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## **THE PLACE AND ROLE OF THE VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION IN THE DISASTER RISK REDUCTION SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

### **Abstract**

Volunteer firefighter associations are members of firefighters unions, voluntary, non-profit organizations based on freedom of association. They are established for the purpose of organized voluntary participation of citizens in the implementation of fire protection, rescue of people and property. They are obliged to form, equip, and maintain at least one volunteer firefighting unit. As such, they represent a huge potential for the security of local self-government. The paper gives an overview of the work of a volunteer firefighters association in the Central Banat Administrative District.

**Keywords:** volunteer firefighters association, local self-government, organization

## **AZ ÖNKÉNTES TŰZOLTÓ EGYESÜLETEK HELYE ÉS SZEREPE A SZERB KATASZTRÓFAVÉDELMI RENDSZERBEN**

### **Absztrakt**

Az önkéntes tűzoltók egyesületei az egyesülési szabadságon alapuló tűzoltói szakszervezetek, önkéntes, nonprofit szervezetű tagjai. Az önkéntes állampolgárokból álló szervezet célja a tűzoltás, a tűz megelőzés, valamint az élet-és vagyonmentés. Kötelesek legalább egy önkéntes tűzoltó rajt kialakítani, felszerelni és fenntartani. Ezek az egyesületek, hatalmas segítséget jelentenek a helyi önkormányzatok tűzoltási feladataiban. A cikk egy átfogó elemzést nyújt a Közép-Bánát Közigazgatási területén működő önkéntes tűzoltó egyesületek munkájáról.

**Kulcsszavak:** önkéntes tűzoltó egyesület, helyi önkormányzat, szervezet



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Volunteer firefighters associations are a great help to the professional units of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia during firefighting interventions and other protection and rescue actions. Volunteers in volunteer firefighters associations, after the adoption of the Law on Voluntary Firefighting [1], are at the disposal of emergency headquarters, and try to help their colleagues in the Ministry of the Interior in all possible ways. If necessary, they can independently participate in some less demanding interventions, such as open fires, water pumping in floods because they are an example of a well-organized, equipped, and trained association; they can independently participate in interventions, but also in cooperation with professional fire and rescue units. Some associations have basic firefighting equipment, a few of them can intervene with special vehicles, whereas most of the volunteer firefighters associations have also pumps for pumping water.

A large number of these associations had problems with equipment and facilities for a long time, and many of them have not resolved them yet. However, the situation improved in 2018. That was when the Law on Voluntary Firefighting whose focus is on forming operational units was adopted in our country for the first time. It stipulated that volunteer firefighters, in case of injuries and other undesirable situations that can occur during interventions, exercise the same rights from health, pension and disability insurance as well as the members of professional fire and rescue units. This law orders the assemblies of local self-government to pass an act on incentives and privileges for members of volunteer firefighting units, which would contribute to their popularization.

## 2. LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF OPERATION

Work and activities of Volunteer Firefighters Associations (hereinafter: VFAs) is based primarily on the Law on Voluntary Firefighting [1], the Law on Fire Protection [2], the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management [3], the Rulebook on Conditions Regarding Material and Technical Equipment [4], the Law on Associations [5] and the VFA Articles of Association [6].



## 2.1. The Law on Voluntary Firefighting

The Law on Voluntary Firefighting [1] regulates the organization of voluntary firefighting, the establishment, operation, bodies, rights, obligations, and association of VFAs, the organization of volunteer firefighters unions and other issues. The VFA is a voluntary and non-profit organization based on freedom of association, established for the purpose of organized voluntary participation of citizens in the implementation of fire protection, rescue of people and property as well as completion of projects and programs in this field, which is as such entered in the Register of Associations. It has the status of a legal entity, the work of the Association is public, it is a member of firefighters unions, the Articles of Association is its basic general act, and it has its own name, headquarters on the territory of a local self-government, its own sign, logo, flag, and other symbols. Any adult can become a member of the VFA under the same conditions. In the Republic of Serbia, there are municipal or city firefighters unions, inter-municipal firefighters unions, firefighters unions of autonomous provinces and the Firefighters Union of Serbia.

