

VOLUNTEERING AND ACTIVISM AS FORMS OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP (A CASE STUDY)

Abstract. The article deals with volunteering as a form of active citizenship related to the concept of participatory and democratic citizenship. The theoretical part of the study concerns the different approaches to the dimensions of citizenship (especially cultural and social), while the article's second part is constructed as a case study of volunteer forms of active citizenship in the urban environment of the city of Banská Bystrica (Slovakia) that was realised through a series of semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews. The conclusion shows the trends and limitations in the application of volunteering to local society.

Key words: *active citizenship, volunteering, society, community, activism*

Theoretical Background to the Topic of Active Citizenship

The concept of active citizenship has become interrelated with terms such as society and community. According to Marshall (1950), this type of citizenship reflects a social agreement based on the status of full membership. Active citizenship is very dynamic and manifests in different, new (untraditional) forms. The main focus of the article is based on two questions: The modern concept of citizenship in the 20th and 21st century not only refers to the rights and duties of citizens, but does it also take their active approach into account? Which forms of active citizenship can we observe in an urban area/city? To answer these questions, I use the method of grounded theory in a case study. The theoretical concept of active citizenship serves as a guideline for the field work based on a series of semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews. The article aims to reflect the contemporary definition of active citizenship in practice and to show the variety of activities concealed by the term.

Citizenship in the context of the 21st century has been shaped in a new way. It has moved in the direction of socio-cultural reconceptualisation becoming a civic-cultural phenomenon (Plichtová, 2010; Bútorá, 2012; Frič-Vávra, 2012; Paine, 2006; Putnam, 2002; Sedláčková, 2012; Lie, 2009). In this

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context, active citizenship accentuates the cultural identity of the individual who is perceived as a member of a socio-cultural community in which his acts are primarily culturally based. The motivation to participate is formed, first of all, according to the own needs and images of the participants and takes place on a voluntary basis. Motivation does not have to result in direct individual participation. Referring to the change in society mechanism today, active citizenship cannot only be characterised in terms of closed state or regional units. Active citizenship is performed across cultures while individuals as cultural identities can choose any community in which they wish to participate.

Citizens participate in public affairs for many reasons. When taking civic activity into account, it is important to consider the fact that citizens have often found themselves between two extremes: passionate involvement on one side and cynical withdrawal on the other (Macedo, 2005). Citizens also very often become mobilised in the case of defending unfair privileges that neglect citizens' rights as well as in situations where democratic institutions do not bring relevant information which would lead to a satisfactory solution to situations. The activities of ordinary citizens are especially related to public services (health care, education sector) and in the long-term they lead to the creation of organisations and associations such as civic associations as well as sport clubs and non-governmental organisations. We observe the promotion of activism especially in volunteer organisations.

Volunteer Work – Part of Active Citizenship

The term volunteer work has become quite frequent when practising active citizenship. Volunteer organisations have become 'test laboratories' of research with their civic focus on activities. The risks connected with different forms of volunteer organisations arise from the values they present, as influenced by political elites, sects, ideological/religious beliefs etc. The goal of activism in the area of volunteer work should be based on building social cohesion and supporting public culture with certain liberal aspects (Plichtová, 2010). Many people nowadays decide on non-political options to participate in resolving public questions in their area, which helps explain why volunteer organisations have become more popular than participating in political organisations (participation in elections, membership in political parties).

When deeply analysing volunteer work, it is inevitable to differentiate between its active and passive forms. On one hand, a passive citizen is a member of a volunteer organisation, but one who does not participate in its activities. On the other hand, an active volunteer performs activities he is required to do. Membership is not a condition of becoming a volunteer,

but the activity is what matters most. Many volunteers are not members of any volunteer organisations. It is also important to distinguish between the terms volunteer work and social activism. The primary difference is that the aim of social activism is to look for solutions which are part of particular state institutions' competencies, while volunteers try to find all self-help means to solve a situation. In any case, citizenship, social activism and volunteer work are interconnected and mutual ties between them can emerge in some cases, making it impossible to differentiate them. Volunteer work is considered one of the EU's most important tools leading to the development of civic communities and support for the creation of social capital in an all-European context (*Dimenzie občianstva Európskej únie*, 2013).

Volunteers provide organisations, society and communities with their skills, experience and knowledge without requiring financial reward. In highly developed democratic countries, the tradition of volunteer work is very strong and citizens regularly participate in societal matters. The exact number of volunteers is not possible to determine and can only be estimated because some forms of volunteer work are neither formal nor institutionalised. The problem usually concerns the limited number of participants (always the same individuals), often members of volunteer and community organisations. Their altruistic effort to help is interconnected with the concept of active citizenship. Their target is not to foster civic rights but to stimulate social activity.

