

IS VOLUNTEERISM EXPERIENCING GROWTH IN GEORGIA? ASSESSMENT BEFORE AND AFTER THE FLOOD IN TBILISI ON 13 JUNE, 2015

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Volunteerism has never been popular in Georgia. Citizens prefer to deal with people they know and trust; this usually includes a small number of friends and relatives. The goal of this research is to answer the question, if the events of 13 June, 2015 in Tbilisi can be interpreted as a sign that the attitudes of the Georgian society towards volunteerism are experiencing a positive change. Based on data collected through an online survey and focus groups, the author comes to the conclusion, that there is a potential for growth in the volunteerism culture, which should be encouraged through more engagement from the state and non-profit sector. Otherwise, citizen activity on voluntary basis, will increase only in extraordinary situations, like the Tbilisi tragedy of 13, June 2015.

Key words: volunteerism, social capital, trust, civil society, Georgia.

Introduction. Volunteerism, defined as “the free giving of an individual’s labor, time, and energy to a larger cause, collective goal, or public good” (Brown, Prince, 2015. Oppenheimer, 2001), is highly valued by democratic societies as a social phenomenon of unpaid care and citizen participation in society (Ascoli, Cnaan, 1997). Western governments and donor organizations spend significant resources in the developed countries to encourage locals to engage in volunteer activities. These latter, often regard such efforts with skepticism, wondering why should unemployed, or underpaid citizens want to do something for someone, they don't even know, without being paid. This approach is typical for societies with the socialist past, where “volunteerism” was rather mandatory, imposed by the party and the ideology of “socialist brotherhood”. Though, volunteerism is regarded as a “cynical exploitation of youthful altruism in the service of corporate profit” by certain leftist thinkers in the western countries, too (Petras, 1997) . But this not a mainstream approach nowadays.

Georgia has a surprisingly active civil society with several thousand registered NGOs and a variety of active interest groups that fight for human rights, environmental issues etc. Hypothetically, this means that people should be used to sacrificing their own time and effort for different cause, contributing to a common goal. Though, NGOs are often accused of being grant- and donor dependant, which means they will not move a finger if there is no financial support. But skills and values, accumulated during the last 20 years thanks to the international donor engagement, should have made it clear why volunteerism

can bring certain benefits. In other words, those who believe in progress, would expect that in such a lively environment, number of people who are doing voluntary work, increases year after year.

The youth, the “post-soviet generation”, born in independent countries, should be more open to participation, including volunteerism, since they grew up in a much diverse, participatory and free political environment. The research question we address in this article is if large-scale disasters changed attitudes of Georgian citizens about the benefits and necessity of volunteerism.

We hypothesize, that (H_A) the Tbilisi flood in 2015 and following mobilization of (mainly young) volunteers was a turning point and the numbers of volunteers has increased since then.

Our null hypothesis (H₀) implies in this case, that the Tbilisi flood in 2015 had no effect on attitudes and the numbers of volunteers show no change.

Besides, lack of job opportunities and hardship of getting into a profession, pushes them to being active and creating networks through engagement on voluntary basis (Phillips, A.S., Phillips, C.R. 2000). Though, some researches show, that despite higher rates in trust toward NGOs, the youth doesn't demonstrate higher readiness to engage in volunteer activities (Paturyan, Gevorgyan, 2015).

