



**The Peer-to-Peer Approach Works: Promoting and Understanding Unique Cultures of Volunteering in Russian and American Youth Social Services**

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# The Peer-to-Peer Approach Works: Promoting and Understanding Unique Cultures of Volunteering in Russian and American Youth Social Services

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*Carpenter, Bogolyubova, and Mitrofanenko*

## Abstract

Two U.S.-Russia projects provide insight into peer-to-peer volunteer professional development and reveal distinct patterns of volunteering in each society. Data gathered through surveys and participatory observations reveal peer-to-peer approaches can succeed across different cultures when team-building activities are part of the programming; peer-to-peer approaches can be effective research tools into cross-cultural differences in volunteering; and, in Russia, volunteering is an organized social movement, is central to volunteers' identities, and is long term with a single organization, whereas in the U.S., volunteering is individualistic, is often a steppingstone rather than central to volunteers' identity, and is shorter-term with several organizations.

## Introduction

It is critical for those working with children and youth in difficult life situations to have opportunities to interact with colleagues from other social contexts in order to provide a cross-fertilization of ideas and fresh approaches. In this paper, we will discuss two projects that used the peer-to-peer approach to foster this kind of interaction between Russian and U.S. volunteers and service providers and show how they were successful not just for professional development, but for understanding and comparing distinctive cultures of volunteering in the two societies. The projects we will discuss are 1) the 2014 Eurasia Foundation's U.S.-Russia Civil Society Partnership Award-funded Students' Internship Exchange for Child Protection Project (hereafter referred to as the SIECP; previously described in Bogolyubova, Mitrofanenko, and Shakirova, [2015]), and 2) the 2017 U.S. State Department Peer-to-Peer Dialog Program-funded Prevention Bridges Dialog Project (hereafter referred to as the Dialog Project; previously described in Bogolyubova, Carpenter, and Mitrofanenko [2019]).

We begin with a review of relevant literature, which will contextualize the results of our two peer-to-peer volunteer enrichment projects and set the stage for our discussion of the value of peer-to-peer exchange programs for both volunteer professional development as well as for research into distinctive cultures of volunteerism in different societies.

## Literature Review

This research engages three important bodies of literature: peer education, volunteerism, and youth social services in post-Soviet Russia.

### Peer Education

The projects we present in this paper are based on the peer education approach. In them, Russian and U.S. participants engaged in peer-focused professional development activities around the topics of youth welfare, social services, and volunteering. The peer education method is rooted in Social Learning Theory, which maintains that "modeling is an important component of the learning process" (Turner & Shepherd, 1999, p.237). Its effectiveness has been demonstrated across a wide range of domains, notably gender and relationship education, parenting, university advising, and especially health and wellness interventions, among others. While scholars of peer education agree that it is effective when practitioners exchange knowledge and experience (Andrews & Manning, 2016), there is not consensus regarding how best to implement a peer-to-peer approach cross-culturally. Indeed, there has been little research overall analyzing the successes and failures of peer education when it engages peers from different cultures, although challenges have been noted. Andrews & Manning (2016) report on a failed peer-to-peer exchange between Georgian and Swedish land reformers. They found that the historical and cultural contexts were so different that common ground for exchanging relevant ideas was too difficult to find, and the project was abandoned. However,

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peer-to-peer activities can effectively develop a group identity among participants (Cornish & Campbell, 2009), suggesting that common ground can be created among participants from different backgrounds, and that if attention is paid to activities that develop a group identity, the peer-to-peer approach can be successful even in an intercultural setting. The goal of emphasizing group identity therefore supplemented our professional enrichment activities to inform our own project design, which emphasized team building, communal living, and shared recreational as well as professional activities, all intended to bridge the participants' different backgrounds and create the kind of group identity that would make the enrichment activities more effective.

