EWA JAKUBIAK

Legal Responsibility for the Evacuation of the Civilian Population During Large-Scale Emergencies: A Case Study of Lithuania

Abstract

The evacuation of the civilian population constitutes one of the fundamental instruments of civil protection in situations involving natural, technological, epidemiological, and military hazards. The primary objective of civilian evacuation is to ensure the orderly, efficient, and timely evacuation of residents from threatened or contaminated areas in order to safeguard their life and health. In response to rising geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe, the Baltic states have undertaken measures aimed at strengthening the resilience of their national security systems. The aim of this paper is to examine the civilian evacuation system operating in the Republic of Lithuania and to assess its effectiveness in the context of large-scale emergencies. The research question addressed in the study is: What legal mechanisms can ensure the effective evacuation of the civilian population during large-scale emergencies in Lithuania? The study employs institutional and legal analysis, an analysis of strategic documents and the comparative method. It presents the organizational structure of the civil protection system, the competences of public administration authorities, and the procedures for planning and implementing evacuation operations. The concluding section identifies directions for the further improvement of the Lithuanian crisis management model. This paper is an outcome of research conducted under the Miniatura 9 grant awarded by the National Science Centre (NCN), Poland, within which the author is carrying out a broader research project. The present publication constitutes one of the four stages of that project.

KEYWORDS: civilian evacuation, civil protection, civil security, crisis management, Lithuania, public administration

EWA JAKUBIAK – PhD in law, University of Lomza, e-mail: ejakubiak@al.edu.pl, ORCID – 0000-0002-7849-2880.

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1 Introduction

The evolving security environment in Europe necessitates the continuous improvement of national civil protection systems. Contemporary threats are multidimensional and include natural disasters, critical infrastructure failures, biological hazards, cyberattacks, as well as armed conflicts and hybrid activities. Under such conditions, one of the fundamental instruments of civil protection remains a well-organized evacuation system.[1]

The Republic of Lithuania, sharing borders with the Russian Federation (Kaliningrad Oblast) and Belarus, occupies a particularly sensitive geopolitical position. Membership in the European Union and NATO significantly strengthens national security; however, it also requires maintaining a high level of readiness within public administration to respond to large-scale emergencies.

Public participation in Lithuania's national security system constitutes one of the key pillars of state resilience. This is primarily due to the country's specific geopolitical location and its vulnerability to both military and non-military threats.

Recent experiences, particularly the migration crisis on the Lithuanian–Belarusian border, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine, have contributed to intensified efforts aimed at modernizing the civil protection system. Special attention has been devoted to warning and alert procedures, the development of shelters, the organization of evacuation processes, and cooperation between central government and local authorities.

The civil protection system in the Republic of Lithuania is based on the principle of state responsibility for ensuring the safety of citizens, alongside cooperation between governmental administration, local self-government, and entities responsible for rescue operations and crisis management. The Lithuanian legal framework concerning population evacuation forms part of the broader civil protection and crisis management system. It regulates the activities of state and local institutions in organizing the protection of the population in emergency situations, during wartime, or in the face of other large-scale threats. The foundations of this system are derived from the

1 Julia Skóra, Dariusz Bogusz, *Współczesne zagrożenia bezpieczeństwa państwa* (Gdynia: Wydawnictwo Akademickie AMW, 2025), 85–86.

Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, which imposes on state authorities the obligation to protect the life and safety of residents.

The above principles are further developed in statutory acts regulating civil protection, crisis management, the functioning of public administration, and the organization of rescue services. Strategic documents defining national security policy also play a significant role. They envisage the development of state resilience through the expansion of warning and alert systems, the preparation of protective infrastructure, and the development of evacuation plans for populations living in particularly high-risk areas.

The Lithuanian legal model is based on the principle of comprehensive risk management. It encompasses all phases of the crisis management cycle: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Population evacuation constitutes one of the key measures implemented in the response phase; however, its effectiveness depends on adequate planning carried out well in advance of any emerging threat.

