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# States of crisis

**Lydie Cabane** argues for a crisis management that tackles the root causes of crisis

Crises are everywhere and so is crisis management. Across the world, governments continuously have to deal with crises and prepare for them. Besides preparing for extreme events such as pandemics, terrorist attacks and major disasters, public authorities recurrently deal with health scandals, floods, urban riots, industrial accidents, technological breakdowns, extensive opposition to mega projects, or the prolonged effects of the financial meltdown. Crisis has become a regular feature of governing today; this implies readiness to manage a range of events that hold the potential to destabilize social, economic and political fabrics.

Over the past fifteen years, numerous western states have adopted crisis management as bureaucratic reform in the wake of a series of different crises. A series of scandals and crises in the 1990s (BSE crisis in the UK, food related scandals in Germany and Belgium, tainted blood and asbestos in France) challenged states' legitimacy and efficiency. One response was the creation of agencies to tackle risks and prevent further major crises. Since then, states have

developed contingency planning, crisis rooms and permanent crisis management units across ministries at every level of government. Temporary as well as permanent structures were added on top of routine bureaucratic organizations: Within sectoral ministries, structures were added to specifically tackle crises within their specific domain, whereas structures at the top were to ensure co-ordination across multiple agencies and actors.

As part of their preparedness, these organizations and actors regularly undergo simulations, exercises and scenario planning for unexpected events. Reforms of the long-standing structures in civil security were implemented throughout the 2000s to reinforce crisis management within the state and to diffuse a culture of 'resilience' (in the UK notably). The European Union has also put forward its own set of new regulations, organizations and resources to enhance crisis management in the EU. These tools have also been diffused to member states (Boin et al., 2013).

How can we explain this upsurge of crisis management in government? The most common line of explanation points to the complexity and instability of our contemporary world. Major environmental transformation, economic globalization, complex financial systems, climate change, deregulation and emerging global governance structures have made our societies more complex and unstable, dependent on fragile networks, and highly vulnerable to even the smallest disruptions. Yet, since the 19th century, states have sought to develop ways of protecting individuals, societies and their territories against risks and hazards that threatened their existence. So what has changed? One suggestion is that scales of intervention have been modified with multi-level governance as crises are increasingly often of a 'transboundary' nature and their resolution requires interventions that go beyond national level and states' capacities (Ansell et al., 2010).

Another line of explanation suggests that

the current concern with emergencies is characteristic of a state of exception and an increasing concern over security issues and terrorism (Agamben, 2005). This perspective offers a persuasive account for the reforms that led to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in the USA in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Such concerns have also been present in Europe and contributed to the rise of crisis management at the European level and accelerated reforms of civil security at member state level. Yet, this framework does not take into account the plurality of contexts and bureaucratic ambiguities in the implementation of such policies. These perspectives also fail to address the role of experts in portraying the world as unsafe and promoting such visions.

In other words, while pointing to important aspects, many of these explanations do not fully account for what is going on. In particular, the literature on crisis often fails to take into account the role of the state. In fact, the wider transformation of the welfare state and of regulation in the current context of market-oriented government reforms and cost cutting exercises helps to shed light on the upsurge of crisis management in government. In many ways, crisis management is a response to the 'depleted state' (Lodge, 2013). Various trends over the past decades have called into question the role of the state in a globalized economy, with the emergence of supra- and sub-national sources of power that contest the state's monopoly in a range of policy domains. In the wake of reforms that transformed the role and capacities of the state and resulted in several high profile failures, crisis management offered state officials the opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to provide security and, more importantly, to decouple the reforms from failures that could undermine their benefits and justification.

Crisis management enables states to deal with the consequences, but not with the root causes of crisis. It allows the state to put forward some responses, without questioning the policy options that led

to the crisis. Leaders can easily point out to exogenous causes, to the surprise and their lack of anticipation in order to eventually (re)assure their own legitimacy and that of state institutions and the state more generally. By focusing on the risk event, the goal of crisis management is to return as quickly as possible to the prevailing order without addressing the root causes of the failures, while compensating the victims for their losses. Thus, crisis management helps to reaffirm the legitimacy of the state at exactly the time when it is put into question.

Although crisis management purports to manage a range of events, it does not help to make sense of these situations by focusing solely on their consequences. For example, after the recent terrorist attacks in France, executive leaders implemented exactly that kind of strategy: the use of emergency management and laws served to maintain the legitimacy of the executive power, but did not at all address the social, cultural and political crises that formed the background to these events. The problem with such strategy is that tackling the root causes of the events lies not within the realm of the agencies, departments or units in charge of crisis management, but befalls upon other organizations. These have little incentive or interest in trying to figure out what could actually go wrong in the policies they pursue.

By investing in crisis management, European authorities erect barriers against questioning the policy decisions that lie behind the crisis. This is not just a blame prevention strategy; it avoids suggesting that certain policies have led to failures and crises that could have been avoided, or at least anticipated. Thus, it prevents the questioning of those political reforms that have sought to reduce the welfare state by advocating self-regulation by individuals and markets. This appears clearly, for instance, in the promotion of preparedness and resilience discourses in lieu of actual risk prevention and reduction policies. Furthermore, crisis management itself adopts the language of budgetary orthodoxy in

order to suggest that public authorities have to be ready to face a wide range of threats, on the one hand, but that, given budgetary constraints, they need to make informed choices on their priorities and allocate

crisis management. It reveals how crisis management appears, not just as a response to a more complex, unstable world, or to some new security threats, but as a cornerstone of reforms of the state in this context. Understanding this is also key to promoting new ways of preventing and responding to contemporary crises affecting our world in ways that actually tackle the root causes of these events, instead of sidelining them.

## References

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**Lydie Cabane** is a member of **carr** and a research officer on the Transcrisis project. A longer and modified version of this article (co-authored with Olivier Borraz, Sciences Po Paris) will be published in September 2016 in a volume edited by D. King and P. Le Galès on *The Reconfigurations of the State in Europe* (Oxford University Press).



resources accordingly, on the other. This is all the more so the case since budget deficits have become a source of vulnerability as they provide major lenders (sovereign, international or private entities) with leverage on national policies.

Crisis management is a response to the crisis of the state in the current political and economic context. Acknowledging this is essential for making sense of



The TransCrisis project (full name: Enhancing the EU's Trans-boundary Crisis Management Capacities: Strategies for Multi-Level Leadership) is a three-year project funded by the European Union under the Horizon2020 programme. **carr** is the co-ordination partner in this network of eight organizations. Other partners involve: Crisisplan (Arjen Boin), the University of Utrecht (Femke van Esch), Central European University (Nick Sitter), Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI, Jacint Jordana), University of Catania (Fluvio Attina), University of Stockholm (Mark Rhinard) and ThinkTank Europa (Maja Rasmussen). More information can be found under the project website [www.transcrisis.eu](http://www.transcrisis.eu).