

# Az Európai Unió katasztrófavédelmi politikájának elemzése és lehetséges irányai I. rész

## Examination and Possible Directions of the European Union's Civil Protection Policy Part I.

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### Absztrakt:

Az Európai Közösség (majd Unió) története során számos különböző válsággal és katasztrófával nézett szembe. A gazdasági visszaeséstől a természeti és ember okozta katasztrófákon át a humanitárius vészhelyzetekig terjedő kihívások következtében a mélyebb együttműködés és szolidaritás felé terelték a tagállamokat, jellemzően az adott esemény súlyosságától függően. Ebből következik, hogy a válságok gyakran nem csak feltárják a meglévő rendszerek sebezhetőségét és hiányosságait, hanem egy szorosabb együttműködés és integráció iránti igény megfogalmazását is eredményezik. Ahogy az Európai Unió tagállamainak polgárai automatikusan uniós polgárok is, úgy azok védelme és biztonsága is több, mint tagállami szakpolitikai (katasztrófavédelmi) kérdés. A szerzők írásukban arra kívánják rávilágítani, hogy az Európai Unió katasztrófavédelmi szakpolitikáját hogyan formálta és formálja mind a mai napig a szolidaritás, az észszerűség és a szükségszerűség egy biztonságosabb, ellenállóbb környezet létrehozása és fenntartása érdekében.

Kulcsszavak: Európai Unió, katasztrófavédelem, polgári védelem, szakpolitika, Uniós Polgári Védelmi Mechanizmus, UCPM

### Abstract:

The European Community (now the Union) has faced numerous crises and disasters throughout its history. These challenges, ranging from economic downturns to natural and man-made disasters to humanitarian emergencies, have consistently driven Member States towards deeper cooperation and solidarity, typically in response to the severity of the events. Consequently, crises not only reveal the vulnerabilities and shortcomings of existing systems but also lead to calls for closer cooperation and integration. Since the citizens of the Member States of the European Union are also EU citizens, their protection and security extend beyond national civil protection policies. This paper aims to highlight how EU civil protection policy has been, and continues to be, shaped by solidarity, rationality, and necessity to create and maintain a safer, more resilient environment.

Keywords: European Union, civil protection, policy, Union Civil Protection Mechanism, UCPM

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the European Union (EU) has been shaped by numerous crises, all of which have tested its unity and determination. The origins of European integration can be traced back to the post-World War II period, which pushed war-torn nations toward economic cooperation and collective security. The first and most significant result of this movement was the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in April 1951 [1]. With the establishment of the ECSC, Europe embarked on a path where individual countries, through their collective efforts, could focus on mutual prosperity and assistance rather than harm. This early framework laid the foundations for the future EU and underscored the principle that crises require a collective response to prevent future instability and conflict [2, Article 2., Article 3 (a)]. Similarly, the immediate aftermath of the oil crises of the 1970s saw a collective response with the creation of the International Energy Agency, laying the foundations for long-term energy security and sustainability [3].

As the Union has expanded and developed, subsequent crises have further strengthened the links between Member States. The financial crisis of 2008 revealed the vulnerability of euro zone economies, prompting the EU to enhance economic governance mechanisms and fiscal coordination through instruments such as the European Stability Mechanism [4]. This crisis highlighted the need for solidarity during economic difficulties and pushed the EU toward greater fiscal integration and harmonization of fiscal policies to protect against future financial instability. Furthermore, humanitarian crises, such as the migration influx that began in 2015, underscored the need for a coherent EU approach to managing external borders, asylum policies, and integration efforts. An EU institution was designated to reinforce Frontex [5], and a common framework for refugee resettlement was announced [6], reflecting a concerted effort to address crises collectively while maintaining humanitarian values and cooperation between Member States.

In the field of civil protection, the EU has made significant progress in responding to crises that threaten the safety and well-being of its citizens. Natural disasters such as major floods and forest fires have underscored the need for coordinated cross-border disaster response and preparedness. The Community Mechanism for Civil Protection<sup>1</sup>, established in 2001, exemplifies the Union's commitment to enhancing disaster resilience and cooperation by facilitating mutual assistance between Member States during emergencies [7]. This approach is further reinforced by the Lisbon Treaty, adopted in 2007, which enshrines solidarity as both an objective and an obligation. The 2013 decision of the European Parliament and Council of the European Union [8], which introduced the possibility of co-financing new response capacities<sup>2</sup>, the development of operational systems, deployment capabilities, and assistance based on voluntary offers by Member States, laid the foundations for the modern and diversified civil protection system that the European Union operates today. To play a greater role in cooperation, the Commission has begun to develop "stand-alone" capabilities<sup>3</sup> [9], making a substantial contribution to complementing national capacities. The Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine presents a new and unique challenge for civil protection policy. One of the main questions for civil protection and the UCPM is how an EU response to an armed conflict, specifically a humanitarian aid response, could be feasible. However, there are also complex issues (critical infrastructure protection, cyber security, prevention of misinformation, etc.) that not only affect the protection of citizens but also go beyond it, as they impact both the core competences of Member States and the common defence policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Known as Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) since 2013, see below.

<sup>2</sup> And also prevention actions such as workshops, studies, projects etc.

<sup>3</sup> These are capabilities fully funded by the Commission but maintained and operated under the responsibility of the Member States.

While there is no doubt about the need for humanitarian assistance to civilians, the implementation and further policy orientations for this and the future of the Mechanism remain the subject of lively debate among Member States in the EU Council Working Groups on Civil Protection.

## 2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF EU CIVIL PROTECTION

### 2.1 Efforts to cooperate (1985 – 2000)

In the mid-1980s, the European Community began to recognize the importance of civil protection in terms of the need for common action to respond to disasters and emergencies that transcend Member States. This period was marked by the need to establish a coordinated civil protection framework. In a narrower sense, this thinking was developing in the field of environmental protection [10, p. 3.]. In April 1985, the European Commission's Directorate-General for the Environment hosted the first civil protection meeting, where the Member States agreed for the first time to coordinate their national civil protection capacities in the event of major natural disasters, laying the foundations for joint cooperation [11, p. 126.]. Two years later, in 1987, it was decided to set up a permanent network of national correspondents for civil protection (PNNC) [12]. The network, made up of national officials and experts, aimed to gather information from the Member States to enable better assistance to be provided and activated more quickly.

