
BULGARIAN YOUNG PEOPLE, VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL CAPITAL: TRENDS IN 2019

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Abstract: Research on the Bulgarian youth in the last two decades detect disturbing trends of sharp decline in the trust towards different public institutions, preferences towards living in the closer family and friends' environment, prevailing consumer attitudes. There is a necessity for injecting new energy and positive life attitude which is taken account of in the national youth policies but fails to become reality.

Data from the annual government reports doesn't show significant changes in the attitudes and ways of life of the Bulgarian young people regarding the use of their free time in a positive way like acquiring new knowledge and skills, or widening their net of social contacts. Researches show very small percentage of young people who are volunteers, low levels of membership in nongovernmental, activist or even political organizations, disinterest in civic activities.

These disturbing results can be discussed in the light of the social capital theories that outline volunteering and civic activism as crucial methods in building bridging and linking social capital. The latter can help young people in their professional and personal fulfillment and in bettering the quality of their lives.

The article studies the results of a research done in the first half of the year 2019 among 240 young people (mostly students). The data is gathered through a structured online questionnaire. It studies the motivation of those young people to take part in voluntary activities; as well as the attitudes of youngsters who have never participated in a voluntary activity. Other researchers in Bulgaria have found that the students are the most active volunteers in the country. The current research verifies that statement. It delves deeper in the reasons why a person would / wouldn't take part in a voluntary activity, what are the preferred causes, what are the best information channels for attracting young volunteers, what are their expectations.

So far governmental policies have failed to produce significant positive changes in the behavior of the young people in Bulgaria. But there is a large number of youth organizations, nonprofit organizations committed to promoting volunteering and international organizations and programmes that slowly are shifting the trends. To add to the portfolio of volunteering forms, an international project started in 2018 is trying to popularize the pro bono programmes and to make them a part of the typical life cycle of the students in Bulgaria and other EU countries.

Keywords: volunteering, social capital, Bulgarian students

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the National Statistics Institute there are 558 089 men and 525 378 women aged 15-19 as of December 31st 2017 in Bulgaria (respectively 7,9% and 7,5% of the population). Since 1989 the overall population has decreased by over one million people. Young people aged 15-34 are less by 300 000 people due to migration and the low levels of fertility. Three quarters of the young live in the cities. This situation is not very different from the one observed in other European countries but it imposes serious obstacles in front of the future development of Bulgaria. Facing receding manpower and losing its' brightest minds, the country should be very active in retaining young people and motivating them to be actively involved in all aspects of society development.

The changes that started in 1989 brought consumerism as a lifestyle and leisure time became equally important as working time. A large-scale research from 2018 studied the frequency of 18 **free time activities** dividing them into passive ways like listening to music, relaxation, doing nothing and active ones like engaging in sport, cultural activities and volunteering¹⁴. The results showed that the Bulgarian young people:

- Very often listen to music (65%), spend time with their family (61%), watch movies (50%) and go out with friends (48%);
- The activities that lead to creating friendships outside the immediate circle, that are aimed towards societal good and bettering the world are not very popular – 5% of the young people do something creative, 3% visit very often youth centers, only 1% travel abroad;
- Volunteering is not a typical way to spend one's free time – 2% do it very often, 4% often, 5% sometimes, 14% are rarely engaging in volunteering and a staggering 71% have never been volunteers.

¹⁴ Митев, П. Е. и кол. (2019). *Българската младеж 2018/2019*. Фондация „Фридрих Еберт“

In regard to **values**, there are some positive trends. In 2014 the most commonly mentioned was “to look good”, followed by “to be independent” and “to have a career”. In 2018 the loyalty to friends and family take the lead and this shows a re-orientation to the close informal circle. So “youth excessive individualism makes way for youth sociality”¹⁵. In 2014 the most important value has been freedom, in 2018 solidarity outstrips market economy.

But still the social environment is treated with suspicion by the Bulgarian young people. Most of them do not trust (51%) or have low trust (18%) in politicians. The various forms of **political engagement** are also not popular – 10% have signed a petition, 11% have participated in marches or rallies, 1% work for a political party. Civic participation as a whole is not very popular among Bulgarians – 78% of them are not members to any organization, 4% are members of political parties, 2% - of trade unions, 5% - of different clubs¹⁶. The positive trends (although very weak) can be found in sport clubs and hunting societies, professional and business associations, and nonprofits where the membership doubles from 2002 to 2018 from 0,5-1% to 2% of the population.

