

STRENGTHENING THE EU'S CRISIS MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK: PATHWAYS TO INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE AND POLICY INNOVATION

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Abstract

In the face of escalating existential threats ranging from climate change and armed conflicts to digital disruption, this paper critically evaluates the European Union's (EU) crisis readiness, management and response mechanisms. By employing a comprehensive qualitative analysis, the study scrutinizes the EU's institutional architecture for threat identification, resource allocation, response prioritization, and policy implementation. The paper reveals pronounced vulnerabilities in the EU's approach to rapid response readiness and crisis management, underscored by challenges in ensuring Member State solidarity, cohesion, effective resource utilization and aligned decision-making. Drawing on these findings, the paper advocates for targeted institutional reforms and policy innovations designed to fortify the EU's structural and operational resilience against existential risks. This research contributes to the evolving dialogue on optimizing crisis management strategies in a supranational framework, offering actionable recommendations for strengthening the EU's adaptive capacity and policy responsiveness in an increasingly volatile global landscape.

Keywords: EU Crisis Management, Institutional Resilience, Policy Innovation, Existential Threats JEL Classification: F55 - International Institutional Arrangements

Introduction

The European Union (EU) is confronted with a multitude of existential crises that pose profound challenges to its stability, unity, and effective governance. These threats range from the escalating consequences of climate change, which have manifested in the form of extreme weather events, resource scarcity, and environmental degradation, to the resurgence of armed conflicts and geopolitical tensions on the continent and beyond. Additionally, the rapid pace

of digital transformation and technological disruption has exposed vulnerabilities in the EU's infrastructure, cybersecurity, and ability to adapt to the evolving digital landscape. As the global landscape becomes more volatile, the EU's ability to respond effectively to crises not only affects its internal stability but also its position on the global stage. Thus, assessing and enhancing the EU's crisis management mechanisms is critical to ensuring its future.

Examining the EU's crisis management capacity has become essential now for a variety of compelling reasons. First, the unprecedented nature and complexity of these crises demand a robust, coordinated, and agile response mechanism capable of effectively mobilizing resources, streamlining decision-making processes, and promoting solidarity among Member States. Second, the EU's institutional framework, originally designed for economic integration and policy harmonization, is experiencing significant strain under these multifaceted and rapidly changing threats. Third, the failure to address these crises promptly and effectively could undermine the EU's credibility, erode public trust, and worsen existing socio-economic and political divisions both within and among Member States.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to achieve three primary objectives:

1. Conduct a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the EU's current institutional architecture for crisis management, including threat identification, resource allocation, response prioritization, and policy implementation mechanisms.
2. Identify critical vulnerabilities and shortcomings in the EU's approach to rapid response readiness and crisis management, focusing on challenges related to ensuring Member State solidarity, cohesion, effective resource utilization, and aligned decision-making processes.
3. Propose targeted institutional reforms and policy innovations designed to strengthen the EU's structural and operational resilience against existential risks, thereby enhancing its adaptive capacity and policy responsiveness in an increasingly volatile global landscape.

By addressing these objectives, this research seeks to contribute to the evolving dialogue on optimizing crisis management strategies within supranational frameworks. Ultimately, the paper aims to offer actionable recommendations for strengthening the EU's ability to navigate and mitigate the profound challenges posed by climate change, armed conflicts, digital disruption, and other existential threats in a coordinated and effective manner.

1. Background and context

The European Union's crisis management architecture takes a sectoral approach, with capacities divided across many institutions and policy domains. The framework lacks a centralized, cross-cutting structure since crisis manage-

ment capabilities are largely structured per sector, such as transportation, health, cybersecurity, and civil protection (Backman & Rhinard 2018).

The European Commission serves as the central coordinating body, housing most crisis management capabilities across its various Directorates-General. The Commission's Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) acts as the focal point for coordinating the EU's response to crises.¹ Complementing the Commission's role, the Council of the EU also has crisis management mechanisms, notably the Integrated Political Crisis Response system within its General Secretariat.² When examining the EU's specific capacities, there is a pronounced emphasis on detecting threats and making sense of situations. The EU has developed numerous early warning systems, monitoring tools, and information-sharing platforms tailored to specific threats like pandemics, natural disasters, and cybersecurity incidents. These capabilities aim to recognize threats in a timely manner and create a shared understanding of the situation (Backman & Rhinard 2018).

