



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 4 December 2020
(OR. en)

13613/20

LIMITE

COCON 29
CFSP/PESC 1067

NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Working Party on Consular Affairs
No. prev. doc.:	13482/202 REV 1; 13483/2020 REV 1
Subject:	COVID-19 Lessons Learned: Interim Assessment by the Presidency - Coordinated consular response during the global repatriation exercise in response to the COVID-19 pandemic - Social Media Strategy

Delegations will find attached the above-mentioned documents as agreed by the members of the Consular Affairs Working Party at their informal video conference on 2 December 2020.

Coordinated consular response during the global repatriation exercise in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequently ensuing consular crisis have been unprecedented in scale, scope, intensity and complexity. During the repatriation exercise, Member States and EU Delegations were confronted with diverse challenges across the world. Therefore, this situation provided a unique opportunity to strengthen coordinated consular assistance and protection.

Member States faced a unique set of challenges on a global scale: how many of their own citizens were stranded where, how should they reach out to them and how could they support them to return home?

While the primary responsibility to assist one's own nationals lies with each state, coordinated consular protection in crisis situation is a key element of EU solidarity. EU citizens deserve to receive consular assistance, regardless of whether their own Member State is represented or unrepresented in a third country. Their right to non-discriminatory consular assistance as established by Article 23 TFEU provides an external dimension of the concept of citizenship to the Union and strengthens the identity of the Union in third countries. In many countries the joint repatriation effort of Member States and EU Delegations was perceived as a sign of European solidarity and strength, during a time when international cooperation has come under immense pressure.

Initially, Member States developed national responses and individual solutions. However, it quickly became evident that a coordinated response would boost effectiveness and efficiency, both for represented and unrepresented Member States. Representation of Member States varies greatly in various countries and does not necessarily coincide with the number of EU citizens present in a particular country. Represented and unrepresented Member States face different challenges, yet, focusing the coordinated consular crisis response on unrepresented Member States is not always the most expedient approach to consular crisis management. Instead, the crisis management needs to be adapted to local circumstances and conditions and the specific incident.

Local crisis management planning, for instance through Joint Consular Frameworks, are vital preparatory steps. Plans should be as specific as necessary, yet as adaptable as possible. For instance, for any major incident the predefined roles and responsibilities need to be refined in the situation, including the division of tasks between local and capital level and between Member States and EEAS/EU Delegations. Clear lines of communication always need to be established and verified in the moment.

The global repatriation exercise has proven that the existing instruments provide a solid foundation to further enhance coordinated consular crisis response:

1. CoOL 2.0 as main tool for communication

The platform CoOL 2.0 has proven to be a useful and versatile communication tool, allowing capitals to communicate and share information in a fast and secure manner. Its potential should be further explored.

CoOL was regularly used to post information amongst other, about upcoming flights, providing fast access to reliable data for capitals to forward to the local level. During other incidents, CoOL will be used to share information for other purposes. In addition, CoOL has already been further improved to allow each Member State to share current travel advice.

Any communication tool can only be as dependable as the content provided. Unrepresented Members States struggled to access information where cooperation among Members States was limited to the local level. In some instances information about repatriation flights did not reach unrepresented Member States in due course and they could not advice their citizens accordingly.

The exchange of information is crucial for all Member States and particularly with a view to unrepresented Member States. Therefore all Member States and the EEAS are called upon to make pertinent and timely contributions to CoOL.

While CoOL is a useful and needed tool to provide relevant data, it is a valuable addition to the direct exchange of views during regular coordination calls.

The EEAS will continue to review the structure of CoOL 2.0 in order to enhance user-friendliness by incorporating feedback given by MS and taking into account the results of the Finnish Presidency.

The EEAS will prepare further workshops in 2021 to support and facilitate the use of CoOL.

2. Collaboration of EEAS/COCON with other relevant stakeholder in the crisis management team

The need for regular (daily) coordination between capitals was determined early on. The ad hoc convocation of a joint EEAS-ERCC task force as crisis management team proved judicious, in particular during the sweeper flights stage of the repatriation exercise. Various products developed by the task force (such as Situation reports, Traffic light matrix, COVID19 Sweeper flights options, Summary tables of repatriation flights) provided significant additional information for the decision making processes of Member States. With regards to the use of the UCPM, direct contact to the ERCC was also especially valuable.

