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**Forum for Free Thought / Albania Corps of Volunteers**

### **“Volunteering” during the Communist time**

There are only few people who did not do voluntary work during communism. Taking part in the volunteers' actions, organized by the government, was a privilege, from which the opponents of the communist regime, i.e. the politically persecuted people, were excluded. As a matter of fact they worked as well, but they worked in even worse conditions, in concentration camps and mines, where they suffered the punishment as a consequence of their opposition to the regime.

Inhabitants from cities and villages, old and young people, men and women, pupils and soldiers, were organized by the communist government and worked for one month in a voluntary way, both night and day, summer and winter.

You can still find in Albania the evidence of a great job done in a voluntary way by hundreds of thousands of people. National roads, railways, hydro-power plants, towns and industrial works, citrus plantations, forests, and marshes transformed into agricultural land, have all been done by the engagement of people in voluntary work, mainly manual labor, and in the absence of modern mechanical technology.

But was it real volunteering? If it was so, then Albania would be one of the countries with the highest level of volunteering in Europe.

But the truth is different. In fact, people were not taken to the construction sites by force but no one ever thought of rejecting the invitation of the government to go there. Actually, they felt “happy” to go there. In our country, under the most cruel dictatorship in Europe, part of a suppressed and ideologically “intoxicated” people, people would go to work in lines, singing revolutionary songs, whose lyrics typically consisted of such phrases as: “Let us go and work, let us be full of sweat, let us build our New Albania”.

Even in cases when the government “invited” people to donate blood, they would go to the hospital “voluntarily” and in an organized way, with the national flag in their hands and singing communist revolutionary songs.

This was volunteering in a country where the communist ideology had totally deformed the society, transforming it into a controlled and blindly obedient mechanism.

The national economy of Albania owes a lot to those people who worked voluntarily, but on the other hand, the culture and cultivation with the feeling of volunteering were severely damaged. Upon the fall of communism, people realized that they had not been volunteers but were simply exploited by the government by working free of charge in extremely bad conditions and with strenuous efforts as well. This bitter memory from the volunteering of the communist times has brought about the lack of a real tradition of volunteering in Albania and has made it not easy to establish it.

### **What are the obstacles?**

In 1998, tens of thousands of people from Kosovo were forced out of their houses by the Serbian army, when NATO started a bombing campaign and military operations which led to the liberation of Kosovo. Most of these refugees came to Albania and many of them were provided shelter in schools, in palace of sports and other public buildings. The 'Red Cross' organization asked for volunteers to serve in the palace of sports in the capital city, Tirana, to assist in the delivery of donations and the maintenance of hygiene in an overpopulated environment. This call for for voluntary work was positively answered by very few people. In the winter of 2009-2010, the Northwestern region of Albania was hit by a serious flood and tens of thousands of people were evacuated to be later sheltered in public buildings for more than a month. Even this time the humanitarian organizations had difficulty in finding volunteers to assist these inhabitants.

### **A natural question arises: Why don't Albanians support volunteering?**

The lack of tradition and above all the destruction and distortion of the concept of volunteering that was made during the communist period is the

main reason for this reality. This would be the first answer, without thinking too long!

But there are also some other not less important factors, which have had a negative influence after the collapse of communism. In Albania, political parties have also taken the attributes of civil society organizations. Having the financial possibilities, they are responsible not only for organizing rallies of electoral character, but of non-political activities as well, or to be more precise, the reality is that they have transformed into political activities what must be non- political activities, such as ceremonies in women's World Day on 8 March, the ceremonies on the national day of teachers, on 7 March, marches on the international Workers' Day, on May 1 ... and examples like these can be endless.

The political entities in the country started to organize other activities as well, seemingly voluntary, such as blood donation, helping children in orphanage, etc. This commitment of politics had a negative impact because it created the idea that such activities could be organized only if there was political support, bringing us back in time when the state party organized all social life of the people, but the only difference with now is that today there is not a single party as it was in the dictatorship, but there are two or more.

Above all, we could not know whether young people who were engaged in a party, were really volunteers or were the children of men or women who were engaged in the party, thus being obliged in some way to get engaged.