The development of national regulations is also significantly influenced by obligations arising from Lithuania's membership in the European Union and NATO. This primarily concerns the implementation of civil protection standards, cross-border cooperation, and participation in the European Civil Protection Mechanism. The integration of these solutions enables evacuation operations to be conducted not only at the national level but also internationally in the event of large-scale disasters.

This publication constitutes one of four stages of a research project conducted by the author under the Miniatura 9 grant awarded by the National Science Centre (NCN), Poland. It enriches the literature and legal analysis with information obtained through expert interviews and consultations conducted in Lithuania in May and June 2026.

2 | Legal Framework for Civil Protection and Evacuation in Lithuania

The national security system of the Republic of Lithuania is based on the assumption that ensuring state security is a shared responsibility of public administration authorities, the armed forces, rescue services, local governments, and civil society.[2] The contemporary security model was

2 Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Crisis Management and Civil Protection of 15 December 1998, No. VIII-971 (*Lietuvos Respublikos krizių valdymo ir civilinės saugos*

shaped after the restoration of independence in 1990 and was subsequently modified following Lithuania's accession to the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 2004.

The Lithuanian security doctrine adopts an integrated approach to threats, encompassing both traditional military risks and non-military threats such as natural disasters, critical infrastructure failures, epidemics, cyberattacks, and hybrid activities. Particular emphasis is placed on state resilience, understood as the capacity of public institutions and society to prevent threats, respond to them, and rapidly restore normal functioning.

Within the national security structure, the civil protection system occupies a particularly important position, with its primary task being the protection of the life and health of the population during emergency situations. Population evacuation is one of the key instruments for achieving this objective and constitutes an integral element of crisis planning at the national, regional, and local levels. Following the outbreak of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, Lithuania significantly increased its investment in the development of civil protection systems. The network of civil protection shelters has been expanded, evacuation plans have been updated, and extensive educational initiatives have been launched to prepare society for functioning under wartime conditions. The effectiveness of evacuation is largely dependent on the clarity of legal regulations, the institutional structure, and the governance model. Lithuania applies a decentralized civil protection model characterized by central-level coordination (Government, Ministry of the Interior) and operational responsibility at the municipal level.

The foundations of the civil protection system are derived from the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania,[3] which defines the state's obligations regarding the protection of life, health, and the security of citizens. Although the Constitution does not contain separate provisions concerning population evacuation, it establishes principles that serve as the basis for laws regulating civil protection and crisis management.

The constitutional principle of a democratic state under the rule of law imposes on public authorities the obligation to take measures aimed at safeguarding fundamental human rights, particularly the right to life, security,

įstatymas), https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.C15592B096FA/asr [accessed: 20.06.2026].

3 Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania of 25 October 1992 (*Lietuvos Respublikos Konstitucija*), http://www3.lrs.lt/home/Konstitucija/Konstitucija.html.

and health protection. In emergency situations, certain rights and freedoms may be temporarily restricted; however, state actions must comply with the principles of proportionality, legality, and necessity.

The Constitution also sets out the principles governing the functioning of states of emergency, enabling state authorities to undertake special organizational measures, including the implementation of mandatory evacuation of populations from areas under direct threat.

The functioning of the Lithuanian civil protection system is based on statutory acts regulating crisis management, civil protection, rescue services, and the organization of public administration. These regulations define the competences of state administration bodies, local governments, and entities responsible for responding to emergency situations.

The legal system is founded on the principle of comprehensive risk management. The process includes the identification of threats, planning preventive measures, preparation of response procedures, conducting rescue operations, and post-crisis recovery. An important element of the legislation is the obligation for both central and local administrations to develop civil protection plans. These documents define procedures for alerting the population, organizing evacuation, securing transport, operating temporary accommodation sites, and ensuring cooperation between rescue services.

