



# Generosity in Times of Crisis

Russian Helping Behaviors During  
the COVID-19 Pandemic

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# 1. Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the world into a health crisis that has had devastating effects on the global economy and public life in many countries. Little is known about how people have responded to two competing pressures caused by the crisis in many countries: increased community need coupled with decreased financial capacity to help others. By generosity we mean all forms of behavior that people engage in with the intention of benefiting others (including people, animals, and environments).

We surveyed 2,018 Russians in August 2020 to understand how their generosity behaviors manifested and changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The national survey that generated the Russian data for this research has received funding from the Basic Research Program of the National Research University Higher School of Economics which is gratefully acknowledged.

Five key findings emerged:

1. A variety of helping behaviors was typical for Russians during the pandemic. Overall 98 percent of Russian citizens engaged in some or other form of helping behavior.
2. Donating money topped the list of helping behaviors during the pandemic with donations to people personally known strongly prevailing. Helping strangers and donating goods followed on the list of helping behaviors. The least common were setting up or joining a local group to help with the crisis, engaging in formal volunteering (through an organization) and donating blood and plasma.
3. The pandemic did not make any significant changes in increasing or reducing helping and generosity behaviors.
4. A new cohort of active formal volunteers has been emerging since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis. The new cohort differs noticeably from both typical volunteers of the previous period and an average Russian citizen. For example, a significant part of the newly joined volunteers are some 10 years older and more educated than those who volunteered before the pandemic.
5. A small percentage of Russians mentioned a lack of opportunity as the most significant barrier that prevented them from practicing helping and generosity behaviors.

**Managerial Implications.** Nonprofits may wish to:

- Given a stable, although relatively low, level of volunteering and donations, make consistent efforts to keep up the current level and involve more citizens in helping behaviors during the pandemic and the post-pandemic period.
- Enhance financial and institutional sustainability by disseminating information and facilitating participation in specialized crisis response training and grant competition programs offered by foundations, resource centers and government at the local and national level.
- Follow up on the needs of the beneficiaries and changes in their needs and establish channels and mechanisms for nonprofits and local initiative groups to receive relevant information.
- Disseminate more widely information about trustworthy charities, successful volunteer programs, and their positive impact during the pandemic among broad categories of the public, government agencies and businesses.

- Educate nonprofits about new digital tools and ways of continuing to serve their communities and involving new categories of volunteers, such as online volunteering.
- Respond proactively to the needs of the new cohort of volunteers that engaged in formal volunteering during the pandemic. Provide them with opportunities for professional development and becoming potential drivers in the engagement of broader categories of population in helping and generosity behavior.

**Policy Implications.** Governments may wish to:

- Continue and expand crisis support measures that would raise financial sustainability of NGOs and stimulate public generosity.
- Develop local and municipal grant programs targeting both local nonprofits and informal grassroots initiatives helping with the crisis.
- Provide incentives for effective partnerships between government institutions, particularly in the welfare sphere (hospitals, nursing homes, social services) with nonprofits to respond to urgent public needs during the pandemic.
- Set up counseling mechanisms and platforms engaging both government and key nonprofits to work out joint crisis response measures in social and economic spheres hit by the crisis and at various government levels.

## 2. Introduction: COVID-19 and Public Generosity

In early 2020, the world was thrown into a health crisis that had devastating effects on the global economy and social life in many countries: the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing (September 2021), more than 225 million people have contracted the virus globally and over 4.6 million people have died (Worldometer, 2021). By April 2020, more than 3.9 billion people from 90 countries – around half the world’s population – were told by their governments to stay at home to slow the spread of the virus (Sandford, 2020). These restrictions had knock-on effects for people’s social lives, as many people were separated from friends and family for long periods of time. Restricted movement (and associated dampened spending) also devastated many economies, with more than 225 million full-time jobs being lost from the global economy and unemployment rates skyrocketing in many countries (Hassan, 2021). In short, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a global crisis that has severely impacted social and economic life in many countries.

The pandemic has had two competing effects in relation to the provision of social support to communities in need. On the one hand, the crisis amplified need: many more families than usual found themselves in need of support due to sickness or unemployment, especially families from vulnerable communities. On the other hand, because the global economy was straining and many families were facing difficult times, nonprofits and social programs faced reduced flows of income and support (CAF, 2021). Yet little is known about how people responded to these twin pressures: did the pressures of the pandemic constrain generosity, or were people able to find ways to help each other regardless?

