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Preparing for transboundary threats: what role for the next Commission?

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Background

Europe has witnessed a variety of large-scale crises and disasters in recent years: river floods and forest fires, terrorism and oil spills, heat waves and tainted food are but a few examples. The frequency of these events and the damage they cause are rising rapidly. The safety and security of citizens is now a European issue.

In reaction to these complex emergencies, the EU has made important strides towards improved crisis management capacity. It has put in place monitoring and early-warning systems, crisis command centres and intervention teams. It has increased its capacity to organise support for Member States overwhelmed by a crisis. It has developed capacity to deal with specific threats from food safety to terrorism, from floods to financial crises, from illegal immigrants to failing states – capacities the EU can deploy at home and abroad.

While impressive, these efforts are not enough. The world is facing a new species of crisis with trans-national and trans-sectoral effects. The swine influenza (H1N1) outbreak and the financial market implosion that caused ripple-effects across the globe are stark evidence of this. These threats do not fit into neat boxes; they unfold across the integrated arteries that drive our economies and societies.

The transboundary nature of post-modern crises creates unique challenges to long-standing crisis and disaster management structures and practices. The EU can and should play a pivotal role in further enhancing the continent's capacity to deal with these crises. This paper outlines developments and highlights challenges before discussing what the next European Commission can do to lead the EU towards a clear, value-added role in the continental-wide coordination of transboundary crisis management.

State of play

Transboundary threats affect large geographical areas and cut across multiple policy sectors. They carry the potential to paralyse life-sustaining infrastructures that stretch across national borders. They cannot be foreseen, as they are the seemingly random outcome of long-term drivers such as climate change, technological revolutions and global political shifts. The combination of scale and uniqueness makes it hard to prepare adequately for such threats or deal with their effects.

National governments cannot do this in isolation. The critical infrastructures and trade systems that determine citizens' well-being have become interconnected and intertwined; they are no longer controlled at national level. Disruptions easily elude national authorities' grasp and reverberate through systems which span the continent and are often privately owned.

The key question then becomes how should we prepare for crises for which we have no toolkit nor coordinated capacity? How best to coordinate national governments' response efforts in real time, and under immense pressure? What kinds of tools and cooperation 'hubs' are necessary?

In developing answers to these questions, the EU has a leadership role to play. Since the 1950s, Member States have used EU institutions to address transboundary problems. When national governments could not deal with industrial decline, shrinking markets, and technological decay, they turned towards the EU. They relied on the Commission to identify common ground, improve information flows, propose solutions and formulate legislation. This allowed the Commission to play a major role in helping to alleviate some of the continent's most intractable post-war policy problems.

The end of the Cold War, the resurgence of regional conflicts and the spread of organised crime initiated changes in the Treaties to manage both internal and external security matters through the EU. Member States endorsed operational capacities in the Council Secretariat for European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) missions and intelligence-sharing. The 11 September 2001 attacks prompted collective action to combat global terrorism.

The Member States are connected through early-warning and alert systems that cover a variety of threats. 'Situation rooms' operate across the Commission Directorates-General (DGs), in the Council Secretariat and in EU agencies. Initiatives are underway to enhance the interoperability of crisis communication systems across borders. The Commission facilitates training for national officials and regional funds are available for risk mitigation in the Member States; research funding related to civil security projects amounts to billions of euro a year.

The EU has become a key venue for Member States to discuss cross-border threats, share information about national preparations and help formulate coherent policies. The Commission sponsors expert committees dealing with emerging threats (such as BSE or financial crises). It also has various programmes to assist countries – both EU members and non-members – overwhelmed by disaster.

In short, the building blocks are in place for enhanced coordination of response to transboundary crises. Yet there is more capacity-building to do. The next Commission will have a unique opportunity to develop these capacities and inject some design principles into the EU's efforts. Before it can do that, however, two barriers to effective continental-wide cooperation will have to be recognised and addressed.

