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EUNPACK Executive Summary of the Final Report & Selected Policy Recommendations

A CONFLICT-SENSITIVE UNPACKING OF THE EU
COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO CONFLICT AND
CRISIS MECHANISMS

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INTRODUCTION

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The academic literature on the European Union's engagement in external conflicts and crises has until recently been predominantly inward-looking, Brussels-centred and concerned with the EU's actorness and institutional capacity-building. The concern has been to investigate EU 'actorness' in this field rather than the Union's actual impact on the ground in various external crises and conflicts (see Mac Ginty et al 2016). Gradually, more attention has been given to the implementation of EU policies, but this literature has often been heavily guided by theoretical or normative agendas. There is therefore quite a knowledge gap as the EU has launched more than 35 civilian and/or military missions abroad since 2003.

In theory, the main objective of the EU is to prevent conflicts before they erupt. In practice, the EU is as engaged in attempting to curb violent conflict and manage volatile post-conflict situations as any similar large international actor. Engaging in ongoing conflicts brings with it – naturally – a set of extraordinary challenges for external crisis response (Rieker & Blockmans 2019).

The main objective of the EUNPACK project has been to fill this gap. By unpacking EU crisis response mechanisms, it has provided new insights into how EU crisis response functions and how it is being received and perceived on the ground by both local beneficiaries and other external stakeholders in target countries.

By introducing a bottom-up perspective combined with an institutional approach, the project has tried to break with the dominant line of scholarship on EU crisis response that has tended to view only one side of the equation, namely the integrity and coherence of the EU itself.

Thus, in addition to interviews in Brussels, the EUNPACK project team conducted fieldwork in countries of EU crisis response, interviewing key personnel from local and international organisations, including representatives of EU delegations and programmes, and conducted surveys on people's perceptions about the EU's crisis response on the ground.

The approach applied by the EUNPACK project team has therefore made it possible to uncover and explore local agencies and perceptions in target countries without losing sight of the EU's institutions and their expectations and ambitions. It has allowed us to analyse the full cycle of dynamic events, from EU intentions, motivations and subsequent implementation, to local actors' perceptions and reactions, and back again to EU intentions and understanding.

Thus, the project has been attentive to the local level in target countries as well as to the EU level and the connections between them. This means that the approach has been neither completely bottom-up, nor entirely top-down, but designed as a bottom-up approach in combination with an institutional approach, pointing to a more networked and transversal understanding of crisis management. Our research has been inductive and systematic empiri-

cal, combining competencies from two research traditions that so far have had little interaction, namely peace and conflict studies and EU studies. In the inception phase, the project group agreed on a common understanding that crises do not follow a linear process from identification to solution, but that crises will often relapse.

However, for the sake of analytical clarity and comparability across cases, our approach distinguishes between the following three phases in a crisis cycle:

- **Pre-crisis phase (the EU's influence on conflict dynamics and preparedness and responses through early warning and conflict prevention)**
- **Crisis phase (response and management, rapid reaction mechanisms, possible deployment of a CSDP mission, aid packages, links to other pre-existing policies and how these impact on conflict dynamics)**
- **Post-crisis phase (stabilisation and state-building efforts and their impact on peace, stability and human security).**

At the outset we identified two potential gaps in EU crisis response: between intentions and implementation, and between the implementation of EU policies and the local reception/perception of this engagement. However, as the research unfolded in the field, we identified a related third gap in EU crisis response that we coined the 'information-local ownership' gap (see Cissé et al 2017; Bøås and Drange 2019).

Related to the first gap, we wanted to systematically investigate a set of questions such as: Does the EU have the capacity to make decisions and respond with one voice and to deploy the necessary resources? How are these responses implemented on the ground by various EU institutions and member states? Do other actors – local and international – enhance or undermine the EU's activities? Regarding the second gap, we wanted to investigate the extent to which the EU has the capacity to be conflict sensitive or taking local stakeholders' views and competencies into account.