In contrast, the EU's direct decision-making powers during crises are relatively limited. The EU's role is primarily oriented towards coordinating the crisis response efforts of Member States, EU institutions, and relevant international organizations. This coordination function is conducted through mechanisms like the ERCC, ad-hoc crisis coordination cells, and sector-specific entities like the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA).³ The framework also encompasses capacities for analysing situations, communicating, and ensuring accountability. These include crisis communication protocols, public messaging strategies, and procedures for providing accounts and facilitating lesson-learning after crisis events.

Overall, the EU's crisis management framework exhibits a sectoral orientation, with the Commission acting as the central node supported by Council mechanisms. While detection and coordination capacities are well developed, direct decision-making powers remain constrained, reflecting the EU's role as a facilitator of coordinated crisis response among its Member States and stakeholders.

In recent history, the European Union (EU) has faced several major crises that have tested its crisis management frameworks and resilience. Notably, the 2008 financial crisis, which originated from a global financial meltdown, severely impacted EU economies, leading to high unemployment rates and economic stagnation. The EU's response included stringent austerity measures and financial bailouts coordinated by key EU institutions and the International Monetary Fund. This response was met with mixed outcomes; while it stabilized economies, it also sparked widespread social unrest and political fallout due to the perceived harshness of austerity measures.

¹ See for more details Decision No 1313/2013/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02013D1313-20231218>

² See for more details Minard 2022.

³ See for more details on recent reforms of EU's health crisis governance mechanism Renda et al. 2023.

Another significant challenge was the 2015 migration crisis, where the EU faced unprecedented inflows of refugees fleeing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and other regions. The crisis exposed the EU's shortcomings in handling sudden, large-scale humanitarian needs, as well as disparities in Member State capacities and willingness to absorb refugees. The initial ad hoc responses evolved into more structured measures such as the EU-Turkey deal and the controversial quota system for distributing asylum seekers among Member States, highlighting the need for more coherent and unified policies.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in the EU's crisis management framework, particularly in the initial stages of the outbreak. Member States initially implemented uncoordinated border closures and export restrictions on essential medical supplies. However, as the pandemic progressed, the EU took steps to facilitate joint procurement of vaccines and medical equipment, and established mechanisms for information sharing and coordination among Member States. Key lessons included the need for stronger crisis decision-making structures, improved supply chain resilience, and better coordination of public health measures across the EU.

In Georgiev 2023's analysis, the multi-faceted crises affecting Europe have highlighted the varied political attitudes among EU citizens, both within individual countries and across the bloc. These crises, including those related to the Eurozone and migration, have exacerbated rather than minimized these disparities, due to the EU's inconsistent institutional responses. Such reactions have also intensified strategic uncertainty, challenging the perceived competence of the EU's institutional framework. Georgiev 2023 outlines the EU's typical crisis response process as follows:

- Crises onset unexpectedly, catching specialized EU early-warning agencies or systems off-guard;
- The European Commission and Council initially respond rapidly with public statements, dialogues, and proposals for emergency policy measures;
- The Commission's ambitious initiatives are prematurely leaked to the media, eliciting backlash from national leaders and key groups;
- Leaks of intense European Council debates further politicize the issues;
- France and/or Germany often lead by rallying a coalition to forge consensus within the Council;
- Resolutions are eventually reached that avoid significantly altering the financial status quo for conservative or Eurosceptic Member States;
- New organizations are established over which national governments maintain substantial control (Hodson and Puetter 2019);
- The European Parliament functions more to mitigate political fallout than drive new initiatives.

2. Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods to examine the EU's crisis management capacities. Regarding early warning, an extensive mapping catalogued existing detection and monitoring mechanisms across sectors. Evaluations assessed these systems' effectiveness based on past performance and expert assessments. Gaps were identified by comparing against known threat profiles and factors like information sharing.

For resource mobilization, the research documented procedures and instruments for pooling resources (financial, medical, civil protection, etc.) during crises. Case studies evaluated the mechanisms' scalability and rapid response. Challenges impeding efficient deployment across states were explored through reviewing decision protocols, legal bottlenecks, and past instances of delayed or contested resource allocation.

