

Social Initiatives in Support of the State: A Mechanism for Enhancing Societal Resilience and Development

Maria Vasilска

University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria, maria@unwe.bg

Abstract: Individual states are generally expected to protect and care for their citizens by creating and enforcing laws, supporting various underprivileged groups in society, and so on. However, governments often fail to provide sufficient and timely attention to different vulnerable groups, to resolve urgent social issues quickly, and to effectively address serious challenges in such critical areas. This is where individuals, community groups, and organisations step in, supporting and complementing governmental efforts through entrepreneurial, volunteer or other kinds of initiatives – sometimes even taking over certain social functions traditionally performed by state institutions. This paper analyses these processes and highlights good examples of two young people whose ideas and actions solve specific social problems in Bulgaria. Such initiatives foster civic responsibility, promote cohesion, and contribute to sustainable development.

Keywords: social initiatives, entrepreneurship, volunteering, sustainable development

1 Introduction

States and their institutions are widely regarded as the primary actors responsible for ensuring the protection and welfare of their citizens. This includes the formulation and enforcement of legal frameworks, civil protection, the provision of public services and targeted support for disadvantaged and marginalised groups within society, among other responsibilities. Nevertheless, there is widely recognised evidence that governments often fail to respond adequately or promptly to the needs of vulnerable populations and society as a whole. In response, various social initiatives – of individuals, public groups or legal organisations – has emerged, aimed at addressing social problems and contributing to the public good, supporting and complementing the role of the state. These initiatives range from informal personal projects, through local community activities, to organised efforts by non-governmental organisations, non-profit organisations, or social enterprises established with specific goals. They may have various focuses, but what they have in common is that they are based on needs in society identified by individuals who are highly motivated and take action to

meet these needs, often attracting like-minded people, volunteers, and supporting specialists and organisations. Their activities and the positive results they achieve often have an inspiring effect and help to increase civic engagement and responsibility, thereby contributing to sustainable development. The aim of this paper is to show, through the examples of two proactive and committed young Bulgarians, that citizens' social initiatives can complement the state in performing its social functions and contribute to enhancing societal resilience and development.

2 Conceptual basis

Social initiatives are actions that benefit society and are typically driven by an individual's personal desire to help others. These actions can vary from supporting people from communities in need, participating in social activism, recycling, etc. They are based on someone's individual concerns, personal values, own motives and particular goals, seeking to address problems of society. At the same time, these actions are often carried out within a team or a social entity (group, organisation, or community) (Fernandez, 2021).

For the purposes of this paper, two forms of implementing social initiatives will be considered, which often intertwine, complement each other, and support the state in fulfilling its social commitments.

The **non-profit organisations** (NPOs) are typically dedicated to pursuing mission-oriented goals through the collective actions of citizens. As they are not formed and organised so as to generate profit, usually they do not have commercial business models and rely on donations, grants, and fundraising to support their mission. NPOs encompass a wide array of entities, including foundations, charities, educational or cultural institutions, philanthropy or advocacy groups, etc., often involving some degree of voluntary participation. Their primary objective is to address societal needs and contribute to the public good, commonly filling gaps left by the public and private sectors.

Volunteers play an important role in the implementation of social initiatives of individuals, NPOs or other kind of organisations. Social enterprises rely on volunteers who are willing to contribute to achieve the organisation's social mission (Dentchev et al., 2022). There are number of definitions of **volunteering** differing by their scope and direction, such as: "conducting work or activity without payment, for those outside of the family or household" (Nichol et al, 2023); "conscious, voluntary and unpaid activity (of a person or non-governmental organisation) aimed at achieving a social effect in the process of solving social, economic, environmental or other challenges of modern society within the limits of one's professional competences and in one's free time free from the main work" (Lenov, 2023). As already stated, this activity is often carried out within social initiatives, but can also be accomplished independently. It is

motivated by the free will and desire of the individual (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016), rather than by the pursuit of material benefits or under external pressure. Volunteers have been found to be the first to donate not only labour, energy, time and expertise, but also funds to the causes they are involved with because they realize the importance of even the smallest donation (Toncheva-Zlatkova, 2023).