The text of the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which led to the creation of the EU, also states that the European Community will develop and implement common measures [13, Article 3 (t), III. Declarations 1.] to support, coordinate, or complement the civil protection activities of the Member States in the fields of civil protection, energy, and tourism. This marked a move towards a more integrated approach to civil protection at the European level, reflecting the growing recognition of the benefits of cooperation in dealing with cross-border and large-scale emergencies. Building on the framework provided by the Maastricht Treaty, the EU has continued to develop civil protection. In 1997, the Council adopted a major Resolution (Community Action Programme, CAP) on the establishment of Community cooperation in the field of civil protection [14]. This Resolution aimed at further improving cooperation mechanisms and operational capabilities, emphasizing the need for solidarity and mutual assistance between Member States in emergencies. It set out principles and guidelines for promoting greater cohesion in disaster response efforts, facilitating the sharing of resources, expertise, and best practices between EU countries. Moreover, training and exercises, exchanges of experts, projects, public preparedness, mobilisation of experts, and the extent to which all these are funded were already identified here [13, Annex]. Given its success, the CAP was followed in 2000 by a second action programme [15].

Between 1985 and 2000, the EU's approach to civil protection evolved from initial recognition and the establishment of a framework to formal establishment and operational integration. These early steps laid a solid foundation for the future development of EU civil protection policy, paving the way for deeper cooperation and a more effective response to disasters and emergencies across Europe. The establishment of the CAP and the provisions of the Maastricht Treaty have played a crucial role in shaping the EU's role in civil protection and paved the way for a more coherent and coordinated approach to civil protection within the European Union. This period marked the beginning of a process that led to the establishment of a more solid and integrated civil protection policy framework within the EU, recognizing the importance of solidarity and the effectiveness of cooperation<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> This period includes the explosion near Seveso in Italy (1976), the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (1986), the emergence of mad cow disease in the EU (1990s), etc.

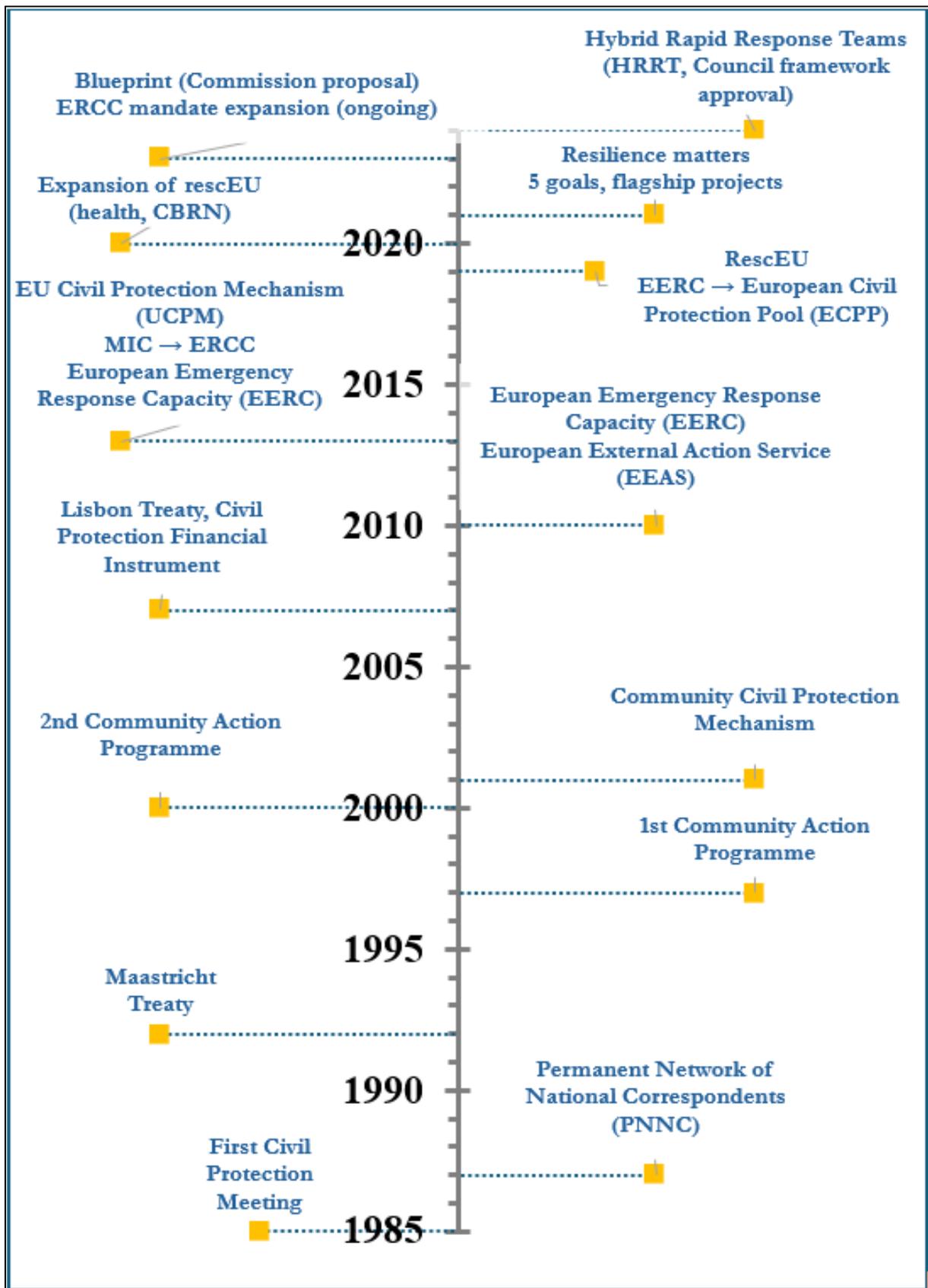


Fig. 1: Timeline of the EU civil protection policy milestones (made by the authors)