The key legal acts regulating population evacuation include: the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Crisis Management and Civil Protection, which defines the principles of organizing the civil protection system, the competences of individual institutions, and the rights and obligations of residents.[4]

The key entities responsible for civil protection include:

- at the national level: the Government, the Government Crisis Response Commission, the Ministry of the Interior, the Fire and Rescue Department (FRD) under the Ministry of the Interior, as well as subordinate agencies, ministries, and other state institutions;
- at the regional level: county governors, civil protection departments, and regional crisis management centres;

4 Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Crisis Management and Civil Protection of 15 December 1998, No. VIII-971 (*Lietuvos Respublikos krizių valdymo ir civilinės saugos įstatymas*), new wording in force since 1 January 2023 pursuant to the Law of 8 December 2022, No. XIV-1640 (TAR, 23.12.2022, No. 26579).

- at the local level: municipal administrators, municipal civil protection departments, civil protection personnel, municipal crisis management centres, fire services and other civil protection services, as well as economic entities and agencies.[5]

Description of the Procedure for Organizing the Evacuation of the Population (adopted by a Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania) – establishes the principles governing the planning, organization, and implementation of population evacuation. National Crisis Management Plan – sets out the responsibilities and actions of institutions in crisis situations at the national level.

The Fire and Rescue Department under the Ministry of the Interior is responsible for supervising its subordinate operational entities, namely the services tasked with disaster prevention, the coordination of rescue operations, and the activities of public institutions and economic entities in the field of civil protection. It is also responsible for ensuring preparedness for the implementation of civil protection measures during crisis situations in both peacetime and wartime.

At the regional level, county governors, civil protection departments, and regional crisis management centres perform tasks related to disaster preparedness and the provision of assistance when required. At the local level, municipal administrators and other relevant entities are responsible for ensuring preparedness for emergency situations and providing assistance whenever necessary. During a crisis, the primary responsibility of local authorities is to provide essential assistance to the population within their jurisdiction while ensuring the uninterrupted performance of their statutory duties.

Several institutions participate in the population evacuation process:

- Ministry of the Interior – formulates civil protection policy;
- National Crisis Management Centre – coordinates response activities at the national level;
- Fire and Rescue Department – organizes the operation of the civil protection system;

5 Zenon Zamiar, Bernard Kaczmarczyk, „Wybrane problemy zarządzania kryzysowego w Republice Litewskiej", [in:] *Zarządzanie kryzysowe w Polsce i państwach sąsiednich*, ed. Bernard Kaczmarczyk (Wrocław: Wyższa Szkoła Oficerska Wojsk Lądowych, 2017), 117.

- Municipal administrations – prepare evacuation plans and designate evacuation routes, evacuation assembly points, and temporary accommodation facilities.

Article 37. Evacuation and return of residents[6]:

"1. When, in the event of a threat or occurrence of an event, emergency event, special event, threat or occurrence of an emergency situation, there is a need to evacuate residents in the territory of the Republic of Lithuania, a decision on the evacuation of residents shall be made in accordance with the procedure established by the Government:

1) the mayor – regarding the evacuation of residents from the territory of a municipality to the territory of another municipality or within the territory of the same municipality;

2) heads of state and municipal institutions and bodies, other institutions, economic entities and operators – regarding the evacuation of residents from state and municipal institutions and bodies, other institutions, economic entities and operators and (or) territories controlled by them;

3) head of rescue operations – regarding the evacuation of residents from the focus of an emergency situation.

2. When, in the event of a threat or occurrence of an act of aggression, after the declaration of mobilization or the introduction of martial law, there is a need to evacuate residents in the territory of the Republic of Lithuania or from the territory of the Republic of Lithuania to a foreign country, the decision on the evacuation of residents is made by the Government in accordance with the procedure established by the Government.

3. Evacuation of residents is organized and carried out in accordance with the procedure established by the Government, and functions established in this procedure are performed by:

1) state and municipal institutions and bodies;

2) other institutions;

3) economic entities;

4) operators;

5) operation centers;

6) population collection points, intermediate population evacuation points, population reception points;

6 Law on Crisis Management and Civil Protection, Art. 37.

7) civil defense forces.

