



Op-Ed

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# Better Early than Sorry: How the EU Can Use its Early Warning Capacities to their Full Potential

*The European Union has put instruments and tools in place to improve its early warning mechanisms. Member states must now work with EU institutions to make them more effective. One concrete step that Germany could take is to push the new EU leadership to regularly put countries ‘at risk’ on the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council.*

The European Union has always been stronger at reacting to crises than predicting or preventing them. On too many occasions the EU was lacking strategic foresight to anticipate major developments that impacted its internal and external policies. The widespread protests and their repercussions during the Arab Spring or Russia’s annexation of Crimea were as much a surprise to most European leaders and EU institutions as to other international actors, leaving them with no better options than to scramble for crisis management solutions since it was too late for preventive measures that might have had lower costs and better outcomes.

The EU’s Early Warning System ensures higher awareness of structural risks

Aware of these shortcomings, the EU has invested more resources in its early warning and early response capacities. The European External Action Service (EEAS) has put in place

its own Early Warning System in 2014. In the EU’s own words, this system is a “tool for EU decision-makers to manage risk factors and prioritize resources accordingly.” The Division in charge of the Integrated Approach for Security and Peace (ISP) within the EEAS leads this process. Every year it works with other EU institutions to identify a number of countries ‘at risk’ with a time horizon of four years. The analysis is based on a wide range of quantitative and qualitative information from internal and external sources. This includes a Global Conflict Risk Index elaborated by the EU’s Joint Research Center which evaluates quantitative indicators in social, economic, security, political, geographical and environmental dimensions. This is complemented by intelligence-based analysis from the EU’s Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity as well as qualitative input from an EU staff review and expert country analysis. The resulting list of countries ‘at risk’ is presented to the EU member states’ ambassadors in the Political and Security Committee, before EU institutions undertake a comprehensive conflict analysis and develop concrete objectives for early action.

This Early Warning System, in combination with flexible financial tools, especially the

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Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), and better intra-institutional coordination allows the EU to be more aware of structural risks of conflict around the world and have mechanisms and tools at hand to respond before the outbreak of a crisis.

While this is all well and good in theory, the practice can sometimes pose challenges to this system, especially when it has to face (geo-) political realities. When EU member states have different views on the analysis of the countries ‘at risk’ or on preventive measures, this comes to the forefront. Even though they do not decide on the final list of countries identified by the Early Warning System, their buy-in is critical to ensure effective early action. When strategic national interests are at stake, it becomes more difficult for member states to agree on a joint analysis, let alone joint action. A member state that has important (or sensitive) relations with a country on the list can have an interest in blocking political or diplomatic action at the European level. It suffices to look at the Libyan example – not an early warning country, but a telling case – to see how diverging views and strategies among member states can paralyze the EU’s abilities to prevent the escalation of a crisis.

To ensure that the information gained from the EU’s Early Warning System is translated into policy despite diverging views and interests, EU member states, including Germany, can push for collective action in three areas:

#### **Fostering joint analysis among the EU and member states**

Firstly, a regular involvement of member states in the Early Warning System and follow-up work is important. While diverging approaches to the list of countries ‘at risk’ are understandable – there is not always an obvious solution to fend off a crisis and there are limits to EU influence – it is all the more important to have a mechanism for reconciling competing views and identifying the best path forward. Both the EU and several member states have already taken steps in this direction. The EU for

instance involves member state embassies in the conflict analysis they undertake in-country. Germany and the Netherlands, which both have their own national early warning systems, initiated a European Early Warning Forum that allows European governments to engage with EU institutions twice a year on the list of countries ‘at risk’.

However, there is room for more regular informal exchanges to ensure the buy-in from member states throughout the process. EU institutions should find additional ways to take member state views and inputs into account, and all 28 national governments need to actively use these opportunities to share information and ideas. Germany could work on both ends of this process, by engaging with the EU to explore creative ways to involve member states and by encouraging the latter to contribute their analysis and expertise.

#### **Bringing early warning countries onto the political agenda**

Secondly, even with an early warning list at hand, the focus ultimately tends to remain on managing ongoing crises, with a particular emphasis on member states’ strategic interests. Drawing and maintaining the attention of politicians and high-level policy makers to countries that appear ‘calm’ remains a challenge.

An important step could therefore be a clear commitment by the incoming High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, to pay specific attention to the countries identified by the Early Warning System and to rally member states behind common preventive action. Germany should incentivize this by proposing to add one of those countries as an agenda item to the Foreign Affairs Council, where ongoing crises usually dominate the debate among European foreign ministers.

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Germany can also host informal high-level discussions on early warning countries in Brussels to foster debates around preventive action.

### **Preserving important early action tools**

Finally, during the upcoming negotiations for the new EU budget for 2021-2027, member states and EU institutions should make sure that the achievements that have been made over the past years will be preserved, specifically when it comes to flexible funding of rapid reaction and long-term preventive approaches. The proposed Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) would channel the EU's specialized funding instruments, such as the IcSP, into one single tool. Even though the NDICI proposal foresees specific pillars for Stability and Peace as well as Rapid Response, ongoing negotiations between the EU, member states and the European Parliament could result in an overemphasis of short-term crisis management support at the expense of long-term preventive and peace-building action.

As these budget negotiations will most likely be finalized under the German Council Presidency in the second half of 2020, Germany will have an important role in fending off attempts to cut or dilute budget commitments in this field.

All this shows that the full potential of the EU's Early Warning System, while an important tool for increasing Europe's awareness and joint understanding of conflict risks, is not yet being fully utilized. A higher level of political support by both EU institutions and member states might help the EU use it to better effect and become more effective in its early response to brewing crises. In recent years, Europe has seen and felt the impact of deadly conflicts around the world, several of them right at its doorstep. It should therefore be in the strategic and humanitarian interest of all member states to prevent further escalation or outbreak of violence and resulting shocks to regional stability. Member states have given the EU a clear mandate to increase awareness of conflict risks. Now that instruments and tools have been put in place, member states should work with EU institutions to make them more effective.