There is no need to formalise the pre-defined crisis management teams (CTM) beyond the existing structures and mechanisms, as cooperation between EEAS and ERCC is already very close. Instead, the decisions whether to establish a task force or include relevant stakeholders, such as ERCC or others, should be tabled early on by the CMT to gain a head start.

In order to avoid confusion as to the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders involved, once the actual structure of the CMT for a particular incident or crisis is set, the setup including roles and responsibilities, as well as the date of the decision, should be communicated to all Member States.

3. Assessment of local situations

For every country an individual assessment of the number and location of people in need of repatriation as well as local circumstances and travel options was needed. The repatriation exercise has shone a spotlight on the true scope and scale of travel movements. In many countries, both the permanent and temporary presence of European citizens was initially underestimated. At first, repatriation efforts targeted short term travellers. As the situation evolved, more and more European citizens realized that they needed to return home and started to seek assistance, including students, short-term workers and seafarers were often forced to finish their stays abroad. In addition, third country nationals with family ties or permanent residencies in European countries required attention, as well.

Many citizens expected to receive consular assistance and up to date information without any delay anywhere in the world, even if their home countries were not represented. European Citizens all over the world were desperate to get in touch with their foreign services and used all means available, such as phone, Email and social media but also by approaching Members of Parliament.

Assessing the situation often proved difficult for represented Member States overwhelmed with the number of people approaching them for information and assistance. Unrepresented Member states faced additional challenges; given that they had not the representations of their own MS of nationality on the ground and needed other MS to deliver assistance, while their citizens contacted them to acquire said assistance. Small Member States with a smaller network of representations seemed to need to rely more heavily on shared knowledge, experiences and capacities than those with a wider network.

In some countries, EU Delegations were able to help with assessing the situation and gathering information about stranded citizens. However consular protection is a national competence and member states will always endeavour to assess a situation with a view to their nationals. The information provided via CoOL helped to distribute information about possible repatriation flights, yet the preceding information about the requirement of additional flights could only be gathered at the local level.

The experience of the repatriation exercise can be used to revise the previously available estimates for the presence of European citizens at the local level.

In addition, this experience can provide indications on how to improve collection and collation of information for complex incidents, both locally for specific countries but also on capital level. The EEAS-ERCC task force has demonstrated its ability to quickly respond to the need for data processing and situation reports with a range of newly developed products. This flexibility should be maintained for future incidents.

Even though during the spring repatriation efforts not possible in many parts of the world due to entry restrictions, in general, one way to improve the flow of information between the local level and capitals, in particular also for unrepresented Member States maybe the deployment of Joint Consular Response Teams (JCT) who can gather and assess information locally and provide situation reports for headquarters. JCTs should be voluntary, flexible (e.g. incorporating staff MS sent bilaterally to a crisis area according to their SOPs) and non-hierarchical (equal footing for all participants).

JCTs could also play a significant role when addressing a very real and pragmatic issue: dealing with large numbers of individual cases, especially unrepresented, on the ground.

JCTs would also go along well with the idea of a larger role for EU-DELs in a crisis situation, including assessing crisis situations – or, but not only, when JCTs cannot be deployed (as often during the spring repatriation efforts).

4. Handling of individual consular cases

Several thousand individual cases had to be addressed locally while resources of Member States, whether represented or unrepresented, were limited.

Depending on local circumstances, baselines differed: In some countries, repatriation became an exercise of tremendous scale, with several thousand stranded people. In other countries, it wasn't the total number of people but individual situations requiring ingenuity and very individual responses. Travelers could be gathered close to international airports or distributed over vast territories, assembled in remote areas or marooned on small islands.

Local circumstances often meant that hundreds of people required travel permits or other documents, several lists needed to be maintained simultaneously, negotiations with authorities on the ground were ongoing while representations were affected by restrictions, operating from home offices and lacking staff who were stranded abroad. Representations including EU Delegations across the world performed exceptionally well and often went beyond what could be expected. Some countries intended to deploy consular rapid response teams to the worst affected locations to relieve staff, however, the global Covid-19 pandemic being the reason for the repatriation exercise, also prevented these missions.

