

'WORSE, NOT BETTER?'
REINVIGORATING EARLY WARNING FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION
IN THE POST-LISBON EUROPEAN UNION

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**‘WORSE, NOT BETTER?’
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EUROPEAN UNION**

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction.	5
1. The Warning-Response Problem: From Aspiration to Reality	9
2. Intelligence in the European Union	17
3. Lessons for Decision-making	25
4. Lessons for NGOs	29
5. Lessons for the News Media	39
Notes on the Authors.	47

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number and lethality of conflicts has been declining significantly since the end of the Cold War, but five new armed conflicts still break out each year. While costly peace-making, stabilisation and reconstruction efforts have helped to end conflicts, no comparative efforts have gone into preventing them from occurring in the first place. The international community appears stuck in the never-ending travails of managing crises, finding it difficult to act early to prevent new conflicts from escalating. Encouraging signs that this is changing include the United Nations (UN) promotion of the preventive arm of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the United States' efforts to improve its capacity to prevent conflicts and mass atrocities emerging from the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review. Similarly, since the launch of the Gothenburg programme in 2001, the European Union (EU) has embraced the case for conflict prevention in policy documents as well as in the Lisbon Treaty itself, making it a hallmark of its approach to international security and conflict in contrast to conventional foreign policy. Yet, it has fallen significantly short in translating these aspirations into institutional practice and success on the ground. It suffers from the 'missing middle' syndrome between long-term structural prevention through instruments such as conditionality for EU accession and development policy, and short-term responses to erupting crisis through military and civilian missions.

The Lisbon Treaty amendments – in particular the creation of the 'double-hatted' High Representative (HR) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) – are widely seen as major opportunities to make the EU more capable, active and coherent. We welcome these opportunities, especially the potential for joint threat assessment and coherence in policy, the improved presence on the ground through EU delegations and the influx of experienced diplomats from Member States. At the same time, our paper draws on research into the warning-response problem to express two main concerns: first, key weaknesses of the old system are not sufficiently addressed such as, insufficient orientation to longer-term forecasting and effective warning, privileging of crisis management against prevention and divergent dispositions among intelligence consumers. More worrying still, the new system could lead to lower receptivity and slower responses due to growing information noise, excessively hierarchical relations as well as an even tighter bottleneck in information processing and decision-making at the top of the broader pyramidal structure. We argue that warning-response will always be a challenge and it is unrealistic to get it right all of the time. However, we advance a number of recommendations addressed primarily to the EU, which could help to mitigate some of the problems obstructing warning for early action:

- to reinvigorate its commitments to conflict prevention and ring-fence institutional resources against competing demands from crisis management;
- to develop a strategic warning doctrine to deal with the uncertainties, overlaps and gaps the current system produces;
- to promote a so-called ‘customer-driven approach’ among warning producers and embrace a number of analytical techniques to improve analysis and warning impact;
- to make sure that the EEAS does not create a culture adverse to warning by replicating the overly hierarchical and formalistic culture pervading the European Commission;
- to devolve analytical resources as well as responsibilities for civilian preventive action to EU delegations and EU Special Representatives to avoid the bottleneck problem;
- to lend more financial and intelligence support to regional and local early warning systems/NGOs, particularly those which integrate warning and response under one roof.

Our paper also addresses the growing importance of the news media and non-governmental organisations for alleviating the warning-response gap. NGO staff as well as journalists can offer excellent expertise of particular countries and can communicate warnings in some circumstances more effectively than analysts within a bureaucracy. Moreover, early action sometimes requires public advocacy in order to challenge some of the disincentives to act on the part of governments and the EU. NGOs also play an important role in holding decision-makers to account for failing to act despite early, clear and well-substantiated warnings. In order to enhance the role of NGOs and the news media we recommend that:

- the EU should more systematically collect and assess information coming from NGOs and aim to formalise and regularise opportunities for sharing information such as thematic working groups;
- NGOs need to invest more time in understanding how their public communication is perceived by decision-makers and should become more alert to the reputational risks arising from ‘over-warning’, moralising and unrealistic recommendations;
- more efforts need to be made to sensitise ‘news decision-makers’ to biases, both geographical and topical, in their coverage and remind them that besides their obligation towards shareholders/owners, they have to fulfil a ‘responsibility to report’ about impending crises;
- the EU should explore how to support journalists in producing proactive and in-depth foreign affairs coverage, for example by funding organisations that could provide grants for reporting about regions under-represented in the media or issues the news media tend to overlook.

INTRODUCTION¹

The end of superpower competition stopped many so-called proxy wars and the international community invested heavily in efforts to bring old conflicts to an end.² But still about four or five new armed conflicts are breaking out each year with little change observable over the decades.³ Costly peace-making has surged and often proven effective, but no comparative efforts have gone into preventing conflicts from occurring in the first place. When prevention works it can save lives, avoid mass atrocities against civilian populations and create the preconditions for a lasting peace. Even when we leave the humanitarian arguments aside, a number of studies have demonstrated powerful self-interested arguments for why investing in preventive action pays off in terms of a conventional cost-benefit calculus.⁴ Western leaders and publics have tended to be initially reluctant to get involved in foreign countries until being forced to do so at considerably higher costs and risks as conflicts in for instance the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes regions and the Balkans have shown in the past. As Michael Browne and Richard Rosecrance have written in their book on the effectiveness of prevention: ‘The question is not whether distant powers and international organisations will become involved in trying to stop deadly conflicts, but when and how’.⁵ Hence, only conflict prevention offers an escape from the Sisyphus-like travails of crisis management, stabilisation and reconstruction.

1. The authors gratefully acknowledge funding from the European Research Council (No. 202022) for the FORESIGHT Project hosted at King’s College London. We have benefited immensely from comments received from expert participants from policy-making, NGO and news media sectors during a workshop on 15 April held at the Egmont Palace in Brussels. We are grateful to Sven Biscop for offering to host and co-organise the event. Thank you also to Richard Heinrich for editorial support. As always, any remaining errors of judgement or fact are our responsibility alone. The authors take collective responsibility for the paper, but would like to acknowledge that Chapter 2 was authored by John Brante, Chapter 3 by Christoph Meyer, Chapter 4 by Chiara de Franco and Chapter 5 by Florian Otto.

2. Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole calculate that the ‘global magnitude of warfare has decreased by over sixty percent since peaking in the mid-1980s, falling by the end of 2009 to its lowest level since 1960’, p. 1, *Global Report on Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility 2008*, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/Global%20Report%202009%20Executive%20Summary.pdf> (accessed 13 May 2011), see also Lotta Harbom and Peter Wallensteen (2009). ‘Armed Conflicts, 1946-2008’, *Journal of Peace Research*, pp. 577-87.

3. See figure 5, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/conflict.htm>; for more wide-ranging assessments of conflict prevention efforts see, Lawrence Wocher (2009). *Violent Conflict: Assessing Progress, Meeting Challenges*. Special Report 231, Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace and David Nyheim (2009). *Preventing Violence War and State Collapse: The Future of Conflict Early Warning and Response*. Paris: OECD – DAC.

4. Bruce W. Jentleson, (2003). ‘The Realism of Preventive Statecraft’, in David Carment and Albrecht Schnabel, eds., *Conflict Prevention: Path to Peace or Grand Illusion?* New York: United Nations University Press, pp. 26-45; Michael E. Brown, and Richard N. Rosecrance, eds. (1999). *The Costs of Conflict: Prevention and Cure in the Global Arena*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, Malcolm Chalmers (2007). ‘Spending to Save? The Cost-Effectiveness of Conflict Prevention’, *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 1-23.

5. Michael E. Brown, and Richard N. Rosecrance, eds., (1999), *The Costs of Conflict: Prevention and Cure in the Global Arena*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 229.

We define prevention as deliberate action aimed at avoiding future harm by tackling its causes. It is closely related to mitigation, which accepts that a potentially harmful event or process of change cannot be stopped, but harmful consequences arising from it can be minimised by precautionary measures. A distinction needs to be made between structural conflict prevention which involves a long-term strategy that is expected to yield effects over years, in contrast to operational conflict prevention. The latter can be defined as a set of tailored measures aimed at eliminating or substantially reducing the likelihood of a near-term outbreak, escalation or resurgence of violent conflict within months, weeks and days. This paper is primarily concerned with operational conflict prevention.

Over the past decade, the European Union (EU) has firmly embraced the case for conflict prevention in a number of policy documents, making it a hallmark of its approach to international security and conflict in contrast to conventional foreign policy. In 2001 the EU Commission presented its ‘Communication on Conflict Prevention’ and the European Council at Gothenburg agreed on the ‘EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflict’, both highlighting the centrality of conflict prevention as a foreign policy objective. These documents aimed at ‘mainstreaming’ prevention into various external policies and agreements with third countries, but also at implementing it across the EU’s external services, including security and defence, development and trade.⁶ Subsequently, one could find commitments to prevention in the Treaty of Lisbon, which mandated that ‘[t]he Union shall ... preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security ...’ and listed ‘peace-keeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security’ as the objectives of the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy.⁷ The European Security Strategy of 2003 demanded ‘... we should be ready to act before a crisis occurs. Conflict prevention and threat prevention cannot start too early’, and the implementation report five years later stated that ‘[p]reventing threats from becoming sources of conflict early on must be at the heart of our approach’.⁸ The drive towards preventing conflicts before they erupt has been widely welcomed because the EU has a strong and distinct contribution to make given the potency and mix of its instruments, its many delegations and the expertise of its members in various regions of the world.

Yet, the EU has fallen significantly short in translating these aspirations into institutional practice and success on the ground. The failure to mobilise preven-

6. COM(2001) 211 final; Presidency Conclusions – Gothenburg, 15 and 16 June 2001.

7. Treaty of Lisbon, Article 10a, 2c & new article 28a

8. European Council (2003), *A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy*; European Council (2008), *Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy: Providing Security in a Changing World*.

tive action in the cases of Darfur in 2003 was just one of the more high-profile instances where the EU has been behind the curve of events and tended to concentrate on crisis management, rather than prevention. Similarly, the upheavals in the Middle East with fighting in Libya and Syria have taken the EU by surprise and limited its options for a political settlement with less bloodshed. A recent study by the Initiative for Peacebuilding concluded that the EU's current efforts in early warning and response are characterised by 'short-termism and ad hoc decision-making. It lacks prioritisation grounded in evidence, and sub-optimal decision-making contributes to inefficient policy-making'.⁹ We concur that the EU suffers from the 'missing middle' syndrome between long-term structural prevention through instruments such as conditionality for EU accession and development policy, and short-term responses to erupting crises through military and civilian missions.

