

Commissioner Hadja LAHBIB
European Commissioner for Equality,
Preparedness, and Crisis Management
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels
Belgium

Subject: “EU Preparedness Union Strategy”

Commissioner,

Crises across our continent are becoming increasingly frequent and severe, whether they stem from climate disasters, health emergencies, or hybrid threats. As we approach another summer marked by wildfires, floods, and droughts, as well as the rise of vector-borne diseases and security challenges, we must strengthen our collective response capacity.

Europe must address these challenges with a comprehensive and ambitious preparedness strategy. We, the European federations of firefighters, welcome the “EU Preparedness Union Strategy” currently under development and fully support your commitment to an integrated crisis management approach, which involves all of society and our institutions.

However, we would like to draw your attention to a fundamental pillar of territorial resilience: citizen engagement at the heart of civil protection.

Recent disasters – over the past years, months, and even weeks – have demonstrated that the first line of defense for territories and Member States, as well as their ability to act in solidarity until a full recovery is achieved, largely depends on their capacity to mobilize citizens and organize them for more efficient and safer participation in civil protection actions. The involvement of civil society, whether through voluntary organizations, civil protection reserves, or volunteer firefighters, is an essential lever for prevention, response, and recovery following a crisis. In this regard, fire services are an indispensable pillar of the security and resilience architecture, being the frontline response to emergencies and disasters, and therefore an essential cornerstone for saving human lives, protecting property and cultural heritage, safeguarding the environment, and building a safer and more resilient society.

However, this engagement remains legally threatened by the Matzak ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union. By classifying a Belgian on-call firefighter as a “worker” under Directive 2003/88/EC of the European Parliament and Council of 4 November 2003 on working time regulation, this ruling weakens the status of

volunteer firefighters and threatens the very sustainability of voluntarism. If left unaddressed, it could jeopardize the entire European civil protection model – at a time when increasing and multiplying crises demand, on the contrary, that we strengthen it, much like the European Union has done for its armed forces.

The recognition and protection of citizen engagement is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity to ensure the security of European populations and safeguard the operational capacity of our emergency services. Furthermore, the new geopolitical context requires a substantial engagement of both civilian and military reserves, with citizens prepared to respond to hybrid threats alongside professionals.

For these reasons, we urge the EU's preparedness strategy to explicitly enshrine civil protection/firefighter volunteerism as a cornerstone of territorial resilience.

We call for formal recognition of the role of volunteer firefighters within the European strategy for crisis preparedness and management.

During the current legislative term, it is crucial to establish a protective and attractive legal framework in the form of a dedicated directive to safeguard the long-term sustainability of citizen engagement and prevent the misclassification of volunteers as employees, which could endanger existing emergency response structures.

It is also essential to consider increased EU funding to support training, equipment, and the attractiveness of voluntary service in civil protection. Lastly, an ambitious educational component, modeled on the Erasmus program, should be integrated to raise awareness among younger generations about crisis preparedness and the importance of volunteerism in civil protection.

The upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework to be proposed in the second half of 2025, will be a crucial moment to secure the necessary resources for the EU's preparedness and response to future crises. The inclusion of citizen engagement in this strategy is a fundamental issue for the resilience and sovereignty of the Union in defense and security matters.

Commissioner, we trust in your commitment to strengthening a more resilient and better-prepared Europe. You can count on European firefighters to continue working alongside European institutions for the protection of citizens and territories.

We look forward to your response and remain at your disposal for further discussion.

Signatories

Fédération Nationale des Sapeurs-Pompiers de France - FRANCE

Brandweer België - Sapeurs-pompier de Belgique - BELGIQUE

Deutscher Feuerwehrverband - GERMANY

Associazione Italiana Vigili del Fuoco - ITALY

Zwiazek Ochotniczych Strazy Pozarnych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej -POLAND
Suomen Pelastusalan Keskusjärjestö - FINLAND
Asociación de Consorcios y Servicios de Bomberos de España - SPAIN
Österreichischer Bundesfeuerwehrverband - AUSTRIA
Gasilska Zveza Slovenije - SLOVENIA
Национална асоциация на доброволците - BULGARIA
Magyar Tűzoltó Szövetség - HUNGARY
Hrvatska Vatrogasna Zajednica - CROATIA
Liga dos Bombeiros Portugueses - PORTUGAL
Ένωση Πυροσβεστών Κύπρου - CYPRUS
Harghita County Volunteer Firefighter Association - ROMANIA
Vakvereniging Brandweer Vrijwilligers - NETHERLANDS
Fédération des sapeurs-pompiers du Luxembourg - LUXEMBURG
International Association of Fire and Rescue Services - CTIF