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When the Air Raid Sirens Start, It's Too Late

Ukraine's lessons for Europe on civil resilience

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Civil protection systems in the EU member states have been built over decades and in conditions of relative security, predictability, and the stable functioning of state institutions. They are based on assumptions about limited crises, sufficient time for decision-making, and the continued operability of infrastructure even in emergency situations. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has challenged most of these assumptions. When missiles start falling on cities, energy systems stop functioning, and air-raid sirens sound, Europe is unlikely to be fully prepared.

Among those who work in Ukrainian territories that are under daily artillery and air attacks, one phrase is heard most often: "If only we had known, we would have been much better prepared." The price of this "if only" is human lives, destroyed communities, and lost opportunities to keep the country functioning during war.

On paper, evacuation plans lay out who calls whom, who goes where, which protocols are activated, where sensitive documents are to be taken, and who performs which functions in a crisis. These documents may even be updated. Their plans may even have been practiced during exercises. But new forms of warfare—mass use of FPV drones, new types of weapons, hybrid attacks on critical infrastructure—as well as complex systems of governance in democratic states, mean that this "paper-based" civil protection has little in common with the reality that will unfold in the early hours of a potential full-scale crisis.

This lack of preparedness raises several questions. Are cities and regions ready to act autonomously, without waiting for instructions from the center? If decentralization is high, are they ready to coordinate quickly and act according to a single protection plan?

Is there legislation that will actually work when war begins? This does not refer to general provisions under martial law—such laws exist in almost every country—but to concrete measures such as emergency procurement, response to attacks, management of critical infrastructure, protection of personnel, and restoration of basic services. Peacetime rules do not work in wartime. General principles are not enough.

Ukraine joined the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, a system of mutual assistance in crises, in April 2023. Since then, the EU has implemented the largest civil protection operation in its history, coordinating assistance from all 27 member states and partner countries. As of early 2026, more than 157,000 tons of humanitarian aid have been delivered to Ukraine—from medicines and temporary shelters to generators, transformers, and equipment for energy and water supply. The EU has also organized the medical evacuation of more than 4,800 Ukrainian patients to hospitals in 22 European countries. Since the start of the full-scale war, total EU humanitarian assistance to Ukraine has exceeded €1 billion.

But Ukraine is not only a recipient of assistance. It is also a source of unique practical knowledge and experience.

In the affected regions, massive electricity and water outages, humanitarian crises, business relocation, governance in de-occupied territories, restoration of medical and educational services, education under shelling, and protection of critical infrastructure have all taken place simultaneously—even as hostilities are ongoing. These are the conditions under which Ukrainian communities have lived and worked for more than four years.

This experience is not theoretical or model-based, but was formed in real conditions and over a long period. This makes it extremely valuable for rethinking approaches to civil protection in the EU. Its systematization and adaptation can significantly increase Europe's readiness for high-intensity crises and, ultimately, save more lives.

The Kherson Region After De-Occupation

The Kherson region provides a unique case for analyzing civil protection in wartime conditions. It is the only region of Ukraine whose regional capital was occupied by Russian forces and later liberated by the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The de-occupation of Kherson in autumn 2022 did not mark the end of the crisis. On the contrary, it opened a new and very different phase: the restoration and organization of civilian life under constant military threat.

After the Russian withdrawal, the extent of the massive destruction of critical infrastructure became clear. The electricity supply was effectively destroyed. Substations and power lines were damaged, or mined, or both. Equipment was looted or destroyed. Water supply and sewage systems were in critical condition due to damage to pumping stations and networks. Mobile communications and the internet were either completely unavailable or worked with serious interruptions, making normal coordination among authorities and emergency services extremely difficult.

A separate challenge was the mass mining of territory. Russian forces left behind mined roads, critical infrastructure sites, residential areas, fields, and forest belts. This represented a constant danger for civilians, repair crews, medics, and rescuers, all of whom had to work with limited access and extreme risk. Demining became not a parallel task, but a foundational element of civil protection. Without it, infrastructure restoration and access to basic services were impossible.

