

Contested Meanings of Volunteering: Socialist Self- Management and Volunteer Fire Departments in Slovenian Municipalities*

Ana Kladnik

ABSTRACTS

This article uses a *longue-durée* approach to discuss volunteering as a practice in Slovenia since the mid-nineteenth century. It uses an example of volunteer fire departments, one of the oldest voluntary organizations in the country and asks what firefighters in Slovenia recognized as voluntary work during the imperial, interwar, and socialist periods? The article looks at women's participation in fire departments to investigate whether the gradual inclusion of women changed perception regarding volunteer work? In particular, the article focuses on the period of socialist self-management, during which the idea of volunteering was based on the participation of people in voluntary actions to improve community life with a loose understanding of individual gains. The chapter argues that while volunteer fire departments notably diversified their membership, the meaning of volunteering remained linked to a national tradition rooted in an earlier era when departments consisted exclusively of men who viewed their participation as unpaid and honorable work.

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Entwicklung des Ehrenamts in Slowenien seit Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts. Am Beispiel der Freiwilligen Feuerwehren, einer der ältesten freiwilligen Organisationen Sloweniens, wird der Frage nachgegangen, was Feuerwehrleute in Slowenien während der Habsburger Monarchie, der Zwischenkriegszeit und der sozialistischen Ära als freiwillige Arbeit verstanden. Der Artikel beleuchtet die Beteiligung von Frauen bei den Feuerwehren und unter-

* This work was supported by the European Union Horizon Europe, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No. 101068647 (project "A Land of Joiners").

sucht, ob die schrittweise Einbeziehung von Frauen die Wahrnehmung von Freiwilligenarbeit veränderte. Insbesondere konzentriert sich der Artikel auf die Zeit der sozialistischen Selbstverwaltung, in der das Konzept des Ehrenamts auf der Beteiligung von Menschen an freiwilligen Aktionen zur Verbesserung des Gemeinwohls basierte, wobei der individuelle Nutzen weniger im Vordergrund stand. Der Artikel argumentiert, dass die Bedeutung des Ehrenamts trotz der deutlichen Diversifizierung der Mitgliederstruktur der Freiwilligen Feuerwehren weiterhin mit einer nationalen Tradition verbunden blieb, die in einer früheren Ära wurzelte, als die Feuerwehren ausschließlich aus Männern bestanden, die ihre Beteiligung als unbezahlte und ehrenvolle Pflicht ansahen.

Introduction

The last constitution of socialist Yugoslavia in 1974 not only strengthened the position of the republics within the federation but also that of municipalities within the system of socialist self-management. Municipalities and their local communities enabled residents to participate more directly in matters of local development and politics. In the Socialist Republic of Slovenia, which is the focus of the article, volunteering was a major part of residents' engagement in their communities. Volunteering, however, was not specific only to socialist self-management. The article uses a *longue-durée* approach to explore volunteering as a practice in Slovenia since the mid-nineteenth century. It investigates a specific voluntary organization that had evolved through various political and social systems, namely volunteer fire departments. What did firefighters in Slovenia recognize as voluntary work during the imperial, interwar, and socialist periods? What (if anything) caused the changes in understanding? Did the gradual inclusion of women in fire departments change perception regarding volunteer work? By using the example of industrial volunteer fire departments and firefighting units within the Civil Protection Organization, the article investigates ongoing debates about the meaning of volunteering for volunteer firefighters and the role of women volunteer firefighters. It argues that while volunteer fire departments notably diversified their membership, the meaning of volunteering remained linked to a national tradition rooted in an earlier era when departments consisted exclusively of men who viewed their participation as unpaid and honorable work. The analysis draws from material published in the firefighters' main monthly journal. Additionally, it uses information from the publications of the Slovenian Firefighting Organization, which was issued following the organization's congresses, and held approximately every four years. These publications contain membership statistics, overviews of recent activities, discussions by organizational leaders regarding past activities and future key directions, and debates by volunteer firefighters from individual Slovenian regions who reported on local developments.

1 Long Tradition of Volunteering in Voluntary Associations in Slovenia

In the mid-nineteenth century, the absolutist politics of the Habsburg emperor were increasingly challenged by political and social activism. The era between the 1850s and 1860s, which Pieter M. Judson characterizes as the emergence of a liberal empire,¹ witnessed the development of the parliament and constitution, alongside a growth of voluntary associations. These included industrial associations, rifle clubs, and singing, mountaineering and gymnastic associations, where citizens “came together, however informally, to discuss and disapprove of public policy.”² The essential elements of voluntary associations, in the literature often considered as “schools of democracy,”³ were voluntary membership and the acceptance of associational rules and norms (which had to be approved by the provincial governments), for the implementation and execution of the associational program. Among the many voluntary associations that began to proliferate in the second half of the nineteenth century were fire departments. The first volunteer fire department in the Habsburg Empire was established in 1850 in northern Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), and in the Slovenian-speaking lands of the empire in 1869. The first departments were established in towns and functioned as spaces where local dignitaries gathered. These fire departments were also associated with industrialization and the development of capitalism, as their establishment was often initiated by factory owners or manufacturers of firefighting equipment.

Volunteer fire departments formed provincial firefighting associations, which organized meetings in different towns that were attended by firefighters from around the empire. For example, in 1874, Marburg/Maribor hosted the fourth meeting of the Styrian Firefighting Association, while in 1877, Pettau/Ptuj hosted the seventh Styrian Firefighting gathering. The latter was attended by a total of 580 participants from 63 volunteer fire departments from Styria, Croatia, and Hungary.⁴ These meetings were important for the volunteer firefighters because they offered opportunities for socializing as well as for the exchange of new practices and ideas. Even after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire and the establishment of new nation-states, the memory of Habsburg connectedness continued in the cross-border cooperation among volunteer fire departments in the new border regions. Firefighting brigades connected through jubilees and thus strengthened the ties between residents and firefighters of towns and villages of the former common empire that were now located in different states.

