

March 19, 2026



Fourth Memorial Scientific and
Professional Conference "Predrag Marić"

MODERN INTEGRATED DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT



Faculty of Security Studies, University of Belgrade

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20412056>

Article review

Legal and Institutional Framework for Emergency Management in the City of Belgrade

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Abstract

Emergency management in large cities represents a complex security and organizational process. The subject of this paper is the analysis of the legal and institutional framework for emergency management at the City of Belgrade level. The paper aims to determine the degree of complementarity between relevant regulations and institutional actors, i.e., to what extent legal norms are aligned with the actual capacities for their implementation. The legal analysis encompasses Republic laws (primarily the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management), by-laws, the Statute of the City of Belgrade, city decisions and planning acts, as well as regulations of city municipalities. The main findings indicate that the legal framework is formally established at all three levels (republic, city, and municipal) and that institutional bodies have been established. However, the substantive complementarity of the legal and institutional framework – i.e., the ability of institutions to actually fulfill the tasks prescribed by law – is significantly impaired. The following deficiencies have been identified: noncompliance with statutory deadlines for adopting planning acts, pronounced inequality in municipal capacities (equipment, training, financial resources), and hampered vertical and horizontal coordination. The reasons for this are financial, cultural, and



Academic Editor:
Prof. Dr. Vladimir M. Cvetković
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regulatory control in nature. It is concluded that the complementarity of the legal and institutional framework in Belgrade is largely formal, whereas the system's actual preparedness varies significantly. It is recommended to establish minimum equipment standards with financial support (equalization fund), to introduce mandatory annual exercises and joint training, and to establish clear criteria for activating higher levels of assistance.

Keywords

Emergencies, legal framework, institutional framework, complementarity, City of Belgrade, municipal headquarters, principle of subsidiarity.

1. Introduction

Emergency management in large cities is one of the most complex challenges in contemporary society. The City of Belgrade, as the capital of the Republic of Serbia, faces various risks – from natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, storms) to technological accidents and epidemics. Given the population concentration (close to 1.7 million inhabitants) and the infrastructural, economic, and administrative capacities, it is necessary to establish an efficient system that, in a legally based and institutionally organized manner, enables prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery from emergencies.

The subject of this paper is the analysis of the legal and institutional framework for emergency management at the City of Belgrade level. Within the legal framework, the analysis encompasses republic laws (primarily the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management, but also related laws such as the Law on Local Self Government and the Law on Defence), key by laws (on headquarters, on assessments and plans), then acts of the City of Belgrade (Statute, decisions, planning acts), and regulations of city municipalities. The institutional framework includes a presentation of the bodies and entities responsible for emergency affairs – from the republic level (the Republic Headquarters, the Sector for Emergency Management of the Ministry of Internal Affairs), through the City Headquarters, the Secretariat for Defense, Emergency Situations and Coordination, and specialist operational teams, to municipal headquarters and public and communal companies as operational executors. In this way, the entire normative and organizational hierarchy relevant to emergency management in the City of Belgrade is covered.

The paper aims to determine, through legal analysis, the degree of complementarity between the legal and institutional framework. The paper is structured into five chapters. After the introduction, the second chapter ana-

lyzes the legal framework by levels of authority (republic, city, municipal), while the third chapter presents the institutional framework. The fourth chapter examines the complementarity of these two frameworks and highlights key deficiencies in their alignment. In contrast, the concluding chapter summarizes the main findings and outlines directions for overcoming the identified problems.

2. Legal Framework for Emergency Management in Belgrade

The legal framework for emergency management in the territory of the City of Belgrade is built on three interconnected levels of regulations: the republic, city, and municipal levels. Republic regulations (primarily the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management) establish the basic legal concepts, principles, and obligations for all subjects. Still, they are formulated in general terms and require further elaboration. The regulations of the City of Belgrade (Statutes, decisions, planning acts) adapt the Republic's framework to the specificities of the capital – specifically, its size, population density, complex infrastructure, and the types of risks to which the capital is exposed. The regulations of city municipalities (17 in total) represent the lowest, but practically the most important, level because, under the principle of subsidiarity (as set out in Article 6 of the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction), municipal headquarters and services constitute the first echelon of response in emergencies. Therefore, for a comprehensive understanding of the system, it is necessary to present all three levels of legal sources.

