

Egy megújuló UCPM stratégiai irányvonalai

Strategic Orientations of a Reformed UCPM

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Absztrakt:

Az Unió Polgári Védelmi Mechanizmus (UCPM) létrehozása óta számtalan alkalommal bizonyította, hogy egy jól felépített működési rendszer hatékonyan képes fellépni a természeti és ember okozta katasztrófák ellen. Egy változó világ azonban természeténél fogva folyamatos kihívások elé állít, amelyek mind egyéni, mind közösségi szinten próbára teszik az alkalmazkodóképességet. A megújuláshoz naprakészen kell lenni – ez adja a UCPM-ről szóló rendeletjavaslat alapelvét. A javaslat egyaránt eredménye és mozgatórugója a polgári védelem, a reziliencia, a felkészültség, a reagálás stb. témaköreinek, ahogyan azt számos korábbi dokumentum (stratégiák, jelentések, közlemények stb.) már előrevetítette, hangsúlyozva annak jelentőségét és fontosságát. A kezdeményezésben többek között szerepel egy nagyobb hangsúlyú polgári-katonai együttműködés, a polgári védelmi és egészségügyi programok összevonása, a nagyobb léptékű tervezés és egy komplexebb működési rendszer, valamint a társadalom és a kormány bevonása a polgárok védelmével és biztonságával kapcsolatos állandó feladatokba. A tanulmány célja, hogy feltárja a „rég” és az „új” UCPM közötti legfontosabb különbségeket, valamint a rendelet által bevezetni kívánt főbb változásokat és azok lehetséges hiányosságait.

Kulcsszavak: UCPM, UCPM jogalkotás, felkészültség, katasztrófavédelem, uniós irányvonalak

Abstract:

The Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) since its creation have proved countless times the effectiveness of well-structured operationalisation in the face of natural and man-made disasters. However, our changing world poses a never-ending challenge that test the ability to adapt on both an individual and communal level. To keep up is to reform – such is the base doctrine of the proposal for a regulation on the UCPM. The legislation proposal is both an outcome and driver when it comes to the topics of civil protection, resilience, preparedness, response, etc. as foreshadowed in many documents (strategies, reports, communications etc.) beforehand, further signifying its scale and importance. Reforms include a heavier emphasis on civil-military cooperation, the merging of civil protection and health programmes, a bigger scale with a more complex operationalisation, and the inclusion of both society and government in the perpetual tasks related to the protection and safety of citizens. This paper aims to explore the key differences of both „old” and „new” UCPM, as well as the main changes the regulation intends to implement with its potential shortcomings.

Keywords: UCPM, UCPM legislation, preparedness, disaster management, union policies

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the European Union has had to confront growing and increasingly complex challenges: security (the war between Russia and Ukraine), health (the COVID-19 pandemic), humanitarian (the Gaza war), climate and environmental crises (the 2024 wildfires and floods) that all demanded continuous readiness, monitoring, and action. Regarding natural disasters, civil protection, and humanitarian assistance, a system of mutual and joint support has been successfully created (the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, UCPM) under the supervision of the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO).

In response to new crises that call for a broader and more integrated approach, the European Commission had a proposal [1] to the EU Member States, seeking to extend this well-working model to effectively manage the aforementioned and similar situations. Although the proposal is unlikely to be adopted exactly as it stands, it includes many ideas that are likely to be reflected in strategic disaster management thinking and policies across the Union in the coming years.

2. PREVIOUS LEGISLATION AND THE ROAD TO A REFORMED UCPM

The legal basis and general framework of the new regulation are drawn from the relevant parts of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [2, Article 168(5), Article 196]. The proposal also builds on, and aims to replace, the European Parliament and Council Decision 1313/2013/EU [3], which set up the current EU system of assistance. After 2013, in response to the growing number of large forest fires in Europe, the European Parliament and Council Decision 2019/420 [4] amended the UCPM and introduced the so-called rescEU capacities. These are EU-financed, common disaster-management assets that are used when national resources and those provided through the ECPP are not enough. The most visible use of these capacities came during the COVID-19 pandemic, and demand for them has remained high since.

The need for a closer link with the health sector is also reflected in the European Council's 2024 conclusions, which stress that, in order to prevent, prepare for and respond to natural and man-made hazards – including serious cross-border health threats – and to improve overall efficiency, the Union must take into account the increasingly complex and interconnected nature of its risks and threats. In this context, Regulation (EU) 2021/522 on the programme to be implemented by the Union for 2021–2027 (the EU4Health programme) is particularly relevant, as it is part of the background to the current proposal as well. The regulation underlines that preparedness for health emergencies and the integration of emergency measures can add an extra layer of protection while boosting resilience, and better protect the population from serious health threats. Past experience shows that a health emergency can also indirectly affect critical infrastructure, having a serious impact on social stability.

