

II. SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY IN COVID-19 TIME*Aygul Khabirova, Katarzyna Lipska, Patrycja Bartosiewicz-Kosiba, Emilia Kijanka***COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of foreign volunteers in Poland****Introduction**

In the first quarter of 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 virus officially reached Poland. The first case of infection with this coronavirus was reported on March 4. The first restrictions were introduced on March 10. Initially, the organization of mass events was forbidden, and two days later nurseries, kindergartens, schools, universities and cultural institutions were closed. On March 15, a cordon was introduced at the borders of Poland, which significantly limited international traffic. Gradually, more orders and bans were introduced, including a ban on access to parks and forests. Many areas of daily life were drastically changed overnight. The general atmosphere in the country made many people feel panicky fear of getting sick, but there were also people who completely downplayed the problem and did not observe any restrictions. It seemed that young people who came to Poland to work as volunteers were in a difficult situation and the pandemic surprised them far from their loved ones. What is more, many institutions in which they helped were suddenly closed. The question arose how they coped with the new conditions and what additional help they needed. In order to answer these questions, interviews were conducted with volunteers of the European Solidarity Corps.

The essence of volunteering

The sources of volunteerism in Western culture should be seen in the idea of philanthropy and charity. The first is the heritage of ancient Greek and Roman societies, and the second has Christian roots (M. Górecki, 1999). Solidarity and mutual aid are immanent features of civilization and societies, hence volunteering is inseparable from the history of mankind (Klimaszewska, 2005).

The etymology of the word volunteering is derived from the Latin tradition, in which *voluntas* means "good will". Volunteering is an activity / work undertaken by a few and carried out with good will (Leszczyński, 2012). The definition of volunteering in the broad sense means the contribution of individuals to altruistic, unpaid, not professional and conscious work for the benefit of others, serving the common good or local society (Górecki, 1999). A volunteer was once mainly perceived as: a social

worker, philanthropist or altruist, was given its modern meaning in 1920 by Pierre Ceresole, the creator of the Service Civil Volontaire (Bertrand, 2009). He appointed a team of volunteers which was a milestone in the history of international volunteering (Gillette, 1968).

The motivation to undertake voluntary activities, in accordance with the classic concept of Abraham Maslow, is “satisfying the need for self-respect, which leads to a sense of self-confidence, value, strength, ability and being up to the task, to the feeling that you are useful and needed in the world.” (Maslow, 2018, p. 85). According to the theory of self-determination the motivation of volunteers arises from the human nature and goals (Ryan and Deci, 2000a, Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2008; Ryan and Deci, 2000b). Internal motivation arises from the need to feel pleasure, while external motivation is stimulated by benefits coming from the outside (Ryan and Deci, 2000a, p. 55). M. Wyszynska (2008) divides the benefits obtained by a volunteer into material and non-material ones, including: increasing the social position, improving one’s own image, and coping with one’s emotions and moods. Karyłowski (1982) distinguished two types of motivation underlying altruism. Endocentric motivation is the tendency to help others in order to improve your own well-being and increase your self-esteem and exocentric motivation is the tendency to help others in order to improve their well-being, in particular to meet their needs. “The power of volunteerism lies in the personal and motivational resources of individual people, their willingness to help others” (Roguska, 2010).

Involvement in volunteering allows for comprehensive benefits, including: social approval, gratitude of the recipients, satisfaction with commitment and the possibility of acquiring new skills, competences, and testing yourself in action (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, 1997). Social activity leads to development of responsibility, creativity, the ability to think independently and cooperation (Krakowiak, 2014). It allows for the development of an individual’s personality, enriching it according to its needs (Wiatrowski, 2000, A. Krajewska, 2009). By building individual human capital, volunteering contributes to the multiplication of social capital (Moroń, 2009).

Transnational youth volunteering in the programmes of the European Union

The European Union appreciates the role of volunteering and promotes its development. It defines it as follows: “Having due regard to the particularities of the situation in each Member State and all forms of volunteering, the term ‘voluntary activities’ refers to all types of voluntary activity, whether formal, non-formal or informal which are undertaken of a person’s own free will, choice and motivation, and is without concern for financial gain. They benefit the individual volunteer, communities and society as a whole. They are also a vehicle for individuals and associations to address human, social, intergenerational or environmental needs and concerns, and are often carried out in support of a non-profit organisation or community-based initiative. Voluntary activities do not replace professional, paid employment opportunities but add value to society” (Council Decision 2010/37/EC).