More worrying still, this paper details significant risks that the post-Lisbon EU will become worse at conflict prevention in some aspects, not better as it is widely expected, unless remedial action is taken. The Lisbon Treaty amendments and in particular the creation of the institution-bridging High Representative (HR) and a European External Action Service (EEAS) are widely seen as major opportunities to reform structures and put in place a more coherent and capable system of generating knowledge, agreeing on priorities and implementing action. In contrast, we point to a number of problems with the new system that risk undermining early warning and conflict prevention:

- the creation of a bureaucracy where country-specific expertise is missing or gets lost and where rules and roles are uncertain;
- the amplification of information noise and overload as more products are being shared without rationalisation;
- a hierarchical organisational culture, which discourages the articulation and fast-tracking of inconvenient warnings from junior officials and the lateral sharing of analytic products with NGOs and local populations;
- a bottleneck decision-making structure which is likely to respond far too late to early warnings and tends to concentrate even more on crisis response;
- insufficient measures to mitigate the drawbacks of receptivity due to differences in worldviews, interests, and priorities among Member States and EU officials.

9. Montanaro, Lucia and Schünemann, Julia (2011). *Walk the Talk. The EU needs an effective Early Warning system to match its ambitions to prevent conflict and promote peace*. Fride & International Alert /Initiative for Peacebuilding-Early Warning, p. 12. Available at <http://www.ifp-ew.eu/>. Accessed 13 April 2011. A further major study by the same Consortium is due to be published in autumn of 2011. We are grateful to Sebastien Babaud and Natalia Mirimanova (Saferworld) as well as Jort Hemmer and Rosan Smits (Clingendael Conflict Research Unit) for letting us access their highly informative papers mapping the Commission's and the Councils early warning and conflict prevention structures and capacities respectively as part of this larger study.

This paper has three main aims: firstly, it sets out a model for understanding the warning-response problem in Chapter 1 on the basis of what we have learnt from cases involving a range of actors, including the United States. This theoretical grounding is important, as many studies in this area are coloured by rather over-optimistic assumptions about the potential of better analysis to improve decision-making and the narrow focus on official providers of warning such as intelligence reports and indicator-based early warning systems. We acknowledge the difficulties involved in determining what good performance is given that actors do not have the benefit of hindsight and have to take decisions under conditions of considerable uncertainty. However, it is possible to identify the conditions that make these judgements more difficult and better understand why warning signals are missed, forecasts of harm not well communicated, good warnings dismissed, and action delayed.

Secondly, we draw on our research findings originating from interviews and case studies to demonstrate how many of the generic problems of warning-response are amplified in an EU setting and may in some respects become worse not better with the transition to the EEAS, or at least remain unresolved. EU-specific difficulties include setting priorities on the basis of interests as well as values, complex institutional structure and different national predispositions to countries and areas likely to be the subject of warnings. We explain these problems in more detail and look at how they have affected the performance of four types of actors within Europe: official producers of analytical products who have some warning function (Chapter 2), official consumers of these products such as policy-planners and decision-makers (Chapter 3), NGOs (Chapter 4) and the news media (Chapter 5).

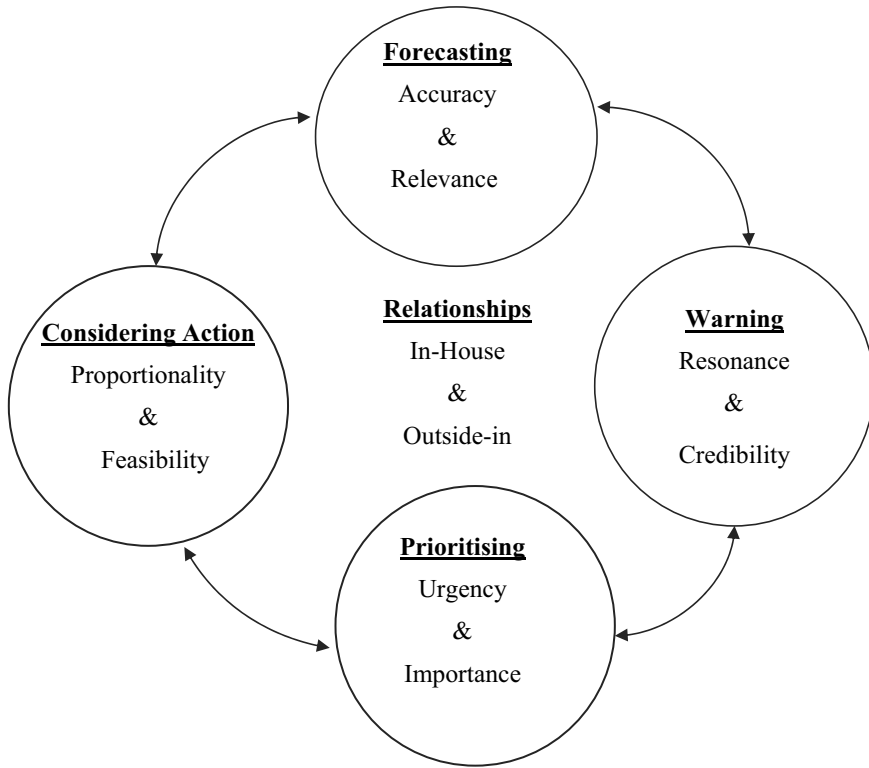
Finally, in each of the chapters we propose recommendations about how these problems can be mitigated. These recommendations are not just addressed to the EU, but also to NGOs, the news media and journalists individually, who have an important role to play in warning about violent conflict and in some cases also contribute directly to prevention.

1. THE WARNING-RESPONSE PROBLEM: FROM ASPIRATION TO REALITY

The EU enlargement process, its neighbourhood policy and some important elements of development policy are typically described as being cases of structural prevention. Operational tools range widely from fact-finding and mediation missions (as in Estonia 1992) to pre-emptive deployment of troops (as in Macedonia 1992) and targeted sanctions. These differences are highly significant as structural prevention can be planned and implemented top-down, whereas operational conflict prevention requires planners and decision-makers to respond relatively quickly to bottom-up warning signals in order to avoid risks and grasp opportunities. Warnings disrupt the normal mode of foreign policy-making but without forcing it into crisis management. Making a success of operational conflict prevention is a particularly difficult challenge for bureaucracies and individual decision-makers alike.

When the EU's High Representative Catherine Ashton talks in speeches about the need for preventing conflicts, she does not say what kind of prevention she has in mind, nor is this specified in the European Security Strategy or its Implementation Report. This lack of clarity suggests that the preconditions for different forms of prevention are neither understood nor adequately pursued. It is therefore important to explain the generic challenges involved in preventing conflicts and what we can learn from the literature about the conditions and factors that either help or hinder appropriate preventive action in response to warning. Appropriate preventive action is unfortunately difficult to measure without hindsight, which makes it all the more important to discuss generic tasks for the actors involved. We identify four main tasks as part of what we call the warning-response loop as represented by Figure 1:

Figure 1: The Warning-Response-Loop: Interlinked Challenges for Prevention¹⁰



All tasks and the actors involved in the loop are interconnected. The tasks are linked because of the bottom-up nature of the process so that failure at one stage is likely to lead to failure at subsequent stages. For instance, inaccurate forecasts which have been successfully communicated to decision-makers will inevitably affect the performance of the preventive policy being undertaken. Conversely, decision-makers can negatively influence the ability of experts to produce relevant forecasts if they do not inform them sufficiently about what information they need and when. Therefore, it would be profoundly misleading to focus only on the decision-making stage in order to ascertain the performance of preventive policy. At the same time, also the actors involved in the warning-response process are linked together through evolving relationships. Both warning producers and consumers develop a shared history as they interact and communicate, which means that actors' experiences with one another establish reputations and

10. Revised version based on de Franco Chiara and Meyer, Christoph O. (2011). 'Introduction: The Challenges of Prevention'. In: Chiara de Franco and Christoph O. Meyer (eds) *Forecasting, Warning, and Responding to Transnational Risks*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.



patterns of interaction. This, in turn, can create both incentives and disincentives for effective communication and trust. Warning producers within bureaucracies are often highly receptive to what they perceive to be political agendas as well as preferences and they consider the implications of their warning products for policy as well as for their careers. Conversely, decision-makers in the case of warning about conflict do not simply trust producers' judgements, but often remake these judgements according with the input of their own sources and worldviews. Moreover, they often consider the political utility of experts' knowledge as limited to avoid blame for failure and claim credit for success.

Task 1: Forecasting violent conflict

Early warning relies on good forecasting of the probability and severity of a latent conflict escalating into violence. On the one hand, forecasting conflict can be carried out with highly institutionalised and indicator-based warnings systems providing quantitative outputs or, on the other hand with more qualitative, semi-intuitive expert prediction of conflict dynamics. In governmental and inter-governmental organisations, the latter tend to be the prevailing approaches. Experts can be intelligence analysts, diplomats in embassies, special representatives and envoys, military personnel on missions, journalists and NGO field officers. Regardless of which method is being used and which type of expert is involved, forecasting for preventative purposes presents some generic challenges relating to accuracy and relevance.

Accuracy is the extent to which a forecast is correct in its description of potential futures, their causes, consequences, and timing. Accuracy can only be measured ex-post, even though ex-ante we can gauge experts' confidence in the quantity and quality of the available evidence coupled with the past reliability of applicable theories or models to make sense of that evidence. Genuinely novel risks are more difficult to accurately forecast as theories could not be previously tested and may not be applicable. The key analytical challenge for analysts is to know when – as in most cases – past developments can be extrapolated into the future and when – in the exceptional case – aberrant scenarios must replace them.¹¹

Main Problems:

- certain countries or regions are 'off the radar' of Western actors as personnel resources are overly concentrated on just a few other areas, leading to a lack of sufficiently early and detailed information about events that may trigger violence (ethnic riots etc);

11. Betts, Richard K. (2007). *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge & Power in American National Security*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 56.

- certain types of conflicts are more difficult to forecast than others;
- relevant information for forecasting is not shared among analysts working in different parts of the bureaucracy or intelligence organisation;
- analysts may lack the necessary country expertise and training to make sense of data (insufficient hand-over in embassies, too much personnel rotation etc) and/or may be affected by various forms of cognitive biases;
- problems also arise when countries are too much ‘on the radar’, particularly in cases of ‘frozen conflicts’ when analysts may be excessively used to high levels of tensions and recurrent skirmishes.