Some tasks could be performed remotely, while others required physical presences. In these cases, unrepresented citizens needed to be looked after by representations and EU Delegations. Unrepresented citizens faced additional hurdles, such as language barriers and confusion which representation would take care of a particular case. For instance, in some countries complex instructions had been sent out to passengers on how to pass military check points in order to reach assembly points prior to being transported to the airport. Individuals who failed to follow such instructions were at risk of being left behind and subsequently turning into longer term consular cases.

However, burden sharing and solidarity can take on various forms and formats. During the repatriation exercise joint EU desks were established at some airports for instance, providing a one-stop-shop for all EU citizens and allowing for a division of tasks amongst represented Member States.

Clear lines of communication between unrepresented Member States and representations (including EU Delegations) are needed to exchange information on particular cases and ensure that those who are looking after unrepresented citizens can communicate efficiently (either remotely or locally). These lines of communication could be taken into account in the JFW if existing to establish clear structures ahead of time. If a JFW is not existing, possibly missing information of a MS point of contact (POC) should be notified to the EEAS and partners.

To the extent possible, services could be provided remotely, as unrepresented Member States are already doing. Technological advances are likely to increase the possibilities for remote consular service provision in crisis situations, yet, there will always be limitations (e.g. networks collapsing or specific tasks requiring physical presence).

Often citizens will approach their home foreign services to request information. Besides exiting formats like the Civil Protection Level one option to improve communication with unrepresented citizens can be to transmit locally available information to capitals' POC for unrepresented citizens. Capitals could then translate the information if necessary and reach out to their consular cases. While this approach needs some time, it can help to ensure that citizens receive relevant information. During the Covid-19 crisis, the merging of CoCon with the Civil Protection working group served as a positive example on exchanging information for future similar situations.

5. Local coordination of Consular protection Directive

Whether there are many represented Member States or more unrepresented Member States, there is always a need for local consular coordination amongst Member States and EU Delegation during a consular crisis. In some countries, local arrangements existed for crisis management coordination while elsewhere arrangements were decided on an ad-hoc-basis.

Depending on local circumstances and conditions, the most appropriate set up for crisis management coordination can differ.

One tool for local arrangements has been the Lead State concept¹ introduced in 2007 to ensure that all European Union citizens are assisted and that coordination takes place between Member States on the ground. However, there is a general agreement amongst Member States that the Lead State concept should be reviewed. The Lead State concept is only one of several instruments available for consular cooperation during a crisis and should not be relied on as a standalone solution. It does not exclude other or additional forms of cooperation coordination initiatives. Furthermore, it needs to be balanced and complemented with other instruments which are more easily adaptable to changing circumstances, such as JCTs.

Smaller Member States may find it particularly challenging to assume the role of Lead State on-site, however, innovative means of support for Lead States could be considered, in order to ensure fair burden sharing, for instance by increasing the role of the EU DEL to coordinate a Union response together with the Lead State.

A Lead State role can require considerable resources and should not lead other Member States to withdraw from the consular response. It is possible that a Lead State becomes unavailable during a crisis, for various reasons. Even larger Member States with a large number of representations across the world can become overburdened by a crisis and may not be able to handle a situation on their own.

Other options may be more appropriate for some local circumstances and conditions: ²

The Lead State concept already stipulates a role for the EU Delegation, should there be no Lead State in place or for other reasons a gap between capabilities and required levels of consular response. The engagement and assistance provided by EU Delegations, the EEAS and ERCC in many countries were quite remarkable. In particular for Member States with small numbers of representations but considerable numbers of unrepresented nationals stranded in third countries, the support of the EU Delegation proved crucial. In third-countries with only few or no Member States represented, EU Delegations may be the last resort.

¹ European Union guidelines on the implementation of the consular Lead State concept
OJ C 317, 12.12.2008, p. 6-8.

² Council Directive (EU) 2015/637 of 20 April 2015 on the coordination and cooperation measures to facilitate consular protection for unrepresented citizens of the Union in third countries and repealing Decision 95/553/EC, OJ L 106, 24.4.2015, p. 1–13

However, EU Delegations may themselves have limited capabilities for consular crisis management. There is no consular staff present at EU Delegations, as consular affairs are a competence of Member States. In fact, EU Delegations may need the support of Joint Consular Response Teams in order to deliver consular crisis management.