The purpose of this report is to answer this overarching question:

*How have generosity behaviors manifested and changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

We define generosity as all forms of behavior that people engage in with the intention of benefiting others (including people, animals, and environments).<sup>1</sup> Generosity behaviors therefore include both formal and informal support. Examples of formal generosity behaviors are donating money to charities, volunteering for nonprofit organizations, or giving blood. Informal generosity behaviors include helping people they know, helping strangers, and participating in grassroots community groups.

To answer our research question, we formed a team of researchers working in eleven countries to collect data on the formal and informal generosity practices that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries included in the research project were Australia, Austria, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Sweden, and the United States.

Country reports will be available online at: [www.globalgenerosityresearch.com](http://www.globalgenerosityresearch.com). This series is part of a broader research initiative from “The Global Generosity Project” led by Professor Pamala Wiepking from the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy in the United States.

In this report, we focus on the Russian context and compare high-level findings to those from another nine countries where scholars also collected data about generosity during the pandemic: Australia, Austria, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, South Korea, Sweden, and the United States.

By understanding generosity responses to this particular crisis, we can learn more about how individuals and societies respond to crises in general. Such knowledge can be used to develop policies and practices that ensure Russia will be able to withstand future shocks while maintaining a thriving and harmonious social fabric. To this end, we include a summary of our key findings and recommendations for both nonprofits and government.

## 3. Research Method

### 3.1 Participants and Procedure

Data were collected in eleven countries during the second half of 2020 and early 2021, with at least 644 participants per country (range 644 – 5900). In many countries, efforts were made to generate a nationally representative sample of participants.

The Russian survey was conducted by the Centre for Studies of Civil Society and the Nonprofit Sector (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia). The sample consists of 2,018 respondents, representative of the adult Russian population. Interviews were carried out using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing method (CATI). The interviewer read the questions to the respondent via the phone and recorded the answers using the designated software.

The current list of both mobile and landline numbers posted on the official website of the Federal Communications Agency was used for number selection, and any phone number had an equal probability of being included in the sample. Three variables were used to ensure the representativeness of the sample, namely gender, age, and place of residence.

Overall, the sample included 45% of men and 55% of women. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 92 years ( $M = 47.57$ ,  $SD = 17.3$ ); 49% were married and 41% had children under 18 years living at home. Roughly one in three (30%) had completed higher education, and approximately two-thirds (66%) said their household was able to make ends meet with either some or great difficulty. More information on the participant demographics can be found in the Appendix.

## 3.2 Timing and COVID-19 Context

The Russian survey was active from 10 to 28 August 2020. At that time in Russia the restrictions were significantly less strict compared to the beginning of the pandemic. The spread of the disease in the country began in mid-March, and by the end of the month international air traffic was discontinued; mass events were cancelled in all regions; universities and schools gradually switched to distance learning (TASS, 2021).

In April 2020 the so-called “self-isolation regime” was introduced first in Moscow, and then in most regions of the Russian Federation. It was forbidden to leave the house without necessity, and a system of digital passes for moving around the city was launched. Restaurants, malls, hotels, parks, cultural and entertainment facilities were temporarily closed. By August 2020, these restrictive measures were partially lifted, and the self-isolation regime was discontinued in most regions in the summer. It should be noted that the introduction of the restrictive measures was mostly left to the discretion of the regional authorities, so the residents of different regions were likely to experience different situations. The incidence rate also varied significantly depending on the region, with Moscow consistently having the highest number of cases by a large margin (Kommersant, 2020).

