

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CSDP

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## Forging opportunity out of crisis?

by

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When the Covid-19 pandemic began to sweep through the world in the early months of 2020, no country or international organisation had contingency plans in place to deal with a crisis that could occur anywhere and affect everybody simultaneously. In the case of the missions and operations deployed under the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), Covid-19 had a severe impact, including on Brussels-based personnel and structures, early on. In hindsight, it is easy to criticise the first three months of crisis management at the CSDP structures in Brussels as well as what operations and missions did in the field. However, the unique and novel challenge of this pandemic must never be lost sight of in any assessment of CSDP performance. The pandemic and its effect on the CSDP revealed some crucial challenges faced by EU missions and their operational and planning structures. This Brief tries to shed light on the impact that Covid-19 has had on the CSDP and points to some lessons which can be drawn from the experiences of dealing with the pandemic crisis so far <sup>(1)</sup>.

### Summary

- > CSDP missions and operations, including the steering bodies in Brussels, were severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Within the first eight weeks, almost half of the deployed personnel were evacuated.
- > Those missions and operations with a stabilisation or security mandate were more resilient at the onset of the pandemic than those delivering training and capacity building to local partners.
- > The evacuation of seconded mission personnel by the CPCC or seconding Member States raises some questions about lines of communication and responsibilities as well as how to balance the duty of care for personnel with maintaining the functions of missions.
- > The internal lessons learned process should continue but should be accompanied by an external assessment of CSDP missions and operations. Both should also inform the wider debate about the Strategic Compass.

# WHEN COVID-19 HIT THE FIELD – AND BRUSSELS

On 6 March, the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC) sent all the heads of mission an instruction issued by the European External Action Service (EEAS) on how to respond to Covid-19. This was the first official communication concerning the pandemic crisis. It took six more days for the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) to transmit their first instruction relating to Covid-19. On 16 March, the CPCC and the MPCC provided more detailed (but separate) instructions to civilian and military CSDP missions. Nine updated or additional instructions followed before the end of the month.

With the exception of the maritime operations *Atalanta* and *Irini*, Eufor in Bosnia, Eulex in Kosovo and Eumm in Georgia, the majority of civilian and military CSDP staffing levels were halved in less than 8 weeks (see diagram opposite), bringing mandate implementation to a halt. By the end of April, EU training missions had ceased all training activities and civilian CSDP mission-related activities had been placed on hold<sup>(2)</sup>. Seconded<sup>(3)</sup> and contracted personnel deployed in missions and stationed in Brussels had been repatriated rapidly by both the CPCC and individual Member States, sometimes even without prior notice<sup>(4)</sup> to the CPCC or the respective missions<sup>(5)</sup>.

## OPERATIONAL GUIDANCE AND COMMUNICATION

In Brussels, emergency mechanisms and mission oversight and control were under severe stress after some Member States withdrew their seconded personnel from operational structures. Furthermore, the Political and Security Committee (PSC), the Politico-Military Group and the Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management (CivCom) temporarily ceased their meetings – thus suspending important discussions and procedures on operational plans (OPLANS)<sup>(6)</sup>, strategic reviews or the extension of mission mandates. As some mission mandates were about to expire, Member States opted instead for a mere one-year technical rollover for Eulex Kosovo, Eubam Libya, Eufor RCA and Eupol Copps on 16 April 2020.

In addition, communication between the CPCC and the field at the beginning of the crisis was late, patchy and often contradictory<sup>(7)</sup>. Field personnel were divided into the categories of ‘essential’ and ‘non-essential’, with the criteria for this categorisation changing

Change in staffing levels in CSDP missions and operations at the beginning of the pandemic  
1 March to 1 May 2020, %



Data: Author’s calculation based on numbers provided by the EEAS.

many times depending on differing mission policies and shifting guidance from Brussels. Non-essential staff either had to leave or could leave – again, depending on changing factors and circumstances. Moreover, Member States decided for themselves whether their (essential or non-essential) seconded staff remained or left. As transportation became scarce and borders were closed, the majority of missions found themselves primarily occupied with making travel arrangements and checking on who had already left or was about to leave. In addition, the private insurance company in charge of medical evacuation was not able to provide sufficient support to civilian missions during the crisis.

In June 2020, the European Council called for ‘the urgent return of personnel, temporarily withdrawn from the area of operation’<sup>(8)</sup>. Starting around July and August, often with rotating teams, both the CPCC and the MPCC tried to bring their presence back to normal staffing levels. However, it took until late October to reach about 80–85 %<sup>(9)</sup> of pre-pandemic levels<sup>(10)</sup>. Autumn then saw the onset of a second wave of the pandemic in Europe, which affected missions and operations again, and led to another round of evacuations and the halting of ongoing re-staffing

processes. There were also internal Covid-19 outbreaks at EUTM Mali and on a ship provided to Operation *Irini* in September<sup>(44)</sup>. Missions and operations were still far from returning to business as usual until spring 2021, even though most were able to ensure a continuous presence either by maintaining sufficient personnel in the field or by teleworking, thus also preserving links with local partners. On a positive note, the crisis triggered a boost in digital innovation which may eventually lead to more efficiency in CSDP operational planning and guidance. However, in the field this surge in digital usage did not help much as local partners and national personnel of missions were often lacking the resources to engage virtually. It seems that only the rapid vaccination of both field personnel and the population of the host country will finally normalise the situation.

