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Keeping a cool head: How to improve the EU migration crisis response

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Credit: KENZO TRIBOUILLARD / AFP

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Executive summary

One of the critical lessons learned from the 2015/16 migration crisis was that the EU's crisis response suffered from lacking coordination. Instead of seeming prepared, it appeared to be 'muddling through', which resulted in ad hoc and reactive measures.

Now, six years later, it has seen a rapid succession of migration and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, Belarus, and Ukraine, evoking memories of the challenges the EU and its member states faced in responding to the events of 2015/16. This Discussion Paper explores whether any lessons have been learned in terms of crisis coordination since that time – and if so, which ones they are. Crucially, it also engages with questions around how much flexibility versus consolidation of crisis structures and processes will be needed to strengthen EU crisis responses in the future.

EU crisis management, including in the field of migration and asylum, resembles a fragmented landscape, with different nodes spread across the institutions. Yet it is also one of the EU's key strengths, and one it is often called upon to exercise. Crisis responses comprise different elements, but coordination is the glue that binds them. Therefore, much is at stake if migration crisis responses continue to follow a reactive and ad hoc approach, without fostering meaningful collaboration.

For internal EU coordination, preserving the status quo would mean more 'muddling through'. This, in turn, would impact its engagement on the international level. A chaotic, crisis mode-driven response could impinge on its role as a reliable, and legitimate crisis manager vis-à-vis partners and affected countries. Moreover, it could hurt its efforts to showcase greater leadership on migration and protection issues.

Fortunately, the past year has shown positive signs of change. Between successful coordination efforts within the Solidarity Platform, established in response to arrivals from Ukraine, as well as increased international engagement and alliance-building, notably with the United States and Canada, there are several good practices to draw on.

Even so, these sorts of flexible and targeted coordination efforts should be complemented with further consolidation. Given that each migration crisis differs from the next, there will never be one single coordinating mechanism or entity. Yet, the EU should consider pooling and streamlining information around (potential) displacement crises at a designated 'crisis hub'.

Importantly, more meaningful and constructive collaboration between the EU, member states, international organizations, partner countries, and affected countries is also needed. For this, the EU should consider replicating or continuing successful coordination mechanisms beyond the crisis moment, such as the Solidarity Platform, while ensuring a more proactive deactivation of purely crisis mechanisms. Internationally, the EU should continue building its engagement around migration and asylum issues. This would serve not only to foster longer-term exchange and crisis learning across boundaries (e.g., transatlantic exchanges on lessons learned and the way forward). It would also strengthen the EU's global convening power and leadership at a time when migration crises are becoming increasingly complex and overlapping and therefore in need of joint efforts.

Lessons learned?

When the Taliban reclaimed power in Afghanistan in 2021, EU leaders were stunned. The scenes from Kabul airport, where thousands of people gathered in a last-minute attempt to evacuate the country, were emblematic of crisis management gone awry. In Europe, statements warning of a repeat of the 2015/16 migration crisis began reverberating across the continent almost immediately, buoyed by a media that, while not necessarily in agreement, appeared eager enough to act as an amplifier. Familiar images and framings, such as those of an impending ‘wave of migrants’ or ‘mass migration’, became prominent again.¹

Not long after, the EU found itself confronted with a humanitarian crisis at its eastern borders with Belarus. And, with more than 7.6 million people having entered the EU since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022,² the war in Ukraine not only constitutes the largest displacement crisis in Europe since the Second World War. It has also proven to be a “watershed moment” for the EU beyond the migration and asylum domain.³

These emergency situations have put to the test the EU’s power to react to new and unforeseen circumstances. This power can be considered both in a legal sense (i.e., a matter of competences), as well as practical one (i.e., the capacities and skills needed for crisis responses). For more than ten years, the EU has faced critical challenges across different policy domains, from the financial crisis of 2008/09 to the COVID-19 pandemic all the way to the ongoing war in Ukraine. This intensification of complex and often overlapping crises has prompted observers to describe the phenomenon as one of ‘permacrisis’.⁴ As a result, the EU’s ability to act as a legitimate ‘crisis manager’ has received renewed attention, including in the field of migration and asylum.

The events of the past year have raised the critical question of whether any lessons have been learned from 2015/16 – and if so, which ones. Stating that the EU was “better prepared than it was in 2015”,⁵ the European Commission presented the New Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2020 in an attempt to make the EU’s migration and asylum policy more crisis-proof. Two years later, in her State of the Union speech in September 2022, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen described the response to Ukrainian refugees as a “blueprint for going forward”.⁶ The nature of such a blueprint has yet to be defined.⁷ Yet, critically, her statements signal a renewed willingness to reflect on how good practices in crisis responses could be embedded into the broader migration and asylum policy framework.

