

This report was created for the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) 2021 by Lauren Fello as part of her course requirement for the Bachelor's degree of International Relations and Spanish at the University of East Anglia. It is intended as a first step in identifying the role of social media and online news visibility in the promotion of national volunteer weeks, and the subsequent promotion of volunteering as a practice. The report finds that higher engagement on social media with national volunteer weeks correlates with higher national engagement with volunteering as a practice.

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**Identifying correlations between (in)visibility of national volunteering events
in online news and social media, and respective national (dis)engagement
with volunteering practices.**

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Introduction

National attitudes and approaches to the practice of volunteering differ across the European continent. While levels of engagement with volunteer activities are of course somewhat dependent on the attitudes of individuals, the promotion, or lack thereof, of national volunteering undoubtedly encourages or discourages the individual.

Taking this into consideration, the aim of this report is to consider the effectiveness of European national volunteer weeks for increasing participation in volunteering by generating positive online news and social media visibility. This focus on national volunteer weeks has led to the following countries being chosen for analysis, the UK, Belgium, Ireland, and Romania. Each holds national volunteer weeks, and each presents different rates of national involvement in volunteer activities, providing a diverse data set for comparison and contrast.

These countries will be discussed in independent sections, and comparisons between them will not be made until the proceeding ‘Comparisons and Findings’ section. This will allow for a standardised, mini country profile for all involved nations, which will entail a brief overview of the national week of volunteering, it’s subsequent online news and social media visibility, and the country’s overall engagement rate with volunteering practices. The ‘Findings and Recommendations’ section which then follows will endeavour to make comparisons and draw conclusions, it will identify a correlation between increased coverage/engagement with national volunteer weeks, and higher engagement with national volunteering. Following the conclusion of this report’s findings, it will be recommended that this correlation is noted going forward, and that data pertinent to this finding is made more comprehensive.

Regarding bibliographic content, both nationally specific and European-wide academic or practitioner literature on volunteering statistics, engagement, and practices will be utilised. Primary sources such as media articles, social media posts, and event websites will also be important for assessing volunteer week impact. This combination of source material will provide a sufficient overview of the landscape of European volunteering for this report.

It is worth noting, additionally, that the examples given for national engagement, and volunteer week coverage, will be isolated to 2019. This is because each country has made individual adjustments following the COVID-19 pandemic, which make comparison and contrast complex; the years 2020 and 2021 would likely be anomalous and misleading if used to identify ongoing correlations. It is suggested that a separate report on (un)successful responses and adaptations of national volunteer weeks to COVID-19 be carried out, as this falls outside the scope of this report's investigation.

In sum, this report establishes a correlational link between the online (in)visibility of national volunteering events/initiatives and the respective national (dis)engagement with volunteer activities. It recommends this be taken into account so that further research may be undertaken with increased source material.

Section 1: The UK

The UK's 'Volunteers' Week' is a collaborative effort from England's National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), Volunteer Scotland, Northern Ireland's Volunteer Now, and the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA). The week has run annually, since 1984, from the 1st to the 7th of June. It celebrates and promotes volunteering through events organised by individual organisations, under the umbrella of Volunteer's Week. Most commonly, locally run, small scale events take place throughout the week; they may engage with volunteering in the broader sense, (the 2019 Luton Volunteers Fair), or have a more specific focus (the 2019 Open Day at National Trust property Plas Newydd).

Mainstream online press coverage of Volunteer's Week is minimal; coverage of Volunteers' Week 2019 was limited to regional news outlets covering local stories (Rennie, 2019) (Jones, 2019) (Cumbria Crack, 2019). However, this is unsurprising given the primarily local outreach of the week's individual events. Additionally, press coverage is consistently positive, and thus, it is improving visibility of volunteering practices at the local level to a geographically specific demographic.

