European Union crisis management: challenges for research and practice

Magnus Ekengren*
Center for European Security Studies
Swedish National Defence College
Box 27805 Drottning Kristinas V. 37
115 93 Stockholm, Sweden
E-mail: magnus.ekengren@fhs.mil.se
*Corresponding author

Martijn Groenleer
Department of Public Administration
Leiden University
P.O. Box 9555
2300 RB Leiden, The Netherlands
E-mail: groenleer@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract: This article raises the question as to what role the EU can and should play in European crisis management. The EU has, in an ad hoc fashion, taken on the responsibility of protecting the security and safety of people from threats, ranging from the mad cow disease to terrorism, after 9/11 and bombings in Madrid and London. The challenge for research is to understand why the EU has been increasingly involved in crisis management. How is an ‘EU crisis’ socially constructed? What ‘EU core values’ must be threatened? Why do citizens expect the EU to act? What is the EU’s ‘crisis management capacity’? The challenge for practitioners is to discuss why, when, how and with what capacities the EU should be involved in crisis management. What should be the division of competence between EU institutions and member states?

Keywords: European Union; studying European crises; EU ‘core values’; crisis management; EU crisis management capacity; EU-member states relationship.


Biographical notes: Magnus Ekengren, PhD, is Senior Lecturer at the Swedish National Defence College and was previously Deputy Director at the Policy Planning Unit of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. He is Co-director of the research programme ‘Creating EU crisis management for a secure European community’. His main research interests are in the fields of European security and crisis management and the Europeanisation of the national state.
1 Introduction: emerging challenges in the EU crisis arena

The conflict on the Balkans in the early 1990s and the 1999 Kosovo refugee crisis, Mad Cow disease in 1996 and the Dioxin scandal in 1999, the running aground of the Erika tanker in 1999 and the sinking of the Prestige tanker in 2002, the severe floods in Western Europe during the 1990s and those in Central Europe in 2002, the Anthrax threats after ‘September 11’ and the Madrid and London bombings in 2004 and 2005 are all examples of crises that have moved crisis management to the centre of the European Union’s political agenda. This raises the question what role is to be played by the EU when it comes to managing crises.

Whereas most EU action remains rhetorical or symbolical, the EU has been taking a more explicit approach to crisis management in recent years. In the wake of recent food crises (e.g., BSE, Dioxin), the EU, for instance, created a European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). This agency has a pro-active role in the collection and analysis of scientific data so as to allow for the European Commission to manage food risks in the Union. And after the Madrid bombmings, European political leaders revoked the EU solidarity clause and called for strong anti-terrorism measures. They appointed an EU terrorism ‘Czar’ to coordinate such measures.

This EU action may lead to rising expectations in respect of the Union’s role as a crisis manager, both from the perspective of the member states and from that of EU citizens. Not all crises require a European response, however. Some crises can more effectively be managed on the national or local level. The risk is that the EU is expected to act in situations that it does not define itself as a European crisis and for which it does not have crisis management capacity. Such an ‘expectation-capability gap’ (cf. Hill, 1993) could be detrimental for the legitimacy of the EU institutions and for EU cooperation as a whole. There is thus an urgent need for the EU to reflect on its role as a crisis manager.

In order to determine the role the EU should play in crisis management, it is necessary to ask two questions. First of all, what crises can actually be considered European crises? If the Madrid bombings really were a crisis for the EU, what made them so? What EU values were threatened? It is not so obvious that the Madrid bombings constitute an EU crisis. One could argue that the EU has no role to play presuming the attack was carried out by terrorists in reaction to the Spanish support for the war in Iraq. A response, then, would involve the Spanish government, perhaps in cooperation with one of the larger member states possessing a greater intelligence capacity such as the UK, but would not necessitate EU involvement.
A second question pertains to what capacity the EU actually has to effectively manage crises. What mechanisms are in place? What instruments are available to manage European crises? The EU has responded to crises by developing a broad range of crisis management capacities. These capacities include systems monitoring societal vulnerabilities and preparing for emergencies as well as military and civil crisis management structures within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) (Duke, 2002). The EU also adopted a security strategy and a solidarity clause under which ‘the Union shall mobilise all instruments at its disposal, including the military resources made available by the member states, in case of terrorist attacks or natural and man-made disasters’.  

