Resilient Solidarity: The Evolving Role of Bulgarian Nonprofits and Volunteerism in Crisis Response and Community Protection

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Abstract

The article examines the critical transformation of crisis management models in the face of increasing natural and humanitarian disasters. The primary objective of the paper is to investigate the role of civil society and volunteer organizations in Bulgaria, specifically focusing on how they transition from sporadic initiatives to structured, professional entities within a "shared resilience" framework. By analyzing the partnership between citizens, local communities, and state institutions, the author aims to demonstrate that volunteer organizations are now essential for building societal trust and national response capacity.

Methodologically, the study adopts a comprehensive qualitative approach. It integrates a detailed document analysis of strategic materials and organizational reports with media monitoring of national print and electronic outlets to assess public perceptions and institutional challenges. Furthermore, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with board members of the National Association of Volunteers in the Republic of Bulgaria to gain internal perspectives on coordination mechanisms and future development visions.

The findings indicate a paradigm shift from traditional "command and control" models toward decentralized "shared resilience". A key conclusion is that the state can no longer manage complex modern crises independently and must act as an institutional mediator rather than a sole command center. The study highlights that while Bulgaria's legislative framework is harmonized with European standards, significant gaps remain in preventive control and information integration. Ultimately, the research emphasizes that strengthening volunteer units and fostering a culture of civic responsibility are vital for achieving sustainable public safety and community resilience.

Keywords

Civil society resilience, crisis management, disaster response, nonprofit organizations, volunteering

Introduction

Climate change and its impact on quality of life, the frequency of natural disasters, and their economic consequences have been the subject of scientific interest for nearly two centuries. Beginning in the 19th century with research by physicists, chemists, and meteorologists into the mechanisms causing natural disasters, by the mid-20th century climatology began to focus its studies on the risks to people and their communities. The quote from Gilbert White's 1942 doctoral dissertation, "Floods are 'acts of God,' but flood losses are largely acts of man," (White, 1945) has become a foundational principle for modern risk analysis and disaster management. This quote summarizes a thesis that was revolutionary for its time: while the natural phenomenon (the flood) is a physical event, the scale of the disaster is determined by human decisions—where we build, how we plan our

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cities, and what protective mechanisms we create. Here we can also find the origin of the argument that the state and its citizens share responsibility for minimizing the damage caused by inevitable natural phenomena.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the issue of the link between global warming and extreme weather events quickly came into the global spotlight. A key milestone was the establishment in 1988 of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)[2]. This is an international scientific body founded by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme (both UN agencies) with the task of conducting meta-analyses of public scientific sources on the topic of climate change and providing a well-founded basis for policy decisions. Thus, natural disasters and climate change have become a global political priority

According to data from the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), the number of recorded extreme natural disasters has increased nearly fivefold over the past 50 years. Between 2000 and 2019, 7,348 major natural disasters were recorded globally, claiming 1.23 million lives, affecting 4.2 billion people, and costing global economies $3 trillion (UNDRR & CRED, 2020). This represents a doubling of both the frequency of disasters and the resulting social and economic losses. On the other hand, there are positive trends—global indicators for the number of natural disaster-related deaths and missing persons per 100,000 people have fallen from 1.61 for the 2005–2014 decade to 0.79 for the 2014–2023 decade, thanks to early warning systems (UNDRR, 2025, p. 2). A conclusion of the cited UNDRR report emphasizes that disasters are no longer isolated events and can even trigger protracted crises for certain countries

The floods, fires, droughts, tornadoes, and other disasters observed across the globe are testing the capacity of government agencies to cope with their consequences. Prevention and response models that worked in the 20th century must be rethought, and a shift must be made toward so-called "**shared resilience**." In this context, the mobilization of citizen volunteers and civil society organizations is emerging as a key factor in the adaptation, protection, and recovery of local communities.

1. "Shared Resilience" as a crisis response model

Research on disaster response in the 1970s and 1980s laid the foundation for the modern understanding of government management during emergencies. During this period, one of the most influential analytical frameworks took shape – the "**command and control**" model. It describes disaster response as a state-dominated process, organized through a hierarchical structure, centralized decision-making, and vertical information flow. Theoretically, this model stems from the logic of bureaucratic organization and from military principles of management, which in the 20th century strongly influenced the institutional organization of civil protection.

Early research in the field of the sociology of disasters shows that the initial understanding of the state's role is closely linked to the notion of the need for central control. In this logic, a disaster is viewed as an emergency that temporarily disrupts normal social order and requires a rapid concentration of power, resources, and command functions in the hands of state institutions. Such a perspective implies that effectiveness depends on a clear chain of command, discipline, and a strict division of responsibilities among the police, fire department, medical services, and administrative bodies. This perspective is clearly evident in the early organizational studies by Russell R. Dynes and Enrico L. Quarantelli. In the article "Organized Behavior in Disaster" (1970), Dynes raises an important question: whether the actual behavior of organizations during a disaster truly follows a strictly

[2] What's Happening at the IPCC? | unfoundation.org

centralized logic. His analysis shows that while formal state institutions operate within a bureaucratic structure, disasters themselves create a dynamic environment in which numerous informal interactions, improvisation, and horizontal coordination arise. Thus, as early as the 1970s, criticism began to emerge regarding the idea that centralization in and of itself guarantees an effective response. This criticism deepened in the subsequent research of Enrico L. Quarantelli, particularly regarding organizational behavior in crisis situations and the management of emergency services. His empirical observations show that actual disaster operations rarely unfold as a linear chain of command. Instead, they involve multiple institutions with different competencies, objectives, and information channels. This leads to the conclusion that disaster response is not merely a problem of control, but above all a problem of coordination. This gives rise to one of the most important theoretical distinctions in the literature: between centralized control and interorganizational coordination.

