

Volunteering, Civic Commitment, and the Common Good in Post-Communist Romania: The Experience of the Kolping Movement

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the role of the Kolping Movement in Romania in the development of volunteering, civic engagement, and the principles of the common good economy during the post-communist period. The study highlights how Christian-inspired associations contributed to the reconstruction of civil society after 1989, in a context characterized by economic difficulties, a democratic deficit, and the underdevelopment of civic initiative. It analyzes the processes of democratic education, the voluntary engagement of leaders, the development of social economy structures, and the integration of Christian social principles into the activities of the Kolping Movement. The research emphasizes that volunteering and civic participation represented not only forms of mutual aid but also mechanisms for moral and social reconstruction. At the same time, the article argues that the Kolping model offers a relevant example of an economy oriented toward the common good, integrating human dignity, solidarity, and democratic participation into social and economic activity.

KEYWORDS: Volunteering, Civic Commitment, Common Good, Social Economy, Catholic Social Teaching, Kolping Movement, Civil Society, Post-Communism

1. Introduction

The transformations of the Romanian society after 1989 laid the groundwork for the emergence and development of an active civil society capable to address the social and economic needs that were not adequately solved by the state. In this context, the reestablishment of the Kolping Movement in Romania represented not only the revival of a Christian associative tradition, but also the emergence of a framework for social, civic, and spiritual formation for people willing to engage in volunteer activities and assume honorary positions.

During the communist era, volunteering had been associated almost exclusively with “patriotic labor,” which was organized on a mandatory basis for schoolchildren, students, or workers. After the fall of the totalitarian regime, volunteering based on personal initiative and civic responsibility constituted a major novelty for Romanian society. Within parish communities and newly established associations, volunteering gradually took on the meaning of a free and conscious commitment to serving the community and the common good.

This article analyzes the role of the Kolping Movement in Romania in promoting volunteering, civic responsibility, and social principles such as human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity during the post-communist period. It also highlights the difficulties of the transition to the market economy, the contribution of associative structures to the

development of civil society, and how the common good has been integrated into the social and economic activities of the Kolping network.

2. Volunteering and Social Commitment After 1989

Following the 1989 Revolution, one of the major challenges was the development of civil society, which inherently involved participation in volunteer activities and taking on roles within the newly established associations. Along with humanitarian aid shipments, the first associations were established in Blaj, Oțelu-Roșu, Caransebeș, and Timișoara (Archive, File 1-4).

The first organized volunteer activities can be analyzed from the perspective of their charitable and community-oriented nature. The actions carried out in parish communities aimed to distribute emergency aid, organize humanitarian transport, support people in need, and set up community centers. The Christian model of serving one's neighbor was the moral foundation for these initiatives, in the sense that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Bible, Bulai & Pătrașcu, Mark 10:42–45). In contrast to the experience of mandatory volunteering during the communist era, this new form of social engagement involved taking free and conscious responsibility toward others. The strategy adopted by the partners of the European Kolping network consisted in organizing initiative groups within parishes. In the first phase, parish communities and newly established associations became privileged spaces for developing a culture of solidarity and civic participation.

In a second phase, volunteer activities expanded beyond the internal sphere of parish communities due to the urgent need for involvement in the local communities and at the societal level. This type of volunteering was associated with "patriotic" volunteering (Bouleanu, 2017) or with "patriotic labor" — mandatory organized activities imposed by the state authorities on schoolchildren, students, workers, and intellectuals.

The confusion between volunteer activities and "patriotic volunteering" made it more difficult to spread this concept throughout society, the only area of action remaining within parish communities and newly established associations. Widespread involvement in volunteer activities began in 2011 in the form of an annual competition (Archive, 2011) aimed at engaging and attracting various groups toward common goals, such as supporters, volunteers, as well as public institutions, schools, and local governments. In addition to volunteer activities, a significant challenge lies in assuming honorary positions within the leadership structures of associations.

