

CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE OF VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTING IN SERBIA

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Abstract: This paper explores the rich history and current challenges that volunteer firefighting associations in Serbia are facing, with a particular focus on the Volunteer Firefighting Association of Šid as an example of good practice. These associations play a vital role in preservation of rural and less developed areas. However, modern challenges such as financial constraints, outdated equipment and a shortage of personnel are threatening their sustainability. Recommendations emphasize enhancing funding, attracting younger generations, and expanding activities in education and prevention. The example of the Volunteer Firefighting Association of Šid, which overcame significant obstacles and revitalized its activities, serves as an inspiring model for other associations. Through dedication and collaboration, volunteer firefighting associations can continue to ensure community safety and meet contemporary demands.

Key words: Volunteer Firefighting Association, Fire Prevention, Fire Protection, Challenges in Firefighting, Community Protection.

1. INTRODUCTION

Volunteer Firefighting Associations (hereinafter referred to as VFAs) have a long and rich history in the Republic of Serbia, particularly in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina[1]. Back in ancient Rome, during the reign of Emperor Augustus, a group known as the "Vigiles" represented the firefighting service of that era[10].

During the Middle Ages, with the urbanization, the need for organized firefighting services became increasingly evident. In many European cities, groups of citizens formed to voluntarily suppress conflagrations, often without formal training and with minimal equipment.

First written records of fire protection in Serbia can be found in the Dušan's Pandect from 1349, which prescribed strict penalties for causing fires. Although the pandect did not include preventive measures, it can be considered as beginning of raising awareness about the importance of fire protection. The first modern forms of organized firefighting in Serbia developed in the 19th century, when in 1834 Prince Miloš Obrenović issued an order to draft a regulation for fire extinguishing[2]. The first volunteer firefighting association in Serbia was founded in 1805 in Elemir, which is followed by the establishment of associations in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Pančevo. Many associations in Serbia have tradition that lasts over a century[1]. A special place in the history of volunteer firefighting is undoubtedly held by the Volunteer Firefighting Association of Šid, founded in 1924. In response to a series of devastating fires, a group of residents, led by Jovan Šumanović and Sreta Stojaković, laid the foundation for an association that, over the course of a century, would become a symbol not only of protection but of unity in Šid as well.

In addition to providing a historical overview, this paper analyzes the current challenges that VFAs are facing, drawing from existing research and documented practices to identify key obstacles these associations encounter, opportunities for improving their activities, and related issues. The analysis is based on a synthesis of secondary sources and observed trends, which provide a solid foundation for the recommendations presented in the paper. Today, VFAs in Serbia play a crucial role in community protection but face numerous challenges, such as financial constraints, a shortage of personnel, outdated equipment, weak connections with local government units, and similar issues. The paper offers targeted measures and strategies to address these challenges and enhance the effectiveness of VFAs in Serbia.

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The aim of this paper is to analyze the current challenges these associations are exposed to, to illustrate how enthusiasm and dedication can lead to significant results, and to provide recommendations for strengthening and improving their work in the future, through the specific example of the Volunteer Firefighting Association of Šid .

2. CURRENT CHALLENGES

All these humanitarian associations face a range of challenges that seriously threaten their work and sustainability. An analysis of data from the literature and documented observations highlights four key problem areas: financial difficulties, lack of personnel, outdated equipment and poor infrastructure, and weak community engagement.

Financial Challenges: One of the greatest challenges for VFAs in Serbia is the lack of financial resources. Most associations rely on limited budgets from local governments, voluntary donations, and occasional sponsorships. The available funds are often inadequate for: acquiring and updating outdated equipment (firefighting vehicles, pumps, protective gear, etc.), maintaining fire stations that are often in poor condition, and organizing regular training and educational sessions for association members.

According to the Law on Volunteer Firefighting [4], the assembly of a local government unit is obligated to adopt a regulation establishing a system of incentives and benefits for members of volunteer firefighting units. However, reality is that many local governments haven't adopted necessary regulations, which is further complicating the work of VFAs[1].

