

Social and civic engagement of participants in international volunteering projects

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Introduction



Data for 2016¹ collected by the Statistics Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, GUS) shows that Poles' commitment to volunteering, i.e. voluntary and unpaid work for the benefit of others, is not uniform. On the one hand, a relatively large number (35%) of people aged 15 and older declared that they had volunteered in their free time over the four weeks preceding the mentioned study. But on the other hand, it turned out that volunteering in Poland is mostly non-formal and individual-based, as "almost four times as many people were involved in unpaid, individual work for the benefit of acquaintances, strangers, neighbours, society and environment than in volunteering within an organisation, group or institution (respectively 30.9% and 8.5% of all Poles aged 15 and older)"². Considering the entire population surveyed by the Statistics Poland, one in four respondents (27.6%) devoted their time to unpaid work on behalf of friends, neighbours and acquaintances. Only 4.1% of respondents declared that they were involved in helping strangers and volunteering on behalf of their locality, community and environment.

The data shows that it is mainly young people who are most likely to engage in volunteering. In the mentioned study, people likely to engage in volunteering accounted for 45% of respondents aged 15-24 and 37% of respondents aged 25-34. This is also confirmed by the results of 2015 Eurostat survey. Young Poles ranked in the top five nations in the European Union in terms of volunteering (mostly in a non-formal form, outside of organisations engaged in this type of activity).

Among the tools supporting youth volunteering in Poland are the EU programmes: European Solidarity Corps, launched in 2018 and preceded by Erasmus+ Voluntary Service (2016-2018) and European Voluntary Service (EVS, 1996-2016). These initiatives have enabled young people to participate in volunteering projects carried out in their country or abroad, lasting up to 12 months, and delivered as part of non-formal education. Participants in volunteering initiatives get involved in matters they consider important, such as working with refugees and migrants, protecting the environment, providing activities for children and senior citizens, supporting NGOs, organising cultural events and working at schools and kindergartens. Any person aged 17-30 can become involved in voluntary service projects. They receive funds to cover travel and accommodation costs, as well as subsistence allowance and insurance. Prospective volunteers do not need to know foreign languages (including the language of the country they are going to) and, when selecting volunteers, hosting organisations must not exclude anyone on the basis of educational background.

1 Czerwiński, M., Kazanowska, D., Kazimierowska-Wasiotek, M., Knapp, A., Pragacz, M. (2017). *Wolontariat w 2016 r.* Warszawa: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, bit.ly/3cfMDuV [accessed: 25/08/2022].

2 Ibid.

Since 1996, more than 100,000 young Europeans have participated in the European Voluntary Service and European Solidarity Corps projects. The Foundation for the Development of the Education System reports that more than 7,500 young Poles have joined these programmes since 2000.

The objective of the study presented in this report was to find out if people who had participated in EU-funded volunteering abroad continued to engage in social activity in the period of at least 3 years after their return to home country.

Study methodology



Participants

The study covered Polish volunteers who completed international mobility as part of one of the EU programmes (Erasmus+ Voluntary Service or European Voluntary Service, EVS). The aim of the study was to find out whether (and how) they engaged in social and voluntary activities in Poland upon their return home.

Research carried out by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System, as well as information provided by sending and hosting organisations, shows that after returning home from a long-term project abroad, volunteers spend some time (about 12-18 months) looking for their “place in the world” – they continue their education, start their studies and careers, and sometimes decide to go abroad again to work or volunteer. The participants in the study were the people who had returned from long-term volunteering abroad at least three years before the survey was carried out, so they had enough time to have a stable life in Poland. Because of the objective of the study, which was to verify the regularity and sustainability of social engagement of project participants, the respondents were volunteers who participated in Erasmus+ Voluntary Service (2016–2018) and European Voluntary Service (1996–2016) programmes and had completed their projects by 2018 at the latest³.

A research assumption was made that the participants of the volunteering projects were both these who had already been socially active before their departure and those who had shown little activity or remained passive in this area. This assumption was based on research carried out on EVS⁴, as well as on information obtained from volunteers during the selection process and data coming from final reports prepared by hosting organisations.

Research questions

The research questions were posed as follows:

1. How did the respondents perceive their social engagement before their mobility?
 - If they had been socially involved, what kind of activities did they participate in?

³ From among the participants in the European Voluntary Service (1996–2016), those whose data had not yet been archived (volunteers active from 2013 to 2016) were invited to participate in the study. Volunteers in the European Solidarity Corps projects were not included, as less than three years had passed since their return home.

⁴ Jeżowski, M., Zaidova, S. and Zsiday, K. (2017). *The impact of European Voluntary Service projects on local communities*. Warsaw: Foundation for the Development of the Educational System. bit.ly/3wui3Ew [accessed: 25/08/2022]; *Research-based analysis of Erasmus+: Youth in Action*. researchyouth.net [accessed: 25/08/2022].

- Did the nature of the activities undertaken prior to the project influence the choice of theme and location of the international volunteering project?
2. What inspired the respondents to volunteer? Why did they choose to volunteer abroad rather than at home country?
 - Why did the volunteers join the project and what were their expectations?
 - Did the project meet these expectations?
 3. Have respondents continued to be socially engaged after their international volunteering project?
 - If yes, what did their engagement consist in, what was its frequency and nature, and what motivated them to such involvement?
 - If not, what were the reasons for this?
 4. Have volunteers noticed the impact of the international volunteering project on their social engagement afterwards?

The following independent variables were considered in the analysis of the determinants of social activity: gender, age, education, work experience, length of volunteering project abroad and time passed since its completion.

Research tools

Data collected by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System shows that between 2014 and 2020, 803 people from Poland participated in international volunteering projects funded as part of the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes. Because of the areas covered by the study and the number of participants, a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods was used:

- an online survey questionnaire for former volunteers who have completed a long- or short-term volunteering project (the survey consisted of 30 questions, including 27 single- or multiple-choice and three open-ended questions),
- in-depth interviews with selected former volunteers.

The survey questionnaire was active from 27 September to 30 November 2021. It was completed by 182 respondents, 152 of whom completed the survey entirely (due to the need to compare

data for different cohorts of respondents, only the latter respondents were taken into account when analysing the survey results).

In-depth interviews with eleven former volunteers who (in the online survey) expressed their willingness to take part in a qualitative study were conducted in November 2021. The participants were selected on the basis of their previous social engagement and time passed since their return from a volunteering project abroad.

Limitations of the study

Due to the sampling and design of the tools used, the study is not representative and therefore the conclusions cannot be applied to all volunteers participating in Erasmus+ EVS. Volunteers who completed their projects between 2014 and 2019 were invited to take part in the survey, meaning that some respondents referred to experiences they underwent eight years earlier, which may have impacted the results. In addition, although the study included all participants in the Erasmus+ and European Voluntary Service projects, it can be assumed that only the most active volunteers completed the survey, which may have contributed to distorted results, especially in terms of declared social engagement after the end of the project.

Study sample



The vast majority of the study sample were women, which is not surprising, as data collected by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System shows that they account for approximately three quarters of all participants in volunteering projects financed within European volunteering schemes in Poland (both long-term and short-term ones). All respondents had completed either secondary or higher education. The mean age of volunteers was 31: the oldest participant in the study was 37 and the youngest was 21.



Figure 1.
Gender of respondents (n = 152)

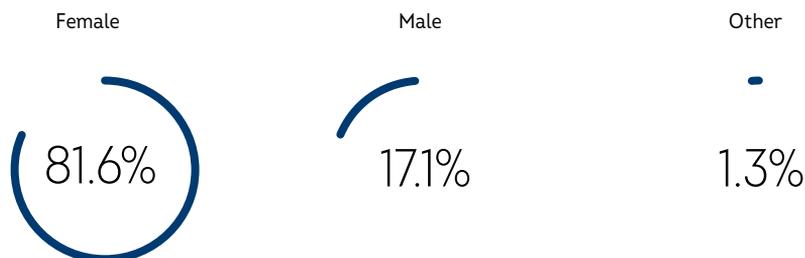


Table 1.
Education level completed by respondents (n = 152)*

Gender	Education level		Total
	secondary	tertiary	
Female	10	114	124
Male	4	22	26
Other	1	1	2
Total	15	137	152

* None of the study participants indicated primary education.

Of the 152 respondents, only eight participants in a volunteering project were younger than nineteen when going abroad. The vast majority of respondents took part in the projects during (63) or after (81) their studies.

Currently, the majority of respondents work full-time (62.4%), some work as freelancers (13.2%), and are employed part-time (7.2%). Having an active working life was more often declared by older respondents. Some participants in the survey were combining study and work (8.6%), and 6.6% were studying, but not working – such situation was most frequently reported by younger people. Only 2% of respondents were neither continuing their education nor working.



Figure 2.
Professional status of survey participants (n = 152)



The participants in the survey were mostly people whose projects ended in the years 2015–2016. Such study sample structure was advantageous in view of the research objective, which was to describe long-term social engagement after volunteering abroad. Thanks to this selection of study sample, it was possible to gather valuable material for analysis and verify if people who had completed an overseas volunteering project a long time ago stayed socially engaged/remained socially active.



