

# Volunteering in the time of COVID-19. The Polish example for Europe

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## Abstract

The subject of the article is the analysis of the possibilities of using the volunteering to counteract adverse effects of crisis situation based on the example of the coronavirus pandemic. The authors examine the *Solidarity Corps for Seniors' Support* (pl. *Solidarnościowy Korpus Wsparcia Seniorów*) and the local system *Warsaw Supports* (pl. *system Warszawa Wspiera*) applying the institutional and normative method, and case study method in an attempt to provide answers to the following questions: (1) How and under what rules was the volunteering potential used to support the citizens? (2) Did the actions based on volunteer activity undertaken in Poland efficiently complement the work of public authorities? (3) Is the implementation of the developed solutions and their usage within the *European Solidarity Corps* structure possible in similar cases in the future? The case study allows to conclude that Polish solutions proved to be efficient and allowed to formulate the proposals of establishing a broader cooperation between the EU Member States concerning experience sharing in voluntary work development in crisis situations.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, crisis situation, European Solidarity Corps, volunteering.

## Wolontariat w czasach COVID-19. Przykład Polski dla Europy

### Abstract

Przedmiotem artykułu jest analiza możliwości wykorzystania instytucji wolontariatu do przeciwdziałania negatywnym skutkom społecznym wynikającym z sytuacji kryzysowej na przykładzie pandemii COVID-19. Autorzy, korzystając z metody instytucjonalno-normatywnej oraz studium przypadku, badają *Solidarnościowy Korpus Wsparcia Seniorów* oraz system *Warszawa Wspiera*, starając się odpowiedzieć na pytania: (1) W jaki sposób i na jakich zasadach wykorzystano potencjał wolontariatu do wsparcia obywateli? (2) Czy podjęte w Polsce działania wykorzystujące aktywność wolontariatu skutecznie uzupełniły działania organów publicznych? (3) Czy możliwa jest recepcja

wypracowanych rozwiązań i wykorzystanie ich w ramach struktury *Europejskiego Korpusu Solidarności* w podobnych sytuacjach w przyszłości? Analiza przedmiotowych przypadków pozwala stwierdzić, że polskie rozwiązania okazały się skuteczne i sformułować postulaty nawiązywania szerszej współpracy między państwami członkowskimi, dotyczącej wymiany doświadczeń w rozwijaniu wolontariatu w sytuacjach kryzysowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pandemia COVID-19, sytuacja kryzysowa, Europejski Korpus Solidarności, wolontariat.

One of the key objectives of any state's existence is to ensure security for its citizens. The occurrence of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to the situation, where public institutions had to undertake the actions aimed at reducing its adverse effects on the social and economic level. For example, Małgorzata Dziembała and Agnieszka Kłos emphasise that "ways, in which the EU Member States cope with the consequences of the pandemic depend to a large extent on their ability to prevent and counteract shocks and the pace, at which the relevant response tools will be implemented" (Dziembała, Kłos 2021: p. 82).

The aim of this article is to present volunteering as a new instrument serving the purpose of minimising the adverse effects of the coronavirus pandemic, which may also be adopted at the European level. The working hypothesis assumes that in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, solutions based on volunteering enabling efficient support for the citizens were developed.

To verify this hypothesis, the following research questions need to be answered:

- How and under what rules was the volunteering potential used to support the citizens?
- Did the actions based on volunteer activity undertaken in Poland efficiently complement the work of the public authorities?
- Is the implementation of the developed solutions and their usage within the *European Solidarity Corps* structure possible in similar cases in the future?

## Methodology

Volunteering is a topic, which frequently reoccurs in the available literature. However, until the present moment this type of activity was rarely discussed in the context of crisis management, or the actual support of the actions undertaken by public institutions in crisis situations. Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic, being a relatively new phenomenon, has been present in the scientific discourse only since 2020. Therefore, the article fills in the existing gap in the scholar literature.

This article discusses issues linked with alleviating adverse social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and implementing anti-crisis measures based on voluntary activity of the citizens. The necessity to ensure security in the light of the coronavirus crisis has become a problem concerning all EU Member States expanding to a global scale. In view of the fact that the subject matter of the paper will be the developed model of interaction between public institutions based on civic volunteering (a good model

that can be propagated in other countries), it seems reasonable to apply the paradigm of Europeanisation in a horizontal perspective treated as the process of transferring the solutions and experiences between the Member States rather than the final result (Börzel, Risse 2012; Schimmelfennig 2010; Witkowska 2013; p. 124).