The concept of an honorary position (German: *Ehrenamt*), considered to be "a commitment of honor, in honor of and for the honor of others," is viewed as a result of the Christian image of humanity. The novelty lay in assuming a leadership role for the medium term - typically four-year terms - without explicitly expecting material benefits. The term "honorary" in Romanian civil society has lost its value, being seen as devoid of substance and responsibility, with the person holding only the "title" and not the responsibilities of the position. The challenge of selecting individuals capable of fulfilling these responsibilities, capable of developing and implementing an action plan, has brought up two challenges: one democratic and the other related to the person's qualifications and professional development. The democratic election of a person to assume a mandate becomes a major challenge given the existing democratic deficits in society. Associations established within parishes were able to elect well-known individuals with a good reputation who were willing to serve faithfully, although they were not always adequately qualified. In the early years, the leaders of the associations were largely appointed by the clergy and approved by the local communities. The Church provided moral legitimacy to the new associative structures in a context where democratic practice was still fragile, but represented an attempt to

replicate models of the Kolping network at the European level. The lack of experience in democratic organization and the shortage of qualified individuals for community work made it necessary to organize the training programs.

One concrete step was the organization of social meetings and seminars aimed at fostering social awareness and participation in democratic processes based on social principles such as the principle of human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the common good (Compendium). These activities, organized over a period of six years, aimed to form an associative elite capable of exercising leadership responsibilities and promoting the values of democratic participation in local communities. Catholic social teaching is considered the starting point for “the Christian’s political engagement, the cornerstone of any state structure” (Archive, Seminars 2000–2006, p. 6), ensuring the presence of at least 200 participants annually, out of the several thousand attending courses and seminars. Such a foundation has ensured the training of leaders and members through advanced training programs for strategic positioning within the network.

The United Nations declared 2001 the International Year of Volunteers, sparking lively discussions about the role of volunteers in society. In the era of globalization and constant change, voluntary engagement - whether individual or in groups - is seen as a way to preserve and promote the community’s human values, care, and willingness to help. In Central and Eastern Europe, following the fall of the communist regime, it became evident that the state was burdened by a multitude of tasks; moreover, the situation on the ground in Romania required the training and professional development of those who had taken the initiative to organize communities.

Another challenge concerns the autonomy and representation of local communities’ interests, with the pledge of honor serving as a contribution to building a society in which the principles of individuality and subsidiarity are put to the test when working across multiple levels and managing resources. The organization of the 107 associations with over 6,000 members across multiple levels—diocesan, regional, and national—as well as participation in working groups at the European and international levels, is evidence of the maturing of democratic processes within the associations (Archive, 2002). Participating and being open to running for office in an association requires an awareness of the role a person can play in fulfilling a long-term mandate. A way of acting “solely out of one’s own conviction and with full awareness, and not out of obligation” (Pacem in Terris, 1963, 34) is gaining ground with regard to activities in the service of others within a community. Accepting and fulfilling these roles on the Boards of Directors demonstrates an understanding that “volunteer and honorary work is an expression of people’s freedom and dignity and of their shared responsibility to carry out tasks for the common good.” (Declaration, Krakow 2011).

The Kolping Movement in Romania, reestablished in the 1990s, serves as a platform for action and development for individuals willing to volunteer or open to taking on a leadership role within an association to consciously act for the common good. These two commitments—to volunteer and to take on a leadership role in an association—can be seen as preliminary steps toward social change in societies undergoing transition and toward achieving a level of organization and operation that aims for the common good.

3. Catholic Social Teaching as the Foundation of Social Action

The transition from a centralized economy to a market economy represented one of the most difficult challenges for post-communist Romanian society, “as people were raised to be immature and childish” (Giesecke, 1993). In the bloc of former communist states, there is a risk that a form of capitalism lacking moral foundations—one focused exclusively on profit and consumption—will take hold. In this regard, the Eastern European experience has

shown that economic transition could not be reduced solely to market liberalization, but also required the reconstruction of social and moral values.

