ROBUST

ROBUST POLICY BRIEF

Advancing Robust Governance to Tackle Heightened Turbulence

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Executive summary

As Europe works to build societal crisis preparedness, the ROBUST project provides a novel framework to help guide these efforts based on real-world examples of robust crisis governance. Based on 50+ case studies and 250+ interviews with leaders and frontline workers in the public and private sectors who have experienced crisis head-on, ROBUST has gathered new insights into the building blocks of robustness. Aiming for common lessons from diverse contexts, ROBUST is a truly cross-European effort by partners from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain. ROBUST is funded by the European Commission's Horizon Europe program.

This policy brief provides a comprehensive summary of the research conducted by the ROBUST project and reports scientific insights and empirical findings that enable decisionmakers to deal robustly with crisis and uncertainty. It highlights the advantage of adopting a new crisis-management vocabulary stressing the need for 'robust governance' in response to heightened 'turbulence'. It also provides a broad repertoire of robustness strategies that decisionmakers at all levels can draw upon and combine to tackle turbulence. Finally, it pinpoints the governance factors that enable robust governance. As the ensuing recommendations emphasize, European crisis management can be greatly improved by making sure that crucial governance factors are in place to provide institutional support for robust governance in turbulent times.

A key scientific insight is that the conceptual doublet 'turbulence-robust governance' provides a broader and more encompassing conceptualization of the present predicament than the traditional doublet 'crisis-crisis management'. It is a conceptual innovation that takes us beyond the false choice between the well-known crisis-response strategies of 'resilience' and 'agility' that are either too conservative or too committed to radical and restless innovation.

A key empirical finding from our study of local pandemic responses is that the role of different strategies for robust governance varies over time. In the first phase of the pandemic, the formation of distributed networks was particularly important while later the promotion of accountable autonomy gained prominence. Dynamic change is also found in the governance factors supporting robust governance. In the first phase, robust governance was achieved merely through societal intelli-

gence fostered by bringing together political, scientific and lifeworld knowledge, or alternatively through a combination of multi-level governance and hybrid governance. In the later phase, societal intelligence was not sufficient for achieving robust governance but was combined with multi-level governance. By contrast, in this last phase, hybridity of governance combining different tools appears to be sufficient for achieving robust governance.

The main recommendation coming out of the ROBUST project supports the all-hazard, all-of-government and all-of-society approach to tackling policy-crisis adopted by the European Union. Decisionmakers at all levels must build capacities for robust governance in turbulent times by enhancing formal and informal interaction in multi-level governance systems, hybrid governance mixing and matching different tools and instruments, and producing societal intelligence through negotiations in knowledge interfaces. Such capacity building will allow decisionmakers to meet a persistently high level of turbulence with flexible adaptation and proactive innovation that will contribute to upholding core public functions, purposes and values in the face of mounting turbulence.

Poly-crisis and heightened turbulence

Europe is facing an unprecedented number of crises that tend to overlap and exacerbate each other in the production of poly-crisis. As a result, public decision-makers at all levels are facing a growing turbulence that force them to spend an increasing amount of time and energy putting out small and big fires—without necessarily knowing how this is done the best.

Case

The **ROBUST project** has analyzed the financial crisis, the refugee crisis and the recent COVID-19 pandemic to learn how decisionmakers can deal robustly with the turbulence that precedes and/or is triggered by poly-crisis. When the level of turbulence heightens, it undermines the public sector's ability to achieve its core functions, purposes and values. To illustrate, the pandemic and ensuing lock-downs put pressure on the health care sector, led to economic decline and soaring unemployment, and challenged the wellbeing of children and youth. Such disruptions beg the question of how decisionmakers at different levels can deliver on key public commitments in an adverse environment characterized by crisis and heightened turbulence.

When the public sector is suddenly and surprisingly hit by unpredictable dynamics with inconsistent and changing impacts, there are severe limits to the traditional crisis response strategies. Hence, it is difficult to prepare for the unexpected. Hard to forecast future developments if you do not know what to look for; and almost impossible to take out an insurance against unknown and rapidly changing problems. Hence, we need to develop a new understanding of how decisionmakers can deal with crisis and turbulence through a skillful combination of adaptation and innovation that enables them to maintain core public functionalities, achieve key public objectives and respect fundamental public values, such as political rights, democratic accountability and the rule of law.

The **ROBUST project** provides such a new understanding. Drawing on break-through research, it conceptualizes 'turbulence' and develops a new concept of 'robust governance' that is translated into a broad repertoire of actor-centered robustness strategies than can be combined in the effort to provide adaptive and innovative solutions in the face of turbulence. It also demonstrates how different governance factors can support robust governance that aims to change the modus operandi of the public sector to preserve key public objectives.

