

## DEVELOPMENT OF VOLUNTEERING IN BULGARIA

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**Abstract:** Current study traces the development of volunteering in modern society in the context of social work. The research analyses the situation of the voluntary sector in Bulgaria and its development. The objectives of the present study are the opportunities provided by voluntary work and the realization of volunteers in the voluntary sector, as well as the voluntary activities in the country, realized mainly by the non-governmental sector and spontaneously formed informal groups. 668 volunteers in various fields of work were interviewed, both from formed informal groups and from the wrong sector. The analysis of the results shows that the main factor for the development of voluntary creation is the impact on the social environment. The society provides a positive attitude to volunteering in Bulgaria, but the problem with the lack of a legal framework and policies has a negative impact on the public breaking of the terminological concepts and functions of the volunteer resource in the country. Other factors that embarrass active involvement in volunteer initiatives are influenced by the lack of a supportive educational or work environment, which further complicates the implementation of volunteer initiatives. The lack of mechanisms and a supportive environment in the institutions are also an obstacle to the implementation of voluntary activities. Public opinion influence is a key factor for the development of the voluntary sector in the country. A large percentage of volunteers do not share their volunteer work, unsure of the reaction of the other party. Support of specialists aimed at future and current volunteers, would make them more open to others, more empathetic and willing to help. Volunteering does not depend on the personal characteristics of the volunteers. Each person shows individuality, it is even possible that there are no points of contact and similarities between the volunteers (including gender, race, religion, age, etc.) and this does not show a reflection. The volunteer community has a clear position in society and understands the nature and importance of volunteering, thanks to the accumulation of volunteer experience over the years. For the respondents, the definition of volunteering was associated with dedication and willingness to perform actions for the benefit of society, without financial gain, neglecting their own interests and showing altruistic motives. Society is increasingly defining and distinguishing voluntary initiatives from the single manifestation of a voluntary act and understands its meaning, but adheres to a standardized and somewhat unrealistic model. The society has mostly positive attitudes about the need for volunteers, as they rely on the need for impartial support of the society and the quality development of personal and social qualities in young people.

**Keywords:** volunteer sector, volunteering, volunteers, development, social work

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Everyone has their own personal definition of the word "volunteer", as well as their own views on what kind of activities volunteers do. However, in order to speak competently on the subject, we need to fully understand the concept and to be aware of its origin and history. Volunteering and any voluntary act in general terms are altruistic in nature and contribute to the quality of life and the improvement of a society. For the individual, humanitarian activities and the support of vulnerable groups are essential for the personal development of each individual.

In the days of global crisis resulting from, among other factors, the pandemic spread of the corona virus, the need for volunteer resources is growing. The problem with the readiness of the society for active involvement in volunteer initiatives also stands out. Most people are not prepared and are not competent enough on the subject. The ignorance of what awaits them if they accept to become part of the volunteer community leads to insecurity and highlights the pressing need for and the great shortage of volunteer resources in the country.

The purpose of this report is to trace the development of volunteering in modern society in the context of social work through research and analysis of the state of the volunteer sector in Bulgaria and its development. 668 volunteers working in various fields and belonging to both formed informal groups and the non-governmental sector, have been interviewed.

### 2. NATURE AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

J. Wilson defines volunteering as any activity in which time is given freely for the benefit of another person, group or cause. He defines it as part of a cluster of supportive behaviors, entailing more commitment than spontaneous assistance, but narrower in scope than the care provided to family and friends. (*Wilson, 2000*)

In the absence of a specific definition of volunteering, it is difficult to determine the meaning of the word "volunteer". Millions of people around the world volunteer in hundreds of different governmental and non-governmental organizations, social services and institutions from a variety of fields. Traditionally, the term

"volunteering" in Bulgaria refers to the provision of work and services without financial benefit. Accordingly, any person who provides free and unpaid work is defined as a volunteer. Volunteers do not have to be trained and qualified in order to participate in and contribute to such activities. T. Minev defines volunteers as one of the main groups engaged in social work. He defines them as an individual or a group form of assistance provided by citizens whose actions are more often individual and unorganized (Minev, 2012: 330). One of the main challenges facing volunteering is the changes related to the nature of volunteering and the disparity between the needs of volunteer organizations and the ambitions of the new generations of volunteers. The main reason for this is the lack of knowledge of the needs of the organizations and the preference for short-term rather than long-term volunteer engagements.

