

FaR 2021**International Forum “Freedom and responsibility in pivotal times”****THE LEGAL STATUS AND SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF
VOLUNTEERING IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION**

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Abstract

The article deals with volunteering, considered as a crucial part of personal development, analysing its current status in the Russian Federation. The aim of the research is to offer an overall picture of volunteerism in Russia after six years from its first institutionalisation, taking into account the juridical status of volunteers and their social perception. The concept of volunteerism was introduced into Russian legislation by Federal Law No. 15-FZ “On the introduction of modification in different regulatory acts of the Russian Federation regarding volunteerism (volunteering)”, the content of which is summarised in the article. After a brief analysis of the current social perception of volunteering, particular attention is devoted to the activity of the Association of Volunteer Centres, founded in 2015 as a direct result of the involvement of volunteers in the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. The main tasks faced by the Association are enumerated and the programs which are currently being implemented are described taking into account their contribution to the development and spread of volunteerism in the Russian Federation. The collected data show the versatile nature of the activity of AVC, while the reported figures testify its achievements in the realisation of its mission. In conclusion, the current development of volunteering in the Russian Federation can be considered satisfying.

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Keywords: Volunteerism, legal status, social perception, Russian Federation, Association of Volunteer Centres



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1. Introduction

The transformation of the educational system is a challenge that every higher education institution of the Russian Federation has to face regardless of its specific area of activity. Following the current global trends, up-to-date curricula must include syllabi aimed at fostering the students' personal development, along with the corresponding calendar plans and forms of certification (On the introduction of modification..., 2020); this way, educational programs shall promote their personal growth and create favourable conditions for the development of a more mature, autonomous, flexible, competitive, creative, sensible and productive personality (Rassokhina et al., 2017).

A key role in this regard is played by the formation of social awareness and responsibility, which represent valuable soft skills that each future professional must possess in order to be successful (Novikova et al., 2018). These qualities fully manifest themselves in the ability to take active part in solving local issues, an ability that becomes particularly relevant in distant rural areas with an underdeveloped infrastructure. As a consequence, the involvement in volunteering activities is of crucial importance while training future specialists.

Over the last decades, volunteering has become an increasing trend all over the world. Many countries, ranging from the USA to Germany and other members of the European Union, have successfully implemented a system which on the one hand regulates volunteering from a legal point of view, while on the other helps to coordinate the activity of different volunteer centres at local and national levels (Anheier & Salamon, 1999).

Russia is currently facing the challenge of becoming a “state, providing social guarantees to citizens to the extent to which a society cannot do it itself” (Isaeva & Sokolov, 2015, p. 402); it is thus not surprising that it has been actively promoting the development of volunteering practices over the last decade. Nonetheless, it should be noticed that voluntary practices are a tradition which dates back to the very roots of Russian society and statehood. In some ways volunteering has been present on the territory of nowadays Russia for many centuries (Biyakova & Demidovich, 2019) but has been facing a renovation and modernisation only since the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, when “the volunteering program Sochi-2014 gave to the country a unique experience in the organisation of large-scale events” (AVC, 2019a, p. 6).

The first direct consequence of this capital event for Russian volunteering was the creation of the Association of Volunteer Centres (hereafter AVC; in Russian Assotsiatsiya volontërskich tsentrov), which has been coordinating and implementing state-level programs for the development and promotion of volunteering practices all over the Russian Federation. Another important moment in the recent history of Russian volunteering is represented by the proclamation, on the part of President Vladimir Putin, of 2018 as the Year of Volunteers, which led to the further spreading and promotion of this kind of activities among the civil society as well as to its legislative consolidation. Finally, the social awareness regarding the contribution of volunteers to the public well-being was highly increased by the AVC social initiative #WeAreTogether (Rus. #MyVmeste), implemented during the difficult period of the COVID-19 pandemics.

2. Problem Statement

Due to its recent emergence as a promising trend of social activity, volunteering in the Russian Federation is a field which can reveal interesting facts and data about the development of the civil society. Over the last few years, the framework of volunteering activities has been constantly changing (if compared, e.g., to Lukka & Ellis, 2001) and being a volunteer is nowadays considered a prestigious and fruitful way of spending one's leisure time, also thanks to the endorsement of the government and President Vladimir Putin himself and of Russian VIPs who are directly involved in volunteerism (e.g. singer Polina Gagarina, supermodel Natalya Vodyanova and actor Konstantin Khabensky). It is thus of crucial interest to analyse the current situation of volunteering in Russia after five years from the first appearance of a systematic volunteering system, to determine the current status of voluntary activity from both a legal and social point of view, as well as to identify its main trends and opportunities, taking specifically into account the main programs and projects financed by the AVC.

