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SERVING BEYOND DUTY: THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

ABSTRACT

This article examines social responsibility practices, particularly volunteer initiatives, implemented in selected Bulgarian public administrations. It focuses on how the principles of public social responsibility (PSR) are adopted within the organization and put into action. This topic is important because it focuses on the role of public institutions in the transformation of contemporary society. The study aims to identify the formal, internal, or informal frameworks that govern PSR and employee volunteering. It also seeks to identify distinctive good practices. Using qualitative document analysis, the study reviews formal frameworks, documented initiatives, and evidence of employee volunteering. A chronological review is conducted to highlight changes and identify trends. The findings show that although in most cases there are no formal PSR strategies, ministries regularly participate in socially beneficial projects, often initiated by the employees themselves. The analysis highlights the high fragmentation of actions, but at the same time, increasing interest in CSR-related activities in Bulgaria. It is emphasized that PSR can improve public trust, social cohesion, and sustainable governance. The article provides a broad overview of PSR practice in Bulgaria, as well as suggestions for future development.

KEYWORDS: public social responsibility (PSR), corporate social responsibility (CSR), volunteering, public administration, good governance

JEL: M14, H83, D64

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has formed a long-standing focus of academic and business discourse. Generally understood to be a business model that helps a company be socially accountable to itself, its stakeholders, and the public, CSR encourages companies to have a positive impact on society and the environment. Apart from making profits, it calls for actions that benefit the community, employees, and the planet. Common CSR activities include philanthropy, ethical labor practices, environmental activities, and volunteerism.

While CSR principles are well established in the private sector, their application in the public sector is a newer and interesting area of research. In this context, CSR becomes Public Social Responsibility (PSR). PSR can be seen as responsible practices and policies that public administrative bodies undertake beyond their legally and functionally defined roles, voluntarily contributing to the well-being of society and the environment. Unlike corporations, which are primarily driven by profit and shareholder value, public institutions are essentially driven by the public interest and the effective delivery of public services. Thus, the motivation behind PSR and the way it is implemented are different. For public administration, practicing PSO is not about building brand image or attracting consumers, but about increasing public trust, creating a culture of service, and showing greater concern for the well-being of the community. In the field of public administration, PSR refers to activities

that go beyond the role, functions, and service delivery for which it is usually responsible and aim to contribute to the broader public good. This perspective takes the position that public administration, rather than simply implementing policies, should be a catalyst for sustainable development, ethical labor practices, local empowerment (e.g., in the community), transparency, and accountability in the institution. These efforts can be crucial in transforming public administration institutions into active participants in the creation of more equitable, inclusive, and responsible social structures. The most obvious example in this regard is **environmental care**, including the integration of renewable energy sources, the reduction of carbon emissions, and comprehensive waste management. Here, it is important to finance green infrastructure, such as public transport, energy-efficient housing, and urban green spaces. This contributes to long-term environmental sustainability, in line with the implementation of environmental regulations to protect natural resources and public health. In the area of **ethical labour practices**, public administration must ensure that the public sector pays workers fairly and maintains safe working conditions. It is necessary to promote work discipline and culture, and the active participation of administrators in public projects and volunteering. It is imperative to create a new working environment that encourages initiative, proactivity, and recognition of contributions, transforming civil servants from executors into change agents. Another important dimension of social responsibility is **community engagement and development**, and here public administration can help to actively engage citizens through public discussions, participation in public consultations, advisory forums, and participatory budgeting mechanisms. By funding and supporting programs led by community or local organizations, public administration will truly respond to the community's needs. In addition, civic awareness and participation can be increased through greater accessibility and transparency of public policies and services, and joint decision-making. This will increase trust in public institutions and their work. The pillars of democratic governance are **transparency and accountability**, which can be strengthened through awareness, anti-corruption measures, and independent bodies that oversee those who exercise power and who have no interest in decision-making. Public administration also has the opportunity to create, participate in, and support charitable and other innovative civic projects, such as social programs, innovative service delivery mechanisms, support for charitable organizations, and awards for socially responsible companies. Such initiatives would contribute to a different influence of the public sector in solving complex social problems.

These are just some examples that show how public administration can go beyond its traditional tasks to promote social responsibility and help create a more sustainable, fair, and resilient society.

