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## Promoting volunteering in Europe

### Report<sup>1</sup>

Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee

Rapporteur: Mr Luca VOLONTÈ, Italy, Group of the European People's Party

### Summary

The European Union's decision to declare 2011 the "European Year of Volunteers" is to be welcomed. In this context, the democratic, humanitarian, social, educational, formative and economic value of voluntary activity should be emphasised, in particular the role played by volunteer work in policies on "active ageing" and in integration policies in a multi-ethnic society.

A positive message should be sent to the Council of Europe member states and practical programmes should be initiated highlighting the importance of active citizenship through participation in public life. Member states are thus invited to adopt and promote an energetic policy on behalf of voluntary service.

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1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 12023](#), Reference 3610 of 2 October 2009.



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## A. Draft resolution<sup>2</sup>

1. The United Nations proclaimed an “International Year of Volunteers” in 2001 and the activities implemented spotlighted volunteer work and voluntary service. In 2001, unpaid and voluntary service received major support in terms of resources, communications and research.
2. In 2001, the Parliamentary Assembly associated itself with the United Nations initiative in [Recommendation 1496 \(2001\)](#) on improving the status and role of volunteers as a contribution by the Parliamentary Assembly to the International Year of Volunteers 2001. The Assembly has observed that, after 2001, the benefits rapidly faded and that practices in Council of Europe member states and the various authorities vis-à-vis these modes of citizen involvement have progressed little, or have even regressed.
3. The Assembly welcomes the European Union’s decision to declare 2011 the “European Year of Volunteers”. It recalls that the Memorandum of Understanding concluded in May 2007 between the Council of Europe and the European Union stipulated that the contribution of civil society to achieving the common goals of the Council of Europe and the European Union should be encouraged.
4. The Assembly also recalls the European Convention on the Promotion of a Transnational Long-term Voluntary Service for Young People of 2000 (ETS No. 175), signed by eight member states and ratified by one single member state.
5. With an eye to 2011, the Assembly wishes to send out a positive message to the Council of Europe member states and to initiate practical schemes in order to highlight the importance of active citizenship through participation in public life. The Assembly therefore invites member states to:
  - 5.1. promote an energetic policy in favour of voluntary service and be involved during the European Year of Volunteers in 2011 in campaigns to raise awareness about voluntary service, in close co-operation with the European Union;
  - 5.2. sign and ratify the Council of Europe’s European Convention on the Promotion of a Transnational Long-term Voluntary Service for Young People;
  - 5.3. create an instrument for assessing the value of voluntary service in order to enhance its recognition by the political authorities and incorporate it into all budgetary considerations at national, regional and local level;
  - 5.4. consider introducing, if they have not yet done so, tax-deductibility of donations made to voluntary service associations;
  - 5.5. introduce a volunteer status to facilitate access to voluntary work;
  - 5.6. recognise the impact of voluntary service on local development and encourage the introduction of official policies agreed between local authorities and voluntary organisations;
  - 5.7. develop systems for official recognition of informal learning and skills developed through experiences with voluntary service;
  - 5.8. set up a social protection system for long-term volunteers and those who work more than a specified number of hours and to credit voluntary action for the acquisition of pension rights;
  - 5.9. encourage the development of voluntary activities for all age groups by strengthening inter-generational solidarity and removing the possible legal and administrative obstacles to the active involvement of older people;
  - 5.10. promote “food banks” ensuring voluntary collection of foodstuffs from private individuals or companies and distributing them free of charge to needy families and individuals;
  - 5.11. create a legal framework for voluntary work tailored to the multi-ethnic realities of a number of Council of Europe member states and develop targeted programmes for enhancing diversity in voluntary associations through the recruitment of migrant volunteers;
  - 5.12. recognise that volunteer work is one of the few areas where there exists a balanced participation of women and men in terms of responsibilities and decision making and that ways should be found to build bridges between this experience in voluntary service and other sectors, including the political sector.

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2. . Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 5 October 2010.

