

It Is Time to Rethink Civil Defence in Hungary

English translation of the supplied Hungarian article

Europe is spending unprecedented sums on strengthening its military defence, while an equally important question is what ordinary citizens would be able to do in the event of a serious security crisis. Hungary does not need to prepare for war; it needs to ensure that, in an emergency, it has a workable plan for protecting the population.

Hungary shares a direct border with Ukraine, where a modern European war has demonstrated how quickly the consequences of missile and drone attacks, cyberattacks, or operations against critical infrastructure can spill over into civilian life. At the same time, drone incidents and violations of airspace are receiving increasing attention across Europe. A drone crossing a border does not, of course, necessarily constitute a deliberate attack: it may also be caused by a technical malfunction, a navigation problem, or electronic interference.

From the perspective of civil defence, however, the decisive question remains the same: do the authorities and the public know what to do?

The lesson, therefore, is not that Hungary is facing an imminent war. Rather, it is that the distance between the battlefield and civilian life has become far smaller than Europe had grown accustomed to in previous decades. Today, a security crisis does not necessarily arrive in the form of tanks: it may take the form of a drone, a cyberattack, a prolonged power outage, a telecommunications failure, or an incident affecting critical infrastructure.

The Institutional Framework Already Exists

It is important to make one thing clear: Hungary already has a civil defence and disaster-management system. Legislation includes public preparedness, warning and alert systems, shelter protection, evacuation and relocation, and the protection of critical infrastructure among the tasks of civil defence. Current professional materials issued by the disaster-management authorities also address methods of protecting the population and communicating information during emergencies in detail.

The problem, therefore, is not that there is no system. It is that, for the average Hungarian citizen, the available information does not necessarily come together into a single, easily understandable framework explaining exactly what to do during a military or comparable security crisis.

Where is the nearest protected location? What does an air-raid warning or drone threat mean? When should people remain indoors, and when should they leave a building? What happens if someone is at school, at work, or on public transport?

Current official information provides partial answers to these questions, but there remains a strong case for a unified, widely known system designed specifically around the decisions ordinary people would need to make.

For this reason, the first step should not necessarily be building new bunkers. We should begin by mapping what already exists. Budapest's metro network, underground garages, underground car parks, cellars and other below-ground facilities may include locations capable of providing adequate protection in certain emergencies. Hungarian regulations themselves also envisage the metro being used as a life-protection facility. The question is therefore not simply whether something exists underground, but whether a particular facility is genuinely suitable based on its structure, ventilation, accessibility, emergency exits, capacity, energy and water supplies, and communication options.

Germany: Building Civil Resilience, Not Just Military Capability

Germany provides a particularly interesting example. The German government's Bevölkerungsschutz-Pakt, adopted in May 2026 and running until 2029, allocates €10 billion to strengthening civil protection and civilian defence capabilities. The programme covers not only equipment, but also warning and communication systems, drinking-water supplies, backup energy, and reinforcement of disaster-response organisations. Alongside further development of the NINA warning system, Germany plans to make information on public protected locations available, while strengthening preparedness in schools is also part of the programme.

This matters because Germany is not simply 'building bunkers'. Its approach is much broader: assess existing infrastructure, improve warning systems, secure backup energy and communications, prepare municipalities, and teach people what to do. The German example demonstrates that modern civil defence is simultaneously an infrastructural, technological, organisational and educational issue.

Parts of this approach could already be adapted in Hungary. A first step could be a national database of existing facilities that, following appropriate technical assessment, could be designated for civil-protection purposes. These could be displayed on maps, marked with signs, and made accessible through a simple digital interface. There would be no need to claim that every underground garage or metro station is a shelter; professional certification would be precisely the point of the system.

In Israel, Shelters Are Not the Only Form of Protection

Israel offers an even more direct example, simply because the country has been compelled for decades to prepare its civilian population. The Home Front Command, or *Pikud HaOref*, is based on the principle that people should know, even before an alert is issued, which location offers them the best protection and what sequence of actions they should follow when an alert occurs. According to official guidance, people inside buildings move to a protected room, shelter, or suitable interior space; those outdoors should seek the nearest building, or, if none is available, lie on the ground and protect their head.

One of the system's most important features is that protection is location-specific. People are not simply instructed to 'go to a shelter'; guidance is linked to alert zones and to the amount of time available in a particular location to reach protection. Official information also allows people to check their alert zone in advance and see how much time they would have to reach a protected space.

