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VOLUNTEERING AND PRECARITY

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Abstract: The rapidly changing world and the unexpected twists in everyday life (loss of a job, pandemics, disasters, etc.) are some of the characteristics, of the "symptoms" of precariousness, of precarious life. In times of sudden changes and crises when a person has no relatives and people from the social circle to rely on, he/she usually accepts the help of more distant people, strangers, and volunteers. Based on the answers of interviewed Bulgarian volunteers, sharing their experience of the privileges of volunteering and their ideas for implementing volunteering as a strategy for dealing with precarization, this text aims to find and present interrelations and commonalities between volunteering and precarity, in the sense of finding a way out of uncertain situations.

Keywords: volunteering, precarity, coping strategies, insecurity, precarious life

Introduction

The precarity of employment entails the precarity of other spheres of life (Temnitskiy 2023). Precarization in life is present when there is "reduced vitality in different areas of human activity due to overloaded employment, less free time and insufficient income, accompanied by reduced access to social and cultural benefits and changes" (Shevchenko, Shevchenko 2022: 64). According to anthropologist Anne Allison precarious life "is not only a condition of precarious labour but a more general existential state: it is a state where one's human condition has become precarious as well" (Allison 2013: 9 in Luleva, Benovska 2024: 155). In this text precarity is seen as an "objective-subjective phenomenon" (Toshchenko 2018: 81) defined as "a social reality linked to instability and risk that affect all life experiences as people struggle to make a livelihood" (Luleva, Benovska 2024: 155). As Kobayashi and Khan (2020) define it, precarity is "the link between the micro and macro, (…) a complex range of experiences and uncertainties that shape the everyday lives" of people, foregrounding those experiences within a broader social setting (Hall 2023: 1919).

National and economic crises and the widespread deconstruction of the Fordist welfare, the increasingly common short-term employer contracts, etc., provide less certainty on the ongoing financial security not only for adults (young and elderly) but in the societies of "undeveloped" and "developed" countries as a whole[1]. The consequences on a personal level could be low self-esteem, dissatisfaction, and family insecurity (see Allison 2013; Dannefer, Huang 2017; Mellor et al. 2009). In this sense, precarity refers not only to economic hardship but can also affect relationships within the family and between the members of any other social group: social, health, and environmental crises, and other exceptional circumstances often lead not only to uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety but also increase the likelihood of strained relationships between the parties involved.

One way or another, in times of crises, people rely first on the people in their closest social network, whom they trust, expecting to receive help, care, emotional support from them which brings them hope and the feeling of not being abandoned. In such situations, as well as in disasters, but also people with children or relatives with disabilities turn to institutions for help and support in which volunteers are involved. As more voluntary and non-government organizations emerge, the number of opportunities for help, for social, ecological or other engagement of volunteers increases. This is observed in Bulgaria since the beginning of the 21st century when new non-governmental social, cultural, environmental, sport organizations were established.

Following John Borneman, from an anthropological perspective, care is a "principle of human affiliation" and a "fundamental human need: the need to care and be cared for" (Borneman 2001). Linked to help care can be seen as a longitudinal help with a profound personal engagement. From the perspective of strategies for coping with precarity, it is a resource and an action (Kay 2012; Thelen, Cartwright, Sikor 2008 in Luleva 2024: 166). This refers also to voluntary work as, on the one hand, volunteering and caring often go hand in hand, and, on the other hand, volunteering is forced by the volunteers' sense of humanity and based on their supporting actions. As such it is a resource of human capital and therefore at a certain extent – a strategy for coping with precarity for volunteers experiencing it. In this sense, in the following, object of the study are not the people in need receiving any kind of care or support but the volunteers themselves who volunteer independently or within voluntary or other social, environmental, sports, religious NGOs.

Volunteering is a two-way process where a man not only changes the environment and helps it become better but also changes himself/herself by developing

[1] Actually, the following economic and financial crisis led to the rise of charity and voluntary work: "Many families are now living below the poverty line as a result of high unemployment rates, soaring living costs, rising economic burdens (mortgages, taxes, rents, etc.), and the decrease in public assistance, forcing them to depend more heavily on non-profit and/or charitable organizations to meet basic needs like food and housing" (Valenzuela-Garcia, Lubbers, Rice 2019: 2). In parallel, people are encouraged to volunteer and donate, to be responsible citizens and active members of their community and society.

skills, gaining different knowledge, experiences, and qualities, meeting many different people, etc.[2] Volunteering done in leisure time, provides "help to others, a group, an organization, a cause, or the community at large, without expectation of material reward" (Musick, Wilson 2008: 3). Voluntary work is a prosocial practice when it is realized in the spheres of healthcare (i.e. during pandemics as COVID-19), education (extracurricular volunteer actions, leaders/helpers in summer and winter camps for children (also with disadvantages[3]), social care (caring for elderly and sick), civil defense, and environment (cleaning up nature). It provides a sense of purpose, encourages concern for others, and generates a sense of personal fulfillment (Stebbins, Graham 2004 in Morawski et al. 2022).