In order to better understand the development of public social responsibility and its expression in different contexts, it is necessary to review the main studies and theoretical approaches in the literature.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of CSR has changed over the years from a voluntary business practice to a strategic approach that requires effort and targeted action, not only in the private sector but also in the public sector. While CSR traditionally referred to the responsibilities of private enterprises toward stakeholders, some scientific research supports its extension into the public sector under the framework of PSR (Chymis, D'Anselmi, & Triantopoulos, 2016). This extension stems from recognition that public administration is a central institutional actor in shaping societal, environmental, and economic conditions, and thus must adopt proactive responsibility beyond legal compliance and service delivery. Research on CSR in public

administration emphasizes the need to integrate it into institutional work. Aras et al. (2015) argue that, based on institutional economics, public choice theory, and management research, responsible public administration improves institutional trust, increases transparency, and promotes sustainable development. Budai & Gáspár (2021) point out that the OECD's general principles for public administration – reliability, accountability, openness, and efficiency – are increasingly being rethought through the lens of CSR and linked to broader social and environmental commitments. Some empirical studies – the analysis by Jurkowska-Gomułka, Kurczewska, and Bilan (2021) on the Polish central administration, provide clear indications that CSR in public institutions manifests itself in several areas, both in policy planning and in operational activities, although reporting is inconsistent. Poland's experience shows that CSR is gradually being institutionalized through specific databases of good practices, working groups, projects, and reports. However, it has not yet been systematically implemented in public administration. Comparative data from Lagos State, Nigeria, show that CSR activities – mainly in the areas of social welfare, education, and infrastructure – complement government programs, with public administration acting as both a facilitator and a participant (Aina-Obe, 2019). Petrov (2023) explains volunteering as a social phenomenon that simultaneously benefits the volunteer, the recipient, and society as a whole, i.e., it has both individual and collective benefits. The analysis distinguishes between internal motivation – personal satisfaction, skill development, and moral satisfaction – and external social benefits, including enhanced social cohesion, increased community resilience, and improved public services. His article emphasizes that volunteering can serve as a strategic tool for achieving long-term social goals, especially when incorporated into public policy. Furthermore, Petrov argues that institutional support, clear legal frameworks, and public recognition are essential to maximizing the mutual benefits of volunteering for individuals and communities. Kereziev (2025) notes that during the COVID-19 pandemic, innovative applications of CSR in public administration have emerged in the Bulgarian context, including digital communication platforms and volunteer support networks. He explains that in a crisis, the introduction of CSR in the public sector is accelerated, and the strategic value of socially responsible management is enhanced. A review of various literature sources again shows that there are no standardized frameworks for CSR, and that not only in Bulgaria but also in many other places, there is significant fragmentation. This is also evidenced by the institutional analysis conducted by Chymis and Skouloudis (2014), which shows that the national perception of CSR is strongly linked to institutional quality management, civic activism, and management effectiveness. Some authors pay special attention to the role of CSR in public administration, linking it to organizational effectiveness and quality management systems (Střihavková, Svobodová, & Vysloužilová, 2021). They insist that integrating CSR principles – stakeholder engagement, sustainable resource use, ethical management – into organizational strategy can lead to benefits such as improved public image and greater employee engagement. There are also challenges related to the lack of a common understanding and definition, poorly developed implementation mechanisms, and inconsistent political will and desire for implementation. Pevnaya et al. (2020) examine governmental support for volunteering in the Russian Federation as a driver for co-production of public services and sustainable development. Their study emphasizes that institutional support, including legal regulation, funding, and other resources, is crucial for integrating volunteering into public administration. The authors point out that post-communist countries face a number of specific challenges: weak civil society, lack of trust in government-led initiatives, and fledgling volunteering. At the same time, they identify state-led volunteering as a possible tool for democratization, but only if it is implemented with transparency and mutual trust between public institutions and citizens. Milkov (2023) presents an additional perspective by linking PSR to social entrepreneurship in public administration. He believes that promoting social entrepreneurship

in state institutions not only meets the needs of society but also becomes a catalyst for innovation in administrative processes. The author proposes a three-sector model involving the public, private, and voluntary sectors. Public administration acts both as a regulator and as a participant in socially oriented initiatives. His analysis highlights the potential of administrative structures to create conditions that promote employment, facilitate career development, and work towards the inclusion of vulnerable groups, but this can only happen if there are adequate resources, policies, and effective cross-sectoral partnerships.