The 2024 Niinistö report [5], which focuses on general preparedness, is also to be mentioned, as it calls for a comprehensive, all-risk approach and highlights integrated civil-military planning, strong national resilience, and more effective EU-level coordination and tools, including civil protection. Likewise, the Preparedness Union Strategy [6], adopted in March 2025, sets out an all-risk, whole-of-government approach for forecasting, protecting critical systems, strengthening population preparedness, and coordinating UCPM and health-related measures. One of the key measures in this Strategy is the review and further development of the UCPM, which directly feeds into the reform proposal.

3. KEY AND SPECIFIC DIFFERENCES

The proposal introduces several central innovations: a cross-sectoral preparedness layer [6, p. 21] to strengthen prevention, preparedness, and response capacities across civil protection, health, and other policy areas; the establishment of a Crisis Coordination Hub [6, pp. 31-33] alongside the existing Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) to improve early warning, monitoring, and response to complex crises; and stronger EU-level arrangements for health-emergency preparedness and response, including support to risk assessment, anticipation, and medical countermeasures. Its impact assessment highlights faster response times, better cross-sectoral coordination, and more efficient use of EU funds through reduced overlap and greater synergies between civil protection and health-emergency instruments. The proposal is expected to increase the availability and accessibility of medical countermeasures in health crises, reinforce disaster resilience and crisis-response capacities in Member States and partner countries, and better align EU support with the changing climate- and conflict-related risk landscape.

Topic	Current UCPM	Renewed UCPM
Scope	Civil protection only (natural and human-induced disasters)	Civil protection and health-emergency preparedness/response combined under one all-hazards, cross-sectoral framework
Coordination and Response	ERCC coordinates civil-protection responses Some delegated-act powers Prevention, training, equipment pools (e.g. rescEU) focused on disasters	ERCC with Crisis Coordination Hub and links to HERA/ECDC/EMA No delegated acts More decisions in work programmes Cross-sectoral preparedness plus explicit health-rapid-response tools (surveillance, stockpiles, medical countermeasures)
Financing	Approximately 3.6 billion EUR for UCPM Separate EU-level health-preparedness tools (e.g. EU4Health) Health-related aid through separate programmes Cost-based and simplified cost options	Approximately 10.7 billion total Civil-protection and health-emergency funds merged into one instrument More use of financing is not linked to costs Weaker controls against double funding

1. Table Comparison of Some Key Aspects (made by the author)

1.1 Scope

The proposal focuses mainly on prevention and preparedness, gives relatively little weight to response activities, and does not clearly specify how it covers cross-sectoral crises. According to the European Court of Auditors (ECA) [7, p. 15] some of its indicators are vague (e.g. “critical items purchased” while critical items are not defined) or lack a baseline, and it is not always clear how to distinguish climate-related investments from those related to other types of disaster.

However, in their opinion it is understandable that the outlined regulation follows a broad, comprehensive approach, so it gradually introduces new concepts and addresses topics like civil-military preparedness and cooperation, budget matters, risk assessment and risk-management planning, rescEU, the ERCC, and preparedness and response to health emergencies.

Although the term “disaster” is defined quite broadly because of differing Member State understandings and is aligned with Decision 1313/2013/EU [3, article 4], the proposal also derives from this the concept of “crisis,” which [1, preamble 24] explicitly includes armed conflicts affecting one or more Member States. On civil-military preparedness and cooperation [1; preambles 24-25; article 5], the proposal stresses its necessity in crises and suggests, as a guiding idea, expanding capacities suitable for dual (civil-military) use, since existing infrastructures such as logistics and transport are shared among all stakeholders. Although the proposal states that the explicit inclusion of third countries and cross-sectoral preparedness can strengthen the EU’s ability to respond to global and complex crises, it also raises questions about whether expanding the scope this far is justified, especially in cases that the efficient management of EU-level tasks should remain top priority.