2.1. Influence of International Law

The legal framework of the Republic of Serbia in the field of emergency management was created under the direct influence of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (United Nations, 2015). After the devastating floods that hit Serbia in 2014, the Republic of Serbia was among the first countries to adopt this framework in full, incorporating it into national legislation. The Sendai Framework emphasizes the transition from a reactive to a proactive approach, putting risk reduction and prevention in the foreground – an approach that has become the basic principle of the domestic legal framework.

2.2. Republic Level: Legislative and By-law Acts

The basic source of law at the republic level is the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 87/2018) (hereinafter: LDRREM). This law regulates the unified system of emergency management, defines basic terms (disaster, emergency, risk, resilience), and prescribes that this system is of special interest for the Republic of Serbia (LDRREM, Art. 2). The law introduces a new conceptual paradigm: the focus shifts from passive response to active risk reduction and strengthening community resilience. Moreover, this law has the character of *lex specialis* in relation to the Law on Local Self-Government and the Law on Defense.

For the subject of this paper, the provisions relating to decentralization and the role of local self-governments are of particular importance. The principle of the primary role of local communities (LDRREM, Art. 4) establishes that local self-government units have a leading role in risk management on their territory. The principle of subsidiarity (Art. 6) prescribes that in protection and rescue actions, the local self-government's own resources are used first, and only when they become insufficient are higher levels (provincial, republican) activated. This establishes a clear hierarchy of responsibility and action.

The same law mandates the mandatory adoption of strategic and planning acts at the local level: Disaster Risk Assessment (Art. 15), Disaster Risk Reduction Plan (Art. 16), Protection and Rescue Plan (Art. 17), and, if there are establishments with hazardous materials on the territory of the local self-government unit, the External Major Accident Prevention Plan (Art. 33). For the City of Belgrade, on whose territory the SEVESO Directives cover facilities, this last obligation is particularly relevant. In addition, the Law prescribes a reporting obligation: municipal headquarters report to the City Headquarters, and the City Headquarters reports to the Republic Headquarters (Art. 27–29), thereby ensuring vertical coordination.

In addition to the basic law, the following have subsidiary significance at the republic level: the Law on Local Self Government (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 129/2007), whose Article 20 determines that affairs in the field of emergency management are part of the original competence of municipalities; the Law on Defence (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 116/2007), which prescribes the obligation to draw up defence plans for the city and municipalities; the Law on Fire Protection (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 111/2009), which regulates the organization of the firefighting service; and the Law on Critical Infrastructure (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 87/2018).

A key by-law act is the Decree on the Composition, Method and Organization of Work of the Headquarters for Emergency Situations (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 27/2020). This decree prescribes in detail the composition of headquarters at all levels, their method of work, and decision-making. It represents a direct legal basis for the functioning of the City Headquarters and the municipal headquarters. Another significant act is the Decree on the Content, Method of Preparation and Obligations Related to the Preparation of Disaster Risk Assessments and Protection and Rescue Plans (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 48/2019), which regulates the technical methodological framework, i.e., specifies the content, procedure, and responsibilities in the preparation of the aforementioned documents.

2.3. City of Belgrade Level

The highest legal act of the City of Belgrade is the Statute of the City of Belgrade (Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, Nos. 39/2008, 6/2010 and 23/2013, Official Gazette of the RS, No. 7/2016 – decision of the Constitutional Court, and Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, No. 60/2019). The Statute, in Article 3, establishes that the City, in accordance with the law, forms the City Headquarters for Emergency Situations, provides fire protection, prepares its defense plan, and performs other protection and rescue tasks.

Based on the legal authorizations and the Statute, several city acts have been adopted. The most comprehensive is the Decision on the Organization and Functioning of Civil Protection in the Territory of the City of Belgrade. This decision regulates in detail the organization of civil protection: it determines the system's subjects (City Assembly, Mayor, City Headquarters, Secretariat, communal companies, Red Cross, citizens' associations) and defines their duties.

The basic operational document at the city level is the City of Belgrade's Protection and Rescue Plan. It elaborates on the measures, forces, and response mechanisms for all types of emergencies. In addition, the Defense Plan of the City of Belgrade (based on the Law on Defense) and the Rules of Procedure of the Headquarters for Emergency Situations are adopted as internal acts.