Policy context

The insights, findings and recommendations of the **ROBUST project** are relevant to decisionmakers facing crisis and turbulence whether they are located at the local, provincial, national and supranational level. They speak to all public, private and civic actors engaged in the formulation and achievement of common objectives in an increasingly dangerous and unstable world in which turbulence seems to have become normalcy. The underlying research objective is to contribute to the development of a comprehensive and integrated approach to crisis management based on a commitment to building a 'proactive readiness' as described in the mission letter to the EU Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management.

The **ROBUST project** has primarily focused on the attempt to deal robustly with the turbulence triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has also used its new theoretical lens to study a wider set crises. As such, it aspires to provide a generic set of concepts, strategies, explanations and action points of relevance to all European actors responsible for upholding key public functions, purposes and values in turbulent times.

Findings

The scientific results and practical recommendations of the ROBUST project are based on a transdisciplinary literature review spurring theory development; proof-of-concept studies applying the new theoretical lens to historical accounts of different European-wide crises; mix-methods case studies of how distributed actors in local networked localities aimed to spur robust governance to preserve the wellbeing of children and youth during the lockdowns prompted by the pandemic; and Qualitative Comparative Analysis of the impact of different constellations of robustness strategies and supporting governance factors.

Robust governance in turbulent times

Turbulence can be found at the level of organizations, sectors and societies and is defined as a relative enduring situation characterized by unpredictable and disruptive dynamics resulting from the contingent interaction of uncertain and changing events, trends, and demands.

The *concept of turbulence* provides a broader and more encompassing lens than the traditional notion of crisis. First, a critical moment of crisis may arrive and pass but still leave us with a heightened turbulence that may jeopardize public governance for a long time. Second, the concept of turbulence allows us to capture disruptions that are not triggered by a particular crisis but arise from the contingent interaction of disparate problems and challenges that may combine and grow into a 'perfect storm'.

Robust governance is defined as the capacity to uphold core public functions, purposes and values in the face of heightened turbulence through a combination of flexible adaptation and the proactive innovation of public policy, regulation, and services.

The concept of robust governance allows us to focus on tackling relatively enduring spells of turbulence rather than particular crisis moments and the recognition of the need for adaptation and innovation to preserve key public functionalities in the face of turbulence brings us beyond both the conservative quest for restoring the status quo ante inherent to the resilience strategy and the naïve embrace of radical innovation inherent to the agility strategy that aims for restless change that risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Actor-centered strategies for robust governance

Robustness strategies are courses of action that actors can draw upon and flexibly combine to promote robust action. They are not formal strategies described in a public manual or prescribed by executive public leaders but emerging strategies that reflective actors develop, adjust and use on the fly.

Nevertheless, based on a study of organizational theory and crisis management literature, it is possible to assemble a broad repertoire of actor-centered robustness strategies: 1) Plan for surprises: provide vigilant responses to early warnings; 2) Build redundancy, slack and buffers: keep something in your pocket to respond quickly; 3) Create collaborative platforms: lower the transaction costs of collaborating; 4) Build distributed networks: facilitate knowledge-sharing, coordination and collaboration; 5) Exert multi-vocality: keep your options open; 6) Promote accountable autonomy: allow local actors to adapt to national strategies and hold them to account; 7) Scale governance responses: get ready to plug and play; 8) Become bricoleurs: recombine, reuse and repurpose existing tools; and 9) Conduct experiments: facilitate improvisation, probing and learning.

Empirical studies of the local pandemic responses show that robust governance of child wellbeing was achieved through *a combination of several robustness strategies* including collaborative platforms, distributed networks, becoming bricoleurs, scaling solutions and accountable autonomy. The constellation of conducive robustness strategies changed over time. To illustrate, right after the outbreak of the pandemic, five pathways to robust governance of child wellbeing emerged. Four of these pathways included building distributed networks. Hence, this strategy featured prominently in the mix of strategies associated with robust governance, although it would always be combined with other strategies, such as creating collaborative platforms and promoting accountable autonomy, to offer a 'recipe' for robust governance. Over time, the role of promoting accountable autonomy became a central part of the pathways to robust governance. In the last phase of the pandemic, four out of five recipes for robust governance included this strategy.