The theoretical and empirical studies presented highlight the need for a more in-depth examination of PSR in a specific national context. This also determines the methodological approach of the present study.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study's methodology is a qualitative, documentary-analytical design. The documents were selected through a comprehensive institutional review of all 19 ministries, using predefined criteria related to PSR, volunteering, and community engagement. Publicly available strategies, reports, policy documents, and project descriptions were extracted from the official websites of the ministries and supplemented with all editions of the Institute of Public Administration's annual collection of good practices, particularly the section on the "Social Responsibility" award. The analysis uses thematic coding to identify recurring patterns, formal frameworks, and emerging practices, enabling comparison across ministries despite differences in reporting transparency.

Publicly available information from the official websites of ministries, strategic documents, and policy reports was systematically reviewed to identify existing social responsibility frameworks, initiatives, and employee volunteering practices in the 19 active ministries in Bulgaria. Attention was focused on the Concept for the implementation of social responsibility issued by the National Institute for Social Security, as it represents a rare, formalized framework for CSR in a national context. In addition, the annual compendium "Good practices in public administration" (2015-2024), published by the Institute of Public Administration, was examined to identify, categorize, and compare relevant "social responsibility" initiatives over time. Evidence of both formal policy integration and informal or ad hoc practices was assessed, with a comparison across years to identify trends, variations in participation, and emerging patterns in PSR in the public sector.

The article contributes to the outline of current practices in the field of public social responsibility, but the study also has several methodological limitations. The analysis is based exclusively on publicly available documents, official websites, and published reports, which means that internal practices, informal initiatives, and non-public institutional procedures remain outside the scope of the article. Since the official published information of the ministries varies significantly in scope, frequency, and transparency, the comparison between institutions may not fully reflect the actual scope of PSR and volunteering activities. Document analysis cannot reflect employees' internal motivation or institutional attitudes. This suggests a more in-depth study using interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and other tools. These limitations suggest that the results provide an indicative rather than a comprehensive overview and highlight the need for future research using mixed methods and more in-depth empirical research.

The information obtained through documentary analysis allows for a clearer conceptual reframing of PSR and reveals its evolution.

3. REFRAMING PUBLIC SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Increasing importance is being attached to the implementation of sustainable solutions, which requires public administrations not only to enforce laws and provide services, but also to take on a proactive, strategic role and work actively for the well-being of society. What business defines as CSR, the public sector must reflect through PSR. Legal responsibility alone does not guarantee responsiveness to complex social needs, i.e., it is no longer enough to simply report on finances or ensure that there is no misuse of resources; a commitment to addressing larger social and environmental issues is also necessary. The transition to PSR is also defined as part of a global movement called Global Social Responsibility (GSR), linking CSR, PSR, and ISR through volunteering (Budai & Gáspár, 2021). To implement this concept, public administration should not only monitor, regulate, and/or promote CSR in other areas, but also adopt and institutionalize these principles in its work. This is a model in which it serves as an example and creates and affirms public values in a way that meets public requirements.

The Global social responsibility reveals several key elements, shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Elements of Global Social Responsibility (GSR)