3. Research Questions

The present research deals with several issues related to the nature and current status of volunteerism in the Russian Federation in an attempt to identify the social role and value of such activity in the contemporary Russian society, taking into account both theoretical and practical aspects.

The starting point of the research is the description of the current status of volunteerism in contemporary Russia. On the one hand, it is deemed necessary to analyse laws and regulatory documents in force which determine the juridical status of a volunteer within the borders of the Russian Federation and its subjects. On the other hand, useful information can be gathered by taking into account the view of the Russian public opinion on volunteering and on the possibility of getting involved into it.

The second part of the research is represented by an evaluation of the activity of the AVC after five years from its foundation. The analysis will consider the main trends of voluntary work in Russia as promoted by the AVC policies as well as the best practices of the Association in promoting the development of volunteerism at local, regional, national and international levels.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the present research is to provide an overall summary of the current situation of volunteerism in the Russian Federation, to identify its main trends and perspectives, as well as to determine the contribution of the AVC to the development and spread of volunteering activity among the civil society.

5. Research Methods

Due to the variety of data collected from different sources, a systematic picture of the current status of volunteering in Russia was obtained by applying the universal methods of analysis and synthesis, as well as generalisation, which were applied while studying theoretical, practical and statistical data regarding Russian volunteerism and the activity of the AVC.

In order to determine the conceptual framework of the research, a significant corpus of scientific works on the concept of volunteering itself (Badaeva & Osipova, 2018; Dekker & Halman, 2003; Lenkov & Matsyuk, 2018; Vasilkovskaya, 2018), on its social and legal aspects at both national and international levels (Bobrakova, 2018; Kolomok & Krapivensky, 2013; Lukka & Ellis, 2001), on its influence on individuals and society (Biglova et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2012; Meier & Stutzer, 2004; Van Willingen, 2000) and on different good practices and experiences in volunteering (AVC, 2019a, 2019b) was taken into consideration.

6. Findings

6.1. The legal status of volunteers

A volunteer, in its general meaning, can be defined as a person who has a desire to help other people. In their study, Dekker and Halman (2003) identify three main characteristics of a volunteer's activity: its non-obligatory nature, its beneficial effects on others (society in general or a more or less specific part of it) and its non-profitability. They state as well that volunteering often takes place in an organised context. In this sense, some forms of volunteering have been present in Russia for many centuries (Biyakova & Demidovich, 2019): in the Kievan Rus many people would perform voluntary works in monasteries, while children could attend free schools which were financed by benefactors. At first strictly connected with religious institution, volunteerism took a more institutionalised form in the XVIII–XIX century, when several organisations and institutions began to systematically bring help to others. After the October Revolution, Soviet authorities promoted a form of state-controlled volunteerism which was, in fact, voluntary and compulsory at the same time; this type of activities remained widespread even after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 (e.g., the tradition of *subbotniki*, or unpaid working weekends, is still carried on mainly for ecological purposes). However, a proper system of volunteering in its current conception can be traced back only to 2014, when the first corpus of volunteers was founded within the framework of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. The desire of volunteers who participated to such large-scale event to continue their activity received full support on the part of the government and of President Vladimir Putin himself, which soon led to the need for legislative regulation of voluntary activities in the country.

Even though different local and federal regulatory acts on voluntary works and other similar activities were already in force on the territory of the Russian Federation (Bobrakova, 2018), the legislative basis of volunteerism in Russia is represented by Federal Law No. 15-FZ “On the introduction of modifications in different regulatory acts of the Russian Federation regarding volunteerism (volunteering)” dated February 5th, 2018. This law introduced for the first time the concept of “volunteering” (Rus. *dobrovolchestvo* or *volontёрство*, which are to be considered synonyms) in the Russian legislation, clearly distinguishing it from charity or charitable activities. According to the law, volunteering must be understood as the gratuitous realisation of works and/or provision of services for the same purposes as in charitable activities. Federal Law No. 15-FZ enumerates both the rights and duties of volunteers. It also regulates the compensation that volunteers should receive in exchange for their work (e.g. the organisers should cover travel expenses, provide accommodation and meals, uniforms and other clothing, needed equipment and

health insurance) and the interaction between state authorities and volunteerism. It then provides for the creation of a unified electronic system aimed at promoting the development of volunteering all over the country; finally, it allows religious institutions to engage volunteers in their activities (On the introduction of modifications..., 2018).