Photographs of the early volunteer fire departments depict male-dominated places of exclusive camaraderie. Firefighters, dressed in uniforms and helmets, and wearing med-

1 Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

2 Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, 248.

3 For critical assessment regarding the link between voluntary associations and democracy, see Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, “Democracy and Associations in the Long Nineteenth Century: Toward a Transnational Perspective,” *The Journal of Modern History* 75, June (2003): 269–299.

4 Ana Kladnik, “A Smouldering Fire: The National, Political and Gender Adaptations of Volunteer Firefighters in Interwar Yugoslavia,” *European Review of History* 26, no. 1 (2019): 19–40.

als indicating their importance and seniority, promoted the image of the firefighter as a pseudo-soldier (see figure 1). From their inception, volunteer fire departments considered themselves humanitarian organizations. However, the militaristic imagery in these photographs, as Nigel A. Raab has argued, does not reflect “aggressive tendencies but, rather, a value system that favors order and discipline over the pluralism normally associated with civil society.”⁵ Volunteering in Austrian fire departments was understood as an honorable and unpaid service “to act together in the event of a fire, flood or other disaster to protect the lives and property of residents in the municipality.”⁶



Fig. 1. Volunteer fire department Maribor/Marburg an der Drau, 1912 (source: Kamra. Digitalized Cultural Heritage of Slovenian Regions)

In the years leading up to 1914, the very rare first photographs of women’s firefighting groups were taken. These images typically depict women posing on fire trucks, dressed in long coats and caps, and accompanied by male firefighters. Although fire legislation in the Habsburg Empire prohibited women from becoming official members of fire departments, they often joined in a supporting capacity, such as through medical services (Samaritan sections) and in cooperation with the Red Cross. The first known women’s fire department in the empire was established in 1906 in the Galician town of Radomyśl, in present-day Poland. A fire had broken out while most of the men were working abroad,

5 Nigel A. Raab, *Democracy Burning? Urban Fire Departments and the Limits of Civil Society in Late Imperial Russia, 1850–1914* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), 189.

6 “Statuten der freiwilligen Feuerwehr” [Statutes of the Volunteer Fire Department], *Gasilec* 2, no. 1 (1898): 1–12.

which led the pastor and school principal to set up a female firefighting brigade.⁷ The absence of men was often the impetus for women to join the volunteer firefighting brigades. Other examples of firefighting departments made up of both male and female volunteers include Vorderzinnwald/Přední Cínovec (1908) in present-day Czech Republic and Strasschische/Stražišče (1910), Idria/Idrija (1912), and Neuhaus/Dobrna (1914), all in present-day Slovenia.⁸ Those departments were exceptions, however. Women had a limited role in most fire departments through the early twentieth century, as the wife of the Konstanz fire brigade commander describes:

For well over a hundred years, women have not been present in the men's firefighting brigades, although they are closely connected through the care of their uniforms and the absence of their husbands. Nevertheless, they are only mentioned once a year at a celebration, when they receive a general thanks from the men's world.⁹

During the First World War in Austria, women replaced the male workforce in factories and in the fields, as well as in the volunteer fire departments. In 1917, the president of the Slovene Association of Volunteer Firefighters in the Austrian crownland of Carniola (nowadays central Slovenia) considered women's participation in fire departments. He concluded:

During peacetime female participation would be unjustified, however, considering the difficult times and that there are enough examples where women proved able to make sacrifices, they should join the firefighting.¹⁰

After the First World War, voluntary associations in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, assumed the roles of national and state guardians. Fire departments thus played an important role in nation building, especially in the borderlands. The Regional Firefighting Association in Ljubljana (the capital of the former Habsburg province Carniola, which was the only predominately Slovenian speaking province in the empire) aimed to unify volunteer fire departments in the Slovenian-speaking part of the new Yugoslav state. Encouraging Slovenian as the language of command within the departments was deemed especially important. In many volunteer fire departments, which became part of Yugoslavia after the war some members did not understand Slovenian. The Firefighting Association in Ljubljana had to work hard to convince and prepare the volunteer fire departments to adopt its regulations. Many volunteer fire departments were established anew, especially

7 Martin Reidl et al., 100 Jahre Burgenländischer Landesfeuerwehrverband [130 years of firefighting in Slovenia (1869–1999)] (Landesfeuerwehrverband Burgenland, 2023), 117.

8 Hans Gilbert Müller and Alfred Zeilmayr, "Frauen in den oberösterreichischen Feuerwehren" [Women in Upper Austrian Fire Departments], *Entwicklung des Feuerwehrwesens, Historische Schriftenreihe des Oberösterreichischen Landesfeuerwehrverbands* 19, no. 1 (2017): 25–64, 29; Branko Božič, *Po poti 130-letnega razvoja gasilstva na Slovenskem (1869–1999)* [130 years of firefighting in Slovenia (1869–1999)], (Gasilska zveza Slovenije, 1999), 28.

9 Müller and Zeilmayr, "Frauen in den oberösterreichischen Feuerwehren," 27.

10 *Gasilec*, December 29, 1917.

in the borderlands, for example, in Prekmurje, the number of fire departments increased from 22 before 1918 to 128 by the end of the 1930s.¹¹

As during the Habsburg era, volunteering in fire departments remained a male-dominated, unpaid, and honorable activity.¹² However, women began to appear more frequently in fire department photographs, especially after the 1933 Yugoslav Firefighting Act allowed their membership in medical sections. In these photographs, women appear in three distinct roles. First, those wearing white shirts—a sharp contrast to the dark uniforms of the men firefighters—served as members of the fire departments' medical services. Second, older, well-dressed women sitting in the middle of the first row, represented a so-called “firefighter godmother,” having donated funds for the purchase of firefighting equipment. Third, women participated in celebrations of newly acquired firefighting equipment (see figures 2 and 3). In some cases, they sat next to a motorized pump while wearing Slovenian national costumes and surrounded by uniformed male firefighters; in others, younger women dressed entirely in white participated in a priest's blessing of the fire engine. These ceremonial events were characteristic of villages, where volunteer fire departments became particularly popular during the interwar period.



