EU TACSO 3 Meeting Notes

Volunteering in the Western Balkans and Türkiye: an agenda for Action

Introduction

These meeting notes are based on the outcomes of a People-to-People event organised by the EU TACSO 3 project in Tirana, Albania on 28-29 March 2023. The aim of the event was to "promote volunteering as a means of social and economic development in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, and to address challenges related to recognition, support, and sustainability."

The event gathered 34 participants from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*[1], Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye. Please refer to the enclosed List of Participants P2P Volunteers Event March 28-29, 2023 Tirana AL.

An enabling environment for volunteering is one of the specific objectives of DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region 2021-2027[2]. It is part of the conducive environment pillar and specifically states that there should be enabling policies and a legal environment to provide incentives and facilitate volunteering. Elements of this enabling environment for volunteering include a legal framework that enables, not inhibits, volunteering, as well as properly resourced Government volunteering strategies and programmes.

Participants and contributors were brought together who had a range of experience and perspectives, from civil society, governments, and academia in the region and in the EU.

This meeting note summarises the main points that arose during the event by theme rather than by a strict sequence of the agenda.

Volunteering concepts and trends

Recent Europe-wide research on volunteering (supported by the Council of Europe and EU) among young people has identified some key trends. Young people are preferring informal/unorganised volunteering rather than formal/organised volunteering. There is a stronger willingness to volunteer for a cause rather than for an organisation. Volunteering is often periodic, with volunteers being active on a particular cause for a short period, and then moving to another cause.

There is no clear distinction between the concepts/terms of 'activism' and 'volunteering'. 'Activism' tends to have political connotations, while volunteering is more neutral, politically. However, there is no clear distinction between the types of activities that could be considered 'activism' or 'volunteering'.

A useful definition of volunteering provided by the EU:

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[1] "Kosovo*"This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

[2] Specific Objective 1.10 "The policies and legal environment provide incentives and facilitate volunteering and employment in CSOs", in DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the Western Balkans and Turkey https://tacso.eu/eu-civil-society-guidelines/

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"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 of 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"[3]

There are challenges related to the internal dynamics of volunteering. Young people increasingly do not trust organisations; in Türkiye especially, there is concern that volunteering for specific causes or organisations might negatively affect career prospects because of the political climate, and people do not want to get drawn into a polarised discussion.

People most often volunteer when contacted personally by someone they know. Finding people to volunteer is faced with a paradox; those with large social networks are more likely to be offered volunteer opportunities but have less time. Those will small networks have more time but are less likely to be contacted to volunteer.

There are two key capacity constraints facing volunteering. The first is the capacity of organisations to host volunteers, including all that entails – contacting, recruiting, selection, training and deployment, monitoring and evaluation. The second is the interest and aptitude of people to volunteer or 'the capacity' to volunteer. Civic education in schools is a key part of the puzzle required to encourage more volunteering.

There are some critical demographic and other trends that have a macro effect on volunteering. The population in many parts of Europe is ageing – this means skilled volunteers can be available for longer, but there may also be fewer young volunteers. The populations are more diverse and move location more frequently – 'rootedness' in a location is a factor that supports volunteering.

Economic crises have reduced the amount of money available and increased the demand for support. Digitalisation enables people to self-organise through social media for ad hoc volunteer actions, and social media makes everyone a potential advocate. Yet volunteer-based civil society organisations have a unique status that can claim to represent constituencies – this needs to be protected and not forgotten among the voices on social media. Populism and shrinking civic space both present challenges.

Institutional framework

When thinking about what institutional framework is appropriate, it is helpful to think about the different ways in which volunteering takes place, including episodic event-based volunteering, responding to disasters, or more continuously. Each of these requires different forms of support from a 'volunteering ecosystem'.

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[3] COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS - Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Crossborder Voluntary Activities in the EU
https://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/doc1311_en.pdf

The image above is courtesy of the Centre for European Volunteering www.europeanvolunteercentre.org – Thank You!

Another approach to framing the enabling environment for volunteering is to see three factors:
- **Enabling environment:** Policies, laws and other key legal instruments that define, regulate, protect and/or incentivize voluntary action.
- **Operational Structures:** Volunteer schemes, volunteer-involving organisations, agencies that support volunteering, networks and coordinating bodies such as volunteer centres, umbrella organisations, and related networks.
- **Implementation Capacities:** Key resources that support volunteering such as funding mechanisms, institutionalised consultation/mechanism with policy makers, mechanisms to collect and share data and good practice standards.

