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## Features of the Russian volunteer movement\*

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**Abstract.** The article considers features of the Russian volunteer movement based on the qualitative criteria, including historical retrospection, and the method of unstructured interview. The authors describe the key characteristics of three models of the Russian volunteering — pre-revolutionary, Soviet and contemporary — and conclude that volunteering in Russia has always been perceived by the public opinion as a kind of cooperative project uniting citizens. The article provides an overview of the legislative framework of the contemporary Russian volunteer movement and of its most popular areas which are mainly associated with ensuring human security. The authors identify and systematize the problems of the Russian volunteer movement and name among the most pressing ones the relationship of volunteer organizations with the state, which can lead to a spiral of silence in the Russian society and hinder the cognitive and emotional involvement of people in the volunteer movement. The article also mentions the influence of the special military operation on the civil activity of the Russian population. The preliminary research results show the emerging shift in the society's attitude to volunteering, which is manifested in a certain loss of interest in supporting civil initiatives due to paying more attention to one's family and close social circle. The authors argue that the specifics of the Russian volunteer movement is determined by its non-political nature 'from below' and focus on the goals of ensuring human security. Thus, not only the state influences the individual, which is typical for the Russian society and history, but also the individual through volunteering influences the state that cannot ignore the powerful social request for justice.

**Key words:** Russia; volunteering; models of Russian volunteering; types of Russian volunteers; humanitarian security; Russian society

In the volunteer movement in Russia, there is a direct dialogue between social and political actors — as a way of political communication between society and the state, which shows to what extent policies affect social solidarity and to what extent social solidarity affects the stability of political structures and the course of political

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processes. The success of this communication determines the legitimacy of the political elite [7] and is determined by the society's approval of their activities, exercises of power, and governance [45].

There are many empirical and theoretical studies of the Russian volunteer movement, which consider it primarily as a sociological [22; 30; 31], philosophical [35; 37] and political [21; 24] phenomenon. Researchers mostly identify its ambivalent nature: on the one hand, people would like to get free from social obligations to the state; on the other hand, the neopatrimonial political system does not give them such an opportunity. The balance between political pressure and motives for gratuitous assistance has not been found yet, and these two remain the driving forces of Russian volunteering in many ways.

### **Three models of Russian volunteering**

In Russia, the focus is traditionally on the state rather than society due to the “fusion of the authorities and the economic sphere; the forms of their connection have changed over the course of history, but even today their inseparable unity remains, which is directly reflected in the political life” [49]. These circumstances led to three key models of charity and volunteerism in the Russian political tradition and culture [20].

The first one was created in pre-revolutionary Russia—social and environmental volunteering prevailed. It aimed at helping to find a job, preventing impoverishment and illiteracy, distracting from drinking and smoking, healthcare, and protecting the environment. The Sisters of Mercy communities [4] and the Russian Red Cross Society [5] assisted the state in natural disasters and on the battlefields of the First World War. Volunteering in pre-revolutionary, imperial Russia had two features — autonomous participation (people were involved not by force, but voluntarily, believing that participation in volunteer organizations was a civil duty), and being “the result of the state's inability to independently solve social problems” [17]. There was a sense of “common cause” in the Russian society, based on the idea of citizenship and solidarity created by the Russian Orthodoxy and socialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century — as an interpretation of the people as a single collective personality, “society without government, the accomplishment of Christianity” [19]. Volunteering was perceived as a cooperative project for uniting citizens.

The second, Soviet, model of Russian volunteerism has similarities with the first as determined by the limited capabilities of the state to independently solve social problems and sometimes even by their outright neglect (like under the state terror in the 1930s). The difference from the first model was the key principle of participation — not autonomous but forced by such political organizations as Pioneer, *Komsomol* and party. In imperial Russia, volunteers could to a certain extent influence decision-making in the field of social and humanitarian security, especially at the local level, while in the Soviet period, volunteer movement became the result of external mobilization.