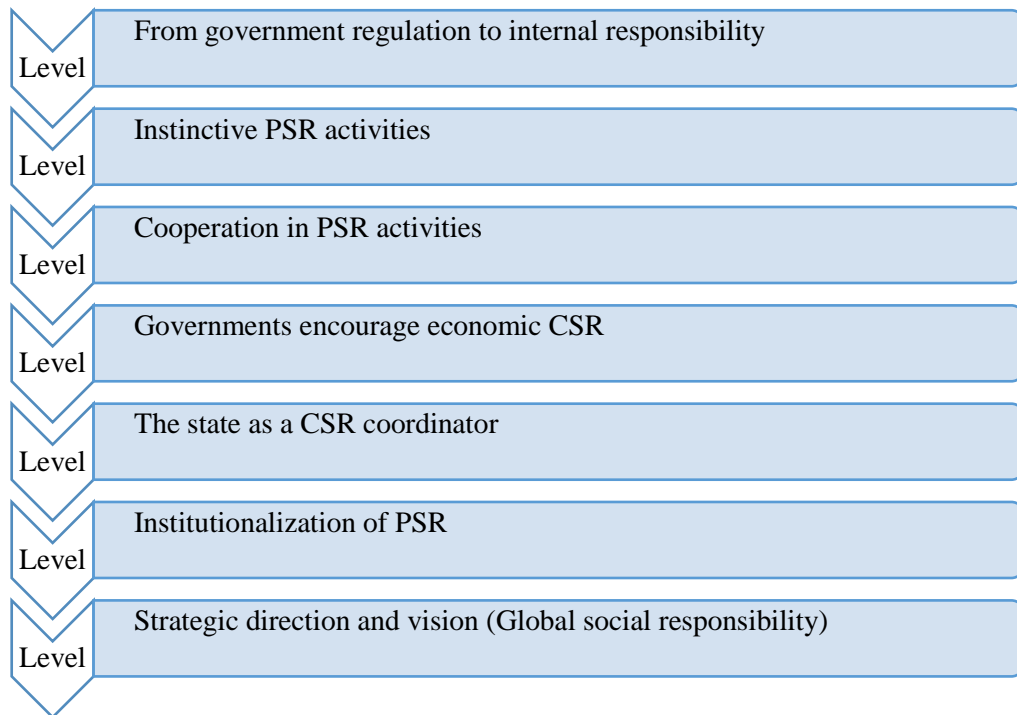


Source: Own, adapted from a study by the National University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary
<https://en.uni-nke.hu/>

A study conducted by the National University of Public Administration (2017-2018) outlines the development of PSR, covering seven consecutive stages. It begins with CSR stimulated by governments. Later, it moves on to the implementation of separate, often random and informal CSR activities carried out within the public administration. Such actions subsequently attract and develop into structured partnerships (level 3). At the next level 4, there is already proactive political support for economic CSR, which leads to a strengthened coordinating role for the state in cross-sectoral CSR efforts (level 5). PSR is institutionalized at levels 6 and 7, incorporated into activities, and embedded in long-term strategies. This final phase reaches its peak with the mutual penetration and complementarity of CSR, PSR, and ISR in a broader model - global social responsibility (GSR). In GSR, all sectors and societies develop on the basis of sustainability and ethical management.

The levels of PSR described and explained are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Levels of public social responsibility (PSR)



Source: Own, adapted from a study by the National University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary
<https://en.uni-nke.hu/>

This development highlights that PSR must transform and move from random or reactive initiatives to targeted and deliberate practices oriented towards strategy and vision, or responsibility must be distributed and visible, embedded in management at all levels. Achieving global social responsibility through the leading role of public administration can only happen if there are clear strategic frameworks and responsible cross-sectoral cooperation. In addition, it is necessary to institutionalize PSR practices and use clear indicators to monitor and track progress.

At the beginning, there is **state regulation**, which is transformed and becomes an internal responsibility. While the concept of CSR is most often associated with business, it was historically the state that laid the groundwork for its emergence in the early 20th century. Through legislation and policies, governments initiate the process of regulating the economy by imposing principles of responsibility on the private sector (business). In this way, they act as an external catalyst by forcing businesses to comply with certain social and environmental standards. However, this model of **internal initiative for social responsibility and self-regulation** does not exist for public administration itself. While the state-imposed responsibility on others, its own voluntary practices, those that went beyond its direct mandate, remained on the periphery. This distinction between the state's role as a regulator and its own role as a subject of voluntary activity is the central focus of this study.

Instinctive PSR activities - Research in this field clearly indicates that public institutions, in addition to their mandatory tasks, are almost constantly engaged in activities that fall within the scope of PSR, yet they do not manage or recognize them as such. This "instinctive" form of PSR is particularly interesting because the motives behind it are diverse and often purely personal. This level emerges spontaneously and is not regulated by internal policies or strategies. The activities stem from the personal initiative of employees, their civic consciousness, and a desire to contribute to society.

Cooperation in PSR activities - In a democratic system of public administration and open governance, it is a natural and logical progression for public bodies to become active players in implementing CSR activities. This applies particularly to partnerships that establish cooperation with both economic operators and NGOs. At this stage, the PSR no longer relies solely on a series of impulsive or isolated actions from within but becomes a structured and collaborative commitment. This phase of the PSR is characterized by the establishment of cooperation and the implementation of initiatives in which public entities do not act in isolation but leverage their special position and use the public sector to form and participate in partnerships to achieve public goals.

Government promotion of economic CSR goes beyond direct involvement and includes the government's role as a facilitator and catalyst for social good among all economic actors. Governments introduce and implement a wide range of policies, programs, and services to encourage economic actors to deepen their CSR activities. Here, the function of public administration is shifting from a direct participant in CSR to a facilitator of CSR. It is not enough for the government to carry out its own voluntary activities; it wants to create an ecosystem in which private enterprises receive economic incentives to implement their own social and environmental projects.

