ESWOCHY

Perceptions of Solidarity Among Youth with Volunteering Experience

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The qualitative research mainly explored the perceptions of solidarity among young people with local and international volunteering experience, emphasising Lithuania's and Slovakia's cross-national context. Additionally, the study explores the insights and perspectives of youth workers. Through semi-structured interviews grounded in social capital and self-determination theories, it is revealed that young people conceptualise solidarity as a form of collective action, a sense of community, and mutual support. Youth workers define solidarity as mutual assistance, shared responsibility, and equality within inclusive environments. This discussion re-evaluates solidarity as more than belonging; it advocates for youth empowerment and active social transformation and highlights the ethical responsibility of care. The insights from a youth-centred perspective present pragmatic recommendations for practitioners engaged with young individuals, volunteer organisations, and policymakers. This is particularly relevant for those who foster youth engagement and enhance social cohesion.

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This research is dedicated to all the young individuals fighting for their lives, joy, freedom, and justice. I stand in solidarity with you, now and always.

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Introduction

Addressing the pressing need for solidarity in the field of social work is emphasised and referenced in various key strategic documents such as the Codes of Ethics of the International Federation of Social Workers (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018); the National Association of Social Workers of the United States of America (the National Association of Social Workers of the United States of America, 2021); the Swedish Association of Social Workers (Akademikarförbundet SSR, 2015); and the Code of Conduct of the Lithuanian Social Workers Association (Lietuvos socialinių darbuotojų asociacijos dokumentai, 2017).

Tava (2023, p. 39) highlights the increasing significance of solidarity as a topic of discussion. Lesch (2018, p. 601) also points out that solidarity is vital for attaining justice. Additionally, Horsham et al. (2024, p. 62) illustrate that their systematic review reveals a strong connection between social cohesion and volunteering, emphasising the essential role of community engagement. Furthermore, Davies et al. (2024, p. 822) discuss the link between volunteering and social cohesion, noting that volunteering fosters social cohesion, which in turn enhances volunteering efforts. Additionally, as observed by Stukas et al. (2016, p. 245), volunteering plays a crucial role in reinforcing young people's sense of belonging to their community. Various perspectives regard the concept of solidarity, but what does it truly mean, and how do young volunteers understand it?

This study will explore a significant and ongoing discussion, along with diverse interpretations, regarding the concept of solidarity. Gaztambide-Fernández et al. (2022) point out that the meaning of solidarity remains a contentious topic today, both within educational contexts and beyond. The ambiguous definition of solidarity has attracted various criticisms, often viewed as undermining its relevance in the pursuit of social justice (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2022).

According to the Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States Meeting within the Council on a Framework for European Cooperation in the Youth Field (2018), the European Union youth strategy for 2019-2027 outlines actions that the governments of European Union member states and the European Commission might consider which includes three key themes: engage, connect, and empower. Engaging youth is fundamental to the strategy, which promotes significant civic, economic, social, cultural, and political participation in democratic processes. The theme of 'Connect' is substantial, emphasising the provision of opportunities for cultural, civic, and other exchanges with peers in European Union member states and non-European countries. Examples of such programs include Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps for volunteering in the civil society sector. The third theme of strategy, 'Empower', acknowledges that youth work is a valuable tool

for youth empowerment, alongside the support of youth organisations for promoting social inclusion via youth engagement and informal education.

As reported by Eurostat (2022, p. 6), the population of young people in the European Union reached 73 million in 2021. Data from Eurostat (2024) concerning the member states of the European Union indicate that, during the period from 2020 to 2024, the percentages of individuals engaging in formal voluntary activities, informal voluntary activities, and active citizenship are approximately 13.3 percent, 14.8 percent, and 8.4 percent, respectively (Eurostat, 2024). Given that the research geographical area concentrates on two member states of the European Union, namely Lithuania and Slovakia, it is crucial to incorporate the most recent statistics regarding youth participation in Lithuania: participation in formal voluntary activities stands at 8.9 percent, informal voluntary activities at 9.2 percent, and active citizenship at 8.4 percent (Eurostat, 2024). In Slovakia, the participation rates for formal voluntary activities, informal voluntary activities, and active citizenship are 10 percent, 10.9 percent, and 4.2 percent, respectively (Eurostat, 2024).

Nichol et al. (2024, p. 111) underscore that comprehensive scientific umbrella studies demonstrate that volunteering generates a multitude of social advantages, including the enhancement of social ties, networks, support systems, connectedness, and community integration. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2024, p. 6) further asserts that volunteering serves as a crucial tactic for addressing the social, economic, and environmental challenges encountered by local communities. Furthermore, volunteering enriches the experiences of volunteers by improving their physical and mental well-being, augmenting civic participation, and fostering self-confidence. It also offers a significant means for both volunteers and communities to mitigate feelings of isolation.

Moreover, Stukas et al. (2016, p. 243) underline the importance of cultivating community involvement, consistently studying volunteer engagement, and exploring effective strategies for promoting volunteerism. They also focus on identifying the factors determining when and why volunteering leads to positive results and exploring the beliefs and choices that inspire volunteers to engage with their communities.

This study investigates the concept of solidarity as perceived by young individuals with volunteering experience in Lithuania and Slovakia, analysed at a cross-national level. Furthermore, it aims to identify the motivations that drive this youth demographic to participate in volunteering activities. The research adopts a multi-stakeholder approach, incorporating the perceptions of solidarity from various institutional actors.

Nevertheless, the practical purpose of the research is to provide support to local governmental and non-governmental organisations, youth workers, and social workers who engage with young individuals in formulating methodologies, frameworks, policies, programs, projects, and volunteering activities that

prioritise youth-centric approaches and take into account the perceptions, perspectives, and understanding of solidarity among the clients, particularly the youth.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

The overarching objective of this study is to explore and comprehend how young individuals with volunteer experience perceive the concept of solidarity.

Specific Objectives

- To explore and analyse perceptions of solidarity among youth with a volunteering experience.

- To understand how volunteering experiences alter individuals' sense of belonging, trust, and community involvement.

- To investigate the influence of solidarity perceptions on volunteering motives and how the evolved sense of solidarity influences individuals' motivations to engage in volunteering activities.

- To analyse institutional perspectives on solidarity and its perceptions among youth workers or social workers working with young people.

Research Questions

- What is the perception of solidarity among youth who have had volunteer experience in Lithuania and Slovakia?

- How has volunteering influenced their perception of a sense of belonging, trust, and community involvement?

- How does the perception of solidarity affect motives to engage in volunteering activities?

- What is the perception of solidarity among youth workers or social workers working with young people in Lithuania and Slovakia? How do youth workers or social workers working with young people perceive or experience the connection between volunteering experiences and a sense of solidarity?

Literature Review

Solidarity

This section delves into the idea of solidarity and its connection to volunteering. It outlines the historical evolution of solidarity, starting with Pierre Leroux and Durkheim, and moving to modern interpretations like 'humanitarian solidarity' and 'solidarity from below'. The review acknowledges the complexities and examines various forms and levels of solidarity, including intergenerational, intersectional, community, political, international, ecological, and digital solidarity. Each type of solidarity is contextualised within existing literature. This exploration offers a thorough understanding of solidarity and prepares the ground for investigating its relationship with volunteering practices.

As highlighted by Cingolani (2015, p. 2), the modern sociological concept of solidarity originated with the French philosopher Pierre Leroux and was further developed during the French Revolution through the discourse on solidarity; however, some viewed it as a challenge to the social bond.

In contrast to earlier views, As argued by Gupta, (2005, p. 69) Durkheim, a key founder of the school of sociology perspectives, argues that there are two understandings of solidarity in society people bond through shared activities which he names a 'mechanical solidarity' and industrial societies, sense of belonging forms due to specialised roles which he calls 'organic solidarity' he also argues what a valuable is defined by society, and sense of duty of ourselves is eventually a duty to society. Furthermore, he emphasises how the way we organise in society shapes our perspectives and consciousness.

According to ter Meulen (2018, p. 115), the concept of 'humanitarian solidarity' encompasses essential human values, defining obligations and responsibilities alongside a profound commitment to assist those in need. It recognises the dignity of individuals facing life-threatening situations caused by factors beyond their control.

According to Zheng (2023), the idea of *solidarity from below* posits that solidarity represents a capability, not merely an emotion or obligation. This perspective highlights the collective strength of individuals who lack the means to organise for transformative social change.

Laitinen (2013, as cited in Schmitt, 2022, p. 47) contends that solidarity has become foundational in diverse societal domains and has consistently been appropriated and influenced by multiple groups. Above all, solidarity serves as a social activity, a theoretical idea, and an analytical perspective.

As stated by Laitinen (2022), there is no clear, definitive canon of theories regarding solidarity; from a general perspective, solidarity is believed to be an under-theorised concept, or, as the author mentions, 'nebulous'. However, several theories seek to clarify key concepts of solidarity in distinct ways. One important viewpoint is that solidarity involves individuals whose lives and futures are intertwined. Solidarity can take various forms or levels, such as social, civic, or group solidarity, depending on the quality of the relationships built on trust and support among individuals. There are also thoughts of nonexclusive human, political, and even the dark side of solidarity.

Types of Solidarity and Definitions

The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines (*Solidarity Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.Com*, n.d.) the word "Solidarity" as being described as supported by individuals or groups of people who share certain feelings, opinions, aims, etc. Further explanations below are commonly well-known perspectives that define and explain the different types of solidarity:

Table 1: *Types of Solidarity and Definitions*

Types of Solidarity	Definitions
Intergenerational Solidarity	Giarrusso and Putney (2020) describe intergenerational solidarity as a firm or supportive relationship among family members across generations, such as between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, or, conversely, between siblings or partners. Referring to Thijssen's (2016, p. 2) perspectives, intergenerational solidarity can be understood as practical support among various generations and the shared belief that they should and must support one another.
Intersectional Solidarity	As referenced by Greenwood (2008, as cited in Tormos, 2017, p. 13), the concept of intersectional solidarity thrives on an intersectional consciousness, which acknowledges that oppression encompasses various interconnected social institutions. Given the awareness of disparities among social groups, intersectionally conscious social movements may consider their internal norms, structures, and practices.

Community Solidarity	As referenced by Kanter (1972, as cited in Ferguson et al., p.223, 2017), community solidarity is a "we-feeling"; put differently, it refers to a sense of unity or inclusion within a defined group or organisation. There are more members of some organisations who experience a sense of belonging on a deeper level, which is known as "community solidarity." In contrast, members of other organisations often lack a cohesive sense of belonging, resulting in a lack of community solidarity.
Political Solidarity	As defined by Starzyk et al. (2019), referenced in Neufeld et al. (2019), political solidarity refers to how much an individual "stands with" a minority group and its mission, dedicating themselves to collaborating with that group to achieve desired social changes. Furthermore, Neufeld et al. (2019) highlighted three critical components of political solidarity: allyship with the minority outgroup, an association with the outgroup's cause, and a pledge to drive social change.
International Solidarity	According to Cecilia M. Bailliet (2024), International Solidarity refers to the collective responsibilities of governments, international organisations, the business sector, and civil society aimed at improving access to universal human rights and peace, achievable through the development of transnational communication networks.
Ecological Solidarity	According to Mathevet et al. (2018), ecological solidarity highlights a vision where people are essential members of the socio-ecological community. It emphasises the moral duty to acknowledge their roles and act with consideration of their impact on various components within that community.
Digital Solidarity	According to the U.S. Department of State (2024), digital solidarity means being ready to work together toward common goals while helping each other develop skills. It acknowledges that when individuals and groups use digital technologies in alignment with human rights, they become safer, more resilient, self-reliant, and prosperous by collaborating to improve the global

	environment and lead technological innovation. The main principles of digital solidarity include pursuing sustainable economic and developmental goals, fully leveraging new technologies' potential, and committing to supporting allies and partners, especially emerging economies.

Volunteering

2.2.1 Forms, types, specific kinds, and practice areas of volunteering

According to the United Nations General Assembly (p. 3, 2002), volunteering encompasses a range of activities, including traditional mutual aid, self-help, formal service delivery, and other forms of civic engagement. These activities are performed voluntarily, without any financial compensation, and are driven by a genuine desire to contribute to the public good.

This chapter highlights prominent forms and definitions of volunteering, drawing on research by Smith et al. (2016), which provides a state-of-the-art overview of volunteering, civic participation, and non-profit membership associations, as discussed by over 200 leading global experts. Informal volunteering. As described by Smith et al. (2016, p.223), informal volunteering refers to unpaid, voluntary activities that are not organised or overseen by any formal organisation or institution. Assisting people outside of one's home, participation in informal political engagement, religious activities, or informal mutual aid groups. Person-to-person helping actions, such as childcare, meal preparation, fixing household items, giving directions, listening to friends' concerns, and offering advice, have been measured through surveys.

Equally important, according to Rodell et al. (2016, p. 1), employee volunteering is becoming a key topic in the workplace. As defined by Rodell et al. (2016), employee volunteering occurs when employed individuals dedicate their time to the activities of an external non-profit or philanthropic organisation. Leading experts (Smith et al., 2016, pp. 223-249) discussed various specific types of volunteering activities, including Stipend Transnational Volunteering, National Service Volunteering, Volunteer Tourism and Travel Volunteering, Online and Virtual Volunteering, and Spontaneous Volunteering in Emergencies. Another group of authors referring to (Smith et al.,369-516 2016) area of volunteering practices such as Traditional Philanthropic Service Volunteering, Self-Help and Mutual Aid Group Volunteering, Participation In Trade and Business Associations or Worker Cooperatives, Volunteering in Consumer and Service cooperatives, Volunteering in Religious Congregations and Faith-Based Associations, Political and Political Volunteering/Participation,

Social Movement And Activist-Protest Volunteering, etc. As noted by Kelemen et al. (2017, p. 1), various definitions of volunteering activities are complex and nuanced.

As King et al. (2024, p. 1478) discussed, religion's influence on volunteering is well-known. The research extends understanding by exploring the roles of both religion and spirituality. In addition to conventional metrics such as active membership or affiliation with formal participation, the study introduces measures of spiritual significance in life and practices, revealing additional connections that demonstrate how these elements influence civic engagement.

Kojima (2024, p. 593) notes that people's participation in volunteering activities is connected to their social networks, including local groups and everyday interactions, such as having regular meals with friends. Notably, friendships serve as a powerful incentive for volunteering. Studies indicate that encouraging volunteering can be effectively done by utilising social interactions and disseminating information within established networks.