However, there was a paradoxical nuance. Objectively, there was no ‘voluntariness’ (people could not but accept the state’s mobilization call), which created a spiral of silence [27]. For example, *subbotniks*, introduced in 1919 by V. Lenin, initially were the voluntary, free, traditional, collective, socially useful labor on Saturdays, but turned into a massive, forced activity with an illusory approval by the majority (due to the fear of social isolation and obstruction) [32]. Subjectively, participation in the volunteer movement was perceived as a completely independent decision, which was true in many cases — people often wholeheartedly accepted the social, collectivist ideals of communism [50]. “However, there was no truly socialist consciousness due to ideological failures, which denied many fruitful ideas from the Russian historical heritage as ‘class alien’” [44]. One needed public space for free social communication in the atmosphere of sincere unity and common interests, and voluntary labor provided a chance for common cause and communication. Thus, All-Russian Voluntary Fire Society, All-Union Voluntary Society for the Fight for Sobriety, All-Union Voluntary Society of Book Lovers, Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation and Navy, and many others were created.

Communist construction projects in Bratsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk and other Siberian cities in the 1950s–1960s are of particular interest: voluntary labor took the form of a collective common cause and social solidarity reminding of the ideals of pre-revolutionary volunteering: people heard about the new construction site and left to help, although they knew that at first they would not work in their specialty and would receive a much less salary [1]. The scale of volunteering reflected the internal revival of the Soviet society in the 1960s, which was called *ottepel* (thaw). The volunteer movement became the organizing force of new mobilization — as a kind of popular counterbalance to the coercive state machine [38]. “In Siberia, not in Moscow, there was a genuine Russian-Soviet, people’s truth, a space of freedom and a new political space in some way reminding of republicanism. Accumulation of many individual freedoms in one common will was launched ‘from below’” [15].

In 1954, the state started to cultivate virgin and fallow land in order to solve the country’s food security problems — *tselina* project. Young people from different towns and villages moved to the southern regions to serve the country [15]. However, the state remained communist, and, despite the voluntary impulse of citizens, the authorities continued to force people to participate in state projects. The possibilities of the society to influence the authorities’ choice of the strategic development vector were limited for many reasons: ideology, policies and scarce economic resources. But the people’s sustainable social structures supported most decisions that change the fate of the state (for instance, the Organized Volunteer Movement saved the government) — the idea of common destiny and common space is still considered a measure of all other values.

At the same time, the Russian society was worried about its possible future, which in the late 1980s led to the formation of the third, post-Soviet, model

of volunteering. In the 1990s, the level of social security was extremely low, and most threats were determined by the interrelated negative economic and social factors, including the danger of a social explosion. Personal safety and decriminalization of the society were needed, but the state could not launch or implement relevant social programs. The first informal associations of citizens were established (NGOs) and aimed primarily at ensuring human and social security. These organizations united different people, and their activities contributed not only to solving specific problems, but also to the national unity and communication between society and the state. The post-Soviet model of volunteering in Russia is characterized by the dialectic of autonomous and forced participation under the general weakness of the state.

### **Organization of Russian volunteering**

Volunteering in Russia is regulated by federal laws. The main one is the Federal Law No. 135 “On Charitable Activities and Volunteerism (Volunteering)” of August 11, 1995. There is also the Federal Law of May 19, 1995, No. 82 “On Public Associations” and the Federal Law of June 28, 1995, No. 98 “On the State Support of Youth and Children Public Associations”. The laws define all volunteering terms, set the rights and obligations of the volunteer and organizers of volunteer activities, and the rules for interaction between the authorities and volunteer organizations. Some regions adopted local laws on volunteering.

In Russia, there are many ‘horizontal’ civil initiatives from below, including unofficial volunteering built on personal agreements, for example, helping neighbors. There are also official volunteer communities supported by the state, for example, Volunteers of Culture, uniting people who aim at preserving the peoples’ cultural heritage and the historical appearance of small towns (1). There are three clusters of online volunteer communities in terms of their internal organization and mechanism of creation: online volunteer communities as social franchises (volunteers solve a social problem); online volunteer service communities organized for special events such as sports; volunteer online communities of direct action, which aim at solving specific problems [39]. One way or another, these online volunteer communities are involved in offline activities.

