

# Volunteering in Europe

## *Voluntariado en Europa*

OONAGH AITKEN AND PIOTR SADOWSKI\*

### KEYWORDS

**Volunteering; European Union; Active citizens.**

**ABSTRACT** This article looks at the current situation and the future of volunteering in Europe. We begin by thinking back to 2011 and the European Year of Volunteering and examine in some detail the recommendations which were made then. We then cover the various ways in which the European Union supports volunteering for a range of people of all ages. We finish by looking forward to the potential for volunteering in the future and its role in supporting and defending the European values of solidarity, equality, active citizenship and social justice.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

**Voluntariado; Unión Europea; Ciudadanía activa.**

**RESUMEN** Este artículo analiza la situación actual y el futuro del voluntariado en Europa. Comenzamos volviendo a 2011, Año Europeo del Voluntariado, y examinamos con detalle las recomendaciones que se hicieron en ese momento. Luego revisamos las diversas formas en que la Unión Europea promueve el voluntariado para una variedad de personas de todas las edades. Terminamos presentando el potencial del voluntariado en el futuro y su papel en el apoyo y la defensa de los valores europeos de solidaridad, igualdad, ciudadanía activa y justicia social.

### MOTS CLÉS

**Volontariat; Union européenne; Citoyenneté active.**

**RÉSUMÉ** Cet article analyse la situation actuelle et l'avenir du volontariat en Europe. Nous commençons par revenir sur 2011, l'Année européenne du volontariat, et examinons en détail les recommandations qui ont été formulées à l'époque. Nous avons révisé les différentes manières dont l'Union européenne promeut le volontariat auprès d'un grand nombre de personnes de tous âges. Nous avons conclu en présentant le potentiel du volontariat pour l'avenir et son rôle dans le soutien et la défense des valeurs européennes de solidarité, d'égalité, de citoyenneté active et de justice sociale.

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\* Oonagh Aitken is International Affairs Consultant, Volunteering Matters & President, Volonteurope.  
Piotr Sadowski is Head of International Affairs, Volunteering Matters & Secretary General, Volonteurope.

## Introduction

**H**ow do we define volunteering? Has volunteering in Europe changed over the last 10 years or so? Are people doing more of it? Has funding from Europe helped to develop volunteering? This article will try to answer these questions and provide a general outline of how volunteering continues to develop in Europe. It will look at the different experiences of the Member States and explore the differences in volunteering between the north and south as well as the east and west of the European Union. It will examine the different EU programmes which over the years have supported volunteering for all ages and consider specifically volunteering for young Europeans, older Europeans and a growing phenomenon – employee volunteering. The article will draw on a number of general European sources and will specifically look back to 2011, The European Year of Volunteering (EYV, 2011) and the Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe (PAVE) recommendations which were developed during the activities from that year.

## The Current State of Volunteering in the European Union

The most recent figures that are available and can tell us something about volunteering across the Union are from 2015. Eurostat asked whether people were involved in formal and/or informal volunteering in the 12 months preceding the survey. Unsurprisingly, involvement in informal voluntary activities was slightly higher than involvement in formal or organised voluntary activities —just over 22% versus just over 19%. The standout countries are The Netherlands and Finland with respectively 82.5% and 74.2% of survey respondents saying that they participated in informal volunteering. Romania, Cyprus and Malta have low levels of participation in both informal and formal volunteering —respectively 3.2% for both types, 2.6% for informal and 7.2% formal, 0.9% for informal and 8.8% for formal. At EU level, women were more involved in informal voluntary work while men's involvement in formal volunteering was slightly higher. The most active age group was 64 to 75 year olds and young people aged 16-24. Slightly more recent statistics are available for the UK from the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) Almanac which surveys every year. In 2017/18 38% of people said they are volunteering formally with a group, a club or an organisation. In the same year, 53% of people said they volunteered informally. Of course, informal volunteering covers a very wide range of activities but for the purposes of the survey NCVO defines informal volunteering as giving unpaid help to someone who is not a relative. Interestingly, certainly for the UK, rates of participation in volunteering stay much the same, changing by only 1%, over a range of 5 years or so.

