WGA

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

Malta Report

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1 | Introduction

Malta has not developed a whole-of-government approach (WGA) regarding external conflicts and crises, and there are several likely reasons for this. The first is that the concept is new in the sense that, until recently, international crises have been seen as falling almost exclusively in the domain of foreign affairs, with the result that they were primarily handled by diplomatic bodies. During its entire post-independence period, Malta was mainly preoccupied with its own security and building its statehood. Malta's small size, its population of less than half a million (Eurostat 2019), its limited resources and its policy of neutrality and non-alignment during the Cold War further accentuated this approach of standing on the sidelines, so to speak. However, since becoming an EU member state, new opportunities have arisen for Malta to participate in regional and global efforts. Historically, it has tended to become more involved (though to varying degrees) in crises occurring in the Mediterranean region and whose consequences have a direct impact on its security and well-being. An example of this was Malta's role during the 2011 civil war in Libya. In general, Malta prefers to act through EU-led initiatives (e.g. CSDP missions) rather than through UN-led ones, as exemplified by its participation in UNIFIL (Lebanon) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

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

As noted above, Malta has not developed an explicit WGA for responding to international crises. However, the fact that some official documents refer to a WGA indicates that this concept is not entirely unknown in the public service. For example, an Armed Forces of Malta strategy paper covering the 2016–2026 period (AFM 2016: 6) says: "While a significant institution in its own right, the Armed Forces of Malta does not act in isolation. It contributes to the whole-of-government approach that is required to address the serious security challenges being faced in today's world." A WGA is also mentioned in passing in other official documents, such as the 2018–2020 strategy of the Malta Information Technology Agency, which discusses a "One-Government" approach (MITA 2017: 17) and then goes on to define "One-Government or Whole of Government" as "An integrated approach to public service delivery moving away from an isolated silo approach" (ibid.: 56). Furthermore, in the last two decades (and mostly as a result of EU membership), the culture of Maltese public affairs has increasingly avoided the silo mentality, which separates key aspects of decision-making into compartments that hardly communicate with each other. Indeed, by now, an 'inter-ministerial' approach to confronting multi-dimensional issues that touch on several policy areas has become well established within the Maltese public service.

In the absence of an explicit WGA policy, one can look for signs of an implicit one by assessing whether the authorities and national decision-makers understand the need for and efficacy of a WGA. In international affairs, Maltese decision-makers appreciate the importance of leaning on a varied array of policies in sequence or all together in a coordinated approach. Malta participates in several peacekeeping missions aiming to stabilise crisis situations. While prioritising CSDP missions (see Fiott 2015), it has committed less to the UN, the Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (Cauchi Inglott 2018). However, this does not imply that it is unaware of the other non-military tools (e.g. development policy and humanitarian aid) that are required to properly respond to and manage international crises.

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

In most cases, decision-making of a WGA-type in Malta involves public officials, the heads of the armed forces (AFM), and government ministers. In the most serious cases of crisis, the prime minister is also involved. In the past decade, only one international crisis has brought out all the characteristics of a WGA, namely, the 2011 civil war in Libya, which threatened to spill over into Malta, particularly if thousands of war refugees were to reach Maltese shores in a disorganised manner.

Malta ensures policy coherence at EU level by establishing a number of interconnected national decision-making bodies that bring all segments of government, parliament and civil society together. These structures have almost eliminated the problem of operating in separate silos. The protagonists in the decision-making process know each other, and their offices are often located within walking distance of each other. The smallness of the public service and the relatively few layers of bureaucracy (compared to those of larger states) facilitate horizontal cooperation and centralised decision-making. In fact, together with the UK

and Ireland, Malta is among the most centralised EU countries (Thijs, Hammerschmid and Palaric 2017: 10).

Briefly, the national EU-related decision-making process works as follows: First, all ministries have set up an EU Directorate or the equivalent to deal with all EU issues falling under the particular ministry's remit. Officials in these directorates participate in the EU's comitology. Second, a new Ministry for European Affairs and Equality (MEAE) was established in 2013, effectively separating EU affairs from foreign policy. It was this ministry that led preparations for Malta's presidency of the Council of the EU in 2017 (Harwood, Moncada and Pace 2018). Third, within the public service, an EU Co-ordination Department has been established to replace the EU Secretariat. Fourth, there is an Inter-Ministerial Committee that includes all the permanent secretaries (i.e. heads of ministries), which meets and reports to the cabinet. Fifth, above these stands the cabinet (of ministers), which is headed by the prime minister, approves the national position, and takes all final decisions. Civil society, NGOs and lobbyists are consulted through the Malta-EU Action and Steering Committee (MEUSAC), and their views are relayed to the key bodies within the national structure. When viewed in its totality, one sees that this national decision-making system has a WGA-like structure.

