

EURO-MEDITERRANEAN COOPERATION ON NATURAL DISASTERS: Civil Protection and Emergency Management

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The EU Civil Protection Mechanism

To fully understand this article, it is essential first to define the concept of civil protection and its characteristics. We can find similar perimeters of competence from one country to another, with semantic variants such as in France where we speak of “*civil security*”, while in Europe the term “*civil protection*” is preferred. It is even customary to speak of “*civil defence*” beyond the EU’s external borders, particularly in the Mediterranean area. These different names are in fact the product of the history and organisation of the national services responsible for relief, emergency and assistance to populations, whose prerogatives vary according to the authority in charge (civilian or military).

The Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), which has just celebrated its twentieth anniversary, is an instrument of solidarity led by the European Commission and, more specifically, by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO).

Its creation in 2001 effectively marks the consecration and the rise of a European civil protection,² which falls under a support competence of the Union, which “*can only intervene to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the EU countries*”,³ thus excluding any Community legislative competence, as well as any ability to hinder the initiatives of the Member States in this field.

Article 196 of the Treaty of Lisbon states that “*the Union shall encourage cooperation between Member States in order to improve the effectiveness of systems for preventing and protecting against natural or man-made disasters*”, and its action shall aim to “*support and complement*

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² Decision 2001/792/CE, Euratom, 23/10/2001 Council

³ Art. 6 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union



Member States' action at national, regional and local level in risk prevention, in preparing their civil protection personnel and in responding to natural or man-made disasters within the Union"; to "promote swift, effective operational cooperation within the Union between national civil protection services"; and to "promote consistency in international civil protection work".

The primary purpose of the UCPM is to promote cooperation between the national civil protection authorities of the thirty-three countries participating in this scheme, i.e., the twenty-seven Member States of the European Union as well as Norway, Iceland, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey, and recently, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania.

It also has a universalist scope, since any State in the world that is unable to respond to a large-scale disaster by mobilizing its national resources could request assistance directly to the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC). This activation competence is also offered to the United Nations and its agencies and any relevant international organisation.

The UCPM is based on four pillars such as prevention, preparedness, disaster response and the European Civil Protection Knowledge Network.

Capability assistance provided through the Union Civil Protection Mechanism may take the form of material support, the deployment of intervention teams or the delivery of specific equipment. Experts may also be deployed to assess needs and coordinate with local authorities and international organisations on the ground, as well as to carry out advisory missions on prevention and preparedness. DG ECHO ensures a comprehensive response: for example, when a request for civil protection assistance is made by a third country, it is usually combined with the provision of humanitarian aid. In addition, the mechanism can also be activated during marine pollution emergencies, working then closely with the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA).

In addition to early warning mechanisms for monitoring or satellite mapping via Copernicus, the ERCC has received, since its creation, more than five hundred requests for activation of the mechanism relating to requests for assistance, previously covering natural and man-made disasters and now also complex and cross-border health or migration crises, including:

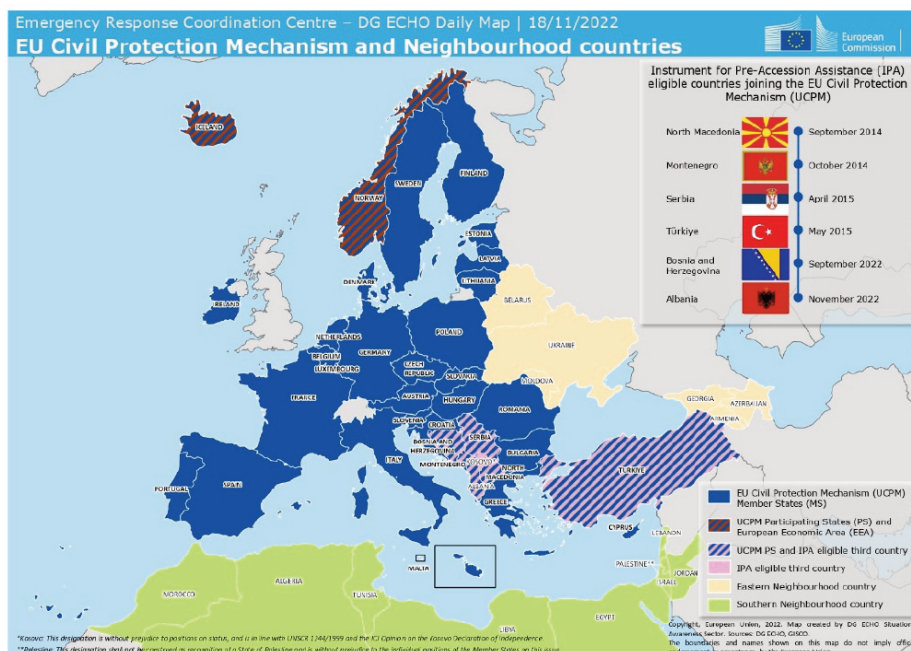
Earthquakes (Iran 2003; Pakistan 2005; Nepal 2015; Haiti 2021), tsunamis (South-East Asia 2004), forest fires (Southern Europe 2005, 2017, 2021; Chile 2017; Bolivia 2019), floods (Bulgaria and Romania 2014; Belgium 2021), health crises (Ebola – West Africa 2014; COVID – world 2020-2022), migration crises (Europe 2015; Greece 2020; Lithuania 2021), cyclone (Mozambique 2019), consular repatriations (China 2020; Afghanistan 2021), industrial accidents (Lebanon 2020), and war (Ukraine 2022).

While the first level of response of the Mechanism consists in the provision of spontaneous offers from the States participating in the facility to the State affected by a major disaster, it has nevertheless appeared necessary to build a rapid, efficient and predictable response from the EU.

