



Research on solidarity among young people in Bulgaria

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About the survey

The survey is conducted within the project “Celebrating Solidarity”, supported by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The project aims to explore, stimulate the debate and advance solidarity and philanthropy as crucial topics within European societies through the means of survey, online museum of solidarity, festivals and international conference¹.

The survey explored the youth perception of philanthropy, volunteering, charity, civic participation, solidarity through focus group discussions (FGD) and a fun online quiz. This report analyses the results of the focus group discussions conducted in Sofia, Bulgaria on 21st of January 2017. The first focus group discussion (participants aged 15 to 20) consisted of 13 people from different high schools in Sofia (referred in the text as *the younger group*), and the second one (age: 21 to 30) consisted of 6 people, all of them concurrently working and studying or finishing their Bachelor or Master studies (further referred as *the older group*). Both groups were balanced in terms of gender and covering all ages within their groups. Both focus group discussions were conducted respecting participants’ anonymity.

The focus group discussion (FGD) is a qualitative method, similar to interviewing, where the whole group is being asked general questions, provoking discussion among the participants and gathering various opinions on the issue.

The three main research focuses were:

- Participants’ perception of solidarity in general;
- Perception of solidarity in Bulgaria;
- Activism: Social engagement and volunteering.

¹ <http://museumofsolidarity.eu/>

Context

Solidarity is a key value and necessary driving force in the dynamically changing world where hate speech and growing social, economic, political, cultural divide is exposed by loud extreme-right voices. At the same time compassion, empathy, support in difficult moments, walking in the shoes of the Other are part of a set of interpersonal skills, valued more and more in many working environments and considered to be a vital part of the professions of the future. Being very personal, the act of solidarity has the power to bring positive change in the world, as said in Lech Walensa's speech at the launch of the International Human Solidarity Day at UN in 2006: "The idea of solidarity on a global scale can transform the contemporary world. It's the only logical opportunity to meet today's challenges."²

In 2014 the book "Young people in European Bulgaria. A sociological portrait 2014." by Petar-Emil Mitev and Siyka Kovacheva is published, initiated by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and following the Shell Youth Studies model. The study aims to predict social developments by identifying the attitudes and values of the youngest generation³. For better understanding the ranking of values according to Bulgarian youth, the authors of the book use Allardt's concept (1993) of the basic needs for human development:

"According to Allardt, the basic needs for individual well-being are having, loving, and being. Having refers to material needs for survival, such as economic resources, housing conditions, employment, working conditions, health, and education. The second type of needs (loving) comprises relationships with family, neighbours, friends, and workmates. These indicators reflect people's need for companionship and social solidarity, which are not correlated to the material level of living. Being stands for the individual's need for self-expression and successful integration into society" (Mitev, Kovacheva 2014:54).

The study results show: *"the low value of social solidarity in the mind of Bulgarian youth and an inclination to give priority to the desire for personal success ("being proactive", "ambitiousness") over values such as support and compassion for the vulnerable and underprivileged (Mitev, Kovacheva 2014:57).*

Leaning on another indicator "values defended by the European Union" and their importance to Bulgarian youth (age: 15-25), the authors find the evolution of the results significant and indicative in regards to the answers of young people in 1997, 2002, 2007 when "market economy" and "democracy" are in the first two places, "solidarity" on 8th and 9th, while in 2014 "freedom" is in first place and "solidarity" goes up to 6th. The triple winning answers in 1997, 2002 and 2007, the authors explain with historical context and the definition of the transition, becoming cliché:

"In the 1990s, the formulation of Bulgaria's social development was clear and categorical, it was supported by the different political parties and popularized by the media: "transition to market economy and democracy". This definition became a

² <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=20565#.WP8X7W4IFdg>, last checked on 26.04.2017.

³ The publication is available in English: www.fes.bg/files/custom/Young_People_in_European_Bulgaria.pdf

cliché and it certainly influenced Bulgarian youth's understandings. However, it also has an ontological aspect, which is also reflected in the respondents' answers. In a situation of mass impoverishment and struggle for survival, it was widely assumed that "everyone should fend for themselves". Thus, the transition from an over-collectivized socialist society to liberal democracy devalued solidarity, which is essential for the functioning of the democratic system itself. It is also indicative that profit and free enterprise were valued more than tolerance and solidarity." (Mitev, Kovacheva 2014:160).