Anyone can find a suitable volunteer activity on Dobro.ru with more than 3 million registered volunteers and 34 thousand registered organizations (2). Volunteer courses are based on real cases (3). Volunteers work with charity foundations, NGOs, volunteer centers of universities and colleges, government agencies [6]. There are resource centers for volunteering — regional organizations that support and develop volunteerism, coordinate volunteers, provide them with methodological materials, train leaders of volunteer associations as effective managers. For example, in Moscow, this is the Mosvolonter Center (4). By 2024, such centers will work in every Russian region.

In 2018, the Year of the Volunteer, the Concept for the Development of Volunteerism (Volunteering) until 2025 was approved (5). The Concept ensures the methodological, information, consulting, educational and resource support for volunteer activities in the institutions of social services, education, healthcare and assistance in emergency situations. According to the Concept, volunteering is to be developed in various professional and social groups, ages and family forms, based on the regional and local traditions of volunteering.

The position of business is of great importance for the volunteer movement. The Social Charter of the Russian Business sets the principles of the corporate social responsibility and volunteering. Although such social responsibility is determined by the business' economic interests, it ultimately contributes to the common social good [41].

According to the survey conducted on September 23–29, 2021, from 2018 to 2021, there was an “increase in the activity of Russians in terms of gratuitous assistance to the poor and victims of natural disasters — from 38 % to 45 %. Russians began to donate more to socially useful purposes (21 % in 2020 and 28 % in 2021) and unite to solve common problems (13 % and 19 %). At the same time, the share of those giving alms decreased” [10]. The survey from August 2, 2021, showed that most often Russians participate in the collective repair of doorways/houses (24 %) and elections (22 %), and help people in difficult situations (20 %) [40]. According to the online survey from November 25 to December 1, 2021, the number of volunteers increased eightfold since 2013, and volunteers mainly help those in need of medical or special care (19 %), children (18 %), pensioners (18 %), animal shelters (16 %), and charity organizations (13 %) [42]. The first large-scale study of the youth volunteering in Russia [34] (31,257 students from 78 regions) provided the following social portrait of the student volunteer: unmarried girl aged 18 to 22, a bachelor's student, engaged in sports, cultural or social activities, who still finds time to relax with friends.

### **The most demanded areas of the Russian volunteer movement**

The search and rescue movement had the greatest impact on the ideology and scale of the Russian volunteer movement, largely due to the well-known Liza Alert (6). It was created in 2010 and named after the four-year-old girl Liza Fomkina, who was lost in the forest near Moscow with her aunt, and for five days nobody searched for them. Only when information appeared on the Internet, hundreds of people began the search on their own, but the girl was found dead on the tenth day. Liza Alert does not accept financial assistance, does not have accounts or virtual wallets, you can donate only the necessary equipment (drones, thermal imagers, etc.). Both small and huge groups are formed for searches, and the main thing is coordination of rescuers and coordination of volunteers with the law enforcement agencies.

There are thousands of volunteers-rescuers in Russia. In May 2022 alone, Liza Alert received 3,641 requests to search for missing people: 2517 were found alive, 161 — dead, and the search for those not found continues (7). In Russia, there are more than a hundred different names of search teams, but Liza Alert is the largest one, with a single ‘how to search’ system, training grid and uniform requirements.

According to the survey, search and rescue and volunteering in emergency situations is not popular among students — they are not ready to risk their health and life. The most popular areas of volunteer activity among students are social (71 %), event (47 %) and environmental (39 %) [33]. However, the pandemic had a huge impact on the volunteer movement in Russia, mainly contributing to the development of local, pedagogical and psychological volunteering. During the pandemic, with the support of business and the state, new horizontal network structures of volunteerism developed (such as the All-Russian #WeTogether): about 7 thousand people were volunteers in hospitals, and the #WeTogether platform became an aggregator of civil activities [43]. Based on the federal initiative “Volunteers of Enlightenment” and the project “Help to Study at Home”, students and teachers developed the IT volunteering by assisting in remote classes and tutoring sessions with schoolchildren, weak students and undergraduates [25].

The NGOs also strengthened coordination throughout Russia under the pandemic. The NGO coalition “Caring Nearby” focused on helping elderly people in self-isolation, lonely ones and those without Internet access. In Yakutia, the project “Get Better!” aimed at helping doctors and medical institutions working with covid-19 patients (volunteers brought lunches to the Yakutsk City Hospital No. 2 at the time of its quarantine).