In the 1980s, this line of analysis was further developed by Gary A. Kreps. In his influential article, "The Organization of Disaster Response: Core Concepts and Processes" (1983), Kreps proposed a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding organizational behavior during disasters. According to him, the response cannot be reduced solely to the formal state hierarchy. On the contrary, disasters activate a network of organizations—state, local, volunteer, and professional—that act simultaneously and interdependently. Kreps demonstrates that institutional effectiveness depends not so much on strict subordination as on the ability of different organizational units to exchange information, adapt their decisions, and create temporary mechanisms for joint action.

This does not mean that the state is losing its central role. On the contrary, the literature from this period is unanimous in its view that the state remains the key source of legitimacy, resources, and regulatory authority. However, its role is beginning to be understood in a more nuanced way. Instead of being the sole source of control, the state is gradually viewed as the primary coordinator of multiple actors. It is precisely here that the important shift in scholarly thought occurs: from the state as a "command center" to the state as an institutional mediator between various organizational structures.

Yet it is precisely empirical studies of actual disasters that reveal the limitations of this logic. In complex and large-scale crises, information flows are incomplete, conditions change rapidly, and new actors are constantly entering the response process. This makes it impossible to fully centralize decision-making. Disaster sociologists note that in such situations, a rigid hierarchy often slows down the response rather than facilitating it.

Consequently, the literature from the 1970s and 1980s reached an important synthesis. On the one hand, the state is indispensable due to its institutional legitimacy, authority, and capacity for mobilization. On the other hand, an effective disaster response cannot be explained solely through the command-and-control model. Empirical studies show that successful management depends on flexibility, coordination, adaptation, and interaction among multiple organizations. In this sense, it can be concluded that the classical literature of the period does not reject the role of the state, but rather rethinks it. Instead of being understood solely as a central command authority, the state begins to be viewed as a structural coordinator of a complex network of institutions. It is precisely this shift in understanding that lays the foundation for later concepts of **disaster management**, **inter-institutional coordination**, and **network-based crisis management** (fig.1).

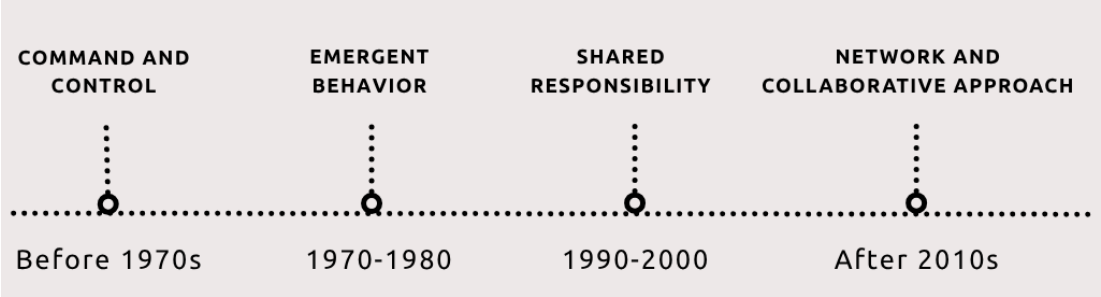
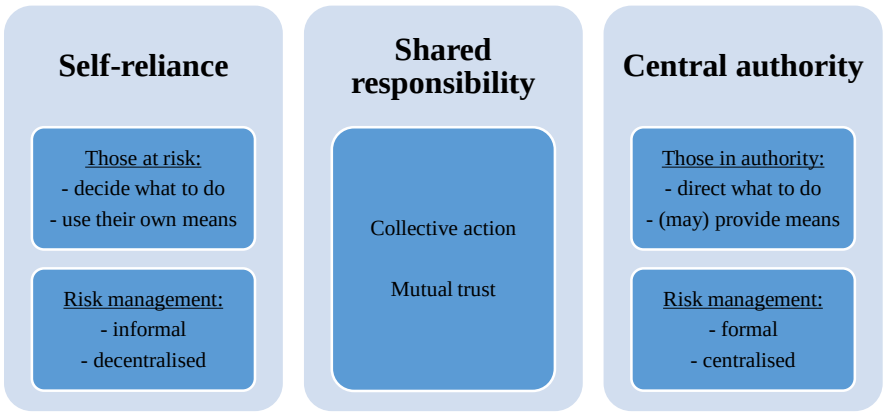


Figure 1. Timeline of crisis response approaches

A significant portion of research in the field of public risk management over the past two decades has focused on the question of who bears **responsibility** for responding to disasters and accidents, and what that responsibility entails. Particularly in light of the neoliberal paradigm, there is increasing discussion of the sharing of responsibility between the government and citizens. For example, Bickerstaff and Walker (2002), analyzing the motivations behind people's behavior in situations where urban air quality puts them at risk, conclude that "responsibility for hazards is systematically shifted from science and industry onto the general public as their individual responsibility" (p. 2177) and recommend greater sensitivity on the part of policymakers regarding situations that pose risks to society. These authors note that there is a clear process of shifting responsibility regarding risks to health, workplace safety, transportation security, and crime from the government to citizens and communities. Similar trends have subsequently been described by a number of other authors (Halpin & Guilfoyle, 2004; Mythen & Walklate, 2006; Löwenheim, 2007; Kemshall, 2008; Gray, 2009), covering diverse areas, including risks to agriculture, youth, international travel, terrorism, and others. Based on this body of research, the concept of a continuum of responsibility emerges when risks of various types arise (see Figure 2).