In regards to that indicator, the results of the study in 2014 bring a normalized perspective: *We see that the distinct economization of consciousness has been reduced, and Bulgarian youth's value orientations are becoming normalized. The "market" is now ranked in the third not in the first place, "democracy" is not ahead of "freedom", and "solidarity" gets more recognition than "profit" (Mitev, Kovacheva 2014:161).*

In that context it is very interesting to analyze and compare the results of the two focus group discussions with the trends already existing in Bulgaria.

Youth and solidarity: research findings in Bulgaria

The main topics of the focus group discussions included poverty, groups identified as poor, other groups that are having difficulties for some reason, helping someone in a difficult situation, solidarity and its gender aspects, and solidarity and activism in Bulgaria.

Poverty

When speaking about poverty both groups distinguished between material and moral poverty. Material poverty was described as when a person does not know whether *“you should pay your electricity bill or eat something more”*. Another example from the younger group of people was based on the Maslow pyramid, describing poverty when the basic needs for food, shelter, etc. are not met. In regards to moral/spiritual poverty, the example given was when a person does not know how to behave, when he or she is without education. Similar example of poverty included *“lack of interests, to not have aims, to be monotonous and to be fulfilled with what you have”*.

Some of the participants in the older group explained the various types of poverty as socio-economical, visible and invisible. This group also elaborated on the issue that poverty depends on the policy of the state as well. An example of a spiritually poor person, given by the older group, was if a person makes a relatively large for Bulgarian standard restaurant bill, yet they leave no tip for the service *“when you go to a restaurant and you make a bill of 200 leva (100 Euro) and you leave 200 leva”*. On the contrary, there are other people – idealists – who are poor, but will never ask for money even for bread. Some people do it out of idealism, others from shame or pride. An example was given that there are homeless people who refuse to be transferred to shelter homes and prefer to stay *“in their box under a balcony”* out of pride, but also because of being scared.

The group of poor people could be recognized because they look miserable, unhappy and also through their actions, living conditions.

When discussing young people, the older group agreed that young people do not have the right to complain about anything. It was commented that even the young people who beg on the streets in Sofia do have a choice and it is a matter of personal choice in this case. Another example of a matter of choice is when a person doesn't have money for food, but buys cigarettes.

A question was raised if a person feels happy, even being on the street, does it mean that he or she is a poor one?

What is poverty in your opinion?	
<i>young 15-20</i>	<i>young 21-30</i>
<i>„Poverty is not to live normally and not to fulfill my everyday needs, and not to have the chance to do the things I want, because from one side I have spiritual quests, but, if I do not have material means, I cannot follow them.“</i>	<i>„There are poor people with high level of culture and poor people with low level of culture.“</i> <i>„The real poverty is when you don't value</i>

<p><i>„Poverty itself depends on the person, if he/she does not have enough brain resource to express it or he is fearful to express it, if he/she tries to fit the environment and the environment manipulates him/her.“</i></p> <p><i>„The more manipulable a person is, the poorer he/she would be.“</i></p> <p><i>„I connect poverty with education, the less educated you are, the poorer you are, both in spiritual and material sense.“</i></p>	<p><i>what you have.“</i></p> <p><i>„Not to have the possibility to do what makes you happy.“</i></p> <p><i>„A person can feel poor of emotions, poor of experiences.“</i></p> <p><i>„There are poor people that can make a lot out of nothing.“</i></p> <p><i>„You can have hunger for something more and to perceive yourself as someone who does not have enough.“</i></p>
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Groups identified as poor

One interesting group that was singled out by the younger group was the one of people born after 2000, being described with no sense of aesthetics and sense of boundaries (of their behavior). An example situation was given when two young people do not know how to behave in the cinema, comment inappropriately with no respect and understanding the plot of the movie.

Another group that was distinguished was the one of the minorities. There was a controversy in the discussion whether the state should support minority groups or through the social benefits some minority groups exploit the state funds. The ones who identified themselves as humanists in the younger group said that minority groups need to be supported. There was a statement that these social benefits should not be for lifetime, but rather for a certain period of time – 9 months, 12 months. In the minorities discussion another interesting argument was that Roma people often have talent for music, and it would be good if they are supported to develop these talents rather than living on social benefits. Positive example was given about a village with Roma population (in 2015) where the local government realized that the problem of not paying bills by the locals was because they did not know the procedure, so they taught the people how to do it, rather than punishing them.