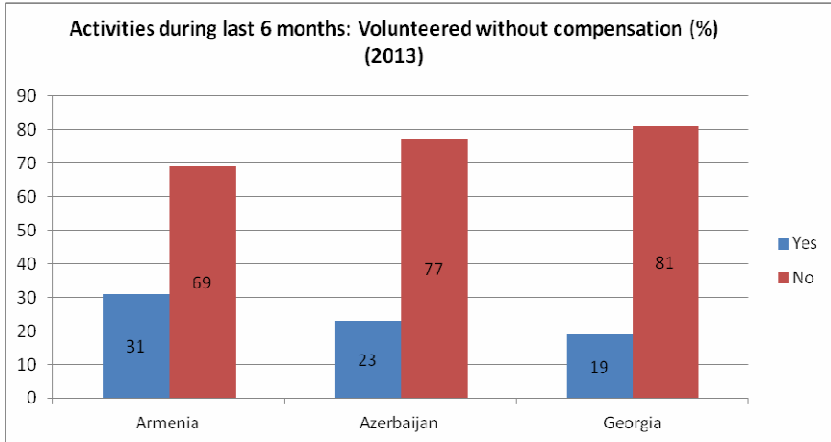
Data on current attitudes and tendencies. According to data from CRRC,¹ the vast majority of Georgians often say they have never participated in voluntary activities. An explanation of this passivity, according to the same respondents' is that first of all, one has to find a job and ensure a regular income for the family and then, think about helping others. In other words, economic prosperity of the society defines the intensity of civic participation of citizens. That should explain why all countries of the South Caucasus have low numbers of volunteers. This might lead us to a hypothesis that countries of the region that more affluent, shall have higher numbers of volunteers. Does Azerbaijan, the most prosperous country among the three, have higher numbers of volunteers?

Back in the 2007, Azerbaijan had, in fact, significantly higher numbers of reported volunteers; the reason for this is that in Azerbaijan the practice of so called *Subotniki* – a Soviet tradition of “voluntary” activities on Saturdays, when the whole staff of an organization undertook joint volunteer activities, is still practiced. These are considered by the Azerbaijani respondents as volun-

¹ The Caucasus Research Resource Center's (CRRC), annually collects data on peoples' opinion on different topics in all three countries of the South Caucasus. Among others, questions about activities based on volunteerism, are also being asked.

tary work but *Subotniki* cannot be counted as volunteer work in the modern understanding.

Chart 1



In Georgia and Armenia a slight increase in the number of people engaged in volunteer activities was observed since 2013: in 2015, around 21 percent of respondents in Georgia answered the same question positively (at the same time, 50 % of respondents in Georgia said that it is “extremely important for a good citizen, to do volunteer work”)¹, and 37 percent of respondents in Armenia said they volunteered without compensation during last six months (data from Azerbaijan is not available in 2014 and 2015).

These data, indicates that volunteerism is experiencing a growth in popularity in the region. This growth is slow, but might look promising to the optimists.

We consider, that the effort of local governments to bring national legislation in accordance with the growing demand led as a consequence to a growing interest among citizens. Though the question remains, if the “law on volunteerism” and a popularization campaigns, financed by the government, will make the local society adopt the practice of volunteerism on a more broad dimension.

The habit of volunteerism is usually linked to *social capital*. According to the World Bank definition, it “refers to the institutions, and norms that shape

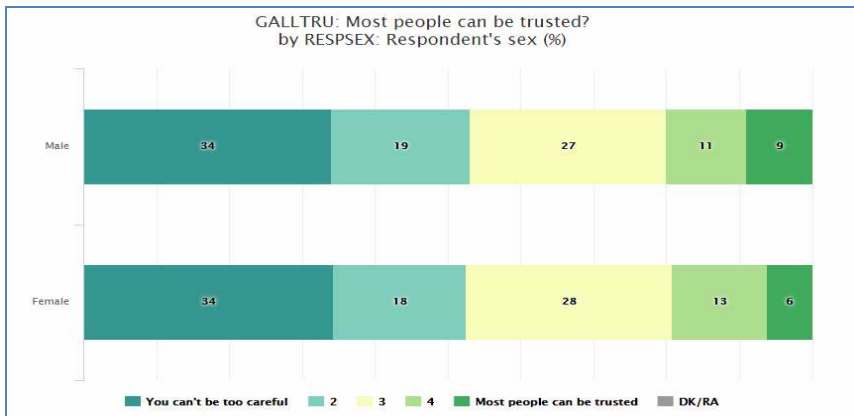
¹ CRRC, Caucasus Barometer-Georgia Dataset, 2015, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2015ge/IMPGCVW-by-RESPSEX/>