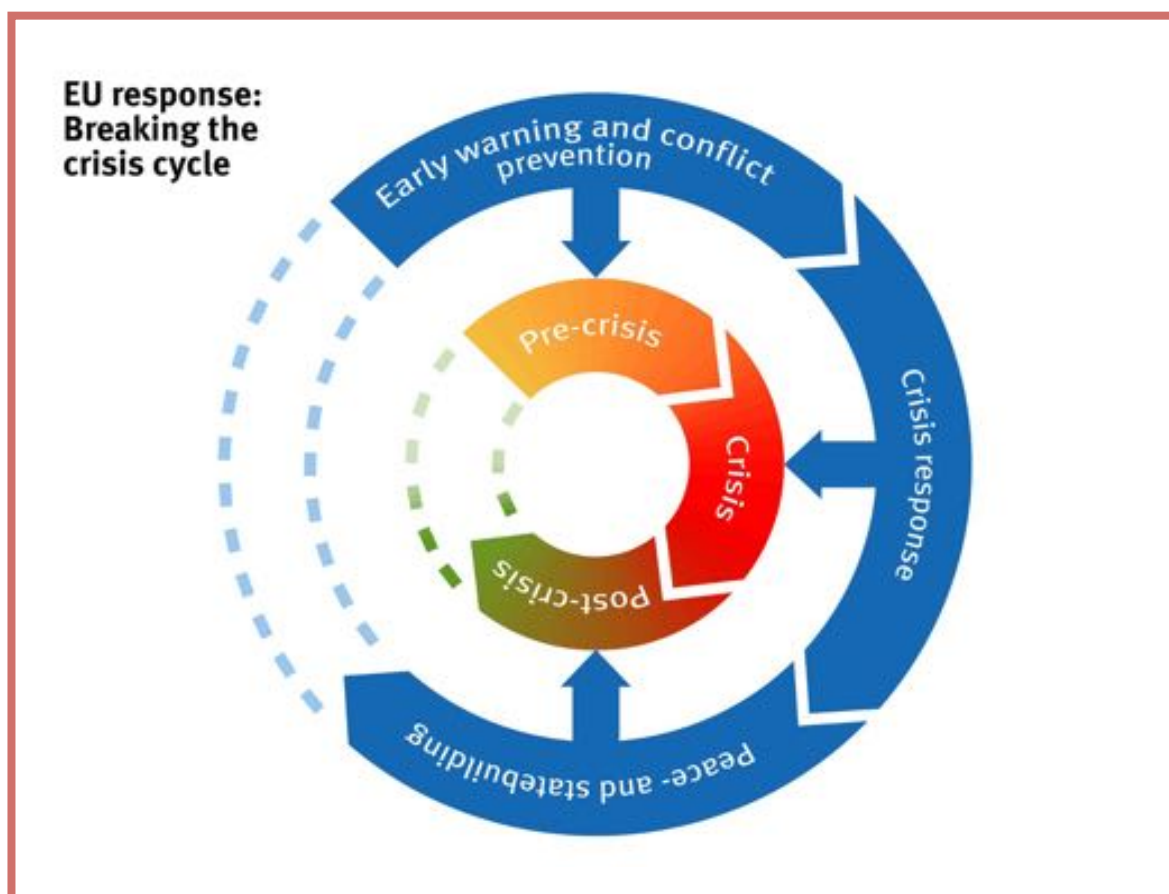
The third gap was brought to our attention based on the perception studies carried out in the case countries. In the case of Mali, for instance, we found that approximately half of the respondents (from a sample of Malians in Bamako who had been involved with the EU either professionally or as direct beneficiaries) had so little knowledge about what the EU is doing and contributing within crucial sectors of their society that they could not come up with an answer concerning their level of satisfaction with EU support. They simply did not know whether they were satisfied with EU assistance to security sector reform, governance and capacity-building, development aid and humanitarian assistance.

