

The background image shows several firefighters in orange and brown protective gear working at a disaster site. They are surrounded by rubble and debris. One firefighter in the foreground is wearing a helmet with the number '19' and the text 'PORT LOUIS' on it. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an emergency or nighttime situation.

VISEGRAD / INSIGHT

NO CRISIS PLAN SURVIVES WITHOUT CIVIL SOCIETY

POLICY BRIEF | JUNE 2026

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Civil Society | Poland and Estonia | Democratic Security

Problem

Despite the existing frameworks and legislation, systems that involve civil society in the crisis mitigation system are still at the infant stage in Poland and much of the CEE region.

Key facts

75 per cent of residents in seven Baltic, Nordic and German cities consider preparedness important, but only half know how to respond.

In Estonia, only 15 per cent of households held the recommended emergency supplies in 2023.

Foresight

Urban communities in Poland would remain vulnerable to humanitarian crises and social unrest during any prolonged loss of essential services.

Unless there is a systematic framework in place that brings together uniformed services, public administration and civil society, initiatives such as Warsaw's Community Crisis Network will lack coherence.

Cross-sectoral Cooperation for Crisis Preparedness and Response

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Effective crisis response requires the uniformed services, public administration and civil society to work together long before a crisis occurs. In Poland and across Central and Eastern Europe, no single platform brings these three groups together, and dialogue bodies established for other purposes are not used for resilience or crisis preparedness.
- This Policy Brief maps the state of play and the existing systematic gaps in Poland. It draws from specific success stories, primarily from local communities in Estonia but also from across the globe. It is meant to encourage further discussions on the topic that would bring forward practical policy recommendations.
- Poland's Act on Civil Protection and Civil Defence of 2024 introduces civil society organisations into the national system, but provides no practical tools for building cooperation. More than 18 months on, participation by the sector remains negligible at national and local levels alike.
- In rural Poland, cooperation rests on personal relationships and on the Volunteer Fire Brigade. Neither exists in large cities, where municipal services operate through hierarchies and procedures and hundreds or thousands of organisations have no realistic route into the system. A coordinating structure on the civil society side is therefore essential.
- Building cooperation mechanisms on that capital should be a national priority, on par with the development and funding of professional services.

About

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of social resilience and readiness to respond effectively in a crisis has been one of the main topics addressed in recent years in most European countries.

The crises of recent years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 refugee crisis triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the ongoing threat from Russia, as well as smaller, local threats caused, for example, by climate factors, have made security a priority for countries, regions and communities. Security involves, amongst other things, being well-prepared and able to respond effectively in a crisis.

Effectiveness is demonstrated by an appropriate response from all parties involved, including civil society. However, the skilful engagement of civil society organisations, informal groups and entire communities in building a system of social resilience is not yet widespread.

Integrating the Activities of the Public and Social Sectors

Central and Eastern European countries and societies share a common history of socialism and a lack of social trust, as well as a lack of specific tools and systems for cross-sectoral cooperation in the areas of security and crisis management. As a result, their governments face a particular shortfall in societal preparedness.

In the Polish system, this area falls within the remit of the uniformed services and public administration. The 2024 Act on Civil Protection and Civil Defence introduces the involvement of civil society organisations into the national system, but does not provide any practical tools for building cooperation. As a result, more than 18 months after the Act came into force, there is a lack of meaningful participation by the civil society sector in the system at the national level.

The situation is similar at the local level. Lacking cooperation mechanisms, local authorities do not have the skills or tools to encourage cooperation or to engage not only civil society organisations but also entire communities.

Project

Resilient Futures Fellowship, initiated by the Res Publica Foundation and the PZU Foundation, brings together the next generation of changemakers from Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine to strengthen democratic resilience across Central and Eastern Europe.

Visegrad Insight is the main Central European analysis and media platform. It generates future policy directions for Europe and transatlantic partners. Established in 2012 by the Res Publica Foundation.

The PZU Foundation has been conducting philanthropic activities since 2004. The key areas of the PZU Foundation's strategy, adopted in 2025, share a common denominator: strengthening social resilience.

Powered by*Dialogue Bodies are not Used for Security*

The existing tools for dialogue between the administration and the civil society sector are not suited to building a platform for understanding and cooperation in the field of security. This applies to both ongoing dialogue and operational cooperation.

Dialogue bodies dedicated to cross-sectoral cooperation in other areas, such as public benefit councils, youth councils, senior citizens' councils and other forums, are not utilised in the context of strengthening resilience and crisis response readiness. Consequently, there is no single platform for meetings between the uniformed services, public administration and the social sector.

The specific nature of the potential partners does not facilitate agreement. The uniformed services are a highly hierarchical sector with a very clear chain of command. These are institutions which, throughout their history and in their day-to-day operations, have had no experience of open dialogue with other entities, particularly civil society.