The differences in participation rates across the Member States may have all sort of attributions. It may be to be with social structures —more focus on the family, for

example, that external activities or it may be the existence or lack of volunteering infrastructure. Eurostat tells us that in all the participating European countries educational attainment strongly influences the voluntary participation patterns. People with a higher level of educational attainment typically volunteer more than those who have completed primary and lower secondary school education. The UK statistics also tell us that people volunteer in different ways, reflecting their lifestyles, values and priorities as well as their life-stage: 39% helped run a group or an event, 22% gave counselling or advice to others, 10% visited people in need. UK volunteering statistics reveal that those living in deprived, urban areas were less likely to formally volunteer (NCVO, 2019) and people in rural areas were slightly more likely to volunteer regularly than those in urban areas —29% versus 21%.

CEV, the European Volunteer Centre, published, in 2012, a mine of information on volunteering infrastructure. Some countries, notably those in Eastern Europe, reported no volunteering infrastructure at all, although we know that in the intervening 7 years, that has changed and many countries have now developed infrastructure. Other countries in the Union, have a well-developed infrastructure and a legal basis for volunteering, notably for young people in the form of full time volunteering opportunities. The UK has a strong volunteering infrastructure through a network of volunteer centres and other national organisations such as Volunteering Matters which focus on volunteering of all kinds, but no legal basis for volunteering, in spite of recent lobbying of Members of Parliament to have this changed.

People volunteer for all sorts of reasons; perhaps it is a particular cause they want to support, they have time to volunteer, they want to make a difference, they want to gain new skills and competences. Later in this article we will explore how EU funding has supported many forms of volunteering rationale over the past years.

One thing that all the reports and health statistics seem to agree on is that volunteering is good for you! The Mental Health organisation tells us that volunteering reduces loneliness and isolation and stress. Volunteers regularly tell us that they feel more connected, more socially active and in better physical and mental health when they volunteer regularly<sup>1</sup>.

### **Focus of EYV 2011**

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It is difficult to make general comments about volunteering across the 28 Member States. We know that to greater or lesser extents people have helped one another, particularly in times of crisis. The verb “to volunteer” was first recorded in the early 18th century and was someone who offered himself for military service. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Read more here: <https://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/casestudy/learning-for-life-together-roses-story/>

course of the 19th and 20th centuries, especially during the Great Depression and war times, some of the major volunteer organisations were founded. In the English speaking world, it was after the Second World War that the idea of voluntary service really developed.

The study on volunteering in Europe, commissioned for the European Year of Volunteering in 2010 already suggested before the year began that it would be, “an excellent opportunity to put volunteering on the agenda of the Member States, raise awareness about volunteering, and promote exchange of good practices” (Volunteering in the EU, p.). It also mentions the fact that volunteering was part of the priorities in the Europe for Citizens programme, first established in 2007 and due to finish in 2020, to be incorporated into a new programme, Justice, Rights and Values, from 2021. Both the European Parliament, in proposing a European Year of Volunteering, and the European Commission in supporting it, recognised the strong link between volunteering and active citizenship. The Europe for Citizens programme is also a tool to encourage citizens to become actively involved in the process of European integration, allowing them to develop a sense of European identity and enhancing mutual understanding between Europeans. Later in this article, we will explore how the various funding streams in the Europe for Citizens Programme and other programmes have been able to support and encourage cross-border co-operation and volunteering during the last 10 years or so.

In order to make the most of the European Year, dozens of European organisations, including networks such as Volonturope and CEV, came together as the EYV 2011 Alliance to ensure that a policy agenda for volunteering could be developed which would be sustainable and have a life beyond the 2011. Their PAVE is still available (and translated into a number of official EU languages) and sets out a wide range of recommendations and tools to promote and support volunteering across the Member States. While the Commission and the Parliament endorsed volunteering and social action as contributing to active citizenship, the PAVE recommendations also bring in the aspect of how volunteering can contribute to economic and social-capital growth.

PAVE stresses the need for a partnership approach which involves all stakeholders continuing to work towards an enabling volunteering infrastructure in Europe. Such an infrastructure would involve appropriate and necessary support mechanisms for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations, including appropriate and sustainable funding. It should provide coherent and cross-cutting policy approaches that reduce barriers to volunteering and involve the development of appropriate frameworks for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations, which include recognising their rights and responsibilities (PAVE Executive Summary).

