ROMANIAN ACADEMY
SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDIES OF THE ROMANIAN ACADEMY
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND LEGAL SCIENCES
RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR QUALITY OF LIFE

– DOCTORAL THESIS –

Scientific coordinator,

Professor Sorin CACE,

PhD Candidate,

Elena Daniela OPREA

BUCHAREST
2026

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ABSTRACT

Volunteering, understood as a social phenomenon of remarkable complexity, has become an established subject of sociological inquiry since the second half of the twentieth century. Its emergence as a distinct field of research has not been a linear process but rather one characterized by successive conceptual reconfigurations, shaped both by the evolution of Western societies and by the diversification of the forms through which individuals choose to engage in community life. A rigorous sociological analysis of volunteering requires a multidimensional approach capable of integrating, within a coherent analytical framework, both macro-social perspectives - focused on the structures and institutions that facilitate or, conversely, constrain civic engagement - and micro-social perspectives, which seek to explain the individual motivations and behavioural mechanisms underlying the decision to engage in voluntary activities (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). Only through such an integrated approach can the phenomenon be fully understood, avoiding both structuralist reductionism, which tends to minimize the role of individual agency, and excessive psychologization, which risks overlooking the social and institutional conditions that shape voluntary action.

From an epistemological perspective, this doctoral thesis situates volunteering within the paradigm of social solidarity and civic responsibility, arguing that any explanatory approach must be grounded in the premise that voluntary action is never purely individual but is mediated and structured by networks of social relationships, cultural norms, and specific institutional contexts. This epistemological stance underpins the entire theoretical architecture of the thesis, requiring volunteering to be interpreted not merely as the aggregate of isolated altruistic acts, but as an integrated social process that exists in a relationship of interdependence with the broader structures of society.

Volunteering constitutes a distinct social phenomenon, founded upon a coherent system of values and principles that makes a significant contribution to social development and to the strengthening of the human capital of the communities in which it takes place. Its historical evolution is inextricably linked to the social and economic transformations characteristic of each historical period; consequently, contemporary forms of volunteering can only be properly understood in relation to the structural dynamics that have shaped their development.

At the global level, volunteering is influenced by a range of specific cultural and economic factors, including rapid urbanization, the globalization of economic and symbolic exchanges, and

the accelerated development of communication technologies (Musick & Wilson, 2008). These structural dynamics directly influence patterns of civic participation and the motivations that encourage individuals to engage in voluntary activities, while simultaneously generating a considerable diversity of forms, organizational structures, and modes of volunteering, ranging from traditional community-based volunteering to emerging forms such as virtual and episodic volunteering.

The intrinsic complexity of volunteering requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates contributions from sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology, and political science in order to develop a genuinely holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Such an interdisciplinary perspective reflects the multidimensional nature of volunteering and calls for the development of conceptual and epistemological frameworks capable of capturing its diverse motivational, relational, institutional, and symbolic dimensions. At the same time, it provides a balanced analytical perspective that coherently links the individual and collective dimensions of voluntary engagement.

Within the traditional motivational framework, altruistic helping remains the historical foundation of volunteering, rooted in solidarity and compassion towards others. From a complementary civic perspective, volunteering is interpreted as an expression of active citizenship (Dekker & Halman, 2003). Through their engagement in activities that serve the public interest, volunteers not only contribute to collective well-being but also develop their own social and political competences (Radu, 2024). From this standpoint, volunteering functions as a fundamental mechanism for revitalising social capital and strengthening participatory democracy by fostering active citizens who are willing and able to participate constructively in decision-making processes affecting their communities.

Although the scholarly literature approaches volunteering from a wide range of theoretical and methodological perspectives, significant gaps remain in the Romanian socio-cultural and legislative context regarding a comprehensive understanding of volunteers' motivations, the long-term impact of volunteering on their personal and professional trajectories, and the role that public institutions, private organisations, and civil society organisations can play in promoting sustainable civic participation.

The topic of this doctoral thesis is particularly relevant in the context of the contemporary social challenges that profoundly shape the evolution of twenty-first-century societies. Phenomena

such as rapid population ageing, the increasing fragmentation of traditional communities, widening economic inequalities, and the accelerated digitalisation of social life require not only the mobilisation of additional resources but also the development of innovative approaches capable of strengthening social cohesion and community solidarity in response to these structural transformations (Camilla et al., 2023).

The topicality and relevance of this research are further reinforced by the recognition that volunteering represents one of the few social resources capable of responding simultaneously to these multiple and interconnected challenges. In the context of population ageing, volunteering provides, on the one hand, essential practical support for older adults and, on the other hand, meaningful opportunities for senior citizens who wish to remain actively engaged in community life, thereby helping to prevent the social isolation often associated with ageing. At the same time, the fragmentation of communities can be counteracted, at least in part, through volunteering, which creates bridges between different social groups, generations, and socio-economic environments.
At the same time, widening economic inequalities have transformed volunteering into a vital resource for the provision of basic social services to vulnerable groups, partially compensating for the structural limitations of public social protection systems. Although the rapid digitalisation of social life has created new opportunities for the organisation and effective coordination of volunteering activities, it has also generated significant challenges, particularly the risk of digital exclusion affecting certain population groups and the need to adapt traditional methods of community mobilisation to emerging technological realities.

Beyond its contextual significance, volunteering constitutes a strategic social resource that directly contributes to addressing complex societal challenges and strengthening the social fabric through multiple and interconnected mechanisms. First, volunteering functions as an essential social support system that complements and reinforces existing public services by providing a high degree of flexibility and adaptability in responding to emerging community needs, which are often difficult for formal institutions to anticipate. Second, volunteering generates social capital by fostering networks of trust and reciprocity that transcend traditional barriers of social class, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, thereby enhancing social cohesion across society as a whole.

The strategic importance of volunteering is further demonstrated by its capacity to mobilise human, material, and symbolic resources that would otherwise remain unused or underutilised within the community (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). By engaging citizens in productive activities

directed towards the common good, volunteering makes a substantial contribution to the efficient use of available social resources and to the development of a genuine culture of civic responsibility (Musick & Wilson, 2008). This dimension is particularly significant in the Romanian context, where the consolidation of an active and responsible civil society continues to represent a major challenge in the broader process of democratic consolidation (Zamfir & Zamfir, 1995).

It is important to emphasise that contemporary volunteering can no longer be understood exclusively through the traditional paradigms of charity or occasional assistance. Rather, it should be approached as a sophisticated form of civic participation, undergoing a continuous process of transformation driven by the social, economic, and technological dynamics of the contemporary world.

This ongoing transformation reflects the capacity of volunteering to adapt to constantly evolving social, technological, and economic contexts. In this respect, the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a defining moment, dramatically demonstrating this adaptive capacity. Volunteer organisations rapidly reconfigured their activities in order to respond to the urgent needs that emerged in the fields of public health, social support, and distance education (Voicu et al., 2023). The digitalisation of volunteering activities, the development of online platforms for volunteer recruitment and coordination, and the emergence of new forms of virtual volunteering represent tangible manifestations of the contemporary evolution of this phenomenon (Nissen, 2019).

