

Volunteering Landscape in a Post-Soviet Country

In the age of social media and countless continuous sharing we have now gained enough experience in building communities online. This is the time when we must ask ourselves whether we are able to build and help communities outside the digital world. The best example and good practice is obviously a volunteering activity. There are countries where voluntary work has been grown into their culture during years, but what about those countries that has no glorious volunteering history and relevant experiences from the past? Post-soviet member states that have just started to cyclically regenerate and born again, like Hungary.

Studies show that in these countries the most volunteers are surprisingly coming from elderly age groups, between 45 and 54. They are typically live in bigger cities, well-educated and mostly women. However, the phenomenon has an obvious explanation: young adults and middle age people are still struggling to establish their economic stability, therefore finding a well-paid job is their focus point and they do not really have time outside that bubble.

However, there is a new generation who has been growing up by these abovementioned elderly people. Their lives are more built around communities; they do not own things, trying to live in and for the moment, experiencing life as its fullest, travelling a lot and like giving back to society. Initiatives like European Solidarity Corps, European Voluntary Service give an extraordinary opportunity to these dedicated youngsters. Most people use it before they go into job market hence they can step into “real life” with developed skills. The dissemination areas of spreading this information around are still universities. From this point of view, it is easily understandable why we are having more highly educated people among volunteers. Meanwhile, it is also a tendency that we need those well-educated professionals.

Hungary’s two biggest volunteer movements are also worth mentioning. “*TeSzedd!*” means “*GoGather!*” is a garbage gathering movement that was established during the European Year of Volunteering in 2011 and growing into a widespread action to clean up the country. Most volunteers are coming from universities classroom as the organization’s advertisement working together with university communities. Another widespread volunteering opportunity in the country is “*Bátor Tábor*”, a *seriousfun* therapeutic camp for children who have long-term illnesses. The unique experience helps them overcome their fears and give them power to fight with their struggles. It is not only about giving something unique to the children, but also to the volunteers. Those who tried once, they usually return. Here comes back the

statement about well-educated people. In this camp children are coming from Central European countries, so volunteering can be an interpreting activity as well. In many minds, voluntary work is mostly something physical, like taking care of children, helping sick or elderly people with household chores, or just picking up some trash from the streets. Nowadays, we must disagree: volunteering can be an office job, translating for Amnesty International, interpreting at *Bátor Tátor* or doing pro-bono consulting.

This is how society can engage people between 30 and 45 where there is a clear and visible gap. These are the people who are more focusing on settle down and start a family. Even big companies found the advantages of volunteering and some of them offer a certain number of hours out of their regular business hours that their employees can use to help communities out. On the other hand, we must mention that most companies have foreign background and culture. While it is of course a nice start to spread good practices around. Budapest as a so-called start-up heaven has started to adopt into their daily life.

How does good practice work in reality? Just for example, the Hungarian government had brought into law that high school students need to do 50 hours compulsory community work before Matura in order to get their leaving documents. These people are the youngest volunteers in the country. The fact and reason behind the regulation is those who were engaged at early age will be easier to be involved again. Besides the past, lack of historical experience, a new generation is on its way knocking on the door.

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