4. Evacuation of residents is coordinated according to the procedure established by the Government.

5. The methods of evacuating residents are as follows:

1) temporary relocation of residents from territories where it is or would be dangerous to continue to live and/or work is organized and carried out to other territories, providing them with temporary living quarters if necessary;

2) instructions are given to the residents to temporarily leave the territories in which it is or would be dangerous to continue to live and/or work within the specified period, to other territories, providing them with temporary living quarters if necessary.

6. After the reasons for which the residents were evacuated disappear, the return of residents to the territories from which the residents were evacuated shall be carried out in accordance with the procedure established by the Government."

In 2022, the relevant legislation was amended to strengthen the state's preparedness to respond to military and hybrid threats. The amendments broadened the competences of the authorities responsible for civil protection, introduced more stringent requirements for evacuation planning, and initiated the modernization of civil protection infrastructure.

The Lithuanian civil protection system remains closely aligned with the frameworks established by the European Union and NATO. Membership in these organizations requires the harmonization of national procedures with international standards for crisis management and civil protection. A particularly important role is played by the European Civil Protection Mechanism, which facilitates mutual assistance among Member States during natural disasters, industrial accidents, and other emergency situations. Lithuania also actively participates in European civil protection and evacuation exercises. Within NATO, efforts are focused on strengthening state resilience, protecting critical infrastructure, and enhancing the preparedness of public administration to operate under conditions of armed conflict. Particular emphasis is placed on ensuring the continuity of government and administrative functions, as well as the capacity to protect the civilian population during military emergencies.

Evacuation in Lithuania is based on the general principles of civil protection law, which are consistent with European Union and international standards.

The key principles include:

- the protection of human life and health as the highest priority;
- proportionality of measures, whereby restrictions on rights and freedoms must be necessary and justified;
- early warning and prevention;
- phased evacuation, comprising preventive evacuation (before the occurrence of a threat) and emergency evacuation (an immediate response to an imminent or existing threat);
- priority protection of particularly vulnerable groups;
- continuity of essential services;
- subsidiarity and decentralization;
- inter-institutional coordination; and
- the use of pre-planned evacuation routes and designated shelter locations.

3 | Organizational Structure of the Population Evacuation System

The population evacuation system is based on the principle of centralized command combined with a significant degree of autonomy granted to local authorities. The Government of the Republic of Lithuania is responsible for shaping security policy, defining the directions of civil protection development, and approving national crisis response plans. Ministries are responsible for developing procedures within their respective areas of competence. Civil protection tasks are primarily carried out by institutions responsible for internal affairs, health protection, transport, infrastructure, and national defence.

At the central level, national crisis management centres operate to ensure 24-hour monitoring of threats, situational analysis, and coordination of activities among all system participants.

Local governments play a key role in the practical implementation of evacuation. They develop local crisis response plans, maintain records of shelter locations, organize transport, and prepare temporary accommodation facilities for residents. Their responsibilities also include conducting public information activities, organizing training for residents, and cooperating with local enterprises responsible for transport, supply chains, and municipal infrastructure. Knowledge of local conditions enables municipalities to plan

evacuation routes more effectively and to identify individuals requiring special assistance, such as elderly persons, persons with disabilities, or those with chronic illnesses.

Rescue services play a fundamental role in the implementation of evacuation, being responsible for securing the affected area, directing population movement, and providing first aid. Fire services, police units, medical services, and other specialized formations are involved in these operations. In large-scale emergencies, armed forces may be deployed to support transport, logistics, the construction of temporary infrastructure, and the securing of evacuated areas. Increasingly important are modern information systems enabling real-time monitoring of evacuation progress, resource management, and information exchange between institutions. Non-governmental organizations constitute an important component of the civil protection system. Their activities focus primarily on humanitarian assistance, the organization of accommodation sites, food distribution, psychological support, and assistance to particularly vulnerable individuals.

In recent years, Lithuania has developed a system of cooperation with volunteers who participate in civil protection exercises and support public administration during crisis situations. This approach enhances societal resilience and enables more effective use of local resources.