the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions"¹. Georgia is described as “a low trust society”, where citizens don't hurry to forms formal associations, and prefer to engage in more informal relationship with neighbor, relatives, friends and kins (CRRC, 2011.). Indeed, the so called *bonding capital*, which provides members of close-knit networks with a means to reciprocally help each other- whether through financial aid, goods and services” (CRRC, 2011), is something regarded as *traditional* for the Georgian society. In contrast to the bonding capital, *bridging social capital*, which connects groups beyond closed family and clan networks, is still scarce: people don't trust each other and prefer to be members informal groups (Aliyev, 2015).

At the same time, bridging social capital is crucial for volunteerism. Higher the bridging social capital gets, more and more people want to do volunteer work; citizens of different ages, professions, religious, ethnic or other belonging, engage in activities, that benefit people they have never met before and will probably never meet again.

CRRC data illustrates some of this observations. For example, when asked if “most people can be trusted” (CRRC, Caucasus Barometer, 2015), a majority of respodens in Georgia don't hide their skepticism (See Chart 2).

Chart 2

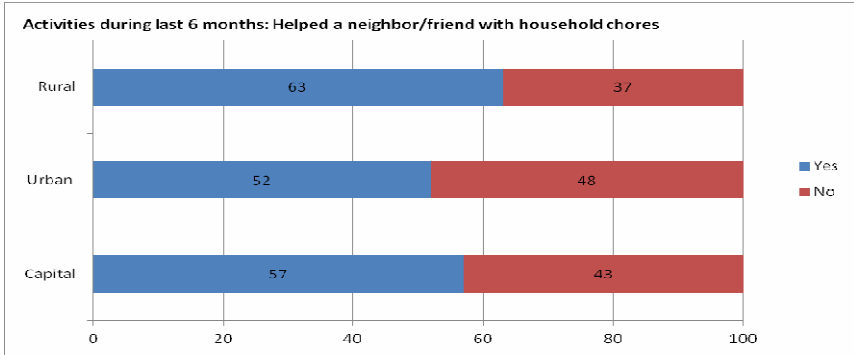


At the same time, a frequent practice that most Georgians have been involved in, is supporting a neighbor. Age is less relevant here; basically, Georgians of all ages report that they have helped a noughbour with household chores in the last six months (65% of the 18-35 age group, 64% of the 36-55

¹ <http://infed.org/mobi/social-capital/> (Accessed 12.06.2017)

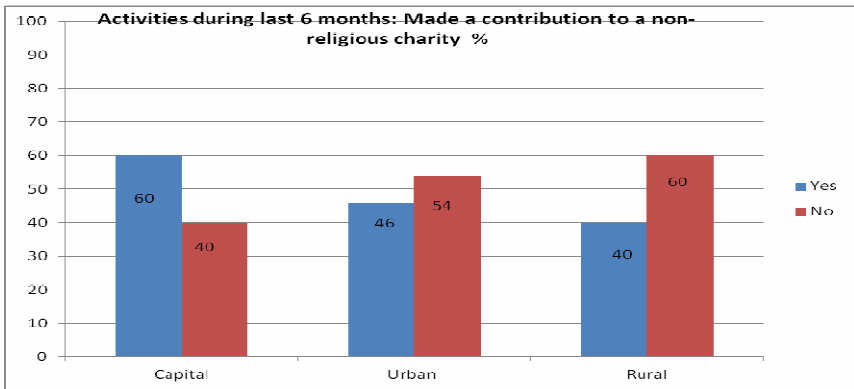
age group, 45% of the 56+ age groups gave a positive answer). In rural areas, the numbers are higher, since due to the inefficiency of state institutions people have to rely more on each other. This is a good illustration of bonding social capital in action (See chart 3).

