

**CITIZEN SCIENCE
IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE**

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WHY IS IT DIFFERENT IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE?

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The aim of this volume is to present citizen-science projects from parts of the Central–Eastern European region. Tomislav Ivanjko’s study clearly shows that there is no universal or precise methodological description for a citizen-science project, as each project depends on many factors. However, we all agree that the role of libraries in citizen-science initiatives is indisputable. We have recognized the opportunities, but we also face many challenges when participating in individual projects. The role of libraries varies greatly, yet our most vital task remains reaching, recruiting, and motivating volunteers. Our existing networks of readers, visitors, and researchers provide a unique platform to introduce ongoing projects, and we are generally convinced that few would resist our call. Although regional statistical data is still being collected, personal experience confirms that our primary challenge is the low level of interest among citizens.

The question, then, is why it is difficult to engage volunteers, or why it is more difficult here than in the "more fortunate" parts of Europe beyond the former Iron Curtain. The answer is clear to us, but we wish to emphasize it to our colleagues as well, to raise awareness of our historical background—something we will certainly carry with us for some time.

Before we get into why it is difficult to recruit volunteers in our region, it is important to point out that in Central and Eastern Europe, volunteers motivated by scientific curiosity began participating in scientific observations at around the same time, if not earlier. Many fields of science that are now considered official owe their existence to the participation of volunteers in the 19th century. One typical example is meteorology. In Hungary, Ágost Heller published his call for thunderstorm observations in 1881 in the *Természettudományi Közlöny* (Natural Science Gazette), in the *Levélszekrény* (Letter Box) section (volume 13, issue 142)¹. He outlined the observation methods in 13 points.

1 Zivatarok statisztikája érdekében, *Természettudományi Közlöny*, 142(1881), 13. évf., 277.

In accordance with the "rules" of citizen science accepted today, two years later he repeated the call in the columns of *Természettudományi Közlöny*², thanking the volunteers who sent in data and highlighting those who sent the most complete descriptions by name, occupation, and location. Among those who documented thunderstorms and lightning strikes were school teachers, clergymen, high school teachers, and pharmacists. We could list many other examples of scientific research involving volunteers in the 19th century, but one example is enough to illustrate the common roots of the people living in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy at that time than other citizens of Europe.

In order to engage colleagues, volunteers, and researchers with appropriate sensitivity, we must understand the closed nature of society and the scepticism of researchers. A few articles examine volunteering behaviour after the political transitions of the 1990s. Sociological studies clearly confirm that the number of volunteers is significantly lower in post-communist countries (Voicu, Bogdan – Voicu, Malina 2009). It should be acknowledged that in the 21st century the societies are not at the same position as the Western communities; therefore, it is understandable that libraries in Central–Eastern Europe cannot easily "compete" with their Western counterparts.

We do not need to look far into the past. There is still a generation alive today that experienced firsthand the less pleasant aspects of the 20th century. In terms of voluntary assistance and work, the most memorable examples were those forced upon the population and labelled as social or voluntary activities. These include forced collectivization, the elimination of charitable organisations, the destruction of church communities, and compulsory community service such as the so-called "subbotniks" (Red Saturdays). Even in the 1980s, every other Saturday was officially a working day, and on free Saturdays people were required to participate in community work-activities unrelated to their actual profession and usually organised by the Communist Party branch at their workplace. In schools, these activities were organised by the Pioneer Movement. Because volunteering was associated with coercion and ideological manipulation, public trust in volunteer organisations collapsed after the fall of communism.

In the 1980s, a silent change could be seen, mainly secretly, but there were groups who volunteered in Hungary to be part of a "research" project, although at that time they probably did not know about the future value of their dedication.

2 Heller Ágost, Zivatarok statisztikája érdekében, *Természettudományi Közlöny* 166. (1883), 15. évf., p. 285. https://real-j.mtak.hu/6578/1/TermtudKozl_1883.pdf

The Social Theory Collection (Társadalomelméleti Gyűjtemény) of the Klebelsberg Library at the University of Szeged³ was established in 1985 by a few young lecturers and students of the Faculty of Humanities at the former University of Szeged with the aim of collecting social theory, ideological and political history, "emigrant" and "samizdat" publications, manuscripts, handwritten translations, memoirs, and research background materials concerning the history of Hungary and Central and Southeastern Europe in the 20th century. Volunteers, usually university students, collected and in many cases copied manuscript materials in the former Yugoslavia and Romania, and gathered political leaflets, which are now indispensable documents and an integral part of university research and education.

In the early transition period, many NGOs were created mainly due to external donors (e.g., the World Bank) or international charitable organisations (Rotary, Lions' Club, Zonta, Order of Malta, Red Cross). When these external actors later withdrew, many organisations became inactive and existed only on paper. For at least two generations, the concepts of voluntarism and charity were either eradicated or carried pejorative connotations. The parents of Generation Z did not have the opportunity to grow up with established traditions of volunteering and charity in the same way as their Western European peers (Silló 2016). In Central and Eastern Europe, volunteering has little value – or at least far less value – than in the West. This situation can only be changed gradually, and it is not certain that the "compulsory" community service required in Hungarian high schools (Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education) is the most effective way to motivate young people, since it also represents an obligation. Students over the age of 16 must choose and complete 50 hours of community service. Nevertheless, volunteering is slowly becoming more popular among young people, and both researchers and practitioners observe growing interest—especially in sustainability and environmental issues.

Studies also highlight that in countries where average incomes are low—lower than in Western Europe—people are far less likely to volunteer, even when the citizen-science project matches their interests. Volunteers are generally better educated in both Western and Central–Eastern Europe, but incomes in our region still lag significantly behind Western salaries, particularly in the humanities, where many individuals need to take on additional work to

3 <https://www.ek.szte.hu/kezdooldal/mit-keres/kulongyujtemenyek/tarsadalomelmeleti-gyujtemeny/a-tarsadalomelmeleti-gyujtemenyrol/>

maintain their standard of living. This means that even if someone considers a citizen science research project important, they will not sacrifice their free time for "unpaid work" because they need to earn money.

Volunteer centres scarcely exist in Central–Eastern Europe, as local governments have not assumed this role. This gap presents an opportunity for libraries, which can fill an important function in community life. Experience also suggests that citizen engagement is most effective when connected to local, place-based initiatives—an opportunity that organisers of citizen-science projects should exploit. There is one excellent example of a Citizen Science Hub in the region, it is in Slovenia: the Central Technical Library at the University of Ljubljana operates the national Citizen Science Hub. <https://citizenscience.si/en/> The website provides comprehensive information and presents Slovenian citizen-science projects. Three full-time colleagues are responsible for operating the Hub, organising training sessions and workshops, and coordinating project participants.

Volunteering has not always carried negative connotations in Central–Eastern Europe. In the 19th century, many civic and aristocratic initiatives produced benefits that remain visible today. This volume is being published as part of the bicentennial celebrations of the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and we cannot overlook the fact that the Academy itself – and its Library – were founded through voluntary donations. This fact also confirms our belief that, libraries are institutions that serve as trusted and engaged hubs, providing support and security even for uncertain but interested volunteers of citizen science projects.

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