The institutional-normative method and the case study (with respect to the analysis of Polish solutions implemented in connection with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic) were used for verifying the research hypothesis.

This article consists of three parts. The first part includes a conceptualisation of the basic notions and COVID-19 depiction as a crisis situation. Next, an analysis of Polish solutions, i.e., the nationwide *Solidarity Corps for Seniors' Support* (pl. *Solidarnościowy Korpus Wsparcia Seniorów*) and the local system *Warsaw Supports* (pl. *system Warszawa Wspiera*) were carried out. The final part identified possibilities of expanding the actions of the *European Solidarity Corps* based on Polish experiences and an estimation of the existing opportunities/possibilities and limitations.

## Volunteering in crisis situations

At the moment, there is no one, generally accepted definition of volunteering. This term is derived from the Latin word *voluntarius*, which means "willing, of one's own free will" (Online Etymology Dictionary W/W). It emphasises the axiological basis of the characterised notion, which is based on voluntariness. Additionally, Agnieszka Bejma distinguishes two additional features of volunteering activity, i.e. "free nature and acting in favour of individuals from outside the family, colleagues and friends" (Bejma 2012: p. 35), which only confirms the interest-free willingness to support others by the volunteer. Furthermore, Anna Kanios refers to it as "a varied social movement, which may be depicted by identifying its crucial components" (Kanios 2008: p. 47). In light of the foregoing, for the purpose of this article, volunteering has been defined as interest-free, non-profit actions undertaken out of one's own free will in favour of the members of local community, whose needs have not been satisfied as a result of activity of public institutions.

The global coronavirus pandemic has all the characteristic features, which allow to classify it as a crisis situation. In reference to the definition introduced by Waldemar Kitler, the element that is particularly distinct is an imbalance and loss of possibilities of controlling the course of events (Kitler 2007: p. 20). Taking into account the scale and duration of the pandemic, which in Poland can be traced back to the first infection case identified on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (Szarota 2020: p.15), it has been the longest and the broadest crisis situation in the contemporary history. The specific nature of the pandemic threat, its potential to affect everybody, makes it ubiquitous and leads to a diminished sense of security in public sphere, because according to Michał Brzeziński, threats evoke social reactions including fear, horror or panic (Brzeziński 2021: p. 272). It has to be emphasised that since 2007, Poland has had a well-established crisis management system in case of similar situations, which includes procedures for reacting in situations including epidemic,

and which is supported by the prevailing acts, especially the *National Crisis Management Plan* (see: Rządowe Centrum Bezpieczeństwa WWW).

In research on crisis management, it has been a common practice to divide this process into four phases referred to: *mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery* occurring in a closed cycle (Baird 2010: s. 1). Focusing on the activities undertaken during the pandemic, which can be classified as the *response* phase, three key groups of activities can be identified: the first one was focused on providing medical help to the infected people (through the healthcare system), the second one – consisting in limiting the spreading of the infections (through measures including quarantine), and the third one was focused on indirect curbing of infections by applying legal measures such as restrictions, prevention and communication (e.g. shopping hours for seniors). This typology concerns primarily the period, when vaccines were not available.

An important element of the third phase was communicating the importance of the infection risk among elderly people with weaker immune system and concurrent diseases, especially those of chronic nature (Ministerstwo Zdrowia 2020a). It had a profound justification as in seniors's cases "the disease was the hardest, particularly when it was coupled with other conditions" (Szarota 2020: p. 15). It was the group that became the target of preventive measures. In March 2020, the Chief Sanitary Inspector publicly communicated to elderly people that visiting public places should be limited and that they should ask their families for help in everyday situations such as shopping, medical supplies, or handling administrative and posting matters (Ministerstwo Zdrowia 2020b). Thus, an unprecedented situation occurred, in which the government appealed to the vast part of the public, because seniors constitute over 25% of the population of Poland (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej 2021a: p.5), to stay at home and avoid activities, which, in particular, determine their ability to live an independent life within the society.