Table 2.
Year in which the respondents completed their volunteering projects (n = 152)

Year of completion of the volunteering project	Percentage of respondents
2014	3.3%
2015	33.6%
2016	24.2%
2017	16.5%
2018	11.2%
2019	11.2%

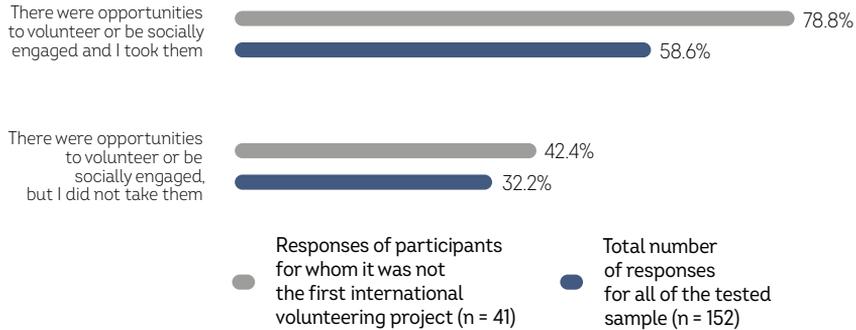
A large share of respondents declared that people in their immediate environment were also socially active. More than 71% of respondents said that their friends were involved in voluntary service, and more than 58% mentioned their participation in social activities organised at their

schools and universities. At the same time, 32.2% of respondents did not get involved in social activity or volunteering, although there was an opportunity to do so.



Figure 3.

Social engagement of study participants at school and university

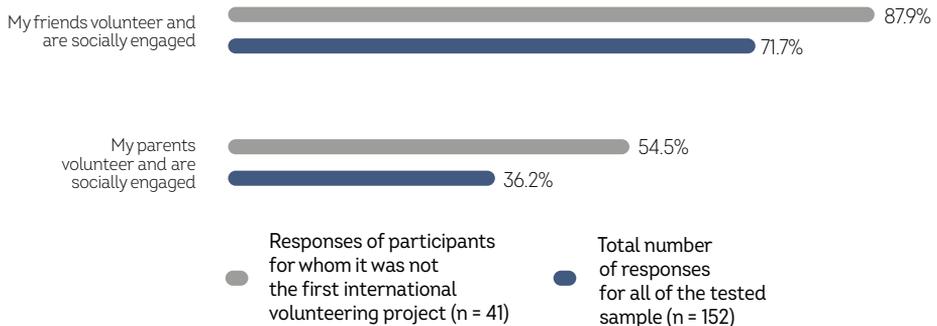


One in three survey respondents claimed that their parents were involved in community service. There were even more such declarations made by those respondents for whom the European volunteering scheme project was not their first venture of this kind.



Figure 4.

Social engagement in the immediate environment of survey participants



General attitude of the study participants towards social and civic engagement



As defined in the *Erasmus+ Programme Guide*⁵ volunteering is an unpaid service lasting up to 12 months on a full-time basis, the performance of which contributes to the common good. Volunteering projects are carried out by participating organisations that offer young people an opportunity to perform a variety of tasks in a formalised manner. Volunteering is part of a wider concept of social and civic engagement, and for the purposes of this study is understood as:

- Active participation in public life:
 - exercising one's voting rights (active and passive ones),
 - membership in and conducting activity on behalf of political parties,
 - exercising public functions,
 - filling petitions and enquiries to politicians,
 - collecting signatures,
 - participating in demonstrations, marches and rallies.

- Informal social involvement:
 - providing voluntary occasional services for the benefit of others (community, neighbourhood, village or town).

- Formal social involvement:
 - unpaid work for a foundation, association, social movement, church, activities taken in the workplace as part of corporate social responsibility (CSR), activity in a student self-government body.

- Other not-for-profit social involvement:
 - blood donation, serving in a voluntary firefighting unit and other voluntary organisations, offering financial support to community initiatives, informing the media, and reporting problems to authorities.

One of the topics discussed during the interviews was how the respondents understood the concept of community and civic engagement. It should be emphasised that the respondents are people with the awareness in this area much higher than average. For each of them, volunteering is an important matter and every one of them has their thoughts on it, although some differences can be observed in the opinions presented. The most common element identified by respondents is the not-for-profit nature of work conducted for others and for the common good. A considerable number of them perceive the social area in a narrow

⁵ bit.ly/3wtkQOk [accessed: 26/08/2022].

framework: they associate it exclusively with activities undertaken outside of work, which are not-for-profit, and focus on providing assistance and support. Respondents therefore exclude initiatives for the benefit of others undertaken as part of their official duties or partially paid one (and thus the more professionalised activities of NGOs). They also ignore civic engagement in politics. For some people, this may be related to their personal experience; the field of outreach activities was the first one they became involved in, which could have influenced their perception of social engagement.

“Social engagement should not be about making money. If someone gets paid for their work, they are not socially engaged⁶.”

“An active person dedicates their time and works regularly – social participation requires more than giving “likes” on Facebook.”

“Someone who sees challenges faced by their community and knows how to solve them tries to have an impact on their immediate environment. They are not passive, they have a say, and are interested in what is going on around them. They check if the authorities are carrying out their tasks, and present solutions to identified problems.”

“Involvement does not only mean taking action personally, e.g. providing support to people in welfare centres. It can also be about passing on information.”

“If someone is able to engage in volunteering, an activity that does not bring them money but contributes to the common good, they can be considered a socially engaged person.”

Interestingly, not all respondents considered politics as an area of social and civic engagement or as something close to them. Some respondents considered politics to be a dishonest or unattractive activity, and some viewed involvement in it as a duty, something that is excluded from the field of social engagement, which they equated with volunteering.

⁶ In this publication, the statements by survey respondents have been edited and adapted to the standards of literary language, and, where necessary, abridged, in order to clearly present the gist of the respondents' statements.

Simply casting a vote in elections is a civic duty, so it can hardly be classified as social engagement, although this kind of participation certainly has some impact on life of citizens and communities. If someone is doing something more in this area, i.e. attends meetings and rallies, this can be considered some kind of participation.

I do not find politics appealing. It is neither “sincere” nor “pure”. Volunteering is not motivated by bad intentions, the activities are simpler and it’s not necessary to identify with any kind of ideology.

However, not all respondents excluded broadly defined politics from the area of social engagement. For some of them, it was even a key dimension of civic service, while others believed that politics and social life were spaces that permeate each other and were difficult to separate.

I always vote in elections and I encourage everyone to do so because it is the most important element of democracy. I also took part in elections when I lived abroad.

Someone who is not interested in politics has to realise that everything is politically motivated – even the choice of clothes you wear.

To me social participation equals volunteering, taking interest in what is happening in the municipality, supporting people and social groups in need. I associate civic engagement with elections.

Politics is inextricably linked to the social sphere – it cannot be ignored, as it affects every aspect of our lives.

For some participants in the study, social engagement is not only about taking action, but also about awareness building. For them, being involved means taking an interest in what is going on around them, fulfilling their civic duties (e.g. paying taxes, waste sorting), and having a say in public affairs, also by participating in demonstrations and voting in elections. Thus, it can be seen that some people treat the concept of social and civic engagement broadly – as a range of activities concerning the individual’s relationship with society, and not only these related to volunteering or providing assistance. Respondents also included financial support for NGOs in this area.

What matters to me is being an active citizen, taking an interest in what is going on in the country, in politics, getting involved in local activities, using your resources (e.g. knowledge or money) to help others, but also paying taxes and waste sorting.

Anyone can be engaged, but you have to take interest in what is going on around you. For different people, different issues matter – for me, for example, it is animal welfare or the rent you pay. The willingness to do research is important. All it takes is just to look around, there are plenty of opportunities to become involved.

If I can talk to someone about current affairs, I consider such a person to be socially engaged. Many of my friends who have lived in Berlin for years have no idea what is going on here, so from my point of view having knowledge of (political) situation is a kind of involvement. Of course, there are many levels of engagement: the first step is to learn more about a given topic, and the next one is wanting to do something about it.

Being engaged also means supporting various organisations, including providing financial support to them, if you lack time to be personally involved, but also casting your vote in local and national elections.

Regardless of how broadly or narrowly the respondents defined the concept of social engagement, they all claimed to be involved in social activities. They often rated their current involvement as average or not as intensive as they would like it to be, which means that it was lower than before the European volunteering project (although they usually tried to be active in their chosen area). However, a relatively high level of declared social activity in the surveyed group may be due to the sampling and characteristics of those who agreed to be interviewed.

To former international volunteers, social engagement comes naturally; they feel the need to act, although they often do not think about the reasons why they are getting involved. Some are driven by a broad sense of justice.

My activism stems from a desire to bring fairness to the world. I see injustice resulting from various causes. It has always been important to me that everyone has equal access to education, which is key to a good life. It also forms the basis for making the right choices and decisions.

To some respondents, the desire to help others was a motivating factor, while other also mentioned personal motives that prompted them to act.