## **B. Draft recommendation<sup>3</sup>**

1. The Parliamentary Assembly refers to its Resolution ... (2010) on promoting volunteering in Europe.
2. The Assembly recalls that volunteering is not a means of making up for social and economic shortcomings which are the responsibility of the state and the government, and should not be regarded as a cheap way for society to delegate public responsibilities to the non-governmental organisations handling voluntary service.
3. The Assembly recognises the democratic, humanitarian, social, educational, formative and economic value of voluntary activity. It wishes to emphasise, in particular, the real influence of voluntary service on democratic life, the active citizenship of Europeans, sustainable development, personal fulfilment and its benefits for the physical and mental health of volunteers, formal and informal training and education, acquisition of skills, production of wealth, intra-European mobility, intercultural and interfaith dialogue, and social cohesion.
4. The Assembly therefore recommends that the Committee of Ministers:
  - 4.1. invite member states to adopt and promote an energetic policy on behalf of voluntary service;
  - 4.2. make a commitment during the year 2011, proclaimed "European Year of Volunteers" by the European Union, through active participation in the information and awareness campaigns on voluntary service, also via the Council of Europe European Youth Centres;
  - 4.3. enjoin member states to sign and ratify the European Convention on the Promotion of a Transnational Long-term Voluntary Service for Young People, so that it may come into force in 2011.

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3. . Draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 5 October 2010.

## C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Volontè, rapporteur

### 1. Introduction

1. The United Nations declared 2001 the “International Year of Volunteers”. The activities implemented during that year spotlighted volunteer work and voluntary service. A series of events, research projects and enhancement drives were organised in this sector. In 2001, more generally, volunteers were provided with major support in terms of resources, communications and research.
2. I have noticed that, after 2001, the benefits rapidly faded and that practices in Council of Europe member states and the various authorities vis-à-vis these modes of citizen involvement have progressed little, or have even regressed.
3. The year 2011 has been declared the “European Year of Volunteers” by the European Union. I wish to recall that the memorandum of understanding concluded in May 2007 between the Council of Europe and the European Union stipulated that the contribution of civil society to achieving the common goals of the Council of Europe and the European Union should be encouraged.
4. With an eye to 2011, I propose that the Council of Europe draw on the wealth and diversity of its past experience in the cultural field to send out a positive message and initiate practical programmes, in order to highlight the importance of active citizenship through participation in public life.
5. In this report, I would like to underline, in particular, the role played by volunteer work in policies on “active ageing” and in integration policies in a multi-ethnic society.

#### 1.1. Topical debate on voluntary work

6. Volunteer service is a long-standing tradition in most European countries, although it exists to varying extents and in different forms depending on political, democratic, socio-cultural and economic conditions in the Council of Europe member states. In many countries, voluntary activities account for a large proportion of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and of the wealth of their citizens in general.
7. Volunteer work is an activity undertaken in accordance with the wishes, choice and motivation of an unpaid person within organised structures (for instance an NGO, a voluntary service centre or more loosely organised groups) for the benefit of someone other than the voluntary worker him- or herself and for society in general, by promoting values of general interest, although the enormous benefit of volunteering to the voluntary worker cannot be overlooked.
8. I consider that the economic and financial crisis affecting all member states should induce us to reconsider how we evaluate our wealth. I might mention, for instance, the recent report by Joseph Stiglitz,<sup>4</sup> which notes that living conditions and well-being in society are just as important as the economy for the development of a given country. Volunteering undeniably accounts for a major proportion of this added value.
9. Given the ease with which we can formalise and assess the value of volunteer work and voluntary service,<sup>5</sup> these two modes of social commitment and added value could be a first step in an approach to assessing the value of the quality of life in our societies.
10. In addition to highlighting and enhancing voluntary service once again in the public debate, I would also like to secure lasting and substantial improvements for the whole volunteering sector. In my view, no lasting change is possible without enshrining it in legislation.
11. The aim is to propose a broad framework for voluntary activities, identify the fields of action conducive to supporting the Council of Europe’s priorities and pinpoint levers for the recognition and promotion of this sector, which is vital for democracy, social inclusion and human rights.

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4. . Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, Professor Joseph E. Stiglitz, Commission Chair, Columbia University, Professor Amartya Sen, Adviser to the Commission, Harvard University Professor Jean-Paul Fitoussi, Commission Co-ordinator, IEP 2009.

5. . In France, there are two French terms relating to those engaging in voluntary work. *Bénévoles* work unpaid, generally in a non-profit making body (association, NGO, trade union or public organisation); *volontaires*, on the other hand, have a legal status covering the work they do, which is most often of a humanitarian, social, sporting or cultural nature.

## 1.2. The contribution of voluntary service

12. Volunteer work and voluntary service are activities which involve learning, sharing and solidarity. They enable the young and the less young to acquire experience of life, a civic spirit and vocational skills. They help transmit knowledge, improve the employability of unemployed volunteers and enable older persons to remain active.