One can also mention a number of WGA-like cooperations. First, Malta has participated in one UN operation, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). At first, its forces were part of the Italian contingent. But, in 2019, the UN listed Malta as providing 11 peacekeepers independently (UNIFIL 2019). Second, in accordance with the Vienna Document (OSCE 2011), Malta deploys military officers as guest evaluators/inspectors with arms control agencies of other European countries. Third, although Malta is not a member of NATO, it did re-join the alliance's Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 2008, and its individual programme focuses on non-military activities of the partnership (NATO 2018). Lastly, in 2019, Malta joined two of NATO's Science for Peace and Security (SPS) projects (Inside Quantum Technology 2019). The first aims to establish and implement post-quantum cryptographic solutions and protocols to guarantee a secure solution for cryptographic computerised communications used to protect sensitive information. The second aims to establish a communication channel between Italy and Malta using underwater optical fibres. In the long run, this project aims to help protect critical infrastructures in Malta and to pave the way for quantum communications to be used between Malta and Italy.

4 | How does your country operationalise a WGA?

There are several examples of a WGA in the Maltese public service, although they do not go by that particular name. They consist of consistent patterns of action as well as inter-ministerial structures. Some of the latter (e.g. the one related to the EU) are permanent, while others have been set up in an ad hoc manner to implement certain policies or strategies in response to specific challenges, such as tackling poverty, fostering inclusion, combatting climate change and drafting the new version of the security strategy (The Malta Independent 2019). Both formal and informal patterns of interaction are discernible among the main decision-makers in times of crisis. What is important to highlight in the case of a small state like Malta is that decisions during crisis often reach the highest echelons of the political order.

The case of the 2011 Libyan conflict is instructive, as it had many dimensions: a diplomatic/political dimension, as Malta enjoyed strong relations with Libya; an economic dimension due to Maltese investments in the country; and a military/security dimension because of the probability that some military action would also impact Malta and the sovereignty of its territory, including its territorial waters. What's more, Malta's only runway and international airport – i.e. its non- maritime lifeline – was also vulnerable to a possible military attack or accident.

In response to the crisis, the director of defence set up a national crisis centre based within the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), which at the time was responsible for national defence. This centre brought together and networked several ministries and national agencies and services (e.g. transport, trade, the armed forces, and security-service and diplomatic staff) to confront the crisis. At the political level, there were frequent consultations with the parliamentary opposition, and the government made statements in parliament to ensure that it remained apprised of events as they unfolded. This was a de facto WGA, although the national crisis centre gradually stopped operating once the crisis subsided. What's more, there is no indication that a permanent structure of the same type or a similar WGA strategy is being planned.

Together, the experience gained in handling the Libyan crisis and the public service's coordinated inter-ministerial cooperation provide a strong basis for the emergence of a Maltese WGA to international crises. Although maintaining a permanent structure might be considered too costly, a strategy for and a protocol on the steps to be taken to set a WGA in motion during times of crisis could serve as a useful alternative.

Given the fact that Malta is a small island country with limited resources and modestly sized armed forces, as well as considering its pacifist foreign policy, it is paradoxical that participation in external crises has almost entirely focused on the deployment of members of the armed forces in CSDP missions even though Malta has a lot of potential for contributing to non-military efforts to respond to international crises (e.g. human rights education, transitional justice, training of border-control officials, civilian control of the military, development assistance, humanitarian assistance and development aid). Granted, the involvement of the Maltese soldiers as peacekeepers does not go against the concept of neutrality or pacifism. But the non-military resources at the disposal of small states can also be mobilised during times of crisis.

The Maltese bodies and resources that can be mobilised in the service of a WGA include: several institutions of learning in the country; medical staff, including paramedics and physicians, to provide health services; several NGOs to assist with migrants and development projects overseas; and legal experts, especially those who have worked in international organisations. The country's pubic service also employs several engineers and architects as well as an array of other professionals. In short, there are several sectors of Maltese society that – if coordinated, trained and organised to pursue a WGA – could be mobilised in the same manner as the members of the armed forces and deployed in times of crisis. For a small country that is short on trained military resources but rich in civilian assets, this could be an approach for boosting its involvement in responding to crises by participating in multinational missions, such as those led by the EU.