Whether in light of the above-mentioned communication followed by legal measures (with respect to limited movement), individuals at particular risk actually remained at home requires separate research. It could be assumed, however, that when formulating such appeals public authorities must have envisaged the consequences, which were extremely difficult for the seniors. Based on the available study data, "individuals over 65 years old usually inhabit single-generation households", while "every third individual lives in a single-person household" with the percentage increasing up to 50% in the age group over 80" (*Samotność...* 2018). The circumstances led to a situation, where the government had to face an immense challenge of providing support to this group of society.

In an attempt at precise identification of public institutions to satisfy those challenges, the social security system should be subject of analysis. Looking through the prism of its objectives, the relevant support should be ensured by the *Social Welfare Centres (SWC)* operating at the local level. However, considering the number of individuals requiring support, as well as the scale of the problem, it has to be acknowledged, that it exceeded the possibilities of efficient operation of such units, especially in light of the fact that SWCs had to satisfy the needs of individuals already supported by them, which, due to

the ongoing pandemic, became increasingly difficult. To sum up, the occurred situation illustrates the "imbalance" referred to the definition proposed by Waldemar Kitler in regard to the relationship between the needs of the society and the operational possibilities of the state.

The presented circumstances resulted in the necessity to engage social potential to satisfy the needs of the largest of the risk groups, i.e., the elderly. The nature and scale of the phenomenon encouraged use of the existing mechanism enabling the support of national institutions by citizens, i.e., through volunteering. It has to be noted, that the engagement of individuals in crisis situations is generally known, and volunteering is a tool widely used in such situations. There are many examples of structured involvement of volunteers by the state, as well as spontaneous participation of groups and individuals in activities, where state organisations fail. Researchers emphasise that in view of such phenomena, groups, as well as individuals, come to act together, become stronger and capable of altruistic actions (Twigg, Mosel 2017: p. 444). Polish experiences in this regard concerns social engagement in combating the consequences of flooding especially the one of 1997 (Mizgalewicz 2017: p. 20).

### Examples of Polish solutions

The situation necessitated that the government adopted relevant measures to enable engagement of volunteers in supportive actions. At the central level, cooperation with the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland and the Ministry of Family and Social Policy led to the launch of the *Solidarity Corps for Seniors' Support*, which was inaugurated on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2020 (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej 2020a). The objective of the programme was to offer support to the seniors, who due to the pandemic situation decided to stay at home. It consisted of three elements: the national call centre, the website, and the local subsidies programme (see: Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej 2020). The programme was carried out based on Art. 17 section 2 item 4 of the Social Assistance Act, which admits a possibility of "undertaking other measures in the social security area based on the local analysis, which under the pandemic circumstances will include actions in favour of seniors protection against COVID-19" (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej 2020b: p. 3), with the coordination at the regional level performed by the voivodes. An elderly person over 70 could call a dedicated phone number and request support. The information was subsequently relayed to the social welfare centre with the jurisdiction of the place of residence of the person, which through the broad network of volunteers reporting their readiness to help on a dedicated website were able to provide adequate service. Use of volunteers allowed to unburden local SWCs, which were not able to help all the individuals in need due to a limited number of social workers.

An example of such actions at the local government level can be the system *Warsaw Supports*, which aim was to bring help to persons under quarantine, the self-isolated people, as well as individuals, who otherwise needed help in connection with the pandemic. The provided support was primarily focused on delivering food and medicine.

In March 2020, a system comprising 18 district teams was appointed (the division derives from the specific administrative structure of Warsaw, which also differs from the functioning of the other Polish cities). Each team was to include local government administration staff (District Office), SWC workers and other individuals – “especially NGO’s staff working in districts and volunteering networks” (Zarządzenie nr 469/2020). The above-described system may be seen as a positive example of the synergies between local governments, specialised institutions and social potential. Volunteers forming the system offered direct help to those in need by shopping for them, walking pets, or removing waste while SWCs and local administration acted as help coordinators receiving calls from those who needed it as well as from other individuals (*Warszawa wspiera WWW*). Thus, the resources were efficiently utilised, and at the same time the system was safe. It has to be pointed out that offering help in a way preventing exposure of the supporters and recipients of the support to infection risk and minimising the risk of the situation being taken advantage of the situation for criminal activity (impersonating volunteers to rob an elderly person) was of the utmost importance.