2.2.2 Model of Volunteering Practices in the 21st Century by Millora (2020)

Millora (2020, p. 15) emphasises that the latest model for comprehending volunteer practices in the twenty-first century includes five essential elements: structure, site, intensity, aspiration, and category. These elements reflect different facets of volunteer actions. **The innermost ring** illustrates the structure of the volunteering activities. Formal volunteer work can be carried out through organisations, community groups, or other platforms that provide specific support. It can also be conducted informally, as part of regular activities to support others. The areas or sites of volunteering practice are indicated by **the second ring.** This can occur offline, online, or through a combination of both. Technology has been utilised by virtual and online volunteers as a tool for their volunteering initiatives. Online volunteering is often paired with in-person, on-site opportunities. However, volunteering can be categorised into various on-site sectors, such as community-based, national, or international. **The third ti**er indicates the degree of volunteer participation. It may also represent a singular event, episodic in nature, requiring volunteers to participate in short-term, spontaneous, and irregular efforts. Furthermore, volunteering can involve sustained activities, becoming increasingly consistent over time. **The fourth ring** synthesises the aspirational aspect of volunteering work or the ultimate objective of helping. Contributions towards broader societal goals, including those defined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, are referred to as community building. This aspect of volunteering practice considers the advantages to specific volunteers, such as the development of social and cultural capital, which encompasses knowledge, skills, experiences, networks, and well-being, collectively referred to as self-building. **The last, fifth ring** represents a typology of volunteering activities based on the

rings mentioned above. It includes one additional form of volunteering, known as 'leisure,' which is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 - *21st Century Model of Volunteering Practices by Millora (2020)*

MUTUAL AID	SERVICE	CAMPAIGNING	PARTICIPATION	LEISURE
Mutual volunteering activities are informal, person-to-person support activities in communities and cultural practices, where community members and volunteers respond to needs or issues within their respective communities.	Service volunteering activities involve volunteers responding to the existing needs of communities or individuals within those communities.	Campaigning and volunteering activities are undertaken collectively by a group or an individual to respond to the marginalised voice and bring about positive changes.	Participation in volunteering activities where volunteers dedicate their time and effort to participate in self-government or various levels of governance and decision-making institutions.	Leisure volunteering activities are expressions of personal interests/passions similar to the arts, culture, and sports, which still contribute to wider well-being and cohesion in societies

(Adapted from Millora, 2020, p.15, Figure 3).

As discussed by Georgeou and Haas (p. 12, 2019), traditional volunteering models were based on generalised reciprocity (solidarity-based engagement), where youth volunteers are connected with communities with the idea of mutual support, rather than expecting immediate benefits. Nevertheless, perceptions have changed with neo-liberal logic focusing on more balanced reciprocity (transactional relationships) or redistributive reciprocity (hierarchical aid). *See* **Figure 2 -** *Forms and logics of reciprocity (Adapted from Georgeou, N., & Haas, B., 2019).*

Figure 2 Forms and logics of reciprocity (Adapted from Georgeou, N., & Haas, B. 2019)

Hierarchy / Power / Redistributive Reciprocity

Relational Model

Solidarity /
Generalised
Reciprocity

Exchange oriented/
Balanced
reciprocity
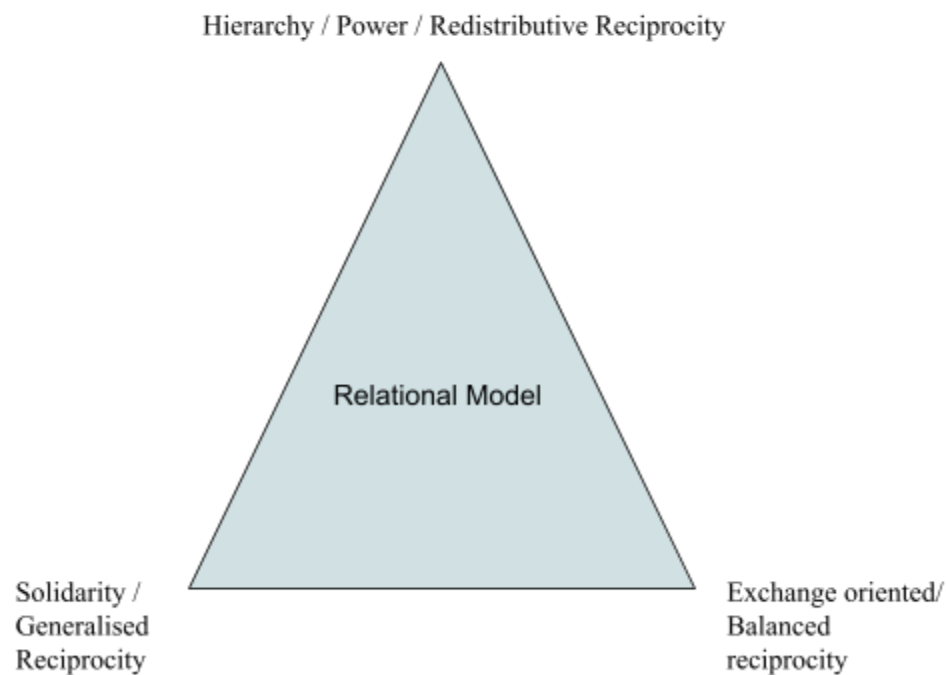
Solidarity and Volunteering

The next section of this literature review focuses on exploring the connection between solidarity and volunteering, emphasising how volunteering enhances social cohesion and a sense of belonging. This chapter investigates the impact of volunteering on social networks, community bonds, and democratic values, incorporating insights from research in rural communities, youth participation, and global perspectives. Additionally, it underscores volunteering's contribution to fostering solidarity within the context of European policy discussions and the UN Secretary-General's perspectives, leading to an exploration of how volunteer relationships help strengthen solidarity and promote community development.

According to Davies et al. (2024, p. 822), a two-way relationship may exist between volunteering and social cohesion, as evidenced by observations over months and years that volunteering promotes social cohesion; however, social cohesion may also enhance volunteering. Furthermore, as discussed by Stukas et al. (2016, p. 245), volunteering has a significant relative impact on strengthening young people's sense of belonging to the community.

Williams et al. (2025, pp. 8–9) highlight that volunteering significantly influences the growth of social networks and strengthens connections among diverse individuals in rural communities. Additionally, research shows that volunteering at the community level promotes a sense of belonging. Participants described feeling

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collectively connected and part of a larger community or social group, often noting how their community prioritised environmental care and support for those in need. This involvement has fostered pride and a commitment to ongoing contributions to the community.

As noted by Butcher & Einolf (Preface, *p. v,* 2017), volunteering plays a crucial role in nurturing democracy, ensuring social cohesion, and enhancing development opportunities. Formal volunteering is defined by the active involvement of individuals in various associations and organisations globally. Meanwhile, informal volunteering, which is embedded in cultural traditions and expressions of solidarity, manifests in diverse ways across all societies and communities. Additionally, individuals' voluntary acts of time and effort toward causes, even if they occur only once, can also be acknowledged as a sign of solidarity and qualify as volunteer work.

Shaw et al. (p. 4, 2022) highlight the importance of youth volunteering in driving action, service, and advocacy to address social issues. This involvement cultivates civic engagement among young individuals, enabling them to create meaningful change within their communities. The European Youth Strategy emphasises the role of youth as agents of solidarity and positive transformation, particularly in nations grappling with challenges like migration, unemployment, and political instability. This underscores the crucial role of volunteering in promoting solidarity and initiating social change. European policies stress the importance of volunteering in building social solidarity among young people. Programs such as the European Solidarity Corps, which facilitates cross-border exchange and volunteer mobility, often promote the values of solidarity and intercultural learning. In the discourse surrounding European policies on solidarity, four key pillars have been identified: human rights, active citizenship, empathy, and inclusion.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres (2022) affirms that "Solidarity through Volunteering" highlights the need for collective support. He stresses that anyone, irrespective of their circumstances or skills, has the capacity to make a difference through their efforts. He encourages individuals to participate by donating their time, skills, and knowledge. He urges us to be inspired by the countless acts of solidarity, both big and small, that make the world a better place, and he calls upon everyone to commit to building a more positive future for all.

According to Aked (2015, p. 40), participation in volunteering activities, particularly the relationships between volunteers, can enhance a sense of solidarity. This feeling forms the basis for unity in joint efforts and the ongoing growth of communities.

The results of the studies mentioned earlier suggest a significant relationship between volunteering and solidarity among those involved in volunteer activities. Additionally, the discussion highlights the importance

of the link between volunteering and solidarity, illustrating how volunteering acts as a vital tool for promoting solidarity.

The triangle of Solidarity, Volunteering, and Social Work

This chapter offers a concise overview of the relationships between solidarity, volunteering, and social work. It underscores the significance of solidarity in social work, particularly in addressing global challenges and advancing social justice. The review additionally examines the contribution of volunteering to social services and the professional development of social work students, while acknowledging the difficulties faced by volunteers within organisations.

As noted by Schmitt (2022, pp. 59-60), solidarity is crucial in social work, particularly given today's global challenges. This concept encourages a sense of interconnectedness among individuals, animals, and the environment, highlighting a collective responsibility and the sustainable use of resources rather than prioritising specific interests. Solidarity should embody equal collaboration across the fields of practice, education, and research. Partnering with civil society organisations that tackle issues like poverty and climate change can help social work transcend national boundaries, fostering a more inclusive and solidarity-driven approach to professionalism. Future dialogues must concentrate on implementing solidarity globally, considering aspects such as organisational structures, funding, and education. It's essential to explore various perspectives, especially those from the Global South, to enhance our comprehension of solidarity.

Hoefer (2019, pp. 21-33) highlights that social workers hold an ethical responsibility to promote social justice. The National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics requires social workers to advocate for social justice, which necessitates a thorough understanding of its various interpretations to ensure alignment with professional values. The advocacy role of social workers for their clients is crucial due to their unique perspectives on their clients' needs and their capacity to identify social injustices. They strongly advocate for prioritising support for the most disadvantaged individuals to enhance their circumstances.

The concept of solidarity is highlighted in the Codes of Ethics of the International Federation of Social Workers (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). They emphasise the active contributions made by social workers within their communities and professional networks. The goal is establishing solidarity networks to facilitate transformational change and create inclusive and responsible societies.

Campanini (2020, p. 692) points out that the pandemic underscored the significance of global interconnectedness and social solidarity. Consequently, international partner organisations have pushed for

the acknowledgement of solidarity as a core component of the international agenda for 2020-2030. These initiatives primarily highlight the essential role of solidarity within the realm of social work.

(The 2025 World Social Work Day Theme Announced – International Federation of Social Workers, 2024) "Strengthening Intergenerational Solidarity for Enduring Wellbeing" highlights the importance of intergenerational solidarity and connections for individual wellbeing and the functioning of economies and societies, which is often overlooked by governments and policymakers. Furthermore, the theme values intergenerational knowledge transfer, honouring the wisdom of elders while recognising the role of young generations in adapting this wisdom to meet current and future challenges. Social workers recognise their role in supporting diverse care practices, which is at the heart of this theme.

As highlighted by Montagud, Mayor, and Martin Estalayo (2024, p. 1), volunteering is a valuable tool for social work students to engage with social intervention sites. Evidence indicates that it benefits their academic preparation and professional development.

According to Von Schnurbein et al. (2023, p. 473), volunteering is significant and fundamental to supporting various social services. However, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges that volunteers might face within organisations. These difficulties can result in multiple problems, such as tension between paid staff and volunteers and potential conflicts between the genuine spirit of volunteering and the formal structure of the organisation.

As highlighted by Neringa Kurapkaitienė & Justinas Sadauskas (2013), volunteering introduces new notions and resources to professional activities and facilitates the personalisation of client assistance. Nevertheless, it is an acknowledged fact that tensions frequently arise between professionals and volunteers. Despite the widely recognised value of volunteers in the provision of social services, along with the evolving relationship between social workers and volunteers, further analysis is required to identify and resolve these tensions.

As mentioned earlier, the perspectives emphasise the interrelatedness of the concepts of solidarity, volunteering, and Social work.

Solidarity, Volunteering, and Youth in Europe: Lithuania and Slovakia

This section examines the themes of solidarity, volunteering, and youth involvement, specifically in relation to youth work in Europe, with a particular emphasis on Lithuania and Slovakia. It addresses the idea of European Solidarity, the function of the European Solidarity Corps, and the ways volunteering fosters civic engagement among young individuals. The review also considers the development of volunteering within the

European Union, underscoring the importance of informal networks and the influence of European Governance on youth policies in Lithuania. In conclusion, it offers a comprehensive overview of the difficulties and progress in volunteering within Lithuania and Slovakia, as well as how solidarity is reflected in societal attitudes and behaviours in these countries. Additionally, it outlines the frameworks surrounding youth in Lithuania and Slovakia, such as recent youth policies, legislative considerations, resources for professionals working with youth, and current trends.

According to Grasso and Lahusen (2020, pp. 31-32), Solidarity is a pivotal concept in social science research across various disciplines. However, he contends that our understanding of many aspects of solidarity, our knowledge, is particularly weak when it comes to how it manifests at the European level, across national borders. This disparity is especially clear regarding how individual European citizens perceive and engage with European Solidarity.

As outlined by Sarancino (2024, pp. 1094-1109), solidarity is a crucial principle for the effective functioning of the European Union and the achievement of its shared objectives. This idea entails cooperation among member states to advance common interests, with the rule of law playing a key role in translating solidarity into tangible actions and responsibilities. This principle is essential for the EU's survival, evidenced by its legal commitments and the necessity for mutual support and aid among member nations.

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture (2025) emphasises that the European Solidarity Corps effectively addresses the changing needs of European society by fostering social cohesion, individual development, and inclusion. This programme promotes positive outcomes for individuals, encouraging both personal and professional growth while enhancing their civic participation. As a result, communities benefit from increased social cohesion and intercultural understanding. Additionally, the program's alignment with the European Commission's core objectives, including democratic participation, inclusivity, diversity, and environmental sustainability, has been recognised.

The United Nations Volunteers (n.d.) emphasises that volunteering is a crucial aspect of civic engagement for young individuals. It serves as a platform for youth to define their goals, develop plans, and connect with others or organisations. Volunteering can inspire young people to participate politically, which is especially vital in countries with large youth demographics and those experiencing rapid social changes. The reasons driving young people to volunteer are diverse, including compassion, the desire to make a positive impact, skill development for future job opportunities, involvement in activities, and personal enjoyment. Youth

volunteers often express challenges and concerns about their experiences within their communities and societies.

According to Meijs, Lucas et al. (2022, pp. 44-45), a new trend in volunteering development within the European Union has emerged, which varies considerably due to institutional factors. However, given the intricate nature of changing institutional factors, it is essential to promote the growth of third-party models alongside encouraging individual volunteerism. This strategy entails recognising and aligning with the interests of prospective volunteers to improve recruitment and involvement.

Smith et al. (2016, p. 232) noted that research on informal volunteering in the former Soviet Union reveals the importance of personal networks. This is largely due to shortcomings in the previously powerful state sector and the development of a weak and poorly defined nonprofit sector.

Michaelsson & Acienė (2021, pp. 75–76) argue that new European governance approaches have influenced the development and implementation of Lithuanian youth policy. This evolution involves adopting the European Union's open method of coordination, utilising European Union funding to enhance inter-agency cooperation and innovative governance procedures, and actively engaging non-governmental organisations. These NGOS have considerable influence in shaping the political landscape. However, it is crucial to adopt effective youth policy strategies that blend both academic knowledge and practical experience, particularly for social work practitioners. The integration of policy guidelines into the training of social work professionals is highlighted as vital.

As highlighted by Staliūnas et al. (2021, pp. 58-59), volunteering is essential for the growth of social capital and civil society, which are key elements for a nation's sustained development. However, Lithuania still demonstrates poor performance on the global stage. The authors point out widespread misconceptions about volunteering and the deficiencies in organisational management. They view the introduction of new long-term programmes as a positive step. To strengthen social capital, especially among schoolchildren, they recommend clarifying the legal definition of volunteering, enhancing management standards, and encouraging collaboration between local governments and volunteer organisations.

