

ANTICIPATING, DETECTING AND RESPONDING TO COMPLEX CRISES



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Learning from national responses, building capacity across the EU



An informal meeting co-organised by the EUISS, the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU and the Finnish Presidency of the Council of the EU on 24 October 2019 in Brussels.

Report

On 24 October 2019, the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), the Finnish Presidency of the Council of the EU and the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU (GSC) (Integrated Political Crisis Response – IPCR) organised an informal meeting focused on the different national and EU approaches to anticipating, detecting and responding to complex cross-border crises. The event was the second in a series of meetings on crisis management and it brought together 50 crisis planners and responders from the EU member states and institutions.

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT AND EXERCISES

The informal meeting began with a presentation on strategic foresight by Florence Gaub, Deputy Director of the EUISS. Drawing on the 2019 European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) report which she drafted, Gaub highlighted key global trends that are expected to create challenges for Europe in the medium-to-long term, and she emphasised the value of strategic foresight in anticipating and shaping the future, particularly with regard to crisis management. This was followed by a crisis simulation in a fictitious region of Europe, which was facilitated by Tarik Meziani, from the GSC-IPCR Team. The subsequent scenario-based policy discussion offered participants the opportunity to highlight key challenges, identify areas of cooperation and enhance awareness of EU-level instruments in crisis management.

In particular, participants engaged in an interactive poll during the scenario exercise and it was revealed how: 1) effectively managing open source information in times of crisis is vital; 2) EU-wide situational awareness and information exchange can assist with cross-border crises, especially in case of situations with spill-over effects (e.g. radiological, biological, environmental); 3) Union mechanisms and capacities such as the Civil Protection Mechanism, Copernicus, the IPCR or even the solidarity clause (Article 222 TFEU) are increasingly valuable to member states; and 4) during crises there is no substitute for clear and reliable strategic communication.

THREATS, APPROACHES AND CHALLENGES

Following the presentations, participants learned about the specific approaches to crisis anticipation and response in a number of EU member states. Participants highlighted the evolution of the threat landscape facing member states and Europe as whole. There are a wide variety of challenges (e.g. cyber, droughts, terror attacks, large-scale demonstrations, climate-driven migration, etc.) that inextricably link internal and external security. Crises are complex, cross-border and cross-sectoral, unfolding either abruptly or at a creeping, hard-to-detect pace. Moreover, while the number of relevant state and non-state actors had increased considerably, new technologies and social connectivity allowed even just a few actors to start a crisis. As a result, traditional crisis management methods are no longer sufficient.

Given this new landscape, participants exchanged views on how to prepare for crises at the national level. A common theme was that current crisis management approaches across Europe had developed on the basis of lessons learned from past crises – in this respect, crisis response has been too reactive. Accordingly, a shift towards a whole-of-

government approach in ‘risk and crisis management’, which addresses the entire risk-cycle in a multi-disciplinary manner, and which entails inter-departmental coordination and international collaboration, is needed.

PREVENTION, PREPAREDNESS AND RESILIENCE

The importance of prevention and preparedness was also underlined, although participants acknowledged the difficulties in scientifically measuring its impact and capturing the attention of political leaders. Other key elements in reducing risk highlighted by participants included rapid information-sharing and situational awareness at the national level, frequent training and exercises, mainstreaming cybersecurity, as well as harnessing the potential of new technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence. A number of participants also noted how the ‘risk analysis’ component of this approach could constitute a robust basis for the formulation of national security strategies.

In addition to reducing risk, a second line of effort on the national level went into reducing the impact of crises through enhancing resilience. A key point raised by participants in this regard was the significance of effective strategic communications with the public, as well as the importance of trust between public authorities and society as a whole. Relatedly, a number of participants emphasised the importance of framing and communicating different crisis stages to political leaders in a way that is clear and of strategic utility. For example, politicians might not require specific tactical and operational details if the objective is to communicate widely with society in a digestible and effective manner.

Another key point raised during the meeting was the importance of communication and cooperation between member states. Participants noted that sharing information and lessons learned was the most cost-effective, citizen-friendly way of improving the capacity to deal with crises at the national level, since national resources are generally limited. However, participants also emphasised that, while learning from others was invaluable, national-cultural specificities should be taken into account when implementing crisis management approaches. Many participants also highlighted the crucial role that trust played in enabling cross-border collaboration, and they called for enhanced coordination within Europe with a view to addressing complex challenges, including hybrid threats, more effectively.

THE EU AND CRISIS ANTICIPATION

During a discussion about how to enhance national and EU crisis response capacities, many participants emphasised hybrid threats and the difficulties inherent in trying to connect the dots and detect coordinated, cross-boundary and cross-sector threats that would fly under the radar individually. Another issue was the relative dearth of strategic foresight capacity at the national and EU levels. In fact, most attention is given to crisis response because of the scarcity of resources and governments’ preoccupation with immediate or short-term problems. Additionally, participants noted the difficulties associated with gaining support from political leadership and securing political attention for longer-term issues. Several participants focused on the importance of continuously questioning baseline assumptions in any foresight exercise and the need to better embed potential adversarial reactions into crisis anticipation and response approaches.

Building on this, officials from the Council of the EU, the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) presented some of the various mechanisms that are available at the EU level to assist member states with crisis anticipation, detection and response. The presentation highlighted that the EU crisis management ecosystem comprises numerous crisis response, situational awareness, and alert/notification tools and capabilities, such as the IPCR, ARGUS, the EEAS Crisis Response Mechanism, or the Global Disaster Alert and Coordination System. In addition, other efforts and capabilities to foster better preparedness, such as cyber exercises (e.g. the EU Agency for Cybersecurity) or knowledge centres (e.g. Joint Research Centre), were highlighted. The presentations underscored how EU tools created added value by providing capacities, through shared assets, that would be beyond the means of individual member states. Moreover, EU tools were cross-border by nature, thus facilitating the fusion of information. However, participants also noted the high fragmentation of the European crisis management landscape and stressed the need for enhanced coordination between the various EU tools and capabilities.