In the European context, where Bulgaria belongs geographically, historically, and politically, and culturally depending on the kind of voluntary work, the emphasis is also put on political participation and social capital and on (non-governmental) organizations which "are the product of people's ability to work together to meet shared needs, address common problems, and serve their members" (Guidi, Fonović, Cappadozzi 2021: 56)[4]. Following R. Putnam (1993), social networks have a leading role in the functioning of social groups. As to voluntary work, these are the extensive and dense networks of voluntary associations in society that foster social trust, tolerance, and civic participation of the people involved in social and political life. If we argue that civic community norms and values are embodied and realized through specific social structures and practices such as volunteering, then voluntary work is one of the elements of the social capital of the local community, where civic associations can influence the people involved in them but also the governance policies of a certain territory (Pevnaya et al. 2022: 206).

Some East European researchers see also some additional specificities. Russian researchers differentiate between volunteering (*dobrovol'chestvo,* "good willingness") as a characteristic of the Russian culture and mentality, based on the ideas

[2] Even in a modern context "charity is essentially voluntary work undertaken with benevolent intentions in order to aid those who need it" (Valenzuela-Garcia, Lubbers, Rice 2019: 4); and often the free goods donated by individuals or businesses are sorted and transported by low paid or unpaid labour performed by volunteers, this aspect and the interrelation between charity and volunteering will not be discussed in this paper.

[3] According to interviewed university students in Russia, if at the beginning of the implementation of volunteer projects they did not realize properly their importance, in the process of systematic regular work with sick children they had a sense of their need, demand, and desire to continue volunteering. This means that regular volunteering develops personality traits as 'orientation to humanistic values, motivation and willingness to help those in need, well-developed communication abilities and empathy" (Pevnaya et al. 2022: 209).

[4] In comparison the contemporary African conception of volunteering features both "practices prevalent in international development where volunteers "freely" give their time, knowledge, and skills through a formal organization" and, in the context of the emergence of donor-funded development projects, due to the increasing precarity and the 'desire to have a "slice of donor funds" (Wilson 2006; Moleni, Gallagher 2006), volunteering is considered as a source for stipends as a source of livelihood (see Guidi, Fonović, Cappadozzi 2021: 63).

of altruism and mutual assistance on a local level, in small social communities (village, manufacturing personnel, etc.) and volunteering as a large event which has become more popular recently and is defined first of all as a social movement, a form of expression of social activity of young people, fulfillment of social order by educational institutions (see Maznichenko, Papazyan 2018:103; Oberemko 2016: 95). In comparison, in the Serbian context B. Radovanović (2019) speaks about the more common among the Serbian population direct help provided to individuals in need (e.g., assistance, taking care, etc.) as an additional form of "individual giving of time" besides formal and informal volunteering[5]. In Bulgaria, in rural settings more common is the "individual giving of time" among members of the local population and voluntary work is something new introduced in the last decades by non-governmental organizations and their voluntary activities such as ecological or social voluntary camps, the programme "Baba Residence", or the voluntary service "Grandchildren for rent" of the foundation "Children with Special Needs" in Madan. In urban settings, individual giving of time happens more often among the members of the closest social network (relatives, close friends). At the same time, formal volunteering seems to be more visible in regional and larger towns where volunteer larger-scale activities of more popular non-profit organizations take place such as the sorting of caps collected by 'Caps for the Future' done for the purchase of equipment for children's health facilities or the mass tree planting throughout Bulgaria initiated by Gorata.bg, food distribution for elderly people living in villages in Bulgarian regions. In the following passages 'volunteering' is defined as "the activity carried out for the benefit of other people, communities or society of their own free will, without any expectation of retribution" (Radev 2012: 84–85). It is characterized by an organizational context, offering space for a planned and episodic involvement (or at least readiness or interest for further engagement in voluntary actions) and financial or other compensation (covering costs for transport, food, training, special clothing, etc.) (see Emilova, Stoyanova, Dinkov 2016: 420–421). In this sense, the activities carried out gratuitously for the benefit of the family or household are not seen as volunteering. At first glance, for volunteers volunteering does not seem to be a strategy for coping with precarity. However, the long-term or episodic volunteering covers to a certain extent the characteristics of such a strategy. Namely, it assembles "the sequence of decisions that an actor makes while pursuing a certain goal according to a set of rules or restrictions, trying to predict the future consequences of specific steps and taking into account the reaction of other social actors (Fontain and Schlumbohm 2000 in Luleva 2024: 167). Thus, even if the actor's goal is to share his willingness to help, his knowledge, his time, his skills, and his openness to the problems of others, placed in a voluntary context and following the ethics of voluntarism it opens up opportunities for the actor to deal with future situations of uncertainty, also by "gaining" the so-called psychological benefits (see Kim, Morgul 2017).

[5] The former is related to giving time to organizations and the latter to the activity of sharing one's time to help an informal group.

In general, the publications related to voluntarism/volunteering and precarity do not point directly to any touchstone between the two fields but speak about the link between volunteering and non-profit (third sectors) organization, between volunteering and development (to development policies and practices) and their function as a discourse and a practice within different contexts (Chadwick, Fadel, Millora 2022). Further studies are related to precarity, income and community participation through volunteering (Lewchuk et al., 2015: 120–139), precarity and poverty alleviation (ibid.), also through voluntarism (Þorsteindóttir 2022).