Volunteer Work – Forms of Active Citizenship in Banská Bystrica

Arising from the previous theoretical background, in the context of the grounded theory case study I focused on volunteer forms of active citizenship in an urban environment. In the study, I concentrate on only one part of my research about the relationship between volunteering and activism. The research was realised in the city of Banská Bystrica between 2013 and 2015 when a series of semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews was conducted with selected representatives of the civic and community sphere in particular institutions in Banská Bystrica as well as with volunteers/participants of civic life in the city. In accordance with the ethical approach to research, I do not mention the names of my respondents.

In a parallel way, in my research I held interviews with citizens of the city active in this sphere, but who are not members of any organisation and I also participated in events organised in public spaces of the city. The majority of respondents showed an interest in my research and were willing to share information and very enthusiastic about the given topic. Many mentioned possibilities for further cooperation and were willing to complete

any missing information after the interviews had been finalised. However, there were also people working for specific institutions who showed an unwillingness and refused to do interviews, so I did not obtain direct statements from them.

Community Volunteer Work

I devoted my attention mainly to an urban part of the city of Banská Bystrica called Sásová because that is where the premises of the *Community Centre Sásová (KC Sásová)* are located. It is a successful project which should serve to develop this residential area and to make the citizens active. Most volunteers come from the ranks of the local people, but the centre is also attractive to the inhabitants of other urban residential areas. Therefore, it also provides a counselling service to other community centres. The centre's activities are connected with projects aimed at improving the environment and other urban spaces such as the *Community Garden*. Following the interviews, the centre has gained in popularity among the citizens. It gives them space to carry out free-time activities. I view it positively that, thanks to the centre's professional management, it has been successful in developing and reacting to the current needs and challenges of community life. How to motivate volunteers and citizens to participate in public life is the greatest challenge facing the centre. As found in the respondents' statements, the problem is the lack of time, missing motivation and limited financial resources. The centre is especially attractive to young people because it has filled a missing space for their self-realisation.

One barrier to the community centre's development is connected to the fact that the *"methodology of development cannot be transported from other countries"* (woman, over 20 years old) and applied automatically to our conditions. Therefore, we need to build our own system of work. The centre provides a broad spectrum of activities. According to its annual report from 2014, the Community Centre Sásová has become the only centre in Banská Bystrica providing space for community development on a volunteer basis, having 113 active volunteers and 10 part-time donors as well as 1,674 hours devoted hitherto to volunteer activities.

It is noted that during the elaboration of this study a separate project to develop a second community centre was taking place in another part of the urban area Fončorda. The situation there, however, is quite different in adapting to the local community. In this case, it is interesting to point to the phenomenon of perceiving one's local identity. If *"the people from the Sásová residential area are not proud of their identity, then the people from Fončorda are"* (woman, over 20 years). There is, however, a lack of sharing information. People do not realise that community centres exist and

are functioning. Therefore, their activities only become part of the public consciousness very slowly. KC Sásová uses local media for propagation, its Facebook network, posters and personal communication. The motivation of citizens from Sásová to voluntarily participate in the activities of KC Sásová is connected with fostering relationships based on mutual trust. “*Slovak people are very suspicious*” (man, over 40 years), that is why it takes them longer time to adapt to changes and start to trust in the work and actual results of the centre.

Community Centre Sásová in Banská Bystrica and the *Centre of Independent Culture Garden (CNK Záhrada)* exert a significant influence on formation of the civic and cultural sphere. The latter was created as part of the independent cultural scene. Today, CNK Záhrada (Garden) is called “*the city in the city*” working on a project basis, but so far it has not obtained its own theatre scene (which was the primary aim). *CNK Garden* participates in many international projects and, according to one of its actors (man, over 30 years), “*today it is financially sustainable*”. In addition to its own projects, it provides space for public reactions to current trends and topical issues to create an intellectual background, whereas the variety of the services and events provided aims to reach the whole public.

CNK Garden is a cultural centre in which culture is only a tool for expressing opinions. Its visitors come from all age groups. Some only participate in a certain type of activities. The *Garden* plans to initiate innovative projects in the future. It is interesting to observe how enthusiasm for art became the basis for an urban community or the so-called city in the city. In the past, many activities were solely based on volunteer initiatives but, today, thanks to projects, “*people get paid for what they do*” (man, over 30 years). Volunteers in *CNK Garden* work in the sphere of organising different cultural events or are directly active in cultivating the garden.