On social media, the UK's Volunteer's Week receives higher exposure; an Advanced Twitter Search revealed over 150 relevant¹ Tweets sent in 2019 under the designated hashtag #VolunteersWeek ([See Search Results](#)), and over 250 including the phrase 'UK Volunteers Week' in the same time frame ([See](#)

¹ Relevant here means tweets pertaining directly to the British Volunteer's Week.

[Search Results](#)). On Instagram, under the hashtag #volunteersweek2019, there are over 1000 posts, and the organising platform's Instagram page (@volunteersweek_2020, formerly @volunteersweek_2019) has garnered over 1,600 followers. This social media engagement suggests that these platforms are being utilised more so than traditional news media in increasing event visibility. Having said that, considering the huge, national reach of these social media platforms, much higher rates of engagement are possible. For reference, the UK Government Instagram account (@ukgovofficial) has over 255,000 followers, demonstrating a much larger engagement level from a UK government-associated account.

In terms of national statistics, there is ample data collection evaluating volunteer engagement across the UK. In almost all instances though, it is divided between the four separate nations; for example, [this data collection spreadsheet](#) considers only England's engagement (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2020). A 2019 report on volunteering in the UK (Fox, 2019) takes this division into account; by using each country's volunteering data, it finds that for all four nations, national engagement was between 14% and 21%, every year from 2010-2018 (Fox, 2019). The report also notes a consistent downturn in engagement since 2016, from which we can estimate that the 14%-21% range is still applicable to the past few years (Fox, 2019). From these estimates, it can be surmised that volunteering is not a national expectation/norm, however, consistent engagement over 14% suggests it is not an unusual practise to partake in, either.

Section 2: Belgium

The Belgian 'Week of the Volunteer' (Week van de Vrijwilliger) is organised by Vlaams Steunpunt Vrijwilligerswerk VZW. It began in 1986 and runs annually towards the end of February and into the start of March. The week celebrates the work done by volunteers in Belgium and facilitates discussions about volunteering practice. Main events that take place during the week are coordinated by Vlaams Steunpunt Vrijwilligerswerk, but other, independent organisations are also able to get involved under the umbrella of the week. There are resources on the website (<https://www.vrijwilligersweek.be>) to do so. In 2019, events throughout the week included presentations from speakers in the volunteering field, dealing with topics such as ethical practice and ensuring health and safety, these key events take place in Flanders, although the week celebrates volunteering across Belgium. As well as this, there are

also events run by organisations with more specific volunteering activities in mind, which are focused more locally/regionally, although many remain concentrated in or around Flanders.

The week is well-structured for publication, given it is organised around a central location with highly structured, timetabled events, with further, independently-run, activities providing added variety; a [Google News search](#) revealed high volumes of online news coverage of the week throughout 2019, the majority in Dutch, both in the lead up to the week and in the weeks following it. From this high level of visibility, it can be seen that the week, and the practice of volunteering in general in Belgium, is well received and is promoted by the mainstream online media in a positive light.

On social media, the week receives moderate coverage, comparatively less than in online news, but nonetheless not minimal. On Instagram, the Vlaams Steunpunt Vrijwilligers account (@iedereenvrijwilligt) has a following of nearly 1,200 users, and the most consistently used, designated hashtag #vrijwilligerswerk has nearly 74,000 posts under it, although this is a combination of all the years' weeks, and content from the Dutch national week as well. On Twitter, the Vrijwilligerswerk Twitter account, @Vlaamssteunp, maintains a similar following to Instagram at just below 1000 followers. To compare to another official Belgian government-associated account for a scale reference, the Belgian government information Twitter (@belgiumbe) maintains a follower count of 54,000.

There is no official statistical data concerning the number of volunteers in Belgium, however, information compiled in a GHK Country Report on volunteering in Belgium (GHK, 2010b), estimates that between 10% and 14% of the Belgian population took place in volunteering activities annually in the years 2004 - 2010 (GHK, 2010b). This data is up to date as of 2010 and notes a continuous increase in European volunteering in the previous decade (2000-2010) that likely continued into the 2010-2020 period, suggesting that these statistics are still relevant, or elevated, in the present day (GHK, 2010b). Data from Eurostat shows the Belgian population percentage involvement at around 20% (Eurostat, 2019a), which would agree with this trend prediction. Taking both datasets into account, we can estimate, cautiously, that 10-20% of the Belgian population participates annually in volunteering activity.