Judging by the recent past, engaging in this sort of learning will not be easy. For one, as the example of Afghanistan shows, the EU has not been fully able to

abandon its habit of responding to crises in a reactive and ad hoc way, despite statements suggesting otherwise. Moreover, changing crisis *modi operandi* entails difficult strategic decisions. At present, the EU’s crisis response architecture remains fragmented, having grown in a piecemeal and ad hoc manner.⁸ A clear benefit of this status quo is that it preserves a climate of flexibility and innovation. Indeed, crises can be vital forces in their own right, “giving momentum to previously inconceivable institutional changes” as well as the development of creative solutions.⁹ This stands in contrast to a more centralized approach, whereby structures and processes are consolidated, and lead figures or agencies are tasked with imposing control to enhance coherence, maintain efficiency, and enable decisive responses.¹⁰ An additional benefit of such a top-down approach is that it reduces the risk of working in silos or duplicating efforts.

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EU crisis management has generally been built around a network approach, with different nodes spread across its institutions. Therefore, it is worth considering where flexibility and agility will remain crucial or conversely, where further consolidation of crisis structures and processes will strengthen EU crisis management in the future. This policy brief will explore this dynamic through the prism of the EU’s crisis coordination mechanisms. As the next sections will show, coordination as such is an essential EU capacity, but migration crises have continuously put it to the test. Against the backdrop of the recent migration and humanitarian crises, this analysis will focus on how the EU’s capacities in this area have grown and changed but could also be improved.

While coordination is only one of several elements of crisis responses, it is also the glue that binds them. For internal EU coordination, preserving the status quo would mean more ‘muddling through’. This, in turn, would have consequences for its engagement on the international level. A chaotic, crisis mode-driven response could impinge on its role as a reliable, and legitimate crisis manager vis-à-vis partner and affected countries as well as hurt its efforts to showcase greater leadership on migration and protection issues.

The EU as a crisis coordinator

Coordination is generally a key strength of the EU, and one it is often called upon to exercise. This has emerged both because the EU has limited crisis decision-making competences as well as the fact that many of the resources needed in crisis management are provided directly by member states (e.g., data, basic life necessities or medical supplies). In crisis situations, it faces the unique challenge of having to coordinate both horizontally (between EU institutions) and vertically (with member states) to achieve a response that is politically and operationally feasible.¹¹

EU crisis coordination has grown in increments, leading to an almost dizzying number of mechanisms and platforms within and between the institutions, with member states, and external stakeholders. Aside from the well-established Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements within the Council, which were first activated in the migration context six years ago, it is the Commission that houses or oversees most other mechanisms. Among others, these include ARGUS, a general rapid alert system, the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) within DG ECHO, as well as coordination efforts under the auspices of DG HOME's Deputy Director-General for Situational Awareness/Head of the Task Force on Migration Management and its Situational Awareness unit.

And yet, as one senior official interviewed explained, a key lesson learned from the events of 2015/16 was that there generally had not been enough coordination, both internally and externally.¹² Indeed, the absence of efficient coordination meant that the EU appeared to be 'muddling through' instead of seeming prepared. A second take-away, pointed out by a senior expert, was that coordination mechanisms have the tendency of only being triggered once the crisis has already hit.¹³ This has hampered efforts to deliver a timely and effective response.

Intra-EU coordination has become stronger, but more collaboration is needed

As mentioned earlier, coordination between the EU institutions is key to any crisis response. As such, capacity-building in this area, whether at a high political level (e.g., the IPCR) or in relation to the distribution of humanitarian aid (e.g., the EU Civil Protection Mechanism), has been particularly evident. But coordinating between and within the three institutions has at times proven to be an unwieldy and opaque process.

Among the persons interviewed, there was nevertheless a general sense that intra-EU coordination had much improved since 2015/16.¹⁴ Indeed, the period since

Coordination mechanisms have the tendency of only being triggered once the crisis has already hit.

As the following two sections will show, the past year has seen positive developments in addressing these issues. This is evidenced by i) new coordination efforts that appear closely targeted to needs arising out of the recent crises, such as data- and knowledge-sharing, ii) a greater diversity of participant backgrounds and expertise reflected within coordination networks, and iii) the EU demonstrating leadership in promoting international cooperation on migration and asylum issues.

