

Patterns of Involvement and Motivation in Slovak Volunteer Response to the Ukraine War: Findings from a National Survey¹

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Abstract

The swift humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict in Ukraine triggered an unprecedented wave of volunteerism across Europe. Due to its geographical proximity and historical ties, Slovakia became a crucial hub for support (Brozmanová Gregorová and Bambúch, 2024). Sharing a border with Ukraine, the country faced a significant influx of refugees, mainly women, children, and older adults seeking safety (Vansač and Gulasova, 2023). The initial response was marked by spontaneous help from ordinary citizens, demonstrating compassion and solidarity (Adamus and Grežo, 2024). Volunteers played a pivotal role in both humanitarian assistance and refugee integration. This study examines the multifaceted aspects of volunteerism during the early stages of the war, focusing on volunteers' demographic characteristics, levels of involvement, and motivations for engagement. Empirical data were collected in 2023 through a representative survey of the adult population as part of the project Volunteering in Slovakia during the crisis, with a research sample of 1,020 respondents. Findings show that 20.7% of adults volunteered to help address the crisis. Most were engaged in informal volunteering. Factor analysis revealed two main motivational patterns: value-based motivation and reactive or pragmatic motivation. Understanding these motives is crucial for sustaining volunteer engagement, especially in prolonged crises where initial enthusiasm may decline (Sengupta et al., 2023). Volunteering during the Ukraine crisis was strongly linked to volunteering in 2023 and to future intentions. This suggests that crisis-related volunteering can evolve into long-term engagement (Baxter-Tomkins and Wallace, 2009), thereby strengthening community cohesion and resilience (Waldman et al., 2018).

Keywords: Volunteering, Motivation, Ukraine, War, Crisis

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1. Introduction

According to UNHCR, more than 5.6 million refugees from Ukraine had been registered worldwide by May 31, 2025 (UNHCR, 2025). The war that erupted in February 2022 precipitated an unprecedented humanitarian crisis with far-reaching consequences across Europe. While refugee crises are not a novel phenomenon within the European Union, the Ukrainian displacement is distinctive in both its scale and character. In the Slovak context, it represents the country's first direct experience with a large-scale refugee crisis, thereby posing unique social, institutional, and policy challenges. (Brozmanová Gregorová and Bambúch, 2024). Bird and Amaglobeli (2022) and Garcés Mascareñas (2022) have identified specific characteristics of this crisis that distinguish it from others. These include the size and speed of the departure, the cultural and social proximity of the refugees, and the atypical profile of arrivals—primarily highly skilled women with children, and a notable proportion with tertiary education and recent migration history. This fostered strong Ukrainian social networks across Europe, particularly in neighbouring countries such as Slovakia. These networks proved invaluable during the initial spontaneous response to the war and in the subsequent months of local-level refugee support.

The humanitarian crisis stemming from the war in Ukraine prompted a robust, multifaceted volunteer response across neighbouring European nations, including Slovakia (Adamus and Grežo, 2024). This widespread mobilisation of civil society highlights the critical role of informal networks and individual initiatives in augmenting official governmental and non-governmental organisational efforts during large-scale emergencies (Macková and Seidlová, 2025). Understanding the underlying motivations and patterns of involvement among these volunteers is crucial for developing sustainable support frameworks and optimising future humanitarian aid operations (Chudzicka-Czupała et al., 2023). This paper, therefore, seeks to analyse the demographic characteristics, motivations, and engagement patterns of Slovak volunteers who contributed to the Ukraine war response, drawing on findings from a national survey.

Whittaker, McLennan, and Handmer (2015) provide an overview of research on volunteering in times of crisis and disaster, highlighting its definitions, opportunities, and challenges. Other studies examine factors at various levels that shape participation in crisis volunteering (e.g., Shi et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2015), as well as the consequences and risks associated with such involvement. Selected research further explores motivation for crisis-driven volunteering (Sengupta et al., 2023; Chudzicka-Czupała et al., 2023), how crisis-driven volunteering can evolve into long-term engagement (e.g., Shaw and Goda, 2004; Baxter-Tomkins and Wallace, 2009) and how it contributes to building community resilience (McLennan, Whittaker and Handmer, 2015; Ganoe, Roslida, and Sihotang, T., 2023). Beyond individual and structural determinants of crisis volunteering, its contemporary forms have also been shaped by broader modernisation processes and societal transformations which significantly altered how volunteering manifests across countries, reflecting global trends (see

Hustinx and Lamertyn, 2003; Rochester, Paine, Howlett and Zimmeck, 2010; Frič and Pospíšilová et al., 2010).