The state's role as a CSR coordinator is achieved in the most advanced phase of the CSR process, when the state assumes a coordinating role and fully recognizes the strategic importance of social responsibility. Here, public administration moves from standard promotion of CSR or individual participation in initiatives to actively taking the initiative to "engage" in cross-sectoral cooperation. In this case, the government acts as a central hub that coordinates and supports joint programs involving the public, private, and non-profit sectors.

Institutionalization of CSR can occur when CSR concepts are applied at all levels and form the basis of even the operational work of public sector institutions. This level marks the transition from ad hoc initiatives to a structured approach. Public bodies, especially local authorities, are beginning to recognize a new set of voluntary tasks and activities, integrating them into their core functions and decision-making processes.

Strategic direction and vision (Global social responsibility) - The ultimate evolution of social responsibility is the emergence of a unified framework that transcends sectoral boundaries. Research has identified several processes that point towards the rise of what we can call GSR. At this highest level, the distinct concepts of CSR, PSR, CCSR, and ISR - which are based on volunteering - are combined and integrated into a single, cohesive vision.

For a better understanding of the different levels and accompanying initiatives for PSR, examples are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of PSR practices across development levels

Levels	Examples
1	An external catalyst, compelling businesses to comply with social and environmental standards. NA examples
2	Informal donations: Employees collecting funds for a colleague in need or a local charitable cause. Educational initiatives: Staff who voluntarily organize lectures or training sessions for the local community, using their professional skills. Environmental protection activities: The informal organization of clean-up events in a city park or around an administrative building.
3	Public-private partnerships: Joint projects to address social or environmental challenges, such as developing new infrastructure or implementing sustainable urban programs. Volunteering initiatives: Organizing joint volunteer days where employees from the public administration and private companies work together on a community project. Shared expertise: Public bodies providing technical expertise or resources to support a CSR project of a private company, and vice versa.
4	Policy and legislative frameworks: Implementing tax incentives, subsidies, or favorable procurement rules for companies with strong CSR practices. Public recognition and awards: Establishing national awards or certification programs to publicly recognize and celebrate businesses that demonstrate excellence in social responsibility. Information and support services: Providing resources, training, and guidance to help businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), develop and implement their own CSR strategies.
5	Cross-sectoral cooperation: The government initiates and manages partnerships that bring together businesses, civil society organizations, and public institutions to address complex societal challenges. Strategic resource allocation: Unlike previous levels, the state may allocate budgetary resources to fund and implement these coordinated programs, ensuring their long-term sustainability and effectiveness. These programs often cover the government's own operations, embedding social responsibility into the very fabric of public service. Unified vision: The government develops a unified vision for social responsibility that aligns with national development goals. It serves as a model, demonstrating how to integrate social and environmental considerations into all aspects of governance.
6	Formal frameworks: Partnership systems evolve beyond simple cooperation and gain a new dimension with formal, institutional frameworks. This might involve creating dedicated departments, committees, or roles responsible for managing social responsibility initiatives. Strategic integration: PSR is no longer an optional add-on but is integrated into the institution's overall strategy, mission, and vision. This ensures that social and environmental considerations are a central part of policy-making and service delivery. Synergy and efficiency: By institutionalizing these efforts, synergies between inter-sectoral cooperation are strengthened. The process becomes more efficient, leading to more impactful and sustainable outcomes for the community.
7	Integrated approach: responsibility is no longer seen as the exclusive domain of a single sector. Instead, a collective and integrated approach is adopted, where businesses, governments, and individual citizens all play a crucial, interconnected role in addressing global and local challenges. Shared vision: A shared vision for sustainable development and social well-being is created, fostering a culture where all actors work in synergy towards common goals. Collective impact: The focus shifts to maximizing collective impact. The state, for instance, not only facilitates CSR and conducts its own PSR activities but also actively nurtures and supports a culture of individual volunteering (ISR) within its workforce and the wider society.

Source: Own

After clarifying the conceptual levels and logic of PSR development, the question arises as to what extent these models are actually reflected in Bulgarian public administration. The

following section presents empirical observations, starting with good practices from Bulgarian ministries.