Gavurová et al. (2017, pp. 1004–1005) note that volunteering in Slovakia is becoming increasingly prominent; however, its potential remains unfulfilled due to a lack of public participation, inadequate volunteer centres, and ineffective organisation. It is imperative to engage diverse age groups with novel programmes and to establish a supportive legal framework. The lack of thorough research in this field limits understanding and progress, while obtaining funding poses a significant difficulty due to low donor

awareness regarding the benefits of investing in volunteerism. To improve the volunteering framework in Slovakia, it is essential to implement focused programmes and research initiatives.

Recent studies from Lithuania and Slovakia emphasise the expression of Solidarity in broader societal attitudes and behaviours.

According to Egner et al. (2024, pp. 139-153), a pervasive aspiration for enhanced unity is observed in Lithuania. In the context of natural disasters, there is a consensus that aid should be provided based on the principle of common humanity, with the expectation of reciprocal assistance in proportion to a nation's capabilities. There is a strong sense of regional solidarity, particularly with the neighbouring Baltic states, and individual solidarity is demonstrated through various means, which include taxes, charitable contributions, and volunteering.

A parallel may be drawn with perspectives in Slovakia. According to Egner et al. (2024, pp. 154-168), a sense of solidarity was evidenced in the context of natural disasters. In the context of financial crises, the provision of support was regarded as being subject to specific conditions and the recipient's perceived merit. Furthermore, solidarity ought to be primarily exhibited in instances where external factors instigate crises.

The previously mentioned viewpoints highlight a notable evolution in the level of engagement in volunteering and solidarity among European youth. Lithuania and Slovakia exemplify these larger trends while contending with unique national challenges and successes.

According to the European Union (2025b), the overarching objective of Lithuanian youth policy, as delineated within the legal framework, is to proactively address the multifaceted challenges confronting young individuals, cultivating nurturing environments conducive to their personal development and societal integration. The objective of this initiative is twofold: to promote a deeper understanding of the issues faced by young people in today's society; and to encourage tolerance towards those who are different. This policy encompasses various systems and actions designed to provide optimal conditions for young people's development and successful societal integration. It encompasses diverse support structures, ranging from informal networks comprising friends to formal institutions such as schools and commercial entities. Two primarily domains of operation characterise Lithuanian youth policy: firstly, the identification of the needs of young people across a range of public policy sectors, including education, culture, employment, and health, and secondly, the orovision of support for youth-led initiatives that facilitate learning though experimental learning and the cultivation of independence. The formulation of this policy is the primary responsibility of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, with the agency of Youth Affairs, municipalities, and non-governmental organisations playing pivotal roles in its implementation. In early 2024, the demographic

composition of Lithuania's population was as follows: the youth demographic constituted approximately 16% of the total population. However, this figure is declining due to emigration, thereby accelerating the country's ageing population. Consequently, the youth policy emphasises the crucial role of young people in Lithuania's future stability. The implementation of the policy is achieved through multi-year programmes. The National Youth Policy Development Programme was implemented from 2011 to 2019.

As the European Union (2025c) noted, the foundational legislation guiding youth policy in the Republic of Lithuania mandates that youth-focused organisations operate under specific guidelines when working with young people. Their diverse activities include creating welcoming and accessible environments, known as open youth work, providing support through street initiatives, and delivering services via mobile units. These organisations are responsible for fostering practical skills in youth and offering essential information and counselling. Recognising the changing dynamics of youth engagement, the law also embraces alternative interaction methods. A key element of these approaches is including non-formal educational techniques and applying innovative, effective strategies in their work. Several core principles govern engagement with young people. First, it is crucial to highlight the importance of open and informal communication, which helps build relationships based on mutual trust, equality, and the understanding that youth workers and young individuals can learn from one another. Secondly, the significance of voluntary participation is paramount; a young person's involvement must stem from their own choice, free from discrimination, allowing them to actively participate in initiating activities, making decisions, and accepting outcomes. Collaborative activities are also emphasised to foster problem-solving skills, encourage joint decision-making, and facilitate sharing tasks and responsibilities. Acknowledging that each young person has unique traits, individuality is a guiding principle, requiring youth work to be tailored to meet specific needs.

Moreover, experiential learning plays a crucial role, featuring activities based on young individuals' personal experiences and promoting self-reflection. When referrals are necessary, they play an essential role in connecting young people to governmental, municipal, or other entities capable of offering specialised support or tailored information that meets their needs. Lastly, creating a safe environment is essential for the successful operation of educational institutions, ensuring that young individuals have access to spaces where they can learn, participate in activities, and express their ideas without fear of physical or psychological harm.

Following the European Union (2025d), Lithuania's national legislation defines youth work as various social, informational, educational, and cultural activities aimed at helping young people integrate into society and actively participate in their personal and social lives. A youth worker is considered an individual over 21 who implements youth policies to promote young people's personal and social development during their leisure

time. Although "youth worker" lacks an official definition as a distinct profession in Lithuania, field experts typically describe these individuals as involved in youth development, often possessing backgrounds in social work, teaching, social education, psychology, or related social science areas. The Agency of Youth Affairs is critical in supporting youth workers by offering ongoing training, providing advice and guidance, and facilitating regular meetings. The training programme is carefully structured to improve understanding of various methodologies for engaging with young people, covering theoretical and practical skill sets.

Furthermore, a comprehensive five-part training programme is available, addressing core areas such as non-formal education, psychology, social work, and youth policy. The Agency also offers consultation services for individuals and teams looking to enhance their practices, while organising meetings for youth workers to exchange information, gain new insights, and tackle common challenges. A certification system has been established to formally acknowledge and elevate the skills of those working with youth, ensuring service quality. The European Union's "Erasmus +" program also provides opportunities for youth workers to enhance their skills and broaden their knowledge through international exchanges and networking. This programme facilitates projects that allow youth workers to acquire new experiences, collaborate with international partners, and improve their competencies, contributing to the progress of youth work practices in Lithuania and beyond.

As highlighted by the European Union (2025a), ongoing discussions within the EU have emphasised the importance of making youth work accessible and of high quality across member states. These debates often centre around the need for consistent legal frameworks, quality standards, and adequate resources to support various forms of youth engagement. The 2022 Lithuanian study on youth work revealed a significant legal focus on open youth centres and spaces. The regulations require providing supplementary services and activities outside of school hours and during school breaks for students in general education programmes. In contrast, other youth work forms and organisations lack clear legal definitions, requirements, or operational objectives. The study suggests that the obligation for free service provision should extend to all youth work forms.

Furthermore, it recommends establishing performance and quality standards for organisations that run open youth work initiatives. Lithuania's National Youth Policy Action Plan for 2023-2027, effective from 1 January 2026, underscores the inadequate adaptation of youth-friendly infrastructure in many municipalities. It also notes the difficulties young people, especially those in rural areas, face in accessing local leisure and employment services. As a result, the plan stresses the need to go beyond open youth work by incorporating mobile and street-based initiatives and programs aimed at developing practical skills among youth.

According to the European Union (2023), Slovakia is known as one of the youngest member nations, due to its large youth demographic. The current government's Manifesto for 2020-2024 highlights the importance of improving the well-being and development opportunities for young people. This includes initiatives to enhance job prospects for Roma youth, streamline the startup process for entrepreneurs to make it more attractive, create supportive conditions for young families in rural areas, assist young farmers, and promote sports and educational activities outside traditional schooling. Additionally, the government recognises the equal importance of non-formal education and youth work alongside formal education. As a result, it plans to bolster the necessary infrastructure and guarantee consistent, transparent funding for non-formal education, which covers arts education and recreational activities. The youth strategy for 2021-2028 outlines the core youth policy in Slovakia. The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport is the primary governmental body promoting youth initiatives. However, due to the cross-cutting nature of youth policy, various other ministries also contribute to specific policy areas affecting young individuals. While the general age range for youth policy extends from 0 to 30 years, individual ministries may concentrate on distinct age groups based on their specific responsibilities. The National Institute for Education, Science, Research and Sports is tasked with various activities related to formulating and implementing youth policy. Municipalities bear general responsibility for all citizens, including the youth, and are tasked with executing national policies concerning youth within their jurisdictions. Local committees addressing various themes, including youth, function within all local governments. The responsibility for developmental activities with young individuals is shared between non-governmental organisations, such as the NGO sector, and the state sector, which includes entities such as youth centres. The NGO comprises non-profit organisations, some exclusively concentrating on children and youth. Established in 1990, the Youth Council of Slovakia shall consist of twenty-six member organisations, representing a membership base exceeding sixty thousand individuals.

As the European Union (2024b) described, the historical roots of Slovak youth work can be traced back to the 19th-century national liberation movement, which gave rise to the formation of associations. The Act on Youth Work Support, which was established in 2008, constitutes the prevailing legal framework for this domain. The Ministry of Education, Research, and Development (MERDY) oversees state support for youth and sport. While MERDY delegates some responsibilities and resources to municipalities(including establishing leisure centres involved in youth work), the term "youth work" as understood in some Western European nations was only legally defined in 2008. Previously, and in some cases still to this day, it was generally perceived that the term encompassed activities for young people, including those related to schools. Within Slovak youth work, three distinct roles have been formally recognised: volunteer young leaders (aged between 15 and 18), volunteer youth leaders (aged over 18), and employed professional youth workers.

MERDY is responsible for the accreditation of quality youth work programmes and issuing official certificates to participants.

Youthpass (Erasmus+) has also become a widely used tool for demonstrating the competencies gained through international mobility. In Slovakia, efforts to raise awareness of the importance of youth work resulted in the Declaration on the Recognition of Non-Formal Education, which has received support from various employers and institutions. The development of quality standards for youth work has been widely discussed, culminating in the establishment of a working group by MERDY in 2018. The NIVAM - Slovak Youth Institute is instrumental in collecting and promoting research on youth, youth policy, and youth work. Non-governmental organisations (NGOS) serve as the primary providers of youth work in Slovakia, relying significantly on volunteers. The funding allocated to youth work comes from diverse sources, including MERDY grants, municipal and regional funds, donations, advertising income, business revenue, and European Union funds.

According to the European Union (2024c), Slovak legislation clearly defines several roles in youth work, including Young leader, Youth leader, Youth worker, Trainer, and Coordinator. The National Qualifications Framework includes the roles of Youth Worker, Trainer, and Methodologist, setting standards for the job market. Key legal requirements for those in youth work are a clean criminal record and the legal capacity to perform these duties. Specific pedagogical qualifications and proficiency in Slovak are necessary in educational contexts like youth clubs. Competence profiles detailing the necessary skills for young leaders, youth leaders and youth workers have been established.

Nevertheless, despite national definitions, Slovakia has no specific "youth work" university degrees. Individuals typically undertake academic studies in related disciplines, while non-governmental organisations (NGOS) offer training programmes. Continuous professional development is a distinct concept. NGOS frequently offer MERDY-accredited training, whilst state centres have their own programmes. NIVAM is a prominent training provider that comprehensively lists available opportunities. Certification is an accredited program that requires the demonstration of acquired skills. The existence of limited opportunities for international exchange for Slovak youth workers is due to national funding, with the Erasmus+ programme thus becoming the primary source for such initiatives.

According to the European Union (2024a), the present discourse on youth development centres in Slovakia is focused on several pivotal themes. An essential focus is on developing crucial skills and competencies in young individuals, seen as necessary for their full potential. Non-formal learning and youth work are acknowledged as critical for helping youth gain these important competencies for their careers and personal

lives. Another key topic is youth employment and financial literacy. It is well-known that young people face greater risks of unemployment and unfair treatment in the workforce. The 2020 Slovakian statistics highlight this issue, which shows a high monthly average of young job seekers. Non-formal education in youth work is viewed as a key approach to creating programmes and offering assistance that nurture vital skills and provide practical experience, thus better preparing young people for the job market.

Additionally, the significant impact of climate change on today's youth is a pressing concern. Young people should have meaningful opportunities to participate in local, national, and global decision-making and actively support initiatives that promote lasting legislative actions on climate change. Lastly, the extensive effects of the pandemic on the younger generation are under serious review. Numerous studies have shown that young adults have faced increased levels of stress and anxiety due to the pandemic, indicating a substantial effect on their mental health. As a result, there is a recognised need for youth workers to adjust their strategies and resources, with digital youth work gaining importance in this new landscape.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents a theoretical framework that serves as a foundation for researchers' data collection methods, instruments, and subsequent approaches to data analysis. Central to this theoretical framework are sociological Social Capital Theory and socio-psychological Self-determination Theory. The concept of 'perception' is approached as a sociological phenomenon.

Concept of social capital theory

According to Watson (2021, p. 173), social capital encompasses the connections, relationships, and shared norms that provide opportunities for collective action within communities, thereby supporting social cohesion. It also involves elements such as trust and civic engagement. The best way to achieve social capital is to bring together a strong community from diverse perspectives and dimensions, which this chapter will explore and discuss within the theoretical framework of social capital theory.

According to Fafchamps (2021, p. 155), Social capital functions as a mechanism that primarily encompasses connections between people, their shared values, a sense of belonging, and common norms.

As Claridge (2018, p. 5) discusses, social capital encompasses shared values, norms, and trust, as well as a sense of belonging and opportunities for social exchange. Social capital is a crucial component of society, its economy, institutions, and political systems, and it cannot exist independently of them. Nevertheless, all human beings need support, sharing, giving, and receiving in kind. Claridge (2018, p. 4) elaborates within

this perspective that these concepts proceed as an outcome that can be termed social capital. It could also be considered a human ability to think of others and be more collaborative.

4.1 Dimensions of Social Capital Theory

As highlighted by Claridge (2018, pp. 11-19), there is no single definition of social capital. The most accepted framework for defining social capital, proposed by Janine Nahapiet and Sumantra Ghoshal, suggests that there are three distinguishing perspectives on social capital dimensions: structural, cognitive, and relational. The aforementioned structural, cognitive, and relational social capital dimensions are distinguished from and illustrated below, as adopted from Claridge (2018, p. 19, Table 2).

Table 2 - *Dimensions of Social Capital*

Structural	Cognitive	Relational
Social structure	Shared understandings	Nature and quality of relationships
➔ Network ties and configuration ➔ Roles, Rules, Precedents, and Procedures	➔ Shared language, codes, and narratives ➔ Share values, attitudes, and beliefs	➔ Trust and trustworthiness ➔ Norms and sanctions ➔ Obligations and expectations ➔ Identity and identification

(Adapted from Claridge, 2018, p. 19, Table 2)

As elaborated by Claridge, (2018, pp. 19-22) above-presented illustration in Table 2 there are three distinguished understandings of the social capital dimensions which are structural perspective, referring to the networks, relationships, and connections that provide access to humans and resources, a cognitive perspective which is related to the shared understandings, interpretations, and common aims within members of the community and relational perspective which involves the trust, norms and mutual responsibilities that are developing through personal relationships, overall key words to describe distinguish dimensions between three is structural - networks and relations, cognitive - shared values and attitudes, and relational - trust and responsibilities.

As highlighted by Claridge (2018, pp. 14-18)**,** the extent to which social capital operates within human interactions at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels must be addressed. At the micro level, social capital focuses on the individual, encompassing personal networks, friendships, and other close relationships, and examines how individuals benefit from social connections based on trust, support, and mutual responsibilities. Mezzo-level social capital includes groups or organisations, ranging from informal teams to formal entities like businesses, professional associations, and community groups. This level of social capital highlights the norms, values, and shared objectives that support cooperation among these entities. On the other hand, macro-level social capital encompasses the wider community and societal context, integrating elements such as national identity, cultural norms, societal institutions, and expansive networks that link individuals and societal members across different social and geographical realms. At this stage, social capital centres on collective norms and trust, fostering societal cohesion and the functionality of institutions. As a complex system, each micro, meso, and macro level is interconnected and influences the behaviours of the others.