Source: adapted by Blythe J. McLennan & John Handmer (2012), p.3

Figure 2. Continuum of Responsibility in Crises

Against the backdrop of increasingly frequent natural disasters and other crises, which are also growing in scale, it is clear that government resources – even in highly developed economies – are limited and cannot adequately address the prevention and/or mitigation of the consequences of these crises. An effective response is emerging

in the form of the active and coordinated participation of civil society, business, and local communities – the so-called "**shared resilience**" model in crisis management. The concept of shared resilience represents a paradigm shift in modern disaster and emergency management, moving from a centralized, command-and-control model to a decentralized and inclusive approach. At the heart of this model lies the understanding that state institutions, while crucial, do not possess the necessary capacity to independently address the complexity of modern crises. Shared resilience views security not as a product delivered by the government, but as a collaborative process in which the state, business, nonprofit organizations, and citizens themselves actively participate.

One of the leading theorists in this field, David Chandler (Chandler, 2014), points out that resilience is not merely the ability to "bounce back after a shock," but a process of continuous adaptation and learning. In this context, shared resilience requires empowering local communities, which are the first to face the disaster. Instead of the population being viewed as a passive recipient of aid, it becomes an active agent of response. This is achieved by enhancing social capital and horizontal connections among individuals, which enables faster self-organization during the critical initial hours of the event.

Other authors examine shared resilience through the lens of "network governance" (Comfort et al., 2010). They argue that during large-scale disasters, information flows are too dynamic for vertical structures. The shared approach requires the establishment of a common operational picture, where data is freely exchanged between professional rescue services and volunteer groups. This model emphasizes the importance of shared responsibility—a concept that is also embedded in international frameworks such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Another key aspect is the role of public-private partnerships. As Kaplaku and Lagadek (2013) note, critical infrastructure is often owned by private entities, making their involvement in resilience planning essential. Shared resilience here means joint investment in protective facilities and coordinated business continuity plans that ensure that vital services such as water, energy, and communications will remain functional.

In light of the above, the shared resilience model outlines several key parameters that would ensure a faster response, deeper engagement, and easier recovery for communities that have experienced disasters and accidents. First and foremost is the adoption of a **decentralized approach**. Instead of concentrating all necessary resources within the state and its agencies, shared resilience means involving all stakeholders and ensuring their prior preparation. This means the participation of individual citizens, spontaneous groups, civil society organizations, and business entities in all stages of managing potential or emerging crises. This leads to the second characteristic, namely – so-called **co-production** in planning, protection, and response. Sharing means treating everyone as equal partners who have their place according to their own scale and capabilities. Building such relationships is a prerequisite for each participant to contribute their strengths and thus compensate for the weaknesses of other participants in the model. The model cannot be implemented in practice unless the state and its institutions are prepared to be **adaptive**, to learn as they go, and to change their rules very quickly in response to the evolution of a specific crisis (so-called adaptive governance). A key advantage of the model is that it fosters a sense of genuine **responsibility among citizens**—they are not viewed as objects of governance, but as a resource that must be trained and integrated.

It is important to note that the shared resilience approach requires a cultural transformation. It shifts the focus from reactive measures to proactive prevention and collective preparedness. The success of this model depends

on trust among participants and the state's willingness to share power and resources with civil society. Only by integrating all levels of the social structure—from the individual volunteer to the international organization—can modern societies build the capacity not only to survive disasters but also to emerge from them stronger and more resilient.

2. Paper objective and methodology

This article aims to examine the role of civil society and volunteer organizations in Bulgaria in the context of growing social, environmental, and humanitarian crises. The main focus of the study is the work of the National Association of Volunteers in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAVRB) as an example of a model of shared resilience based on partnership between citizens, institutions, and local communities. The article aims to demonstrate how volunteer organizations are gradually establishing themselves not only as a complementary resource during disasters and emergencies, but also as a key factor in building societal resilience, social trust, and response capacity at the local and national levels. It is important to note that the shared resilience approach requires a cultural transformation. It shifts the focus from reactive actions to proactive prevention and collective preparedness. The success of this model depends on trust among participants and the state's willingness to share power and resources with civil society. Only by integrating all levels of the social structure—from the individual volunteer to the international organization—can modern societies build the capacity not only to survive disasters but also to emerge from them stronger and more resilient.

This study aims to analyze the transformation of volunteering in Bulgaria in recent years—from sporadic civic initiatives to more structured forms of organizational participation in crisis management. In this context, the activities of the National Association of Volunteers are viewed as a best practice for fostering a new type of solidarity, based on the professionalization of volunteer activities, coordination with state institutions, and active participation in disaster prevention, preparedness, and response processes. Particular attention is paid to how the organization builds networks for mutual aid, training, and public engagement, as well as to its role in fostering a culture of civic responsibility and participation.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative approach that combines document analysis, media monitoring, and in-depth interviews. The first stage involves working with the organization's reports, strategic materials, and publicly accessible archives. Analysis of these sources makes it possible to trace the association's main priorities, organizational practices, and directions of development, as well as its interactions with state institutions, local authorities, and international partners. Documentary analysis provides an opportunity to reconstruct the organization's institutional evolution and to identify the mechanisms through which it contributes to social sustainability.

The second methodological component involves tracking the organization's and its representatives' appearances in national print and electronic media. Through an analysis of media publications, interviews, reports, and public appearances, the study examines the organization's views on key unresolved issues in Bulgaria's crisis management system and its role as an intermediary between institutions and citizens.

A key component of the study was the in-depth interviews conducted with members of the organization's board of directors. The interviews aim to reveal internal perspectives on the challenges facing volunteer organizations, the motivation for participation, coordination mechanisms, and visions for the future development of volunteering

in Bulgaria. They seek to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between civic engagement, social solidarity, and community resilience in times of crisis.

3. The Bulgarian institutional context

Disaster and emergency response in the Republic of Bulgaria is governed by the Disaster Protection Act, which was adopted in 2006 and most recently amended in 2020. It regulates the organization, coordination, and measures for prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery in the event of disasters. For the purposes of this study, it is worth reviewing the powers of the various stakeholders covered by this law – state institutions, local authorities, commercial entities, healthcare facilities, nonprofit organizations, volunteer groups, and citizens.

