

Bulgaria - contribution done by Youth Society for Peace and Development of the Balkans (YFJ partner in Bulgaria)

Volunteering in Bulgaria is still in the process of being developed, especially regarding the government actions. Few organizations have developed volunteering as an important part of the process of civil society development and youth participation for the last 15 years.

Government Policy on Volunteering

The term "volunteer" is not defined in the Bulgarian legislation. This is one of the main reasons for the lack of government policies for volunteering development. In 2003 the Bulgarian government created a strategy for National Youth Policy for the period 2003-2007. The document acknowledges the fact that in Bulgaria, there are organizations working with volunteers and that these organisations try to develop volunteering in the country. Despite this, there is no legal document defining what is volunteering, what is a volunteer, and therefore no legal status. As it will be also said later, volunteering is still perceived in Bulgaria as a former communist constrain, therefore the first need is more to spread another understanding of volunteering, as practised in other European countries. This fact impedes the implementation of the good European practice. One of the priorities of the strategy is to promote voluntary activities as an alternative form of youth social activity. According to the same strategy there should be legislative regulations on the volunteers' and youth workers' statute. One of the strategy's guidelines is about increasing the number of volunteers in the civic and youth organizations. At the end of year 2006 these results are not achieved. In the report on youth in 2005, volunteering is mentioned only regarding the Action 2 of the YOUTH Programme - "European Voluntary Service". On the other hand, volunteer services are part of the existing State programme for youth activities. This programme is actually based on the State report on youth and is the only governmental source for funds for national or local youth organisations and their activities in Bulgaria

If we have to sum up, the government didn't really develop volunteering in the country and it is not priority for the government regarding the national youth policy. It is a fact that there is not a department in the Bulgarian administration, which is working and developing strategies for voluntary activities. In the same trend, there are not concrete State initiatives for developing any kind of voluntary service.

EVS - European Voluntary Service - is in Bulgaria the only instrument providing voluntary service opportunities. Unfortunately, the training and capacity building activities (under Action 5) of the YOUTH programme, which are of great importance to develop the youth field and motivate young people, are hardly and slowly developed. The number of the projects under this Action is extremely small (in 2005, 13 hosting projects and 28 sending were developed and implemented in the whole country). The rate of fund assimilation is also

considerably low (40 00 Euro on the 240 000 Euro available for the Action). The money which is not spent is sent back to the European Commission. On the other hand, there aren't any projects or actions aiming at raising the motivation for voluntary service, trainings or tutorial programmes. The only participation of Bulgarian young people in training programmes is their sending by the programme SOHO ("Sending organizations, hosting organizations"). This programme is an initiative of the National agencies of YOUTH Programme in cooperation with SALTO Youth. Its objective is to train NGOs, working with volunteers. The National Agency of the YOUTH programme has published Action 2 promotional materials. Other informational channels are the EURODESK network, articles in Bulgarian newspapers, magazines and other printed documents. In spite of that, the activeness is not sufficient.

Problem of the National Agency is also the lack of independence. As a part of the State Agency for Youth and Sports, it faces a number of bureaucratic and political obstacles in implementing its work. This is one of the reasons for the lack of trainings under the Action 3. In the beginning of 2005, the European Commission clearly stated the necessity of full independence of the National Agency, in order to avoid such obstacles and any political influence. Until now, these recommendations are not fulfilled.

The only good practice that the State provides is the exemption of fees for visa and permits for staying. This practice is actually applied only in the framework of activities of the YOUTH programme. However, there have been some cases that show that this decision has not been taken into consideration by the Regional representative offices of the Ministry of the Interior. For the other existing programmes, such as Peace Corps, these exemptions do not apply. Therefore, we would recommend in order to better develop the volunteering activities to extent these exemptions to all volunteers coming in Bulgaria.