Self-determination Theory

Deci & Ryan (2015, pp. 486–491) describe Self-determination Theory (SDT), as a motivational theory of personality, development, and social process and how individual differences such as culture, social or economic status or social contexts support various motivational styles, primarily controlled and autonomous motivations, and how these motivational styles, in turn, predict psychological health, performance, experience, and learning. According to Self-determination theory, all individuals have three fundamental psychological needs that must be satisfied for well-being and health - the requirements for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. When these essential requirements are met, the optimal motivational characteristics and states of intrinsic aspiration and autonomous motivation are fostered, which support psychological well-being and productive engagement with the world.

As highlighted by Deci & Ryan (2015, pp. 486-191), basic psychological needs are:

Table 4 - Three basic Psychological needs

Autonomy	Competence	Relatedness
The need to feel in control of own	The need to feel good at what one	The need to feel connected to

actions and decisions, and choose self-endorsement in own behaviour (2015, pp. 487-490)	does and manage challenges, emphasising feelings of effectiveness and capability (2015, pp. 487-490)	other people and to have a sense of belonging (2015, p. 488)

Table 4 - Three Basic Psychological Needs adopted from Deci & Ryan 2015, pp. 486-191; *Created by the author.*

According to Deci & Ryan (2015, pp. 486-191), social contexts can be need-supportive or controlling.

Table 5 - *The need-supportive and controlling social contexts*

Need supportive Environments	Controlling Environments
Environments that support Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness foster autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2015, pp. 489-491)	Environments that pressure Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness undermine autonomous motivation(Deci & Ryan, 2015, pp. 487-490)

Table 5 - The need-supportive and controlling social contexts adopted from Deci & Ryan 2015, pp. 486-491; *Created by the author.*

According to Piaget (1971, as cited in Deci & Ryan, 2015, p. 486), self-determination theory, including perspectives from the SDT meta-theory, emphasises how humans actively seek opportunities for growth and integration within their social contexts. It utilises the interactions between people and their social environments to further explain behaviour, motivation, and development.

According to Deci & Ryan (2015, pp. 486-491), motivation types are:

Table 6 - *Motivation types by Deci & Ryan (2015, pp. 486-491)*

Autonomous Motivation	Controlled Motivation
Autonomous motivation refers to acting with a complete sense of free will and choice (Deci &	**Controlled motivation** refers to acting due to the pressure of obligation (Deci & Ryan, 2015, p. 486).

Ryan, 2015, p. 486).	Includes the following forms:
Includes the following forms:	● **External Regulation** - The Individual engages in the activity for external contingencies that have not been internalised (Deci & Ryan, 2015, p. 488).
● **Intrinsic Motivation** - The Individual engages in the activity because it is interesting or enjoyable (Deci & Ryan, 2015, p. 487).	● **Introjected Regulation** - The Individual engages in the activity because they have partially internalised an extrinsic motivation but have not accepted it as their own (Deci & Ryan, 2015, p. 488).
● **Identified Regulation** - The Individual engages in the activity because of personal values (Deci & Ryan, 2015, p. 488).	
● **Integrated Regulation** - An Individual engages in the activity because it aligns with an integrated sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2015, p. 489).	

Table X - Motivation types adopted from Deci & Ryan 2015, pp. 486–491; *Created by the author. (Created by the author)*

The Self-Determination Theory will serve as a guideline for analysing young people's motivations for solidarity and their willingness to engage in volunteering activities. It includes factors such as autonomy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, the concept of internalisation, understanding autonomy across cultures, the role of close relationships, and the pursuit of goals and aspirations, among others.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design widely recognised in the social sciences. As Bryman (2012, p. 408) highlighted, qualitative research aims to explore individual behaviours, values, and beliefs within the specific context of the research process.

In contrast to quantitative studies, which focus more on larger populations and social trends, qualitative studies emphasise the specific aspects of social reality's micro nature. According to Maxwell and Reybold (2015, p. 685), the qualitative approach focuses on understanding research Participants' experiences, meanings, various interpretations, behaviours, and social phenomena.

As noted by Trenholm-Jensen et al. (2022, p. 8), the qualitative approach provides a comprehensive understanding of Participants' perceptions and experiences concerning their interpretations. The principles of research design elaborated upon above are especially pertinent to the study's nature, which seeks to comprehend the perceptions of youth with volunteering experiences and the institutional viewpoints, specifically the interpretations and ideas about solidarity with youth workers or social workers who engage with young individuals.

Data Collection Methods

Bryman (2012, as cited in Albaret & Deas, 2023, p. 82) explains that semi-structured interviews are intended to gather data on both factual information and personal representations through interpersonal communication. This method offers flexibility in understanding participants' worldviews related to a specific research objective. In line with this, the semi-structured interviews will enable an in-depth exploration of the target group's views on solidarity, considering the nature of this research.

This study utilises a qualitative research design featuring **semi-structured interviews** based on **social capital theory** and **self-determination theory** to collect participants' perceptions, emotions, and experiences.

Kallio et al. (2016, p. 1) state that established qualitative semi-structured interview guidelines offer a framework that boosts a study's objectivity and trustworthiness, thereby increasing the credibility of the results. As elaborated by Kallio et al. (2016), the interview guide developed comprises five key steps:

identifying prerequisites, utilising existing knowledge, formulating preliminary questions, pilot testing, and preparing final guidelines for the interview.

In collaboration with the researcher and supervisor, three kinds of guidelines with semi-structured interview questions were developed, focusing on volunteers with local experience, volunteers with international experience, and youth/social workers working with young people. Pilot research was conducted using these guidelines, grounded in the theories of social capital theory and self-determination theories, during scientific research practice in Slovakia, with minor adjustments made after analysing the pilot data. Data were gathered through online Zoom software to facilitate clear audio recordings of conversations. Additionally, visual video recordings documented the participants' behaviours, expressions, and emotions throughout the interviews.

Data Collection Instrument

When creating the interview guidelines, especially the questions, the focus was carefully shaped by Bryman's (2012, p. 479) recommendation regarding essential aspects that should be addressed in the qualitative research interview process. These aspects encompass beliefs, behaviours, formal and informal roles, relationships, places and locales, emotions, encounters, and stories. Appendices A, B, and C provide interview guidelines and instruments.

Sampling Strategy

As highlighted by Bryman (2012, p. 418), most qualitative studies employ a particular form of purposive sampling. According to Campbell et al. (2020, p. 653), purposive sampling is applied to choose Participants who are most likely to provide relevant information. As a sampling strategy for this study, the Participant selection process is determined to be purposive sampling, which involves selecting Participants based on specific characteristics, such as local young people with volunteering experience, youth with international experience, and youth workers/social workers working with young people, with a geographical focus on Lithuania and Slovakia. The participants' criteria are detailed in Table 1. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth workers, international volunteers, and local volunteers. Table 7 shows the demographic information of the Participants.

Table 7: *Participants' criteria*

Participants Title	Participants Criteria

Social Worker/ Youth Worker	● Participants can be of any age of majority, which is 18 years in all European Union member states except Scotland (*Age of Majority | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights*, 2017). ● Participants must be citizens or holders of resident permits in the following countries: Lithuania and Slovakia. ● Participants must be working with young people.
International Volunteer	● Participants can be of any age of majority, which is 18 years in all European Union member states except Scotland (*Age of Majority | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights*, 2017). ● Participants must be citizens or holders of resident permits in the following countries: Lithuania and Slovakia. ● Participants must be aged 18 to 35 years old. According to Eurostat, youth are aged 15 to 29 (*Overview - Children and Youth - Eurostat*, n.d) Nevertheless, the European Union considers and offers youth opportunities, including volunteering and solidarity activities for young people from Europe aged 18 to 30, and also to 35 in case of humanitarian aid volunteering (*Volunteering in Humanitarian Aid | European Youth Portal*, n.d.) ● Participants must be individuals who were engaged in International volunteering activities for at least 6 months in the past 1 year.
Local Volunteer	● Participants can be of any age of majority, which is 18 years in all European Union member states except Scotland (*Age of Majority | European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights*, 2017). ● Participants must be citizens or holders of resident permits in the following countries: Lithuania and Slovakia.

	● Participants must be aged 18 to 35 years old. According to Eurostat, youth are aged 15 to 29 (*Overview - Children and Youth - Eurostat*, n.d) Nevertheless, the European Union considers and offers youth opportunities, including volunteering and solidarity activities for young people from Europe aged 18 to 30, and also to 35 in case of humanitarian aid volunteering (*Volunteering in Humanitarian Aid | European Youth Portal*, n.d) ● Participants must have been engaged in local volunteering activities for at least six months within the past year.

Recruitment and Participant Selection Process

In the initial selection process, the Participants were recruited as part of the scientific research practice in Slovakia, among the target group of the non-governmental institution that actively works with youth and young volunteers. In Lithuania's second remaining recruitment process, the researcher utilised personal contacts from their previous volunteering experience networks to reach out to individuals who align well with the research Participant criteria.

Data Analysis

This study transcribed the recorded audio interviews using Colibri software (*Online Transcription Service \| Convert Audio to Text—Colibri.Ai*, n.d.). The software effectively supports the initial transcription process and complies with data processing and Data Protection requirements. Following a meticulous review and thorough cross-verification, the original transcripts were manually rectified, enhanced, and coded according to the Jefferson Transcription System (n.d.), thereby preserving the authenticity of conversational nuances, including pauses and intonations.

According to Bryman (2012, p. 578), thematic analysis is often chosen to analyse qualitative data. This study employs the six phases of thematic analysis as delineated by Braun & Clarke (2006). The phases of thematic analysis include: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, developing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and ultimately producing the report. However, this study did not strictly adhere

to the aforementioned analysis order. Moreover, the thematic analysis will serve as guidelines, as these phases are interconnected with the research's sociological and socio-psychological theoretical framework, specifically social capital theory and self-determination theory.

As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 1398), the first stage of the "familiarisation" process is vital in qualitative analysis, requiring a comprehensive review and understanding of the collected data. The study's researcher meticulously adhered to the guidelines mentioned above to become familiar with the qualitative data collected. In accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 1399), coding represents the subsequent stage of thematic analysis; codes serve as the fundamental basis upon which themes are constructed, which may pertain to the research questions. Building on Braun and Clarke's exposition (2006, p. 1403), the third stage of the analytical process is concerned with theme generation. This step takes place after the data has been assigned suitable codes. Evaluating the coded data is crucial, as it allows for categorisation according to similarities and shared meanings, which helps in the further development of specific themes and sub-themes.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 1404), the fourth stage of thematic analysis involves a thorough review of potential themes, entailing a close inspection of the collected data and the coded segments. In the following stage, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 1407), the focus shifts to clearly defining and naming the themes. Researchers need to carefully select relevant data points that will contribute to their analytical conclusions. Furthermore, as Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 1409) underscore, the sixth and final stage of thematic data analysis involves the production of a report; however, in qualitative research, the processes of writing and analysis are profoundly intertwined.

MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software (*MAXQDA | QDA Software Package for Windows & Mac*, n.d.) was used from the beginning to the final phases of the thematic analysis process, including familiarisation and generating initial codes, generating and reviewing reports, defining and naming themes, and producing the report to accurately and effectively proceed with analysis.

Research Ethics

As discussed by Osborne and Grant-Smith (2021, p. 7), ethical principles are fundamental to the compilation of rules and values that delineate the types of behaviour deemed appropriate or acceptable throughout the research process, which encompasses various moral and social standards. Furthermore, as emphasised by Bryman (2012, p. 130), the social research process encounters ethical issues at multiple stages.

The following ethical considerations were rigorously implemented throughout the entire research process involving Participants:

Informed Consent

As articulated by Bryman (2012, p. 138), in studies involving human participants, the researcher must secure a voluntary agreement from Participants to participate in the study, ensuring they are fully informed about the subject matter. Each participant was told in advance regarding the voluntary nature of their participation. Consent was obtained twice and documented through audio and video recordings at the commencement of the interviews.

Privacy and Confidentiality

As elaborated by Bryman (2012, p. 143), the anonymity and privacy of Participants must be diligently upheld irrespective of the methodologies employed in social research, including the recording and maintenance of information. Participants were informed about the management of the collected data, which would be used solely for scientific purposes, including audio/video documentation, at the outset and conclusion of each interview. Throughout the entire research process, the anonymity and privacy of the Participants were scrupulously respected.

Scope of Study

The scope of this study encompasses the perceptions of solidarity among youth engaged in volunteering activities at both local and international levels, as well as among youth workers and social workers who support young individuals. The research specifically targets Lithuania and Slovakia, enabling a cross-national examination of young people's perceptions. The study centres on understanding the complexities of solidarity and its relevance to volunteering, as well as the factors motivating youth participation in volunteer activities. Additionally, the theoretical framework builds on the concepts of social capital and self-determination, while the practical aim is to offer perspectives centred around youth that will assist youth workers and social workers who engage with young individuals.

Research Limitations

The initial limitation pertains to language and communication barriers. The precision and complexity of the data collected may be adversely affected by Participants' perceptions, which may lack specific nuances due to linguistic or communicative impediments encountered during the interview process, particularly among local volunteers aged 18 to 20 and recent school graduates.

The subsequent limitation concerns the sample size. Purposive sampling may constrain the diversity of opinions, and the limited sample size of the research poses a challenge concerning the generalizability of the

findings. For instance, in a recent study regarding youth with volunteering experiences in Sri Lanka, only six individuals participated (Meemaduma & Booso, 2022, p. 44).

The third and final limitation pertains to the time frame. This study centres on perceptions of solidarity at a specific point in time, which can be affected by changing socio-economic conditions or circumstances. This short-term emphasis may not fully reflect young people's views on the evolution of solidarity or its lasting impacts over the years.

Findings, Analysis, and Discussions

Demographic Information of the Participants

This section presents a demographic overview of the sample population.

Table 7 - *Demographic information of the Participants.*

Participant Title	Participant informants Ex. Participant TITLE-COUNTRY-NUMBER-GENDER	Participant age	Participant Origin	Place of the interview	Date of the interview	Duration of the Interview
Youth Worker	Participant SW-SK-001-M	41	Slovakia	Dolný Kubín, Slovakia.	18 October 2024, 15:30	36 minutes and 51 seconds.
International Volunteer	Participant IV-SK-001-F	19	Slovakia	Dolný Kubín, Slovakia.	20 October 2024, 09:00	31 minutes and 42 seconds.
Local Volunteer	Participant LV-SK-001-F	18	Slovakia	Dolný Kubín, Slovakia.	18 November 2024, 15:30	25 minutes and 7 seconds.
Local Volunteer	Participant LV-SK-002-M	18	Slovakia	Dolný Kubín, Slovakia.	21 November 2024, 15:30	19 minutes and 11 seconds.
Youth Worker	Participant YW-LT-001-F	27	Lithuania	Interviewer: Lisbon, Portugal Interviewee: Šeduva, Lithuania	03 February 2025, 11:00	41 minutes and 39 seconds.
International Volunteer	Participant IV-LT-001-F	19	Lithuania	Interviewer: Lisbon, Portugal Interviewee: Klaipeda, Lithuania	10 February 2025, 13:00	49 minutes and 47 seconds

International Volunteer	Participant IV-LT-002-F	24	Lithuania	Interviewer: Lisbon, Portugal Interviewee: Klaipeda, Lithuania	07 February 2025, 15:00	33 Minutes and 58 Seconds.
International Volunteer	Participant IV-LT-003-F	21	Lithuania	Interviewer: Lisbon, Portugal Interviewee: Vilnius, Lithuania	06 February 2025, 12:00	61 minutes (1 hour) and 2 seconds.
Local Volunteer	Participant LV-LT-001-M	18	Lithuania	Interviewer: Lisbon, Portugal Interviewee: Šeduva, Lithuania	04 February 2025, 13:30	38 Minutes and 44 seconds.
Local Volunteer	Participant LV-LT-002-M	18	Lithuania	Interviewer: Lisbon, Portugal Interviewee: Šeduva, Lithuania	07 February 2025, 13:00	30 minutes and 18 seconds.

