation with Democratically Governed Federations*. Stockholm.

Inglehart, R. (2003). Modernization and volunteering. In: Dekker, P., & Halman, L. (eds.): *The Values of Volunteering: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. New York, pp. 55–89.

International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) (2025). Our Members. Available from: https://www.iave.org/about/our-members/ [Accessed 06.01.2025].

International Commission on the Futures of Education (2021). *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*. Paris, https://doi.org/10.54675/ASRB4722.

Jacob, G., Röbke, T. (2010). *Engagementförderung als Infrastrukturförderung – Gutachten für das Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement*. Darmstadt/Nürnberg.

Johansson, H., & Johansson, M. (2012). From a 'liberal' to a 'social democratic' welfare state: The translation of the English compact into a Swedish context. *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, 3(2), Article 6, https://doi.org/10.1515/2154-3348.1057.

Kapsammer, E. et al. (2017). iVOLUNTEER. In: Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on Information Integration and Web-based Applications & Services (iiWAS 2017), Salzburg, pp. 366–373, https://doi.org/10.1145/3151759.3151801.

Karnick, N., Simonson, J., & Hagen, C. (2022). Organisationsformen und Leitungsfunktionen im freiwilligen Engagement. In: Simonson, J., Kelle, N., Kausmann, C., & Tesch-Römer, C. (eds.): *Freiwilliges Engagement in Deutschland – Der Deutsche Freiwilligensurvey 2019*. Wiesbaden, pp.183–202.

Kearney, J. (2003). Volunteering: Social glue for community cohesion? *Voluntary Action*, 6(1), pp. 45–58.

Klein, A. (2024). Entwicklungsstand und Herausforderungen der neuen Politikfelder. In: Gille, C., Walter, A., Brombach, H., Haas, B., & Vetter, N. (eds.): *Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement und Freiwilligendienste*. Baden-Baden, pp. 587–596.

Koolen-Maas, S., Meijs, L., van Overbeeke, P., & Brudney, J. (2023). Rethinking volunteering as a natural resource: A conceptual typology. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 52(1_suppl), pp. 353S–377S, https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640221127947.

Krell, W. (2012). Freiwilligen-Agenturen – Entwicklungsagenturen für bürgerschaftliches Engagement. In: Rosenkranz, D., & Weber, A. (eds.): *Freiwilligenarbeit. Einführung in das Management von Ehrenamtlichen in der Sozialen Arbeit*. 2nd ed. Weinheim/München, pp. 78–89.

Leister, S., & Opinion, A. (2024). *Svenskarnas engagemang*. Available from: https://issuu.com/volontarbyransverige/docs/svenskarnas_engagemang_2024 [Accessed 15.04.2025].

Leonard, R., & Johansson, S. (2008). Policy and practices relating to the active engagement of older people in the community: A comparison of Sweden and Australia. *International Journal of Social Welfare,* 17(1), pp. 37–45, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2007.00497.x.

Librett, J., Yore, M. M., Büchner, D. M., & Schmid, T. L. (2005). Take pride in America's health: Volunteering as a gateway to physical activity. *American Journal of Health Education*, 36(1), pp. 8–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/19325037.2005.10608149.

Lorentzen, H., & Henriksen, L. S. (2014). The invention and institutionalization of volunteer centers: A comparative analysis of Norway and Denmark. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 43(3), pp. 589–608, https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764013476765.

Marenco-Escuderos, A. D., Ramos-Vidal, I., Palacio, J., & Rambal-Rivaldo, L. I. (2020). Community participation and empowerment in a post-disaster environment: Differences tied to age and personal networks of social support. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01802.

Osborne, S. P. (1999). Volunteer bureaux and the promotion and support of volunteering in local communities in England. *Voluntary Action*, 1(3), pp. 67–84.

de Palma, E., & Paganin, A. (2002). Voluntary service centers in Italy: A new social actor in the development of voluntarism. *Voluntary Action*, 4(2), pp. 63–74.

Penberthy, C., & Forster, A. (2004). *Building on Success. Strategy for Volunteering Infrastructure in England 2004–2014*. London.

Robertsson, K. (2021). *Mellan civilsamhälle och folkrörelse: Ett aktörsperspektiv på rekrytering och organisering av medborgerligt engagemang.* Stockholm.

Rochester, C. (2021). Trends in volunteering. In: Holmes, K., Lockstone-Binney, L., Smith, K., & Shipway, R. (eds.): *The Routledge Handbook of Volunteering in Events, Sport and Tourism*. London, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367815875.

Rutherford, A., Bu, F., Dawson, A., & McCall, V. (2019). *Volunteering for All: National Framework – Literature Review.* Edinburgh. Available from: https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/31598/1/literature-review-inform-development-scotlands-volunteering-outcomes-framework.pdf [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Shaw, A., & Dolan, P. (2022). Youth volunteering: New norms for policy and practice. IntechOpen, https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.108441.

Simonson, J. et al. (2021). *Volunteering in Germany. Key Findings of the Fifth German Survey on Volunteering* (FWS 2019). Berlin.

Socialstyrelsen (2007). *Frivilligcentraler i Sverige – En Kartläggning*. Stockholm.

Speck, K., Backhaus-Maul, H. Friedrich, P., & Krohn, M. (2012). *Freiwilligenagenturen in Deutschland. Potenziale und Herausforderungen einer vielversprechenden intermediären Organisation*. Wiesbaden.

Speck, K., Backhaus-Maul, & Krohn, M. (2021). Freiwilligenagenturen in Deutschland – Die Befunde der dritten quantitativen Wiederholungsbefragung.

Stukas, A. A., Snyder, M., & Clary, E. G. (2016). Understanding and encouraging volunteerism and community involvement. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 156(3), pp. 243–255, https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2016.1153328.

Šimunković, G. (2022). Volunteering as a response to society's challenges. *European Perspectives – International Scientific Journal on European Perspectives*, 13(2), pp.19–45.

Sveriges Frivilligcentraler (2025). *Vad är en frivilligcentral?* Available from: https://www.sveriges-frivilligcentraler.se/ [Accessed 12.03.2025].

Thibault, A. (2020). Volunteer recruitment: New perspectives. *Loisir et Société/Society and Leisure,* 43(3), pp. 407–420, https://doi.org/10.1080/07053436.2020.1849161.

United Nations Volunteers (2021). *2022 State of the World's Volunteerism Report. Building Equal and Inclusive Societies.* Bonn. Available from: https://swvr2022.unv.org/ [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Valková, A., Koňasová, J., & Marková, A. (2016). *Příklady dobré praxe inkluze v dobrovoľníctví*. Prague.

Volontärbyrån (2025). *Om Volontärbyrån.* Available from: https://www.volontarbyran.org/ [Accessed 12.03.2025].

Wijkström, F. (2007). The role of civil society: The case of Sweden in international comparison. In: SSE/EFI Working Paper Series in Business Administration. Available from: https://ideas.repec.org/p/hhb/hastba/2004_019.html [Accessed 10.01.2025].

Wijkström, F. (2017): Nytt svängrum för filantropi och frivillighet: Migrerande idéer och transnationella projektioner. In: *Civilsamhället i Det Transnationella Rummet*, pp. 379–416.

Wijkström, F., & Zimmer, A. (2011). *Nordic Civil Society at a Cross-Roads: Transforming the Popular Movement Tradition.* Baden-Baden, https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845231624.

# The Legal Status of Volunteers: Reflections on legal frameworks and policy developments in Europe

**Oonagh B. Breen**
Professor of Law | Sutherland School of Law, University College Dublin | Ireland | oonagh.breen@ucd.ie

**Katerina Ronovská**
Professor of Law | Masaryk University | Czech Republic | katerinaronovska@law.muni.cz

**Marek Blažek**
Research Assistant | Masaryk University | Czech Republic | mblazek@mail.muni.cz

**Wino van Veen**
Professor of Law | Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam | The Netherlands | w.j.m.van.veen@vu.nl

**Summary**
Volunteer involvement has a complex relation to the state. Volunteers need to have some kind of legal status in order to be able to do their activities 'safely'. Volunteer involvement needs to be defined in order to separate it from undesired forms of unpaid work. For this a national legal framework is needed. The article will develop a typology of European national legal frameworks. Co-authors will present their 'own' legal framework and analyse pros and cons. The article will conclude with suggestions for policy and practice.

Keywords: Volunteering, Legal Frameworks, Volunteer Liability, Vicarious Liability, Voluntary Organisations, Duties of Care.

## 1. Introduction

It is now more than a decade since the launch of the European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers. Bringing together the European Youth Forum, the European Commission and the European Youth Federation of the Council of Europe, the Charter attempted to define volunteers and volunteering activity while bringing some sense to the rights and responsibilities of both volunteers and volunteering providers. The Charter was a clarion call for the development of a legal framework for volunteering (European Youth Forum 2012: 15). Reflecting in 2021 on the 10-year anniversary of the European Year of Volunteering, the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) emphasised the ongoing need for a "more structured and consistent approach from the EU" in terms of the ever-changing characteristics of volunteering while calling on more countries "to translate the policy recommendations into national laws to ensure the rights and responsibilities of volunteers" (Centre for European Volunteering 2021). Yet the calls for a more cohesive legal and policy framework in the subsequent Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 (BEV2030) limit the recommendations to three high-level "asks". First, these

focus on "fit for purpose legal frameworks" that are easy for volunteers and their association to understand and to apply. Second, they cover both role-based and task-based volunteering by these frameworks. Third there is framework protecting the physical, mental, and social safety of volunteers and beneficiaries in a form that enables a proportionate and realistic response for organisations of all sizes to apply (Centre for European Volunteering 2021).

Outside of the EU, other regional and international organisations have recognised the importance of promoting volunteering and, to the extent it is needed, to enable such activity to regulate that space. In 2001, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 56/38 on support for volunteering (United Nations General Assembly 2001). In its recommendations on enabling fiscal, legislative, and other frameworks, including for community-based organisations and not-for-profit organisations engaged in volunteering, it called for the introduction of enabling legislation. It also highlighted the need to "facilitate partnership-building around volunteer-based activities of civil society, including arrangements for joint planning, implementation and monitoring, which could incorporate employee volunteer activities of the private sector" (United Nations General Assembly 2001: 5). For its part, the Council of Europe has called on Member States to "seek to identify and eliminate, in their laws and practice, any obstacles which directly or indirectly prevent people from engaging in voluntary action, and to reduce tax pressure which penalises voluntary action" (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 2001). It has also urged Member States to "give voluntary workers legal status and adequate social protection, while respecting their independence, and removing financial obstacles to volunteering" (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 2001).

This article asks what a fit for purpose legal framework might look like by comparing laws of three EU member states – Ireland, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic – regarding their legal approaches to the definition of 'volunteer' or 'voluntary organisation', the rights and protections provided to such volunteers, and the resulting responsibilities and liabilities that flow from such activity for both the individual volunteer and the volunteering organisation. The article considers the various legal frameworks available to member states when it comes to the regulation of volunteering and the contextual, political, or environmental factors that inform their use.

## 2. Available regulatory frameworks

Different models of regulation exist in different countries. In its comparative paper on volunteering, the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL) helpfully categorised three common models of regulation and outlined the advantages and disadvantages of each model (European Center for Not-for-Profit Law 2014).

According to ECNL, the respective categories are: models where the regulatory measures are grounded in custom/practices, self-regulation, and analogy in law; models where regulation of volunteerism occurs through various laws (e.g., labour law, tax law, etc.); and models where there is a separate comprehensive law on volunteering.