## WONDERING ABOUT IMPACT AND RESILIENCE

But what was the overall effect on the situation in the countries hosting CSDP missions and operations when the majority of them stopped their activities and withdrew half of their personnel? Except for some disappointment expressed by local counterparts about international crisis management personnel leaving in a moment of crisis, it seems that the absence of the majority of CSDP missions, particularly small and medium-sized training missions, had no visible impact on the situation. In general, it has been difficult to measure the impact of CSDP missions, especially their training or capacity-building activities, which have become the typical trademark of the CSDP post-Lisbon<sup>(42)</sup>.

Nevertheless, four of the 17 missions and operations displayed strong resilience during the onset of the pandemic. These were the two executive military operations EUNAVFOR *Atalanta* and EUFOR *Althea* in Bosnia, along with the pre-Lisbon<sup>(43)</sup> civilian missions EULEX Kosovo and EUMM Georgia. They were able to maintain all or the majority of their staff as well as their core functions. What do they have in common? They are large, and almost all Member States are strongly committed to them. They are less about training and capacity building and more about stabilisation and monitoring. The downsizing or freezing of their activities could have had severe consequences. In the case of the EUMM, Georgian counterparts feared Russian aggression should the EUMM cease its monitoring activities. EULEX Kosovo's police and EUFOR's troops

in Bosnia also still play an important role in security in these countries. In addition, their size meant that they had better internal medical services and their relative vicinity to the EU provided them with better regional health provisions and greater flexibility in the event of emergencies.

## WHO'S IN CHARGE?

The instrument of secondment has been key for civilian CSDP missions (as is the provision of uniformed personnel to CSDP operations). In recent years though, the number of seconded personnel has decreased from an all-time high of over 80 % of all mission staff to currently slightly over 60 %<sup>(44)</sup>. Member States not only pay the salaries of seconded personnel, they are also in charge of the 'duty of care' – making sure that their personnel are safe and well. When Covid-19 hit the field, some Member States decided to prioritise the duty of care<sup>(45)</sup>. Some even withdrew seconded personnel designated as 'essential' by the missions. While this is comprehensible from a human resources perspective, it does raise some questions about who is actually in charge of mission personnel and how much of a risk Member States are willing to take in crisis management. If they no longer see missions as crisis management instruments but as essentially focused on 'training and classrooms', they might decide not to take any risks. This was clear through the comments made by the Director of the EU MPCC, Vice-Admiral Hervé Bléjean, concerning the CSDP during the pandemic. He stated that 'we should remember that these [Minusma and Barkhane] are executive fighting operations. We are dealing with training and classrooms, so the way to appreciate the risk is very different (...) for a lot of Member States a mission is not an operation, it is not a war, not a fighting operation, you should never die in a mission, not even in an accident'<sup>(46)</sup>.

The initial focus on duty of care and repatriation of personnel was mostly based on the (incorrect) assumption that host countries, especially in Africa, would be hit early and severely by the pandemic, and that

their health systems would not be equipped to treat their own people, let alone mission personnel<sup>(47)</sup>. The opposite was in fact the case: in spring 2020, international mission personnel would often have been safer in theatre than at home – and sometimes staff even brought the virus back to the mission and country when they were redeployed. Risk-analysis and contingency planning for health were both inadequate at the beginning of the pandemic<sup>(48)</sup>. Looking at how the EU approached the outbreak

of Covid-19 in spring 2020, a former UN employee summarised it as: ‘At the beginning of the pandemic, the main question for CSDP was “When do we leave?” while the UN was asking “How can we stay?”’<sup>(19)</sup>

## WHAT LESSONS FOR CSDP?

Even though the functioning of CSDP both in Brussels and the field was severely affected in the first months of the pandemic, the immediate creation of a task force on Covid-19 as well as the early work on lessons by the Directorate on the Integrated Approach for Security and Peace (ISP) has clearly helped, and provided first analysis already by April 2020. Especially the internal report from August 2020 can be seen as a milestone. For civilian missions, the CPCC published another report in December, a ‘Study on the impact of Covid on civilian CSDP Missions’<sup>(20)</sup> which also included scenarios for the further development of the pandemic. All these provide valuable insights to make CSDP missions and operations more resilient in the face of future crises.

In general, Covid-19 has clearly shown that civilian missions were lacking medical infrastructure and resources, as well as means for the medical evacuation of staff (MEDEVAC). Military operations fared better. But where they were deployed in parallel with civilian missions (such as in Mali), military operations did not share their MEDEVAC capacities<sup>(21)</sup>. Perhaps it is time to merge structures, funding and procedures for civilian and military CSDP missions; this could promote increased efficiency and effectiveness and encourage a more comprehensive approach.