3.1. The state and its branches

Under the Disaster Protection Act, the **Council of Ministers** (CM) exercises overall leadership and implements state policy in the field of civil protection and infrastructure protection. The government adopts a National Strategy and a National Plan for Disaster Protection, which define strategic objectives and the allocation of resources.

The main functions of the CM include declaring a state of emergency over part or all of the country's territory, as well as coordinating international assistance. The Council of Ministers establishes an Interdepartmental Commission for Recovery and Assistance, through which it allocates targeted financial resources to address the consequences of crisis events. At the operational level, the body ensures coordination among agencies and monitors the appropriate use of the state reserve and wartime stockpiles for the needs of rescue operations

Within the framework of the state administration, the **regional governor** serves as the primary coordinator of regional disaster protection policy, acting as a liaison between the central administration and local government. His powers, as defined in the Disaster Protection Act, begin with the planning phase, during which he organizes the development and adoption of the Regional Protection Plan. This document is fundamental for coordinating the actions of all components of the Unified Rescue System within the territory of the relevant administrative unit. In the event of imminent danger or the occurrence of a disaster, the regional governor has the operational authority to implement the Regional Plan and, if necessary, to declare a state of emergency for the entire region or a specific part thereof. In such circumstances, he convenes and directs the Regional Headquarters, which serves as an advisory body for strategic decision-making and the provision of logistical support for rescue operations. Through this headquarters, the resources of the police, fire department, medical services, and armed forces units are effectively integrated. In addition to his operational duties, the regional governor provides methodological guidance and exercises ongoing oversight of municipal mayors' preparedness to manage crisis situations. He is responsible for monitoring preventive measures and for promptly informing the public about the progression of the disaster and the protective actions taken. Once the critical situation has been brought under control, his role shifts to coordinating assessments of the damage sustained, which serve as the basis for applying for targeted funding from the state budget.

In accordance with the Disaster Protection Act, the **municipality** is the fundamental level of government where immediate actions to protect the lives, health, and property of citizens are carried out. The mayor of the municipality is the authority with primary responsibility for planning and organizing protective measures, and his or her duties include developing a Municipal Disaster Protection Plan. This document is coordinated with the regional plan and defines the specific risks to populated areas, as well as the available resources for managing

them. In the event of a critical incident, the mayor has the authority to declare a state of emergency within the municipality's territory, immediately informing the regional governor and the Minister of the Interior. To manage response activities, the mayor convenes a Municipal Emergency Operations Center, which coordinates the work of the components of the Unified Rescue System at the local level. An important aspect of this work is organizing the evacuation of the population and providing for urgent needs such as temporary shelter, food, and medical care for those affected.

A specific and key function of municipalities is the establishment, training, and maintenance of volunteer units for disaster response, firefighting, and other emergency situations. These units supplement the capacity of professional rescue teams and are crucial for rapid response in remote or hard-to-reach areas. The municipal administration is also responsible for maintaining local early warning systems and conducting information campaigns to raise public preparedness. Once the active phase of the disaster has passed, the municipality organizes commissions to document and assess damage to public and private property. These reports serve to support requests for financial assistance submitted to the Interdepartmental Commission for Recovery and Assistance under the Council of Ministers. In this way, the municipality closes the crisis management cycle, transitioning from an operational response to the long-term restoration of normal life in the local community.

Within the national security framework, the **Ministry of the Interior** (MoI) plays a central role as a key pillar of crisis management. Its leading role is carried out through the General Directorate for Fire Safety and Civil Protection (GDPSCP), which is responsible for the direct operational functions of forecasting, preventing, and mitigating the consequences of disasters, accidents, and fires. As a specialized agency, the GDPSCP coordinates the operational activities of the Unified Rescue System, ensuring continuous readiness to respond to incidents of various types and scales. The Directorate's primary activities are multifaceted and cover a wide range of rescue and emergency response and recovery operations. GDPS teams carry out firefighting operations, tackling both urban and wildfires using specialized equipment and tactics to contain the fire. At the same time, they conduct complex rescue operations during floods, earthquakes, and traffic accidents, with personnel trained to work in specific conditions, including alpine and diving teams.

An important specific function of the General Directorate for Fire Safety and Civil Protection is to carry out state fire inspections and preventive inspections aimed at minimizing risks by inspecting buildings, facilities, and critical infrastructure sites. The Directorate is also responsible for protection against chemical, biological, and radiological incidents, maintaining specialized units for the detection, decontamination, and containment of environmental disasters. This expertise is vital in the event of industrial accidents and hazardous substance leaks. From a technological standpoint, the GDPSA administers the National Early Warning and Notification System, as well as modern digital platforms for informing the public in real time. Through its regional units, the Directorate provides methodological assistance to local authorities and organizes training for volunteer units, thereby integrating civilian resources into the overall protection plan. In conclusion, the work of the General Directorate for Civil Protection and Disaster Management ensures professional and timely intervention, combining technical capacity, strategic planning, and direct commitment to public safety.

The **Regional Directorates of the Ministry of the Interior** (RDMI) play a critical role in the national security framework by ensuring the direct implementation of state policy on civil protection at the regional level. In the context of disasters and accidents, they function as a key logistical and operational pillar, integrating the resources

of the police and fire services to maintain public order and ensure the safety of citizens. The directorates maintain a 24/7 duty roster to receive reports and conduct an initial analysis of emerging threats within the respective administrative region. The primary functions of the Regional Directorates of the Ministry of Interior include managing forces during rescue operations and providing assistance to other components of the Unified Rescue System. They are responsible for securing affected areas, regulating traffic to ensure corridors for specialized equipment, and preventing attacks on the property of evacuees. Through their territorial units, the regional directorates assist local authorities in implementing protection plans, while maintaining direct communication with the National Operational Center to coordinate additional reinforcements during large-scale crisis situations.