4. BEST PRACTICES IN PSR: EVIDENCE FROM BULGARIA

Although it is a practice that is familiar and inherent to the private sector, social responsibility is increasingly seen as an integral part of the work of public administration. In this context, the present analysis aims to examine how and to what extent the 19 ministries in the Republic of Bulgaria apply the principles of social responsibility through their policies, programs, councils, initiatives, and internal practices.

Table 2 summarizes the information about official documents, main activities, and examples of social responsibility of 19 Bulgarian ministries.

Table 2. Overview of social responsibility practices in Bulgarian ministries

Institution	Special SR document	Main social responsibility activities	Examples
Ministry of Agriculture and Food	No	Support for low-income households, quality of rural life	“Easter basket” campaign, CAF public service improvement initiatives
Ministry of Culture	No	Cultural inclusion through events and programs	Cultural projects with community participation, initiatives supporting minority access to culture
Ministry of Defense	No	Civil protection, crisis response, staff welfare programs	Military support during natural disasters, welfare services for armed forces families
Ministry of Economy and Industry	Partial	Sustainable investments, CSR initiatives via Advisory Council	Participation in national CSR advisory bodies, promoting responsible business practices
Ministry of Education and Science	No	Educational CSR programs, volunteering clubs in schools	Integrating CSR topics into school curricula, creating student clubs for social projects
Ministry of e-Government	No	Digital accessibility, transparency through open data	Publishing open datasets for public use, improving access to e-services for all citizens
Ministry of Energy	No	Addressing energy poverty, sustainable transition	Programs supporting vulnerable households in paying for energy
Ministry of Environment and Water	No	Environmental sustainability, green public procurement	Implementing a national environmental strategy, encouraging sustainable consumption and social justice in resource management, and promoting eco-friendly purchasing
Ministry of Finance	No	CSR-related reporting for public investments, budget transparency	Requiring disclosure of social and environmental investment impacts
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	No	Support for Bulgarian citizens abroad, cultural diplomacy	Organizing assistance for nationals in crisis situations, cultural exchange projects with social impact
Ministry of Health	No	Healthcare access for vulnerable groups, preventive campaigns	National vaccination drives, screening programs in underserved areas
Ministry of Innovation and Growth	No	Support for social entrepreneurship, CSR recognition awards	Funding for social enterprises, organizing CSR competitions

Institution	Special SR document	Main social responsibility activities	Examples
Ministry of Interior	No	Public safety campaigns, disaster relief volunteering	Road safety awareness drives, staff participation in firefighting, and emergency response
Ministry of Justice	No	Social program in correctional facilities, volunteering	Award-winning social projects in prisons, a certificate for social responsibility through good practices, and reintegration initiatives
Ministry of Labor and Social Policy	Partial	Activities: Partnerships with NGOs, social inclusion programs	National strategies to assist vulnerable groups, corporate volunteering initiatives
Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works	No	Infrastructure with social affordability and access focus	URBACT initiatives, including the CITIES4CSR project (Empowering Local Public Authorities to Co-Design and Implement CSR Policies), an EU-funded action under URBACT III that supports cities in forming cross-sector CSR partnerships and implementing socially responsible urban development practices.
Ministry of Tourism	No	Indirect CSR through sustainable tourism policies	Promoting eco-friendly travel practices and responsible tourism campaigns
Ministry of Transport and Communications	No	Road safety campaigns and public awareness	National strategy promoting shared responsibility for traffic safety
Ministry of Youth and Sports	No (no active site with CSR info)	Not established	Not identified due to a lack of available public information

Source: Own (Adapted from the official websites of the Bulgarian ministries.)

This study focuses only on the 19 ministries in Bulgaria, and the results show that these institutions lack formal or independent strategies for CSR or PSR. Public authorities work on social responsibility issues on a piecemeal and ad hoc basis, often implementing isolated projects with an element of CSR woven into their organizational tasks. This suggests that some structures (the Ministry of Economy and Industry and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy) at least partially form the basis for formalization, indicating that CSR principles have begun to be integrated into institutional frameworks. In addition, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy includes topics related to social responsibility in strategic documents for working with vulnerable groups, for creating and supporting social enterprises, and for cooperation with NGOs.

Although no policy documents have been published, all the ministries examined show some degree of social responsibility. Examples include environmental projects, such as the "green" public procurement by the Ministry of Environment and Water, and social projects, such as the "Easter basket" campaign by the Ministry of Agriculture for vulnerable households. Other ministries also engage employees in socially beneficial initiatives – such as the Ministry of the Interior's volunteer work in disaster relief or the Ministry of Defense's crisis response-while others present new approaches, such as school clubs based on the social responsibility of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice's award-winning rehabilitation schemes. However, there is no publicly available evidence of such organized, structured public volunteering programs that are formalized, undertaken, and followed only by state employees across all 19 ministries.