Chart 3



High numbers of respondents in Georgia also report to have made a contribution to a non-religious charity. Most frequently, this means people have helped a beggar in the street, or provided some kind of material support to a person, or family in need they know, or have come across (Hough, 2011).

Chart 4



These low numbers in volunteering have become an issue for reflection in 2015, when a tragedy hit the capital city and a significant number of citizens decided to intervene and help the victims.

The tragedy of 13 June, 2015 and failure of state institutions. The events of Tbilisi on 13th June, 2015 made world headlines. A landslide near the capital of the country, Tbilisi blocked a small river flowing through the city and caused a flood of unexpected dimensions. The disaster hit the city at night and left the government and citizens little time to understand what was going on.

With the first morning light, the country witnessed the scale of the catastrophe: missing people, ruined infrastructure and a devastated zoo with wild animals on loose. The next weeks were a true nightmare for the city: schools and universities had to close down because of the wild animals reported to be seen all over the city.

Taken back by the disaster, the government rushed into looking for a scapegoat. Surviving the first shock, officials started blaming the previous government of the city, claiming the incorrect planning of the new road and bridge system next to the zoo, implemented by the former mayor (who served a prison term at the time of this tragedy), was to be blamed. Another person named by the officials was the director of the zoo, accused of providing the officials with incorrect information about missing animals; officials claimed, this was the reason of their inability to detect a tiger, hiding for several days near the zoo in an abandoned factory building, finally hunted down only after a deadly attack on a worker. Later, it turned out that the tiger was found days before the attack, but was presumed to be dead and the officials failed to remove “the corpse”, because they had a lot to do!

At the first sight, for the outside world the flood had also a comic touch: pictures of a hippo, roaming streets of Tbilisi, caused jokes and ironic comments on the pages of the international news agencies from all over the world.

If anything positive and promising could happen during these tragic events, was an unexpected and quick mobilization of citizens. Hundreds of, mostly young, people mobilized and flocked to the zoo and the surroundings to clean the territory and help in finding the missing humans and animals. Others, unable to work physically, collected money, or goods for the victims and volunteers.

An online campaign to protect the director of the zoo was launched and had a positive outcome since the government abandoned the idea of putting charges against him. A big part of Georgian society united in an effort to help the victims (not only humans, but animals, too), was interpreted as a sign of maturing civil society and social capital.

Georgian legislation on volunteerism. How volunteerism can be encouraged and if the state should intervene by creating incentives in order to raise motivation of citizens, is a controversial issue. Necessity of adopting legislation controlling volunteerism, has been actively promoted by the UN and some international organization in the last decades: 2001 was announced as

international year of volunteerism and 2011 was announced by the Euro Commission as the year of volunteerism in Europe. During this decade, a majority of countries that didn't have laws on volunteerism, adopted such documents.

There are various factors that can push forward legislative initiatives and state policies in the field of volunteerism, resulting eventually more citizen engagement in voluntary activities for public interest (Abashidze, Abashishvili, 2011):

a) *Economic factor*- governments, as well non-profit organizations benefit a lot from saving money on work performed by volunteers. In countries with a strong tradition of volunteerism, citizens annually perform work worth billions of dollars.

b) *Response to a crisis*- earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters, cause big numbers of citizens to act in order to help those in need and fight the consequences. Governments often have to act in response to this reality and create a legislative basis for volunteerism (Gazley, Brudney, 2005).

c) *Propaganda* – international organizations often spend significant resources to encourage certain societies to engage into volunteer activities and governments to adopt laws regulating the sphere.

d) *Growth in numbers of active volunteers* – this is a supply-driven tendency, when due to different reasons, a growing number of citizens find interest in volunteer activities. Big cultural, or sport events, such as Olympic Games, usually engage thousands of citizens in different activities (organization, logistics etc.) and give people a sense how useful it can be. A positive experience of this kind, motivates people to repeat it later.