As a separate group were specified the minorities with Eastern origin who come from places with different culture. They were described as *“different people who function differently”*. India was given as an example – people from India who have culture of minimalism – work little, have little, and here they come across the culture of materialism. They keep on working little but want to spend as much as the people living here.

Which groups would you single out as poor?	
<i>young 15-20</i>	<i>young 21-30</i>
<i>People who do not have money</i>	<i>Disabled people</i>

<i>People who cannot fulfill their needs</i>	<i>Disadvantaged people</i>
<i>People on the street who do not have anything</i>	<i>Roma</i>
<i>Minorities who need social benefits</i>	<i>Refugees</i>
<i>Ethnic minorities</i>	<i>Families with many children</i>
<i>Minorities with Eastern origin</i>	<i>Elderly people</i>

Other groups that are having difficulties for some reason

The younger group focused the discussion on the Millennium generation that could be considered a kind of poor group as well. Among these young people is observed “a severe degradation in professional and personal life, they have difficulties to connect on a deeper level with friends and relatives, they have low self-esteem, they are addicted to social networks, they want to do something different, but have no patience. This is a result of the development of society, but we cannot leave them like this. They are poor because they are robbed.”

Other reasons/conditions that make people poor were enumerated as: health issues, war, addicted people, people rejected by the society, people who have suffered accidents, who don't have health insurance, children deprived from parents' care, the lack of attention to children; people who do not have values, people who are associated with particular stereotypes. In the sphere of arts, an example was given that the artist has to consider the taste of the audience and this also causes difficulties.

Other groups that are having difficulties for some reason?	
<i>young 15-20</i>	<i>young 21-30</i>
<i>Millennium generation</i>	<i>Accidents</i>
<i>Health issues</i>	<i>If you don't have health insurance</i>
<i>War</i>	<i>Children deprived from parents' care</i>
<i>Addicted people</i>	<i>People with no values</i>
<i>Rejected by the society</i>	<i>Art people</i>

Helping someone in difficult situation

All the participants from both groups have helped different people in need in one way or another. The following types of help were shared: donations via SMS (Hitrino⁴, the Bulgarian Christmas campaigns⁵); visiting Home for elderly people and celebrating Christmas with them; volunteering in a project about kids with autism; volunteering in projects about integration of ethnic minorities. In that regard a disappointment was mentioned by a girl who has helped in such a project, because the volunteers were called, but the organizers let them go after taking some pictures, without actually let them do anything. Another type of volunteering is cleaning mountain routes, walking from one hut to another and gathering the garbage on the way. Another type of help mentioned is the personal help to friends who are in depression, also addicted to drugs. Another participant said that has assisted to personal development seminars and helping kids from homes for children, deprived of parental care, with different ethnic background. Another person has helped to find a home for a kitten.

The older group added some other types of personal help such as helping a disabled alcoholic for 5 years, helping neighbours, a grandmother of 85 with a broken leg, a dog that was saved, and also group support as the charity of big companies. An example for such group help was given by one of the participants who explained that the company he works in is taking care of a home for kids deprived from parental care in another town in Bulgaria. What they do is cook things and bring them to the office, sell them to their colleagues and donate the money raised to this home, as well as buying presents for the kids at Christmas. Another member of the group described a similar practice in her company of donating books. When talking about the charity of the big companies, corporations, it was questioned to what extent this help is real, authentic. Sometimes, if a person misses the humanness, when he or she is not fulfilled, they search a way to redeem that, and they help. All participants agreed in the end that to do something good is fine, *“to what extent it is real, it depends on the person”*. It was also mentioned that most non-governmental organizations need such charity funds of corporations, etc. to help their target groups.

Another type of help discussed in the older group was to inspire others for change through being a personal example as a teacher or role model through sports or other activities. The help to educate a person was discussed as a long-term investment and invaluable for the person's future. One of the participants who is already teaching arts in his high school explained: *“I teach drawing. Pupils form a sense of arts, beauty. People who love beauty, appreciate it and are searching for it afterwards, and they will find it. I believe this also is some kind of help”*.

“I feel pity mostly for animals, elderly people, disabled and children” concluded one of the participants, realizing that in this small group we also had many types of helpers –

⁴ A gas transport train exploded in the village of Hitrino in December 2016.