## 2.2 Establishment and consolidation of the Mechanism (2001 – 2013)

In 2001, the EU took a decisive step forward with the adoption of the Community Mechanism for Civil Protection [16], a framework designed to improve the coordination and effectiveness of disaster response efforts in the Member States. A central element of this initiative was the creation of the Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC) [16, Article 1. 3.], which served as a central working body for Member States to exchange information in real time, coordinate requests for assistance, and monitor disaster situations. By streamlining communication and decision-making processes, the MIC has played a crucial role in facilitating a rapid and effective response to emergencies, thereby strengthening the EU's overall civil protection capabilities. The Mechanism required Member States to identify in advance the intervention teams that could be deployed within 12 hours of a request for assistance in the event of an emergency in another Member State or in certain third countries [16, Article 3. (a)]. Participating States also had access to an IT platform, the Common Emergency Communication and Information System (CECIS), which provided a rapid and secure exchange of information between the MIC and the Member States' contact points. As a tool in the event of a disaster, CECIS enabled participating States to provide assistance to affected States, while the MIC also acted as a centre for information sharing and early warning of impending disasters. Interestingly, the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Hungary, were also effectively part of the Mechanism until their accession to the EU in 2004. Taking up the responsibility of being a participating state in the Mechanism, i.e. the willingness to cooperate in times of need, can also be seen as a means of either a soft integration into the EU or a potential enlargement of it, as most of the non-EU member states are either Eastern Partnership or IPA<sup>5</sup> countries (see fig. 1).

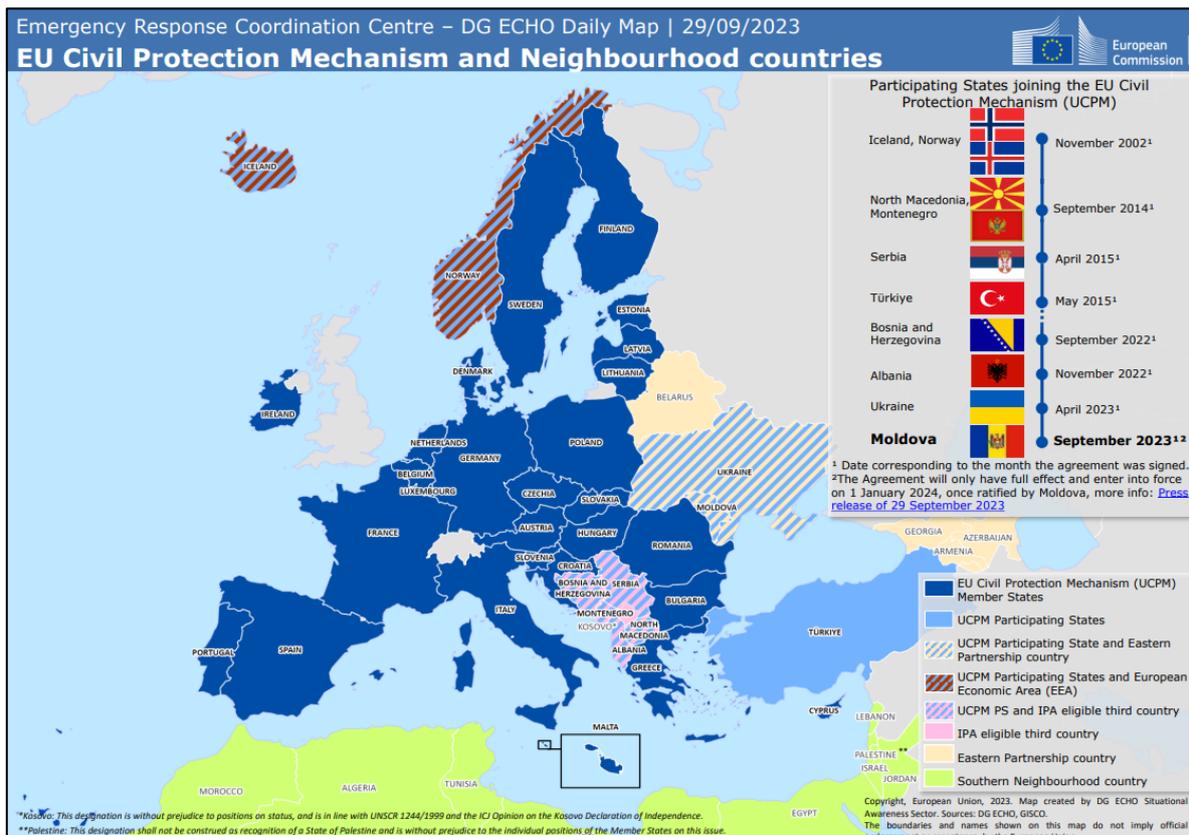


Fig. 2: EU member and participating states [17]

<sup>5</sup> Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) and Eastern Partnership, launched in 2007 and 2009 respectively, are both strategic initiatives of supporting countries with the enlargement of the EU in mind.

The Commission's supranational structures have been tasked with mobilising teams of experts to assess disaster situations on the ground and coordinating with national authorities to provide assistance teams on-site. Training programmes have also been launched to improve the capacity, interoperability, and coordination of the different disaster response capacities of the participating Member States. Financial support for civil protection activities also boomed during this period. In 2007, the Commission made two decisions regarding the Mechanism. Firstly, it created the Civil Protection Financial Instrument [18], a major EU financial fund for studies and research, exercises, maintenance of the MIC, development of early warning systems, public information and preparedness, etc., with a total amount of €189,800,000 [16, Article 4. and 14.] for the period 2007-2013, which was also open to third countries [18, (19).]<sup>6</sup>. The second decision was a more comprehensive and practical elaboration of the 2001 version of the Mechanism [19]. By allocating financial resources to enhance resilience and preparedness and by defining the functioning of the Mechanism more precisely, the EU aimed to strengthen its capacity to mitigate the impact of disasters and improve the overall effectiveness of civil protection at both national and European levels.