With the first model, there is no national law regulating the distinct legal status of volunteers. Such an approach is generally found in jurisdictions that have a well-developed tradition of volunteering and therefore less need for any legally binding regulations. Sweden is often cited as a strong example of this model in action (GHK 2012: 7). The second model provides a more disparate functional approach as opposed to a holistic approach to the regulation of volunteering. This can lead to definitions of 'volunteer' or volunteering activity being defined in various different laws relating to, for example, NGO regulation, youth participation, or codes of obligation. ECNL cites the example of Kosovo where the legal framework recognises only youth volunteering (European Center for Not-for-Profit Law 2014: 9). In contrast, the French laws on volunteering engagement distinguish between "bénévolat" (volunteers engaging without financial gain in their free time) and "volontariat" (full time volunteers as part of a voluntary service programme usually with an associated financial stipend), with both forms of engagement regulated under numerous other laws. While the former depends upon the regulation of the main organisational status (as either for-profit or non-profit), the latter is even more widely dispersed with legal provisions affecting volontariat found in laws relating to "volunteering in associations, civil volunteering, international volunteering in companies and voluntary civil service" (European Center for Not-for-Profit Law 2014: 10). The final model focuses on the holistic regulation of volunteering under a primary or main statute. One difficulty with this model can be to avoid the temptation to over-regulate volunteering and instead to facilitate its practice. In European countries one finds many examples of such comprehensive legislative approaches from the North Macedonian Law on Volunteering in 2007 to Slovakia's Law on Volunteering in 2011 and Lithuania's law of the same year. The motivation for a national law often comes out of the need to create a better recognition of the contribution that civil society makes in terms of social cohesion between citizens, particularly in countries that lack long ingrained customs of volunteering practices upon which to draw more naturally (Shalayeva 2011).

Approaching the matter from first principles, one might ask why legal recognition of volunteering is important? In essence, in addition to recognising the contribution to civil society made by volunteers, their legal recognition should ensure that volunteers are protected when providing services and/or engaging in other ways such as advocacy activities while also being differentiated from paid employees.

Good legal frameworks seek to incentivise rather than to impede volunteering activities and opportunities (Hadzi-Miceva 2007).

## 3. Country cases

### 3.1 Ireland

#### 3.1.1 Volunteering Context

The law of volunteering is a combination of statute and case law. The Civil Liability Act 1961, as amended, distinguishes between a 'volunteer', a 'voluntary organisation,' and a 'good Samaritan'.

A 'voluntary organisation' is defined as "a body (whether or not incorporated) that is not formed for profit and that authorises the doing of voluntary work whether or not as the principal purpose of the organisation" (Civil Liability Act 1961: 51A(1), inserted by Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011: 4).

A 'volunteer' is a person who performs voluntary activity that is authorised by a voluntary organisation and does so without expectation of payment (other than reasonable expense reimbursement) or other reward (Civil Liability Act 1961: 51A(1), inserted by Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011: 4). While the absence of remuneration normally points in the direction of volunteerism, it is not a sufficient condition per se (Breen and Smith 2019). Consideration should always be taken of the contractual obligations (if any) and the organisation's control over the volunteer. Case law indicates that payment of anything more than expense reimbursement can shift a relationship away from voluntary work towards employment (Camphill Communities of Ireland v Elke Williams 2021; John Clark v Camphill Communities of Ireland 2024).

A 'good Samaritan' means "a person who, without expectation of payment or other reward, provides assistance, advice or care to another person in an emergency, but does not include a person who does so as a volunteer" (Civil Liability Act 1961: 51A(1), as inserted by Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011: 4).

#### 3.1.2 Duties of Care to Third Parties

Lack of salary does not bestow immunity on a volunteer for their actions. If a third party suffers injury or loss because of a volunteer's actions, both the volunteer and the organisation for whom they are acting are potentially exposed. Risk management therefore becomes important, and while an organisation cannot compel a volunteer to undertake necessary training, it can terminate its relationship with untrained volunteers.

### 3.1.3 Organisation's Duty of Care to Volunteers

The voluntary organisation's duty of care to the volunteer is set out in s51G of the Act. In determining this question, a court "shall consider whether it would be just and reasonable to find that the organisation owed such a duty having regard to the social utility of the activities concerned" (Civil Liability Act 1961: 51G(2); Irish Law Reform Commission 2009). To date, neither s51E (dealing with volunteer liability) or s51G (organisation duty of care) have been the subject of judicial interpretation. Volunteers, however, are owed the same health and safety obligations as a visitor to the voluntary organisation would be (Breen/Smith 2019). The greater access afforded to volunteers may result in a greater duty of care by the organisation, considering the increased risks to which volunteers may be exposed. Beyond this duty, volunteers are owed only limited duties. Unlike employees, volunteers are not entitled to holidays or statutory leave, there is no obligation to entertain grievance procedures for volunteers, and the volunteer relationship may be terminated at will.

### 3.1.4 Volunteer/Good Samaritan Liability

In terms of volunteer liability, s51E(1) of the 1961 Act provides that a volunteer shall not be personally liable in negligence for any act done when carrying out voluntary work. This general immunity is copper-fastened by s51E(3), which prohibits an organisation from contracting out of its vicarious liability to such volunteers arising because of s51E or in any way attempting to have the volunteer indemnify the organisation. Public liability insurance is thus essential for a voluntary organisation (Department of Rural and Community Development 2020: 36).

The statutory protection from liability is denied in cases where:

(a) a volunteer acts in bad faith or with gross negligence, or

(b) the volunteer knew or ought reasonably to have known that the act was (i) outside the scope of the voluntary work authorised by the volunteer organisation concerned, or (ii) contrary to the volunteer organisation's instructions (Civil Liability Act 1961: s 51E(2)).

Thus, reckless acts or acts outside their role description or instructions may leave a volunteer personally liable.

Protection from personal liability is also extended to 'good Samaritans' who aid, care, or advise in an emergency situation. The extent of this protection similarly does not apply where the Samaritan acts in bad faith or with gross negligence or in any instance where the Samaritan had a duty to help (Civil Liability Act 1961: 51D(3)).

## 3.2 The Netherlands

### 3.2.1 Volunteering Context

There is no legal definition of a voluntary organisation. There is no definition in the Civil Code of 'volunteer', 'volunteer activity/engagement', or 'voluntary organisation'. In publications, often the notion of 'voluntary organisation' is used for associations and foundations. Volunteering and the concept of a volunteer are defined, however, for the purposes of unemployment law and tax law.

Under Dutch unemployment law (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment 2014; Regeling van 10 december 2014, tot vaststelling van de Regeling vrijwilligerswerk in de Werkloosheidswet), unemployed persons may volunteer without losing their unemployment benefits if the volunteer activities in question meet the following conditions. It must be:

- unpaid labour (however, an allowance of max € 210 per month and € 2,100 per year (2024) is permitted);
- this labour is customary unpaid work within the institution or work location (so does not replace paid work);
- the labour must be carried out at an ANBI (public benefit institution), a non-profit organisation or institution, an SBBI (social interest benefit organisation), or an SBBI support foundation.

Under Dutch personal income tax law and tax law on wages (Wet op de loonbelasting 1964, article 2, subsection 6), a volunteer is defined as a person who, other than in exercise of their profession, undertakes activities for a public benefit institution (ANBI), a sports organisation, or a body not designated as such that is not subject to corporate tax or is exempt from it. The effect of these statutes is firstly to exempt allowances up to a certain amount from personal income tax (reimbursement of costs is not considered income) and secondly a waiver of rights to allowances or reimbursement of costs in favour of an ANBI is considered a tax-deductible gift. (Ministry of Finance, n. d.).

Notwithstanding the fact that there is no specific statutory regulation of volunteering in the Netherlands, there are general policy guidelines for organisations using volunteers and codes of conduct for volunteers, established by national umbrella organisations. These include:

- NOC*NSF (sports sector) (https://nocnsf.nl);
- CIO (interkerkelijk contact in overheidszaken: churches) (https://www.cioweb.nl/);
- NOV (Vereniging Nederlandse Organisaties Vrijwilligerswerk; not sector-specific) (https/www.vrijwilligerswerk.nl).

There is an abundance of codes of conduct in several subsectors issued by their specific umbrella organisations and federations.

### 3.2.2 Duties of care to third parties

There is no specific legislation on volunteers' duties of care to third parties. This means that the general duty of care is the leading norm. The codes of conduct (referred to above) make specific provision for the conduct that is expected of volunteers in their contact with people within or under the care of the organisation and/or that the organisation seeks to help or serve.

The organisation with which the volunteer engages can, as a rule, also be held liable for damages caused by its volunteers. This is generally the case if the volunteer is involved in providing services for clients of the organisation (art. 6:74 jo. 76 DCC) or if the volunteer is a subordinate (like an employee) of the organisation (art. 6:170 DCC). If the volunteer is not a subordinate, the organisation is liable for tort of the volunteer if the tort is committed in the performance of professional (business) activities of the organisation (art. 6:171 DCC). These are all provisions of general nature.

### 3.2.3 Voluntary Organisations' duties of care to their volunteers

Case law abounds on this subject. Basically, if volunteers carry out activities in the exercise of the business or profession of the organisation, the organisation is subject to the same duties of care that an employer has towards its employees. This means that specific regulations that apply for certain types of work to protect the health and safety of workers, also apply to volunteers.

In other cases of personal injury of volunteers incurred because of the activities for the organisation, the general duty of care (tort law) is the norm. In broad terms, this implies that the higher the risks involved, the higher duty of care of the organisation.

Regarding damages to volunteers' possessions in connection with their activities for the organisation, the default position – absent specific agreements on this point – is that the volunteer cannot claim compensation from the organisation. Principles of reasonableness and fairness may in specific circumstances lead to a different outcome.

### 3.2.4 Volunteer/Good Samaritan Liability under Dutch law

There is no clear pattern in case law that a specific regime regarding the duty of care applies to volunteers or Good Samaritans and there is no specific legal provision on this point. A volunteer that acts with the best of intentions but causes harm

or damage is judged by the general standards of tort law. The norm would be what can be expected of a reasonable volunteer acting in the circumstances of the case.

## 3.3 The Czech Republic

### 3.3.1 Volunteering Context

Czech law does not contain a universal definition of volunteering. There is, however, the Volunteer Service Act from 2002 (VSA) law aimed at regulating (a selected part of) volunteering (Act No. 198/2002 Coll). This Act defines 'volunteer service' as any help offered by volunteers in certain situations (such as helping the elderly, people with disabilities, or during natural disasters) (VSA § 2, subsection 1), and without the right to remuneration (VSA § 1, subsection 1; VSA § 5, section 4). Volunteers perform their service in a contractual relationship with a "dispatching organisation" (VSA § 3, subsection 2), which is a public-benefit legal person accredited by the Ministry of Interior (VSA § 4, subsection 1). The Act also contains provision regarding the contents of the contract between a volunteer and a dispatching organisation (VSA § 5). Volunteers whose service does not satisfy the legal definition of the VSA will usually perform their service under a general contractual type, whether it be an "innominate" contract or "mandatum" (*příkaz* in Czech) (Vít 2015).[1]

### 3.3.2 Duties of Care to Third Parties

A distinction must be drawn between volunteers who perform their activity under VSA and those who do not. Volunteers who perform their activity under VSA are somewhat protected by this Act, since they are only liable for harm caused intentionally (VSA § 7, subsection 1). Victims are still protected, however, as the dispatching organisation might be subject to vicarious liability should the legal prerequisites thereof be fulfilled. Furthermore, dispatching organisations are required to conclude an insurance contract which will cover harm caused by a volunteer (VSA § 7, subsection 1). In the case of volunteering outside the VSA, there is no specific regulation and the duty of care volunteers owe to third parties is the same as the duty of care regular private persons owe. If they culpably interfere with somebody's absolute right, or interfere with another right of their victim, culpably breaching a statutory duty enacted to protect such right, they will be obliged to compensate for such harm.[2]

1 See, in the context of the previous Civil Code, Hloušek 2012.

2 See § 2910 of the Civil Code (zákon č. 89/2012 Sb., občanský zákoník). English translation available at: http://obcanskyzakonik.justice.cz/images/pdf/Civil-Code.pdf.