Legal frameworks and national policies

Across Europe, there are indicative preferences for legislation on volunteering. In northern/western Europe, there is a preference for lighter, or no specific legislation on volunteering. While eastern and southern European countries tend to go for more specific legislation. This preference is rooted in cultural and legal traditions. Where there is no specific legislation, countries can opt for a 'charter' on volunteering to set out roles, obligations and expectations of government and civil society.

The arguments against legislation include:

- An increased administrative burden for CSOs can be discouraging,
- Can be a basis for inspections and threats, and
- Can lead to a loss of benefits.

Arguments supporting legislation include:

- Volunteers treated similarly to paid employees in terms of their rights and obligations,
- Protection from liability,
- Access to some incentives for volunteers, such as public transport, libraries and other public services, and
- Formally place volunteers as part of a disaster response mechanism

Where legislation is needed, it should include:

- Protection for the freedom to volunteer for everyone, including people potentially at risk (without coercion),
- Volunteers treated equally across the EU and Member States,
- Social protection for volunteers, including adequate insurance and reimbursement of expenses,
- Protect volunteers from not losing social security benefits,
- Reimbursement of expenses not to be taxed,
- Enabling visas and travel,
- Criminal record checks when absolutely necessary, and
- Validation of learning – though volunteering is not equal to traineeships.

The current legal frameworks across the region are not effective. They tend to over-regulate and do not take into consideration the nature of CSOs. There are inconsistencies and a lack of clarity in the involvement of volunteers, and laws entail a lot of bureaucratic requirements resulting in a lack of application.

The legislative frameworks of the countries do not constitute a strategic approach for regulating, facilitating and stimulating both employment and volunteering in CSOs (only in few countries have dedicated strategies for the development of volunteering).

When developing new laws, the first step should be to examine all legislation that affects volunteering (positively and negatively). The range of legislation that affects volunteering includes laws on employment, tax, education, association/CSOs, social security, health insurance, etc. Any new law on volunteering needs to ensure that there are no contradictions with existing laws. For example, laws on employment might include a requirement for a minimum wage – which might then prevent volunteering from taking place in certain settings.

Initiatives to revise both policy and law on volunteering are underway in Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia and Kosovo.

Public policy challenges:

The primary public policy challenge for volunteering is to convince Governments that volunteering deserves government attention. Stalled legislative processes, for example, in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia, suggest that it is a low priority.

The campaign from 20 years ago (linked to International Year of Volunteers 2001) to demonstrate the economic value of volunteering was reductive and potentially counterproductive. Volunteering offers much more than an economic contribution; at the same time, presenting volunteering as an economic

contribution risks volunteering activities being seen as cut-price services. Similarly, presenting volunteering as only a training opportunity for young people does not sufficiently promote its value.

Key messages for governments on the value of volunteering will need to be developed – and messages will vary depending on the nature and values of each government. A risk for volunteering is to be associated with 'activism'. While there is no clearly defined separation between volunteering and activism, the term 'activism' is more politically loaded and is likely to be seen negatively by many governments in the region – especially those with authoritarian tendencies.

Volunteering has value for:

- Individuals, communities, the economy and society at large as one of the most visible expressions of solidarity,
- The promotion and facilitation of social inclusion, building social capital and producing a transformative effect on society,
- The development of a thriving civil society that can offer creative and innovative solutions to common challenges,
- Economic growth, as such deserves specific and targeted measurement in terms of both economic and social capital.

In some European countries (EU Member States such as Hungary), volunteering and community action has been co-opted by ruling parties for party political purposes. There is a risk that promoting volunteering in similarly aligned countries might lead to a similar outcome.

Volunteering in emergencies

Volunteering is critical in emergencies. It is a way of both providing large numbers of people to deliver support and services in a time of crisis and also of channelling people's concern and wish to help. During Covid lockdowns, Red Cross volunteers provided assistance to elderly and vulnerable people isolated in their homes, bringing essential food and non-food items; helped with transport to hospitals and transport for access to vaccines when they came available.

Volunteer action in response to an Earthquake in Albania in 2019 was critical for assessing entitlements and delivering assistance to those made homeless or with damaged homes.

In the current earthquake response in Türkiye, many civil society organisations supported by volunteers are providing assistance. Examples include a mobile library/school room which gives a safe space for children to learn.