At the same time, the regional administration and local communities had to restore governance in de-occupied territories in an extremely short time. Hospitals had to be reopened. Education had to be organized. Social and administrative services had to be restored. Humanitarian assistance had to be delivered to the most vulnerable groups. All of this happened without a "stabilization pause" and under constant shelling.

In parallel, the local population formed a system of national resistance in its civilian dimension. This was not only about security or military components, but also involved the mobilization of residents to support community resilience through self-organization, volunteer networks, assistance with civilian evacuation, support for critical infrastructure, and close interaction with authorities and emergency services. Under conditions of limited resources and constant danger, this local engagement became a key factor in the city's resilience.

The experience of Kherson demonstrates a core feature of modern civil protection. The line between response, recovery, everyday governance, and national resistance disappears in times of crisis. Authorities, utilities, and communities must simultaneously respond to attacks, restore infrastructure, protect civilians, and maintain social cohesion under high uncertainty. This requires not only resources, but fundamentally different approaches to governance, coordination, and decision-making.

This experience—civil protection and national resistance under de-occupation and permanent military threat—is especially valuable for the EU. It shows how systems function when there is no clear "after", threats are long-term, and decisions must be made quickly, often with incomplete information and without relying on peacetime procedures.

The Adaptation and Evolution of Civil Protection Systems

In the Kherson region, de-occupation did not bring peace. The war took on a different, exhausting form. Russian forces remain on the opposite bank of the Dnipro River from the city, within direct line of sight. This has turned much of right-bank Kherson region into a zone of constant targeted attacks. This is not a front line in the classical sense; it is systematic targeting of civilians.

Air-raid alerts last for hours each day. They shift from artillery shelling to mortar fire, guided munitions, and FPV drone attacks. Being above ground has become a risk; moving through the city requires a calculation between strikes. In many communities, providing services or organizing education above ground is prohibited.

As a result, life has gradually moved underground. Shelters, basements, and converted underground spaces are no longer temporary refuges. Maternity wards, hospitals, administrative and social service points, and educational spaces now operate partially or fully underground. Cities and communities increasingly resemble an underground world, where civilian infrastructure must function under constant threat of direct attack.

This reality defines the logic of all governance decisions. Civil protection in the Kherson region is not about responding to emergencies. It has evolved so that it is about surviving when every decision is made with the understanding that the next strike may come at any moment. Civil protection in Kherson region gradually ceased to be a separate function of specific services and became the framework within which all governance decisions are made.

One of the first and most visible changes was the shift toward autonomy of infrastructure. Hospitals, shelters, humanitarian centers, and administrative services are no longer planned around stable central networks. Backup power, local water reserves, alternative communications, and rapid recovery capacity became basic requirements, not temporary solutions. Each critical facility began to be treated as an autonomous unit capable of operating in isolation.

The approach to protecting critical infrastructure also changed fundamentally. Instead of waiting for full reconstruction or ideal engineering solutions, the authorities introduced practical passive protection measures. These included physical shielding of transformers and pumping stations, access restrictions, and prioritization of the elements most critical for civilian survival. Protection of water, energy, and gas systems became not only a technical task, but a security issue directly linked to preventing humanitarian disasters.

Response systems also evolved. Emergency and repair teams began working during short, pre-planned "security windows", taking into account repeat strikes and mine risks. Surface work was minimized. Much of the coordination moved to protected or underground spaces. These measures reduced personnel losses while maintaining basic infrastructure functioning.

Communications and information security were transformed as well. Constant shelling and telecom destruction forced a shift to multilayered solutions: mobile base stations, satellite communications, backup information channels, and centralized crisis communications management. Restoring Ukrainian broadcasting and countering disinformation became elements of civil protection alongside shelter construction and evacuation.

Approaches to social, educational, and administrative services also changed. Authorities adapted education, family support, and access to public services to underground or semi-underground formats. Temporary solutions such as mobile centers, informal education spaces, and simplified administrative procedures gradually became stable practices without which community life would have been impossible.