The PAVE recommendations also stress how important it is to recognise and validate not just the efforts of volunteers but their acquisition of skills and competences. The

contribution to life-long learning is also emphasised and this concept has indeed grown in recognition and importance in the last few years.

Of course, PAVE recommendations included a call for sustainable funding for volunteer-involving organisations and support for volunteering infrastructure. But this was not just a call for more money for civil society; it was also to ensure that the quality of volunteering opportunities was maintained across the EU. The EYV 2011 Alliance argued that improved quality of volunteering opportunities increases the rate, impact and value of volunteering and also needs to focus on training and proper management of volunteers.

EYV 2011 really put volunteering and social action on the map and also ensured that future funded programmes in the Europe for Citizens programme and in Erasmus + and the European Volunteer Service focused on some of the “harder” aspects of volunteering policy but always with the goal of giving the volunteer the best possible volunteering experience with maximum positive value for beneficiaries and communities.

## **Volunteering for and by Young People**

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Students at universities all over the EU have had the opportunity to spend part of their degree course in another EU country, experiencing the culture, the language and the academic and intellectual life of their chosen institution. Many of these students also take the opportunity to volunteer and to date, the easiest way to do this, has been through the European Volunteer Service (EVS). The programme, funded by the European Commission and commissioned through the National Agencies, for over 20 years, allowed many thousands of young people to spend up to a year volunteering in another EU Member State with all their travel and living costs covered. Undoubtedly, the programme had a huge impact on volunteers and communities alike. It contributed to the improvement of language skills, intercultural competences, solidarity, tolerance and mutual respect and understanding among young people (EVS factsheets and impacts). These volunteering opportunities are as varied as the organisations that host the young people and can offer them the possibility of leaving their “comfort zone” and volunteering in circumstances quite new to them where they have to develop leadership skills, understand diversity and gain in self-confidence and resilience. Volunteering Matters in the UK has been hosting EVS volunteers for the length of the programme since it complemented its own UK full-time volunteering programme. Following the replacement of EVS with the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme, the organisation continues to offer a wide range of volunteering opportunities, in partnership with ProjectScotland, for both European and in-country (UK), volunteers. The UK is not the only country to have a full-time volunteering programme; many other European countries have a form of formal and legally-established civic service for young people. In some countries this was developed

as an alternative to military service in others it is enshrined in law that gives young people state supported opportunities to volunteer for a year. Volunteering Matters full-time volunteers have typically worked with young disabled people to give them a voice and agency and support them to volunteer themselves and take part in their own communities.

EVS undoubtedly was a fantastic programme but it tended to attract young volunteers who are already experienced in travel, generally studied and could opt to spend up to one year abroad. What about young people across the EU with fewer opportunities who perhaps face barriers to volunteering because of economic, social, or educational disadvantages or health issues? The EVS programme could be difficult for these young people since it involved taking a large step to moving to another EU Member State for up to 12 months. Young people experiencing disadvantage have had fewer educational opportunities and perhaps have never left their home area, let alone their country. Towards the end of the EVS programme, the Strategic EVS strand was developed to attract these young people, prepare them for the experience and offer them a shorter term opportunity —between 2 weeks and 2 months. In addition, the partnership of sending and hosting organisations ensured that the preparation and the experience matched the expectations and abilities of the volunteers so that they had a really positive experience which opened their hearts and minds to language learning, new skills, travel and of course importantly European values, social justice and solidarity.

During his 2016 State of the Union address, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker announced the creation of the ESC programme which would offer young people between the ages of 18 and 30 the opportunity to participate in a wide range of solidarity activities across the Member States (voluntary and professional). Between 2017 and now, a number of pilot projects have been running and then in June 2018 an announcement was made that for the next long-term budgeting period 2021-2027, a new programme would be proposed by the Commission. This would carry a budget of 1.26 billion euros in order to broaden opportunities again through volunteering opportunities and job placements. For the moment in 2019/20, the last EVS projects are being finalised and new ESC initiatives are running in parallel. ESC is a more flexible programme, allowing in-country volunteering, team volunteering and individual volunteering opportunities of a variety of lengths. In short, all the young people's volunteering opportunities will be under the one programme.