This points to a deep problem of democratic deficit as it suggests that important decisions concerning peace and security in Mali are being made without local involvement (Bøås et al 2018; Cissé et al 2017). We find similar tendencies and lack of knowledge about EU's engagement among the local population in the other conflict areas as well (see Bátorá et al 2017, 2018; Ivashchenko-Stadnik et al 2017; 2018; Loschi & Raineri 2017; Loschi et al 2018; Mohammed 2018; Peters et al 2018; Echavez & Soroush 2017; Soroush 2018).

Thus, if it is the intention of the EU, as an external stakeholder, to leave a light footprint and build local ownership, our findings suggest that a serious rethinking of the current approach is needed, based on a much deeper engagement with local counterparts and the population at large (Cissé et al 2017; Bátorá et al 2017; Ivashchenko–Stadnik et al 2017; Loschi & Raineri 2017; Echavez & Soroush 2017; Soroush 2018).

Not to the extent of creating a liberal trusteeship framework based on EU authority, but rather connected to different local sites of authority and their understanding of how crises may be addressed.

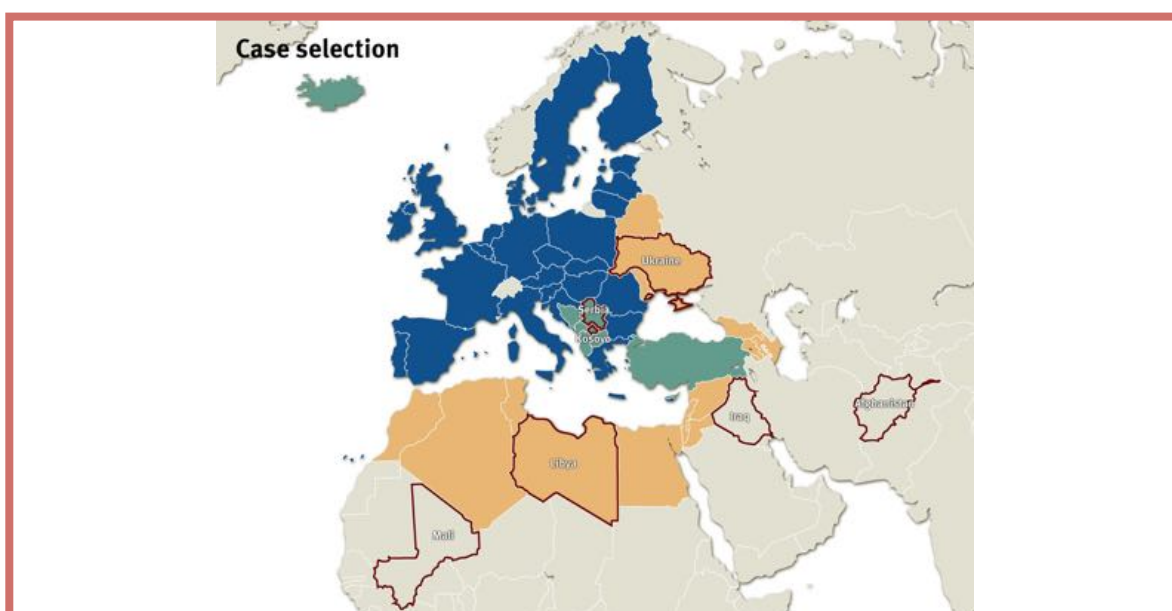
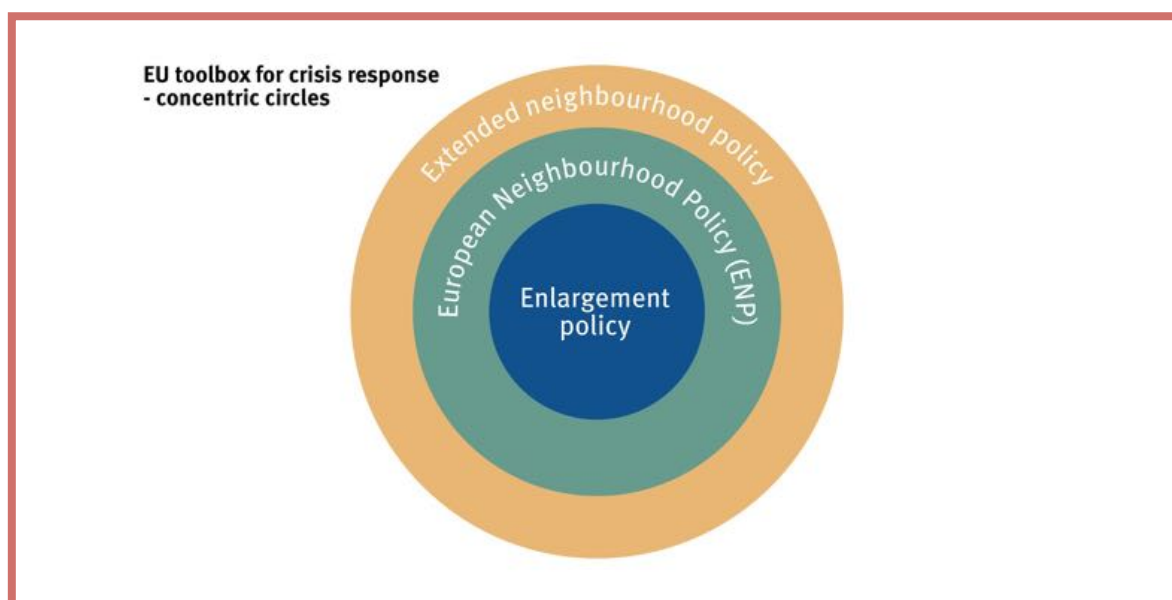
Initially, our expectations were that investigating the nature and the severity of the first two gaps (well established in the literature) would give us an indication of the EU’s impact on crisis management and its ability (or lack thereof) to contribute more effectively to problem-solving on the ground. We expected then that this kind of knowledge would enable us to provide some concrete policy advice on how to improve the Union’s crisis response and make it more efficient. These questions proved to be very relevant for a deeper understanding of the impact of EU crisis response on the ground. However, we also identified an additional gap that concerns the lack of information about the EU’s engagement among the local population. We will return to this issue later in the text and in our policy recommendations.