13. The Parliamentary Assembly has often urged civil society players to come forward as guarantors of social cohesion and vehicles of participative democracy. Volunteering enables all citizens to take part in the democratic process. Volunteering, like social activism, can be purposeful and change orientated. For example, volunteering can be directed at influencing agenda setting, policy making and decision making. It can also promote social change by contributing to personal transformation, whereby individuals change their beliefs, perspectives and day-to-day behaviour once they have developed a new awareness or understanding of a particular situation.<sup>6</sup>

14. In my view, there is no state which does not have voluntary workers, whether individuals or groups, organised or informal. In many countries volunteer work and voluntary service provide considerable assistance for society and the economy while promoting social cohesion and political stability. They are components of the intermediate bodies which facilitate ongoing dialogue and mediation between the political authorities and the citizens.

15. According to a report published by Johns Hopkins University in 2007 on "Measuring Civil Society and Volunteering", in many countries the sector of non-profit institutions is virtually on a par with the building and finance sector in terms of its contribution to GDP, paying in almost twice as much as the public services. This means that it accounts for between 5% and 7% of GDP in the countries surveyed. This is the conclusion from the data submitted by the statistical offices of eight countries (Australia, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Japan, New Zealand and the United States).<sup>7</sup>

16. It should be noted that when this report was published, another 20 countries, including developed and developing countries, had undertaken to present such "satellite accounts", and a number of others were about to introduce such accounts, as a clear sign that an increasing number of states are aware of the need to include volunteering in their national accounting systems.

17. In the European Union, a Eurobarometer survey conducted between 17 November and 19 December 2006 showed that three in every 10 Europeans claim to be involved in a voluntary activity.<sup>8</sup>

18. However, the European average obscures some major discrepancies among member states, with a very high percentage of citizens declaring that they participate actively in voluntary activities or work for an association on an unpaid basis in some countries. For instance, in Austria (60%), the Netherlands (55%) and Sweden (53%), more than half of the respondents aged 15 and over state that they exercise a voluntary activity. The rates of participation in voluntary work are lowest in Lithuania (11%) and Portugal (12%).<sup>9</sup>

19. More or less equal numbers of men and women are involved in volunteering. In 2003, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation Rec(2003)3 on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making, which included women's involvement in associations.<sup>10</sup> Volunteer work and voluntary service are exemplary in this respect and have conducted ground-breaking work in ensuring access by women to responsibilities.

20. Alongside the traditional educational and training courses, volunteering helps the young and the less young to acquire life experience, a civic spirit and vocational skills. It provides adults in mid-career and retired persons with fulfilment, encourages knowledge transmission and helps people to cope better with the ageing process.

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6. . CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation – International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) – UN Volunteers (UNV), *Volunteering and Social Activism – Pathways for participation in human development*, 2009.

7. . Report from Johns Hopkins University, "Measuring Civil Society and Volunteering", September 2007.

8. . Eurobarometer report, "Social Reality Stocktaking", February 2007.

9. . Ibid.

10. . The recommendation invited member states to "promote the participation of young people, especially young women, in associations to enable them to acquire experience, knowledge and capacities which are transferable to the field of institutional, and especially political, participation" and to "encourage youth organisations to ensure a balanced participation of women and men in their decision-making structures".

21. Volunteering has a role to play in securing full employment by making unemployed persons more “employable”, helping restore their self-confidence, opening doors for them and supplying them with new labour-marketable skills. Furthermore, voluntary work often leads to the creation of new types of paid services and jobs. During periods of unemployment, the activity afforded to the individuals involved ensures that they remain in the social circuits and prevents them from becoming isolated, undermined or even excluded.

22. However, I also believe that voluntary work must not be used by governments as a means of manipulating unemployment statistics and creating a “second labour market” with second-class jobs for second-class citizens. Nor should it be regarded as a cheap way for society to delegate public responsibilities to the non-governmental organisations handling voluntary service.<sup>11</sup>

23. Volunteers are therefore driving forces in civil society, and their existence and development are guarantors of democracy and peace. In a world in which money is becoming the sole value and where individualism sometimes reaches extremes, volunteering is a free act, a symbol of sharing.

24. In some European countries the means of combating poverty increasingly include “banks” run by associations of volunteers having the status of non-profit making organisations. These include “food banks”, that collect foodstuffs donated by private individuals or companies, which are then distributed free of charge to families and individuals experiencing financial difficulties.

25. I note that the private and governmental sectors are showing increasing interest in voluntary work and they should be encouraged to continue. Businesses frequently sponsor projects run by voluntary associations and encourage their staff to become involved in volunteering by giving them paid leave or financial aid.