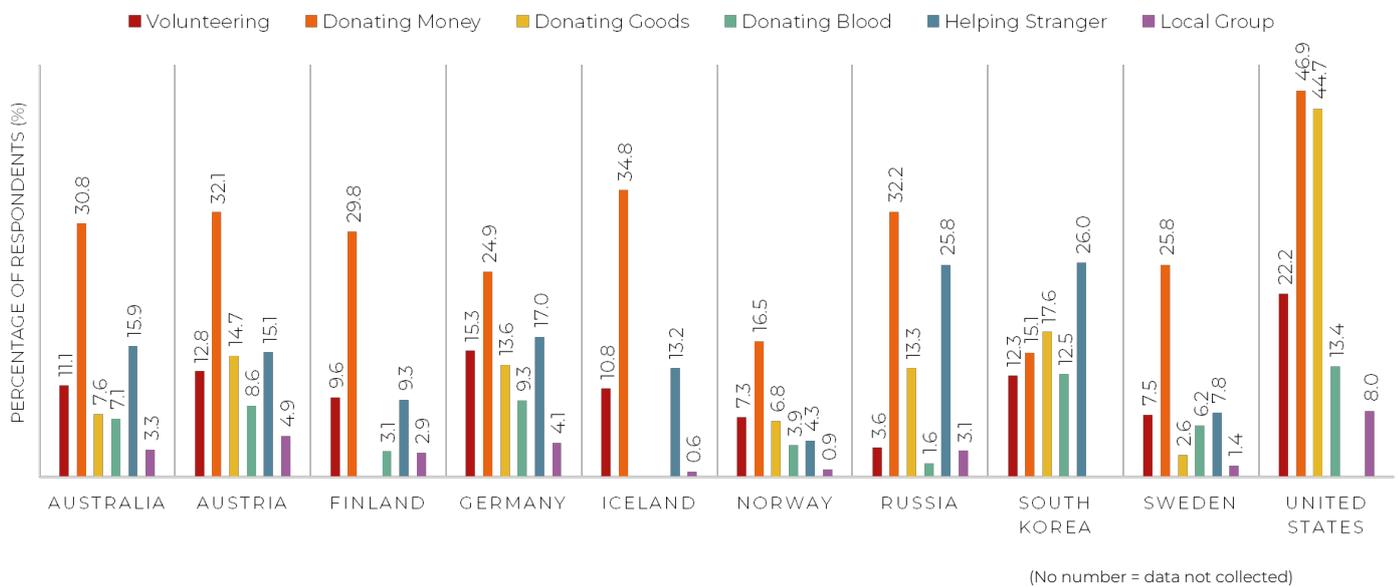
In July 2020, the unemployment rate reached 6.3%, showing an increase by 40.6% compared to July 2019 and reaching the highest level since 2012 (Federal State Statistics Service, 2020). Nevertheless, according to the Central Bank, the Russian economy passed the lowest point of the decline caused by the pandemic in May 2020, and was getting on the path of recovery (RBC, 2020). Several measures were introduced to support citizens, NGOs, small and medium-sized businesses, such as tax incentives, deferred rental payments, and preferential loans.

## 4. Global Comparison

As seen in Figure 1, manifestations of generosity behaviors varied across national contexts. We asked participants which generosity behaviors they had engaged in since the beginning of the pandemic. Some countries did not ask about all behaviors. In most countries, donating money was the most common generosity behavior reported. That holds true for Russia as well.

The second most common generosity behavior in Russia after donating money was helping strangers, and donating goods ranked third. The least popular activity was donating blood. In comparison to other countries, Russians and South Koreans were more likely to help strangers, and Americans were more likely to donate goods and volunteer time.

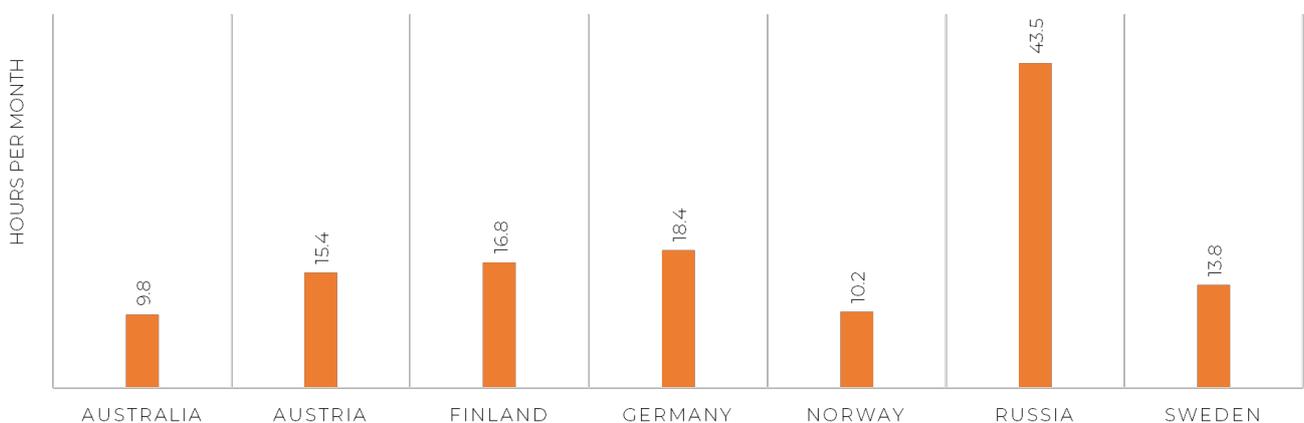
**Figure 1.** Generosity responses during pandemic