The evacuation process consists of five basic stages: threat detection, decision-making regarding evacuation, alerting the population, relocation of residents to safe areas, and the provision of assistance following the completion of relocation. Each of these stages requires close cooperation between public administration, rescue services, and society.

The initial stage is planning, which includes risk analysis, designation of hazard zones, preparation of evacuation routes, identification of reception areas for the population, and ensuring adequate logistical resources. Particular importance is attached to the updating of plans and the conduct of regular practical exercises. The Lithuanian system uses siren alarms, radio and television announcements, SMS messages, mobile applications, and social media. The effectiveness of warning systems depends on the speed of information transmission, its reliability, and its clarity for recipients.

Another important stage is the transport of evacuees, which is carried out using public transportation, state service vehicles, and transport provided by private enterprises. Logistical organization also includes the delivery of food,

water, medical supplies, and the maintenance of continuity in energy and fuel supplies.

Subsequently, evacuees are directed to temporary accommodation facilities prepared by local authorities. They are provided with accommodation, food, medical care, psychological assistance, and social support. Special procedures apply to children, elderly persons, and persons with disabilities.

The final stage of the process is the organization of the safe return of residents once the threat has subsided. These activities include the assessment of infrastructure safety, restoration of public services, psychological support for residents, and the rebuilding of social and economic life. The effectiveness of this stage determines the long-term resilience of local communities to future crises.

The practical functioning of the Lithuanian civil protection system was put to a significant test during the migration crisis on the Belarusian border in 2021–2022. The sudden increase in the number of migrants crossing the state border required the involvement of government administration, local authorities, the Border Guard, the Police, rescue services, and non-governmental organizations. The crisis demonstrated that contemporary hybrid threats may affect not only border security but also the functioning of the civil protection system. In response to the situation, Lithuania activated crisis management mechanisms, including the organization of temporary accommodation facilities, the provision of medical assistance, and the coordination of logistical operations. At the same time, cooperation with European Union institutions and agencies responsible for external border protection was strengthened.

The experience of the crisis highlighted the need to increase the flexibility of the evacuation system and its capacity to respond to non-traditional threats. In particular, attention was drawn to the necessity of improving information exchange between central and local administration and enhancing the state's logistical capabilities.

4 | Lithuania's Preparedness for Military Threats after 2022

The full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine has led to a fundamental shift in Lithuania's approach to civil protection. The priority has become the preparation of public administration and society

for functioning under conditions of armed conflict. State authorities have initiated the updating of evacuation plans for major cities, the inventorying of shelters and collective protection facilities, the modernization of warning and alert systems, and an increase in material reserves intended for civilian needs.[7] In parallel, public information campaigns have been conducted concerning household preparedness for crisis situations and appropriate behaviour during alerts. Particular emphasis has been placed on the protection of critical infrastructure, ensuring the continuity of government operations, and strengthening cooperation among institutions responsible for national security. These measures are consistent with the concept of state resilience, according to which military security and civil protection constitute mutually complementary elements of the national security system.

An important component of improving the evacuation system is the regular organization of practical exercises. Their purpose is to verify existing procedures, assess inter-institutional coordination, and identify potential organizational challenges.

At the national level, exercises are conducted involving government administration, local authorities, fire services, police, medical services, and the armed forces. Scenarios include natural disasters, industrial accidents, and military threats.

The analysis of the system's functioning allows the identification of several strengths. These include, above all, clear legal regulations, a high level of international cooperation, well-developed crisis planning, and increasing public awareness of threats.

At the same time, areas requiring further improvement can be identified. These relate primarily to the limited number of shelters, the need to modernize logistical infrastructure, the need to increase the frequency of practical exercises, and the further digitalization of crisis management processes. Another challenge is ensuring effective protection for particularly vulnerable groups, including elderly persons, persons with disabilities, and residents of sparsely populated areas.

