

VOLUNTEER ACTIVITY OF TRANSCARPATHIAN YOUTH DURING THE 2022 RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

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ABSTRACT: *The Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan protests led to a significant increase in civic engagement among the Ukrainian population. After the turn of the millennium, civic participation among the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia also expanded. During the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022, young people from Transcarpathia played an important role as volunteers in helping refugees in Transcarpathia, on the Ukrainian–Hungarian border, and in Hungary. In our exploratory study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with young volunteers from Transcarpathia. In the thematic analysis, we explored the interviewees’ pre-war volunteer experience, their voluntary activities during the war, their motivations for volunteering, and finally, the potential returns to volunteering. The interviews were also used to carry out type analysis, delimiting three volunteer types based on motivations and frequency of volunteering. According to our most important result, despite the social tensions caused by the war, young volunteers in Transcarpathia show strong solidarity with Ukrainian refugees from central regions, and the activity has generally increased volunteers’ well-being. Another important implication could be that the group of interviewees who only started volunteering during the war may be open to helping others in the future, which could further spread the culture of volunteering in the region.*

KEYWORDS: *youth, volunteering, 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war, helping refugees, motivations for volunteering*

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INTRODUCTION

In this study, we examine the volunteering of young people in Transcarpathia during the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022. The Russian invasion forced millions of Ukrainian citizens to flee their homes. The majority of those fleeing abroad headed for a neighbouring country in the European Union. In this respect, the westernmost Ukrainian province (oblast) of Transcarpathia,² which borders four EU Member States (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania), gained a crucial role. Volunteers from Transcarpathia have been particularly important in managing the influx of refugees.

According to Tokhtarova (2014), the largest group of volunteers in Ukraine consists of secondary school and higher education students. In our qualitative semi-structured interview study, we included students from the Hungarian minority in Ukraine who speak Hungarian and volunteer in Transcarpathia as well as in Hungary, where they also help refugees. The novelty of the research is that, despite the topicality of the subject, relatively few studies have dealt with volunteer activities resulting from the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war. The study also fills a gap in that, in recent years, the volunteering of students in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region was primarily investigated with quantitative large-sample data and not with qualitative interview methods.

In this study, we formulated five main research questions. The first concerned volunteer experience before the war and its motivations. The other two questions sought to explore the characteristics of volunteering during the war and its motivations. We then examined the impact of and returns to volunteering from the volunteers' perspective and the effects on volunteers' well-being. Our final research task was identifying the types of volunteers associated with this specific volunteer activity.

In the theoretical section of the study, we deal with volunteering in Ukraine and Transcarpathia in the post-communist period, as well as with the volunteering of higher education students in this region. Then, we focus on the impact of volunteering and its returns. After the presentation of the research methodology, we discuss the thematic analysis based on the interviews, in which the main dimensions of analysis were developed relying on our research questions. We then present the type analysis of the interviews, delimiting among the young volunteers helping refugees three volunteer types. Finally, we present the discussion and conclusions as well as the limitations of the research and further research plans.

2 The territories of the former counties of Northeastern Hungary (Ung, Bereg, Ugocsa, and Máramaros), which now belong to Ukraine, are referred to as Transcarpathia.

THEORETICAL SECTION

Volunteering in Ukraine

In the Central and Eastern European region, civil society became pronounced after the fall of communism in 1989–1990, at the same time as the first volunteers appeared. Unpaid work, which was compulsory under the socialist system, was followed in post-socialist countries by a surge in “voluntary” volunteering in non-governmental organisations (Juknevičius–Savicka 2003). In Ukraine, volunteering as a form of responsible social engagement and civic participation also started to emerge in the years following the fall of communism.

After the political upheaval known as the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Euromaidan protests in 2013–2014,³ civic engagement in Ukraine increased, which was further intensified by the armed conflict which erupted in March 2014 in the east of Ukraine (Tokhtarova 2014; Pankova et al. 2016). The resulting social problems generated new tasks for volunteers: they had to help refugees from Crimea and Donbas as well as soldiers fighting in the Anti-terrorist Operation Zone (ATO). The most frequent tasks associated with assisting soldiers included the delivery of aid and supplies, first aid, searching for soldiers declared missing, and the release of prisoners (Paslavska 2016). The Russian invasion, which began on February 24, 2022, has given an even greater impetus to the social activism of Ukrainian citizens.

