

Knowledge Sheet



Strengthening Georgia's consular crisis management

Country approaches to consular crisis management during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The cases of Georgia, Austria and Slovenia



Background

On 28 October 2022, a peer-to-peer exchange session took place between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Austria and Slovenia and the Diplomatic missions of Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the UK and the US in Georgia. The exchange aimed at consolidating the knowledge gathered during emergencies, with a special focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, in the context of the [project Georgia III Action \(2020-18\)](#), implemented by MIEUX+ in collaboration with the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia.

The exchange focused on consular crisis management practices in response to the COVID-19 crisis and their applicability to the Georgian context. It also effectively provided an opportunity to exchange and learn about takeaways from recent crises, in particular, the global COVID-19 pandemic and how it has reshaped traditional tools, mechanisms and avenues of diplomatic work as well as new challenges and innovative opportunities for response measures.

This Knowledge Sheet focuses on how these countries managed consular crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic, what challenges they faced, and what lessons learned and promising practices can be extracted from their experiences.



Summary

The major takeaway for Georgia is that the consular assistance is especially crucial during a large-scale crisis when the safety and/or security of large groups of nationals are threatened.

As illustrated by the good practices and lessons learned from Austria and Slovenia the provision of adequate consular assistance during the crisis requires the full governmental machinery to operate in unison and complement each other, not to become the subject to scrutiny and criticism if the society considers the provided consular assistance insufficient.

However, the primary responsibility should rest on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, as several factors influence consular assistance during the emergency, such as the capacity of the ministry and preparedness of consular staff to respond to the crisis situations, consular networks and availability of financial resources to increase modern technologies.



Actors

Georgia

The Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia

Austria

Directorate General IV – Consular Affairs, Austrian Federal Ministry of European and International Affairs

Slovenia

Directorate for International Law and Consular Affairs, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia



Lessons Learned

Preparedness and creating safeguards for consular assistance

Adequate crisis preparedness and strategic planning improves the quality and quantity of interventions required during an emergency, ensures effective assistance to fellow nationals, and mitigates negative consequences.

For example, even countries with well-established crisis management capabilities were under extreme pressure to respond to the pandemic, as the protection of nationals abroad requires an efficient Foreign Service with prepared consular staff, adequate regulatory frameworks, availability of financial resources, and advance communication with citizens abroad.

International cooperation

International cooperation and support in response to emergencies such as the global pandemic are particularly important to tackle existing challenges and achieve common goals. Experience has shown that pandemic control is closely connected with rapid, effective, coordinated and sustained pandemic response at local, national and international levels. International cooperation and support are even more important for countries facing limitations with regard to consular presence and resources.

Multidisciplinary and multisector approaches

Well-managed responses to emergencies are based on multisectoral approaches involving a wide range of entities, which includes diverse ministries and public administrations.

Given the multistakeholder nature of crisis management, it is essential to have a structured approach with clear understanding of roles and responsibilities.

The situation must be monitored and comprehensive information should be shared promptly.



Resource Box

- **EU citizens' right to diplomatic and consular protection outside the EU, the development of EU consular protection and the applicable EU rules**
- **Consular protection for EU citizens**



Georgia

Consular crisis management: lessons learned, practices and challenges in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic



Identified Challenges

The Covid-19 pandemic was a serious challenge for the consular services of Georgia and all countries worldwide. During the pandemic foreign posts were at the frontline of overseas citizen protection. For Georgia, and most countries, it was their largest repatriation operation.

The challenge was immense due to the number of citizens stranded abroad; the need to respect safety measures, travel bans and border closures; lack of staffing due to sickness; limited consular coverage in many countries; and, simultaneously managing the health crisis back at home. This required a mass redistribution of human and financial resources.

It is noteworthy that ICMPD supported the strengthening of institutional capacity of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia and Georgian Diplomatic Missions abroad shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic.

As part of its enhanced crisis response strategy, Georgia conducted an assessment to explore and understand the structure of the consular crisis management system already in place in Georgia, the current capacity of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to achieve their objectives in terms of supporting citizens abroad, practice of diplomatic and consular representatives during the emergencies, as well as training capacities of consular and diplomatic staff, taking into consideration the lessons learned from the global pandemic.



Practices

1. Commitment to provide effective consular assistance

Prior to the pandemic, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia proactively began working on ways to improve the crisis preparedness and response.

This included tailored training activities and the development of tools and guidelines to strengthen capacities in preparing for, responding to, and protecting the dignity and rights of citizens abroad caught in situations of acute crisis.