### 3.3.3 Voluntary Organisations' duties of care to their volunteers

Concerning the duties of care voluntary organisations owe to volunteers, we must also distinguish between volunteers whose activity falls within the scope of the VSA and those whose activity does not. Under the VSA, voluntary organisations must ensure that volunteers undertake their activities in a safe environment and that their volunteer activity will not be performed in a life- or health-threatening environment, given the circumstances (VSA § 7, subsection 3). When it comes to occupational safety, labour law statutes will apply (VSA § 5, subsection 6). Furthermore, voluntary organisations are required to conclude an insurance contract which will cover any harm caused to the volunteer (VSA § 7, subsection 1).

As far as volunteers not 'serving' under the VSA are concerned, there is some duty of care owed by voluntary organisations. Each contract obliges the parties to protect the legitimate interests of the other (Melzer 2018b: 317–318, m. č. 16; Sutschet 2024: Rn. 89ff.). Even if there are no contractual provisions, the voluntary organisation owes the volunteer some duty of care, the standard being very similar to the one set forth by the VSA.

Some volunteers (e.g. Red Cross paramedics, volunteers 'serving' local governments) are entitled to compensation for damage caused by industrial injury.[3] This is supposed to be more favourable to the volunteers, as the liability is strict Supreme Court of the Czech Republic, docket number 21 Cdo 2162/2016. There is not much practical difference between the two, however, since voluntary organisations are contractually liable to ensure the safety of their volunteers, contractual liability also being strict.[4] Nonetheless, the prerequisites of the obligation to compensate for harm incurred are different. While it is not required that an employer breach any legal duty in order for them to be liable for industrial injury (Novotný 2023: 1152, m. č. 2), breach of a contractual obligation – although not necessarily culpable – is required in the case of contractual liability (Melzer 2018b: 316, m. č. 4–5).

### 3.3.4 Volunteer/Good Samaritan Liability under Czech Law

Outside the provisions of the VSA, there are not any specific statutes to protect good Samaritans. There is, however, a good Samaritan duty in criminal law, requiring individuals to help somebody whose health or life is endangered.[5] There

3 See § 393 of the Labour Code (zákon č. 262/2006 Sb., zákoník práce). English translation available at: https://www.mpsv.cz/documents/625317/625915/Labour+Code.pdf/b1f02b8f-ece9-c898-cd4b-4d4f448538c3.

4 See § 2913 of the Civil Code and Melzer 2018b: 316, m. č. 2. Cf. the above-cited Supreme Court judgment, docket number 21 Cdo 2162/2016.

5 See § 150 of the Criminal Code (zákon č. 40/2009 Sb., trestní zákoník). English translation available at: https://adsdatabase.ohchr.org/IssueLibrary/CZECH%20REPUBLIC_Criminal%20Code.pdf

is also a similar duty in private law,[6] which, besides health and life, also protects property (Melzer 2018a: 98, m. č. 47).

## 4. European trends

In their 2021 study on new trends in the development of volunteering in the European Union (Meijs/Hendriks/Dobreva 2021), the EESC highlighted the emergence of a new volunteering infrastructure based on a consideration of five European Member States (the Netherlands, Spain, Hungary, Croatia, and Finland). This infrastructure was constructed on the prevalence of two concepts identified by the study: 1) third-party facilitation of volunteering (most commonly in the sense of corporate CSR programmes or arising from community service or service learning prompted by educational institutes); and 2) "spontaneous volunteering," described as an array of situations in which individuals began to either spontaneously self-organise to provide assistance to strangers or were prompted to join organisations following events such as a natural disaster (e.g., earthquakes or flooding, the arrival of refugees, or the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic).

In terms of individual country reports, the European countries addressed in the study differed in terms of the reported percentage of the population volunteering, with underlying aspects of both volunteer energy (supply) and volunteer opportunities (demand). Variations were observed regarding the forms and levels of volunteer activities. According to the study, these differences could be explained by "national institutional factors (nonprofit regimes, volunteering discourses, and religion), which influence volunteer energy, and volunteering-infrastructure factors (volunteer profiles, volunteer scenarios, and third parties), which influence opportunities" (Meijs/Hendriks/Dobreva 2021: 26–27). In the intervening years, research into spontaneous volunteering has grown internationally (Choi et al. 2024; Wong 2024). European research in this area coincides with or precedes the COVID-19 pandemic (Marinca/Negru-Subtirica 2024; Mao et al. 2021). Commenting on the shift towards episodic spontaneous volunteering, the EESC study noted that such volunteering when it occurs tends to be more intensive and less sustainable over time than conventional volunteering (Meijs/Hendriks/Dobreva 2021: 45–46). Looking to the future in 2021, the study predicted that "the rates of traditional volunteering for 2020 and 2021 will likely be lower in almost all countries. At the same time, there is no reason to expect volunteering not to bounce back" (Meijs/Hendriks/Dobreva 2021: 44). A recent OECD Local Economic and Employment Development Paper confirms this analysis, noting that in 2022/23 just under one-quarter (22 percent) of the population declared having volunteered formally (i.e. through an organisation) in the preceding month across

6 See § 2901 of the Civil Code.

the OECD, with rates particularly high in European countries such as the Netherlands, France, Luxembourg, Ireland, and Norway, where three out of ten people or more volunteered (OECD 2024: 6). As this 2024 report notes: "Formal volunteer rates had been declining in recent years, with the COVID-19 pandemic bringing additional pressures. While on average across the OECD rates have rebounded to baseline levels, this recovery has not been shared by all places and people" (OECD 2024: 9; Nowakowska et al. 2025).

In light of these country reports, several key policy questions emerge that are worthy of further exploration in terms of the future of volunteering in Europe and the public policy and legal frameworks that support it. As patterns of volunteering evolve in the twenty-first century, what legal frameworks will be required to facilitate their maintenance and growth?

There is a shift in the nature of volunteering from traditional associational voluntary engagement involving a key relationship with a voluntary organisation of which the volunteer is an 'active member' to something more akin to 'active citizenship' whereby an individual feels a responsibility to a larger community to participate in a voluntary action (which can, depending on the breadth of the larger community in question, encompass the notion of spontaneous volunteering discussed above) or to undertake a job-like task without remuneration out of willingness to give up time for other people or for society. This can encompass the notion of corporate CSR employee programmes or service-learning activities, although these activities do raise questions as to the actual 'voluntariness' of the engagement, particularly if there is either peer pressure or promotional pressure to participate within a work setting in these projects. These useful categories coined by Dekker 2019 provide a mechanism to better understand the changing landscape of volunteering in Europe and to consider the legal framework necessary to facilitate its growth.

In terms of legal and policy frameworks, while national volunteering strategies remain relatively uncommon across EU member states (OECD 2024: 25), with Ireland being an exception with its comprehensive strategic document to encourage and support volunteering practices and its infrastructure (Department of Rural and Community Development 2020), many Member States have dedicated comprehensive volunteer laws. Examples abound in Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Italy, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Portugal . Other Member States include regulations affecting volunteering within other laws relating to the social economy or civil society organisations. Thus, France adopted a new law supporting employee volunteering initiatives in associations in 2024, enabling workers to 'donate' some of their days off to an association by having them converted to a cash payment by their employer to the NGO. The legislation also facilitates corporate firms to second staff or entire teams to work for an association for a fixed

period. Volunteering is also often mainstreamed in national youth policies, as is the case in Croatia, Denmark, Hungary, and Poland (United Nations Volunteers 2019: 12).

There is general agreement across commissioned reports to date that there needs to be better evidence in relation to informal volunteers and marginalised groups to strengthen the evidence base and broaden volunteer policy discourse. The UN's 2019 report on the Action Plan for 2030 revealed gaps in data quality and a lack of coordination in approaches amongst the countries studied. It recommended the need for concerted efforts "to generate high quality, disaggregated and comparable data on the impact, added value and capacity gaps of volunteerism as a people-centered approach to achieving locally-informed SDG targets" (United Nations Volunteers 2019: 18). Noting that such data would inform decision-making and monitoring at the national and local level, it recommended the regular application of statistical tools and ensuring that national statistical systems use harmonised methodologies to generate comparable data. The role of Eurostat would be important in the compilation of national data in this area. Currently available Eurostat data for persons participating in formal/informal voluntary activities or active citizenship for the years 2015 and 2022 shows a decline in all 20 countries represented in both cohorts with the exceptions of Romania and Malta (Eurostat 2025). It is noteworthy, however, that some of the figures are identified as being either of low reliability or being estimated, thereby affirming the need for better data to inform volunteering policy and law.

## 5. Conclusion

With 2026 designated as the UN International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development (IVY 2026) (United Nations General Assembly 2023; United Nations Volunteers 2023), international policy focus will once more turn to volunteering. The UN Resolution in question encourages Member States to include the integration of volunteering into sector priorities and national development strategies, plans, and policies. It also appeals to Member States to recognise and measure the contribution of formal and informal volunteers and volunteering. While this appeal is made in the context of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, it speaks to a wider need to capture data in this growing area. Without more consistent statistical data at national, European, and international levels, it becomes increasingly challenging to facilitate good legal frameworks to support such civic activity and to protect those who volunteer as well as those who facilitate the voluntary activities or benefit from them.

One can neither regulate nor facilitate what is not seen, so mapping is extremely important in this area. The diversity of activity that occurs under the volunteering umbrella makes data even more important and it is unlikely that a one-size-fits-all

legislative solution will work across Member States. Within the European Union, the EU institutions have an important role to play in speaking to the value of volunteering and by encouraging Member States to reflect on the state and the status of volunteering in their national jurisdictions and to consider what barriers to volunteering could be removed or what legal steps need to be taken to create an enabling space to encourage more organised and more informal civic action. It is interesting in this regard that one of the UN Recommendations Resolution 78/127 specifically speaks to the introduction of "policies that remove all inequalities and risks in volunteering and support the setting up of knowledge and information platforms to develop and promote new forms of volunteering."[7]

With the growth of spontaneous volunteering and the increasing prevalence of corporate community service models, we find two examples of the "new forms of volunteering" mentioned in the Resolution. Building a supportive regulatory framework to enable these two models requires a re-thinking of the duties of new actors (in this case the corporate employers enabling employees to engage with community benefit activities and programmes) and a reallocation of both the responsibilities and liabilities with existing actors in the voluntary sector. In the same way that the law has adapted in many countries to define and protect a Good Samaritan in certain situations when helping someone in need, there is room to consider legal framework around the action of spontaneous volunteers – what constitutes such activity, how such activity sits with the law of tort and when legal protections should be rendered to a spontaneous volunteer who is acting as a good citizen. It raises the question in some instances as to the boundaries between spontaneous volunteers and Good Samaritans.

As the three case studies of Ireland, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic show, EU Member States have an awareness of the importance of volunteer contributions to civic life and have either developed an overarching strategy (as in Ireland), or a framework law (as in the Czech Republic) to support such activity or have kept an awareness of the implications of volunteering in play by adapting employment or tort law accordingly (as in The Netherlands).

It is now almost a decade since the European Parliament published its resolution on "European Voluntary Service and the promotion of volunteering in Europe" (European Parliament 2016). 2021 saw the promulgation of Regulation 2021/888 establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme, described as a "unique EU gateway to solidarity activities for young people" (EU regulation, n. d.). While efforts to make 2025 a European Year of Volunteers[8] were unsuccessful, there is

7 UNGA Resolution 78/127: International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development, 2026 (A/RES/78/127)

8 https://ctv.erasmus.site/endorse-now-european-year-of-volunteers-2025/; see also https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/revive-campaign.

room to push for a modern EU institutional statement on the value of volunteering that addresses a much broader spectrum of volunteering than simply youth engagement. It will be interesting to see what initiatives emerge under the UN Year of Volunteering that might provide momentum for further development at a European level. The promised evaluation of the implementation of IVY 2026 is to be awaited with great interest.