26. Volunteering and innovative partnerships between enterprises, public authorities and voluntary centres are a means of developing policies of corporate social responsibility.

27. Furthermore, corporate staff members that are involved in volunteering provide a wide range of competences which help support and reinforce local communities. Partnerships between the private sector and voluntary organisations increase the added value of volunteering by targeting and matching up needs and resources.

28. Particular attention must be paid to recognising skills and competences developed through informal learning experiences. The role of voluntary work in a lifelong training strategy requires active recognition. Moreover, activities intended to develop official recognition systems for informal and non-formal learning processes must be supported.

### ***1.3. Volunteering by older people in the context of “active ageing” policies***

29. Faced with an ageing society and a new inter-generational balance, it is important to develop and support instruments to facilitate the participation of older people in society. I would support and promote the declarations by the European Older People’s Platform on this subject.<sup>12</sup>

30. According to the 2008 European Union Flash Eurobarometer on family life and the needs of ageing populations, 73% of European Union workers approaching retirement age are in favour of taking part in some type of voluntary activity when they have stopped working. Many of them would also like to contribute to society outside their occupational context while they are still working. But in fact, only 44% of retired people opt for volunteering.

31. Older people who take part in voluntary activities bring with them solid competences and knowledge and show incredible commitment. They have specific qualities to offer thanks to their social maturity, their lifelong experience and their sense of obligation to society.

32. However, older people wishing to take part in voluntary activities often face deterrent factors such as negative attitudes and prejudices, cultural barriers and discriminatory practices and policies. Increasing demand for special skills, the complex administrative procedures for organising the simplest voluntary activities and the imposition by insurance companies of unjustified age limits for voluntary activities are among the many obstacles which we must help remove.

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11. . European Convention on the Promotion of a Transnational Long-Term Voluntary Service for Young People (ETS No. 175) – Explanatory Memorandum.

12. . European Older People’s Platform, Promoting voluntary work among older Europeans – Declaring 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Inter-generational Solidarity.

33. Sometimes older people themselves hesitate to become involved in volunteering due to a lack of self-confidence or because they do not realise what voluntary work really involves. Such obstacles as health problems, financial and time constraints or mobility problems can also raise difficulties.

34. Similarly, it is sometimes difficult for older people who are from ethnic minorities, have disabilities or fail to correspond to the standard image of volunteers to take part in voluntary activities, especially in the leading organisations.

35. National governments and local and regional authorities can do a great deal to promote volunteering by older persons in their respective countries. The aim is to encourage the development of voluntary activities for all age groups by reinforcing inter-generational solidarity, remove legal and administrative obstacles and devise legal frameworks to ensure that the possibility to exercise a voluntary activity does not depend on the individual's legal or social status.

#### **1.4. Volunteering by migrants and ethnic minorities as a vehicle for integration**

36. Volunteer work also has a powerful effect on the integration and empowerment of traditionally excluded social groups such as immigrants and can constitute a vehicle for social, cultural and occupational integration.

37. Volunteering enables immigrants to acquire basic knowledge of the host society, for example in terms of language, access to housing and educational and health services. It facilitates participation in society through non-formal and informal education<sup>13</sup> and helps reinforce the immigrant's employability on the labour market.

38. Furthermore, volunteering makes the immigrant community's contribution visible to the host society. It brings immigrants and non-immigrants together in conducting civic activities that address local issues affecting them both. It helps the host society to cope with increasing diversity and adapt to change.

39. All sectors of associative life are obviously open to immigrant populations. However, it should be easier to promote their voluntary involvement in specific activities which primarily affect migrants and ethnic minorities.

40. I would especially highlight the importance of the following categories and fields of work: learning the language of the host country and supporting school and out-of-school activities; cultural activities and intercultural encounters; mediation services and action to prevent minor everyday conflicts; training and employment; access to housing and services geared to mediating between population groups and government departments or landlords; health information and prevention; and information on rights and free legal consultations.<sup>14</sup>

41. A number of statutory, linguistic, psychological, educational, cultural, financial and administrative obstacles often prevent immigrant populations from becoming involved in volunteering.

42. Foreigners in precarious or unstable situations hesitate to join voluntary associations because they are worried about their provisional status, which sometimes borders on illegality. A command of the language of the host country is a tacit precondition for voluntary work in an association, whatever the duties to be discharged. Moreover, volunteering is based on self-esteem and skills or knowledge that can be passed on; unfortunately, many foreigners who face multiple difficulties, such as access to housing and employment, have a negative image of themselves and their abilities.