During this time, the number of voluntary, charitable organisations whose purpose was to help soldiers, war veterans, and those forced to leave their homes also grew. According to UN estimates, there were 750 volunteer groups in Ukraine at that time that helped the army and internally displaced persons; 75,000 people were doing volunteer work, and donations and charity collections increased significantly (Stepaniuk 2022). Based on Bulakh’s (2023) study, there are more than 15,000 charitable organisations operating in Ukraine, 8% of which were registered in April 2022. These are not always registered NGOs but often so-called ad-hoc initiatives that respond to specific needs. We can conclude that volunteering in Ukraine involves performing specific tasks in addition to traditional ones. Pankiv et al. (2023) draw attention to the fact that this is primarily a military volunteer movement. Volunteers not only support the army but also take part in meeting basic needs, most of which involves grassroots initiatives.

The survey, conducted on March 8 and 9, 2022 (see *Ukraine under Wartime Conditions*), involved 1,200 Ukrainian citizens from all provinces of Ukraine

3 The dispute over Ukraine’s closer association with the EU erupted between the pro-Russian government and the opposition. The protest eventually turned into a violent clash with the police.

(excluding Donbas and Crimea). The results show that about 35–39% of respondents had done voluntary work since the outbreak of the war. Furthermore, the largest proportion of people volunteering was in the western part of the country, presumably because there is no active fighting in those regions, but people there do much of the work of housing and caring for refugees from war zones. Stepaniuk's (2022) study also highlights that residents of the Kyiv and Western regions were more active in voluntary initiatives compared to in other regions; in addition, women were involved in greater numbers and proportions in helping soldiers and those forced to leave their homes. Tereshchenko (2010) demonstrates the unconventional civic participation of youth in the Orange Revolution. Tokhtarova (2014) highlights a feature of the volunteer movement in Ukraine that was already present in the past, namely that the largest group of volunteers is made up of students. The findings show that almost half of the volunteers were young people aged between 18 and 35 in 2022 as well. After February 24, 2022, children's volunteering also appeared, in the framework of which children create presents in order to support and encourage the armed forces. People with different views, including political views, set aside their previous conflicts and started volunteering together. Pankiv et al. (2023) highlight that in a war situation, all social strata take part in volunteering, regardless of age, occupation, or education.

Volunteering in Transcarpathia

The majority of those fleeing abroad from the war have headed for a neighbouring country in the European Union. Transcarpathia, the westernmost province of Ukraine, borders four EU Member States: Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. A significant number of the refugees have crossed Transcarpathia and have stayed for some time there. As there was no active fighting in this province, the number of temporarily resettled people from central regions increased significantly. The war and the influx of refugees in Transcarpathia also boosted informal and formal volunteering among local residents, and distance learning gave students more flexibility to volunteer. Young people joined various (religious, cultural, recreational) volunteer organisations, and these organisations started to help refugees, as large events were banned because of the war to avoid the grouping of people. The surge in volunteer activity during the Russo-Ukrainian war has not been confined to Ukraine. A significant number of Ukrainian citizens fleeing abroad have become volunteers themselves in their current place of residence to help refugees and people living in the war zone (Kotelevets 2022). This trend is

also observed among young people in Transcarpathia who stay temporarily abroad. In the post-Euromaidan period, the Hungarian government provided scholarships to Transcarpathian Hungarian youth studying in Hungary, which strengthened emigration (Tátrai et al. 2017). University students residing and studying in Hungary who usually speak Hungarian, Ukrainian or Russian, and English acted as interpreters for refugees on humanitarian trains from Záhony to Budapest, at the Western and Eastern Railway Stations, and in the BOK Sports Hall (a refugee reception centre in Budapest).

It is an interesting research question: What is the role of ethnicity in volunteering among Transcarpathian youth? According to the concept of Zakariás and Feischmidt (2020), volunteering can also be interpreted as a practical manifestation of national consciousness. Two types of helping attitudes are distinguished: an intra-group (co-nationals, co-ethnics) one and the inter-ethnic, universal helping attitude, which relate to different types of national conception, ethnic and civic nationalism. In this study, young people in Transcarpathia primarily helped another ethnic group, internal Ukrainian refugees, which is related to the inter-ethnic solidarity type.