## Acknowledgements

We thank our friends and colleagues, particularly those involved in the practice of volunteering, who read and suggested improvements to this article.

## Funding

This Article is part of a Special Issue whose publication has been supported by the Citizens Equality Rights and Values fund of the European Union.

## References

Act No. 198/2002 Coll., on Volunteer Service and on Amendments to Certain Laws (Volunteer Service Act), as amended. Collection of Laws of the Czech Republic, 2002.

Belgium (2005) 'Law on the Rights of Volunteers 2005', *Government of Belgium*.

Breen, O.B., & Smith, P.A. (2019). *Law of Charities in Ireland*. Dublin.

*Camphill Communities of Ireland v Elke Williams* (2021). 9 JIEC 0703 (UDD2155, Irish Labour Court).

Centre for European Volunteering (2021a). Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030. Available from: https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/bev2030 [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Centre for European Volunteering (2021b). 10 years after EYV2011, did we adopt a rights-based approach to volunteering? Available from: https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/rights-based-approach-volunteering [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Choi, D. et al. (2024). The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on recruitment and retention of volunteers and donors in the U.S. *Management, Leadership and Governance*, 48(3), pp. 340–354.

Civil Liability Act 1961 (2011). Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011, p. s51A(1).

Dekker, P. (2019). From pillarized active membership to populist active citizenship: The Dutch do democracy. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 30(1), pp. 74–85.

Department of Rural and Community Development (2020). National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025. Government of Ireland. Available from: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-rural-and-community-development-and-the-gaeltacht/publications/national-volunteering-strategy-2021-2025/ [Accessed 28.08.2025].

EU regulation (n. d.). Available from: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legissum:4532507 [Accessed 28.08.2025].

European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (2014). Volunteering: European practice of regulation. Available from: https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Voluntary%20Activities%20-%20European%20Practices%20of%20Regulation%20%28Belarus%20volunteering%20paper%29.pdf, [Accessed 28.08.2025].

European Parliament (2016). Resolution on European Voluntary Service and the promotion of volunteering in Europe (2016/2872(RSP)). Available from: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016IP0425 [Accessed 28.08.2025].

European Youth Forum (2012). Charter on the rights and responsibilities of volunteers. Available from: https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/charter-on-the-rights-and-responsibilities-of-volunteers [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Eurostat (2025). Persons participating in formal/informal voluntary activities or active citizenship by sex, age and educational attainment. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_SCP19/default/table?lang=en [Accessed 28.08.2025].

GHK (2012). Study on volunteering in the European Union – Country report Sweden. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/national_report_se_en.pdf [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Hadzi-Miceva, K. (2007). Civil society in complex environments: A comparative analysis of the European legal systems and practices regarding volunteering. *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, 9(3).

Hloušek, J. (2012). Dobrovolnictví ve zdravotnických zařízeních. 3. část: Právní ukotvení dobrovolnických programů a analýza rizik při jejich realizaci. *Zdravotnické forum,* no. 5.

*John Clark v Camphill Communities of Ireland* (2024) ADJ-00021922, Workplace Relations Commission, 22/2/24.

Mao, G. et al. (2021). What have we learned about COVID-19 volunteering in the UK? A rapid review of the literature. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), pp. 1–15.

Marinica, B. V., & Negru-Subtirica, O. (2024). Civic engagement in times of crisis: How did Romanian emerging adults engage? *STUDIA UBB PSYCHOL.-PAED*, 69(2), pp. 25–48.

Meijs, L., Hendriks, P., & Dobreva, A. (2021). New trends in the development of volunteering in the European Union. European Economic and Social Committee, https://doi.org/10.2864/12288.

Melzer, F. (2018a). § 2901. In: Melzer, F., Tégl, P. (eds.): Občanský zákoník – velký komentář. Svazek IX. § 2894–3081. Prague, pp. 91–99.

Melzer, F. (2018b). § 2913. In: Melzer, F., Tégl, P. (eds.): *Občanský zákoník – velký komentář.* Svazek IX. § 2894–3081. Prague, pp. 314–348.

Ministry of Finance (n. d). Wanneer bent u vrijwilliger? Available from: https://www.belastingdienst.nl/wps/wcm/connect/bldcontentnl/belastingdienst/prive/werk_en_inkomen/werken/werken-als-vrijwilliger/wanneer_bent_u_vrijwilliger [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (2014) Regeling van 10 december 2014, tot vaststelling van de Regeling vrijwilligerswerk in de Werkloosheidswet.

Nejvyššího soudu ze dne. Rozsudek 5. 5. 2017, sp. zn. 21 Cdo 2162/2016 [Judgment of the Supreme Court of the Czech Republic, docket number 21 Cdo 2162/2016].

NOC*NSF (n. d.). Nederland sport veilig. Available from: https://nocnsf.nl/basiseisen [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Novotný, Z. (2023). § 269 [Povinnosti zaměstnavatele vůči zaměstnanci]. In: Bělina, M., & Drápal, L. (eds.): *Zákoník práce. Komentář.* Prague, pp. 1150–1162.

Nowakowska, I. et al. (2025). Challenges for formal organisations engaging volunteers during regular and crisis times according to Polish and Italian volunteer coordinators. *Voluntas*: *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 36(1), pp. 18–31.

OECD (2024). Unleashing the potential of volunteering for local development. *OECD Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Papers,* no. 2024/11 [Preprint].

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2001). Improving the status and role of volunteers as a contribution by the Parliamentary Assembly to the International Year of Volunteers 2001. Recommendation 1496, Council of Europe [Preprint]. Available from: https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=16868&lang=en [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Shalayeva, K. (2011). European legal framework on cross-border volunteering. Where young people have a say? *Pool of European Youth Researchers*. Available from: https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261884/2011_youth_mobility_Presentation_Shalayeva.pdf/e6d090c5-e817-4c01-93f8-d6ca9dcb0faa?t=1382960832000 [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Simsa, R. et al. (2019). Spontaneous volunteering in social crises: Self-organisation and coordination. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 48(3), pp. 1–20.

Sutschet, H. (2024). BGB § 241: Pflichten aus dem Schuldverhältnis. In: Hau, W., Poseck, R. (eds.): BeckOK BGB. München. Available from: https://beck-online.beck.de/?vpath=bibdata%2Fkomm%2FBeckOKBGB_73%2FBGB%2Fcont%2FBECKOKBGB%2eBGB%2eP241%2ehtm.

United Nations General Assembly (2001). UNGA Resolution 56/38: Recommendations on support for volunteering. Available from: https://www.unv.org/publications/unga-resolution-5638-recommendations-support-volunteering [Accessed 28.08.2025].

United Nations General Assembly (2023). UNGA Resolution A/RES/78/127: International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development, 2026. International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development, 2026 : (accessed 10.09.2025)

United Nations Volunteers (2019). A Plan of Action Synthesis Report on Integrating Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Region.

United Nations Volunteers (2023). UN General Assembly Proclaims 2026 as the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development. Available from: https://www.unv.org/pressrelease/un-general-assembly-proclaims-2026-international-year-volunteers-sustainable [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Vít, P. (2015). *Praktický právní průvodce pro neziskové organizace.* Prague, chapter 6.2.

Vrijwilligerswerk (n. d.). https://www.vrijwilligerswerk.nl/in+veilige+handen+home+nieuw/default.aspx [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Wong, K. L. (2024). Overlapping functions: Volunteering and other forms of civic participation in the COVID-19 disaster. *Voluntas*: *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 35, pp. 854–865.

Yang, Z. (2021). Understanding spontaneous volunteering in crisis: Towards a needs-based approach of explanation. *The Social Science Journal*, 62(1), pp. 28–38.

# Expanding the Boundaries of Volunteer Measurement: Emergent Forms of Voluntary Action from a Transnational Perspective

**Ksenija Fonović**
PostDoc Research Fellow | Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, Prague | Czech Republic | Italy | ksenija.fonovic@fhs.cuni.cz

**Selene Greco**
PhD Student | Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza University of Rome | Italy | selene.greco@uniroma1.it

**Ondřej Hrubeš**
PhD Student | Civil Society Studies Programme, Charles University, Prague | Czech Republic | hrubeson@gmail.com

**Yasmien Khaled**
PhD Researcher | Ghent University | Belgium | Yasmien.Khaled@UGent.be

**Iwona Nowakowska**
Assistant Professor | Institute of Psychology, Maria Grzegorzewska University, Warsaw | Poland | inowakowska@aps.edu.pl

**Tererai Obey Sithole**
PhD Research Fellow | Department of Global Development & Planning | University of Agder | Norway | tererai.o.sithole@uia.no

**Lucas Meijs**
Professor Strategic Philanthropy and Volunteering | Rotterdam School of Management Erasmus University | The Netherlands | lmeijs@rsm.nl

**Summary**

Volunteering must be measured to be recognised, but current definitions often exclude innovative forms of civic engagement. Traditional metrics focus on hours and numbers, overlooking the quality and impact of volunteering. New, informal, and hybrid forms of volunteering, blending lifestyle, activism, and community action, are often missed in national surveys, despite their public value. Sometimes it might be good to be overlooked, but it can also mean not being recognised or supported. Based upon five examples of volunteering in contexts like third spaces, crisis engagement, issue coalitions, lifestyle participation, and third-party involvement, we conclude that measuring volunteering risks excluding innovative forms that blend with daily life. Five European examples show hybrid civic actions often go unrecognised. Formal definitions limit access to resources and recognition. A broader, real-time, grassroots-based measurement approach, leveraging AI, can better capture evolving volunteer energy and its societal impact across diverse, dynamic contexts.

Keywords: Impact, Measuring, Activism, Associations, National Accounts

## 1. Introduction

In a world focused on data, volunteering also needs to be measured and accounted for. If something is not measured, it does not matter, and if something cannot be counted, it does not exist. Volunteering matters and it does exist! To be able to measure volunteering, it needs to be defined. The International Labour Organisation (ILO 2011: 13) defines volunteering as "Unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organisation or directly for others outside their own household". To support the measurement of volunteer activities, the ILO (2011: 17) provides an interesting summary of what it regards as falling within or outside the scope of volunteering. National statistical offices are counting the number of citizens volunteering and the number of hours they 'produce', leading to international comparative rankings of countries with high and low scores (ILO 2021). However, as postulated by Cnaan et al. (1996), and as demonstrated by Handy et al. (2000), public perceptions concerning concrete activities being recognised as volunteering differ between countries. This explains why comparing volunteer rates across countries is a tricky endeavour. However, limitations of rankings are not our concern here.

Just as importantly, official definitions of volunteering have two fundamental negative consequences. First, an official definition bears a 'definition power,' which allows the government, or even civil society, to accept only certain organisational forms of volunteering or to differentiate between good (or legal) and bad (or illegal) volunteering. It gives the parties embraced by the formal definition the power to grow. At the same time, an institutionalised definition shrinks the space for people to be active in the public domain. Second, any definition hinders recognising innovation and new forms. This is fundamental for volunteering, as being a volunteer is not a static immutable condition. It is an expressive practice of individuals in perpetual mutation. It is an ongoing process, diversifying in response to circumstances into a pluriform spectrum. Clear and rigid boundaries are not the reality of volunteering. We need to understand the way people volunteer and observe what they volunteer for. This adds to the depth of the measurement. By focusing on people and hours, we measure the input of resources instead of the quality of the volunteering experience for the volunteer or the results of the volunteering for the beneficiaries, community, or society. It is more difficult to measure the process and the outcomes than the already standardised input. Furthermore, it is less precise to measure domains whose boundaries are not formally defined but are yet to be explored. But if our aim is to support volunteering, we must look beyond the already acquired knowledge.