According to the chart above, a total of nine Participants were interviewed, comprising one Youth Worker from Slovakia and one from Lithuania, three international volunteers- one from Slovakia with experience volunteering in North America, and two volunteers from Lithuania with experience volunteering in Europe. Additionally, there were two local volunteers from Lithuania and two from Slovakia. The age range for both global and local volunteers was eighteen to twenty-four years. The geographical distribution of the sample population included five Participants from Lithuania and four from Slovakia. Finally, the minimum interview duration was nineteen minutes and eleven seconds (Participant LV-SK-002-M), while the maximum interview duration lasted sixty-one minutes and two seconds (Participant LV-LT-003-F).

Themes and sub-themes

This section outlines the themes and sub-themes derived from the collected data. The author of the master's thesis developed these central themes and sub-themes using MAXQDA software, based on interviews conducted in 2024-2025 with local and international volunteers and youth workers.

Table 9 - *Themes and sub-themes*

Themes	sub-themes
Theme 1 - Perceptions of Solidarity	Collective action
	Emotional connection and empathy
	Social bonds and lasting relationships
	Intrinsic Motivation and Personal Fulfilment
	Solidarity in Diversity and Inclusive Participation
	Community engagement
	Personal development
Theme 2 - Perceptions and perspectives of youth workers on solidarity	Inclusive communities
	Youth Empowerment
	Development and transformation
	Commitment and Reflection

Theme I - Perceptions of Solidarity

The data sets reveal a central theme: perceptions of solidarity, particularly within the context of volunteering experiences. Participants reported a strong sense of solidarity when they collaborate towards a shared goal, whether it be helping others or undertaking a significant community project. This solidarity, as described by participants, is characterised by a common purpose, mutual understanding, and a readiness to support one another. They further noted that volunteering facilitates connections with new people, enhances empathy and communication skills, and contributes to the overall welfare of the community. Moreover, participants highlighted that solidarity fosters a supportive network, cultivates a sense of belonging, and enables self-discovery. Their narratives also address the varying attitudes towards volunteering and solidarity across younger and older generations, as well as among different cultures. The findings suggest that participants' experiences underscore the crucial role of solidarity in creating a more cohesive and caring society, where individuals work together to uplift and support each other.

The following quotation illustrates participants' perspectives on this theme:

"So... I would say when I felt the most solidarity feelings, it's like when we help somewhere and the thing or the project ends up really well and you have like the feeling like wow we did something nice and that we participated together on it." - Participant_LV-SK-002.

"I believe it means... When the whole community or group of people are concentrated on one thing for some bigger purpose, bigger reasons."- Participant_LV-LT-002

"Solidarity. Solidarity, I think it's... Understanding the people around you, they are coming from, their motivations, their needs, what their experiences might have been, and their..." - Participant_LV-LT-001

"Well, so it's like, definitely... The connection with the people is stronger because you know you have to be patient with others if you want to achieve something and it's also about making compromise, I don't know if that's the right word, like you know you have to somehow I agree on the same thing and if you don't agree, you have to somehow debate about it and figure out the best for everyone." - Respondent_LV-SK-002.

Figure 3 - *The relational model between the central theme and sub-themes I*

Emotional Connection and Empathy

Collective Action

Social Bonds and Lasting Relationships

Perceptions of Solidarity

Personal Development

Intrinsic Motivation and Personal Fulfillment

Community Engagement

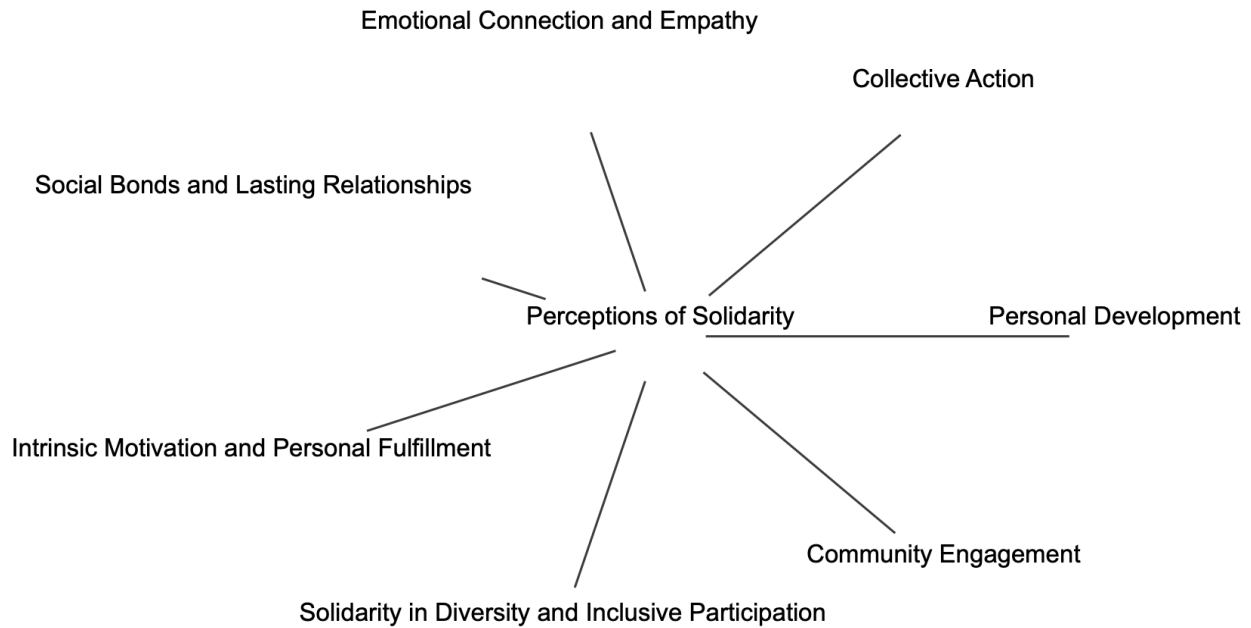Solidarity in Diversity and Inclusive Participation

Figure 3 illustrates the model generated in the MAXQDA software based on collected data. The model demonstrates the relationship between the central theme and its sub-themes, as analysed in the qualitative data. The shorter lines indicate a higher frequency.

Figure 4: *The clouds of word-perceptions of solidarity*

Figure 4 illustrates a word cloud generated in the MAXQDA software based on collected data. The larger font size indicates a higher frequency of the word usage.

7.3.1 Collective action

Participants emphasise the significance of solidarity and collective action across different contexts. They discuss how a sense of community, unity, and common purpose develops when individuals collaborate toward a shared goal. The benefits of teamwork are highlighted, with participants indicating that joint efforts can produce results that far surpass what individuals can accomplish on their own. Additionally, they emphasise the joy of volunteering and the ability to create positive social change. Participants are tasked with providing specific examples, such as organising events, cleaning chairs, and engaging in youth parliament activities, where individuals come together and support one another. They convey a core belief that human connection is essential, claiming that solidarity nurtures belonging, understanding, and acknowledgement of everyone's ability to make a positive impact. Participants argue that solidarity extends beyond personal actions, embodying a mutual recognition of our interconnectedness and shared responsibility in addressing societal challenges.

The idea of solidarity is deeply connected to the concept of a community uniting to address common challenges. It is based on the belief that if one person can undertake acts of kindness, others can too. This understanding gives humanity a sense of shared potential. Notable examples of such efforts include organising community events, engaging in youth programs, and participating in activities that require collective problem-solving and support. Participants emphasise how solidarity and teamwork contribute to a feeling of belonging, a sense of purpose, and the ability to create positive change.

The following quotations illustrate the participants' views on this sub-theme:

"Yes, so... As I said, most of the things that we like, achive is because... We did it together because if it wasn't for me, I could not achieve that many things alone." - Participant_LV-SK-002.

"Okay, when you tell me solidarity, I first think of our society as holding hands together against some problems and issues we face in our daily life or also on a global level." Participant_IV-LT-002

"and if all the, let's say, stakeholders unite their powers, the probability of success is very high."- Participant_IV-LT-002.

7.3.2 Emotional connection and empathy

The participants highlighted the essential emotional and social aspects of volunteering and service, emphasising the feelings of solidarity, empathy, and connection that arise from these activities. They expressed feelings of pride, joy, and fulfilment from helping those in need, whether through fundraising, companionship, or simply being a supportive presence. Volunteering is seen as a way to understand and connect with people from various backgrounds, fostering a shared sense of humanity and a desire for mutual assistance. Participants are urged to consider how their original motivations for volunteering can develop into a deeper appreciation for the small yet impactful changes they can bring to others' lives. This sub-theme underscores the importance of emotional involvement, empathy, and community spirit in volunteer activities, which can lead to significant and lasting effects on both volunteers and recipients. Ultimately, the summaries reflect the profound emotional and social ties that can form through acts of solidarity and service.

The following quotations illustrate the participants' views on this sub-theme:

"So I am helping them just because of the empathy and that's all. I'm not wanting, I don't want something from them, I don't need, I'm just helping, I'm just being a volunteer and how I have helped them" - Participant_LV-LT-002.

"You are working for, I don't for emotions, positive emotions and the fact that you have helped someone, that he is, only thing that he is thinking is how can I solve this and you have helped him like in a blink of a second. That's amazing." - Participant_LV-LT-002.

"Yes, actually, because I began volunteering mainly for myself, like this new experience, you know, this one, but volunteering for a bit, I kind of start feeling this sense of solidarity yeah."- Respondent_LV-LT-001.

"And that in the end you see that even a little good thing can make you happier, can make someone's day better, and you understand that we don't need, maybe what I learned from my volunteering and how my motivation changed, is that we don't need a big project or a big program to go and help someone." - Respondent_IV-LT-002.

"Talking about volunteering and solidarity, the Lithuanian Song and Dance Festival, when we were scrubbing those chairs and helping each other, it was four of us, I if I remember correctly and we had hundreds of chairs to scrub And we were kind of you know helping each other carry buckets of water and like soap and changing gloves and asking if you had water." -Respondent_IV-LT-003.

7.3.3 Social bonds and lasting relationships

Participants noted a stronger bond with fellow volunteers, linked to their pursuit of shared goals. This common objective effectively breaks down barriers and promotes the formation of deeper, more meaningful relationships. Additionally, participants emphasised the creation of new interpersonal connections and a reduction in feelings of isolation. They also expressed an increased sense of value and interconnectedness, further strengthening their sense of purpose and belonging. Moreover, Participants reported experiencing a sense of familiarity and interconnectedness with others who shared their goals, even during large-scale events.

The following quotations illustrate the participants' views on this sub-theme:

"And the connections, even after a year...I still shake hands with them, talk about something, how they're doing, what has happened to them. And I told what is happening in my life, in my personal life." - Participant_LV-LT-002.

"it has strengthened my connection with the people I work with." - Participant_LV-SK-002

"you are closer to a lot of people, a lot of different types of groups"- Participant_LV-SK-001

7.3.4 Intrinsic Motivation and Personal Fulfilment

Participants highlighted the deep personal satisfaction and intrinsic motivations that come from volunteering. They consistently note that their involvement is fueled by a genuine desire to assist others, utterly free from expectations of financial compensation. For these individuals, volunteering serves as a vital means of contributing to their community and fostering positive change. Volunteers express a strong sense of solidarity, experiencing connection within a temporary community united by a common goal. This collective experience nurtures camaraderie and satisfaction derived from working together towards shared objectives. Participants have recognised how volunteering profoundly impacts their personal development, aiding in overcoming shyness, building new friendships, and enhancing their self-identity. Many describe the experience as immensely rewarding, cultivating feelings of usefulness and gratitude while deepening their understanding of societal roles and responsibilities. In conclusion, this sub-theme underscores that volunteers often prioritise the intrinsic rewards of volunteering, such as personal growth, community participation, and the joy of helping others, over any material or financial benefits.

The following quotations illustrate the participants' views on this sub-theme:

"But then it was kind of I'm a very emotionally driven person, so when I do stuff and it brings out ... Good emotions. And I feel like I belong somewhere, I feel like I'm doing something right, I feel like I'm being productive as well. It's kind of a no-brainer, really. It comes from somewhere within you. I cannot even explain the motivation. " - Participant_iv-LT-003.

"Yeah, when I will volunteer for other times, I'm not thinking about getting additional score for an exam or something, or a salary. I'm thinking just that I will meet new people. So I will have a Great and enjoyable experience, and I will, and the most importantly, I will help others that they need the help, which they need help." - Participant_LV-LT-002

"So, yeah, it's, I think it's, for some people, it's definitely not something that they like to do, but I think people should try out volunteering in anything because I think it's. It kind of helps break out of that shell. And it also, when you start networking and building contacts as well, it might help you in the future." - Participant_IV-LT-003, 112 - 113

7.3.5 Solidarity in Diversity and Inclusive Participation

The participant further underscores the importance of solidarity and inclusive participation within diverse communities. It is particularly significant to recognise and appreciate the backgrounds, motivations, and experiences of individuals from varied demographics. The examples provided demonstrate how community activities, like cultural performances and youth-led projects, can cultivate a sense of unity and collective purpose, despite differences in geographical and socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, the data emphasises the necessity of nurturing inclusive environments where everyone is treated equally, regardless of age or social status. Engaging in cross-cultural exchanges and collaborating to confront societal challenges are seen as opportunities for personal development and for fostering a more unified and supportive community.

The following quotations illustrate the participants' views on this sub-theme:

"Solidarity. Solidarity, I think it's... Understanding the people around you, they are coming from, their motivations, their needs, what their experiences might have been" - Participant_LV-LT-001.

"everybody was equal, starting from the social workers who are, one of them is a teacher and children come to the youth center" - Participant_LV-LT-001.

"so I met people from Western Europe, we were all living in South Europe, so you can see the differences between our context and lifestyle in general, and it's also very like it helps you to learn

things about yourself, maybe about what you haven't thought when you were back home." -
Participant_IV-LT-002

7.3.6 Community engagement

The participants then proceeded to discuss their engagement within their respective communities, emphasising the formative influence of community experiences. Numerous participants highlighted the importance of volunteering and collective action in supporting others and improving their local communities. While some participants mentioned adopting community engagement in their daily lives, they stressed the deep sense of belonging, responsibility, and mutual support that comes from being involved in the community. Providing concrete examples, such as organising events, volunteering at youth centres, and collaborating on community projects, effectively illustrates these experiences. The findings from this study indicate that fulfilling community engagement often stems from connections with others and that shared goals increase the likelihood of successful outcomes. Additionally, different geographical contexts are acknowledged to feature varying cultural norms and attitudes toward community involvement. In summary, the participants' stories reflect the significant value placed on community, solidarity, and the positive impact of their contributions on collective well-being through their time and efforts.