The civil society sector, on the other hand, lacks established and well-developed structures in the field of security. It is characterised by immense diversity, differing operational models and varying levels of engagement. Bringing together such a diverse range of partners requires a space in which they can learn about each other's specific characteristics and potential, and build closer ties.

The role of public administration should be to create such mechanisms and tools, and to open up spaces for dialogue and genuine cooperation between sectors. This requires not only openness and an understanding of this need on the part of the public sector, but also the establishment of appropriate structures within civil society.

Particularly at local levels, it is essential to manage effectively a network of civil society organisations that are active in crisis situations and respond to the needs of local communities. This requires networking, forming associations and identifying or establishing new bodies to coordinate and represent the civil society sector.

COOPERATION IN RURAL AREAS AND SMALL TOWNS

Local Volunteer Services in Poland

In Poland, in rural areas and smaller towns, social cooperation is largely based on established relationships, personal connections and, to a significant extent, on collaboration with Volunteer Fire Brigades.

Volunteer firefighters act as a link between the professional services and the local community. The existence and operation of the Volunteer Fire Service not only reduces the time taken to commence rescue operations in a given area, but also ensures familiarity with the local area where operations are carried out and with the local community.

The network of relationships and connections (often personal) between service representatives, local authorities, institutions, organisations and residents is naturally established.

Interestingly, this situation is not unique to Poland. Examples from rural areas and small communities around the world show that personal relationships and mutual acquaintances are key in such contexts.

We are talking here about situations where key figures representing the emergency services, local authorities and representatives of organisations and communities can meet in a single, small room. In such a setting, it is easier to agree on joint actions and even to decide how to utilise available resources. Importantly, the creation of such local 'councils' is often driven by a specific threat to the community (floods, fires, earthquakes, typhoons), and examples of such initiatives can be found on almost every continent.

The Estonian Village Model

A similar dynamic is visible in rural Estonia, where some of the most effective cooperation has grown out of individual villages rather than national programmes. In south-eastern Estonia, the village of Peri is cited by the national Rescue Service Agency as a strong example of a community and its rural municipality working closely together, built through joint exercises bringing municipal officials, non-governmental

organisations, the rescue service and volunteers around a shared crisis scenario [1].

In the municipality of Võru, a village society invited the Rescue Service Agency to run a community crisis training on its own initiative in 2023 and used the results to apply successfully for state funding, while another village association elsewhere in Estonia used a similar grant to combine crisis training with acquiring a generator and building a working relationship with its local government.

What unites these cases is that the initiative typically came from the community itself, with the state acting as trainer and funder rather than director. This role is also played by *Kodukant*, the national village movement that brings together some 900 village societies and 550 village elders across the country [2].

The Absence of a Formal Framework

However, there is still no clear, formal or practical framework for this cooperation and, more importantly, no guidelines or conditions for extending it to other organisations and further community representatives in Poland. A consequence of this is also the lack of tangible support from the state or local authorities for the development of other civil society organisations and the establishment of effective structures for cooperation.

The potential of the social sector, invaluable due to its rapid response, ability to assess local needs and capacity to organise activities and provide humanitarian aid to those in need, remains underutilised and lacks meaningful support.

Estonia offers one working example of the kind of tangible state support this article argues is missing elsewhere. In 2023, the Ministry of the Interior and the Civil Society Foundation (KÜSK) launched an annual innovation fund specifically for population-protection projects proposed and run by village societies, apartment associations and other local civil society groups; in its first year it distributed close to 875,000 euros across 110 applications from 67 municipalities, funding activities ranging from crisis training to generators for village halls [3].

THE PROBLEM OF CITIES

In urban or metropolitan settings, the conditions and opportunities for building cooperation based on relationships and personal connections are lacking. The principles of the Polish system, which takes into account the presence of Volunteer Fire Brigades, are also not applicable in large cities, where only a few units operate or none at all.

The extensive structures of municipal services and administration operate through internal hierarchies, procedures and regulations. The voluntary sector, often comprising hundreds or thousands of organisations, has no realistic chance of engaging in effective cooperation. In such circumstances, it is essential to establish a structure that facilitates cooperation on the part of the voluntary sector.

Standing Structures in Jõelähtme and Tallinn (Estonia)

The small municipality of Jõelähtme has attached a population-protection commission to its council, bringing together the local government, the Rescue Service Agency, Naiskodukaitse, village elders and apartment-association representatives on an ongoing basis rather than only when a crisis is imminent.

In Tallinn, the municipal police have built a dedicated population-protection unit that has trained more than 6,000 city staff, partner organisations and apartment-building chairpersons, and is now advising apartment associations across the capital's more than 3,000 apartment blocks on shelter and basement conversions. This is a rare example, in this article, of a large-city administration building this capacity directly rather than solely through a civil-society intermediary.