Many questions are raised by volunteering in emergencies. These include:

- What level of preparedness is appropriate? How to prepare and train many people very quickly in the event of an emergency? How to maintain skills and funding when there are no emergencies?
- To what extent can/should civil society organisations coordinate and work alongside governments in situations where governments are seeking to control and limit access? To what extent can they legitimately work independently of the government in disaster situations?
- How can potential volunteers be mobilised quickly? How to train and deploy them, and at the same time ensure that appropriate safeguards and safeguarding measures are in place?

Researching volunteering

Data and statistics on volunteering are helpful as a part of advocacy and policy efforts – the extent of volunteering and evidence of its contribution to society is helpful in support of campaigns to raise the profile and political importance of volunteering.

However, counting volunteering can be administratively cumbersome and unnecessarily formal. Efforts have been made to provide an economic value of volunteering, notably by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). These count as the equivalent economic value of labour, but do not account for the added value of the experience of volunteering for the volunteer. Both North Macedonia and Montenegro have been involved in piloting the application of this methodology.

There is a campaign to encourage Eurostat to include statistics on volunteering as part of the standard set of statistics for Member States, supported by a standard methodology. However, the EU does not see volunteering as within its scope of competence.

The Centre for European Volunteering is developing a tool to measure the impact of volunteering, called V-Calc. This tool will be available at the end of this year/beginning of 2024. And will be accompanied by training for volunteer managers.

Funding and support opportunities

The majority of volunteering activities in Europe are not funded by government or EU grants, but by local sources of funding. This includes, for example, donations from communities, and companies and trading of merchandise (such as t-shirts). Selling services is also an option. This happens in cases where companies want to support employee volunteering, so they finance CSOs to organise volunteering activities.

Other private sources of funding include membership fees and subscriptions, which is common in Europe.

'Voluntourism' is also an opportunity to generate revenues; volunteers can pay for opportunities to participate in activities related to, for example, the environment, and nature (for example: making hiking paths). Voluntourism should *not* be organised to provide services for support to vulnerable people or children.

Institutional donors do not often have funding specifically for volunteering, but they do have funding for the *impacts* of volunteering. And so it is important to frame project proposals in terms of the impact of volunteering work.

The main source of EU funding for volunteering is the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). Formerly, Erasmus+ had support for volunteering, but this was transferred to the ESC. Serbia, North Macedonia and Turkey have local agencies to which CSOs can apply for funding. The other countries in the region have to apply directly to Brussels. European Solidarity Corps is intended, however, for young people. There is a campaign to enlarge ESC funding to cover adults and older volunteers.

Erasmus+, while it does not have opportunities to support volunteering as such, its Key Action 1 supports lifelong learning. This line can be used to support, for example, volunteer managers' learning, and exchange opportunities, and in some cases, volunteers can even be considered adult learners. This funding line can be used to support adults (rather than young people).

Volunteering can be considered as match-funding for grants where financial participation from the applicant is required. There are existing methodologies on how to calculate the value of volunteer time for this purpose from the EU and Council of Europe.

Agenda for Action, ideas for recommendations

Policy, strategy and legal framework:

Overall approach

- Governments should be encouraged to formulate policies on volunteering, which should articulate what they want to achieve in relation to volunteering; e.g., more people engaged in volunteering, stronger communities, early introduction to volunteering through schools, etc.
- The policy should be accompanied by a strategy which sets out *how* the policy goals will be achieved. This should include a review of current laws and identification of any changes needed to existing laws and secondary legislation; a description of the purpose of any proposed new legislation, the institutional responsibilities required, including any new public functions; budget requirements, timeframe and mechanisms for monitoring progress.
- The third stage is to amend existing laws and introduce new legislation (new legislation should not be introduced unless the previous steps have been carried out first).

About the law:

- law should be designed to adapt to the needs of the country, there are some other models, e.g., secondary legislation which regulates volunteer work,
- should be a framework for volunteering but not so much control, so not to focus on regulating volunteering but on encouraging and facilitating it,
- incentives such as tax-free expenses, insurance, free public transport, access to libraries, recognising volunteering work as an asset or contribution, and additional value when applying for a job or university place.

Donors, EU, governments and supporters of volunteering

- Donors should ensure that volunteering can be used as an in-kind contribution for match-funding grants. And that there is no requirement for an audit of the volunteer contribution component.
- Governments/EU should review public procurement rules to create opportunities for funding volunteer services/activities without compulsory competitive tendering. This can enable small-scale volunteer activities which benefit communities (such as one-off gardening activities in parks, mural painting, etc.) to be publicly funded.
- Governments can offer public properties, and office spaces, free or at reduced rent for CSOs that need space for their activities.
- Governments should reinforce/redefine, in close consultation and cooperation with the civil sector, the criteria on who gets the funding and how it is allocated to ensure fair distribution based on performance.
- Cooperate with the local self-government to map out available abandoned/unused local public spaces for revitalisation.
- Public enterprises could offer their services to support volunteering actions.
- Governments can review their spending on CSOs and volunteering, and in particular look at how the effects of public funding can be amplified through funding volunteer programmes.
- Governments can follow the example of Montenegro in providing match-funding required for EU grants – this increases the amounts of EU funds that come to the country and support civil society and volunteering.