<http://www.novinite.com/articles/177875/Bulgaria%27s+Hitrino+Braces+for+Cleanup+after+Tragic+Blast>, last checked: 27.04.2017.

⁵ The charity initiative of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria "Bulgarian Christmas" aims to promote donation, to help solve socially significant problems concerning the health of children and to support the treatment of children.

volunteers, awakers, people helping through small donations, people helping relatives, etc.

Have you helped someone in a difficult position?	
<i>young 15-20</i>	<i>young 21-30</i>
<i>Donations via SMS</i>	<i>Donations to people selling something in the street</i>
<i>Visiting home for elderly people</i>	<i>Taking care about a disabled-alcoholic</i>
<i>Volunteering in a project for kids with autism</i>	<i>Helping a neighbour</i>
<i>Volunteering in a project about integration of ethnic minorities</i>	<i>Helping an old person</i>
<i>Volunteering to clean mountains routes</i>	<i>Helping animals</i>
<i>Personal help to friends in depression or addicted to weed, cocaine</i>	<i>Charity of big companies</i>
<i>Assisting in personal development seminars</i>	<i>Teaching arts</i>
<i>Helping animals</i>	

Solidarity

Although it was discussed that people today are becoming more selfish, many examples were provided contributing to the better understanding of solidarity among the younger group of people. People being good by nature was one of the central points of the discussion in the older group, where solidarity was explained as synonymous to sympathy, that should be constant/lasting and not only around Christmas. Sympathy, an attempt to unite and do something useful, whether it will be for an individual, for a community or for a whole country like Nepal (after the earthquake in 2015) and Haiti (after Hurricane Matthew devastation in 2016) – the whole world participated in helping these societies. Another definition given was that: „Solidarity is whether we are open for a different group“, for example disabled people for not feeling isolated, socially excluded. Solidarity is also „the respect for a certain position of someone, something, maybe for someone who is successful in something and you just support him/her, this is still solidarity, to agree, as an attitude, there is energy set in this attitude“. But are we constantly practicing our solidarity, this is a key issue.

What is solidarity?	
<i>young 15-20</i>	<i>young 21-30</i>
<i>“This what makes us helping others.”</i>	<i>“Sympathy, an attempt to unite and do something useful, whether it will be for an individual, for a community or for a whole country.”</i>
<i>“Antonym to egoism, to be able to help others, to think not only for yourself and to be</i>	

<p><i>useful to the others.”</i></p> <p><i>“Type of sympathy towards somebody in need.”</i></p> <p><i>“Sympathy and act of help for cause or somebody in need.”</i></p> <p><i>“You do it out of your personal will.”</i></p> <p><i>“To help a friend without thinking about the immediate reward you get.”</i></p> <p><i>“To see that there is a problem in your environment and to lead to awareness and action.”</i></p> <p><i>“Nowadays, people help, because then they will feel proud, not because they want.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Solidarity is whether we are open for a different group.”</i></p> <p><i>“Solidarity is the respect for a certain position of someone, something, maybe for someone who is successful in something and you just support him/her, this is still solidarity, to agree, as an attitude, there is energy set in this attitude.”</i></p> <p><i>“But are we constantly practicing our solidarity, this is a key issue.”</i></p>
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Girls or boys?

Both groups agreed that girls help more than boys, but also it depends on what kind of help is needed, if you need somebody to push your car, you ask a male.

Who shows/acts more solidarity - girls and the boys?	
<i>young 15-20</i>	<i>young 21-30</i>
<i>Girls help more than boys.</i>	<i>Girls express more willingness to help.</i>

Solidarity and activism in Bulgaria

The following events in Bulgaria triggered solidarity and activism in the Bulgarian society according to the younger group – the tragedy in Hitrino and the refugee crisis, which different groups of people asked for solidarity in the two completely opposite directions - some asked for help and support to help the people in need, while others asked for help and support to stop them and discourage them from coming, as a kind of *“a national crisis that needs to be stopped”*. Another example of solidarity campaigns is linked to the fact that each year many people die on the road, because of car accidents. The younger group concluded that if people care, they can find many causes and groups that need help, support or just other human being presence. There is much information in Internet, in the social media, but also in different TV programs and people can learn about various campaigns from friends as well.

The older group also stressed the fact that these efforts should be constant, not sporadic. As a good example was given a TV advertisement of the Bulgarian Christmas⁶ campaign that says that Christmas is gone, but you can still help by the end of the year.