Studies show that the relationship between precarity, insecurity, and volunteering and caring is present in researches directed to "aging, insecurity and care (by volunteers)" (Kobayashi, Khan 2020), to "help of volunteers and voluntary organization to migrants" (Hall 2023), "insecurity among volunteers working with disadvantaged people" (Kislyakov, Shmeleva, Govin 2019: 138; Yakovleva, Karanevskaya, Afanasieva 2017).

In the Bulgarian context, the volunteer work towards migrants, besides among the ethnic groups in Bulgaria (e.g. Armenians, Ukrainians), is most visible in the contribution of volunteers engaged in Caritas Bulgaria, where people of different ethnic backgrounds are involved in the activities of the organization, offering a variety of creative workshops. An interesting example related to the social adaptation of migrants, but not through cultural, educational or creative activities, is the 'Real Sofia' football sports club, which brings together migrants coming from the Middle East, African countries, countries, and also from Ukraine. Its main driving force are two men who, on a voluntary basis, spurred on by their interest in football, organize the team's training sessions and performances, provide them with equipment, but also help them find accommodation, jobs, and deal with various legal issues[6]. As for the uncertainty among the volunteers working with people with special needs (existing mostly in the first months and years of work, especially when the volunteer has no prior experience or acquired theoretical knowledge), the practical skills or the special qualifications needed to work with such a group of people, as can be observed, for example, in the volunteering of people involved in sports clubs for people with special needs, it decreases with the accumulation of experience, security, and here an important role is played by the example of the more experienced and often more qualified trainer or teacher.

A study on British elderly migrants in Spain sees "precarity as a lens for drawing attention to insecurity and risk in relation to migration, ageing and care, (…) [which] enables a deeper understanding of the circumstances facing older migrants not only at individual, household and community levels but within a broader social, economic and political context" (Hall 2023: 1919–1920). It reveals the insecurity of the formal and informal health and social care that the British migrants with no knowledge of Spanish and low levels of integration experience in their new home of residence. The author pays attention to the solidarity, social support, and practical

[6] For more information see Kyurkichieva, Matanova 2024.

help (transport, translation, shopping, etc.) they receive from British-led voluntary organizations, the importance of the support of volunteers with "a shared socio-cultural and linguistic background" filling the "critical 'care gap'" and in general to the voluntary migrant organizations that in some cases even pay for care services for British migrants facing financial precarity (Hall 2023: 1927, 1930).

This aspect has not been studied among Bulgarian migrants abroad. The Bulgarian migrant communities do not have volunteer organizations. Instead, they find solidarity and any kind of support in their social circle in the first period after immigration, characterized very often by felt uncertainty by the migrants (visible through non-orientation and non-adaptation to the social and cultural environment of the host society because of poor language skills, limited financial possibilities at the beginning, etc.). Some Bulgarian migrants with a weaker social circle join online groups in social networks (Facebook groups) or Bulgarian associations (dancing, reading, music, sports, etc.), when there are such groups operating in the place or close to the place they live. As Bulgarian emigration is seldom related to retirement, in the case of emigrating pensioners, it is rather done with the purpose of helping raise their children's heirs. The retired Bulgarian migrants get social and financial support from their well adapted and/or integrated children.

Another study analyses the volunteer experience and the readiness of the Russian Federation's youth and its social significance on the meso level proving that the social importance of youth volunteer participation is related to the social capital of territorial communities and their sustainability. In this sense, it is important to understand the motivation, intentions, and real opportunities for volunteer participation of high school students so that students could contribute to improving the effectiveness of solving the task of increasing the social activity of young people, defined in the framework of the state youth policy (Pevnaya et al. 2022).

Even with some exceptions (Kanev 2023; Stoyanova 2021; Stoyanova 2022, and others), the Bulgarian scientific literature has more publications on youth volunteering than any other spheres (Gorchilova 2019; Toncheva-Zlatkova 2021, Zlateva 2014 and others), further researches would contribute for an objective overview of the development and the diversity of youth voluntary opportunities on local and national level, for the increase of social activity of this young population and for better state policies.

Other researchers study the precariousness volunteers experience in their lives, in their work-life balance, and problems and challenges they face during volunteering regarding interpersonal relationships, informal/ unpaid working hours, housing insecurity, etc. (see Sandiford, Green 2021; Motakef 2019). In contrast, a recent study on the relationship between labour market insecurity and volunteering shows that employees who do voluntary activities are more likely to declare perceived labour market insecurity than employees who do not volunteer (see Nappo, Fiorillo, Lubrano Lavadera 2024). As already mentioned, in the Bulgarian context, research on volunteering is mainly focused on the study of volunteering among youth, less often in sports and work with people with intellectual or physical disabilities

(Dimitrova 2019; Emilova, Karagenova et al. 2014; Matanova 2025; Stoyanova, Dinkov 2016; Toncheva-Zlatkova 2021; Yonkova 2019; Zlateva 2014). Research on the relationship between volunteering and its benefits and its use as an exit strategy from a precarious situation is lacking. The studies presented are mentioned to show the possible aspects to explore the relationship between volunteering and precarity, the positive consequences of volunteering for the volunteers also in crisis situations. Accordingly, the present study aims to provide data on Bulgarian volunteers' views on the benefits they derive in precarious situations from their accumulated volunteering experience and social capital. In this regard, the subject of the study is the perceptions of the interviewed individuals on the relationship between volunteering, precarity, and its use as a coping strategy.