The cases studied in the project were selected on the basis of a range of challenges that the EU addresses (different types of crisis and different levels of crisis) and the variation in policy framework/instruments employed to respond to these challenges. The underlying assumption is that key analytical lessons can be drawn both from what works and what does not work.

The EU toolbox for crisis response can be visualised as three concentric circles, covered through:

- **Enlargement policies (Kosovo, Serbia)**
- **Neighbourhood policies (Ukraine, Libya)**
- **Policies for the extended neighbourhood (Mali, Afghanistan, Iraq)**





KEY FINDINGS

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The EU has significantly improved its capacity to act in response to crises over the past 20 years. Still, the two gaps identified above, are still far from being bridged while new gaps such as the ‘information-local ownership’ gap are emerging. In the following, we will shed light on the remaining challenges that we have identified in this project in relation to the intention-implementation gap and the implementation-perception gap, new gaps identified, and the paradoxes of EU crisis response that they produce.

The intentions-implementation gap

Since adopting a ‘comprehensive approach’ to crisis management in 2013 (European Commission and HRVP 2013), the EU has spent considerable time and energy on streamlining its approach and improving internal coordination. New and protracted crises, from the conflict in Ukraine to the rise of Daesh in Syria and Iraq, and the refugee situation in North Africa and the Sahel, have made the improvement of external crisis-response capacities a top priority. This also explains why the EU has revised both the European Security Strategy from 2003 and its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (Blockmans 2017; Rieker 2016). The EU’s ‘Global Strategy’, presented to the European Council in June 2016, aims to offer a practical, pragmatic and principled route to conflict prevention, crisis response and peacebuilding, fostering human security through an ‘integrated approach’. The comprehensive approach has been expanded beyond the development-security nexus, to attempt to encompass the commitment to the synergistic use of all tools available at all stages of the conflict cycle, while paying attention to all levels of EU action, from local, to national, regional and even the global (EU Global Strategy 2016, p. 9; Council of the European Union 2016).