The Lisbon Treaty of 19 October 2007 marked another milestone for EU civil protection cooperation. The so-called solidarity clause [20] was introduced, which required the Union and the Member States to act together "in a spirit of solidarity" to assist another Member State in the event of a terrorist attack or a natural or man-made disaster, but did not limit the right of Member States to determine the most appropriate means of response and management within their own competence. The clause, by imposing responsibilities on the Union, reinforces its supranational character by obligating the Union to ensure, using its own institutional instruments, mechanisms, and resources that it can act in a coherent, coordinated, and effective manner with the assistance of each Member State. In other words, the European Union, as set out in the Treaty, replacing the European Community, has both supporting responsibilities and shared competences within its territory and outside it. While the former is called civil protection, the latter is called humanitarian aid [20, Article 6 & 196, Article 4 & 214.].

In addition, recognizing the need for continuous operational preparedness, the MIC underwent a major upgrade in 2008 [21], transforming itself into a 24/7 operational centre, available around the clock to monitor and coordinate emergency response across Europe. This upgrade was key to improving the EU's ability to provide timely and coordinated support to Member States in crisis situations and demonstrated its commitment to maintaining a high level of preparedness and response capability in civil protection operations.

With the Lisbon Treaty, the development of civil protection at the EU level accelerated, and the Commission became increasingly determined to address it. In 2010, the Commission announced in a Communication [22] the creation of a common European Emergency Response Capacity (EERC), which should be able to deal with all types of disasters (natural and man-made), except armed conflicts<sup>7</sup>, that exceed national response capacities and require EU assistance. In addition, the Communication called for the creation of a European External Action Service (EEAS), through which a common response to disasters and crises beyond the EU's territory could be possible. The Commission's 2011 proposal [23] laid the foundations for the launch of the new modern Mechanism in 2013 and the latest institutionalization of EU civil protection, where volunteered and stand-by capabilities can be mobilized at the request of the Commission [23, Article 12. 4.].

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<sup>6</sup> EUR 56 000 000 of the above amount.

<sup>7</sup> A subject to be addressed below.

Against this background, the millennium and its first decade or so have witnessed a significant step forward in the European Union's approach to civil protection, characterized by increased cooperation, improved mechanisms, and strengthened operational capabilities in response to evolving threats<sup>8</sup>. Key initiatives such as the creation of the MIC, further development of the EC Mechanism, introduction of the solidarity clause, and launch of the Civil Protection Financial Instrument all reflect the EU's evolving capacity to take initiative and its ambition to play a proactive and reactive role in civil protection.

### **2.3 Modernising the Mechanism, from complex challenges to today (2013 – )**

Decision 1313/2013/EU [8], adopted on 17 December 2013, provides for a rather broad scope of application of the new Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), which can potentially be activated "in the event of all types of natural and man-made disasters, including the consequences of terrorism, technological, radiological, and environmental disasters, marine pollution, and acute health emergencies" [8, Article 1. (2)]. These disasters may affect people, the environment, or property, including cultural heritage, inside or outside the EU [8, Article 4.]. In other words, the Mechanism can be activated in cases where there is no immediate threat to human life, but only a threat to the environment or cultural heritage. In light of its broader scope, EU civil protection policy has been integrated into the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), along with humanitarian aid, under the responsibility of a single Commissioner.

A central element of the reform was the creation of the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) [8, Article 7.], which replaced the MIC as a preparedness measure. The ERCC serves as a focal point for coordinating the EU-level response to disasters, facilitating the rapid deployment of assistance, and ensuring effective communication and cooperation between Member States. This structural development marks another milestone in strengthening the EU's ability to respond effectively to major emergencies and crises 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. An important related innovation was the basis of the UCPM on the capabilities of Member States, in addition to their civil protection capacities, which they have pre-committed and contributed to the EERC. The EERC pools the capabilities of Member States and participating States (see fig. 2), under the understanding that they are ready to deploy to disaster areas at short notice if needed. These capacities are referred to as modules, which may include search and rescue teams<sup>9</sup>, medical teams, experts, tools and equipment, or logistical support. To ensure the most effective response, the EU funds 75% of the operational and transport costs [24] for deploying these capacities, and sets minimum requirements such as self-sufficiency and cooperation with other modules, including joint actions by sub-components of multi-component capabilities [25]. Although the proposed legislation assumed that Member States would automatically contribute to module deployment by offering them [26, p. 8.], this limitation on Member States' competence was not implemented in the end. However, this did not lead to a reduction in the effectiveness of the Mechanism.

As for the activation procedure during the response phase, situations both inside and outside the EU were covered [8, Art. 15 & 16.]. A concerned Member State or non-EU State can request assistance through the ERCC, and states participating in the mechanism are free to decide the extent to which they will contribute. Once they decide, they inform the ERCC through CECIS about the level and type of assistance they wish to provide.

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<sup>8</sup> Among others, earthquakes in Turkey and Greece (1999), cyanide pollution of the Tisza (and Danube) (2000), the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre (2001), the Prestige oil spill (2002), the earthquake in Haiti (2010), etc.

<sup>9</sup> The professionalism and capability of these search and rescue teams is usually measured by their classification (light-medium-heavy) in respect to the United Nations International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (UN INSARAG) guidelines.