The legislative framework for volunteerism was reinforced in 2020 by the amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation. First of all, volunteers from all over the country were involved in the state referendum which led to the nationwide approval of the amendments within the national program Constitution Volunteers (Rus. Volontëry Konstitutsii). This strengthened the social perception of volunteerism, especially if taking into account the extraordinary epidemiological conditions under which the referendum was voted. The direct impact of the amendments on volunteering is determined by the new formulation of Chapter 9, Art. 114, according to which the Russian government must implement the necessary measures to support volunteering activities (Kuksin & Shukhov, 2020; On the improvement of the regulation..., 2020).

Further consolidation of volunteerism within the Russian legislative framework was provided by Federal Law No. 489-FZ “On youth policies in the Russian Federation” dated December 30th, 2020. According to Art. 6, one of the main vectors of Russian youth policies should be identified as the promotion of volunteering activities among young citizens aged 14–35 (On youth policy in the Russian Federation, 2020).

6.2. The social dimension of volunteering

As regards the social perception of volunteering, sociological studies have shown an increasing willingness of the Russian population to get involved in this type of activities. In particular, statistical data gathered by the Association of Volunteer Centres show that 88 % of Russian citizens are convinced that volunteerism brings benefits to society, 17 % want to get engaged in volunteering activities, 15 % consider themselves volunteers (AVC, 2019a). A great contribution to the popularisation of volunteerism among the civil society was represented by 2018, which was proclaimed the Year of Volunteers by President Vladimir Putin. The vast amount of events organised during the whole year helped to lay the foundation for an overall transformation of volunteering in the eye of the public opinion; this new social perception was instrumental in increasing the engagement of Russian citizens in this kind of activity and getting rid of the negative stereotypes which are attached to it (e.g. many still consider volunteering merely as unpaid work, others believe that volunteers do what they do for glory or even worse for money).

As a result, the spectre of citizens currently involved in voluntary activities has not only increased from a numerical point of view, but it has also become more varied. The vast majority of Russian volunteers is still represented by young people aged 14–30 (1 out of 3), but also middle-aged people (aged 30–40) as well as the so-called “silver” volunteers (aged 55+) are actively engaged in volunteering. Other interesting statistical data include the fact that 59 % of Russian volunteers are women, 42 % have completed higher education, while 1 volunteer out of 10 is currently a student (AVC, 2019a). The main motives for getting involved in volunteering are represented by the willingness to help others (58 %), to solve specific problems (14 %) or to repay an assumed “debt for the good received” (12 %). In contrast, some admit to have become

volunteers for pleasure (17 %), entertainment (12 %), specific skills (5 %) or new acquaintances (4 %) (Isaeva & Sokolov, 2015).

The social perception of volunteering in Russia has been gradually increasing since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemics, mainly thanks to the media coverage of the national initiative #WeAreTogether: between the start of lockdown (March 30th, 2020). And the first wave of lockdown easing (May 15th, 2020) news broadcasting on the four main Russian channels (Russia 1, First Channel, NTV, TV Centre) included 35 video clips concerning volunteers and their activities (Tertyshnikova & Nemova, 2020). As a result, the public has become more aware of the importance and dimension of mutual help, as evidenced by statistical data collected by means of direct telephonic interviews on April 24th–26th, 2020 by the Social Opinion Fund (hereafter SOF, Rus. Fond “Obshchestvennoye mnenie”): the majority of the interviewed people consider Russian people ready to help each other (74 %) and most of them often meet such kind of people (53 %). As regards the pandemics, some think that people have become more prone to helping (41 %), while according to others the situation is the same as before (34 %). About 1/3 of the surveyed people have helped others in need during the pandemics, delivering food and/or drugs (10 %), making donations (7 %) or performing some kind of manual labour (4%) (SOF, 2020).