Municipalities are advised, though not legally required, to set up such a crisis commission with a pre-agreed activation procedure; as in Poland, take-up still varies considerably between local authorities [4].

Civil Society Acts, but in Isolation

Importantly, the lack of mechanisms enabling cooperation does not mean there is a lack of action on the part of civil society. The experiences of recent years and crises in Poland show that the civil sector's activities are vast and significant,

and that they are capable of channelling the spontaneous actions of individuals by engaging people in coordinated efforts.

Unfortunately, without an appropriate culture of cooperation with parallel public bodies, the civil society and public sectors operate in isolation, which will always result in reduced efficiency on both sides. As a result, public authorities in Poland should develop a framework for cross-sectoral cooperation in the area of resilience and crisis preparedness. This has to be a functioning system that takes into account the day-to-day, routine work of all stakeholders in building resilience and preparedness at national, regional and local levels, whilst also enabling them to reach out to, educate and engage individuals.

Low Levels of Preparedness

The University of Latvia survey, carried out in 2025, highlights important preparedness gaps in the Baltic states, Finland and Germany [5]. The survey involved residents of Riga, Tallinn, Helsinki, Vilnius, Berlin, Hamburg and Munich.

Around 75 per cent of respondents acknowledge that preparedness for various types of emergencies is an important issue, but only half of them have any knowledge of how to prepare for and respond to an emergency. City dwellers also answered detailed questions regarding the preparedness of their homes for a crisis and the resources they possess in this regard.

The results indicate a very low actual level of preparedness among city dwellers for situations requiring household self-sufficiency. The ease with which resources and services are accessed on a daily basis in cities may be one of the factors contributing to a disregard for actual preparedness and a failure to take concrete action in this regard.

Unfortunately, in the event of a prolonged shortage of essential services and the inability to distribute resources, for example, power or water cuts, the urban community is vulnerable to immense strain, a humanitarian crisis and further social unrest. This is a further factor highlighting the need to prioritise the development of specific mechanisms for social support during a crisis and the strengthening of self-organisation within urban communities.

A comparable gap between awareness and actual readiness appears in Estonia's own data. The Rescue Service Agency

and Kantar Emor's biennial preparedness index found that, as of 2023, only 15 per cent of households had all the supplies and reserves recommended for an emergency, even though the share of people who had never thought about the issue at all had fallen from 45 to 30 per cent over the last two years [6].

EXAMPLE MECHANISMS FOR BUILDING CROSS-SECTORAL COOPERATION

Solutions designed to encourage cross-sectoral cooperation with a view to building social resilience and ensuring an effective response to crises can be found at national, regional and municipal levels. Each of these can be regarded as a model which, once tailored to specific circumstances and needs, could be adapted to other contexts.

Statutory Forums and Community Partnerships in the UK

At the statutory level, 'Local Resilience Forums' have been established to operate locally in individual counties, enabling various stakeholders to collaborate on building resilience in a given area. Importantly, these forums include local community organisations, and activities aimed directly at the community and supporting its education and engagement are given high priority.

To implement this model effectively, London needed an organisation which, on the community side, would be capable of carrying out activities within a community of several million people and bringing together thousands of different organisations around the issue of safety. To this end, the London Communities Emergencies Partnership (LCEP) was established, led by a consortium of non-governmental organisations and funded by public money [7].

These organisations train, maintain readiness and educate local communities on preparedness for a variety of hazards. They carry out activities in every London borough and maintain a network of communication and cooperation within the community sector. The LCEP is also the body which, on behalf of the community sector (alongside specialist organisations such as emergency services), participates in the work of London's Local Resilience Forum.

Trained Volunteers and Local Leaders in the US

The American Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) programme was established with the involvement of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It operates in every state. As part of the programme, groups of volunteers are formed and trained; they work closely with the emergency services and local authorities and, where necessary, mobilise the local community to take action.

American cities also have tools for ongoing collaboration with a wider range of stakeholders. One example is the Citizen Corps Councils. As forums for dialogue, councils focused on security and were open to all community representatives, both institutional and civil society.

There are also examples of appointing and supporting local leaders. In the city of Palo Alto, the local authority supports the work of Block Preparedness Coordinators – leaders at the level of specific streets and neighbourhoods within the city [8].

This is a public investment in the lowest level of the coordination and communication network with the local community; most importantly, it provides tangible support for improving self-organisation and mutual support, which are key to maintaining independence for as long as possible during a crisis.

Umbrella Organisations and Community-Led Structures

There are also many examples of how effectively community-led structures can be established. These structures enable the integration, networking and, above all, effective coordination of the activities of dozens or hundreds of community organisations.

In the US, an example of such an organisation is Voluntary Organisations Active in Disaster (VOAD); in Europe – the Finnish organisation Vapepa [9]. Each of these organisations brings together and provides a framework for dozens of other organisations which carry out their statutory activities on a day-to-day basis, and are mobilised to support communities in crises when the need arises.