Section 3: Ireland

Ireland's 'National Volunteering Week' runs annually from the 17th to the 23rd of May² and is coordinated by Volunteer Ireland, an organisation supported by the Irish government's Department of Rural and Community Development. National Volunteering Week takes place across the country with events primarily organised by local Volunteer Centres³, sometimes in partnership with specific organisations.

This structure and regional delegation makes the advertising of events online simple to navigate, although it does not appear to have encouraged a huge amount of coverage from online news media. For example, an advanced Google search of online news articles from Irish sources in the months of April and May 2019 revealed just one article (Echo.ie, 2019), however, a search outside the 'News' tab did reveal a wider breadth of coverage from city-specific volunteering and community development sites such as volunteerdublin.ie and offalyldc.ie.

On social media, National Volunteering Week has much higher engagement; Volunteer Ireland's twitter account, @voluntireland, which is used to publicise all information regarding National Volunteering Week, has over 12,000 followers and receives dozens of signs of engagement regularly on tweets. The designated hashtag for National Volunteering Week 2019, #NVW19, shows [several hundred tweets](#) including the hashtag in 2019 - although it should be noted some may be unrelated, given the non-specificity of the hashtag as an identifier. On Instagram, contrastingly, there is no official Volunteer Ireland account, however, the hashtags #volunteerireland and #NVW19 both have several hundred posts including their tags. This demonstrates engagement on that platform, despite the absence of an official account working to market the week there. This suggests that visibility on Instagram would likely mirror the fairly high level seen on Twitter should an official account be made in the same way.

Statistics regarding national engagement with volunteering in Ireland are readily accessible and there is a fair amount of data on the subject, although variations in research parameters and reliance on

² In 2020, National Volunteering Week was moved to September due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but returned to usual dates in 2021.

³ According to Volunteer Ireland, Irish 'Volunteer Centres' "develop volunteering opportunities through consultation with local voluntary and community organisations." <https://www.volunteer.ie/about-us/vcs/>

antiquated statistics present the recurring problem of uncertainty as seen previously in the cases of the UK and Belgium. A GHK National Report on Irish volunteering (GHK, 2009a), takes into account research done by the National and Economic Social Forum (NESF) in 2002, as well as the 2006 Irish Census, and information from Volunteer Centres Ireland (VCI) in 2009. The GHK report identifies a small downturn in national volunteering between 2002 and 2006, followed by a sharp, 80% increase in volunteering engagement from 2008-2009 (GHK, 2009a). It is difficult to verify whether this upturn persisted as a long-term trend, however, data from the 2006 Irish Census, which estimated national volunteering engagement⁴ to be around 16%, and 2015 Eurostat data estimating engagement at over 29%⁵ (Table 1) (Table 2), suggests that engagement continued to increase. Given these estimates, Irish national engagement with volunteering today is thought to fall at the higher end of the 15% to 30% range.

Section 4: Romania

Romania's 'Săptămâna Națională a Voluntariatului' (SNV) ('National Volunteer Week' in English) has taken place annually, since 2002, in the third week of May. Events during SNV are developed, funded, and run, by locally based SNV partners, while overarching coordination of the week at the national level is done by Pro Vobis - National Resource Center for Volunteering. Pro Vobis is not commonly involved in individual events, though it may run its own or offer support to local partners on occasion. The SNV website (<http://www.saptamanavoluntariatului.ro/>) lists all events organised for the week; these range from volunteering specifically for young children, to volunteering in community libraries for the elderly.

