

STEERING THE EUROPEAN UNION THROUGH POLY-CRISES STORMS

The Role of Public Administration

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the European Union must navigate wave after wave of successive storms that form a sort of enduring “poly-crisis”. To stay the course in such stormy weather, it is essential to develop strategies for steering the European Union towards new perspectives for the future of our community of States and peoples, by responding to the needs of our citizens, co-constructing solutions with and for them, and by learning to speak with one voice as a world power in the geopolitics of tomorrow.

Over the past several decades, we were confronted with various crises of different nature, from the financial and economic crisis (2007-2009), the migration crisis (ongoing since 2015) to foreign policy crisis (Crimea, other external shocks...), the disintegration crisis caused by the Brexit (2016-2021), the legitimacy and rule-of-law crisis (in some Member States such as Poland, Hungary, etc.), the climate and environmental crisis, the health crisis with the Covid-19 pandemic (2019-2022), the subsequent macroeconomic crisis, the Russian war against Ukraine (since 2021) and the subsequent energy crisis, food security crisis, the more and more frequent natural disaster crises... and so on and so forth.

In this context, the neologism poly-crisis is frequently in use to qualify the external shocks because of which the EU Governance and Public Administration have to significantly improve and build new institutional capacities, not only to “manage” such crises but to govern and administer them with agility in all their dimensions and implications, and to develop resilience, robustness, forward-looking capacity, solidarity and rapid and reliable recovery at all levels of public governance, from subnational to national to European.

Crisis, Poly-crisis, Poly-crises storms

The notion of poly-crisis refers to the coexistence and combination of simultaneous and overlapping crises. In the recent decades, multiple interlinked emergencies have been expanding at the same time and provoked several shocks for the global, European, national, and subnational governance systems.

The term “poly-crisis” appears to have been coined, in the late 1990s, by the French sociologist Edgar Morin and his co-author Anne-Brigitte Kern, to describe the “*interwoven and overlapping crises*” facing the humanity, especially in the ecological sphere.

The term was borrowed in 2016 and 2018 in several speeches delivered by Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission (2014-2019), who recalled that the EU was at risk of jumping from one crisis to another without recovering.

More recently (2022), the notion has been used by several editorialists (e.g. Adam Tooze, from the *Financial Times*) to characterise the most complex, disparate, and cross-cutting set of challenges facing today's world.

Strengthening EU Multi-Level Governance and PA Capacity in poly-crises storms

The EU institutions (see, for example, the European Commission Expert Group on Governance and Public Administration) are working on major interrelated issues such as: Crisis Management; Multi-Level Governance; Resilient Public Administrations; Green and Digital Transitions; Evidence-Informed Policymaking; Digitalisation (AI, Big Data); The Future of Work; Skills (Upskilling, Reskilling, Green Skills, Digital Skills); Human Resource Management (HRM) Processes; Attractiveness of Public Administration; Strengthening Coordination; and Trust and Democracy.

One of the utmost important issues is to self-reflect on and improve the preparedness of our governmental and administrative institutions to timely respond to crises and their agility to handle different types of crises: from natural disasters to energy crisis reactivity, from the reinforcement of first line services to the continuity of public services in times of crisis, and of course the implementation of sectorial policies towards the achievement of a global sustainable development while ensuring better food, energy, and industrial sovereignty to the EU.

Ensuring a rapid response to crises and the continuity of public services

European leaders and citizens start to realize that we are living in an age of permanent storms. Therefore, it is our duty to better prepare ourselves to adapt to a constantly changing environment. Handling such high levels of uncertainty, fragility and unpredictability will require from our elected leaders and appointed administrators increased agility combined with in-depth understanding, professionalism, integrity and new sorts of adaptive skills and competences.

The institutional and processual arrangements designed to respond to crises will have to be refined. They will have to become citizens- and community-oriented and more integrated, a need particularly identified during the pandemic crisis that calls for better inter-institutional coordination of the decision-making processes and of policy implementation at all the layers of governance: EU, national, regional, meso-local and local levels.

Moreover, a new architecture like the Integrated Political Crisis Response Arrangements (IPCR) adopted by the EU requires several preparatory activities to ensure that the IPCR crisis mechanism works well, once activated. These activities include training on the mechanism for stakeholders, emergency mechanism, first-line services to citizens in case of crisis, sharing information about risks and planning, setting-up a network of crisis communication experts from member states and EU bodies, etc. It is undeniable that the EU institutions as well as the Member States are now working hard enough to improve the collective ability of our societies to better respond to crises and to enhance our resilience to future challenges.

Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine war, or other major calamities affect one of the basic principles of the Public Service, that of continuity, and raise the social awareness that such a continuity is nothing “evident” or “natural”, but highly depends on the dedication, or even sacrifice, of public servants. In a show of courageous response, in many countries, we have observed how lower, middle and upper rank public servants were quick to adapt and re-adjust the way in which public services are delivered, so as to minimize the negative impact of crises on individuals, families, and communities. For example, as many schools and universities were suddenly closed in compliance with nationwide lockdowns during the pandemic, teachers and education professionals rushed to provide at home learning solutions via online platforms and e-materials, where there was infrastructure to support such approaches.

In some other cases, like in the context of natural disasters, Public Administration must ensure the continuity of public services to citizens who are victims of earthquakes, water floods, and the like. For instance, the role of local public administration, working in close coordination with civil society organisations, was fundamental to make solidarity and resilience more effective after the 2021 flooding devastated southern and eastern Belgium. Similarly, several key public administrations along with local governments and civil society made possible a quick humanitarian response when the two strong earthquakes hit Zagreb, Petrinja, Glina and other towns of central Croatia in 2020.

A step forward in governing and administering poly-crises?

The EU and the institutions of the EU Member States have learned from the recent succession of crises that short-termism is responsible of unpreparedness and that a wide conversion of political decision-makers and public administrators to a “protect, prepare and transform” (PPT) culture is crucial to increase the resilience and robustness of our public institutions and of our societies.

The EU Member States, the candidate countries and other neighbourhood policy nations are currently developing strategic plans and conducting reforms aimed at ensuring a better and swift recovery from various crises affecting the functioning of our public institutions, public services, and other sectors of our economies and societies.

On the occasion of the 2023 EGPA Annual Conference hosted in Zagreb, our EGPA Permanent Study Groups, our French Speaking Seminar and our different panels and plenary sessions will address all the aspects of the major role of Public Administration in the handling of poly-crises, as well as the necessary technical arrangements and organizational reforms that are now on the institutional agenda in order to ensure the continuity of Public Service in times of growing turbulences.

Crises are obviously devastating and hit numerous victims, but at the same time they often raise the civic and political awareness on the structural weaknesses of our societies, economies and polities, and they sometimes open some “opportunity windows” which give a wider room for manoeuvre and legitimacy to our leaders in order to adopt and enforce the needed reforms to strengthen ourselves in preparation of the challenges to come. Let us hope that the EU and its Member States are now following such a reform route together, rowing towards a common horizon on stormy waters!

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More information on the Conference at : <https://www.egpa-conference2023.org/> .