“ I am engaged, because it makes me feel better. I feel great satisfaction when I see how my city is developing.

Some participants in the study saw their work for others as a contribution to building social capital and strengthening civic society.

“ Our engagement is important. It gives you a sense of empowerment and awareness that you have a say about the kind of society and country we live in. We contribute to a democratic community, where people know their rights, do not demonise trade unions, pay their taxes and know what the money will be used for, and have confidence in the state and the people they meet every day.

“ We are all members of society. We can impact issues that directly affect us, such as these related to, for example, public administration and climate change. We need to realise that we are responsible for others, so pro bono work and participation in public life are important.

“ Knowing your rights and being aware that you can fight for them is vital in democratic states, as it affects our future.

In the course of the study, isolated claims were noted that not every social and civic engagement is valuable.

“ I don't like to be inundated with posts or emails about an issue I am not familiar with or the context and wider background of which is not known to me. Such action is ineffective. However, I appreciate consistent involvement, e.g. when someone helps the homeless over a long period of time. In such cases I know that their commitment is sincere.

Conclusions

Even committed and informed volunteers do not always notice the full dimension of social and civic engagement. This is why it is worth educating future participants in volunteering projects in order to provide them with knowledge of what civic participation is and how it can manifest itself, as well as to make them aware of its role (along the function of NGOs) in a democratic system. It is recommended to organise a workshop (pre-departure training) on the importance of involvement and gathering, and on the role of social trust in the development of democracy and/or to prepare attractive and accessible educational materials on the topic.

It seems particularly important to bring about a change in volunteers' perceptions of politics. Although they tend to regard voting in elections as a basic civic duty, they are often discouraged by and have negative attitude to politics itself. This is why they separate activity in politics from their social and civic engagement. It is therefore essential to show them a different perspective on politics as a field that encompasses all areas of social life, rather than an activity limited solely to parliamentary discussions and disputes. The very idea of the European volunteering schemes is based on certain political assumptions, which proves that social engagement is not necessarily related to a specific political party, although it is often politically motivated. This is why it is advisable that volunteers are aware of this.

International volunteering projects

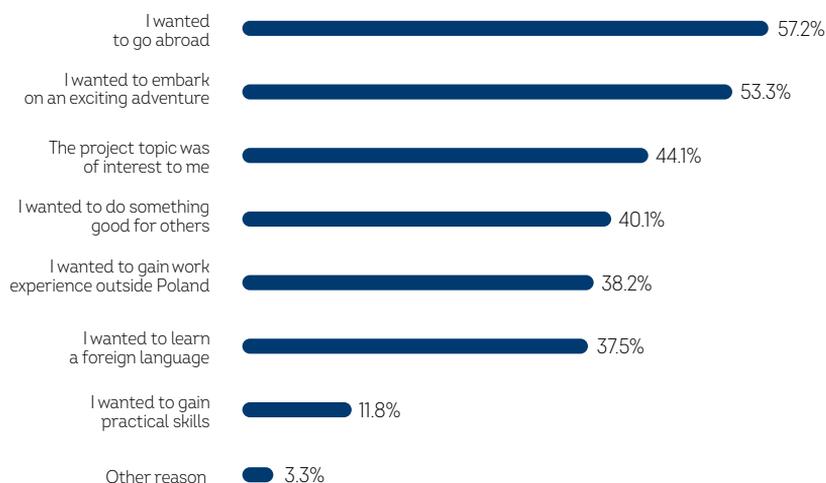


Reasons for participating in the project

The respondents participated in international volunteering projects mainly because they wanted to satisfy their needs. They wanted to: go abroad (57.2%); embark on an exciting adventure (53.3%), gain work experience outside Poland (38.2%) and learn a foreign language (37.5%). Helping others was ranked only as the fourth most important motivation (40.1%). It is worth noting, however, that those for whom the mobility was not their first volunteering project abroad were more likely than other respondents to choose the answer “I wanted to do something good for others” (48.5%).



Figure 5.
Motives for participating in a volunteering project abroad
(n = 152, multiple choice question)



Quite often, participants in the interviews mentioned “spontaneous” motivations, i.e. the desire to make a change in their lives and get to know the world, to escape formal education or problems, and the willingness to go away with a loved one. Therefore, to some volunteers volunteering itself was a secondary concern.



I wanted to visit Italy and learn Italian.



After thirteen years in formal education, I wanted to see what the real world was like. Sitting in a school bench was just boring for me.

“ I was motivated by the desire to visit other countries, meet other cultures, experience something new, and to change my environment.

“ I quit my corporate job to volunteer. I was fed up with my job and needed a change.

“ It was because of personal considerations; I was in a relationship with a person from the country where the volunteering was taking place.

“ I started to learn German, I didn't know if my employer would extend my contract and I had split up with my boyfriend – these three factors influenced my decision. In addition, volunteering focused on sports, which I was really interested in.

Among the respondents, you could identify some people who chose to volunteer because of their previous social engagement in Poland. They had already been interested in this field. This group of respondents had clear vision of what they could do, what kind of experience they would like to gain, and sometimes also which country they would like to go to.

“ Just before volunteering, I had been active in a local organisation working with youngsters in my hometown for 18 months, so I decided to work with children in Italy.

“ My previous experiences with volunteering have influenced my choices. When meeting people from abroad, I realised that I was a cosmopolitan and I wanted to see the world. I also wanted to see Russia, a country that is quite mysterious to us. I wanted to verify the opinions I heard about it. These were my main motives.

Previous mobility as part of the Erasmus programme (for study or student placements) served as an important incentive to go abroad, too. Such initiatives were an opportunity to learn more about the offer of the European Union, and at the same time stimulated participants' desire to join further international initiatives.

“ I have participated in Erasmus student exchanges twice and thanks to them I learnt about the European Voluntary Service. After my graduation, I took this opportunity.

During my studies, I completed an Erasmus mobility and was involved in a student organisation, so I gained experience in working with various people and the skill to manage abroad. The two experiences contributed greatly to my decision to volunteer abroad.

I was driven by the desire to experience an adventure similar to the one I had during my Erasmus mobility. Due to the fact that international volunteering projects last longer than Erasmus mobilities, there is more time to get to know the culture of the country, to settle in and to have a fairly normal life there. These projects have a very different dynamic to student mobilities. They involve work, which means a regular routine.

However, the majority of respondents said that they did not have clear expectations when deciding on an organisation or project theme. These people often knew nothing about the country they were going to. They chose their hosting organisations based on a general theme or a target group they had previously had the opportunity to work with.

I didn't want to work with children, I preferred to work with adults or young people, and that was the main criterion for me. The second one was the theme of a volunteering project, which would be either politics or sports.

I went to Jordan without any idea of what to expect. I knew nothing about the country or the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and I was supposed to work with Palestinian refugees. But I thought: "I would give it a try!".

I was looking for a project that would combine tourism and work with local communities. In Slovenia, I really liked the work of the youth community centre, the commitment of its staff and the activities they carried out for the residents.

The frequent motivation for choosing a destination project country was the desire to learn a particular language.

I had completed a fitness instructor course and wanted to gain some experience. I also wanted to practice German, as I was learning it at the time.

卷卷 German was both motivating and demotivating to me. I ended up in a small town where hardly anyone spoke English, so I did a crash course in German. The problem was that I knew only basic vocabulary, so I was thrown in at the deep end.

Those respondents who consciously had chosen a given theme, a target group or even a specific organisation they had wanted to work for, were very satisfied with the project, and treated it as an important element of self-improvement. It can be assumed that intrinsic motivation predominated in this group of volunteers. They were certain about what they wanted to do and what they were able to do, and they made an informed choice of a hosting organisation and the theme of the project.

卷卷 A person who makes an informed and conscious choice of the country for their volunteering takes better advantage of such a project. For me, it was not about going to Portugal and spending most of your time on the beach. I chose my project deliberately. I knew I wanted to go to Russia to work with sick children there, which required specific qualifications. I also knew that I wanted to join an organisation that carries out international projects.

Some participants in the study also stated that speaking the language of the country allowed for a more engaging voluntary service, which involved more complex tasks and taking meaningful action⁷.

卷卷 The work involved creativity and my language skills enabled me to participate fully in the work of the organisation.

卷卷 Thanks to knowing the language, I was able to teach classes and talk about international projects. It was very motivating for me. I stayed with the hosting organisation because my appetite grew as I ate, I wanted to keep trying something new.

Knowledge of the foreign language, coupled with an informed choice of the topic, target support group or the destination country is the factor that helps motivated individuals benefit from projects, even in situations where the quality of the project itself or the level of commitment and preparation on part of a hosting organisation are not up to standard.

⁷ However, it must be emphasised that, in accordance with the rules of European programmes, host organisations cannot require that volunteers speak local language.

Course of the volunteering project, previous experience and continuation of voluntary service

Erasmus+ Voluntary Service offered the possibility to carry out individual and group projects, both long-term (lasting three to thirteen months) and short-term ones (up to three months).