Volunteering as an activity is closely linked to the overall policy objectives of the European Commission to strengthen and support European citizenship. Volunteering complements the rights granted to citizens and allows them to promote their active attitude and activities for the benefit of society. Transnational volunteering offers opportunities and potential for intercultural learning and the development of a European identity. Moreover, volunteering is an element of social innovation, offering opportunities to develop creativity and make better use of resource scarcity.

Transnational volunteering contributes to the achievement of the key objectives of European Union policies, i.e. social inclusion, employment, education, skills development and citizenship. It affects the development of human and social capital, constituting an important element of social cohesion, and the group of volunteers is an important resource in the economy and society.

European Union in cooperation with Member States promotes transnational volunteering and contributes to the mobility and intercultural learning of its citizens and reinforces their European identity.

Volunteering in the youth sector has a long history. In 1996 the European Commission launched a pilot action initiating a European Voluntary Service for Young People (EVS). The pilot action was based on two basic concepts:

- The promotion of voluntary service as an effective way of providing complementary educational and training opportunities to young people;
- The stimulation of the local development projects.

Launching the pilot action, Mrs. Edith Cresson, then Commissioner responsible for Education, Training and Youth, stressed the opportunities offered by the scheme for reinforcing European solidarity: "Europe is not just about high-level meetings. Grass roots activities are just as important to European construction. Young volunteers will have the chance to get involved in such activities, exchange ideas and experiences, and contribute their enthusiasm and creativity. They can help to lay the foundations for the future. In short, they can take part in the process as active citizens"¹.

Following an initial pilot project, involving some 2,500 young people, the Commission expanded the action further and established the "European Voluntary Service for Young People" program (Decision No. 168/98/EC).

Then EVS was included in the "YOUTH" program (Decision No. 1031/2000/CE), which operated in 2000-2006. In the next perspective, EVS was in the "Youth in Action" program (Decision No. 1719/2006/EC). The European Voluntary Service was one of the key activities in these programs - the so-called Action 2. It was aimed at developing solidarity and tolerance by means of voluntary activities abroad to the benefit of local communities.

Since 2014, youth volunteering has become part of the Erasmus+ Program (REGULATION (EU) No. 1288/2013) under the Key Action 1 - mobility of individuals. This action supports mobility of learners and staff to undertake a learning and / or professional experience in another country (Erasmus + Program Guide 2014).

1 <https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/7233-european-voluntary-service-for-young-people> [Accessed 20-10-2020]

In September 2016 the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, during his annual State of the European Union speech, announced a new European Union initiative which creates opportunities for young people to volunteer or work in projects that benefit communities and people around Europe - The European Solidarity Corps. It was officially launched in December 2016 (REGULATION (EU) 2018/1475). The first edition of ESC was operational until the end of 2020 and will be continued in 2021-2027. Over the course of this financial period, the ESC should provide opportunities for hundreds of thousands of young people to engage in solidarity activities across Europe by volunteering, thereby strengthening cohesion, solidarity, democracy and citizenship in Europe, while also responding to societal challenges and strengthening communities, with a particular focus on promoting social inclusion.

The idea of the European Solidarity Corps is to send the volunteers aged 18–30 to another country, providing them with basic means to sustain themselves during their stay (accommodation, food, insurance, travel fares, etc.) The program facilitates volunteering of European volunteers in Europe or all other countries of the world, as well as volunteers from European partner countries that will volunteer in EU countries. The program is meant as a benefit to the volunteer, and not only as a benefit to the people that the volunteer is supposed to work with. Regulations provide that the volunteer cannot occupy a job position that would otherwise be filled by a salaried employee. Volunteers participate in projects that are highly useful, such as working with disabled people or for various NGOs.

