

# Mentoring – the Connection between Volunteering and Social Work

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## Abstract

The challenges before the social work in Bulgaria are many. The attempts to fit in and meet the high European standards for social work are putting more and more challenges to social workers, students studying in this field, as well as to higher education related to the social sector. Unfortunately, Bulgaria has a lot to catch up. After the difficult process of deinstitutionalization, the Bulgarian people are still facing the whole diversity of social work and the groups that need it. The purpose of this report is to outline the parameters that are essential to the implementation of three activities, namely mentoring, volunteering, and social work. Mentoring in social work has been talked about relatively recently in Bulgaria. Although it existed earlier, it has not been addressed as such. Pedagogical mentoring is more widespread. Young people in Bulgaria demonstrate readiness and social commitment to activities such as volunteering. It is through it and in it that a form of mentoring takes place. The difficulties facing the social sphere in the last year are enormous due to the serious health crisis facing the whole world. Volunteering and sacrifice have been at the heart of overcoming most of the problems associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students studying “social activities” took part in volunteer initiatives that enriched and upgraded their knowledge and skills related to social work. Mentoring is the link between professionals involved in social work and volunteering people. Passing on professional and life experience to those who come after us is one of the most practical and logical human activities in human life.

**Keywords:** Couching; Deinstitutionalisation; Learning; Social Activities; Social Skills.

## 1. Introduction

Social work is that which accompanies people in their activities. Historically, there is much evidence that people, nations, rulers, and religion have focused their efforts on various vulnerable groups – widows, orphans, the poor. One of the basic rules in the old world was “the strong should not oppress the weak” (Danov, 1976). In the Middle East and Egypt, most laws affected the poor and their protection. The ethical rise from helping a weak and vulnerable group of people has been a huge burden for the Egyptians. Information about the implementation of philanthropic activity in historical terms is also available for the ancient Greeks, Rome, and Byzantium (Hristova, 2018). All evidence indicates that caring for other people (neighbors) and for the one who has less, has always been at the heart of human social relationships.

Mentoring is a well-known mechanism for influencing and implementing non-formal learning. Bozeman and Feeney define mentoring as “a process for the informal transfer of knowledge, social capital, and psychosocial support aimed at the recipient, in the field of work,

career, or professional development; mentoring involves informal face-to-face communication over an extended period of time between a person who is considered to have the relevant accumulated knowledge, wisdom and experience (mentor) and a person who is considered to have less (protégé)” (Bozemann & Feeney, 2007). Mentoring has many advantages, but also some disadvantages.

Volunteering is directly related to human social activity. It is clearly intertwined with the acquisition of new knowledge and skills through mentoring, but also takes place in the social sphere through social services. Historically, volunteering is as close as possible to the historical framework of the emergence of social work, namely – doing voluntary work, which has a limited expectation of financial or other compensation. Modern volunteering has its roots in the late nineteenth century, meeting primarily the needs of the church. In the 1920s, Service Civil International was established as a “tool for establishment of friendships between young people from different European countries” (Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2010). This is the organization that provided assistance to young unemployed people after World War I and in the years of the economic crisis in 1929.

## 2. Social work in Bulgaria and the opportunities for mentoring and volunteering therein

*The goal*, we set for the preparation of this report is to establish the fundamental parameters of social work in Bulgaria and the opportunities to provide mentoring and volunteer work during its implementation. The *object* of social work, according to Stavreva, are “persons, a group of persons, families, or other separate community of people who are in one or another social risk (maybe a combination of several social risks) and for whom it is necessary to provide social support or protection” (Stavreva, 2008). The *subject* of social work are normative, financial, educational, social, psychological, and other intermediary activities by a social worker, which are aimed at overcoming social risk and at integrating disadvantaged people in the system of social relations by overcoming inequality, through correction or through compensation (Glushkova, 2020A; Derizhan, 2010). We have applied a critical content analysis of some of the main scientific publications and normative documents related to them. The assumption that showed us the correlation between social work, mentoring, and volunteering was absolutely subject to the logic and the development of events in the social sphere in Bulgaria over the past 10 years. We assume that in order to carry out volunteering in the social work in Bulgaria, it should necessarily take place under the sign of mentoring. Our main idea is that mentoring combines volunteering and social work. On the one hand is the specialist who has more professional and life experience, and on the other hand is the volunteer who wants to give his or her time, to work, and to help those in need. Mentoring is the natural process that takes place between a social worker and a volunteer.