The extent of generosity behaviors varied significantly across nations. Respondents in different countries showed large differences in terms of the number of hours they volunteered each month<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 2).

Of the hours volunteered per month (Figure 2), Russia stands out with 43.5 hours, about 2.5 times more hours than volunteers in Austria, Finland, Sweden and Germany. Yet Russia also had the lowest percentage of volunteers during the pandemic (Figure 1: 3.6%), compared with 22.2% of Americans, 15.3% of Germans and 12.8% Austrians.

**Figure 2.** Average number of hours per month spent volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic



## 5. National Findings

The key purpose of this report is to examine how Russians responded to the COVID-19 crisis; in particular, how individuals came together to help support those directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19. Below we consider the different forms of generosity behavior that were common in Russia during the pandemic and how these generosity behaviors changed during the pandemic. We then discuss a particular example of how generosity manifested in Russia during the crisis.

### 5.1 Generosity During COVID-19

During the pandemic Russians engaged in a variety of helping and generosity behaviors shown in Figure 3: the majority (77 %) practiced social distancing and self-isolation. Financial support was mostly directed to family members and people from the inner circle. Every fourth respondent donated to strangers and similarly, every fourth one helped with small tasks like shopping. Some 30% provided free professional services, and every eighth respondent directed food and nonmonetary donations to charities distributing items to those in need. Overall, an overwhelming majority of Russians (98%) practiced some kind of generosity behavior.

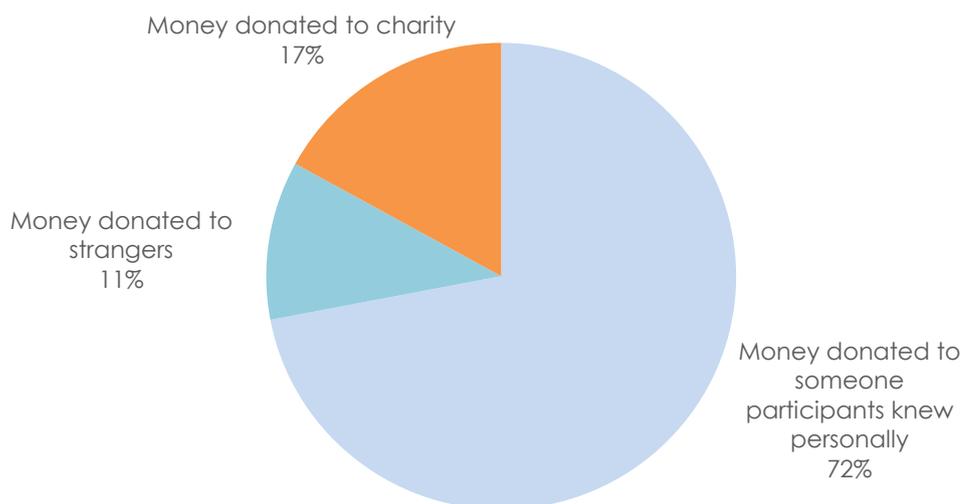
**Figure 3.** Russians' generosity behaviors during the pandemic



Only 2% of population avoided all of the above socially responsible and helping behaviors, including social distancing and self-isolation. When asked about the reasons that prevented them from caring about others during the pandemic, this group of people mentioned lack of opportunity to help (39%) difficult financial circumstances (29%) and lack of time (17%). The most frequent responses were “No one approached/asked me for help” and “There was no one to be helped.” Some of the respondents did not believe in the reality of the pandemic threat: “I think that coronavirus is no more than a figment and I am not going to participate in this.”