What CSOs can do to support volunteering

How to appeal to potential volunteers

- Discussing topics around voluntarism - reaching a shared understanding between the CSO and volunteers, informing them on all the important policies, principles etc.,
- Offering capacity development opportunities to develop specific sets of skills/competencies needed to effectively volunteer, reach and work with specific target groups or interventions (cultural heritage, environment, etc.),
- Informing them of their rights, potential, recognition, and reward, and
- Use language/narrative that fits targeted volunteers.

Capacities required for effective management of volunteering

- a strategic plan that sets out the main objectives,
- clearly articulated principles and procedures,
- policies on gender equality; data protection; child protection; parent/guardian's consent; safety policy,
- Communication strategies,
- Understanding of and activities to support the volunteer cycle: from promotion, recruitment, inclusion, active participation, mentoring, closure & visibility (having a recommendation letter, certificate, thank you note),
- Monitoring & Evaluation -> the whole process from strategic planning to the end of the process,
- Setting up and using a volunteer management platform/database -> not only for specific interventions/ activities but in general in the work of a CSO,
- Making visible the results, and the impact of volunteering and reporting not only to donors but also to national agencies or similar, and
- Ability to apply for grants.

CSOs can raise further funding for volunteering:

- Crowdfunding, use existing national and international crowdfunding platforms to fundraise,
- Cooperate with businesses: Liaise with businesses that have Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) - corporate volunteering policy. Explore opportunities to recruit their employees in volunteering actions and to get funds as part of their community development strategies.
- Check the legislation in your country for tax incentives for donating to non-profits and the Labour Law. Reach out to corporate foundations for support.
- European Solidarity Corps opportunities
- Erasmus+ opportunities for supporting life-long learning.

Sources for further information

Resources

Centre for European Volunteering toolkits
https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/toolkits

Calculating the value of volunteer time for match-funding purposes:
https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/volunteer-time-recognition

ILO counting volunteer time:
https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_167639/lang--en/index.htm

European Solidarity Corps:
https://europeansolidaritycorps.net/

Erasmus+
https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/

Participants and Contributors

EU Delegation to Albania Albania | EEAS Website (europa.eu)

Partners Albania Partners Albania for Change and Development – Partnerët Shqipëri për Ndryshim dhe Zhvillim

Red Cross of Albania www.kksh.org.al

Beyond Barriers Albania http://www.beyondbarriers.org/

Caritas Albania Albania - Caritas

Volonteurope https://volonteurope.eu/

Centre for European Volunteering www.europeanvolunteercentre.org

Red Cross of Bosnia and Herzegovina www.rcsbh.org

Kosovar Civil Society Foundation Kosovar Civil Society Foundation (KCSF) - Toka : Toka (toka-ks.org)

Dokufest Kosovo https://www.dokufest.com/

NGO TOKA Mission - Toka : Toka (toka-ks.org)

Red Cross of Montenegro https://ckcg.me/

Association for Democratic Prosperity – ZID Asocijacija za demokratski prosperitet - ZID

Ministry of Public Administration: Directorate for Strategic Planning, International Cooperation and IPA funds, Government of Montenegro https://www.gov.me/mju/nvo Ministarstvo javne uprave (www.gov.me)

Konekt Konekt

Youth Coalition SEGA Prilep Дома (segaorg.mk)

Youth Cultural Cenetr Bitola (3) Mladinski Kulturen Centar - Bitola/Youth Cultural Center - Bitola | Bitola | Facebook

National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility North Macedonia http://na.org.mk/Home/Index

National Youth Council Serbia https://koms.rs/pocetna/

Istanbul Bilgi University, Centre for Civil Society Studies, http://stcm.bilgi.org.tr/english/

Education Volunteers Foundation of Türkiye (at the P2P event representing National Volunteering Committee) Home page (tegv.org)

Union of Municipalities, Türkiye www.tbb.gov.tr

Ministry of EU Affairs, Türkiye MINISTRY FOR EU AFFAIRS - Republic of Türkiye (ab.gov.tr)