There are many real heroes among volunteers like Elizaveta Aleshina from Tula: she died of a serious illness in early June 2022 at the age of 25, and she was a volunteer for 15 years, starting from children’s events and later organizing assistance to the elderly. She said: “Volunteering became an integral part of my life, I have been volunteering for more than 12 years. Many people ask me why I need this, why to work for free? For me, this is a call of my soul, new acquaintances, communication, positive emotions, training and a great experience” [36]. Such examples show that there is a huge potential of unity in society at the everyday level, which helps state institutions and citizens interact with each other on the initiative from below and proves the need for cooperation in solving the most acute social problems and ensuring social security.

The peculiarity of the concept “security” is that the emphasis in its analysis and practical implementation is not so much on the security as on the individual for “being human has various specific requirements” [14]. Human security is the foundation for human development as both an analytical tool and a real policy [8]. The key areas of Russian volunteering correspond to a three-part system of humanitarian security, consisting of physical, biological/environmental, and social spheres [48]. The physical sphere includes natural disasters (earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons,

floods, tornadoes, etc.), biological/environmental– epidemics, pandemics, climate change, social — societal, political and economic problems. The volunteer movement in Russia focuses on human security — gratuitous assistance to the poor and victims of natural disasters; assistance in life difficulties and food delivery; environmental protection; search for people; cultural development of urban areas.

Opinion polls show interesting trends. According to the survey from February 17–21, 2022, Russians are most afraid of “illness of loved ones, children” (56 %), “war” (53 %) and “illness, loss of working capacity” (41 %). As the main problems of society, respondents name “rising prices” (62 %), “corruption, bribery” (38 %) and “poverty, impoverishment of the majority of the population” (37 %) [13]. In March, after the start of the special military operation in Ukraine, the majority supported the actions of the Russian armed forces, especially those who approve the president’s actions, the older generations, and those who live in small cities and rural areas: 53 % “definitely support”, 28 % “rather support”; 14 % “do not support”; 6 % found it difficult to answer [12]. In March, the approval of the main state institutions also increased significantly: the activities of the president were approved by 83 %, of the prime minister — by 71 %, the government — 70 %, the State Duma — 59 % [3]. Thus, those who feared war in February were replaced by those who “definitely support” it in March, and the fear of rising prices and poverty also decreased. This paradox can be explained as follows: respondents were convinced that the war would be ended by military means, which was supported by the legislative use of the term “special operation” instead of the term “war”, by the regular reminder that the conflict in eastern Ukraine began 8 years ago, and by the conviction in the justice of the special operation as based on deep religious and cultural grounds.

In June–July, Russians’ attention to the special operation was declining, while the support of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine remained high (20 % did not support it). There is growing confidence in the Russian society that the special operation would continue for a long time (a third of Russians mentioned six months) [11], but in general Russians assessed the country’s economic situation more optimistically than in March.

The growing confidence of respondents that they would not lose their jobs and would not experience a decrease or delay in wages supported the consumer demand [16] and affected the desire to participate in the volunteer movement in two ways. On the one hand, people saw that the state emphasized the need to solve important social-economic problems, i.e., strived to fulfill its social obligations and maintain the quality of life, which determined the positive attitude to volunteering. On the other hand, there was a decrease in civil activity over the past 12 months [9]. The most common types of civil engagement still were gratuitous assistance to the poor and those affected by natural disasters (44 %), educational events (30 %), donations to social purposes (26 %), and collective solving of common problems and protecting rights (16 %). However, only 8 % were engaged in volunteering over the past 12 months. More and more people were increasingly family-oriented, being

socially passive. There is an emerging shift in the society's attitude to volunteering, which cannot be identified as a trend without further research, but such moods were confirmed by the unstructured interviews conducted with 528 respondents (18+) in 34 localities of 10 subjects of the Russian Federation.

### **Problems of the Russian volunteer movement**

The key problems of the volunteer movement are its heterogeneity, imbalance between official and unofficial activities, public misunderstanding of the difference between volunteers and service personnel, consumerist perception of volunteers by many state and non-state organizations, which results in volunteers' emotional burnout, disorganization and disunity of volunteer organizations [2].