Russians were most active in donating to family and close kin, friends and neighbors. Almost three quarters of respondents (72%) gave money to people they know personally, while only 25% of the respondents made donations to strangers. Even fewer people donated to charities (21%) and religious organizations (also 21%). The amount of donations to strangers was four to six times lower in comparison with the financial support of those personally known: almost half of donations to strangers were less than 1,000 rubles (about \$13.5). Donations to family, friends and neighbors ranged from 1,000 to 20,000 rubles, half of them exceeding 5,000 rubles (about \$67.5). The distribution of the donation amount is shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4.** Recipients of money donations during the COVID-19 pandemic



As could be expected the prevailing amount of donations was received by nonprofits working in the healthcare sector followed by those providing welfare support.

## 5.2 Changes in Generosity

To evaluate the changes in generosity behavior resulting from the pandemic, two questions were asked about possible changes in giving to charities and volunteering since the COVID-19 outbreak. Answers to the first question revealed that most of the population (68%) did not make charitable donations at all. In the opinion of those that made charitable donations (32%), the pandemic did not exercise any tangible impact on their giving behaviors. Only about 5% of the country's population started to donate more money. Respondents indicated not to have made any other changes in their giving due to the pandemic.

They reported no changes in the causes they donate to, the number of causes they gave to or the method with which they made donations. Only 1% of all those making donations said they started practicing new ways of giving during the pandemic.

Along the same lines, when asked about the changes in volunteering patterns during the pandemic, 92% of Russians said that they did not participate in volunteering. Overall volunteering patterns in Russia have shown even less diversity than giving practices since the pandemic outbreak. More than half of those engaged in volunteering did not see any changes during the pandemic in volunteering activities. New directions, such as online volunteering and others, did not receive any noticeable impetus during the pandemic. This can be accounted for by several factors. First of all, only a minor part of Russian citizens (3% at the time of the pandemic) participate in formal volunteering through organizations which may be more apt to seek new modes of sustainable activity during the crisis than informal groups of individuals. Moreover, many of those engaged in helping behavior and generosity informally even do not consider themselves volunteers. Overall, the COVID-19 crisis did not bring about any growth in the numbers of formal volunteers engaged with nonprofits.

Those few who changed their volunteering behavior were generally inclined to volunteer less often mostly due to movement restrictions, concerns of the virus transmission, or financial instability during the pandemic:

“Can’t leave my house due to the self-isolation regime”

“Self-isolation. We were not allowed to go out, the city was on lockdown”

“My financial condition got worse”

“My wife is pregnant, and I am afraid to infect her”