An additional goal of this project was to explore ways to use the peer-to-peer approach as a research tool. Most analyses of peer education are assessments of its effectiveness (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002; Medley, Kennedy, O'Reilly, & Sweat, 2009), and there has been little examination of how peer education can be integral to a research methodology. However, we propose that the self-reflection, explanation, and comparison that are inherent in the design can facilitate insights that are otherwise less available, precisely because the peer-to-peer approach makes cultural differences more salient. In our study, therefore, we view the peer-to-peer model not just as an opportunity to foster intercultural dialog but also as an opportunity for research which can identify similarities and differences as well as relative strengths and weaknesses of patterns of volunteering among participants. Thus, our findings will provide a contribution not just to a deeper understanding of volunteerism but also a greater understanding of the peer-to-peer approach as a tool for understanding how cultures of volunteering can be distinct in different societies such as Russia and the U.S.

### **Volunteerism**

A significant gap in the literature exists regarding cross-cultural studies of volunteering, including in Russia, the focus of the current project. Although volunteering is a global and indeed universal phenomenon (Butcher & Einolf, 2017), volunteering has been more widespread in the U.S. than in many other societies (de Tocqueville, 1835/2000), and most research on

the topic either originates from or is about the U.S. and, more recently, Western Europe and Australia (Ascoli & Cnaan, 1997; von Essen, 2019).

Topics pertaining to volunteerism that are most frequently addressed in the literature and most relevant to the current project include analysis of the motivations of volunteers (Shier, Larsen-Halikowski, & Gouthro, 2020), consequences of volunteering (Worker, Espinoza, Car, Go, & Miller, 2020), and ethics of volunteering (Witcher, 2019). Ongoing professional development and support of volunteers remain considerably less well researched than many other topics, and yet crucially impact most of them. For example, while Overgaard (2019) analyzes five implications of volunteering as unpaid labor, she entirely neglects training and professional development, despite the fact that the unpaid nature of volunteering can contribute to gaps in skills and knowledge of volunteers, as well as the feasibility of setting high expectations or improving volunteer performance. Volunteering in the west is becoming increasingly episodic and short-term (Evers and von Essen, 2019), and recruitment and retention are growing challenges for agencies that rely on volunteers, making it increasingly unrealistic to expect or cultivate needed skills and knowledge or to expect accountability (Martin & Nolte, 2020).

The topic of motivation for volunteering pertains directly to the issue of recruitment and retention, but while heavily researched in the Western literature, motivation is less well-understood in cross-cultural, especially non-Western, contexts, although it almost certainly has a strong cultural dimension. Some scholars propose that volunteers may benefit more than those they intend to assist (Vrasti, 2013), leading to charges of selfish rather than altruistic motivations such as resumé padding (Jardim & da Silva, 2018), exacerbating concerns about the reliance on volunteers for providing social services to vulnerable or underserved groups.

Many analyses of volunteerism raise concerns regarding how well volunteerism may be a replacement for government-provided services, which are increasingly underfunded, and ways that it "may allow government to gradually divest itself of its responsibility for

welfare" (Eikenberry, 2019, p. 58). However, research has also shown that volunteerism can have real value in terms of service provision as well as in benefits to volunteers, such as enhancing a sense of civic engagement among them and improving their own employment prospects and sense of personal life satisfaction.

The current research is intended to address the above-described gaps in the literature through the lens of a peer-to-peer approach to volunteer development and support. Specifically, the peer-to-peer technique has potential for enhancement of skills and knowledge and increased satisfaction and therefore retention. In addition, the topics of motivation, both initial and ongoing, as well as the related issues of professional development and retention are of particular interest in the current project. If successfully implemented, the peer-to-peer approach could be effective for directly enhancing motivation and skills development, and therefore for indirectly improving retention and ability to provide benefits. This research will also contribute to our understanding of volunteerism in non-Western contexts, specifically Russia. Most research regarding volunteering in non-Western contexts remains at the descriptive level, and little comparative research exists (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Haddock, 2011). However, Shachar, von Essen, and Hustinx (2019) stress how volunteering is not itself a fixed phenomenon or concept but varies in how it takes shape and how people think about it, especially in a cross-cultural context. Recent research is increasingly recognizing indigenous and traditional forms of community participation and support as related to more modern, Western interpretations of volunteerism (Butcher & Einolf, 2017), making historical as well as cross-cultural approaches especially valuable.

For all these reasons, we turn next to a short history of social services and volunteering in Russia to provide context for this research. The history of youth welfare and civil society in Russia contrasts with the history of youth social services and volunteerism in the U.S., which has been well described elsewhere (Gordon, 2011; Dreyfus, 2018), raising questions regarding how successful the peer-to-peer approach can be across such different contexts. The distinctiveness of Russia's history of youth welfare and civil society also leads to manifestations and

conceptions of volunteerism that are different from those of the U.S..