Voluntary activities have been entered into “The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027” (2018/C-456/01). The strategy highlights young people’s interest in social activity, including volunteering, but only 8% of young people participate in cross-border activities. The new Strategy emphasizes the extension of activities to practice in the form of, inter alia, internships abroad, promoting the recognition of volunteering experience, validating learning outcomes so that the acquired skills and competences can be recognized in the labor market. Hence, the main activities are: engaging, connecting, and empowering (European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027).

Institutional support for voluntary projects

In Poland the European Solidarity Corps is implemented on the ground by Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE). It is responsible for providing information on the programme, selecting projects to be funded, monitoring and evaluating the programme, supporting applicants and participants, working with other National Agencies and the European Commission, promoting the European Solidarity Corps and sharing success stories and best practice.

FRSE always strongly supports volunteers and involved organisations. Since the beginning of the pandemic the Foundation has kept interested parties informed about the possibilities of operating in the new conditions (<https://eks.org.pl/komunikatynna/>).

On February 27, 2020, the FRSE issued the first announcement in connection with Covid-19. It concerned projects that were yet to start and the possibility of

applying the force majeure clause in connection with the pandemic (Communication FRSE 27-02-2020). On March 16, the FRSE issued a second communiqué. It informed that it would use a flexible approach enabling the implementation of project activities in accordance with the guidelines of the supervisory institutions (the European Commission and the national authority) and within the limits of the applicable legal framework (Communication of the FRSE 16-03-2020). In another communication, the FRSE asked for information on Polish citizens who participate in educational programs and stay outside Poland, so that, if necessary, they could be provided with additional support and the necessary information to be provided to the authorities. The FRSE recommended considering the possibility of immediate return of volunteers to Poland and taking decisions that would reduce the risk of Covid-19 infection by participants.

As a result of a very large number of reports from program beneficiaries regarding force majeure, the FRSE issued a recommendation that defined simplified administrative procedures regarding the principles of project co-financing, when the volunteer decided to return to his country, both when s/he finally shortened the project and when s/he suspended it and planned to return, if the situation allowed it. The rules on which volunteers / organizations could get reimbursement of additional travel costs if they were forced to purchase another ticket to return home were presented (Recommendation of April 2, 2020).

On April 14, 2020, the FRSE published additional information on the scope of Cigna insurance for volunteers, e.g. clarified the issue of reimbursement of the costs of performing diagnostic tests, purchasing masks, and undergoing quarantine.

The communication of 25 May 2020 paved the way for the implementation of volunteering projects virtually and the inclusion of real mobility only when possible.

The volunteer in the project is directly assisted by two organisations - a supporting and a hosting organisation. The supporting organisation is based in volunteer's home country, it helps the volunteer prepare for the experience abroad. The host organisation receives and helps the volunteer in the destination country. The well-being of the volunteers depends on the quality of their work. During the pandemic, organizations faced a new challenge. It was especially important to provide protection against the disease as well as psychological support and to quickly organize a new program of activities.

Methodological assumptions of the research

The main objective of the study was to diagnose how the pandemic affected foreign volunteer projects in Poland, how volunteers and their organisations found themselves in the new situation, what special lessons they learnt, what problems they faced and how they solved them. The results of the research can be used to improve the quality of implemented projects and to prepare and implement further ones in case the pandemic lasts for a long time and organisations face a problem.

The research material was collected using the method of an individual, semi-structured interview. The research sample was selected from volunteers who carried out their projects in different parts of the country, in different organisations. What

the respondents had in common was that they had already been in Poland for 6-8 months and had managed to complete an “on arrival” training in Warsaw. A total of 20 interviews were conducted between May and June 2020. The age group of young people who took part in the survey was 19 – 28 – year-olds. These young people, 30% men and 70% women, came to Poland from different countries (Armenia, Luxembourg, France, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Italy, Turkey). By the time of the interviews, none of the respondents had been ill with Covid 19, had been in contact with an infected person, or were under mandatory quarantine.

Presentation of research results

The vast majority of respondents worked with children and young people before the pandemic, most often in schools and community centres, where they conducted a variety of activities, e.g. art, music, sports, computer and foreign language learning. Volunteers helped carers of disabled children with their daily activities. One of these people, in addition to working with children, also helped at the senior citizens' activity centre. Only one person had a completely different type of job - she worked in the public relations department of her organisation and was in charge of preparing promotional materials, concerts and other events. All interviewees were satisfied with the first part of the project. They emphasised that they got a lot of satisfaction from their work, although sometimes it was difficult for them to implement completely new activities.