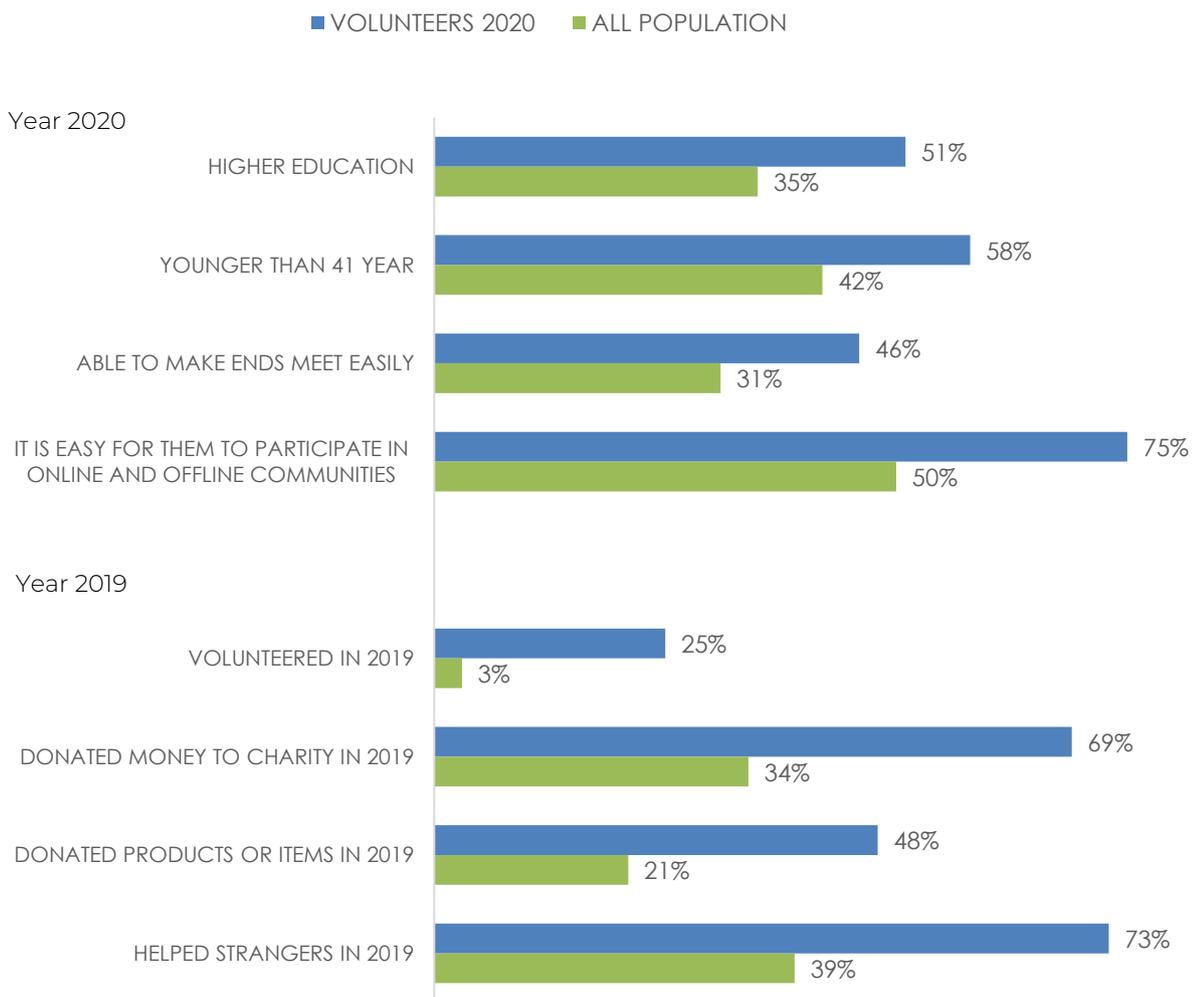
“I am scared to leave my house, it’s better to stay at home and wait until everything is recovered”

Although there has been no increase in the size of the formal volunteering segment and its expansion in the new spheres, the pandemic did not result in the reduction of the number of formal volunteers. In 2020, just as in 2019, according to the data of the All-Russia population survey conducted by the Center for Studies of Civil Society and the Nonprofit Sector in 2019 (n=2,0000, 18+), 3% of the Russians were engaged in formal volunteering. However, only one-third among volunteers of the pandemic time were engaged in formal volunteering before the pandemic. Most of formal volunteers joined nonprofit organizations after the pandemic outbreak, although they had practiced various forms of helping behavior. We call this newly joined cohort “Volunteers 2020” and find pronounced differences in their socio-demographic characteristics as compared to volunteers in the pre-pandemic period. The most striking difference between them is in the contrast between the Volunteers 2020 and average Russian citizens in 2019 and during the pandemic.

More than half of Volunteers 2020 are male (57%), about a third of them are aged from 31 to 40 years (before the pandemic, 38% of volunteers were under 30). The presence of more highly educated volunteer cadre compared to the situation before the pandemic is also evident. Furthermore, typical Volunteers 2020 differ both from the volunteers of the previous period and from average Russians in several important respects (some of these differences can be seen in Figure 5). Most of Volunteers 2020 (90%) practiced various forms of helping behavior before the pandemic. Significantly more often than average Russians, they made charitable donations, helped strangers, made nonmonetary donations to charities, were donors of blood and plasma. Also, Volunteers 2020 differ from an average Russian by a more positive subjective perception of physical health, more active Internet presence (daily online activity), lively online and offline communication and interaction in social networks, positive outlook for the future and a high level of interpersonal trust. Every second participant in formal volunteering of the pandemic period feels happy (among Russians, only one-third share the feeling of happiness). In contrast, volunteers of the pre-pandemic period shared more similarity than differences with average Russians.