The crisis associated with the Ukrainian war appears to be generating entirely new patterns of volunteering that may challenge established theoretical frameworks. Research in this area is therefore highly relevant, not only in the Slovak context but also internationally. Specifically, the ongoing humanitarian needs stemming from the conflict necessitate a deeper empirical understanding of volunteer motivations and the mechanisms that sustain their engagement, particularly given the distinct socio-political landscapes of Central and Eastern European nations (Macková and Seidlová, 2025; Sengupta et al., 2023).

Research questions:

- 1) What was the extent and nature of involvement in volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine?
- 2) What socio-demographic characteristics were associated with involvement in volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine?
- 3) What were the factors motivating volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine?
- 4) How does involvement in volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine relate to subsequent involvement in volunteering?

2. Methodology

The study is part of a larger national research project titled "Volunteering in Slovakia in Times of Crisis." We have selected only those findings that answer the research questions.

The data comes from a nationwide representative survey of the adult population of the Slovak Republic (N = 1020), conducted in 2023. The average age of the respondents was 47.5 years (SD = 16.32), with 48% of the sample comprising males.

Volunteering involvement was assessed through questions about participation in activities related to the war in Ukraine. A 16-item questionnaire, inspired by foreign tools, was developed to map motivational factors. The reliability of the scales was verified using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.80$). The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, difference testing, and factor analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Extent and nature of involvement in volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine

According to a representative survey, 20.7% of respondents aged 18 and above have volunteered to help resolve the crisis connected with the war in Ukraine in Slovakia. The majority of volunteers participated in informal aid efforts, operating independently of any organisational structure. Specifically, among individuals assisting with the Ukraine crisis,

40.3% engaged in informal volunteering, while 28.4% contributed through formal organisations, and 31.3% participated in both formal and informal capacities.

Table 1 presents a summary of the duration of volunteers' involvement in crisis-related activities related to the war in Ukraine. The distribution of volunteer duration reveals varied levels of sustained commitment, reflecting both the intensity of initial engagement and volunteers' adaptability to evolving crisis demands.

Table 1. Volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine – involvement over time

Involvement over time	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Immediately after the outbreak of war, within two weeks	35,5	35,5
After 3 weeks, the war started	25,6	61,1
After more than a month	19,4	80,6
After more than 2 months	10,0	90,5
More than 3 months after the outbreak of the war	9,5	100,0

Within the initial four weeks of the crisis precipitated by the war in Ukraine, a significant 61.1% of volunteers were engaged. This involvement escalated to 90.5% within three months, clearly indicating a direct response to the unfolding crisis.

3.2. Socio-demographic characteristics associated with involvement in volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine

Statistically, women, respondents aged 40–49, university-educated, economically secure, and religiously active (deeply religious and religious) individuals were significantly more involved in volunteering related to the refugee crisis associated with the war in Ukraine. A higher representation was identified among residents of large cities (Bratislava, Košice) and among members of ethnic minorities. Membership in organisations was positively associated with participation in volunteering in response to the crisis related to the war in Ukraine.

3.3. Motivations for volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine

Factor analysis identified two basic motivational patterns:

- a) Value-based motivation – altruism, solidarity, the need to contribute to the common good.
- b) Reactive (pragmatic) motivation – utilisation of current capacity, immediate response to a crisis.

Table 2. Descriptive indicators of motivation for volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine (N=211; Men = 88; Women = 123)

	Motivation total			Value-based motivation			Reactive motivation		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Mean	69.8	69.0	70.3	35.8	35.0	36.4	33.9	34.0	33.9
SD	16.8	16.8	16.9	8.6	8.3	8.7	10.2	10.3	10.1
Skew	-.25	-.04	-.40	-.54	-.22	-.77	-.17	-.13	-.21
Kurt	-.18	-.53	.16	-.15	-.73	.38	-.37	-.35	-.34
Min	17.0	32.0	17.0	7.0	16.0	7.0	8.0	10.0	8.00
Max	105.0	105.0	105.0	49.0	49.0	49.0	56.0	56.0	56.0

Note: Skew – skewness, Kurt- kurtosis, Min- minimum, Max- maximum

Statistical verification of intergroup differences using Student's t-test did not confirm differences between men and women involved in volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, either in overall motivation or in its two components. According to the Student's paired t-test, respondents scored statistically significantly higher on the Value-Based Motivation factor, with a moderately strong effect size. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Student's paired t-test of differences between the Value-based Motivation factor and the Reactive (pragmatic) Motivation factor among respondents involved in volunteering in the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine (n=211)

	Mean	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
Value-based motivation	35.82	8.56	3.255	.001	0.224
Reactive motivation	33.95	10.17			

3.4. *Volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine and subsequent involvement in volunteering*

The last research question focused on verifying whether involvement in various forms of volunteering (organised and unorganised) before 2023 and in 2023 was related to respondents' participation in volunteer activities during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. To verify these relationships, we used the chi-square test, supplemented by Cramer's V as an indicator of the strength of association between variables.