### **EU Aid Volunteers**

The EU Aid Volunteers programme as it was initially conceived, was not only designed for young people. However, the proposal in 2019 is that it becomes part of ESC and is restricted to young people between 18 and 30. This is the Commission's proposal to the European Parliament and to the Council at the time of writing. The general idea is that young European volunteers can be deployed to offer humanitarian aid in zones that require capacity building post conflict or post natural disaster and will be hosted by suitable certified organisations in the third countries. Pilot projects —generally

developed and implemented by organisations already delivering humanitarian aid—have been successful and have offered life-changing opportunities to volunteers. The Commission is consulting with stakeholders on the format of the new programme which will come into effect in 2021.

### **Erasmus + Key Action Programmes**

The most relevant Key Action under the Erasmus+ programme for young people's volunteering and social action is number 2—Cooperation for Innovation and Exchange of Good Practices. These Strategic Partnership projects (which are also available in the areas of Adult Learning under a dedicated strand) focus on sharing, developing and transferring innovating practices in education, training and youth provision between participating countries. They are always multi-partner and multi-country projects, with one organisation taking the lead and administering the programme and the grants. To offer an example of how funding from this strand can boost the mobility and volunteering opportunities for young people, two specific projects are described below.

### **BE PART, FEEL YOUR PART**

Led by an Austrian partner organisation based in Graz, BE PART brings together seven organisations from six Member States (Austria, Germany, Denmark, Portugal, UK and Italy) that work with young people of all ages and abilities. The first part of the project developed an innovative youth work curriculum which was then used as a training tool in each country. Young people were then recruited to volunteer to take part in a social action programme which will see them explore some aspect of their immediate environment with which they are dissatisfied. Youth workers or volunteer managers work with the young people to think through how they can approach local decision-makers to make the change they want. Thus the project offers an opportunity to volunteer and be part of a social action project, offers new skills, boost self-confidence and exposes the young people to active citizenship, democratic values and team working.

### **Wake Up Europe**

Led by a German partner organisation based in Passau, Gemeinsam leben & lernen in Europa, Wake Up Europe brings together eight organisations (from Germany, Norway, Croatia, Czech Republic, Romania, North Macedonia, UK and Austria) that work with young people. A range of training courses for young people will be brought together in a single curriculum designed to help them to become more informed citizens, to learn about democracy and European solidarity and if they choose, to help them to be more politically active.

These projects are building on the PAVE recommendations which wanted young people's social action to be grounded in European values, democracy and solidarity. Young people are giving of their own time to develop the curriculum along with the partners and are trying out the modules as they are developed.

## **Volunteering by and for Older People**

Although the first part of this article focused on young people, their opportunities for mobility and volunteering, we saw at the beginning that older people contribute many hours to volunteer activity. European funding is available to boost their opportunities and to offer them opportunities to exchange practice with their counterparts across the EU. Older people, again according to Eurostat and NCVO are also more likely to have the time and motivation to commit to longer, more regular periods of volunteering. At Volunteering Matters, we have also found that older people are attracted by the possibility of organising and managing their own volunteering projects. In the UK, our Retired and Senior Volunteering Programme has been successful for over 20 years, attracting older volunteers who organise activities as varied as knitting groups, healthy walks, exercise and cookery classes, gardening and much more. Many of these older volunteers also give their time to intergenerational work, exchanging experience and ideas with younger volunteers and offering their time to support reading and maths in primary schools.

By way of an example of how Erasmus+ funding can support older volunteers, Volunteering Matters is just about to kick off a project which will involve 6 European partners from Ireland, Italy, Cyprus, Portugal and Austria, coordinated by Volunteering Matters. This project will support senior volunteers who will work with migrant communities in all 6 countries to help them to integrate into local life.