Such "voluntary" activities produced the symbol of abuse, because as they were undertaken for political or electoral reasons, they often served only as a political decor to be filmed by television, without having a concrete impact. This minimized the degree of trust by the youth in organizing activities that were really voluntary and beneficial to the community.

Today in Albania, civil society is wrongly personified by an army of not-for-profit organizations, which have often undertaken voluntary activities. Many of them have abused with the funds they have received and the young people have realized that the activities they have attended were formal, thus losing trust and minimizing their desire to get further engaged. Many people are expected, for this reason, to be prejudging and if they are invited to join a voluntary initiative, before thinking about the importance of what they are going to do, they think that the organizer has obtained a great amount of money and they will feel used as a decor to justify the funding

that the organizers have received from international organizations or national institutions.

Another serious obstacle for the development of the culture of volunteering is the lack of philanthropy. In general, the class of businesspeople in Albania is very little inclined to support the operational costs of voluntary activities. They prefer to fund party activities, including their electoral campaigns (even in an informal way), because in this way they pre-pay corruption, the political support for their businesses when the party these business are supporting comes to power.

Furthermore, they prefer to support activities that draw the attention of the media, asking to be “rewarded” with advertisements for the contribution they give. In Albania, there is no law for volunteering yet, so that it can be recognized as a contribution to society. Some efforts have been made recently. A draft has been prepared but it has not taken the form of a draft-law and, most importantly, has not been ‘tested’ by the stakeholders. Only few people had the opportunity to participate in this draft. On the other hand, there are some efforts through the special directives by the Albanian government, which has thought of ‘imposing’ the involvement of young people in voluntary activities. In order to gain the right to be part of the competition to attend university, the Ministry of Education in Albania has issued a directive which provides for the “obligation” of learners to actively attend voluntary activities, or community service as they call it. But even this practice, because of including the word “obligation”, is far from being volunteering and has ended in formalism.

### **Efforts to establish a tradition**

The young people up to the age of 20 have not experienced the period of communism. They were born after 1990, when, in Albania, the last fort of dictatorship in Europe, collapsed. They have not done hard work in construction sites, do not have bitter memories from the past, but they did not find a tradition for volunteering.

They did not find this tradition even in their families, school or social environment. Most of the adults nowadays think that they will be used if you invite them to help the community or work for several hours for the city.

Wrongly or not, Albania is found today before the fact that volunteering is still understood or identified with the work in construction sites.

There is not an accurate perception about the space where someone can serve voluntarily yet, such as in an orphanage, in an old age home, in the construction of a kindergarten, in the area of environment, which is a big problem in our country, or in the raising of funds to help someone in need.

All this mentality and all this lack of tradition is a major obstacle for the establishment of voluntary movements and education of young people with a sense of volunteering. However, among young people, small groups of volunteers have started to emerge and the mentality is changing. Generally in high schools, with the initiative of teachers who are civil society activists and with sensitivity in certain areas, limited character movements have been formed, which exert their influence mainly in the area of environment. They get involved in cleaning the territory of the school, organizing sensitizing campaigns about environmental protection, organizing protests against government laws that harm the environment, etc.

### **Volunteering in schools and the risk of becoming a formality**

Despite the teachers' efforts to influence on the voluntary organization of learners' educational activities, these initiatives remain localized and very modest, and they cannot have great influence in order to bring about fundamental changes.

**The reason?** Sadly, we are facing a bitter reality at a time when young people should be brought up with the sense of volunteering and thought that they should do something for the community. Ina Kasimati is a biology teacher in 'Çajupi' high school in the capital city, Tirana. She has organized a volunteering movement at her school with pupils of different classes, but she is concerned about what is happening in the community service hours! All high school pupils, due to the 'obligation' to do the community service, via a mandatory directive by school directorates, have to be enrolled at 'Red Cross' to fulfill the obligation dictated by the school curriculum. But participation in the activities of this organization is often

very formal, there is no final product that affects or benefits the community. Above all, they negatively affect the education of youth. The teacher, worried, shows that she has seen her pupils wear shirts with the logo of the Red Cross on the World Day against AIDS, in which there were slogans to donate blood. They do not carry out any real voluntary activity but only walk on the road producing the decorative "crowd" of a sensitizing marching.