The consequences of such a totalitarian system that destroyed ethical and moral values are best described in 1990 by the Czech dissident Václav Havel, referring not necessarily to the ruined economy and the ruins left behind, but to the distorted moral conscience and the loss of concepts such as “love, friendship, empathy, humility, or forgiveness.” (Přibáň, 2021, pp. 33–34). From organizing aid shipments to supporting the establishment of mutual aid structures, all of these represented challenges for both sides within the necessary transformation processes. The challenges were aimed at both those who believed they possessed all the necessary knowledge and those who wanted change but did not know how to bring it about. One of the conclusions reached by those who came to offer support was that “both those in the East and we in the West have much to learn” (Weiss, p. 1). In short, the expression *Ex oriente lux – ex Occidente lux* (Stanisław, 1957) vividly describes the situation of a Europe divided into two blocs: the Eastern and the Western, with people today being less interested in enlightenment and more in material things.

The first activities organized could not have been anything other than the so-called social seminars, which aimed, first and foremost, to help each person discover their own personality and learn the basics of community life, grounded in the social principles of Christian life: personality, solidarity, and subsidiarity. We are referring to homogeneous groups in which a balanced relationship has developed between “religious elements” and “sociability” (Brauer, 1935, p.13). Everyone’s personality had been so deeply affected during the communist era that those who came to Romania identified the same acute need on an individual level: the development of their personality and self-confidence. This initiative was based on the principle of the dignity of the person as set forth in the Church’s social teaching, according to which every person is a unique creation of God, endowed with dignity, and respect for this dignity is both a duty and the greatest challenge for those around them (Compendium).

To kickstart the formation of associations, Alfred Weiss proposes that these processes be underpinned by support for the discovery of each person’s identity, thereby highlighting the principle of personality in Catholic social teaching. The starting point for such an approach was the fact that each individual’s identity is influenced by their social network, their work and productivity, their financial security, and their personal values (Petzold, 1984). With regard to values, we refer to personal values, which, to a large extent, were neither valued nor promoted by the communist regime. For this reason, there was a felt need for substantial support to cultivate and rediscover them.

The novelty was the shift in focus toward the person, toward the individual, with all their qualities and talents, rather than exclusively toward the collective, as most people had been accustomed to thinking and acting. This strengthening of individual identity also led, over time, to the discovery of the principle of solidarity and to a desirable attitude: inclusion instead of exclusion. In this context, the Kolping Movement placed particular emphasis on personal development and the discovery of individual identity. The principle of the person in Catholic social teaching became the foundation of its educational activities. The human person, with their dignity and talents, is considered the central element of any process of social development. The strengthening of individual identity has gradually contributed to the development of solidarity and community participation. The experience of community, the rediscovery of faith, and the partnership relations between East and West have played an important role in rebuilding trust and fostering civic engagement.

4. The Common Good and the Economy of Solidarity within the Kolping Network

If we consider the common good as an expression of shared interests—a particular way of acting that benefits the general public—we are thinking of the overall well-being of a society. The concept of the common good is one of the fundamental values underpinning the development of a balanced and responsible society. It encompasses the totality of social, economic, and moral conditions that enable individuals and communities to realize their potential and contribute to the general well-being. By organizing local associations into a diocesan and national structure, the Kolping network has created a framework for cooperation and solidarity focused on the interests of the community and the development of a society based on social responsibility.

From a theological perspective, the focus is on love for one's neighbor. We are talking about charity, providing emergency aid, or offering mutual support within the community. In addition, there are concerns about helping those around us, with the entire community involved in this process, essentially turning into action a goal that seeks the common good, the good of the many. Through our established mission statement, embodied in the four key words: community of education, action, and mutual support, we aim to fulfill our stated vision: building a society dedicated to the common good (Kolping Profile, 2018). To pursue and realize its mission and vision, the entire Kolping network is committed to the so-called economy of the common good, a concept that aims to foster an ethical economic culture as an alternative to the capitalist economy.