Another question is how minority status is related to volunteering. In his work entitled *Suicide*, Durkheim points out the protective effect of being member of a minority, the background of which is greater community integration (Durkheim 2005). Based on the results of one large sample survey conducted in 2019, the chance of voluntary group membership among students in Transcarpathia was higher than in Eastern Hungary (Bocsi et al. 2020). The phenomenon can be explained by minority status since the largest proportion of minority students was observed in the Ukrainian sub-sample and the smallest in the Hungarian sub-sample. Furthermore, due to minority status and traditions, Transcarpathian students are more religious, and most of them are members of religious organisations and small religious communities. Based on Perpék (2012), social (relationship) resources are stronger predictors of volunteering than socio-demographic factors. In relation to religiosity, it is primarily religious activity in a community (e.g. church attendance, small religious community membership) which increases the chance of volunteering, rather than faith in itself (Ruiter – De Graaf 2006; Wilson–Musick 1997; Becker–Dhingra 2001; Tienen et al. 2011; Fényes–Pusztai 2012b; Fényes 2015; Bocsi et al. 2020). According to data from the 2020 Hungarian Youth Survey, it is attachment to the church that played a community-integrating role among young people in Transcarpathia, which is related to being a minority since the majority of Transcarpathian Hungarians are of the Reformed or Roman Catholic faith, as opposed to the Ukrainian majority. Among Transcarpathian youth, in the case of church-related religiosity, there is a nearly 12-fold chance of someone becoming an active formal volunteer.

In contrast, the effect of socio-demographic variables on this likelihood has been found to be insignificant (Bartal–Fényes 2023). Kuryliak and Balaklytskyi (2021) also point out that in Ukraine, members of the minority Protestant church played a great part in overcoming the difficulties caused by the 2014 armed conflict.

Characteristics of student volunteering in CEE

According to a series of large-sample surveys conducted between 2012 and 2019, in Transcarpathia, 31% of higher education students volunteered during their studies in 2012, which share rose to 55% in 2014 during the Euromaidan protests, then declined slightly to 43% in 2019 (Fényes–Pusztai 2012a; Fényes 2015; Bocsi et al. 2020). According to Dekker and Halman (2003), volunteering can be motivated by intrinsic, individual personality traits (e.g. helpfulness, activity, generosity) and extrinsic factors (e.g. circumstances, behaviour of others). Both altruistic and egoistic motivations can lead to volunteering. Initially, motivational models featured two or three factors (altruistic, egoistic, socially motivated), but multifactor models are now more common (Clary et al. 1998). The motivations for volunteering among higher education students can be classified into two main groups: altruistic and helping motivations (including helping others, religion and faith, belonging to a community, and volunteering as a moral duty) or individualistic and self-interested motivations (e.g. acquiring work experience, professional development, spending leisure time meaningfully, making new friends). Smith et al. (2010) found among university students in five developed Western countries that students' motivations for volunteering were mixed, with individualistic motivations slightly stronger than social motivations. Holdsworth and Brewis (2014) demonstrated that in the UK, the most important motive for students' volunteering was to meet their own expectations and aspirations. However, more recent results (Geng et al. 2022) show that the COVID-19 pandemic amplified social motivations among students over individual interests.

Research conducted in Central and Eastern Europe (Stefanescu–Osvat 2011; Fényes–Pusztai 2012a; Fényes 2015; Bocsi et al. 2017; Fényes et al. 2021) showed even before the pandemic that purely individualistic motivations did not appear among university students as helping others was also important for modern volunteers. It is important to note that including volunteer experience on one's résumé has been an important career-related motivation in Western countries (Handy et al. 2010) but has only recently become significant among higher education students in the CEE region (Fényes et al. 2021).

The impact of and returns to volunteering

According to Astin and Sax (1998) Hesser (1995), Eyler et al. (1997) and Mabry (1998), volunteering in higher education develops several competences. It supports academic progress and professional development, and it also develops skills and competences needed later in life (e.g. leadership and communication skills, conflict resolution, teamwork). It may increase the knowledge and acceptance of other cultures and ethnicities while also promoting changes in individual values, goals, and attitudes. Finally, volunteering also develops civic awareness and responsibility and may increase political activism and the acceptance of social justice and fairness. In addition to the benefits of volunteering in terms of skills development, it is important to highlight that in the longer term, volunteering may also pay off financially for young people by helping them get a good job. The social and cultural capital acquired while volunteering can later be converted into financial benefits in paid employment (see Bourdieu's theory of capital conversion (Bourdieu 1986)).