Before delving into greater detail, a few conceptual caveats should be noted: while crisis management theory tends to differentiate between several elements of crisis responses, there is a general recognition that these sometimes overlap.¹⁴ Detection and 'sense-making' systems, such as rapid alert and horizon-scanning systems, often have a coordinating function in addition to allowing for monitoring and initial analysis of potential risks and threats. Coordinating bodies, then, also allow stakeholders to engage in decision-making, both before and during crises. This analysis will treat all of these as examples of coordination.

summer 2021 has not just experienced further growth in this area, but also shown promising signs of greater effectiveness.

A prime example of this is the Solidarity Platform. It was first announced in the Commission's 10-Point-Plan, a document that outlined its actions in response to the unprecedented number of arrivals from Ukraine.¹⁶ It serves a variety of purposes, from information exchange on registrations under the Temporary Protection Directive or other forms of protection, a mapping of reception capacity, and the development

of contingency and response plans for the medium to long-term.¹⁷ Notably, it does not just involve member states and the Commission as a coordinator, but also external stakeholders, such as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The platform has been deemed such a success that calls for replicating it in future crises have begun to gain traction.¹⁸

Moreover, the Commission also established the Migration Preparedness and Crisis Blueprint Network, a soft law instrument to support the EU's emergency and crisis response.¹⁹ The Blueprint is complementary to other EU crisis management mechanisms, such as the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and the IPCR arrangements. It is managed by DG HOME and serves to monitor, collect, and disseminate vital information to inform subsequent crisis responses.²⁰ Despite only having been up and running for a few months, the Blueprint appears to have already proven valuable. As one person actively involved in the crisis response to Belarus explained, having data on the number of attempted crossings, arrivals, and people's country of origin was crucial to understand the scope of the situation and to build an effective response, including the diplomatic efforts with countries of origin. Likewise, the Blueprint has remained active during the invasion of Ukraine.²¹

However, intra-EU crisis coordination still faces several challenges. First, despite their added value, the recently established mechanisms risk duplicating efforts, and thereby producing further fragmentation. As one interviewee pointed out, in the case of Ukraine, there appears to be an overlap between the Solidarity Platform, led by DG HOME, and the IPCR, which is a Council mechanism. Over the past few years, the IPCR arrangements have remained active on migration issues, but have been underused. This changed with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since then, the crisis decision-making forum has been in full mode. However, the two mechanisms perform many of the same functions, from monitoring to streamlining information-sharing to discussing next steps in the crisis response. One way to reduce the duplication of efforts would be to limit the IPCR to acute crisis moments and consider keeping the Solidarity Platform in place as the EU transitions from crisis response to a longer-term approach to refugee reception and integration.

Second, the recent coordinating efforts have given rise to tensions within the Commission around who can establish authority and leadership in migration crisis responses. As one senior official stated, "everybody wants to chair".²² Another expert described the situation as one in which DGs have become increasingly keen to exercise the "power of intervention".²³ DG HOME's key role in the Solidarity Platform as well as the Blueprint Network points to its natural competence on migration and asylum issues. But this also comes with drawbacks. For one, as one senior expert pointed out, officials dealing with home affairs often lack a thorough

understanding of foreign relations and how these may play a role in crisis responses.²⁴ If left primarily in their hands, there is a risk that security-oriented measures cloud crisis responses, resulting in outsize emphasis on stronger external border management or return and readmissions.

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Finally, given that migration emergencies often span across different policy domains, there is also a crucial need for DGs to overcome this sense of competition and strengthen their collaboration. This applies to many aspects of crisis management, including preparedness and anticipation. Capacities in these areas have typically evolved in a sectoral manner, but less so across policy domains. DG HOME has its Situational Awareness unit and leads the Blueprint Network, DG ECHO manages the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) and has begun expanding its foresight capacity, while the European External Action Service (EEAS) also uses foresight and relies on the timely delivery of information by its delegations across the world. Making sense of this wealth of information, however, requires the ability to 'connect the dots'.

As has been argued elsewhere, "some form of lead agency model will need to emerge" for sustained and stronger EU responses to future migration challenges.²⁵ This brings to mind the concept of 'crisis centers'. Given the decentralized nature of EU crisis management, the closest approximation may be found in DG ECHO's ERCC. At present, the ERCC acts as a coordinating hub, focused on delivering assistance to disaster-stricken countries. In 2021, its capacities were boosted through enhanced operational, analytical, monitoring, information management and communication capabilities.²⁶ While migration is not at the core of the ERCC's monitoring mission, there are ongoing efforts to expand its ability to anticipate all sorts of potential crises, including bringing the roughly 80 early warning systems into one physical place.²⁷ This suggests that the ERCC could become a sort of 'crisis hub', acting as a reliable and robust source of information. Moreover, it could help foster exchange and collaboration between DGs, and with member states, strengthening the EU's 'situational understanding' of crises.²⁸

Such a common basis could also help to determine whether a fully-fledged crisis response is needed, or if instead, smaller steps to de-escalate the situation can

be taken. However, even though such a step towards further consolidation could improve the Commission's efficiency and reduce the amount of redundant coordination efforts, inter-DG competition may get in

the way. DG HOME in particular is unlikely to agree to this sort of a strengthened coordinating role for DG ECHO, given its continued efforts to take (full) ownership of migration crisis responses.