The **Armed Forces** of the Republic of Bulgaria support the Unified Rescue System through specialized modular units. Their role includes conducting engineering operations, aerial firefighting, evacuating casualties using all-terrain vehicles and helicopters, as well as disposing of unexploded ordnance. The Army intervenes when the scale of the disaster exceeds the capacity of civilian services.

3.2. Roles of private and public organizations

The Disaster Protection Act imposes specific obligations on **commercial companies and sole proprietors**, treating them as active participants in ensuring public safety. Their role varies depending on the nature of their business activities, with the aim of minimizing risks at their source.

For enterprises operating high-risk facilities, including manufacturing plants and chemical plants, the law imposes the strictest requirements. They are required to develop and maintain disaster protection plans for their facilities that are aligned with municipal and regional plans. These businesses must conduct regular training for their staff, provide individual and collective protective equipment, and establish their own early warning and notification systems. For enterprises classified as sources of specific hazards (radiological, chemical, or biological), it is mandatory to maintain constant readiness to contain and respond to potential industrial accidents.

Commercial entities that operate **critical infrastructure** (energy, water supply, transportation) are tasked with ensuring the continuity of services and taking preventive engineering and technical measures to protect their facilities. They are required to provide information to the competent authorities regarding the status of their systems and to contribute their resources to the overall rescue effort in the event of a large-scale crisis.

The role of the **media and telecommunications** operators is specific. They are legally required to ensure the immediate and free broadcast of information provided by the authorities of the Unified Rescue System. Their function is to serve as a channel for critical messages, instructions on how to behave, and official data on the situation, thereby preventing panic and coordinating the actions of civil society.

All other businesses, regardless of sector, are required to cooperate with rescue teams and, upon request, make their assets (vehicles, storage facilities, or equipment) available for the purposes of emergency response operations. In return, the law provides mechanisms for compensating for expenses incurred and damages suffered in the performance of these public service tasks.

The role of **healthcare facilities** during crises is regulated by a synergy between the Health Act, the Medical Institutions Act, and the Disaster Protection Act. Within this legal framework, healthcare is viewed not merely as a social service, but as a strategic component of national security. Emergency medical centers (EMCs) are the vanguard of medical protection. According to Regulation No. 25 and the Health Act, their functions during

disasters include the immediate dispatch of mobile teams to the scene of the incident to perform medical triage (sorting of casualties). They provide initial treatment for life-threatening conditions and maintain vital functions during transport. The Emergency Medical Services operate in full coordination with the 112 emergency number and regional coordination centers, ensuring that every casualty is directed to the appropriate medical facility based on the severity of their injuries. Inpatient care facilities handle the second and longest phase of the response. The Law on Healthcare Facilities requires them to maintain readiness to deploy additional beds and mobilize specialized staff when a state of emergency or disaster is declared. General hospitals, especially those with mixed or 100% state ownership, are tasked with providing "emergency rooms" and operating rooms to handle large influxes of patients. They are required to maintain emergency stockpiles of medications, blood, and supplies to enable autonomous operation during the initial hours of a crisis.

Healthcare facilities and Regional Health Inspectorates (RHI), under the direction of the Ministry of Health, are responsible for hygiene and epidemiological control in the affected areas. Their functions include monitoring drinking water and food, organizing disinfection measures, and preventing epidemic outbreaks resulting from the disaster. At the regional level, the director of the Regional Health Inspectorate chairs the Council for Medical Care in Disasters, which coordinates the plans of all hospitals and emergency centers in the region, ensuring a unified and structured response from the health system.

The effectiveness of disaster and accident response in Bulgaria relies on the functioning of the **Unified Rescue System** (URS), which integrates administrative and operational structures at various levels of government. Although the regulatory framework established by the Disaster Protection Act is harmonized with European standards, scientific analyses reveal significant discrepancies between strategic planning and practical implementation. According to Bogomilova (2020), a major problem is the lack of preventive control over critical infrastructure, which leads to reactive rather than proactive government policy. This cyclical pattern of "post-factum" response limits the possibilities for minimizing damage even before it occurs.

Institutional coordination between central and local authorities remains a critical issue in crisis management. Stoyanov (2021) emphasizes that the lack of a unified and fully integrated information system hinders coordination between municipal, regional, and national command centers. This fragmentation of information often leads to delays in operational decisions during the first hours of a disaster. In addition, the research by Berberova and Kostova (2024) highlights the anthropogenic nature of many of the hydrological crises in the country, which is a direct indicator of gaps in methodological guidance and control over activities related to the maintenance of riverbeds and dam facilities.

The technological capabilities and capacity of specialized agencies such as the General Directorate of Fire Safety and Civil Protection are being severely tested in the context of climate change. Sandov (2023) highlights the lack of specialized state-owned aerial firefighting equipment, which creates a strategic vulnerability and forces the country to rely on international assistance mechanisms during large-scale wildfires. Alongside these technical shortcomings, the 112 emergency call system faces the risk of overload during extreme situations. Analyses in specialized publications on civil protection indicate that the intensity of calls could block communication channels if intelligent algorithms for prioritized traffic management are not implemented.

In conclusion, the resilience of Bulgaria's emergency response system depends on overcoming institutional formalism and investing in effective prevention. The condition of the building stock, which was designed before

modern seismic requirements were established, remains a hidden threat that calls for a long-term national strategy. Strengthening volunteer units at the municipal level and improving the training of local authorities are essential steps toward achieving a high level of public safety.

4. The Bulgarian nonprofits in crisis response

Nonprofit organizations play a central role in the shared resilience model, acting as a link between government institutions and citizens. In the context of disasters and emergencies, their role goes beyond the mere provision of humanitarian aid; they are a key factor in decentralizing responsibility and mobilizing local resources.