### **Youth Social Services in Post-Soviet Russia**

The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 affected not only political and economic structures in the country, but also changed the state welfare system and social benefits for the majority of the population by transforming education, family and child welfare, housing, health care, and pension systems to conform to the new market economy conditions (Cook, 2005; Rodeheaver & Williams, 2005). Families with children have been most strongly affected by this change (Cook, 2005). Poverty rates for households with two or more children almost doubled in the 1990s relative to households with no children or just one child (Goskomstat, 1999 as cited in Cook, 2005). As the whole state system has changed over the last three decades, the responses of Russian citizens to new conditions have been also changing. One of the positive responses to the changing political and socio-economic environment in the country is that charitable foundations, social movements, and formal or informal voluntary organizations have multiplied in Russia (Rodeheaver & Williams, 2005), and many of them are addressing the social problems of families and children that the state structures fail to address. As of 2009, the percentage of the population which participated in informal local community-based activities had reached 28% (Jakobson, L., Mersiyanova, I., Kononykhina, O, 2011).

Although voluntary organizations in Russia have been spreading widely since the early 1990s, the independent sector still faces many obstacles, and the relatively slower pace at which it is developing in Russia relative to other countries of Eastern Europe has been a topic of interest for western scholars. For example, Howard (2003) connected ordinary citizens' lack of motivation to join formal organizations with the prior communist experience of "mandatory volunteering," when people were forced to have organizational memberships and to participate in state-controlled organizational activities. With respect to volunteering, he argues, "people's current behavior is shaped by their prior experiences and how they interpret those experiences" (Howard 2003, p. 97). However, the new generation of Russians has no firsthand

knowledge of communist doctrine and experience, and so might be expected to be more receptive to participating in volunteer activities. Additional challenges, though, include the weak structure of the Russian non-profit sector, government control on their activities and funding, limited funding opportunities, low salaries, and a shortage of volunteers (Henry & McIntosh Sundstrom, 2006).

### **Development of Volunteerism in the Stavropol Region**

Studies on volunteerism, especially outside of the Moscow region, are rare in the literature (Salamon, 2010; Javeline & Lindemann-Komarova, 2010). However, popular engagement is increasingly vibrant, particularly in the South.

In 1998, two non-profit organizations were formed in Stavropol—the Stavropol Regional Branch of the Russian charitable foundation No to Alcoholism and Drug Addiction (NAN) and an informal youth organization Volunteers' Movement of Stavropol (DDS). NAN is a federation-wide organization founded by its head office in Moscow in 1987. By 2015 there were 65 branches, making it one of the largest non-government entities in Russia. NAN continues to develop programs aimed at preventing alcohol and drug addiction, as well as to help individuals already affected. It creates programs to help children in crisis situations, engages in the revising of juvenile justice in Russia, implements programs to develop civil society institutions and forms social programs based on public initiatives (NAN Foundation, n.d.). The Stavropol branch has taken on the same goals and tasks.

Social service volunteering began to develop in parallel with the activities of the Stavropol NAN branch in 1998. It was originally the focal activity of the youth wing of the Association of Social Services, and developed into an independent entity, the Volunteers Movement of the Stavropol Region. The movement became an independent youth organization and later turned into a non-profit partnership of volunteering associations and NGOs working in the interests of local children and youth. Thus, it can be seen that one important distinction between volunteerism in Russia as contrasted with the U.S. is that volunteerism has emerged as an organized social

movement in Russia, as opposed to the individualistic approach that dominates in the U.S..

