

CVS - Bulgaria



The mission of CVS - Bulgaria is to popularize the idea of voluntary work through organizing voluntary initiatives, to motivate young people to participate in voluntary actions, to promote and support international understanding and solidarity, social justice, and respect for the environment.

The association was founded in 1998 in Bulgaria and became a member of Service Civil International (SCI) in 2005. More about it and the international community of volunteers in Bulgaria and around the world follow below in an interview with the chairperson Katerina Stoyanova.

Identity

How would you describe the community around CVS - Bulgaria?

In CVS - Bulgaria we create small communities around our different projects, and we are people who believe in the power of volunteering. Regarding the SCI, we have common guidelines for projects, procedures for partnerships, and managing finances. We have a shared frame to ensure a quality international exchange of all volunteers.

Who are the members of CVS - Bulgaria – as a legal organization and the wider circle of supporters?

Our core members are the people who founded the organization. They have coordinating and managing roles. The informal community is all people who are interested in our projects, and they involve themselves in different initiatives according to their interests.

Most of our core members are people over 30 years old, while the informal group around the organization consists mostly of young people with more free time. These are people between 18

and 35 years old. Women are more than men, as it is not surprising for the social sector. Most of them have jobs in other NGOs or international companies in Bulgaria. However, predominantly, the biggest number of these people are still students.

Structure

How do the members get involved?

Usually, during an event organized by us people can fill in our associate membership application and pay a membership fee. After they become associate members of the organization on paper, they should be active within it at least a year before becoming official members. The goal of this period is for people to gain more experience because as full-members they have the right to attend assemblies, vote, and influence the decision-making process.

At the moment we are reconsidering the membership model because we want to start involving more young people. We want to empower and inspire more of them because we have noticed that they want to take part in projects but they do not want to coordinate them and get involved at a higher level. We want to make them ask: *Is there anything I can organize, or I have an idea and I want to make it happen* instead of: *Is there anything I can volunteer for?*

Our mission is a process and the achievement of this goal will take time because people need to develop the idea themselves.

How many members are on the general assembly?

In the core, we are 4 people. Our colleagues from other organizations have around 10 members, and in this way, the work is split between more minds and hands. At our strategic meeting this year we will discuss that because we want to have more active core members.

What are the roles of these 4 people?

The roles are split on meetings depending on the different projects. Before we had that structure that everyone had a role but back then we were around 40 people. Now this board has more consulting and operating functions. For the last 10 years, things changed a lot.

How many people are actively working in the office?

We have 2 people on full-time positions. One of them is doing all the office communication. We also have another one who works from home. This year we have a volunteer who also works from home and her job is administrating the work camps.

We also have 4 EVS volunteers. Their role depends on what kind of qualities they have. Previous years we had volunteers who were very active and created things on their initiative. When we look for such European volunteers, we want people who are over 25 years old, and who are proactive. However, everyone looks proactive on their CV. And when they come to Sofia some can find excuses such as the one that they don't speak Bulgarian... The EVS volunteers stay minimum of 8 months to a maximum of 1 year.

How is CVS - Bulgaria financed?

Mostly by European projects and programmes, and from time to time we have sponsorships from companies, different donations and of course, our membership fee. The small fees that participants pay for us being their sending organization abroad cover the administration work that has to be done for these projects.

Experience

What is the difference between a volunteering camp and training?

Volunteering camps happen in the SCI network. We have an online system where every year we have around 800 proposals for volunteering camps in different countries around the world. The volunteers should be 18+ years old to travel in Europe and 21+ to travel outside Europe. For the camps, people usually have to cover their travel expenses and have pocket money, while the project covers food and accommodation. Some places in Africa and South America also have different additional fees.

Trainings are usually programs of Erasmus +. They cover travel expenses, accommodation, food, etc. People are trained on different subjects by working in particular fields. The goal is to bring people from different countries to work together for a local community. We have around 12 topics like cultural festivals, working with people with addictions, elderly, disabled people, etc.

The idea is born after the First World War and it aimed to show that no matter nationality all people can work and achieve something together. This is a real experience of multicultural exchange that develops qualities like tolerance and acceptance within people.

How many Bulgarians are going to this kind of camps?

Yearly, we have around 30-50 people. Compared to Catalunya, for example, they send around 200 people a year, and Germany even more. In Bulgaria, we still have work to develop this culture.

We also do this kind of camps for foreigners to come to our country. This year we work with a small community from Lukovit village. This is the third year of the project and it will be a survival camp.

Communications

How do people hear about what you do?