The participants in the study were mostly individuals who had been involved in long-term volunteering projects abroad which differ greatly from shorter mobilities lasting a few weeks. Volunteers worked full-time for organisations and local communities. They carried out comprehensive tasks and were given a free hand to implement their ideas and initiatives. As time went on, they had gained recognition in local communities and many of them stayed in them after the project was completed.



Figure 6.

Duration of international volunteering projects (n = 152)



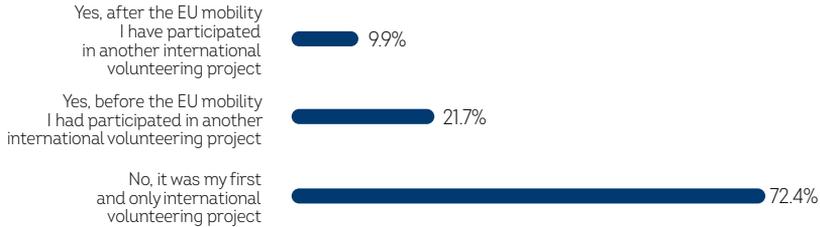
To 72% of respondents, European volunteering project was the only such experience in their lives. One in five respondents had previously participated in similar activities and one in ten decided to use another mobility opportunity after volunteering (most likely funded by other programmes, as under the Erasmus+ Voluntary Service and the European Voluntary Service, one can participate in a project abroad only once).

It is worth noting that respondents whose parents were involved in voluntary work for the others were more likely to participate in volunteering abroad than other groups of respondents (32.7%). They were also less likely to indicate (61.8%) that this was their only mobility of this type.

**Figure 7.**

Participation in voluntary service projects abroad other than EU-funded ones (n = 152, multiple choice question)

Have you participated in foreign volunteering activity, other than the initiatives financed from EU educational programmes?



The majority of respondents stayed in touch with the hosting organisation after completion of the project (some of them maintained only social relations). One in ten volunteers stayed abroad after project completion and continued to work with the hosting organisation. No contact at all was reported by almost 40% of survey participants.

**Figure 8.**

Volunteers staying in contact with the hosting organisation after completion of the project (n = 152)

Have you maintained contact with your host organization upon completion of a foreign volunteering project financed by EU funds?



Motivating and demotivating factors during volunteering abroad

The most frequently indicated factor that strengthened volunteers' motivation was the awareness that their work was needed and its results were visible, and that recipients were grateful for the action taken for them.

“ The gratitude expressed by the kids at the end of the project was a fantastic reward for me, especially as they posed as “tough guys” throughout the year.

“ I was motivated by people who came to us with their ideas. Some of them were ridiculous, but other were brilliant. I was thrilled that I could help them organise something unusual, such as designing graphic arts.

Several interviewees indicated that the opportunity to use their own creativity and independence to design and complete tasks was motivating to them. This was particularly the case for those volunteers who had chosen their mobility theme and hosting organisation and had clear expectations of the project.

“ Despite my poor language skills (A1 level), the organisers from the very start placed trust in me, which I had never seen before, even during my work in a corporation. I was immediately allowed to take a trip with the children, although they did not fully understand me and I did not always know what they were saying to me.

The main motivators that drove the volunteers to participate in the projects were opportunities for personal development, learning new skills (especially those they considered important for their professional careers), and working in a different environment. They believed that the projects offered exciting challenges to them.

“ The very fact that I stayed in a place so different from where I come from was a big motivation for me. I was constantly learning new things - English, managing my budget, planning expenses and travel, overcoming difficulties. I also had the opportunity to build relationships.

“ We attended seminars for volunteers where we learned a lot about politics and culture. One of our tasks was to organise a happening at a demonstration in Bonn.

As volunteering projects abroad involve all sorts of challenges (long separation from relatives, first independent and prolonged stay abroad, cultural differences, language barrier), for some volunteers the support of a mentor and assistance from the hosting organisation or family were motivating factors. This was particularly important in situations where more serious difficulties arose.

“ I had a fantastic mentor. He was my boss and took volunteers under his wing and made tougher days seem lighter. It was a great help to me and I don't know if I would have stayed if I hadn't had that support, especially as I didn't know the language.

For the participants in the study, the sense that they were taken seriously and that their work was appreciated was a major motivating factor.

“ There was no “make me some coffee” approach, but we were taken seriously straight away. We felt a part of a team. We participated in important meetings and working groups. It was a very different experience from that we had in Poland.

“ The year I spent abroad totally changed my perspective. It was great to meet people who understood why I volunteered. The first question I heard after returning from Germany to Poland was whether I had earned enough money to buy a car. My negative answer was received with a great surprise, as my interlocutors could not understand why I had decided to go abroad.

The strongest and most frequently mentioned demotivating factors for volunteers, especially those who joined the project with great positive energy, concerned the observation that in the sphere of social engagement not everyone is driven by pure motives and the desire to change the world for the better. In such a situation, there was a bitter confrontation between volunteer's expectations and the blank wall between them and the organisation. Most often, this was due to the fact that hosting institutions treated European volunteering projects as a systemic source of income and a way to support its current operations. This resulted in a high turnover of volunteers and the recruitment of random people (what mattered was the number of accepted project participants, and not the quality of their work).

“ It was demotivating that people left at different times and we had quite a turnover, and also that the project would not continue. The hosting organisation was not interested in further collaboration due to financial constraints.

“ The organisers did not pay attention to the selection of volunteers, there was a high turnover of volunteer groups. They were primarily interested in hosting people from specific countries, e.g. Poland and Turkey. Many volunteers didn't speak English, so it was difficult to communicate with them.

Three organisations were involved in my volunteering project. While I didn't have any problems with the sending and hosting organisation, working with the intermediary institution was a huge challenge. After three months, I decided that I would just manage on my own. It seems to me that the person working there was completely unsuited to her role. She showed no interest in what I was doing. When I had a problem that had to be addressed, she didn't want to take responsibility. She didn't help me.

I learnt from staff members with whom I had good contact that it was simply about the money. The organisation wanted to get one more person to work, but there was no intention that I could provide added value to the children as a volunteer.

When volunteering was a mere source of income for the organisation, volunteers felt a lack of interest from them and were left to fend for themselves. However, if they went abroad knowing what to expect and what they wanted to do during the project, they were motivated and skilled enough to start acting independently. They were able to carve out space for their activity in spite of passivity and lack of support from the hosting organisation (and therefore assessed the volunteering project as a positive experience).

Sometimes I lacked support from the hosting organisation. Some days I would come to work and have no idea what I was going to do. Either I would sit empty handed for 6 hours, or there were so many tasks that I didn't know what to put my hands into. This was due to the fact that the organisers themselves did not know how many projects would be implemented. Did it demotivate me? I don't think so.

Volunteering was a great time for me, but I have many reservations about the hosting organisation. But not all people were to blame. I am still in contact with some of them today, they even offered me a job recently. So I can see the plus sides, although not everything during the project went perfectly.

It was demotivating that as long-term volunteers we were burdened with too many tasks, simply because we wanted to do something. Some people came to volunteer for two-weeks and all they did was just sit in the flat.

Impact of the mobility on volunteers' social engagement

Volunteering abroad usually did not change participants' attitude towards social engagement. None of the respondents became neither more nor less engaged in voluntary service as a result of their mobility, and it is worth noting that their engagement was already at a relatively high level. Interestingly, even the challenging project experience did not negatively affect the attitudes of the volunteers. On the contrary, as the study showed, informed and motivated people even in a poorly performing organisation were given a free hand.

☺☺ *Volunteering abroad has not – either positively or negatively – affected my attitude towards social engagement. I have been involved in volunteering before and this has not changed.*

☺☺ *In my opinion, a volunteering project cannot impact on your attitude towards social engagement.*

In some cases, participation in a volunteering project abroad reassured participants that it was worthwhile to act, and what is more, it helped them identify the field in which they wanted to prove themselves.

☺☺ *My volunteering abroad proved that it is worth to work for others and that young people in Poland can do a lot. I have tried to reach as many people as possible by talking about my experiences and showing that it was worthwhile to get involved and stray from the usual career path: school – study – work.*

However, it should be taken into account that the interviews were conducted mainly with active and socially aware people. The fact that even a challenging or poorly-organised volunteering project did not impact their attitude towards being active for the benefit of others proves their firmness and belief that it makes sense to engage in this type of activity. However, it may be different for those without previous positive experiences in this area.

To some respondents, volunteering abroad was an important formative experience in the area of social engagement. It strengthened them as informed citizens of the European Union who are willing to contribute to the development of European integration. As a result of the mobility one respondent converted and consequently changed her areas of activity upon returning to Poland.

 I used to find politics very boring, as it was a puzzle to me. It changed when I went to Russia. When abroad, I tried to keep up with what was happening in Poland, and it has stayed that way. During the mobility, my identity as a European and representative of the European Union was strengthened. I had believed that western countries were “the real” Europe, but when I talked to Russians, I kept hearing: “Poland is Europe”. This came as a shock to me, because I had believed that we were rather aspiring to be part of Europe, yet we still had a long way to go. Then it changed, I actually felt that we were part of the European Union. Since then, I have taken a stronger interest in politics and in elections to the European Parliament. Before the mobility, this topic seemed completely irrelevant to me.

