



An EU Survey on Whole-of-Government Approaches to External Conflict and Crisis

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Estonia Report

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1 | Introduction

In the case of Estonia, the presence of a whole-of-government approach (WGA) is difficult to discern. WGA has not been formulated as the explicit policy response to external crises. On the one hand, certain elements of a WGA (e.g. policy coordination between different national actors and coherence between different levels of policymaking) are clearly present. On the other, the extent to which this is a deliberate policy decision and not simply one born of situational necessity is unclear.

There are at least two structural explanations for this situation. First, the implicit presence of WGA principles in Estonian policymaking can be explained by Estonia's overall integration into Western policy structures over the past 20 years. The most impactful has been its accession to the European Union with the adoption of the EU acquis, which resulted in significant 'downloading' of EU policies to the domestic (member state) level. Joining the EU required significant efforts from Estonian policymakers, such as expanding or developing expertise in various policy fields. This affected the institutional structures, existing policy networks and policymaking practices. It also influenced Estonia's method of formulating its foreign policies and enabled Estonia to benefit from the EU's policymaking networks and structures. In short, horizontal structural changes and policy alignment already started taking place at that time.

Similar, although much less extensive tendencies could also be observed when it came to other international organisations (NATO, the UN, the OSCE and, later, the OECD). Indeed, gradually increasing Estonia's contribution to the settlement of external conflicts and crises has been

one of the implications of joining these organisations, and this contribution has been developed by and large in accordance with the expectations of Estonia's partners and allies in the framework of the EU, NATO and other institutions.

The second structural explanation for this situation is related to the need to realistically assess Estonian policymaking against the backdrop of its resources. As a relatively small country, Estonia has had to balance active participation in international organisations and limited resources within a small government structure. While this requires effective governance and clear policy preferences, it also means that Estonia has directed its capabilities at select policy priorities and that, in doing so, few people have often had to carry out several tasks. As a result, responses to external crises may vary depending on both policy priorities and available resources.

While a WGA is not explicitly present in the Estonian policymaking framework, there is a clear tendency towards more engagement between various national actors as well as active participation in various international organisations, especially in the recently altered European security environment. In any case, WGA-based thinking is clearly more discernible and elaborate in addressing national security and defence than in the area of external crisis management.

2 | What policies have been developed to further policy coherence?

While there are no explicitly formulated WGA policies in Estonia, this should not be understood as indicating that the principle is altogether absent from its policymaking. What's more, there are non-explicitly formulated policies. First, there are references to a 'comprehensive' approach in Estonian foreign policy strategy documents as well as to a 'broad concept of security' in defence development plans. These highlight engagement across various policy domains and require cooperation among multiple governmental institutions and agencies. For example, the National Development Plan for Foreign Policy 2030 (MFA 2019) defines the further strengthening of cooperation and coordination among relevant institutions as a priority.

Very broadly, these mentions pertain to the national policy preferences of Estonia when it comes to policies on protecting Estonian national interests at home and policies towards third countries (see discussion on post-2013 Ukraine below). However, the downside of comprehensive approaches is that they tend to require a significant amount of resources in both financial and organisational terms.

Second, external actors influence Estonian foreign policy through shared policy positions. Above all, the EU, NATO and the UN play key roles in framing Estonia's foreign and security policies. For example, clear references to shared values and principles, decisions taken at the EU level, and NATO summit commitments are often incorporated into Estonian policy positions.

In the area of crisis management, Estonia emphasises the need to complement military operations with civil contributions and development aid. Relative to its small size, Estonia has been an active and significant contributor to missions of the UN, NATO and the EU. In the field

of development and humanitarian aid, the UN and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) provide a rationale and basis for Estonia's bilateral activities, such as identifying countries for humanitarian aid, coordinating aid donation and harmonising national reporting with that of the OECD-DAC.

Third, principles similar to that of a WGA are pursued through clearly established national priorities that are then projected to the international level. A good example of this is Estonia's profile in the world as an expert in e-governance and cybersecurity. Identifying specific fields of expertise that cut across various policy domains helps to ground coordination efforts among different institutions aimed at joint foreign policy goals. Estonia's activity in the field of digital society and cybersecurity encompasses legal, political, technological and military fields while requiring the engagement of various actors from the public and private sectors as well as civil society.