The AVC experience

A crucial role in the constant development of volunteerism in Russia is undoubtedly represented by the promotion and coordination activities carried out by the Association of Volunteer Centres, whose main mission is “to create the conditions and infrastructure of volunteer centres in order to unveil the human potential and to reinforce the volunteering culture as a natural life standard of a society in which each person takes part in its positive development” (AVC, 2019a, p. 5). The Association was founded in the aftermaths of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, when the organisational committee decided to promote the further development of volunteerism in Russia through the educational system, and was initially composed by a network of 25 HEIs and 1 college. Nowadays, the AVC includes 1,016 organisations in 83 regions and more than 1 million volunteers all over the country; its main tasks can be grouped in the following directions:

- creating an infrastructure for the development of volunteerism;
- supporting social projects, spreading the best practices and cooperating with youth leaders;
- elaborating and implementing educational programs and methodological support in the sphere of volunteerism;
- increasing the social status and prestige of volunteers among the civil society (AVC, 2019a).

As the above-mentioned data show, the activities carried out by the AVC over the last five years have at least partially fulfilled such tasks. Thanks to the AVC, volunteer organisations have now the possibility to become co-organisers of paramount national programs, to participate in important events at local, regional, national and international levels and to contribute to the overall development of volunteerism in Russia. Taking its origin from a large-scale sport event, volunteerism in Russia – thanks to the contribution of the AVC – is now a multi-faceted social phenomenon which encloses different trends and spheres of activity, ranging from ecology to social support, from education to the preservation of the historical heritage and many others.

Over the years, the AVC has been elaborating and implementing a series of different programs aimed at promoting the development and spread of volunteerism all over the territory of the Russian Federation. At the present time, the AVC has successfully implemented 9 federal programs (AVC, 2019a).

The All-Russian Contest “The Best Volunteer of Russia” (Rus. Dobrovolets Rossii) has been held annually since 2010 and is part of the platform “Russia – A Land of Opportunities” (Rus. Rossiya – strana vozmozhnostey). The contest was originally intended for young participants aged 14–30, but in 2016 two special categories were added for young (aged 9–14) and “silver” volunteers (aged 50+). The program is aimed at promoting and financing the best practices in the sphere of volunteerism at local and national levels; it includes several nominations which are grouped into three categories: “Social Project”, “Good Deed” and “Creative Work” (AVC, 2019b). 2018 saw the launching of the so-called Acceleration Program, aimed at supporting volunteer projects, helping the participants to find partners and resources for the implementation of their ideas and to replicate them all over the country. In 2021 the contest was renamed Prize #WeAreTogether (Rus. Premiya #MyVmeste) after the same-name initiative implemented during the COVID-19 pandemics in order to help the people in need.

The Unified E-System “Volunteers of Russia” (Rus. Dobrovoltsy Rossii) – also known as Portal DOBRO.RU – is the main online resource on volunteerism, allowing for the coordination and cooperation between volunteer organisations, state authorities and individuals already involved or willing to get engaged into volunteering (as provided by Federal Law No. 15-FZ, 2018). The website was launched in 2016 by the AVC in cooperation with the Federal Agency for Youth Policies. At the present time, it counts more than 750,000 registered users, 52,000 events and 19,000 NGOs; its content includes fresh news about ongoing and forthcoming projects and events, as well as online courses for organisers and volunteers themselves.

The International Program “World Volunteers” (Rus. Volontëry mira) aims at integrating national and international volunteering, thus representing the conceptual heritage of the XIX World Festival of Youth and Students, which took place in Sochi in 2017. The program involves different focus areas, including the creation of an international community of volunteers, the support and development of international projects, the promotion of exchange and mobility projects, as well as lifelong learning formation and education in the field of volunteerism.

Three AVC programs are meant for the promotion of volunteering among specific target groups; the first of them is the Federal Program “You Decide!” (Rus. Ty reshaesh!), aimed at promoting social awareness and the values of volunteerism in schools. Its main achievement was the creation – in 2015 – of the League of Volunteer Brigades (Rus. Liga dobrovolcheskikh otryadov), which as of 2019 counts more than 1,500 school brigades. The program faces practical tasks such as the education and formation of volunteers, the creation of a volunteer brigade “in 7 simple steps”, as well as mentoring on the part of other volunteer organisations.