Relevance connotes the usefulness of the knowledge included in the warning with regard to decision-making aimed at prevention and the extent to which it relates to issues and areas considered crucial by consumers. Forecasts can lack relevance to decision-makers either because they leave out risks important to decision-makers altogether or because they are too vague in their assessment about what is going to happen when, how and with what probability. Relevance typically rises with the specificity of the forecasts and does not necessarily imply that forecasts have to be coupled with recommendations. Simply saying country “X” may become unstable without saying more about questions of likelihood, timing and the different types of specific consequences arising from it is not very helpful to policy-planners and decision-makers contemplating whether, when and how to act. The problem is that the reality of forecasting is not always compatible with the needs of decision-makers. Good forecasting of socio-political events (or non-events) is by its very nature vague and uncertain, while decision-makers like to have not only reliable, but also very precise and specific assessments of when things are likely to happen, how and with what kind of consequences: ‘In many cases, there is a conflict between what intelligence at its best can produce and what decision makers seek and need’.¹²

Main Problems:

- insufficient sharing of relevance criteria between warning producers and consumers, partly out of concern to preserve analysts’ objectivity;
- inadequate knowledge of the instruments at the consumers disposal;
- overdue pressure on experts to minimise margin of error, thus increasing incentives for vague forecasts or forecasts that are not actionable.

12. Jervis, Robert (2010). *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Task 2: Warning about violent conflict

The next stage involves the communication of a given risk to those with the capacity to act upon it. It is usually the most neglected aspect in post-mortem studies of under-reaction as investigators look for warning signs, but do not investigate whether these signs were translated into intentional communicative acts of warnings. Moreover, whether these warnings actually reached the target recipient and were understood as such is frequently not scrutinised.¹³ Just as spotting discontinuities requires analytical boldness, communicating them necessitates a certain degree of courage. A former US National Intelligence Officer for Warning advised his staff, ‘you have to be used to being the dumbest guy in the room’.¹⁴ What he had in mind was that his subordinates were not alone in thinking about the future – their customers also did it, and did it with great confidence. As outbreaks of war generally reflect discontinuities to established patterns, to warn is hence often the process of challenging the customers’ prevailing assumptions and as a consequence risk being seen as ‘out of the loop’. The challenge is to persuade the latter that the warning should be believed as credible and that it deserves further attention.

Message resonance is the extent to which a warning is tailored and communicated in a way that persuades the decision-maker to accept the judgement and interpretation of the evidence by the warning communicator. Messages about impending conflict resonate more, for instance, when they highlight those consequences that the recipient cares most about, rather than those that only the warning producer considers most important. They are also more likely to have an impact when they include evidence that the recipient considers most credible and translate analysis into a language that is understandable. Hence, warning producers need not only communicative skills but also to know how decision-makers ‘tick’, i.e. how they process information and learn, what their worldviews and assumptions about certain countries and leaders are, and on what issues they require a higher bar of proof.

Main Problems:

- warnings may not be intelligible as warning communicators are often specialised in conflict analysis but not communication, or lack sufficient knowledge about recipients to adequately tailor the message;
- bureaucratic bottlenecks may prevent speedy and direct communication;

13. Christoph O. Meyer, Florian Otto, John Brante, and Chiara De Franco (2010). ‘Re-Casting the Warning-Response-Problem: Persuasion and Preventive Policy’ *International Studies Review*, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 556-578; Otto, Florian (forthcoming) *Warnings That Were’nt: Reassessing Warnings of the Rwandan Genocide*, Foresight Working Paper.

14. Erdmann, Drew and Mendonca, Lenny (2009). ‘Focused on foresight: An Interview with the US national intelligence officer for warning,’ *McKinsey Quarterly*, September.

- there may be organisational disincentives hindering the communication of challenges to prevailing views and policies;
- there may be high dissonance between the key judgements and the customers' 'mindsets' and political inclinations.

Source credibility is crucial as decision-makers may lack either the time or ability to judge the reliability of the evidence, but also because they tend to be wary of being manipulated for political reasons. The conventional way for sources to acquire credibility is through relevant academic qualifications and/or experience of the country/region in question as well as through building up a successful track-record in analysis and warning. However, source credibility will also be a function of decision-makers' assessment of the source as politically neutral, friendly or opposed to the recipients' political beliefs. Being seen as neutral is not the only road to credibility, inconvenient messages can also be persuasive when recipients know the source's political views well and can thus compensate for biases in message content. Hence, close political advisors in national administrations tend to have higher influence than more 'neutral' intelligence analysis and military professionals and may be more trusted when warning about humanitarian consequences than NGOs relaying the same message.

Main Problems:

- some organisations may give their analysts strong incentives to 'over-warn' which will limit receptivity (cry wolf syndrome);
- whereas 'under-warning' may hinder building up a track-record;
- source credibility is generally reliant on pure chance, as impact too often depends on trusted individuals with relevant knowledge and compatible political views between warning producer and consumers, rather than on robust processes, institutional knowledge, and sound criteria for judging source credibility.

Task 3: Prioritising the warning

Given limited organisational, political, and material resources, political institutions need to decide which warnings deserve a follow-up and which ones do not. Responding to every warning in any corner of the world is a recipe for either paralysis or failure, even for a resourceful actor such as the EU. To make this judgement requires an organisation to assess:

Importance: how grave is the harm that is anticipated in absolute terms from the perspective of stated interests and legal obligations as well as in relative terms given that other issues may compete for attention and the same

resources? As violent conflict may have a range of consequences further questions arise, for instance: what is the expected scale of violence? How many and whose lives are threatened? Could refugee flows follow? Are regional spill-over effects likely? Could international or home-grown terrorism be nurtured? Could there be any implications for strategic self-interests? Could there be violations of international law and norms?

Main Problems:

- policy-planners may simply not know which criteria are being applied by senior decision-makers;
- different parts of a government (foreign affairs, development, defence, trade/business) care about different types of consequences and resolving these differences takes time and may lead to a narrowing down of the list of countries concerned to the lowest common denominator;
- warnings may focus on direct humanitarian consequences, but ignore secondary effects, which do impinge on self-centred interests.

Urgency: when exactly is the escalation of a conflict and associated consequences likely to occur? What and when is the window of opportunity? Which kind of instruments are relevant and what is the lead time required for these? And how does the degree of urgency compare to competing demands on attention and resources, especially already escalating or ongoing crises?

Main Problems:

- early warnings are notoriously vague about the timing of harm ('X is going to become a problem');
- warnings may not provide an adequate basis for thinking about different response options;
- resources for prevention are not ring-fenced against demands from imminent or current crises ('the crocodile near the canoe, not the waterfall down the river');
- urgency is sometimes defined in terms of the media calling 'to do something', which tends to be too late.

Task 4: Considering action

This task overlaps with the previous one in the sense that both negative and positive opinions about whether 'something can be done' about a given conflict influence the receptivity of organisations. The key problem to acknowledge is that preventing conflicts involves costs and risks and that doing so is a political not a technical decision, as even the distribution of aid can be construed as

siding with a party in a conflict. Preventive action in one case may send a message to other groups that Western intervention is predictable and can be provoked. These and other considerations may determine that a decision is taken that 'little can be done' in given circumstances. The two key judgements revolve around:

Feasibility: is it possible to achieve the objectives of prevention with the resources available in the short and the medium-term? How likely is it that the necessary political will can be mobilised and sustained in the short and medium-term? What are the costs and benefits of different kinds of action that could be contemplated to address the threat?

Main Problems:

- warnings are often communicated too late for the mobilisation of the available instruments;
- there is systematic asynchrony between operational and political feasibility, i.e. the optimal point of use for a given instrument is too early for it to be mobilised and sustained politically;
- decision-makers may be excessively pessimistic about political feasibility and over-optimistic about operational feasibility.

Proportionality: what are the opportunity costs of action? Is the use of resources proportional in relation to the problem at hand and to alternative uses for a different foreign affairs issue? Can the preventive action required have unintended implications of a magnitude that is greater than the anticipated threat? How can the potential consequences of preventive action be balanced against those of inaction/alternative actions?

Main Problems:

- policy/contingency planning is too often under-resourced, undervalued and under-practiced in civilian areas in contrast to military planning to respond to crises;
- policy-planning tends to take place in policy-silos (military, political economic, environmental, migration, terrorism), which means that risks/costs occurring outside the silo are insufficiently noticed;
- consideration of risks and alternatives may not take place for fear of leaking/undermining political support for action.

2. INTELLIGENCE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

With regard to *Task 1* – anticipating future threats – EU analysts face the same epistemological challenges as their national equivalents. The fundamental uncertainties and complexities of thinking about future political, social, and human behaviour do not depend on what organisation you work for. Moreover, the high number of delegations, the various CSDP missions, and the EUSR offices around the world provide the EU with a strong ‘informational infrastructure’. For long-term estimative analysis of conflict outbreak one should not exaggerate the importance of clandestine HUMINT, IMINT and SIGINT collection capacities. EU forecasting will thus not suffer from a lack of input even if Member States’ intelligence sharing remains restricted. Insufficiencies regarding the EU’s forecasting capacity lie elsewhere:

- *Lack of experience in delegations:* in the pre-Lisbon era, many of the then Commission delegations did not have political analysis as one of their prioritised tasks. Hence, the actual performance was highly dependent on having individuals with both the personal ability and power of initiative to be engaged in political analysis. Many national diplomats, recently having gained access to delegation reporting, have criticised the quality of what they have so far received. Personnel from the EU Situation Centre (SITCEN) have also in some cases reinforced delegations in certain hot spots where the analytic capacity was deemed insufficient. On a more positive note, however, the leadership of the EEAS has reportedly realised the dangers of this problem and reacted quickly by actively recruiting personnel with a political profile. The continuous transfer of national diplomats, who previously served in Member State embassies, into the EEAS is also likely to mitigate this problem.
- *Lack of long-range forecasting unit:* neither the SITCEN nor the EEAS in general have a dedicated unit tasked with horizon scanning and identifying distant risks. DG RELEX previously had a unit for ‘forward studies’, but judging by the organogram this did not survive the transition into the new service. During its lifetime, it did neither have a specific ‘conflict profile’ nor receive the resources it would have needed to continuously maintain a global outlook. The key benefit of a long-range forecasting unit is that its analysts have the time and skills necessary to combine a range of methods – qualitative as well as quantitative – when compiling their products and can more easily integrate the perspectives of both inside and outside experts and organisations, e.g. NGOs working on the ground (see below).
- *Alternative analysis – limited efforts:* a key debate in the US Intelligence Community evolves around how analysts can probe their own presumptions and develop alternative hypotheses about future risks. Unfounded assumptions guiding conclusions have been the recurring explanation to a range of

intelligence failures in the past and led to proactive efforts to improve analytic performance through both structured techniques and outreach exercises. The application of structured techniques (see below) has so far not been sufficiently promoted in the EU context. Analysts working in the EU have explained this by referring to limited resources.