This targeted review found that the PSR in Bulgaria's ministerial system is fragmented and functions as individuals managing projects, partnerships, and not the state as a whole. Some ministries also participate in international cooperation or benefit from EU-funded programs, which usually leads to a more formalized approach to social responsibility. However, the results show that there is increasing recognition of the ability of PSR's capacity to increase public trust, generate civic responsibility, and increase employee engagement, provided that future efforts are synchronized, institutionalized, and made more visible to the general public.

In the Bulgarian public administration, **a rare example** of a formalized policy regarding the PSR is the concept of applying social responsibility in the activities of the National Social Security Institute (NSSI) (2018-2021). This strategic document, in line with the principles of ISO 26000, outlines social responsibility as an institutional commitment beyond legal obligations. It identifies three priority areas: employee responsibility (e.g., safety at work, non-discrimination, professional development), responsibility to society (e.g., transparency, anti-corruption measures, facilitating access for disadvantaged groups), and environmental care (e.g., energy efficiency, conservation of resources). The concept explicitly calls for the promotion of staff participation in volunteer campaigns, which reflects the official recognition of volunteering as part of the institutional culture.

It is important to note that future studies of such practices are recommended at the district and municipal level, where more examples of direct community work are expected to be found.

In the next part of the article, various projects from across the public sector related to social responsibility will be discussed. The Institute of Public Administration (IPA) holds a competition aimed at promoting the creativity of civil servants and the good practices are collected in a *Collection of Good Practices in Bulgarian Administration*. In order to stimulate employee motivation and improve the organizational culture of public organizations to meet societal needs, through competition, the IPA seeks to expand the sharing of valuable experience and expertise. IPA is the knowledge-sharing hub within the administration, promoting good governance principles and their application. While earlier editions in 2015 and 2016 included other thematic categories, from 2017 onwards, a special category, "Social Responsibility," was introduced in the competition. This category is open to all public administrations at the national and local levels. An analysis of the collections reveals a relatively stable trend, with an average of 23-25 good practices appearing each year. For 2024, the number of applications dropped to just ten (see Figure 3). Nevertheless, even within years or editions with fewer submissions, individual elements or projects linked to social responsibility and employee volunteering can still be identified.

The number of good practices in the "Social Responsibility" category is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Good practices in “Social Responsibility” 2016-2024



Source: Own (Adapted from the Collection of good practices in Bulgarian administration, Institute of Public Administration (IPA), <https://www.ipa.government.bg/bg>, 08.2025)

The review of good practices from 2016 to 2024 clearly shows that although public administration in Bulgaria does not operate within a unified national framework for PSR, there are individual institutions that regularly undertake socially beneficial initiatives. Most of them are strongly linked to employee volunteering, even though it is not regulated by a specific legal act. (Table 3).

Table 3. Good practices in social responsibility and volunteering (2016-2024)

Year	Institution	Good practice
2016	Ministry of Environment and Water	Organizing employee volunteer teams for river and forest clean-up campaigns
2017	National Revenue Agency	Charity initiatives by staff to collect funds and goods for orphanages
2018	Ministry of Defense	Military and civilian staff participating in emergency rescue and community rebuilding
2019	Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry	Organizing food donation drives for low-income families
2020	Ministry of Education and Science	Teachers and administrative staff volunteering in digital literacy campaigns for disadvantaged students
2021	National Social Security Institute	CSR concept implementation, including staff-led volunteer charity campaigns
2022	Ministry of Interior	Police and administrative staff volunteering in road safety awareness campaigns in schools
2023	Ministry of Health	Medical staff volunteering for free preventive check-up days in rural areas
2024	Ministry of Energy	Employee volunteer program to support energy efficiency awareness in vulnerable households

Source: Own (Adapted from the Collection of good practices in Bulgarian administration, Institute of Public Administration (IPA), <https://www.ipa.government.bg/bg>, 08.2025)