### 2.1. Social work in Bulgaria

Social work in the Republic of Bulgaria can be considered as a national system of social work. This stems from the fact that it can function at organizational, local, regional, and national levels (Glushkova, 2020). The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy is responsible for the controlling and monitoring of the functioning of social work in the Republic of Bulgaria. The organization, management, and control over the national system for social work are carried

out by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, as well as according to the Rules of Procedure of the Ministry.

Glushkova synthesizes them in the following order:

1. Minister of Labor and Social Policy – a central sole body of the executive power with special competence, which manages, coordinates, and controls the implementation of state policy in the field of income and living standards, social security, unemployment protection, and employment promotion, the market of labor migration, labor migration and free movement of workers, occupational health and safety, social investment, social protection, social inclusion, support for children and families, demographic development, integration of people with disabilities, equal opportunities and anti-discrimination in accordance with the laws of the country and the government's programs. The activities are carried out independently or jointly with other state bodies and/or public organizations.
2. Political cabinet – an organizational structure that assists the Minister in formulating and developing specific decisions for the implementation of government policy in the field of its powers, as well as in presenting government policy to the public. The political cabinet includes the Head of the cabinet, the deputy ministers, the parliamentary secretary, and the Director of the Public Relations Directorate, as well as advisers, experts, and technical assistants.
3. Secretary General – manages, organizes, coordinates, and controls the functioning of the administration.
4. Inspectorate – under the direct subordination of the Minister; carries out administrative control over the activity of the Ministry and of the secondary budget managers to the Minister.
5. Financial Controller – under the direct supervision of the Minister; carries out preliminary control for legality, according to the Financial Management and Control in the Public Sector Act, except for the cases in which the preliminary control is carried out by the financial controllers of the European Funds, International Programs and Projects General Directorate.
6. Personal Data Protection Officer – under the direct supervision of the Minister; carries out activities on the lawful application of the normative acts in the field of personal data and in accordance with the General Regulation on Data Protection.
7. Internal Audit Directorate – under the direct supervision of the Minister; performs internal audit under the Internal Audit in the Public Sector Act.
8. Information Security Officer – directly subordinate to the Minister; performs the tasks assigned to him or her under the Protection of Classified Information Act and the normative acts on its implementation.
9. General administration – supports the exercise of the powers of the Minister, creates conditions for the implementation of the activity of the specialized administration, and performs the technical activities for the administrative servicing of the citizens and the legal entities. The general administration is structured in:

- Legal Services and Public Procurement Directorate;
- Information Technology and Administrative Services Directorate;
- Human Resources Directorate;
- Financial Directorate;
- Public Relations and Protocol Directorate;

10. Specialized administration, which is organized in:

- European Funds, International Programs and Projects General Directorate;
- Living Standard, Demographic Policy and Social Investment Directorate;
- Labor Law, Social Security and Working Conditions Directorate;
- Labor Market Policy and Labor Mobility Directorate;
- Policy for People with Disabilities, Equal Opportunities and Social Assistance Directorate;
- Social Inclusion Directorate;
- European Affairs and International Cooperation Directorate;

(Glushkova, 2020; Rules of Procedure of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, 2019).

In the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as in the other European countries, the activities in the national system for social work comply with and are subordinated to the hierarchy of the normative documents, which are:

1. Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria – supreme law in the country;
2. Codes – regulate the functioning of various spheres of public life;
3. Laws – regulate the functioning of various spheres of social life, economy, and state structure;
4. Decrees of the Council of Ministers, which adopt regulations for application of laws, structural regulations of ministries, and other state bodies, etc.;
5. Regulations, ordinances, instructions, orders, tariffs, norms, rules, letters, instructions – issued by ministers.
6. National strategies, plans, and programs – developed and adopted by the Council of Ministers and ministries;

Simeonova writes that the normative documents related to the implementation of social policy in the state reflect the vision of society about the role and functions of social work therein (Simeonova, 2011). The main normative documents concerning the implementation of the social policy in relation to the various target groups are:

1. Social Assistance Act;
2. Regulations for application of the Social Assistance Act;
3. Social Services Act;

4. Family Benefits for Children Act;
5. Regulations for application of the Family Benefits for Children Act;
6. People with Disabilities Act;
7. Employment Promotion Act;
8. Regulations for implementation of the Employment Promotion Act;
9. Child Protection Act;
10. Regulations for application of the Child Protection Act;
11. Family Code;
12. Protection against Domestic Violence Act;
13. Combating Trafficking in Human Beings Act;
14. Asylum and Refugees Act;
15. Execution of Punishments and Detention in Custody Act;
16. Health Act;
17. Numerous bylaws (structural regulations, ordinances, strategies, methodologies, etc.)  
(Glushkova, 2020)

The diversity and variety of social services in the Republic of Bulgaria is great. They are defined in the Social Services Act as activities to support individuals to prevent and/or overcome social exclusion, to exercise rights, and to improve the quality of life, based on: social work, individual approach, and individual needs assessment.

