Abstract:
Volunteering is an active expression of civic participation which strengthens common European values and solidarity. Volunteering works beneficial to people who need help because it helps them to integrate better into society. It also gives them the feeling of not being alone in challenging moments. Volunteering also works well on people providing help because it gives them a sense that they have done a good job. In the article, we focus on the importance of volunteering for young volunteers. Youth constitutes a group that is very vulnerable to social exclusion. In the last years, a lot of attention has been paid to volunteering as a driver for social inclusion of youth. Besides, volunteering also enhances employment opportunities for young people - it gives young people opportunities to develop new skills, extend networks, build CVs, try new vocations and gain experience. Active citizenship of youth is another dimension that volunteering promotes - it is often argued that volunteers are those who identify what shall be improved in society before the general public or authorities do. In the article, the data about the involvement of young people in volunteering activities in the EU in 2011 and 2014 are presented too.

Keywords: volunteering, EU citizenship, democracy, social inclusion, youth
1. INTRODUCTION

Volunteering is one of the critical dimensions of active citizenship and democracy, putting European values such as solidarity and non-discrimination into action and which is contributing to the harmonious development of European societies. Voluntary activities increase civic participation and can help foster a sense of belonging and commitment of citizens to their society at all levels — local, regional, national and European.

According to volunteering charter, a volunteer is a person who carries out activities benefiting society, by free will. These activities are undertaken for a non-profit cause, supporting personal development of the volunteers, who commit their time and energy for the general good without financial reward (European Youth Forum 2012, p. 7)

Volunteering is infused with values including solidarity, reciprocity, mutual trust, belonging and empowerment, all of which contribute significantly to the well-being of individuals, their communities, and societies. People engage in volunteerism for a great variety of reasons: to help to eliminate poverty and to improve basic health and education; to provide a safe water supply and adequate sanitation; to tackle environmental issues and climate change; to reduce the risk of disasters; and to combat social exclusion and violent conflict (UNV 2011, p. 2). At a collective level, volunteering is linked to the idea of active citizenship and social participation. At the individual level, volunteers acquire and develop specific skills and competencies, which are more and more recognised in the labour market.

Volunteering is, however, far from having fulfilled its potential. The number of Europeans who consider helping others an important part of their life is greater than the number of those actively involved in volunteering. According to Eurobarometer 2007, seven out of ten Europeans do not volunteer while 80% of survey respondents feel that voluntary activities are an important part of democratic life in Europe. Regarding young generation, 16% of people aged between 15 and 30 declare to be regularly or occasionally engaged in voluntary activities and only 2% report that they participate regularly in voluntary or community work while three out of four young people consider volunteering as an incentive for their greater participation in society (CEV 2010 p.1)

2. VOLUNTEERISM FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION OF YOUTH

Young persons are an important force for social change and progress. Moreover, it is recognized that youth constitutes a group that is very vulnerable to social exclusion. Volunteerism, as a form of civic participation, can be a powerful mechanism for giving youth a voice in decision making. Studies show that engaging in volunteerism from a young age helps people take their first steps towards long-term involvement in development. When volunteerism facilitates the inclusion of youth in development processes, it can enhance social inclusion as well by strengthening the bonds between young people and their communities, giving those volunteers a feeling of belonging to and respect for their society. The communities in turn also develop a better understanding of the potential asset that youth represents in today’s society (UNV 2014, p.5.)

Employment is a critical component of any discussion regarding the social inclusion of young people. It is, therefore, important to highlight evidence that volunteerism can complement formal education by teaching young people practical skills that enhance their employability. Voluntary activities are recognised as rich learning experiences enabling the development of social skills and competencies. Volunteering can also improve the career prospects and progression of young people by enhancing their job-related skills — from cross-cultural communication and conflict resolution to evaluation and management, problem-solving and leadership skills (UNV 2014, p.5.).

3. VOLUNTEERING AS NEW DIMENSION OF EU CITIZENSHIP

Active citizenship promoted by the EU involves formal political participation and informal political practices. It also includes engagement in the activities traditionally related to the non-political private sphere. Active citizenship is not restricted only to the political dimensions or to the right to participate in processes of popular self-governance – the oldest and perhaps the most common meaning of citizenship (Bezjak Klemenčič, 2014, pp. 53-54). Roker and Eden (2002) developed a concept of constructive social participation. By their definition, it encompasses various social actions: formal
voluntary work, informal community networks, neighbourliness, everyday political action, awareness-raising, altruistic acts, and caring work at home and the community, through which young people 'participate in their communities and influence policies and practices in the world around them' (Roker and Eden, 2002, p.7).

This line of thinking about citizenship, within which we can find the genealogy of the idea of active citizenship, is the basis for Putnam's (2000: 132) famous thesis that volunteering is an integral part of a good citizenship and political involvement and not an alternative to it (Bezjak, Klemenčič, 2014, pp. 53-54).

Today, volunteering is, for some reasons, widely recognised and supported as an efficient strategy for fostering citizenship engagement. Volunteering is said to develop civic values, enhance political participation, and improve democracy. It is often argued that people are more likely to vote, to join political parties, and to participate in political processes in case they have been involved in volunteering (Bezjak Klemenčič, 2014, p. 55). Volunteers are described as "little platoons" in society: the ones who see what should be improved or changed in society before the public authorities do. Volunteers make hidden things visible (IRIV 2011, p.13).