The following quotations illustrate the participants' views on this sub-theme:

"I would say is the sense of community and that we can join together and to put stuff together." -
Participant_LV-SK-002.

"So I would say it means the sense of belonging into a community and kind of even The responsibility
to bring back what's been given and kind of just fitting in and being a part of something." -
Participant_IV-SK-001.

"But now, the community, I feel it like it's young people, whole group, like young people, because we
are trying to... Somehow, like in the teens for town, we are trying to explain to them that the
volunteering is good and we are trying to be closer to them, some activities doing for them." -
Participant_LV-SK-001

"So the community, even ...... with this whole group, has been pretty active. So I would say my biggest
example would probably be the youth parliament that we have in our city that's active, it tries to help
with organizing many things in the city with the youth, with other people from other cities that are
trying to do the same thing and kind of just connect the network of young people among Slovakia and

even other countries since they've been to Georgia, to Poland, to Czech Republic, Romania and other countries as well. So I think that would be my example." - Respondent_IV-SK-001.

7.3.7 Personal development

The participants highlight the significant personal growth and development that people experience through volunteering. Their accounts suggest that volunteering acts as a catalyst for overcoming personal challenges, such as shyness, while also nurturing essential interpersonal skills like communication. Additionally, these individuals developed a stronger sense of responsibility and gained the trust of others through their volunteer work. Engaging in volunteering activities has been shown to promote feelings of self-discovery and boost self-confidence. For many, volunteering serves as a pathway to diverse communities and cultures, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity. Participants stressed the profound impact of even small acts of service, emphasising that large projects are not necessary to make a meaningful impact. In a context where volunteering was a new idea, individuals sought external insights to understand its potential benefits.

The following quotations illustrate the participants' views on this sub-theme:

"So, the meaning of helping them, for me, was that I found some new values or skills of myself. And I felt the empathy for them. and I learned that I need to take an initiative, to be an initiative, and I have to be the first one to talk with a person." - Participant_LV-LT-002.

"So I would say it means the sense of belonging into a community and kind of even
The responsibility to bring back what's been given and kind of just fitting in and being a part of something." - Participant_IV-SK-001.

"I believe I have gained some communication skills. Yeah, like courageous to be the first one to initiate a conversation.Yeah." - Participant_LV-LT-002.

Theme II - Perceptions and perspectives of youth workers on solidarity

The Participants express a profound sense of solidarity and community among the youth with whom they engage, particularly within the context of a youth parliament group. Professionals working with youth see this involvement as a way to positively impact the upcoming generation positively.

The participants expressed a strong sense of belonging to this community and recognised many members as acquaintances. They view the group as a positive and supportive space that fosters improved social confidence and engagement among youth who may have felt introverted or isolated. However, confident

participants also recognise the difficulties in promoting international solidarity and collaboration with local government entities or older generations, who might have different communication styles or priorities.

The Participants emphasised the importance of creating inclusive and participatory environments that foster solidarity and active engagement among young individuals.

Figure 5 - *The relational model between the central theme and sub-themes II*

Figure 5 illustrates the model created in the MAXQDA software based on collected data. The model demonstrates the relationship between the central theme and its sub-themes, as analysed in the qualitative data.

Figure 6: *The clouds of word-perceptions and perspectives of youth workers on solidarity*

Figure 6

illustrates a word cloud generated in the MAXQDA software based on collected data. The larger font size indicates a higher frequency of the word usage.

7.4.1 Inclusive communities

The Participants note that young people form strong relationships and foster a sense of community through shared activities, mutual support, and collaborative efforts. They emphasise that this is evident in the way young individuals celebrate essential milestones, offer assistance to one another, and participate in social interactions.

The generational gap is a common concern raised by the Participants. While youth workers typically report favourable experiences with young people, they sometimes face difficulties connecting the younger generation with older individuals, whose views and goals can differ significantly. The youth workers recognise a substantial barrier in facilitating intergenerational dialogue.

The following quotations illustrate the participants' views on this sub-theme:

> *"Yes, so at the moment, the biggest obstacle, I would say, is the intergenerational dialogue, so with some, like among the youngsters, I always have a good feeling." - Participant_SW-SK-001.*

The Participants emphasise the importance of offering young individuals a range of opportunities for international exchange and intercultural learning, as this fosters the development of a global perspective and enhances their capacity to appreciate diversity within their local communities. Additionally, the Participants deliberated on the strategies they implemented to promote solidarity and inclusion, which included fostering active participation, eschewing a top-down "helper-recipient" dynamic, and adopting a more informal, peer-oriented approach in their interactions with young individuals.

> *"Encourage solidarity. So like in this city, like this "Garaz" club, this garage club, I think they do a good job to encourage solidarity among young people, like how they work with volunteers, how they involve the clients, that the clients are not just receivers of some activities and work, but they can very easily become volunteers or they can become the active participants." - Participant_SW-SK-001*

7.4.2 Youth empowerment

Observations of the youth indicate the formation of close friendships and the establishment of a supportive network characterised by mutual assistance, the commemoration of milestones, and participation in various social activities.

The following quotations illustrate the participants' views on this sub-theme:

"like if the kids do some activity, let's call them kids, they do some activity and they know that there is a lot of work to do. So they divide the task accordingly based on their skills or because they know each other, they know that, okay, you are good at social media, you do the social media, you are good with communication with people, you go more this way and they have this feeling that it's all their like responsibility they don't want that somebody suffers somehow." - Participant_SW-SK-001.

The Participants further emphasise their sense of inclusion within this community, underscoring their treatment as companions rather than authority figures. The youth workers report being inspired by the positive energy, personal development, and sense of responsibility they observe in the young individuals.

7.4.3 Development and Positive Transformation

Participants highlighted the positive transformation among the young people with whom they work. The young workers describe observing a strong sense of community, support, and belonging within the youth groups they engage with, particularly in the context of a youth parliament and Erasmus projects. It has been noted that young people have transitioned from a small, disconnected group to a close-knit community that actively supports each other personally and professionally. Youth workers reported feeling strong solidarity and friendship with the youth, often viewing them as friends, particularly during group activities and outings. I highlighted these youth groups' significant positive influence on developing essential skills in young individuals, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving.

Moreover, youth workers contemplate their motivations, highlighting how working with young people fosters a sense of purpose, energy, and personal growth. They emphasise the importance of establishing trust, setting boundaries, and serving as role models and mentors. In conclusion, those involved in this theme conveyed their belief in the transformative power of youth-centred initiatives to promote solidarity, community, and personal development.

The following quotations illustrate the participants' views on this sub-theme:

"So for me, this solidarity in this context that we work is more about like helping each other, helping each other with like personal or professional life. Like that you the other person, you know what they need and you want to help them to the goals, activities, something"- Participant_SW-SK-001.

"and I can share as well one experience, when I took a drug addict, not like, like really big addict or whatever, but he, the guy was using drugs, and I took him to Hungary as a youth exchange participant, and after coming back for half of a year, all the, all the teachers told him, okay, he's very motivated, he's learning English now, he's learning math now, he's learning blah, blah, blah, because

he wants to, you know, improve and he wants to travel abroad, so I think these, you know, tiny things that you believe in people, and you just give me a grain of hope, it's like helping them, you know, in the future to believe, okay, I can do that, I'm capable of that, and everything's gonna be fine."- Participant_SW-LT-001

"And also, the other people, like, I see that many of them were maybe introverts, or they didn't have many friends, and this is feedback, not only from them, but also from the parents, that they feel that thanks to this community, now they, like, develop a lot of, like, social skills, like, communication skills, teamwork"- Participant_SW-SK-001

7.3.4 Commitment and reflection

Participants emphasised perspectives on youth work experiences related to solidarity and empowerment. The report illustrates the development of a strong sense of community and support within youth groups, particularly in relation to a youth parliament. Youth workers have observed that young individuals have formed genuine friendships, assisted each other with personal and professional challenges, and participated in various social activities, enhancing team spirit and a sense of belonging. They reported feelings of group cohesion and close friendships among many individuals. It is noted that the youth group has promoted the acquisition of essential competencies, such as communication, teamwork, and leadership, especially for introverted or socially isolated young people. The youth workers are motivated to engage with this age group because they believe in its potential to positively influence the future generation and help them achieve their goals. They highlight the significance of providing international experiences and exposure to diverse cultures to expand young people's perspectives.

Additionally, the young workers address the obstacles they encounter, including intergenerational dialogue and challenges like bullying. They also discuss how they navigate these situations in a supportive and empowering way. The participants' testimonies collectively reflect the deep commitment of youth workers to fostering solidarity, building community, and encouraging personal growth among the young individuals they support.

The following quotations illustrate the participants' views on this sub-theme:

"I see that they become from like a little group of students which are maybe classmates or maybe from another class, they don't know that much themselves, now they become a true community of friends and I see a big type of... Like support between each other, like not only when they have these, let's say, Monday meetings, but also in the free time."- Participant_SW-SK-001

"And also on the Monday meetings, like I can go there, like being among friends, I consider many of them being my friends, and I think they as well."- Participant_SW-SK-001

"Yes, so at the moment, the biggest obstacle, I would say, is the intergenerational dialogue, so with some, like among the youngsters, I always have a good feeling. There were some situations, like let's say with alcohol, or with some misbehaving, let's say bullying, but the young people solved it themselves. like you give, I spoke about it with them, but on a very friendly way, and they find their own solutions, or they suggested the solutions, and we just discussed it, and it was solved very quickly, and we don't come back to it, or if we come back to it, it's just kind of joke, or the internal stories."- Participant_SW-SK-001

"Yeah, and at the beginning, it was kind of voluntarily activity, but then slowly it became like, let's say, part-time job. And now it's, you know, one of my main occupations is to take care of this organization and activities." - Participant_SW-SK-001.

Discussion

This research aimed to study the perceptions of young individuals with local and international volunteering experiences, as well as the understanding and lived experiences associated with these perceptions, alongside the viewpoints of youth workers on the concept of solidarity. The emphasis was specifically on the cross-national context involving Lithuania and Slovakia.

Empirical studies show that young people often view solidarity as belonging to a community. Professionals who work with youth stress that solidarity and volunteerism are crucial for developing social cohesion, enhancing youth participation, and building social capital. These results correspond with previous studies on the link between solidarity and social cohesion, as highlighted by Davies et al. (2024, p. 822), Stukas et al. (2016, p. 245), and Williams et al. (2025, pp. 8-9).

Contemporary views of solidarity pose significant challenges to the existing perspectives related to some findings. There is a need to rethink solidarity not just as belonging, but as a driving force to empower youth. This redefinition aims to equip them as leaders with a deep sense of responsibility, motivating them to advocate for positive, transformative changes that promote inclusivity, equality, peace, and justice in both local communities and global societies. Additionally, the importance of developing a sense of accountability and addressing ethical issues is increasingly acknowledged among professionals working with youth.

This chapter interprets findings regarding young people's and youth workers' perceptions of solidarity experienced through volunteering in Lithuania and Slovakia. It delves into solidarity as a collective force grounded in belonging, social connections, and mutual support. The discussion incorporates Social Capital Theory and Self-Determination Theory for deeper analysis. Key themes emerging from this study include reflective solidarity, empowerment, and the ethical obligation of care. Furthermore, this chapter critically assesses the concept of solidarity, highlighting its significance as a catalyst for social justice, advocacy, and responsible action in communities and society.

Perceptions of Solidarity among Youth

The study's findings illustrate that solidarity among youth is viewed as a strong force grounded in collective action. This phenomenon is marked by a feeling of community and unity, resulting from joint efforts toward common goals. The process includes mutual support and the rewarding experience of accomplishing something significant together. As one participant emphasized:

"I would say is the sense of community and that we can join together and to put stuff together." -
Participant_LV-SK-002.

As noted by ter Meulen (2018, p. 111), solidarity refers to the degree of interconnection within a group or society, as well as each individual's readiness to support one another and collaborate for the greater good of the group or society instead of solely chasing their personal interests.

As ter Meulen (2018, p. 113) highlights, solidarity goes beyond a mere feeling of connection; it represents an ongoing dialogue that necessitates mutual participation. This dialogue aids community building, as individuals reflect on shared expectations. Through this process, each person's unique identity is recognised and valued, allowing for various interpretations and responses to these common expectations. The idea of 'reflective solidarity' suggests that unity and individuality are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, the active engagement and consideration of individuals in social interactions have proven to strengthen social ties. This collaborative participation promotes introspection, enabling individuals to reflect on societal expectations and their personal identities.

Giraldo-Giraldo et al. (2018, p. 301) argue that solidarity goes beyond mere feelings; it is a proactive idea that involves taking steps to enhance interpersonal relationships. Such actions aim to address injustice and mitigate feelings of apathy or fear. Moreover, while solidarity appears in various settings, it is mainly driven by a desire for justice.

The perspective to contemplate is the research findings regarding the significance of Georgeou and Haas's (2019) framework on the changing models of reciprocity in volunteering, particularly among young people. Participants described their volunteering experiences using concepts of generalised reciprocity, which correlate with the idea of solidarity-based engagement. These concepts focus on mutual support, a common purpose, and emotional ties, rather than immediate personal benefits. This aligns with Georgeou and Haas's observation (2019, p. 12) that traditional volunteering models were fundamentally rooted in solidarity, with youth participating in collective actions to aid communities and promote social cohesion. For example, participants highlighted how working together towards community objectives fostered feelings of pride, purpose, and belonging. However, a deeper examination of the data shows subtle nuances indicating emerging tensions with more transactional or redistributive approaches. These dynamics have been contextualised within the neo-liberal shift identified by Georgeou and Haas. Some participants acknowledged that they found personal development, networking, and skill-building to be valuable outcomes. This observation implies an evolving understanding of reciprocity, blending altruistic motives with self-improvement. Nonetheless, the dominant narrative remains firmly anchored in solidarity, expressed

through empathy, emotional connections, and inclusive participation. This indicates that the principle of generalised reciprocity continues to significantly shape contemporary youth volunteering experiences (Georgeou and Haas, 2019).

A further important aspect to reflect on is what drives individuals to engage in volunteer activities. Participants emphasise their freedom in choosing to volunteer, highlighting the voluntary nature of their involvement and their sense of autonomy. Additionally, skills development and a feeling of effectiveness gained through meaningful community contributions greatly enhance their competence. Notably, the idea of relatedness emerges as a primary motivator. Participants frequently point out the significance of forging strong social connections and the profound sense of belonging that arises from working toward a shared purpose. As one participant aptly expressed:

> *"I think it's the fact that over the years we have become like friends, you know, and with friends you want to help each other and you want to support each other." - Participant_IV-LT-003.*

The motivations underlying Participants' engagement in volunteering activities exhibit a robust alignment with Self-Determination Theory (SDT). According to Deci and Ryan (2015, pp. 486-491), fulfilling the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness leads to the development of optimal motivation traits and states. This includes intrinsic aspiration and autonomous motivation, which in turn promotes psychological well-being and enhanced engagement with the world.