Social services are *publicly available* and *specialized*.

- *Publicly available* social services are the services for information, counseling, and training for realization of social rights and for development of skills, which are provided for a period not longer than two months; mobile preventive community work.
- *Specialized* social services are the services that are provided in the event of a certain risk to life, health, quality of life, or development of the person; the need to meet the specific needs of a particular group of persons.

Depending on their function, the social services in the Republic of Bulgaria are:

- *Preventive* – provided to all persons or to a certain group of persons without a previously identified specific risk;
- *Supporting* – provided as a result of identified risk or to meet a specific need;
- *Rehabilitation* – offer highly specialized support for people with special needs (Glushkova, 2020).

The services are tailored to the age and specific needs of the users, as well as to the various activities they offer. This additional breakdown offers a huge range of centers, shelters, crisis centers, transitional housing, supervised housing, sheltered housing, homes, day care centers,



foster care, Mother and Baby Unit, etc., which serve all the needs of society, while respecting all human needs, rights, and freedoms.

In the brief review of the organization, structure, and management of the national system for social work in Bulgaria it becomes clear that there is a great need for well-trained social specialists who to be integrated into the system and to be useful to society. Higher education institutions in Bulgaria provide a rich palette of professional fields that train in the field of social work. Unfortunately, we must say that the theoretical training is far from enough for future social specialists to be good at their job. In the curricula of the professional fields in Bachelor's and Master's social programs there are many practices, which are a mandatory element for the completion of students' education. Direct observations show that these practices are not sufficient. We will pay attention to this in a moment.

## **2.2. Volunteering – a natural socially engaged activity**

Volunteering in the Republic of Bulgaria is practically developed. It exists and is practiced due to the folk psychology of the Bulgarian people and their tendency to help. From a scientific and legal point of view, information related to volunteering is rather scarce. In the last 10 to 15 years, several large European projects have been made, in which Bulgaria was a participating country and which helped to reveal and structure the essence of volunteering. One of the big projects was Moving Borders for Volunteering, which was developed jointly with Serbia. The main idea of the project was not only to provide synthesized information on volunteering and its development, but also to create a clear “methodology for establishment of local volunteer centers” (Common Methodology for Social Volunteering, 2018). This raised awareness among people who would like to volunteer.

The term “volunteering” in Bulgaria refers to any work and service without financial gain. Therefore, a volunteer is any person who provides such free and unpaid work. In the legal system of the Republic of Bulgaria there is no legal definition for volunteering or for the provision of work and services without interest in financial gain. Therefore, the status of volunteers, as well as their rights and obligations, are not established by law or officially recognized. The existing legal framework for volunteering is only partial and far from well developed. The Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law Foundation formulated in 2002 the so-called “Legal Framework for Volunteering and Volunteers” (BCNL, 2010). It clearly highlights the gratuitous, unconditional, and desirable nature of volunteering. The legal framework lists some of the forms of voluntary activities that are enshrined in the regulations of the Republic of Bulgaria, such as: Advocacy Act, which clearly states which persons can benefit from free legal services; Fire Protection Act, in which the voluntary fire brigades are assigned control and administrative functions; Child Protection Act, which introduces the promotion of voluntary activities related to the protection of children, in accordance with their personal and social qualities; as well as Physical Education and Sports Act, which encourages extracurricular voluntary sports activities for children. From all the above it is clear that volunteering is talked about at all state levels, but there is no officially adopted Volunteering Act on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria. A draft law has been prepared, which we hope will be voted on and adopted in the near future.

Volunteering is gaining more and more popularity among students. Unfortunately, in the higher education institutions in Bulgaria there is no policy for implementation and promotion

of volunteering, which is directly related to the educational process. In this respect, Bulgarian universities lag far behind European universities, which have extensive experience with student volunteering. In countries such as England, Germany, and Finland, volunteering is embedded in the curricula of students. This further enriches and expands their practical experience by promoting it at the level of an educational institution. Students in Bulgaria do not have much information about volunteering. The information reaches them thanks to personal commitment and activity, but not through the universities themselves. In recent years, there has been a jump in the desire of students to get involved in voluntary initiatives. The past year, which presented us with great challenges, also speaks volumes about this. Many students majoring in social sciences have become involved in a variety of volunteer initiatives related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many young people helped the elderly, who were the most vulnerable age group. They responded in shelters that prepared hot food, in the Bulgarian Red Cross, where a telephone line was opened for people in need, in homes for children who had difficulties with online learning, and many others. The positive results were not long in coming, when this initiative, sacrifice, and selflessness were recognized by the universities and the students received an incentive directly related to their education – grades, exemption from exams, opportunities for professional realization. The past year has clearly shown the opportunities that volunteering provides. This would be a good start for the national policy of the higher education institutions in Bulgaria, which should accept and more actively include volunteering in their educational process.