Events in Stavropol, North Caucasus, the Russian site for both exchange projects included in this project, paralleled these broader trends in Russia. The second organization introduced above, the Volunteers Movement of the Stavropol Region (DDS), working in close partnership with the North Caucasus Federal University and NAN, was founded in 1998 and celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2018. The DDS has served as a local model for more far-reaching volunteer associations in the former Soviet Union. For example, it was the model for the creation of the Association of Volunteer Movements of the Caucasus in 2010, and initiated the creation of the Association of Volunteer Movements of the Commonwealth of Independent States countries in 2014. The DDS has successfully raised the profile and credibility of volunteerism throughout the region (Kirillova, 2010; Mitrofanenko, 2016). According to Mitrofanenko's personal observation of several generations of DDS volunteers, the effectiveness of DDS programs, the credibility of the organization among professional communities, and the success of participants all show that Russian university students can be effectively motivated to participate in professionally oriented volunteer activities such as social support programs for children at risk. For example, 30% of DDS members continue to engage in professional development or practical activities related to their own area of study or professional interests in the field of social protection and have academic degrees, 15% opened their own successful private organizations, 15% became leaders of NGOs, and others work in different institutions, having authority among industry experts (Mitrofanenko, 2018).

The activities of the Stavropol NAN and DDS, including the efforts of most volunteers, have focused on working with children at risk. The Stavropol branch has built the most extensive network in the whole of NAN, including more than 20 organizations in the south of Russia. This exemplifies the distinctive strength of NAN in Stavropol, namely creation of networks for collaborative sharing of resources and expertise along with a focus on practical, effective strategies for improving the situation of children

at risk. It is this commitment to collaboration that solidified NAN's position as the Russian partner in the collaborative projects with the University of Oregon, which will be discussed in later sections of this paper.

### Current Situation

The picture in southern Russia remains mixed at present. While progress has been made, the overall level of development of non-profit organizations implementing programs for children at risk remains rather low, and professional development remains a pressing concern. Many organizations do not have experience in developing and implementing projects or finding funds to support them, and many do not know where to obtain the necessary information. The lack of qualified, competent, experienced employees and volunteers in non-profit organizations makes creating a strong independent social services sector, capable of positioning itself as an equal partner with the state, especially difficult in the Stavropol region.

The size, geographical reach, and broad base of support of non-governmental organizations such as NAN make them especially important because oversight and transparency of governmental programs has remained low, highlighting the value of volunteerism for ensuring appropriate service delivery. While systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of social projects is starting to occur, the examination of state structures has not yet been permitted, thus limiting the value of professional development activities. While the program for evaluating the effectiveness of social projects is only now beginning to unfold, it is not yet applicable to state organizations (Avtonomov & Hananashvili, 2010). Therefore, in many ways the structure and delivery of social policy has not changed significantly. It is, as before, still built on mostly unmotivated, ineffective, and extremely expensive principles and practices.

In addition, and perhaps more importantly, social attitudes have not changed significantly, making the kinds of sharing entailed in the peer-to-peer approach potentially valuable. This is true especially when it comes to the rejection of more repressive approaches to addressing issues, including social problems of childhood. This was very clearly demonstrated by the legislation on Juvenile Justice that was introduced to the State

Duma in 2002, but which did not receive final approval (Rodeheaver & Williams, 2005) because it was incorrectly interpreted by the general public as requiring that children be taken from parents in all cases of crisis. In reality, it was an attempt by civil organizations to create separate juvenile and family courts and to conduct specialized training for judges and social workers to protect children's rights and interests. As of today, "...there are no official, legal alternatives to the formal processing of juveniles in the criminal justice system, and in most cases juveniles undergo processing as adults by the police, adult courts and the system of correctional colonies, even for minor crimes" (Rodeheaver & Williams, 2005, p. 239). The reform of archaic institutions such as the guardianship system has only been the main priority in Russia in rhetoric, but not in practice.

The above-mentioned remaining challenges highlight the need for effective professional development and volunteer enrichment in a context where evaluation, coordination, and social attitudes are still in need of considerable enhancement. This is exactly the kind of context where a peer-to-peer approach might have the most value, bypassing bureaucratic structures and providing participants with information and inspiration.

### Research Questions

The large differences shown in the preceding sections between the historical and social contexts of U.S. and Russian volunteering highlight the potential value of peer-to-peer engagement for professional development, but also raise questions about the feasibility of a successful peer-to-peer exchange. The contrasting contexts also raise questions about what a peer-to-peer program might reveal about the participants' perceptions of and participation in volunteer activities, in their own and in the other society. As discussed above, there are relatively few cross-cultural studies of volunteering, particularly in countries outside Western Europe. Most importantly for purposes of this current project, as described in the previous section, lack of critical examination and evaluation of existing programs is a major obstacle to the improvement of youth social services in Russia. Thus, the following research questions shaped this project:

1. Can a successful peer-to-peer educational exchange be designed to overcome the challenges inherent with peers from such different social and historical backgrounds as Russia and the U.S.?
2. What can the peer-to-peer approach reveal about patterns of volunteerism in Russian and U.S. social organizations?