Expanding the scope of activities for VFAs could significantly enhance their financial sustainability. One potential approach involves allowing associations to generate their own income by performing services such as maintaining fire extinguishers and conducting periodic inspections of hydrant networks. Periodic inspections of fire extinguishers and hydrant networks primarily involve visual checks and include activities such as: verifying the physical condition of the equipment (corrosion, damage, valve integrity), weighing extinguishers to confirm the presence of extinguishing substances, basic pressure checking and checking valve functionality, and recording irregularities[5]. Given that these activities do not require complex equipment or advanced technical education, trained members of volunteer firefighting associations could perform them effectively with appropriate legal regulation. On the other hand, specific and more demanding tests, such as hydrostatic testing of extinguishers, should remain under the jurisdiction of authorized entities to ensure technical compliance.

However, the current legal framework does not recognize VFAs as legal entities authorized to perform these activities. This implies that amendments to laws and regulations would be necessary to enable their role in such tasks. The funds generated could be directed toward the procurement of equipment, which is often reported to be in inadequate condition. Many VFAs face significant challenges due to outdated and insufficient equipment, limiting their ability to effectively respond to emergencies. In addition to fire extinguishers, VFA members could also conduct basic inspections of hydrant networks, which in periodic reviews primarily involve visual inspection[5,6].

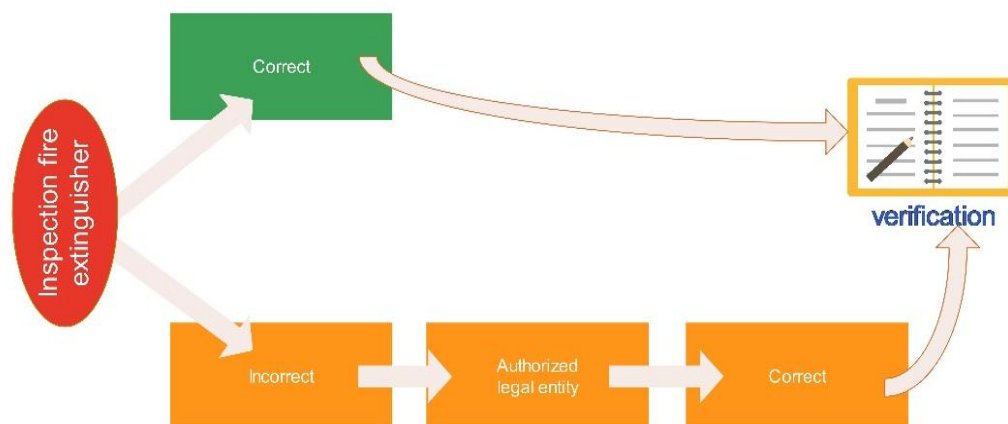


Figure 1. Visual representation of equipment inspection

In Figure 1, a graphical representation illustrates how this process would work in practice: VFA members would inspect fire extinguishers or hydrant networks, and if the equipment is found to be in proper condition, an appropriate certificate of inspection and functionality would be issued. But if irregularities are identified, the equipment owner would be referred to an authorized entity for further testing or repair. Records of all inspections would be maintained in a centralized register, ensuring transparency and enabling effective monitoring of equipment status.

Lack of Personnel: The depopulation of rural areas and declining interest among young people in volunteer work have significantly reduced the source of potential VFA members. This issue is particularly pronounced in smaller towns, where the migration of younger populations to larger cities is prevalent. Another major challenge is the insufficient awareness among citizens about the work and importance of volunteer firefighting associations. A systematic approach to education about volunteer firefighting from an early age is essential. Activities such as working with children in kindergartens and schools, organizing public demonstration exercises, and incorporating tutoring sessions in schools could raise awareness and increase interest among the youth. Motivational measures, such as offering specific benefits like exemptions from certain fees, reduced costs for educational materials, or excused absences from work during interventions, could be effective in attracting new members and retaining existing ones. Addressing the issue of personnel shortages is critical, as the aging of current members and the lack of younger individuals to replace them is especially concerning in operational activities that require physical readiness. To overcome these challenges, VFAs should intensify their efforts in promotion and collaboration with schools and youth organizations. Leveraging modern technologies, such as social media campaigns, could significantly improve the visibility and appeal of volunteer firefighting among younger generations. A targeted, multi-faceted promotional strategy is key to addressing this issue.