Another important lesson is education. For the public, the question is not only where a shelter is located, but also what to do when someone is travelling, sitting in a vehicle, using public transport, or simply does not have enough time to reach a protected location. The Home Front Command therefore communicates specific rules for these situations as well.

Hungary obviously does not need to copy the Israeli model. The geography, threat environment and social context are different. The operating principle, however, can be adopted: people should know in advance what an alert means, where the nearest protected place is, what to do indoors and outdoors, and which official channel will provide the next instruction. The goal is not to turn people into military experts, but to ensure that they do not have to stop and work out what to do during the first critical minutes.

How Much Would It Cost?

It would not be professionally responsible today to attach a single precise figure to the cost of a serious Hungarian programme, because the first task would be to determine what infrastructure already exists and how much of it can be adapted. For that reason, I would not begin with a multibillion-euro construction programme.

The first phase would primarily involve organisational, engineering and IT work: mapping infrastructure, conducting technical audits, creating a database and digital map, establishing standardised signage, developing warning and communication systems, and educating the public. This could be orders of magnitude cheaper than constructing large numbers of new bunkers.

In the second phase, investment should be directed to places where the assessment identifies genuine gaps. Hungary's GDP in 2025 was HUF 87,307 billion. One tenth of one percent of this is approximately HUF 87 billion, while 0.3 percent is around HUF 262 billion. For a multi-year, comprehensive civil-defence programme, even this scale of funding would provide meaningful room for action, although I would not argue that Hungary should automatically spend 0.1 or 0.3 percent of GDP on it. The precise amount should follow from the risk and infrastructure assessment. Germany's example nevertheless indicates the scale involved: Berlin has allocated €10 billion to strengthening Bevölkerungsschutz through 2029.

If We Could Do Only Three Things

If Hungary could do only three things now, I would set three priorities.

The first would be a nationwide assessment and designation of existing infrastructure. We should know which metro stations, underground garages, cellars and other facilities could be used as protected locations after appropriate preparation.

The second would be public education. A few simple rules should be taught: what an alert means, when to shelter in place, when to evacuate, what to do outdoors, where to find official information, and what to do if electricity or mobile networks fail. This could be communicated through schools, television, social media, mobile applications and municipal channels. The aim would not be to create fear, but to make basic responses automatic.

The third would be targeted action to address gaps in areas where suitable existing infrastructure is unavailable. Initially, this could include a limited number of rapidly deployable, prefabricated protected facilities. Later, based on a risk map, it could be determined where permanent, larger-scale investment is justified.

Better to Be Prepared Than Surprised

The protection of critical infrastructure cannot be treated separately. A modern society depends fundamentally on electricity, telecommunications, water supplies, transport and digital systems. A prolonged power outage can quickly affect banking services, petrol stations, heating, traffic lights, mobile networks, hospitals and water supplies. Civil preparedness therefore also requires backup energy sources, alternative communication channels and regular institutional exercises. This is precisely why the German programme places emphasis on drinking-water supplies, backup energy and communication systems.

Terrorism, drones, cyberattacks, operations against critical infrastructure and military conflicts are different risks, but from the perspective of civilians they create many of the same requirements: rapid warnings, credible communication, protected locations, functioning emergency services and a prepared population.

Hungary therefore should not develop a bunker policy focused on a single threat, but should build broader societal resilience.

This is primarily the principle I consider worth adopting from Israel. The system does not assume that everyone can predict exactly what will happen. It assumes that if something does happen, people should not have to improvise during the first few minutes. They should know where to go, what to do, how long to remain there, and where the next instruction will come from. That knowledge can save lives.

Hungary should therefore consider establishing a comprehensive nationwide civil-emergency preparedness programme. Its purpose would not be to militarise everyday life, but to increase society's resilience. A fire extinguisher does not mean that we expect every building to burn down. A seat belt does not mean that every journey will end in an accident. Preparing for something is not the same as expecting it to happen.

Hopefully, Hungary will never have to use civilian shelters because of war. Hopefully, no family will ever have to follow emergency instructions because drones, missiles or terrorist attacks threaten Hungarian cities. And hopefully these plans will remain unused for decades. That would be the best possible scenario.

But if an emergency does occur one day, it will already be too late to start explaining how the system works. By then, people must already know where to go, where to obtain reliable information, how to protect their families, and what to do during the first few minutes. A good emergency plan is therefore one that is carefully developed in peacetime, learned and periodically tested — and which, hopefully, never has to be used in a real crisis. Preparedness is not fear. Preparedness is responsibility.