

This report was compiled by Thomas Richomme, Turing Scheme trainee at the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) from the University of East Anglia (UEA). The report is based on information gathered from online research. This is a preliminary study to gather information about introducing ethical voluntourism practices into EU policies.

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# How can the EU Successfully Leverage Volunteering and Ethical Voluntourism in its Internal and External Policies?

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## Introduction

In 2019, 34% of the EU's youth stated that in the past 12 months they had engaged in organised volunteering activities, clearly demonstrating volunteering as an important activity, given the figure rose ten percent compared to 2011 (Data.Europa.EU, 2019). Over the past few decades, volunteerism – best described as “a person who does something, especially helping other people, willingly and without being forced or paid to do it” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022) – has increased worldwide, especially in the form of a month-long trip or as a part of gap-year for young students (Butcher & Smith, 2010). This specific type of volunteerism has been increasingly singled out and criticised as a neo-colonial endeavour that seeks to impose the views of Western modernism on different cultures, akin to the ‘white saviour’ project during imperial times (Butcher & Smith, 2010). The commonly used term for this is ‘voluntourism’ or a ‘volunteer tourist’ which is described by Stephen Leslie Wearing as someone who partakes “in an organised way to undertake holidays that may involve the aiding or alleviating the [of] the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment” (Wearing, 2002, p. 240). This begs the question of how one differentiates between volunteering and voluntourism. Moreover, in the context of the European Union (EU), how can positive volunteering be further integrated into its foreign policy and strategy? This report will thus seek to solve both of the aforementioned questions in order to understand how the EU can best address volunteering and voluntourism in its policies. Firstly, a detailed introspection of volunteering and voluntourism will be undertaken, which will then be followed by an examination of how to render voluntourism more ethical. Secondly, the previous study of volunteering and voluntourism will be used in the context of the EU; what it already does to support volunteering and how it could be incorporated into its internal and external policies.

## Volunteering and Voluntourism

In the 2018 Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) report written by Wanda Alarcon (Ferraguto, 2018) and entitled ‘Voluntourism: A Critical Evaluation and Recommendations for the Future’ explain that voluntourism should aim to reduce the distance between those attending these events as voluntourists and the communities that are being tended to. CEV Director also wrote on this topic in 2018 in an article for “Voluntaris” saying the following:

*Volunteering and tourism are both phenomenon motivated by passion and interest in a particular subject and are both something that people generally engage with in their free time. Concepts and feelings such as excitement, memories, opportunities, entertainment, free time, travel, new experiences and pleasure are common to both. It is therefore no surprise that there is a growing trend towards linking the two concepts. As people's time becomes increasingly under pressure, due to the vast range of opportunities that are available for them to experience, both on and offline, the idea to combine time that is available to be dedicated for tourism and a holiday, with time that could be committed for solidarity purposes, is increasingly attractive to an ever-greater number of people. As with many other phenomena, different individuals and organisations have identified a ‘business potential’ in this proposition. There is an expanding multi-billion Euro industry of what has now come to be known as ‘voluntourism’ sector.*

Voluntourism has thus been increasingly used in a negative way by the tourism industry to, as is the objective of all businesses, create more revenue and profit for their investors. They are therefore capitalising on people who genuinely want to help the vulnerable but, for the most part, create infrastructures that contradict this objective. Despite this, some scholars and others have argued in favour of voluntourism, talking about its merits and how it enables a sense of belonging, responsibility, and political action in a globalised world, along with the help provided to the vulnerable. They argue that for these reasons, the practice of voluntourism as it currently is, should carry on (Lyons, et al., 2012) (Wearing, et al., 2017). However, this viewpoint is short-sighted, for it does not consider if the results gained from these voluntourism projects are positive or negative for the affected peoples, especially through intended or unintended neo-colonial practices (Wearing, et al., 2017).

CEV has already published a policy statement on voluntourism in 2016, noting seven distinct characteristics (CEV, 2017).