Outdated Equipment and Infrastructure: VFAs in Serbia often rely on very old equipment. This includes firefighting vehicles, protective uniforms, and basic technical tools, which are frequently in poor condition and inadequate for effective operations. Worn-out uniforms increase the risk of injury, as wearing and consuming decrease their protective properties, potentially reducing resistance to fire, mechanical damage, and similar hazards. Also, infrastructure of many fire stations represent an additional challenge. In principle, equipment is improperly stored and vehicles are not kept in garages, which lead to faster deterioration. According to research by Milenković and Kekić [1], most operational interventions in Serbia are carried out by professional firefighters, while VFAs provide critical support in rural and less developed areas, often serving as the first line of defense against fires. The modern role of these associations requires adequate equipment and infrastructure to ensure that they are prepared to meet everyday challenges.

Community Engagement: Despite playing a crucial role in responding to emergencies and catastrophic events, the work of VFAs is often underappreciated by the public. Limited collaboration with educational institutions, minimal media presence, insufficient involvement in local activities further aggravate their work, making it more challenging to attract new members, sponsors, and other types of support. One of the biggest issues is the lack of cooperation with schools and youth. Working with children and young people should become a foundational step toward popularizing volunteer firefighting. Organizing educational workshops in elementary and high schools, as well as participating in extracurricular activities, would allow young people to acquire basic knowledge about fire protection and recognize the importance of VFAs. Weak connections with local government units also pose a significant challenge[1]. Although these associations were established to serve their communities, a substantial gap remains between VFAs and local government units. Additionally, insufficient media presence represents a growing issue in today's world. Although social media offers significant potential for promoting volunteer firefighting, many associations have yet to adopt this form of outreach. By sharing information about their work, interventions updates, and educational content, VFAs could attract new members, secure sponsors, and enhance public recognition.

3. THE FUTURE

Although VFAs in Serbia face numerous challenges, they have the potential to significantly improve their performance and adapt to the needs of modern society. One of the key steps toward ensuring a brighter future is undoubtedly attracting young members. The promotion of volunteer firefighting must focus on engaging youth. Training seminars and demonstration exercises organized in collaboration with schools would provide the opportunity to young people to learn about firefighting and its challenges. Many would consider joining if offered additional motivation, highlighting the importance of providing incentives such as benefits or recognition for their contributions.

Financial stability is another crucial aspect of future development. Increased support from local governments, along with the opportunity to engage in simple commercial activities such as maintaining fire extinguishers or hydrant networks, could significantly contribute to their self-sustainability. Gaining incomes like this would enable VFAs to modernize their equipment and infrastructure, thereby enhancing the safety of their members and improving efficiency during interventions.

The modernization of equipment and infrastructure is essential for VFAs to meet the challenges of the modern era. Acquiring new vehicles, uniforms, and technical equipment, as well as investing in fire stations, are key steps to enhancing their capabilities. This modernization can be achieved through partnerships with local and international organizations, as well as through projects that support the development of such associations.

Beyond technical and financial aspects, the future of VFAs also depends on their role in preventive activities. The importance of VFAs in educating citizens about fire protection and other types of risks is increasingly recognized. Organizing public educational events and seminars is becoming an essential part of their mission. VFAs can play a key role in raising awareness about the importance of fire safety and preventive measures.

In addition to their operational activities, VFAs should also focus on becoming a substructure of education and prevention. A modern approach to fire protection requires more than just extinguishing fires. While operational activities must remain a key aspect of their work and should not be neglected, the era when a firefighter's sole role was to extinguish fires is long gone. The goal should be for a whole society to recognize the importance of preventive action, thereby reducing the risk of fires.