In the specific context of Romania, the relevance of this research is further reinforced by the processes of accelerated modernisation, urbanisation, and European integration, all of which generate both new opportunities and new challenges for the development of the voluntary sector at the national level. Access to European funding, the expansion of the social economy, and the growing level of civic awareness among the population create a favourable environment for the expansion and gradual professionalisation of volunteering in Romania, while simultaneously opening new avenues for research aimed at understanding the distinctive features of this phenomenon at both the local and national levels.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the trajectory of Romanian volunteering cannot be dissociated from the legacy of the communist period, during which compulsory forms of "voluntary labour" fostered a certain degree of public scepticism towards civic engagement undertaken on a genuinely voluntary basis. Overcoming this historical legacy and building an authentic culture of volunteering, founded on free choice and intrinsic motivation, is a long-term

process requiring both institutional intervention and the gradual transformation of collective attitudes. This historical particularity further justifies the need for a careful analysis of the ways in which the traditional and modern dimensions of civic engagement are currently articulated within Romanian society.

Another factor contributing to the relevance of this topic is the ongoing evolution of the legislative and institutional framework governing volunteering in Romania, as well as the still insufficient social and professional recognition of the experience acquired through voluntary work. Despite the significant progress achieved over the past two decades, many civil society organisations continue to face difficulties in recruiting and retaining volunteers. This situation highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the factors that sustain long-term volunteer commitment beyond the initial enthusiasm associated with occasional participation.

The doctoral thesis therefore contributes to addressing several gaps identified in the existing literature by providing an in-depth analysis of the motivations, mechanisms, and impact of volunteering within the socio-cultural and institutional context of contemporary Romania. The research adopts an interdisciplinary and empirically grounded approach to a phenomenon whose social relevance is beyond dispute, while also formulating practical recommendations of value to both public policymakers and organisations active in the field of volunteering that seek to strengthen sustainable civic participation over the long term.

Research objectives and methodology in the study of volunteering

The study of volunteering as a complex social and cultural phenomenon requires a rigorous scientific approach, structured around clearly defined objectives and supported by a methodology appropriate to the multidimensional nature of the subject under investigation. The architecture of the research objectives and the methodological framework adopted in this study reflects the need to integrate historical, theoretical, and empirical perspectives into a coherent analytical approach, with the aim of developing a comprehensive understanding of volunteering within the current socio-cultural and institutional context of Romania.

Research objectives

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a multidimensional sociological analysis of volunteering in contemporary Romania, with particular emphasis on the structural transformations that have taken place over recent decades, the social functions performed by this

distinct sector of civil society, and the specific contribution of volunteering to the sustainable development of Romanian society.

To achieve this overarching objective, the research pursues eight specific objectives that provide an integrated analysis of volunteering from theoretical, historical, sociological, strategic, legal, and empirical perspectives. The study begins by establishing the conceptual foundations of volunteering and highlighting its role in social governance, before examining its historical evolution and the transformations generated by social, economic, and cultural change.

The research further investigates the functions and impact of volunteering in contemporary society, emphasising its contribution to strengthening social cohesion, fostering social capital, and promoting the emergence of new forms of civic engagement characteristic of the digital age. It also analyses the profile, motivations, and behavioural patterns of volunteers, together with the factors influencing the dynamics of their participation.

Another major objective is to identify the strategic directions necessary for the development of volunteering in Romania and to evaluate the effects of the legislative framework on both volunteer organisations and volunteers themselves. Furthermore, the research proposes an integrated model for the sustainable development of volunteering based on cooperation between the public sector, the private sector, and civil society, in accordance with the principles of participatory governance and social innovation.

Finally, by drawing upon the findings of an empirical investigation, the study identifies the priority areas for the development of volunteering services, with the aim of formulating recommendations capable of strengthening civic participation and enhancing the social impact of volunteering in Romania.

Research methodology

The complexity of the research objectives outlined above requires the adoption of a mixed-methods approach that combines, in a balanced manner, theoretical and documentary analysis with both qualitative and quantitative empirical research methods.

Literature review

The literature review constitutes the starting point of the methodological approach, enabling the identification of general explanatory models and relevant causal relationships among the variables associated with volunteering through the critical synthesis of findings reported in a broad range of previous studies. This approach facilitates, on the one hand, a deeper understanding

of the epistemological foundations of volunteering and, on the other, an appreciation of its cultural and geographical variations, thereby providing a solid conceptual framework for the subsequent stages of the research.

Empirical data analysis

The analysis of existing empirical data, complemented by the generation of new empirical evidence, provides concrete information on the socio-demographic characteristics of volunteers, their motivations, and the various forms of civic engagement in the contemporary Romanian context. The integration of qualitative and quantitative research methods enables a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In particular, the questionnaire-based opinion survey, the Delphi method, and the critical analysis of the legal framework each contribute to capturing the motivational and relational dynamics that characterise volunteering.

Research instruments

To collect, analyse, and interpret the data required for this research, five complementary research instruments were employed:

Two opinion surveys: the first designed to identify volunteers' motivations and the implications of their involvement, and the second aimed at identifying and ranking the volunteering services considered to be of highest priority;

A critical analytical study examining the legal effects and social consequences of the legislative provisions governing volunteering activities;

The Delphi method, applied to establish the strategic priorities for the development of volunteering in Romania through the structured consultation of a panel of experts;

A conceptual framework model, developed to outline an ecosystem conducive to the sustainable development of volunteering at the national level.

Research phases

The methodological approach is organised into five successive phases, each corresponding to a distinct level of analysis:

Phase I - Theoretical and documentary analysis, dedicated to the conceptual foundation of the research and the critical synthesis of the relevant literature;

Phase II - Quantitative empirical research, conducted through a structured questionnaire-based opinion survey administered both online and offline to ensure representative coverage of the target population;

Phase III - Delphi study, aimed at identifying the strategic priorities for the development of volunteering in Romania through the iterative consultation of a panel of experts in the field;

Phase IV - Legal and public policy analysis, primarily focused on examining Law No. 78/2014 on the Regulation of Volunteering Activities and assessing its implications for institutional practice;

Phase V - Synthesis of findings and development of *the ecosystem model,* integrating the conclusions drawn from the previous phases in order to propose a framework conducive to the sustainable development of volunteering in Romania.

3. Research hypotheses

The research is grounded in five hypotheses designed to identify the main development directions and the factors influencing volunteering in Romania. The first hypothesis (H1) posits that the development of the voluntary sector depends primarily on improving the legislative framework, integrating volunteering into the educational system, and strengthening the technological infrastructure supporting volunteering; these aspects are assessed using the Delphi method. The second hypothesis (H2) states that the primary motivation for engaging in volunteering activities is the desire to help individuals and groups in need. The third hypothesis (H3) assumes that insufficient information regarding volunteering opportunities constitutes the principal barrier to civic participation. The fourth hypothesis (H4) suggests that personal satisfaction and the social impact of volunteering are perceived by volunteers as the most significant benefits of their involvement. Finally, the fifth hypothesis (H5) argues that healthcare and medical care services are regarded as the highest-priority field of volunteering in Romania.