According to the association's founding documents, statutes, and regulations, the Kolping Society defines itself as a network dedicated to the common good, as it bases its activities on respect for human dignity, environmental responsibility, solidarity and social justice, and democratic and transparent decision-making. In the early 1990s, when these principles and values were either unknown or not respected, there were failures or misappropriation of funds provided by donors, or significant deviations from the established objectives (Archive, Projects 1992–2012).

Globally, resource scarcity, biodiversity loss, poverty, and limited access to education, as well as the gap between the rich and the poor, are consequences of a capitalist system that aimed solely at achieving financial results. The concept of the “common good balance sheet” aims to assess an organization's contribution to societal development, taking into account criteria such as human dignity, solidarity, sustainability, and social responsibility (Felber, 2010). In this context, the assessment of stakeholders—comprising suppliers, shareholders, employees, customers, and the social environment—is based on the following values: human dignity, ecological responsibility, solidarity and social justice, democratic decision-making, and transparency (Blachfellner, 2017, p. 5). The balance sheet of the common good represents the benefits generated for society.

In the Kolping model, the founding organization is an association with committed values and principles, driven by the vision of building a society of the common good. Without pressure from investors seeking to maximize profits at any cost, Kolping enterprises focus on maintaining a balance between income and expenses, making sustainable investments, respecting the dignity of every employee or student, and, above all, the benefits that society can derive. Transparency is a prerequisite for empowering stakeholders to participate in the decision-making process. Here we refer to access to the minutes of management meetings, financial statements, and the presentation of balance sheets and reports (Archive, Reports).

A Kolping-style association, situated at the intersection of the Church and society, is an organization that, according to its bylaws, commits to organizing itself democratically and working to build communities and, by extension, to shape society.

The realization of the concept of the common good is not solely the responsibility of the state; associations and civic initiatives can also contribute to the societal change. The number of people who take on an honorary role and are engaged in volunteer activities is proof of this. As a Christian association, respect for human dignity and the principle of the individual are conditions found in all the founding documents of the Kolping Society. We refer to the social environment in which every association and enterprise operates, to humanity as a whole (that is, all people as rational beings capable of defining values and meanings for themselves), which also includes future generations. The human being, endowed with dignity, is at the center of all actions, including children, students, and vulnerable adults (Archive, Safeguarding). When referring to society in general, we mean associations, public institutions, individuals, and communities that share a common social space. Solidarity and social justice are present in various spheres of social assistance, ranging from those in need to those affected by the war in Ukraine, from individuals seeking professional qualifications to those requiring social assistance services (Archive, Reports).

Care for the environment and ecological sustainability are reflected in educational initiatives regarding responsible consumption, recycling, climate change, volunteer activities for environmental protection, and sanitation campaigns. Purchases of products and services generally aim for a product lifecycle that does not harm the environment, or for products and services to be sourced from small businesses and from a relatively short distance. New buildings incorporate energy-saving features such as heat pumps, photovoltaic panels, heat recovery systems, and domestic hot water panels (Pantea, 2022).

Employees are organized into unions, with a collective bargaining agreement in place and elected representatives participating in negotiations with management, specifically the association's leadership. For the stability of an association managing development projects and its affiliated enterprises, one key aspect is the diversification of funding sources, ensuring the necessary stability for such a structure at the group level: the categories include donations (31%), sponsorships (3%), rental income (17%), dividends from enterprises (26%), and funding grants (20%). Total group revenue is approximately 3.0 million euros for the year 2023 (Archive, 2023 Report, pp. 40–41). This is a completely different situation from that of the year 2000, when revenues came from a single funder (Archive, 2000 Report, p. 14).

Performance analysis for a social organization cannot be conducted by considering only revenue; we must also take into account the common good matrix or the common good economy - that is, a model oriented toward social cohesion. In addition to generating revenue, there is a social mission, a contribution to the local community, and a response to the community's social needs.

The funds accessed and the revenue generated are used for new investments at various stages of implementation. These intentions are communicated to facilitate access to the respective funds, raise awareness among the public, the administration, and the clients who use the services provided. The project's focus on the public interest, local development, and supporting groups such as children, students, youth, seniors, volunteers, and marginalized individuals (Archive, 2024). These investments are part of an economy that serves everyone, in the sense that both members of the Kolping network and those outside it, at the national or international level, are called upon to contribute to their realization through donations and volunteer work.