However, in recent years there has been a growing interest in volunteering by the population. It is quite possible that in the future volunteering will play an increasingly important role in maintaining the various social systems in Bulgaria, but the nature of voluntary work is such that it cannot completely replace paid labour. Changes in terms of economy, as well as in the attitudes and perception of the population, are a prerequisite for the increasing and more active use of voluntary work in an increasing number of social areas. This can improve the situation of various niches, suffering from shortage of staff, that urgently need workers in order to function properly. Thus, it is likely that volunteering will be a real alternative to paid work in the social sector - health care, education, social services and others.

Volunteering in most EU member states is regulated by law, but in Bulgaria a major challenge is the lack of a clear legal framework. Bulgaria is one of the few countries where a law on volunteering has not yet been adopted. On the one hand, this hinders its development, but the European Commission's report on volunteering states that "the increasing legislative burden can impede volunteering by the accumulation of rules and laws applying to the voluntary sector". (*Volunteering in The European Union, Final Report 2010, 2010*) A positive factor is that the law can hardly hinder voluntary initiatives and activities. As the Bulgarian Red Cross Act stipulates, "State institutions in the Republic of Bulgaria and abroad, commercial companies and citizens are obliged to assist the Bulgarian Red Cross in carrying out its tasks." (*Bulgarian Red Cross Act*).

The above statements lead to the conclusion the status of volunteers, as well as their rights and obligations, have not been established by law or officially recognized. However, there is an existing legal framework for volunteering that has not been further developed. In 2006, a bill on volunteering was drafted by various non-profit organizations, including the Bulgarian Red Cross, the National Alliance for Volunteer Action (NAVA), the Tulip Foundation and the Bulgarian Center for Not-For-Profit Law (BCNL). If ratified, the definition proposed in this legal act on voluntary work will identify volunteering as an activity outside the field of legally regulated employment or service relations that is performed by a natural person of their own accord for non-profit legal entities, local or state bodies without remuneration. The lack of such a law determines the controversial opinions of society on the topic and the low interest in participating in voluntary campaigns and actions by the citizens, and also creates various obstacles for the institutions and non-governmental organizations whose main work involves volunteer resources.

The non-governmental and voluntary sector needs to adopt a law that regulates volunteering as a public phenomenon and provides for a clear definition and the legal status of organized volunteering in the country (*Study of the Voluntary Sector in Bulgaria, 2002*)

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main **purpose** of the present study is to examine the opinion of volunteers and identify the interaction of the social environment with volunteering as well as the main factors that affect the volunteer resource, through a survey conducted among the public. The **subject** of this study are the opportunities provided by volunteer work and the realization of volunteers in the volunteer sector in Bulgaria. The **object** of the study are the voluntary activities in the country, implemented mainly by the non-governmental sector and spontaneously formed informal groups. The scope of the survey includes 668 respondents from all over the country, 294 (44%) of whom self-identify as active volunteers. The research method is a standardized survey.

## 3. RESULTS

The conducted survey is the grounds for drawing interesting conclusions about the groups of people with whom active volunteers would work and those who have left the volunteer system or have yet to enter it. There was no significant difference in the responses of the two groups of volunteers, which is indicative that the experience in this case is not significant. Over 60% of all volunteers prefer to work with children from vulnerable groups, including children with and without disabilities, and children who have been victims of violence and trafficking. The share of volunteers who prefer to work with elderly people placed in institutions and using social services is also high - approximately 45%. The lowest share is of volunteers who would work with minority groups. In modern society,

volunteers must adhere to ethical norms, codes and principles that deter them from discriminating, bias and behaviors that undermine the person or organization to which they belong. NGOs have introduced their own codes of ethics and codes of conduct, but the lack of a legal framework obstructs the transparency and nature of volunteering. According to Eurobarometer data from 2019, discrimination against Roma society is among the most widespread in Bulgaria - 38%. The analysis of the survey shows that 31.3% of active volunteers would work with minority groups, while only 16% of inactive volunteers would work with this group of people. (<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer>)

