

VOLUNTEERING OR COMPULSORY COMMUNITY ACTIVITY: THE EVIDENCE OF POST-SOVIET COUNTRY

Purpose – The research focuses on the attitudes toward volunteering in post-soviet countries as under Soviet regime volunteerism was organized by the state and was compulsory activity. As a well-known example of forced volunteering we can mention annual Saturday environment cleaning campaigns organized in honor of the birthday of Lenin. In some CEE countries it was state organized but not compulsory, so there was some place for volunteering. The main objective of the research is to disclose historical and institutional context of Post-soviet countries and explore the attitudes towards volunteering.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on the qualitative study – interview, seeking explore people attitudes towards voluntary activity in post-Soviet countries. The study is based on the interviews executed in Lithuania.

Findings – attitude towards volunteering has very strong bounds with the period of Soviet Union “involuntary activities”. It is associated with strong feeling of being part of the society, organization, being valued and beneficial for the society. Attitude towards volunteering nowadays it influenced by the historical heritage, work of well known voluntary organizations and the transparency of their work.

Originality/value – The paper expands knowledge about the volunteering in emerging countries and provides insights about the attitudes towards volunteering in post-soviet countries.

Keywords Volunteering, motivation, commitment, volunteers, post-Soviet country
Paper type Research paper

Volunteering, according to Ellis (2011) was described as „to act in recognition of a need, with an attitude of social responsibility and without concern for monetary profit, going beyond one’s basic obligations“. Volunteerism is recognized as an important source of sociability, satisfaction, and self-validation over the life course (Hendicks & Cutler, 2004). Volunteers are making a positive impact to the society by working on economic, environmental, cultural or social issues and problems. Every third European and every fourth American citizen (TNS Infratest 2007; United States Department of Labour, 2009) spends one or more hour per week doing a voluntary activity. Every voluntary organisation has the same principles for management, finance, and human resources. The only exception compared with profit related business organisations is the monetary expenses – salary, to staff. There might be up to 140 million volunteers in the world. The main areas where people volunteer are education, health, sport/arts, civic, social services, and religious. The corporation for National and Community service (201) added that volunteering in 2009 provided over 8.1 million hours of service, worth over 169 billion dollars (Toman, Leichtman, 2010).

Seeking to understand the nature of this activity, scholars raise the question what are the driving forces of volunteering? Research of Clary and Snyder (1999), Penner and Finkelstein (1998), Black and Jirovic (1999), Okun and Schultz (2003) and others have been focused on motivation of volunteers’. Clary and Snyder (1999) have identified the basic motives, which encourage people to volunteer: protective – a way to reduce any negative feelings; values – to way by the important values an individual has; social – to strengthen the relationship with the society, to feel sociable; understanding – be aware about the world, what

is happening in the world; career – to gain the experience, which might be useful in the future career; enhancement – a possibility to enhance self-confidence, self-esteem. Volunteering is not only a motive to be a sociable, beneficial, and valuable, socially responsible member of the society. Is it also related with interacting with other individuals, sharing experiences, gaining knowledge, and making friends.

Across Eastern Europe, communist regimes systematically coopted voluntary activity, establishing it as a collective, compulsory, rigidly organised, and centrally directed form of unpaid labour. (Bell, Reinert, 2011). Volunteering in post-soviet countries as under Soviet regime volunteerism was organized by the state and was compulsory activity. As a well-known example of forced volunteering we can mention annual Saturday environment cleaning campaigns organized in honor of the birthday of Lenin. Another form of volunteering, which existed during the period of Soviet Union, was the unpaid work in social organisations and movements. A lot of people were involved in cultural amateur activities, were involved in doing unpaid work for trade unions. These activities have involved various parts of the society from children to adults, and elderly people. It enabled the social integration of different segments of the society. According to Sikorskaia “In the Soviet Union, the crucial role in the process of the socialization of the rising generation was played by young people’s participation in civic work and projects”. When the Soviet Union fell apart, this smoothly running mechanism ceased to function. The general opinion of the society was that everything that has happened during this period of time has to be forgotten and abolished. With the fall of the communist states as coercive agents, volunteer numbers generally dropped sharply, only to rise again very slowly: due, in large part, to a widespread atmosphere of resentment, distaste, and public disaffection engendered by this system (Jucknevičius, Savicka, 2003).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the “involuntary voluntarism”, has been abolished. The society has been divided and looking for new behavioral patterns, the orientation of the society was not known. The Trade unions, amateur cultural organisations have been dissolved. Religious organisations have been raising after being restricted and has been an important part of the development of the society, of its change. The re-gained influence on the society of Lithuania has enabled these organization to start advertise voluntary, society beneficial activities. First official voluntary organisations were registered under the care of the Church.

