



“European Partnership for Volunteering” – an opportunity for the Polish EU-Council Presidency

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- *Volunteering has relevance for nearly all EU policy areas. Volunteering contributes to tackling the key challenges faced by the European Union and the Member States.*
- *Volunteer projects between EU countries directly help build a European identity, foster the integration of various culturally diverse European communities and improve mutual perception and understanding between the European nations.*
- *The agenda of the European Year of Volunteering can and should reach beyond the borders of the European Union. Volunteer exchange programmes with countries outside the EU can help bring their societies closer to UE values and standards.*
- *In order to make the best use of the opportunity posed by the overlapping of the Polish Presidency and the European Year of Volunteering, Poland should emphasise the European dimension of volunteer work and propose specific changes to European policies and regulations concerning volunteering that still require reform.*
- *Poland should support the adoption of the Council Conclusions on volunteer work during its Presidency. The Conclusions should highlight three themes: the importance of voluntary work in different EU policy areas, the role of volunteering as soft power, especially in the context of the creation of the European External Action Service and the necessity to develop volunteer work programmes addressed to the countries of the Eastern Partnership. In order to emphasise the importance of volunteering for the process of European integration and for the building of partner relations with other countries, the Conclusions may be called the “European Partnership for Volunteering”.*
- *During the negotiations on the future EU budget, appropriate funding should be allocated for voluntary work.*

During its EU-Council Presidency, Poland should make the most of the fact that 2011 is the European Year of Volunteering. The development of European volunteering within the agenda of the Polish Presidency may bring positive changes in many areas of major importance to Europe’s future, such as coping with demographic change, the European Neighbourhood Policy or strengthening the EU’s *soft power* globally. The Polish Government seems to be aware of this opportunity and plans to highlight this issue during the Presidency.

To paraphrase a well-known saying, the development of volunteering in Europe is too important a matter to be left to the European Commission officials. If the Member State governments – and the Polish Government holding the Presidency in particular – are not involved, the year of volunteering may go largely unnoticed by the general public, as was the case with the previous years dedicated to such issues as innovation or combating social exclusion and poverty. It is even more pertinent, because in view of the many problems and challenges faced by Europe, volunteering seems an issue of relatively little importance. This is the wrong approach.

Volunteering is all around us

Volunteering has relevance for nearly all EU policy areas. Its aims include, but are not limited to, helping others without seeking personal gain. Volunteering contributes to tackling the key challenges the European Union and the Member States face, which include the development of informed civil society, the integration of culturally diverse European societies (thus creating common European identity), building up social capital, and integrating different generations of Europeans through developing intergenerational cooperation. Last but not least, volunteering could help promote EU values and the positive perception of the EU both in its neighbourhood and globally. It can thus become an important instrument of EU public diplomacy and thus improve its *soft power* in international affairs.

The agenda of the European Year of Volunteering can and should reach beyond the borders of the European Union. Volunteer exchange programmes with countries outside the EU can help bring their societies closer to EU values and standards. Today, few will remember that in 2002, on the eve of Poland’s EU accession, the Polish Government, in consultation with a number of Polish NGOs, prepared the so-called *non paper* outlining ideas for the Union’s Eastern policy. One of the proposals was the establishment of the European counterpart of the American Peace Corps, i.e., a publicly-funded programme which would provide a framework for young Europeans to go abroad and engage in unpaid work, contributing to the development of a given country by, e.g., teaching foreign languages or making other uses of their competencies and energy. Now, when Poland is increasingly becoming an influential and respected Member State, it would be worthwhile to revisit the issue and come up with a concrete initiative in this area.

Volunteering dovetails with the Presidency

The Presidency of the Council of the European Union is a time when the presiding country has an opportunity to show itself as an active member of the EU - one which has interesting ideas for the Union as a whole and which seeks to reach a compromise between the often dissimilar interests of individual countries. The Presidency is regarded a success when it contributes to the building of the common good and to promoting European unity, and when it makes a positive impact on the life of European citizens. The country presiding over the Council of the EU sets the list of priorities for its Presidency. Such priorities are mostly determined by the EU agenda of the day and the current political and economic situation in the Community (and worldwide). For this reason, the room for manoeuvre that the country has in preparing the priority list is rather limited. The preliminary priorities adopted by the Polish Council of Ministers largely pertain to areas (budget, energy security, defence, internal market) which are extremely technical and demanding in terms of specialised knowledge and therefore rather uninteresting and hard to understand for the general public. Likewise, it can be expected that Member States will have different views in these matters, as a result of which Poland will be forced to coordinate complicated negotiations. On the contrary, volunteering is an issue that is closer to the citizens, highlighting the idea of European unity, and politically uncontroversial, which can help popularise the presidency and the EU among the broader public.