For most respondents, the first stage of the pandemic came as a huge surprise. Most of the people interviewed did not expect that the virus would reach Poland and that very strict restrictions would be introduced so quickly. The restrictions seemed exaggerated to them, but they all declared that they complied with them. In the first days of “spring lockdown 2020”, the respondents were left without work. The institutions in which they helped were closed. During the period of compulsory social isolation, most of the respondents suffered from the lack of their previous responsibilities. This period was a time of waiting and uncertainty for them. Most of the respondents shared flats with other volunteers, so they did not feel lonely, they stayed with the same people as before the pandemic. They tried to organise their time together. One of the volunteers who lived in a student house was re-located to another building. She lost her roommate, but as she emphasised she gained extra space and a sense of security. Another volunteer was re-housed from a three-bed room to a different place. The respondent emphasised that her accommodation conditions had improved and she had gained freedom and that she had not lost contact with other volunteers as she often arranged walks with them. One respondent returned to her family home (Western Europe) and continued the project remotely.

The host organisations soon made changes to the stay programme and adapted it to the new conditions. One organisation provided its volunteers with sewing machines, trained them and they sewed masks. Other organisations helped the volunteers to transform their living space into a remote working zone. This allowed the volunteers to stay in touch with the people they had worked with previously. Almost all of them taught foreign language classes online. One respondent continued her creative work and prepared promotional materials for the organisation. As

this was only the beginning of the pandemic volunteers regarded the new tasks as interesting challenges. They learned to use popular Internet platforms as Skype, Zoom, Jitsi Meet, Messenger rooms in education, they learnt about language learning applications and prepared teaching aids themselves. Furthermore, some volunteers have successfully learnt new programs and Internet resources that can make video messages, short educational films, create online games and many other engaging things that can be useful for their projects.

The respondents emphasised that they felt safe and the host organisations took good care of them. One person feared that she would not be well taken care of if she fell ill, she was mainly afraid of communication problems (she was the only one who considered ending the project earlier). Volunteers were in constant contact with their support organisations in their country of origin. They were kept informed about changes in the ESC programme, new opportunities for continuing activities and additional support. Volunteers emphasised the psychological and organisational support they received from mentors and project coordinators, although immediately after the introduction of the restriction on social contact they mainly contacted them online and did not meet face-to-face until late April and early May. The respondents valued, above all, the support they received from their flatmates, i.e. other volunteers. Moreover, contacts with family and old friends helped them a lot during this difficult period. On the other hand, volunteers have found some benefits of isolation and spending time on their own. Lots of them discovered new hobbies and talents, learnt new facts, read interesting books and shared all of these things with other people via blogs and short video reports. Several people mentioned that during the pandemic it was an opportunity to learn Polish. Two people were learning to cook and one volunteer was intensively learning to play the guitar and developing her photography skills. Some of the volunteers noticed that they were more stress-resistant and flexible than they expected.

Volunteers during the pandemic had the opportunity to test themselves in completely new and unexpected conditions. They learned how being cut off from their daily pleasures and social life affected their well-being. Some of them particularly appreciated this self-discovery. The respondents emphasised that by adapting so easily to new conditions and dealing with a difficult situation they became more confident.

The volunteers participating in the study were looking forward to the summer with great hope. Almost all of them were going to take their holidays in the summer and they already had ideas about how they would spend them. Above all, they wanted to travel. They believed that with the coming of summer the situation would improve (this was also the message from the media). As for their plans for the near future (next month), they had no illusions, they knew that they would work remotely. The vast majority planned to stay until the end of the project, believing that they would still return to their institutions and fulfil their tasks.

Conclusions

The study looked at volunteering projects during the first phase of the pandemic and the spring lockdown 2020 introduced in Poland. It turned out that although the projects were not carried out as planned, the volunteers were still in a much better

situation than most of their peers. Although they lost their jobs at the beginning, they did not lose their monthly income, even when they decided to return home and switch to implementing projects remotely. They did not feel that they were losing something important, only that the challenges they faced had changed. They stayed in their teams where they felt good. They were part of a community so they did not feel alone. As young people, they tended not to fear for their health, but rather for their families left behind in the country, but they knew they could take advantage of a new solution introduced in the ESC during the pandemic, namely to come home and continue the project remotely. They themselves decided to stay or go home. Undoubtedly, the welfare of the volunteers during the pandemic was influenced by the care of the host organisations. Each volunteer was cared for by at least two caregivers who had managed to bond with them before their social isolation.