The results (Table 4.) confirmed that volunteer engagement before 2023 and in 2023 was statistically significantly and moderately strongly associated with involvement in volunteering in the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. Similarly, it was found that respondents' plans to continue volunteering in the future were significantly related to their involvement in volunteer activities in the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. These findings suggest continuity in volunteer behaviour—past experiences and future intentions are closely linked to current engagement during a humanitarian crisis.

Table 4. Volunteering during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, and subsequent involvement in volunteering

	Involved in volunteering in the Ukraine Crisis	Not involved in volunteering in the Ukraine Crisis	p value	Cramers V
Formal volunteering before 2023	67,2%	32,8%	< .001	0.428
Formal volunteering in 2023	73,9%	26,1%	< .001	0.385
Informal volunteering in 2023	82,5%	17,5%	< .001	0.308
Plans to be engaged in volunteering	89,3%	10,7%	< .001	0.291

4. Discussion

A national survey in Slovakia indicates that approximately one-third of the population volunteers. Specifically, research from 2019 found that 36% of adults participated in formal volunteering and 55% in informal volunteering within the preceding 12 months (Vašečka et al., 2020). More recent data from the 2023 study "Volunteering in Slovakia in Times of Crisis" reveals that 34.2% of adults were involved in formal volunteering and 52.7% in non-formal volunteering. While the proportion of individuals volunteering for the Ukraine crisis is lower than these overall figures, this is attributed to the shorter, specific timeframe of crisis-related volunteering compared to the broader tracking of general volunteering. Nevertheless, the data indicate a tangible increase in solidarity, as manifested through volunteerism. This surge underscores the dynamic nature of civic engagement in response to acute humanitarian needs, challenging previous assumptions about volunteer participation rates in specific crisis contexts. This increased participation, particularly in informal aid efforts, highlights the crucial role of spontaneous civic action during humanitarian emergencies (Høgenhaven, 2025). The results confirm that volunteering related to the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine builds on existing social and cultural ties with Ukraine in Slovakia. Unlike Slovakia's previous experiences with migration, this was the first time Slovakia faced a mass refugee crisis in its

immediate neighbourhood, reflected in an unprecedented mobilisation of the population (Bird and Amaglobeli, 2022; Garcés Mascareñas, 2022; OECD, 2022).

Among individuals assisting with the Ukraine crisis, 40.3% engaged in informal volunteering, while 28.4% contributed through formal organisations, and 31.3% participated in both formal and informal capacities. This dual involvement highlights the fluid nature of crisis-driven volunteerism, in which individuals frequently transition between structured and unstructured support mechanisms in response to emergent needs and personal capacity (Carlsen et al., 2020). The prevalence of informal assistance, often involving the direct provision of goods or services, aligns with observations from other acute humanitarian crises, where spontaneous, community-level responses frequently precede or complement institutional aid efforts (Whittaker et al., 2015; Yükseler and Yazgan, 2023). Furthermore, this finding indicates a significant proportion of the general population is actively engaged in direct support, extending beyond those formally affiliated with established humanitarian organisations (Høgenhaven, 2025). The rapid, large-scale mobilisation of informal volunteers in Slovakia mirrors similar patterns observed in neighbouring countries, where the perceived proximity and urgency of the Ukrainian conflict galvanised a strong, localised response that transcended typical barriers to participation (Macková and Seidlová, 2025). This substantial volunteer engagement also contrasts with some other humanitarian crises, where a significant majority of assistance remained within formal organisational structures (Zakariás et al., 2023). This informal engagement highlights the critical role of grassroots initiatives and individual altruism in immediate crisis response (Macková and Seidlová, 2025).

The findings suggest that women and individuals with greater social resources were more likely to volunteer during the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. To compare the social profiles of respondents in our representative survey who volunteered in general in 2023, we present the social profile of volunteers involved in informal volunteering. An informal volunteer was a creatively employed individual aged 50–59 with a university education, living in an economically secure household. They identify as believers, but not as deeply religious. Most often, they were persons of other nationalities residing in smaller municipalities (5,000–9,999 inhabitants) outside the Trenčín Self-Governing Region. Gender and marital status did not significantly influence this profile.