For *Task 2* – warning communication – EU warners are forced to tackle obstacles that are more complex than at the national level. As unanimity is required in matters of foreign policy and security, all Member States must normally accept a given warning in order for a response to come about. The European Security Strategy is correct in stating that ‘common threat assessments are the best basis for common action’.¹⁵ However, a common warning impact is difficult to achieve – especially at early stages when signals are weak and the uncertainty remains high. Some inherent factors that together account for this are:¹⁶

- *Contrasting mindsets*: a mindset can be defined as a person’s ‘mental model or paradigm of how government and group processes usually operate in country “X” or on issue “Y” [and is based on his or her] accumulated knowledge of past precedents, key players, and decision-making processes’.¹⁷ While mindsets certainly may differ between customers on the national level, research in political psychology shows that they generally do so to a higher extent in multinational settings. That is, a multinational consumer body contains a greater variety of understandings and views of a given country or issue than its national equivalent. A warning is hence likely to have a better fit with the mindsets of some Member States and less with those of others.
- *Diverging interests*: in comparison to other forms of intelligence, warnings have a closer link to action and heeding them will always interfere to some extent with the implementation of current and planned policies. When this is seen as an opportunity, for instance by being conducive to other desired policy changes, warnings have a higher likelihood of influencing the thinking of customers. When this is not the case, they risk falling prey to distorted interpretation and selective attention. It is a truism that interests often diverge among EU Member States. Consequently, just like their cognitive equivalents, political predispositions decrease the chances to achieve a common warning impact: the policy response reflected by a warning may support the preferences of some and subvert those of others.

15. European Council (2003). *A Secure Europe in Better World: European Security Strategy*.

16. Brante, John (2011). ‘Why the EU Does (Not) Heed Warnings: Lessons from the Russo-Georgian War of 2008,’ *Article Under Review*.

17. Davis, Jack (2008). ‘Why Bad Things Happen to Good Analysts.’ In: Roger Z. George and James B. Bruce (eds), *Analysing Intelligence: Origins, Obstacles and Innovations*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, p. 160.

- *Different source preferences*: a key factor determining the impact of a warning is obviously the perceived credibility of its producer. Customers of intelligence rely on a large number of different sources of analysis. If producers have a low standing among these, the success of their warnings will depend on the extent to which they say the same as more trusted information providers. There is a tendency in the EU, especially among large Member States, to rely more on their own national sources than those of other Member States or common multinational ones. As a result of the cognitive and political predispositions mentioned above, the judgements of analysts from different countries are in many cases likely to diverge along national lines. Hence, contrasting source preferences may further decrease the chances for a common warning impact.
- *Negative warning culture: Disincentives to Warn Early and 'Honestly'*: the above obstacles also have a secondary effect as they produce disincentives to warn early and incentives to water down analytic messages to give them a more general fit. That is, customers do not become aware of the producer's judgement as early as they could have or in its original form. Having experienced the negative impact of the above factors, analysts in multinational settings are inclined to wait to communicate their judgements until these are made more certain by events on the ground and therefore will have a higher likelihood to achieve a common impact. If this is not possible and analysts are asked to make a call straight away, an alternative effect of this knowledge may be that judgements are phrased in a way that they do not strongly object to any of the cognitive and political inclinations represented among the customers.

Recommendations: A Warner's Perspective

What can be done to overcome these obstacles and improve the track record of warning providers in the context of the EU? Before suggesting recommendations, some words of caution are called for regarding often seen approaches to the improvement of warning processes:

- *Limits of reform*: the common response to past warning failures has been organisational reform. Most post-mortem investigations have provided suggestions for how to streamline intelligence communities, improve inter-agency co-operation, and centralise responsibility. The history of the US Intelligence Community provides numerous examples of this – from Pearl Harbor to 9/11. However, the recurrent lesson from these is that warning failures keep occurring despite reforms. That is, the obstacles to success do not depend on structure but rather the nature of estimative intelligence and the influence that psychology and politics have on the production and communication of it. Consequently, while the changes made in EEAS may not be

negative, it is dangerous to assume that they will necessarily improve the link between early warning and preventive action.¹⁸

- *More information does not mean increased impact*: to encourage Member States to become more prone to share intelligence and to improve the EU's own collection capacities are desirable steps and will – to some extent – improve analytic output. However, given the inherent uncertainty and complexity of estimative analysis and the unavailability of erroneous judgements, the obstacles mentioned above will continue to limit receptivity. There is no way to *a priori* ascertain analytic success, and an accurate warning is as likely to have an impact as an inaccurate. Indirectly, the success rate of warnings could be improved by a higher 'batting average' and thereby credibility in the eyes of consumers. Still, failures are more memorable than successes as they are often followed by negative consequences while successes are not, and one wrong call can easily ruin a solid track record.

While acknowledging that no silver bullets exist and stressing the need of limited expectations, some recommendations can nevertheless be put forward concerning the EU's forecasting capacity, some of which include organisational aspects. These propositions should also be advantageous for *Task 2*:

- *Institutionalise a pre-deployment training programme*: bearing in mind the alleged low quality of the current delegation reporting, the EEAS would be helped by letting its deployed diplomats attend a short but comprehensive training programme during which the basics of political analysis and reporting are dealt with. Common analytic pitfalls and cognitive biases should be highlighted and techniques provided for how mitigate their influence.
- *An EU 'Intelligence Committee' and 'Intelligence Officers'*: to remedy the lack of a dedicated long-range forecasting capability as well as to increase the credibility of warnings, the EU would be helped by establishing an equivalent to the US National Intelligence Council (NIC). An 'EUIC' could be constructed around a number of high level 'Intelligence Officers' each being responsible for a geographical or functional area. Like in the US, these 'EUIOs' would be drawn from wide range of backgrounds (e.g. national and private intelligence, diplomacy, business, military, academia, journalism, and NGOs) on the basis of their proven expertise rather than nationality. They would have direct access to the High Representative and the Political and Security Committee when needed and the aim would be to establish the same level of credibility that some EUSRs have managed to build up, but at the same time not be involved in the implementation of policies. The division of labour with the SITCEN would be that the former focused exclusively on the mid-term to long-term perspective while the latter would be fully responsible

18. Betts, op. cit., pp. 142-158; Jervis, op. cit., pp. 182-186.

for current and short-term intelligence production as well as operational support for CFSP/CSDP missions.

- *A professional track for assessment staff*: like in the UK, the EU would benefit from establishing a separate professional track for analysts alongside the operational staff. Filling the ranks of both the SITCEN and a potential 'EUIC', such staff could be properly trained and gain the experience necessary to build up a long-term track record. The importance of training area expertise has been recurrently stressed in the context of the US Intelligence Community.¹⁹
- *Warning staff*: it would be advantageous to develop a smaller warning staff, also reflecting the US model. This staff, comprised of senior analysts not personally in need of maintaining a track record, would be charged with highlighting warning signals that are seen as too weak for regular analysts to communicate. Internally, it could have a Red Cell/Devil's Advocate function and proactively challenge conclusions and assumptions by the regular staff.

For *Task 2*, it is here argued that improvements can be made by promoting what the US Intelligence Community labels 'customer-driven intelligence'.²⁰ The 'customer-driven' approach rests on the premise that so-called 'over-the-wall' warnings need to be avoided as far as possible and be replaced by an active engagement in the customers' own anticipatory thinking. Some of the suggestions presented below have positive implications also for the quality of analysis:

1. *Knowing Predispositions*

Firstly, it is necessary to recognise that warning is not only about accuracy, it also 'involves understanding the decision-makers and how they process information; knowing their mind-set, what they perceive to be the risks ahead, and where they are confident about the future'.²¹ Moreover, it requires an appreciation of their political inclinations and constraints as well as – if possible – what they are told by other trusted sources. In multinational settings, this stage further calls for an understanding of where Member States differ from each other. A deeper knowledge of predispositions can be gained by:

- *Using structured analytic techniques*: in order to improve analysis, scholars and practitioners of intelligence have in recent years developed a large

19. Russell, Richard L. (2007). *Sharpening Strategic Intelligence: Why the CIA Gets It Wrong and What Needs to Be Done to Get It Right*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 119-148.

20. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2008). *Vision 2015: A Globally Networked and Integrated Intelligence Enterprise*, p. 9.

21. Schwartz, Peter and Randall, Doug (2007). 'Ahead of the Curve: Anticipating Strategic Surprise,' in Fukuyama, Francis, ed., *Blindside: How to Anticipate Forcing Events and Wild Cards in Global Politics*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, p. 104.

number of techniques that analysts can use to clarify their own thinking and assumptions. Some of these methods (e.g. ‘Red Hat Analysis’ and ‘Key Assumptions Check’) can be modified and used to structure discussions about consumers’ predispositions. If such discussions were held on a regular basis, warners would have a better foreknowledge of what obstacles their products face.²²

- *Promoting staff exchanges and seconding producers*: letting intelligence analysts serve in policy-planning units and vice versa for shorter periods as well as seconding a producer to a customer organisation on a more permanent basis would be beneficial in this regard.
- *Observing meetings*: even if active attendance is not asked for, it is helpful for warners to sit in during policy deliberations and observe how consumers think and where their views differ.
- *Asking consumers*: if feedback is not provided on the consumers’ own initiative, it is important for producers to actively seek explanations as to why warnings are not accepted or prioritised.
- *Conducting post-mortems*: most of such exercises focus on the analytic performance of producers. Expanding this scope by explicitly evaluating the impact of warnings is highly desirable and could highlight when and how products fail or succeed.

2. Using Predispositions

The next step is to ‘anchor’ warnings in the knowledge about consumers’ predispositions.²³ That is, without changing the core analytic messages, warners are helped by an ability to customise warnings. This type of cautious tailoring can be achieved by:

- *Bolstering and probing assumptions*: when compiling products, analysts should try to bolster assumptions that are seen as correct by providing supporting evidence and – more importantly – point to weaknesses in faulty ones by including disconfirming facts.²⁴ That is, they must proactively try to influence the customer’s anticipatory thinking and seek to lower the barriers to receptivity.
- *Displaying issue linkages*: if producers know which issues customers see as important and urgent, they can increase the impact of warning by highlighting the linkages to these issues, for instance by emphasising risks to national security, impact on diasporas, or domestic industries. In a complex world,

22. Heuer Jr, Richards J. and Pherson, Randolph H. (2011). *Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis*. Washington D.C.: CQ Press, pp. 183-188, 197-200.

23. Chan, Steve (1979). ‘The Intelligence of Stupidity: Understanding Failures in Strategic Warning,’ *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 73, No. 1, p. 179.

24. May, Ernest R. and Zelikow, Philip D. (2006). *Dealing with Dictators: Dilemmas of U.S. Diplomacy and Intelligence Analysis, 1945-1990*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 211-212, 137-165.

issues are seldom isolated and multiple connections and implications arising from a single phenomenon can often be identified.