The Lithuanian legal system shows numerous similarities to solutions applied in Finland, Sweden, and Estonia, where significant emphasis is placed on societal resilience and on preparing citizens for self-sufficient functioning

7 Resolution of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania of 18 July 2024, No. XIV-2946, „On the Approval of the Programme for Strengthening and Development of Civil Protection" (TAR, 19.07.2024, No. 2024-13291).

during the initial days of a crisis. Compared with Poland, the Lithuanian system is characterized by greater centralization of coordination, alongside extensive use of the competences of local governments. The Scandinavian countries, in turn, possess more developed protective infrastructure and a longer tradition of civil defence education.

The experiences of these countries indicate that the effectiveness of evacuation depends not only on the quality of legal regulations, but above all on the level of preparedness of public administration and the awareness of citizens.

The solutions adopted in Lithuania may serve as a valuable source of experience for other Central and Eastern European countries. Particularly noteworthy are the mechanisms of cooperation between central administration and local governments, the development of warning and alert systems, and the integration of civil planning with defence planning.

The potential for adapting Lithuanian experiences also extends to the organization of inter-institutional exercises and the strengthening of societal resilience through public education and the development of volunteer networks. Public awareness constitutes a legal and strategic priority in light of regulations on crisis management and civil protection. Recommended measures include nationwide civil protection campaigns, the inclusion of civil protection topics in educational curricula, regular evacuation exercises and simulations, the development of digital tools, as well as clear and coherent risk communication strategies.

5 | Conclusion

The analysis conducted on the basis of the completed research has demonstrated that the Lithuanian legal system of population evacuation constitutes a coherent component of the national security system. The applicable legal regulations provide the foundation for the functioning of public administration during crisis situations, while experiences from recent years have contributed to the further development of civil protection procedures.

In answer to the research question, the existing legal system enables the effective conduct of population evacuation during large-scale emergencies; however, it requires further improvement in terms of protective infrastructure,

digitalization of management processes, and the strengthening of societal resilience.

In 2026, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania adopted a package of amendments to the Law on Crisis Management and Civil Protection, as well as related legal acts, prepared by the Ministry of the Interior. The purpose of these amendments is to increase the state's resilience to crisis situations and to enhance the level of public safety by strengthening the legal and organizational framework of the civil protection system.

The most significant change is the introduction of the concept of civil defence into the Lithuanian legal framework, along with a comprehensive strengthening of its instruments, including the development of protective infrastructure (shelters), evacuation systems, population warning and alert systems, and other crisis response mechanisms. Civil defence has been defined as an integrated set of state activities aimed at protecting the population both in peacetime and during armed conflict. In order to ensure the horizontal resilience of the entire state system, enhanced civil-military cooperation is envisaged, along with the establishment of a national network of preparedness coordinators, joint response teams, and civil protection support points. These solutions are intended to increase the state's capacity for coordinated response to large-scale events, including hybrid and cyber threats, as well as natural disasters and technological failures.

Preparedness coordinators operating within individual ministries will serve as institutional coordination units responsible for developing cooperation with non-governmental organizations, the academic and educational community, the private sector, and business associations. An important element of the reform is also the comprehensive regulation of population evacuation procedures. The provisions clarify the scope of responsibilities of individual public administration bodies, the criteria for initiating evacuation, its scale, and the procedures for the return of the population to their places of residence once the threat has subsided. At the same time, the competences of the Fire and Rescue Department have been expanded, strengthening its position as the central expert body in the field of crisis management and civil protection, particularly with regard to evacuation planning and coordination processes.

The ministers responsible for civil protection in Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Germany have agreed on the content of a memorandum that places particular emphasis on cross-border evacuation planning and preparedness for managing

uncontrolled population movements. The countries of the region have agreed to develop common planning principles, harmonize procedures, exchange necessary information while maintaining security requirements, assess the capacity of transport systems and infrastructure, identify potential evacuation corridors, border crossings, transit and accommodation sites, and strengthen cooperation between civil and military institutions as well as the public and private sectors. Particular attention will be paid to the protection of particularly vulnerable persons.[8]

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