While it is correct to say that the ‘capability-expectations gap’ has narrowed considerably since Christopher Hill coined the term in 1993 (Hill 1993), it has not fully disappeared. While this is partly due to higher ambitions and a persistent lack of decision-making procedures capable of overcoming dissent (Toje 2008), this is not the full story. We also need to take into account how these responses are implemented on the ground by different EU institutions and member states, as well as how other actors – local and international – enhance or undermine the EU’s activities.

For example, our findings suggest that there is still a lack of institutionalised procedures for lessons learned and best practices. While there is some degree of horizontal learning (learning from previous experiences in other conflicts and crises), mainly within the EEAS in relation to civilian and military CSDP missions and within the Commission’s DG ECHO (humanitarian aid), this is very limited compared to the rest of the area of crisis response. Horizontal learning also has its limits and may even make it more difficult to recognise the particularities of each conflict. For this, we need more vertical learning (institutionalised learning and best practices from the same crisis or conflict).

So far, this type of systematic learning is more or less non-existent. In addition, we find very little evidence of coordination with other actors on the ground to promote a division of labour. This has resulted in a certain degree of 'training fatigue' among local beneficiaries in all the countries we have looked at (Rieker & Blockmans 2019).

The implementation-perception gap

Concerning the implementation-perception gap, the overall finding from our surveys and qualitative case studies is that conflict sensitivity has not become a key concern of the EU. Although it is increasingly referred to in EU documents, it is difficult to find any evidence of this being operationalised and mainstreamed into policy and programming in any systematic manner. The very fact that thorough vertical lessons learned exercises are not systematically undertaken is also an indication that this is the case.

We find clear indications of a lack of conflict sensitivity in all three geographical areas where the EU has been engaged in crisis response.

In the enlargement area, we find that EULEX Kosovo, the largest EU civilian CSDP mission to date, has been seen as an important watchdog for preventing further human rights abuses. Nonetheless, Kosovo-Albanians and Kosovo-Serbs alike have complained of conflict or context insensitivity on the part of the EU: 'While the local institutions are reporting to EULEX, communication only goes in one direction. (...) The EU is more interested in stabilisation than in building democracy within the country' (Bátora et al 2018, p. 28). Thus, one conclusion we draw from this is that EU's broader political objectives impact the mission's legal work, which, in turn, undermines people's perceptions of the EU. The conflict of interest become obvious as some of the individuals that the general public think should be investigated as part of EULEX' work are the very same that the EU relies on as partners in the dialogue process between Serbia and Kosovo (see Osland and Peter 2019).

In the neighbourhood area, we also find a similar trend. Amplifying the EU's conflict insensitivity of the post-2011 turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa, the Ukraine crisis triggered a review of the ENP which led the EU to abandon, at least on paper, its formula of regional integration as a model for stabilisation, cooperation and growth. A more bilateral and security-driven approach has therefore dominated the implementation of the 2015 ENP Review, akin to the expression of traditional foreign policy (Blockmans 2017). This is mainly referred to as 'stabilisation', but what this label means and contains is poorly specified by the EU (Raineri and Strazzari 2019).

Whether or not one attributes conflict-triggering characteristics to the Eastern Partnership policy, the fact remains that war in Ukraine was a scenario not anticipated when the EU initiated negotiations on an Association Agreement (including a deep comprehensive free trade agreement). Russia's Putin forced Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to follow the example of his Armenian counterpart by rescinding talks with the EU in November 2013 and used the ensuing pro-European revolt as an excuse to annex Crimea and facilitate a pro-Russian rebellion in the Donbas region. This episode exposed shortcomings in the EU's awareness of the strategic nature of the Eastern Partnership.