Wilson (2000) points out that volunteering has a positive impact on quality of life and physical and mental health. This positive impact is mainly reflected in volunteers' improved social relationships, better integration into the community, and a sense of belonging. According to Díaz-Iso et al. (2020), volunteering among higher education students also increases well-being, mainly through social relationships. Borgonovi (2008) showed that volunteering was strongly associated with better health and greater happiness, while other forms of altruistic behaviour, such as donating money or blood, did not have this positive effect. Fenn et al. (2022), however, emphasise that the positive effect may depend on the social background of the volunteer.

Research on Ukraine's wartime volunteering showed that the function of volunteering was not only to provide financial assistance and help meet everyday needs but also to create social relations and a sense of community support (Bulakh 2023). Karhina et al. (2017) investigated the impact of volunteering on personal well-being in the western Ukrainian city of Khmelnytsky in the context of the 2014 Ukrainian military conflict. The results showed that volunteering had a positive impact on volunteers' well-being in various ways. Voluntary activity expanded volunteers' social networks and brought positive emotions into their lives, which could compensate for the effort they put into their work. In addition, they felt that volunteering gave a sense of meaning to their lives. The negative effects of volunteering were also mentioned, such as physical fatigue and the fact that volunteering sometimes took up a significant amount of time, which caused volunteers to become disconnected from the everyday (non-volunteer) world and they often felt insecure, and sometimes put the needs of others before their own.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design and sample

In our study in May 2022, we conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with volunteers involved in helping refugees from Ukraine. The interviewees were typically Hungarian native speakers who currently live in Ukraine (mainly in Hungarian-speaking settlements near the Ukrainian–Hungarian border) or who moved to Hungary after the outbreak of the war. Respondents are young people aged 18 to 36 with higher education or currently enrolled in postgraduate studies (Table 1). It is also important to highlight that almost all interviewees reported that religious faith played an important role in their lives.

Table 1. *Introduction to interviewees*

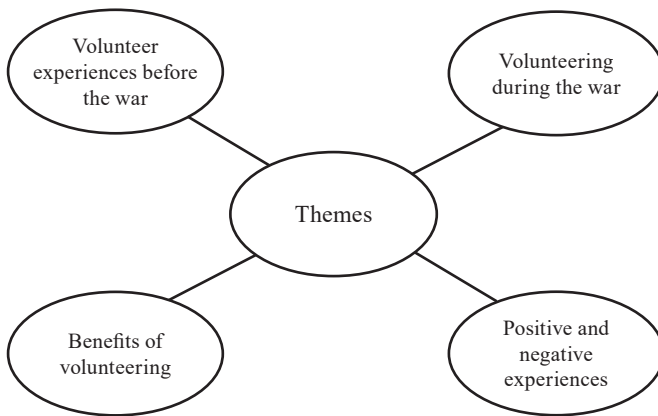
Interview No.	Gender	Age (years)	Occupation	Current Place of Residence
1.	Female	36	Ethnographer, PhD candidate	Berehove (Beregszász)
2.	Male	18	College student – history and English	Koson (Mezőkaszony)
3.	Female	22	College student – kindergarten teacher	Hat (Gát)
4.	Female	20	College student – biology	Fertesholmash (Fertősalmás)
5.	Female	22	College student – teacher	Budapest
6.	Female	22	College student – mathematics	Vynohradiv (Nagyszőlős)
7.	Female	26	Teacher, PhD student	Berehove (Beregszász)
8.	Male	20	College student – engineering	Budapest
9.	Male	23	College student – mathematics	Budapest
10.	Female	36	College student – English teacher	Berehove (Beregszász)
11.	Female	28	University student – special needs teacher	Szeged
12.	Male	23	College student – mathematics	Eger
13.	Male	19	College student – mathematics	Budapest

Data analysis

To process the interviews, we carried out thematic analysis and type analysis. Our findings are supported by interview excerpts. The analysis was conducted using manual coding with deductive logic. The thematic analysis is based on the following key themes from the interviews:

- Volunteer experience before the war (what volunteering means to the volunteers, previous voluntary activities, and related motivations, organisational memberships);
- Volunteering during the war (characteristics of and motivations for volunteering);
- Positive and negative experiences with volunteering;
- The impact of volunteering (returns to volunteering, effects on well-being).