Methodology and demographic data

To see whether volunteering is seen by the volunteers themselves as a coping strategy in uncertain situations I have analyzed the answers of twelve Bulgarians (3 men and 9 women) given during semi-structured interviews carried out between March and December 2024[7] in a non-formal setting. Except for the students (3 of 12), all interviewees have had at least a bachelor's or a master's degree. They have different social statuses (students, employees, self-employees) and belong to several age groups: 18–35 (5 persons), 36–50 (6 persons), 51–65 (1 person). In this case, the results show that the volunteer experience depends on the frequency of volunteering and not on their age group. In terms of the frequency of volunteering most have volunteered more than once, half are episodic volunteers and a person has volunteered only once and would like to do it again if an occasion, time, or a "co-volunteer" comes. They all volunteer at their places of residence (Sofia, Sliven, and Varna). Except for the latter case and two of the students, all others have a job (they are teachers, economic employees, municipal and church officials, self-employees) which means that being employed for them does not impede volunteering and they do not experience precariousness because of unemployment. None of the interviewed persons is in any precarity situation during the studied period so they speak about their previous experience, of the positive outcomes they have had from volunteering or share their opinion about what they think they are going to do when they are in a precarious situation.

All interviewees have been volunteers in the social sector (ethnic community service; engagement with people from marginalized groups – disadvantaged chil-

[7] Interviews and the presented research – are carried out in the frames of the project "Volunteering in Bulgaria – history, causes, recommendation (Heroes)", No КП-06-80/10, 15.12.2023. All cited field work materials are archived at the National Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage at the Institute for ethnology and folklore studies with Ethnographic Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences with archive numbers AIF I No 600, 601, and 602. Correspondingly, for each archive unit are mentioned sex (m, f) and age group of the respondent (20–35, 36–50, 51–65, over 65).

dren, minority children), in sports events (marathons, European and world championships and cups, Olympic Games, sport festivities for disabled children), and in educational or religious activities for children (religious and non-religious Sunday schools, camps, festivity events). One of them has been engaged for more than five years in the leading team of a voluntary organization.

Considering their marital status, most of them are singles. Only three persons are married and live with their grown-up or small children what does not stop their will for volunteering but in the latter case they take part in child-centered or child-friendly voluntary actions. This contrasts with the observations on volunteering made in Serbia according to which married individuals are more likely to volunteer than single people (Radovanović 2019: 139).

The high number of younger volunteers is due to the more leisure time available, less family and work obligations, the continuing European policies for active youth citizens. Some of the reasons for the participation of older people could be the more time they have for side activities after children have grown-up, workload is reduced, and a need for usefulness has increased. Another explanation is the fact that these are people who have spent their youth years before the change of the political system in Bulgaria in 1989, when secondary pupils and students were massively engaged in various social activities (see also Emilova, Stoyanova, Dinkov 2016: 423). At the same time, this could be a barrier to engaging in volunteer activities if people have negative experiences and memories from this period.

Many of the interviewees are not members of the researcher's social circle. They were not found by contacting voluntary organizations but by asking members of social circle about their volunteer work or that of their friends and relatives (snowball method). All interviews were transcribed and content analyzed. In order to find some additional data on volunteering in Bulgaria digital ethnography was employed for researching websites and online social network forms (mainly Facebook groups) focused on voluntary work.

Volunteering in Bulgaria: some insights

In general, as the mentioned examples show, volunteering in its contemporary form is not a Bulgarian phenomenon. Affected by European and North American influences, volunteering spreads in Bulgaria mainly after the end of the socialist period, when many local offices of foreign non-governmental prosocial organizations offering voluntary involvement and – more intensively after 2008, Bulgaria's joining of the EU – new native such associations are established on a local basis. Characteristic for Bulgarian volunteering is that it is more common among the youth population and not the elderly people because they have more free time, less family responsibilities, they travel a lot abroad (most often to Europe and North America) for studying or student exchanges, holiday trips, etc., where they are able to get acquainted with different forms of volunteering. Elderly Bulgarians

participate in voluntary actions because of their volunteering children, or when they have volunteered before in an ecological, health or a social (or sociocultural) sphere because of their personal interests. The lesser desire to assist others now could be explained by the fact that in socialist Bulgaria (and in other Eastern European countries as well) many people from the older generations have experienced forced (compulsory) "volunteering" since they were required to devote their free time to social, cultural, and political causes. Another example from that period with a more voluntary character was inspired by the Soviet Timur movement called 'Timur squads' which united young persons (pioneers) impressed by the main hero of Arkady Gaidar's "Timur and His Squad" to help and to offer care for neighbours in need.