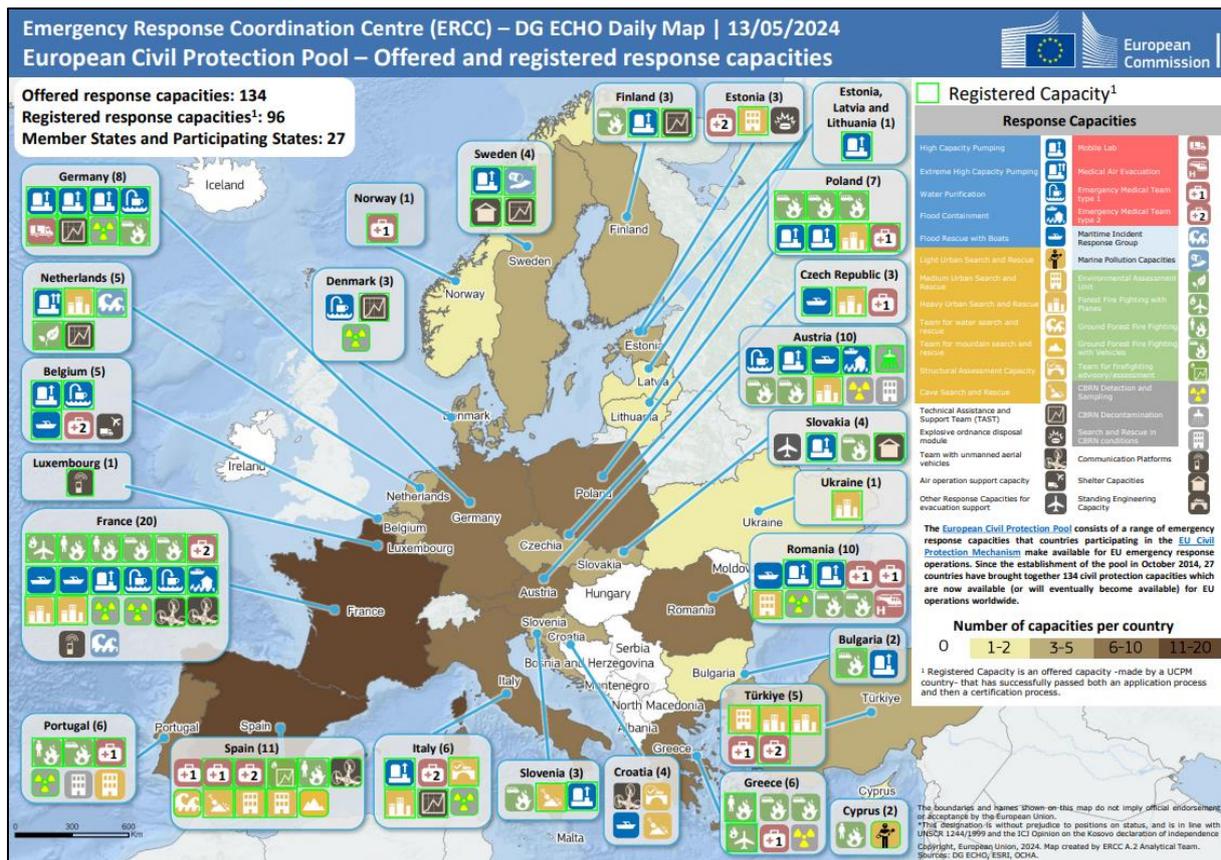


Fig. 3: CECIS registered<sup>10</sup> capacities (modules) of the UCPM [28].

To broaden civil protection policy, the Mechanism has previously allowed the participation of countries that were not yet members of the European Union<sup>11</sup> [8, Art. 28.]. The Mechanism considers the involvement of major international actors and respects the sovereignty of countries requesting assistance. The Commission does not have authority or responsibility for Member States' teams, modules, and other support. Deployed team personnel also must liaise and cooperate with UNOCHA or local emergency management authorities (LEMA) [8, Article 16. (2), (10)]. In essence, the ERCC acts as a facilitator, while modules operate under the control of Member States but are subordinate to the LEMA in the area of operation.

The next major step in responding to natural disasters was the 2017 proposal [29] for a rescEU reserve capacity for aerial forest fighting planes, special water pumps, field hospitals, emergency medical teams and search and rescue<sup>12</sup>. With this initiative, the EU no longer solely relies on voluntary contributions from Member States; instead, it reverses the roles, whereby Member States contribute to the EU's own nearly autonomous response at the EU level. The rescEU reserve is a dedicated pool of EU-managed assets that can be activated when national-level capabilities or those under the EERC are insufficient or unavailable. In an emergency situation, the Commission, in cooperation with the concerned Member State or partner, decides on their deployment and mobilization. However, these capabilities remain the responsibility of the participating Member States and can be directly supported through grants for expansion and the purchase of additional equipment. Unlike capabilities offered to the EERC, these capabilities are fully financed and mobilized by the Commission or maintained by the Member State with EU support.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that the process of registration of a Hungarian search and rescue team (HUNOR), the very first search and rescue team to obtain the INSARAG heavy classification in 2005 [27, p. 41.], is currently ongoing.

<sup>11</sup> EEA, acceding, candidate and potential candidate countries.

<sup>12</sup> Though mentioned in the proposal, there are no search and rescue capacities included in rescEU.

As a follow-up to the proposal, the Commission advanced in 2018 with a draft implementing decision [30] that would have empowered it to organize, procure, rent, lease, and/or otherwise secure rescEU capacities for use under the mechanism. The Commission's proposal faced strong criticism from several Member States [31, p. 346-348.], as EU institutions cannot exercise their competences in a manner that supplants the actions of Member States in the relevant areas [32]. In other words, the EU's concurrent competences were interpreted by Treaty drafters as areas of cooperation where the EU could only support Member States' actions without replacing them in the management of relevant activities. Against this backdrop, the proposed amendments to the UCPM, which would allow the Commission the ability to exercise "full control" over certain response capabilities without specifying roles for Member States, were considered to contradict the inherent nature of EU competences in civil protection and ultimately the principle of conferral enshrined in the Treaties [30, p. 348.]. In the light of the above, an amending and an implementation Decision was finally adopted in 2019 [33, 34].