The EU has spearheaded international efforts, but challenges around longevity and legitimacy remain

Aside from intra-EU coordination, the recent crises also provided an impetus for building stronger international ties. Coordination at this level is not as formalized as the Council or Commission mechanisms discussed above but has arguably become increasingly relevant as the EU seeks to become more of a 'global actor', including in the area of migration and protection.

Aside from intra-EU coordination, the recent crises also provided an impetus for building stronger international ties.

First, in response to the rapid increases in protection needs in Afghanistan, and the failure to evacuate more people in time, the Commission used its convening power to reignite cooperation around protection needs, resettlement, and complementary legal pathways. While the first High-Level Resettlement Forum in July 2021 involved only member states, the second one focused on Afghans at risk, and also had the United States (US), Canada, and the United Kingdom (UK) sitting at the table. These events not only highlight the need for policy action on resettlement and remind countries to stick to their pledges. They also showed the EU's capacity to set the agenda and demonstrate leadership on an issue that had previously been dominated by players such as the US.²⁹

However, the past months have also shown that the mere act of bringing stakeholders together may only prove meaningful if it is accompanied by some medium- to long-term vision of how the conversation should be continued and collaboration increased. For instance, while the High-Level Fora in 2021 provided a spark in the conversation on resettlement, both EU member states and the US continue to struggle to implement their commitments.³⁰ The Ukraine war has, of course, in the meantime absorbed much of the EU's and member states' capacities. Yet, defining clear and shared objectives, even if scaled down, could help to sustain high-level attention around the issue, while having an important signaling

effect that people in need of long-term protection have not been forgotten. With Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson having already indicated support for strengthening community sponsorship of refugees in Europe, and the Biden Administration set to launch the first pilot sponsorship scheme in the history of US refugee admissions by the end of 2022, reconvening would not only reignite previous efforts, but could also spark renewed transatlantic exchanges around lessons learned from crisis responses.

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In addition to the issue of lacking longevity, international coordination efforts have also invited critical questions around leadership and legitimacy. The failed tangential efforts to establish a Regional Political Platform to coordinate the response to Afghan displacement together with Iran and Pakistan are a case in point. The purpose of the platform, as outlined in a Draft Action Plan for Afghanistan in September 2021, was to "manage migration flows from Afghanistan, prevent the spread of terrorism, and fight against organized crime".³¹ According to one official involved in the response, there was limited appetite from neighboring countries for such a platform.³² More importantly, there were doubts whether an EU-led effort would be a good idea.

Presumably, this had to do with the fact that the EU was already struggling to coordinate member states' evacuation and longer-term efforts to meet Afghans' high protection needs. Second, the EU's panicked initial reaction did not necessarily give it much authority or leverage to determine what Afghanistan's neighbors

should do. More broadly, relations with Iran and Pakistan have experienced several blows, such that any endeavor to engage, whether on migration issues or other, is bound to be challenging.³³

Following these unsuccessful efforts, the EU has, however, assumed the chairmanship of the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR). This SSAR brings together states and institutions committed to developing solutions to the protracted displacement situation in Afghanistan, as well as the host countries Iran and Pakistan.³⁴ It is, importantly, led by UNHCR and, therefore, allows the EU to circumvent some of the delicate questions around legitimate leadership and authority.

A final point is that similar to efforts in bringing different DGs and relevant organizations to the table, engaging with a diverse set of stakeholders also pays off in the EU's international coordination. While it is primarily an instrument to enhance member states'

coordination, the Solidarity Platform also has an important international dimension. Not only is it used to facilitate ongoing transfers of vulnerable Ukrainians from Moldova to member states; it also allows for stronger international cooperation by bringing in Canadian, US, and UK representatives to, amongst others, find durable solutions for those unable to return home. It therefore has the potential to improve mutual learning from crisis responses across boundaries, building alliances that exist beyond immediate crisis moments.