This short contribution aims to outline the emerging challenges in the EU crisis arena with regard to the above questions. As such, it seeks to stimulate the debate among researchers as well as between researchers and practitioners on the EU as a ‘post-national’ crisis management actor. In Section 2, we sketch the central problems involved in defining what a European crisis is, in studying the Union’s crisis management capacity and in making generalisations about EU crisis and crisis management. We outline some possible directions for future research and practice in Section 3.

2 The EU crisis arena: problems of inquiry

2.1 Defining EU crises

Problems of inquiry are first of all related to the nature of the EU, being a hybrid of an international organisation and an emerging polity. EU institutions were not built for short-term crisis management, but for long-term conflict prevention. Today, however, ‘EU security’ pertains to the protection of a set of core values relating to the well-being of EU citizens, both inside and outside the EU borders. Moreover, the span of EU security now stretches from international peace and stability to food safety and consumer protection.

In the context of the nation state, a crisis is commonly defined as an urgent threat to core societal values that necessitates immediate action by political actors (cf. Rosenthal et al., 1989; Rosenthal et al., 2001; Boin et al., 2005). But the EU is not a state based on territorial principles in relation to which major crises could be defined. Instead, European crises might perhaps best be defined by threats to the core values of the EU – free trade, fundamental rights etc. However, the definition of an EU crisis cannot solely be based on a pre-empirical assumption of values. In order to understand what an EU crisis is, we also need to investigate how and why an event is perceived as an EU crisis by the actors concerned. We need to add ‘subjectivist’ facts (Ekengren, 2002, ch. 4).

Our understanding of ‘EU crisis’ should crystallise in the process of empirical investigation, in what Bourdieu calls ‘the second break’. The researcher should try to situate himself in the position of the subject at the very moment when the act is taking place. In order to relate the agent’s own ‘sense’ of his practice and the objective structure constructed by the researcher, Bourdieu uses the concept of habitus. In this way, we not only avoid assessing ‘EU crises’ solely from the outside, with an ‘objective’ definition constructed by the researcher – a view that risks to produce a-historical assumptions about ‘EU crises’, but also a perspective based only on subjective ‘facts’ mirroring only one level of social reality.
Understandings are not supposed to be ‘included’ in the premises of the study but should instead appear as a result of the investigation. The risk of leaving out any significant empirical facts – e.g., a particular EU type of crisis – due to the use of prefabricated conceptions originating from the study of nation-states or other international organisations should be minimised. We have to derive the crucial European values from the practices and activities that the EU employs to protect them. By studying the EU’s concerns with sources and consequences of instability, which evolve over time, we can define what an EU crisis is. A good definition requires a full grasp of the nature of threats – old, new, and unimagined – that can materialise. It would be a mistake to think that we can put together an exhaustive list of potential threats. A threat is, after all, the resultant of perceptions, practices and values.

A first sub-set of questions we need to ask concerns the concept of an EU crisis. What threats to which core values are we talking about? What safety and security are we referring to? Do we need to consider both internal and external safety and security? Can European crises be located both inside and outside the Union? For whom is an European crisis a crisis? Who needs to perceive a situation as an urgent threat? Is it a crisis of, for, or in the EU? What do we actually refer to when we refer to the Union: EU supranational institutions (such as the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice), intergovernmental cooperation and coordination by EU member states, or some kind of multi-level system of governance including supranational EU actors, EU member states and perhaps also non-state actors?

A second sub-set of questions relates to actual crisis situations. What kind of ‘events’ have been perceived as ‘EU crises’ in the past? Were these situations actually labelled European crises? What were the core values at stake? In what way did the crisis pose a threat? Has the number of these crisis situations increased in recent years? In other words, are there more EU crises than before? If the number of EU crises has increased, why is this so? Has the EU actually been delegated more authority by member states when it comes to managing crises, or are we observing spill-over effects from a broader process of EU integration/Europeanisation? What kinds of crisis situations make member states and EU citizens expect the EU to act?