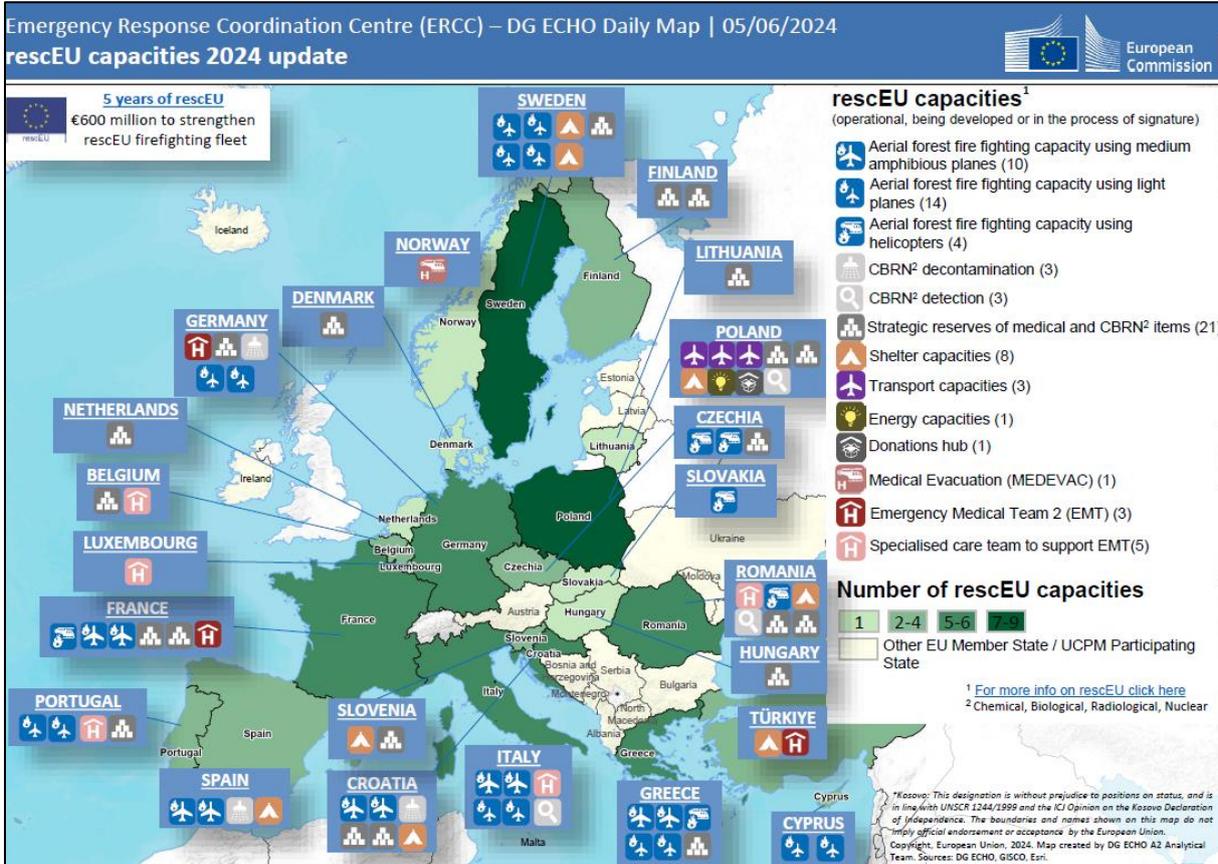


Fig. 4: Capacities of rescEU per Member States [35]

The outbreak of Covid-19 gave new momentum to cooperation in the field of civil protection. The Mechanism played a significant role in addressing the health crisis: the high demand for medical equipment and subsequent shortages of medicines and medical devices left some Member States without access to vital resources. The European Commission reacted swiftly: on 19 March 2020, it announced the expansion of rescEU capacities as part of the pandemic response [36]. Among the countries hosting such rescEU stocks is Hungary<sup>13</sup>, which has contracted to store, maintain, and conditionally<sup>14</sup> mobilize relevant equipment for five years.

<sup>13</sup> After Romania and Germany, Denmark, Greece, Sweden and Hungary joined in the second round (September 2020).

<sup>14</sup> E.g. own usage.

The rescEU stockpiles have thus been expanded to include medical equipment such as laboratory equipment, ventilators, masks, etc. A study by the European Parliament evaluating the response to the coronavirus pandemic highlights the EU's effectiveness in mobilizing various resources in public health, financial instruments, and civil protection through the UCPM to provide emergency and long-term structural support within the EU [37]. The study identifies the development of an EU vaccine strategy, procurement and distribution of vaccines, joint implementation of medical countermeasures, and the establishment of the European Health Union (EHU) as additional strengths of the EU's response to COVID-19 [37, II, Pillar 3.]. The EHU [38] encompasses measures aimed at enhancing coordination of the EU response to the pandemic and bolstering EU resilience and preparedness against cross-border health threats.

The complex and global management of the pandemic is underscored by the UCPM's role in coordinating the repatriation of European citizens, including co-funding transport costs. This enabled Member States, in close cooperation with the ERCC, to repatriate more than 90,000 EU citizens [39] during the pandemic.

The EU's swift decision-making and mobilization of capabilities under the Mechanism have further demonstrated its capacity to provide coordinated assistance and support to Member States, even during public health emergencies of global proportions. Activation of the Mechanism facilitated the repatriation of EU citizens stranded abroad due to travel restrictions, and also enabled procurement and distribution of essential health supplies such as personal protective equipment, ventilators, and vaccines.

### 3. THE CHALLENGES OF THE FUTURE: RESILIENCE MATTERS

And what are the latest challenges the EU faces? According to the Commission's latest Communication on the evaluation of the UCPM and further preparedness, "the EU is facing a number of simultaneous, diverse, and increasingly complex challenges and threats. The increase in conflicts, both man-made and natural disasters, including extreme weather events, and the evolving nature of security risks are posing greater challenges to the EU's disaster risk management architecture and the effectiveness of the UCPM" [40]. The recommendations include strengthening the current capacities of the UCPM; enhancing inter-sectoral coordination and the role of the ERCC in EU disaster prevention and preparedness<sup>15</sup>; sharing knowledge and expertise on risk identification and early warning capabilities; addressing the needs of vulnerable groups; improving existing prevention, preparedness, and response measures; increasing the budget; and enhancing integration into existing EU instruments [40, p. 7-10.].

