

Building transboundary crisis management capacities in Europe

Lavinia Cadar and Maureen Donnelley point to the critical tasks at the core of transboundary crisis management

The world of crisis is changing. The refugee crisis, the Eurozone crisis, Brexit or terrorism – the modern crisis cannot be tamed unilaterally. These transboundary crises cut through geographic, political, policy, cultural, economic or legal domains. They require transboundary crisis management capacities.

The European Union (EU) must adapt to this new world of crisis if it is to demonstrate continuing relevance in the face of ever-growing threats. The EU has in place modest capacities to help member states manage crises within its boundaries and beyond. But the EU can do more, we argue, to assist member states. In thinking about potential trajectories for institutional design, it is helpful to think of crisis management as a set of tasks that have to be fulfilled in each and every crisis: detection, sense-making (understanding what is going on), making critical decisions, coordinating a response network, communicating about the crisis, and rendering account for the

response actions (Boin et al., 2016).

These tasks are particularly hard to implement in a transboundary context. Here is what the EU may try to accomplish.

Detecting an emerging crisis may seem straightforward. But in many cases, critical bits of information must be pieced together and deemed relevant by a considerable number of people before a crisis is recognized. The EU has in place a large number of early warning networks that gather information on the origin, spread and severity of many threats. Yet, early signs of a transboundary crisis must make their way through the complicated and time-consuming process of national and EU agenda-setting, where they become subject to consensus-forming among member states. The trajectory of early warning signals must be streamlined.

Once an emerging crisis has been detected, it is crucial to understand what is going on. Identifying sources, collecting information, analysing ambiguous and often conflicting data. **Sense-making** is not easy in the bordered world of national states and agencies. When the number of actors involved stretches across geographical borders, when the crisis management authorities are not hierarchically related, when it is uncertain who knows what and where information must come from and go to, sense-making is a daunting task. During the 2010 Icelandic volcanic ash crisis, none of the EU member states dared to reopen air traffic as uncertainty loomed over the composition, size and direction of the ash cloud, as well as the ash tolerance limits of jet engines. In the early phases of the global financial crisis, the division of competencies between the EU and member states on monetary and economic policies made it difficult to understand what exactly was happening and which institution needed to do what.

The EU has various crisis centres and is working to put procedures in place that will help to process information, share it across boundaries and understand information from other sectors and/or countries, thus facilitating a shared response. But many barriers



remain, especially when it comes to sensitive intelligence.

The biggest problem in a transboundary crisis is the absence of clearly demarcated **decision making** powers. While the US has at least addressed this problem through its National Response Framework (NRF), the EU is still stuck with the decision making structures that were designed to deal with complex but not urgent problems.

Think of the refugee crisis. The large numbers of people from Syria and elsewhere arriving at Europe's borders highlighted serious limitations of the EU's joint decision making process. Initially, humanitarian concerns dominated responses. However, other issues, such as those relating to security, health and wider economic impacts, soon emerged. These concerns had to be weighed against a background of conflicting and incomparable information on the number, identity and

affiliation of the refugees, as well as political pressures, budget restrictions, education and social services limitations, and divided sentiments among host communities. The lack of an appropriate decision making process to quickly bring together the many jurisdic-

tions involved resulted in paralysis. Uncertainty over who (EU institutions, national leaders and authorities such as health services or border control, international organizations) should deliberate, and how, made it impossible to enable a comprehensive course of actions that could reduce the impact of the crisis.

Even when all national leaders agree on a course of action, the efforts of member states must be **coordinated** somehow. After all, the EU (like NATO) has no resources of its own. The EU's agencies have very little coordinating power.

After the outbreak of the avian influenza (H5N1) in 2005, the European Commission made efforts to coordinate member states in abiding by the WHO's recommendation regarding antiviral stocks. However, these efforts stranded in debates over the centralization of antiviral stockpiles, in criti-

cism from pharmaceutical companies on member states' delays in approving vaccine manufacturing, and in controversy over some member states' decision to vaccinate birds (Boin et al., 2013).

In the face of a transboundary crisis, it is critical that leaders **communicate** effectively and do so from the same song sheet. The recent terrorist attacks in France, Belgium and Germany were followed by different interpretations over causes and what must be done to contain them. Conveying a shared message that remains true to the espoused values of the EU turned out to be a challenging task for European leaders. This challenge will no doubt become increasingly relevant in the face of simplistic explanations and extremist solutions put forward by populist politicians across Europe.

Finally, successful crisis management concludes when the actors **render account** about decisions and strategies initiated before, during and after the crisis, as well as the rationale behind those decisions. When it is not clear who owns a crisis and who is responsible for what, particularly when multiple actors across borders are involved in responding to a transboundary crisis (think of the refugee crisis), a clear process of accountability is hard to imagine. The lack of accountability deepens the EU's democratic deficit. The European Parliament should push for improved procedures to hold EU leaders accountable for their (non-) involvement in managing transboundary crises.

Preparing individual institutions to respond to crises is no longer sufficient. Effective transboundary crisis management hinges on fostering successful cooperation across a far wider response network. Management demands amplify greatly when a crisis not only requires scaling up an institution's hierarchical chain, but

also pervades multiple policy domains, jurisdictions and systems, requiring coordinated efforts among multiple organizations (Ansell et al., 2010). The EU has limited capacities to facilitate the effectuation of the crisis management tasks set out above. But it can do more. We suggest three possible initiatives:

- ▶ Define a European vision on transboundary crisis management. This manifesto should set out what the EU can do to help member states, along the lines of the NRF in the US.
- ▶ Integrate the various institutional capacities now found in separate policy domains under one EU roof.
- ▶ Refine training and preparation efforts rather than investing in large-scale exercises, pursue trainings that facilitate the effective implementation of detection, sense-making, decision making, coordination, communication, and accountability.

References

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