2.2 Studying EU crisis management

Additional problems of inquiry result from the dispersion of authority across the different levels of EU governance. Policymaking at the EU level does not follow the model of national decision structures. This is especially so because of the lack of a formal authority hierarchy within the Union. The EU cannot compel national authorities to implement EU-wide measures unless national authorities have delegated the authority to do so to the EU. Yet, even in the absence of a polity and a formal authority hierarchy, it has been argued that, in particular for issues of international concern, a ‘coordination reflex’ has developed among EU member states: they tend to coordinate their actions on the EU level. This might very well also be the case in the field of crisis management.

If member states pull in the same direction over a longer period of time by coordinating their national civil and military crisis management and defence structures, they may develop a common outlook on crises, threats and security questions. The cooperation under the Community Mechanism for civil protection during the 2002 floods in Central Europe serves as an example here. In practice, however, we often observe discord among EU member states, particularly when it involves Internal Market issues. In
the BSE and Dioxin cases, EU member states imposed unilateral bans (directed against the UK and Belgium, respectively) and supported the Commission’s proposals for imposing EU-wide bans not only because of public health concerns, but also because they could economically benefit from the ban (Grönvall, 2000; 2001; Olsson, 2005).

Moreover, the question is who will take the lead in coordinating crisis management. Coordination can, for instance, be achieved through EU legislation to be implemented by member states (ultimately enforced by the European Court of Justice), central EU decision-making by the Council, or policymaking by the Commission. The problems are similar to other areas where the EU has already gone from negative to positive integration: from cross-border trade and cooperation on economic issues to more active policymaking for common political goals. Consider, for example, the solidarity clause. Although the practical implications of this clause are far from being clear, it is very well possible that its application will result in transforming the EU’s instruments for ‘passive’ conflict prevention and security into an ‘active’ crisis management policy.7

Although member states do not easily transfer competences to the EU level, they have agreed on delegating limited policymaking power to the EU, for example when it comes to the management of certain threats and risks. This might, of course, be a strategy of national leaders: they shift crisis management responsibilities to the EU level so as to avoid being blamed themselves and to use the EU as a scapegoat for pursuing national interests. At the same time, however, when authority is concentrated on the EU level, it should be possible to point to particular actors, such as the Commission, to assess the decisions that they have made (or that they have failed to make), even if they were not explicitly authorised to make those decisions by member states in the first place.

A first set of sub-questions we think should be asked is theoretical and relates to how we consider the EU: as a clearing house in which member states coordinate amongst themselves (in the Council), as a coordinating centre in which the Commission links member states and their capacities together, or as an independently acting crisis manager? On what does our image of the EU depend: the different types of EU crises that we can envision, the specific competences that member states have transferred to EU supranational institutions, or to the different responses the EU is capable of in practice? Do the characteristic features of the EU render it more capable of managing certain types of crises, or particular phases in the crisis management process?

A second range of sub-questions is empirical and has to do with actual crisis management capacities. We are curious to find out what the EU can actually do when it comes to crisis. What capacities does it have in different areas? How has it used these capacities in responding to crisis situations in the past? How do instruments such as the solidarity clause and the Community Mechanism for civil protection work in practice? Do EU and national capacities overlap? Or does the sum of national capacities amount to the total of EU crisis management capacities?

2.3 Making generalisations about EU crisis and crisis management

A final problem of inquiry concerns the generalisability of our findings. The question is to what extent we can generalise about the nature of EU crisis and the character of Union crisis management on the basis of a growing number of sector-specific case studies. The basic criteria for all crisis studies, theoretical as well as empirical, is that they should be assessed on the basis of whether and how they contribute to an accumulation of
knowledge of what an EU crisis is and why it is an EU crisis, and of what EU crisis management entails and how it can be explained. There is a need for more theoretically informed empirical studies; more time and energy should be devoted to the development of a theory capable of balancing an already large number of inductive and descriptive studies.