Virtual City

A virtual community also helps renew social cohesion in a specific way. It includes elements of humanity and goes back to the idea of civic virtues. Following Frič a Vávra (2012: 15), “*Virtual community is a real community in the 21st century*”. Virtual reality today interferes directly in what is going on in reality and it is necessary to pay more attention to it. Community volunteer work can go hand in hand with the development of technologies as well as in a real and virtual way. In this context, it is important to take not only consider progressive movements or initiatives but also their reverse side. A community in a democratic environment can proclaim and express undemocratic values, resulting in fostering extremism, terrorism and other threats to modern society, too.

Extremist virtual forms are especially attractive to young people who engage in specific kinds of performances to show they are dissatisfied with society. Participation is easier than in the past through the medium of Internet networks. On the other side, we observe different activities of young people resulting in efforts to improve the life of society in accordance with democratic values and tolerance. Many virtual activities are based on voluntary associations in Banská Bystrica and manifest themselves in an undemocratic and intolerant, even extremist way. The ideological background of these groups is often non-conceptual and does not lead to genuine efforts to achieve community or urban development.

Apart from extremist virtual groups, there are virtual communities emerging in the city whose aim is to present the opinions of citizens on public matters concerning the city. The virtual community called *Banská Bystrica – kam mieriš?* (*Banská Bystrica – where are you heading?*) is a public Facebook group that currently has around 2,470 members. In comparison to other similar groups, it provides an open Internet space for the opinions of citizens, although its administrators try to maintain the quality of the content and, in case of inappropriate contributions, they have the right to intervene in the website's content. As stated by the administrator of this group, the aim of the virtual community was primarily to provide a public space for the citizens of Banská Bystrica on Facebook.

Non-formal Volunteer Work and Activism

Informal performances of active citizenship have mainly emerged through the initiative of individuals who feel a responsibility to make public affairs work. These activities are usually connected with interfering in a social space of the city or the protection of historical sites or monuments. An example is an event in 2008 that was one of the greatest performances of individual civic activism. It was when information appeared about the building of a hotel in the area of the SNP Museum (Museum of the Slovak National Uprising). The organiser (a woman, over 70 years old) of this protest activity stated that she addressed the initiative *Občania mestu* (*The citizens to the city, angl.*) as well as the Municipal Office in this case, resulting in a petition in reaction to the plan to build a hotel in the area of the SNP Museum. The petition received more than 5,000 signatures and was successful. Today, however, the hotel is still on the list of plans for the future although the inhabitants' resentment prevails (most inhabitants are against the plan and so the process is not yet finished).

This example indicates that informal performances of civic participation and activism are connected with a particular event on a public space. The problem of the informal activists and volunteer workers who support these

activities is that they have limited time available. This fact was confirmed by one of our respondents (woman, over 60 years old): *“People are able to get together when solving problems e.g. during the time of the high-rise building in the Fončorda residential area and the sports hall in the area of the SNP Museum. And then, when the threat diminished and the pressure was effective, they again dispersed, unaware of the fact that what had threatened them before did not cease to exist, but has only been shifted in time”*. Whether we are speaking about extremist tendencies, individual voluntary civic activities or a virtual community, they are all present in the city today as forms of activism. According to the respondents’ statements, the mentioned activities emerged without receiving any support from the city and they occur on a voluntary basis. On the other side, we could expect that the city alone would communicate with the citizens about any new plans that would interfere with the urban environment.

International Volunteer Work of Youth

When talking about the two dominant groups of volunteers (youth and seniors), it is necessary to consider the fact that only volunteer work seems to be easily accessible and simple since barriers also exist in this process. Referring to the international volunteer work of youth, projects can be supported by the *European Voluntary Service (EDS)* as part of Erasmus+. International volunteering in Slovakia does not have such a long history as in Western countries of the EU since non-governmental organisations have mainly focused on different areas of interest.

In the city of Banská Bystrica, there are many volunteers who come from different EU countries who have decided to stay in Slovakia for one year. They are mostly active in cultural institutions in which their activities are guided by a coordinator. Their stay is financed by the EU and marginally by the receiving institution. We think that European active citizenship in Banská Bystrica is mostly developed in this way. It is directly present in the local structure interconnecting the international, national and regional levels, providing an opportunity for somebody from a different country to participate in the life of our democratic civic society. Moreover, this form of work is also about fostering intercultural dialogue and the creation of a European identity. Organisations participating in the European Voluntary Service (EDS) such as Junior Centre, the YMCA or the Volunteering Centre host many volunteers taking responsibility for their programme. All criteria must comply with the EU’s standards.