Figure 1. Themes emerging from qualitative analysis



Type analysis is used to explore the types of volunteers, which can be identified by treating each interview as a unit. Smith et al. (2010) found the greatest differences between students in terms of the motivation for and frequency of volunteering. We used these two factors as the basis for the typology.

RESULTS

Results of the thematic analysis

Volunteering before the war

Half of the interviewees did not report any previous volunteer experience; they were motivated to volunteer by the need to help the victims of war. Their main reason for not having volunteered before was the lack of opportunity. Those who had volunteer experience were mainly involved in activities organised by churches, local organizations, or their higher education institution. The activities typically focussed on helping people who lived nearby (elderly people, children), organizing cultural programs or launching initiatives to support the development of the immediate surroundings.

Before the war, I helped in the village and in the church. I also volunteered in children's camps and at the dormitory. At the dormitory, I joined the student union, and we help and inform the students.
(Interviewee 4)

Family members and friends who volunteer not only raise awareness of the importance of volunteering but can also motivate individuals to get involved. One interviewee stressed that she was “born into volunteering,” as her parents and grandparents had volunteered, so volunteering came naturally to her from a young age. Others pointed out that their friends had also volunteered, thus providing exposure to volunteering.

Volunteering during the war

As most interviewees were religious and were typically members of the Reformed Church, many of them learned through their religious community that they could volunteer to support their church in helping refugees. Those who did not find opportunities in this way either applied through a notice at the workplace or joined volunteering opportunities advertised at their higher education institution. There were also some who came across a call for volunteers on the internet. As most interviewees were higher education students, distance learning made it easy for them to combine volunteering with studying. Most interviewees helped at aid centres. One interviewee worked in a temporary shelter where they provided full care for refugees.

As refugees are housed in the kindergarten where I work, I also go there to help. We keep the common areas, the showers, and the canteen tidy. We call a doctor if they have complaints. We are also responsible for them. We keep a diary of who goes where, register where they come from, and keep track of their stay. We also have a curfew policy; we check that everyone has returned. There's also a night shift. Then, there are not so many tasks, but we still have to be on the lookout at night. We alternate 12-hour shifts, day and night. (Interviewee 4)

Another interviewee also worked at an aid centre, assisting in the delivery and distribution of food packages.

I do two types of activities: unloading and sorting incoming shipments in the warehouse, and the second is preparing the packages. It's important that every package has the same value. After that, I'm also involved in the loading of the packages. (Interviewee 2)

Those arriving from Ukraine crossed the Hungarian border and typically headed for the capital, several thousand of them by train. As few Hungarian ticket inspectors speak Ukrainian, volunteers who speak both Hungarian and Ukrainian were of great help to both refugees and railway workers. Several interviewees travelled back and forth on the Záhony–Budapest railway line and acted as interpreters to help guide and inform refugees.

My third volunteering activity concerns train rides. This consists of helping refugees buy their tickets and then having them fill in a questionnaire on the train. This is to assess their age group, how many women and men are arriving, whether they need medical care, etc. I then advise on accommodation, but once the train arrives, I hand them over to the volunteers in the capital, accompanying them to the aid centres. (Interviewee 8)

Some interviewees participated in administrative tasks. These mainly involved assessing the need for assistance among the people arriving, but some also took on the role of providing temporary accommodation for refugees. Others were involved in organising recreational activities, mainly for children.

Motivations for volunteering

One of the key questions of our research was the interviewees' motivations for volunteering. The main motivation for volunteering was to help war refugees. This was the first factor mentioned by almost all interviewees. One interviewee even reported this "need" as a motivation. As for *individualistic motivations*, the majority mentioned the ability to spend leisure time usefully, and as presented below, some considered the returns to volunteering to also include networking as a substantial benefit. In addition, frequent volunteers also cited gaining new knowledge and experience as motivations for their previous volunteering.