Bulgarians are engaging rarely in any form of **civic participation**. Giving is the most common (practiced by one third of the population), followed by signing petitions and complaints, organizing protests or boycotting brands and products/services. But all these are a typical behavior for 5-7% of the adult population. Those low levels of civic engagement are a persisting problem for the country in the years after 1989.

As far as the **institutionalized civic activity** again we are facing low levels of trust – only 1% of the young people imagine having a career in a nonprofit/nongovernmental organization. The level of trust towards NGOs is among the lowest – 17% compared to 50% trust in the EU, 35% in the police and 34% in the army. These numbers are a part of the wider disbelief in the capacity of the voluntary sector typical for contemporary Bulgaria – another survey shows 22% of the Bulgarians trust nonprofit organizations whereas 30% do not trust them¹⁷. The main reason for that situation is the lack of information about the work and results of the Bulgarian NGOs. As far as young people are concerned, the trends are more positive with them. Nonprofits are more trusted by people who are younger, with higher educational degrees and higher income. The age group of 16-29 shows the highest levels of trust towards nonprofits – 38% trust them completely or partially¹⁸.

Slightly different results are demonstrated by a specialized survey that outlines youth volunteering as a travel opportunity (e.g. the European Voluntary Service)¹⁹. Another interesting finding is that during focused group discussions it becomes clear that young people don't know well volunteering activities and don't always recognize that they have been a participant in such.

The Youth Report 2017 shows positive attitudes of young people towards volunteering/giving campaigns. They are more popular among people with higher education (79%) than among those with primary or lower education (53%)²⁰. Youth volunteering according to that report is channeled mainly through giving money and not through giving time or special skills (which is the definition of volunteering). The report has tested which causes would attract young volunteers and found that those are mainly short-term and ad hoc situations: disaster responses (45%), environment protection (37%), work for children/people in need (35%), distribution of information and/or materials, artistic endeavors and so on.

The Bulgarian government has adopted a *National Youth Strategy 2010-2020*²¹ that brings special attention to the abovementioned negative trends. It's Strategic Goal No.5 is called “Youth Volunteering Development” and envisions promoting volunteering as a driving force for personal development, mobility, competitiveness, social cohesion, and generation solidarity. Among the operative goals are the law regulation of youth volunteering, recognizing the acquired knowledge, skills and experiences, promoting volunteering through national programmes. Strategic Goal No.6 “Promoting Civic Activity” is also oriented towards opening possibilities for young people to engage fully in social life. It envisions supporting youth organizations, campaigns and initiatives; promoting civic education and youth leaders. That strategic goal also aims at making young people better represented in the national, regional and municipal policies and governance.

¹⁵ Митев, П. Е. и кол. (2019). *Българската младеж 2018/2019*. Фондация „Фридрих Еберт“

¹⁶ Стойчев, Г. (ред.) (2019) *Демокрация и гражданско участие. Обществените нагласи към демокрацията, върховенството на правото и основните права на човека през 2018 г.* Фондация „Отворено общество“.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Стойчев, Г. (ред.) (2018) *Доверието в неправителствените организации в България*. Фондация „Отворено общество“.

¹⁹ _____ (2015). *Проучване на младежките нагласи и нужди*. Алианс за регионални и граждански инициативи

²⁰ _____ (2018). *Доклад за младежта 2017*. Министерски съвет.

²¹ <https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=986>

Despite the existence of a national policy and several specialized programmes, the shift towards a more active and engaged youth is still not happening.

2. YOUTH VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Since its proposition in the 70's the concept of **social capital** has been linked to many topics varying from the role of voluntary organizations and social networks to decaying neighborhoods and the ways to their revival. Using the approach of Robert Putman who defined social capital as “the connection among individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”²² we can see how civic activism as a whole, volunteering and youth volunteering in particular are strongly linked to that concept. The primary ingredient of social capital is trust and it stems mainly from interactions with people with positive outcomes. But the outcomes can be sense of belonging, self-fulfillment, attaining mutual goals. As Laser and Leibowitz put it, “the individual must feel that it is in her best self-interest to support the greater good of the group ... [and] to believe that her involvement now will pay dividends later”²³. So again volunteering experience is a good example of paths that build, expand and maintain social capital for young people.

The distinction between bonding, bridging and linking social capital is illustrated in fig. 1.