The hypotheses concerning volunteers' motivations, barriers to participation, perceived benefits, and the prioritisation of volunteering services are tested through a questionnaire-based opinion survey, while the strategic directions for the development of volunteering are examined using the Delphi method. The testing of these five hypotheses, together with the findings generated by the other components of the methodological framework described above, made it possible to develop a comprehensive, empirically grounded, and methodologically rigorous understanding of

the current state, the major challenges, and the strategic development directions of volunteering in contemporary Romania.

The first part of the doctoral thesis is devoted to establishing the theoretical and conceptual framework of the research by defining volunteering as a multidimensional social phenomenon and analysing the functions it performs within contemporary social structures. Rather than providing a purely phenomenological description of volunteering, the study develops a systematic classification of its functions, organised around three complementary categories: theoretical-pragmatic functions, social functions, and psychological functions.

Beyond this functional classification, the thesis also examines volunteering from the perspective of its strategic dimensions, conceptualising it as a distinct social sector that performs complementary roles alongside the state and the market, while simultaneously functioning as an instrument of social governance embedded within polycentric networks comprising both public institutions and non-governmental actors. The contribution of volunteering to public policy development is manifested primarily through three mechanisms: bringing social issues that might otherwise remain overlooked by formal institutions onto the public agenda; monitoring the implementation of existing public policies through civic oversight; and proposing innovative solutions derived from the practical experience of volunteer organisations and volunteers actively engaged in the field.

As a provider of social services, the voluntary sector accounted for a significant share of Romania's national social service system in 2022, delivering approximately 28% of all accredited social services nationwide (National Institute of Statistics [NIS], 2023). This figure provides tangible evidence of the substantial contribution made by volunteering to the functioning of Romania's social protection system, extending far beyond its symbolic or declarative dimension.
The thesis further advances a complementary interpretation of volunteering as an instrument of civic soft power, drawing upon Joseph Nye's (2009) conceptual framework. From this perspective, volunteering is understood as a driver of sustainable social change that operates through attraction, example, and persuasion rather than through institutional coercion.

This perspective also makes it possible to view volunteering as a reliable barometer of a society's civic maturity and democratic health, suggesting that both the level and the quality of voluntary engagement may serve as relevant indicators of a community's capacity for self-organisation and its collective willingness to assume responsibility for its own development.

The chapter devoted to the history of volunteering offers a sociological interpretation of the evolution of this phenomenon, tracing its development from the spontaneous forms of community solidarity characteristic of ancient civilisations to the organised, globalised, and digitalised voluntary sector of the contemporary era. The central argument is that volunteering is far more than a form of unpaid assistance; rather, it is a complex social phenomenon that performs multiple functions—including social integration, the generation of social capital, the promotion of democratic values, and responses to emerging social challenges - and whose historical evolution reflects the broader transformations of social, economic, and cultural structures in each historical period.

a. Theoretical foundation: moral choice versus economic rationality

The historical analysis is grounded in Titmuss's theory (2018), according to which social policy—and, by extension, volunteering - cannot be reduced to calculations of economic efficiency, since it necessarily involves moral choices and altruistic actions undertaken for the benefit of "strangers." From this perspective, the history of volunteering should be understood not merely as a chronological succession of events but as the history of active humanism, in which giving represents a form of symbolic resistance against the reduction of social relations to purely monetary terms. This theoretical standpoint justifies the interpretation of volunteering as an expression of the values that structure communal life rather than simply as a measurable form of prosocial behaviour.

b. The Historical evolution of volunteering: from community-based action to a global sector

The earliest forms of mutual assistance can be traced to the ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilisations, where they were deeply rooted in the religious and moral codes of the time. In ancient Greece, the concept of philanthropia embodied the ideal of benevolence towards others, while in ancient Rome evergetism referred to the practice whereby wealthy citizens voluntarily financed public works and services for the benefit of the community. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, religious institutions - including Benedictine monasteries and military-religious orders such as the Knights Hospitaller - became the first systematic voluntary organisations, while the Christian doctrine of charity institutionalised assistance to those in need as a moral obligation. The pre-modern period witnessed a gradual

process of secularisation through the emergence of guilds and lay organisations, which introduced the concept of collective social responsibility.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries marked the emergence of modern volunteering, driven by industrialisation and urbanisation. This period saw the establishment of emblematic organisations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) (1844), The Salvation Army (1865), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (1863). According to Harrison, the Victorian era represented the transition from individual charity to organised philanthropy. The interwar period, examined also within the Romanian context, consolidated volunteering as an institutional response to the social crises generated by the First World War. The post-war era, analysed by Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003), witnessed a profound transformation of volunteering motivations, shifting from collective, tradition-based volunteering towards more reflexive and individualised forms of engagement. This transformation was reinforced by the institutionalisation of volunteering at the international level, notably through the establishment of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in 1970, and by the influence of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The last three decades (1990 - present) are characterised by the processes of globalisation and digitalisation. Online platforms and social networks have redefined the boundaries of volunteer communities, while new forms of engagement - including virtual volunteering, corporate volunteering, skills-based volunteering, and the transnational mobility of volunteers - have emerged. Innovations such as time banking, implemented in countries including Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and China, have introduced mechanisms for the social accumulation and exchange of volunteering hours. Although this model has not yet been implemented in Romania, the chapter argues that it possesses considerable potential for adaptation in areas such as elderly care and the integration of refugees.

c. The history of volunteering in Romania: a paradox of interrupted development

The analysis of the Romanian context is structured around a central paradox: although traditional forms of solidarity - such as claca (collective community labour), șezătoarea (traditional communal gatherings), and the obște (village commons) - have existed for centuries in Romanian society, modern, organised, and institutionalised volunteering developed relatively late and, more importantly, experienced repeated interruptions in its historical trajectory.

During the pre-communist period, the Romanian Orthodox Church, the reforms introduced by Alexandru Ioan Cuza, and the Law on Associations of 1864 laid the foundations for an emerging civil society. This process was further strengthened by the philanthropic activities of prominent intellectuals such as Titu Maiorescu and Petre P. Carp, as well as by the organised women's volunteer movement, exemplified by the Romanian Orthodox Ladies' Society (1862). The First World War generated an unprecedented wave of civic mobilisation, illustrated by the reorganisation of the Romanian Red Cross and the symbolic leadership of Queen Marie of Romania. The interwar period is consequently described as a genuine "golden age" of Romanian volunteering, supported by a favourable constitutional framework (the 1923 Constitution), the Bucharest School of Sociology led by Dimitrie Gusti, and the diversification of cultural, social, and cooperative organisations.

