Project description

Atlatszo.hu - KiMitTud

The aim of the project

Although the Hungarian legal framework ensures the possibility for any citizen to submit freedom of information requests (FOI) to obtain information of public interest, this has been an unexploited legal tool for several years. Besides not being familiar with legal details, technical obstacles to submitting FOIs (to whom, which address and how in practice one can submit) also hindered the use FOIs. In order to make it easier for everyone with internet access to excercise their fundamental right to receive FOI, atlatszo.hu established a free and public online FOI request generator system, by which anyone can submit FOIs without any legal knowledge and for free. Users do not even need to know the address of the data owners as the system ensures that FOIs shall be sent to the correct email address. In case someone is not able to form his/her question or faces other difficulty, an employee or volunteer at atlatszo.hu is able to assist the user. If someone does not dare to submit the FOI under his/her own name, atlatszo.hu might also do it for him/her.

This makes it possible for citizens or other NGOs subordinated to the state and being in an asymmetric position in terms of information to protect their rights with better chance.

Project activities

Atlatszo.hu-s „What DoTheyKnow" website started in May 2012, and by 2013 became the second biggest FOI request platform in the world. By the beginning of 2013 more than 1000 FOIs had been sent using the platform, by the end of December of same year we reached 2000, while in September 2014 the number topped 3000. In January 2016 this number is close to 6000.

Currently the project website is available at http://KiMitTud.atlatszo.hu/, which was completely renewed last year, both its internal software and external design. Data can be requested from 4758 data owners, as of 20 January 2016, 5903 FOIs had been submitted through it. The number of data owners is growing.

All the FOIs are public, therefore both them and the official response to them can be researched as well.

Ever since the project started, atlatszo.hu has been organizing trainings on the use of this unique tool in Hungary. During the three and a half years of operation about 30 such workshops have been held for a total of more than 300 participants, among whom were journalists, employees of other NGOs and dozens of citizens who wanted to learn about the work of the atlatszo.hu and the mechanisms of FOI requests, as well as investigating their own local cases through FOI requests.

Every week 5-10 users ask our team for assistance, these are typically requests to help form the text of an FOI, finding the right data owner or giving information on legal possibilities whenever a request is denied. This means 200-300 direct assistance per year, in many cases

we even prepare legal documents or submit FOIs ourselves instead of the citizen whenever they would like to remain anonymous.

Perhaps the most telling example of the impact of this complex activity is that the Hungarian illiberal Government adopted a law trying to restrict the right to FOI which is popularly called lex Átlátszó. In the summer of 2015, Freedom of Information Act was further amended, aiming to restrict citizen's access to public interest data. Most of these amendments rely on the more than 50 law suits brought to court and won by Atlatszo in the past few years.

The „empowering potential" of the project is also shown by the fact that there are several citizens who started to submit FOIs regularly and seek our advice whenever they need it. The spread of use of FOI requests is best shown by the high number and regularity of articles published in popular online media that rely on information obtained by sending FOI requests.

Project staff activities

a.   Project manager – responsible for the overall operation of the projects and answers the letters sent to project admin, handles user and data owner letters, if necessary, after consultation with the lawyer.

b.   Computer engineer and designer: responsible for software development and website design with graphic assistance of the designer.

c.   Data owner coordinator: responsible for collecting data of data owner, to upload and to control them regularly. He also answers the questions of the data owners. He is assisted by volunteers.

d.   Lawyer: gives legal advice related to the project and if necessary prepares legal documents to be be submitted by users. In certain cases volunteer lawyers assist this work as well.

Budgetary issues

Since the project started in 2012, the total cost was 51.000 USD with the following breakdown per year: 2012: 11.000 USD, 2013: 15.000 USD, 2014: 25.000 USD. Last year's increase was due to the complete renewal of the software and design. Project costs in 2015 reached 43.000 USD, including operation of KiMitTud system and the services offered to its users, as well as sharing the watchdog know-how of Atlatszo.hu with other news sites, NGOs, and citizen movements, supported in part by the Norway Grants.

The launch of the project and part of its operation were funded by OSI and the Norway Grants. Some of the costs are financed by the atlatszo.hu microdonations campaign.

Project results

The atlatszo.hu became one of the most successful civil initiatives during the last decade in Hungary, a crucial element of which was that it provides real assistance for the citizens via the „WhatDoTheyKnow" system and all the related assistance and this way trains and empowers citizens. The number of FOIs submitted per year already exceeds 1.000 which is expected to grow thanks to regular traingings and workshops. Some of the information revealed through FOIs will be covered by the mainstream media as well. Therefore the

project becomes one of the most important instruments of controlling political power in the country which already expressly left the democratic route.

Atlatszo.hu's „KiMitTud" is the realization of the british MySociety.org's WhatDoTheyKnow project in Hungary, along with several innovations. The system is unique in Hungary but is internationally appreciated for its success and complexity. According to a study (https://www.mysociety.org/files/2014/11/FOI-Impact_Part-1-Literature-Review-05.pdf,   p. 38), only the similar British project generated more FOIs in the world than the Hungarian, which is an especially good result in light of the number of resident population. Besides the FOI generator website the organization of trainings, the online technical and legal assistance and the anonymity ensured for those who request FOI in sensitive issues, and all this integrated into a investigative journalism website makes the whole project unique all over Europe.