Fig. 2. Volunteer fire department Loka, celebration on acquiring the first motorized pump (source: Volunteer fire department Loka pri Mengšu archives)

Despite the long-standing importance of voluntary associations in Central Europe, comprehensive historical overviews remain scarce. Existing historiography on associations and civil society has largely focused on the Habsburg Empire,¹³ while in the context

11 Ana Kladnik, “Faithful Guardians of the National and State Border: Refugees, Land Reform, and Colonization in the Post-1918 Central European Borderlands,” *Nationalities Papers First View* (May 2025): 1–22.

12 „Gasilska služba” [Firefighting service], *Gasilec* 40, no. 7 (1937): 73–88, 83–85.

13 See, e.g., Gary B. Cohen, “National Politics and the Dynamics of State and Civil Society in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1867–1914,” *Central European History* 40, no. 2 (2007): 241–78; Harald Heppner, “Die Habsburgermonarchie

of Slovenian-speaking lands, research has typically focused on specific regions, towns, or associations.¹⁴ Slovenian historiography has studied associations, including women's organizations, during both the Habsburg and interwar period, particularly in relation to nationalism, charitable work, and the involvement of Slovene women in political life and the struggle for suffrage through voluntary associations.¹⁵



Fig. 3. Volunteer fire department Velenje, modest gender diversion, 1937 (source: Volunteer Fire Department Velenje archives)

In recent years, historians of interwar Yugoslavia have begun exploring the relationship between voluntary associations and the state. A notable example is the special issue edited by Fabio Giomi and Stefano Petrunaro, which examines different voluntary associations (none of them exclusively female) in interwar Yugoslavia and their roles in nation- and

und die Idee der Zivilgesellschaft" [The Habsburg Monarchy and the Idea of Civil Society], in *Zivilgesellschaft im östlichen und südöstlichen Europa*, eds. Jörg Hackmann and Klaus Roth (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2011), 171–87; Helmut Rumpler and Peter Urbanitsch, eds., *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, vol. 8 (VÖAW, 2006).

14 Daša Ličen, *Društveno življenje v habsburškem Trstu* [Associational life in Habsburg Trieste] (ZRC, 2023); Marija Mojca Peternel, "Deutscher und Oesterreichischer Alpenverein" [German and Austrian Alpine Club], *Contributions to Contemporary History* 63, no. 1 (2023): 86–104.

15 See, e.g., Robert Devetak, "Boj za slovenske šole in delovanje ženskih podružnic Družbe svetega Cirila i Metod" [The fight for Slovenian schools and the activities of women's branches of the Society of Saints Cyril and Methodius], *Zgodovinski časopis* 74, no. 3–4 (2020): 360–387; Mateja Ratej, "Drugi jugoslovanski gasilski kongres" [The second Yugoslav Firefighters Congress], *Časopis za zgodovino in narodopisje* 84, no. 4 (2013): 71–87 (this study is one of the few academic articles on the Slovenian Firefighting Organization and examines its connection to the conservative Slovenian People's Party, the most important party in Slovenia before the beginning of the Second World War); Irena Selišnik and Ana C. Paradiž, "Delovanje žensk od karitativnosti do socialnega dela v letih 1850–1941" [Women's work from charity to social work between 1850–1941], *Socialno delo* 55, no. 5–6 (2016): 239–251; Irena Selišnik, "Female Suffrage in Slovenia," in *The Struggle for Female Suffrage in Europe*, eds. Blanca R. Ruiz and Ruth R. Marín (Brill, 2012), 339–355.

state-building. This special issue also includes the category of gender, suggesting that associations during this period in Yugoslavia underwent a process of gradual feminization and contributed to women's empowerment.¹⁶

The introduction to the *Palgrave Handbook of Volunteering* notes that “communist regimes abolished or nationalized many civil society organizations and the rest functioned under direct state control.”¹⁷ However, it also acknowledges that socialist countries “allowed new forms of voluntary association to emerge from the 1980s onwards,” and that “the assumption that voluntary associations developed after the collapse of Communism from scratch (*de novo*) has been challenged.” Several contributions in my special issue on volunteering in the late-socialist Yugoslavia and its successor states argue that there was a continuation of associational civil society throughout both socialist and postsocialist periods.¹⁸ Tatjana Rakar and Zinka Kolarič demonstrate that the rapid growth of civil society organizations in 1990s Slovenia did not translate into the genuine development of civil society. Associations have remained the most common form of civil society organizations in the country.¹⁹ In Eastern Europe, the concept of civil society assumes a specific connotation, having been highly politicized since the late 1970s and often linked to anti-communist oppositional movements and “new” civil society groups, areas that have typically dominated the focus of studies on civil society. However, recent debates have expanded this view, arguing that civil society in Eastern Europe went well beyond anti-communist movements.²⁰

In recent years, volunteering in socialist societies has become a fruitful field of study. The Slovene and Yugoslav historiography has focused on youth working brigades, especially in the context of the postwar national reconstruction. Much of this research has been preoccupied with the question of whether volunteering was authentic.²¹ While some scholars view socialist voluntarism as involuntary, others call for a reassessment of simplistic binary categories such as altruism versus self-interest, urging instead for recognition of the complex motivations that inspired people to volunteer.²² Regarding

16 Fabio Giomi and Stefano Petrungaro, “Voluntary Associations, State and Gender in Interwar Yugoslavia: An Introduction,” in “Voluntary Associations in Yugoslavia (1918–1941),” special issue, *European Review of History* 26, no. 1 (2019): 1–18.

17 David H. Smith, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Volunteering, Civic Participation, and Nonprofit Associations* (Palgrave, 2016), 37.

18 Ana Kladnik, “Volunteering and Voluntary Associations in the Post-Yugoslav States: An Introduction,” in “Volunteering and Voluntary Associations in the Post-Yugoslav States,” special issue, *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 68, no. 2 (2020): 125–129.

19 Tatjana Rakar and Zinka Kolarič, “The Role of Civil Society Organisations in the Slovenian Welfare System after 1990,” *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 68, no. 2 (2020): 130–147.