The reason for this is that recent global events have demonstrated the vulnerability of the EU, and the need to increase its overall resilience has come to the fore. The Commission's latest 2021 regulation [41], addresses resilience in depth and how to deal with it, with 5 specific areas and objectives set out in its recommendations [42]:

- Anticipation: improving risk assessment and management to anticipate and mitigate potential disasters. Key measures include the development of disaster scenarios for preventive purposes.<sup>16</sup>
- Preparedness: raising public awareness, preparedness and general knowledge through educational campaigns and initiatives.

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<sup>15</sup> In particular in the areas of CBRN, civil-military cooperation, cyber, hybrid, health, logistical support for consular assistance and climate change mitigation.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. power cuts caused by extreme weather, earthquake tsunamis, drought etc.

- Alert: Improve early warning systems to disseminate alerts and information in a timely manner. This includes integrating global warning systems with local (cross-border) measures, with the support of the ERCC.
- Response: strengthening the EU's response capabilities by expanding the rescEU strategic reserve to include additional fire-fighting aircraft and other crucial capabilities<sup>17</sup>.
- Security: ensuring the resilience and operational continuity of civil protection systems through regular stress testing and enhanced coordination (cross-border and cross-disciplinary) between emergency operations centres.

To ensure the implementation of the above, „flagship projects” and initiatives have been developed and are currently in various stages of implementation. Disaster scenarios are still under development, and the PreparEU programme on preparedness was launched in February 2024 [43]. Regarding alerting, the linking of global early warning systems with local measures remains an ongoing initiative, and stress tests [44, Chapter II. 6.] on overall security have not yet been conducted by all Member States. In terms of response, significant progress can be observed, as the ongoing procurement and intervention operations ensure steady advancement in this area.

Civil protection preparedness will thus require multidisciplinary cooperation and stronger (centralized) coordination, information sharing, and cooperation, which will inevitably support deeper policy-making and EU integration. Consequently, Member States are currently being consulted at the level of Council Preparatory Bodies (PROCIV, PROCIV CER<sup>18</sup>). The working documents of the relevant PROCIV meetings, which occur approximately monthly, are not public due to potentially containing the views of individual Member States and sensitive information—this exception does not apply to agenda items. Similar to previous Swedish [45] or Spanish [46] EU presidencies, the extension of the ERCC mandate beyond UCPM [47-51] is a standing agenda item under the current<sup>19</sup> Belgian EU presidency, particularly regarding the so-called Blueprint [52] and the Hybrid Rapid Response Teams (HRRT). The Blueprint proposal advocates for an EU-wide response in case of critical infrastructure disruption affecting multiple Member States, while HRRTs would serve as deployable units of experts, acting within civilian and military (!) CSDP missions. Given the ERCC's proven effectiveness in managing UCPM to facilitate EU coordination between Member States, its extension to other areas of expertise (while safeguarding citizen interests) appears a logical step for the EU. However, legitimate questions may arise from Member States regarding potential confusion between civil protection and military operations, clarification on issues related to sensitive information security, or concerns about deployability in areas of armed conflict, such as the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine or the current humanitarian situation in Gaza – while the latter has already been seeing a tremendous amount of energy put into assistance<sup>20</sup>, the former has triggered the largest ongoing emergency operation in the history of the UCPM [53, 54]. In view of these efforts and challenges, and the uncertainty of conclusion of these situations, the responsibility for sending unified assistance and non-military people to an environment being dangerous for intentional purposes remains an issue to be solved.

Further complicating matters is the EU's composition of both NATO and non-NATO countries, where civil protection formations, focus, and stakeholders vary across states – another layer to be considered while trying to come up with solutions and making coherent policies.

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<sup>17</sup> Health, search and rescue, flood, CBRN etc.

<sup>18</sup> Working party responsible for civil protection, and the sub-working group responsible for the scheduled implementation of the Critical Infrastructure Resilience Directive (CER Directive).

<sup>19</sup> 1 January - 30 June 2024.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. the UCPM logistics hub established in Cyprus to facilitate aid via the maritime corridor.