### **2.3. Mentoring and its role in social work**

As mentioned above, one of the main definitions of mentoring is the transfer of knowledge and skills from a person who has more of them to a person who lacks them. Age also plays a role here, because experience is believed to accumulate over the years. One of the myths of today is that the mentor must be older than his or her protégé. There are examples that clearly reveal the capabilities, knowledge, skills, and ambitions of young people – young people who for their 30 years of age are already university professors, inventors, IT specialists, managers, and many others. Examples of mentoring:

- More experienced people help younger and inexperienced people;
- Adults help students in their school activities;
- Adults help children and/or adolescents to cope with various problems;
- People help others to overcome addictions;
- People help prisoners to reintegrate into society;
- People help the homeless;
- People help other people to practice sports or other activities;
- Women professionals help other women to realize themselves on the labor market;
- Experienced workers help newcomers to integrate into companies;
- Experienced teachers help new colleagues;
- Large companies help smaller ones (collective mentoring).

All types of mentoring can be formal or informal (Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2015). From all the above activities it is clear that most are in the social sphere. By eliminating those who serve pedagogical, industrial, and personal mentoring intentions, a higher percentage remains, which is entirely related to social work, social services and the service of specific needs in various socially disadvantaged groups.

Mentoring, as well as volunteering, is not well known for the scientific literature and practice in Bulgaria. There is scientific experience in the pedagogical and industrial spheres, but there is almost no talk about the social one. This is where the main problem arises – that social work and services are entirely practical activities. They cannot be realized theoretically. The professional training of the future social specialists is reached again. They study at universities, receive fundamental theoretical knowledge, but how prepared are they for the practice? Who prepares them for the real social work in the field? The answer here can be ambiguous – they are prepared by social workers who are realized in the field of social work and they prepare them through the experience (practice) they have. They pass on skills, experience, and the way they work through mentoring. It turns out that students in Bulgaria, who carry out their undergraduate professional practices immediately before graduation, appear in the role of protégés, who are mentored by mentors (social workers) in various social institutions that provide social services. A weak point is the concept of *mentoring* in Bulgarian universities. There is no clear picture of what it is, how it is implemented, as well as what rights and obligations people have. The concepts of the mentoring process, its organization, course, and successful completion have not been developed. Universities need to reveal the nature of mentoring to students in order to ensure the smooth and fruitful implementation of mentoring in social work. Mentoring would give the highest results when the three parties are directly involved in the process of building future professionals, namely – university, students, and social workers from various social services.

### 3. Conclusion

In the last 10 years the development of social work in Bulgaria has gone through a number of changes and tremors. The new Social Assistance Act and the Social Services Act, renewed one year ago, also speak for themselves. Most important changes as Vazova writes are linked to the „new standarts for quality methods for evaluation and that is why it was created Agency for The Quality of the Social Services that implements control and monitoring over the provided social services; New National Card for The Social Services through out the municipalities was established.” (Vazova, 2021) Processes, such as deinstitutionalization, have exposed various social groups of people in need of support and care. This posed new challenges to people involved in social work – the need for specialized higher education, the acquisition of specific experience and skills, as well as serious psychological, health, regulatory, and rehabilitation training. However, all this turns out to be impossible without the direct intervention and assistance of practice. One of the most common ways to gain practical skills in the learning process is volunteering. Opening opportunities for students to develop their potential outside the lecture rooms is a commitment of the university. There should be a system to encourage and support student volunteering, which should be part of university policy. This cannot be done without first adopting a formal Volunteering and Volunteering Activity Act, which should set the regulatory framework for implementation. At the moment,



this is not an obstacle for people who want to provide their unpaid work and to help those in need. An increasing percentage of students have been interested in and participated in volunteer initiatives since the beginning of their higher education. The global health situation in the last year has led to large-scale social volunteer initiatives in which young people have become extremely involved and responsible. All this happens thanks to the mentorship and the example that has been given. The transfer of specific experience, knowledge, skills, and practical guidance is the key element that unites volunteering and social work.

Without the help, support, and example of social workers, who carry out virtually the full range of social services for all those who need it every day, students leaving universities will not be sufficiently prepared. The interaction between mentoring and volunteering in social work is a completely natural and logical process that needs state support. Because the best preparation for professional realization is carried out through practice!

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