To assess policy implementation and coordination efficacy, the study also utilized the previously developed mapping of the EU's crisis management policy frameworks across relevant sectors. The investigation into the implementation and coordination of crisis management policies at the EU level involved a review of legislative and regulatory frameworks governing EU crisis response mechanisms.

This mixed-methods design enables a holistic and rigorous examination of the EU's crisis management capacities across the critical domains of threat identification, resource mobilization, and coordinated policy implementation while accounting for perspectives from diverse stakeholders and sectoral contexts.

3. Analysis of the EU's Crisis Management Capacity

This section reviews EU's capacities in three key areas - crisis identification, resource allocation, and policy implementation. Specific findings for each area are presented in abbreviated form below due to space limitations.

3.1. Crisis Identification and Early Warning Systems

The EU has developed an extensive early warning system network spanning almost every policy domain from health to energy, border control, cybersecurity and more - over 80 systems in total. Mechanisms are in place under the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) to identify and prepare for major disaster risks through activities like national risk assessments, a multi-state disaster risk overview document, and prevention projects. However, evaluations⁴ have

⁴ Interim Evaluation of the implementation of Decision No 1313/2013/EU on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism, 2017-2022, available at https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/evaluation/2024/report_interim_evaluation_of_the_implementation_of_decision_no_13132013_eu_on_a_union_civil_protection_mechanism_v1.pdf

found that more work is needed to comprehensively assess potential existential threats facing the EU holistically. While the UCPM has enhanced preparedness through tools like the European Civil Protection Pool, rescEU capacities, training, exercises and early warning systems (EWS), gaps in the EWS were identified requiring improvements. Specifically, expanding hazard coverage, improving data quality control, utilizing innovative data sources, and better integrating information across EU and national EWS to reduce fragmentation. Bernal et al. 2023 highlight several key gaps and challenges related to early warning within the EU's emergency response and civil protection mechanisms. A lack of common approach in public disaster early warning is a major issue, with technical, procedural and outdated alert system problems in some regions. Misinformation spread is also a common emergency challenge. Most detection capacities are sector-specific rather than cross-sectoral, with few mechanisms operating across policy boundaries to identify transboundary, complex threats. Consolidating and coordinating the numerous sector-specific detection systems remains difficult, with some suffering from inadequate information sharing among states (Backman & Rhinard 2018).

In summary, while the EU has substantially enhanced threat identification mechanisms, gaps remain in developing holistic cross-sectoral approaches, consolidating efforts, translating early warnings into decisions, and proving effectiveness during actual crises. Continued evolution is likely needed for transboundary, complex threat landscapes. Importantly, elevating an issue from „risk“ to „threat“ seems a constructed process based on expert/bureaucratic analyses, potentially influenced by organizational biases or political factors. The focus appears more on monitoring risks and escalating threats rather than examining root causes that may lead to existential dangers long-term (Bengtsson et al. 2018).

3.2. Resource Mobilization and Allocation

The EU has mechanisms in place to mobilize and allocate resources when issues escalate to „serious cross-border threats“, as identified through its expansive early warning network. The Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) serves as a hub coordinating national responses and sharing risk assessments. However, achieving synchronized resource mobilization across 27 Member States poses challenges. Past incidents like COVID-19 saw some countries prioritizing national stockpiling over collective European interests. Data protection laws, varying threat perceptions, and political factors can hinder full information sharing and consensus on deploying EU crisis resources. The EU's competences rarely allow direct crisis intervention on the ground. Coordination challenges arise given the numerous actors involved across EU institutions, Member States, agencies, etc., potentially leading to gaps or overlaps. Overcoming such obstacles to burden-sharing remains a key test of the Union's crisis response capacities. Pre-existing political agendas can also impact crisis responses and respective resource allocations when shocks cannot

be blamed on specific institutional deficiencies (Fifi 2024). Additionally, a „blame game“ can arise post-crisis, with national and EU officials blaming each other for failures, hampering accountability and future coordination (Backman & Rhinard 2018). Investment in prevention initiatives is widely needed, including disaster risk management provisions across all relevant EU funding instruments and programmes.