Towards a more realist approach?

Together with the refugee and migration crisis, the instability in Libya is an illustration of the EU's tendency to tackle immediate security threats instead of focusing on longer-term solutions such as developmental state-building whose key component is administrative capacity-building through deep local ownership.

Instead, the EU runs the naval operation 'Sophia' in the south-central Mediterranean (EU-NAVFOR MED) and an EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Libya. In different ways, both constitute a short-term security approach to handle the immediate migration challenge through EU naval operations as the vessels patrolling along the Libyan and the training of Libyan coast guard officers. Some of which have been found responsible for human right abuses and complicity in running smuggling and trafficking related activities in the country (Loschi et al 2018).

Beyond these operations, the EU has launched a Trust Fund for Africa, and ECHO is engaged in Libya with humanitarian aid. In response to criticism that the Trust Fund was defined in an overly top-down manner, with very little consideration for local ownership and absorption capacity, projects have since undergone 'conflict sensitivity assessments'. However, the multi-faceted response to the protracted crisis in Libya still reveals a fragmented picture in terms of the EU's conflict sensitivity and ability to learn and implement lessons (Loschi et al 2018).

Beyond the geographical neighbourhood, the EU approach shows more 'realist' than 'normative' tendencies. The concern with fragile states in the Sahel became evident through the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel (EEAS 2011), which largely pioneered the comprehensive approach to development and security. The conflict that erupted in Mali in 2012 pushed the issue higher on the agenda, and the migration crisis in 2014/15 propelled the Sahel to top prominence in the European Council. Various actors are involved in Mali: the UN with MINUSMA; France with its operations Serval and now Barkhane; the EU with police, anti-terrorist and military training missions (EUCAP Sahel Mali and EUTM) as well as border management through the EU Trust Fund and the support to the G5 Sahel.

Despite these international 'interventions' and engagements, security in Mali is deteriorating and the conflict has spread to the centre of the country.

As many Malians have problems understanding what the EU missions entail, their anger and frustration with the French approach affects the EU. France is criticised for defining the crisis as being caused by foreign terrorist insurgencies – and that has become a convenient excuse for the political elite for not dealing with the root causes of conflict and the drivers of violence. It has been argued that, even if EUTM and EUCAP Mali were well-intended responses from Brussels-based policy-makers concerned with terrorism, trafficking and irregular migration, they have produced mixed results, due to massive staff turnover, generically defined operation plans unsuited to the local context, and the superficial, technocratic and short-term 'solutions' offered (Bøås et al 2018).

The EUNPACK studies from Iraq illuminates similar findings (see, for example, Mohammed 2018). While, in the EUNPACK case study of EUPOL mission in Afghanistan, one key finding is that the short-term training and advisory missions of this project meant that the Afghan police trained through this programme was not adequately exposed to the civilian policing content of the programme. Many EUPOL trainees expressed that had the EUPOL training programme been more comprehensive, it would have had a greater impact (see Suroush 2018; Peters et al 2018).

The information-local ownership gap

The findings we presented above are also very much in line with Ehrhart and Petretto's (2014: 192) argument, based on their study of the EU's engagement in Somalia, that 'to be fully legitimised, the process of state-building has to be based to a far greater extent on democratic procedures and local identities'. They point out that the EU has been underlining the importance of ownership without actually pursuing such an approach. In their view, external engagement has ignored the intrinsic features of Somali society and failed to leave space for local concepts, ideas and efforts (ibid: 189).

This criticism also resonates with the findings from the EUNPACK surveys and research in Iraq (Mohammed et al 2018) and Afghanistan (Suroush 2018). While people generally have a good impression of the EU, many respondents were unaware of its engagement and had difficulties distinguishing between its actions and those of individual member states. Overall, the EU is best known for its humanitarian assistance, less for its efforts in development aid and rule of law. Local stakeholders who have been cooperating with the EU claim that its activities lack impact and sustainability, held to be due to the combination of limited resources and lack of understanding of the situation on the ground.