Given the highly regionalised element to the week, it is not unexpected that a search of Google News media revealed no articles at the mainstream national level from 2019, although a generalised search for coverage of SNV that year did bring up results from smaller sites (RomaniaPozitiva, 2019) (Mladin, 2019). On social media, there is fairly minimal engagement with the week across both Twitter and Instagram. The official Twitter account for Pro Vobis, (@pro_vobis), has only 41 followers and receives very little tweet engagement. Additionally, a Twitter search of the hashtag #SNV19 revealed no tweets

⁴ For citizens aged 15 and over.

⁵ For both formal and informal volunteering activities. See Table 1 and Table 2.

relevant to the week throughout 2019 ([See Search Results](#)) suggesting Twitter is not serving as a platform for increased visibility.

On Instagram, Pro Vobis' account (@pro_vobis) has a higher follower count, although for the size of the Instagram platform it is fairly low, at 432. Posts from @pro_vobis, as a consequence, do not receive high engagement, each displaying between 1 and 10 likes. Under the designated hashtag #SNV19, there is the most engagement shown out of all the media platforms considered previously. There are over 100 posts which include the hashtag, although around 15% of them are for unrelated subjects. Under another hashtag designated to SNV 2019, #facbine, there are nearly 100 relevant posts, demonstrating again the higher engagement rate on Instagram than Twitter.

Regarding national engagement in volunteering, there is a relative scarcity of information; discrepancies in defining 'volunteering' being one of the factors making it difficult to pinpoint an exact percentage (GHK, 2009b, p.3). However, by culminating statistical results from various independent studies and public opinion surveys, a 2009 GHK national report estimates the percentage of the population involved in volunteering activities to be between 2% and 9.2%. Taking into account 2015 Eurostat data estimating national volunteering engagement to be at 3.2%, it can be supposed that the past two decades have seen engagement rates consistently falling under 10% (Eurostat, 2019a) (GHK, 2009b). From these estimates, the conclusion can be drawn that there is a very low level of national engagement with the practice of volunteering in Romania, as well as low visibility on online platforms.

Comparisons and Findings

This section endeavours to compare and contrast the previously discussed situations of the UK, Belgium, Ireland, and Romania respectively. Through doing this, it will become evident that there exists a correlative pattern between rates of online news and social media engagement with National Volunteer Weeks and the corresponding country's national volunteering involvement percentages.

Eurostat data for the year 2015 provides the most accurate means of comparison going forward, given it's accountability for variable changes and discrepancies, as well as its inclusion of all countries discussed in this report. Looking first at an initial comparison, it is evident that existing simultaneously is a range of national volunteering engagement levels within the cases discussed, as well as an overall

objectively low engagement rate for all nations (Eurostat, 2017) (Angermann and Sittermann, 2010). This demonstrates a need for increased engagement across the board. At the same time, however, it illustrates that some countries are having more success in expanding their volunteer sectors than others, even if none can currently be held as examples of excelling in doing so.

As such, the country considered in this report with the highest engagement, is Ireland (Eurostat, 2019a). Irish engagement with informal and formal voluntary activities in 2015 falls at 37.6% and 29.0% respectively, comparatively, the lowest engagement country discussed here, Romania, has a rate of 3.2% across the board. It should be noted here that socio-political factors, such as the historical context of a country and its governance, very likely impact the present state of its volunteering engagement (GHK, 2010a) (Angermann and Sittermann, 2010). For example, in a formerly Communist country, such as Romania, public perceptions of volunteering today are still thought to be impacted by negative associations with activities like ‘Patriotic Work’, imposed during past political regimes (Delgado, 2008) (GHK, 2010a). This is evidenced by increased non-participation due to ‘lack of interest’ in Romania over Ireland, the UK, and Belgium (Eurostat, 2019a) (Eurostat, 2019b). Recognising this leads us to acknowledge that as a result, volunteering is less likely to appear widely and with positive reception in the national press, as well as less likely to be encouraged as a practice.