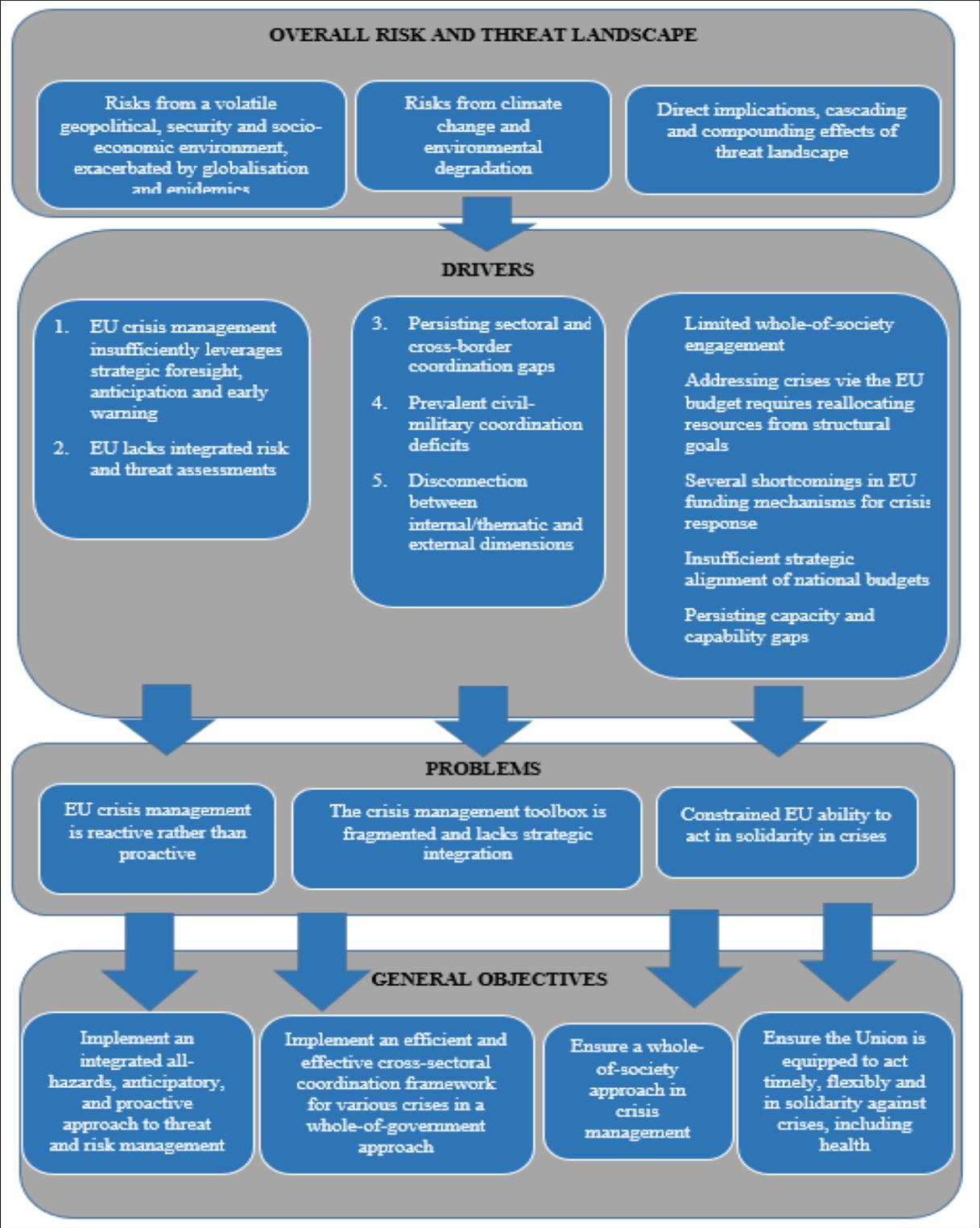
1.2 Coordination and Response

The new proposal is meant to support three main areas: civil protection (e.g. disaster-risk management, rescue resources, civil-military cooperation), health-emergency preparedness and response (including surveillance, detection of emerging threats, stockpiling and deployment of medical countermeasures, access to production capacities in crises), and cross-sectoral preparedness activities (joint exercises, training, technical assistance) to build whole-of-government and whole-of-society resilience. The ERCC will continue to coordinate the civil protection response, while a newly strengthened EU-wide health-emergency coordination structure (involving HERA, ECDC, EMA, and national authorities) will handle health-specific issues, and the proposal aims to make the links between these two systems clearer.

In the spirit of closer Union cooperation, a further innovation [1; preamble 10, 18, 19 and articles 14, 15, 16] is that Member States must, by the end of 2028 and every five years thereafter, submit to the Commission a summary of their national disaster-risk assessments and disaster-risk-management capacities – currently it is required only every three years – and that these summaries must now additionally include national response capacities, measures supporting the achievement of Union disaster-protection resilience objectives, and disaster-risk-management investment needs. According to the proposal, the role of rescEU [1; preambles 34–35 and 37–39, articles 21, 22] remains that of complementing national capacities and the capacities provided by Member States through the ECPP, ensuring effective and rapid response in assistance operations. As a new element, it emphasises the dual (civil-military) use of these capacities and allows the Commission, by decision, to lend or donate equipment and consumables. One of the most significant changes would concern the ERCC [1, article 25]: in the draft, an overarching crisis-coordination centre (the aforementioned crisis coordination hub) [1, preamble 23, 26–28; article 26] is to be set up on the basis of the ERCC, to strengthen coordination around the forecasting and management of cross-sectoral crises (potentially including the armed conflicts already mentioned), and this hub would be able to receive and process even classified data while staying in continuous contact with the Member States and the European External Action Service.