20 On critical assessment of the concept of civil society in late socialist Slovenia, see Tomaž Mastnak, *Civilna družba* [Civil society] (ZRC, 2023).

21 Ivana Dobrivojevič, “(In)Voluntary Builders of Socialism: Young Workers in Early Socialist Yugoslavia,” *Istorija* 20. Veka 30, no. 1 (2015): 61–75; Gašper Mithans, “Youth Labour Brigades in Yugoslavia and Representations of Volunteerism,” *Annale, Historia et Sociologia* 32, no. 4 (2022): 603–619.

22 Tanja Petrovič, *O herojima, od ranog do poznog socijalizma, i dalje* [About heroes, from early to late socialism, and beyond] (Fabrika knjiga, 2020); Helena Trenkič, “Tagungsbericht: Solidarity and Voluntarism in State-Socialist Societies,” *H-Soz-Kult*, December 20, 2023, <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-140770>.

women's associations in Yugoslavia after 1945, historians have focused on the activities of the Anti-Fascist Front of Women (AFŽ), a mass organization established by volunteers during the Second World War that actively participated in the Partisans resistance to Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia.²³ The AFŽ served as a platform through which women articulated their demands for equality. Following the war, Yugoslav women participated for the first time in elections for the Constitutional Assembly, and the 1946 Constitution confirmed women's equality in all spheres of societal life. In the postwar era, firefighting was envisioned as unpaid and honorable work that should encompass broad public participation, including as many young people as possible.²⁴ The 1948 Firefighting Act extended women's roles to include operational tasks and stipulated that fire departments have youth sections, including boys and girls under the age of 14 (see figure 4).²⁵ Mass organizations such as AFŽ helped the Slovenian Firefighting Organization achieve the broad mobilization of women into fire departments. In 1949, there were 3,136 women firefighters, representing 6.45 percent of the total membership in the Slovenian Firefighting Organization; by 1954, this number had increased to 7,136, or 11.34 percent.²⁶



Fig. 4. Volunteer fire department Stražišče, 1952 (source: Kamra. Digitalized Cultural Heritage of Slovenian Regions)

23 Chiara Bonfiglioli, "Revolutionary Networks: Women's Political and Social Activism in Cold War Italy and Yugoslavia (1945–1957)" (PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 2012); Marijana Stojčić, "The Feminist Movement in Yugoslavia 1978–1989," *Antipolitika*, July 29, 2020, https://antipolitika.noblogs.org/post/2020/07/29/the-feminist-movement/#_ftnref25.

24 Božič, *Po poti 130-letnega razvoja gasilstva*, 84.

25 "Zakon o prostovoljnih gasilskih društvih" [Act on Voluntary Fire Departments], Uradni list LRS 23 (May 25, 1948), 217.

26 Branko Božič, *Ženske v gasilstvu* [Women in firefighting] (GZS, 1991), 41.

In 1948, the split between Yugoslav and Soviet leaders, followed by Yugoslavia's expulsion from Cominform (the Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties), prompted a rethinking of the country's model of socialism. Over the following decades, Yugoslavia began to implement a system of self-management. In 1950, the Basic Law on Self-Management was adopted, and the first workers' councils were elected. In 1953, Yugoslav Constitutional Law further established legal foundations for workers' control over enterprises and expanded the legal powers and financial independence of municipalities. This post-1953 era is often referred to as the period of socialist democracy.²⁷ In Slovenia, the biggest mass organization, the Liberation Front,²⁸ aimed to strengthen self-management and foster the development of socialist democracy. By 1951, the Liberation Front accounted for 70 percent of eligible voters and included over 3,500 organizations,²⁹ including firefighting. In 1953, the Liberation Front was renamed the Socialist Alliance of the Working People (SAWP). That same year, the AFŽ was dissolved, and its focus was transferred to the newly formed Federation of Women's Associations, operating under the auspices of the SAWP.

While the immediate postwar period is often characterized by a strong emphasis on voluntarism, research has indicated that by the comparatively affluent 1970s, voluntarism in Eastern Europe was more about social cohesion. The period of late socialism has been associated with a "performative turn" and the ritualization of social and political life.³⁰ *The Cambridge History of Communism* suggests that "by the late 1960s, the official women's leagues in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union had become sites of sociability and social work, rather than revolution."³¹ However, researchers who have investigated local and factory sources within the Yugoslav context claim that women's activism continued throughout the socialist period.³² While the Slovenian Firefighting Organization, with over 1,200 local volunteer fire departments, was not solely a women's organization, it significantly increased female membership and challenged previously established gender

27 Igor Duda and Ana Kladnik, "Socialist Democracy in Yugoslav Municipalities and Local Communities, 1970s and 1980s," in *Visions and Practices of Democracy in Socialist and Post-Colonial States*, ed. Ana Kladnik (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, forthcoming February 2026).

28 The Liberation Front of the Slovene Nation, established in 1941 as a coalition of different political parties and groups led by the Communist Party of Slovenia, called for immediate armed resistance against the occupier. During the war, the Liberation Front became part of the Yugoslav Liberation Movement and developed into a political organization that laid the foundations of the Slovenian statehood within the framework of federative Yugoslavia.

29 Zdenko Čepič, "Osvobodilna fronta Slovenskega naroda" [Liberation Front of the Slovenian Nation], in *Enciklopedija Slovenije*, ed. Marjan Javornik (Mladinska knjiga, 1994), 202.

30 Aleksei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

31 Juliane Fürst, Silvio Pons, and Mark Selden, *The Cambridge History of Communism: Volume 3* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), Kindle Edition, 404.