In this article we focus on emerging forms of volunteering that are not always recognised in national surveys. These new forms share the essential aspects of civic engagement and production of public good. In this way, they address the new interpretation of the building blocks of voluntary action in its contemporary forms.

This permits us to charter the future instead of describing what has been considered volunteering in the past 25 years in Europe.

The forms of citizen activation reflected upon push the boundaries of traditional organisational forms: participation merges with lifestyle, consumption choices, other contexts, and political positioning. The focus is on the relational nature of volunteering, emphasizing the objectives that join people into previously non-existent connections. In such hybrid environments, traditional membership-based associations of people and volunteers can develop their potential to act as the backbone for widening venues for participation, by catalysing informal and direct volunteering and the weight of public and market institutions. Recognising this is an important point, as in many measuring activities traditional membership organisations are not evaluated for their dynamic potential but only for their static numbers (members, volunteers, activities). However, this quantitative basis should be enriched by understanding the qualitative aspect of direct and future impact on the lives of people involved.

### 1.1 Brackish waters: The mismatch between the energy of citizens and opportunities for engagement

Voluntary engagement is based upon a process of three parts: volunteer energy (supply), volunteer opportunities (demand), and volunteer activities (the match). Focusing the measurement on the match misses the ongoing, long-term trends that explain changes in volunteer energy and the volunteer opportunities of the future. The supply part is conceptualised as 'volunteer energy' (Brudney/Meijs 2009; Koolen-Maas et al. 2023), referring to the notion that some individuals will offer to volunteer when asked or given the opportunity. Volunteer energy from citizens can be measured using the concept of volunteerability: willingness, capability, and availability (Meijs et al. 2006). Traditionally, volunteer opportunities (demand) depend primarily on nonprofit organisations needing volunteers and a supporting volunteering infrastructure (including such elements as community service in secondary schools, corporate volunteering with companies, and national days of service). However, in the past two decades, changes in the collective and individual life and technological innovations have played an important role in changing the European volunteering landscape.

Creating a match is complex. Volunteerability in society is low when the opportunities to volunteer do not match what individuals can offer in terms of willingness, capability, and availability. A mismatch between volunteer energy and opportunities for volunteering will result in no actual volunteering, even despite high levels of both supply and demand. In this article, we show that the mismatch is partly a measurement issue. As we measure the shortage of volunteers in existing organisations but miss the new types of volunteers and volunteering in new organisational

forms, the esteemed mismatch may result higher than what more complete data would provide.

Regarding the concepts of volunteer energy and a supporting ecosystem (Koolen-Maas et al. 2023), the following contributions are exploring 'brackish waters,' the place where fresh and salt water meet. In this metaphor, the fresh water is what is clearly considered volunteering, in the acquired understanding of the European volunteering tradition, most typically organised through associations – non-governmental, non-profit, membership-based organisations. These have been at the core of European policy development and infrastructural support for the past forty years. In the eyes of citizens, both 'contributors' and 'spectators' of voluntary engagement, the 'service dimension' in welfare, and the 'expressive dimension' in sports and culture are easily identified as volunteering (see also Handy et al. 2000). The 'fresh water' is therefore easy to measure, because the boundaries of the definition are clear (ILO 2011; 2021) and because the scholarly, policy, and practitioners' interests and understandings coincide. By exclusion, the salt water is all that is clearly not volunteering. The ILO module operational statistical definition of voluntary work helps (ILO 2013) clarifying what volunteering is not: paid work, unpaid work within one's own household, such as grandparents taking care of children, unpaid work within a legal frame, for example internships or military service, or unpaid work that is enforced (enslaved).

The distinction between what is volunteering, our 'fresh' water, and what volunteering is not, our 'salt' water, has mostly been the terrain of institutional culture-building in the EU policy arena and oftentimes conflicted with national politics, thus contributing to measurement complications. However, as in any ecosystem, boundaries between two elements of a different nature are not clear-cut and immutable in time: they are porous, osmotic, responsive to the changes in the context.

In this article we propose a first exploration of domains that appear to be precisely that: voluntary action, yes, but possibly not fully considered volunteering yet. This might also expand the understanding of the two new volunteer energy resources Koolen-Maas et al. (2023) describe: 'Farmed Fish' and 'Marine Zooplankton'. While the fresh water is good for the traditional 'Wild Salmon', the third volunteer energy resource (Koolen-Maas et al. 2023), 'Farmed Fish' describe the sources in which a third party is providing the access to the volunteer energy while a (traditional) nonprofit guides the volunteers (Brudney/Meijs/Van Overbeeke 2019). Highly organised third-party volunteering (Haski-Leventhal/Meijs/Hustinx 2010), for example combining working for a company with volunteering (corporate volunteering) or achieving learning objectives while volunteering (service learning), is complicated for measurement, as it might lead to double counting, not reflecting how volunteering is integrated in one's life. 'Marine Zooplankton' represents the sources for spontaneous action that are difficult to measure, as they are so unorganised. 'Marine Zooplankton' represents the cases on the margins of the

ILO definition of voluntary work, which call for a wider span of volunteering practices to be included (Fonović 2024). At the same time, there are numerous instances in which people perform 'voluntary work' as defined by the ILO module interpretation of volunteering, but do not think of themselves as volunteers. They consider themselves activists, or participants, or just giving a hand in the community, or joining an initiative that feels right for a day – or do not consider themselves anything at all. However, we do. Because these novel emerging forms on the boundaries between what is considered volunteering and what is considered not-volunteering are an important reservoir of the volunteer energy for the future.

The examples we present open the challenge of measuring volunteering by considering its relational and processual dynamics and chart a first map of volunteering domains of interest for developing shared accountabilities in a multi-stakeholder approach. To this end, we first devised an observational matrix to find new practices in different European countries based upon the 'Marine Plankton' and 'Farmed Fish' metaphors. This initial scoping and categorisation exercise was undertaken by a writing team that includes young pracademics of different nationalities and different scholarly perspectives, who have been engaged with volunteering and research in different capacities. Together we have chosen five new forms of volunteering that share the following characteristics:

- They offer data from the European public sphere looking at voluntary engagement of citizens as a component of European democracy.
- They involve engaging young people with a potential open eye to the future.
- They target organisers of volunteering showing new forms of infrastructure for matching citizens to volunteering opportunities that can provide novel structures for data gathering.
- They address major global challenges but on the local level. This allows them to contribute to the global movement for recognising the contributions of volunteering to sustainable development which will be celebrated in IVY 2026.
- They focus on the relational dimension of the collective voluntary action, as measuring the quality of volunteering is measuring connections between people and goals pursued.

### 1.2 Boundary forms of volunteering in Europe. First results of a collective participant-observation exercise

In the ecosystem of 'brackish waters', the five examples deal with

1. alternative 'third spaces' spaces of cooperative action that open possibilities for inclusion;

2. engagement in circumstances of polycrisis and digitalisation, such as waves of refugees and natural disasters, that speaks of active citizenship;
3. issue-raising coalitions that enlarge the horizon of defending rights;
4. occasional participation as part of a lifestyle that embodies an advanced culture of citizens' contributions to sustainable development objectives;
5. third parties engaging with volunteering programmes, reflecting on how they are insufficiently considered by policy and practice, and why they are important.

In all these examples, volunteering hyphenates with other life-spheres – leisure, work, education, identity-formation, political positioning – rendering measurement more complicated. Similarly to the associative life in the membership-based tradition of European volunteering, all show that the connective tissue of these novel forms of collective voluntary action are social ties.

## 2. Alternative spaces of cooperative action

In this section we refer to cases of emergent, spontaneous group formation that maintain an informal organisational structure and take the form of self-managing collectives, uncoupled from any direct formal institutional or market constraints, as alternative forms of cooperative action. In this kind of contexts, volunteering is a commitment to a local community engaged in multiple practices ranging from mutual aid and social service provision to cultural expression, political mobilisation and advocacy. Three criteria differentiate these forms of voluntary action to the 'traditional' ones:

1. Collective cooperation and decision-making are based on *informality and self-organisation*
2. The scope of the collective action is based on the *local places*
3. The aims of the collective action are unified by the underlying general function of building *a sense of community*

This kind of value-based aggregation is often based on the local dimension of space and nourished by social proximity. Even when the aggregation takes place in digital spaces, it is concretised offline, thanks to neighbourhood relations.

A particularly representative case is given by Self-Managed Social Centres (SMSCs), a wide-spread practice originating in grassroots movements that occupy buildings in urban areas for the explicit purpose either of resisting its institutional/market destination (e.g. commodification, gentrification) or of urban requalification and political aggregation (Yip et al. 2018; Mudu 2014; Tupin 2013). After

successful occupation, a self-organising group forms a collective identity and brings the physical space to life by engendering opportunities for practicing political engagement, social support, cultural production, and community building. Tasks and influence in decision-making are distributed only through relational mechanisms and mediated by interpersonal dynamics of interaction. This informal dimension can be understood in terms of its functional scope, given that one of the main values of SMSCs is their attempt to counteract social disaggregation in urban spaces and the absence of the welfare state and cultural policies by informally providing public opportunities for social interaction and often forms of social support, non-formal education, and cultural expression, alongside with political mobilisation. In this sense, we can observe how alternative forms of cooperative action generally have an explicit or implicit central focus on creating third places (Oldenburg 2023) for non-market-mediated socialisation. By fostering a sense of community, these places are meant to foster dynamics of reciprocity, spontaneous support, social inclusion, local regeneration of places, and cultural effervescence.

However, while studying them, we must consider that this kind of collective action can also hide a dark side, as collectives spontaneously gathering around shared values can tend to develop closed identities driven by ideological styles, which can lead to underlying dynamics of conformity to the rhetorics that circulate hierarchically within them. Sometimes this intrinsic dynamic of political self-organisation can result in forms of radicalisation and non-reflexivity in group political thinking. Furthermore, for the same reason, it can be difficult for a new volunteer or for new entries with non-conformed political perspectives to become and keep being included.

In this type of community space, volunteering overlaps with activism and militancy. Such blended reality is challenging for measurement. While it is easy to label as a volunteer an individual providing a free after-school programme to support children and families in the neighbourhood, it is not so straightforward to draw a line that distinguishes volunteering from political participation, for example in the case of individuals participating in an assembly to organise a political protest. Analytical distinctions for measurement purposes ought to be handled carefully and bear in mind the overlap and hybridity between the categories of volunteering and political activism occurring in these particular contexts of civic activation.

## 3. Commitment to global challenges: Practices as political positioning

The world today is faced with multiple global crises ranging from concrete and potential pandemics to climate change and the war in Ukraine, with one crisis seemingly triggering or worsening another, intensifying the impact and harm associated with these crises. The intersectionality of crises led to the popularisation of the concept of polycrisis, which as per Allouche et al. (2023) refers to a state where

multiple crises intertwine, their causes and processes inseparably coming together to create heightened effects. War, for instance, does not only lead to the destruction of infrastructure but also to mass displacement; and in cases of pandemics and climate change, the human populace is affected in terms of inadequate productivity. All these crises impact livelihoods, thereby creating a gap in humanitarian needs, and volunteering has played a critical role in responding to the crises and supporting affected populations.

Globalisation and progress in technology have created interconnectedness and interdependence of the world, wherein peripheral crises interact and reinforce each other (Katsikas et al. 2025). In the same vein, improvements in technology have presented opportunities to explore potential mechanisms to support people affected by crises even beyond borders. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia triggered forced migration, and millions of people who fled Ukraine left for Poland – with some moving to other EU countries shortly after entering Poland (Podgórska et al. 2024). In Poland, as in other European countries, widespread humanitarian actions were implemented by volunteers, indicating a positive impact of volunteering in supporting refugees.