The communist period (1945–1989), by contrast, represented a fundamental rupture. Drawing extensively on the research of Bogdan Voicu and Mălina Voicu, the chapter emphasises the essential distinction between authentic volunteering and the regime's compulsory "patriotic labour" (muncă patriotică), which included mandatory participation in agricultural work and prestige construction projects, such as the Danube–Black Sea Canal, enforced through a coercive system of sanctions against those who refused to participate. This ideological distortion of the concept of volunteering—considerably more pronounced in Romania than in most other communist countries—eroded social capital (Voicu, 2012) and generated a structural reluctance towards organised forms of civic participation, the effects of which continue to influence Romanian society today.

The post-communist period (1990–2024) is presented as a gradual process of reconstruction. The establishment of the first non-governmental organisations, including the Civil Society Development Foundation (1994), the adoption of the first legislative framework specifically regulating volunteering (Law No. 195/2001, subsequently replaced by Law No. 78/2014), Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, and the acceleration of digital transformation during the COVID-19 pandemic represent successive milestones in the maturation of the Romanian voluntary sector. Nevertheless, the chapter highlights the persistence of cultural obstacles inherited from the communist period - including conceptual ambiguity regarding volunteering and the absence of a well-established tradition of modern philanthropy - which continue to influence the pace of development of volunteering in contemporary Romania.

Overall, the analysis reveals a gradual and organic evolution of volunteering in Western societies, characterised by successive transitions from religious charity to secular philanthropy and, subsequently, to the organised, professionalised, and globalised voluntary sector of the present day. Romania's trajectory, however, has been markedly discontinuous, shaped by the major political ruptures of the twentieth century. The central conclusion of the chapter is that volunteering cannot be understood independently of the historical, cultural, and political context in which it develops. Understanding this legacy - both its positive resources and its structural vulnerabilities - is therefore essential for designing effective public policies and organisational strategies capable of fostering a genuine culture of civic engagement in contemporary Romania.

Chapter III develops a comprehensive and interdisciplinary analysis of volunteering, examining it not merely as a form of civic participation but as a fundamental mechanism of social transformation, community cohesion, and social capital development. The analysis adopts a predominantly sociological perspective, drawing upon the contributions of leading scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (1986), Robert Putnam (2000), Émile Durkheim (1965), Axel Honneth (1995), John Wilson (2008), C. Rochester (2006), Lucas Meijs and colleagues (2019), Lesley Hustinx (2021), as well as numerous national and international empirical studies.

The chapter argues that volunteers are strategic actors in contemporary society whose role extends far beyond that of providers of unpaid services. They are defined as mediators of social capital, agents of social change, and promoters of the values of solidarity, contributing to the reduction of social fragmentation and the strengthening of mutual trust within communities. From this perspective, volunteering is interpreted as a process through which individuals' cultural and symbolic capital is transformed into collective social capital, thereby facilitating more equitable access to resources and fostering social relationships based on cooperation and reciprocity.

The analysis demonstrates that the strategic importance of volunteering derives from its capacity to strengthen social cohesion in a context characterised by social polarisation, increasing individualism, and cultural fragmentation. Volunteers facilitate intercultural and intergenerational dialogue, encourage genuine civic participation, and contribute to social innovation by developing flexible solutions tailored to community needs. At the same time, they fulfil an important educational and cultural mission by fostering human capital, promoting social inclusion, and contributing to the preservation of collective memory and local identity.

The transformative nature of volunteering is also emphasised. The chapter argues that volunteering reshapes the relationship between citizens and public institutions, symbolically redistributes social power, and creates the conditions for the emergence of a reflective society capable of identifying and addressing its own challenges. Within this framework, volunteers become promoters of social hope, helping to bridge divisions between generations, social groups, and cultural communities, while demonstrating that solidarity constitutes an essential resource for the sustainable development of society.

The chapter also examines the rights and responsibilities of volunteers from a sociological perspective, moving beyond a purely legal interpretation. Volunteers' rights are presented as expressions of social recognition, democratic participation, and personal development, and are analysed through the theoretical lenses of recognition theory and social capital theory. Particular attention is devoted to the right to social recognition, the right to community participation, and the right to personal development through non-formal education. Conversely, volunteers' responsibilities are interpreted as expressions of social responsibility, professionalism, and compliance with organisational norms. The author demonstrates that both rights and responsibilities are influenced by factors such as place of residence, generational affiliation, cultural diversity, and the ongoing digitalisation of society.

A significant contribution of the chapter lies in its analysis of the recent transformations of volunteering within the context of the digital society and broader global social change. It presents emerging volunteer typologies differentiated according to generation, patterns of engagement, and the use of digital technologies. Particular attention is devoted to new forms of volunteering, including micro-volunteering, episodic volunteering, digital volunteering, skills-based volunteering, and volunteering conducted through distributed networks. The analysis demonstrates that flexibility, autonomy, and the integration of digital technologies are fundamentally reshaping traditional patterns of civic participation. At the same time, the chapter argues that the core essence of volunteering - freely chosen and non-coercive engagement for the common good - remains unchanged despite organisational and technological transformations.

Finally, the chapter devotes considerable attention to volunteer management and its implications for public policy. It argues for the adoption of flexible, volunteer-centred organisational models capable of recognising generational diversity and effectively integrating digital tools into volunteer management practices. The study proposes several strategic directions

for future development, including the adaptation of the legislative framework, the strengthening of volunteering infrastructure, the formal recognition of emerging forms of civic engagement, and the development of modern systems for assessing the social impact of volunteering activities.

In the final section, the sociological analysis is extended to examine volunteers' motivations, the relationship between volunteering and social stratification, the labour market, civic participation, and the professionalisation of the non-governmental sector. The chapter highlights the motivational transformations brought about by contemporary society, in which altruistic motives coexist with aspirations for professional development, personal identity formation, and the expansion of social networks. It also discusses the challenges associated with the professionalisation of volunteering, the need to ensure volunteers' protection and safety, and the growing tendency towards hybrid models of engagement that combine face-to-face and virtual participation. The author concludes that volunteering simultaneously functions as an instrument of social integration, a mechanism for the development of both human and social capital, and a key factor in strengthening participatory democracy, thereby enhancing society's capacity to adapt to the economic, cultural, and technological challenges of the twenty-first century.

Chapter IV. The consequences of volunteering in Romania

Chapter IV examines the impact of volunteering on post-communist Romanian society from a multidimensional perspective. The analysis is organised around three complementary dimensions: the systemic effects of volunteering on social capital, democratic participation, and the national economy; its influence on labour market integration as well as on individuals' personal and professional development; and, finally, the transversal competencies developed through volunteer engagement, including within the specific context of corporate volunteering.