To elderly people, volunteering allows participating in meaningful activities and developing new relationships. This activity positively impacts their mental and physical health as they fulfill socially meaningful roles that give them a purpose in life (Morawski et al. 2022; Musick, Wilson 2003). Several studies argue "that volunteer work does help people live longer" (Mellor et al. 2009: 145; see also Sabin 1993; Yum, Lightfoot 2005). A survey on volunteering in Bulgaria from 2014 (Zlateva 2014) and another one on the quality of life of people aged 55+ in Bulgaria (which included 1,030 respondents), carried out in 2022, show that elderly people in Bulgaria have a low engagement in unpaid volunteer work: "6.1% of the elderly do unpaid volunteer work for organizations that offer social services on a volunteer/public basis; 5.7% of the elderly do unpaid volunteer work for educational, cultural, sports or professional associations; 6.8% work as volunteers for civic movements; and 5.4% of the elderly do free volunteer work for other organizations. Moreover, these are the figures for volunteer work done less than once a month or only occasionally. Those elderly people who have never engaged in unpaid volunteer work range from 89.7% to 91.5%, depending on the kind of organizations referred to" (see Nakova 2023: 14–15). This data to some extent corresponds to the number of interviewees over 55 who are just 1 of 12. However, it is a person who has participated in volunteer actions and events all his conscious life and has even educated his own and other people's children in volunteering from their teenage years. Thus, this elderly volunteer belongs to the almost 7% of people giving their free time to educational, cultural, and sports associations.

Even though volunteering helps with the organization of social life and is one of the few mechanisms of forming socially responsible behavior and a certain civic attitude among the young generations[8] (see also Haski-Leventhal, Meijs, Hustinx 2010), volunteer activities are seldom present and presented in Bulgarian educational structures. They are not part of the school curricula except on rare occasions

[8] By gaining experience in socially-oriented activities and developing civic qualities volunteering encourages people to be socially active, to work for the benefit of society and other people, and to develop civic qualities as initiative, responsibility, patriotism, and mutual assistance (Maznichenko, Papazyan 2018: 105).

as extra-curricular activities or school-hosted volunteer centers[9]. Only around 15 schools in Bulgaria are listed as offering volunteer activities for pupils[10] as, for example, the pupils' voluntarily watering of trees in the school yard in 2024 in the frames of the project "Eco patrol" of the National Alliance for Work with Volunteers' campaign "School in Action"[11]. Similar situation is observed also in higher education institutions where volunteering is present in the form of clubs (*Voluntary Club We Succeed Together* at Veliko Tarnovo University; *Club for a Better Society* at the AUBG) in 1/4 of the eight universities surveyed in 2021 (see Toncheva-Zlatkova 2021: 105).

It is worth mentioning about 'TimeHeroes' 'Heroes' Cup'[12] that developed as a network since 2015; it is launched for the 2019/2020 school year known nowadays also as a national voluntary competition. It works as a kind of extracurricular external generator of voluntary actions (missions) among young people at school age. Encouraged to register voluntary clubs and to do well and describe their deeds in words and pictures, the students (heroes) participate (divided into two age groups) in the 'Heroes' Cup' through missions of different nature, area and duration, thus accumulating points: the greater the good deeds, the more the points received and the bigger the chances to win the cup. As a result, since 2019 between 12 and 36 clubs (more numerous in the years of COVID-19 pandemics) engaged in more than 1500 missions in 24 locations (towns and villages). These examples show and confirm once again another study results that volunteering in Bulgaria is more common among people aged 15–35 and 36–50 (see Toncheva-Zlatkova 2021: 103), with students prevailing, who volunteer in cultural, sports, environmental activities or charity campaigns, and also in emergencies (Gorchilova 2019). Similar are the results in the present study:

> Student volunteers have given talks to the children. In one such talk we had a practical task: 'School for a Day'. We made bird houses, bird feeders. The children learned about the biodiversity in the Balkan Mountains and what to do if someone gets hurt in the mountains, how one should behave if one meets or finds a wild animal, who one should contact. The more informed a society is, the better. But informed by people who are experts in the field. Sadly, we are much more often informed through Google than having these direct encounters with people. (AIF I No 662, a. u. 6, 36–50)

[9] In comparison, in the USA the rates of volunteering in adolescence are high because of the schools, churches, and other youth-oriented institutions which require community service of their young people.

[10] https://navabg.com/bg/центрове-за-работа-с-доброволци/ (Accessed 8 December 2024)

[11] https://navabg.com/bg/2024/03/11/екопатрул-в-су-климент-охридски-пл/ (Accessed 8 December 2024)

[12] https://kupatanageroite.com/ (Accessed 10 May 2025)

> Mainly volunteering at sporting events, competitions. But I've also been involved in eco-orienteering with a mountain clean-up. (AIF I No 661, 1, f, 36–50)
>
> By volunteering, you make a lot of contacts that can help you. And that's very important, especially at our age, maybe right when you're coming out of high school and getting a little bit into the real life. Because for that school helps you with almost nothing, doesn't prepare you in any way for what awaits you with administration, bureaucracy, and things like that (AIF I No 660, 3, f, 20–35).