An important overarching goal is to ensure the application of international law in cyberspace. More specifically, for example, the cybersecurity domain is relevant when sharing expertise in the case of electronic voting, protecting citizens' personal data, or storing state secrets in the case of an attack. Establishing such special expertise (and a reputation for it) obviously requires a lot of effort, which needs to be backed up by resources.

Finally, more specifically in the EU framework, Estonia's experience of holding the EU presidency for the first time ever in the second half of 2017 provided important impetus to the country to enhance coordination both at the national level and with EU institutions and member states regarding EU policies. Preparedness for external crises and readiness to engage and coordinate among various actors and policy areas was one aspect of this work.

3 | Who are the main actors involved in cooperating in a WGA?

Policy coordination and cooperation in terms of a WGA is largely informal in Estonia, with the exception of obvious formal cooperation and reporting taking place between the executive and legislative branches. However, the practices of cooperation have developed over a long period of time and have become sufficiently established.

In formal terms, cooperation and coordination take place between the legislative (parliament) and executive (government, ministries) branches. Members of the government are accountable to the MPs and subject to hearings during parliamentary plenary meetings. Parliamentary committee meetings regularly feature representatives from ministries and, if necessary, from other governmental bodies. The Chancellery of the Parliament provides policy and research support to the committees and parliamentary groups (factions) and, when necessary, can organise ad hoc meetings and inquiries for the MPs.

The main actors involved in WGA-like policy framework in Estonia are at the ministerial level. The national contact point or leading institution in the case of most external conflicts or crises is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). In terms of formulating policies, foreign policy and diplomacy is led by the MFA in cooperation with the Government Office, both of which have specific regional or thematic policy departments that work in close cooperation. The MFA also

emphasises cooperation with the parliament, the ministries, the Office of the President, civil society organisations and academic institutions. The Government Office is the main governmental body tasked with coordinating Estonia's policies in the EU.

Depending on the nature and the extent of the crisis at hand, other ministries and agencies can be involved in responses to external conflicts or crises on a case-by-case basis. Rather than being anchored in specific policy documents, this principle is often an informal practice developed over a longer period of time. For example, in security matters, the involvement of the Ministry of Defence is crucial, and representatives from other bodies (e.g. the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service or the Defence Forces) may be invited. In the case of humanitarian crises or natural disasters, the Ministry of the Interior, the Police and Border Guard Board, the Estonian Rescue Board, the Ministry of Finance, or the Ministry of the Environment may also be involved.

The best-documented examples of multi-level engagement of various actors in Estonia can be observed in the field of development and humanitarian aid. While the MFA acts as the focal point of national development policy, the policy itself is drafted and executed by the MFA in cooperation with several actors. Most development aid is distributed through projects funded by the MFA and implemented in third countries by its partners. These can include other Estonian ministries, various public-sector institutions, institutions of higher education, Estonian and local NGOs, private companies and international organisations. The humanitarian aid is usually channelled through international organisations, such as various UN agencies (e.g. the UN Refugee Agency, UNICEF, UN OCHA, the UN World Food programme), the World Health Organization (WHO) or the International Committee of the Red Cross.

4 | How does your country operationalise a WGA?

In terms of structures, the main points of coordinating responses to external crises and conflicts are in the Government Office and include, among others, the EU Secretariat, the National Security and Defence Coordination Unit, and national ministries. While the processes of coordination can be both formal and informal, there are certain policies and policy cases in which a WGA can be seen in practice, notably development aid and Estonia's policy towards Ukraine since 2013.

One of the most advanced and well-documented coordination fields is development aid. Estonia has defined a list of priority partner countries for bilateral development aid (specifically, these are Afghanistan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) with the justification that these are "countries to which Estonia can offer added value based on its own experiences" (MFA n.d.: 5).

It should be noted that Estonia's selection of priority partners in the field of development aid strongly reflects national security concerns. A focus on Eastern Europe aligns well with one of Estonia's bilateral foreign policy priorities: the Eastern Partnership. Additionally, Estonia's contributions in Afghanistan (in the fields of both security and development) have been an important way to enhance relations with key allies (e.g. the US, the UK and other NATO partners).