It is worth noting that, regardless of location, the local branch of the Red Cross or Red Crescent often plays a leading role in such organisations. Their experience in organising

humanitarian aid, the preparedness of their teams, their resources and organisational capacity mean that they are usually the first partner to be approached for organising initiatives of this kind.

Public-Authority Partnership Models in Sweden and Estonia

In Sweden, the *Frivilliga Resursgruppen* (Voluntary Resource Groups, FRG) is a partnership model involving local authorities, community organisations (including specialist and emergency response organisations) and the local community.

FRGs are not independent organisations. They are established by local authorities and funded from public funds, and their role is to organise local community response efforts during crises. The organisations most active in the region in the field of civil protection usually become the operators of the FRGs.

Training and preparation for organisations and volunteers are organised in collaboration with the emergency services and specialist units, which ensures a fairly uniform standard of preparedness and management at both local and national levels.

A related model, adapted to a small state with a strong tradition of subsidiarity, operates in Estonia. Estonian crisis-management legislation treats preparedness as a shared responsibility of individuals, municipalities and the state and, rather than making cooperation compulsory, encourages local governments to draw up risk analyses and emergency plans together with community organisations, with the national Rescue Service Agency providing methodological support, training and funding [10].

The Rescue Service Agency and the Naiskodukaitse (Women's Voluntary Defence Organisation, part of the Estonian Defence League) run a standing joint training programme reaching every county, delivering population-protection courses to village communities, schools and apartment associations alike.

The Estonian Rescue Service Agency mapped 261 public shelters with combined capacity for 224,000 people and established a growing network of resilience hubs in familiar, everyday community spaces such as libraries, schools and municipal buildings, where residents can obtain information, supplies and support during a crisis [11]

Local Resilience Centres

A model in which the administration supports and directly subsidises the activities of local organisations that build resilience and communication within their communities has another, specific dimension. These organisations can operate local resilience centres for the community at their premises or in dedicated spaces during a crisis.

These places provide a space for humanitarian activities, meetings and the organisation of the local community. They have the facilities to organise access to water, electricity, food, heating or cooling (in the event of a heatwave).

Thanks to their knowledge of local communities and strong organisational capabilities, civil society organisations are the best partners for local authorities in running such centres. Once again, London and its 'Community Resilience Hubs' project provide an excellent example of such initiatives.

EXISTING INITIATIVES TAILORED TO SOCIAL REALITIES IN POLAND

The Central European flood of 1997, often called the 'Flood of the Millennium', devastated large parts of Wrocław, Poland. Currently, the city has an initiative that engages the 'flood leaders' – local leaders from neighbourhoods directly at risk of flooding who work with communities, neighbourhood councils, emergency services and the city authorities.

In Warsaw in 2025 on the initiative of the city authorities, the Community Crisis Network was established to coordinate cooperation between the city authorities and services and non-governmental organisations, and to strengthen the city's capacity to organise spontaneous voluntary efforts in the event of a major emergency.

At a regional level, it is worth highlighting the work of the Lublin Coordination Group: a platform for integrating the activities of the administration and non-governmental organisations in support of refugees. Although this group has a specific area of focus, its coordination potential extends far beyond this single area of activity.

At the national level, the 'Mapuj Pomoc' Network was also established in response to the refugee crisis and currently focuses its activities on advocating for the role of the social

sector in the field of security and on strengthening cooperation in this area.

CONCLUSION

In Poland, there is still no single system that highlights the importance and appropriate role of the social sector. There are no coherent models that can be implemented at national, regional and local levels, depending on the needs of a given level or community.

In Estonia, it is clear that a strong national framework can give civil society a funded, structured place in preparedness, yet the same institutional strengths coexist with uneven results on the ground. The task is therefore to close the gap between capable institutions and household readiness by standardising municipal crisis commissions and sustaining the joint Rescue Board and Naaskodukaitse training that reaches communities directly.

The initiatives that are emerging lack coherence and do not address the full range of needs in this area, as they are not underpinned by actual regulations or procedures. There is also a lack of structures enabling coordination, management and representation on the social sector's side.

It is therefore essential to find ways and create a space not only for coordinating actions and a joint response to a crisis. Long before a crisis occurs, there must be a space for dialogue, getting to know one another, building trust and understanding the mutual potentials and limitations of each party.

Otherwise, it seems impossible to find a way to cooperate effectively in an area as important as the protection of the population, life, property and the environment in the event of a crisis. Consequently, given the scale of this shortfall, building such a system should be one of the priorities at the national level, on a par, for example, with the development and funding of professional services.

This is a universal need, which is particularly evident in urban communities, which, as the examples show, are especially vulnerable to the consequences of a lack of effective mechanisms for cooperation and social support.

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