5 | Conclusions

In analysing Malta's case, one must unfortunately start by noting that there is neither a WGA strategy nor a permanent structure for assuming a WGA to international crises. However, on closer inspection, one can conclude that WGA-like structures and approaches do, in fact, exist. What's more, as discussed with the case of the 2011 civil war in Libya, the country also has experience at quickly and successfully setting up ad hoc WGA-like structures.

Looking forward, the factors (or 'enablers') that could lead to a more permanent and explicit WGA are the following: First, the fact that Malta has already had positive experiences with inter-ministerial cooperation may make it more likely to embrace the approach on a more permanent basis. Second, the relatively small size of Malta's bureaucracy would make it easier to establish an explicit WGA. Indeed, this works in both a horizontal and vertical fashion in Malta, as upper-level politicians and government officials are already used to exercising hands-on leadership on crucial issues, and most public officials already have personal ties to their counterparts both within and among ministries, agencies and other bodies.

The main disablers include the facts that international crises are all unique in their own way and often require types of specialised knowledge which are hard to obtain in small states, and that the information-gathering capabilities of small states are relatively meagre despite the importance of having such information. What's more, small states also suffer from a lack of resources and may also encounter difficulties in the implementation and follow-up stages.

As discussed above, an example of a WGA applied to international crisis is Malta's handling of the 2011 civil war in Libya. There are various positive factors that help explain the successful management of this crisis at the national level: First, public servants in small countries tend to have to be generalists rather than specialists in order to be able to grapple with a broad array of circumstances and decisions. Since they are not normally restricted to specialised silos and can therefore take a bird's-eye view of events, they tend to cultivate a much broader view of how to act in certain circumstances as well as to have the needed range of tools and services at their disposal. Second, Malta's smallness results in few bureaucratic layers, facilitating ease of communication. Indeed, if Maltese public servants opt not to use modern systems of instantaneous communication, they usually only have to walk a short distance to meet face-to-face with their counterparts in other parts of the government apparatus. Third, the proximity that political decision-makers enjoy in terms of both physical space and bureaucratic layers helps them to project their leadership more easily and directly. In fact, seeing and meeting with their minister on a regular or even daily basis is nothing out of the ordinary for most senior officials, and politicians at the highest level of government often participate in deliberations and decision-making with the lower-level officials who are directly responsible for the issue at hand. Fourth, even though this is not the case for other areas of governance, when it comes to responding to international crises, there has consistently been the horizontal and vertical consultation – among political elites, between the government and parliament, and between the government and the opposition – needed to secure the necessary political consensus. This, in turn, helps in efforts to mobilise public support for the approach agreed for responding to the particular crisis.

Despite these advantages, small states like Malta also face several challenges to responding to international crises. First, though they may have a voice in decision-making and access to information (e.g. through EU institutions), they have limited resources and 'punching weight' to influence proceedings in international fora, organisations and institutions. Second, they are often reliant on external sources to provide the information they need to take good decisions. Third, the fact that small states have fewer diplomats, embassies and consulates overseas makes it more difficult to nurture contacts and gather information. Fourth, smallness also often results in a lack of expertise in some situations and a reliance on generalists (or external resources). Fifth, despite what many might (perhaps romantically) imagine, small states are not immune to the internal political and societal cleavages of larger states. In fact, party politics, political competition and bureaucratic rivalries are often just as present and crucial in small states as in large ones.

In the case of small states like Malta, it is fairly reasonable to expect that they will be more interested in crises which are closest to them in a regional context and which could have a strong negative spillover effect on their societies, and that distant crises will appear remoter to them than for larger states, especially if the benefit of resolving such a crisis is relatively smaller for them in any case. However, if the distant threat (e.g. piracy in the Persian Gulf) could impact their trade or economic well-being or if they are viewed as potentially leading to some other negative trends (e.g. mass emigration) that could directly impact them, they are naturally more interested in them. Furthermore, smaller states often have greater incentives (and needs) than larger states to work through multilateral institutions or organisations, such as the EU, the UN and the OSCE.

Lastly, it should be noted that, despite their small size and limited resources, states like Malta can nevertheless supply invaluable assets to international crisis management.

6 | Reference list

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