 I converted in Jordan – it was a significant event for me, I had the feeling that I was starting all anew in Poland.

Thanks to the volunteering projects, participants' awareness of social issues increased. They noticed, among other things, that only well-prepared and planned activities, carried out by appropriately selected people, stand a chance to have a tangible positive effect.

 During my time as a volunteer, I realised that I lacked adequate qualifications to work with problematic kids, as this requires extensive knowledge. However, I learnt Italian and discovered Italian cuisine. What is more, I learnt how to work with large groups of children and how to organise activities for them.

 One thing has changed. I realised that social engagement is not as simple as it seems, and that your conviction that: “I will get involved in volunteering and give the world what it needs” is simply not enough. There are social groups that require a special approach, and some organisations and foundations are not ready to help them in a professional manner.

During their mobilities, the volunteers found out that not all activities described as “pro-social” were driven by noble intentions. They came into contact with people and entities who treated this kind of activity as for-profit one and for whom helping others was not a primary concern. Some participants in the study worked in the countries where volunteering culture and social engagement were better developed than in Poland, and thanks to their projects they saw that volunteering was much more popular and respected there (not only as part of projects), and that voluntary work was considered as valuable as paid job.

“What has changed is that as a volunteer, I don't feel like I'm doing an inferior job. I appreciate the commitment of my mentor who also made sure that I was shown German culture, Christmas traditions, and Cologne.”

According to the participants in the survey, the European volunteering project enabled them to learn and experience a new sphere of social engagement and to develop a number of competences (e.g. public speaking, action planning, communication and group work, self-reliance and responsibility).

“I gained many new competences during my volunteering abroad: I improved my English and Russian, learned how to resolve conflicts, and how to speak in public in a foreign language. I also improved my organisational skills. I realised the importance of intercultural communication. Before I started running informal education workshops for young people, I had not been aware of the extent to which culture influences personality.”

Conclusions

Interviews with former volunteers provide evidence that their social engagement prior to joining a project, as well as a high degree of awareness (e.g. knowing the types and themes of activities they are interested in) increase the likelihood that international mobility will prove an important and developing experience for volunteers.

Therefore it seems reasonable to recommend that prospective volunteers try their hand at volunteering in their chosen area of activity in home country before going abroad. Just a few days of working, for example, with the elderly or with young children, will show how well they can cope in this area. Candidates should also be encouraged to participate in a short-term volunteering project abroad before venturing on a longer activity. Another way to test the aptitude and motivation of prospective volunteers can be asking them questions concerning relevant project issues during the selection process.

An important factor influencing the motivation of volunteers is the quality of the project and the level of support from the hosting organisations. In order to improve the situation in this respect, it could be worthwhile introducing a limit on the number of projects and volunteers per organisation. This, in turn, would reduce the number of organisations which treat volunteering projects as an opportunity to make money.

For many volunteers, host organisations are the first institutions with which they come into contact during their voluntary work. Their interaction can affect young people's perceptions of the whole sphere of social and civic engagement, and this is why measures to improve the quality of the organisations' operations, including taking individual approach to volunteers and enabling them to develop, can be of great value.

Hosting organisations should take more care to provide personalised support to volunteers. It seems reasonable to appoint a person who will have time to get to know project participants, talk to them, find out what their needs and goals are and, if possible, adapt the scope of future tasks to them. Ideally, volunteers not only should be given an opportunity to participate in the operations of the organisation, but also to reflect on why and how it works. This would enable project participants to develop in their chosen field and, more broadly, in the area of social engagement. The hosting organisation should furthermore provide opportunities for volunteers to put their ideas and intentions into practice.

Informed volunteers who have completed their projects could support national agencies of the European Solidarity Corps in monitoring the projects and the way the organisations work, as they know what to focus on (e.g. what elements are important during the implementation of the projects and what kind of support participants need). In addition, before going abroad, volunteers should know that they can inform the national agency of the European Solidarity Corps about problems appearing during the project.

Social and civic engagement of study participants



Before mobility

The vast majority of respondents exercised their voting rights. Those who participated in more than one international volunteering project were slightly more likely to vote than the average, i.e. 72.7% of them participated in each election and 21.2% missed one or two elections, in which they were eligible to vote. Those whose parents were involved in voluntary service were also more likely to turn up at the ballot box (70.9% voted in all elections). A small proportion of respondents were members of a political party prior to volunteering abroad.



Figure 9.

Participation in elections before volunteering abroad (n = 152)

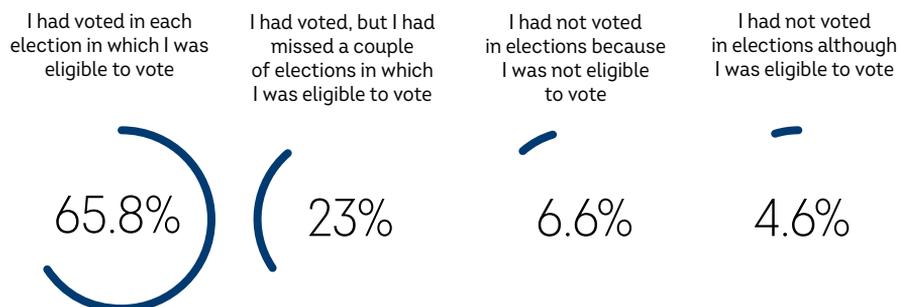
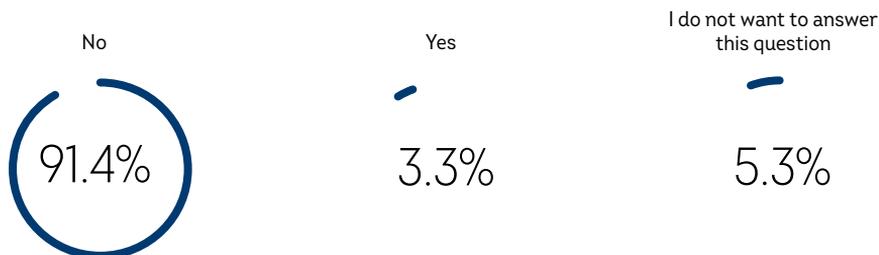


Figure 10.

Membership in a political party before volunteering abroad (n = 152)

Did you belong to or work for the good of a political party before volunteering abroad?

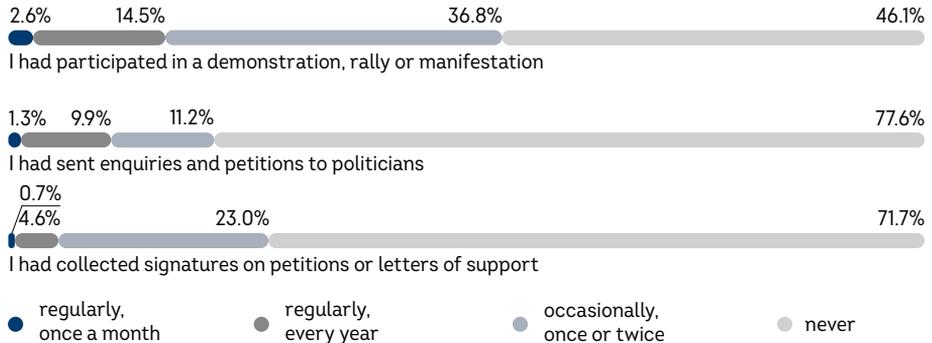


More than half of the respondents had taken part in a demonstration, rally or manifestation at least once before their volunteering abroad. One in four survey participants collected signatures on petitions or letters and one in five sent enquiries and petitions to politicians.



Figure 11.
Civic participation before volunteering abroad (n = 152)

How often did you take the following actions before volunteering abroad?



More than 76% of the respondents had been involved in volunteering before joining a project abroad. The percentage was slightly higher (84.8%) among these who had participated in volunteering abroad more than once and among those whose parents had been socially engaged (81.8%).

Respondents were most likely to volunteer for NGOs (including the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity⁸ and Noble Gift⁹), libraries and community centres. Participants in the survey also mentioned: scouting, helping neighbours with shopping, caring for animals and supporting peers with disabilities and learning difficulties.

When specifying the type of activity for the organisations, respondents most often declared in-kind and financial support. More than half of the respondents for whom the volunteering project was not the first activity of the kind and more than 40% of those whose parents were involved in volunteering worked for foundations, associations, societies and social movements. More than half of the respondents also declared participation in activities unrelated to school and work (e.g. interest clubs), which confirms the thesis that above-average socially engaged individuals participate in volunteering abroad.

⁸ The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity (Wielka Orkiestra Świątecznej Pomocy, WOŚP) is a public benefit organisation aiming to support and improve medical care in public hospitals in Poland.