The act of solidarity requires a value system that needs to be created, to develop a sense of solidarity competence. Media, family and books could help in that direction, and a question was raised: *“how can you help to a certain group if you don’t know that they need help?”* Another perspective also discussed was that this group should not become dependent on people/state’s support/help. The critical evaluation of the development aid in Africa was given as an example. It was said that *“it is better to really spend time to understand the problem, rather just send some money”*.

The act of giving for some people is not an easy one, *“it requires overcoming yourself”*. Concern was expressed that people are not sure whether if they send a SMS for some campaigns their money is spent accordingly, so some people call and check whether this initiatives are real and not fake. Hence, the biggest problem is seen that *“people talk more than do”*. Sharing in Facebook spreads the word for a certain cause, campaign, but *“it is another thing to really help”*. *“Posting is a step, when more people understand about a problem, this raises the motivation for such activities”*. A positive example was given that one of the participants found a home for a dog through Facebook campaign that reached 150 people. For young people, Facebook, YouTube are powerful instruments of exchange and communication. Traveling was given as another example of a form of exchange – *“a form of learning more and empathizing with others”*.

In general, the culture of helping others is increasing. The broadest platform for this is social media, but calls for solidarity could also be found in the workplace. Various forms of art, documentaries, music can also provoke solidarity acts – like making exhibitions of pupils’ drawings and collecting donations for some other activities at schools. A concrete example was given with the High School of Fine Arts in Sofia, where if a teacher gets ill and needs a special treatment, students prepare exhibitions with their pieces of work and collect donations.

Thus, the older group agreed that what matters most is the personal, emotional element. For example, *“a close person of yours has passed through something difficult and you would like to help other people who you don’t know, but who are in a similar situation”*. *“The cause should be close to you and at the same time you should feel the desire to make something significant for somebody.”*

The culture of solidarity becomes more popular not only among NGOs, but also in businesses and companies through various creative forms and means. The VMWare IT company was given as an example – it contributes through teaching computer skills for disadvantaged kids.

⁶ The charity initiative of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria "Bulgarian Christmas" aims to promote donation, to help solve socially significant problems concerning the health of children and to support the treatment of children: <https://www.bgkoleda.bg/>, last checked 29.04.2017.

Solidarity and activism in Bulgaria	
<i>young 15-20</i>	<i>young 21-30</i>
<i>Hitrino tragedy</i>	<i>Bulgarian Christmas campaign</i>
<i>Floods in Bulgaria in the previous years</i>	<i>Raising money for a surgery for a friend</i>
<i>Refugee crisis</i>	<i>Finding home for a dog through Facebook</i>
<i>People dying in road accidents</i>	<i>Artists billboards campaigns against domestic violence</i>
<i>The famous Bulgarian football player Dimitar Berbatov and his foundation helping children</i>	<i>The famous Bulgarian football player Dimitar Berbatov and his foundation helping children</i>

Conclusion

“I rebel, therefore we exist”, in this powerful phrase, Albert Camus sets the bridge between rebel and solidarity, empowering the individual through the act of voicing the needs of the Others, the ones who are humiliated and powerless. Thus, the act of solidarity also becomes an act of taking responsibility, an aware choice to contribute to a positive change, helping the ones in need, supporting the well-being of the so called Others.

As seen from the answers of both groups, there are many kinds of solidarity practiced among young people in Bulgaria: visible and invisible, spontaneous and organized, towards individual or towards groups; towards people and animals, helping nature as well, etc. Above all, the act of solidarity is an authentic and personal one. It is based on feelings, emotions, attitudes, requiring identification with the problem of the Other. The Other is sometimes close in space or could be distant (Africa, Haiti, etc.), with similar problem or problem to which the person feels related. The Others are close ones (friends, relatives), but also different ones (disabled, minorities, refugees).

The acts of solidarity among young people in Bulgaria based on the answers of the two groups are rather spontaneous and random, hence it is very positive to observe, following the tendency of the previous study in 2014, that there is a trend of more and more young people being sensitive to the needs of the Others, being open to empathize, but also to take real actions towards doing, bringing change in our interconnected world, pleading that solidarity should be constant, lasting and not a one time job. Inspiring agents of change are the positive examples in the family (mother, grandfather, etc.) and popular people (music stars, IT gurus, football players, etc.) who devote time and money to different causes.

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