- First, participants of a 'volunteering project' generally travel to low- to medium-income countries, paying a fee to partake in these 'volunteering' activities.
- Second, voluntourism organisations are either for-profit, or non-profits.
- Third, those partaking in these projects, through the fees that they must pay, can benefit the local population with resources that they would otherwise maybe not have had access to.
- Fourth, volunteers can be mis-led by scam-like advertisements for projects which barely include any volunteering at all and are mostly just holiday schemes for which one receives a certificate.
- Fifth, globalisation has affected the growth of voluntourism, with multitudes of companies offering the possibility of 'doing good' whilst on their holidays and volunteering to help the vulnerable local populations.
- Sixth, there are many programmes that come to areas where vulnerable people live with pre-conceived ideas of what they need and refusing to engage, wilfully or unwilfully, with the local population to understand what their real needs are.
- Seventh and finally, there are good voluntourism programs that better the pre-existing projects and promote 'good practice', such as that funded by the EU to develop better cooperation between Croatian and Montenegrins volunteering and voluntourism organisations (CEV, 2017).

Moreover, in the same report, CEV also gave indications as to how to improve the practice of voluntourism, which are four-fold (CEV, 2017). First, the providers of voluntourism experiences and activities should clearly state whether they are for-profit or non-profit, and other stakeholders should produce information that defines quality voluntourism. Second, advocates of more positive forms of voluntourism should apply pressure to European institutions and policymakers to make non-fee paying volunteering the standard, which has a higher likelihood of properly answering the needs and challenges of the local populations. Third, if any person or organisation has concerns about certain voluntourism experiences, especially in Europe, then these should be flagged to CEV, either through its secretariat or its members in their respective countries, as these experiences would be highlighted in future policy recommendation reports. Fourth and finally, there should be a mechanism to raise funds to monitor the situation of voluntourism across Europe.

## How Voluntourism could be Useful to the EU

As previously stated, there is a way of ensuring that voluntourism remains a positive activity which benefits not only the volunteer, as they are genuinely undertaking kind and useful acts in the servitude of others, but also for the receivers of these acts, the often vulnerable local populations. When voluntourism is not a neo-colonial enterprise, but rather a 'rich intercultural understanding and mutuality', then it can be a positive endeavour.

The EU has already recognised voluntourism's usefulness with this Croatian and Montenegrin project. The EU already has programmes that allow cross-border volunteering through the European Solidarity Corps and the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps. These initiatives enable one to "bring change while developing your skills and competences" (Europa, 2022) in an environment that has been carefully studied so as to bring real positive benefits to those in need. With the invasion of Ukraine by Vladimir Putin's Russia came waves of people fleeing the conflict and death into the EU, and the humanitarian and refugee aid given to them, especially in countries like Poland, was exemplary. These voluntary actions have been complimented through an EU 'candidacy status' likely to be granted to Ukraine sooner rather than later, and the potential of reviving the old idea first proposed by French President François Mitterrand, and then reignited by Emmanuel Macron, of a 'European Political Community' (France 24, 2022). This could see the inclusion of countries further east, with whom the EU already has ties with through the Eastern Partnership and various trade deals and partnerships. The European Political Community could have a positive impact towards bridging the existing gaps between candidate and member states. This would also benefit wider EU integration, for three of the countries of the Eastern Partnership – Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova – have applied to integrate into the EU, with Ukraine having just been accepted to follow that path today. Building long-lasting ties amongst these communities that can then spread positive messages is key to the correct integration of these countries; volunteers can help this process.

The EU already helps students to study abroad to learn about a new culture, well why not have similar schemes with volunteering? A potential model here would be to enable young people to go abroad, whether that be from EU countries to those of the Eastern Partnership and vice versa, and to have the participants integrate into local life by working real jobs that would not only benefit the local communities but also the economy, rather than being simply a 'CV booster'. There will be a real transfer of knowledge between the different communities. If this model is successful in the EU, it could potentially be exported to other places such as Africa with the AU-EU partnership, however, only if it is successful and balanced with both sides benefiting positively according to CEV's CARE policy on voluntourism and volunteerism. Moreover, the EU could create a system to send people on a week or month-long volunteering trip across different EU states.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this report has shown how voluntourism can be a positive practice if it is actually used with the proper intentions of listening to the needs of the local populations, instead of applying neo-colonial thought. Moreover, it has also explored ways for the EU to better implement voluntourism and volunteering into policies, especially with countries applying for EU membership.

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