2.4. Level of City Municipalities

The legal framework at the level of the 17 city municipalities (Čukarica, Novi Beograd, Palilula, Rakovica, Savski venac, Stari grad, Voždovac, Vračar,

Zemun, Zvezdara, Barajevo, Grocka, Lazarevac, Mladenovac, Obrenovac, Sopot, Surčin) is founded on the obligations from the Republic Law (Arts. 4 and 6) and the Decree on Headquarters. Each municipality is obliged to have its own municipal headquarters for emergencies, headed by the municipality's president. The number of municipalities is determined by the Statute of the City of Belgrade (Art. 26).

Municipal regulations include several types of acts: decisions on the establishment of municipal headquarters (adopted by the Municipal Assembly), decisions on the organization and functioning of civil protection in the territory of the municipality (each municipality adopts its own decision, harmonized with the city decision), rules of procedure of the municipal headquarters, and annual plans and reports on work. For illustrative purposes, the Municipality of Novi Beograd has adopted a Decision on Civil Protection in its territory, and regularly adopts its own Protection and Rescue Plan. All municipalities are obliged to prepare a disaster risk assessment for their territory and a defense plan in accordance with the Law on Defense. These acts establish operational capacity at the lowest level. Municipal headquarters represent the first echelon of response, directly implementing the principle of subsidiarity (Art. 6 of the Law).

2.5. Challenges in the Application of the Legal Framework

Despite the formally established legal framework, practice indicates several challenges in its implementation in the territory of Belgrade. Deadlines for adopting strategic acts (risk assessment, protection, and rescue plan) mandated by law are often not met. Municipal headquarters exist mostly in name only – their work is irregular, members are not adequately trained, and material-technical equipment is often insufficient. Also, a certain inconsistency between city and municipal acts is observed (for example, different degrees of elaboration of responsibilities), which creates legal uncertainty and hinders coordination. The reporting and supervision system, although prescribed by law, has not fully taken root in practice. These problems reduce the complementarity of the legal and institutional framework, which will be discussed in the fourth chapter.

3. Institutional Framework for Emergency Management in Belgrade

The institutional framework consists of a network of bodies, entities, and services that implement legally established competences at the republic, city, and municipal levels. Its structure directly reflects the principle of subsidiarity from Article 6 of the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 87/2018): the first response is expected from municipal headquarters, then from the city, while the republic level intervenes only when local and city resources become insufficient. Bearing in mind the importance of each level, the following section will analyze the main actors at each level.

3.1. Republic Level – System Bearers

At the republic level, the central place is occupied by the Republic Headquarters for Emergency Situations. The Decree prescribes its composition, method of work, and decision-making on the Composition, Method, and Organization of Work of the Headquarters for Emergency Situations (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 27/2020). The role of the Republic Headquarters is not direct management on the ground in Belgrade, but strategic direction, making unified risk assessments, and providing resources when the city's capacities become insufficient.

The operational bearer at the republic level is the Sector for Emergency Situations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This sector includes professional firefighting and rescue units, specialized teams (for search-and-rescue from ruins, water rescue, etc.), and material-technical resources. Its importance to Belgrade is reflected in its constant presence within the city's territory, both through the Belgrade Firefighting and Rescue Brigade and through engagement at major public events.

3.2. City Level – Coordination and Operations

At the City of Belgrade level, the key body is the City Headquarters for Emergency Situations. It is headed by the Mayor of Belgrade, and its members include representatives of city secretariats (especially the Secretariat for Defense, Emergency Situations and Coordination, the Secretariat for Health, the Secretariat for Transport, and the Secretariat for Communal Affairs), managers of public companies, and presidents of municipalities. Such

a structure ensures that all sectors potentially affected by an emergency are involved in decision-making (Statute of the City of Belgrade, Art. 3; Decree 27/2020).

The Headquarters convenes as needed, when there is an immediate danger or when an emergency has already occurred. Its functions include adopting the Protection and Rescue Plan of the City of Belgrade, activating and coordinating specialist operational teams, ordering the use of communal and other resources, and informing the public and issuing warnings. For illustrative purposes, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the City Headquarters met daily, adopting movement restriction measures and organizing temporary hospital capacities.