### **Methods**

In order to pursue these questions, the Dialog Project, introduced at the beginning of this paper, was designed with an explicit research as well as a praxis focus. Evaluation instruments contained questions concerning U.S. and Russian social services and volunteering in addition to questions about the success of the peer-to-peer education approach itself.

In the United States, the University of Oregon's Department of International Studies was the host organization, and in Russia the Stavropol Branch of NAN served as the local host. NAN also recruited participants from Volunteerism in Stavropol, the informal grassroots volunteer movement whose membership is loosely tied together for social and training purposes but not directed either centrally or top-down. The Oregon team consisted of seven university students, all chosen in part because of their active volunteer histories, and two faculty coordinators. The Stavropol team consisted of seven young volunteers from Volunteerism in Stavropol, and two mature and established representatives of the non-profit sector.

Activities centered around team-building activities, professional enrichment activities, and research activities. The team-building activities were designed to develop a group identity and included the exchange of visits to participants' home communities, culminating in a summer school in Archyz, North Caucasus that drew 23 participants from a range of youth welfare organizations throughout southwest Russian Federation. Team-building activities such as group hikes, dances, morning exercises, and communal meals complemented the structured sharing of experiences and knowledge.

The research component included qualitative and quantitative data collection from three surveys and one focus group along with participant-observations by the authors,

supplemented by informal personal communications with the participants. At the end of the Eugene portion of the exchange, the U.S. participants engaged in a focus group debrief while the Russian participants completed an anonymous survey with 9 open-ended questions. At the end of the Stavropol portion, all participants received an anonymous survey with 19 questions, including Likert scale, sentence completion, and open-ended questions. The questions covered the program in general (for example, "Overall how well did the summer school program meet your expectations?") as well as perceptions of volunteerism and civil society (for example, "What differences have you noticed between the functioning of Russian and American NGOs, based on your participation experience in the "Prevention Bridges" project?"). Results were tabulated and an inductive approach was used to identify key themes. Neither descriptive nor inferential statistics were used because the sample sizes were small.

### **Results**

The inherently reflexive and comparative nature of the peer-to-peer approach stimulated participants to consciously reflect about their volunteering experience, and the results revealed that despite the cultural and historical differences among the Russian and the U.S. participants, the peer-to-peer approach as implemented was highly successful, in contrast to previous research described in the literature review that had found implementing peer-to-peer exchange across very different cultural contexts to be difficult. Participants were consistently positively impressed with the project, in terms of both professional and personal development. Furthermore, the peer-to-peer approach provides the depth of experience needed to conduct revealing comparisons, in this case with respect to the culture of volunteerism. Findings will be discussed in detail below.

#### *1) Success of the peer-to-peer approach in a cross-cultural context*

Overall, participants were very satisfied with their experiences in the Dialog Project, showing that the project design was able to mitigate the challenges to using the peer-to-peer approach across different cultural and historical contexts that caused Andrews and Manning (2016) to end

their project before its completion. Participants uniformly reported that the project improved intercultural understanding, enhanced their professional knowledge, and was personally enjoyable. Both U.S. and Russian participants agreed that as a tool for improving intercultural understanding and positive attitudes among Russians and Americans, the Dialog Project was successful and met their expectations. In addition, both Russian and U.S. participants agreed that the peer-to-peer approach facilitated their ability to highlight differences and similarities between Russian and U.S. volunteerism and civil society, helping them to appreciate the distinctive features of each. The team building activities that were most appreciated by the participants for bridging cultural differences were cultural excursions, outdoor trips, ice breaking games, group exercise, and talent shows. Professional development activities that were structured as team-building activities, such as presentations by participants and master classes, were also successful and appreciated.