Participants' perceptions of solidarity signify a shared commitment and mutual support within a group, which emerges as a critical motivational factor. For many Participants, belonging to a supportive and purpose-driven community is a key factor in sustaining their engagement, often serving as the initial motivation for their involvement in volunteering activities.

An additional viewpoint to contemplate involves the research findings on the importance of Georgeou and Haas's (2019) framework regarding the changing models of reciprocity in volunteering, especially among young people. Participants described their volunteering experiences in terms of generalised reciprocity principles, which resonate with solidarity-based engagement. These principles emphasise mutual support, shared goals, and emotional connections, rather than seeking immediate personal benefits. The results endorse Georgeou and Haas's (2019, p. 12) observation that traditional volunteering models were rooted in solidarity, where youth participated in collective efforts to support communities and foster social cohesion. For instance, participants noted that working together towards community goals generated feelings of pride, purpose, and belonging. However, a detailed analysis of the data reveals subtle complexities that indicate the rise of tensions related to more transactional or redistributive approaches. This shift has been framed within

the neo-liberal transition identified by Georgeou and Haas (2019). Some participants recognised that personal growth, networking, and skill acquisition were considered beneficial outcomes. This insight suggests a changing view of reciprocity, intertwining altruistic intentions with self-improvement. Nevertheless, the dominant narrative still firmly rests on solidarity, expressed through empathy, emotional connections, and inclusive involvement. This indicates that the principle of generalised reciprocity continues to significantly influence contemporary youth volunteering experiences (Georgeou & Haas, 2019).

Empirical evidence indicates that volunteering has a profound effect on young individuals, nurturing a sense of belonging, trust, and community engagement. By setting common goals and sharing experiences, volunteering fosters an inclusive environment, and the mutual trust in these groups boosts confidence and teamwork. Participants contribute to their communities' improvement and become more connected and integrated within them. As one participant points out:

> *"Yeah, it's like, it's like, connected, because if you You wouldn't feel that way, that you want to be part of some community, you wouldn't be really volunteering, because mostly when you volunteer you do it for free, like you usually get any money from it." - Participant_LV-SK-002*

Manifestations of Solidarity Among Volunteers

The data gathered from the participants' disclosures reveal a diverse array of solidarity manifestations, aligning with extant literature on the subject, particularly with regard to community, intergenerational, and international solidarity. The repeated emphasis on shared objectives and emotional bonds within volunteer groups corresponds with Kanter's (1972, as cited in Ferguson et al., 2017) concept of community solidarity as a "we-feeling" that fosters unity. Participants engaging with both younger and older generations, especially during events such as Christmas programmes or youth centre activities, exemplify international solidarity as described by Giarrusso and Putney (2020) and Thijssen (2016). Furthermore, international volunteers reported a sense of mutual learning and collaboration across cultures, which is in accordance with Bailliet's (2024) vision of international solidarity built on shared global responsibility. The focus on collective grassroots actions within local contexts is indicative of a connection with Zheng's (2023) concept of solidarity from below, wherein individuals enhance their own capabilities through collective action.

Key forms and areas of volunteering among research participants

Participants engaged in a variety of volunteering activities that closely corresponded to the typologies and models outlined in the literature review. Informal mutual aid, for instance, in the form of assistance to the elderly or peer support, corresponds to the definition of informal volunteering proposed by Smith et al.

(2016). In contrast, organised service activities like those held in youth centres or community events exemplify Millora's (2020) notion of service volunteering. Several respondents recounted their experiences in organising charity drives or engaging in social initiatives, which aligns with Millora's concepts of campaigning and volunteering, as well as the aspects of social movements and activist-protest volunteering discussed by Smith et al. (2016). The idea of leisure volunteering, introduced in Millora's model for the 21st century, is further demonstrated through participation in cultural or leisure-oriented initiatives, such as performances supporting social causes. The engagement of international participants in cross-border projects and multicultural teams resonates with the principles of the European Solidarity Corps and reflects the broader policy emphasis on solidarity, inclusion, and intercultural learning (Shaw et al., 2022). A review of the existing literature indicates a consensus among participants on how volunteering relationships foster solidarity and community development. This supports Aked's (2015) claim that volunteering transcends mere service, serving as a pathway to forge deeper social connections.

A theoretical framework of social capital could be utilised to analyse the findings. Claridge (2018, pp. 14-18) argued that social capital operates across three levels: micro, mezzo, and macro. Each of these levels has distinct characteristics, yet they are interconnected. At the micro level, attention centres on personal social connections like friendships, highlighting aspects of trust, support, and mutual responsibility. The mezzo level involves forming groups and organisations that prioritise shared norms, values, and objectives, which aids in collaboration. At the macro level, social capital expands to encompass the wider community and society, including cultural norms and institutions that promote cohesion. Together, these levels create an intricate system where interactions at one level can impact behaviours at others.

The following perspectives on empirical findings are by social capital theory at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels:

Table 10 - *Empirical Findings Through the Lens of Social Capital Theory.*

The micro-level (Individual)	The mezzo-level (Groups and organisations)	Macro-level (community and society)
Volunteering positively impacts personal connections and friendships, enhancing support, trust, and mutual respect among	Shared norms, values, and goals enhance cooperation and teamwork among volunteer groups. The focus on collective	Volunteering promotes a more inclusive community and enhances social cohesion. Community events and initiatives

those involved. Participants expressed that they felt valued and that their interpersonal relationships were strengthened, aligning with the micro-level emphasis on the individual advantages of social connections.	action and mutual support reflects mezzo-level social capital, emphasising the importance of group relationships for reaching common objectives.	benefit collective well-being, strengthen societal bonds, and encourage civic participation.

The findings, as mentioned above, align with the existing literature review. As posited by Davies et al. (2024, p. 822), a two-way relationship may exist between volunteering and social cohesion, as the findings suggest that observations over months and years indicate a relationship in which volunteering promotes social cohesion, and conversely, social cohesion may also enhance volunteering. Furthermore, as discussed by Stukas et al. (2016, p. 245), volunteering significantly impacts young people's sense of belonging to the community.

Williams et al. (2025, pp. 8–9) suggest that volunteering significantly enhances social networks and fortifies social connections among people with varied backgrounds and interests in rural communities.

Perceptions and Perspectives of Solidarity among Youth Workers

Evidence shows that youth workers in Slovakia view solidarity as closely linked to mutual support, care, and shared responsibility. This is especially evident in youth parliaments, where members demonstrate strong bonds and collaboration. Additionally, Slovak youth workers connect solidarity to wider social values, including aiding those in need, which can be associated with religious beliefs.

> *"Sense of solidarity, like, okay, at the moment in my hometown, we started this good parliament for the last three years, and it started from very little number of kids. They were kids at that time, like 14 years old. And after three years, now most of them are 17, turning 18."- Participant_SW-SK-001*

Lithuanian Youth workers conceptualise solidarity as a recognition of equality and equal rights, underscoring the significance of collaborative endeavours towards shared objectives.

The two groups of youth workers agree that solidarity is paramount in fostering positive relationships, promoting personal growth, and creating inclusive environments where young people feel valued and empowered.

" So for me, solidarity is understanding that everyone is equal and everyone has equal rights, even though they are not aware of that and they try to look for differences in everything around."- Participant_SW-LT-001.

Manifestation of Solidarity among Youth Workers

The discourses articulated by the youth workers in the empirical evidence present a varied panorama of solidarity practices that are embedded within their volunteering and professional experiences. These forms of solidarity are not static entities; instead, they are characterised by their ability to intersect and evolve through lived relationships and shared endeavours. The alignments explored in the literature review highlight several key forms of solidarity: community, intergenerational, political, intersectional, international, ecological, and humanitarian solidarity.

A prominent form identified was community solidarity, marked by a strong sense of belonging, mutual support, and a shared identity among youth groups and organisations. This perspective aligns with Kanter's (1972, as cited in Ferguson et al., 2017) definition of community solidarity as a "we-feeling" that nurtures deep interpersonal relationships. Numerous respondents described their settings as "like a family" and characterised the group dynamic as one where "you can count on them, you can trust them." The emotional connections established extended beyond formal meetings, indicating a lasting sense of inclusion that affected both structured and informal interactions.

A connected theme was intergenerational solidarity, highlighted by youth workers' insights into their roles as mentors or learners in multi-age settings. Giarrusso and Putney (2020) propose that intergenerational solidarity involves supportive relationships between different age groups and a collective sense of responsibility. For example, a youth worker shared their experience of balancing their roles as both mentor and parent, explaining how being a father influenced their dedication to guiding younger individuals. These exchanges often occurred through educational initiatives, mentorship, and shared learning, underscoring the idea that solidarity can act as a link between generations (Thijssen, 2016).

A key element was political solidarity, where youth workers demonstrated their commitment to causes beyond their immediate communities. This view aligns with the definitions provided by Starzyk et al. (2019, as cited in Neufeld et al., 2019), who describe political solidarity as aligning marginalised groups with the goal of achieving social transformation. The youth workers framed their participation as a way to foster systemic change, highlighting the importance of raising awareness, amplifying underrepresented voices, and advocating for inclusive policies. The solidarity shown by these individuals went beyond simple charity, reflecting a deep commitment to justice principles.

Youth workers' attentiveness clearly demonstrated intersectional solidarity to varying backgrounds and the intricacies of social identities. According to Greenwood (2008, as cited in Tormos, 2017), this solidarity arises from recognising the interconnected nature of oppression. Such commitment was reflected in expressions that highlighted the intentional inclusion of young individuals from diverse ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds and the promotion of environments that prioritise inclusivity and acceptance. During the discussion, multiple youth work participants emphasised the necessity of establishing safe spaces where differences are acknowledged and celebrated, rather than overlooked.

Moreover, youth workers engaged in international solidarity efforts, especially via cross-border volunteer programs such as Erasmus exchanges. These experiences cultivated a global citizenship mindset and a sense of shared humanity, echoing Cecilia Bailliet's (2024) characterisation of international solidarity as transnational cooperation for human rights and peace. There was a broad recognition of the critical importance of connecting with people from diverse international backgrounds. Such interactions were seen as invaluable avenues for gaining insights from a rich array of cultural diversity and for creating transnational communities rooted in compassion and mutual understanding.

The aforementioned varied expressions of solidarity among youth workers illustrate what Laitinen (2022) describes as the "nebulous" yet pervasive nature of solidarity—simultaneously a theoretical idea, a social practice, and an analytical perspective. In contrast to the notion of neat categorisation, the experiences of youth workers indicate that solidarity is a dynamic, relational, and frequently intersectional concept. This suggests that contemporary civic engagement is characterised by a high degree of complexity.

This discussion will further explore the previously mentioned perceptions by offering critiques from various viewpoints. It aims to reassess the current understanding of 'solidarity,' including insights from social work professionals.

As Ricœur (1995, pp. 15-22) noted, the inherent fragility of human life and the world around us is closely tied to our sense of duty. This duty emerges from recognising the vulnerability of others- whether individuals, groups, communities, or the environment- who rely on our compassion and assistance. This understanding nurtures a fundamental trust that should take precedence over doubt in our interactions. Ricœur's ethical outlook is focused on the future, contrasting with a retrospective view of responsibility that emphasises past deeds. He asserts that we have a duty to aid those who are vulnerable to ensure their survival and well-being. This forward-looking responsibility enhances a sense of mutual recognition and collective duty within a civil society that acknowledges shared vulnerability. It can be suggested that recognising our own vulnerability fosters solidarity, thus reinforcing community ties through reciprocal support. Consequently, this promotes a

transition from individual self-interest to a broader sense of communal responsibility, especially amid life's inherent uncertainties.

Dierckxsens (2018, p. 55) argues that Ricœur's 'Oneself as Another' highlights the crucial role of individual lived experiences in comprehending responsibility and justice. Ricœur's notion of selfhood (ipseity), which includes attributes like self-esteem, concern for others, and practical wisdom, suggests that our ability to engage with responsibility and justice relies on developing a clear sense of self. Moreover, Dierckxsens believes these experiences underscore the importance of innate emotions, such as sympathy, which drive our understanding of responsibility and justice.

As Dierckxsens (2018, p. 236) has highlighted, Ricœur demonstrates that our ethical and moral sentiments, and consequently our sense of responsibility, are developed through our unique encounters with others and the narratives we inhabit and disseminate. Through cultivating self-respect and considering others, one may begin to comprehend the rationale behind action, responsibility, and pursuing justice.

As suggested by Kneuer et al. (2022, pp. 266-385), the descriptive-analytical approach to solidarity is a framework that aims to theorise solidarity based on specific analytical criteria, rather than normative prescriptions. This approach posits that solidarity should be conceptualised as a dynamic form of action, focusing on its manifestation across various levels of social organisation. These levels of analysis include the individual (micro), socially organised actors (meso), and political-institutional (macro) levels.

According to Rodríguez (2024, pp. 471-472), the notion of solidarity must be subjected to empirical testing in real-world settings, as there is a lack of a universally applicable set of guidelines for forming collaborative groups. Instead, Rodríguez proposes using analytical tools derived from **hermeneutics** (the study of interpretation. It is a fundamental aspect of disciplines that seek to interpret human intentions, beliefs, actions, and experiences as they are preserved in various forms of cultural and historical artefacts (George, 2025) and **creolisation** (the process through which elements from multiple cultures are combined to create a new cultural entity ("Creolization," 2016) to facilitate a more nuanced comprehension of the transformative potential of solidarity. Rodríguez explains that hermeneutics highlights solidarity as the coming together of diverse individuals who establish a shared identity through mutual understanding. In contrast, creolisation emphasises how power dynamics and evolving identities influence teamwork. Ultimately, Rodríguez argues that genuine solidarity relies on individuals' deliberate collaboration to create a brighter future, beginning in the present.

Banks (2016, p. 46) contends that the concept of "ethical work" is essential for professional practice. It underscores that ethical responsibility goes beyond merely following guidelines or personal moral choices.

Instead, it is presented as a continuous process of self-reflection and engaging critically with the socio-political environment. This perspective also urges professionals to recognise their influence in shaping ethical standards, questioning existing policies, and fostering fairness, accountability, and empathy in their work.

Banks (2021, p. 105) emphasised that the roles of social work professionals necessitate a profound connection with clients, which includes grasping their positive and negative experiences. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that merely understanding these experiences is not enough. Authentic social work practice requires fostering 'empathic solidarity', a concept that transcends individual empathy. This idea involves a dedication to collaborative efforts aimed at systemic social change. To facilitate this, practitioners must develop critical and analytical skills that allow them to challenge existing norms and envision alternative social frameworks, thus promoting an optimistic outlook for a transformative society.

Limitations of the study

This study has identified key limitations as follows. First, the findings cannot be generalised beyond the sample's parameters. Second, gathering data from social work professionals may enhance the study and provide a richer discussion on solidarity, volunteering, and social work. Lastly, it would be beneficial to include a broader range of perspectives, such as anthropological, artistic, and historical viewpoints, along with philosophical, political, sociological, psychological, and economic dimensions of solidarity.

Future researchers should consider several aspects, embracing a holistic approach that integrates modern theoretical frameworks. They are encouraged to analyse various policies, legal documents, guidelines, and other relevant materials. Examining multiple geographical areas adds depth, especially if the regions display socio-political diversity. Lastly, including more participants broadens the represented perspectives.