The Secretariat for Defense, Emergency Situations, and Coordination represents a professional, permanently employed city administration that provides expert and administrative support to the Headquarters. Its role is often neglected in public discourse, although it prepares analyses, drafts decisions, and ensures the implementation of the Headquarters' conclusions.

A special feature of the organization at the city level is the presence of specialist operational teams, as provided for by the Decision on the Organization and Functioning of Civil Protection in the Territory of the City of Belgrade (Official Gazette of the City of Belgrade, No. 6/2026). They are formed for each type of risk: a team for floods, earthquakes and ruins, epidemics, snowstorms and ice, storm winds and hail, drought and high temperatures. Each team is led by an expert from the relevant field (for example, the director of PWC "Belgrade Water" for flood management, the secretary of health for epidemic management). Such a division enables fast and focused response.

3.3. Municipal Level – First Echelon of Response

Each of the 17 Belgrade municipalities has its own municipal emergency headquarters, headed by the municipality's president (Law 87/2018, Arts. 4 and 6; Decree 27/2020). These headquarters are the first to be activated in the event of a localized emergency – for example, floods in a suburban settlement, a storm blocking several streets, an epidemic in a single school. Their task is to use their own human and material resources (municipal communal services, volunteer firefighting associations, Red Cross). Only when they assess that their own capacities are insufficient do they seek assistance from the City Headquarters.

In practice, the capacities of municipal headquarters are rather uneven. Municipalities in a better material position have better-equipped headquarters and more regular training. In contrast, more remote and less developed

municipalities often lack equipment, trained personnel, and financial resources. Municipal regulations, such as decisions on the establishment of headquarters, on civil protection, on rules of procedure, on annual plans, and the like, exist in formal form. Still, their implementation at the municipal level is not uniform.

3.4. Public and Communal Companies – Operational Strength

The operation of each headquarters necessarily relies on the operational capacities of implementing entities, typically public and communal companies. In Belgrade, this role is taken over by the city's communal and public companies. Their competence derives from the Statute, the Decision on Civil Protection, and special operational plans. The most important are: PUC "Belgrade Put" (winter service and remediation of storm damage), PWC "Belgrade Water" (flood defence and drainage), PUC "City Cleanliness" (waste disposal and cleaning after emergencies), PUC "Belgrade Power Plants" and "Electricity Distribution Belgrade" (energy supply), and PUC "Belgrade Transport" (transport of affected population and rescue teams). These companies are not merely executors of orders; in accordance with the Law (87/2018, Art. 17), they are obliged to have their own internal protection and rescue plans and to train their employees regularly. In this sense, they form an integral part of the City of Belgrade's institutional framework for emergency response.



3.5. Cross-Sectoral and Vertical Coordination – Challenges

The effectiveness of such a complex network of actors depends on the quality of coordination. Vertical coordination (municipality – city – republic) is often slowed by untimely reporting and unclear criteria for when local resources are truly insufficient. Horizontal coordination (between municipalities or between city secretariats) suffers from fragmentation of competencies. For example, in the case of simultaneous floods in several municipalities, the City Headquarters must coordinate them, but some municipalities are not accustomed to exchanging information.

These challenges do not diminish the value of the institutional framework. Still, they indicate that its functionality is conditioned not only by regulations but also by a culture of cooperation, staff training, and the availability of financial resources. The fourth chapter will analyze whether and to what extent the legal framework supports overcoming these coordination

problems, i.e., where full complementarity occurs and where there is a gap between the prescribed and the actual.

4. Complementarity of the Legal and Institutional Framework in Emergency Management in Belgrade

The complementarity of the legal and institutional framework implies that regulations and organizational structures operate in close and mutual conditionality – legal norms provide legitimacy and guidelines, while institutions, through their actions, implement those norms. In an ideal case, a legal obligation meets the institutional capacity to fulfill it. In Belgrade, this relationship is present only formally, while substantive alignment – i.e., the ability to actually act in accordance with the law – is significantly impaired.

The basic precondition for complementarity is fulfilled at the level of the formal establishment of institutional bodies (headquarters, secretariats, teams). The Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management (Articles 4 and 6) and the Decree on Headquarters mandate the existence of headquarters at the republic, city, and municipal levels. The City of Belgrade and all 17 municipalities do have such headquarters established, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the system to function. The same applies to planning acts: the Law (Arts. 15–17) prescribes the Risk Assessment, the Disaster Risk Reduction Plan, and the Protection and Rescue Plan. The City of Belgrade has adopted the Protection and Rescue Plan, and the municipalities have, at least formally, adopted their plans. However, complementarity almost stops here.