According to the shared resilience paradigm, protecting the population is not solely the state's responsibility, but a collective function of society as a whole. The nonprofits implement this approach by building social capital and training specialized volunteer teams that possess the flexibility and speed of response often beyond the reach of cumbersome administrative structures. They fill critical gaps such as psychological support, specialized logistics, and work with vulnerable groups, while also serving as a channel for accurate information and prevention. In this way, the nonprofit sector transforms society from a passive observer into an active participant, making the community more adaptive and capable of absorbing traumatic events through shared knowledge and coordinated efforts.

4.1. The Bulgarian Red Cross

The Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC) occupies a unique and strategic position within the national security system, operating as a voluntary humanitarian organization that is independent of the state but at the same time acts as its official partner in the humanitarian sphere.

The Bulgarian Red Cross was founded immediately after the Liberation, with the first branch established in Sofia on October 25, 1878. The organization received international recognition from the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1885, just before the outbreak of the Serbian-Bulgarian War, where it underwent its baptism of fire in providing aid to the wounded. From its very inception, the Bulgarian Red Cross expanded its scope beyond military affairs, focusing on addressing public disasters and epidemics. In the 1920s, the organization structured its rescue operations, and in 1950, it officially assumed the role of preparing the population for disaster response. With the adoption of the specialized Law on the Bulgarian Red Cross in 1995, it was legally established as a key partner of the state in crisis management.

The organization's role is defined by a special Law on the Bulgarian Red Cross, which mandates it to prepare for and provide assistance to the population during disasters, accidents, and crises. As part of the Unified Rescue System, the BRC serves as a bridge between state institutions and civil society through its extensive network of volunteers and professional teams.

The BRC's primary operational activities during crises begin as early as the planning and prevention phase. The organization maintains round-the-clock rapid response teams and specialized disaster reserve warehouses throughout the country. This reserve contains critical resources such as tents, cots, blankets, hygiene kits, and clothing, which are intended for immediate deployment during large-scale incidents. Under the National Disaster Protection Plan, the Bulgarian Red Cross plays a leading role in organizing temporary shelters and providing food for affected individuals, as well as in managing fundraising campaigns for financial and material assistance.

One of the organization's most significant achievements is the development of the **Volunteer Teams for Disaster, Accident, and Catastrophe Response**. These teams have undergone specialized training in search and rescue, first aid, and response to floods or earthquakes. Alongside physical aid, the Bulgarian Red Cross is the leading institution in Bulgaria in terms of psychosocial support. Specialized teams of psychologists and trained volunteers work directly on the ground with victims and their loved ones, helping them cope with acute stress and prevent long-term trauma – an activity that often falls outside the scope of technical rescue services.

Another important aspect of the organization's work is the Mountain Rescue Service, which is part of the Bulgarian Red Cross. It is the only specialized service in the country that conducts rescue operations in hard-to-reach mountainous terrain, utilizing modern equipment and highly qualified personnel.

In addition to its field operations, the BRC carries out extensive educational activities. The organization is responsible for providing mandatory first aid training to driver's license applicants and company employees, which directly enhances the public's overall preparedness to respond to everyday incidents.

Data from the Bulgarian Red Cross's 2023 report[3] reveal that the organization has 141,580 members (2.2% of the Bulgarian population) and 16,546 volunteers, 46% of whom are under the age of 35. The BRC has the densest territorial network, comprising 2,691 local associations, 264 municipal branches, and 28 regional branches. The Bulgarian Red Cross maintains over 500 Voluntary Disaster Response Teams, including 42 National Disaster Response Teams, 19 National Floods Response Teams, 28 Branch Disaster Response Teams, 19 Units for Flood response action, 101 professional psychologists trained to provide first psychological support and psychosocial support in disasters and crisis.

Regarding mountain rescue in the year of 2023 the BRC has had over 520 volunteers and staff rescuers, organized in 32 rescue teams; they manage the Main Dispatch Center that maintains 24/7 communication with the Unified Emergency System 112. Their teams have rendered assistance to 2 383 persons, of whom 2 175 have suffered accidents at ski slopes and have led 180 rescue operations in the high parts of the mountain with assistance rendered to 208 persons, with 12 fatalities.

The Bulgarian Red Cross has demonstrated exceptional capacity in major crises. Examples of this include its operations to assist refugees from the conflict in Ukraine, where the organization deployed the largest humanitarian logistics operation in its modern history, and the rapid response to the earthquake in Turkey and Syria in 2023, when Bulgarian teams with trained dogs were among the first on the ground.

Through these multifaceted functions, the Bulgarian Red Cross has established itself as an indispensable partner to the state, combining the professionalism of a rescue service with the ethics and flexibility of a humanitarian volunteer organization.

4.2. Volunteer Units

Volunteering plays an increasingly significant role in the management of crises, natural disasters, and emergencies, particularly in the context of the growing need for societal resilience and a coordinated civic response. The academic literature typically distinguishes between spontaneous and organized volunteers. Spontaneous volunteers step in immediately after a disaster or crisis strikes, driven primarily by moral motivation, solidarity, and a desire to provide rapid assistance. Their activities often occur outside institutional mechanisms and are characterized by informal organization and limited training. Organized volunteers, on the other hand,

[3] 935-brc-f-f-2023-web.pdf

operate within volunteer groups, non-governmental organizations, or civil protection structures; they undergo specialized training and work in coordination with institutions and professional services.

According to Twigg and Mosel (2017), spontaneous volunteers represent an important resource during disasters, as they can ensure an immediate response and mobilization of local communities. At the same time, the lack of prior preparation and coordination often creates difficulties for official institutions and crisis management organizations. A similar view is expressed by Yükseler and Yazgan (2022), who emphasize that spontaneous volunteering is an expression of high civic engagement, but at the same time poses challenges related to safety, communication, and the distribution of tasks during emergencies.