This practice does not have any positive impact on pupils, it does not really educate them with the feeling of volunteering. Participation in such activities does not come as a result of the fact that he/she wants it, but because he/she has to be registered due to school credits. And, after this activity, the pupils will not feel any affection for what they did, as practically they did nothing, and they will not try to be part of voluntary movements again because above all, people want the job when they see its fruits.

### **A success story**

Albania suffers a lot from the problem of environmental pollution, from waste dropping. There is no recycling industry in our country and a lot of waste is discharged in river valleys or public areas, causing a very big damage to the environment. As a result of the waste discharged into the sea by rivers, the coastline and beaches are polluted, thus becoming a serious obstacle to tourism development.

The communes administering beaches do not have sufficient funds to clean all the area. The organization "Free Thought Forum" in 2008, produced a documentary with the images of beach pollution and other touristic spots. The scenes were really shocking and the organization broadcast them in the main cities of the country, at schools and universities, in cinemas, where everyone was invited to watch these images recorded in every corner of the country.

The aim of the campaign was to make young people aware to assist in changing this situation. We had planned to organize a volunteering movement, which would sensitize by working. Many other organizations had previously drawn the attention of the public about the problem of waste

pollution but they had done it from the conference rooms in the luxurious hotels of the capital city.

But we thought that it would be better to call for cleaning the country while we were the first to work. At the beginning we were not sure about the support that would be gained by the movement, we were actually very skeptical. For this reason, before starting the movement, we decided to make a minimalist study in order to see the trend of the young people. Most of those who were asked did not believe that it would be a serious movement. But in spite of this, most of the interviewees answered “YES” to the question whether they would participate in the voluntary actions for cleaning touristic areas. However, they did not hesitate to add to their answer: Only if they are serious!

What we had to do was to show that we were serious, and we made it evident in the first activity, in May 2009, when we cleaned 8 kilometers of coastline in a single day.

Around 3 thousand pupils and students, intellectuals, artists, civil servants and ordinary citizens joined this movement. This is how the “Albanian Corpus of Volunteers” came into existence, which today is the biggest volunteering movement in Albania. For three years, the “Corpus of Volunteers” has cleaned almost all of the coastline of Albania, where tourism is mostly present. During April-May-June-July, the volunteers organize actions in the touristic areas. In each action an average of 300 persons take part and an average of 3 thousand plastic bags of plastic litter or other food or industrial product’s wrappings are picked up.

In each activity, a call is made both to the citizens not to drop waste in public places and preserve our common space, as well as to the government to invest, to strengthen and implement the laws on environment. The surprise of this movement is that the young people have been joined by older people of 50 up to 60 years old, while local inhabitants join us when we go and clean their beaches. Today, among members of the “Corpus of Volunteers” are 5 actors of the National Theater of Albania, one of the most famous writers in our country, one of the most famous film directors of Albanian cinematography.

The “Corpus of Volunteers” now has its branches in the most important cities of Albania. Many members have joined us through social networks, such as Facebook. After being informed by the media or social networks about the activities of this movement, they offered to join us. You just need to click on GOOGLE or FACEBOOK, “Albanian Corpus of Volunteers”, and you will find a whole gallery of articles, photographs and recorded images, which show about the activities and the impact of this voluntary movement. Thanks to the seriousness of our work, we have managed to convince some companies in our country to support us in these activities.

There are tens of thousands of supportive comments on social networks. Volunteers have put hundreds of photos from our activities on their sites and the impact has been tremendous. Thanks to the sensitization that we made with our cleaning campaigns, the Albanian government established a task force in the spring of this year, with the participation of several ministries, with the sole purpose of cleaning the country. The Organization, on the International Earth Day, on 5 April 2011, proposed an initiative for banning the use of plastic bags in supermarkets or department stores. The government has already drawn a draft for this problem and will be soon voted in parliament. Meanwhile, a law on “waste management” has just been passed, which provides for very harsh measures against local government entities or authorities which throw waste in rivers or other public environments.

But more than that, we think that we have achieved another success. While we were working to clean the beaches, many people asked: Which political party do you belong to? A commentator on social networks said: I strongly support these volunteers, on the condition that they do not transform into a political party. These suspicions were justified. But we separated volunteering from politics and gave it seriousness and totally civil dimensions.