The country holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union has a special responsibility for the promotion of European identity among the Union's citizens and for undertaking initiatives aimed at building a European civil society. Volunteering certainly fulfills such goals. Exchange programmes for volunteers, with shorter or longer stays in EU countries other than their own, create a perfect opportunity for getting to know such countries, their culture and language. At the same time, volunteers act as ambassadors of their countries and can share their experiences while cooperating with citizens from other parts of Europe after they return home. In this way, volunteer projects between EU countries directly help build a European identity, foster the integration of various culturally diverse European communities and improve mutual perception and understanding between the European nations.

Exchange programmes with countries outside the European Union help disseminate EU values and promote its positive image abroad. This can be of particular importance for the implementation of the Eastern Partnership programme which is included among the priorities of the Polish Presidency. Supporting volunteer projects in the Eastern Partnership countries – both hosting volunteers from this region in EU countries and sending EU citizens to the East – can represent a significant component of the implementation of the Partnership initiative. Moreover, in the longer term volunteer programmes may become elements of a pro-active EU foreign policy, the broad framework of which is currently being prepared.

In addition to the above, volunteering also means an opportunity to develop cooperation between the generations, promote greater participation of the elderly and foster an

intergenerational transfer of experiences. Volunteering also plays a major role in building social capital because doing unpaid work for the good of the community constitutes a foundation for building efficient NGOs which are well-rooted in the society and for developing social trust.

In addition to the aforementioned areas, volunteering is linked to practically all of the EU policies, from healthcare to culture and promoting democracy to actions during natural calamities, the latter recently increasingly gaining in importance. Even though we may not realise it, we encounter volunteer work all the time. This is another sound reason why the European Year of Volunteering should be regarded as a major task by all those who are responsible for the success of volunteering in Poland and Europe as well as for the success of the Polish Presidency.

Selected EU documents on volunteering

Owing to the many benefits they bring, voluntary activities are supported both internationally (by the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Union) and nationally. The European Union has addressed the issue of voluntary activity in many of its documents. The first was the 1983 resolution of the European Parliament on volunteering, which explained the nature of voluntary activity and the role of developing an adequate infrastructure for effective policies in this sphere. It also called for a “statute for voluntary work”, which would regulate the issue of the reimbursement of expenses and social insurance for volunteers.¹ In 1997, Declaration 38 was appended to the Treaty of Amsterdam; it was a document which recognised the contribution that voluntary activities made to the development of social solidarity, mostly via exchange of information and experiences. It also emphasised the role of voluntary work in different social groups, mainly the young and the elderly.

Volunteering was also addressed in the 2001 Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 10 July 2001 on mobility within the Community for students, persons undergoing training, volunteers, teachers and trainers, which recommended facilitating access to information about studying, training and volunteering opportunities in the Member States. The proposals set out in the Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council of 27 June 2002 regarding the framework of European cooperation in the youth field were similarly oriented. The document also set out the “Common Objectives” regarding voluntary activities of young people. It also defined the way volunteering is understood by this social group, and introduced the notions of voluntary activity and voluntary service. With the adoption of these documents, the Council and the Member States reaffirmed the

¹ European Parliament (1984). Resolution on Voluntary Work, OJ C 010, 16.01.1984, pp. 288–291.

central role of volunteering, mainly in youth policies. This direction of EU policies was later reasserted in other documents (listed below).

In 2008, the European Parliament adopted a report on the role of volunteering in enhancing socio-economic cohesion – the European Parliament Resolution of 22 April 2008 on the role of volunteering in contributing to economic and social cohesion. The document calls for a system of satellite accounts based on UN standards² to be introduced by the Member States to assess the value of voluntary work.³

Volunteering has also been incorporated in the EU strategic documents which outline the development directions for the societies of Europe and represents a tool to achieve the goals set in these strategies. Its role is enshrined both in the “Renewed Social Agenda”⁴ and the Lisbon Strategy⁵. Volunteering can also be used to put to life the assumptions underpinning the follow-up to the final document of the EUROPE 2020 Strategy,⁶ in particular its appeal to develop knowledge-based and innovation-based inclusive European societies and economies.

Selected regulations and mechanisms related to volunteering in Europe

Volunteering is promoted via such European Union programmes as: Youth in Action, Lifelong Learning and Europe for Citizens. There are differences at the level of individual Member States regarding the legal status of volunteering and its place

² A system of satellite accounts for volunteers is a register used to assess the value of the product generated through voluntary work.