This is further evidence of the 'information-local ownership' gap that we presented above as an emerging gap in EU crisis response; a gap that seems to become more severe when the crisis is framed mainly as requiring a security-first approach than when the programming is more in line with the more normative approach of the enlargement and neighbourhood areas of EU foreign policy.

When security and stabilisation become the driving force, issues concerning conflict sensitivity may also become of less importance to the EU, mainly, but not exclusively, because once an area or issue is securitised it also signals a certain rush to act and act decisively.

The findings from a systematic EUNPACK study of the language used to address the Union's engagement in crises and conflicts since 2000 supports this argument as it shows that conflict sensitivity is not a key concern. Another interesting finding from this study is that the Union's repertoire of tools (or toolbox) in crises response rather correspond with the European agendas of hard security, soft security, and integration,¹ and that there has been a trend towards an increased attention to security over integration in both the enlargement area and in the neighbourhood area. In the wider neighbourhood, there is also a tendency that hard security measures are getting more attention than softer security measures (Rieker & Gjerde 2019).

¹ The hard security agenda seems to be linked to words such as border management, migration, security, stability, crime, trafficking, and sanctions. The soft security agenda is associated with words such as civil society, good governance, rule of law, dialogue, humanitarian aid, and development aid. And finally, the integration agenda is linked to words such as integration, enlargement, membership, conditionality, and association agreement.

Thus, we find that a stronger security focus tends to undermine other concerns, including that of conflict sensitivity.

These findings tell us that there has been a main emphasis on EU institution- and capacity-building (strengthening the actorness of the EU) rather than on obtaining lasting results on the ground, but also that the current geopolitical context seems to reinforce the trend towards a greater focus on short-term security measures rather than long term-stability. This leads us to conclude that there are five major paradoxes of EU crisis response that the Union needs to take seriously and act on.

The paradoxes of crisis response

While the EU's comprehensive approach has potential, what is needed are concrete policy measures to tackle the gap between intentions and mixed results. This will be essential if the Union's crisis response is to have a larger impact. Paying serious institution-wide attention to the paradoxes below may contribute to such a process of reform.²

- 1 The first paradox** is that while the EU claims that it strives to make its programmes locally owned, the lessons of the EUNPACK studies from Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali show that this is challenging for the EU. Most often, local ownership in these cases means in practice essentially for the EU to seek the support of the political elite or the government. Widespread support among people on the ground has proved much more challenging. The result is intervention that may be in line with regime or elite priorities, but these are not necessarily the same as the wants and needs of the people on the ground.
- 2 The second paradox** is that while the EU aims for conflict sensitivity in its crisis response, interventions tend not to be based on a thorough analysis of the root causes of the conflict or crisis. Hence, responses are not tailor-made to the context of the conflict in question and the issues that are at stake locally. Instead of being based on a grounded micro-political analysis, the EU's response is very much a Brussels-based design with limited sensitivity for the context on the ground.
- 3 The third paradox** is that the EU claims that it seeks a demand-driven crisis response, where the needs of the population living in the conflict-zones are priority. Often, however, it is the interests of the EU that drives its response. The EU gets involved on its own premises – building state security authority – for example to halt migration – which are not always what local populations need.
- 4 The fourth paradox** is that in areas of conflict the EU crisis response is state-building through security sector reform, police reform or strengthening the judiciary as a tool to deal with non-state armed groups. However, this crisis response, since it is driven by narrow security concerns, tends to become militarised, and focused on a limited set of actors dealing with EU priorities, rather than addressing underlying structural issues which undermine the capacity and legitimacy of security institutions.

² See Drange (2019) and Bøås and Drange (2019) for elaborations on the paradoxes of EU crisis response.

Thus, instead of solving the issues at stake in many cases it enhances the original problem.