Conclusions

This research primarily aimed to explore the perceptions of solidarity among young individuals engaged in both local and international volunteering. It also considered the viewpoints of youth workers, particularly focusing on the cross-national environments of Lithuania and Slovakia. The objectives of the study were threefold: first, to comprehend how young people and youth workers define solidarity; second, to explore the lived experiences linked to these perceptions within the context of volunteering; and third, to critically assess these findings in relation to established theoretical frameworks and contemporary perspectives.

The empirical findings indicate a consistent perception of solidarity as a powerful force rooted in collective action, community belonging, and mutual support. Young volunteers feel a sense of unity through shared assistance, leading to personal fulfilment from achieving common goals, which fosters strong social connections and deep feelings of belonging. The benefits of volunteering in promoting trust, community involvement, and social capital are evident at individual, communal, and societal levels. Professionals working with youth in both countries recognise the significance of solidarity as a system of mutual support, shared responsibility, and equal acknowledgement. They stress that this practice is crucial for cultivating positive relationships and fostering inclusive settings.

It is essential to recognise both the strengths and weaknesses of the study. Its alignment with current literature on the link between volunteering and social cohesion underscores the importance of these activities in strengthening community ties. Nonetheless, the study revealed the need to transcend a simplistic view of solidarity as just belonging. The push for a re-evaluation towards an empowering concept that fosters inner responsibility and inspires youth to advocate for significant social change carries important implications for how volunteering and youth work are understood and practised. Additionally, highlighting the ethical imperatives of care, responsibility, and accountability emphasises the need for a more proactive approach to promoting solidarity.

This research underscores the diversity that needs to be considered among its audience. It demonstrates that young people can enhance their comprehension of their volunteering experiences and appreciate how these experiences contribute to a greater sense of solidarity and social impact. Consequently, youth organisations and volunteering programmes can utilise these insights to develop more effective initiatives that strengthen community ties and empower young individuals as active change-makers. Additionally, youth workers and social work professionals may gain a richer understanding of solidarity, which could improve their practices and better foster ethical responsibility and a commitment to social justice among the youth they serve. Policymakers can also apply these insights to create and support initiatives that encourage youth involvement

in volunteering and promote social cohesion at both national and international levels. Therefore, the current findings offer a solid foundation for scholars and researchers in youth studies, sociology, and social psychology to build upon, facilitating deeper exploration of the complexities of solidarity in contemporary society.

Recommendations

1. The empirical data from youth workers in Lithuania and Slovakia indicate a need for a practice of solidarity that empowers young individuals to transition from observers to active participants in instigating positive social changes. This empowerment process equips youth with platforms that enable them to recognise community issues, collaboratively devise new solutions, and initiate projects with their peers.

2. Policymakers in Slovakia and Lithuania should establish an ethical framework with policies encompassing continuous educational opportunities that encourage critical self-reflection among youth and the professionals working with them. Young individuals require motivation to delve into the complex dimensions of social justice. This encourages ethical guidance, helping young people develop a sense of solidarity based on fairness and equity while grasping the complexities of today's contemporary issues.

3. Slovak and Lithuanian non-governmental organisations must enhance a development ecosystem that empowers youth-led initiatives and promotes systemic change. This involves partnering with social workers to further social justice and equity through collective support for transformative solidarity. Collaborating with youth organisations, educational institutions, social agencies, policymakers, community leaders, and other stakeholders is essential.

4. Future research should explore how volunteers perceive social responsibility in social work during their involvement. By examining formal, non-formal, and informal educational methods in youth work, we can foster the cultivation of active practices that encourage solidarity. Such insights can ultimately contribute to building a just and equitable world through youth empowerment.

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Appendix A

Interview Guideline for International Volunteers

Good morning/afternoon/evening,

I am IRAKLI KHORAVA, a student in the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's program in Social Work with Children and Youth. I am conducting this interview as part of my thesis research titled "Perceptions of Solidarity Among Youth with Volunteering Experience." Thank you very much for taking the time to participate today. I want to remind you that the audio and video of the interview will be recorded with your consent. Rest assured, I have effective measures to maintain the confidentiality of your name and personal information, and the data collected will solely be utilised for scientific purposes.

This interview seeks to understand your views on solidarity, especially from the perspective of someone with international volunteering experience. We will explore how volunteering has shaped your sense of solidarity, your feelings of belonging in your community, and your motivation to volunteer. Please share as many details as you feel comfortable providing.

Before we begin, I would like to double-check—may I have your permission to record the audio and video of this interview for documentation purposes?

The Participant's response to be recorded (voice and video): Agreed/Disagreed

Participant Data
Date: Location: Interviewer: , Interviewee:
Interviewee:
Origin/Nationality: Gender:

Age:

Interview Questions

Key Questions and Themes - Introduction	
1. Can you please introduce yourself briefly?	

Demographic Data on Volunteering Experience	
Questions	**To define**
1. How long have you been volunteering?	Duration
1. Where have you been volunteering?	Location
1. What types of activities have you participated in?	Types of Volunteering Activities

<u>Understanding of Solidarity</u>

1. How can you define the word solidarity? What does it mean for you? Kindly offer specific examples.

2. What did it mean to you to help these people? What was your connection to them?

3. Tell me more about your encounters with the idea of solidarity before your international volunteering experience. How much attention is paid to this idea in your family, the local community where you grew up, and educational institutions?

4. Do you experience support for the idea of solidarity in your environment - Illustrate with examples.

5. What challenges to solidarity implementation do you see in your environment - Illustrate with examples.

Probing questions in case need: Would you give me an example? Can you elaborate on that idea? Would you explain that further? Is there anything else?

Solidarity and Volunteering Experience

1. Could you please describe the volunteering activities and situations when you experience a sense of <u>SOLIDARITY</u>?

2. Could you please describe if <u>a sense of solidarity</u> is relevant to the volunteering activities you participated in?

3. When did you realise you were assisting others?

4. What significance did being with them hold for you?

5. Why it was important to you, What did you gain from supporting these people?

Community and Community Belonging

1. Can you describe any specific moments during your volunteering experience that made you feel of belonging to the community?

2. Before you started volunteering, what were your feelings regarding your sense of belonging to the community?

3. Has your sense of belonging to the community changed since you started volunteering? If so, how?

4. What does solidarity with other volunteers/solidarity with the staff of the organisation you worked for/solidarity with the beneficiaries of the organisation you worked for mean to you?

5. To what extent have you become in solidarity with the people of the country where you volunteered?

6. How has the principle of solidarity been developed in the organisation?

7. How has your care/relationship with the people you work with changed?

8. What kind of relationship with these people has remained?

9. What does this relationship/what do these people mean to you today? What does the work of this organisation mean to you?

Motivations for Volunteering

1. What prompted you to volunteer initially?

2. What inspires you to assist others?

3. Have your motivations shifted since you started volunteering?

4. Could you elaborate on any changes in your motivation since then?

5. Have you discovered new reasons for your continued volunteer work?

6. How does volunteering make you feel in terms of being in control of your actions?

7. Do you feel that volunteering has made you more competent? Would you give me an example?

8. How has volunteering affected your sense of connectedness to others? Would you give me an example?

9. How has your relationship with people in need changed after this volunteering experience?

10. How does the experience of self-ownership affect your current relationships with other people/community?		
Emotions and reactions observed during the interview:		
Positive Emotions: Curiosity, Relift, Empowerment, Satisfaction, Joy, Pride, Trust, Hopefulness	**Negative Emotions:** Nervousness, Vulnerability, Frustration, Confusion, Embarrassment, Sadness, Regret	**Neutral Emotions:** Surpise

Closing and final thoughts (Reflections or questions Participants might have for the interviewer)

Closing

Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experiences. Your perspectives are crucial for grasping how young international volunteers view youth solidarity. Please share any final thoughts or questions you might have. I appreciate your honesty and wish you all the best in your future endeavours.

Appendix B

Interview Guideline for the Local Volunteers

Good morning/afternoon/evening,

I am IRAKLI KHORAVA, a student in the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's program in Social Work with Children and Youth. I am conducting this interview as part of my thesis research titled "Perceptions of Solidarity Among Youth with Volunteering Experience." Thank you very much for taking the time to participate today. I want to remind you that the audio and video of the interview will be recorded with your consent. Please be assured that I have adequate measures to keep your name and personal information confidential and that the data collected will only be used for scientific purposes.

This interview seeks to understand your views on solidarity, primarily through the lens of someone with local volunteering experience. We'll delve into how your volunteering has shaped your sense of solidarity, community belonging, and motivation to participate. Please share as much detail as you feel comfortable.

Before we begin, I would like to double-check—may I have your permission to record the audio and video of this interview for documentation purposes?

The Participant's response to be recorded (voice and video): Agreed/Disagreed

Participant Data
Date: Location: Interviewer: , Interviewee:
Interviewee:
Origin/Nationality: Gender: Age:

Key Questions and Themes - Introduction	
1. Can you please introduce yourself briefly?	
Demographic Data on Volunteering Experience	

Questions	To define
2. How long have you been volunteering?	Duration
2. Where have you been volunteering? What types of organisations or communities have you volunteered with at the local level?	Location/ Types of organisations or communities
2. What types of activities have you participated in?	Types of Volunteering Activities

Understanding of Solidarity

6. How can you define the word solidarity? What does it mean for you? Kindly offer specific examples.

7. What did it mean to you to help these people? What was your connection to them?

8. Tell me more about your encounters with the idea of solidarity before your volunteering experience. How much attention is paid to this idea in your family, the local community where you grew up, and educational institutions?

9. Do you experience support for the idea of solidarity in your environment? Illustrate with examples.

10. What challenges do you see in your environment regarding solidarity implementation? Illustrate them with examples.

Probing questions in case needed: Would you give me an example? Can you elaborate on that idea? Would you explain that further? Is there anything else?

Solidarity and Volunteering Experience

6. Could you please describe the volunteering activities and situations when you experience a sense of <u>SOLIDARITY</u>?

7. Could you please describe if <u>a sense of solidarity</u> is relevant to the volunteering activities you participated in?

8. When did you feel you were helping strangers?

9. What did it mean to you to be with those people?

10. Why was it important to you, What did you gain from supporting these people?

Community and Community Belonging

10. Can you share any particular moments from your volunteering experience that made you feel a sense of belonging to the community?

11. Before you began volunteering, what were your feelings regarding your sense of belonging to your community?

12. Has your sense of belonging to the community changed since you started volunteering? If so, how?

13. What does solidarity with other volunteers/solidarity with the staff of the organisation you worked for/solidarity with the beneficiaries of the organisation you worked for mean to you?

14. How has the principle of solidarity been developed in the organisation?

15. How has your care/relationship with the people you work with changed?

16. What kind of relationship with these people you supported locally has remained?

17. What does this relationship/what do these people mean to you today? What does the work of this organisation mean to you?

Motivations for Volunteering

11. What were your initial reasons for volunteering?

12. What motivates you to help others?

13. Has this motivation changed since you began volunteering?

14. Can you discuss any motivational changes since you started volunteering?

15. Have you developed any new reasons for continuing to volunteer?

16. How does volunteering make you feel in terms of being in control of your actions?

17. Do you feel that volunteering has made you more competent? Would you give me an example?

18. In what ways has volunteering influenced your feelings of connection with others? Could you provide an example?

19. How has your relationship with people in need changed after this volunteering experience?

20. How does the experience of self-ownership affect your current relationships with other people/community?

Emotions and reactions observed during the interview:

Positive Emotions:	**Negative Emotions:**	**Neutral Emotions:**
Curiosity, Relift, Empowerment, Satisfaction, Joy, Pride, Trust, Hopefulness	Nervousness, Vulnerability, Frustration, Confusion,	Surpise

	Embarrassment, Sadness, Regret	

Concluding remarks and final thoughts (Reflections or questions the participants may have for the interviewer)

Closing

Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your insights. Your perspective is crucial for understanding how young local volunteers perceive youth solidarity. If you have any last thoughts or questions, please feel free to share them. I appreciate your honesty, and I wish you all the best in your future endeavours.

Appendix C

Interview Guideline for Youth workers/social workers working with young people.

Good morning/afternoon/evening,

I am IRAKLI KHORAVA, a student in the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's program in Social Work with Children and Youth. I am conducting this interview as part of my thesis research titled "Perceptions of Solidarity Among Youth with Volunteering Experience." Thank you very much for taking the time to participate today. I want to remind you that the audio and video of the interview will be recorded with your consent. Rest assured, I have sufficient measures to protect your name and personal details. The data gathered will solely be utilised for scientific purposes.

This interview aims to examine your views on solidarity, especially from the perspective of professional Youth Workers/Social Workers engaged with young people. We will discuss your professional experiences, instances of solidarity, your organisation's support, and what motivates you in this work. We are interested in your thoughts on promoting solidarity, your challenges, and how volunteering has impacted young people's feelings of solidarity and belonging within their community. Please share as many details as you feel comfortable with.

Before we begin, I would like to double-check - May I have your permission to record the audio and video of this interview for documentation purposes?

The Participant's response to be recorded (voice and video): Agreed/Disagreed

Participant Data
Date: Location:
Interviewee:
Origin/Nationality: Gender:

Age:

Interview Questions

Key Questions and Themes - Introduction	
1. Can you please introduce yourself briefly?	
Demographic Data on Volunteering Experience	
Questions	**To define**
1. How long have you been working as a youth worker/social worker working with young people?	Duration
1. Where have you been working/worked, and what kinds of environment: community centres, Schools, non-governmental organisations?	Location and types of institutions
1. What types of activities/specific programs/projects have you been involved in?	Types of Specific Programs/Projects/Activities
Solidarity, Institutional Roles, and Youth Work Experience	

1. Can you share the specific activities and situations in your work where you feel a sense of SOLIDARITY?

2. Could you please describe if a sense of solidarity is relevant in your work with youth? How can you define the word solidarity? What does it mean for you? What does it mean for you in a professional context?

3. What is your perspective on how the organisations you work with—like community centres, schools, or NGOS—foster a sense of solidarity among young people?

4. Have you encountered any specific institutional policies or initiatives that promote youth solidarity in your experience?

Probing questions in case need: Would you give me an example? Can you elaborate on that idea? Would you explain that further? Is there anything else?

Community and Community Belonging

1. Can you describe any specific moments during your work that made you feel of belonging to the community you serve?

2. Before you became a social worker/youth worker working with young people, how did you feel about your sense of belonging to your community?

3. What positive effects do you think community work and volunteering have helped young people feel more capable or competent? Could you give me an example?

Motivations for Working with Youth

1. What were your initial reasons for becoming a youth worker/ social worker working with young people?

2. What motivates you to help others? What motivates you to support young people?

3. Can you discuss any motivation changes since you began working with youth?

4. Have you developed any new reasons for continuing to work as a youth worker/ social worker working with youth?

5. Do you feel that working with youth has made you more competent? Would you give me an example?

6. What challenges have you faced in building solidarity among young people, if any? How do you manage these obstacles?

Emotions and reactions observed during the interview:

Positive Emotions:	**Negative Emotions:**	**Neutral Emotions:**
Curiosity, Relift, Empowerment, Satisfaction, Joy, Pride, Trust, Hopefulness	Nervousness, Vulnerability, Frustration, Confusion, Embarrassment, Sadness, Regret	Surpise

Concluding remarks and final reflections (Questions or insights participants may have for the interviewer)

Closing

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences. Your insights are crucial for understanding how social workers and youth workers perceive youth solidarity. If you have any final thoughts or questions, please feel free to share. I value your honesty and wish you all the best in your future endeavours.