Citizens in their diversity offered their presence, time, and other resources to support others who were affected by the consequences of crises. Utilising digital platforms, teams were formed, collaborations were established, and crowdfunding campaigns were launched (Sithole 2024). These efforts culminated in offline delivery of humanitarian needs such as food, housing, and transport. Besides voluntary actions aimed at supporting refugees from Ukraine with humanitarian needs, we posit that the pro-Palestinian student protests that spread across Europe (Corder et al. 2024) are yet another practice bordering on volunteering. This confirms that there is a rise in new forms of volunteering that are individualized, periodic, and at times online (Hustinx/Meijs 2011).

In a polycrisis world, volunteering has proven to be a valuable and impactful practice for volunteers themselves, the people supported by them, and other stakeholders. Volunteering has seen strangers fostering new relationships and strengthening them, bound by an interest in delivering aid to affected populations and standing in solidarity with victims of calamities elsewhere. Transcending self-organisation in online communities, practical activities were implemented offline and online to alleviate the consequences created by a crisis.

Citizens across Europe identified needs and voluntarily responded accordingly to the Ukrainian refugees. Some opened their homes to host them, drivers provided transport from the border to different destinations, and many delivered warm meals and drinks at train stations. Apart from the value in fostering local and

transnational networks, volunteering presented a sense of satisfaction amongst volunteers as they felt that their contributions were for the greater good.

In times of crisis, states and other stakeholders in the humanitarian ecosystem are often unprepared. Hence, the presence of volunteers goes a long way in closing the gaps and facilitating integration. The significant contributions of volunteering are worthy of acknowledgement, as they inform policy and practice for better preparedness of stakeholders in future.

## 4. Issue-raising coalitions: Filling public space with values

Public norms and regulations often do not sufficiently recognise the role of coalitions raised around socially crucial issues. Nevertheless, they are one of the most potent people-raising initiatives. We can consider them as reflecting what traditional membership-based volunteering did to stimulate the recognition of social and human rights and the agenda it set for civil society to function.

The coalitions raising issues speak to the European values, but also to the ones that are controversial or contested in some countries. For example, a movement can be congruent with the European values of tolerance, equity, and inclusion, and yet, in some countries, it can be considered controversial, as not everybody accepts the postulates put forward by the coalition members. Moreover, they can also be formed around issues that contest the general direction of the current policies and highlight the importance of traditional rules. However, regardless of the moral compasses which are fundamental to the particular coalitions, they are a form of freely expressing oneself using democratic rights to protest. Thus, they are instances of democracy at its best.

Issue-raising coalitions put to forefront how volunteering engages and stimulates the general public. They have a great educational potential towards citizens and public policy decision makers; they are an alternative modality of practice-politics. Many agenda-setting or awareness activities are small in time (e.g. based on episodic volunteering during protests) but may be still big in creating a community or a larger movement.

Examples of coalitions raising socially important issues in Europe are the Pride movement (Bruce 2016), initiatives for human rights (Park et al. 2019), pro-choice and pro-life movements regarding abortion issues (Cullen/Korolczuk 2019), support for the excluded (e.g. people in homelessness crisis, people with disabilities, people in poverty) in communities (Ilcan/Lacey 2007), and global citizenship support movements (Reysen/Hackett 2017). Many of them are controversial.

Participation in such initiatives can have an impact on the engaged individuals, for example:

- Building identities and well-being through advocacy. Thanks to participation in issue-raising coalitions, people can build and express their identities, share personal stories, enhance their well-being and lead a more fulfilling life (Literte 2020; Reid et al. 2019; Rychlik 2021). For instance, people gathered in the Pride movements might find a way to safely come out, put forward their needs, and build a positive identity, while seeing that they are not alone.
- Forming social networks and fulfilling the need to belong. Issue-raising coalitions provide an opportunity to be part of a social network, which can be useful in building further professional or private relationships, fulfilling the needs of relatedness and belonging (Orhan/Craig 2025).
- Empowerment and creating a sense of agency. By participating in an issue-raising coalition, people can feel empowered while fighting for certain rights (Aceros et al. 2021), and, while seeing a positive change on a higher level, develop a sense of agency and be encouraged to actively use their rights to demonstrate and advocate for legislative changes. This can lead to greater engagement of future volunteers and encourage the feeling that one person can have a real impact on what happens around them.
- Radicalisation. Apart from the positive influence on people being part of a coalition, negative aspects can be observed, too (Opozda-Suder et al. 2024), for example radicalisation and deterioration of personal relationships with people who do not support a particular matter. This can encourage remaining in an information bubble and hinder the chances for overcoming biases and barriers in communication with others. This aspect does not necessarily discourage volunteering. It would be interesting to study how these individual-level consequences relate to wider societal impacts.

## 5. Occasional participation as part of a lifestyle: Culture, sports, community, environment

Traditionally, the ideal volunteer in Europe was extracted from a pre-existing network constructed for a particular cause. More recently, however, a typical volunteer arises from a looser network, where 'members' miscellaneously connect when it best suits their own, personal lifestyle. Untethered to membership in a long-established association, more volunteering opportunities are presented to people connected by casual communities both on- and offline. These networks alter between different temporal and spatial arrangements, as they vary in degree of centralization and fluctuate in frequency of meeting. Nevertheless, these loose networks can quickly mobilise great numbers of people, often because the net is cast so widely.

In the realm of large-scale public cultural events, there is a heavy reliance on these loose networks of enthusiastic individuals who might spontaneously decide to

contribute voluntarily. For instance, the vibrant festival culture spans from small town gatherings to internationally acclaimed music festivals. Not only are these events cultural highlights, but they are also deeply rooted in local traditions and social life. Behind the scenes, a diverse group of volunteers power these events. Ranging from residents of nearby towns who see the festival as a community affair to passionate festivalgoers who travel from afar to be part of the experience. Together they are connected by shared interests and occasional collaboration. Such weak ties are crucial: they allow for the flexibility needed to sustain the once-a-year cultural events year after year by drawing on a broad and ever-evolving pool of support, volunteer energy, and potential volunteers.

In the same vein, volunteering in Europe nowadays often means that an opportunity aligns with the individual's lifestyle and their sense of community, perhaps more so than helping the public good. Increasingly so, the line is becoming thinner between volunteering and leisure activity, as well as a sense of belonging and participation. An example are initiatives like Let's Do It, where European citizens are invited to register to local litter clean-up-campaigns in order to get support from the EU. In doing so, the EU connects multiple smaller communities to a larger, loose network that ideally entices more individuals to volunteer and contribute to the cause. By uniting the smaller campaigns into one formal one, there is a greater pool of potential volunteers to consult. Shaped by large networks of peers, communities, and shared values, individuals find themselves making meaningful choices that extend beyond formal work and civic duties. In all Europe, ethics as well as community and leisure become heavily intertwined with volunteering.

## 6. Third parties: Emerging actors for volunteer matching

We use the example of the Czech Republic to trigger a critical assessment of how institutions, different from associations and non-profit organisations, are considered in different European countries with regard to their potential for magnetising, channelling, and amplifying volunteer energy. In Czechia, the four main sectors (government, local administration, businesses, universities) considered to hold the key for the prosperity and progressivity of the volunteer ecosystem have all the resources to endorse new forms of volunteering, but they suffer from networking deficiency and struggle with maximising potential impact.

In terms of policy, volunteering in Czechia falls within the competence of the Crime prevention department of the Ministry of the Interior and has a legally regulated "volunteer service". There is an ambitious Volunteer Development Policy 2030 that strategically operates only within the ILO definition of volunteering, leaving topics like active citizenship, future youth volunteering, and borderline activities out of scope. The policy reflects the 'active' side of Czech cultural identity, but the lack of a vision for the future of volunteering as a whole reflects more of the 'idle' side.

There is a hidden potential in the local administrations, as municipalities and regional organisational networks play an important role in the Czech volunteer ecosystem. They are not only the biggest sources of volunteer engagement, but their scope of activity, being not strictly bound by the ILO or government definition, often tends to cross the formal boundaries of volunteer efforts. Of course, it varies greatly across regions, but some general categories related to borderline volunteering forms can be identified:

- regional one-time low-threshold activities (cleanups, charity events);
- participative decision making and public education (Agenda 21, Active Citizens Fund);
- traditional associations responding to an aging population (fire brigades, Scouts).

In the private, for-profit sector, the concept of Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) accountability is becoming more of a standard for bigger Czech companies. The experience of NGOs being asked to *find for their employees something to do on a specific day* can be measured as additional volunteer hours in the society, but in fact the impact is dubious. Still, the ESG strategies are generally more impactful than local administrations programs. The potential for impact measurement of the corporate ESG-generated volunteer opportunities could be enormous in terms of capital diffusion where companies redirect resources to borderline and hybrid volunteer activities: NGO event support, professional skills sharing or in-house employee rights, and well-being advocacy.

On a more positive note, there is a significant rise in establishing volunteer centres, communities, and activities amongst Czech universities. This fully reflects the universities' third mission and at the same time satisfies the urge of young students to 'make a difference' and develop transversal skills. Apparently, it is the perfect environment for emerging new border-line volunteering forms. In 2023 a couple of universities joined forces and published a methodology for implementing various forms of volunteer opportunities and incentives.

In conclusion, in Czechia the productive and borderline progressive part is emerging as dominant in local administrations and businesses. The universities seem to act on their potential as a trendsetter in this area. Metaphorically speaking, this volunteer ship is moving in the right direction in brackish waters, loaded with strong praxis and progressive ideas. However, the motion towards a broader and more open-minded approach related to new forms of volunteering seems to be slow.

What about the government's role in this challenge? The Ministry holds a huge stimulating potential, though the extension to boundary forms of volunteering does not reside in its current agenda. If we aim for a diverse approach to volunteering

and its measurement, we need to step out of the dichotomies. Supporting not only the traditional but also progressive decentralised stakeholders (municipalities, companies, universities) could be done through professional mediating and networking focused on evidence-based impact measurement of all the possible kinds of volunteer effort. If the government proved able to lead this process, then we can shift from ambivalent active rigid citizenship to proper citizenship – and be able to measure it.

## 7. Conclusion

Measuring the quantity of volunteering is important but bears two major risks. As measuring, and consequential comparison, need a stable formal definition that remains fixed over time, measurement can pose obstacles when considering change and innovation. In this article, five explorations of practices in Europe present widespread and easily recognisable examples of citizens' activation not counted as volunteering, which thrive at the hyphenated spaces between volunteering and other life-spheres such as leisure, work, education, identity-formation, and political positioning. These forms of volunteering are the materialisation of the volunteer energy resources 'Farmed Fish' and 'Marine Zooplankton' as described by Koolen-Maas et al. (2023). They seem to prosper in brackish water where many stakeholders find it difficult to address the participants as volunteers but do acknowledge that they are volunteering. Certainly, in these hybrid spaces the 'volunteer work market' is undergoing evolutions comparable to the paid labour market where, for example, many people are paid for their work or gig-job but are often not considered employees.

The relation between volunteering and (not) being recognised as a volunteer is important as it entails legal consequences, potentially both positive and negative. It might be good in some contexts to not recognise the volunteering as being done by volunteers, while in others this might take away advantages, for example the right to get expenses compensated. Indeed, the definition power, the second consequence of a formal definition, is also a problem, as inclusion or exclusion of entities or activities from the normative sphere of what is considered volunteering translates into the possibility of access to resources. Policy can regulate funding, insurance, support by volunteering centers, partnership opportunities with public administration, and a voice in decision-making. But recognition is also a form of symbolic capital, it magnetises trust of the general public.

The task we see for the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) and its members is to promote real-time, all-encompassing measurement initiatives on community, programme and organisational level in a transnational European perspective. The data gathering should move from central bureaus of statistics and voluntary support centres to (non-)traditional voluntary organisations and their networks on

the grass-roots level. In envisaging this direction, we propose putting to use the emerging potential of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning tools in the framework of the EU register of recognised data altruism organisations that has been established in the framework of the Data Governance Act (DGA), a key pillar of the European strategy for data.