Taken together, these changes mean one thing: A new reality has formed in the Kherson region, where war is not a temporary crisis but an ongoing environment. This is a different way of life, and leads to a different logic of organizing space, services, and local governance. Civil protection is no longer an add-on to "normal" governance. It has become its foundation.

The key factor in survival is the ability to adapt quickly—to constraints, constant attacks, and lack of time. In the Kherson region, decisions were implemented when they were needed, not when they were perfectly designed. Preserving life outweighed efficiency.

For EU member states, especially those facing the highest risk of military attack, this experience is critically important now. War does not allow years of preparation. For example, even under the most conservative estimates, building physical protection for a single energy facility—including design, approvals, procurement, financing, and construction—takes at least four years. In reality, Europeans will not have four years. They will have perhaps a few months before the winter heating season.

From the first moment of a military aggression, another critical factor emerges: responsibility for decisions. Without clearly defined legal instructions, few people will be willing to take responsibility for fast, unconventional, and risky decisions. Peacetime rules designed for stability will paralyze the system instead of protecting it.

Ukraine's experience, particularly that of the Kherson region, shows that adaptation must begin well before a crisis begins. Readiness for war is not only about resources and infrastructure. It is about preestablished decision-making mechanisms, local autonomy, clear mandates, and comprehensible rules for situations in which there is no time for discussion.

Institutionalizing Ukrainian Experience in the EU

Ukraine's experience cannot be imported into Europe after the fact—meaning, after the first mass strike, the first energy system collapse, or the first evacuation wave. In war, there is no time to learn. There is only time to act.

Ukrainian regions paid an extremely high price to find solutions that work: restoring services under fire, evacuating civilians under shelling, protecting energy systems "here and now", and maintaining governance and services when normal life moved underground. More lives could have been saved if mechanisms had existed and preparations had been made in advance.

Ukrainian experts are already sharing their experience with European communities, civil protection services, and central authorities. They are invited to trainings, conferences, and exchanges. This matters, but it is not enough.

Fragmented exchanges do not create system readiness. Without preapproved rules, mandates, and procedures, EU systems will face what Ukraine faced: Decisions must be made quickly, but few are ready to take responsibility. Resources exist, but cannot be deployed quickly because of inflexible standard operating procedures. Engineering solutions are urgently needed, but standard design–approval–procurement cycles take years.

This is why a permanent, dedicated European mechanism is needed—a mechanism that transforms Ukraine's lessons from stories and presentations into standards, clearly defined action plans, training, and joint response modules—ahead of any potential crisis. Such a mechanism should systematically absorb the lessons of Ukraine's wartime civil protection experience. It should not merely collect cases, but should translate them into European

rules, standards, and learning systems. It should allow partner countries not just to "study Ukraine", but to embed Ukrainian experience into their own civil protection systems.

A **European Civil Protection Working Group on War-Related Threats** could become such a mechanism. This should be not another discussion platform, but a working structure that brings together Ukrainian practitioners, European institutions, national civil protection services, local authorities, and analytical centers. Its task would be to transform Ukrainian solutions—evacuation under fire, rapid infrastructure restoration, autonomous critical facilities, underground public services, governance under attack—into clear, replicable, and legally sound operational plans for partner countries.

For European states, this is about practical benefit, not abstract solidarity. It would lead to prepared scenarios instead of improvisation; clear mandates instead of fear of responsibility; and ready response modules instead of years of planning when there is no time left. It entails the ability to act quickly and lawfully during crisis.

One of the most important outcomes would be a shift from a "disaster response" mindset to a mindset of resilience in times of war. Modern wars do not allow preparation over the course of a few months. But while Europe still has the most valuable resource—time—it can significantly reduce future losses by acting now.

Ukrainian experience is a practical survival manual for civil protection systems. The key question is whether Europe will manage to absorb this experience into its own preparations before it is forced to learn under the same conditions as Ukraine.

The views expressed herein are those solely of the author. GMF as an institution does not take positions.