However, there were also areas of disagreement, reflecting the challenges inherent in peer exchanges across cultures and historical contexts. A majority of Russians wanted more structured activities and less free time, whereas most of the Americans wanted fewer structured activities and more free time. In addition, Russians were more likely to view team-building activities as a critical part of the curriculum, while Americans were more likely to view team-building activities as “extras” that came at the expense of personal time. While this difference is not surprising, it highlights challenges for peer exchange design. We believe that much of the success of the project, despite the large cultural and historical differences, lies in the emphasis on structured group interactions. This difference of opinion among Russian and U.S. participants highlights the need to be mindful that although team building is important and effective, more individually-oriented participants may need more encouragement or explanation to maintain their level of engagement, and future orientations should address this explicitly.

In terms of the professional development content of the exchanges, Americans most appreciated the cultural learning dimension, for example learning about Russia and the North

Caucasus. In contrast, Russians most appreciated the professional learning dimension, for example learning about youth welfare organizations and strategies. It was evident that the Russians started the project with far more knowledge about the U.S. than the Americans had about Russia; yet despite these differences in background knowledge, both groups were satisfied. This shows that a project can be successfully structured to meet the needs of participants with a range of reasons for participating and disparities in background knowledge about each other.

### *2) Participants' comparisons of volunteerism in Russia and the U.S.*

The peer-to-peer approach facilitated a majority of participants' abilities to notice and appreciate differences between their own and their counterparts' approaches to volunteerism, both in terms of the characteristics of volunteerism itself and in terms of its contribution to service provision. Not only did they discern differences, but also they were favorably impressed by them, suggesting not only that the peer-to-peer approach is an effective way to introduce professional enrichment and new ideas, but that it supports positive rather than negative encounters with difference.

### **American participants' impressions of Russian volunteering**

Participants from the U.S. were most struck by differences between the cultures of volunteering in Russia and the US. In particular, they judged the affective dimension of volunteering as more salient in Russia than in the U.S., commenting that they saw Russians as motivated to volunteer through intrinsic, more affective rewards (camaraderie, being part of a team), while Americans are motivated through extrinsic, more instrumental rewards (demonstrating skills and values for future employability). U.S. respondents observed that volunteering seems to tie in directly with individual identity for Russians, while volunteering for Americans is only indirectly tied to their own identity. Instead, volunteering is seen as a means to an end like career success, which is more significant for an American's identity. They appreciated the more family-like atmosphere among Russian volunteers, as contrasted with a more job-like atmosphere among U.S.-based volunteers. They noted that the Russian volunteers they encountered appeared to be more



committed to a single organization for a longer period of time, whereas American volunteers tend to volunteer for shorter times with more different organizations. They also noted that volunteers in Russia assumed more leadership roles at a younger age than in the U.S., perhaps because of their longer and stronger commitment to a single organization, or perhaps because in general volunteers in Russia tend to be younger, whereas in the U.S. volunteering cuts across generations to a greater extent.

### **Russian participants' impressions of U.S. volunteering**

Participants from Russia also observed differences between U.S. and Russian volunteer roles and behaviors, commenting in particular on the high level of professionalism they observed in the U.S., as well as the better success of fundraising efforts. For them the most salient differences had not to do with the motivations and efforts of volunteers per se, but rather with aspects of service provision more generally, as shown by their response to questions about what they had learned from the program about American service providers. The most frequent responses were fundraising expertise and success, high levels of professionalism, high levels of government support, lack of focus on institutional care, inclusiveness with both gender and disability, and possibilities for and receptiveness to further international collaboration.

The Russian participants perceived strengths in U.S. social service provision that complemented the challenges they saw for Russian social service provision, supporting another strength of the peer-to-peer approach, namely to highlight similarities and differences in order to create reciprocal learning and problem-solving opportunities. They were most saliently struck by differences in care provision, especially the U.S. de-emphasis on institutional care for children, the focus on inclusiveness in service provision with respect to both gender and disability, and what they perceived as the high level of government support for social services. While comparison automatically includes self-reflection as well, the Russians used the opportunity to reflect more on their own experiences with volunteering than did the Americans. However, the Russians' self-perceptions dovetailed with, and expanded upon, the Americans' assessment of Russian

volunteers as being more internally and affectively motivated, rather than externally and instrumentally motivated. The Russians reported a range of reasons for participation but most of them were personal rather than professional, including affective ("I'm an optimist," "fascinating," "self-realization," "growth," "fulfill creative potential") and agentive ("find a platform for my personal ideas," "leadership," "opportunity to change the environment"). There were only rare, secondary mentions of professional reasons ("obtain work experience," "fulfill my professional ambitions").

