

## Reconceptualizing the Civil Defence Paradigm: Insights from European Civil Protection Developments in the DPPI SEE Member States

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**Abstract:** The European civil protection landscape has evolved significantly in response to growing transboundary risks, necessitating enhanced cooperation, interoperability, and resilience. Instruments such as the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) and RescEU (as a reserve within UCPM framework) have played a central role in shaping national civil protection and civil defence strategies, while frameworks like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction emphasize prevention, capacity building, and resilient infrastructure. Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, a shift toward a more integrated civil defence paradigm has emerged, integrating prevention, preparedness, and response capabilities across national borders.

Within this evolving context, the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South-Eastern Europe (DPPI SEE) serves as a regional platform, facilitating collaboration among national civil protection authorities and fostering knowledge exchange in disaster preparedness and prevention aligned with experiences and standards of the European Union, United Nations Agencies and other relevant stakeholders connected with civil protection and humanitarian action, encompassed with DPPI SEE interests and mandate.

This paper examines the extent to which developments within the European civil protection system influence national paradigms of civil defence among DPPI SEE member states, with a particular focus on preparedness, prevention, and cross-border cooperation. The study employs qualitative data collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to national civil protection focal points across the ten DPPI SEE member states, but also regarding the statements and reactions received by representatives of the member states regarding the title and purpose of this study. Preliminary findings reveal a broad acknowledgment of the need to adapt national systems to contemporary risks. However, divergences persist concerning the integration of civil protection and civil defence concepts. Although progress toward alignment with European Union standards is evident, disparities in institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and available resources remain considerable challenges.

The findings highlight the importance of strengthening regional cooperation and value of innovative technologies, harmonized legal and institutional frameworks and enhanced cross-sector collaboration. By exploring the evolving civil defence paradigm in South-Eastern Europe, the paper offers insights into the opportunities and challenges of aligning national systems within broader European trends, while recognizing region-specific complexities and contexts.

**Keywords:** Civil, Protection, Defence; Regional Cooperation, DPPI SEE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The evolving security environment in Europe, particularly following Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, has accelerated discussions about enhancing resilience through a more integrated civil defence paradigm. Traditionally, civil protection and civil defence have been treated as distinct concepts in Europe, with civil protection focusing on disaster management and civil defence connected to military support to civilians in wartime (Schmertzing, 2020). However, the growing complexity of threats, including hybrid threats, cyber-attacks, technological accidents, and large-scale humanitarian emergencies, blurs these distinctions, prompting a re-evaluation of national strategies and operational frameworks.

Recent European Union initiatives, such as the strengthening of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) and the expansion of its RescEU reserve capacities, reflect a broader trend toward building collective resilience through more integrated and interoperable systems (European Commission, 2020). The recently launched EU Preparedness Union Strategy emphasizes strengthening prevention, preparedness, and cross-border cooperation without necessarily merging civil protection functions into a military-led civil defence framework (European Commission, 2025; European Commission, 2025b; European External Action Service, 2025; European Committee of the Regions, 2025). The EU Preparedness Union Strategy is articulated through a series of complementary policy documents that together outline its scope, rationale, and implementation logic. The European Commission's Communication presents the strategy as an all-hazards, whole-of-government, and whole-of-society framework aimed at strengthening the Union's capacity to anticipate, prevent, and respond to crises and emerging threats (European Commission, 2025a). This approach is further clarified through the Commission's Questions and Answers on the EU Preparedness Union Strategy, which provides accessible explanations of core focus areas such as foresight and anticipation, societal resilience, and improved crisis coordination across governance levels (European Commission Representation in Cyprus, 2025). In parallel, the European Parliamentary Research Service briefing "EU preparedness: From concept to strategy?" contextualizes the development of the strategy within broader EU policy debates, including insights from the Niinistö report, and highlights its key thematic priorities and institutional implications (EPRS, 2025).