The VFA is obliged to form, equip, and maintain functional at least one Volunteer Firefighting Unit (hereinafter: VFU). The purpose of forming the VFU is to implement fire protection, rescue people and property, prevent and suppress other technical and technological accidents and natural disasters. VFAs are formed by VFUs which can be units of the first, second or third category depending on the material and technical equipment and the number of members. The VFA issues an act on the establishment of the VFU, which must contain: the category of the volunteer firefighting unit, personnel, material, and technical equipment as well as the training level of the volunteer firefighting unit members. The VFU is headed by a commander appointed by the VFA executive board. In order to be a member of the VFU, a person is required to be between 18 and 55 years of age, to be medically fit to perform tasks, to be professionally qualified to perform tasks, to be professionally trained on a regular basis.

## 2.2. The Law on Fire Protection

The Law on Fire Protection [2] regulates the system of fire protection, rights and obligations of state authorities, bodies of the autonomous province and bodies of local self-government units,



companies, other legal and natural persons, organization of the fire department, supervision of law enforcement and other issues important for the fire protection system. The law determines that “volunteer firefighters associations are associations established for the purpose of organized voluntary participation of citizens in the implementation of fire protection, rescue of people and property”, and “firefighters unions (municipal, city, district, provincial and the Firefighters Union of Serbia) are professional and humanitarian organizations of special interest established for the purpose of organized and unified participation in implementing fire protection, their common goals and raising awareness of the importance of fire protection, within which volunteer firefighters associations and volunteer firefighting units operate. ”

### **2.3. The Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management**

The Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management [3] deals with Firefighting and Fire and Rescue Units in the opening Chapter V. Firefighting units can be professional or voluntary. Professional firefighting units are fire and rescue units of the Ministry, firefighting units of the Ministry of Defense, firefighting units of local self-government units and firefighting units of legal entities. *Volunteer Firefighting Units* are firefighting units of legal entities and associations, organized on a voluntary basis.

### **2.4. The Rulebook on Conditions Regarding Material and Technical Equipment**

The Rulebook on Conditions Regarding Material and Technical Equipment [4] classifies VFUs into three categories depending on the material and technical equipment and the number of members. *The first and second category* includes VFUs that have at least 18 members who have a certificate of passing the exam for a member of the VFU and who have the equipment and resources given in Annexes 1 and 2 of the Rulebook. *The third category* includes a VFU that has at least 9 members who have a certificate of passing the exam for a member of the VFU and who have the equipment and resources given in Annex 3 of the Rulebook. The Ministry of the Interior issues a VFA certificate on the possession of a volunteer firefighting unit in accordance with Article 8 of paragraphs 5-7 of the Law on Voluntary Firefighting in a particular category for which a VFA or a VFU meets the conditions prescribed by this Rulebook. If the VFU, by purchasing equipment and



increasing the number of members, meets the condition for changing the category in which it is classified, it may submit a request to the Ministry for a change of certificate in the part of the VFU category.

## **2.5. The Law on Associations**

The Law on Associations [5] regulates the establishment and legal status of associations, registration and deletion from the register, membership and bodies, status changes and termination of associations, as well as other issues important for the work of associations. The association is a voluntary and non-governmental non-profit organization based on the freedom of association of several natural or legal persons, established for the purpose of achieving and promoting a particular common or general goal and interest, not prohibited by the Constitution or the law.