Engagement in social initiatives and volunteering has a number of personal intangible benefits for the individuals devoted to them, but it also helps the state to respond to society's demands or other contemporary challenges. That is why governments often encourage, support or at least try not to hinder such actions, as they reduce social tension caused by the state's inability to solve pressing problems. There are also a number of benefits for the society, including more accessible and quality social, health, educational and other services, increasing social capital and strengthening social inclusion.

The topic of social initiatives and volunteering is of particular importance in the Bulgarian context. In general, people in the country develop various social initiatives and entrepreneurial businesses, but are not particularly active in volunteering, although in recent years there has been significant progress in this area. There have also been repeated attempts to adopt a law on volunteering in Bulgaria over the years, incl. now, in mid-2025.

3 Methods

The research methods employed in this work include: a review of existing research findings and publications on the topic; the collection of secondary source information about the two young Bulgarians featured in the study (including websites, publications by and about them, media interviews, and podcast appearances), followed by the synthesis, chronological presentation, and analysis of this information; the conducting of two interviews with one of the subjects, Ralitsa Kolarova; and finally, the summarising of the results and drawing of conclusions.

4 Good examples and discussion

4.1 Ralitsa Kolarova and her platform “I achieve myself - Informed for success!”

In the current year, 2025, Ralitsa is a 21-year-old student living in Sofia, Bulgaria. Two years ago, during her final year at school, she developed a social project for her

Civic Education course, focused on the informational needs of children with a single parent or no parents at all. This project soon evolved into an extremely important personal cause, as she herself had once needed information about the available opportunities for receiving help and support during a difficult time in her life. While both state and private support options do exist, the information about them often remains inaccessible – hidden away somewhere and failing to reach those who need it. Ralitsa recognised this, and even while still a schoolgirl, she created her own platform to help other young people like her stay informed and navigate the bureaucracy. She firmly believes that in doing so, these young people will be encouraged to continue their education, to grow and develop, and to build a successful future for themselves.

A bit more about the project:

In every country, the responsible institutions are aware of how many children have only one living parent or no parents at all, and they develop mechanisms to help them feel more secure and valued as citizens. Bulgaria also has such mechanisms in place. Unfortunately, however, the necessary steps are often not taken to ensure that these children are informed about their rights and the opportunities available to them. That is why, following a preliminary conducted survey that confirmed a lack of sufficient awareness, Ralitsa created the platform <https://sampostigam.org/> (“I achieve myself”). The aim was to help fill this information gap by gathering in one place the opportunities for financial, material, and personal support – both from public and private sources – available to these children. The target group includes schoolchildren and university students in Bulgaria who have one living parent or no parents; those who have grown up or are growing up in institutions; or who are in the care of relatives. The website is also intended to support the single alive parents, guardians, and custodians.

The website’s motto, “*Informed for Success!*”, clearly expresses its main goal: providing easy access to information as a springboard to achievement. As an active young person with a noble cause, Ralitsa quickly gained support from NGOs and business organisations, and received help in promoting the site from schools, universities, the media, and the state itself (represented by the two directly responsible Bulgarian institutions: the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy). These institutions also supported the implementation of a second survey by sharing the website across their networks and with end beneficiaries. The *Blagotvoritel*¹ Foundation is the platform’s main financial, promotional, and communications partner, having supported both its creation and development.

Ralitsa is currently in the process of establishing NPOs (likely a foundation), which will allow her to communicate and engage with various stakeholders (primarily state authorities, volunteers, donors, funders, and other supporters) in a more transparent and authoritative manner, as well as to reach an ever-growing number of beneficiaries. The platform is continuously being enriched with information on: public and private support available to pupils and students in such disadvantaged situations; scholarship

¹ A Bulgarian word, meaning a person who is doing charity.

programmes for pupils with one parent or no parents (placed in the care of relatives); scholarship programmes for children without parents living in institutions; opportunities available to guardians and custodians of such children; news in this field; etc. The young lady is particularly active in personally promoting her initiative, taking part in radio and television programmes, podcasts, lectures for students, and other public engagements.

All of this is already bearing fruit, as evidenced by letters of appreciation from young people who have benefited from the information gathered for them. Around Ralitsa, a circle of experts has also formed – offering voluntary support in the form of mentoring, consultancy, financial assistance, technical help (including free hosting provided by bCloud.Club), and other types of aid for the initiative. However, in order for her to fully achieve her goals, there is still work to be done, especially in overcoming bureaucratic obstacles – including the site to be further promoted, as well as to start being used and enriched by state institutions, so that the information can reach more and more disadvantaged youth.