Our results confirmed two main dimensions of volunteer motivation during the war in Ukraine: value-based motivation ($M = 35.82$, $SD = 8.56$) and reactive (pragmatic) motivation ($M = 33.95$, $SD = 10.17$). A statistically significant difference ($t = 3.255$; $p = .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.224$) indicates a slight predominance of value-based motivation over pragmatic motivation. These motives play a crucial role in maintaining volunteers' long-term engagement (Sengupta et al., 2023).

A similar structure of motivations was identified in a study by Sengupta et al. (2023), which examined volunteers during the refugee crisis in Ukraine in Poland. The authors reported that hedonic (pragmatic) motives dominated among young Polish volunteers, followed by normative (value-based), eudaimonic, and personal motives. While pragmatic motives prevailed among them, our sample shows a stronger representation of value-based motives. This different arrangement of motives may point to cultural, demographic, or situational

specifics. While young Polish volunteers may have been motivated by emotional relief or personal satisfaction during the immediate response to the crisis, Slovak respondents—spanning across age categories—seem to be more driven by internal values such as solidarity and altruism.

Furthermore, our findings confirm that value-based motivation is strongly related not only to current volunteer activity but also to future intentions to continue volunteering. This relationship supports the theoretical foundations of a functional approach to motivation, such as the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) model, which posits that value motives predict volunteer engagement and retention.

Our data confirm that the experience of crisis volunteering also strengthens future volunteering intentions, suggesting its potential to transform into lasting engagement (Baxter-Tomkins and Wallace, 2009; Waldman et al., 2018).

Our data show that the willingness to help after the outbreak of war in Ukraine was not a random, one-off impulse. On the contrary, it builds on the respondents' existing volunteer behaviour outside of the crisis: those who were involved in both formal and informal volunteering before 2023 and in 2023 were statistically significantly more likely to be engaged during the Ukrainian crisis (Cramér $V = .428, .385, .308$; all $p < .001$). The same pattern of continuous behaviour can also be seen in plans—those who plan to volunteer are also those who have already been involved during the crisis. This "continuity model" is consistent with the idea of a volunteer career and role identity, according to which an existing stock of networks, skills, and volunteer identity is activated in a crisis, rather than an entirely new cohort of helpers emerging (Wakefield et al., 2022).

Similar findings have been reported in international studies of the COVID-19 pandemic. Australian longitudinal data show that previous formal volunteering is a strong predictor of later (including informal) helping; continuity thus explains who becomes active when the need arises (Biddle and Gray, 2022). In the British context, coordinated aid-giving during the pandemic was based on pre-pandemic volunteer role identities and connections—that is, people who had previously engaged in volunteering (Wakefield et al., 2022). In addition, even outside of strictly volunteer indicators, previous prosocial practice predicts help in crises (e.g., donating items during lockdown was significantly linked to the frequency of volunteering before the pandemic among young adults) (Nowakowska, 2023).

At the same time, however, the literature points out that, in addition to the "core" of continuous volunteers, crises also attract so-called emergent (unorganised) volunteers. A systematic review of crisis volunteering shows that many essential tasks are performed by spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers who join ad hoc and outside traditional structures (Whittaker et al., 2015). In the context of the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Poland, there has also been a substantial influx of new volunteers in community and mutual aid initiatives; among young people, hedonistic-pragmatic motives prevailed over normative (value-based) ones, which differs from our profile (Sengupta, 2023). Qualitative studies from the UK also show

how these groups can be sustained through group processes (horizontal management, community ties) (Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021; Perach et al., 2023).

5. Conclusions

The study's results showed that more than a fifth of Slovakia's adult population participated in volunteer activities in the refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, with informal volunteering being the most prevalent. The socio-demographic profile showed a higher representation of women, educated and economically secure individuals, and residents of large cities. Factor analysis identified two motivational patterns – value-oriented and reactive motivation. Value-based motivation was statistically significantly stronger, which points to the deep-rooted nature of volunteer work in solidarity and altruism. A significant relationship was found between involvement in volunteering during the refugee crisis associated with the war in Ukraine and actual and planned participation in the later period. Crisis volunteering thus appears not only as an immediate response, but also as a potential for long-term civic engagement. This suggests that the initial catalytic event of the humanitarian crisis could foster sustained prosocial behaviours, potentially integrating these individuals into broader civic participation frameworks beyond the immediate emergency (Horstmann et al., 2017). This enduring commitment challenges the transient nature often associated with crisis-driven volunteerism, suggesting a more profound integration of altruistic impulses into everyday civic life (Trujillo et al., 2024). The distinct patterns of engagement and motivation observed in Slovakia offer valuable insights into the broader dynamics of crisis volunteering within Central and Eastern Europe.

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