³ Other relevant documents on volunteering also include: Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee of 13 December 2006 on Voluntary activity: its role in European society and its impact (OJ 325 of 30.12.2006); Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 7 February 2008 on The contribution of volunteering to Economic and Social Cohesion (OJ 105 of 25.04.2008); Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of 2 July 2008: “Renewed social agenda: Opportunities, access and solidarity in 21st century Europe” (COM(2008) 412 final); Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of 27 April 2009: An EU strategy for youth: Investing and empowering. A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities (COM(2009) 200 final); Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010–2018) (OJ 311 of 19.12.2009); Council Decision of 27 November 2009 on the European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship (2011); Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council of 23 November 2010 on how to express EU citizen’s solidarity through volunteering.

⁴ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Renewed social agenda: Opportunities, access and solidarity in 21st century Europe, COM(2008) 412 final, Brussels, 2.7.2008.

⁵ Presidency Conclusions, Lisbon European Council, 23 and 24 March 2000, particularly part one entitled: “Employment, Economic Reform and Social Cohesion. A Strategic Goal for the Next Decade”.

⁶ Communication from the Commission, EUROPE 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, Brussels, 3.03.2010, COM(2010) 2020 final.

within the national policies. A number of concerns have also been raised in connection with these programmes. Some of these initiatives are described below.

Youth in Action is an EU programme which promotes participation in non-formal education. It is primarily addressed to young people between the ages of 13 and 30 and to those working with the young. The programme encourages international contacts and the exchange of experiences. It also supports various activities serving local communities which also support individual development, and promotes the idea of a unified Europe. The Programme’s main objectives include *inter alia* promoting active citizenship among young people, fostering tolerance and mutual understanding among young people in different countries, developing structures to support activities of young people and organisations working in the youth field. The programme provides funding to those projects and activities which aim to support individual development of young people and help them acquire new skills. It was established by a decision adopted by the European Parliament and the European Council in 2006 as a follow-up to the Youth in Action 2007-2013 programme round.

One of the initiatives of the Youth in Action programme is the **European Voluntary Service (EVS)**, aimed at supporting volunteer exchanges between the Member States. As Action 2 (one of the five actions of the Youth in Action programme), it facilitates volunteers or groups of volunteers to start voluntary work in all the Programme Countries and the Neighbouring Partner Countries. The aim of the EVS is to allow volunteers to acquire competencies and skills strengthening their personal and professional development through experiences in non-formal education. All young people between the ages of 18 and 30 (and those aged 16-17 in exceptional cases) may participate in the EVS. The stay in a foreign organisation lasts between 2 and 12 months. Altogether, some 30,000 volunteers participated in the European Voluntary Service in the first decade of the programme (1996-2006). According to the assumptions for the 2007-2013 programme round, the number of Youth in Action volunteers should grow by 10,000 annually. However, it reached only about 4,500 in 2007 and 6,000 in 2008. The allocation for Action 2 (EVS) is about one third of the total budget of the Youth in Action programme (MEUR 885). With 32% of all the applications submitted under the Youth in Action programme for voluntary work projects, 2,100 and 2,300 grants were awarded respectively in 2007 and 2008.⁷

Despite its steady development, the programme itself and the opportunities it provides are not widely known. Its promotion among the wider European public still remains a challenge. Steps should also be taken to allow participation for young people without tertiary education who come from small towns and villages. The current system neither encourages such individuals to take part in youth exchanges nor offers sufficient assistance in the recruitment process.

⁷ Based on: SALTO SEE Resource Centre: Hopscotch to Quality in EVS, 2009, p. 12, <http://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-2006/Hopscotch%20to%20Quality%20in%20EVS-7ok%20%282%29.pdf>, accessed on: 28.08.2010; data and statistics at the EC website: http://ec.europa.eu/youth/evs/aod/hei_list_from_query.cfm, http://ec.europa.eu/youth/glance/doc/youth_in_action_figures/eac_statistics_yia_2008.pdf, accessed on: 06.09.2010; and the Polish National Agency for the Youth in Action programme, <http://youth.org.pl/index.php/ida/778/>, accessed on: 28.08.2010.