32 Chiara Bonfiglioli and Sara Žerić, "Working Class Women's Activism in Socialist Yugoslavia: An Exploration of Archives from Varaždin, Croatia," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70, no. 1 (2022); Larisa Kurtović, "An Archive to Build a Future: The Recovery and Rediscovery of the History of Socialist Associations in Contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina," in *After Utopia: Leftist Imaginaries and Activist Politics in the Postsocialist World*, eds. Larisa Kurtović and Nelli Sargsyan (Routledge, 2021), 20–46.

norms. By 1988, the organization counted 19,111 women members, representing 17.68 percent of its total membership of 108,082—approximately 5.7 percent of Slovenia's population.³³ While male firefighters remained the majority in photographs of volunteer fire departments in the mid-1970s, the presence of women dressed in firefighter uniforms—some displaying badges of various ranks—was unmistakable (see figure 5). In addition, the photographs featured retired male and female firefighters (veterans), as well as young firefighters of both sexes, collectively pointing to a healthy civil society developing.



Fig. 5. Volunteer fire department Štore, 1985 (source: Kamra. Digitalized Cultural Heritage of Slovenian Regions)

2 Socialist Self-Management and Participation in Volunteering

In 1955, Yugoslavia introduced the communal system, which aimed to strengthen municipalities' legal powers and financial independence through decentralization. Furthermore, the 1963 Yugoslav Constitution introduced local communities as sub-municipal territorial units within larger municipalities. By the time of the 1974 Constitution, local communities had become obligatory administrative units. These territorial structures were intended to facilitate direct citizen participation in decision-making about joint issues important for the community. In 1974, the Socialist Republic of Slovenia had a population of approximately 1.8 million citizens, divided into 60 municipalities and 1,050 local communities. Of these local communities, 86 percent were rural or suburban, and 72 percent had populations of 2,000 or fewer citizens.³⁴ By 1976, the Slovenian

33 Božič, *Ženske v gasilstvu*, 41.

34 Božo Grafenauer, *Lokalna samouprava na Slovenskem* [Local self-government in Slovenia] (Univerza v Mariboru, 2000), 321.

Firefighting Organization comprised 1,170 local volunteer fire departments, resulting in at least one, and sometimes more than one, department per community, making firefighting the most spatially expansive civil organization in the country.

By the end of the 1960s, Slovenia had approximately 7,000 civil society organizations, a modest decrease in comparison to the interwar period total of approximately 8,000.³⁵ The 1974 Act on Associations transferred responsibility for providing and financing public goods and services to the municipalities, thereby weakening state control over associations' activities. Consequently, according to Rakar and Kolarič, "civil society organizations enjoyed greater autonomy, while their communication with the state remained quite limited."³⁶ Between 1975 and 1985, the number of associations in Slovenia rose by 64 percent (see table 1).

Table 1. Number of civil society organizations in Slovenia, 1965–1995 (source: Rakar and Kolarič, *The Role of Civil Society Organisations*, 136)

Year	1965	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995
Number of civil society organizations	6,919	6,761	8,500	10,500	11,000	13,984

Socialist democracy in Yugoslavia after 1950 was based on the system of self-management, workers' participation, and local self-government. Property was not considered state-owned but socially owned. Local communities were intended to become essential elements of direct democracy. In 1976, Yugoslav citizens voted almost 2,000 times across various local communities to decide on the next steps for their communities.³⁷ In the months leading up to the elections, meetings were held in local communities and workplaces, during which voters nominated and confirmed candidates. The local branches of the aforementioned SAWP served as the main organizers of these events. In local communities, candidates received nominations from various local organizations, such as volunteer fire departments, or ordinary residents. Once confirmed at the assembly of the local community, candidates became election contenders. On election day, residents directly elected one of the proposed candidates as their representative for the municipal assembly. While municipal assembly elections were direct, elections to the republican and federal assemblies were indirect. However, in theory, a candidate initially nominated by a local volunteer fire department could be elected to the municipal assembly and then later indirectly delegated to the republican assembly and, ultimately, to the federal assembly

35 Rakar and Kolarič, "The Role of Civil Society Organisations," 134.

36 Rakar and Kolarič, "The Role of Civil Society Organisations," 135.

37 Igor Duda, *Socijalizam na kućnom pragu. Mjesna zajednica i svakodnevnica društvenog samoupravljanja u Jugoslaviji* [Socialism on the doorstep. Local community and everyday life of social self-management in Yugoslavia] (Srednja Europa, 2023), 14.

in Belgrade.³⁸ In this way, participation in associations enabled further decision-making possibilities (as a citizen and as a member of an association).

Recent historiography on local communities in socialist Yugoslavia highlights the importance of resident participation in voluntary work campaigns to improve living conditions for themselves.³⁹ Participation in these voluntary work campaigns could yield material benefits and social recognition. For example, individuals who accumulated more hours of voluntary work might receive priority access to an apartment or medals for their work.⁴⁰ Voluntary work campaigns were also social events, often followed by barbecues and dancing.⁴¹ As early as 1965, a research group from the University of Ljubljana conducted a survey in a Slovenian town, dedicating one section to voluntary work. The study found that voluntary work was not only materially beneficial but also socially meaningful. According to the study, residents expressed a strong identification with their local communities and a sense of personal responsibility for communal affairs.⁴² Another voluntary practice that emerged in the last two decades of Yugoslav socialism was the practice of so-called self-imposed contributions. These contributions provided supplementary financing for municipal infrastructure and social welfare, as well as for the local communities to accelerate their development plans.⁴³ Self-imposed contributions became more common as wages started to rise, allowing residents to offer financial resources rather than manual labor. For example, those with a personal income from employment might contribute 2 percent of their net income. In 1973, the Slovenian Assembly adopted the Self-Imposed Contribution Act, which stipulated that municipalities and local communities could implement such contributions only through a referendum in which at least half of eligible voters approved the measure. Before a referendum, each local community would draft a five-year plan detailing the community projects to receive financial support, such as new roads, kindergartens, or fire stations.⁴⁴

The new funding structure for volunteer fire departments—through municipal support and the mechanism of self-imposed contributions—enabled the construction and expansion of numerous fire stations. However, these funds were often insufficient, prompting volunteer firefighters, frequently aided by other community residents, to contribute voluntary labor to build the stations. The firefighters' monthly journal documents many

38 Duda and Kladnik, "Socialist Democracy in Yugoslav Municipalities and Local Communities, 1970s and 1980s."

39 See, e.g., Duda, *Socializam na kućnom pragu*; Mladen Ostojić, "Yugoslav Self-Management as a Model of Participatory Municipal Governance? Local Communities in Belgrade in the 1980s," in *Participatory Democratic Innovations in Southeast Europe*, eds. Irena Fiket, Čedomir Markov, Vujo Ilić and Gazela Pudar Draško (Routledge, 2024), 173–194.