Research on organized volunteering emphasizes sustainability, coordination, and the building of social capital. Kaltenbrunner and Renzl (2019) examine the interaction between nongovernmental organizations and volunteers as a form of social cooperation that strengthens trust between institutions and citizens. According to the authors, it is precisely social capital and sustainable mutual aid networks that are key to an effective response to crises and disasters. In this sense, organized volunteer structures fulfill not only operational functions but also an important social role related to building trust, solidarity, and resilience in local communities.

The issue of coordination between spontaneous civic initiatives and official institutions is also particularly significant. Simsa et al. (2019) analyze the processes of volunteer self-organization during the migration crisis in Europe and emphasize that successful interaction between civil society networks and state structures requires flexible mechanisms for communication and inclusion. Similar conclusions are drawn by Whittaker, McLennan, and Handmer (2020), who note that civil protection systems should integrate spontaneous volunteering as part of crisis management strategies, rather than viewing it solely as an unpredictable factor.

In the Bulgarian context, the issue of collaboration between professional organizations and volunteers is also becoming increasingly important. Andreeva and Pavlova (2025) examine the attitudes of medical professionals and volunteers toward joint participation in rescue operations and emphasize the need for better coordination, training, and institutional support. These developments indicate that volunteering is gradually establishing itself as an essential element of disaster protection systems and societal resilience.

Volunteer units play a strategic role as a decentralized rapid-response tool within the institutional framework for disaster protection in the Republic of Bulgaria. Under the Disaster Protection Act, these units are defined as organized groups of citizens who assist professional rescue services in critical situations. Their legal status is regulated in Articles 39 through 47a, with an emphasis on the territorial principle governing their establishment and operation. The mayor of the respective municipality has the exclusive authority to initiate the creation of a volunteer unit based on a decision by the municipal council, which makes these units an integral part of the local administrative security framework.

An analysis of Article 41 reveals the strict requirements for personnel, as the law explicitly excludes the possibility of participation by individuals who do not meet certain physical and moral criteria. Volunteers must be adult citizens whose health permits the performance of high-risk tasks and who have a clean criminal record with respect to intentional crimes of a general nature. This selective approach ensures that the units are composed of reliable individuals capable of operating under conditions of high stress and physical strain.

The process of professionalization is outlined in Articles 42 and 43, which regulate mandatory specialized training. Volunteers undergo theoretical and practical training under standardized programs approved by the Minister of

the Interior, which ensures the necessary operational compatibility with the professional teams of the General Directorate "Fire Safety and Civil Protection." This training is the foundation upon which the volunteers' ability to perform firefighting, rescue, and emergency recovery operations is built, as well as their ability to provide qualified first aid to injured persons.

The socioeconomic aspect of volunteering is regulated through a system of guarantees and benefits. Articles 44 and 45 provide for a mechanism whereby volunteers retain their employment relationship while participating in rescue operations or training. For the duration of the actual performance of their duties, they receive compensation from the state budget, while the law also requires the municipality to insure them against all risks related to their health and life. This legal mechanism minimizes the volunteer's personal risk and encourages civic engagement for the benefit of society.

Institutional oversight and transparency are achieved through the maintenance of a Register of Volunteer Units, as provided for in Article 47a. This centralized register enables the Ministry of the Interior to monitor the allocation of resources and the level of preparedness in the various regions. Funding for the units is provided through earmarked funds from the state budget, which ensures the maintenance of equipment and vehicles. In this way, volunteer units cease to be spontaneous acts of altruism and transform into a sustainable, legally regulated, and professionally trained resource that expands the state's capacity to handle crisis situations in remote and hard-to-reach areas.

According to data from the Register of Voluntary Disaster Response Units in the Republic of Bulgaria and the number of volunteers by municipality[4], as of April 2026, there are 255 voluntary units in the country, established by municipal mayors, with a total of 3,638 volunteers. There are also 31 volunteer units in operation that are associations or foundations, bringing together 447 volunteers. This brings the total to 286 volunteer groups, involving 4,085 volunteers.

5. The case of National Association of Volunteers in Republic of Bulgaria

The National Association of Volunteers in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAVB) was established as a logical response to the need to consolidate civic resources in the security sector. The idea for its establishment arose in mid-2013, with the Sofia Municipality (specifically its Security Directorate) serving as the primary initiator and driving force behind the process.

The official founding took place on July 18, 2013, in Sofia, with representatives from the Sofia Municipality and the municipalities of Plovdiv, Varna, and Panagyurishte among the founders. Yasen Tsvetkov – a Ph.D. in Administration and Management with many years of experience in volunteer work – was elected as the first chair of the board of directors and remains the organization's leading figure to this day (BNR, 2018). According to press reports, the idea was actively supported by the then-director of the General Directorate for Fire Safety and Civil Protection, Gen. Nikolay Nikolov, who saw the association as a tool for overcoming the institutional isolation of volunteers (24 Часа, 2014).

In an in-depth interview, mr. Tsvetkov noted that "*NAVB was established precisely to bring together volunteers, the fire department, municipalities, and other institutions within a unified crisis management framework. In*

[4] Доброволни формирования

Bulgaria, coordination during disasters often depends on personal contacts and goodwill rather than on a sustainable mechanism."

The founders' primary mission is to create a unified platform that represents the interests of volunteer groups before government authorities and supports their training and technical equipment. The association is establishing itself as "the voice of volunteers," bridging the gap between the administrative provisions of the Disaster Protection Act and the real needs of people on the ground.