More generally, the documents emphasise flexibility both in development aid and crisis response, which can also be observed in everyday policy decisions (e.g. humanitarian aid to refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey). In setting up, managing and assessing the development aid framework and related activities, even though the MFA takes the lead, it also involves a wide range of partners in the execution stage. Depending on the specific activity and aid target, cooperation partners may include various ministries, other public-sector institutions (e.g. the justice sector or institutions of higher education), private companies and NGOs.

An example of the application of a comprehensive foreign policy approach would be Estonia's policy towards Ukraine since 2013. The events in Ukraine constitute a clear-cut case of an external crisis that had both domestic and foreign policy repercussions for Estonia. The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the war in Eastern Ukraine triggered a severe security crisis for Europe with significant security-related impacts on Estonia and the Baltic Sea region, as well.

Estonian foreign policy decisions were consequently focused on two main objectives at the international level: diminishing the effects of the crisis on Estonia and supporting Ukraine. To achieve these aims, Estonia employed a strategy of active engagement both in bilateral relations (e.g. in transatlantic relations) as well as through supranational and inter-governmental cooperation (e.g. with the EU, NATO, the UN and others). Bilaterally, Estonia's support to Ukraine in all its various forms tripled in 2014 (compared to 2013). This support entailed humanitarian aid, civilian missions and aid through international organisations, and it reached EUR 1.2 million (or 10% of Estonia's annual budget for humanitarian and development aid) beginning in 2015, and Estonia's annual support to Ukraine has ranged between EUR 2.2 million and EUR 2.7 million (or over 20% of the budget).

The palette of Estonian activities has been extensive and included support for democratisation, the provision of digital solutions, corrupting-fighting efforts, and assistance to educational and media organisations. Among the implementers have been various governmental bodies and ministries, local and Estonian NGOs, and international organisations. Domestically, extensive policy coordination has developed among various security institutions with respect to building up the military and enhancing civil-military relations, internal security and strategic communication.

5 | Conclusions

The Estonian case suggests that being small in size is both a curse and a blessing when it comes to developing a national WGA. On the positive side, people working in different institutions in a small state inevitably know each other and interact more than their counterparts in larger countries. Inter-personal ties and the relatively small size of various state organisations contribute to flexible, ad hoc cooperation and the ability to take decisions and mobilise resources quickly, if need be.

On the other hand, a more explicit and elaborate development of a WGA would require additional resources and put an extra strain on institutions that are already operating under a rather heavy workload. Estonia's response to the Ukraine crisis that broke out in 2013 serves as an example of a rather successful WGA-type approach, including a quick and comprehensive

mobilisation of resources and the involvement of a wide range of actors, both domestic and external.

Estonia's related activities have truly been broad-ranging, encompassing major efforts to enhance different aspects of national security and resilience, on the one hand, and support to Ukraine in a number of fields, including e-government, the fight against corruption, and supporting education and media organisations, on the other. National security concerns have been the main underlying motivator for these activities, with Ukraine being an obvious example of possible far-ranging implications of an external conflict for Estonia's national security.

A comprehensive approach is particularly visible – and regarded as vital – in the area of national defence, where a broad concept of security has become increasingly important in recent years – again, partly due to the crisis in Ukraine. For a small state with a somewhat precarious geopolitical location, national security and defence are inevitably top priorities. As the nature of threats has become more wide-ranging and complex due to technological developments and a high level of global interconnectedness, involving a wide range of actors and issue areas in national security planning has become a necessity. Although focused on national security, this experience is also relevant for Estonia's engagement in external crises and conflicts, irrespective of the presence of a clear national security interest.

To conclude, it is worth noting that Estonia will become, for the first time ever, a rotating member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in the 2020–2021 period. Cybersecurity and conflict prevention will be among Estonia's priorities in the UNSC, together with a broad emphasis on the importance of international law for peace and security. Again, for a small state with limited resources, the campaign for the UNSC seat was already a major effort that forced the country to strengthen the global dimension of its foreign policy. Participation in the UNSC can be expected to contribute significantly to the further development of a comprehensive approach to international security and external crises in Estonia.

6 | Reference list

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