At the supranational level, existing capacities are scattered across the institutions and the EU's many policy sectors. It is not clear what exactly the EU has 'in house' or who is running it. There is no institutional unit responsible for coordinating all these actors, policies, funds and tools, and no strategic framework to guide further expansion.

At the national level, there is considerable variation in both capacities and mindsets. Member States may be well-prepared for localised emergencies, but are generally unprepared for crises that span borders and sectors. Some advocate a greater role for the EU, while others remain reluctant; they diverge over what exact role the Union should play in managing crises; and there is no agreed mindset as to what threats are truly 'transboundary', what collective action would help check the development of such threats, and what the EU's added value could be in this area.

New forms of transboundary threats will require integrated response capacities that stretch across the continent. These should consist of local, national and supranational actors working together in a timely, effective and mutually-enhancing way. This, in turn, will require a fundamental rethink of how to coordinate European action on transboundary threats.

Prospects

The Commission's goal should be to create *dynamic capacity*: the ability to bring together available resources and response tools quickly and efficiently in the event of an unexpected crisis spanning the continent. No region in the world has such a system in place. The next Commission must therefore begin thinking about what a dynamic, multi-level crisis management arrangement for transboundary crises might look like.

This does not necessarily involve delegating authority to the supranational level. The Commission should play the role of 'facilitator', building shared understandings of the problem and helping Member States to improve the linkages between their crisis management systems and with its officials.

It should assist Member States to 'join up' different sources of

information, helping to make sense of emerging problems, improving crisis communication links and familiarising government actors with the challenges of improvising and working together during crises that play out across Member States.

Dynamic capacity-building begins at the national level. Member States must make their crisis and disaster management capacity internationally compatible so it can be employed in concert with other countries' efforts.

Currently, most Member States wisely organise their crisis and disaster management from the bottom up, placing operational authority at the local level. The higher levels supplement and facilitate, only stepping in when the local level can no longer cope. This system of subsidiarity, though, stops at the level of national governments. *National crisis systems need to be extended to the supranational level to ensure interoperability when it is needed most.*

In turn, the EU institutions need to create a point of connection where national systems can 'plug in' with necessary resources (e.g. information, people, goods and money). Some European policy areas have well-developed 'hubs' for moving resources across governance levels – the Monitoring and Information Centre is a case in point. But no common venue exists for all the institutional units involved in managing transboundary crises.

If Member States are to upscale quickly and effectively in the face of an emerging or unfolding disaster, some coordinating apparatus to initiate and direct this dynamic capacity is needed. The Commission can play this role by *streamlining and connecting its own services towards these ends and creating a venue for Member State interaction.*

A new portfolio

The creation of a portfolio for crisis management would be a good start. Considering the existing fragmentation and lack of an analytical underpinning for many safety and security initiatives, the Commissioner with this portfolio would provide essential leadership both within the institution and with external actors. It would signal to citizens that the Commission takes this task seriously; help create a hub for information, consultation and coordination; and provide Member States and international partners with a focal point for coordination.

Such a portfolio should have budgetary resources and oversight authority of existing disaster and crisis management policy-making and operations in the Commission. Authority does not mean control, however, and the temptation to rearrange administrative 'boxes' should be resisted. Efforts to combat localised crises should be maintained and encouraged in the interests of internal subsidiarity. The Commissioner should focus on the cross-cutting needs of transboundary crisis management and the 'added value' the EU can provide. To that effect, the next Commission should focus on the following tasks:

1. Providing strategic leadership: The Commission's fragmented focus on known, sectoral threats may inhibit its ability to 'see the next one coming'. Moreover, it nurtures Member State doubts about the EU's added-value in crisis management. The new Commission should quash those doubts by building a new strategy to guide the EU's efforts.

This should help define transboundary crises, illuminate the challenges to managing them, and identify where capacities currently reside across Europe. It should build on consultation with Member States and experts, and result in a natural division of competences between the national and supranational levels. It could become the seed of a future Europe-wide paradigm for cooperation to address transboundary threats.