40 Ana Kladnik, "Local Self-Governance, Voluntary Practices and the Sinnwelt of Socialist Velenje," in *Making Sense of Dictatorship: Domination and Everyday Life in East Central Europe*, eds. Celia Donert, Ana Kladnik, and Martin Sabrow (CEU Press, 2022), 94–95.

41 Kladnik, "Local Self-Governance," 94–95.

42 Ivanka Polenc, "Prostovoljna dejavnost v novem Velenju" [Voluntary activities in the new Velenje], in *Ljudje v novem mestu Velenje*, ed. Zdravko Mlinar (Univerza v Ljubljani, 1965), 325.

43 Duda, *Socializam na kućnom pragu*; Ostojić, "Yugoslav Self-Management."

44 Jelka Piškurić, "Dinar by Dinar – A New Kindergarten: The Role of the Self-Imposed Contribution Mechanism in the Process of Socialist Modernisation," *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 64, no. 3 (2024): 237–265.

such cases, in which residents contributed labor, money, or material, or organized fire-fighting festivities to raise additional money. For example, in the village of Slovenska Vas, a new volunteer fire department was established in 1971. Within a year, “a fire station was built, with a hall and stage, a meeting room, which will also serve other organizations. The value of the fire station was 240,000 dinars, the Local Community contributed 19,000 dinars. More than 6,000 hours of volunteer work were spent on the construction.”⁴⁵ Notably, the report noted that the first trophy displayed in the new fire station was won by the women’s youth squad.

Fire stations represented central institutions in local communities and were often called “firefighting homes” (*gasilski dom*). Rural local communities called them “village-firefighting homes” or “culture-firefighting homes,” where many social activities occurred. Members of volunteer fire departments were operative firefighters aged 18 to approximately 63 for men and 50 for women; children and youth aged 7 to 18; and firefighting veterans—long-serving members older than 63 (men) and 50 (women). In the words of one firefighter from the village of Studenci: “Being a volunteer firefighter means being prepared at all times.”⁴⁶ Membership in volunteer fire departments was never mandatory (except in some cases during the Second World War). Family tradition played a significant role in recruitment: children often joined departments if older family members were members. In smaller local communities, the social aspect of volunteer firefighting was especially important in motivating participation. In addition to active members, departments also included “supporting members”—individuals who paid membership fees, helped raise funds or organized firefighting events, but were not expected to be “prepared at all times” and did not have voting rights to vote the bodies of the department. For example, in 1973, the construction of a firefighting home began in the settlement of Spodnja Idrija “without funds.” Building materials were purchased using profits from firefighter festivities and supporting members’ membership fees. Local farmers donated wood, while firefighters and some non-members contributed most of the labor.⁴⁷

3 Firefighters Preserving the “Purity” of Volunteering

The economic reform that swept Yugoslavia in 1965 affected the economy and municipal budgets, and, consequently, weakened the firefighting service. The number of women members in the Slovenian Firefighting Organization dropped to 3,612, or 5.27 percent of all members, by 1968.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, male membership dropped from 65,000 in 1963

45 Franc Hernet, “Za drugo obletnico novi gasilski dom” [For the second anniversary, a new fire station], *Gasilski vestnik* 27, no. 11 (1973): 324.

46 Franc Hernet, “V Studencih delovni tudi lani” [Working in Studenci last year as well], *Gasilski vestnik* 27, no. 6 (1973): 178–179.

47 Janez Jeram, “Nov gasilski dom v Spodnji Idriji” [A new firefighting station in Spodnja Idrija], *Gasilski vestnik* 28, 1 (1974): 24.

48 Božič, *Ženske v gasilstvu*, 41.

to 58,000 in 1972.⁴⁹ In response, the Firefighters Organization used the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the first fire department in Slovenia (1869) to show the public that the fire service had a “progressive part in the history of the Slovenian nation.”⁵⁰ On the occasion of the great jubilee in 1969, a Slovene Firefighting Museum was opened to help foster “the growth of Slovenian identity.”⁵¹ The president of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, awarded the Slovenian Firefighting Organization the Order of Merit. The most prominent representatives of sociopolitical organizations attended the celebrations, while Stane Kavčič, the president of the Executive Committee of the League of Communists of Slovenia, assumed the patronage of the celebration.

A central feature of the 1969 celebration was a rally of female firefighters, the largest postwar event to exclusively feature women. During the event, it was emphasized that women’s activity in the immediate postwar years, particularly through the support of the AFŽ, had been much stronger than the previous decade.⁵² Zora Tomič, a member of the Executive Council of the Slovenian Assembly and representative of the Committee for Social Activities of Women, emphasized in her speech that although women did not have their own organization and were now part of SAWP, it remained essential for them to participate in various social organizations and associations.⁵³ Municipal assemblies and municipal-level associations had committees for women, which also applied to municipal firefighting associations.

In 1975, in cooperation with the municipal SAWP, the municipal firefighting association of Ormož, a small town in southeastern Slovenia, organized a special rally in honor of the International Women’s Year. The event brought together 2,000 female and 1,000 male firefighters, alongside 5,000 visitors.⁵⁴ The rally’s discussions led to tangible outcomes: the 1976 Firefighting Congress called for female members to be equal to male members in everything. In practice, this call meant not only seeing an increase in the number of women members but also promoting women to higher firefighting ranks and management positions in regional firefighting associations, as well as in the presidency of the national Firefighting Organization. Under this initiative, the number of women operatives increased. By the early 1980s, 83 percent of the 8,842 adult women in the Firefighting Organization were involved in operative tasks. At that time, 374 women had achieved the rank of corporal, 24 had become lieutenant commanders, and six held the title of commander.⁵⁵ The number of female competition units also increased and began to

49 Božič, *Ženske v gasilstvu*, 41.

50 Božič, *Po poti 130-letnega razvoja gasilstva*, 130.

51 “Zgodovina požarnega varstva” [The history of fire protection], X. kongres GZS (1984), 311–318, 311.