## **3. THE VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION IN THE CENTRAL BANAT ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICT**

The Volunteer Firefighters Association [6] is a voluntary, non-profit, independent association of citizens, freely established and organized for the purpose of providing and improving fire protection and the common interests of its members. For the needs of organized realization and improvement of fire protection and interests of its members, the VFA:

- gathers and organizes citizens for the purpose of organized participation in activities in the field of fire protection, protection and rescue of people, material goods endangered by fire, natural disasters, and other extraordinary events,
- develops self-protection and technical culture of citizens, popularizes fire protection and its programs,
- proposes activities and protection measures and participates in their implementation,
- gathers, trains and nurtures junior firefighters through exercises, trainings, courses, competitions, and other activities through which the awareness of junior firefighters about the dangers and measures of fire protection is raised,



- organizes firefighting competitions, performances, and parties,
- organizes activities to implement personal preferences and interests of its members and their common or general goals,
- organizes a fire protection watch for legal entities which, due to the activity they perform, have a legal obligation to operate in the presence of professionally trained persons in fire protection with appropriate equipment.

***Goals of the Association are:***

- organizing professional training of the VFA members and the members of civil protection units, citizens, and workers, for the implementation of fire protection,
- improvement and promotion of fire protection, civil protection, environmental protection, and security,
- development of technical knowledge and popularization of information and communication technologies,
- publishing professional and educational propaganda literature, brochures, manuals, newsletters, audio and video materials, etc.,
- promotion of ecology, protection of the environment and health, preservation, and improvement of natural values,
- education and promotion of safety and protection in the field of agriculture,
- development and promotion of sports and sports activities,
- organizing competitions, seminars, trainings, workshops, entertainment, training...,
- cooperation, association, and networking at local, regional, and international levels.

***The Association consists of*** active members, honorary members, assistant members, and junior firefighters.

***Members of the VFA*** have equal rights and duties to:

- participate in the work of achieving goals of the VFA,
- decide on the acts of the VFA and the contents of the VFA work and their implementation,





- comply with the VFA Articles of Association, general and other acts of the VFA and the decisions of its bodies,
- elect and be elected to the bodies of the VFA and the union,
- be praised and rewarded for successful and dedicated work,
- to improve their knowledge and skills in the areas in which the Association achieves its goals, and
- protect the reputation of the VFA and the personal reputation of a member.

*The Bodies of the VFA* are: Assembly, Executive Board, Supervisory Board, and Youth Club.

*The Assembly of the VFA* is the highest authority of the Association and a form of personal declaration of the VFA members. The Assembly consists of all adult members registered in the VFA register. The Assembly:

- adopts the VFA Articles of Association and other general acts and their amendments,
- elects and dismisses the chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary, treasurer, VFA commander, storage keeper and a number of members of the chair officers,
- elects the VFA representative,
- elects and removes members of the Supervisory Board,
- elects and recalls representatives of unions and associations,
- adopts the work plan and program, financial plan and annual calculation of the VFA and considers reports on their implementation,
- decides on joining unions and related associations in order to implement joint programs,
- adopts the act on the establishment of the VFA, which is required to contain: the category of the VFA, personnel, material, and technical equipment as well as the training level of VFA members,
- makes decisions on the appointment of honorary members of the VFA,
- decides on the termination of the VFA,



- decides on status changes (mergers, acquisitions, and divisions) and other issues in accordance with the law and the VFA Articles of Association.

**The Executive Board of the VFA** is a VFA body and the executive body of the Assembly, elected by the Assembly from among the members of the Assembly for a term of 4 years.

**The Chairperson** of the VFA manages the work of the Executive Board, organizes, and manages the business of the VFA; the Chairperson is elected by the Assembly for a term of 4 years and is responsible for their work to the Assembly and the Executive Board; the Chairperson organizes the work of the Executive Board and takes care of their legal work, enforcing acts and decisions adopted by it as well as the use of the VFA funds. The Chairperson is a representative of the Association.

**The Vice Chairperson** of the VFA replaces the Chairperson of the VFA in their absence when they perform the duties of the Chairperson in full. The Vice Chairperson of the VFA is a member of the Executive Board and is elected by the Assembly for a term of 4 years.

**The Secretary** of the VFA keeps business books and records, the register, the archive book, and administrative business; the Secretary is a member of the Executive Board, elected by the Assembly for a term of 4 years, responsible for their work to the Executive Board and the Assembly of the Association.