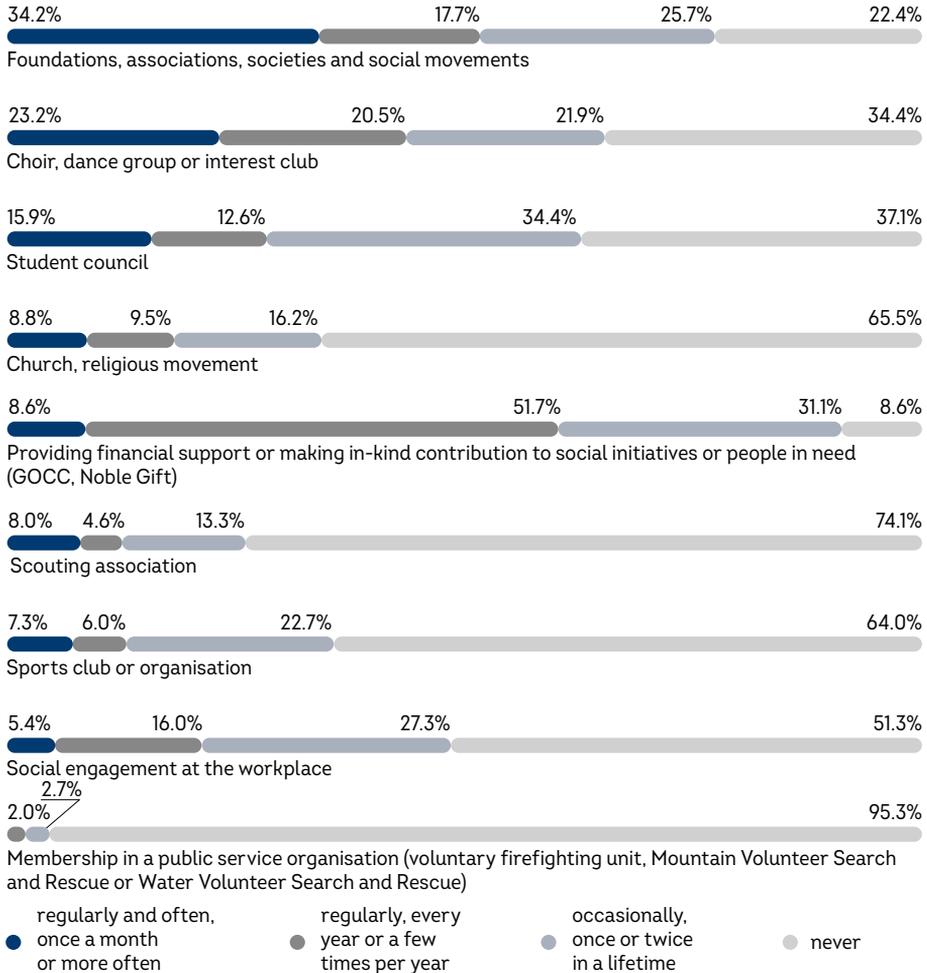
⁹ Noble Gift (Szlachetna Paczka) is one of the largest social programmes in Poland. Its beneficiaries are families and individuals that have found themselves in difficult financial circumstances for reasons beyond their control.



Figure 12.

Type and frequency of social engagement for the mentioned organisations before volunteering project abroad (n = 152)

Whether and how often did you spend your free time on voluntary activities for the benefit of the mentioned organizations and initiatives before volunteering abroad?



Nearly half of the respondents declared that they regularly donate 1% of their tax to the chosen charity¹⁰.

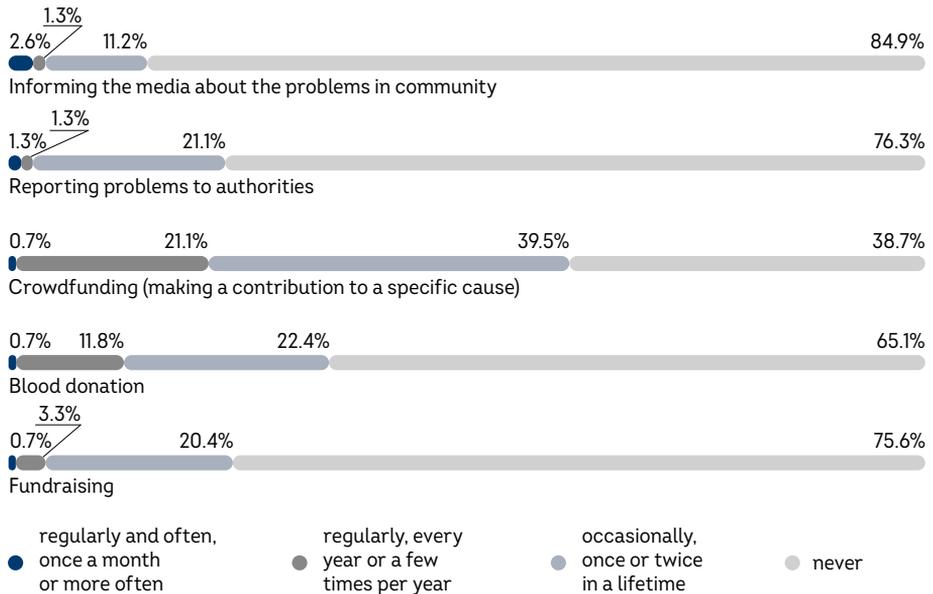
¹⁰ In Poland, pursuant to the public benefit and volunteer work Act of law, from January 1, 2004 individual taxpayers have an opportunity to reduce their income tax - as calculated in annual statements for the amount equal to 1% of the tax (1,5% as of 2023), by donating this amount to the selected public benefit organization.



Figure 13.

Type and frequency of social engagement of the participants of the study before volunteering project abroad (n = 152)

Whether and how often did you undertake following social activities before volunteering abroad?



Current social and civic engagement of volunteers

The study compared social and civic engagement of project participants prior to volunteering abroad to their current involvement. The majority of respondents exercised their voting rights after returning from volunteering. Interestingly, they were more likely to state that they had voted in elections to the European Parliament than in local elections. The largest group of respondents voted in the 2020 presidential election (86.8%) – almost 18% more than in the 2018 local elections (held before their voluntary service abroad).



Figure 14.
Volunteers voting in elections held in the years 2018–2020 (n = 152)



Scarcely any respondents decided to stand in elections. Only 2% of them stood in an election over the two years preceding the study and 3.3% of them were members or worked for a political party over that time.

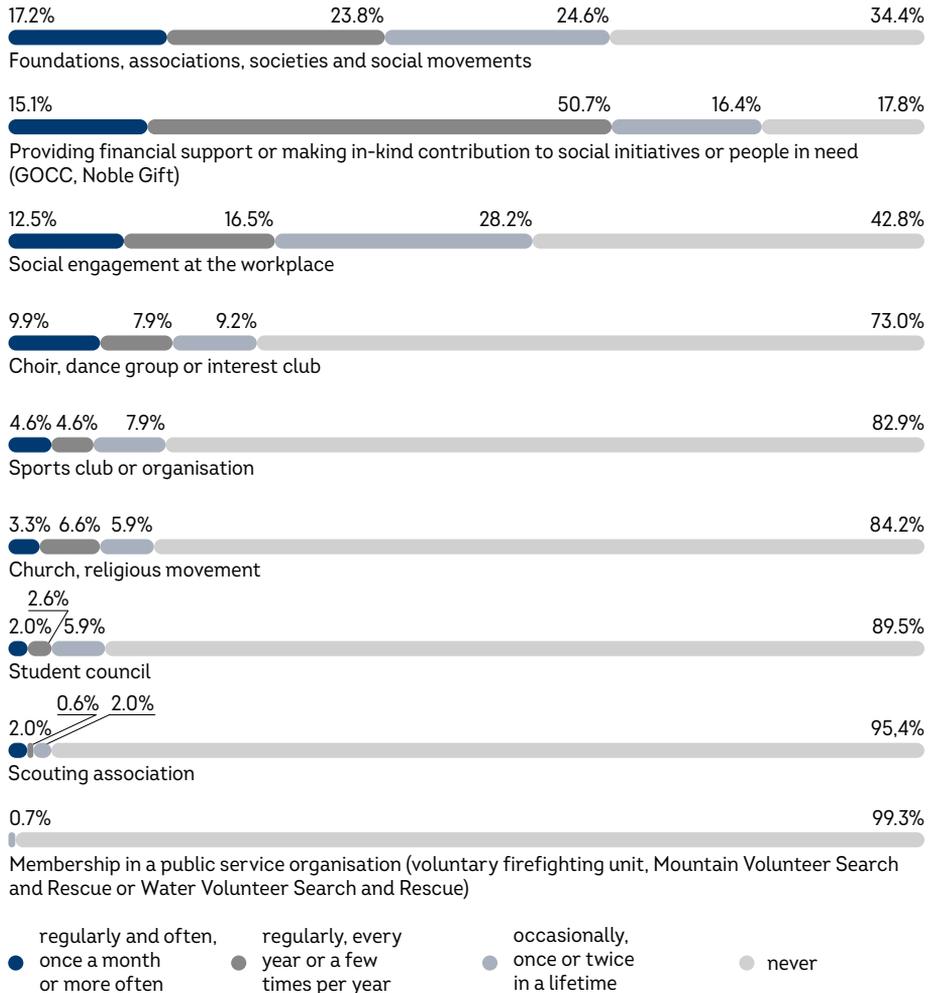
More than 60% of respondents said they were socially engaged after returning from volunteering abroad. Those for whom international volunteering was not their first project of this type were more likely than other respondents to undertake voluntary, spontaneous and occasional work on behalf of others after returning to Poland. 75.8% respondents were involved in such activities – less than in the group involved in voluntary service before the project carried out abroad (81.8%). According to the study entitled “Aktywność w organizacjach obywatelskich” (“Engagement in civic organisations”)¹¹, carried out by the CBOS Public Opinion Research Centre, 40% of Poles were involved in this type of initiatives. When compared to the results of this survey, it is clear that former participants in European volunteering projects are definitely more active than the average.