A consistent trend from year to year is this approach to direct community benefit: **environmental clean-up campaigns** (2016) and **charity events for orphanages** (2017), as well as **food donation** programs for vulnerable families (2019), are indicative of the

commitment to meeting urgent social needs. Several ministries have mobilized their personnel for **emergency and crisis response** – notably the Ministry of Defense's disaster relief efforts (2018) and the Ministry of Interior's road safety campaigns in schools (2022). The COVID-19 period (2020-2021) brought a surge in socially responsible activities with a **digital and institutional SR dimension**, such as online literacy campaigns for disadvantaged students and the National Social Security Institute's formalized social responsibility concept incorporating volunteering. **Health and sustainability** are on the agenda (from 2023 onwards): medical volunteering in the countryside and energy efficiency awareness projects at vulnerable homes indicate a swing away from reactive aid and toward preventive, capacity-building programs. This transformation means that public Bulgarian institutions no longer view volunteerism as solely charitable; they are witnessing volunteering practices becoming a strategic strategy of social development and employee engagement, and also a means of developing public trust.

Overall, the trend points to **fragmented yet persistent** PSR practice – largely project-based, dependent on institutional leadership, and without systematized inter-ministerial coordination. However, the recurring presence of staff-led volunteerism demonstrates a strong potential foundation for future formalization of volunteering and social responsibility as integral components of public sector governance.

The results obtained highlight the need for systematization and clearer institutionalization of PSR. Therefore, strategic recommendations should be proposed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve and institutionalize PSR in Bulgarian public administration, several strategic recommendations can be proposed. Firstly, there should be **an understanding and encouragement of employee engagement**, as well as systematic research (internal or with academic partners) to examine how civil servants participate in socially responsible initiatives and what motivates their participation. These findings can serve as a basis for developing policies that encourage voluntary participation and civic engagement. **Effective incentives for employees need to be created, including material and symbolic incentives such as formal recognition, career development opportunities, flexible working hours for volunteering, and departmental awards**, to encourage consistent participation in social responsibility projects. Another recommendation is **to measure and evaluate the impact**. This means using clear indicators to measure the social impact of PSR initiatives internally (morale, employee satisfaction, and loyalty) and externally (public trust, institutional legitimacy). It is essential to increase **transparency and visibility**. These projects should be publicly announced through official websites, reports, and public campaigns. Sharing the results of social responsibility and employees' contributions across organizations would increase public trust and thus foster a culture of responsibility in institutions. **Incorporating PSR values** into organizational strategy is fundamental to integrating social responsibility into human resource management practices and institutional strategies. This will link volunteer efforts and activities with social impact to mission, performance management, and staff development. Finally, it is important to build **organizational commitment and promote public trust through leadership**. This involves the strategic management of PSR to motivate the workforce, increase institutional loyalty, and promote ethical and socially responsible behaviour, leading to transparency, public trust, and the development of democracy.

These steps would gradually take public administration to the next level on the path to becoming a recognizable agent of global social responsibility. The proposed measures outline

possible directions for the development of PSR in the public sector. On this basis, the main conclusions of the study can be summarized.

CONCLUSION

Public social responsibility (PSR) in public administration refers to voluntary, value-based actions by government institutions that go beyond legal and regulatory mandates to promote social well-being. The concept positions public administration not only as a regulator but also as an active participant in sustainable development, community engagement, and social equality. A review of the 19 ministries in Bulgaria shows that there is no unified national framework for PSR. However, some ministries demonstrate partial integration of these principles into their policies and activities. Ministries often participate in a range of socially responsible projects, from environmental sustainability programs to community-based initiatives linking services to broader social value creation. According to studies of official websites and a competition for “Collection of Good Practices” run by the Institute of Public Administration, socially beneficial projects remain, but are often fragmented and ad hoc. Examples of this include participation in the CITIES4CSR project, green public procurement policies, the Easter Basket campaign, award-winning rehabilitation projects, etc. Although employee volunteering is visible – for example, in firefighting, disaster relief, and digital literacy campaigns – it remains without an official legal mandate or systematic institutional support. Despite the relative stability in the number of good practices presented annually, the lack of structured frameworks for volunteering and inter-agency coordination limits the potential impact of these efforts.

The study provides recommendations for 1) creating a PSR strategy, 2) developing mechanisms to support and encourage employee volunteering, and 3) implementing standardized impact assessment tools. Through the example it sets, public administration can establish a public standard for ethical behavior and civic responsibility by promoting a culture of transparency, active participation, and sustainable management. Ultimately, structured and institutionalized PSR practices have the potential to transform Bulgarian public administration into a more trusted, responsive, and socially engaged actor in modern society.

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