European youth represents a segment of European population that is most keen to acquiring the habit of active EU citizenship, but they need to be given opportunities to engage in social change. In the current times of systemic crisis, overcoming the lack of global awareness and burgeoning scepticism about the EU's assets the volunteering is likely to become more challenging. Economic hardship is hitting Europeans (especially youngsters) with unprecedented levels of unemployment and risk of social exclusion and poverty. For instance, young people (aged 18 to 29) seem to be losing some of their trust in the European project. The Youth Eurobarometer of April 2014 showed that 57% of young Europeans feel that they have been marginalized and excluded (European Parliament 2014). Through different types of citizenship activities, youth can enhance their role as "European activists" in their immediate local communities. Volunteering is for sure one of these activities.

However, all types of volunteering activities cannot be the substitute for political participation (especially if they do not address the political issues of power, equality, and structures), but they for sure play a major role in fostering democratic civic participation, social responsibility, and solidarity.

4. INVOLVEMENT OF YOUTH IN VOLUNTEERING ACTIVITIES IN THE EU

In December 2014, Eurobarometer carried out a survey on the involvement of youth in volunteering activities (over 13,000 young people between 15 and 30 were interviewed in 28 Member States of the European Union). The results showed that one-fourth of the young Europeans took part in voluntary activities in last 12 months, whether on a regular or irregular basis. This finding is very similar to the proportion observed in the Flash Eurobarometer survey "Youth on the Move" (No. 319a) in February 2011 when 24% said that they had participated in an organised voluntary activity (Eurobarometer 2014, European Commission 2015b).

From the figure 1, we see the involvement of youth in voluntary activities in the EU in 2011 and 2014. Compared to the findings from February 2011, young people are now either equally or less likely to be involved in organised voluntary activities. The largest increases can be seen in Cyprus, Italy, and Portugal, while the most significant decreases can be seen in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia and Lithuania (European Commission 2015a, p. 109).

Figure 1: EU Youth Indicator: Participation of young people (aged 15 – 30) in organised volunteering activities by country, 2011 and 2014
There are two important factors that encourage young people to engage in volunteering activities: the possibility of receiving financial compensation for the expenses incurred during their period of volunteering and the right to obtain formal recognition of the personal and professional experience acquired. Namely, by participating in voluntary activities, volunteers gain skills or enhance their personal and vocational capabilities through non-formal learning. Such skills can later be useful in either continuing education or entering the labour market, especially when they are formally recognised through qualifications that can enrich their curriculum vitae.

Some member states, such as Croatia, Malta, Slovakia, and Austria, have implemented or prepared tools supporting young people in describing and recognising competencies and skills acquired through voluntary activities. Several countries use the web and IT solutions to operationalise these tools. In October 2014, the Czech Republic introduced a vocational qualification for 'Coordinator of Volunteers', a certificate that is accepted across the country (European Commission 2015 c, p.115). On the other hand, figure 2 shows that on average, only a quarter of young people who have participated in voluntary activities received a certificate or diploma formally recognising their experience and the skills they have demonstrated, a percentage that has slightly increased since 2011 (European Commission 2015a, p. 113).

**Figure 2:** EU Youth Indicator: Share of young people (aged 15 – 30) who received a certificate or diploma for their voluntary activities, by country, 2011 and 2014

As showed in figure 3, most activities of volunteers focus on humanitarian and development aid – causes which have a particular global dimension. Education, training, and sports are also among popular activities. Conversely, other issues such as the environment, animal welfare, as well as political, cultural and religious causes seem to have less appeal.

**Figure 3:** Main themes of the voluntary activities undertaken by young people (aged 15 – 30), EU-28 average, 2014
Young volunteers are mostly engaged in activities within their country, a finding in line with their propensity to engage in actions which benefit their local community. Results of the study show that 93% of the young people participating in the survey never had the opportunity to go abroad for the purpose of volunteering. (European Commission 2015a, p. 113).

**Figure 4:** EU youth indicator: Share of young people (aged 15-30) going abroad to do voluntary work, by country, 2011 and 2014

Source: Flash Eurobarometer 408, ‘European Youth’, 2014

5. CONCLUSION

The Economic crisis and its impact on the labour market pushed a large number of young Europeans at risk of social exclusion. As many young Europeans are losing their confidence in the EU, it is vital to seek possibilities which can prevent young people from drifting to the margins of society.

Besides social exclusion, threats of unemployment among young people are also very common these days. The reason for that might be the lack of working experience and practical competencies as well. Volunteering might be an excellent opportunity to gain such experience and competencies. The problem that might appear in this area is a possibility of miss-match between the competencies needs in the labour market and competencies gained at volunteering. Nevertheless, we believe that the main advantage volunteering might bring to the young people is the enhancement of general skills on one side and social capital on the other. As literature notes (Keeley, 2007), there is a definite cause and effect link between the social capital and human capital, which means that volunteering can promote employability as well.

The main pillars that need to be fostered are 1) increasing social inclusion of all young people, 2) ensuring a stronger participation of all young people in democratic and civic life, and 3) helping young people make an easier transition from education into the labour market. Engagement in volunteering activities can help young people to be more integrated into society, to feel citizenship and also to gain new skills and competencies which can improve their employment possibilities. It is, therefore, important that voluntary activities of young people are supported and that the skills acquired through
voluntary activities are better recognised for their value as an important form of non-formal learning. Possibilities of young people to go abroad for volunteering shall also be increased through various EU programmes.

REFERENCE LIST