¹¹ *Aktywność w organizacjach obywatelskich. Komunikat z badań, nr 4/2022.* Warszawa: Fundacja Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, bit.ly/3eelLas [accessed: 28/08/2022].



Figure 15.
Type and frequency of social engagement for the mentioned organisations after return from a volunteering project abroad (n = 152)

Whether and how often do you spend your free time on voluntary activities for the benefit of the mentioned organizations and initiatives after volunteering abroad?



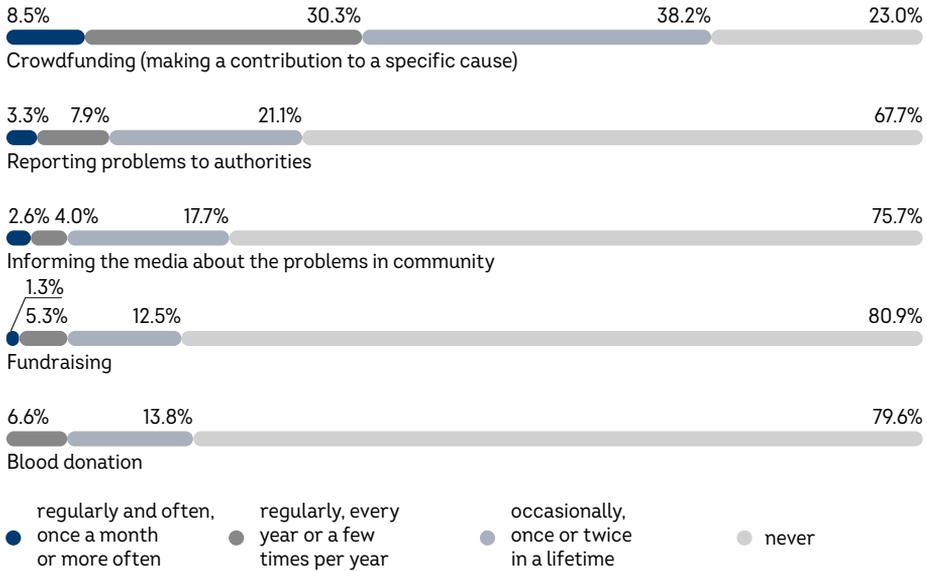
The respondents whose parents were involved in volunteering are more likely than others to work for NGOs: one in three does so several times a year and one in five does so regularly – once a month or more often. Prior to international volunteering, such work was declared by more than 60% of respondents. Although a similar percentage of respondents from both groups supported social initiatives either financially or in kind, 1% of tax was decidedly more often donated by respondents after their return from volunteering mobility than before it (which is also related to taking up a job by them).



Figure 16.

Type and frequency of social engagement of the participants of the study after return from a volunteering project abroad (n = 152)

Whether/how often have you undertaken following social activities after return from volunteering project abroad?



The in-depth interviews confirm that the majority of respondents maintain a relatively high level of social and civic engagement, although for the majority of them such activity is less frequent and less diverse than before. The respondents reported that the main reasons for this include: lack of time because of their job, the COVID-19 pandemic and fewer opportunities to be involved, and problems in their personal lives.



If I cannot be personally involved in an activity due to lack of time or long distance, I am happy to contribute online, either donate money or vote for something. I also join demonstrations and enjoy volunteering at my company.



During the pandemic I suffered from depressive disorder, which excluded me from life in general, not only from social life.



In recent years I have been active in a trade union. I sporadically worked for a charity organising Christmas Eve parties for the homeless in Warsaw. However, I don't currently get involved in any community initiatives.

My professional situation is unstable, I don't work regular hours, so I can't tell if I will be available every Friday, for example.

☺☺ *I hold online meetings where I talk to school students about life in Russia and volunteering. I miss direct contact with people – we are now living in a COVID bubble, which greatly limits what we can do.*

☺☺ *When I returned from volunteering, I have been less active, although I voted in elections and got involved in a fundraising for a friend's sick child.*

☺☺ *My social activity has decreased due to the fact that I have less free time. The pandemic didn't make things easier, either.*

However, it should be noted that social activity of respondents – although limited – is still higher than this of an average Pole. This is evident in both the answers in the survey and these given during the interviews. Even if the study participants mention reduced activity, at the same time they regret that daily responsibilities of “adult life” and lack of free time, prevent them from being more socially involved.

☺☺ *If I could, I would quit my job and start organising workshops, because I really enjoy informal education activities. As a student, I saw no point in learning certain subjects, and I wished that we had been taught critical thinking at school. If time and opportunity allowed, I would organise such classes.*

☺☺ *I got involved in other sectors, and after the volunteering mobility I have joined a few more projects and youth exchanges, which focused on politics and democracy. As a volunteer, I have also worked for Polish Humanitarian Action. I have conducted training on water, taken part in fund raisers and run a workshop at the Islamic Centre. I have more money now, so I support various organisations. I have also been active in a political party for a year.*

Some volunteers became more active after returning from their mobility. They were looking for new opportunities and areas of activity for themselves. To some respondents, their volunteering project was such an important and inspiring experience that they considered working in the third sector. However, they usually realise that it is difficult to make a living from such a job, even being employed full-time.

” I felt unsatisfied because I wanted to be professionally involved in community activities. Once I succeeded, I found out that you didn't earn much at an NGO.

” After returning from volunteering abroad, I really wanted to work in an NGO and for a year I was looking for an opening in this sector, but the opportunities available in my city – I was living in Częstochowa at the time – were very limited. I was keen to carry out projects related to culture, sensitising audiences to art, so I looked for opportunities to work in this area, but unfortunately with no success, so I was forced to give up this idea.

Of those interviewed, only one person had a success story. He has moved directly from volunteering to working in the NGO sector (in the hosting organisation). Although this is an exceptional situation and the recruitment of volunteers is not the most important objective of hosting organisations, it illustrates how important it is to match the competences and interests of the volunteer with the profile of the hosting institution.

” I worked in the organisation's office as a volunteer and was offered a permanent position. I was the first person to succeed, because hiring foreigners in Russia is not easy. I spent four years in the country, including the volunteering time.

The majority of respondents stick to their chosen areas of activity. They do not change under the influence of volunteering abroad, but in some cases they find new fields of activity for themselves. The projects either inspire them to take an interest in other areas or increase their knowledge of different opportunities for engagement and gaining information about them.

” Thanks to the volunteering mobility I learnt about different types of activities taken by NGOs. Later, I searched for ones in which I could get involved.

” My interests revolve around minority rights, so after returning from volunteering I have joined initiatives on behalf of migrants and LGBT community. I have performed in charity concerts, attended film screenings and participated in handicraft workshops, the proceeds of which supported LGBT community.

The survey results confirm that volunteers have widely participated in elections and some became involved in other ways, i.e. by being active in a political party. A large share of them declared that they had funded organisations whose profile matched their interests to a greater extent than before the volunteering project, which was due to their higher income, but at the same time, they had less time for direct involvement. Some participants in the survey also mentioned larger involvement in online initiatives, such as signing petitions.

What is interesting, almost all participants in the qualitative study indicate that they had not had important role models for social involvement in their family or community.

“ There were no models for pro-social engagement in my family. I discovered volunteering at my university, where a number of associations focusing on environmental protection, helping the homeless and underprivileged school children operated. I started to get involved.

“ I was brought up in a post-communist culture, where it was better to keep a low profile, do one’s own thing quietly to stay out of trouble. For a long time, I believed that being an everyman I had no impact, so I did not get involved in pro-social activities.

“ My parents are not socially engaged. They rarely vote in elections, although I encourage them to do so. I am more influenced by my friends.

“ My parents have always voted in elections and my friends have been involved in various social actions, but I can’t say that anyone in particular has inspired me to volunteer.

Only two people out of all participants declared in interviews that their friends and acquaintances were involved in pro-social activities. This is less than indicated in the questionnaire survey, in which as many as 70% respondents mentioned social engagement of their friends and acquaintances and 36% of their parents. The reason for such a significant difference may be that the participants in the questionnaire survey were considering undertaking any activity, while the interviews were about identifying specific role models (relevant and inspiring attitudes).

After returning from volunteering, some respondents' awareness of phenomena in the socio-political sphere increased and they began to pay attention to different issues and problems than before their departure.