With this in mind, a European Civil Protection Pool (ECPP) was created in 2013 as a voluntary pool of certified and interoperable national resources, pre-committed by the States participating in the UCPM and for which the Commission contributes financially to their operational deployment.

Taking note of the capacity gaps identified on EU soil (simultaneity of large-scale events), Decision 2019/420 amends the Union Civil Protection Mechanism in depth by creating the rescEU mechanism. This is an additional capacity response designed as a “*safety net*” intended to intervene as a last resort, after national response capacities, spontaneous bilateral offers from participating States and capacities registered within the European Civil Protection Pool have been exhausted.

The rescEU scheme covers rare and costly resources, such as airborne forest fire-fighting resources, emergency medical response resources, as well as resources to respond to a nuclear, radiological, bacteriological, and chemical crisis. The current health crisis has highlighted new needs, such as emergency accommodation, as well as transport and logistics capacity or, more recently, energy capacity, which is directly in the hands of the Commission, the latter assuming the financial burden of acquiring, hosting and deploying all these managed resources, de facto, by the Member States.



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The choice and commitment of these capability response assets (ECPP and rescEU) are managed by the ERCC, the operational heart of the UCPM. The ERCC is active and operational 24/7, with a capacity for disaster monitoring and response coordination. It collects information in real time, via a disaster early warning system, monitors risks, prepares plans for the deployment of resources (experts, teams and equipment, modules, etc.) from the European Reserve (ECPP) or rescEU, maps available capacities in cooperation with Member States and coordinates European disaster response efforts.

The ERCC is in direct and permanent contact with the civil protection and humanitarian aid authorities in the UCPM participating States, as well as beneficiary countries, thus ensuring a coherent European response to disasters.

Euro-Mediterranean civil protection cooperation

The countries of the Southern Basin of the Mediterranean are particularly at risk from natural hazards in a context of climate change. The Mediterranean is considered a hot spot, particularly sensitive to and affected by climate change. It warms up 20% faster than the rest of the world. Only the Antarctic warms up faster. Under current policies, regional temperatures will increase by 2.2% by 2040. Sea level rise will exceed 1 meter by 2100, affecting a third of the region's population. Now, more than ever, there is a need for a formal common regional framework to help build a positive prevention, preparedness, and response agenda in the region.

The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) is an intergovernmental Euro-Mediterranean organisation bringing together on an equal and representative basis, all EU Member States and the 16 countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. As a direct follow-up to the Barcelona Process, the launch of the UfM in July 2008 was a true reflection of the common political commitment of the 42 States to strengthen cooperation, dialogue, and regional integration in the Euro-Mediterranean area.

The UfM is a political forum, a platform for dialogue and works on projects with a regional impact.

In 2019, the Directors General of Civil Protection, meeting in Barcelona, launched three working groups which met in October 2020 and 2021 such as (1) preparing effective mutual assistance in the Euro-Mediterranean area, (2) engaging citizens in disaster risk management, (3) role of volunteers in civil protection.

From 2021, the UfM has refocused its work on five areas of action identified as priorities by the Member States, including civil protection.



With the increasing number of forest fires, floods, earthquakes, marine pollution, pandemics and other natural and man-made disasters across the Euro-Mediterranean area, civil protection is at the heart of the UfM's mandate.

The culmination of a new phase for the UfM in the field of civil protection was the official launch, on 12 December 2022, of the Regional Dialogue Platform - an emblematic tool of the UfM - which will bring together not only UfM Member States, but also international organisations and stakeholders, and civil society actors, around themes to be determined jointly. Thematic working groups will be conducted within the framework of the regional dialogue platform.

The platform will also work on (1) developing a comprehensive regional strategy, horizon 2030, (2) preparing the next UfM Directors General meeting on civil protection, (3) accompanying the launch of the new EU-funded PPRD Med programme, which will also be promoted by the UfM Secretariat.

This space of permanent dialogue should make it possible to anchor within the UCPM in order to mutually benefit from good practices, knowledge, and synergies in the Euro-Mediterranean area. In this sense, DG ECHO remains a crucial and essential partner.

The UfM Annual Programme 2023 reaffirms the need to increase cooperation between the UfM Member States as necessary to strengthen civil protection and disaster risk management in the region.

The main added value of the UfM lies in the interrelation created between the political dimension and its operational translation into concrete activities, field projects and initiatives that have a tangible impact on citizens in the respective regions.

We are working together with the UfM Member States and DG ECHO to create the conditions for a dialogue aimed at creating regional and sub-regional synergies. The last EU Civil Protection Forum held in June 2022 in Brussels was an opportunity to share common visions between the two shores of the Mediterranean and to consider partnerships that will be developed through the future Mediterranean PPRD or Multi-Countries Risk Mapping - aimed at establishing an atlas of risks in the MENA region.

Climate change and its immediate effects (suddenness, extreme events, cumulative, cross-border or cross-sectoral effects) require States and their civil protection systems to review their disaster risk management.



We are entering an era of understanding, mitigation and rapid adaptation of our Mediterranean societies, which, more than any other part of the world, are particularly exposed to a change in climate behaviour. Solidarity is no longer an option, but an obligation to maintain a high level of preservation of business continuity and citizen security.

Online Tools of interest

The European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO): https://ec.europa.eu/echo/index_fr

The Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC): https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/civil-protection/emergency-response-coordination-centre-ercc_fr

The Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM): <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/fr/policies/civil-protection/>

The Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) Knowledge Network: <https://civil-protection-knowledge-network.europa.eu/>

The UfM Regional Dialogue Platform on Civil Protection: <https://ufmsecretariat.org/fr/platform/plateforme-regionale-de-lupm-sur-la-protection-civile/>