There has been not much time since the outbreak of the pandemic and further research is needed to examine in depth the changes brought to generosity behaviors by the cadre of volunteers that have been joining the nonprofit sector during the time of the pandemic, their needs and capabilities. It would seem that these new actors can become potential drivers for involving broader categories of populations in generosity and helping behavior.

Figure 5. Volunteers 2020 compared with the average citizen



### 5.3 Case Studies

Although this report deals mostly with individual generosity behaviors, owners of Russia's largest companies, entrepreneurs and founders of major charitable funds, such as the Vladimir Potanin Charitable Fund, have been making huge private donations to support nonprofits (Mersianova et al. 2015). The Vladimir Potanin Foundation was among the first Russian private foundations to respond to the risks and challenges the COVID-19 pandemic facing NGOs.

On March 23, 2020 at the outset of the pandemic first wave, Vladimir Potanin announced that his fund would provide an additional one billion rubles to support NGOs in this time of crisis, thereby increasing the 2019 budget of the fund by 82%. Over the following 13 days, the fund designed, launched a series of new grant competitions and introduced more flexible conditions for its current grantees. In addition to ongoing grant competitions, the fund launched innovative grant programs specifically focusing on minimizing risks for NGOs and enhancing NGO sustainability in crisis time.

The Vladimir Potanin Foundation launched two new anti-crisis grant competitions, named “Effective Philanthropy” and “The School of Philanthropy”. Both these programs aimed to develop financial sustainability of nonprofits and support the development of strategic philanthropy in Russia. The former program served to identify and scale up best philanthropic practices. The latter one supported and disseminated local philanthropic initiatives in support of vulnerable populations and targeted community foundations and resource centers. Rather than rendering direct support to nonprofit organizations, both programs provided a rapid response to alleviate financial risk for NGOs during the pandemic promoting solidarity and self-help initiatives at the local level.

An example of an NGO funded in the School of Philanthropy program, is the Happy Old Age Foundation. With the funding they are targeting new donor groups, particularly, of the younger generations, to support senior citizens in nursing homes. Owing to the seed funding of 10 mln rubles from the “Effective Philanthropy” program, the “Humanitarian Project” NGO in Novosibirsk, established an endowment which received some 10 mln rubles more from the local pharmaceutical company. With the funding from the Potanin Foundation, The Siberian Center for Citizen Initiatives Support has developed an online training course for NGOs focusing on evaluating the impact of charitable programs.



Happy Old Age NGO supported by the Potanin Foundation (2021)

## 6. Conclusion

In this section we briefly summarize the findings about Russians' generosity behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic and elaborate potential implications both for government policy and nonprofit management.

### 6.1 Key Findings

There are five key findings from this report.

1. A variety of helping behaviors was typical for Russians during the pandemic. Overall 98% of Russian citizens engaged in some or other form of helping behavior.
2. Donating money was one of the most common helping behaviors during the pandemic and donations to people personally known were strongly prevailing. Helping strangers and donating goods followed on the list of helping behaviors. The least common were setting up or joining a local group to help with the crisis, engaging in formal volunteering (through an organization) and donating blood and plasma.
3. The pandemic did not make any significant changes in increasing or reducing helping and generosity behaviors.
4. A new cohort of active formal volunteers has been emerging since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, Volunteers 2020. The new cohort differs noticeably from both typical volunteers of the previous period and an average Russian citizen. According to their socio-demographic characteristics, a significant part of the newly joined volunteers are some 10 years older and more educated than those who volunteered before the pandemic. Differing from the average Russian, they share a more positive subjective perception of physical health, a highly active Internet presence, a more positive outlook for the future and a high level of interpersonal trust. Overall, members of the new cohort demonstrate more differences from an average Russian than volunteers of the pre-pandemic time.
5. A small percentage of Russians mentioned a lack of opportunity as the most significant barrier that prevented them from practicing helping and generosity behaviors.