2. Boosting the Commission's coordinating capacity: The new Commission should create an organisational unit that coordinates all efforts to design, develop and employ dynamic capacity, to encourage more cooperation across the various DGs with crisis management responsibilities (some 18, by our count).

The new unit should serve as a reception point for information streams and existing analyses, and thus provide insight and oversight, without necessarily taking over or changing existing processes and structures. An inventory of current EU capacities should be carried out to help identify shortcomings after the strategic vision described above is completed.

This unit should also reach out across the Commission/Council divide to improve coordination. Crudely put, the Commission has most of the capacity to manage transboundary crises, while the Council has stronger political legitimacy. Ensuring the two institutions can work together during crises should be a priority for the new Commission. A good start would involve close cooperation with the Council's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, who has responsibility for overseeing a specific type of transboundary threat.

The Commission unit should organise EU-wide exercises, which are crucial for teasing out vulnerabilities, identifying strengths and enhancing shared awareness

of all the capacities the EU has in place.

Finally, it should focus on outreach with international actors such as NATO, the United Nations and the US, starting with an inventory of organisational capacities and an assessment of coordination opportunities. The aim is to identify existing strengths that £can be marshalled in times of transboundary crises, not only in Europe but also with key international partners.

3. Developing a capacity for instant expertise: The central unit for the management of crises should develop the required expertise to understand the threats of the future – those truly transboundary risks and vulnerabilities that must be managed through cooperation.

The Commission must have the capacity to formulate future scenarios, identify vulnerabilities, uncover latent capacity and educate Member States in how to unlock the EU's potential. To do this, its expertise in this area needs to be strengthened. Building ties with experts in a wide range of threat areas would help to develop a shared knowledge-base in Europe that can be employed when the unthinkable happens – and these experts should be made readily accessible in times of need.

In due course, this unit could develop a 'data fusion centre' to analyse incoming information from Member States and EU institutions, make sense of unfolding crises, determine challenges, formulate options and describe potential consequences. The ARGUS rapid alert system can be viewed as a precursor to this type of centre.

4. Improving coordination between Member States: Member-State coordination to develop 'dynamic capacity' may require new thinking about the relationship between national and supranational governance. Traditional thinking tends to juxtapose the two levels in a zero-sum game. Before we can deal with transboundary crises, questions of 'competence' and subsidiarity must be settled to ensure the efficient interlocking of the local, national and supranational levels.

The Commission must resist temptations to legislate and expand competences until a shared strategy is set out amongst the EU institutions and Member States. Working more closely with Member States precludes an adversarial approach and should instead focus on orchestrated collaboration: the Commission may take on the role of conductor, but the Member States make the music.

The 'Open Method of Coordination' may be a good way to facilitate Member-State cooperation. The Commission could use this method to launch an annual 'European threat assessment' (along the lines of the UK's National Risk Register). Gathering Member States together in a collaborative process to detail different threats helps generate a shared perspective on the European threat environment. Through regular meetings, these risk assessments can be evaluated, common action decided upon and goals set for each Member State. These meetings could measure progress through a 'peer assessment' system in which the European dimension of national response plans is regularly discussed. This, in turn, will help build a shared inventory of national capacities. The group would consist of Member State and Commission representatives, outside scientists and agency personnel, with other experts providing analytical input.

The time is right

Some may consider a portfolio dedicated to crisis management premature. We do not. New threats have appeared on the horizon that will test the EU's administrative and political potential. Remember when the environment (considered just another dimension of the Internal Market) and monetary policy (quite far from the EU's then-mandate) began being discussed? Now core elements of EU policy, they seemed unlikely candidates for a dedicated portfolio not so long ago.

The Commission has a unique chance to prepare for threats that are sure to emerge, and a unique opportunity to demonstrate 'added value' to sceptical citizens. By helping to provide safety and security in a world full of threats, the EU will live up to its reputation as a unique institution with answers to global challenges and citizens' needs.

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