

### **From being assistant policemen to working as volunteers in the social field**

Estonia is a tiny country in North-East Europe, with a population of only a little over 1.3 million. Our experience of being independent is not extensive, although historically, Estonians have lived in the same location for about a thousand years. Throughout history, Estonia has been ruled by Denmark, Sweden, Russia, and Germany. Only on 24 February 1918, in the whirlwind of the end of the First World War, did the country succeed in creating an independent state. However, the good fortune was not there to stay – without going into detail, as a result of the Second World War, the Soviet Union occupied Estonia for decades.

Independence was restored on 20 August 1991. In history, our journey towards independence is known as the Singing Revolution – a revolution during which not a single drop of blood was shed.

In the 1990s, we had to learn how to act and operate as a state again. Gradually, the civil society began to rear its head as well. An ordinary person had a somewhat difficult life in the early days of Estonia's restored independence, as the existing economic model collapsed, unemployment was high, wages were low, and inflation was high. Considering all that, volunteering with its opportunities and values was not regarded as important – if at all, it was seen as unpaid work.

Today, the situation is quite different. We are politically strong partners in European Union: we have been holding the presidency of the Council of the EU over the second half of 2017.

Looking back, it seems that the initiative 'Let's Do it', launched in 2008, gave a new impulse to the popularity growth of volunteering. Now, volunteering is a popular way of spending time, because it allows you to do something meaningful, to feel good, make new friends, or acquire useful experience and skills for future work.

It is estimated that about 1/3 of the population are volunteers in Estonia. Sport is the most popular field for volunteering globally, but in Estonia, most volunteers operate in the areas of environmental protection and nature conservation as well as promoting local life (primarily in our village movement and residential associations in towns).

A study on volunteering conducted in 2013 reveals that only 16% of volunteers have contributed to the social sector. It is known that the social sector is a very sensitive and delicate topic and it often seems to be the realm of social workers alone. Several social institutions

and officials, however, find that almost anyone who has enough desire and empathy can provide help.

Yet, it is currently difficult for a person from the street to offer their aid in the social field, as associations or public authorities quite often face the problem of not being able to provide suitable training or run a background check of a person.

In the long term, the carefully considered involvement of volunteers will help make better use of social resources. There is undoubtedly a need for support structures for the operation of that kind of services, which would deal with background checks of volunteers, training, and support. For example, regional voluntary centres, which already have the necessary competencies, could take on such a role. Volunteers are ready to help and do not expect a reward for their actions. On the other hand, we must understand that organising the involvement of volunteers cannot be an act with an arbitrary basis – it also requires appropriate funding.

For the systematic modelling of volunteering in the social system, we have focused on the field of internal security in Estonia, where volunteers have been active as volunteer rescuers as well as volunteers in the police as ‘assistant police officers’.

To tell the truth, assistant police officers have a long and dignified history in Estonia. In 1917, in the turmoil of the First World War, active citizens on the territory of Estonia founded a so-called militia consisting of volunteers defending public order and protecting the property of citizens. In the early years of the Republic of Estonia, there was no active unit of assistant police officers, but during the Soviet era, people were involved as (kind of) volunteers to become so-called People’s Volunteers or social car inspectors. After the restoration of independence, the tradition continued. In 1994, the first Assistant Police Officer Act was passed after lengthy disputes. Over time, the tasks of assistant police officers have diversified and, as a result, the law regulating their work has been updated and specified as needed. It is worth mentioning that there is no general law regarding volunteer work in Estonia, and the assistant police activity is one of the few areas of volunteering that is regulated at the legislative level.

According to the law, it has been determined that a citizen of the Republic of Estonia who is at least 18 years of age, who has at least a B2 level in Estonian, and who has not been subject to criminal prosecution may become an assistant police officer. A thorough background check is also carried out for each assistant police officer. At present, there are over 1,000 assistant police officers in Estonia.

Assistant police officers are provided with basic training that lasts for 40 hours. A person who has contributed at least a hundred working hours as an assistant police officer may attend the second-level training course. This means that as a rule, an assistant police officer works together with a police officer, but if they successfully complete the second level training, they may also independently carry out tasks given by a police officer. At the suggestion

of the group leader, the assistant police officer will be able to attend firearms training and a training on driving with alarms, for example. Various training sessions are organised on a regular basis for the assistant police officers, and they can also participate in trainings meant for police officers.

The assistant police officers contribute the most working hours on patrol. Over the past year, the volume of preventive activities and attending regional police work has increased. The assistant police officers also participate in camera watch, border guards' activities, landscape searches, as well as in the training of other assistant police officers and police officers.

In everyday life, assistant police officers have a wide range of occupations. There are service providers and entrepreneurs, teachers and students, security staff and officials, and otherwise lovely and active people who are united by one particular desire – to contribute to a safe living environment. More and more young people can be found among assistant police officers, who are spurred by the desire to do something important in society. The young people join the ranks of assistant police officers for a more informed choice of occupation – they want to find out whether the work of a police officer work is suitable and agreeable to them.

Police contribute daily to their activities – ensuring that the assistant police officers are heard, trained, motivated, and have appropriate engagement opportunities. Then, the assistant police officers will keep their job, and the resources spent on training and equipment will not be wasted. As the uniforms and equipment of the assistant police officers have considerably improved over the years, the citizens often cannot tell the difference between a police officer and an assistant police officer.

Although a volunteer can never replace a paid employee, an assistant police officer is unquestionably a colleague and reliable assistant to the police: according to the police, it would be foolish not to rely on active people in the community.

Why could we not use a similar or parallel model in the social field? The most important difference is that the police sector in Estonia is regulated at the state level, while the local governments are responsible for organising services in the social field. There are a number of good examples in Estonia where NGOs and local governments have excellent cooperation (including the involvement of volunteers in the social area).

For example, volunteers from the Viljandi Maanaiste Ühendus (NGO Viljandi Countrywomen's Association), in cooperation with local governments of the surrounding area, offer social companion services to the rural elderly people. A companion is a volunteer who talks to elderly people and takes them to the shop or a doctor's visit if needed.

Läänemaa Naiste Tugikeskus (Lääne County Women's Shelter) offers help and support to women suffering from violence. Although the support centre also has paid employees, they are assisted by volunteers who help to collect the necessary items, for example. Volunteers are also on telephone watch; they babysit if needed or go out with a woman if she needs to

feel safe. Volunteers have concluded co-operation agreements. Only those volunteers who have completed the respective basic training in full are allowed to be in direct contact with a client. Leaders of the support centre find that the most significant role of volunteers could and should be prevention work and training.

In south-east Estonia, in Võru County, there is the non-profit organisation Maana, which was established by local social workers to provide more flexible ways of helping and supporting socially weaker people. Various community-based services are offered to local residents (often to elderly people who live alone): such as lawn mowing and laundry service.

In the coming years, there is a plan to test the already existing and working models in various municipalities and then introducing them to wider areas.

### **Author**

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