The local EU Presidency or particularly affected Member States can equally adopt a predetermined (local EU Presidency) or ad-hoc (both) coordination lead role, depending on their available resources. Joint approaches, for example between EU Delegation and the local EU presidency, EU Delegation and most affected Member State or local EU Presidency and most affected Member States are other options.

It should also be taken into consideration to what extent unrepresented citizens are affected and the lines of communications established by unrepresented Member States for the country in crisis. For instance, if local representation arrangements exist, a barely affected represented Member State might turn into the most affected Member States due to the unrepresented citizens it is representing. This can in turn lead to that Member State taking on an ad-hoc lead or to that Member State being so overstretched that taking on the lead becomes impossible.

The best set up for coordinated consular crisis management should be locally prepared and regularly reviewed, including possible decision points where Capital's / HQ's approval might be needed. The lead may change over time and always needs to be assessed when crisis management is activated.

Not all tasks need to be completed by the coordination lead. Allocation of responsibilities and divisions of tasks can significantly ease the burden and increase efficiency and effectiveness of the crisis response. Different arrangements may be appropriate for consular representation during peace time and for major consular crisis situations requiring a coordinated consular response and during normal times.

6. Local Lessons Learnt (and implemented)

The pandemic situation is ongoing; however the main repatriation exercise has been drawn down. Due to the reduction in international travel and the ongoing global restrictions, a comparable repatriation exercise is unlikely to take place in the foreseeable future.

This is an opportune time to review local arrangements and identify local lessons learnt which can be transferred to other crisis situations. As mentioned above, many issues need to be decided locally in light of local circumstances and conditions.

Where Joint Consular Crisis Preparedness Frameworks are in place, they should be reviewed in light of the recent experience. For countries without a Joint Consular Crisis Preparedness Framework it should be considered to develop such a framework now.

7. Role of Honorary consuls

In some third-countries few Member States are physically represented with consular or diplomatic staff and honorary consuls are the norm. This applies to small countries in particular small island states as well as to remote areas of large territorial states.

During the repatriation exercise, honorary consuls sometimes found themselves confronted with hundreds; in some places even thousands of European citizens in need of assistance. Honorary consuls are a valuable asset for crisis management often in remote areas where distances are big or difficult, yet, even more than many smaller representations they have very limited resources available to deal with consular cases. They also have not received the same kind of training consular staff usually undergo.

Where and when appropriate honorary consuls could be included in coordinated consular crisis response and invited to attend relevant crisis coordination meetings. This role should be reflected and reviewed in a possible JFW. When honorary consuls are requested to extend assistance to EU citizens for whom they are not the recognized honorary consul, additional consideration should be exercised not to overburden honorary consuls.

Remote support is particularly important. An early JCT-deployment could also provide relief to honorary consuls. Honorary consuls on the other hand should assist in hosting a JCT and put it in contact with competent local authorities.

8. Joint Demarches

Local regulations often created difficult conditions, both for flights to take place and for citizens to reach their departure airport. These regulations included military controlled lockdowns and other restrictions of movement, curfews, self-isolation rules, lack of transport, closures of borders and airports, as well as restrictions for transit and technical stop-overs. These local conditions required negotiations with host governments or local authorities or agencies.

A coordinated outreach was often the key to a successful consular operation. Joint demarches took place in several countries. Time was often of the essence and normal approval procedures for joint demarches had to be adapted to allow the lead representations to act in a timely manner and speak with authority on behalf of all Member States.

An adaptation of the Joint Demarche Toolkit ³ could add demarches to meet the situations to facilitate repatriation efforts.

9. Social Media Communication Strategy

With the increase in international travel and the availability of modern information technologies, many citizens in case of an emergency, expect to receive consular assistance and up to date information without delay anywhere in the world, even in remote places.

³ ST 8280/2016.

Social Media played an important role in providing up to date information to citizens across the world about repatriation flights or procedures, such as requirements to enrol in waiting lists or booking conditions for flights. Many Member States used social media also to highlight their overall effort to repatriate their citizens. Many Member States underscored the number of European citizens they were able to assist in returning home and the excellent cooperation between Member States.

