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NATIONAL CONSULAR SERVICES ARE STRETCHED TO THE LIMIT BY COVID-19

by Aurélie Sgro

One of the more sinister aspects of the global pandemic is the spread of deliberately misleading information online. ICMPD's Regional Office for the Mediterranean considers how disinformation networks work to falsely portray migrants as vectors for the disease.

Amidst the current pandemic, foreign posts are at the frontline of overseas citizen protection. Consular officials have to deal with a flood of queries linked to health, finance, travel, accommodation and even loneliness.

Getting their own citizens home is the priority. For most countries, it is their [largest ever repatriation operation](#). The challenge is colossal due to the high number of tourists and short-term migrants stranded around the world; the need to respect physical distancing measures; the limited consular coverage of many countries worldwide; and most seriously the wide-ranging travel bans and border closures. National services are having to coordinate with host authorities, like-minded countries, private stakeholders (such as hotels and airlines), community leaders... the list is endless. Host authorities typically require special consular demarches (formal diplomatic requests) be made for everything from access to airspace, landing and transit rights, missions to identify citizens in need and facilitation of departure, to visa waivers or simplified visa extension procedures for those stuck in transit. This entails a tremendous amount of bureaucracy and time.

EU solidarity in action

When the pandemic hit, over [600,000 EU citizens](#) were stranded abroad. End of January, France, the [EU country with the widest diplomatic network](#), requested the activation of the [EU Civil Protection Mechanism](#) (UCPM) to repatriate citizens located in Wuhan, China. This mechanism is designed to get EU countries to pool their resources and different specialisms in a civil emergency. Many other assistance requests have followed since then.

Since its creation in 2001, the UCPM steps in to support practical coordination of special transport assets and co-finance repatriations when commercial or national options are exhausted. The EU also assists in coordinating the enforcement of the [EU right to equal](#)

[consular protection](#) for unrepresented citizens abroad. However, the debate on plugging consular capacities at EU level can be complicated by the predominance of national interests and administrative traditions. Enthusiasm among EU Member States to enhance joint response capacity and to entrust the European External Action Service (EEAS) – and its 143 Delegations - with a greater consular-related role is mixed at best.

On March 28, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, stated that bringing EU citizens back to Europe is an “[absolute priority](#)”, underlining that attempts concern only travellers, and not EU citizens permanently living abroad.

Half a million Europeans have already been brought back home thanks to flights organised by the Member States. In addition, so far, the UCPM has co-funded 229 flights facilitating the return of over [57,000 EU citizens](#) from about 70 countries. Germany is the [biggest user](#) of the UCPM with 30,616 citizens brought back home with EU funds, ahead of France (5,396) and Spain (3,226).

On 20 April, Josep Borrell reported that [90,000 EU citizens are still missing](#) and scattered in small groups around the world. Repatriation missions are entering their final phase and should be completed by the end of next week. The EEAS compiles [good news stories](#) of consular cooperation as tangible evidence of EU solidarity. For example, EU Member States’ diplomatic missions in [Venezuela](#), in coordination with the EU Delegation and national authorities, provided the necessary transport, airport and immigration permits to evacuate 670 Europeans on two flights in the last three weeks.

Nevertheless, consular cooperation challenges also emerge from the crisis. They range from ensuring a high degree of complementarity, quantifying and locating citizens unable to return home to optimising resources. By way of example, [return flights do not always operate at full capacity](#). Hopefully, as the pandemic peters out in some regions of the world, commercial flights will resume and alleviate the pressure on consular services.

Limited consular crisis preparedness calls for capacity building

Consular work is the most operational part of diplomats’ skill-set but its importance and difficulty is often overlooked, until people get in trouble abroad. The pandemic therefore reveals the urgency to boost consular crisis preparedness and management structures in order to be better prepared for similar emergencies in future.

Over the past five years, the need to enhance consular crisis management capacities has progressively been flagged at international level. Successively, through the [Guidelines to Protect Migrants in Countries Experiencing Conflict or Natural Disaster](#), the [High-Level Summit for Refugees and Migrants](#), and the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#), world leaders are committed to improve consular capacities and cooperation in order to better safeguard the rights and interests of migrants. The current crisis is likely to underline the rationale for such agreements.

Already, there is a significant body of best [practices](#), laws and softer instruments framing consular crisis management and cooperation between services to help citizens in distress. Efforts are needed to share, replicate and adapt these, in light of how unprepared consular and other services were for the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

Few diplomatic schools provide the necessary crisis management training to their foreign staff before posting let alone periodic refresher courses throughout their career. To help fill this gap, since 2016, ICMPD has rolled out a comprehensive [consular capacity building programme](#). The latter offers a programme of professional training for diplomats and other consular staff in order to help strengthen consular responses in an emergency and to help citizens abroad in crisis.

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