The higher participation of young and middle-aged volunteers can be explained by the fact that, in addition to their active age, they tend to use the Internet as a means of communication and information much more than older people[13]. Internet seems to be the most suitable instrument for finding voluntary actions. On one hand, it offers a direct contact to online social groups – in the Bulgarian context these are predominantly Facebook groups – related to support and care of people in need, homeless animals, charity actions, etc. Existing groups are about volunteering in general[14], local ones for volunteers in Ruse, Stara Zagora, Varna, Sandanski, Blagoevgrad, Troyan, Burgas[15] and also specific for ecological activities[16], for animal care or village volunteers[17]. Other online sources are internet platforms and other websites – as TimeHeroes, NGO.BG[18], or the site for volunteer activities in Burgas ihelp.bg – functioning as an online database for volunteer activities. On the other hand, when a person has volunteered through any organization and accepted to be added to a mailing list for future initiated actions, he/she receives e-mails or App-messages through the Internet. Other reasons for the prevalence of young volunteers could be found in the lack of policies aimed at promoting volunteering in Bulgarian society[19] and the low presence of volunteering on TV and in other mass media preferred by many middle-aged and senior people.

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[13] According to a previous study (Zlateva 2014), the largest share of respondents indicated specialised websites and social networks as a source of information, followed by those of friends and professional circle.

[14] Доброволци | Facebook; Прави добро! Бъди добър! | Facebook

[15] Доброволци в Русе | Facebook; Подари добро-Троян | Facebook; ДОБРОВОЛЦИ И ИНИЦИАТИВИ ВАРНА | Facebook; Доброволци Ямбол – доброволчески и благотворителни инициативи в обл. Ямбол | Facebook; https://www.facebook.com/groups/395000891257836; Доброто в Бургас | Facebook

[16] As ДоброЖънци | Facebook; Доброволци за опазване на българските планини | Facebook;

[17] Доброволци на село / Village volunteers | Facebook

[18] It is the information portal for NGOs in Bulgaria with a section for calls for and offers from volunteer offers.

[19] Genereally, a study from 2014 shows that in Bulgarian society dominates the view that working with volunteers is a territory reserved for civil society organisations and the Bulgarian Red Cross. With overwhelmingly positive responses, international organisations ranked next, followed by so-

Several interviewees mentioned that there is no stable infrastructure for volunteering, no official national institutions or mechanisms set up to manage organization during disasters, pandemics, and other crises, to target initiatives at volunteers of different ages, and to create a space that allows people in need to connect those offering help. Of course, some successful websites and platforms like 'TimeHeroes' and the others mentioned above exist but they are not sufficient. Furthermore, due to their online format, they are inaccessible to all age groups and remain unknown to the general population in the country. In this regard, an interviewee shared:

> People need to do good. They need an institution. Recently a fire on a hill near Sliven broke out and many people individually rushed to help [it is actually an uncertain situation]. People need to be together, to be united, and to do good. I think there is a need for that but there isn't any person, institution, or organization responsible for that which will unite and organise them in such cases. (AIF I No 662, a. u. 1, f, 36–50)

Here, too, the need for a "state fund for the support of volunteering" is mentioned, for a legal framework that would also provide a control mechanism for organizations working with volunteers (and possibly increase their number[20]) (see Zlateva 2014: 27). Maybe to a certain extent the gaps are filled by the *National Association of the Volunteers of Republic Bulgaria*, which is established to gather emergency volunteers, and the more locally functioning since 2000 foundation *National Alliance for Work with Volunteers* in Plovdiv (as of September 2017 uniting 52 Centre for work with volunteers in more than 20 regions in Bulgaria), aiming to strengthen the volunteer practices in Bulgaria and to change the community attitudes towards it by organising various initiatives involving a maximum number of people from the community and promoting the values of volunteering[21] such as respect, social responsibility, reliability, and others.

Volunteering and precarity

Mentioned in several interviews as an avail of volunteering in precarious situations of searching for a treatment for an illness, unexpected loss of a job, or the death of a family member, is the good chance one gets when he/she finds money or a good doctor specialist for an advice or a treatment or finds someone, he/she felt close during volunteering with whom he/she can share his/her feelings and sorrows as a widowed or divorced person. The more people a person meets during voluntary work, the more chances he/she has to find someone to provide help, support

cial and religious institutions (see Zlateva 2014: 10).

[20] In Bulgaria, there is no official register of voluntary organisations which according to preliminary unofficial findings are more than 80.

[21] https://navabg.com/bg/за-нас/ (Accessed 8 December 2024)

or care for him/her find a job, or someone with experience in the possible ways of treating an illness. This could be seen as a "profitability" of volunteering coming at the right time:

> Surely, you can rely on help. One way or another, the good thing, you have done is coming back somehow. (AIF I No 662, a. u. 2, f, 20–35)

Even if people do not volunteer for the sake of profit but because they prefer to act humanly through a support and care or to fill their free time, it brings positive outcomes in their lives. Religious interlocutors see it as God's intervention:

> I am a believer. I have always believed in the good and I trust God and I know that what will happen to me is coming from Him, and it can't not be good. There is no haphazard. (AIF I No 662, a. u. 1, f, 36–50)

Although according to religious teachings it matters whether you do good deeds for human glory or humbly, driven by the desire to follow God's laws and to be a good person for others around you ready even to neglect yourself, from the respondents' point of view the more important is the confidence that what they are doing in the present is making them happy and useful in the moment and is giving them an experience that in a moment of uncertainty can be used to get out of it. Most often seen as a benefit of volunteering is the meeting of new people with various professional and social backgrounds and expanding the social circle, i.e. the capitalization of personal contacts:

> The contacts that volunteering has given me are invaluable, they cannot be measured in money. And if I ever had to, I would use those contacts. (AIF I No 661, 1, f, 36–50)
>
> Along with these volunteer activities, I have met many people too, which is also a big plus. Now, whenever I need something in my life, I can ask someone I met through these activities to help me. (AIF I No 662, a. u. 3, f, 51–65)
>
> If you lose your job and you volunteer somewhere, there you might get acquainted with someone who can help you somehow find a job. It has happened to me. (AIF I No 662, a. u. 4, f, 36–50)

Besides the support one can find from a volunteer acquaintance, for example, when he/she gets unemployed, there is also the perspective of the 'educational' profiting side of volunteering which allows for the acquisition of work experience, of the so-called volunteering 'imprints' that can be used for professional and employment careers (see also Chashkova et al. 2016; Hoskins, Leonard, Wilde 2020):

> Every young person in Bulgaria, even in high school, should volunteer in three areas during three summer vacations. It is a must for me that a

> young person should work in the media, to see how the news is written, how important words are (...). The other thing is to volunteer in a social institution where people need someone to support them and to feel the care of others. The third thing is in administration. Everyone imagines the grumpy aunt behind the counter who sends you back 15 times. The truth is that the administration is extremely important. It is essential for people to know their institutions and to have work experience there. (AIF I No 661, a. u. 1, f, 36–50).

In Bulgaria, as in many other countries, volunteer experience is seen as enriching autobiographies: "Employers are 82% more likely to select a candidate with volunteer experience and 85% more likely to overlook gaps in a CV when it includes volunteer experience" (Toncheva-Zlatkova 2021)[22].

The broadening of the social circle, also influenced by the immediacy of communication that the volunteer environment predisposes to, does not always lead to the building of personal trust between those involved, especially when it is a one-off volunteer initiative and when volunteers are involved in a common cause, taking them away from the routine, from their everyday lives, from their usual social environment, which follows the principles of personal trust built over time. These encounters are, however, a good basis for broadening horizons, for developing personal trust for the future, also through episodic volunteering activities in the same environment, and for seeking help in precarious conditions:

> Where I have volunteered, I know from experience that there is a lot of sharing going on. You get to know each other as you work. And if you have a problem and you share it, you can find a solution. (AIF I No 662, a. u. 4, f, 36–50)

Another important quality, a skill developed predominantly within volunteering is struggling with difficulties, with yourself, and your fears of the unknown[23], i.e. leaving the zone of comfort, which also helps in moments of uncertainty by developing individual qualities:

> I've applied for years for job positions and nobody wanted to take me because I was young and I had no experience. I kept working, and now, this year, I got three offers from places where I had applied for jobs before. (...) Volunteering helped me to have that adaptability and courage not to give up and to achieve my goal. (...) I mean, there is that aspiration, that

[22] This practice is widespread in Western European countries, the USA, etc., where it is encouraged in society, during education (and often applied during the gap year between school and university), and recently skeptically connoted in the opinion of youth in the USA (who feel it abused when they steadily volunteer, also as interns, and prefer community organizing and helping in the closer social circle (family, kin, neighbourhood) (see also AIF I No 662, a. u. 6, f. 36–50).

[23] Mastering this skill in result decreases isolation, depression, mistrust, etc.

> drives when you want to do something and do not give up. (AIF I No 660, a. u. 1, f, 20–35)

Furthermore, by helping to solve other people's problems in precarious situations as support in cleaning up homes after floods and fires, volunteering with people with special needs and other illnesses, volunteering at children's camps, etc., but also volunteering at institutions in the form of unpaid work during internships (especially among youths), the volunteer can benefit from that experience (new knowledge, new skills) and eventually use it for similar future moments of precarity in his/her life.

An interviewed volunteer shared that once he "used" volunteering as a way for coping with precarity[24], a situation that he faced when having returned from abroad he applied for jobs in his re-adaptation phase and was willing to find some security, some meaningfulness:

> When I came back to Bulgaria, I was looking for my place – why I came back, where I came back, what social contacts I didn't lose. There was a wondering where and what I would work. And in that process, I really needed something to anchor me in some way and give me some meaning. Alongside that, I started volunteering in Bulgaria. I wasn't looking for skill sets. I was looking to do something concrete that gave my life meaning; to know that I was doing something meaningful. (AIF I No 662, a. u. 6, 36–50)

Another characteristic highlighted by the interviewees is that volunteering is inclusive, creating a sense of community, which also helps in times of uncertainty, such as the loss of a loved one, a relative (after a divorce, or a death):

> We are like a family, not like colleagues in a firm. (AIF I No 662, a. u. 2, f, 20–35)
>
> I meet like-minded people; I meet people who through their work, through volunteering, become more refined in their souls. They want good things to happen, and somehow that separates the people who take this on from those who don't. The people who do not volunteer but they are deprived of this joy of the soul, to contribute and to rejoice, because in fact not everything in life is money... Here [during the camps] we see our benefit – to sow the seed in the children, which sooner or later will sprout. To carry love in our heart. Otherwise it creates anxiety. Children are restless. Parents want to, but they don't have time. Children need to communicate. They get on the computer and phone and don't navigate the world. (AIF I No 662, a. u. 3, f, 50–65)

[24] The opposite practice – to volunteer to get a job – can hardly be used as strategy. It is "not unequivocally beneficial for employment, particularly if it does not offer career-related experience or is imposed rather than self-initiated. It can even have a negative effect on employment" (Hoskins, Leonard and Wilde 2020).