The main volunteer activity, which accounted for a little over 75% of the respondents' answers, was "assisting victims of disasters, accidents and catastrophes". It is normal and understandable for society to associate the response with volunteering on a large scale, since studying the need for a volunteer resource over the years, it turned out there is always the most significant need for it during a crisis. Ever since the establishment of the first volunteer organizations that aimed at helping and supporting the wounded in military conflict until the present day, with the emergence of a new strain of coronavirus and the pandemic nature of the disease, leading to a shortage of medical staff and a clear need for volunteer resources and the problem with the lack of regulation by law. Approximately 67% of the respondents agreed on their answers - "donation of money, clothes, food" and "support and advocacy for various causes". The listed activities, depending on the nature of the work, may be interrelated with the goals they support. Under certain conditions, they could also be considered volunteering, but in a broad sense they differ from the notion of voluntary work. Depending on the cause and the activity of a person participating in it, we can accept the support and advocacy for volunteering. The donation, on the other hand, is rather different from volunteering, as it is a manifestation of a single humanitarian or so-called voluntary act.

According to 386 respondents, or 57.8%, "blood donation" is considered to be another form of volunteering. The need for blood donation and blood donors and its frequent connection with the needs of relatives, the promotion of donation through various information campaigns and media activity promote it as a personal free-willed act. However, regular blood donation and participation in organized actions are defined as volunteering.

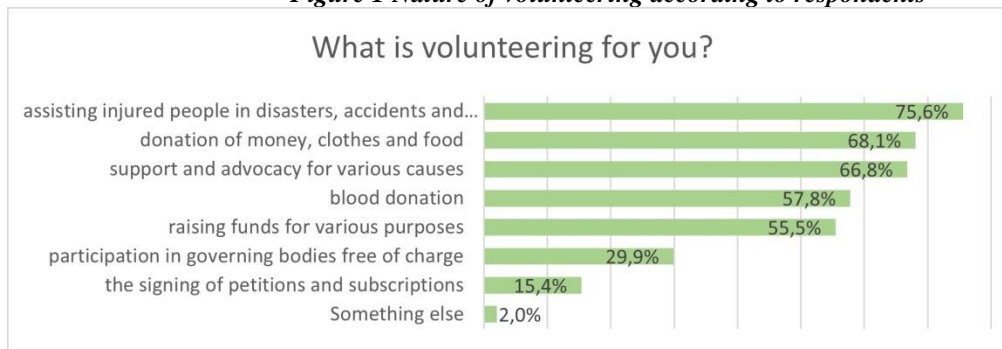
"Volunteering is raising funds for various purposes" is the opinion of 55.5% of respondents. If we consider it as part of a voluntary activity, it must be clearly formulated, and the activity must be as "transparent" as possible. It is a fact that many volunteers participate or are initiators of fundraising and charitable actions for fundraising, but the purposes for which the funds are necessarily must be for the benefit of a specific person in need or an activity for the benefit of society.

"Participation in governing bodies free of charge" is the answer of approximately 1/3 of the respondents - 29.9%. We tend to classify this activity as volunteering, as there are various structures, governmental and non-governmental organizations that actively work with volunteers and in which the volunteers play a significant role, including their management and decision-making. An example of this is the Bulgarian Red Cross, an organization with a clearly defined structure, led mainly by volunteers. The chair person, vice-chair persons, members of the National and Regional Councils and other structures of the Bulgarian Red Cross are all volunteers – members of society from various fields of work, who are the basis of the organization's management and decision-making. The answer of the respondents corresponds to the notions of volunteering - a natural person working for an organization who provides their competencies, knowledge and skills completely free of charge.

Only 103 people (15.4%) define "signing petitions and appeals" as volunteering. This is because the one-time support of a cause is willful, but not voluntary, so we classify this activity as a free-willed act, but it cannot be considered as volunteering. Despite the small percentage of responses, it is significant that one in six does not distinguish between the concepts of "volunteering" and "voluntary act".

Respondents were given the opportunity to add additional answers. One of them can be derived as a definition of volunteering - "Volunteering is everything that is in service of society and the common good, for which no material or any benefits are received" or, in other words, volunteering is the active gratuitous participation of an individual or group of people in activities providing specific support.