- *Considering the bureaucratic level:* another consideration when customising warnings is to think about the level in the bureaucracy one is addressing. For example, when engaging with consumers on lower levels who would be involved in the implementation of preventive policies, it may be a good idea to provide more instrument-focused warnings. By this is meant warning forecasts that include variables that can be manipulated by the policy instruments at the consumers' disposal. Moreover, it may also be helpful to warn lower levels in the bureaucracy earlier and in this way sensitise them to the anticipated harm even if the predictive certainty at this stage is low, and thereby possibly increasing the lead time for the implementation of a response.
- *Considering the desired level of impact:* finally, it is important to consider what level of impact one is trying to achieve. For instance, if the aspiration is for customers to notice the warning, a rather clear and simple message may be needed that quickly appeals to their immediate concerns and thereby can be singled out among other incoming messages. If judgements are noticed, the producer can compare the warning to other potential threats, make analogies to previous incidents, and by this display its comparative importance and need of prioritisation. When this is achieved, it may be important to provide consumers with analysis that help them mobilise support among other actors.

3. *Approximating Predispositions*

It is further helpful to think about how to approximate predispositions and by this pre-empt disagreements between Member States. This aim can be promoted by establishing:

- *Joint seminars to discuss analytic issues:* to occasionally have the possibility to discuss broad assumptions and where they diverge may be a way to promote a better understanding for one's own and others' biases. Structured techniques may be employed also for this.²⁵
- *Consumer handbooks:* furthermore, the long-term effects of predispositions may be mitigated by simply explaining their influence to recipients. This could be done by so-called consumer handbooks. In the US, these are long used but have been rather cursory and not gone much beyond explaining the intelligence cycle, the structure of the various agencies, and what types of products they offer. It would be helpful to develop these handbooks further

25. Heuer and Pherson, *Structured Analytic Techniques*, op. cit.

and discuss obstacles to receptivity and what a successful intelligence-policy relationship may look like.

4. Enhancing Actionability

The ongoing debate among both practitioners and scholars of intelligence about how to improve the actionability of products has yielded insights about ‘best practices’, such as:

- *Common standards for expressing probability*: the father of American intelligence analysis Sherman Kent famously underscored that consumers may understand expressions of estimative probability very differently.²⁶ Standardised concepts therefore had to be developed. In multinational settings that have several working languages and a multitude of official languages, this seems even more called for.
- *Active role in post-warning process*: this paper also supports a more proactive role for producers after their judgements have been delivered. In case these have failed to achieve an impact, warners should try to repeat their message albeit trying it from a different angle. If they are successful, analysts could make important contributions to the process of constructing an appropriate response. Techniques have also been developed for this kind of decision support (e.g. ‘Complexity Manager’, ‘Force Field Analysis’, and SWOT Analysis).²⁷
- *Common standards for what qualifies as actionable intelligence*: what is considered actionable intelligence may vary from country to country depending on their respective intelligence cultures. In an organisation such as the EU it may hence be important to develop joint criteria, for instance regarding the extent to which policy options should be included in products.

26. Kent, Sherman (1964), ‘Words of Estimative Probability’ in Steury, Donald P., ed., (1994), *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays*. Washington DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency.

27. Heuer and Pherson, op. cit., p. 271-290.

3. LESSONS FOR DECISION-MAKING

This section focuses on the challenging tasks surrounding the prioritisation of warning messages and decisions about whether, when and how to act. The focus on policy-planners and decision-makers in this section should not detract from the argument made earlier that the success of warning-response depends to a significant extent on the nature of the relationship between warning producers and consumers. This can, indeed, facilitate regular dialogue, mutual respect, and fast-track personal warning but also, on the contrary, hinder warning success when there are strong hierarchical relations that punish bottom-up questioning of dominant assumptions and a culture of blame which makes analytical judgements under conditions of uncertainty very difficult.

Problems Affecting Warning-Response in the EU

When taking stock of the EU's ability to respond, one can note that it has improved quickly in a number of areas, including the rapid financing of a range of pre-crisis initiatives through the Instrument for Stability or the civilian response teams that assist EU Special Representatives. The EU's deployment of monitors in Georgia and as well as the ESDP missions in the DRC (Artemis) and Chad have arguably also prevented an escalation or resurgence of violence. While a lot can be said about how to further improve the effectiveness and speed of deployment of preventive instruments (e.g. 'standing civilian expeditionary force, civ-mil human security corps, etc), this section focuses on the EU shortcomings with regard to prioritisation and mobilisation before the coming into force of the Treaty of Lisbon. It then addresses particular challenges we see with regard to the European External Action Service (EEAS).

Long-standing & pre-Lisbon problems:

1. It is well-known that the EU struggles more than most states to establish priorities for external action and implementing them consistently across different geographic contexts. EU strategic documents are often vague on key issues because agreement among Member States would otherwise not be possible. This problem is also visible in the area of conflict prevention and with regard to the crucial question of what kind of criteria should be used to prioritise resources. For instance, the six-monthly watch-list of countries at risk of instability needs to be agreed by all Member States, which means that particular countries can be vetoed, while other countries are placed high for reasons unrelated to the risk of instability. The politicisation of the watch-list as well as its length of 40 plus countries means that the organisation uses informal watch-lists instead. There is no open discussion, not to mention

- agreement, about the criteria that should be used for the prioritisation of countries that deserve most attention from the EU.
2. The second major area of concern for judgements of urgency is that generally organisational receptivity to early warnings is much lower than to late warnings. This generic problem has been exacerbated in the case of the EU because of the political signals that were sent under the previous High Representative who sought to enhance crisis management and build-up military prowess and operational experience. In the Commission, conflict prevention enjoyed a high level of prioritisation, but was hindered by co-ordination problems between DGs. So far it is unclear to what extent the new High Representative wants to continue this set of priorities or whether she intends to send a different signal about the relative importance of prevention as compared to crisis management.
 3. Judging the feasibility of preventive action is vastly complicated because different instruments are owned by different institutions as well as Member States and require different levels and procedures of authorisation. The complexity of the EU's institutional structure and the large number of actors with a say implies that feasibility judgements are difficult and there is little scope for flexibility in response to changes in dynamic conflict situations, leading to a fragmented, slow and unresponsive process of policy-planning. Furthermore, judging the potential effectiveness of these instruments on the ground requires in-depth geographic and issue expertise, which is dispersed across the system or not available at all. There are no robust procedures for warning-response, which means that too much depends on individuals and their expertise. This setting tends to slow down response and impede consistently high-quality judgements on feasibility and proportionality.

The creation of the EEAS, made possible by the Treaty of Lisbon, has often been portrayed as a solution to the problem of inconsistency and slowness in response. We see, however, that it may create particular risks for warning and preventive action:

1. By bringing together more products of analysis and political reporting from across the whole of the EU system as well as Member States, analysis may not become better nor agreement easier. The risk is that without rationalisation, the 'noise' in the system would simply increase. This would make the difficult job of picking out weak signals and prioritising warning messages of various kinds even more complicated.
2. If organisational culture is a key factor for ensuring that more junior officials with relevant expertise about a country are encouraged to speak out and be listened to, we are concerned that the sheer increase in size will lead to a strengthening of hierarchical relations and restrictive formal and informal communication rules. This will hinder the building up of trust and under-

standing between producers and consumers of warning and as a result close-down opportunities for fast-tracking warnings and using informal channels of communication. This could lead to less warning as well as to a mismatch between producers and users expectations.

3. A larger entity with the new double-hatted HR on top increases the risk of decision-bottlenecks as compared to the old system, which suffered from incoherence but allowed different parts greater autonomy for action. In conflict prevention it can sometimes be better to trade-off perfect co-ordination of instruments for speed of reaction. The risk is that opportunities to intervene early will be missed while waiting for the green-light from the top, which may take too long in a pyramid with a much broader base than before. Moreover, the EEAS may create new ambiguities as to whether it is the High Representative or the Political and Security Committee who is the main consumer of warnings.²⁸

Potential Avenues for Improvement

1. *Empower decision-makers other than the HR and the PSC*: under the current system it is unrealistic to expect completely joined-up government and co-ordination on conflict prevention issues within a reasonable amount of time given the bottleneck problem with the HR and the disincentives on national governments to act early. This means that:
 - the EU should seek to empower other first-hand responders such as local community leaders or NGOs and encourage the setting up of local and regional citizen-based warning and response systems. They have often both the interest and the instruments to act early;
 - the EU should think about whether it cannot delegate more power to actors with in-depth expertise of a country/region such as EU Special Representatives. These are particularly suitable to conduct quick and well-calibrated preventative action. Their mandates and resources should be strengthened, not the opposite;
 - similarly, ambassadors in EU delegations, together with ambassadors of Member States as well as non-EU states, can play an important role in conflict prevention when given moderate resources and political encouragement to do so. Finally, core groups of Member States could be the right early responders in certain countries, so encouraging co-ordination between them and involving them at an early stage could help ease the bottleneck problem.

28. We are grateful to Eva Gross (VUB) for highlighting that the transition to the EEAS has created at least temporarily a bureaucracy-in-flux in which warning-responses processes are hindered by uncertainty over institutional rules and roles.

2. *Reinforce the message that prevention is a priority*: bureaucracies are highly sensitive to leaders' articulation of their priorities in public discourses, but also to their decisions on the allocation of internal resources and the way key personnel are rewarded. While operational prevention has already been a priority in strategic documents, it was not always a priority in public discourse and institutional resource allocation and practice. What could help to change this are: (a) speeches on the topic by key EEAS officials; (b) ring-fencing resources for prevention rather than crisis management; (c) creating new instruments focused primarily on prevention; (d) regular analysis of and reward for preventive success.
3. *Creating an organisational culture that values expertise wherever it is located*: the creation of the EEAS is a unique opportunity to create an organisation that is better than conventional ministries of foreign affairs in how it develops and uses expertise. Conventional MFAs have traditionally been very hierarchical, unforgiving of errors and sceptical of challenges to consensus views. On the one hand, the EU needs to value the country and regional expertise of individuals who have their ear-to-the ground and provide them with channels to articulate warnings through less formalised routes (e.g. warning concerns papers, regular discussion of wildcards). Warning should not become part of an institutional/issue silo, but the responsibility of geographic desks. On the other hand, the EEAS should develop more sophisticated systems of knowledge and information management, which do not just seek to process more information and increase accuracy, but also involve decision-makers closely in the kind of analysis and products that are considered credible and relevant.
4. *To be strategic in where to act and where not*: successful conflict prevention depends on being strategic on where to say 'no', for instance to many of the calls for action in current crises as well to warnings about conflicts that are not considered sufficiently important in terms of their consequences to the EU. If the EEAS should become an influential actor and not be dismissed as an obsolete organisation, a success in the short or medium-term is desirable. One possible avenue for this would be to take over the chairmanship of the Minsk Group and make a renewed attempt to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This is a burning issue where a proactive EU role is imperative given the mounting risks of another inter-state conflict in its neighbourhood.

