

Future of Crisis Management in EU context**Non-paper**

28 September 2020

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has been unprecedented in the history of the European Union ('EU'). The outbreak of the pandemic has posed and will continue to pose severe challenges to the EU and its Member States. It has caused significant loss of life and demands a lot from our societies and citizens.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that each Member State can be affected, albeit asymmetrically and that Member States have responded differently to this crisis based on their own domestic circumstances and policy decisions. This crisis has also reiterated the need for solidarity, as well as the added-value of joint action and decision making. When responses are not coordinated, it could prompt unintended and undesirable consequences. The variety of responses, especially at the beginning of the crisis, led to inadvertent disruptions in the functioning of the Single Market, e.g. the free flow of goods, in particular the transport of essential goods and services (medical equipment, medicines and food supply), was disrupted. Also, many EU-citizens staying abroad were unable to return to their homes and in several instances frontier workers experienced severe delays at internal borders. These examples show the importance of the preservation and continuation of a well-functioning Single Market and more generally the development of efficient coordination between Member States even in crisis situations, especially for crises that do not stop at borders. Potential other adverse effects of measures that may be adopted should also be closely monitored. Uncoordinated crisis responses leading to disruptions of the Single Market must be prevented in any future crisis.

An extensive evaluation of the initial response to COVID-19 is vital and lessons learned should be the basis for further development of crisis management. This crisis offers a window of opportunity for a more integrated approach. Based on initial observations identifying the need for enhanced coordination and communication between Member States, this paper proposes a more permanent crisis coordination structure within the Council aimed at crises requiring cross-sectoral coordination. This should be a strategic and agenda-setting forum focusing on prevention and preparedness before crises emerge and on strong coordination and clear communication in times of crises. In order to ensure continuity and support among the member states, the group could elect a chair among their midst to hold the presidency for a fixed term which would work closely with the presidency of the Council.

European Action

The first step to effective crisis management is that each and all Member States should ensure their own readiness and resilience to crises, to their full extent/capacity possible, which requires a strong domestic policy on prevention. Constitutional arrangements in Member States require of democratically elected governments that they are responsible and accountable towards their voters and parliaments in ensuring the safety and security of their citizens. Therefore, the Member States bear the primary responsibility for crisis management. The current crisis, however, raises questions on how to organise a coordinated response. Up to now natural or man-made disasters in the EU did not involve health pandemics, but with COVID-19 that has changed.

On 26 March 2020, the Members of the European Council jointly stated that lessons must be drawn from the present crisis and that the time has come to put in place a more ambitious and wide-ranging crisis management system within the EU. In its Joint Roadmap for Recovery, the Presidents of the Council and the Commission emphasised the importance of a functioning system of governance to ensure that the EU will be more resilient, more efficient and more effective. Moreover, the Presidents of the Council and the Commission propose that the EU must become better at developing its executive capacity and managing crises in a coordinated way.¹

Further thereto, on 2 June 2020 the Commission made an ambitious proposal to amend the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM). However, an evaluation of the current crisis mechanisms, including the UCPM mechanism and the impact of its 2019 amendments which introduced several upgrades, is needed

¹ The Presidents of the Council and the Commission, *A Roadmap for Recovery; Towards a more resilient, sustainable and fair Europe (21 April 2020)*, p. 5

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before new far-reaching initiatives for UCPM could be considered. Moreover, to be effective and efficient the crisis management capacity of the individual Member States should be improved, as the first response is always domestic.

A more ambitious and wide-ranging crisis management system in the EU should therefore be based on enhanced and embedded coordination and communication between Member States. Local and regional circumstances must be taken into account in a coordinated crisis response. Hence the Council should discuss the guiding principles for enhancing crisis management and consider a more permanent crisis coordination structure within the Council. This would increase readiness and resilience of the EU and its Member States before crises emerge and would strengthen coordination and response in times of crises. It would also ensure transparency and contribute to avoiding parallel tracks in exchanging information and decision making. Hereby, additional burdens on national resources would be prevented, by fully exploiting synergies between stakeholders and existing means, structures and capabilities at EU level, and finding the most cost-effective solutions.

Improving the development of the Council coordination mechanism and the Executive Capacity of Member States and at EU level

Coordination of crisis management is currently primarily a role for the IPCR mechanism. The mechanism was set up in 2015 and has several stages that trigger different levels of actions. Enhancing this mechanism may make it more robust to weather different storms simultaneously.

The IPCR could be enhanced and given a stronger foothold if it would develop into a permanent Council mechanism. A technical level Crisis Management Working Party will provide the necessary Council preparatory body for policy-making to enhance prevention and increase crisis preparedness. In addition, a structure of high level national representatives of the Member States with required knowledge, capabilities and decision-making capacity regarding crisis management would ensure the smooth functioning of the IPCR, including fast and efficient transformation of political decisions into operational actions. This structure could provide guidance to a Council coordinated approach on crisis management. Naturally, changes to the IPCR should duly take into account the UCPM and its operational capacity so as to prevent duplication of existing mechanisms.

The current successful features of the IPCR, such as the round tables during times of crises (including their flexible and scalable nature and strong link to CRP), the integrated situational awareness and analysis (ISAA reports) and the 24/7 information exchange in the full activation mode, are important to be retained within the proposed Council mechanism. In addition, the proposed Council mechanism could, for instance, be tasked with the following:

- offering a more strategic and agenda-setting forum for the work that is related to the solidarity clause.
- facilitating the exchange of best practices and information, ensuring prevention, readiness and resilience before crises emerge, and in times of crises, identifying and promoting solutions for key bottlenecks.
- coordinating the cross-sectoral crisis response based on inter alia thematic round tables, established best practices, situational awareness and on proposals of the Commission.
- facilitating rapid and coordinated decision-making within the capitals.
- providing a broad view to prevention and preparedness with a long term and cross sectoral approach (e.g. security, internal market, health, migration), including through the work in the Horizon Scanning Network, and also stimulating other fora to do so.

Another important aspect of crisis management is communication and data/information sharing. Existing communication channels enough should be more integrated and strategic. Coherent strategic crisis communication could increase the recognised benefit of coordination on EU level and provide more clarity to EU citizens. This should be an integral part of the crisis response and therefore also of the proposed Council mechanism. To this end, the Crisis Communicators Network can be envisaged including high

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level national representatives of crisis communication offices, who are centrally located within their respective governments. Dedicated participation in this network is necessary to ensure its effectiveness. During a crisis, the network could provide regular updates to the (political) crisis structures based in Brussels. This network should also be maintained when there is no crisis, so that representatives can find each other immediately in the very first days of a crisis. Finally, communication between EU institutions, including EEAS, the Commission and the European Parliament, should always be closely aligned in times of crisis.

The proposed Council mechanism could be organised to meet regularly both to assess the current state of play, but also to set a strategic agenda and work programme. The frequency may be increased in times of crisis depending on the necessity. Additionally, an elected chair holding the presidency, which works closely with the presidency of the Council, could be considered to ensure continuity. Such a construction mirrors other High Level Council structures.

The way forward

An extensive evaluation of the initial response to COVID-19 is vital and lessons learned should be the basis for further development in crisis management. In anticipation thereof, we propose to discuss and further develop the concept of an enhanced permanent Council mechanism and incorporate newly developed understandings of effective crisis coordination.