The effects of volunteering on Romanian society

The analysis begins by examining the contribution of volunteering to the development of social capital. Research conducted by Bogdan Voicu and Mălina Voicu (2007) within the framework of the European Values Study demonstrates that Romanian volunteers display significantly higher levels of generalised social trust than non-volunteers. Voluntary engagement is positively associated with the frequency of social interactions and with greater institutional trust. Sorin Cace highlights the role of volunteering as a mechanism of social integration for vulnerable groups -including young people at risk of social exclusion, socially isolated older adults, persons with disabilities, and migrants - while Mălina Voicu identifies a strong correlation between

volunteering and democratic participation. According to the European Values Study (2007), volunteers are approximately 25-30% more actively involved in democratic processes than non-volunteers, suggesting that volunteering functions as a genuine "school of democracy" or "democratic training ground."

From an economic perspective, the chapter cites estimates produced by the Research Institute for Quality of Life, according to which the value of volunteer work in Romania amounts to approximately EUR 180-220 million annually, representing 0.08-0.10% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This contribution generates substantial cost savings in sectors such as healthcare, education, social services, and environmental protection. In addition, volunteering produces significant benefits for the development of socio-emotional competencies - including among children and adolescents, as demonstrated by a study published in JAMA Network Open (2024) - as well as for mental health, overall well-being, and the formation of civic identity, particularly among young people. Volunteering also enhances the effectiveness of non-profit organisations; according to the Civil Society Development Foundation (FDSC), organisations supported by volunteers are approximately 40% more efficient. Furthermore, volunteering contributes to strengthening community cohesion and fostering social innovation, with Cătălin Zamfir (2023) describing volunteers as genuine "agents of social innovation."

The chapter also highlights two major risks associated with volunteering. The first concerns the substitution of public services, with Sorin Cace (2021) warning against the state's "temptation" to use volunteering as a low-cost solution to compensate for deficiencies in the social protection system. The second relates to inequality in access to volunteering, a phenomenon that, according to Bogdan Voicu, remains concentrated in urban areas and among individuals with higher levels of education. The chapter further examines two exceptional moments of civic mobilisation: the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the development of online volunteering and initiatives such as Code for Romania and Vreau să ajut ("I Want to Help"), and the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis, interpreted as evidence of the growing maturity of Romania's social capital. Nevertheless, comparative data from the European Values Study indicate that Romania continues to rank among the lower-performing European countries in terms of volunteering participation, although the overall trend remains positive. The chapter concludes with a series of policy recommendations, including the digitalisation of the voluntary sector, alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the promotion of intergenerational volunteering, the development of

a national volunteering strategy, and the reform of the legislative framework, including the introduction of fiscal incentives.

Volunteering, labour market integration, and professional development

The second section synthesises an extensive body of econometric research on the professional benefits of volunteering. Day and Devlin (1998) identify a 7-12% wage premium for individuals with volunteer experience, attributing this advantage to the acquisition of transferable skills, the accumulation of social capital, and the positive signalling effect of volunteering for prospective employers. These findings are subsequently confirmed by the econometric analyses of Hackl, Halla, and Pruckner (2007). In a longitudinal study, Wilson and Musick (2008) report that volunteering increases the probability of employment among previously inactive individuals by 27% and improves the likelihood of career advancement by 21%. Similarly, Khasanzyanova finds that 75% of employers regard volunteer experience as a positive factor in evaluating job candidates.

Within the Romanian context, Bogdan Voicu and Mălina Voicu demonstrate that young people with substantial volunteering experience obtain their first job, on average, 3.7 months earlier than those without such experience. This finding is consistent with the results reported by the Centre for the Study of Democracy, which estimates an average advantage of approximately four months. The study identifies four principal explanatory mechanisms: the development of professional competencies, the expansion of professional networks, the acquisition of practical experience, and the clarification of career interests. However, these benefits are not distributed equally, tending to favour young people from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

The theoretical foundations of these effects are explored through the perspectives of developmental psychology and human capital theory. Kolb's experiential learning theory, with its cycle of experience-reflection-conceptualisation-experimentation, Mezirow's transformative learning theory, which emphasises the role of "disorienting dilemmas" in reshaping personal perspectives, and Kegan's constructive-developmental theory, centred on the transformation of the subject–object relationship within an "optimal holding environment," explain the psychological mechanisms through which volunteering promotes personal growth. At the same time, Becker's human capital theory provides the economic framework for understanding the professional advantages associated with volunteer experience.

Competencies developed through volunteering

The final section examines the transversal competencies developed through volunteer engagement, building on the observation of Wilson and Musick (2008) that these benefits are particularly significant for young people and for individuals with limited access to other opportunities for personal and professional development. Cnaan et al. (2020) propose a four-dimensional taxonomy of competencies acquired through volunteering: cognitive competencies (critical thinking, problem-solving, and strategic planning), social competencies (communication, empathy, and teamwork), managerial competencies (leadership, coordination, and time management), and personal competencies (autonomy, resilience, and emotional intelligence). Astin et al. (1999) further demonstrate the positive effects of volunteering on civic competencies, while Cress et al. highlight its contribution to the development of transformational leadership, characterised by collaboration, inclusion, and shared responsibility. Within the Romanian context, Andronic reports significant improvements in communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, whereas research conducted by the "Solidaritatea" Centre (2019) reveals that the competencies developed vary according to the type of volunteering undertaken, including social, cultural, civic, and environmental volunteering.

Particular attention is devoted to corporate volunteering, analysed from the perspective of organisational commitment. A. Glavas (2016) argues that corporate volunteering enables employees to integrate their personal and professional identities, while Rodell et al. (2017) introduce the concept of a "corporate volunteering climate," demonstrating that it enhances employee commitment through value congruence, organisational pride, and perceptions of organisational support. The studies reviewed, including Deloitte Global (2022) and Business News Daily (2023), indicate a growing demand among younger generations of employees for corporate social responsibility programmes, together with positive effects on job satisfaction, with 89% of respondents reporting improved overall well-being. Grant (2012), as well as Pajo and Lee (2011), advocate the strategic design of corporate volunteering programmes through greater diversity of opportunities, alignment with targeted competencies, and the personalisation of volunteer experiences in order to maximise benefits for both employees and organisations.

Overall, the chapter presents volunteering as a phenomenon with multiple structural effects - social, democratic, economic, educational, and organisational - while emphasising the need for public policies capable of ensuring equitable access to volunteering opportunities and fully

harnessing volunteering's potential as a driver of individual development and social cohesion in contemporary Romania.

Chapter V. Empirical applications in the study of volunteering

The final chapter brings together the empirical component of the doctoral thesis, structured around five complementary research projects: an opinion survey examining civic participation in volunteering activities; a Delphi study aimed at identifying the strategic priorities for the development of the voluntary sector; a sociological and legal analysis of Law No. 78/2014 on the Regulation of Volunteering Activities, accompanied by proposals de lege ferenda; an opinion survey on the prioritisation of volunteering services; and, finally, the development of a conceptual ecosystem model designed to support the sustainable development of volunteering in Romania. Collectively, these five components provide an integrated quantitative, qualitative, and normative perspective on the current state and future directions of volunteering in Romania.

1. Volunteering in contemporary Romania: survey on civic participation

The first empirical study seeks to assess the level of participation in volunteering activities organised by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and to identify the motivational factors associated with civic engagement in volunteering.