### **Examples to be followed**

Graceni is a mountainous village in central Albania, not more than 40 kilometers from the capital city, Tirana. The inhabitants of a small

neighborhood, not more than ten houses, were constantly complaining to the commune offices because the stream that passed through their village was corroding the land and this risked their houses. The commune had no funds to invest or it would take weeks or months until funds could be obtained. But it would be too late until then. The mayor was a young man and instead of looking for funds to intervene, he proposed another solution to the villagers. He and the inhabitants worked voluntarily only for two days, building wood and stone obstacles, as the village was full of these materials, thus preventing the destruction of the houses.

The biggest Television in Albania, “Top Channel “, broadcast in 2009 the story of a family in a village in the suburbs of the capital city. The wife ended up in prison after murdering her husband, who was a violent and alcoholic person, leaving six children behind. They lived in a ruined house, which risked their lives every day. A year later, a group of young people from Denmark, high school pupils, had decided to spend a part of their summer holiday in a different way.

The television received the news that some young people from another country were building the house of the family whose story had been made public. A Danish citizen who was staying in Albania had told the young people the story he had heard. They had decided to help them and had organized a fund-raising campaign and a year later arrived in Albania to do voluntary work for the reconstruction of the orphans’ house. The young people did not want their story to be public on Television because their act was just a human and not a commercial one.

## **Efforts to impact**

Finding a solution in this situation is difficult but it is not a ‘mission impossible’. Our organization, through the ‘Corpus of Volunteers’ movement is at the stage of planning meetings and discussions with high school directorates in Tirana so that it exerts its influence all over Albania, even in other major cities of Albania, in order to discuss the ways to attract and encourage the young people to get organized or join voluntary movements.

We will propose to extend the Corpus of Volunteers to schools and establish there the branches of the movement. We will encourage the self-

organization of pupils to do activities in the school, neighborhood or the city they live in. It is very necessary to explain to the young people that the scope of volunteering is very broad and the fruits they may receive by joining voluntary movements are numerous.

### **‘Peace Corps’ & UNV Albania**

To stimulate and develop volunteering in Albania, there are a few international organizations operating in the country. It can be mention the “Peace Corps” in Albania and UNV Albania.

The “Peace Corps” program in Albania currently has over 76 Volunteers placed throughout the country working in 3 projects: Health Education, English Teaching, and Community and Organizational Development. The “Peace Corps” opened its program here in 1991, but suspended it in 1997. In 2003 “Peace Corps” reopened its office. Nearly 300 volunteers have served in Albania.

**What they did in this years?** In my opinion is great job to bring another approach to volunteering, they have worked to help people in need, they have brought their experience in Albania, where they have been, they have included albanians in their programs as volunteers not only as persons who have benefited from their volunteer!

With their action, they have helped on bringing another spirit, but but their action is localized, is why I think that their impact has not affected the overall perception of volunteering in Albania.

**What about UNV Albania?** One of the goals of “United Nations Volunteers”- Albania is empowering the vulnerable Communities of Albania” a programme that coordinates the activities of agencies working with minorities groups (Roma and Egyptian) and provides direct assistance to the poorest and most marginalized minority communities by facilitating their access to basic services, promoting, participatory planning, the development of local infrastructure and increasing access to the labour market. The programme uses volunteerism and volunteers as core features of all activities. The programme engages seven National and one International UNV Volunteers, some of whom are from marginalized communities themselves and work closely with local communities and local government to carrying out project activities.

In this way, many volunteers from different countries of the world, have contributed with their volunteerism in Albania but it can’t be said that

the perception about volunteering has changed greatly during these years despite the commitment of these organizations.

**But...what we need...?**

Volunteers from different countries of the world does not lack in Albania but their action is centered and connected with very few civil society organizations which have become monopolies.

In my opinion we need them to bring their experience in the organization of activities, way of lobbying and fund raising to support activities.

And the most important, we need to develop a national strategy because during these years, after the fall of communist regime there are dozens of organizations aimed at promoting volunteering, but there is no cooperation between them.

I see as necessity the national strategy to make together government institutions, NGO's operating in the field of volunteering, international organizations operating in Albania also in way that volunteering in Albania take another direction.