Volunteering of Seniors

There is an umbrella institution in Banská Bystrica for active seniors called the *Association of Seniors/Experts (ASE)*. Its members are former employees of project institutions, professors, doctors etc. (aged up to 80 years). The former chairperson of the association in Banská Bystrica says that they emerged in 1995 as an affiliated branch of the centre in Bratislava which no longer exists but is still registered at the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Slovak Republic. In 2015, they celebrated 20 years since the beginning. *ASE* is an informal part of *Harmony* – a club for retired people. Members express their opinions on the city's policy through the medium of their activities. There are currently 12-15 active members/volunteers. One interesting activity is based on open communication with representatives of the public sphere (in the form of letters) interested in urban activities, especially preservation of the cultural-historical tradition. Their opinions on activism in Banská Bystrica are very critical as stated by one respondent (woman, over 70 years old): *“My opinion on activism in Banská Bystrica is based on the fact that the organisations are not very activist, without a long-term character. (...) they are also non-formal organisations and declare an action only when something is going on”*.

The so-called middle generation also has a chance to participate in civic activities, to become active in civic councils as well as community activities. It is necessary to point out the fact that most working citizens plan their free time carefully and volunteering must also be carefully planned. Many initiatives interfere, however, with all generations. The fact is that volunteering has a long history in many EU countries and it is not limited by formal performances since it interconnects different performances or manifestations of active citizenship, it is also directly linked to this topic although it is a new view on the extent of citizenship in its former context.

Volunteering Centres

In addition to the above-mentioned forms of volunteering in the context of active citizenship in Banská Bystrica, there is the *Centre for Volunteering*. This relatively new organisational structure is based on the concept of a broad community vision of volunteering which makes volunteering efforts more visible and coordinated. As claimed by Brozmanová-Gregorová (2012), the main function is based on the plan to strategically use the volunteering potential of the community and to make the services available to all age categories, boosting the participation of inhabitants, enhancing good practice and leading campaigns to increase awareness. *“Volunteering centres define volunteering as a form of active participation and indicator of*

civic society development" (Brozmanová-Gregorová, 2012: 129). The centre promotes public volunteer activities of different organisations, but they are limited by selected topics (social work).

Conclusion

Civic society in Banská Bystrica has gradually been transformed and we can observe a progressive rise in interest and participation in the area of community development. The citizens are ever more interested in improving the quality of their environment. Thanks to such activities, it is possible to maintain specific cultural patterns of the given environment in connection with its history and unique environment. There is interest in local communities, civic councils in different urban parts as well as in organising protest meetings or petitions.

To reply to the first research question, it is clear that the active approach of citizens in these initiatives does not have always a formal character. I found that their duration is limited by time and they are connected with the activities of specific centres (*CNK Garden*). In such an informal way, these "community islands" have come into being and are very close to the citizens while the realisation of ideas does not require huge financial expenses or a large number of members. On the other side, civic activities often represent a reaction to the state of weak transparency, the lack of sharing information among the public in the city as well as the non-functional creation of public policy on the local level. As Bútorá (2012: 17) states, a "*significant increase of civic activism can be observed also in such environments that do not have to represent non-governmental non-profit sector in a formal way*". Such civic activities are based on the individual initiatives of actors, associations or social networks.

To give an objective answer to the second research question about the variety of volunteer activities in Banská Bystrica, many forms and performances of active citizenship are represented in the city. This is especially manifested in the form of voluntary activities resulting in a higher number of community activities, the creation of local initiatives, and revitalisation of interest in the local area. It is particularly the rise of volunteering which is perceived in a positive way. The examples I presented in the text (*Community Centre Sásová, Centre of Independent Culture Garden, Centre for Volunteering etc.*) contribute to the creation of a heterogeneous civic society of the city through their activities. Their existence largely depends on the work of volunteers. I suppose that volunteering activities in Banská Bystrica will continue in the area of enhancement and will hopefully help in expanding and building the local civic society.

To conclude my research, active citizenship as a form of volunteer activities is linked to the community and identity. The community has a crucial position in the public engagement. Volunteers reflect the specific cultural conditions of the area (city), as shown by the focus of their activities. On the other hand, they are building the local identity and the sense of fellowship and belonging. Citizenship not only refers to rights and duties, but is seen in its most complex form through socio-cultural activities.

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