The study tested four research hypotheses. The findings indicate a higher-than-expected rate of participation in volunteering activities among respondents, thereby refuting Hypothesis H1, which assumed a participation rate below 20%. This discrepancy can be explained by the overrepresentation of respondents who were active online and residing in large urban areas.

Regarding motivation (H2), the hypothesis that the desire to help others constitutes the primary motivation for volunteering was not supported. This motivation ranked only sixth (9.5%), being surpassed by the need for social recognition within the community (11.5%), other situational motives (10.6%), and the desire to acquire knowledge and experience (10.4%).

With respect to barriers to volunteering (H3), the hypothesis that lack of information is the principal obstacle was only partially confirmed. Lack of information ranked second (9.4%), following personal and financial constraints (10%), which emerged as the most frequently reported barrier.

By contrast, Hypothesis H4, according to which personal satisfaction and perceived social impact constitute the principal benefits of volunteering, was fully confirmed. Personal fulfilment

(16.3%) and social impact (15.0%) ranked first and second respectively, although the overall distribution of perceived benefits remained relatively balanced.

The survey portrays the typical volunteer as predominantly female (56.8%), young (aged 21–29 years), highly educated, and residing in large urban centres, particularly Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, and Iași. These findings confirm that volunteering in Romania remains geographically and socially concentrated.

The results also reveal significant shortcomings in the implementation of the existing legal framework. Forty-three percent of volunteers reported that they had not signed volunteer agreements as required by law, while 39% had not received volunteer certificates documenting their activity. Furthermore, more than half of the respondents were unaware of the tax deductibility provisions associated with volunteering. At the same time, 61% supported the creation of a national online platform for volunteers, while 45.4% indicated that the possibility of obtaining a digital volunteer certificate would further encourage their participation.

Based on these findings, the study formulates a series of recommendations, including the professionalisation of the voluntary sector, improvements in institutional communication, the development of digital infrastructure, and the geographical expansion of volunteering opportunities, particularly in rural areas.

The distribution of responses concerning barriers to volunteering also demonstrates a relatively balanced pattern, with no single factor emerging as overwhelmingly dominant. In addition to personal and financial constraints and lack of information, respondents identified lack of time and the perceived mismatch between personal interests and the opportunities offered by volunteer organisations as important obstacles. This distribution suggests that non-participation in volunteering cannot be attributed to a single cause but rather results from the interaction of structural factors—such as limited time and available resources—and communication-related factors, including the visibility and accessibility of volunteering opportunities.

The authors conclude that the profile emerging from the survey - young, well educated, and urban - provides a solid foundation for expanding volunteering in Romania, provided that the identified shortcomings concerning public information, legal recognition, and geographical accessibility are effectively addressed. This conclusion also serves as the conceptual bridge to the subsequent Delphi study on strategic priorities and to the legislative reform proposals presented later in the chapter.

2. Strategic priorities for the development of volunteering: the Delphi study

The second empirical investigation employs the Delphi method to identify the strategic priorities for the development of volunteering in Romania. The study was conducted between 2 and 30 April 2025 and involved a panel of 15 experts representing non-governmental organisations, academia, public institutions, organisational development consultancy, senior volunteers, and the corporate sector.

The Delphi process consisted of three successive rounds. During the first round, participants were invited to identify freely the priorities they considered essential for the future development of volunteering. After aggregating the responses, ten recurrent strategic priorities were identified. The most frequently mentioned were improving the legislative and strategic framework (identified by 13 of the 15 experts), professional training for volunteer coordinators (12 experts), and the creation of a national volunteer matching platform (11 experts).

3. Regulation of volunteering. analysis of Law No. 78/2014

In the second round, these priorities were assessed using a five-point scale, resulting in a ranking that showed a high level of consensus for the first two priorities (mean scores of 4.7 and 4.5, respectively) and a lower level of consensus for the last two (volunteering in rural areas and the system for recognizing competencies, with mean scores of 3.6 and 3.5, respectively). The third round further strengthened the consensus regarding the top five priorities—improving the legal framework (final score: 4.8; consensus: 93%), training volunteer coordinators (4.6; consensus: 87%), creating a national volunteer matching platform (4.4; consensus: 80%), integrating volunteering into the educational system (4.3; consensus: 73%), and improving public perceptions of volunteering (4.2; consensus: 67%). For each priority, concrete actions, responsible stakeholders, and implementation timelines were proposed.

The findings only partially confirm the working hypothesis (H1), according to which the main priorities for the development of volunteering would be the improvement of the legal framework, the integration of volunteering into the educational system, and the development of technological infrastructure. Only the first component ranked first, while the other two were not placed among the experts' top three priorities. The study proposes an integrated implementation plan structured into three phases: Foundation (0-12 months), Development (12-24 months), and Consolidation (24-36 months), supported by an estimated funding scheme consisting of 40% European funds, 25% state budget allocations, 20% private sector contributions, and 15%

organizations' own resources. The study also acknowledges several methodological limitations, including the relatively small size of the expert panel, the absence of a pilot validation phase, and the estimated nature of the financial projections.

The consultation process also generated valuable qualitative insights expressed by the panelists during the second and third Delphi rounds. Several experts emphasized that a robust legal framework constitutes the fundamental prerequisite for the success of all other initiatives, whereas others argued that, in the absence of well-trained volunteer coordinators, even an improved legal framework would remain ineffective in practice. Representatives of the corporate sector expressed their willingness to support initiatives related primarily to volunteer training and technological infrastructure, highlighting the considerable yet underutilized potential for public-private partnerships. Statistical indicators further confirmed the robustness of the consensus achieved: the variation between rounds remained below 5% for the top three priorities, the correlation coefficient between the second and third rounds reached 0.92, and the expert participation rate remained at 100% throughout all three rounds, providing a high level of methodological reliability and credibility.

3. Legal regulation of volunteering: an analysis of Law No. 78/2014

The third component of the chapter presents a socio-legal analysis of Law No. 78/2014 on the Regulation of Volunteering, interpreting it as an instrument for the formalization and social regulation of volunteering. From a critical perspective, the law embodies a structural paradox: it seeks to regulate an activity that, by definition, should remain spontaneous and freely undertaken. Drawing on a Foucauldian interpretation, the study argues that the legislation transforms volunteering into a mechanism for producing "responsible citizens" operating within a framework of state supervision.

The legal recognition of volunteering as professional experience—conditional, however, upon its correspondence with the volunteer's field of study—is interpreted as a mechanism through which symbolic capital is converted into economic capital. At the same time, this provision is viewed as a potential source of educational inequality, as it tends to favor individuals with higher levels of formal education.