There are different channels. We have a good social media presence. Some people also find us through google and our website, as well as word of the mouth. It is very interesting that the volunteering itself is a process and many people did something 10 years ago and then they are coming back now.

However, most of the participants get in touch often through our calls for projects that we share on the website and social media – on the Facebook page (6000 fans), and then on the groups about Erasmus+ projects.

Do you try to target the so-called hard to reach people?

We target them when we share information on different online groups. Also through different initiatives that are not typical events. Lately, we have been doing many guerrilla actions. The last one, in July, *What is the cost of silence?* was our activity under the project "Three Actions in Support of the Istanbul Convention", financed by the Bulgarian Women's Fund (Urgent Action Fund, aimed at financing initiatives in support of the Istanbul Convention).

Its purpose was to raise awareness of the structural phenomenon of violence against women and domestic violence and the urgent need for Bulgaria to ratify the Istanbul Convention. The activities included a guerilla action in Sofia public transport. We remained anonymous on the day of the action and the first days after it. Mainly because the innovative approach was intended to create a platform for conversation in society, without a facilitator. We put 150 pieces of underwear, with a price list - the stories of victims from Bulgaria.

How do you promote these camps and events?

We post almost every day on our Facebook page. CVS - Bulgaria was born as an association between different NGOs. Because of that, we have particular frames that have been accepted by all of them to follow common values. So when we communicate we also use the common guidelines. Also every time we have an event we always try to get in touch with the media.

What do you do to connected people within the community?

We organize Volunteering Circles. These are themed events in the office that we hope to bring people together. We also did an informal gathering, like a team-building, for our members and more active people in the organizations. We spend a weekend together, and people had the chance to discussed so many things. We had the team-building effect, and after the trip, we started organizing more events in the office. We could see more clearly everyone and get to know each other better. It was the beginning of the strategic meeting that we are going to have soon. And because of this, we wanted to see how serious people are about the organization.

However, we know that the real problem today is time. People started to appreciate their free time, especially when we are so stressed by everyday life.

How does CVS - Bulgaria tell the stories of their members?

We have a blog section on the website and we invite people to write a story and send photographs about their experiences after coming back from a project. We have noticed that other people are reading them, especially, before travelling themselves. We also invite those people to tell stories at different events.

We encourage people who came back from trainings to organize an initiative that shares what they have learned during the training. They can make it happen like an action, but also they can do it through our format CVS Uni – a space for volunteers to exchange knowledge and skills. This year, in CVS Uni we have 5 events every month on the topic of the Montessori method in teaching. For example, we have also done for knitting, blogging, etc.

What are the other ways that people can contribute with valuable content?

We encourage people if they have an idea for a project to write it down, to try to develop it, and to make it happen. CVS - Bulgaria can help in various ways by providing space, support in planning, communication and connections with people.

This year for 1st of June – the International Children's Day, our volunteers had the lovely idea for collecting old toys from the employees of different companies. They organized 13 locations, put boxes, and posters there. We helped them with contacts, and they did all the logistics.

Cooperation

How do CVS - Bulgaria and its community partner with other stakeholders?

We have 3 ways of partnership – coordinating volunteers, making shared ideas come true, or supporting each other by sharing information on our channels. Most often we work with other NGOs to organize events. The best examples are Caritas, and Sofia Film Fest. We have also worked with schools to create workshops in and outside of Sofia, for example in Teteven, and Sakomokov.

Now we have an intern from New Bulgarian University. We also do presentations in universities for the students and we also work, for example, with the Hungarian Cultural Institute - Sofia and Czech Centre Sofia.

Do you use any tools to keep everyone in the community on the same page?

We realize how important it is to sign agreements for long term partnerships. They clarify the relations between the organizations. Like it is with Sofia Film Fest. We know every year that we have tasks and things to do regarding our collaboration with them. Also, we always sign agreements with partners for the working camps venues.

We also used to do working groups for human rights and ecology. Thought those groups volunteers themselves could find collaborators among other volunteers, and join forces to create actions together. They also sign agreements as code of conducts.

We actively use Google and its tools for organization, Facebook groups and chats, etc. However, for the Sofia Film Fest, we need to find a better tool for management because the logistics of coordinating the volunteers are a lot.

What are the benefits of collaborating for you?

Through collaboration, we achieve the goal to communicate the volunteer work as a tool for different causes. A very important aim is to keep our standards about the coordination of the volunteering group. Because it is more than just coordinating them, it is about creating communities and adding value to the community.

Also, our volunteers for the Sofia Film Fest get involved in the whole organization of the festival, and they develop new skills and knowledge in the field of cultural management. The best thing is that the expertise of one organization adds to the expertise of the other.