

Introducing TransCrisis

Arjen Boin and **Martin Lodge** introduce the new international research programme on transboundary crisis management capacity in the European Union

Why study transboundary crisis management capacity?

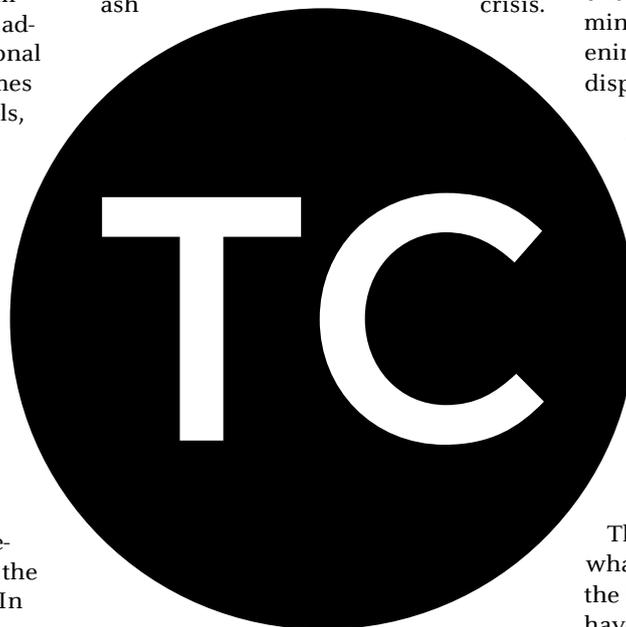
The global financial crisis put the European Union through one of the deepest crises in its existence. The EU-response drew sharp criticism in many member states. It undermined support for the euro, eroded solidarity within the Union, and, perhaps most importantly, cast a negative spell on further integration efforts. It provided the basis for broad Euro-sceptic mobilization in the 2014 European Parliament election. While the need for co-operation, if not further integration in the face of future threats, is higher than ever, the response to the financial crisis has made clear just how big that challenge is.

The financial crisis and its aftermath exposed acute and salient shortcomings in the EU's joint capacities to address transboundary threats. National and transnational regulatory regimes failed to respond to warning signals, political institutions appeared ill-prepared to act within the constraints of multi-level and volatile environments, and political leaders in EU institutions and member states found it hard to communicate effectively with the public at large. Co-ordinating national responses proved difficult; developing a coherent EU-level response all but impossible.

The underwhelming response to the financial crisis fuelled disagreement among member states about the degree and type of 'more' Europe. In response to its perceived underperformance, the EU has initiated many changes. The emerging post-crisis institutions (rule-based approaches to public finances, such as budgetary surveillance, or approaches to the banking union) reveal a growth of executive power (especially the European Council and the European Central Bank (ECB)). Yet, these reforms have not helped the EU to re-gain citizens' trust in its practices, institutions and leaders. The

irony is that the EU's declining legitimacy is at least partially related to the perceived failures to administer growing powers (often granted in the wake of crises).

But the EU needs enhanced crisis management capacities, perhaps more than ever before. The transboundary nature of European policy domains makes transboundary threats and crises ever more likely to occur in a wide variety of policy sectors. Indeed, the EU has seen a series of transboundary crises in recent years, from Chernobyl to BSE (mad cow disease) and further food crises (such as the 'horsemeat' re-labelling scandal); from the SARS threat to the Dioxin food scandals in Belgium and Germany; from terrorist threats to the Icelandic volcanic crisis.



The global financial crisis exemplifies the transboundary nature of modern threats.

The future is likely to bring more such crises as climate change and cyber threats have entered the picture. Indeed, this state of uncertainty, volatility and vulnerability has been termed 'the new normal'. The nation state cannot deal with such threats by itself. Mod-

ern threats do not recognize or respect geographical, legal, institutional and policy borders. As they escalate quickly across various domains, they leave national administrations impotent. Interdependence among member states and resultant co-ordination challenges mean that the EU can play a meaningful role in facilitating shared action in the face of transboundary crises.

Building a new transboundary crisis management system, which is both effective and legitimate, is therefore one of the big challenges for Europe. We define a crisis as a situation in which a widely perceived threat compels authorities to initiate an urgent response under conditions of collective stress and deep uncertainty. A transboundary crisis plays out across political and administrative levels of a system, threatening the functioning of geographically dispersed critical systems.

The context of EU transboundary crisis management

The TransCrisis project offers a unique framework for assessing crisis management capacities and the various multi-level constellations in which they can be configured. It will offer a way to assess crisis leadership in the Union and will suggest strategies that will enhance European capacities to meet future threats.

The TransCrisis project will study what crisis management capacities the EU has and how political leaders have made use of these capacities. Our analysis will play out along three dimensions:

1. The crisis management capacity of EU institutions (including Commission, Council, EU agencies and the European Parliament).
2. The capacity of individual political leaders to effectively and legitimately employ these institutional resources in concert.