The analysis identifies a series of practical obstacles: the lack of meaningful recognition incentives (as certificates of competencies are rarely valued by employers), excessive bureaucratization of the relationship between NGOs and public authorities, and the ambiguity of

the legal provisions concerning civil liability in the event of accidents. The 2022 amendment (Law No. 211/2022) introduced a more concrete definition of the purpose of volunteering, linking it to the competitive labor market, vocational training, and social solidarity. However, the chapter observes that this reformulation maintains a strong state-centered approach, with the state preserving its role as the exclusive authority defining the fields and limits within which voluntary activities may be carried out. This aspect is highlighted through a detailed examination of Articles 1-22 of the law, covering definitions, volunteers' rights and obligations, contractual procedures, certification of volunteer activities, and conditions for contract termination.

Based on this analysis, the chapter proposes several de lege ferenda recommendations: expanding the legal framework to include additional areas such as political, electoral, and administrative volunteering; reducing state control over volunteer initiatives; introducing mechanisms for academic and professional recognition through transferable credit systems; simplifying administrative procedures; establishing tax incentives following the examples of countries such as France and Germany; and creating a national authority responsible for coordinating volunteering policies. The chapter concludes that the success of any legislative reform depends not only on the quality of the legal provisions themselves but also on the institutional capacity to implement them effectively and on raising awareness among all stakeholders involved.

A separate section of the analysis is devoted to the contractual regime established by the law. Article 12 sets out four categories of volunteers' rights: the right to carry out activities in accordance with their own abilities and availability; the right to request a volunteering certificate accompanied by an activity report; the right to confidentiality and protection of personal data; and the right to appropriate leisure time. By contrast, Article 13 establishes considerably more detailed obligations, including performing public-interest activities without remuneration, complying with the volunteer assignment description and safety regulations, maintaining the confidentiality of information for two years after the termination of the contract, and notifying the host organization of any temporary unavailability.

This asymmetry - where rights are formulated in general terms while obligations are detailed in a manner resembling an individual employment contract—reflects the structural tension between the voluntary nature of civic engagement and the institutional logic of regulation and control. The chapter also examines the provisions concerning the joint liability of the host

organization and the volunteer for damages caused to third parties (Articles 16–17), as well as the conditions governing contract renegotiation, unilateral termination (subject to a 15-day notice period), and dispute resolution (Articles 19–22). The conclusion is that, although the current legal framework provides procedural predictability, it remains insufficient to genuinely encourage volunteer initiative.

4. Prioritization of volunteering services: the second opinion survey

The fourth empirical component of the study aimed to rank the areas of activity considered priorities by volunteers. The findings reveal a clear hierarchy, led by healthcare and medical care services (85.7% of respondents expressing interest), followed by education and training (77.9%) and social assistance (76.9%), all three exceeding the 70% interest threshold. At the opposite end of the spectrum are areas such as technology and digitalization (35.2%), animal protection (33.5%), and sports and recreation (44.2%), which are viewed as sectors with development potential but currently attracting relatively limited interest.

The research hypothesis stating that healthcare services rank first among volunteers' preferences is therefore fully confirmed.

Based on this ranking, four strategic recommendations are proposed: concentrating resources on the fields of healthcare and education; strengthening partnerships for social assistance services targeting vulnerable groups; developing dedicated campaigns to attract volunteers to the technology sector; and adapting volunteering programs to the dominant demographic segment—young volunteers aged 16–25 years (37.9% of the sample).

The survey also provides a complementary picture of respondents' previous volunteering experience and their age distribution, confirming the trend already identified in the first survey: the predominance of the younger age group (16-25 years, representing 37.9% of the sample) among individuals interested in volunteering. Correlating this demographic distribution with the ranking of priority service areas suggests the existence of generation-specific preferences, a finding that may justify, in future research, a more refined segmentation of volunteering programs according to age and previous volunteering experience. The chapter also highlights the relatively polarized nature of the resulting hierarchy: a group of three areas with high levels of interest (over 70%), an intermediate group with moderate interest (44-67%), and a small group of emerging areas attracting less than 36% interest. This configuration provides policymakers with a useful tool for

differentiated resource allocation and for designing awareness campaigns tailored to each level of public interest.

5. An Ecosystem supporting the sustainable development of volunteering

The final component of the chapter proposes an integrated conceptual model designed to synthesize the findings of the previous empirical investigations into a strategic and operational framework. The proposed vision aims to create an inclusive, transparent, sustainable, and innovative environment, structured around four interconnected pillars:

The institutional and legal framework, including the establishment of a National Volunteering Agency, the revision of Law No. 78/2014, and decentralization through regional volunteering centers;

Support infrastructure, consisting of a national digital volunteer matching platform, networks of regional volunteer coordinators, and university and corporate volunteering hubs;

Sustainable financing mechanisms, including a national volunteering fund with a minimum annual allocation of 0.1% of GDP, public-private partnerships, and innovative financing instruments such as social impact bonds and civic crowdfunding;

Human capital development, through experiential civic education, volunteering placements within higher education, and a national system for recognizing and certifying competencies acquired through volunteering.

The model also proposes operational mechanisms, including cross-sectoral coordination through a National Volunteering Council, monitoring by a National Volunteering Observatory, and nationwide communication campaigns. Its implementation strategy is structured into three phases, mirroring the Delphi study: Foundation (Years 1–2), Expansion (Years 3–5), and Consolidation (Years 6–10).

The proposed success indicators include increasing the civic participation rate from the current estimated 6% to 20% within ten years, together with qualitative indicators measuring social impact, volunteer satisfaction, and the financial sustainability of volunteering organizations. Finally, the chapter identifies the main anticipated barriers - public distrust in state institutions, lack of time, and geographical constraints - and proposes corresponding mitigation measures based on transparency, flexibility, and digital solutions.

The five components of the chapter converge toward a common conclusion: volunteering in Romania is currently in a transitional stage, characterized by a genuine increase in civic interest

and participation, but also by significant structural deficiencies in the legislative, institutional, and infrastructural spheres. The empirical findings - a 60% participation rate, motivations centered on recognition and personal development, and the clear hierarchy of priority volunteering services - are consistent with the expert consensus achieved through the Delphi method and with the critical analysis of the legal framework, resulting in a comprehensive and coherent diagnosis of the current state of volunteering in Romania.

It is particularly significant that the four empirical studies, although distinct in both methodology and scope, converge toward the same priority directions: the need for a more flexible and less state-centered legal framework, the importance of training professional volunteer coordinators, the necessity of a unified national digital infrastructure, and the opportunity to improve the social and professional recognition of volunteering experience. This methodological convergence - between the perceptions of the general population, the judgments of experts, and the normative analysis of legislation - enhances the robustness of the chapter's findings and suggests that the identified priorities are not artifacts of a single research method but rather reflect genuine structural trends within Romania's volunteering sector.

The *ecosystem model* proposed at the end of the chapter likewise provides an integrative framework designed to transform the diagnostic findings into concrete courses of action, while also serving as the argumentative foundation for the legislative reform proposals developed in the final part of the doctoral thesis. Overall, Chapter V demonstrates the value of a mixed-methods approach - combining opinion surveys, the Delphi technique, critical legal analysis, and conceptual modeling - for understanding a complex social phenomenon and for formulating evidence-based public policy recommendations capable of supporting the maturation of Romania's volunteering sector.