*Figure 1 Nature of volunteering according to respondents*



According to the participants in the survey, the main reason for the small number of volunteers in the country is that "people are alienated, there is no empathy" - 63.9%. We live in a time when technology is at the heart of everything, even of communication between people. In Bulgaria, several successful online platforms have been developed to connect volunteers with various organizations and causes, but observations from the experience show that they are active and useful only in larger cities. 360 (53.9%) of the respondents indicated the lack of mechanisms for connecting those in need and those willing to help as a significant factor hindering the participation of more volunteers. The creation of a unified platform for volunteering and its promotion would lead to an increase in the country's volunteering capacity, but this should be done in stages and regulated by various laws and policies, which are presumably lacking.

The answers emphasize two specific points - the importance of the time spent on unpaid work and the contribution of the individual to society. 44.2% of the respondents indicated as a negative factor for volunteering the lack of understanding of the usefulness of each individual. Underestimation of personal qualities and willingness to help without expecting any retribution for it plays an important role in motivating the individual as well as for the development, promotion and active involvement in volunteer life on the other, especially among young people. Considering volunteering a waste of time is a particularly strong factor, cited by 204 (30.5%) respondents between the ages of 15 and 69. For modern society, every minute is important, because everyone's main goal is to ensure that time spent on some activity brings profit. However, people do not assume that the time spent on volunteering is much more valuable and brings much greater benefits for the volunteer themselves. They gain experience and knowledge that can later be applied in their daily life or work, and through which they develop their personal qualities and skills, and this can be perceived as a strong personal incentive and contribution.

The lack of rules or legal framework for the protection and promotion of volunteering is an important factor for the development of volunteering in the country according to 261 (39.1%) respondents. Unregulated volunteering leads to chaos and confusion for volunteers, who in turn can make mistakes or abuse the trust vested in them.

An important role for the development of volunteering in Bulgaria is played by the institutions. The school was singled out with the highest value, but no less important with equal values (38%) were the family and the media, defined as not supporting the volunteering spirit. Hence, there is a significant decrease in the volunteers' motivation, and this leads to distancing from the causes and loss of volunteer spirit. This upholds the claims that a supportive environment is needed for volunteers to actively and fully participate in their altruistic life. An important role is played by the institutions for the development of volunteering in Bulgaria. The school was singled out with the highest value, but no less important with the same values (38%) were the family and the media, defined as not supporting the volunteer spirit. In this way, there is a significant decrease in the motivation of volunteers and leads to distance from the causes and loss of volunteer spirit. This confirms the claims that a supportive environment is needed for volunteers to actively and fully participate in their altruistic life.

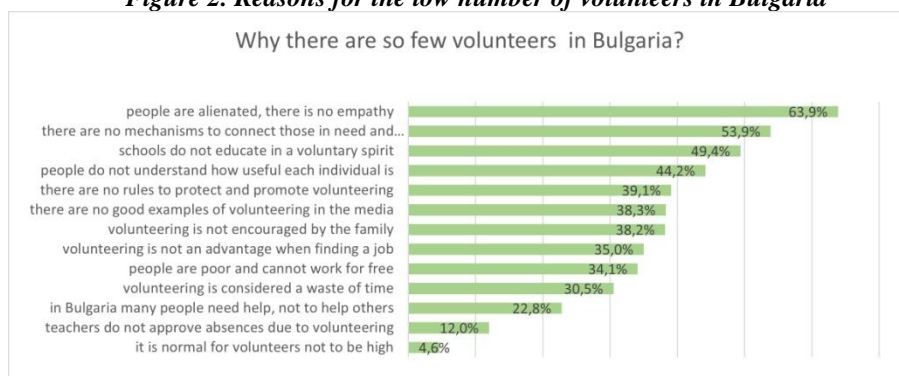
Another significant factor for the challenges of volunteering in Bulgaria is measured by the following answer - "volunteering is not an advantage in finding a job." 234 (35%) of the respondents indicate the impossibility to start a career although possessing previous volunteer experience. Unfortunately, public perception, including that of employers, is that people who volunteer put some of their resources and potential into those activities, and so they will not be fully committed to their professional responsibilities. These are extremely wrong conclusions and notions, which arise mainly from the lack of sufficient information in society.