52 Jernej Čertanc, “Žena v gasilstvu” [Women in firefighting], *Gasilski vestnik* 23, no. 6–7 (1969): 176–178.

53 Čertanc, “Žena v gasilstvu,” 252.

54 “Republiški zlet gasilk v Ormožu – mogočna manifestacija za vključevanje žensk v gasilsko organizacijo” [The national firefighters’ meeting in Ormož – a powerful manifestation for the inclusion of women in the Firefighting organization], *Gasilski vestnik* 23, no. 8–9 (1975): 228–237.

55 “Članice v gasilski organizaciji” [Female members in the Firefighting organisation], X. kongres GZS (1984), 80–92, 82.

participate in previously male-only disciplines, such as hydrant drills and pipeline laying, challenging the mentality that women could not physically handle the operative field.⁵⁶ Following the hundredth anniversary, the Slovenian authorities increasingly supported volunteer firefighting as a representation of national tradition.⁵⁷ Over the next two decades, professional firefighting services developed only in Slovenia's five largest towns and in the most fire-hazardous factories, such as the Jesenice Ironworks, the port of Koper, and the Krško nuclear power plant. Since the postwar period, the Slovenian Firefighting Organization sought to regulate relations and cooperation among the various firefighting structures: territorial (in local communities), industrial, and professional. However, under the 1974 Act on Associations, professional fire departments were no longer permitted to be members of the Firefighting Organization. While local territorial fire departments experienced a revival beginning in the 1970s, voluntary industrial fire departments suffered stagnation. Further complicating matters, the Firefighting Organization gained a rival, as the Civil Protection system began to establish firefighting units. In the early 1970s, 578 companies in Slovenia employed more than 200 workers who were supposed to maintain a fire department. However, the Slovenian Firefighting Organization, which kept poor records of industrial fire departments, recorded only 148.⁵⁸ Successful examples of industrial fire departments in factories displayed positive effects both in terms of reducing fires and being the cheapest form of organizing fire safety in a company. Legally, fire departments were only mandatory for the most fire-prone companies; all others were left to internal decision-making.⁵⁹ A journalist writing for a firefighting magazine remarked that "the industrial fire department lives only because of the goodwill of individual company managers."⁶⁰ Some companies, such as Iskra (an electromechanics firm), donated funds to the local volunteer fire department. According to the company's president, this constituted a "general social benefit. Financial assistance encourages people to be even more active and creative."⁶¹

During the first postwar decades, Slovenia's larger cities and economic centers developed rapidly, while peripheral regions lagged behind. By the early 1970s, this growing disparity in economic prosperity had become one of the country's biggest developmental concerns. In response, the government initiated a program in 1970 to promote long-term, targeted economic assistance to less developed areas. This effort encouraged

56 Mira Poje, "Članice tudi v operativno" [Female members into the operative as well], VIII. kongres GZS (1976), 248–251; Božič, *Ženske v gasilstvu*, 30–40.

57 Božič, *Po poti 130-letnega razvoja gasilstva*, 100–101; Ana Kladnik, "A Nation of Joiners. Volunteer Firefighters and Slovenian Nation- and State-Building from Below," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 68, no. 2 (2020): 148–175.

58 "Industrijska gasilska društva" [Industrial fire departments], VII. kongres GZS (1972), 54–56.

59 "Gasilska društva v organizaciji združenega dela" [Fire departments in the organisation of associated work], X. kongres GZS (1984), 106–107.

60 Alojz Konda, "Tudi gasilci v Beli krajini gredo v korak s časom" [Firefighters in Bela Krajina are also keeping up with the times], *Gasilski vestnik* 23, no. 9 (1973): 261.

61 Konda, "Tudi gasilci," 261.

companies from more prosperous regions of Slovenia to invest in less developed areas,⁶² which meant that industrialization spread in areas where agriculture had until then been the main economic sector—and also where volunteer fire departments were the most numerous (e.g., the Pomurje region in eastern Slovenia).

In industrial fire departments, workers were typically assigned fire duty in shifts, mostly completed exercises during regular working hours, and often received compensation. This remuneration became a key point of disagreement with local fire departments. According to them, it was impossible to speak of this as being “pure” volunteerism because the work was paid.⁶³ The Firefighting Congress in 1972 noted that territorial firefighting departments viewed industrial fire brigades “as some kind of black sheep that do not belong in our organization.”⁶⁴ Additionally, at the next Firefighting Congress four years later, the voluntary status of industrial fire departments remained a concern:

*Due to the specificity of these departments, they will often include workers who will also be paid appropriate compensation for the time spent in the departments—so they will not be ‘pure’ volunteers who work for free. [...] For us, the only thing that should be important is that these departments exist and are connected to the Firefighting Organization.*⁶⁵

The Slovenia Firefighting Organization sought greater cooperation with industrial fire departments, expecting local fire departments to help their industrial counterparts with activities such as drills and training. However, the interpretation of this mandate varied among local fire departments. In Radlje ob Dravi, a northeastern Slovenia town listed among the least developed local communities, the Okus fashion clothing factory, employing exclusively women,⁶⁶ was established in the early 1970s. The company soon formed an industrial fire department with a team of 16 female workers, and the company’s works council approved funds for uniforms.⁶⁷ Although the local Radlje volunteer fire department was designated to help the factory’s fire unit, the report noted the following:

*The company’s fire department [...] volunteers were accepted into the Radlje Fire Department. The new female team means not only greater fire safety in the factory but also the strengthening of the Radlje Fire Department, which has not had any women in its ranks so far.*⁶⁸

By incorporating the industrial fire department into its own structure, the Radlje volunteer fire department not only strengthened the number of women in their department

62 Jože Prinčič, “Pospeševanje gospodarskega razvoja manj razvitih območij” [Accelerating the economic development in less developed areas], in *Slovenska novejša zgodovina*, ed. Jasna Fischer (INZ, 2005), 1115–1117.