However, the main problem is the relationship of volunteer organizations with the state due to the lack of the tradition of contractual, law-based relationship between the state and society and of the institutional understanding of the state, which pushes people away from official volunteering. This does not mean that there are no spontaneous social contracts in Russia. For instance, in 2015, there was the so-called Crimean consensus — the state informed the population that in order to live in a prosperous state in the future, they should tighten their belts, and the population agreed. Another example is the pandemic consensus in 2019: in exchange for the citizens' patience, the state promised to solve the economic crisis after lockdowns and to preserve the health of the population. Both agreements broke up for different reasons, but the main one was the insecurity of the contract due to the lack of trust.

In Russia, relations between the state and society have the character of the state patronage, which has a direct impact on the volunteer movement. In 2020, the studies of the civil society in Russia showed that participation in volunteering became politically approved and important for a career, which leads to formalism in volunteering. The relationship between volunteer organizations and the state is ambiguous for the state strives for control and support, which may lead to conflicts, like with “the volunteer election-observation movements — their interests are directly opposite to those of the state” [23].

Volunteering is often considered by the state as a form of patriotic education, which reproduces the Soviet model of volunteering ‘from above’. In the volunteer movement, there is “semi-volunteerism as a duty to participate in events sanctioned by the state organizations and quasi-volunteerism as an imitation of volunteer activity” [31], which can generate a spiral of silence and hinder the cognitive-emotional involvement of people in volunteering.

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The basis of the Russians' interest in volunteering is the desire to achieve social justice which the country sorely lacks: people need meaningful, joint, public actions to reach socially important goals (reduce poverty, achieve a decent level of health care, etc.). Episodic volunteering (actions from time to time) is based on this



desire. The survey of 2,494 episodic volunteers showed the impact of satisfaction on intentions to engage in volunteering in the future [32]. There is an increase in the share of episodic volunteers in many countries: in the USA — to 40 %, Australia — 69 %, Canada — 59 %, the UK — 78 %, Russia — 58 %. “Episodic volunteers are more often women than men (76 % vs 24 %), over 30 years old, mostly with higher (57 %) or incomplete higher (14 %) education, with average income, living in large cities (41 %), mainly specialists (28 %), students (26 %) or managers [34]. Satisfaction is the main motive for the future participation in volunteer activities, and satisfaction depends greatly on the management of volunteer participation and the feeling of belonging to the team. We believe that no less important is the understanding of doing something little but significant for solving the problem: to feed the elderly, to transfer children to the camp, etc. Thus, the volunteer movement in Russia is rather non-political, ‘from below’, focusing on issues of social and human security, influencing the legitimacy of power and contributing to social solidarity.

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## Специфика российского волонтерского движения\*

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**Аннотация.** В статье обозначена специфика волонтерского движения в России на основе качественных показателей, включая историческую ретроспективу, и неструктурированных интервью. Авторы систематизируют ключевые характеристики трех моделей российского волонтерства: дореволюционной, советской и современной российской. Выделены общие и особенные черты этих моделей, и сделан вывод, что волонтерство всегда воспринималось российским обществом как некий совместный проект, объединяющий граждан. Представлен обзор законодательной базы российского волонтерского движения и его наиболее востребованных направлений, которые преимущественно ограничены обеспечением безопасности. Выявлены и систематизированы проблемы волонтерского движения, и в качестве ключевой проблемы авторы рассматривают взаимоотношения волонтерских организаций с государством, которые могут породить спираль молчания и препятствовать вовлечению людей в волонтерское движение. Очерчено влияние специальной военной операции на гражданскую активность российского населения. Отмечена тенденция смещения отношения общества к волонтерству — определенная потеря интереса к гражданским инициативам и возрастающее внимание к близкому окружению. Делается вывод, что специфика волонтерского движения в России состоит в его неполитическом характере, развитии «снизу» и фокусе на обеспечении безопасности человека. Таким образом, не только государство оказывает влияние на личность и формирует ее, что в целом характерно для России, но через волонтерство и личность влияет на государство, которое не может игнорировать мощный социальный запрос на справедливость.

**Ключевые слова:** Россия; волонтерство; модели российского волонтерства; типы российских волонтеров; гуманитарная безопасность; российское общество

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