**The Commander** of the VFA manages the operational work in its entirety. The Commander also coordinates the work of competition teams, appoints and dismisses coaches of competition teams, controls the work of commanders and deputy commanders of the operational unit of the Association, controls the work of the operational unit of the Association, controls proper functioning of devices and equipment necessary for the work of the Association, proposes procurement or purchase of new or used equipment to the Executive Board, performs all other tasks related to the operational work of the Association. The Commander of the Association is elected by the Assembly for a term of 4 years; the Commander is a member of the Executive Board, responsible for their work to the Executive Board and the Assembly of the Association.

**The Deputy Commander of the Association** replaces the Association Commander in their absence when performing duties of the Association Commander in its entirety.

**The Treasurer** of the Association keeps business books in the field of material and financial operations of the VFA; the Treasurer is elected by the Assembly for a term of 4 years; the Treasurer





is a member of the Executive Board, responsible for their work to the Executive Board and the Assembly of the Association.

**The Storage Keeper** of the Association maintains and takes care of the VFA equipment; the Storage Keeper is elected by the Assembly for a term of 4 years; the Storage Keeper is a member of the Executive Board, responsible for their work to the Executive Board and the Assembly of the Association.

**The Youth Club** consists of all members of the VFA under the age of 18, and it promotes voluntary firefighting among young people. The Youth Club members do not participate in VFA activities that may take any form of work. The Youth Club has a chairperson and an executive board in accordance with the VFA Articles of Association. The chairperson of the Youth Club is a member of the VFA Executive Board.

The Assembly establishes the VFU as an internal organizational unit of the VFA for implementation of fire protection, rescue of people and property, prevention and suppression of other technical and technological accidents and natural disasters. Members of the VFU can only be professionally trained and medically fit members of the VFA over the age of 18 and may remain members until they reach the age of 55. A member of the VFU may also be a person older than 55 years of age if it is determined that they are medically fit to perform the tasks of the VFU. A member of the VFU may also be a person performing fire protection activities as a regular occupation, except for persons employed in the Sector for Emergency Situations of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia. Internal organization, composition of members, equipment and material means of work, duties and responsibilities as well as other issues of organization and activities of the VFU are determined by the Executive Board, based on the conditions regarding the material, technical and personnel equipment of the VFU prescribed by the Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia. Members of the firefighting unit perform protection and rescue tasks responsibly and impartially, in accordance with the law and the rules of the profession. The VFU is managed by the commander of the Volunteer Firefighting Unit who is appointed by the Executive Board of the Volunteer Firefighters Association.



## 4. HISTORY AND ACTIVITIES OF THE VFA

Since its formation in 1946, the VFA is one of the most active VFAs in the Central Banat District. Since its beginning, the Firefighters Association has had about 1200 members, which shows that 1 out of 4 inhabitants of the settlement has been a voluntary member of the Firefighters Association. Most people who have run this association have contributed to the fact that this association has a new firefighters station, which is used by the VFA as well as the local community and local office, and the grand hall is used by all socio-political and sports organizations.

The VFA has repeatedly won first places in municipal, regional, and national competitions. There were times when it participated in municipal competitions with 12 teams and won 7 first places and 9 medals. All these activities contributed to the association and organization to obtain funds from the Firefighters Union of the city of Zrenjanin for the construction of a new fire station. The firefighters who participated in voluntary work made a huge contribution. The station has the following rooms: a small hall, a grand hall in which the local community and local office are situated now, two storage rooms and the space in the attic. The total area is 450 square meters. A kitchen with tables and benches, which is equipped for independent cooking and baking with complete equipment for 120 people, is a separate entity. All VFA rooms are equipped with radiators for the winter period.

Considering firefighting equipment, it has enough fire extinguishers, one FAP (Srb: *Fabrika automobila Priboj*, Engl: *Priboj Car Factory*) fire truck, and the personal equipment necessary for extinguishing the fire. The tasks involve inspection of private households and duties during the harvest and threshing of an agricultural land.

