

A case study of the Lithuanian crisis management system and focal factors for improvement

In December 2022, the Government of Lithuania approved the amendment to the Crisis Management and Civil Safety law and established the National Crisis Management Centre (NCMC) by January 2023 to increase efficiency and optimise the country's crisis management system.

Since Lithuania gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1990, only a few major crises and emergencies have affected the country. The most recent challenges that the Lithuanian government and the public institutions were faced with are the COVID-19 pandemic, the illegal migration which started in July 2021 on the Belarus-Lithuanian border, and an increase of refugees entering the country due to the war in Ukraine. During the response activities to these emergencies and crises, the government realised a need to create a more unified and efficient crisis response system. This realisation paved the path for the creation of the NCMC, which aims to 24/7 monitor the situation in the country and coordinate response activities, resources, and actors involved during emergencies and crises. This thesis was written during the initial phase of the NCMC creation process (January – August 2023) with the aim to suggest focal factors that the centre could consider to optimise crisis management performance.

The professionals who work within the crisis management system at the national, regional (municipality), and local levels were interviewed for this thesis. The professionals shared their knowledge, experience, and wishes regarding how Lithuania's new crisis management system should function. Some of the key findings are that most of the orders and communication come top-down during crisis. This means that the actors who are responding to emergencies and crises (e.g., fire and rescue teams, police, medical staff, NGO workers and similar) get orders from the higher levels (e.g., the government, ministries or municipalities). According to some of the interviewees and the available scientific literature, to have a more efficient crisis management performance and to make sure that the staff feels motivated, included and empowered by the system, it is vital to have a more bottom-up approach. This means that when the decisions are made, the ones who will make the decisions (e.g., the government or a ministry) should include the staff working on the ground in decision-making processes because they are the ones who will have to perform the actions.

The abovementioned factors are essential to achieve a more efficient crisis management performance. A few other factors were discussed and suggested in this thesis. For example, there is a need to facilitate informal communication and networks. During crisis response, public employees often use each other and their networks to get the resources faster or process the procedures needed because bureaucratic procedures are slow in Lithuania. Both the interviewees and the scientific literature suggest that there are many benefits gained from encouraging and maintaining these networks. This thesis argues that honest, transparent, open and consistent leadership increases trust in the staff and how the staff views the system. The high trust of the staff working on the tactical level improve their performance level and the performance level of the whole crisis management system.