Socio-economic factors have relatively little weight in relation to the challenges that volunteering faces. According to 22.8% of the respondents, in Bulgaria many people need to be helped, not to help others, and 34.1% consider poverty as an obstacle to pro bono work. A report on the socio-economic development of Bulgaria from 2018 states that poverty and social exclusion continue to pose serious challenges to Bulgarian society. The existing economic

growth is not inclusive enough to help reduce social inequalities. This is a good reason to believe that there are really many people in need, but there is also a tendency for them to show more compassion and support and to participate in volunteer initiatives. (*Socio-economic Development of Bulgaria 2007-2017, 2018*)

Another negative factor from the analysis of the survey is highlighted in the response of 12% of respondents, which is that "teachers do not approve of being absence from school/university in order to participate in volunteer initiatives." Disapproval or lack of support from the educational institution can in itself play a key role in the level volunteer motivation. 4.6% of respondents mentioned that a low percentage of volunteers was normally to be expected. This shows that part of society does not understand the need and demand for volunteer resources.

**Figure 2. Reasons for the low number of volunteers in Bulgaria**



The impact of the external social environment on volunteering and directly on volunteers is one of the biggest challenges we face. If there is a lack of a supportive environment - family, relatives and friends - then a volunteer almost always stops being one due to the negative influence of his environment. Support is a key factor for the development of volunteer potential in people, so we monitor the attitude of society towards volunteers.

Most respondents indicated a positive impact on the social environment through positive reactions - receiving congratulations (35.4%), encouragement (25.2%) and admiration (16%) are the predominant answers. This gives hope that in the future the manifestation of a voluntary act will be increasingly tolerated, and people will be "infected" with good. First-person stories about volunteering are also at the forefront of the positive effect and development. 94 (32%) of the participants in the survey indicated that their social environment is interested and wants to get involved in volunteer initiatives.

Although the respondents indicated mostly positive attitudes, the percentage of negative reactions and the impact of the social environment on the volunteers is worrying. One of the most common negative reactions to volunteers is neglect - 10.2%, both to them personally and to the volunteer initiative in which they participate. Others have shared that the voluntary act for their environment is a manifestation of naivety - 18.7% and that those in need of volunteer resources use volunteers for personal gain - 9.9%. The most prominent result is that 30.6% or 90 of the respondents prefer not to share with friends and family information about their volunteer activities. A probable reason for this is that they are aware of the attitude of people in their social environment towards volunteering and do not want to risk their involvement in conflict situations or prefer not to advertise their volunteering action. The impact of the social environment on the volunteers plays a significant role for their motivation to get involved in socially significant volunteer initiatives, but there is always a set of factors that determine the duration, dedication and altruistic nature of volunteers. It depends on whether a person would make a single voluntary act or a series of such in their life as a volunteer.

#### 4. OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION

The research in this report has been compiled and analyzed on the basis of the answers submitted by volunteers who have participated in various volunteer initiatives and structures in Bulgaria or have, in some way, been engaged with the volunteer sector in the country. Based on the collected and processed information, several main conclusions can be drawn.

The volunteer community has a clear position in society and understands the nature and importance of volunteering due to the accumulation of volunteer experience over the years. For the respondents, the definition of volunteering was associated with a person's dedication and willingness to perform actions for the benefit of society without financial gain while neglecting their own interests and showing altruistic motives.

Society is increasingly defining and distinguishing voluntary initiatives from the single manifestation of a voluntary act and understands its meaning; however, it adheres to a standardized and somewhat unrealistic model. The hectic

daily life of each individual, resulting from socio-economic factors, leads to alienation, lack of empathy and selfishness in the Bulgarian society.

The main factors hindering the active involvement in volunteering initiatives are related to the lack of a legal framework, and to the educational or work environment which do not support volunteering and further complicate the implementation of volunteering initiatives. The lack of mechanisms and a supportive environment in the institutions is also an obstacle to the implementation of voluntary activities.

Other factors are affected by the personal perceptions of society. The influence of public opinion is a key factor for the development of the voluntary sector in the country. A large percentage of volunteers do not share their volunteer work, feeling insecure about the reaction of the other party. The support of specialists in this field, aimed at future and current volunteers, will make them more open to others, more empathetic and willing to help.

In conclusion, volunteering in Bulgaria is developing gradually. A generation of volunteers is growing up who appreciate the worth of the voluntary act both for themselves and for society.

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