The VFA participates in competitions that check the ability of the members to perform all types of fire protection readily, successfully, and safely, with a special emphasis in firefighting competitions on the work with youth categories, which the VFA has prioritized in fire protection activities since its formation to the present day. This association pays special attention to the work with the youngest categories in which the youngest members are introduced to the dangers caused by fires and taught how to react in these situations, and the commanders train them to use fire extinguishers which combine water and air foam, also used in competitions.



Old junior firefighters participate in the knowledge and use of firefighting equipment, while senior firefighters are familiar with all technical and material means and are trained for their application and localization as well as extinguishing fires. Due to the successful work of the young firefighters, the VFA organizes excursions every year. Almost every year, the VFA, in cooperation with the Municipal Firefighters Union of the city of Zrenjanin, organizes a training course for firefighters.

Special activities of the VFA are preparations and duties during the harvest when the association inspects the fire extinguishers and mechanization used in the harvest activities, and it is on duty 24 hours a day.

The VFA is one of the most numerous associations and one with the most skilled personnel. This firefighters association has 153 members out of which there are: 3 senior first class fire officers, 3 senior fire officers, 9 first class fire officers, 3 fire officers, 11 fire sub-officers, 22 first class firefighters and 47 firefighters. In addition, there are two youth B teams with 12 members each, one male and one female team; there are also a youth male A team and a youth female A team - the male one has 19 members, and the female one 12 members, which means that the total youth branch has about 55 members, whereas together with the executors, teams, and youth teams there are 153 members.

The VFA Managing Board has 13 members and 9 unit parts; it has the means for the most modern methods of extinguishing fires, as well as resistant suits that can withstand high temperatures.

The VFA successfully cooperates with the Municipal Firefighters Union of Zrenjanin, the primary school, numerous companies, the water supply and sewerage, Vojvodinaput Ltd., the Danube-Tisa-Danube company, as well as all social and sports organizations. The VFA firefighters participate at least 10 times a year in firefighting interventions or providing support to professional firefighting units from Zrenjanin in extinguishing fire. Smaller fires in the place are localized by the firefighters themselves, and they also provide social assistance in populated places in the vicinity.

Additionally, the VFA participated in all performances, both in techniques and membership, as well as in the events and demonstration exercises that were organized by the Municipal Firefighters Union of Zrenjanin. It proved to be a good host in all competitions that were held in the populated area. The VFA hosted many seminars and meetings of the Firefighters Union of Zrenjanin and the Firefighters Union of Serbia, which shows the importance of the work of this association.



## 5. CONCLUSION

A volunteer firefighters association is a voluntary and non-profit organization based on freedom of association, established for the purpose of organized voluntary participation of citizens in implementing fire protection, rescue of people and property, which meets the conditions prescribed by this law.

The VFA has done a lot for the population of its own and the nearby places through its work and commitment. It has taught a great number of children the importance of fire protection and introduced them to the system and work of the firefighters association through its activities. Many accolades which the volunteer firefighters association received speak in favor of the fact that it is really one of the best and most active associations in the city of Zrenjanin.

The firefighting activities so far show that there has been no need for more modern equipment and vehicles because the actions are of the local type, fires mostly occur in agricultural crops, and the association has sufficient funds and equipment for such activities. In cases of larger fires, the association is never alone in the action, however; as the nearest unit, it goes out first to the place of fire, but the unit of the city of Zrenjanin quickly joins it.

When it comes to the events and accidents, the VFA is well equipped.

In order to improve the situation, more funds should be invested in the VFA; the activity of the VFA should be increased regarding information and commitment of residents to emphasize the importance of fire protection and organization of additional activities in order to indicate the possible causes of fire base on the previous experiences; stricter precautionary measures during harvest activities should be taken in order to reduce the risk of fire outbreak to a minimum and thus increase the safety of residents.



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