Volunteering is also among the priority issues of the **Europe for Citizens** programme, aimed at encouraging European citizens to act and engage in the implementation of joint projects. The programme’s characteristic feature is that it addresses activities (and funds) to ordinary citizens from different European countries. The programme’s assumption is to organise Europeans and encourage them to cooperate, discuss and reflect on various aspects of European integration. That is why the Europe for Citizens programme is primarily targeted at local community workers (local government employees, representatives of NGOs, public or public benefit institutions) who understand the needs of their local communities, can best satisfy their demands and inspire their members to participate in various initiatives and undertakings. The current phase of the programme is planned for the years 2007-2013. The guidelines for the programme’s operation in subsequent years will be agreed during the Polish Presidency. Relevant consultations with the Polish beneficiaries of the programme have already been initiated by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

Volunteering is also regarded by the EU as an **important element of learning**. As part of the Lifelong Learning programme launched in 2007, the Grundtvig programme has been reformulated accordingly. One of its measures encompasses senior volunteering projects. Its aim is to provide senior citizens with opportunities to take part in volunteering projects in a European country other than their own. Another measure supporting voluntary activity is the VALUE (Volunteering and Lifelong Learning in Universities in Europe) initiative, intended to foster cooperation between institutions of higher education and not-for-profit organisations. There is an ongoing debate in the EU concerning the development of a joint European framework for the recognition of skills and competencies acquired by volunteers. It is acknowledged that voluntary work involves both non-formal and informal learning experiences which are among the central aspects of the lifelong learning concept.⁸

All that having been said, it has to be noted that European Union initiatives lag considerably behind programmes implemented in the United States. The **Peace Corps** is the most popular as one of the greatest volunteering initiatives internationally, with origins dating back to the 1960s. The Peace Corps is underpinned by the belief that the liberal, democratic and civil values of American society should be promoted in other countries. Volunteers are also supposed to promote a better understanding of America through their contacts with the residents of the host countries, as are the American volunteers expected to gain a better understanding of other cultures and nations. A 2003 review of international voluntary activities showed that of 124 international volunteering programmes, 38 were US ones, of which the Peace Corps was the sole organisation not run by an NGO. From its beginning, the Peace Corps has attracted about 200,000 Americans who have served in over 130 countries. In 2009, the agency had a budget of USD 340 million. Most of the volunteers serving in the Peace Corps go to Africa (37%), Latin America (24%), Eastern Europe and Central Asia (20%).

⁸ See, e.g., European Commission (2007). Staff Working Document – Accompanying document to the Communication on Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation (COM(2007) 703 final) http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/policy/sec1484_en.pdf.

How to foster European volunteering during the Polish Presidency

In order to make the best use of the opportunity posed by the overlapping of the Polish Presidency and the European Year of Volunteering, Poland should emphasise the European dimension of volunteer work and propose specific changes to the European policies and regulations concerning volunteering that still require reform. Certain steps have already been taken.

The further debate about volunteering in the European context should be aimed at:

- demonstrating the European dimension of volunteering and its significance for the future of Europe;
- promoting volunteer work and the benefits it brings in order to make volunteering fashionable and to enhance its perception as an activity based on knowledge and skills;
- demonstrating that volunteer work can be an effective tool for European integration that can benefit the European community and promote its values beyond the EU borders.

During the Presidency Poland should launch concrete initiatives in the field of volunteering. The activities related to European Year of Volunteering in Poland should be also used to introduce appropriate changes on the national level.

Poland should support the adoption of the Council Conclusions on volunteer work during its Presidency. The Conclusions should highlight three themes: the importance of voluntary work in different EU policy areas, the role of volunteering as a form of *soft power*, especially in the context of the creation of the European External Action Service, and the need to develop volunteer work programmes addressed to the countries of the Eastern Partnership. In order to emphasise the importance of volunteering for the process of European integration and for the building of partner relations with other countries, the Conclusions may be called the “European Partnership for Volunteering”.

Volunteer work programmes addressed to the citizens of Eastern Europe should be strengthened. Using such occasions as international events devoted to volunteering, e.g., the July youth conference on supporting mobility and volunteering globally organised by the Ministry of National Education, opportunities for developing volunteer projects with the Eastern Partnership countries should be highlighted.

The idea of volunteering should also be incorporated into all events which deal with Eastern Partnership issues. Therefore, the issue of volunteering should be included in the list of topics to be raised by the participants of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (CSF) (within Platform 4) which will contribute to working out concrete solutions in this respect.

The programme of volunteer work abroad funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the “Polish Aid” programme should be developed, which would strengthen the Eastern policy of Poland. The Polish foreign ministry is now working to redefine the content of the programme, also in consultation with non-governmental organisations. There are plans to

retain two overriding goals of the programme, viz.: 1) offering support to countries receiving aid in the form of volunteer work, and 2) educating Polish society on development-related issues. As part of the new Programme, it would be advisable to identify a new set of values which should be embraced by its volunteers. The latter aspect is particularly important if we take into account the fact that support is provided by sending volunteers from countries with deficient democracy and restrictions in the functioning of a civil society. It would also be advisable to increase the scope of the Polish state programme for volunteers working abroad and to introduce arrangements facilitating the work of outgoing volunteers and those who come to Poland from other countries. This particularly involves the arrangements easing access to visas for entry into the EU for volunteers from the Eastern Partnership countries.