### 6.2 Implications for Nonprofits

Results suggest that although Russians engaged in various types of helping behavior during the pandemic, in comparison with other nations, the total share of Russians engaged in volunteering and charitable giving remains relatively low. In practicing their generosity behaviors, they tend to avoid institutionalized channels, and therefore, prefer to make direct donations rather than through charities or funds and engage in informal volunteering. This can be explained by a sort of "path dependence" trajectory resulting from the traditional reliance of citizens on the state welfare support (Mersianova et al., 2010, p. 19) and lack of trust in charitable funds and nonprofits (Mersianova et al., 2015, p.259). The pandemic crisis may provide new opportunities for nonprofits and charities to raise public trust and awareness of their positive impact.

There also may be new opportunities for partnering between government institutions, charities, and volunteer associations, enhancing the credibility of nonprofits in the public eye and facilitating public participation in giving and volunteering.

During times of crisis nonprofits can:

- Focus on keeping up the current level of volunteering and giving. Make consistent efforts to involve more citizens in helping behaviors through wide dissemination of information about the positive impact of their work to help with the crisis. and Provide communities with the tools and platforms to engage in generosity behaviors.
- Enhance financial and institutional sustainability by disseminating information and participating in specialized crisis response training and grant competition programs offered by foundations, resource centers and governments at the local and national levels.
- Follow up on the needs of the beneficiaries and track changes in their needs, establishing channels for charities and local initiative groups to receive relevant information.
- Educate nonprofits about new digital tools and ways of continuing to serve their communities and involving new categories of volunteers, such as online volunteering.
- Respond proactively to the needs of the new cohort of volunteers, Volunteers 2020, engaging in formal volunteering during the pandemic. Provide them with opportunities for professional development and becoming potential drivers in the engagement of broader categories of population in helping and generosity behavior.

## 6.3 Implications for Government Policy

The results showed that an overwhelming majority of Russians expect government to provide support to people during self-isolation and the crisis. Only one-third of respondents think of charities as potential sources of help. In the crisis context, government is in a position not only to continue measures of direct financial support to various population categories, nonprofits and small and medium enterprises, but also improve the sustainability of nonprofits and raise their public image.

During times of crisis governments can:

- Continue and expand crisis support measures raising financial sustainability of NGOs and stimulate public generosity.
- Develop local and municipal grant programs targeting both local nonprofits and informal grassroots initiatives helping with the crisis.
- Provide incentives for effective partnerships between government institutions, particularly in the welfare sphere (hospitals, nursing homes, social services) with nonprofits to respond to urgent public needs during the pandemic.
- Set up and support counseling mechanisms and platforms engaging both government and key nonprofits to work out joint crisis response measures at various sectoral and government levels.

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# 8. Appendix

## 8.1 Notes

1. A full overview of generosity behaviors can be found on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/mznqu/>).
2. Due to unusual outliers, the data has been winsorized for two countries at the 99th (Australia) or 95th (Russia) percentile.

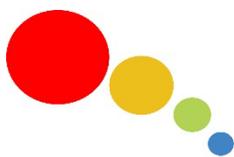
## 8.2 Additional Information About Sample

- Age distribution of the sample is as follows: 8% participants are 18-24 years old, 55% are 25-54 years old, and 36% are 55 and over.
- Residential spread of the sample: 21% participants reside in the largest cities (population more than 1 million), and 26% are rural dwellers. 53% live in smaller cities or urban-type settlements.
- Sample marital status: 17% single, 49% married, 11% in domestic partnership, 10% divorced, and 13% widowed.
- Income of sample: Roughly one third of the participants has sufficient income, 3% saying their household was able to make ends meet very easily, 15% saying easily, and 13% saying fairly easily. 30% indicated some difficulty, 19% said that they have difficulty and 17% reported great difficulty.
- Religious affiliation of sample: 28% participants do not consider themselves believers. Apart from them, most participants stated that religion was important in their lives: 15% saying that it was very important, 28% saying somewhat important, 23% saying not too important, and only 4% saying religion was not important at all.



NATIONAL RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY

The Center for Studies of Civil Society and the Nonprofit Sector at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia) leads academic research and education in third sector and civil society development in Russia and the post-Soviet space empowering government and nonprofits with informed advice on a range of topics including philanthropy, volunteerism, nonprofit-government collaboration and citizen self-organization. The research builds on a unique database generated in the framework of the large-scale Civil Society Monitoring Project conducted by the Center since 2006.



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