In the Georgian case, the 2015 Youth Olympic Games were expected to become a milestone event. Indeed, the law on volunteerism was adopted in December 2015. It was just a coincidence that the law was undergoing necessary procedures (hearings in the committees etc.) in summer 2015, when the disaster hit the capital and hundreds of Georgians, a big part of them teenagers, volunteered to do hard physical and emotionally challenging work in the remnants of the devastated Tbilisi zoo.

The law is brief, comprised of 10 articles and sets a framework, that regulates basic issues connected with the relationship of the volunteer and the host organization. First of all, the law defines the term “volunteer”, previously not mentioned in the Georgian legislation at all. It defines that only persons who have reached 16 can do volunteer work; those, under 16 need a permission of an adult, i.e. parent or supervisor. Teenagers between 16 and 18 should not be kept busy as volunteers more than 36 hours per week.

Most importantly, the law requires the host organization, to inform the volunteer about potential threats, connected with the work to be performed, and to take necessary steps in order to prevent any harm to the volunteer. The law requires existence of a written agreement between two sides, if the volunteer is

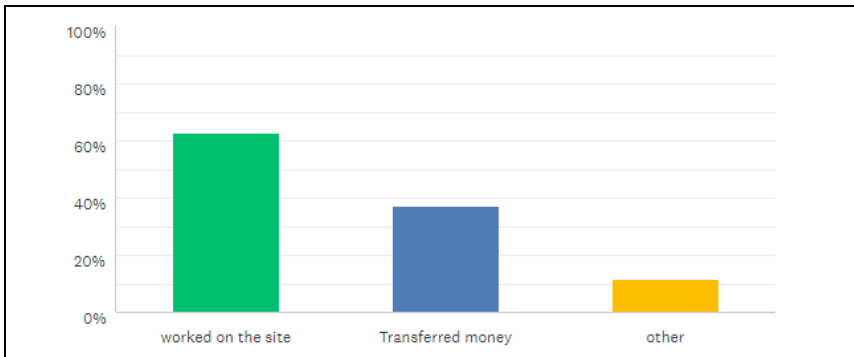
engaged for longer period than 1 month. The law also defines the requirement of the host organization to take financial expenses of the volunteer, that can arise while he/she is performing the agreed work, such as: travel, communication, living or visa costs. The law can be regarded as a first and positive step in the direction in protection of the rights of volunteers, which can help them to avoid exploitation from the side of host organizations.

The law definitely solved some of the problems faced previously by the volunteers and their host organizations (for example, the volunteer will feel more protected and the host organization will carry more responsibility for their safety). Though, based on recent data (perceptions of citizens about volunteerism), one can see that the law didn't have a groundbreaking effect.

Survey methodology and main results. In order to check our hypothesis we collected data by means of a) an online survey and b) two focus groups. We received 118 answers on the online survey and had 29 participants in the focus group (11 persons in the first group, and 18 in the second).

The online questionnaire consisted of 9 questions, aimed at finding out what experience participants had before and after the 2015 events and if the event changed their attitude on volunteerism. 67% percent of respondents were female; age distribution – most of the respondents between 20 to 30 years old (74 %), 21 % more than 30 and the rest (5 %) were teenagers. 51.58 % said they had participated in the rescue operation after the 13 June events in 2015. We asked then -How (in what form) did they participate? 62 % said they worked on the site of the tragedy, 37 % transferred money to the special fund (See chart below).