The governance structure of the NAVB is organized in accordance with the principles of democratic self-governance established in its Statutes. The highest governing body is the General Assembly (GA), which includes all members of the association (municipal voluntary units, private voluntary units, clubs, sport federations, nonprofits). The General Assembly adopts strategic decisions, approves amendments to the Statutes, and elects the governing bodies.

The analysis of the structure of the General Assembly reveals a specific hybrid form of representation that values the balance between the administrative capacity of local authorities and the expertise of operational volunteers. According to the Statutes and the organizational practice of the association, the members and participants in the General Assembly are divided into several fundamental groups.

(1) The municipalities are **collective members**. They are the backbone of the organization. Since volunteer units are legally established under municipalities, the municipalities themselves serve as the main institutional members. In the General Assembly, they are represented by mayors or their authorized representatives, often heads of departments responsible for civil defense, mobilization preparedness, and security. This group provides administrative legitimacy and maintains the connection with local government authorities.

(2) The volunteer units and other legal entities are **operational members**. The General Assembly includes representatives of registered volunteer units, as well as non-profit legal entities whose activities are directly related to disaster protection. These are individuals with practical field experience. Their participation guarantees that the association's decisions will not be purely bureaucratic but will reflect the actual needs related to equipment, training, and insurance protection.

(3) The next type of members are the **individual members and experts**. NAVB allows the membership of individual experts in areas such as fire safety, psychological assistance, medicine, and crisis management. Within the General Assembly, these members contribute scientific and methodological expertise and often serve as a corrective mechanism in the development of proposals for legislative amendments.

(4) **The state** plays the role of observer and has partner status. It is important to clarify that representatives of the state institutions, including the Ministry of Interior and the General Directorate Fire Safety and Civil Protection, are not "members" of the association in the classical sense, since the organization is a non-governmental entity. However, they play a key role in the General Assembly as partners and honorary guests. The state participates through the methodological guidance provided by the Fire Safety Service. This model of cooperation without direct membership has been deliberately designed in order to preserve the autonomy of the volunteers while maintaining full coordination with the state's vertical system of crisis management.

The operational management of the organization is carried out by a Management Board (MB), consisting of 7 to 9 members, with the exact number determined by a decision of the General Assembly. The Management Board is responsible for implementing the decisions of the General Assembly, managing the organization's assets, and representing the association before third parties. The term of office of the Management Board is five years, after which the body is renewed through elections. The Chairperson of the Management Board presides over meetings and coordinates the organization's ongoing activities. The members of the Management Board also represent the variety of participants in the crisis response network: the "administrative block" of mayors and deputy mayors; the "volunteers block" of leaders of voluntary units and active first responders; the "expert block" of representatives of national institutions like the General Directorate for Fire Safety and Civil Protection or the Bulgarian Red Cross.

In the context of crisis management and civil protection, NAVB performs the role of a central coordinator that transforms dispersed municipal resources into a unified and operational response mechanism. The organization's activities during disasters are primarily focused on providing logistical and methodological support to volunteer formations, enabling them to function as an effective "second echelon" within the unified rescue system. Through systematic efforts, the association ensures that when a critical situation arises, volunteers are not only present on the ground but are also equipped with the necessary equipment and clearly defined procedures for interaction with the professional teams of Fire Safety and Civil Protection.

Statistical data from recent years, reflected in the reports of the organization and its partner institutions, indicate a significant increase in the actual participation of volunteers in rescue operations. During large-scale wildfires and severe floods, such as those recorded in 2024 and 2025, volunteer formations mobilized hundreds of trained rescuers who assisted in containing fire outbreaks and evacuating endangered citizens. The association actively works toward the implementation of modern communication systems that allow the real-time tracking of volunteer team deployment, ensuring better coordination and greater safety for participants involved in emergency operations.

A particularly important aspect of the association's work during disasters is the management of donation campaigns and the distribution of humanitarian aid in affected areas. Instead of relying on spontaneous actions, the organization promotes a model of structured support in which volunteers take responsibility for the logistics of receiving, sorting, and delivering essential goods, while state agencies remain focused on direct rescue activities. This functional balance minimizes operational chaos in the field and optimizes the use of available resources.

At a strategic level, the association develops specialized response modules for specific risks, such as earthquakes and hazardous material incidents, with the objective that each volunteer formation should include narrowly specialized experts. Through the organization of large-scale field exercises, the association tests the preparedness of teams to operate under conditions of disrupted communications and damaged infrastructure. As a result of the organization's methodological leadership, volunteering in Bulgaria is being transformed into a professionally structured reserve force that significantly reduces response times and enhances the country's overall resilience in the face of natural and technological disasters.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that the National Association of Volunteers in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAV RB) represents a successful model for coordination between state institutions, local authorities, and civil society in disaster and emergency management. The organization illustrates how volunteer formations can be integrated into the civil protection system not as a peripheral resource, but as a strategic partner in the processes of prevention, response, and recovery. In this sense, NAV RB serves as an institutionalized expression of the shared resilience model in Bulgaria.

The cooperation between NAV RB and the structures of the General Directorate "Fire Safety and Civil Protection" confirms the applicability of the concept of "co-production of security," whereby public safety is achieved through joint efforts between the state and organized civic participation. The analysis shows that sustainable crisis management requires not only professional capacity, but also trust, coordination, and a clear distribution of responsibilities among stakeholders.

The structure of the association functions as a tripartite model of cooperation in which municipalities provide resources and legal support, volunteers contribute operational capacity, and the state establishes professional standards and the regulatory framework. This balance prevents the association from becoming either an overly state-dependent structure or an uncoordinated civic initiative, instead positioning it as a professional consultative body in the field of civil protection.

Despite these positive outcomes, the absence of a comprehensive law on volunteering remains a major obstacle to the full realization of the shared responsibility model in Bulgaria. A clearer legislative framework is needed to ensure the sustainability, protection, and institutional recognition of volunteer activities as an essential component of the national disaster management system.

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