Political divisions on crisis burden sharing and resource allocation remain in the EU Council, particularly between members of the „frugal“ coalition⁵ and the other Member States, on future developments. How things work out in the future depends in large measure upon whether the Resilience and Recovery Facility proves successful in spurring growth while clearly being effective, efficient, and devoid of corruption (Schmidt 2022). While EU public debt is no novelty, it is a highly contested subject when its aim is to finance national budgets, public expenditures and investments, or when its guarantee and repayment structures foresee any major actual or potential transfer of resources among Member States (Eisl & Tomay 2023).

In summary, while the EU has developed tools and processes to mobilize resources for cross-border crises, their effectiveness depends on harmonizing the actions of individual Member States. Striking this balance between EU-level mechanisms and securing buy-in from sovereign states remains an ongoing challenge in operationalizing the Union’s crisis management frameworks. Continued efforts are likely required to enhance Member States coordination when mobilizing resources to mitigate serious threats.

3.3. Policy Implementation and Coordination

The EU manages crises through a combination of institutional and interstate solidarity. Institutional solidarity involves vertical measures coordinated by EU institutions like the European Commission and the European Central Bank, exemplified by financial aids such as the NGEU recovery package and the SURE program.⁶ Interstate solidarity encompasses horizontal cooperation between Member States, such as sharing medical supplies and facilities during COVID-19. At the EU level, crisis management and crisis governance are distinct response modes. Crisis management involves reactive, ad-hoc measures addressing immediate crisis issues. Crisis governance entails more structured actions, equipping the EU with systematic future response tools. During crises, individual states take direct coercive actions for urgent needs, while the EU coordinates efforts mitigating negative spillovers and providing cross-border benefits (Lord et al. 2023). However, emergency measures tend to be adopted with little democratic input from European citizens, while national parliaments and the EP remain largely side-lined (White 2023). The transition from crisis

⁵ The Netherlands, Denmark, Austria and Sweden.

⁶ Council Regulation (EU) 2020/672 of 19 May 2020 on the establishment of a European instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency (SURE) following the COVID-19 outbreak.

management to governance can involve developing new governance toolkits, as seen in EU sovereign debt crisis responses leading to economic, fiscal and banking supervision reforms. Several issues impede effective policy implementation and coordination. First, the EU's response can be fragmented due to varied competencies across policy areas. The complex decision-making process can delay and dilute response intensity when seeking broad consensus among diverse members (Roos & Schade 2023). Conflicts arise from competing national interests and ambiguous public solidarity perceptions within and between states (Georgiev 2023). Uneven crisis impacts and contentious resource allocation can further hinder coordination, exemplified by initial competition for medical supplies during COVID-19. Variability in administrative and financial state capabilities affects uniformity and effectiveness of EU-wide measures (Fossum & Lord 2023).

In summary, the EU often finds itself in permanent crisis management mode, with short-term responses and shifting common priorities (Kreuder-Sonnen 2023; Roos & Schade 2023). This is exacerbated by rising Euroscepticism increasing political tensions and complicating consensus. Past economic constraints like the Eurozone crisis led to budget cuts hindering new crisis response financing. Additionally, the EU's institutional framework sometimes struggles to adapt quickly and effectively to crises.

4. Recommendations for Institutional Reform and Policy Innovation

Building upon the preceding analysis of the EU's capacities in crisis identification, resource mobilization, and policy coordination, this section provides recommendations to bolster institutional resilience and drive policy innovations that can strengthen the EU's overarching crisis management framework. Given space constraints, these recommendations are presented in a concise, bulleted format:

4.1. Strengthening Institutional Resilience

- Establish an overarching, cross-sectoral mechanism for threat identification and early warning, consolidating efforts across various policy domains to detect transboundary, complex threats more effectively;
- Streamline decision-making processes and reduce fragmentation in crisis response by clarifying competencies and coordination mechanisms across EU institutions, agencies, and Member States;⁷
- Develop flexible policy frameworks that can be quickly adapted as new information becomes available or as the situation evolves, reducing the time between recognition of a crisis and policy response;⁸

⁷ See for specific reform proposals White 2023 and Kreuder-Sonnen 2023.

⁸ E.g., by broader use of delegated acts or open method of coordination.