4. LESSONS FOR NGOS

Although the extent of their influence is contested, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are arguably important providers of both early warning and response:²⁹ By both location and activity, NGOs are often the first to notice increasing tensions and to intervene as they usually have a wealth of information regarding the conditions and grievances that give rise to violence and the capacity to respond promptly even if not always exhaustively. In particular, NGOs' first-rate information and situation assessments can complement intelligence services' products and do represent an invaluable resource for regional and international agencies that do not have their own intelligence capabilities.

Today, the principle of co-ordination and co-operation with NGOs seems to characterise both national and multinational contexts. However, partnership between NGOs on the one side and governments and international organisations on the other is problematic. Information produced by the former is not always directly usable by the latter and the quality of their interaction frequently depends on the specific relationships between key individuals as well as on the characteristics of particular crisis situations.

The EU has managed to develop some mechanisms of co-operation with NGOs in the context of crisis management and structural conflict prevention, *but co-ordination and co-operation with NGOs geared to the production of quality situation assessments for operational conflict prevention remain under-developed.*

1. NGOs' contribution to Early Warning: Assets and Problems

The major international NGOs have a solid and important presence in conflict areas around the world. They substantially contribute to structural conflict prevention as well as to mitigating the consequences of war for civilians. International and local NGOs work in those regions to support economic development, environment protection, defence of human rights, improvement of health conditions, arms control, or mitigation of ethnic tensions. Some have even taken up concrete activities in the field of early warning and conflict prevention as a reaction to the tendency of governments and governmental organisations to do 'too little too late'. Five broad categories of NGOs can be identified that offer potential contributions to early warning:

29. Jentleson, Bruce (1996). 'Preventive diplomacy and ethnic conflict: possible, difficult, necessary', *University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Co-operation Policy Papers*, no. 27. University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Co-operation, La Jolla, p. 13.

1. Human Rights and other advocacy groups;
2. humanitarian and development organisations;
3. 'Track Two' diplomacy groups;
4. academic or private providers of forecasting and early warning-response systems;
5. academic research groups or other providers of analysis and assessments for conflict prevention.

These organisations are sometimes the only sources of information from which the international community can learn about a crisis situation where international links are largely non-existent, such as in the case of Cambodia throughout the 1980s or, more recently, Sudan and Congo.³⁰ DeMars even claims that humanitarian NGOs are major sources of information on all emerging conflict and humanitarian crises.³¹ This is normally ascribed to two main factors: (1) in some conflicts, NGOs are the only actors with access to remote rural areas where violence, and therefore humanitarian need, are concentrated; and (2) NGOs are deemed more credible, apolitical³² and independent than other actors which may be present in the field, like local and international journalists, local politicians or representatives of the conflict parties.³³ NGOs have also been at the forefront of development and deployment of the so called 'third generation' or 'fourth generation' systems of early warnings. These are 'micro-level' systems whose monitoring and analysis are both conducted within a conflict region and whose objective is not mobilising 'Western' countries but giving a local civil society information, tools and methodologies to mediate, resolve and transform conflicts, especially the inter-communal ones.³⁴

At the same time, NGOs often understand their role as being watchdogs or antagonists of governmental organisations involved in conflict prevention, which is not only an inevitable but also a necessary and important feature of any democratic society. Not surprisingly, NGOs favour the development of third and fourth generation systems of early warning: they imply that local communities are empowered to get out of harm's way and that response becomes embedded in the warning and independent from the political decisions taken far away from the conflict region. In sum, co-operation and collaboration between

30. Bakker, Edwin (2001). 'Early Warning by NGOs in Conflict Areas,' in Bas Arts, Math Noortmann, and Bob Reinalda (eds.), *Non-State Actors in International Relations*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 263-277. Also available at: <http://www.kun.nl/cicam/early-warning.pdf>

31. DeMars, William (1995). 'Waiting for Early Warning: Humanitarian Action after the Cold War', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 8, p. 398.

32. Jentleson, op. cit, p.13.

33. Ibid.

34. Rupesinger, Kumar (2009). *Third Generation Early Warning*, Colombo: The Foundation for Co-Existence.

NGOs and governmental institutions remains problematic. Not only is it unclear to what extent this is desirable, but also if and along which lines it is possible.

In support of the idea that co-operation between governments and NGOs in early warning is advisable, the assets of NGOs, as compared to national and international governmental institutions, are numerous:

- deeper knowledge of regional and local issues, cultures and relationships than national or international organisations³⁵ due to their stable presence on the ground. Most NGO personnel manage to develop significant regional expertise because they are not forced to rotate as frequently as diplomats. Moreover, NGO personnel are often better trained than other field observers like journalists or diplomats;
- greater ability to function in adverse circumstances due to a more flexible and less hierarchical and bureaucratic organisation and structure;³⁶
- greater ability to sense trouble at early stages and take steps to avoid it – indeed it is of vital importance for them to be able to foresee trouble and to be prepared to evacuate their personnel when tensions escalate into violent conflicts;³⁷
- more incentives to sound the alarm bell due to a different organisational culture and multi-authored or de-personalised products;
- lower threshold to push an early warning than officers or departments within governmental organisations;
- lower risk of ‘shoot the messenger’ penalties or being blamed for the bad – even if accurate – news they bring;
- better capacity of rapidly spreading information to large audiences, either directly through their members or indirectly through their contacts with the media.

Other elements, instead, do suggest that the risks associated with NGOs assuming an informing and early warning role are numerous:

- many domestic or international NGOs in troubled regions do not know how the policy-making process works and formulate idealist and impractical recommendations;
- some NGOs make money out of services that are most needed when a conflict escalates and may not always be objective when signalling an increase of tensions or disputes;

35. Ibid.

36. Bakker, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

37. Ibid.

- NGOs that operate regularly in a specific crisis area may develop their own agendas that often do not conform to those of parties to the dispute and of governmental or intergovernmental organisations;³⁸
- lack of awareness of the so-called ‘cry wolf syndrome’ can cause NGOs to produce too many warnings, which undermines policy-makers’ and journalists’ cognitive ability to notice the most relevant warnings.

On the one hand, if co-operation is not developed, receptivity to warnings by NGOs cannot be improved and a significant risk remains that important warnings issued by NGOs are neglected by their intended recipients. On the other hand, if co-operation goes too far it may have a negative impact on NGOs’ ability to exercise their accountability role as well as on their primary activity – especially when this is not strictly conceivable as conflict prevention – and in particular on:

- their perceived or actual neutrality/impartiality;
- access to local partners;
- control over sensitive information for humanitarian action.³⁹

It may also have a negative impact on governmental institutions with no intelligence capability as they may rely too much on NGOs’ information and assessment and/or have too high expectations about their quality. NGOs’ ability to produce relevant warnings has indeed some important limits:

- many domestic or international NGOs in conflict areas are careful in issuing warnings that are critical of the political authority on which they depend to operate in the country. Some of them even have to develop forms of co-operation with the host country to carry out their activities and are not prepared to put this at risk when issuing a warning;
- NGOs may be reluctant to provide information that can be used to undermine the position of one of the conflict parties and generate allegations of spying and heightened dangers for their field staff⁴⁰ – the risk of retribution may be particularly high for local NGOs;⁴¹
- warnings by NGOs are often the product of an inherent tension between researchers and advocates: the analysis is used as a tool by the advocates and not as basis for the advocacy. This often causes the warnings to be ideological more than ‘scientific’;

38. Ibid.

39. Bakker, op. cit, p. 271.

40. Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (1997). *Preventing deadly conflict*. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

41. Rotberg, Robert (1996). ‘Conclusions: NGOs, early warning, early action, and preventive diplomacy,’ in Robert Rotberg (ed.), *Vigilance and Vengeance. NGOs preventing ethnic conflict in divided societies*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, pp. 263-268.

- warnings by NGOs are often transmitted via very long reports and are noticed only when translated into brief statements for the press or when NGO representatives meet policy-makers in more or less formal meetings.

NGOs that do have warning as their primary activity seem better equipped to produce actionable early warning as they do not suffer from tensions arising from conflicting interests. Very often, as in the case of the International Crisis Group, they are also more familiar with the policy-making process and have direct contacts with diplomats and politicians, which allows them to better understand the complexities and constraints faced by policy-makers as well as to be seen as more credible. They can, however, be weaker than other NGOs with regards to presence in the field and knowledge of local society and culture.

2. NGOs in the EU system

In the last 15 years, the EU has co-operated with civil society on the prevention of violent conflicts mainly by funding NGOs' activities. While co-operation between NGOs and EU institutions and decision-making bodies for structural prevention and crisis management has been promoted and formalised by a series of EU documents, *co-operation and especially co-ordination with regard to early warning and situation assessment remain underdeveloped*.

The EU has formally recognised the importance of NGOs first with the *Cotonou Agreement* (2000) and then by adopting the *EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts* in Gothenburg (2001). The latter acknowledged that 'exchange of information, dialogue and practical co-operation with humanitarian actors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), relevant non-governmental and academic organisations should also be strengthened.'⁴² Afterwards, in approving the Programme, the EU Parliament recognised 'the lack of real strategic and operational co-ordination with NGOs and other actors in civil society',⁴³ as one of the main obstacles to improve the EU's role in conflict prevention and encouraged the Commission and the Council 'to make use of the information gathered by third parties, such as specialised NGOs and the academic community'.⁴⁴

42. Council of the European Union (2001). *EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts*. Available at <http://www.eu2001.se/static/eng/pdf/violent.PDF>.

43. European Parliament (2001). 'Resolution on the Commission communication on Conflict Prevention' (COM(2001) 211 – C5-0458/2001 – 2001/2182(COS)). Available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P5-TA-2001-0703+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

44. Ibid.

After Gothenburg, the European Council has also conceptualised the added value of co-operation with NGOs in other policy documents:⁴⁵

1. the ESDP Procedures for coherent, comprehensive EU crisis management (2003), which noted that ‘modalities for co-ordination in the field between the EU and international organisations, local authorities and NGOs need to be developed’;⁴⁶
 - the EU Action Plan for Civilian Aspects of ESDP (2004), which welcomed a regular exchange of views with civil society organisations regarding the general orientation of EU civilian crisis management. It furthermore stated that ‘NGO experience and early warning capacity are valued by the EU’;⁴⁷
 - the report ‘Partners Apart: Enhancing Co-operation between Civil Society and EU Civilian Crisis Management’ (2006) completed in the Framework of ESDP by the Finnish EU Presidency together with the KATU Civil Society Conflict Prevention Network, the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) and the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), which examined how NGOs can be an important resource of knowledge and specialist expertise for civilian ESDP missions;
 - the CivCom agreement on Recommendations for Enhancing Co-operation with Non-Governmental Organisations and Civil Society Organisations in the Framework of EU Civilian Crisis Management and Conflict Prevention, which were approved by the Political and Security Committee in November 2006;⁴⁸
 - the European Security Strategy (2008) recognises the role of civil society in preventing and reacting to conflict.