“ I have begun to see differently the issues of climate change and the need to take care of the environment. I have noticed how much these areas affect social life – if people live surrounded by greenery, they have a positive attitude.

“ Having returned from volunteering abroad, I am definitely more interested in what is happening in Poland. I try to keep abreast of issues that directly affect me.

“ My perception of time and space has changed. Before I took part in volunteering abroad, even a two-hour coach journey to another location was quite an event for me. When I came to Russia, I sometimes spent up to seventeen hours on the road to a location. I also met people who drove 450 kilometres to Moscow to do some shopping and returned the same day. This has changed my perspective – 100 kilometres is no longer a long distance for me...

“ Previously, I believed that volunteers were workers doing their job for free. I have definitely changed my view after the mobility.

It is worth noting that, in many cases, participation in an European volunteering project abroad did not increase the level of social engagement of the respondents (e.g. in terms of time devoted to such activities), but improved its quality. It enabled volunteers to increase their knowledge in this area and strengthened their conviction about the importance and value of their involvement.

Main conclusions



- 1 The vast majority of former volunteers who answered the survey questionnaire thought of themselves as socially engaged, but their current involvement was less intensive than before volunteering abroad. It mainly manifested itself in voluntary work for NGOs, social engagement in the workplace and financial or in-kind support for social initiatives and people in need.
- 2 The in-depth interviews, on the other hand, show that many respondents understood social and civic engagement quite narrowly – only as non-profit aid and support activities undertaken outside of work. Such understanding of this broad area is therefore close to the concept of volunteering, which is a much narrower field, included in the sphere of social and civic engagement, but does not form its only manifestation. It is worth noting that the political sphere was not included in the category of social and civic engagement by all the respondents. For many, it was an area distant from their interests, even unattractive and non-transparent. Some respondents considered casting their vote in elections as a civic duty and thus did not count it as social involvement.
- 3 For some respondents, social and civic engagement meant not only taking specific action for the benefit of others, but also keeping up to date with what was happening in their community, both in social and political sphere. They also pointed to the manifestations of social and civic involvement that can be identified with axiomatic attitude models. These included: paying taxes and waste sorting, but also having a say on public issues (e.g. by participating in demonstrations and voting in elections). It can therefore be seen that some respondents perceived social and civic engagement as a wide range of activities related to individual's functioning in society, and not only those strictly related to voluntary service or providing aid.
- 4 The current level of their activity was often rated by respondents as medium or lower than desired, and definitely lower than before their international volunteering project. However, even so, they usually had an area or theme they focused on. Volunteers mainly cited the following reasons for their reduced involvement: lack of time due to work and private life (e.g. family) obligations, but also due to the COVID-19 pandemic and limited opportunities for being active and problems in their personal lives. However, it should be noted that still they were significantly more involved than an average statistical Pole. This is evidenced both by the results of the survey and the findings from the interviews. Even if former volunteers mentioned being less active, they regretted this state of affairs, and emphasised that if not for the demands and responsibilities related to work and family life, they would have devoted their free time more to social engagements. It should be added that, although

in many cases, participation in a volunteering project abroad did not increase participants' activity (e.g. in terms of time), for some respondents it improved the quality of their work. As a result of experience gained abroad, volunteers were able to engage in worthwhile activities upon their return, which they felt brought about real social change.

- 5 International volunteering projects have changed volunteers' awareness of approaches to social engagement. They have realised that only well-prepared and planned activities (which in their opinion were mainly international volunteering projects), carried out by carefully selected people, were likely to have a tangible positive effect.
- 6 The majority of respondents continue to be active in areas that are important to them - these have not changed as a result of international volunteering project, although the projects provided them with opportunities to learn about new areas. Volunteering abroad either inspired the respondents to take interest in another area of social engagement or made them learn about various opportunities for social and civic engagement.
- 7 The volunteering project proved to be such an important and inspiring experience for some respondents that they decided to work in the NGO sector afterwards. In many cases, however, it turned out that it was not easy to make a living from it, even working full-time.
- 8 As a reason for participating in a volunteering project, respondents most often indicated their needs: the desire to go abroad, to experience an exciting adventure, to gain work experience or to learn a foreign language. Helping others was ranked fourth most important motive.
- 9 Those who made an informed choice of a thematic area, target group and even a specific organisation for which they worked abroad were usually very satisfied with the project and considered it an important part of their own development. Self-awareness of needs and goals was a factor that made it possible to benefit from and enjoy volunteering abroad even when the quality of the project itself and the degree of commitment and preparation on the part of the hosting organisation left much to be desired.
- 10 To some respondents, an international volunteering project was an important formative experience in the area of social engagement. It strengthened them as informed citizens of the European Union who are willing to contribute to the development of European integration.

- 11 The European volunteering schemes allowed them to learn about and experience new types of social activities and to develop competences that are useful in such activities and include, for example, public speaking, action planning, communication and teamwork, self-reliance and responsibility.
- 12 With regard to organisational and content-related aspects of volunteering projects abroad, the respondents often indicated that they were motivated by the opportunities to be creative and self-reliant, and to design and implement tasks themselves. This was particularly the case for those volunteers who had chosen their mobility theme or host organisation and had clear expectations of the project. In addition, they were motivated during the project by factors such as opportunities for personal development, the acquisition of skills (especially those they considered relevant for their career progression), a new environment and anything that was perceived as an interesting challenge.
- 13 Among negative aspects of the project, some respondents mentioned cooperation with organisations that treated international volunteers as a systemic source of income or a way to support their ongoing operations (which is not in line with the principles of the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes). In these types of entities, volunteers were treated as unpaid labour, which resulted in high turnover and selection of random people (it was the number of volunteers “processed” that mattered, not the quality of their work). However, even in such organisations, volunteers with a clear vision for their work were able to find fulfilment and carry out rewarding activities.

Recommendations



For organisations

To many volunteers, organisations hosting international volunteering projects are the first social institutions with which they have direct contact and for which they work. This experience can influence these young people's perception of social and civic engagement. This is why it is so important to implement well-thought-out, high-quality activities and to apply an individual approach to each volunteer. Attention should be paid to their development and support throughout the project.

It is worthwhile for organisations to enable volunteers to participate not only in day-to-day activities, but also in the planning and evaluation process of individual tasks, and to impart knowledge that would help them develop in their chosen area and in the sphere of social engagement in general. The hosting organisation should also provide space for volunteers to implement their own ideas and initiatives in accordance with the programme rules.

It is also advisable to include in the selection process questions that will highlight to volunteers relevant issues related to the project and to diagnose their own motivation to join it.

For national agencies

Even committed and informed volunteers do not always see the full picture of social and civic engagement. It is therefore worth taking more care to educate prospective volunteers in this area so that they are aware of what civic participation is, what types of activities it involves, and appreciate the role social engagement and community organisations play in a democratic system. Staging pre-departure training on the importance of engagement, associating and the role public trust plays in democracies or the preparation of attractive and accessible educational materials on this topic could prove useful in this respect.

It seems particularly important to bring about a change in volunteers' perceptions of political sphere. It happens so that although they declare voting in elections and treat it as a basic civic duty, they are often discouraged by and have negative attitude to politics (and therefore strongly separate social and political engagement). It is therefore essential to show them a different perspective on politics as a field that encompasses all areas of social life, rather than an activity limited solely to parliamentary discussions and disputes. The very idea of the European volunteering schemes is based on political assumptions, which proves that

social engagement can be apolitical, although it is often politically motivated. This is why it is important that volunteers are aware of this.

Informed volunteers who have completed their projects could support national agencies of the European Solidarity Corps in monitoring the projects and the way the organisations work, as they know what to focus on e.g. what elements are important during the implementation of projects and what kind of support volunteers need. In addition, before going abroad, volunteers should know that they can inform their national agency of the European Solidarity Corps about problems appearing during the project.

Recommendations for volunteers

Before volunteering abroad, especially on a long-term basis, it is advisable to test yourself, even for a short period of time, in a chosen area of volunteering activities in the home country. Just a few days of working with, for example, the elderly or with young children makes it possible to determine whether (and how) one performs in this area. Such a test would increase the group of people satisfied with their projects abroad. It is also a good idea to try a short-term volunteering abroad before joining a long-term volunteering project.

This report is the result of the survey of participants in volunteering abroad schemes. The survey's aim was to establish whether and how participants are involved in the social and volunteering actions upon completion of a scheme. The study concerned former Polish volunteers who have taken part in one of the EU-funded actions: Erasmus+ Voluntary Service or European Voluntary Service.

Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE) operates since 1993. It is the Polish National Agency of the Erasmus+ Programme and the European Solidarity Corps for 2021-2027. Since 2014 it has participated in the implementation of the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development. FRSE is also responsible for other European educational and informative initiatives in Poland, such as eTwinning, Eurodesk Polska, Eurydice, Europass, EVET and EPALE. The Foundation supports cooperation with countries in the East via the Polish-Lithuanian Youth Exchange Fund, the Polish-Ukrainian Council of Youth Exchange, SALTO-EECA Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre. One of the most important educational events in Poland – the Education Congress – is organized by FRSE.