This could provide channels to incorporate in the measurement efforts the voice of people who are actually producing the common good. We need to observe, as they make their everyday decisions, for which goals they want to invest their individual reservoirs of volunteer energy. The ways in which this match between the time, talents, and priorities of individuals is weaved together in small collectives, not necessarily communities, will provide us with pointers on both policy and practice.

## Acknowledgements

We thank our friends and colleagues, particularly those involved in the practice of volunteering, who read and suggested improvements to this article.

## Funding

This Article is part of a Special Issue whose publication has been supported by the Citizens Equality Rights and Values fund of the European Union.

## References

Aceros, J. C., Duque, T., & Paloma, V. (2021). Psychosocial benefits and costs of activism among female migrant domestic workers in southern Spain. *Journal of Community Psychology,* 49(7), pp. 2905–2921.

Allouche, J., Metcalfe, S., Schmidt-Sane, M., & Srivastava, S. (2023). Are we in the age of the polycrisis? Institute of Development Studies. Available from: https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/are-we-in-the-age-of-the-polycrisis/ [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Bruce, K. M. (2016). *Pride Parades: How a Parade Changed the World*. New York.

Brudney, J. L., & Meijs, L. (2009). It ain't natural: Toward a new (natural) resource conceptualization for volunteer management. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly,* 38(4), pp. 564–581, https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764009333828.

Brudney, J. L., Meijs, L., & van Overbeeke, P. S. (2019). More is less? The volunteer stewardship framework and models. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 30(1), pp. 69–87.

Cnaan, R. A., Handy, F., & Wadsworth, M. (1996). Defining who is a volunteer: Conceptual and empirical considerations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly,* 25(3), pp. 364–383.

Corder, M., Surk, B., & De Cristofaro, P. (2024). Pro-Palestinian student protests spread across Europe. Some are allowed. Some are stopped. The Associated Press. Available from: *https://apnews.com/article/amsterdam-campus-protest-gaza-europe-palestinians-israel-1eeb4e07231ebcc6776319ff0663db66 [Accessed 28.08.2025].*

Cullen, P., & Korolczuk, E. (2019). Challenging abortion stigma: Framing abortion in Ireland and Poland. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters,* 27(3), pp. 6–19.

Fonović, K. (2024). Capturing data on volunteering in a global dimension: A window of opportunity for furthering Third Sector Research. In: Bassi, A., Aquino Alves, M., & Cordery, C. (eds.): *The Future of Third Sector Research: From Theory to Definitions, Classifications and Aggregation Towards New Research Paths*. Cham, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67896-7.

Glucksmann M. (2006). Shifting boundaries and interconnections: Extending the 'total social organisation of labour'. *The Sociological Review,* 53(2_suppl), pp. 19–36, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00570.x.

Handy, F. et al. (2000). Public perception of "who is a volunteer": An examination of the net-cost approach from a cross-cultural perspective. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 11, pp. 45–65.

Haski-Leventhal, D., Meijs, L. C., & Hustinx, L. (2010). The third-party model: Enhancing volunteering through governments, corporations and educational institutes. *Journal of Social Policy*, 39(1), pp. 139–158.

Hustinx, L., & Meijs, L. C. (2011). Re-embedding volunteering: In search of a new collective ground. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 2(1), pp. 5–21, https://doi.org/10.1332/204080511x560594.

Hustinx, L., Meijs, L. C., Handy, F., & Cnaan, R. A. (2012). Monitorial citizens or civic omnivores? Repertoires of civic participation among university students. *Youth & Society*, 44(1), pp. 95–117, https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X10396639.

Ilcan, S., & Lacey, A. (2013). Networks of social justice: Transnational activism and social change. *Studies in Social Justice,* 7(1), pp. 1–6.

International Labour Organisation – ILO (2011). *Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work*.

International Labour Organisation – ILO (2013). *Resolution Concerning Statistics of Work, Employment and Labour Underutilization*. ICLS/19/2013/2. International Labour Office.

International Labour Organisation – ILO (2021). *Volunteer Work Measurement Guide*.

Katsikas, D., Lins, M. A. D. T., & Ribeiro Hoffmann, A. (2025). Introduction: A new era? Permacrisis and the challenges to financial stability, economic growth, and democracy. In: Katsikas, D., Del Tedesco Lins, M. A., & Ribeiro Hoffmann, A. (eds.): *Finance, Growth and Democracy: Connections and Challenges in Europe and Latin America in the Era of Permacrisis*. Cham, pp. 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-68475-3_1.

Koolen-Maas, S. A., Meijs, L. C., van Overbeeke, P. S. M., & Brudney, J. L. (2022). Rethinking volunteering as a natural resource: A conceptual typology. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 52(1_suppl), pp. 353S–377S, https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640221127947.

Literte, P. E. (2020). Mobilising beyond Black and White: Coalition building and identity formation among Students of Color at a public and a private university. *Journal of Minority Achievement, Creativity, and Leadership,* 1(2), pp. 301–336.

Meijs, L. C., Ten Hoorn, E. M., & Brudney, J. L. (2006). Improving societal use of human resources: From employability to volunteerability. *Voluntary Action*, 8(2), pp. 36– 54.

Mudu, P. (2014). Where Is Culture in Rome? Self-Managed Social Centers and the Right to Urban Space. In: Marinaro, I. C., & Thomassen, B. (eds.): *Global Rome: Changing Faces of the Eternal City.* Bloomington, pp. 246–264.

Oldenburg, R., (2023). *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community.* Great Barrington.

Opozda-Suder, S., Łopatkiewicz, A., & Michel, M. (2024). The Activism and Radicalism Intention Scales (ARIS) as a measure of political mobilisation: Verification of factor structure and invariance across gender in a sample of polish academic youth. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 37(4), pp. 458–477.

Orhan, I., & Craig, M. A. (2025). A relational approach to coalitions: Pragmatic and communal interracial coalitions. *Social Issues and Policy Review,* 19(1), e70001.

Park, B., Murdie, A., & Davis, D. R. (2019). The (co)evolution of human rights advocacy: Understanding human rights issue emergence over time. *Cooperation and Conflict,* 54(3), pp. 313–334.

Podgórska, K., Jekaterynczuk, A., Yarosh, O., Kuzmuk, O., & Liubchuk, V. (2024). Support for Ukrainian refugees after Russia's invasion of Ukraine: Aid structure and resilience factors. Case studies of Lublin and Lutsk. *European Societies*, 26(2), pp. 386–410, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2206892.

Reid, A. et al. (2019). Using collaborative coalition processes to advance community health, well-being, and equity: A multiple–case study analysis from a national community transformation initiative. *Health Education & Behavior,* 46(1_suppl), pp. 100S–109S.

Reysen, S., & Hackett, J. (2017). Activism as a pathway to global citizenship. *The Social Science Journal,* 54(2), pp. 132–138.

Rychlik, J., Hornung, J., & Bandelow, N. C. (2021). Come together, right now: Storylines and social identities in coalition building in a local policy subsystem. *Politics & Policy,* 49(5), pp. 1216–1247.

Sithole, T. O. (2024). The use of digital platforms by citizen aid actors during the Ukraine humanitarian crisis. *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 6, 1326769, https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2024.1326769.

Tupin, S., (2013). An open-air self-managed social center called Occupy. *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest*, 1, pp. 17–30.

Yip, N. M, Lopéz M. A. M., & Sun, X. (2018). *Contested Cities and Urban Activism.* London.

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

**Karin Y. Biermann**
PhD Affiliate Researcher | Erasmus University Rotterdam | The Netherlands | biermann@rsm.nl & University of Klagenfurt | Austria | k1biermann@edu.aau.at

**Remigijus Civinskas**
PhD Researcher | Vytautas Kavolis Transdisciplinary Research Institute | Vytautas Magnus University | Lithuania | remigijus.civinskas@vdu.lt

**Jana Solcova**
PhD Researcher | Faculty Of Education, Matej Bel University Banská Bystrica | Slovakia | jana.solcova@umb.sk

**José Almeida**
Coordinator | Oeiras Volunteering Network | Portugal | jose.almeida@oeiras.pt

**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 |
| **Austria** | 28.3% | 25.8% | 11.9% | 12.0% | 11.9% | 12.0% |
| **Lithuania** | 16.3% | 7.5% | 6.3% | 5.7% | 6.3% | 5.7% |
| **Portugal*** | 6.4% | 7.3% | 9.9% | 9.3% | 9.9% | 9.3% |
| **Slovakia** | 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 statecivil 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 (Kamerāde 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/Bučiūnienė 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 (Mesežníkov 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 20th 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.

## Acknowledgments

We thank our friends and colleagues, particularly those involved in the practice of volunteering, who read and suggested improvements to this article.

## Funding

This Article is part of a Special Issue whose publication has been supported by the Citizens Equality Rights and Values fund of the European Union.

## References

Accornero, G., & Ramos Pinto, P. (2022). Movements at the border: Conflict and protest in Portugal. In: Fernandes, J. M., Magalhães, P. C., & Pinto, A. C. (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Portuguese Politics*. Oxford, pp. 457–471, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780192855404.013.29.

Acus, A. (2018). Volunteering in non-governmental organisations as social policy expression. *Tiltai: Socialiniai Mokslai*, (3), pp. 149–163.

Alves de Matos, P. (2021). The morality of inequality: Charity encounters and the making of "real need" in austerity Portugal. *Antropologia*, 8(3), pp. 45–61.

Andriukaityte, M. (2025). Seimas ėmėsi atnaujinto savanorystės įstatymo: opozicija kelia klausimus dėl biurokratijos [Parliament takes up the renewed Volunteering Law: Opposition questions bureaucracy]. *15min.lt*. Available from: https://www.15min.lt/tema/savanoryste-37447 [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Bogorin, F.-E., More-Hollerweger, E., & Simsa, R. (2019). Austria. In: More-Hollerweger, E., Bogorin, F.-E., Litofcenko, J., & Meyer, M. (eds.): *Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019*. Vienna, pp. 25–32.

Brozmanová Gregorová, A., Marček, E., & Mráčková, A. (2009). *Analysis of Volunteering in Slovakia*. Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic.

Brozmanová Gregorová, A., Šolcová, J., & Bambúch, F. (2023). The role of the non-governmental organisations and volunteers in organising support for Ukrainian refugees: The case study from Slovakia. IntechOpen, https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1005084.

Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania. (n.d.). *Electoral programmes, political party and election candidates information*. Available from https://www.vrk.lt [Accessed 25.01.2025].

Chamusca, P. (2024). Discontent, populism, or the revenge of the "places that don't matter"? Analysis of the rise of the far-right in Portugal. *Societies*, 14(6), 80, https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14060080.

CIVICUS (2018, November 19). Austria's civic space rating downgraded from open to narrowed. CIVICUS – Tracking Conditions for Citizen Action. Available from: https://monitor.civicus.org/newsfeed/2018/11/19/austrias-civic-space-rating-downgraded-open-narrowed/ [Accessed 28.08.2025].

CIVICUS (2025, March). Austria. *CIVICUS Monitor: Tracking Civic Space*. Available from: https://monitor.civicus.org/country/austria/ [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Della Porta, D. (2022). *Contentious Politics in Emergency Critical Junctures: Progressive Social Movements During the Pandemic*. Cambridge.

Diário da República (1998). Lei n.º 71/98. Available from: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/71-1998-223016 [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Dolezal, M., & Hutter, S. (2007). Konsensdemokratie unter Druck? Politischer Protest in Österreich, 1975–2005. Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwiss*enschaft (ÖZP)*, 36(3), pp. 337–352.

European Youth Portal (2025). European Solidarity Corps: The power of together. Available from: https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/organisations/quality-label_en [Accessed 28.08.2025].