These developments emphasize not only immediate response capabilities but also preventive measures, risk reduction, and infrastructure protection, aligned with global frameworks like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2015). In this context, civil protection is increasingly seen as a core component of societal security, requiring coordination across civilian and, where necessary, civil-military interfaces.

Within this dynamic environment, regional initiatives such as the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South-Eastern Europe (DPPI SEE) play a critical role. DPPI SEE serves as a regional platform that fosters collaboration among ten national civil protection authorities in Southeastern Europe in ten member states – Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and

Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Türkiye, facilitates knowledge exchange, and supports capacity-building efforts aimed at strengthening disaster preparedness and prevention. Against the backdrop of these European and international trends, regarding the regional (sub-European) perspective, it is challenging to explore how DPPI SEE member states perceive and adapt to the evolving paradigm, analysing national perspectives on the convergence between civil protection and civil defence and the implications for future regional cooperation.

## **2. METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative research approach aimed at capturing national policy-level perspectives on the evolving relationship between civil protection and civil defence within the DPPI SEE member states. The research design was exploratory in nature, reflecting the sensitivity and conceptual ambiguity surrounding the civil protection–civil defence nexus in the current European security and preparedness context.

### **2.1 Data Collection and Questionnaire Design**

Data were collected primarily through a structured questionnaire designed specifically for this research and distributed to senior policymakers and officials within national civil protection authorities of all ten DPPI SEE Member States. In addition to formal questionnaire responses, the study also drew on institutional reactions and feedback received from Member States regarding the objective, scope, and framing of the questionnaire itself. These reactions provided valuable contextual insights into national sensitivities and interpretative challenges related to the topic.

The questionnaire combined closed-ended and open-ended questions and was structured into five thematic sections:

- a. general respondent information.
- b. national civil protection and civil defence policies.
- c. influence of European frameworks, particularly the UCPM.
- d. capacity-building needs and future investments; and
- e. overall system assessment and willingness for further engagement.

The questions were designed to elicit qualitative insights into how civil protection and civil defence are currently conceptualized at national level, perceived policy challenges, institutional arrangements, and the extent to which national systems align with broader European Union standards and emerging trends, including UCPM and *rescEU* opportunities.

### **2.2 Target Population and Response Characteristics**

The questionnaire was disseminated to all ten DPPI SEE Member States, with the request that responses be provided by officials involved in policy formulation, strategic planning, or international cooperation in civil protection. Even responses rate is considered as low – three member states responded out of ten, the responses were consolidated at the national level to ensure that each participating state provided a unified institutional perspective, rather than individual opinions.

The overall response rate was limited, reflecting the sensitivity of the subject matter. Informal feedback indicated that some policymakers were reluctant to respond due to concerns that the questionnaire framing implied a shift from civilian civil protection toward a civil defence or militarised paradigm, which does not fully correspond with established national concepts in several countries. Additionally, uneven familiarity with the EU Preparedness Strategy and its practical implications affected respondents' confidence in addressing certain questions. These factors are treated not only as methodological constraints but also as empirical findings indicative of existing conceptual and policy gaps.

### **2.3 Data Analysis Procedures**

The collected data were analysed using a thematic qualitative analysis, allowing for the identification of commonalities, divergences, and emerging regional trends across participating states. Closed-ended questions were analysed descriptively to identify dominant response patterns, while open-ended responses and institutional feedback were coded thematically to capture recurring narratives related to policy evolution, EU influence, and capacity gaps. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of regional dynamics, interoperability challenges, and differences in national interpretations of the civil protection–civil defence relationship, consistent with comparative policy analysis in the field of European security and crisis management (Bossong & Hegemann, 2015).

### **2.4 Comparability, Visualization, and Limitations**

Although the study is primarily qualitative, the use of a structured questionnaire allowed for a degree of comparability across countries, supporting cautious regional-level observations while acknowledging national specificities. To support analytical clarity, the findings are presented through a structured narrative synthesis, highlighting key themes related to perceived EU influence, capacity-building priorities, and self-assessed system effectiveness.