Conclusions

The scientific investigation conducted throughout the five chapters of this dissertation, supported by five original empirical studies, leads to an integrative understanding of volunteering as a multidimensional social phenomenon with profound implications for contemporary Romanian society.

The principal theoretical conclusion of this research is that volunteering cannot be reduced to a simple manifestation of individual altruism or to occasional charitable activity. Rather, it constitutes a complex social phenomenon shaped simultaneously by structural, cultural, and

contextual factors. It performs multiple functions: serving as a mechanism of social cohesion, an instrument of participatory governance, a complementary provider of public services, and a barometer of a society's democratic maturity. Contemporary volunteering is the outcome of a long historical evolution marked by major social and political transformations, which has led from traditional forms of mutual community assistance - such as communal labor (clacă), traditional social gatherings (șezătoare), and religious charity - to the sophisticated strategies of social pedagogy and active solidarity characteristic of the postmodern era.

The research also identifies a number of productive tensions that shape contemporary volunteering: the tension between individual freedom of choice and collective social responsibility; between traditional spontaneity and the need for professionalization; between the local dimension of civic action and the influence of globalization; and between the authenticity of civic engagement and the pressures of institutional efficiency. These tensions should not be interpreted as obstacles to the development of volunteering but rather as genuine drivers of its continuous evolution, reflecting the vitality of the sector and its capacity to adapt to constantly changing social contexts.

The synthesis of the research identifies six distinct and complementary sociological roles performed by volunteers. First, volunteers act as early detectors of social vulnerabilities, identifying, through their direct experience, emerging weaknesses within communities before these develop into major social fractures, thus serving as sentinels of participatory democracy. Second, they function as architects of intergenerational and intercultural cohesion, mediating social capital, building bridges between fragmented communities, and transforming diversity into a collective resource. Third, volunteers serve as catalysts for bottom-up social innovation, organically generating intervention models tailored to local contexts and functioning as social laboratories for new community-based paradigms. A fourth role is that of guardians of civic memory, fostering and transmitting democratic values as a counterbalance to the individualistic tendencies of postmodern society. The fifth role consists of acting as a dynamic interface between civil society and public institutions, translating community needs into the language of public policy and contributing to the humanization of institutional responses. Finally, the sixth identified role is that of agents of social resilience, maintaining the functionality of support networks during times of crisis and ensuring the continuity of community values over time.

The empirical research conducted within this dissertation estimates the economic contribution of volunteering at approximately 0.08-0.1% of Romania's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), generating substantial savings for the public sector. Beyond its strictly economic dimension, volunteering also produces measurable social effects: volunteers exhibit 25-30% higher levels of generalized social trust than non-volunteers and are 25-30% more actively involved in democratic processes, thereby confirming volunteering's function as a genuine "school of democracy." At the individual level, young people with substantial volunteering experience secure their first job 3.7 months earlier and are 23% more likely to obtain employment that matches their qualifications.

The overall body of empirical evidence outlines the typical profile of the Romanian volunteer: young, well educated, living in large urban areas, and motivated by prosocial values as well as by the desire for recognition and personal development. The survey on civic participation generated findings that either refute or significantly refine the initial research hypotheses.

The five strategic priorities identified for the development of Romania's volunteering sector—improving the legal framework, training volunteer coordinators, establishing a national volunteer matching platform, integrating volunteering into the educational system, and enhancing public perceptions of volunteering—confirm the need for a systemic approach to these priorities and demonstrate the growing maturity of strategic thinking within Romania's volunteering sector.

The critical analysis of the current legislation reveals several significant shortcomings: it grants the state a position of superiority over volunteer activities, restricts the scope of volunteering to areas predetermined by public authorities, and fails to fully capitalize on the potential of volunteering to compensate for shortcomings in state intervention. The de lege ferenda proposals advanced in this dissertation include expanding the fields of voluntary activity, introducing academic recognition through transferable credit systems, simplifying administrative procedures through digitalization, introducing tax incentives, and establishing an autonomous National Volunteering Authority.

Original contributions and proposed models

The dissertation makes two major original contributions that go beyond the level of a purely descriptive analysis. The first is the progressive circular model, whereby the results of each stage of research constitute the empirical foundation for the subsequent investigation, generating an epistemological continuum with cumulative value. Specifically, the findings of the Delphi study informed the design and content of the sociological survey, while the conclusions of the legal

analysis subsequently supported the de lege ferenda proposals. The second contribution consists of the ecosystem conceptualization of volunteering - an integrated model grounded in five guiding principles: demographic inclusion, systemic transparency, financial diversification, innovative adaptability, and intersectoral collaboration. This model advocates a shift from isolated programmes to a holistic system of interdependent relationships. The proposed ecosystem comprises six pillars: the institutional and legal framework; digital and physical support infrastructure; sustainable financing mechanisms (including a minimum allocation of 0.1% of GDP); human capital development; monitoring through a National Volunteering Observatory; and strategic communication. The model's ambitious objective is to increase the national volunteering participation rate from 6% to 20% over a ten-year period.

Structural challenges and final recommendations

The dissertation clearly concludes that volunteering in Romania has reached a critical turning point. With a relatively low proportion of the population actively engaged in volunteering - significantly below the European average - Romania has the potential to transform volunteering from a marginal activity into a fundamental pillar of participatory democracy, but only through a coherent set of decisive and coordinated actions. The principal structural challenges identified include the geographical and social concentration of volunteering in urban areas and among highly educated individuals, the absence of a coherent national strategy, existing deficiencies in volunteer training and management, and the rigidity of the current legal framework.

The dissertation's final recommendations are addressed separately to all key stakeholders in the field. For public policymakers, it recommends the development of a National Volunteering Strategy with clearly defined objectives, resources, and performance indicators; the reform of the legislative framework; the establishment of a system for recognising and validating competencies acquired through volunteering; and the implementation of multiannual funding mechanisms. For non-governmental organisations, the recommendations include adopting professional volunteer management models, diversifying volunteer engagement strategies, implementing rigorous impact assessment systems, and building sectoral cooperation networks. For the corporate sector, the dissertation recommends expanding corporate volunteering programmes as an essential component of corporate social responsibility. Future development prospects include accelerating the digital transformation of the sector, expanding corporate volunteering, aligning volunteering

policies with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and promoting intergenerational volunteering programmes.

The dissertation concludes with the well-supported conviction that volunteering constitutes an essential strategic resource for contemporary societies, providing flexibility, innovation capacity, and close responsiveness to the genuine needs of beneficiaries. Societies that successfully integrate this distinctive contribution into the architecture of their social protection systems demonstrate greater resilience in addressing the complex challenges of the contemporary world. Fully harnessing this potential in Romania requires concerted efforts by all relevant social actors—the state, non-profit organisations, the private sector, and citizens—to build an ecosystem conducive to the sustainable development of volunteering as a genuine driver of social cohesion and participatory democracy.

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