Social media can also help to manage citizens' expectations and clarify their responsibilities. Closely linked to the issue of expectation management is the need to counter inaccurate information which can lead to a possibly false sense of "informed-ness" and an expectation of "insuredness".

Social media can also provide targeted information to unrepresented citizens in third-countries, for instance when information for specific countries provided through social media channels by represented Member States is translated and posted by unrepresented Member States. Additionally, Social Media can be used as a tool to further promote visibility of positive European cooperation. During the repatriation exercise, a historical number of 620.000 EU citizens was repatriated which lead to an increased visibility of EU citizenship. The exercise has additionally showcased the possibilities stemming from European cooperation, as the joining of forces and creation of synergies by MS and EU institutions, enabled the successful repatriation of such a large number of people. It is crucial to maintain this visibility in the aftermath of the exercise to promote European unity and cooperation.

Building on the lessons learned, the German Presidency is proposing a more coordinated Social Media approach which will help to streamline future communication in particular for crisis situations. A non-paper for a Joint Social Media Communication Strategy has been distributed (WK 13483/2020 REV1 - Presidency Social Media Strategy, cf. Annex II).

10. Travel advice

All Member States were affected by travel restrictions and interested in the travel advice provided by other Member States. Due to the implications of travel advice and in particular travel warnings, each Member State was keen to receive information on travel advice issued by other Member States for itself. In addition, Member States were comparing notes on their general approach to COVID-19 travel advice and on their assessment of the situation in particular third-countries.

CoOL 2.0 already included a tool to share travel advice, however the original CoOL 2.0 tool was only intended for the use for third countries, assuming that amongst Member States, the times for travel advice and in particular travel warnings were long gone.

While initially most Member states issued blanked advice to avoid all but non-essential travel globally, over the last few months many Member States have returned to more specific, country- based travel advice. In light of the second wave with increasing infection rates in autumn it is apparent that travel advice will remain a key question of concern, both within and outside Europe.

To improve the information sharing on travel advice the CoOL 2.0 Travel Advice tool has been enhanced to include information on travel advice within the European Union.

Social Media Strategy

Social Media has become an essential part of political communication, as it is a very easy and efficient way to reach out to citizens. Among others, the German crisis response centre has its own active twitter account in order to make use of social media outlets to inform and communicate with citizens. In general, Social Media particularly allows governments and governmental institutions to communicate clearly what policy outputs are being pursued and are great facilitator to promote a positive EU image. In particular, we could enhance our EU and national reach of crisis relevant communication.

During the global repatriation efforts, Germany in particular set a focus to communicate and promote the European cooperation which was taking place while flying not only German, but also other EU citizens back to Europe under the often strict Covid-19 travel restrictions. As a way forward, the German Presidency suggests to develop a common Social Media Strategy including crisis preparedness, crisis management, public relations and multiplier effects, by sharing best practices in order to facilitate communication and outreach, not only to Member state's own nationals, but also with other EU citizens.

Social Media Network

To increase reach and raise awareness about European cooperation, it is advisable to inform the public about European cooperation and initiatives which are taking place on Social Media. To improve the reach of this information, it is vital to not only post on individual Member state accounts, but also to allow for cross-sharing, for instance, in the form of retweets. This is facilitated by a European Social Media Network, which the German Presidency proposes to build up. This network is easy to achieve, simply by following or subscribing to the relevant accounts.

The German Presidency asks to send MS Social Media information on accounts dealing with consular cooperation and crisis management to 040-hosp1@diplo.de and 040-r@diplo.de until [Wednesday, December 2, 15.00](#). We will then prepare an overview of the relevant accounts, to be uploaded to the Delegates Portal and CoOl.

Communication

There are a few steps which can promote and amplify Social Media reach and

1. The use of #EuropeUnited or #EU in posts on European cooperation
2. A short translation of relevant posts on European actions and partnerships. This could either be as a separate second post (for instance on Twitter where characters are limited / possibly also as a retweet of an original post with translation) or within the same original post (for instance on Facebook where characters are not limited).

The German presidency encourages every delegation to promote, share and retweet the relevant posts of EU partners on European collaboration in order to not only raise awareness for EU joint actions, but also to promote a positive image of European Unity. Likewise, local consular cooperation groups should be encouraged to exchange relevant Social Media accounts in order to achieve the same goals on a local level.