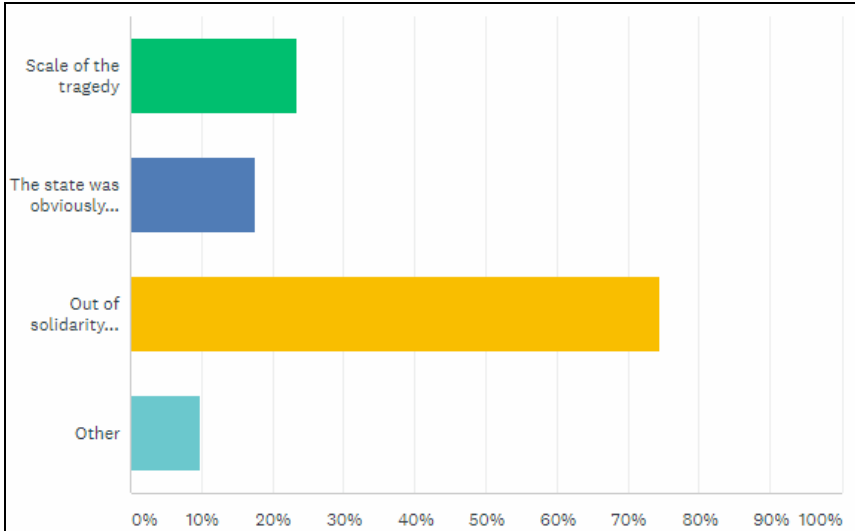
Chart 5



To our surprise, when asked what pushed them to get engaged, a big number named pure solidarity rather than the scale of the tragedy, or the fact that state institutions were failing to address the tragedy on its own. Since other

tragic events don't stir up such a big wave of volunteer support, we expected that more respondents would stress that of the 2015 event was something extraordinary (See Chart 6).

Chart 6



Interestingly, 36 % say that had volunteer experience before June 2015 and 28 % had volunteered after 2015. We think this numbers are pretty close and show that a certain number of the population volunteers because it corresponds to their values¹. In contrast, 54% of respondents said they had no experience before 2015 and 74% have not participated in volunteer activities after 2015. Almost an absolute majority of these latter (93 %), say the simply didn't have an opportunity to do so after 2015 (The rest 7% say “they don't want to work for free”). On the one hand, it is hard to believe, that there were no opportunities for volunteer work for these respondents during the last two years; on the other hand, it seems that volunteerism is considered by people as an activity organized by someone-the state, an NGO etc. The skill and motivation of self-organization is still weak. This is something to be considered by organizations which promote volunteerism in the developing countries.

Lastly, 69% of respondents say the 2015 experience changed their opinion about volunteerism in a positive way. Not a single respondent shared a negative answer, though we expected that at least someone would be disap-

¹ Previous experience included cleaning the environment (school, university yard), planting trees, blood donation.

pointed by their experience. The rest of answers, 30,53 %, was “my opinion was not affected anyway”.

The results of the focus groups were pretty similar. Two groups of students, 29 persons in total, were asked to share opinion and discuss issues raised in the questionnaire use for the online survey. These groups consisted of people before 22, but their experience and participation in the 2015 events were identical to those of the online respondents: previous experience usually was described as “teacher/director/headmaster made/asked us to participate in an event”. Though, on the 13 June, 2015 they participated voluntarily and made so mostly because of solidarity to the victims and lost persons. Both groups agreed that volunteerism is not popular in Georgia because a) unemployment is high and people prefer to concentrate on job search, b) people are not informed about opportunities to volunteer, c) people are lazy and often unable to understand why volunteerism can be useful. In both groups, participants thought that it is necessary that someone organizes events and informs citizens about them; and if they want young people to get involved, they should take care “it is also fun” and participants enjoy doing volunteer work. These last opinion, demonstrate that volunteer activities is considered to not an activity that an individual decides to undertake on his/her own, but rather an opportunity planned and implemented by others, the society and every individual decides whether to participate or not. Lack of initiative can be considered as one of the reasons why few Georgians are involved in volunteer work and this altogether is linked to lack of social capital.