5 **The fifth paradox** is that the EU preaches long-term solutions and claims that it seeks to build sustainable peace. In practice, however, it emphasises a ‘stabilisation’ oriented approach, which often boils down to doing short-term conflict management. This happens, for example, through the strengthening of the security apparatus that lacks deep-rooted reforms in the management culture. Without this, the EU risks building the security capacity of regimes lacking in legitimacy.

These paradoxes are key reasons why the EU’s impact is limited and why its crisis response continues to produce mixed results on the ground. In the EUNPACK study, these paradoxes were most evident in the research carried out in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Mali, but we find traces of this also in the Balkan cases and in Ukraine. It is important to note that this is not unique to the EU; most other international engagements beyond the EU also frequently suffer from these. Going forward, the EU should make efforts to address these paradoxes. Co-operating more and deeper with constructive local actors and designing operations increasingly based on local needs are important, and all EU engagement in this regard must think long-term. While some actions may be favoured in the short-term, one must more critically engage with potential long-term effects. With this mind, we turn to the main policy recommendations that have emerged from our research.³

³ For detailed case-specific recommendations, please visit the number of studies from all the case countries available at www.eunpack.eu.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

SELECTED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Following on from our five paradoxes, we would suggest five items of generic policy advice that can be applied across the universe of EU crisis response.

First, the EU needs to get a better grip on what the real needs of the people on the ground are.

This can only be achieved by establishing a sound local knowledge base built on micro-political approaches to grounded data and intelligence gathering. The EU needs to establish contacts with local civil society organisations and other traditional and non-traditional sources of knowledge and information. This might also be facilitated by more innovative thinking about diplomatic representation from the EU side. Instead of high turnover of generalists, it might be better to have longer-term postings of personnel with in-depth competence and interests in the country where they are stationed. This means in practice that the European External Action Service (EEAS) in its posting system should leave aside the traditional diplomatic practice of preference for generalists and move towards a rotation system that combines area specialists with generalists. This is the only way to build institutional memory also at Delegation and programme level in these countries.

Related to this is **our second recommendation**, the EEAS must start to institutionalise systematic procedures for vertical lessons learnt.

This can be done by developing precisely the close contacts with networks involving the local groups and individuals we call for above. If this is combined with a new approach to blending area specialisation with generalists, this will enable much more efficient vertical EU uptake of in-depth knowledge of local root causes of conflict and how they can be addressed most effectively in a legitimate and transparent manner.

To achieve this, the EU must be clearer on its intentions and objectives – **our third recommendation**.

This means that the EU must acknowledge and work with local beneficiaries to overcome the ‘information-local ownership’ gap. The EU must improve its capacity to communicate clearly with a broad spectrum of the population when it is engaged in a crisis response. This will help the Union minimise gaps in expectations and should constitute the basis for a more transparent and credible platform for popular debates about the terms of the EU’s crisis response engagement with various beneficiaries. Such types of productive interaction will strengthen EU crisis response if efficient procedures for vertical up-take are in place.

However, such an approach will only work, and this is **our fourth recommendation**, if the Union realises that EU priorities are not necessarily aligned with the interests of various segments of the local population.

This is particularly evident when stopping migration or fighting terrorism tops the Union's agenda. In these cases, the main interests of the population in question may lie elsewhere and parts of the EU's approach such as improved border management may in fact be seen as a threat. This is a dilemma of external crisis response that cannot be glossed over. It must be recognised and taken into consideration, and Union representatives must actively try to work with, instead of against, local populations' views and ideas in this regard.

Finally, **our fifth recommendation** is that the EEAS and the Commission always need to combine short-term crisis response with more long-term engagement to avoid unintended consequences.

This is important in all geographical areas of EU crisis response, but even more so in the most fragile countries that the Union is involved in. Fragile countries are not only those most in need of external crisis response, but also those where it will be most difficult to get such external programming to work due to a combination of very weak domestic administrative capacity and frequently, governments without much real popular legitimacy.⁴

⁴ See Boås (2017) for a more elaborative account of the dilemmas of external support to fragile states.

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