63 “Industrijska gasilska društva,” VII. kongres GZS (1972), 54–56.

64 “Industrijska gasilska društva,” VII. kongres GZS (1972), 55.

65 “Ženske v gasilski organizaciji” [Women in the Firefighting organisation], VIII. kongres GZS (1976), 63–65.

66 In 1952 in Slovenia, women accounted for 33 percent of the labor force and by 1985, 45 percent.

67 S. Vezovnik, “Ženska gasilska desetina tovarne Okus v Radljah” [Women firefighting team of the Okus company in Radlje], *Gasilski vestnik* 29, no. 11–12 (1975): 320.

68 Vezovnik, “Ženska gasilska desetina tovarne Okus v Radljah,” 320.

but also maintained the principle of voluntary service as they understood it, meaning unpaid.

Initially, the Firefighting Organization did not specifically differentiate between volunteers and professionals in industrial fire departments. This practice changed by 1976 when a congress report recorded 242 professional firefighters in industrial fire departments alongside 7,147 voluntary firefighters (885 women and 6,262 men); by 1984, these figures had risen to 528 professional industrial firefighters and 10,116 voluntary firefighters (1,822 women and 8,294 men).⁶⁹

It was not merely that the territorial volunteer firefighters in local communities emphasized their lack of financial compensation; they also frequently noted the responsibility they bore for securing sufficient financial resources to sustain their departments. The firefighter's newspaper contains numerous articles expressing firefighters' frustrations over having to beg for funds. This sentiment became particularly noticeable in the 1970s, after the establishment of new firefighter units within Civil Protection—part of Yugoslavia's new defense system adopted following the 1968 Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia. Civil Protection units operated at all territorial levels, including local communities and companies. Associations whose regular activities were crucial for protection and rescue—particularly firefighters and the Red Cross—had to align their activities with Civil Protection. Women were especially active within these Civil Protection units. For instance, in the winter of 1973, the Slovene Firefighting Organization assisted in organizing specialized Civil Protection firefighting units. That year, the Municipal Firefighting Association of Radovljica held nine seminars for the Civil Protection firefighting units in companies. A total of 211 Civil Protection members passed the examination, including 107 women.⁷⁰

Nonetheless, tensions existed between the Firefighting Organization and Civil Protection. Firefighters were proud of their organization's century-old tradition and viewed themselves as the most popular and effective actor in local communities. As an organization reliant on volunteers, their training, and self-financing, volunteer fire departments expressed dissatisfaction with being subordinated to Civil Protection and resented that Civil Protection units often received better funding. The firefighters criticized the Civil Protection for assigning larger numbers of women to its general units than in the Civil Protection fire units.⁷¹ The fire department specifically assigned women the task of cooperating with Civil Protection. However, according to firefighter Ivana Žunka, Civil Protection conscripts were physically inadequate for the role.⁷²

69 "Aktivni člani konec leta 1975" [Active members at the end of the year 1975], VIII. kongres GZS (1976), 40; "Člani po starosti 1983" [Members according to their age in 1983], X. kongres GZS (1984), 49.

70 Viktor Pogačar, "Usposabljanje enot Civilne zaščite za gasilsko službo" [Training of Civil Protection units for the fire service], *Gasilski vestnik* 27, no. 12 (1973): 355–56.

71 "Uresničevanje nalog na področju SLO in DS" [Performing tasks in the field of SLO and DS], X. kongres GZS (1984), 176–183.

72 Branko Božič, "S 3. seje predsedstva GZS" [From the 3rd meeting of the GZS Presidency], *Gasilski vestnik* 28, no. 6 (1974): 185–193, 190.

The Firefighting Organization advocated for a leading role in rescue and protection in municipalities, local communities, and factories. Although the Firefighting Organization remained subordinate to Civil Protection, it successfully negotiated a significant concession: members of Civil Protection who joined the volunteer fire department were recognized for work in the department as supplementary education. Specifically, if a member of the Civil Protection was also a member of the volunteer fire department, they were exempt from the annual Civil Protection practical training requirement.⁷³ This arrangement provided dual benefits. The firefighters secured further help from the Civil Protection, primarily in the provision of materials; additionally, they gained new members, especially women, and importantly preserved the “traditional” meaning of volunteering.

Conclusion

This article discussed one of the oldest voluntary organizations in Slovenia and its development during the period of socialist self-management. As the most geographically widespread organization, the development and operation of volunteer fire departments corresponded to the idea of self-management, which emphasized the participation and co-decision-making of citizens in the development of their municipality and local communities. Fire departments drew their strength and agency from their tradition and anchoring in the social life of local communities. Over the hundred years of operation, fire departments, as an originally exclusively male organization, had become democratized to the extent that the activities of women in the departments became non-negligible.⁷⁴ On the one hand, the idea of volunteering offered by the self-management system was based on the participation of people in voluntary actions to improve community life with a loose understanding of individual gains. Volunteer firefighters, on the other hand, had a clear vision from their very foundation that for them, volunteering means unpaid and honorable work. The article uses the example of women’s participation in fire departments in factories and in the Civil Protection system to show the efforts of volunteer fire departments to implement volunteerism, according to their own measure. After the end of the socialist period in Slovenia, volunteer fire departments in municipalities continued the tradition and understood volunteering as an unpaid activity, as did the new Slovenian state.⁷⁵

73 Pogačar, “Usposabljanje enot civilne zaščite za gasilsko službo.”

74 For comparison, by 1995, when Austrian women could legally join fire departments, there was already around 20 percent of women in the Slovenian Firefighting Organization.

75 The 2024 *Dictionary of the Slovenian Literary Language* defines volunteering as “an activity that involves the voluntary, unpaid performance of certain tasks” (“Prostovoljstvo,” in *Fran. Slovarji Inštituta za slovenski jezik* [Institute for Slovenian Language] ZRC SAZU, 2024).