To date, views and recommendations as formulated in the documents above have been implemented only as far as the introduction of a regular dialogue between CivCom and NGO representatives is concerned. Also, a Civil Society Dialogue Network has been set up in July 2010 by the EPLO to manage dialogue between EU policy-makers and civil society on conflict prevention and peacebuilding.⁴⁹ Apart from that, the situation remains very similar to the compelling picture made by the 2006 report: information exchange between NGOs and the various agencies which now are part of the EEAS is mainly ad hoc, informal, and oriented to crisis management or structural prevention more than to operational prevention.

45. EPLO (2007). ‘Partners in Conflict Prevention & Crisis Management: EU and NGO Co-operation.’ Available at http://www.eplo.org/assets/files/3.%20Resources/EPLO%20Publications/_Report_Partners%20in%20Conflict%20Prevention%20and%20Crisis%20Management.pdf.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Woollard, Catherine (2011). *EPLO Review of the Gothenburg Programme*, EPLO internal document.

Foremost, none of the above mentioned documents reflects on the challenges implied by the use of NGO assessments and warnings in the EU system, which are directly linked to some of the limits of warnings given by NGOs as listed in the previous paragraph:

1. different NGOs produce information and analysis in different ways, focusing on different aspects of the same situation and with varying objectives. Even if the SITCEN, the Crisis Room, and the EU delegations draw on information coming from NGOs when drafting their reports, the EU does not have a centralised warning structure able to assess such a variety and diversity of information and warnings which often are inconsistent with each other. The variety and diversity of NGOs' perspectives can be a plus if the EU becomes able to collect and assess them in a rigorous manner, while they can be detrimental if the EU does not develop that analytical capacity. In this case co-operation will remain ad hoc and dependent on the specific relationships between key individuals as well as on the characteristics of particular crisis situations;
2. the EU does not maintain a record of the performance of international and local NGOs to establish which of them are credible and trustable partners and which are not. Without such a system of evaluation, EU consumers of early warning may hold unrealistic expectations about the depth and comprehensiveness of the information produced by a particular organisation at a given moment.⁵⁰ Moreover, EU consumers may not realise that NGOs are not necessarily more independent than other subjects and that the information they provide is filtered through their own interests as well as those of their partners;
3. the EU has proven to be reluctant to share products with NGOs as it does not trust how the latter deals with sources. This implies that instead of a mutual exchange of information, governmental organisations have so far mainly acquired information from NGOs without giving anything in return. This has often made NGOs averse to co-operation;
4. NGOs tend to be suspicious of the real objectives of governmental organisations and to assume that the interests of the latter are ultimately incompatible with humanitarian goals.

3. Recommendations

Enhancing co-ordination and co-operation of NGOs with and within the EU system with regard to early warning is recommendable, but it has to take into consideration and be respectful of the accountability function of NGOs. Fruitful co-ordination and co-operation between the EU and NGOs can improve the

50. DeMars, op. cit., p. 398.

early warning capacities of both. Mutual understanding of the complexities and constraints faced by either side as well as awareness of the limits of information and analysis produced by both the EU system and NGOs are the two obvious starting points to work out what direction such a process of co-operation should take. To this end, launching an initiative similar to the UN Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations is advisable.

This should aim at creating mechanisms able to: (1) building confidence aimed at information sharing; and (2) facilitating collection and assessment of NGO warnings. A mechanism facilitating confidence building could be, for example, a joint organisation of regular meetings to ensure contact and communication with planners, policy-makers, political leaders and journalists. These forums should not follow, but precede a crisis and should be used not only to discuss international events and present early warning information, but also to discuss issues related to co-ordination. EPLO's proposal to constitute a warning group goes in the same direction, but more formal and thematic working groups oriented at policy-making could also be created by the EU, i.e., working group on human rights; national minorities; arms trafficking; criminal organisations and so on. NGOs could be invited to participate according to their expertise and/or field competence and credibility/trustfulness. There could be a small group of 'permanent members' but NGOs should be given the possibility to enter or leave the group according to their willingness and capacity to cooperate. Equally important is that NGOs are given the possibility of participating in the annual reviews of the EEAS in order to reduce the existing tensions between their accountability role and co-operation with the EEAS. As stated already in Chapter 3, the EU could also fund those NGOs that are developing local and regional citizen-based warning and response systems. We believe that while the accreditation system in place at the UN can be a case of extreme and risky institutionalisation of NGOs, the system of co-operation set by ECOWAS can instead work as a sustainable model.⁵¹

Collection and assessment of NGO warnings, instead, can be improved throughout the whole EEAS system, both locally and in Brussels. The EEAS should be given a structure able to assess information coming from NGOs and maintain a track record of NGOs performance. The EU could also share with NGOs its own criteria, if any, to qualify warning as actionable as well as to express probability and type of harm. NGOs, in turn, can enhance actionability and communication of their warning by transforming existing warning prod-

51. See The Economic Community of West African States (2008). *The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework*. Available at www.ecowas.int/publications/en/framework/WCPF_final.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2011.

ucts: (a) statements and reports could be crafted through a more policy-oriented and less moralising approach; and (b) could aim to be as concise and brief as possible. Developing a specific strategy to increase visibility of the warning in the media and at the same time control the negative aspects of mediatisation is also advisable. NGOs could also facilitate comparison, assessment and integration of information by preferring explicit analytical frameworks and solid research inputs over straight forward lobbying. Co-ordination among NGOs and with the academia to evaluate different warning formats and analytical frameworks would also be useful.

5. LESSONS FOR THE NEWS MEDIA

The role of the news media in warning of intra-state conflict is an ambiguous one: no other non-governmental actor equals them in terms of reach, and their reporting is not only crucial for informing the public but also civil servants and political decision-makers. Furthermore, the media can heavily influence the public discourse about warnings and are able to determine how long an issue stays in the public domain. At the same time however, the news media are frequently criticised for not dedicating attention early enough and mostly following government leads or events on the ground, instead of proactively covering impending conflicts. Moreover, the media's attention cycles are often erratic. The resulting recurrent lamentation is 'too little too late'.⁵² Whereas this criticism cannot be dismissed entirely, the media not only have the potential to play a crucial, if not decisive, role for the success of warning but have also demonstrated the impact they can make in the past.

At the same time, developments in communication technology and the rise of the internet have led to an unprecedentedly fragmented media landscape over the last years.⁵³ If there ever was something like a single news narrative, today, decision-makers are confronted with an often confusing multitude of narratives, especially in times of crises. Before conflicts escalate, however, traditional media, particularly elite news media, have retained their role in being a major provider of information. For this reason, this discussion focuses on European and US professional news media with political decision-makers and 'Western' publics as audiences.

1. What role for the news media?

The EU – a special media environment

Most media organisations address national audiences and produce news accordingly, focusing on topics they deem most interesting and important for their viewers, listeners and readers. There are only a few 'European' media outlets in the sense that European Affairs are their main point of reference, for example Euronews, a TV satellite outlet, the *European Voice*, a weekly newspaper, and *EUobserver*, an online 'newspaper'. Apart from that, there is no major news outlet addressing a 'European' audience and selecting its news on the basis of

52. Gowing, Nik (1997). 'Media Coverage: Help or Hindrance in Conflict Prevention.' *Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict*. New York: Carnegie Corporation; Jakobsen, Peter V. (2000). 'Focus on the CNN Effect Misses the Point: The Real Media Impact on Conflict Management is Invisible and Indirect.' *Journal of Peace Research*, 37:2, pp. 131-43.

53. Gowing, Nik (2009). *'Skyful of Lies' and Black Swans. The New Tyranny of Shifting Information Power in Crises*. Oxford: Reuters Institute.

what might be essential to know for a ‘European’ public and its decision-makers. The main media outlets with the strongest focus on Brussels are the *Financial Times* (FT) and the *Economist* as well as, though to a lesser degree, the *International Herald Tribune* and *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ). Furthermore, representing a second tier, the main national quality newspapers, such as the *Guardian*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *El Pais*, *Le Monde* to name just a few, also play an important role in Brussels. The FT, coming closest to a daily ‘Brussels paper’, has a special place in mediatised political discourses at the EU-level. However, it has a certain bias in favour of economic and business issues, a characteristic it shares with the WSJ and, less pronounced, the *Economist*. Whereas these ‘transnational’ elite news organisations may be most effective in performing the functions discussed below in relation to European foreign affairs, they only do so in an even more limited fashion than ‘national’ media outlets. Compared to other foreign policy areas, in which the EU has developed and is further developing own capacities to rely on, national news outlets remain the dominant actors in the media sphere.

The role(s) of the news media

The news media’s role in warning processes can be divided into four different functions:

1. an *informing* function;
2. an *amplifying* function;
3. an *advocacy* function;
4. a *warning* function;

Informing decision-makers and the public

The last years have seen an unprecedented proliferation of web-based news sources as well as an availability of first-hand information that can be directly observed over far distances via ‘social media’. Yet it would be premature to declare that the mainstream media has lost its crucial role in informing the public, officials and policy-makers. Our interview findings strongly suggest that, as far as preventive policy is concerned, the ‘traditional’ news media’s remain very important notwithstanding the changes in the media landscape:

- new sources of information may be quicker in spreading ‘the news’ but they often lack the credibility of established news organisations and struggle for being noticed and taken seriously. With the exception of some NGOs, for example the International Crisis Group or Human Rights Watch, and expert bloggers, they hardly deliver the kind of in-depth analysis and background information provided by professional news organisations, in particular the quality ‘print media’. This specific type of news coverage represents an important resource of open-source intelligence. If produced during the early

stages of an escalation process, media coverage can serve decision-makers with ‘strategic notice’ by highlighting potentially harmful developments looming beyond the horizon;⁵⁴

- media coverage of impending conflicts can furthermore create an information environment conducive to both the communication and reception of warnings given by other sources. If a simmering or escalating conflict becomes the subject of reporting, its overall salience rises, which is expected to increase receptivity. Even if the media does not specifically report about certain warnings, they can make a positive impact by putting a country or region on decision-makers’ ‘radars’.