At the same time, the proposal does not lay down clear rules on how the UCPM and health components will coordinate with each other, or how the Crisis Coordination Hub and the ERCC will divide their roles, which raises the risk of confusion and inefficiency in cross-sectoral crises.

ECA recommends in its opinion that the Commission introduce minimum earmarking for prevention and preparedness, clearly splitting the financial envelope between civil protection and health emergencies; strengthen coordination by spelling out the responsibilities of the ERCC and the Crisis Coordination Hub, as well as those of civil protection and health actors (HERA, ECDC, EMA); and revise performance indicators so they better cover response activities, remove vagueness, set clear baselines, and explain how they connect across different intervention fields.



2. Picture The simplified display of problems, drivers, and general objectives (re-designed based on Annex 7 of the Impact Assessment; 6, Annex 7, pp. 92-93.)

1.3 Financing

The financial framework envisaged for implementing the proposal [1, article 6] is close to 10.7 billion EUR, roughly 3.5 times the budget for the current 2021–2027 period, and this amount is meant to cover health preparedness and cross-sectoral crisis management tasks in addition to existing civil protection activities. The annex lists eligible activities such as prevention, capacity building, preparedness, response, and (not clearly defined) cross-sectoral crisis management, so that civil protection and health preparedness are consolidated under a single financial envelope. As a consequence, DG ECHO expects an increase of about 15% in its staff in order to carry out the tasks linked to these eligible activities [1, p. 70].

The proposed envelope represents a major increase over the current combined budgets of the UCPM and EU4Health, yet the Commission does not present a detailed cost analysis that fully explains or justifies this level of funding. At the same time, there are no clear safeguards to prevent double financing [7, p. 9, 17] across several overlapping programmes, like UCPM, EU4Health, Competitiveness Fund, or Recovery and Resilience-type instruments. According to ECA, the proposal leaves unspecified the division of funds between civil protection and health emergencies, and also between prevention, preparedness and response unspecified as well, which leads to weakened transparency.

Although the new regulation brings civil protection and health-emergency funding under one overall framework, the ECA observed that this does not actually reduce the total number of instruments: health-emergency preparedness and response will still be financed through three different programmes, only re-arranged rather than merged. Making financing not linked to real costs, or based on simplified cost options, the default approach raises concerns about accountability, transparency and the traceability of funds, including the abovementioned higher risk of double funding and over-financing. It was noted as well that the wording on simultaneous funding from multiple programmes (Articles 8(1) and 11(5)) is ambiguous and could, in practice, allow more than 100% financing of the same action. The proposal does not explicitly confirm the Court's audit rights for third-country beneficiaries, which yet to be clarified. Therefore, there is a need for the Commission to define how EU added value is assessed to better justify the budget increase with a detailed cost analysis, tightened rules on eligibility and double funding, and to secure the Court's audit rights for both Member States and relevant third countries.

3. SUMMARY

The issues outlined above form the core of the COM(2025) 548 proposal for a regulation, published on 17 July 2025. The future, further development, and reform of the UCPM have already been on the agenda of the Council's PROCIV working party since the first half of 2023. In the course of these discussions, the debates have covered not only the content expansion of the legal instrument – such as broadening civil protection measures for natural and man-made disasters while also integrating civil protection and health emergencies – but also the question of the legal form itself (regulation instead of decision). Beyond this, the proposal calls for precise definitions of new concepts (i.e. armed conflicts as basis of cooperation), as well as coping with an enormous increase of the financial framework and the creation of a crisis-coordination centre – which raises the question of handling sensitive data, among others. The concept of an “EU added value” is not clearly defined in EU law, and the impact assessment does not show in concrete terms how the new UCPM framework will produce benefits that go beyond what Member States could achieve on their own [6, p. 29]. As ECA expressed in its opinion [7, p. 20], though the stated objectives mirror the 2025 EU Preparedness Strategy (all-hazards, whole-of-government, whole-of-society), they are not “SMART” (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound).

Nevertheless, the ECA, in general, supports the Commission’s aim of an integrated and flexible framework for civil protection and health-emergency management while it stresses that the current wording is too vague and unspecified, which could lead to weakened financial control and transparency. It is expressed the notion of EU added value as well as performance indicators to measure effectiveness are to be assessed and established [8. pp. 7-8]. Against the background of recent years’ resilience- and preparedness-oriented narratives, the proposal is wide-ranging, cross-sectoral, and ambitious, but in places it remains vague or superficial, perhaps deliberately to leave room for debate. It is clear that the proposal will not be adopted in its present form, yet this does not appear to be the Commission’s main objective: the deeper aim seems to be the establishment of a cross-sectoral, overarching, and EU-focused perspective and practice that can deal as effectively as possible with an increasingly complex set of challenges in a community that values solidarity.

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