Given the reliance on self-reported data, the limited response rate, and the political and conceptual sensitivity of the topic, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than representative. Nevertheless, the methodological approach provides valuable insights into how preparedness, civil protection, and civil defence are currently understood and negotiated at policy level within the DPPI SEE region.

### **2.5 Ethical Considerations**

Particular attention was given to confidentiality and anonymity, ensuring that individual respondents and specific national positions could not be directly identified. The analysis was conducted with respect for national contexts and policy specificities, recognising the diversity of institutional traditions and legal frameworks across DPPI SEE Member States.

## **3. PROBLEM ANALYSIS**

The findings reveal a complex and nuanced picture regarding the perception of the civil protection and civil defence nexus among DPPI SEE member states. Several countries, including Albania, North Macedonia, Slovenia, and Romania, expressed clear reservations

about merging the two concepts. Their responses emphasized the importance of maintaining a conceptual and institutional separation between civil protection—focused on disaster management, humanitarian assistance, and civil preparedness—and civil defence—traditionally linked to military support for civilian structures during wartime or situations of armed conflict (Alexander, 2002; OECD, 2020). Although the remaining countries did not express a clear position regarding the content and purpose of the questionnaire, it can be stated that the prevailing view among them aligns with that of the four highlighted countries, which insist on maintaining a clear distinction between civil protection and civil defence and avoiding their conflation. This distinction is deeply rooted in historical, legal, and political frameworks, reflecting the broader European principle that civilian emergency management structures should remain independent from defense's indoctrinated approaches, military command and control systems.

For instance, North Macedonia sustains a formal distinction, with civil protection responsibilities defined under the *Law on Protection and Rescue*, including risk prevention, emergency response, and recovery operations, while civil defence functions are outlined in the *Defense Strategy* and pertain to military-civilian coordination during national security threats. Albania similarly differentiates civil protection, oriented toward managing natural and other disasters, from civil defence functions designated for wartime conditions and defence-related contingencies. Slovenia emphasized that, under its *Protection Against Natural and Other Disasters Act*, civil protection tasks are distinctly civilian in nature, based on an all-hazard and all-government approach, ensuring an integrated system capable of responding to both peacetime emergencies and exceptional circumstances (Kešetović & Samardžija, 2014). Romania noted that the notion of "civil defence" remains under discussion within European Union institutions and warned against premature conceptual shifts that could complicate regional coordination efforts without a shared European understanding (European Commission, 2020; European Council, 2023).

Despite differences in national terminology, legal frameworks, and organizational models, there is a broad consensus across DPPI SEE member states on the necessity of strengthening resilience, interoperability, and regional cooperation. Countries recognize the benefits of enhancing capacities through mechanisms such as the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, particularly in the context of transboundary disasters and complex emergencies. However, the transition toward a comprehensive civil defence paradigm is approached with caution. Key concerns include the risk of diluting the strictly civilian, humanitarian character of civil protection systems, the potential confusion between civilian disaster management responsibilities and defence-related tasks, and the implications this may have for international humanitarian law compliance (UNDRR, 2015; Boin & Rhinard, 2021). These findings suggest that, while there is significant willingness to modernize and enhance national and regional disaster management capacities, the terminology and political framing of "civil defence" require careful, inclusive deliberation to ensure broad acceptance, clarity of roles, and effectiveness across the DPPI SEE region.