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Concluding reflections and recommendations

Since 2015/16, the EU has experienced an ebb and flow of migration and humanitarian crises. Yet, efforts to learn from the past to meet challenges in a more coordinated manner have not yet been sufficiently translated into the EU's crisis responses. But if the past year is any indication, the EU will face an *intensification* of crises that are complex in their nature and cut across different policy areas. To maintain its role as an effective crisis manager, including vis-à-vis member states, further investment into its coordinating capacities will be crucial.

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The benefits of coordination, whether within the EU or internationally, are plentiful. Between agenda-setting and ensuring high-level political support as well as encouraging a complementarity of efforts, knowledge-exchange, and peer learning,³⁵ there are many reasons why the EU should continue to capitalize on its ability to bring stakeholders together. Yet, the multiplicity of networks may also stymie crisis management efforts. Not only is there a risk that efforts are duplicated; there is also a chance that the added value of coordination mechanisms, when there are too many, becomes diluted.

Therefore, achieving greater clarity on where consolidation – despite the questions it raises around authority and legitimacy – would prove valuable, and where, conversely, working in a more flexible manner is preferable, will be crucial.

The good news is that the EU does not need to start from scratch. As highlighted above, there is a wealth of good practices and innovations it can draw from. Between improving intra-EU coordination and demonstrating international leadership on migration and protection issues, the EU has already progressed in the right direction. The question, therefore, is how to ensure that these elements of the EU's crisis response can be maintained, but also adapted and improved for the future.

Given that each crisis differs from the next, there will never be one single coordinating mechanism or entity. Yet, working towards more consolidated structures and processes, while maintaining the benefits of its flexible, agile, and innovative crisis modus operandi will only strengthen future crisis responses. Going forward, the following considerations could help guide and strengthen the changing fabric of EU migration crisis management:

- ▶ **Fostering coordination and ensuring continuity and longevity.** The EU, and notably the Commission, has continued to successfully exercise its ability to facilitate crisis coordination, both internally and internationally. But, while some platforms that emerged out of the crises cater to specific needs and may therefore become obsolete with time, others appear to falter because they lack medium- to long-term follow-up or implementation plans.

The objectives of coordination efforts differ – ranging from information exchange to peer learning to achieving high-level commitments. However, defining the purpose of coordination early on could help to sustain those initiatives considered useful. Moreover, clearer distinctions between crisis and non-just-crisis coordination efforts should be made.

- ▶ **Pooling and streamlining information.** While the EU already has a wealth of early warning and horizon-scanning systems in place, more efforts should be invested into pooling and streamlining pertinent information and data on potential migration crises. Given that they often span across different policy areas, it could prove useful to have a single place to rely on for up-to-date information and initial analysis following the lead agency model. Within the Commission, the ERCC's role as a crisis hub could be strengthened for this purpose, allowing representatives from different DGs to maintain their specialized knowledge, while referring to a common source. For this, DGs will have to be willing to overcome competition for the sake of collaboration on who gets to sit in the driver's seat of crisis responses.
- ▶ **Strengthening intra-EU collaboration while diversifying stakeholders.** Siloed or sectoral thinking can easily hamper effective crisis responses. As such, the EU should strengthen its efforts to include a more diverse group of stakeholders, both among DGs (DG HOME, EEAS, DG INTPA, DG ECHO) as well as EU agencies, affected countries, countries that are allies, and international organizations.

The Solidarity Platform, which also includes representatives from EU agencies, UNHCR, IOM, as well as several non-EU countries in addition to EU institution and member states, has proven to be a useful complementary tool vis-à-vis the IPCR and the Blueprint Network in facilitating effective information-exchange and discussion around ways forward. Such efforts not only help to reduce the degree of duplication and fragmentation in the EU's migration and humanitarian crisis response architecture, but they also highlight the value of collaboration, an element that has been crucially lacking in the past years.

- ▶ **Forming and maintaining international alliances.** While the recent migration-related crises have kept EU leaders relatively preoccupied with domestic migration and asylum issues, the EU has also been able to effectively use its convening power and demonstrate its ability to set the agenda on an international level. While this may be limited to specific issues, such as resettlement, these efforts should continue and be maintained. Not only do they help position the EU as a leader on migration issues, but they could also help foster longer-term exchange and crisis learning across boundaries (e.g., transatlantic exchanges on lessons learned and the way forward). At the same time, the EU will also have to reckon with the fact that the more panicked and security-driven its crisis responses are (e.g., Afghanistan), the more it will struggle to be perceived as a legitimate actor, regardless of its ability to provide support and resources.

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