State of volunteering and youth organisations that are working with volunteers in Bulgaria

Volunteering in Bulgaria is very underdeveloped. The interest of young people in participating in voluntary activities is also very low. The main reason for that is the ignorance of the meaning of the volunteering for the development of the society. The voluntary initiatives are not seen as valuable by young people. On the other hand, a majority of young people is not attracted by the volunteering idea, because it doesn't bring them any direct advantages and concrete material benefits. According to research conducted by the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation, hardly 1.7% of Bulgarian young people would have become volunteers in any circumstances. In most cases the reason for participation in such initiatives is the conviction that they have to lead to concrete results (6.8%), and that the cause must be trustful (6.6%). Another reason for participating is the existence of extraordinary situations and natural disasters; for children or big group of people; charity; cleaning; landscape gardening and decoration; building something such as a street, a club, a church; care for the environment, for elderly people; anticorruption campaigns; fight against drugs, etc. Last but not least, some people still

believe, that volunteering is a part of the communist past and an archaic method.

The existence of organizations working only with volunteers is a fact, but the lack of national policy and support is a major obstacle in their work. There are also national organizations working with volunteers - YMCA-Bulgaria, National alliance for Volunteer Action, Green Balkans, Red Cross youth, and „For the Earth“ foundation. Their activeness is related with organizing different programmes and trainings for voluntary work. The lack of state support puts these organizations on in a very difficult administrative situation. As no administrative grant or funds does exist, youth organisations can't set up proper office, requiring minimum standards in terms of human resources or offices supplies. Therefore, not having the primary requirement for working, youth organisations are in a way on an unequal footing with the administrations and cannot always comply with all the bureaucracy. .

It is a fact that a majority of youth organizations works with volunteers, but the main problem is the motivation of the young volunteers. The problem has both a cultural and an economic aspect. Most of the high schools' graduates prefer to start working instead of participating in voluntary activities. The lack of specific rights and recognition for their voluntary work is another reason for lack of motivation. In order to improve the situation, the youth organizations have developed the First VOLUNTEER RECORD BOOK, which now is in its pilot implementation phase in Gabrovo region. NGOs are still waiting the State agency for Youth and Sports to recognize the Volunteer Record book and to promote it nationally. It helps young people to prove their work and experience in the youth field. The Youth sector lobbies for the State recognition of the VOLUNTEER RECORD BOOK. The organizations believe that it will allow them to attract more young people in their activities. However, the communication with the government often is only a subject of conversations, without any concrete commitments or actions.

The Bulgarian youth NGOs developed a system for promoting the recognition of experiences of the volunteers. The system includes both a nomination process for “Volunteers of the year” and an Awarding ceremony at regional level, as well as special award for the organization which best co-ordinated volunteers during the year.

A great part of the volunteers is school students. Therefore youth organizations promote their activities in the schools. Here they are facing another obstacle, which could be easily solved by an efficient State policy. There are many cases when the pupils are not supported by their teachers. So, this means, they are not allowed to take part in trainings, because of their everyday curriculum and the fact that they would have to miss classes.

Recommendations by Youth organizations for volunteering development in Bulgaria, in connection with the Open Method of Coordination in the youth field.

From January 2007, Bulgaria will be a full member of the European Union and the implementation of the priorities of Open method of Coordination, as part of the necessary legislation to implement entering the EU, will assist the process of putting into practice an active state policy for developing the voluntary work. Even if welcoming the fact that a political mechanism to promote volunteering will be then available after the accession to EU, number of organizations are concerned regarding the only policy that the Bulgarian State put in place for volunteering, namely the exemption of visa and permits for staying fees.

An important next step for the government should defined the term and concept of volunteering, followed by clear and effective state policy for recognition of the voluntary service as an educational experience and a period of non-formal education, as well as juridical and social protection of volunteers according to the White paper on Youth. Therefore, being experts and practioners, youth organizations offer legislative initiative, which is going to solve a good deal of the problems and will give the State a chance to work actively on the development of the voluntary activities as an important instrument for the civil society building and participation of young people in the society as a full members of the European family. Youth organisations are convinced that once a legal definition and status for volunteering and volunteer will exist, NGOs and government will be able to work on the development of volunteering activities and spread the concept across the country.