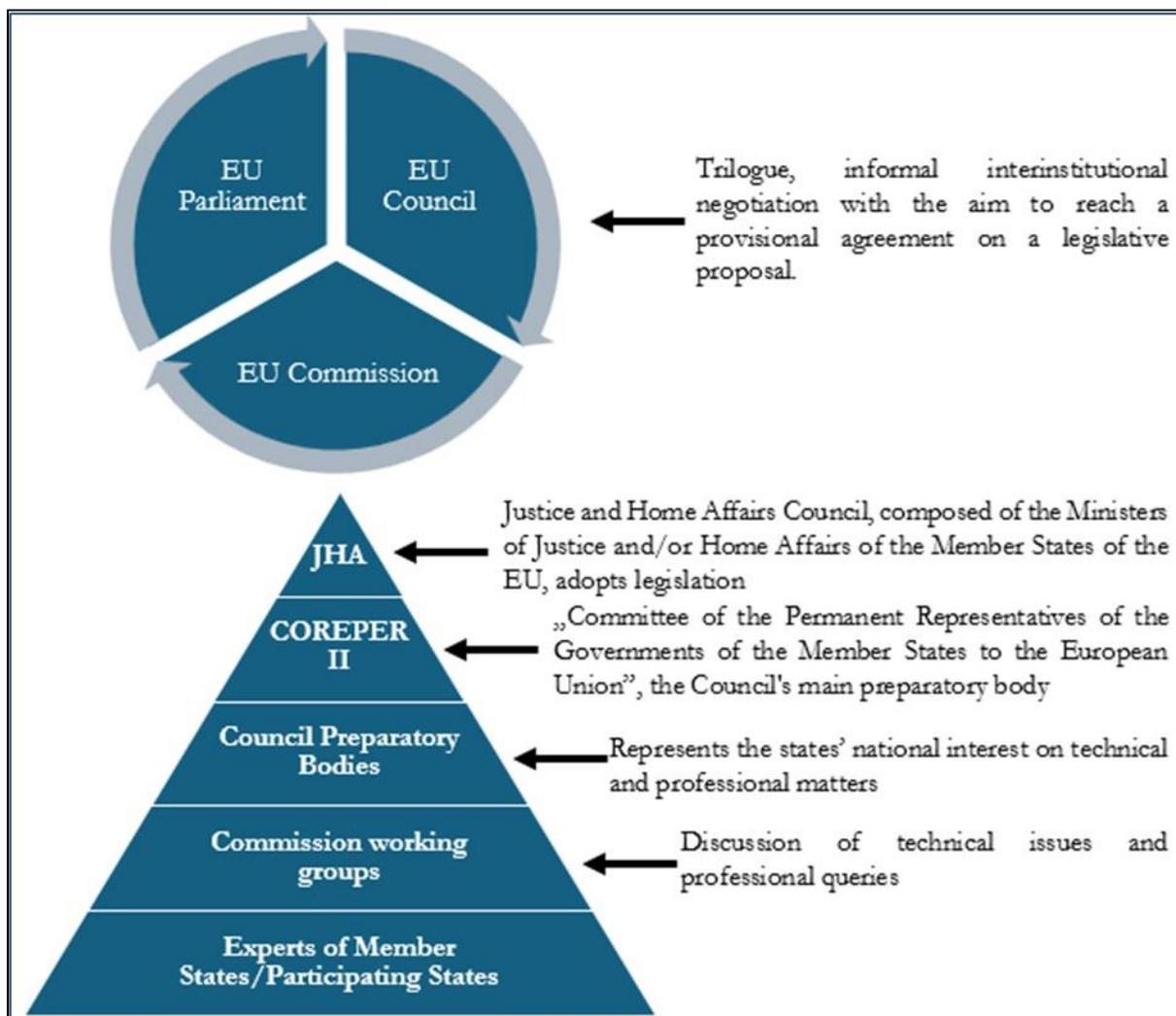


Fig. 5: Steps of policy making, from expert level to adoption (made by the authors)

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the necessity to address civil protection and disaster prevention emerged within the EU's predecessor in the realm of environmental protection. Subsequently, the EU's evolution consistently involved the enhancement and modernization of organizational and financial resources for civil protection. Milestones in this progression include the establishment of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and the development of the Financial Instrument. Today, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism represents a pivotal period spanning just over 10 years from 2013 to the present, characterized by proactive measures and strategic investments in civil protection policy within the EU, which have effectively addressed recent events<sup>21</sup>. The inception of the rescEU program, ongoing responses to forest fires, management of the COVID-19 pandemic, new dialogues, and the diverse approaches arising from the Russia-Ukraine conflict stand as noteworthy examples of the EU's sustained commitment to bolstering disaster response capabilities, promoting resilience, and ensuring a coordinated and effective approach to crisis and emergency management across Europe. However, the question remains about the new demands posed by complex challenges that will necessitate unified and obligatory action from the EU in the (near) future.

<sup>21</sup> Floods in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014), earthquake in Nepal (2015), migration (2015-), Ebola virus repatriation (2015), persistent annual forest fires across Europe, the coronavirus epidemic (2019-), the Russian-Ukrainian war (2022-), cyber security, population preparedness, disinformation, etc.

Given Member States' insistence on sovereignty, it is expected that the EU will respond to future challenges by expanding its institutional framework at the supranational level, rather than relying solely on Member States' voluntary capacity or imposing binding obligations to allocate their resources.

In the EU, successful disaster response also hinges on international cooperation between states. Cooperation, by definition [55], is the process whereby two or more participants work towards a common goal for a variety of reasons: to make it easier to address common challenges by pooling resources, to achieve reciprocity in the activities undertaken, to increase trust by getting to know each other, to adhere to a formal agreement, to foster a sense of collective responsibility, etc. Its essence can be expressed in the following insight: “The whole is greater than the sum of the parts” [56].

The EU's involvement in the field of civil protection has undergone significant change and development over the last 40 years or so. The reasons for this can be found in the need to respond to disasters, in the practical expression of solidarity, in the rational and effective implementation of prevention, or even in the limited resources available to Member States. Although civil protection policy is a national competence and the primary national responsibility towards its own citizens, a more effective response increasingly seems to require centralized (but collective!) management by a supranational institution.

What can be expected in the international arena in the future will be clearly and directly visible and experienced during the upcoming EU Presidency, which Hungary will hold between 1 July and 31 December 2024. For the Hungarian civil protection sector, this means that while chairing the aforementioned Council Preparatory Bodies of PROCIV and PROCIV CER, it will be able to affect and contribute<sup>22</sup> to the joint development of policies in its relations with the Commission and the Parliament.

The election or appointment of the new institutional leaders<sup>23</sup> is expected to take place in July 2024, after the European Parliament elections, although it is unlikely that the new leaders will be identified by then. However, their election, along with the hearing and vote of the new Commissioners in the European Parliament, will occur during the Hungarian Presidency. Based on past experience, the new European Commission is expected to take office in November 2024. This is compounded by the fact that a six-month presidency does not equate to half a year due to the institutional break, which will last for almost a month and a half, in addition to the end-of-year holidays. Therefore, considering the operational patterns of EU institutions, instead of six only nearly four and a half months are available to fulfil the tasks of the presidency.

In summary, the EU's limited role serves as a guarantee for Member State governments, which are not yet willing to relinquish their powers in any area of civil protection. One of the great questions to be answered is the potential expansion of civil protection to (semi)military cooperation, risking participation in operations not fitting its profile and risking its reputation. The direction in which this will change in the future (whether Member States will give up their own powers or the EU will extend its own) is open to question, but change is both certain and necessary, as has been repeatedly observed over the decades under review.

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<sup>22</sup> E.g. with the priorities to be defined by the presidency, which for Hungary is flood protection and civil protection tasks related to floods.

<sup>23</sup> President of the European Council, President of the European Commission, President of the European Parliament, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

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