European Youth Portal (n. d.). Organisations holding a Quality Label. Available from: https://www.youth.europa.eu/solidarity/organisations/quality-label_en [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Eurostat (2023). *Country facts*. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/countries-statistics [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Eurostat (2024). *Quality of life indicators – governance and basic rights*. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Quality_of_life_indicators_-_governance_and_basic_rights [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Evers, A., & von Essen, J. (2019). Volunteering and civic action: Boundaries blurring, boundaries redrawn. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 30(1), pp. 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-00086-0.

Fernandes, T. (2015). Rethinking pathways to democracy: Civil society in Portugal and Spain, 1960s–2000s. *Democratisation*, 22(6), pp. 1074–1104, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.901966.

Ferreira, S. (2015). New paths for third-sector institutions in a welfare state in crisis: The case of Portugal. *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, 6(2), pp. 213–241, https://doi.org/10.1515/npf-2014-0025.

Franco, R. C., Sokolowski, S. W., Hariel, E. M. H., & Salamon, L. M. (2005). *The Portuguese Nonprofit Sector in Comparative Perspective*. Baltimore.

Freiwilligengesetz (n. d.). Österreichs digitales Amt. Available from: https://www.oesterreich.gv.at/Gesetzliche-Neuerungen/archiv-bgbl-2023/freiwilligengesetz.html [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Gazibara, T., & Pesakovic, M. (2023). Understanding attitudes and willingness to volunteer in COVID-19 hospitals in a setting where medical students were not deployed. *Bratislavské LekáRske Listy/Bratislava Medical Journal*, 124(05), pp. 387–393, https://doi.org/10.4149/bll_2023_0.

Göttlinger, S., & Kronsteiner-Mann, C. (2023). Freiwilliges Engagement in Österreich 2022 (4. Freiwilligenbericht) Bundesministerium für Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz (BMSGPK).

Grigaliūnas, M. (2012). Savanoriškos veiklos įstatymas: savanorystės įvaizdžiai politinėje-visuomeninėje diskusijoje dėl jo priėmimo [The Law on Volunteering: Images of Volunteering in the Political-Societal Debate on Its Adoption]. *Parliamentary Studies*, (13), pp. 133–157.

Guidi, R. (2021). Reintermediating voluntary action: The path-dependent pluralization of the Italian volunteering field. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 33(4), pp. 752–765, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00386-y.

Hadj Abdou, L., & Rosenberger, S. (2019). Party activism: The permeability of the asylum protest arena in Austria. *Social Movement Studies*, 18(4), pp. 391–407, https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1567321.

Hall, P. A., & Taylor, R. C. R. (1996). Political science and the three new institutionalisms. *Political Studies*, 44(5), pp. 936–957, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1996.tb00343.x.

Heitzmann, K., & Simsa, R. (2004). From corporatist security to civil society creativity: The nonprofit sector in Austria. In: Zimmer, A., & Priller, E. (eds.): *Future of Civil Society: Making Central European Nonprofit-Organisations Work*. Wiesbaden, pp. 713–731.

Hjort, M., & Beswick, D. (2021). Volunteering and policy makers: The political uses of the UK Conservative Party's international development volunteering projects. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 32, pp. 1242–1254, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00222-9.

Hofer, B. (2015). Bericht zur Lage und zu den Perspektiven des freiwilligen Engagements in Österreich (2. Freiwilligenbericht). Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Konsumentenschutz.

International Labour Organisation (n. d.). ILOSTAT Data Explorer [Dataset]. Available from: https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer11/?lang=en&id=FOW_TVOL_AGE_VOL_RT_A [Accessed 21.03.2025].

Juknevičius, S., & Savicka, A. (2003). From restitution to innovation: Volunteering in post-communist countries. In: Dekker, P., & Halman, L. (eds.): *The Values of Volunteering: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. New York, pp. 127–142.

Kamerāde, D., Crotty, J., & Ljubownikow, S. (2016). Civil liberties and volunteering in six former Soviet Union countries. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 45(6), pp. 1150–1168, https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764016649689.

Koper, J. (2023). Surveys, results and consequences of the elections to the National Assembly of the Slovak Republic 2023. Interpolis '23 International Scientific Conference. Belianum.

Lietuvos šaulių sąjunga (Lithuanian Riflemen's Union) (2024). *Lietuvos šaulių sąjungos 2024–2035 m. veiklos strategija* [Lithuanian Rifle Association 2024–2035 Strategy]. Available from: https://www.sauliusajunga.lt/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/GALUTINELSS_strategija_2035.pdf [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Mesežnikov, G. (2019). *Together or against each other. What influences our coexistence?* IVO.

Meyer, M., Moder, C., Neumayr, M., & Vandor, P. (2020). Civil society and its institutional context in CEE. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 31(4), pp. 811–827, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00106-7.

Ministério da Administração Interna (2025). Eleições Legislativas 2025. Available from: https://legislativas2025.mai.gov.pt [Accessed 21.03.2025].

Ministry of Interior Slovak Republic (2023). Statistical overview of legal and illegal migration in the Slovak Republic for 2023 [Data set]. Available from: https://www.minv.sk/?rocenky [Accessed 20.02.2024].

Murray Svidronova, M., & Brozmanova Gregorova, A. (2025). The 2025 Global Philanthropy Environment Index Slovakia. [Report] Available from: https://hdl.handle.net/1805/47052 [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Neumayr, M., Pennerstorfer, A., Vandor, P., & Meyer, M. (2017). Country report: Austria. In: Vándor, P., Traxler, N., Millner, R., & Meyer, M. (eds.): *Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*. Vienna, pp. 282–297.

Neumayr, M., Schneider, U., Meyer, M., Pennerstorfer, A., Sokolowski, S. W., & Salamon, L. M. (2017). Austria: A Dualistic Pattern of Civil Society Development. In L. M. Salamon, S. W. Sokolowski, & M. A. Haddock (Eds.), *Explaining Civil Society Development: A Social Origins Approach* (pp. 197–210). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Pennerstorfer, A., & Zierer, B. (2018, October 12). Country profile Austria: Social policy, social economy, and social work. *Sozialnet: Das Netz für die Sozialwirtschaft*. Available from: https://www.socialnet.de/international/en/austria.html [Accessed 28.08.2025].

Petreikienė, D., & Bučiūnienė, I. (2024). Unearthing the legacy: Contrasting Soviet imprints on early NGOs in Lithuania. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 35(4), pp. 723–735, 10.1007/s11266-024-00636-9.

Pierson, P., & Skocpol, T. (2002). Historical institutionalism in contemporary political science. In: Goodin, R. E., & Klingemann, H.-D. (eds.): *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*. New York, pp. 693–721.

Pranaitytė, I. (2024). The motivation to volunteer and change of attitudes towards volunteering in a post-Soviet country. *Social Welfare: Interdisciplinary Approach*, 14, pp. 146–168.

Rogulis, D. (2025). Understanding Lithuania's total defence approach in the face of Russian threat through principal–agent theory. *Security and Defence Quarterly*, 49(1), pp. 58–73.

Simsa, R. (2022). Changing civic spaces in the light of authoritarian elements of politics and the Covid crisis – The case of Austria. *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, 13(3), pp. 211–228, 10.1515/npf-2021-0053.

Staliūnas, D., & Aoshima, Y., eds. (2021). *The Tsar, the Empire, and the Nation: Dilemmas of Nationalization in Russia's Western Borderlands*, 1905–1915. Budapest.

The Platform of Volunteer Centres and Organisations (2020). Vyhlásenie platformy dobrovoľníckych centier a organisácií k zapájaniu dobrovoľníkov a dobrovoľníčok počas celoplošného testovania. Available from: https://www.dobrovolnickecentra.sk/sk/platforma/novinky/302-vyhlasenie-platformy-dobrovolnickych-centier-a-organisacii-k-zapajaniu-dobrovolnikov-a-dobrovolnicok-pocas-celoplosneho-testovania [Accessed 30.03.2025].

United Nations (1948). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Available from: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf [Accessed 28.08.2025].

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

**Gabriella Civico**
Director | Centre for European Volunteering | Brussels, Belgium | gabriella.civico@cev.be

**Anna Domaradzka**
Director | Robert Zajonc Institute for Social Studies | University of Warsaw, Poland | anna.domaradzka@uw.edu.pl

**Jurgen Grotz**
Director | Institute for Volunteering Research | University of East Anglia, UK | J.Grotz@uea.ac.uk

**Lucas Meijs**
Professor Strategic Philanthropy and Volunteering | Rotterdam School of Management | Erasmus University | The Netherlands | lmeijs@rsm.nl

**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. Freiwilligengesetz, 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.

## Acknowledgements

We wish to thank all the many volunteers, those who involve volunteers and make volunteer involvement happen, as well as the numerous other professionals and individuals whose activities and views have inspired us to publish this Special Issue. Particular thanks go to the members of the "European Coalition for Volunteering Evidence & Research" (ECVER) and the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV), who took time to discuss this publication and contribute their valuable inputs.

## Funding

This Article is part of a Special Issue whose publication has been supported by the Citizens Equality Rights and Values fund of the European Union.

## References

Beveridge, L. (1948). *Voluntary Action.* London.

Clary, E. G. et al. (1998). Understanding and assessing the motivations of volunteers: A functional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(6), pp. 1516–1530.

Cnaan, R., Handy, F., & Wadsworth, M. (1996). Defining who is a volunteer: Conceptual and empirical considerations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 23, pp. 335–351.

Davis R., & Davis P. (2024). *Join or Die*. Television documentary available to download from https://www.joinordiefilm.com.

European Commission (2011). *Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Cross-border Voluntary Activities in the EU*. COM(2011) 568 final. Brussels.

Evers, A., & von Essen, J. (2019). Volunteering and civic action: Boundaries blurring, boundaries redrawn. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 30(1), pp. 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-00086-0.

Freiwilligengesetz (n. d.). Österreichs *digitales Amt*. Available from https://www.oesterreich.gv.at/Gesetzliche-Neuerungen/archiv-bgbl-2023/freiwilligengesetz.html [Accessed 20.07.2025].

GHK (2010). *Volunteering in the European Union*. Brussels. Available from https://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/doc1018_en.pdf [Accessed 21.06.2025].

Grandi, F. L., Lough, B. J., & Bannister, T. (2019). The state of volunteering infrastructure globally. *Voluntaris*, 7(1), pp. 22–43, https://doi.org/10.5771/2196-3886-2019-1-22.

Grubb, A. (2021). Avoiding intimacy: An ethnographic study of beneficent boundaries in virtual voluntary social work. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations,* 33(1), pp. 72–85, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00350-w.

Harding, T. (2012). How to establish a study association: Isomorphic pressures on new CSOs entering a neo-corporative adult education field in Sweden. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations,* 23(1), pp. 182–203, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-011-9186-4.

International Labour Organisation (2021). *Volunteer Work Measurement Guide.* Available from https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/%2D%2D-dgreports/%2D%2D-stat/documents/publication/wcms_789950.pdf [Accessed 20.07.2025].

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone, the Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York.

Rochester, C. (2013). *Rediscovering Voluntary Action: The Beat of a Different Drum.* Basingstoke.

The Platform of Volunteer Centres and Organisations (2020). Vyhlásenie platformy dobrovoľníckych centier a organisácií k zapájaniu dobrovoľníkov a dobrovoľníčok počas celoplošného testovania. Available from https://www.dobrovolnickecentra.sk/sk/platforma/novinky/302-vyhlasenie-platformy-dobrovolnickych-centier-a-organisacii-k-zapajaniu-dobrovolnikov-a-dobrovolnicok-pocas-celoplosneho-testovania [Accessed 30.03.25].

V-Calc (2025). V-CALC, a page on the website of the European Volunteer Centre. Available from https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/vcalc [Accessed 20.07.2025].

Wilson, J. (2000). Volunteering. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(1), pp. 215–240.