Governance factors supporting robust governance

The **ROBUST project** identified *three governance factors* that may support and scaffold robust governance:

1. *Multi-level governance* creates and sustains productive relationships between local, regional, national and supranational actors across sectors and thereby helps to promote creative problem solving through knowledge-sharing, coordination and collaborative problem solving.
2. *Hybrid governance* combines organizational forms and governing tools from different governance paradigms and thereby helps to exploit complementarities and create synergies based on creative practices of mixing and matching.
3. *Societal intelligence* brings together elected politicians, scientific experts, and lay actors with different epistemologies in knowledge interfaces where they negotiate their cognitive claims to produce actionable knowledge that authorizes the deployment of new governance responses.

Cross-case analysis of the role of *different features multi-level governance* in the context of hybrid governance and societal intelligence shows that, in the first phase of the pandemic, the *involvement of non-government actors* features in four out of six pathways to robust governance, compared to the involvement of actors from different levels of government and the presence of non-hierarchical relationships that are only a part of three of the six pathways.

In addition, the analysis of *different features of hybrid governance* compared to multi-level governance and societal intelligence shows that the network governance is a part of all four pathways to robust governance whereas hierarchical governance is only part of two pathways and market governance is largely irrelevant.

Finally, the analysis of *different features of societal intelligence* in conjunction with multi-level governance and hybrid governance shows that lifeworld knowledge features in four out of six pathways to robust governance whereas expert knowledge and in particular political knowledge has a limited presence in the pathways to robust governance.

The configurational analysis of the combined impact of the three governance factors shows that there is not one best way, but instead different recipes for robust governance in each of the three phases of the pandemic:

Recipes in phase one:	Recipes in phase two:	Recipes in phase three:
1. Societal intelligence (other governance factors IRRELEVANT) 2. Multi-level governance + hybridity of governance	1. Hybridity of governance (other governance factors irrelevant) 2. Societal intelligence + multi-level governance	3. Hybridity of governance + ABSENCE of societal intelligence 4. Multi-level governance + societal intelligence

Recommendations and action points

To stimulate robust governance responses in times of increasing and enduring turbulence, we recommend policymakers and practitioners to prioritize adaptive capacity over rigid institutional designs. Robust governance emerges through flexible collaboration across sectors and levels, integrating diverse perspectives and modes of coordination in different phases of turbulence. This calls for trust-building and inclusive engagement. The European Commission and its Commissioner for Preparedness and Crisis Management can lead by fostering frameworks and incentives that encourage such adaptive governance approaches.

Based on the findings of the ROBUST project, we propose the following recommendations:

1. Promote and institutionalize multi-level and hybrid governance structures.

> Who: European Commission, as well as national, regional and local governments What: Develop policies and funding mechanisms that incentivize collaboration across governance levels (international, national, regional, local) and between public, private, and civil society actors. Facilitate formal and informal arenas for cross-sector dialogue and coordination to address interconnected societal issues. Why: Effective crisis responses depend on combining the strengths of diverse actors and governance levels, adapting to evolving challenges as shown in the varying pandemic phases. Example from ROBUST dataset: the city of Reggio Emilia (Italy) deepened and broadened its existing collaborative arrangements around youth mental health and education. A 'steering committee' was established, which served as a coordination point for sharing insights, discussing challenges, and aligning interventions related to child and adolescent wellbeing.

2. Invest in societal intelligence through inclusive knowledge interfaces.

Who: Policymakers, local authorities, and crisis managers What: Create and support 'knowledge interfaces' where people bringing scientific expertise, lived experience, and political knowledge interact regularly. Why: Integrating diverse types of knowledge increases situational awareness and policy relevance, especially during the early and uncertain phases of turbulence. Example from ROBUST dataset: youth professionals from Antwerp, Belgium working in public spaces to provide low-threshold psychological support, based on prior trust, insights from local context and professional expertise.

3. Support actor-centered robustness strategies emphasizing distributed networks and accountable autonomy.

Who: Local governments, public institutions, and civil society organizations What: Encourage the development of distributed networks that facilitate (e.g.,) mutual learning. Grant local actors autonomy within clear frameworks to tailor responses to local needs, accompanied by accountability mechanisms. Why: Flexibility and local initiative enhance timely adaptation to rapidly changing conditions. Example from ROBUST dataset: youth workers in Utrecht, the Netherlands were stimulated to adapt their services independently to local needs, including organizing small-group outdoor activities, digital meet-ups and peer-to-peer mental health initiatives. While they operated with significant freedom, they remained accountable to the city administration through regular reporting.

These recommendations align with the Commissioner's mission to shift from reactive to proactive integrated crisis management. By embedding adaptive governance capacities and inclusive collaboration in policy frameworks, Europe can strengthen its robustness for future turbulence.

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