In addition to the motivation to help people in need through their current voluntary activities, several interviewees also mentioned that they volunteered because it gave them a sense of fulfilment, well-being, and joy.

I once delivered packages for refugees to families. I was delighted by how happy they were and how unexpected it was for them. (Interviewee 2)

I like to see that what I do has a positive impact on others. It makes me feel good. I feel motivated knowing that I can help others and make their life or situation easier. (Interviewee 4)

One interviewee started volunteering precisely to avoid feeling bad. She felt that in this situation, she should be in Transcarpathia, but she was in Hungary. To relieve this psychological burden, she decided to look for opportunities to volunteer to make life easier for those who had stayed at home.

I felt very bad about the helplessness and the fact that I'm not in Beregszász [Berehove] now. I would've been able to help more there. It was a big effort at the Maltese Charity, where they were short-staffed. I was very hurt that I couldn't be at home. So, I helped here as much as I could. (Interviewee 11)

Experiences with volunteering

In our study, we asked about both positive and negative experiences with volunteering. Most volunteers mentioned the positive feelings and experiences they had had and talked about spiritual recharging and the love they had received from refugees.

We received a lot of gratitude and love. (Interviewee 1)

It was great to work with children. Often, they were the ones to cheer me up, as our situation was also uncertain. Elderly people also sparked a positive experience; they always gave me a hug. (Interviewee 5)

Some highlighted the *positive joint experiences in a community*, the joy of working together, the sense of belonging, and cooperation. In addition, the opportunity to expand one's social network and meet new people was also mentioned as a positive aspect.

The people I've met are all positive. I've been part of a familiar collective. Now, I've met completely new people, which has been a positive experience. And the refugees are very grateful, which has been nice to see. (Interviewee 3)

It's positive for me that many people can come together for a good cause. Parents and children alike have come together. For me, this has been a good experience. (Interviewee 6)

For others, volunteering further reinforced the importance and usefulness of doing something for the community. This also provided the motivation for them to volunteer in the future.

As this has been my first serious volunteer experience, I've realised that I would like to continue being an active volunteer in the future. It's reinforced in me how good it is to help selflessly. (Interviewee 13)

The majority of volunteers did not report any *negative experiences*. Some mentioned as a negative experience that refugees were sometimes nervous or dissatisfied with the assistance, but when they felt the volunteers' supportive attitude, this quickly changed. There were also some volunteers who mentioned the sad life stories they had heard, which they felt were emotionally draining. Similar negative experiences were reported by Karhina et al. (2017) in their study on the 2014 military conflict in Ukraine, and Pankiv et al. (2023) also emphasised that volunteering since the war has been associated with enormous psychological stress. One of our interviewees reported the following:

The many sad stories have been a negative aspect. One elderly lady, over seventy, told us in detail how they had arrived from Kyiv by bus.

They came at night; all the lights were turned off. When they heard the explosions, the bus stopped, and everyone got down on the ground. It was mentally taxing to think what the people who were arriving were going through. It was also shocking that not everyone had a place to go to. They fled, crossed the border, and that's where they could first catch their breath. They were wondering where to go from here. (Interviewee 7)

Returns to volunteering

In our study, we also aimed to investigate volunteers' perceptions of whether and in what form volunteering yielded returns for them. Many mentioned spiritual well-being as a positive aspect of volunteering, and thus, mental well-being was also mentioned as an example of returns to volunteering.

It's being satisfied with what you do and being proud of yourself. (Interviewee 2)

In emotional terms, volunteering pays off. It feels good that the village has come together. (Interviewee 4)

In addition to the joy of volunteering, many also mentioned making new friendships and professional contacts, gaining experience, and achieving professional development.

In terms of joy and networking. I've also made new professional contacts. (Interviewee 11)

I've learned a lot from people. One has to forget about financial returns, but it's worth it because I've learned a lot and made a lot of connections. Over the years, I've made friends from all over the world, and my language skills have improved a lot. When the war broke out, lots of people from abroad called me. I have many dear friends in the Netherlands and America, so I have no regrets. (Interviewee 10)

Results of the type analysis

In the following, we apply type analysis to differentiate groups of volunteers. Based on the 13 analysed interviews, three types of volunteers are identified, which are presented below.