Engaging the community from the very beginning of a project—through its initiation and implementation phases—has a positive impact on the efficiency of its execution and the quality of the results achieved through the identification of new solutions and ideas; last but not least, it has a moral impact, fostering a sense of ownership among those involved in the project. The execution of government projects, merely by following the legal procedures for

awarding and implementing them, cannot possibly lead to greater efficiency or help identify those involved in the project. The greatest impacts are felt in terms of morale, self-confidence, and the revitalization of society.

Members may decide on the manner of organization so as to ensure that there are no violations of the common good or individual interests that might undermine the association's established mission and purpose. This approach clearly differs from the private sector and especially from private investments, where profit maximization often represents the primary objective, or worse yet, from a shadow economy where tax and social contribution evasion is practiced - a rate of 29% in 2022 (Pele, 2023). In this context, for those who pay taxes legally, unfair competition arises, requiring a specific managerial structure to address this disparity. Such a disparity can only be overcome by recruiting dedicated and passionate individuals, creating high-performing teams, and fostering a work environment based on respect and personal initiative.

Pope Francis calls for a social market economy in which people are placed at the center of attention and by no means just financial results: "We must be cautious with the economy: if it focuses too much solely on finance, on mere numbers that have no real entities behind them, then the economy crumbles and can lead to a serious betrayal" (Evangelii Gaudium, 53). Achieving only financial results without the development of the people who make up the business or society in general becomes a matter that ultimately signals material and spiritual poverty; change management has the mission of generating new cycles of activity in which employees are motivated to improve themselves. Although the aspects related to the many economic situations in which people are merely tools for profit are well known, we often find ourselves discussing "that excess of diagnosis that is not always accompanied by decisive and truly applicable proposals" (Evangelii Gaudium, p. 50).

The organizational culture within the Kolping Association's enterprises represents a competitive advantage over many businesses in Romania. The principles established within KOR—namely, integrity, responsibility, solidarity, trust, and competence (Archive, 2023 Report)—are, in turn, derived from the values upheld by the association. The starting point is the individual, endowed with talents and skills, whose mission is to become competent, build trust, take on responsibilities, and show solidarity. This opens up opportunities for everyone, opportunities that depend on a willingness to learn and grow, on deepening one's faith, and on following the example set by the founder. Achieving financial independence by the end of 2012 for the entire social structure "dependent on aid and expertise" (Kolping Switzerland)—comprising associations and enterprises in Romania—is evidence of the promotion of projects and activities grounded in principles and values.

Conclusions

The experience of the Kolping Movement in Romania highlights the important role that associations and religious communities played in rebuilding civil society after 1989. In a context marked by economic difficulties, the underdevelopment of democratic structures, and the legacy of a totalitarian system, volunteering and voluntary service have become tools for civic education and social responsibility. The history of the Kolping Movement demonstrates that social transformation cannot be achieved solely through economic reforms or external financial support. Rebuilding a democratic society requires educating people, fostering mutual trust, and cultivating the values of solidarity, responsibility, and participation. Catholic social teaching has provided the conceptual framework for promoting the principles of the person, subsidiarity, and the common good. These principles have been applied both to volunteer work and training, as well as to the development of economic structures geared toward the needs of the community.

The Kolping model demonstrates that the economy can be put at the service of people and the community without reducing social activity to the logic of profit. Through the involvement of volunteers, the responsible exercise of honorary positions, and the development of sustainable social and economic projects, the Kolping Movement contributes to the strengthening of a society oriented toward the common good.

Ultimately, the experience gained over the past three decades confirms that volunteering and civic engagement are not merely forms of social involvement, but also mechanisms for the moral and democratic reconstruction of society. In this regard, the Kolping Movement in Romania can be considered a relevant example of how Christian values and civic initiative can contribute to the development of a society based on solidarity and participation.

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