The questions we need to ask here are therefore both theoretical and empirical. What patterned set of practices crystallises at the European level? Is it fruitful to distinguish two fields, a safety field and a security field, as a first step that could help us to better understand the particular logic of EU crisis management? Will the aggregation and decoding of sectoral findings display European systemic dimensions of security and crisis management? Are we in need of different approaches for each sector should a European aggregated crisis structure *not* crystallise? Does the field consist of distinct area specific logics that should be interpreted in terms such as an ‘EU civil protection structure’ rather than a ‘European crisis management structure’ or ‘European security structure’?

3 Directions for future research and practice on EU crises and crisis management

The questions we have raised above with regard to EU crisis management capacity are not only of a scholarly interest; they are also of importance for practitioners in the field of crisis management. How should the research community study European crisis management and generate scientific knowledge in a way that can also help clarify the issue for European and national policymakers?

We distinguish several directions for future research and practice. First, as in all EU studies, a multidisciplinary approach is essential. An understanding of EU crisis management requires bringing together different literatures, including the scholarly work on EU integration and cooperation, EU security studies, as well as research on crisis and disaster management. We propose to adopt a sociological and organisational approach to investigating EU crisis management, *i.e.*, focusing on how the EU is organising for crises instead of only looking at what it, in accordance with the Treaties, formally or legally can or should do, or what the political motives behind EU efforts in the field of crisis management are.

Second, not only does the EU need to rethink the traditional demarcations between, for example, trade, environment, humanitarian aid, and diplomacy (as clearly reflected in the pillar system of EU governance) and crisis management in order to make the safety and security of EU citizens a reality. More important is perhaps the political willingness of member states to reconsider and redefine political and administrative divisions within national government systems, such as those between internal and external security, police and defence forces, civil and military intelligence, the Ministries of Internal Affairs, Justice, Foreign Affairs and Defence, and the state, regional and local level.

Third, research projects should investigate the crisis management capacities at both the EU and the trans-governmental level. We stress the need to look into the interaction between the European and national level. It seems that member states are increasingly aware of the actual and potential capacities of the EU. They are now actively seeking to find ways to have an impact on EU policymaking. There appears to be a need for multi-sectoral EU infrastructures among the member states; infrastructures able to produce active norm and standard setting networks. These should include national
administration, as well as regional and local authorities – the backbone of civil protection and crisis management in many countries. Civil society, private sector, business and NGO’s should also be part of such structures.

Finally, there might be a need for rethinking EU cooperation due to developments in EU crisis management capacity. Is it desirable that the EU is taking on responsibilities as a crisis manager? And if so, what responsibilities should it take on exactly? As in the case of the creation of the open method of coordination, scholars could be of some help here. Bridges must be built not only across public and private spheres, but also between the research and policymaking communities. The intellectual input needed for transforming the European security community – as once referred to by Deutsch (1957) – also into a secure European community is great.

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References


Notes


2 Consider, for example, the Dutch Ministry of the Interior’s Policy Paper on Civil Protection 2004–2007 that proposes, on the basis of developing civil protection and the solidarity clause, a more coordinating and steering role for the Commission.

3 In fact, one could argue that the Union itself is largely the result of crisis management.

4 See Article I-42 of the Draft Constitutional Treaty.

5 The point of departure for Bourdieu is the assumption that there is a fundamental difference between the logic of science and the logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990, p.81).

6 Habitus can be thought of as ‘forgotten history’. This unconscious capacity for action has been described by Bourdieu as the result of incorporation into habitus of the objective structures for future-oriented practices. Thus, in contrast to the theory of rational action, in which the agent consciously judges his alternatives of action, habitus is shaped but not determined by social processes: habitus unconsciously generates actions (Bourdieu, 1979, p.78).

7 Thereby, the aim of the clause is similar to the task that the open method of coordination has attempted to resolve in the area of welfare policy cooperation.