During the negotiations on the future EU budget, appropriate funding should be allocated for voluntary work. For instance, volunteering should be incorporated in the new framework of the EU Cohesion Policy, e.g., via the European Social Fund or the European Fund for Regional Development and via other programmes intended for implementation during the new Multi-annual Financial Perspective. It would also be desirable to introduce a system for recognising voluntary activities as a contribution to project co-financing by all the EU Funds.⁹ This, however, will not be possible unless mechanisms to facilitate an objective evaluation of the value (both economic and substantive) of voluntary work are worked out. A good solution here would be the adoption of the research methodology developed by Johns Hopkins University¹⁰ both at the Community and national level, which is advocated by entities involved in the European Year of Volunteering.

During the preparatory work on the new budget perspective, the earlier EU programmes promoting volunteering should not be neglected. These notably include the Youth in Action, Lifelong Learning and Europe for Citizens programmes. As budget cuts are made across the European Union, it is also proposed that the financial allocation for such programmes should be reduced. Some even suggest that these initiatives should be merged into one programme, a move which would certainly result in a reduction of its budget in comparison with the funds earmarked for the three separate initiatives. During the Polish Presidency, the importance of developing voluntary activity in Europe should be constantly emphasised by highlighting its role in individual EU policies, including foreign policy. A good opportunity

⁹ Activities in a similar vein are proposed by members of the Civil Society Working Group on the Reform of European Funding Rules who are working on a new framework of spending funds from the EU budget. They point out that a similar diagnosis concurs with the Europe 2020 Strategy; one of its flagship initiatives, the Innovation Union, recognises and emphasises the role of civil society organisations in solving crucial social problems.

¹⁰ In consultation with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a manual for measurement based on this methodology was prepared. See, e.g.: ILO (2010), *Manual Quick Facts*, http://www.ccss.jhu.edu/pdfs/ILO/ILO_Manual_QuickFacts_1.24.2010.pdf.

In Poland, an in-depth survey based on the model developed by the JHU is being carried out in 2011 by the Central Statistical Office (GUS). It also partly informed a survey of the involvement of Poles in voluntary activities conducted in April 2011 by CBOS in cooperation with the Institute of Public Affairs and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The findings from these two surveys are to be made public during the final conference of the European Year of Volunteering to be held in December 2011 in Warsaw.

to reinforce such an image would be to adopt the Council Conclusions on the role of volunteering in social policy outlined above.

Building on the abovementioned results of volunteering, such as European identity building, EU values promotion outside its borders and integration of European societies, the establishment of frameworks for long-term volunteering abroad at the European level should be considered. There are at least two initiatives that are worth mentioning with regard to this issue. Firstly, in the long-term perspective the programme of the European Voluntary Service (EVS) should be further developed using the experience of the American Peace Corps.

Secondly, there is also another initiative associated with the EU external policy already undertaken by the European Commission and capable of being implemented in a short time frame. Namely, it is the establishment of the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps, as stipulated in Article 214 TFEU. Recent developments abroad suggest that if the Polish Presidency wishes – as it has made clear – to put emphasis on volunteering and build a “safe Europe” it should be very active in this sphere because humanitarian volunteering is a vital form of soft power in EU foreign policy and in the future could also be relevant to the Eastern Partnership countries. The Polish Government may not find it easy, however, to embrace this initiative without making it possible for Polish experts to become involved in this type of volunteer activity. And this may be problematic because there are no regulations in the labour code or other legislation (other than unpaid leave) which would allow employees with desirable qualifications to become involved in activities abroad and to leave their workplace for a longer period of time. Volunteering initiatives cannot be developed without ensuring systemic support from the EU on the one hand and creating conducive conditions at the level of individual Member States on the other. Proposals of relevant changes to be made in Poland could be adopted in the long-term volunteering development policy which is currently being prepared. Taking action in this sphere by the Polish Government during the Presidency may promote Poland’s image in Europe as a country which cares deeply for social affairs and, by this very token, for the underpinning Community values.

The European Year of Volunteering may pass unnoticed in Poland, just as many other “thematic” European years went largely unnoticed. However, it can also make an impact and bring tangible changes in Poland and in Europe. Whether this will happen depends on us: on politicians, officials, NGOs as well as individuals – because as regards volunteering, everybody can make a difference. This year offers an unequalled opportunity to do so.

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