Most of the Russian respondents report observing changes in the valorization of volunteer activities and an increase in the professionalism of volunteers, especially among young people. However, they continue to perceive obstacles, specifically corruption and lack of government support at the local level, along with a lack of visible structures for recruiting and placing volunteers. Although they see the attitudes of individuals changing to make them more receptive to volunteering, they still assess opportunities to volunteer as being often difficult to find. They also suggested that the Russian model of volunteerism, which they saw as less widespread, less formal, and less extrinsically motivated, can lead to less cooperation and communication among service providers, and a less unified voice with which to raise their status and visibility, which may limit their ability to garner local government support or to facilitate the recruitment and retention of volunteers. However, this may reveal as much about different expectations about volunteerism as it does about relative success. U.S. participants appeared to have little expectation that volunteering should lead to more cooperation and communication among service providers and did not mention it in their responses.

## **Discussion**

### **Returning to the two research questions**

Recall from our introduction that two research questions guided this project. In this section we will address each in turn.

*1. Can a successful peer-to-peer educational exchange be designed to overcome the challenges inherent with peers from such different social and historical backgrounds as Russia and the U.S.?*

The success of the team-building component of the Dialog Project provides a model for implementing the peer-to-peer approach across very different historical and cultural contexts. The daily mix of cultural, physical, and social activities which complemented the very practical experiential and participatory, rather than abstract and general, approach to knowledge sharing, are factors that contributed to the success. While some organizers and participants, particularly those from more individualistic societies such as the U.S., might believe that daily team-building activities are unnecessary or excessive, we found them to be critical for the success of the professional enrichment activities. In particular, it was important to have a range of different kinds of team-building activities, rather than just a few, because there was variation in the preferences of participants.

### *2. What can the peer-to-peer approach reveal about patterns of volunteerism in Russian and U.S. social organizations?*

The inherently reflective and comparative design of peer education successfully encouraged participants to note and reflect upon differences that have implications for the vitality of volunteerism in both societies. Participants from both Russia and the U.S. agreed that the U.S. emphasizes professionalism among volunteers and social service organizations, which results in a higher level of expertise and stronger ability to mobilize funds and other resources, aspects that the Russian participants appreciated learning about. At the same time, though, the more instrumental motivations of U.S. volunteers lead to higher turnover, lower commitment to a particular organization, and communication challenges. However, the resulting increased contact among different individuals and organizations facilitates the sharing of new approaches and techniques, leading to a kind of ongoing cross-fertilization of best practices and ideas that is less salient in the Russian context, where adoption of new practices and ideas is slower.

The Russian model, on the other hand, provides examples of strengths that address weaknesses in the U.S. model of volunteerism. Russian organizations have fewer challenges with retaining volunteers, which is a problem recognized among organizations in the U.S. Volunteering in Russia is structured more like a

social movement, with individual volunteers joined together in broader volunteers' organizations which feature opportunities for bonding and group identification. The team-building approach and affective orientation of Russian volunteers helps to create more inclusive, cohesive bonds among volunteers, leading to better retention and greater loyalty to organizations as well as greater inclusivity. The Russian team was much more diverse in terms of ethnicity, nationality, and physical ability than was the American team. While the volunteer identity and affective rewards that are cultivated among Russian volunteers lead to more continuity in staff and programming, overall the level of professionalism is not as high as it could be, and in particular fundraising skills are not well developed. Because the commitment to a single organization is strong, and because the rewards for volunteering are intrinsic rather than extrinsic, volunteers are less able to convey the value and importance of volunteering among the wider society, leading to a greater lack of awareness and participation overall.

## Conclusions

### **Youth Volunteering In Its Broader Social Context**

The unique value of the peer-to-peer approach is that its reciprocal sharing and immersive exchange allow for more nuanced examination and comparison. In both Russia and the U.S., volunteerism at the local level is thriving, with active, inspired, and committed volunteers making a wide range of contributions. At the same time, the patterns are distinctive in each society, reflecting how history and cultural context influence how and why young people choose to volunteer in their respective societies.