Religious organizations are often highly effective in bringing people together to become active volunteers (Taniguchi & Thomas, 2011). The most well known organization Caritas has been the first organization, which promoted volunteering through churches and Lithuania. More and more people started to be involved in voluntary actions in new organisations, but inspired by their religious beliefs. The beliefs were often in align with the norms of behavior in the society. The growth of voluntary sector in Lithuania has been increasing with the economic, political development of the country.

There are still remaining gaps in the research of volunteering, especially in comparative analysis between regions taking the political regime and time period into account. The volunteering has been researched widely in the Western Europe but its state in Eastern Europe still lacks further investigation. The goal of the research is to evaluate historical and institutional context of Post-Soviet countries and to see what aspect of phenomenon of volunteering are acknowledged and developed. As Plagnol & Hupper (2010) suggest that “future research should take further into consideration country level differences, including historical and institutional differences between countries to explain regional variations”. The focus of the research is about the cultural change, and change of the attitude towards volunteering in a Post-Soviet country.

Gronlund, Holmes (2011) suggests that attitudes towards volunteering and its spread in particular country is influenced by cultural, religious, social and political context. These factors influence the level of volunteerism, and range of possibilities to volunteer. Putnam, Wuthnow (1998) have argued that sociologists and political scientists, view volunteering as an expression of core societal principles such as solidarity, cohesion and democracy.

Voluntary sector has a long tradition and is stronger in countries with a longer experience of democracy. In emerging economies, volunteerism has started to gain awareness and acknowledgement by the society after collapse of authoritarian regimes. According to Musick and Wilson (2008) the former communist countries have lower national rates of formal volunteering compared to older democracies, although the level of volunteering has been increasing in post-soviet countries during last two decades comparing to Western European countries, where volunteering rates are either static or in decline. There is, however, an argument that volunteerism flourishes in countries, which have been deprived of democracy (Gronlund, 2011).

Cultural settings provide the socio-political models that regulate the requirements and possibilities for volunteering. The substantial differences between cultures in their values and norms (e.g. Inglehart 1997) lead to different meanings and motives for volunteering (Gronlund, Holmes, 2011). The political history of the country determines attitudes towards volunteering of different generations of the same country who have lived in a particular historical period.

In some CEE countries it was state organized but not compulsory, so there was some place for volunteering. Wymer has been doing a research on a national study in the U.S.A., and has reported that “People are more than four times as likely to volunteer when asked than when they are not”. The compulsory organized campaigns after the collapse of Soviet union have been forgotten, but now the society is coming back to the social responsibility for the society, community. After having a very negative attitude towards this activity, the cultural change has happened and the generation change could have impacted this to happen. Nevertheless recent research findings showed that in post-soviet countries, the volunteering is growing. This leads to proposition that attitudes toward volunteering are changing and overcome the perception of this activity as mandatory.

The volunteering in Lithuania hasn't been researched widely, but there are some researchers who were researching this area from regional perspective. E. Butkuvienė (2005) has analyzed the involvement into voluntary activities and perspectives in Lithuania after 1990. In Lithuania volunteering is described as involvement in the voluntary organization by the law, but the individual direct volunteering hasn't been included into definition. The attitude towards volunteering hasn't been explored yet; no analysis has been conducted to evaluate the change, the reasons for change, and the economical, political circumstances.

Research methodology

A qualitative research was conducted to evaluate the attitude towards volunteering compared with “involuntary volunteerism” activities during the Soviet Union period. A structured interview was used to conduct the research. 10 interviews have been conducted with individual born 1960-1965. The respondents were individuals who have had their professional career in the time of Soviet Union and were participating in Saturday environmental activities during the existence of Soviet Union and who have been involved and not involved in voluntary activities after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The interviews enabled to evaluate the attitude towards volunteering, willingness to volunteer, benefits of volunteering. The purpose of the research was to reveal how the transition of values has changed in the society.

Findings

A qualitative research has shown that the respondents have been very positive about the impact of the involuntary volunteerism activities during April every year. The activity was executed for the honor of Lenins' birthday. Everybody was gathering to clean the surrounding of neighborhood, city, village or working environment. Everybody of the interviewees acknowledged that it was "annoying at the time". The attitude before the cleaning was negative, even though it encouraged socialization of the employees and co-workers. The advantage of the country-organized activity was providing obvious results, provided everybody with feeling of satisfaction, being beneficial to the society. Immediately noticeable result was named as one of the most satisfactory outcome.