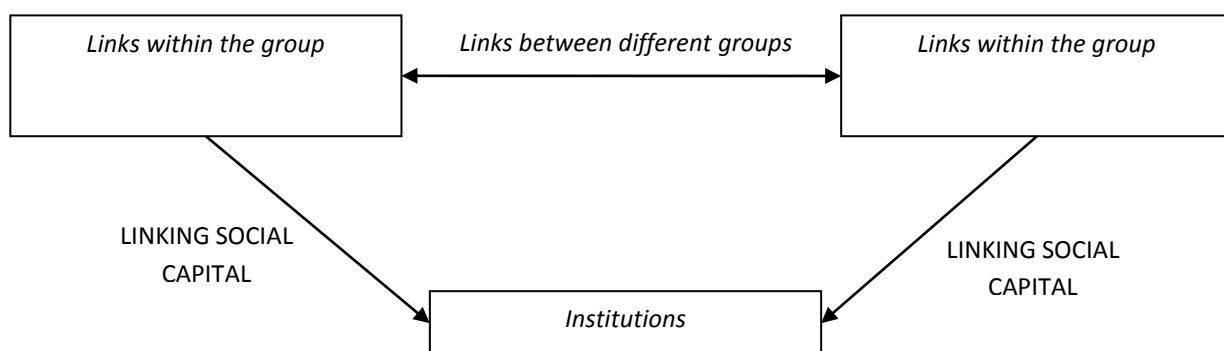


Figure 1. Types of social capital

Bonding social capital arises from interaction within groups like the family or close friends. Bonded solidarity comes quite naturally and creates sense of belonging, common purpose and personal obligations towards the group. On the negative side, strong bonding capital could marginalize young people and limit their lifestyle options.

More important for the social well-being is the **bridging social capital** that stems from interacting with people who are different by beliefs, values, culture, origins, financial status, profession and so on. One of the ways to create and expand that kind of social capital is volunteering. It is even more important for people to build bridging solidarity from a very young age because that will lead to a more open minded society with high levels of trust and abilities to cooperate. Bridging social capital can arise not only through participating in direct volunteering activities but also through their typical ingredients – youth exchange programmes, trainings, seminars, round tables, work visits, etc. Valuable bridging links are also created when different types of young people networks with different values, traditions, background and reciprocity intertwine during volunteering activities. That becomes a type of cultural exchange that creates higher levels of trust between young people and raises the levels of social capital for society. To finally distinguish bonding and bridging capital (linking social capital is not the subject of that text), one can say that the former enables people to “get by” while the latter enables them to “get on”²⁴.

Research shows that students who do **volunteering work** during their study acquire skills that are later beneficial for their employability. A social experiment of the Bulgarian Time Heroes foundation (<https://timeheroes.org/>) proved

²² Cited as in Mohd Nor, M. H.z, Alias, A.r & Musa, M. F. (2018). Social capital in youth volunteerism.

²³ Laser, J. A. & Leibowitz, G. S. (2009). Promoting Positive Outcomes for Healthy Youth Development: Utilizing Social Capital Theory. *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*

²⁴ As in Holland, J. (2008). Young People and Social Capital: What Can It Do For Us? *Families & Social Capital Research Group*. London South Bank University

that the CV of a young person that shows volunteering experience got 85% more employers' interest than the ones who displayed only learning achievements. Laser and Leibowitz list among the positive outcomes the new skills that young people acquire – they are “often aware of more information, able to gain information more quickly, synthesize information from a variety of sources, and gain advantages from that information”²⁵. Volunteering allows people to apply theoretical knowledge, get in touch with real-life working experience, adds soft and communication skills and what's most important – widens and diversifies the social network of the students allowing them to gain understanding of others' ways of life, building trust and hence – multiplying their social capital. In this way by being civic activists young people gain social and personal development whilst giving back to society.

A recent study outlined three characteristics that are important for young people to the **development of social capital**: face-to-face interaction, common interests and experiencing emotional connection²⁶. Face-to-face communication (despite the strong influence of modern technology) remains the main source of emotional support, material aid and role modeling. In absence of face-to-face interactions social capital deteriorates rather quickly. Common interests (like sports, music, gaming, supporting a cause) are necessary for building identity as a part of a group and group solidarity. Emotional connections (even negative ones like disappointments, failures, feelings of injustice) are the final ingredient for building and sustaining high levels of social capital for young people.

Volunteering has all the above-mentioned prerequisites. It most often requires intensive face-to-face communication – with peers, beneficiaries, nonprofit representatives, mentors, etc. On the second place, it is cause-related meaning that a volunteering mission will attract common minded young people who would like to create change in the world, practice a skill, acquire a new one but always in a field where there is already a common interest available. Finally, the challenges and outcomes of a volunteering mission end up with strengthened emotional connection – between the young person and his/her peers, the young person and the beneficiaries or the nonprofit staff, etc.