4.2 Lazar Radkov and his voluntary initiatives

Lazar is 41 years old man who, for the past eight years, has been launching volunteer initiatives that inspire and attract hundreds of thousands of like-minded people, with their most visible result being the saving of dozens of human lives.

Lazar was born in Plovdiv, the second-largest city in Bulgaria. He completed his higher education in Germany, where he initially studied engineering, but later changed direction and graduated with a degree in Nutrition Science. In addition, he passed a course to become a paramedic and volunteered with emergency medical teams in Bulgaria. He founded his own fitness and healthy eating company, but alongside running his business, he also devotes a great deal of time and effort to initiatives aimed at improving health awareness among people in Bulgaria. To support this work, he established a foundation bearing his name. His passion for sport and his knowledge of nutrition have earned the trust of his followers and made him a role model.

Despite his success in business and the positive impact of his efforts to raise awareness and encourage people to take greater responsibility for their own health (through organising mass challenges and flash mobs, contributing regular features to social and public media, writing articles and books, giving public lectures, etc.), Lazar felt a strong desire to give much more. At the same time, he believed he had the strength to achieve something far greater, that could transform the environment and improve people's lives in Bulgaria. This is how the idea for "Caps for the Future" came about, which soon after its launch absorbed all of Lazar's energy. His entrepreneurial business became a secondary occupation, which, however, financed the "Caps" initiative for quite some time. Although Lazar intends to pay more attention to this business in the future, he has now almost completely stepped away from it due to his changed focus of enthusiasm towards non-profit initiatives that help people, save lives, create

cohesive communities dedicated to doing good and enhance people's readiness to demonstrate mass solidarity. His volunteer endeavours and campaigns are numerous, among which there are some aimed at people at risk from countries close to Bulgaria. Lazar thinks that the power of civic engagement and volunteering is one of the three forces that drives society forward, alongside economic and political power.

Here we will focus on two of his large-scale volunteer initiatives:

4.2.1 “Caps for the Future”

The idea of collecting and recycling plastic bottle caps did not originally come from Lazar Radkov, of course. Such initiatives exist in a number of European countries, including Bulgaria. A few years before “Caps for the Future” was launched, there had been two similar undertakings in Bulgaria aimed at helping people in need. However, by 2017, when the group of training with Lazar people decided to start collecting caps (because they use a lot of bottles during training), those earlier initiatives were no longer active.

Since then, “Caps for the Future” (<https://www.facebook.com/kapachkizabudeshte>) has become one of Bulgaria's most loved social initiatives, supported by both the business and the citizens from all parts of the country. It has two main goals: 1) to collect plastic caps, which are handed over for recycling, taking care of the environment; 2) with the money received, the huge chronic deficits in the healthcare system to be reduced. The small change from the caps is not enough to help all hospitals, so the they have targeted it at the hope of the nation – babies, buying and delivering incubators and other necessary equipment for neonatology wards across the country, mainly in smaller towns.

The results of the campaigns are becoming exponentially more significant each year. In addition to the vast number of people collecting and handing in tonnes of caps for recycling (between 230 and 250 tonnes annually), thousands of individuals are voluntarily involved in organising the process. However, the funds raised from recycling caps account for less than half of the total amount received by the Lazar Radkov's foundation, which manages “Caps for the Future” – the greater portion of the funding comes from corporate and private donors, as well as from the sale of merchandise. Thanks to the initiative, five specialised children's ambulances and other four specialised for other purposes have been purchased and donated to Bulgarian hospitals, along with over 25 incubators and various medical devices and specialised equipment, worth more than half a million euros. Renovations of hospital wards have also been carried out, along with other related activities. None of the people involved in the initiative receives a salary or any funds from the foundation. Lazar insists on this in order to ensure full transparency in the use of funds and to prevent any grounds for speculation or mistrust. He supports himself by leading physical training sessions.

“Caps for the Future” is an excellent example of how little personal efforts can create a huge change and a “snowball” effect of kindness in the society.