Interestingly therefore, social media may provide a useful platform for the promotion of volunteering in Romania, as it allows for individual voices to be heard and organisations with smaller platforms to gain traction with national, target, audiences (Tajudeen et al, 2018). In the case of Romania’s SNV however, social media presence is very minimal compared to the other three countries discussed in this report. As seen in Table 3, follower counts for Romanian social media are significantly lower than those of Ireland, which has more than 25% higher national engagement rates with volunteering practices.

Moving on to the UK and Belgium, there is a comparable level of engagement on social media (Table 3) and an equally comparable level of national engagement (Eurostat, 2019a), although Belgian news coverage of the national volunteer week is much more extensive than that of the UK. The two countries alternate in the middle ground for all categories of comparison (see Tables 1, 2, and 3), and when this is considered alongside the comparatively high and low engagement for Ireland and Romania respectively, a trend emerges.

This trend suggests that countries with increased social media engagement during their National Volunteer Weeks, also see increased levels of national engagement with volunteering. This is demonstrated by Ireland, the country with highest national volunteering engagement (Eurostat, 2019a), also presenting with the highest rates of online engagement, while the UK and Belgium present at the mid-level for both categories, and Romania at the lowest level.

Meanwhile, national news media coverage, or lack thereof, appears to demonstrate national interest in and reception of the practice, but it is unclear if increased visibility in online news would increase national engagement, due to the fairly minimal and localised coverage in all instances.

Table 1:

Country	% of population (all sexes, age 16+, at all ISCED 2011* levels) involved in informal voluntary activities in 2015
Romania	3.2
United Kingdom	19.2 (u)
Belgium	20.8
Ireland	37.6 (u)

(u): low reliability

* ISCED 2011: The International Standard Classification of Education (2011).

<http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>

Source: Eurostat, 2019a

Table 2:

Country	% of population (all sexes, age 16+, at all ISCED 2011* levels) involved in formal voluntary activities in 2015
Romania	3.2
Belgium	20.4
United Kingdom	23.3 (u)
Ireland	29.0 (u)

(u): low reliability

* ISCED 2011: The International Standard Classification of Education (2011).

<http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>

Source: Eurostat, 2019a.

Table 3

Country	Follower Count - Twitter	Follower Count - Instagram
Romania	41 (@pro_vobis)	432 (@pro_vobis)
Belgium	965 (@Vlaamssteunp)	1, 160 (@iedereenvrijwilligt)
United Kingdom	n/a	1, 691 (@volunteersweek_2020)
Ireland	12,100+ (@voluntireland)	n/a

Sources: Twitter.com, Instagram. Table created by document writer.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This report has considered the individual cases of the UK, Ireland, Belgium, and Romania as pertaining to their National Volunteer Weeks, the subsequent online news media and social media coverage/engagement, and, finally, the state of national engagement in volunteering practices. In comparing these individual cases, it has been found that there is a correlation between countries which receive higher engagement on social media during National Volunteer Weeks and higher engagement with national volunteering, and vice-versa. With regards to coverage in online news media, however, there is no clear suggestion of correlation.

Although correlation, not causation has been demonstrated in this instance, the trend identified nonetheless suggests that increasing social media platform engagement presents itself as a strategy for increasing national participation in volunteer activities. It is recommended that this is considered going forward. It is also strongly recommended that continued efforts for data collection relating to national volunteer engagement be made; having a larger, more accurate, dataset to work from would undeniably lead to more conclusive findings, and recommendations that can be actioned with confidence.

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The Centre for European Volunteering (CEV), established in 1992, is the European network of over 60 organisations dedicated to the promotion of, and support to, volunteers and volunteering in Europe at European, national or regional level. CEV channels the collective priorities and concerns of its member organisations to the institutions of the European Union and the Council of Europe. CEV's vision is a Europe in which volunteers are central in building a cohesive, sustainable and inclusive society based on solidarity and active citizenship. CEV is a European network of organizations dedicated to the promotion of and support to volunteers and volunteering. Our mission is to provide collaborative leadership to create an enabling environment for volunteering in Europe.