

After the Brussels Attack: Time to Build Transboundary Crisis Management Capacity

Arjen Boin (Leiden University), Mark Rhinard (University of Stockholm) and Magnus Ekengren (Swedish National Defense University)

The recent terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, in combination with the ongoing refugee crisis, demonstrate to many the risks of increased integration and open borders. In response, the borders are closing and the walls are coming up. The European road towards integration is running into roadblocks.

It is a scenario that EU-skeptics envisioned when the European Union began to speed up its march towards integration in the 1990s. Scholars and skeptics warned that the rise of integration would create new risks: transboundary threats that do not fall neatly within the geographic borders of a country, or politely confine themselves to a well-marked policy sector.

Transboundary crises do not adhere to the response plans of national or functional authorities. To prevent and manage these transboundary risks, we also need response capacities that reach across borders. If you increase integration, in other words, you must enhance transboundary crisis management capacities.

National leaders have always been faster to enable integration than to create transboundary crisis management capacities. As a result, the development of these capacities has not kept up with the speed of integration. This gap is easily and immediately exposed in times of crisis. Examples abound: think of the Mad Cow crisis (BSE), the ash crisis, the pervasive financial crisis, the refugee flows and now terrorism once again.

After each crisis, the leaders of EU member states tiptoe around what really is a stark choice: dial back integration (thus limiting transboundary risks) or increase transboundary crisis management capacities (making sure we can handle the risks). For a long time, EU leaders refused to backtrack and seemingly opted for the latter. But grand statements were rarely followed by meaningful resources and effective implementation.

Nevertheless, European leaders managed to build what looks like the foundation of a European crisis management structure. The EU now has crisis-related agencies, prevention programs, mechanisms for response coordination, crisis centers and rapid response teams both at home and abroad. With only modest funding, European leaders have enhanced EU crisis management capacities inch by inch.

To be sure, these capacities do not suffice: they represent only an initial and rather modest set of safeguards that cannot protect against all risks produced by the free movement of people, goods and services. After the terrorist attacks in Brussels, EU leaders now face a sharp choice: either backtrack on integration or create a truly transboundary crisis management system.

This time backtrackers appear to have the upper hand. Europe's leaders have become skittish when it comes to building a more complete transboundary response system. As they do not trust the EU's capacity to protect them from the negative consequences of integration, the backtrackers opt for closing borders and building walls. They seem less concerned by what was not so long the cardinal sin of "backsliding:" reneging on firm promises to democratic values and international treaties. Their

voters prefer protection over principles, or so the backtrackers tell us. Backtracking and backsliding – it is today’s preferred solution to deal with transboundary risks.

But the promise of backtracking is a false one. The economic costs of closing borders are immense, much more than Europe can afford in a time of relentless unemployment. As any economist will explain, isolationism does not benefit economic progress. Not only is it expensive, backtracking simply does not work. A country can close its borders and make it harder (but never impossible) to let undesirables in. But many contemporary risks – ash clouds, climate change, cyber terrorism, epidemics, and financial breakdowns – do not recognize borders.

These rational arguments are a hard sell nowadays. It is much easier to promise safety through isolation – an idea that instinctively appeals to our senses. Put an extra lock on the door, fence off the neighborhood. Don’t cross the tracks, where the bad people live. But once the inevitable backsliding begins, there is no telling where it will end. Reneging on hard-earned promises to democracy in the name of crisis is a slippery slope.

The story about a European crisis management system is not self-explanatory. A transboundary system violates traditional conceptions of the state. It rejects the idea that national leaders should be endowed with extraordinary powers to manage “the exception.” It argues against the traditional notion that democracy is justifiably limited as leaders organize the wagons to face the threat coming over the border. It recognizes that these traditional conceptions do not work against modern crises.

The much more promising way forward – protecting integration and building response capacities at the EU level – requires a visionary pitch to convince skeptical publics. It is not sufficient to sell the beauties of integration if EU leaders cannot explain how they will work together to counter the inevitable risks that come with integration. Leaders must explain that a transboundary crisis management system requires giving up a little in exchange for safeguarding the greater good.

Crises provide critical junctures in the development of political systems. The Brussels attacks may well have brought us to such a juncture. Leaders can elect to build walls in the hope that modern risks somehow magically bypass their neighborhood. Or they can cooperate to build an encompassing system that will facilitate joint responses to common threats. Integration can only work when it is safeguarded. A coalition of the willing (and the courageous) must now take the necessary steps to build transboundary crisis management capacities.

Arjen Boin, Mark Rhinard and Magnus Ekengren are the authors of *The European Union as Crisis Manager* (Cambridge University Press). For more information on their research, see www.societalsecurity.eu