4.2.2 “Rescue club for the Future”

As a next step, the initiative “Rescue club for the Future” (<https://spasitelen.club/>) was launched in autumn 2023. It develops a network of clubs, which, under the Bulgarian Disaster Protection Act, function as voluntary formations for the prevention or management of disasters, fires, and emergencies, as well as for dealing with their aftermath. The clubs operate under the umbrella of Lazar Radkov’s foundation and are funded through participants’ own contributions, the foundation itself, or private donors. The clubs support the General Directorate for Fire Safety and Civil Protection of the Ministry of the Interior. There are already ten such clubs in eight cities across Bulgaria, with over 150 professionally trained, experienced, and well-equipped volunteers providing assistance in disaster situations. “Rescue club for the Future” is already recognised and actively involved in tackling forest fires, supporting drainage operations, and participating in search and rescue missions. One of the ideas for expanding the initiative is the formation of youth rescue clubs.

This volunteer formation is developing not only as a rescue organisation but also as a symbol of civic engagement and solidarity in Bulgaria.

Conclusions and implications for the future

A developed society should be democratic, civically active, and socially responsible.

Ralitsa wants to contribute to the creation of such a society in Bulgaria – one in which the state is able to protect rights and guide young people from disadvantaged social backgrounds towards a better future. With the expected stronger partnership and collaboration between the state and the legal entity that Ralitsa will establish, “I achieve myself” will gain sustainability and serve as an example of a citizen-created mechanism that benefits both the state and at-risk target groups.

Lazar has a vision for the development of Bulgaria through volunteering and how this can be achieved – in areas where he can personally contribute. He believes that with a little more effort, significant results can be achieved in the development of society through caring for oneself and for others, including the vulnerable and those in disadvantaged or at-risk situations. A step towards realising this vision was the establishment of local “Clubs for the Future” (that are without rescue activities) in 2022 across 30 Bulgarian towns, developed by local residents. These clubs not only support the “Caps for the Future” campaign locally but also have a broader focus on volunteering through causes aimed at improving the local environment. Another volunteer initiative involving medically trained individuals is the delivery of first aid training in schools, which has so far reached over 8,000 pupils.

The two good examples presented within this paper show that we should not rely on the state for everything or complain that it is to blame, but rather take matters into our own hands and strive every day to improve our own lives and those of others.

Acknowledgement

This work was financially supported by the UNWE Research programme (Research grant No. 21/2025). Many thanks go to Ralitsa Kolarova for what she does, for the information she has shared, and for being a role model to students with her involvement as a guest lecturer at UNWE. The author would also like to express her gratitude to Lazar Radkov, who is a true inspiration to many people.

References

- [1] Dentchev et al. (2022). Social Entrepreneurship and Vulnerable Groups, e-book 3 in ERMIScom project, Common curricula for diversity: education in media and integration of vulnerable groups. Athens: National Kapodistrian University of Athens
- [2] Fernandez, L. O. (2021). Motivation and social action. In: Gorchilova, D. (editor): Pro Bono at the European Universities, Guidebook, Publishing Complex-UNWE, <https://beeseprobono.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/BEESE-guidebook-EN.pdf>
- [3] Facebook page of the initiative “Caps for the Future”: <https://www.facebook.com/kapachkizabudeshte>
- [4] Internet cite of the initiative “I achieve myself - Informed for success!”: <https://sampostigam.org/>
- [5] Internet cite of the initiative “Rescue club for the Future”: <https://spasitelen.club/>
- [6] Lenov, A. (2023). Volunteering as a complex social phenomenon today. Humanitarian studios: pedagogics, psychology, philosophy. № 2, pp. 55-66 (2023)
- [7] Nichol, B., Wilson, R, Rodrigues, A., Haughton, C. (2024). Exploring the Effects of Volunteering on the Social, Mental, and Physical Health and Well-being of Volunteers: An Umbrella Review. *Voluntas* 35, 97–128 (2024)
- [8] Salamon, L.M., Sokolowski, S.W. (2016). Beyond nonprofits: Reconceptualizing the third sector. *Voluntas* 27, 1515–1545 (2016)
- [9] Toncheva-Zlatkova, V. (2023). Communication with volunteers: challenges and solutions for civil society organization. *Journal of Management Sciences and Applications*. 2(1), pp. 151–161, <https://jomsa.science/index.php/jomsa/article/view/34>