As civilian and military training missions were not high on the agenda at the beginning of the pandemic (as is still the case for some), either for Member States or for local counterparts, the EEAS has to critically evaluate its signature CSDP activities through an independent impact assessment<sup>(22)</sup>. The positive early lessons process steered by ISP so far has to continue and should not shy away from difficult issues. Moreover, the results of this process could provide valuable input to the discussions in the framework of the Strategic Compass on what the EU and its Member States want and should deliver in global crisis management.

Digital innovation in CSDP has accelerated during the pandemic, even though some structures in Brussels and in the field were lacking adequate technical equipment and expertise. Some missions have developed new digital tools which should be adapted at all levels of CSDP missions and operations. In this domain, the Covid-19 crisis may yet prove to be a catalyst for more efficient operational planning and conduct.

Finally, as secondment remains important, especially for civilian CSDP missions (the Civilian CSDP Compact set the ambition of raising the share of seconded experts to at least 70 % of the international mission staff), the institutions in Brussels have to clarify who is in charge of local risk assessment and the decision to withdraw mission personnel from the field, so as not to endanger mission functionality in a crisis.

## References

<sup>(19)</sup> This Brief is partially based on information provided during informal interviews by the author in March and April of 2020 with officials from EUCAP Sahel Niger and Mali, EULEX Kosovo, EUAM Ukraine, EUPOL COPPS, EUMM Georgia, CPCC in Brussels and the Crisis Management Centre (CMC) in Finland.

<sup>(20)</sup> Interview with EEAS official, 30 April 2020.

<sup>(21)</sup> In the case of CSDP missions and operations, Member States can ‘second’ personnel, which means that they provide the funding, insurance, etc. for deployments. The share of seconded personnel in missions varies, reaching as high as 70 % in some cases. In addition, member states also provide seconded national experts to the CPCC, SECDEFPOL, the ISP and other EEAS structures dealing with the CSDP.

<sup>(22)</sup> On 20 March, the ‘Note to delegations of the civilian operations commander’ thus ended with the plea to member states ‘to give CPCC prior notice at their earliest convenience’ if they plan to withdraw their seconded personnel.

<sup>(23)</sup> Interviews with CPCC official, 31 March 2020; EUMM Georgia official, 3 April 2020; EUPOL COPPS official, 3 April 2020.

<sup>(24)</sup> In the case of the sensitive CSDP OPLANS, one interviewee mentioned that these can only be accessed inside the building of CPCC – which was no longer possible during the first lockdown. Interview with EULEX Kosovo official, 2 April 2020.

<sup>(25)</sup> Interviews with EULEX Kosovo official, 2 April 2020; EUCAP Sahel Niger official, 3 April 2020; EUAM Ukraine official, 6 April 2020.

<sup>(26)</sup> Council of the European Union, ‘Council Conclusions on Security and Defence’, 8910/20, 17 June 2020 (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44521/st08910-en20.pdf>).

<sup>(27)</sup> See European Parliament, Policy Department for External Relations, *How the Covid-19 crisis has affected security and defence-related aspects of the EU*, January 2021, p. 29 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653623/EXPO\\_IDA\(2021\)653623\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653623/EXPO_IDA(2021)653623_EN.pdf)).

<sup>(28)</sup> EUTM Mali, for example, returned to pre-pandemic staffing levels by mid-November 2020. (See <https://eutmmali.eu/an-expected-redeployment-and-resumption-of-activities/>).

<sup>(29)</sup> *How the COVID-19 crisis has affected security and defence-related aspects of the EU*, op.cit., p. 29.

<sup>(30)</sup> See Larsen, H., ‘CSDP missions: Addressing their limited reform impact’, *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, Center for Security Studies, No 279, March 2021.

<sup>(31)</sup> Pre-Lisbon CSDP is different to post-Lisbon CSDP – in many ways. See Tobias Pietz, ‘EU Crisis Management: Back to the Future’, *IP Quarterly*, 3 June 2021 (<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/eu-crisis-management-back-future>).

<sup>(32)</sup> For an in-depth analysis of secondment to CSDP missions, see Timo Smit, ‘Increasing Member State contributions to EU civilian CSDP missions’, *SIPRI Policy Brief*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, November 2020.

<sup>(33)</sup> Interviews with CPCC official, 31 March 2020; EUMM Georgia official, 3 April 2020; EUPOL COPPS official, 3 April 2020; EUCAP Sahel Niger official, 3 April 2020; EUAM Ukraine official, 6 April 2020.

<sup>(34)</sup> See *How the COVID-19 crisis has affected security and defence-related aspects of the EU*, op.cit., p. 28.

<sup>(35)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(36)</sup> EEAS, ‘Initial lessons identified regarding CSDP decision-making and operational aspects from the current Covid-19 crisis’, August 2020, p.3.

<sup>(37)</sup> Interview with former UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations employee, 22 April 2020.

<sup>(38)</sup> CPCC, ‘Study on the impact of Covid on civilian CSDP Missions’, December 2020.

<sup>(39)</sup> See *How the Covid-19 crisis has affected security and defence-related aspects of the EU*, op.cit. p. 30.

<sup>(40)</sup> The Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network could provide such an independent assessment (<https://effectivepeaceops.net/>).