While not specifically focused on older people, our EU Voice project, financed through the AMIF (Asylum, Migration, Integration Fund), EU-VOICE aims to support the integration of Third Country Nationals (TCNs) and to promote relationships between TCNs and host-country nationals by organising volunteering experiences with TCNs in the cultural sector in four EU countries, Italy, Greece, Republic of Ireland, United Kingdom. A further Austrian partner is supporting dissemination activities for the project consortium at European level. Again this is a project to encourage and support integration into the local community through voice and agency, giving migrants an opportunity to get involved and engage with their new locality.

## **CEV European Volunteer Centre and Volonteurop**

These two networks are involved in supporting volunteering, but from very different perspectives. CEV offers a wide range of support to volunteer centres and organisations promoting volunteering across the EU. Again with the assistance of funding from the Europe for Citizens programme, the centre has been involved in a wide range of projects from the validation of volunteer skills and competences to measuring the impact of volunteering. CEV also have wide-ranging experience of projects which support the integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers through VALUES,



TANDEM and WISH<sup>2</sup>. As a Brussels based network, the centre also offers up to date advice and news from the European Institutions as it relates to volunteering and is represented on a number of European Parliament interest groups.

Volonteuropa is a network of organisations, extending beyond the EU Member States, which directly organise volunteering opportunities. It exists to support social justice, active citizenship and volunteering mainly through an on-line presence but also by bringing members together in an annual conference. During the years that the network was supported by a Europe for Citizens operating grant (up to 2018), it was also able to do extensive work on exchange of good practice and publish a number of research reports. Through its network of over 40 member organisations, it is still able to bring members together for activities ranging from submitting partnership project proposals for EU funding, to advocating for more prominence and support for volunteering and active citizenship at both European and national levels.

## **The Future of Volunteering in Europe**

There is no doubt that EYV 2011 helped to put volunteering on the European map. Support from the Europe for Citizens programme and Erasmus+ allows organisations that develop and support volunteering activities to exchange practice across the Member States and innovate in terms of the involvement and agency of volunteers. As we move into a new Multi-Annual Financial Framework and significant changes to the funding proposals for the next period, at the time of writing, it is unclear exactly how that funding will pan out. Certain volunteering related activities and projects are likely to be funded under the new “Justice, Rights and Values” programme and it is clear that this will mean a greater level of competition for scarce resources in the future. As we saw above, the European Solidarity Corps will be the main way for young people to volunteer in another Member State or in a third country via the humanitarian aid strand.

How would we like to see volunteering develop in Europe in the future? A few suggestions. We note that the European Commission has proposed that the humanitarian strand of the new European Solidarity Corps should have an upper age limit of 30 years. While we understand that the whole programme is designed to support the young people of the European Union, we urge the European Parliament and the Council to consider a separate humanitarian aid strand which would offer the opportunity to people over 30 to volunteer in third countries.

CEV has long lobbied for a Volunteering Inter-group in the European Parliament. We are delighted that a meeting to constitute a Volunteering Inter-group will take place in early November.

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<sup>2</sup> More details from [www.europeanvolunteercentre.org](http://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org)

The new Justice, Rights and Values programme which will incorporate the previous Europe for Citizens will begin next year. Within that programme, we urge the European Commission to make a clearer definition of what constitutes a Civil Society Organisation. The draft proposals are unclear and include both business organisations and Trades Unions, which have significantly different goals from Civil Society Organisations. Within the new programme, we urge the European Commission to make volunteering a significant aspect of the new programme and offer support to European networks which develop and support volunteering activities which encourage solidarity and European values.

And finally, a more general recommendation; participation of civil society organisations in cross-sectoral dialogue with Institutions and other partners is key and it is crucial that policy makers actively engage with them. It requires EU Institutions to create obligatory guidelines, including minimum standards for civil dialogue, to make organised civil society equal partners in the design implementation and monitoring of decisions and policies that impact on people's lives, as well as processes such as the action plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Semester and Agenda 2030.

However, the funding is distributed, whatever the support the European Union elects to give to volunteering, what is certain is that millions of people, young and old, will continue to give their time, energy and commitment to contribute to the lives of individuals, families and communities across the EU and beyond. This demonstration of solidarity, often with the most vulnerable in our societies, is part of what upholds the European Union values of social justice, equality and the support for human rights.

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