Having in mind that while volunteering a person is trying to do his/her best for the others and is feeling welcome by the other volunteers, this social environment resembles the atmosphere of an idyllic family or of a like-minded group of people, based on mutual understanding and respect.

All volunteers, especially the episodic ones, feel the difference in the experience of working for money and the experience of giving their time and skills to others for free. Performing team tasks for the good of a third party (elderly, sick, disabled, marginalized) and putting the other person with his/her problems in the first place, takes the volunteer away from his/her personal problems and commitments. The volunteer environment is about taking responsibility for the other persons' problems, a willingness to be flexible, a desire for empathy, and directness in communication that contrasts with the paid work atmosphere, where there is competition, rivalry, and even mobbing. The volunteer work environment broadens the self-perception and also shows the importance of one's personal issues over monetary disruptions, of putting others' problems before one's own, of the cost of labour, and enriches the volunteer's social experience and communication skills. All this, on the one hand, contributes to the good functioning and development of the community and, on the other, expands the possibilities for positive attitudes in interpersonal understanding and in building personal trust. For the younger population seeking career guidance, the involvement in activities relevant to their interests on a voluntary basis enriches their work experience and acquired knowledge.

People who have volunteered once in an area of their interest repeat their participation when possible. Their motivations to feel useful, to fill their free time – "I have plenty of free time. (...) These initiatives give me the opportunity to use my time in some meaningful way." (AIF I No 661, a. u. 1, f, 36–50); "The leading thing for students is filling free time, gaining experience, having an interesting time, meeting new people." (AIF I No 661, a. u. 2, m, 36–50), etc.–help them to cope with the difficulties they face while volunteering, which as a lived experience is useful for future situations related to exiting their comfort zones.

Besides the interviewees involved in childcare during summer camps and activities for children with disabilities, in collecting clothes and school supplies (school bags, ball dresses and shoes, etc.) for marginalized children in Bulgaria or in providing educational activities (reading books, creative workshops) for minority children, there are many cases of people caring for elderly poor persons in villages by providing food. Others care for and provide help to people affected by disasters (floods, fire, earthquakes) and even in hospitals as during the COVID-19 pandemics.

Although there are dozens of Facebook groups for volunteering, the low number of members – less than 1000[25] – shows that online (and presumably also offline, i.e. in the Bulgarian society) volunteering is rather not one of the most socially interesting topics, compared to entertainment, 'lost and found' or rideshare groups. Of the web platforms for informing about volunteer actions, the largest, best known

[25] In this case are considered only volunteering groups. Profiles maintained to publicise a structure, organisation or initiative linked in some way to volunteering are not included.

and most used (also by event organizers searching for volunteers) is 'TimeHeroes' which "makes the process of finding a suitable cause so easy that you no longer have an excuse" not to volunteer[26]. This, but also the categorization of initiatives by fields (education, social assistance, art, culture, ecology, etc.) may explain the number of just under 100,000 registered participants (heroes) at the end of May 2025 (since 2012). This still shows that Bulgarians are interested in the various volunteer initiatives and the interest is growing since in the last three years the number of participants has increased by almost 10,000; the number of missions by 700 and the number of organizers by about 100.

Concluding words

In times of instability and crises in the course of life, support and help are sought and desired. Volunteering is one of the appropriate methods to cope with difficulties in such precarious situations. Although it is rarely seen as a strategy, on community and collective level the work carried out by volunteers is a coping strategy, from which not only volunteers benefit (by gaining experience and expanding their network of social contacts) but also other members of community who receive care and support.

Furthermore, both volunteering and precarity are characterized by the struggle against difficulties: a heavy burden for people in need, in uncertainty, and a challenge for the volunteers who face problems of their own free will. The focus is on the individual: the agent with his experiences, views, motives, reflections, and actions, who reacts with a particular concern to a specific current situation. Next, both volunteering and precariousness are linked to 'help': help is provided by volunteers and received by people in insecure situations. The same applies to 'caring': it is central to the actions and work of both volunteers and in dealing with precariousness: driven by inspiration and a sense of humanity, people who have time, patience, and faith in a good cause spend their free time for the people in need.

Even if the driving force behind volunteering is not remuneration or other reward, but the desire to help and be useful which brings also acquiring of knowledge and professional skills, all interviewees see as a benefit of participating in volunteer activities the broadening of their social circle – also useful in uncertain economic, health, family or other crises. As another positive consequence they see the feeling of satisfaction of having given care, having helped someone – something that also improves their confidence and mental wellbeing. All interviewed persons shared that they could profit from the knowledge, skills, social contacts, and oneself they have learned during volunteering and applying it in precarious situations. This meaningfulness of volunteering and the sense of being useful to someone contrasts

[26] Sevda Nesheva on https://Timeheroes.org/bg/testimonials.

with the emerging “meaninglessness of work” (Nikitina 2023: 141) resulting from the expanding precarity which is a topic for another research.

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