After completing the research, the main following findings can be named in regards to attitude to volunteering:

1. *Self-realization, socialization at working place*

The activities were planned and spread from Union level to country, then area and organizational level. Each company was informed which activities have to be completed, as reports were essential for the execution purposes. Individuals didn't have a choice to participate it or not, unless it was related with serious health, or family issues. The positive impact for each organization was that it was known why they were trying for, what will be the benefit or their "involuntary activity" for the country.

Individuals saw this activity as compulsory, but providing benefits for the organizational culture, climate, socialization, feeling of being associated with particular company, establishment of relationship with co-workers, the management.

2. *Value of cultural activities*

Cultural activities were a very important voluntary activity during the time of Soviet Union. It was encouraged through the Union politics. Half of the participants of the research have been involved in cultural activities from 3 to 7 years. They have had a strong feeling of self-realization, exploring their talents, performing for others, and having the ability to be occupied. Others haven't been participating in these activities, but had a very positive attitude from the viewers' point of view. They have had the opportunity to enjoy the artistic shows, when there was a lack of cultural activities at that time, had the feeling of personal growth.

Cultural activities were working as a tool of self-expression, the ability to provide cultural entertainment in the area, country or the whole Soviet Union.

3. *Nostalgia after the collapse of Soviet Union*

After the collapse of Soviet Union, everybody felt released from compulsory activities. First two years were full of optimism, related with the politics of independent country. The "involuntary activities" were demolished. The deficit has started to show after two or three years when nobody was looking after the environment in the cities, villages. No common interest was existing, and it lead to the individualistic approach. There were no activities, which were enabling organizations to participate in something beneficial to the society, no encouragement for working for more beautiful surroundings. More effort was needed to keep the organizational culture in place, no new tools were provided. Although some of the organizations were continuing to perform these activities when they weren't compulsory. It had a negative effect of the promoters of the independent country image.

4. *Positive attitude to volunteering activities nowadays*

Attitude to volunteering is seen as short-term activity, associated with the liquidation of the damage of nature disasters, activities before the main religious occasions, work with children, their occupation. No long-term activities were mentioned as an attractive choice. Talking about the widely promoted activities is also associated with a short help in regards to food giving, help for schools, city council. None of the participants of the research wanted to be involved in the voluntary activity at the moment, and when they are retired. The “involuntary activity” would be very welcome again, and supported by organizations, but the initiative is expected to be encouraged on a country level, rather than single council.

5. *Negative attitude towards volunteering*

The negative attitude towards volunteering is associated with the lack of transparency in work of voluntary organizations. General distrust of charities and the difficult economic situation of many potential volunteers also discourage voluntarism (Kaufman, Mirsky & Avgar, 2004). Authors have named the second reason associated with negative attitude towards volunteering. This attitude still exists. The media have uncovered few cases when the actions of volunteers weren't appropriate. Few organizations have a very good reputation, and they are encouraging people to get involved, especially in events, associated with religious occasions. On the respondents have mentioned, that *“I've seen how the so-called volunteers are working, and how they are beneficial to the society. I see them more as thieves, rather helpers”*.

6. *Volunteering in the society*

Volunteering is seen as a very important part of the society varying from activities with children to religious organizations, youth work, and involvement of the elderly individuals of the society. The positive point of view to the volunteerism is associated with the beneficial works, which are executed, with social projects related with the education and occupation of children, the services provided for disabled and elderly people.

7. *Individuals' perspective*

Taking the individuals perspective in Soviet Union period, “involuntary volunteerism” have been providing sense of self-realization, being part of the community, organization, being beneficial, recognition, commitment to the community, sense of responsibility for the community you are living in.

Being a valued member of the organization, having a collective identity was named as important components of the professional individual perspective or career.

As an individual, attitude towards volunteering is associated with the set of Christian values and beliefs, sense of altruism, high self-esteem, satisfaction. Some of the factors remain equally important in both periods, like self-realization, satisfaction, socialization, being valued, recognized.

Conclusion

The literature review has revealed the existing knowledge about volunteering, especially associated with the volunteering of Soviet Union period. It was state organized, compulsory, but provided benefits for the cities, councils, communities. It was recognized through the time of the research that the positive memories are related with these activities, and would be welcome nowadays. The further research should be completed to evaluate the attitude of younger generation, which hasn't experienced compulsory activities, and their attitude towards volunteering should be measured. Comparative analysis would be useful for

further wider research. Limitations, which were experienced during the research – lack of understanding that the “involuntary volunteerism” can be named as volunteerism at all. It is thought that it wasn’t a volunteering activity, and was seen sometimes as a forced unpaid work. The attitude towards volunteering is changing; together with the recognition it provides, the higher self-esteem, socialization, feeling a valued member of the society.

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