Regular volunteers with altruistic motivation

The first group of interviewees consists of altruistically motivated individuals with a long history of voluntary work, often with a strong religious background, whose main goal is to help others. These volunteers are regularly involved in helping activities, mainly assisting the elderly and those in need through physical work (food distribution, package deliveries). They are the ones who do not expect any benefit from volunteering. As one interviewee put it: “It has not paid off, but I don’t expect it to.” They mainly engage in volunteering activities which do not require any expertise but only basic human values such as patience, helpfulness, compassion, determination, and selflessness. One interviewee views volunteering as a means of self-expression: “It makes me feel like a good person because I’m helping; I’m there.” These volunteers are also characterised by frequent examples of volunteering in their family and immediate environment. “I was born into volunteering; I grew into it through my family.” They consider gratitude and thankfulness as the reward for their work. They plan to continue volunteering in the future and consider *volunteering to be a part of their life and lifestyle*.

Regular volunteers with mixed motivations

Studies conducted in the CEE region (Fényes–Pusztai 2012a; Fényes 2015; Fényes et al. 2021; Stefanescu–Osvat 2011) show that a significant proportion of students have mixed motivations for volunteering. The second group of volunteers includes those who have also volunteered for a time, usually in multiple organisations. Several people from their environment, friends, and family also volunteered, but to a lesser extent than in the previous group. Although they attach importance to helping others, they are also motivated by individualistic reasons for volunteering. As one interviewee described her motivations: “Lots of experience, new encounters, new acquaintances... If we’re volunteers at an event, we can participate for free and enjoy it while working.” They are involved in a variety of voluntary activities, ranging from assistance

to leisure volunteering (e.g. organising events, helping to preserve traditions, community development) or activities which require professional skills (e.g. interpreting). In their view, the positive aspects of volunteering include the community experience and the joy of the activity. They consider their spiritual recharging to be an important benefit of volunteering. They plan to continue volunteering in the future.

Occasional volunteers with mixed motivations

The third group of volunteers do not yet have much experience as they only started volunteering during the war. For them, helping others is important, but they also see volunteering as a useful way to spend their free time. Some volunteered in the hope of future returns, believing that if they needed help themselves, they could count on others' assistance. As one interviewee put it: "I believe that someone up there tallies good deeds and that we'll also get help if, God forbid, we find ourselves in a similar difficult situation. If we can help, others will help. If we put our hands up and run away, we won't get help either." Others were motivated by a desire to expand their professional networks and make new friends. They are involved in both physical work (packing and unpacking aid supplies) and intellectual work. Volunteering is less common in their immediate environment, and there were some who did not have anyone in their environment who engaged in voluntary activity. They get information about volunteer opportunities from friends, but mostly from the Internet. They see the returns to volunteering in people's gratitude and in the sense of satisfaction and calm. They plan to volunteer for as long as they need to, but life-long volunteering is not part of their plans.

DISCUSSION

The outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022 led to an increase in voluntary work in general as well as among students. Young people have volunteered not only in their home countries but also abroad, for example, in Hungary, where they often help other refugees. In this paper, we present volunteering activities aimed at helping refugees from Ukraine in Transcarpathia, on the Ukrainian–Hungarian border, and in Hungary. In our study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with young people who were university students or had already graduated from university. The interviews were conducted in

May 2022, when distance learning was in place to accommodate the refugees staying in dormitories, allowing our university student interviewees to be more flexible in their voluntary activities. In Ukraine, the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan protests increased the civic participation of Ukrainian society. As most of our interviewees were members of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, being a minority may have also contributed to their social engagement.