- Improve mechanisms for real-time data sharing among Member States to overcome the challenges posed by diverse data protection laws and political factors, facilitating a more cohesive approach to crisis management;
- Enhance the role of the European Parliament and national parliaments in crisis governance to increase democratic legitimacy and public trust in crisis responses;
- Develop a more robust burden-sharing framework that incentivizes equitable resource allocation among Member States during crises;⁹
- Assess and strengthen the administrative, technical and financial capabilities of Member States to ensure uniform implementation of EU-wide crisis response measures;
- Prioritize addressing root causes that may lead to the so-called existential threats over the long term, rather than solely focusing on monitoring and escalating immediate threats;¹⁰
- Develop mechanisms to counter the spread of misinformation, rumours, and fake news during crisis situations, which can exacerbate threats;
- Foster greater societal resilience by promoting public awareness, preparedness, and active engagement in crisis management efforts;
- Strengthen international cooperation and coordination with global partners to address transnational threats and enhance collective resilience.

4.2. Advancing Policy Innovations

- Establish a dedicated innovation fund or program to support research, development, and piloting of cutting-edge technologies and approaches for crisis management;
- Encourage partnerships between government agencies, academia, and private sector companies to leverage cutting-edge technology and expertise in developing solutions for crisis management and response;
- Adopt regulatory sandboxes or controlled environments where innovative approaches in crisis management can be tested without the usual constraints of full regulatory compliance, allowing for faster innovation and adaptation;
- Embrace agile methodologies, such as rapid prototyping and iterative development, to quickly test and refine crisis management solutions;
- Encourage cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral approaches, bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise to tackle complex crisis challenges;

⁹ E.g., by broadening the scope of the European Civil Protection Pool and rescEU by including more comprehensive disaster and crisis scenarios, coupled with enhanced funding and resources.

¹⁰ See as a starting point the classification of crises developed by SØgaard Jørgensen et al. 2024.

- Create platforms for sharing best practices and innovations in crisis management across EU Member States and with international partners to ensure continuous learning and improvement in policies and practices;
- Ensure ongoing training and capacity-building programs for policy-makers and crisis managers to keep them updated on the latest tools, technologies, and methodologies;
- Regularly review, assess, audit and update crisis management policies, strategies, and frameworks to adapt to emerging trends, technologies, and evolving threat landscapes.

Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the European Union's capacities in crisis management, specifically focusing on crisis identification, resource allocation, and policy implementation. A key finding is that while the EU has developed robust mechanisms and infrastructures for crisis management, including an extensive network of early warning systems and coordinated resource mobilization strategies, significant gaps remain. These include fragmentation in early warning systems, inconsistencies in resource allocation due to political and national priorities, and often reactive rather than proactive crisis management approaches. The existing frameworks, while relatively comprehensive, require enhancement to cope with the complex and transboundary nature of modern crises.

The proposed reforms and innovations aimed at enhancing the EU's crisis management capabilities are vital for building a more resilient Union. Institutional reforms such as centralizing early warning systems, establishing unified crisis response frameworks, and enhancing information sharing mechanisms can streamline responses and reduce the time to action in crises. Moreover, promoting innovation through public-private partnerships, regulatory sandboxes, and investment in advanced technologies like AI for predictive analytics could significantly improve the EU's ability to anticipate and mitigate crises. These enhancements are not merely incremental; they represent transformative shifts towards a more integrated and agile crisis management system.

This paper underscores the importance of continuous learning and adaptation in crisis management. As the nature of crises becomes increasingly complex and transboundary, future research should explore cross-disciplinary approaches to tackle multifaceted risks and threats.¹¹ Longitudinal studies evaluating the effectiveness of implemented crisis management reforms and innovative solutions can provide valuable insights for iterative policy development. Furthermore, comparative analyses with other regional or global crisis management frameworks could yield best practices and opportunities for international cooperation in fostering collective resilience.

¹¹ See in particular Bergman-Rosamond et al. 2022.

In conclusion, enhancing the EU's crisis management framework is critical for addressing current deficiencies and preparing for future challenges. By implementing targeted reforms and promoting innovation, the EU can enhance its crisis response efficacy, ultimately leading to a stronger, more resilient Union. This paper provides a roadmap for such advancements, with broad implications for policy development and future research in EU crisis management and resilience strategies.

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