

Building Crisis Management Capacity in Europe: A manifesto for action

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The Facts: New Frontiers for Crisis Management

- The 2004 Christmas tsunami shows what the crises of the future will increasingly look like: they come in the guise of old threats – the forces of nature; technological failures; terrorism and wars – but they cause unforeseen and unimaginable effects.
- The explanation is simple. In the constant rush toward more effective and efficient systems – social, economic and technical – modern society has become increasingly complex and the systems have become tightly coupled. As a result, even small glitches can rapidly cascade into deep crises. Paradoxically, these modern systems also provide society with the means to deal with many old-fashioned crisis types, which has made modern society safer than ever.
- The challenge now is to prepare for new species of “inconceivable” crises. We must learn how to deal with these crises and their disturbing characteristics: how to cope with the global context, high speed and cross-sector domino effects – the factors that render the conceptual maps of actors obsolete.

The Gaps: Pathological reflexes

- The tsunami demonstrated - once again - that modern government systems are ill prepared to deal with these modern threats. Surprise and failure go hand in hand. The great majority of policymakers remains unprepared to deal with unconventional threats; paralysis is a common reaction. The institutions of Western society are not designed to deal with the inconceivable. A crisis typically catches institutions by surprise, as they are not prepared to recognize or mitigate unimagined and unexpected events. Crisis preparation remains the domain of ready-made answers, when it should be the realm of bold “questions” – asking what could happen and what we can possibly do in case the unthinkable materializes..
- The political landscape in which crisis management takes place has changed fundamentally in the past two decades or so. The modern citizen has little patience for breakdowns and is infuriated by even small crises. Large-scale disasters trigger instant witch-hunts. Calculating politicians and media incorporated fan the fires of discontent. It is clear that Western politicians still do not understand the new rules. The Tsunami experience is a classic case: always slow to grasp fast developments, many Western leaders initially ignored and downplayed the disaster; in response to the UN, NGO and media criticisms, they soon dramatized and over-reacted.
- An old reflex to crisis was widely witnessed in the aftermath of the tsunami: throw money at the problem and propose symbolic measures (an early warning system for the hit region; EU rapid forces to help with the next disaster). All this may be necessary, but it is far from sufficient to deal with the next big one. A crisis management approach that is primarily symbolic in nature will do nothing but create deep distrust in the capacity of Western institutions.

Strategic Leadership Requirements

- Modern governments and their international institutions (including EU) should develop a philosophy of crisis management that prescribes concrete tasks and addresses the organizational and political complexities that make the management of today's crises an “impossible job.” This requires leadership involvement. Leaders can no longer evade the difficult questions – they must avoid the classic trap of “leaving it to the specialists.” Unconventional challenges require strategic answers.
- Crisis leadership comprises five strategic tasks: organizing awareness (early warning), making critical decisions and facilitating a coordinated response; communicating to the public (craft a message; explain what happens); learn to prevent and account to regain trust.
- Crisis leaders should not try to imagine and “discover” the unthinkable, but they should train to deal with it; they should not add plans to plans, but prepare to act strategically in unstable contexts; they should not focus on hierarchical structures, but foster creative networks that can help deal with emerging complexities; they cannot delegate responsibility to technical officials or specialized bodies, they must accept full responsibility to lead in unstable times.
- Leaders must also develop organizational cultures marked by awareness and resilience; they should nurture an anticipatory mindset (from “it won’t happen here” to “it will happen here”). Everyone must understand that something inconceivable can happen and they must be prepared to engage with the unknown.

Initiative: A Rapid Reflection Force

- What’s missing: a clear idea how to accomplish these tasks and how to design the organizational cultures that serve them.
- What must happen: a healthy link should be created between research and practice. Practitioners are applying old solutions to new problems. That must change. We propose a key initiative to break down the wall between research and practice: the creation of a European think tank that translates insights from theory and practice into practical theories of crisis management. This think tank should take on the characteristics of a network: easily deployable, rapidly adaptable, creative capacity.
- It would be more than a classic think-tank: an effective Rapid Reflection Force would be created that can rapidly assemble advisory and assessment capacity that supplements existing networks.