3. The interaction across levels: between the EU level and efforts at the national level.

More specifically, the TransCrisis project will investigate (1) what institutional, administrative and political capacities are needed to fulfil crisis management functions; (2) how leaders should use these capacities in times of crisis; (3) what constraints need to be taken into account when employing these capacities; and (4) what can be done to enhance effective and legitimate transboundary crisis management.

The first question pertains to what political leaders need to fulfil critical crisis tasks. What is needed to detect impending threats (think of ICT instruments of information-sharing protocols)? How can leaders make sense of a complex crisis (which analytical units in the EU can make a difference here)? What do political leaders need to enable a truly joint response (what co-ordinative bodies can play a role)? How can EU leaders assess the potential electoral backlash of their (often technical) responses?

The second question points to political and administrative leadership in times of crisis. TransCrisis looks at the way in which leaders across different levels of governing interact with each other to initiate and coordinate a joint response to a shared threat. It includes elected leaders (at the national and EU-level) and non-elected leaders (i.e. those located at the European Commission, and at regulatory and other agencies). The study analyses how political leadership can be exercised to identify challenges and crisis, to make decisions, to gather support, and to ensure that 'things happen' whilst being sensitive to historical and cultural differences. It studies the consequences of leaders' performances on the legitimacy of political systems and their core institutions. Such a focus has become more pertinent as the financial crisis revealed a reluctance of various national leaders to 'own' crisis responses in public, thereby straining relationships between and within institutions of the EU, and between the EU and member states. In short, we want to know how political leaders can and do work together within the dispersed EU multi-level system that constrains and enables trans-boundary crisis management.

This third question reflects on the constraints on transboundary crisis management. One such constraint is the deep tension between decentralized, specialized governance and co-ordinated synoptic governance modes. Political leadership in the EU govern-

ance context takes place in settings of dispersed authority (horizontally at any level of government, and vertically across different levels of government). This means that leadership is inherently about mediation and negotiation by elected and non-elected leaders rather than the exercise of hierarchy. Our project therefore will reflect an appreciation of the varied ways in which EU institutions exercise their own crisis management mechanisms, mediate with each other and, how national administrations interact with and are informed by EU-level decisions.

Another constraint stems from persistent fiscal constraints, accentuated by emerging pressures such as demographic and climate change. The financial 'slack' and political appetite to reflect on and finance planning for the future and investment has vanished. The financial crisis has changed EU politics into one of high salience and one that has potential redistributive effects across member states. This, in turn, has increased the reluctance of some national governments to engage in EU-wide crisis responses.

Yet another constraint is found in the re-nationalization of politics, which makes it more problematic to gather political support for transboundary solutions. During the financial crisis, national leaders were only too ready to practise 'blame avoidance' and easily shifted blame onto the EU, even though, behind closed doors, they may have advocated the very same solutions they were criticising in public. There has been a worrying growth in contestation about the direction of European integration which has moved (degrees of) euro-scepticism from the political fringe to the political mainstream, including parties in national government. More generally, this trend has also led to a wider debate about the problem-solving capacities of the modern state.

The fourth question focuses on the observed backlash or 'backsliding' following EU crisis management. If we take into consideration that the EU was not built to manage crises, it is quite remarkable what the EU has accomplished in recent years. But effectiveness does not automatically translate into recognition and support. Many politicians and citizens have blamed EU responses to the financial crisis for the economic health of their countries. This sentiment, in turn, has translated into a widespread resentment against the European project. It is therefore crucial that political leaders develop an understanding of the negative consequences of their crisis management

strategies (even those that are considered functionally effective).

Taken together, TransCrisis will offer a framework for understanding, analysing and assessing political leadership in response to transboundary crises. It offers a way to analyse what may be said to have gone right or wrong during a transboundary crisis while taking account of the difficult circumstances in which crisis leadership is exercised; it will help assess existing tools and processes that have not been tested by actual crises.

TransCrisis will develop our understanding of political leadership in a context of paradox: the increasing realization of the transboundary nature of crises is met by an increasing re-nationalization of political discourse that denies the EU a legitimate role in addressing overall crisis management capacity. It is this context of paradox that makes TransCrisis a highly pertinent project that addresses not just important academic debates, but that also develops understanding of the most important aspects of contemporary governing, and, ultimately, legitimacy.

Arjen Boin is Professor of Public Institutions and Governance at the University of Leiden. He is also advisor and partner of Crisisplan, a crisis management consultancy. Martin Lodge is Director of **carr**. Both are editors of Public Administration and members of the TransCrisis consortium.

The TransCrisis project (full name: Enhancing the EU's Trans-boundary Crisis Management Capacities: Strategies for Multi-Level Leadership) is a three-year project funded by the European Union under the Horizon2020 programme.

carr is the co-ordination partner in this network of eight organizations. Other partners involve: Crisisplan (Arjen Boin), the University of Utrecht (Femke van Esch), Central European University (Nick Sitter), Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI, Jacint Jordana), University of Catania (Fulvio Attina), University of Stockholm (Mark Rhinard) and ThinkTank Europa (Maja Rasmussen). Future editions of *risk & regulation* will report on individual research activities and events.

More information can be found under the project website www.transcrisis.eu.