3.1. The Volunteer Firefighting Association of Šid as a Model Example

The Volunteer Firefighting Association of Šid was founded in 1924 at the “Šaloš” Hotel, in response to the high number of conflagrations in the municipality. The first president of the association was Jovan Šumanović, while the first commander was Sreta Stojaković[9]. Since its establishment, the association has demonstrated a strong commitment to serving the community, even with minimal resources. Over the years, it has grown into a symbol of protection, unity, and selfless dedication. Throughout its history, the VFA of Šid has faced numerous challenges and undergone various transformations. The association has been honored with numerous awards at both local and regional levels. Its contributions to the community have gone beyond operational activities. For generations, members of association have served as teachers, advisors, and role models for youth, passing on the knowledge and values of volunteer firefighting.

One of the most challenging periods for this association began after 2018, when the Law on Volunteer Firefighting [4] came into effect. This law introduced significant changes that further complicated functioning of the VFA Šid. The association faced severe financial difficulties. In addition to the implementation of the new law, the association no longer met the requirements to conduct inspections of fire extinguishers and hydrant networks, which had previously been an important, mostly primary source of income. Association depended on a small number of individuals, primarily retired professional firefighters and a few local residents, with the average age of members exceeding 50 years.

By 2024, the future of the association seemed uncertain. A turning point occurred in April 2024 when, with the support of veteran members, new leadership was elected, bringing a clear vision,

mission, and a plan to revitalize the VFA Šid. This marked as significant in the association's history, injecting new energy and optimism into its ranks[9].

In 2024, a series of activities were organized. That captured public attention and strengthened ties with the local government and the community itself. Open house days were organized for children, as shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3, where the youngest visitors had the opportunity to learn about firefighting job, take part in educational activities, and acquire basic knowledge about fire safety. Before the heating season began, a public education session titled "Protect your home" was held. Also, an exposition titled "Fire: A Good Servant, but a Bad Master – A Century of Control" was held in celebration of the association's centennial anniversary. All activities were strongly accompanied by media representatives, and the association has been highly active on social media platforms[9].



Figure 2. Open house day, May 2024 [9]



Figure 3. Open house day, September 2024 [9]

What particularly highlights this period is the recognition of the association's work by the local government and legal entities. As a symbol of excellent cooperation, the association presented a certificate of appreciation to the local government for its support, while the local government reciprocated with an award recognizing the association's contribution to the community[9]. This exchange demonstrates that, despite the fact that local government haven't adopted an incentive act for financing VFAs yet as required by law, significant results can still be achieved through dedication and hard work.

Through well-planned activities and dedicated efforts, the association successfully attracted a new generation of members, significantly rejuvenating its population. This rejuvenation and the collective enthusiasm of members led to establishing volunteer firefighting unit in less than a year. This achievement highlights the power of teamwork and the commitment of all members.

Since the survey revealed that companionship and a sense of belonging to community are key motivators for joining a VFA, the association actively works to attract young people through various activities. Their mission is clear: to restore tradition, make the firefighter's uniform a symbol of pride and responsibility, and create new generations of firefighters ready to serve their community.

Despite financial difficulties, a lack of equipment, and the challenges of modern times, this association has demonstrated that with hard work, dedication, and a love for firefighting — and above all, a love for their community — any obstacle can be overcome. Their motto, "Work, work, and work only," should serve as an inspiration for many VFAs, as there is no other way to succeed in today's world.

4. CONCLUSION

VFAs play an indispensable role in protecting the population from emergencies such as fires, floods, earthquakes, and similar events, especially in rural and underdeveloped areas. Modern challenges such as financial difficulties, a lack of personnel, outdated equipment, and even insufficient community engagement call for new approaches and changes.

Analysis of the current state highlight the need for reforms that will enable the sustainable development of volunteer firefighting. This includes improving funding, modernizing equipment, strengthening connections with young people and local communities, and involving VFAs in new activities such as prevention and education. The experience of the VFA Šid demonstrates that with dedicated work and community support, even associations with limited resources can achieve significant results and serve as a model for others.

VFAs are not just organizations meant to act during emergencies; they are symbols of unity, humanity, and solidarity. Their future depends on their ability to adapt to new challenges, as well as society's willingness to recognize and support them as key players in the protection and rescue system. Given the tradition and values they uphold, VFAs have all the prerequisites to continue their mission and contribute to a safer future for us all.

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