The most obvious lack of alignment is reflected in the non-compliance with legal deadlines. According to the Law (Articles 15–17), the Risk Assessment and the Protection and Rescue Plan were to be adopted within two years of the law's entry into force. However, practice shows that some municipalities are slow to adopt these acts. Without these acts, headquarters cannot know exactly what their obligations are, what resources they have at their disposal, or how to act in specific situations. Therefore, one key characteristic of the absence of substantive complementarity is that the legal framework prescribes imperative obligations. At the same time, institutional capacities are often unable to fulfill them, both due to resource constraints and untimely responses.

Another deficiency is the unevenness of municipal capacities. The principle of subsidiarity (Art. 6) prescribes that municipal headquarters should respond first, using their own resources. Nevertheless, municipalities vary

significantly in terms of equipment, staff training, and financial resources. The law does not provide mechanisms to equalize these capacities; it merely imposes an obligation but provides no funds. The consequence is that municipalities most exposed to risks may be the least capable of independent response. In this sense, complementarity becomes largely formal.

The third problem concerns the inconsistency of acts and competences. The Statute of the City of Belgrade and the Decision on Civil Protection, in some places, define competencies differently from those of the Republic Law. The distribution of responsibilities between the City Headquarters and the municipal headquarters in the event of an emergency affecting several municipalities is not precisely defined, which can delay coordination. Also, the obligation of communal companies to draw up internal protection plans (Art. 17) is often not implemented consistently due to a lack of systematic supervision. The legal framework exists, but institutions do not always have the mechanism or the will to apply it consistently.

The reasons for this situation can be grouped into several categories. Financial reasons are the most obvious. It has already been pointed out that the law imposes obligations but does not provide funds, so municipalities are left to their own budgets, and the poorer ones are often unable to equip their headquarters. There is no regular inter-municipal reporting and cooperation; institutions often operate in a particularistic and isolated manner. Normative control reasons are reflected in the inefficient system of supervision over the implementation of the law at the local level. Hence, inspections are rare, and sanctions are lacking when needed.

Overcoming these deficiencies would require systemic interventions. It is necessary to improve the legal provisions by prescribing minimum equipment standards for municipal headquarters and providing financial support from the republic budget (for example, an equalization fund). Also, the introduction of mandatory annual exercises and joint training for all municipal headquarters would help build a culture of cooperation. Finally, establishing clear criteria for assessing the “insufficiency of own resources” would help avoid arbitrariness and delays in seeking assistance.

Finally, the complementarity of the legal and institutional frameworks in Belgrade is formal rather than substantive. While bodies and acts are established on paper, the actual ability of institutions to perform the tasks prescribed by law varies significantly, primarily due to uneven equipment, non-compliance with deadlines, and insufficiently efficient supervision. Without systemic interventions (financial, training, and control interventions), this gap between the prescribed and the actual will remain a permanent feature of the emergency management system in the City of Belgrade.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the legal and institutional framework for emergency management in the City of Belgrade has shown that the system is well-founded in principle. Still, substantive complementarity – i.e., the ability of institutions to fulfill the tasks prescribed by law – lags seriously behind. Republic laws, primarily the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management, together with the Decree on Headquarters, establish a clear hierarchy and obligations at the republic, city, and municipal levels. Formally, all necessary bodies (headquarters, secretariats, specialist operational teams) exist, and planning acts have been adopted. However, at the implementation level, three key deficiencies already emerge: non-compliance with legal deadlines, pronounced unevenness in municipal capacities, and hampered coordination. Financial and normative control reasons lead to complementarity remaining largely formal, while the system's actual preparedness varies across municipalities.

Overcoming this gap requires systemic interventions: establishing minimum equipment standards with financial support, mandatory annual exercises and joint training, and clear criteria for activating higher levels of assistance. Without these measures, even a relatively good legal framework will not ensure efficient emergency management in the territory of Belgrade.

This paper aimed at a normative institutional analysis, but its limitation is the lack of empirical data on the actual capacities of municipal headquarters. Future research should focus on field collection of such data and on a comparative analysis with other cities in Serbia and/or the region.

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