Putting in line the statements from the member states with very recent *EU Preparedness Union Strategy* (European Commission, 2025), it makes sense to check on how national civil

protection authorities are flexible to changes in the European civil protection's area. It is obvious that strategy marks a significant advancement in the European Union's approach to managing crises, building resilience, and protecting citizens against future disasters. The strategy explicitly aims to move beyond reactive (response-oriented) disaster management toward a proactive (preparedness and resilience - oriented), all-hazards, and whole-of-society approach. It emphasizes strengthening prevention, preparedness, and response capacities through improved cross-sectoral cooperation, early warning systems, interoperability of assets, and strategic reserves. This approach directly resonates with the core discussion of the paper, which examines the transition from civil protection toward a more comprehensive civil defence paradigm in the DPPI SEE region. In particular:

- Integration of civil protection and societal resilience: The Preparedness Union Strategy reinforces the idea that civil protection must integrate broader societal resilience objectives, without necessarily merging into military-led structures. This matches the caution expressed by several DPPI SEE member states (e.g., Slovenia, Romania) about maintaining the civilian nature of civil protection even when strengthening links with national security strategies.
- Regional cooperation and cross-border preparedness: The strategy calls for closer cooperation across borders, recognizing that crises (natural disasters, pandemics, cyber threats) are increasingly transboundary. This matches with growing emphasis within DPPI SEE on regional cooperation, although the conceptual framing (civil protection vs. civil defence) remains sensitive.
- Interoperability and standards alignment: The strategy advocates for the full alignment of national systems with European standards, including operational coordination under the UCPM. There are similar trends in the DPPI SEE countries, where efforts are made to harmonize laws and practices with EU frameworks while maintaining flexibility for national contexts.
- Focus on prevention, innovation, and capacity building: The strategy prioritizes investments in digitalization, early warning systems, AI-powered risk assessment tools, and strategic workforce development — areas that also highlighted and considered as relevant under the sections on practical implications and technological innovation.

#### **4. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of this study reveal both strategic alignment and notable divergences between the evolving European Union approach, as outlined in the EU Preparedness Union Strategy (European Commission, 2025), and the national perspectives of DPPI SEE member states. Both at the European and regional levels, there is a shared vision of building a more coordinated, resilient, and forward-looking civil protection system. However, a critical divergence emerges regarding terminology and conceptual emphasis. The EU Preparedness Union Strategy deliberately avoids reframing civil protection structures as "civil defence," instead reinforcing a vision of strengthened civil protection that integrates societal resilience, security, and risk management components without militarization. This conceptual clarity supports the cautious

position articulated by several DPPI SEE member states, who advocate for modernizing civil protection while preserving its distinct civilian and humanitarian character.

The study is both relevant and timely, providing valuable regional insights into how European strategies are interpreted, adapted, and occasionally contested at the national level, particularly in a region where legal traditions, historical legacies, and sensitivities around civil-military boundaries are deeply entrenched. The findings indicate a broad openness among DPPI SEE member states to enhance cross-border cooperation, build institutional capacity, and improve interoperability within the evolving European civil protection framework. Nevertheless, the political sensitivities surrounding the conceptual transition to a civil defence paradigm require careful and inclusive navigation to avoid misinterpretations.

The broader shift in European strategic thinking toward resilience—integrating disaster risk reduction, civil preparedness, societal resilience, and security dimensions—is clearly evident. Initiatives such as the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (European Commission, 2020), and global frameworks like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [UNDRR], 2015) underscore the move toward comprehensive, anticipatory disaster risk management. However, DPPI SEE member states emphasize the importance of preserving national flexibility, tailoring civil protection reforms to domestic legal frameworks, operational needs, and democratic principles. Such localization of the conceptual, legal, and organizational frameworks often fosters sustainable development and long-term ownership.

Going forward, strengthening regional cooperation remains imperative. Harmonizing legal and institutional frameworks with European standards should be prioritized, alongside expanding joint capacity-building initiatives and investing in technological innovation, including digital tools, real-time early warning systems, and AI-driven risk assessments. Furthermore, fostering cross-sector collaboration with civil society organizations, academia, and private sector actors will be crucial for enhancing collective resilience. Future strategic dialogues within the DPPI SEE framework must carefully balance the pressures for integration with the need to respect national systems, institutional sovereignty, and the unique political and historical contexts of the region. Only through such a nuanced and adaptive approach can South-Eastern Europe evolve in alignment with broader European and global resilience goals.

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