The benefits of volunteering are increasingly being recognized globally and that process is slowly getting momentum in Bulgaria as well.

3. PRO BONO AS A NEW FORM OF STUDENT VOLUNTEERING IN BULGARIA

To further stimulate the processes of engaging young people in volunteering, several pro bono intermediaries and universities undertook an effort recognized and funded by the Erasmus + Programme 2014-2020. The general goal was to give the students work-based learning experiences and thus to make them more competitive at the labor market while also motivating them to be more actively engaged in community building. The project is called “**Boosting Employability and Empowering Social Engagement in High Education through Pro Bono – BEESE**” (registered with number HU01-KA203-047732). It is the first European level initiative that involves higher education institutions, companies and nonprofits to develop work-based learning academic programmes.

The expected outcomes are to equip the students with marketable skills and to engage them to participate constructively in social life. Sideway benefits are the opening of universities to input from the practice of businesses and nonprofits, to create new and expand existing networks, to offer nonprofits cheaper solutions to their problems, etc. By implementing different pro bono programmes as a part of the studying experience, the universities across Europe can make the student life-cycle more dynamic and closer to the needs of the labor market.

A starting point of the project was a **study on the motivations of students** from the five participating countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Spain, Portugal and France) to be or not to be a part of volunteering and/or pro bono experiences. The methodology included a unified online questionnaire that consisted multiple choice, ranking and open questions. It was spread through the networks of the project partners – 4 universities and 5 pro bono intermediaries. The questionnaire was filled by over 1500 respondents and the Bulgarian sample was 240 young people (16-35 years old). The in-depth understanding of students' motivation will be achieved by quantitative interviews after the planned pro bono pilots (short-term, mid-term and long-term ones).

The preliminary results from the questionnaire depict an interesting “picture” of the motivations of the Bulgarian young people to participate in voluntary campaigns. Most of the participants are with positive attitudes towards volunteering – 55,8% of them have had volunteering experiences; 39,6% would like to participate and only 4,6% would never attend such an occasion.

Among those **with volunteering experiences**, the most common causes are focused on children and families (41,8%), collectives of humans or animals (42,5%), local problems – neighborhoods, villages, cities (45,5%) and

²⁵ Laser, J. A. & Leibowitz, G. S. (2009). Promoting Positive Outcomes for Healthy Youth Development: Utilizing Social Capital Theory. *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*

²⁶ Lisa Smylie, L. (2015). The nature and development of young people's social capital: transitions, co-presence, shared interests, and emotional connections. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*

less often on global problems (39,6%). The information about possible volunteering programmes is spread most often online – through shared posts in social media and through the social platforms of the organizers. The other most trusted source are personal recommendations from friends and acquaintances.

The part of the responses coming from young people who do **not intend to be volunteers** conveyed their motivations – they don't have the time (as a main reason), they have bad opinion on volunteer organizations, or they do not believe in the effectiveness of such programmes. Those results bring back the task to distribute more information about the work and achievement of Bulgarian nonprofits and to do it mainly through social media where young people get informed and form opinions.

Some interesting results concerning the **motives** of all participants in the survey are as follows:

- Regarding their predominant values, Bulgarian students are prone to experiencing something “new, different and exciting” (n=154), like to engage in challenges that can make the world a better place (n=110), and prefer to be decision-makers (n=102). That means that “advertising” and popularizing volunteering and pro bono should be done by presenting those activities as an exciting experience.
- Students who already have volunteering experience are more empathic and can put themselves in the shoes of people in distress. They are responsible but also understand that achieving something new sometimes means that you have to take risks.
- Bulgarian young people believe that humanity and its environment depend on their actions (totally 150 of the respondents agree or strongly agree with that statement). The same number believe that they can change the world through voluntary actions.
- Voluntary experiences are not perceived as a means to feel less alone (160 respondents disagree in different extent with that statement). So the potential of pro bono and other voluntary activities for building social capital is not yet recognized enough and point another item to popularize.
- Volunteering is viewed as a means to “test myself and evaluate my skills” (n=177 for those who agree), to gain new skills, knowledge and experience (n=211) and to enhance one's CV (n=127). So the idea to boost employability through pro bono is not an exotic idea for Bulgarian students.

These results are just the starting point for better understanding the motivations of Bulgarian young people to participate or not in different forms of voluntary experiences. After the first round of pro bono pilots that happened between April and July of 2019, the next phase of the BEESE project will elaborate on the survey findings to see if it is possible to attract more and better participants from the students in the partner-countries. All intermediate results, insights and findings can be found on the website <https://beeseprobono.eu/>.

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