## Results

Within the *Solidarity Corps for Seniors’ Support*, over 20 thousand of elderly individuals received support from 13 thousand volunteers (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej 2021b). It seems that this success derived from the fact that centralised institutions took the burden of establishing a dedicated call centre enabling request reporting, and a website with a pool of potential volunteers to be used by communes or organisations operating in close contact with people. The adopted solution allowed to reduce expenses linked with the development of the necessary tools, which would have been incomparably higher if they had been created by each local government organisation separately; it also enabled to unify the procedure for registering the needs and offering support countrywide. Furthermore, at the local governments’ level, the above-mentioned solutions proved to be indispensable and efficient – since the end of March until the beginning of November 2020, within the system *Warsaw Supports* the support programme covered 1.8 thousand seniors (see: *Warszawa wspiera seniorów 2020*). It is worth noting that each person requiring help received it.

The presented information justifies a positive answer to the question presented at the beginning of this article – those actions based on volunteering activity undertaken in Poland efficiently completed the operations of public authorities. The government institutions did not have sufficient capacity to offer help on such a scale, which is a characteristic of the crisis situations. Volunteers offered efficient support and introduction of systemic solutions enabling effective management of this potential resulting in synergies between the state and society, and social action was of pivotal importance.

Considering the efficiency of the aforementioned Polish solutions, a question may be posed, whether each of the EU states encountered a similar issue. Although, this problem requires separate and additional research, however, basing on the Polish

context presented above, it may be a subject for consideration, whether or not the use of volunteers in crisis situations is a potential field for cooperation between the EU Member States.

In the analysis of the volunteering-related issues, it is impossible to overlook the already functioning tool serving the purpose of development of volunteering in the EU states, i.e. *European Voluntary Corps*, whose objective was defined as "to promote solidarity as a value, mainly through volunteering, to enhance the engagement of young people and organisations in accessible and high quality solidarity activities as means to contribute to strengthening cohesion, solidarity, democracy and citizenship in Europe, while also responding to societal challenges and strengthening communities, with particular effort to promote social inclusion. It shall also contribute to European cooperation that is relevant to young people" (European Commission 2020: p. 6). During the development of the programme, the need to create solutions in crisis situations was taken into account in European Parliament's resolution: "Given the significant increase in humanitarian crises and global emergencies, and with a view to enhancing the promotion of solidarity and the visibility of humanitarian aid among Union citizens, there is a need to develop solidarity between Member States and with third countries affected by man-made or natural disasters." (European Parliament Legislative Resolution P8\_TA/2019/0150: p. 3). However, the Corps operates primarily on the transnational level encouraging volunteers' mobility between Member States (Council Recommendation 2008/C 319/03) and participation in volunteer projects (also those linked with the humanitarian support) as well as execution of "solidarity projects" (i.e., bottom-up initiatives of young people). It also carries out a number of additional activities enhancing the quality and supporting the principal activities. The programme focusses primarily on young people (who constitute only part of all volunteers). The Corps' actions currently cater for the pandemic context making it a priority. It is ensured by the following: "This year's priority is focused on COVID-19 impact and recovery, particularly through supporting the health and social care systems with activities tackling prevention, promotion and support in the field of health..." (European Commission 2021: p. 30).

## Conclusions

It may be concluded that volunteering work of young people, as well as their mobility during the work, are socially important issues from the pan-European perspective. It is worth considering whether or not, in the face of such issues as pandemic, the *European Voluntary Corps'* actions should be extended to fulfil the above-mentioned goals. It seems justified to propose expansion of the Corps' activities or to create a new instrument to enhance its work. It also seems that typically horizontal actions enabling establishment of cooperation between the states with respect to exchange of experience in the development of volunteering programmes may be required. The pandemic example shows that one of the areas of such an exchange could be a solution based on engaging volunteers in crisis situations. Individual solutions worked out in the EU Member States

may contain valuable elements capable of being implemented in the other countries. The reflections on this topic may, therefore, be concluded by a proposal of further research of the possibilities of cooperation in the development of horizontal solutions with respect to volunteer engagement in crisis situations at the pan-European level.

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