Our first dimension of analysis related to our interviewees' volunteer experience before the war. Those who had volunteered before had mainly done so in a church setting, within the organisation of their university, or in their local environment, but some had also been involved in the organisation of events and other forms of leisure volunteering. The following interview block focussed on volunteering after the outbreak of war. The interviewees had heard about volunteering opportunities primarily through church organisations, workplace advertisements, or Internet sites. They assisted refugees at aid centres, for example, by distributing clothes and food, as interpreters on trains between Záhony and Budapest, or through other administrative tasks. As in previous studies (Fényes–Pusztai 2012a; Fényes 2015; Fényes et al. 2021; Stefanescu–Osvat 2011), the main motivation of young people was identified as a desire to help, but additional novel motivations also included the desire to spend free time in a useful way and the attempt to avoid negative feelings, which was pronounced among those who had come to Hungary because of the war. When talking about the returns to volunteering, interviewees mentioned the improvement in their psychological well-being and perceived happiness and the expansion of their social network, which are often mentioned in the literature as potential sources of motivation (Wilson 2000; Boronovi 2008). Mentioning such factors as among the benefits and not the motivations suggests that these were not primary motivating considerations when their volunteering started. As expected, a desire for knowledge advancement and other professional motivations, which had driven interviewees during their previous voluntary activities, did not dominate during the war, although the development of language skills was reported by several as one of the benefits of volunteering. The returns to volunteering were also expressed in terms of the pleasure of helping others and the friendships and professional contacts acquired during volunteering. Positive experiences included spiritual recharging, the love from refugees, the joy of working together, building relationships, and a sense of belonging. In contrast, the most striking negative experience was witnessing the sad life stories caused by the war, which was psychologically taxing (see also Karhina et al. 2017; Pankiv et al. 2023).

In the type analysis of the interviews, three groups were identified. Regular volunteers with altruistic motivation were not motivated by self-interest; they

had mostly been and were still involved in helping activities, many in church settings. Regular volunteers with mixed motivations, in contrast, had previously volunteered mainly in non-church organisations and had often opted for leisure volunteering and helping the local community. In addition to the desire to help, their aim was to gain experience, understanding, professional knowledge, and connections. Finally, occasional volunteers with mixed motivations, who only joined in voluntary activity during the war, were motivated, in addition to the goal of helping others, by the opportunity to spend their leisure time usefully. Several of them mentioned spiritual recharging and building relationships as returns to volunteering.

The main message of the study is that in a time of crisis-related destruction and social collapse, volunteering has offered the affected Transcarpathians, including the students, on the one hand, an opportunity for meaningful activity, mitigating the effects of the war on mental well-being and existential uncertainty and on the other hand an opportunity for belonging and connection to others and to the community. It also highlights connections between pre-war volunteering and volunteering after 2014 and shows how such volunteering networks and past experiences may become structures that are mobilised in times of crisis.

The results showed that despite the social tensions caused by the war, young people in the Hungarian minority set an example of solidarity, as they volunteered wholeheartedly to help Ukrainians fleeing from the interior of the country in Transcarpathia, on the Ukrainian–Hungarian border and in Hungary, using their Ukrainian and Hungarian language skills. The helping attitude was realised along the lines of tolerance and inclusion, based on a kind of universal solidarity, according to the Zakariás–Feischmidt concept. Stepaniuk (2022) also highlighted that national and ethnic affiliation and spoken language did not influence the intensity of voluntary work. Volunteers identified with the situation and helped regardless of national and ethnic affiliation.

Based on our results, a positive consequence may be that those who started volunteering only because of the war may continue to do so in the future, thus spreading the idea of volunteering among young people in Transcarpathia. As other research has shown, the vast majority of the war-related volunteers had no previous volunteer experience, so the majority of humanitarian assistance was carried out by fresh volunteers (Stepaniuk 2022). This suggests that wartime volunteering made Ukrainian citizens (including the Transcarpathian youth) more aware and responsible (Boichak–McKernan 2022)

One of the limitations of our study is that, concerning the motivations, it focuses primarily on socio-psychological aspects, differentiating between

altruistic and individualistic motivations for volunteering. However, some egoistic motivations, such as “self-development” and “professionalism,” may be understood as serving the common good and the betterment of society as a whole. According to Hustinx’s and Lammertyn’s (2003) concept of reflexive volunteering, these egoistic motivations are a kind of consequence – responses to modernisation and individualisation. Zakariás (2018), however, primarily using Wuthnow’s model, points out that modernisation and individualisation are not associated with the rejection of volunteerism, community and helping others, which claim is also supported by our results.

A further limitation of our research is that our method is qualitative and based on a small sample of semi-structured interviews, so it is not suitable for broad generalisation, but it has provided more in-depth information than questionnaire surveys. Our further plans include examining the commitment and future volunteering of those who only started volunteering during the war, which corresponds to the third group in the type analysis, a more targeted investigation of young volunteers’ organisational embeddedness, and further large-scale quantitative studies among young volunteers in Transcarpathia.

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