The second target-oriented program is called “SVOI”, which on the one hand can be spelled out as an acronym for Student Volunteer Organisations, on the other is a possessive pronoun meaning “our own”. It was released in April 2019 in order to expand the network of student volunteer organisations and increase their efficiency, as well as to support and replicate their best practices. More than 250 higher and secondary education institutes are involved in the program in 50 different federal entities. Within the framework of the Federal Program “SVOI”, new educational modules and vocational training programs on the

organisation and support of volunteering activities and socially-oriented NGOs have been elaborated; they were test-driven in 20 pilot higher education institution in spring–summer 2020 and shall soon be launched in the vast majority of Russian universities.

The third target-oriented program is called “Young in the Soul” (Rus. *Molody dushoy*) and is aimed at promoting the values of volunteerism among the so-called “silver” volunteers, i.e. people aged 55+ and still willing to contribute to the public good. The silver volunteer movement counts more than 20,000 people and 30 centres involved. Apart from helping the people in need, the program has the main advantage of promoting socialisation among the eldest, giving them the opportunity to fulfil themselves, to learn something new and to share their own life experiences while acquiring new ones.

The idea for the Social Movement “Volunteers of Culture” (Rus. *Volontëry kultury*) emerged after the All-Russian Educational Forum “Tauride” in August 2018, when the participants proposed the creation of a new movement of socially active citizens, ready to implement volunteering activities in the field of culture. The main tasks faced by the newly born movement include the integration of volunteering in museums, libraries, theatres, cinemas and other cultural institutions; the preservation of cultural heritage; the popularisation of culture among young generations; as well as the implementation of socially-relevant cultural projects. The program currently involves prestigious cultural institutions such as the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, Peterhof Palace and many others.

The Mobility Program for Volunteers (Rus. *Programma mobilnosti volontërov*) is meant to face a common problem in volunteerism: the impossibility for volunteers to pay for transport and accommodation near the venue of large-scale national and international events, which becomes a crucial question when taking into account the vastness of the Russian Federation. In addition, thanks to this program volunteers can take part in educational traineeships both within the Russian borders and abroad; in 2019 such educational trips were organised in Germany, Israel and Japan; by 2024, 18 traineeships are to be organised in other foreign countries within the framework of the Mobility Program.

One of the main tasks faced by the AVC is to increase the level of socio-economic development and the quality of life at a local level by creating an efficient supporting system for volunteering activities among citizens and organisations. For this reason, the AVC supports the best and most active organisations by nominating them as Resource Centres of Volunteering (Rus. *Resursnye tsentry dobrovolchestva*). Such centres act as official representatives of the AVC at a local level and provide services such as monitoring, consulting, skill-building and information support. At the present time, the total number of sanctioned Resource Centres amounts to 65, while 7 organisations are still going through the preliminary phase.

These programs exemplify the multifaceted nature of the activity of the AVC in its mission to promote volunteerism at all levels, ranging from local (Resource Centres) to global (World Volunteers, Mobility Program), taking into account specific target groups which are highly involved in volunteerism (You Decide!, SVOI, Young in the Soul) as well as specific areas (Volunteers of Culture). The reported figures testify the success of the Association in achieving its main objectives and tasks, while showing the promising outlooks of a further development of volunteerism in the Russian Federation.

7. Conclusion

Despite its recent emergence, volunteerism in Russia has reached a satisfying level of development over the last six years. The enactment of Federal Law No. 15-FZ has officially introduced the very concept of “volunteer” in the Russian legislation, determining the rights and duties of volunteers and clearly distinguishing volunteering from other beneficial activities such as charities. In 2020, the amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation and Federal Law No. 489-FZ further stressed out the importance of volunteerism in youth and state policies. In addition, the social perception of volunteerism has changed; its prestige has increased, especially thanks to the media coverage of the #WeAreTogether initiative during the 2020 pandemics, while statistical data on the information about and willingness to get involved into it forecast a further broadening of the volunteer network in the country. From a practical point of view, the analysis of the figures and programs supported by the Association of Volunteer Centres testifies the growth of the volunteer movement at a national level, its highly developed and comprehensive nature and promising outlooks for further development.

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