We propose that the five following factors uncovered in this research project are novel contributions to the understanding of Russian volunteering in the Western scholarly literature: a) As we have shown, the vibrancy of Russian volunteer activities may be underestimated, because volunteer networks are local and volunteer efforts are motivated internally, such as for identity reasons, rather than externally, such as for increased employability; b) Russian volunteer networks tend to be less professional and more social, further making their status less salient; c) The fact that Russian volunteers are

more likely to commit long term to one organization rather than to circulate among several makes them less visible and restricts communication networks that could provide for greater cross-fertilization of new ideas; d) The emphasis on volunteering within one's own local community, rather than making volunteer trips to other communities or engaging in "volunteer tourism" also limits the visibility of volunteers' activities and exchange of new ideas; e) Volunteering manifests differently in different societies, so there may be a mismatch between actual volunteer activity and recognized indicators of activity. For example, in the U.S. organization websites typically contain links to volunteer opportunities and scholarship and university applications typically devote sections to them, but these indicators may be missing entirely in their Russian counterpart organizations.

We believe that this research has broader implications beyond the questions concerning the success of the projects themselves and the insights they reveal regarding volunteerism in Russia and in the U.S. In particular, it can be insightful to assess how individuals' own developmental trajectories are affected by volunteer experiences. Youth volunteering, particularly when it is internally motivated rather than an expected normative behavior, facilitates the trust, skills, confidence, knowledge, networks, and sense of agentivity that are themselves indicators of the potential for citizen involvement in more effective social services delivery, especially in the areas of evaluation and reform, which we have argued above are weaknesses of the state system in Russia. While these components may not be sufficient, they certainly are necessary, and therefore can provide crucial foundations for strengthening service provision. Because of the youthfulness of most of the participants in our study, these necessary traits will mature as the participants themselves mature, personally and professionally, particularly because of the Russian preference for long term rather than short term volunteering.

We therefore propose that youth volunteering can serve as an incubator for a more robust and comprehensive system of social services delivery in the future, and we suggest this relationship as a fruitful line of inquiry for future research. Despite the perception that youth volunteerism, especially

with vulnerable and dependent populations such as children, is apolitical and even self-indulgent (Godfrey & Wearing, 2012, Reas, 2020, Carpenter, 2015), we argue that there may be a developmental relationship between the two and that fostering openness to new ideas and information through youth volunteering can lead participants to a deeper understanding of the role of the citizen in informing and reforming policy. Youth volunteerism can be an effective way to provide services that are appropriate to a local context, especially in a multicultural society such as the Russian Federation. Youth who are still outside of the hierarchies of status and seniority can bring a greater willingness to listen to the populations they serve and a greater openness to new understandings of broader changes that might benefit them.

The evidence that leads us to these conclusions lies in both the demographic patterns that we saw and in volunteers' survey responses regarding their own involvement. There is a clear generational divide between the mostly twenty-somethings that participated in the program and the generation that grew up during the Soviet era. There is no reason to expect that the young participants' commitment to volunteering and to professional development will decrease as they age, or that they view volunteering primarily as a steppingstone to paid employment. Their experiences and views of volunteering are not only very positive, but as we saw in the discussion of the results, volunteering is an aspect of their identity, not just something they do. Already, our survey showed that most have volunteered with the same organization for extended periods of between four to fifteen years. Most of the peer-to-peer exchange participants themselves expressed the belief that the volunteer ethic in Russia is developing, and their volunteer experiences may in future enable and encourage them to take more active leadership roles in policy formulation. They are not just garnering skills such as event planning and discussion facilitation, but they are gaining a sense of agency and trust in networks outside of their immediate circles that may encourage them to look outward toward a broader civil society. As several of the participants expressed, their fellow volunteers feel like a family to them. In this way, the peer-to-peer approach may be incubating the potential for policy reform through developing the habits of

citizenship among young volunteers, even as it enhances the abilities of volunteers to make substantive, meaningful contributions to social services provision and serves to bridge societies with very different histories and cultures.

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