43. The primary concern of immigrants is often their basic livelihood, including foreign students, whose grants and family support are not always enough. They have no time for voluntary work and, more often than not, associations consider immigrant populations as target groups rather than full partners. Lastly, creating and developing an association involve procedures which may well put foreigners off.

44. When compared with the voluntary commitment by the overall population of the host country, the following common points emerge for immigrants: lack of time, lack of information on volunteering, a poor experience on first contact with an association and financial problems.

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13. . Although learning often takes place within formal settings and designated environments, a great deal of valuable learning also occurs either deliberately or informally in everyday life.

14. . Final report of the project "Involve: involvement of third country nationals in volunteering as a means of better integration", published by the European Volunteer Centre, 2006.

45. I consider that volunteering should be easily accessible to migrants. This may involve providing information in the language of the target migrant group or refunding volunteers' travel expenses. Targeted programmes should be developed and financial support provided to reinforce diversity in voluntary associations by recruiting migrant volunteers.

46. Recognition of the role and achievements of migrant volunteers by the organisation and by the general public is vital in counterbalancing the lack of confidence and the negative perception of migrants prevailing in society, for example by organising information campaigns and publishing articles in the local press on successful projects.

47. Lastly, an appropriate legal framework for voluntary work tailored to the multi-ethnic realities of the member states of the Council of Europe would help address the integration issue in an original and positive manner. I would advocate a policy of national, regional and local integration, which also enhances the role of volunteering and granting immigrant populations the status of full stakeholders in the integration process.

## 2. Conclusions

48. While many Council of Europe member states have legislation or regulations on the right of association, few have systematically and comprehensively recognised the value of voluntary work and accordingly established a genuine legal status for volunteers.

49. Europe has no common references for voluntary work. The same applies to the development of rights and duties facilitating mutual understanding of the challenges and the place of volunteering in our modern democracies.

50. In a few states, the initial steps have been taken, providing ideas to be followed and strengthened; they generally involve establishing social protection and attempting to take account of voluntary work in acquiring a retirement pension.

51. For instance, since the 1980s the United Kingdom has been running a number of programmes and schemes to encourage unemployed and disabled persons to volunteer in the health and social services sectors. In Ireland, unemployed persons can engage in voluntary activity if it does not interfere with their availability for and efforts to secure paid employment or training. In Germany, people on unemployment benefit are allowed to volunteer for a maximum of seventeen hours per week.

52. I would like to refer to the "Legal Status of Volunteers in Europe" study, conducted jointly by the European Volunteer Centre and the Association of Voluntary Service Organisations. It provides a broad overview of the current legal situation of persons dealing with voluntary activities and volunteer programmes in Europe, describes voluntary activities and pinpoints the obstacles to their development. It also sets out examples of good practice in national legislation, policies and national programmes.<sup>15</sup>

53. I believe that the concept of "bolder giving" which was developed in the United States and consists in forming associations bringing together individuals who donate part of their assets or income to voluntary organisations for at least three years, should also be promoted in the member states of the Council of Europe. It is also critical that the principle of the tax deductibility of donations should be harmonised in all Council of Europe member states so as to allow genuinely fair competition and improved transnational action by voluntary-sector organisations.

54. However, I would also like to stress that volunteering is not a means of making up for social and economic shortcomings which are the responsibility of the state and the government, and should not be regarded as a cheap way for society to delegate public responsibilities to the non-governmental organisations handling voluntary service.

55. I see an obvious and increasing political interest in the volunteering phenomenon and its potential role in an ageing and multi-ethnic society. This is why I am hoping that the Assembly will join in the European Year of Volunteers, in co-operation with the European Commission, and come down wholeheartedly in favour of developing a volunteering culture in Europe.

56. I propose that the Assembly address this matter by preparing a resolution on good practices in terms of supporting and taking into account volunteer work and voluntary service, and recommending that the Committee of Ministers also deal with this question.

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15. . The detailed reports on the legal status of volunteers in 23 countries can be consulted at [www.cev.be/67-legal\\_status\\_of\\_volunteers\\_country\\_reports-EN.html](http://www.cev.be/67-legal_status_of_volunteers_country_reports-EN.html).

57. In the same spirit as for the campaign “All Different, All Equal”, long-term co-operation between the European Union and the Council of Europe, with co-ordinated action in line with their respective fields of action, could help reinforce the action of volunteers. The Committee of Ministers should encourage the activities and enable its member states, particularly those which are not in the European Union, to become involved in promoting democracy by boosting the voluntary sector.