Conclusion. Considered to be a “low trust society”, Georgia traditionally shows low numbers of citizen engagement in volunteer activities. Due to lack of the *bridging social capital*, people prefer to spend their time and effort only for the benefit of those, they know well, or are related to. *Bonding social capital* is relatively high in all three republics of the South Caucasus: helping out a friend, or relative in trouble, or giving money to beggar, is a common practice. Maybe this is due to the distrust to the state, inherited from the Soviet past, when citizens had to count on themselves, rather than on the state institutions; maybe, there are other deeper, cultural reasons. The fact is, people are not very enthusiastic about volunteer activities, though regard as a duty to support their family members, friends and neighbors.

Our goal in this research was to find out if attitudes are changing with time and the young now share values encouraging *the bridging social capital*. In debate over the development of the culture of volunteerism in Georgia, the tragedy of 13 June, 2015 in Tbilisi, is sometimes regarded as a milestone event. Was the quick mobilization of citizenry a sign that people are becoming more open and trustful towards other members of the society?

Half of our respondents confirmed their participation in the 2015 events. Around 40% percent of them had volunteer experience before the event and

only around 30% volunteered since 2015. As the main reason for their inactivity after 2015, an absolute majority of respondents named *lack of opportunities*. Despite some efforts of the government to encourage volunteerism, or at least bring some clarity in the legislation in this field, it seems citizens find available chances for volunteer engagement in public life as scarce and not attractive enough. This data shows that our research hypothesis is refuted: we don't observe a significant increase in numbers of volunteers since 2015. The null hypothesis can be accepted: our respondents say the events of 2015 didn't change their perception on volunteerism and once again, the numbers confirm their words.

At the same time, the explanation that is offered by the theory about bonding social capital being the reason of people preferring to stick to small groups of kinship, might be a bit exaggerated. Most of our respondents didn't decide to go out and work for days in Tbilisi in 2015 because the scale of the tragedy was big or they didn't expect the government to handle the challenge, but out of solidarity to the victims. This means there is potential for growth in volunteerism in the Georgian society, if the benefits of such actions for the people in need, and the society in general, is better articulated and disseminated.

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Абашидзе А. Чи справді спостерігається зростання волонтерства в Грузії? Оцінки до і після повені в Тбілісі 13 червня 2015 року

Волонтерство ніколи не було популярним у Грузії. Громадяни воліють приділяти увагу людям, яких вони знають і яким довіряють; зазвичай це невелика кількість друзів і родичів. Мета цього дослідження полягає в тому, щоб відповісти на питання, чи можуть події 13 червня 2015 року в Тбілісі бути інтерпретовані як ознака того, що постави грузинського суспільства щодо волонтерства зазнають позитивних змін. На основі даних, отриманих за допомогою онлайн-опитування та фокус-групи, автор робить висновок, що існує потенціал для зростання культури волонтерства, який слід заохочувати шляхом більш активного залучення державних та неприбуткових секторів. Інакше активність громадян на добровільній основі зростатиме лише в надзвичайних ситуаціях, таких як, наприклад, Тбіліська трагедія 13 червня 2015 року.

Ключові слова: волонтерство, соціальний капітал, довіра, громадянське суспільство, Грузія.

Абашидзе А. Действительно ли наблюдается рост волонтерства в Грузии? Оценки до и после наводнения в Тбилиси 13 июня 2015 года

Волонтерство никогда не было популярным в Грузии. Граждане предпочитают уделять внимание людям, которых они знают и которым доверяют; обычно это небольшое количество друзей и родственников. Цель этого исследования заключается в том, чтобы ответить на вопрос, могут ли события 13 июня 2015 года в Тбилиси быть интерпретированы как признак того, что установки грузинского общества относительно волонтерства переживают положительные изменения. На основе данных, полученных с помощью онлайн-опроса и фокус-групп, автор делает вывод, что существует потенциал для роста культуры волонтерства, который следует поощрять путем более активного привлечения государственных и неприбыльных секторов. В противном случае активность граждан на добровольной основе будет возрастать только в чрезвычайных ситуациях, таких как, например, Тбилисская трагедия 13 июня 2015 года.

Ключевые слова: волонтерство, социальный капитал, доверие, гражданское общество, Грузия.