Amplifying other sources’ messages

As pointed out in chapter 4, NGOs and non-official actors play a particularly crucial role in warning of intra-state conflict. Although almost all humanitarian and human rights NGOs have developed their own dissemination channels for communicating with interested audiences, they still aspire to get direct media exposure for their messages. This so-called ‘warning coverage’ is crucial for various reasons:

- from a communication perspective, a warning being not only communicated directly by its source but also by the media means a diversification of communication channels, which increases the likelihood that the message reaches the intended recipient. In the words of an NGO representative, the news media are ‘the single most important magnifier of our voice’;
- more importantly, the news media have a better and further reach than most non-governmental sources. NGOs with a few notable exceptions such as the International Crisis Group often struggle to get a particular message across for the sheer amount of information decision-makers receive every day. Furthermore, there is still widespread scepticism among policy-makers towards some NGOs, as their neutrality and objectivity is often doubted. If a warning is picked up by a quality media outlet decision-makers trust, it is much more likely that the initial warning is taken seriously.

Advocating preventive policy

Media advocacy, i.e. direct support for a warning or calling for action as a response to warnings, is expected to be a crucial factor for mobilising preventive action. This is particularly the case when the conflict in question does not score highly in terms of strategic interests. We do not expect that media reporting can

54. Omand, David (2011). ‘The Coastline of the Future: Some Limits on Forecasting and Prediction’, in Chiara de Franco and Christoph O. Meyer (eds), *Forecasting, Warning and Responding to Transnational Risks*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

single-handedly drive policy, as it is undoubtedly true that the news media often take cues from government officials, report reactively or relay the opinion of an administration. However, there are important exceptions:

- when the news media decide to openly support warnings or start questioning and criticising decision-makers for not paying attention to a conflict, the latter often cannot avoid dedicating some attention to the issue at least. This may not necessarily translate into effective preventive action, but critical coverage can prompt policy-makers to engage with warnings, if only to explain why they are not pursuing a certain course of action;
- media coverage running counter to stated policy priorities and objectives is important for challenging the dominating interpretation of a situation and helping diverging appraisals to be taken into consideration. In these instances, we assume that media coverage can promote the importance that is attached to warnings given by other actors and bring alternative views to decision-makers' attention.

Warning of harm

Finally, journalists sometimes observe escalation processes directly and can become a genuine source of warning by providing first-hand information and their own assessment of how they expect a situation will develop. Their advantage compared to other sources is:

- warnings by the media can reach audiences that have no a priori interest in preventive policy;
- news reporting is often – rightfully or wrongfully – perceived to be more credible and objective than messages sent by NGOs or activists, especially when journalists themselves ‘bear witness’ and report from the scene.

2. Problems and Obstacles

From the perspective of preventive policy, the main problem of the media's role in warning of conflicts is the ‘unreliability’ as well as the ‘unpredictability’ of coverage. In that respect three aspects deserve attention:

- news as business vs. ‘the Responsibility to Report’;
- the contested newsworthiness of warning and the (un)sustainability of proactive coverage;
- cutbacks in foreign reporting

News as business vs. ‘the Responsibility to Report’

Under the currently dominant paradigm of foreign news reporting, contributing to warning and preventive policy is not one of the news media's tasks. The news media observe, inform and entertain. If they perform one of the roles discussed

above, this will often be accidental and only happen if the issue of escalating conflict converge with what the media consider their genuine professional obligations. As most media organisations are businesses that have to return a profit, they will concentrate their resources on areas where they suspect audience interest to be strong. As it is questionable whether this applies to distant intra-state conflict, especially before they escalate into large-scale violence or when they continue over months or years, there is the tendency to opt out from reporting on these issues. If editors conclude that the audience will not care about a story, it will not be aired or published.

Whereas this stance is understandable and might be sensible from a business perspective, it raises questions of the media's responsibility towards society. The news media themselves often claim to perform a watchdog function and various legal privileges underscore that society expects the media to assume this role and is willing to grant them a special status so that journalists can fulfil this task. This implies that choosing stories mainly on their 'business' or 'audience fit' is too narrow a consideration. As a reaction to insufficient media coverage of intra-state conflict, the idea of a 'Responsibility to Report' was developed.⁵⁵ In the same way, governments accepted a 'Responsibility to Protect' their own citizens and people abroad, individual journalists should acknowledge that it is their responsibility to cover those stories that do not get sufficient attention, preferably before crises fully escalate. In essence, Allan Thompson argues, if the media as such are unwilling or unable to fulfil this task, journalists should assume this role.⁵⁶ The idea of a 'Responsibility to Report' is definitely helpful from a preventive policy perspective. Yet, it remains questionable whether enough individual journalists have the means and resources for in-depth reporting from the field outside media organisations, paying not only the costs of reporting but also providing them with an outlet to publish their stories.

The contested newsworthiness of warning and the (un)sustainability of proactive coverage

Generally, the news media report news, and although it is debatable what qualifies as such, the bulk of reporting deals with events that have already happened, are happening or that are at least imminent. Warnings by their very nature, however, often reside outside these categories. They are also relatively difficult to cover, as they deal with evolving processes and the future, which requires a lot of background information to explain. Due to the complexity of covering simmering or hidden conflicts as well as warnings, though generally newsworthy,

55. Thompson, Allan (2007). 'The Responsibility to Report: A New Journalistic Paradigm', in Allan Thompson (ed.) *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. London: Pluto Press.

56. Ibid, pp. 439-440.

they are disadvantaged compared to spot-news or major events that are happening at a given moment. This aspect partly explains why the news media tend to dedicate much more attention to conflicts after violence escalates, instead of reporting about escalation processes proactively.

Further complicating the problem, in most instances, a single piece about a country at risk will not be sufficient to raise awareness. Yet lasting in-depth reporting from the scene is resource-intensive and often leaves reporters little to no room for dealing with other events happening in the region they are responsible for. Editors thus face difficult choices when deciding whether a long research trip justifies the costs, both in terms of money and the alternative stories that remain untold. As a consequence, proactive coverage is rare and, if at all, they are likely to favour shorter trips, giving reporters not enough time to go beyond the obvious stories and uncover more complex issues.

Taken together, the resulting unpredictable and erratic coverage is a severe disadvantage for warning, as sporadic reporting on the inside-pages is unlikely to give a conflict the salience it needs to attract attention, get traction with interested audiences and create an information environment favourable to warnings. To the contrary, ‘superficial’ reporting might also hinder the success of other warnings by creating noise or unintentionally discounting them by conveying a different picture of the situation.

Cutbacks in foreign affairs reporting

The problems discussed above take place in the context of a rapidly and profoundly changing media environment. The rise of news being published on the Internet without charging consumers is increasingly threatening the business model of traditional news organisations. As a result, a lot of media organisations have cut down on their foreign correspondent networks or, as some in the US demonstrate, abolished them entirely.⁵⁷ Existing geographical biases in news coverage can be expected to become even more pronounced. As a consequence, those regions that from a preventive policy perspective need most of the media’s attention, will receive it even more sparsely.

Whereas some media organisation have resisted cutting back on foreign reporting (for example the *Financial Times*, the *New York Times*, or the *Guardian*), there has been at least a loss in width, depth and nuance with smaller newspa-

57. Enda, Jodi (2011). ‘Retreating from the World’, *American Journalism Review*, December/January; Moore, Martin (2010). ‘Shrinking World: The Decline of International Reporting in the British Press.’ *Media Standards Trust Report*, November; Sambrook, Richard (2010). *Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant? The Changing Face of International News*. Oxford: Reuters Institute.

pers increasingly retreating from foreign affairs coverage. As we have argued elsewhere, from a preventive policy perspective, it is difficult to compensate for permanently based foreign correspondents, though this is less about the loss of a certain model of foreign reporting than the quality and type of journalism that comes with it.⁵⁸ Putting events into context, spotting evolving crises early and effectively communicating them to the home audience usually requires in-depth knowledge of the country where these events take place, reliable local contacts, first-hand information and the knowledge to relate these developments to the ‘home audience’. With a smaller number of foreign correspondents and reporters covering foreign news, the media’s ability to serve decision-makers with ‘strategic notice’ has inevitably suffered.

This aspect is particularly important for those European countries that do not maintain extensively staffed foreign diplomatic representations and large intelligence gathering capabilities. To some extent, this also applies to EU agencies tasked with providing warning, as their analysis can strongly rely on open-source information. In some regions that are most prone to violent conflicts these days, foreign journalists are among the few external observers who are able to flag that a potential crisis is developing and explain why this matters.

3. Recommendations

1. *Raising awareness among journalists, especially editors, that they can play a crucial part in warning of conflicts and preventive policy:*
 - more efforts need to be made to sensitise ‘news decision-makers’ to biases, both geographical and topical, in their coverage and remind them that besides their obligation towards shareholders, they have to fulfil a societal function as well. The International Reporting Project’s (IRP) ‘Gatekeepers Trips’, a programme specifically targeted at editors, offers a potential way forward.⁵⁹ Members of the IRP, a non-profit organisation based at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, take 12 editors from different newspapers, journals, radio and TV to a selected country for two weeks. Countries are usually chosen from regions that are under-represented in the news. The idea is to give ‘news decision-makers’ a better idea about what is happening in the country and the region to help them making better informed decision about the stories they select and open up the ‘newsgates’ for these countries.

58. Christoph Meyer and Florian Otto (2011). ‘Missing the Story? – Changes in Foreign News Reporting and their Implications for Conflict Prevention’, paper presented at the International Studies Association Convention, 16-19 March 2011, Montreal.

59. <http://www.internationalreportingproject.org/about/gatekeeper-trips/>, accessed 04/04/2011.

2. *Assisting in producing proactive in-depth coverage and finding outlets for publication:*

- a potential way to help individual journalists to fulfil their ‘Responsibility to Report’ is to develop fellowship schemes for freelance journalists to help them fund their research and travels. In the US, the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting as well as the International Reporting Project support journalists in covering different issue areas in a sustained fashion, mostly in countries that usually fail to get the news media’s attention.⁶⁰ Although both programmes are not limited to reporting about protracted or simmering conflicts, they make up a considerable part of the resulting coverage. In the past, participants have produced the very in-depth analysis and background coverage, shedding light on hidden or overlooked problems, which we deem crucial for the success of warning. Both programmes also actively engage potential outlets and help to get the coverage published or broadcasted. Traditional media organisations still have to provide airtime or space but they get quality journalism without bearing the financial burden of producing it alone.

3. *Broadening news seeking and consumption:*

- decision-makers looking to the news media for alternative views or information should seize the opportunity the internet partly offers to them. Some NGOs and non-profit organisations offer the very quality in-depth and background reporting that mainstream media organisation increasingly struggle to provide. For analysts these reports have already become part of their information diet. We acknowledge that there will be a price to be paid in terms of adjusting collection and consumption routines, especially during the early stages when new sources have to be evaluated and credibility established. Yet, this adjustment might be inevitable in light of the changes in the media landscape. By taking this step, policy-makers would follow an increasing number of journalists who are now working in the non-profit- and NGO-sector.

60. <http://pulitzercenter.org/travel-grants>;
<http://www.internationalreportingproject.org/about/fellowships/>, accessed 04/04/2011.

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