2. Strengthening the institutional framework

In promoting the modernisation and optimisation of consular work, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs adopted a new framework on consular crisis management.

As a result, going into the pandemic, the MFA had an additional instrument in place to improve crisis response efforts while ensuring the security and protecting the rights and interests of Georgian citizens abroad.

3. Clear differentiation between consular crisis and consular assistance

While creating the crisis management system in Georgia, one of the most interesting aspects was the formulation of the definition of a crisis and clearly establishing the difference between consular crisis and consular assistance, in terms of criteria and implications for corresponding action.

4. Whole-of-community approach

In times of crisis, making the best use of all available resources and providing targeted communication is critical. In line with the Georgian MFAs crisis management system, the Georgian diaspora was mobilised and played a significant role in supporting foreign posts in responding to the pandemic.



Lessons learnt

1. Continuous improvement with an enhanced crisis simulation strategy

Simulation exercises are an important part of the cycle of practicing, evaluating, and improving crisis response capabilities. They reinforce the understanding of roles and procedures and can identify gaps in preparedness. An enhanced crisis simulation strategy requires conducting continuous simulation exercises with consulates abroad and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to assess and further develop the functional capabilities of emergency systems and mechanisms in order to respond to crises.

2. Government incentive to data collection on Georgia citizens living abroad

In order to respond to citizens abroad, Georgian Diplomatic Missions need to know how many citizens are in a given area and any other information which can help them to anticipate particular needs. To encourage information sharing, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia proactively communicates about the benefits of consular registration in the Georgian Diplomatic Missions. Enhancing e-registrations will support establishing more accurate and disaggregated data on Georgian nationals abroad.

3. “Wellbeing is not a luxury – watch out for staff burnout”

Crisis management involves additional stress and threats to the safety and security of diplomatic staff/consular officials. Therefore, the preparedness of personnel to be posted abroad should include training on crisis management as well as stress management, involving psychological support if needed.



Consular crisis management: practices in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic



Practices

1. Increasing use of modern technologies for consular assistance

The pandemic necessitated the adoption of innovative strategies, one of which was the establishment of situation rooms to monitor crises and to promptly address challenges as they arise.

Therefore, setting up an effective operation centre with proactive tools will render it well-prepared for any crisis situation happening outside the territory.

2. Pre-crisis documentation

Having learned from past crises, it is of utmost importance that potential useful information (e.g. updated contacts of local administration, doctors, airport and other kinds of infrastructure) is well established in advance so that no time is lost to obtain this information after the crisis starts.

This is important not only for locations with a consulate but worldwide.

3. Multi-stakeholder coordination

Recent and past crises show that they could not be managed by consular officers and diplomatic missions only. Therefore, close cooperation with other crisis management actors, such as law enforcement bodies, different ministries, public health authorities, intelligence, armed forces, etc., is essential.

This serves as a framework for providing a common solution to the complex challenges at hand, and rendering assistance to nationals hit by a crisis in a tangible/effective manner.

4. Training in consular crisis management

In light of the past crises, in particular the global pandemic, strengthening the capacities of the staff involved in consular crisis management, including soft skills is crucial.

Thus, a comprehensive training plan consisting of tailor-made practical training, strictly addressed for consular crisis management, aimed at assisting fellow nationals caught in varying levels of distress abroad is key.



Slovenia

Consular crisis management: practices in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic



Practices

1. Cooperation with other countries

The Covid-19 crisis showed an urgent need for cooperation among different countries. Slovenia is a small country with a limited network of diplomatic and consular representations.

For this reason, it is of utmost importance to establish effective cooperation with other countries that could help in locations not covered by their representations.

2. Use of honorary consuls

In light of the pandemic, it became more obvious that honorary consuls can play an important role in handling a crisis.

Therefore, ensuring they are well aware of the crisis management tools (e.g. response planning and operations) is essential.

3. Establish global and local messenger groups

Effective communication on all levels is crucial, especially the need for a fast and effective exchange of information during a crisis. During a global pandemic, Slovenia created a network of contacts for informal communication among the central authority, consular officers abroad and local staff of the missions.

In addition, each embassy created local networks for effective communication between an embassy and Slovenian citizens on-site and between consuls of different countries locally. This network proved extremely helpful when organising repatriation flights.

4. Training of local staff

If trained properly, local staff at the embassies can largely help during a crisis.

Therefore, Slovenia established a good practice training local staff recruited in different Slovenian embassies all over the world.

Currently, Slovenia has decided to include different aspects of crisis management as part of the training.

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