In a situation of restrictions and reducing social contact, when the cultural and educational institutions were closed, hosting organizations changed the tasks for volunteers in order to ensure their physical and psychological safety and still allowed them to act for local community.

The potential cause of worsening of the volunteers' subjective well-being is the isolation and lower frequency of direct social interactions. The sense of belonging is an important factor in shaping pro-social attitudes and behaviours (Lunn, Belton, Lavin, McGowan, & Timmons, 2020). The consequences of self-isolation can lead to serious psychological problems (Brooks et al., 2020). To ensure a sense of security, a volunteer must be given complete information on what to do in a crisis situation. The information communicated must be specific, without any emotional tinge. The research shows the negative impact of tracking news on COVID-19 on well-being, increasing people's anxiety (WHO, 2020). The constant influx of news carrying disturbing news, fueling rumors, is causing fear to grow (Moghanibashi-Mansourieh, 2020). In addition to providing general information on the situation of the country / region and applicable regulations, internal procedures should be developed and implemented regarding emergency situations, e.g. disease, compulsory quarantine.

In the current situation, the good conditions of accommodation are extremely important. On the one hand, it is obvious that it is difficult to live in a confined space with a group of strangers, but, on the other hand, the cohabitants are the greatest support for the volunteers. It seems that the best solution for accommodation is large flats with single rooms with bathrooms.

During the pandemic, it may be difficult to create a volunteer community which is an important element of European volunteering projects. The possibility of sharing opinions and experiences during the required training courses helps to build a sense of community among volunteers, and this leads to an increase in job satisfaction (Costa, Chalip, and Green, 2006). The host and support teams should consider how they can help the young volunteer to integrate with the organisation's staff and other volunteers in conditions of social isolation.

As always, the key to a successful project is close cooperation with the volunteer from the moment of planning the activity to the final evaluation of the project, individual treatment of everyone and sensitivity to their personal needs and expectations.

The study was an attempt to better understand the situation faced by young volunteers working abroad during the outbreak of the pandemic. The obtained results were put into practice. They helped organizations to decide to launch new projects in the framework of the European Solidarity Corps Programme despite the ongoing pandemic and to prepare for its implementation in order to ensure the safety of all stakeholders during the activities and to support the achievement of the objectives. The results of the research can help organizations involved in international youth volunteering to better prepare for crisis situations.

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COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of foreign volunteers in Poland

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and the restrictions introduced on the situation of foreign volunteers who carried out their projects in Poland. The research was conducted between May and June 2020 by means of an individual, semi-structured interview with 20 volunteers of the European Solidarity Corps Programme. The analysis of the results indicated that the volunteers treated the outbreak of the pandemic as another challenge that they had to deal with. They focused on new responsibilities and personal development. They felt safe, were not afraid for their own health, had a stable financial situation and the support of people from the organizations they worked with, other volunteers, family and friends from their country of origin. It was important that they had a choice both in terms of taking on new responsibilities as well as when and how to continue the project.

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Aygul Khabirova, Katarzyna Lipska, Patrycja Bartosiewicz-Kosiba, Emilia Kijanka

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Aygul Khabirova, MA

Education Center ProHarmonia, Kielce, Poland

email: poczta@proharmonia.org

ORCID: 0000-0002-7426-3685

Katarzyna Lipska, MA

Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce

email: lipskakatarzyna@wp.pl

ORCID: 0000-0002-9015-3910

Patrycja Bartosiewicz-Kosiba, MA

Education Center ProHarmonia, Kielce, Poland

email: patrycja.bartosiewicz@proharmonia.org

ORCID: 0000-0002-9541-3734

Emilia Kijanka, MA

School Complex No. 2 in Kielce, Poland

email: emiliakijanka@wp.pl

ORCID: 0000-0001-5172-8948