

# Early warning mechanisms for global crises in non-governmental organisations

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the use of the early warning mechanism in non-governmental organisations on the example of the *International Crisis Group*, which is a leading entity in respect of that matter. For the purposes of the study, the author verifies the hypothesis that the mechanisms developed in the *International Crisis Group* are effective, and the forecasts are useful for the needs of decision-makers. It is supported by the fact that non-governmental organisations shape desired attitudes and decisions taken by the international community regarding the prevention and resolution of conflicts. Several questions were posed in this research: (1) what is the nature of early warning mechanisms? (2) what distinguishes early warning systems in international organizations? (3) what is the effectiveness of early warning mechanisms? (4) how is the *International Crisis Group's* early warning mechanism used? The *case study* method was used to verify the research hypothesis, while the main technique is the analysis of the state of the scholar literature and the content of appropriate documents.

**Keywords:** early warning, conflicts, crisis, international non-governmental organisations, the International Crisis Group, forecasting in international relations

## Mechanizmy wczesnego ostrzegania przed kryzysami globalnymi w organizacjach pozarządowych

### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza wykorzystywania mechanizmu wczesnego ostrzegania w organizacjach pozarządowych na przykładzie *International Crisis Group*, która jest podmiotem wiodącym w tym zakresie. W trakcie analizy autorka weryfikuje hipotezę o efektywności mechanizmów wypracowanych w *International Crisis Group* i przydatności tworzonej prognoz dla ośrodków decyzyjnych. Prze-

mawia za tym fakt, że organizacje pozarządowe wpływają na kształtowanie pożądanych postaw i decyzji podejmowanych przez społeczność międzynarodową w zakresie zapobiegania i rozwiązywania konfliktów. W niniejszym badaniu postawiono kilka pytań: (1) jaka jest natura mechanizmów wczesnego ostrzegania? (2) co wyróżnia systemy wczesnego ostrzegania w organizacjach międzynarodowych? (3) jaka jest efektywność mechanizmów wczesnego ostrzegania? (4) w jaki sposób jest wykorzystywany mechanizm wczesnego ostrzegania w *International Crisis Group*? W celu weryfikacji hipotezy badawczej zastosowano metodę analizy przypadku, natomiast główną techniką badawczą jest analiza stanu literatury przedmiotu oraz zawartości odpowiednich dokumentów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wczesne ostrzeganie, konflikty, kryzysy, międzynarodowe organizacje pozarządowe, the International Crisis Group, prognozowanie międzynarodowe

The concept, application and, above all, the utility of early warning mechanisms make them an extremely important tool for ensuring the security of societies, states, regions, and, consequently, the entire world. Contemporary mechanisms of crisis prevention have been developed on the basis of a number of instruments already used in management sciences, economics, as well as security and political sciences. Since they take into account the conditions and dynamics of changes that occur in the sphere of international relations, these mechanisms include political, social and economic factors. To a different extent, the analysed mechanisms are in the sphere of interest of decision-makers and organisations – both regional and international, governmental and non-governmental. A growing body of literature has examined the early warning systems established and developed at the level of international governmental organisations (including the European Union, the United Nations, NATO, and the African Union). Against this background, the issue that proves particularly interesting is early warning mechanisms in the context of the functioning of non-governmental organisations. The aim of this article is to analyse the use of the early warning mechanism in non-governmental organisations on the example of the *International Crisis Group*, which is a leading entity in respect of that matter. For the purposes of the study, the author attempts to test the **hypothesis** that the mechanisms developed in the *International Crisis Group* are effective, and the forecasts are useful for the needs of decision-makers. It is supported by the fact that non-governmental organisations shape desired attitudes and decisions taken by the international community regarding the prevention and resolution of conflicts. Furthermore, as B. Bliesemann de Guevara rightly stated, neither the *International Crisis Group* nor other non-governmental organisations, which conduct research on peace and conflicts, have received much scientific attention despite their prominent role in the security-building processes (Bliesemann de Guevara 2014).

Several research questions were posed in this research. Firstly: what is the nature of early warning mechanisms? Secondly: what distinguishes early warning systems in international organisations? Next: what is the effectiveness of early warning mechanisms? Finally: how is the *International Crisis Group's* early warning mechanism used? The *case study* method was used to verify the research hypothesis, while the main research technique is the analysis of the state of the scholarly literature and the content of appropriate documents.

It is worth emphasising that preparing security forecasts is not new, yet it is not used as a matter of routine. Decision-makers treat forecasts with great caution and are reluctant to rely on them in taking preventive actions or engaging in solving existing crises. This is due to the very nature of such forecasts, which do not provide any detailed information about specific time or scope of the anticipated crisis, but merely serve as a warning against a potential threat to the security of the country, region and the world. Too vague and uncertain, forecasting has not developed a proper cause and effect chain, which would facilitate the transition from early warning to early action in international relations. This is a complex process ongoing since the beginning of 2000, demonstrating a visible intensification of activities aimed at establishing extensive early warning systems. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between the early warning mechanism and the system, as the first one relates to the method of generating a forecast using early warning, whereas the latter refers to a system of elements of specific, logical and coherent structure. Early warning mechanisms should thus be considered as primary, while early warning systems – as secondary instruments, much as the latter are more advanced and more extensive than the first ones.

From a practical perspective, this differentiation gives rise to distinct consequences resulting from the use of the indicated terms to denote these two categories. While the first refers to the method of preparing a forecast, the second contains an extensive formula, which should entail expanding such subsystems as counteraction, early warning and early action subsystem, as well as connect them into one efficient global security system. This requires a platform for international cooperation. In respect of involving international organisations of a governmental nature in any stage of the conflict, however, this cooperation is not an obvious one. Actions undertaken both by organisations and by specific states depend on many political and economic conditions. They result from interdependencies and potential profits and losses that the involvement in a specific crisis might bring. Moreover, in building global security based on early warning mechanisms, one should address areas with a conflict-generating potential, i.e. regions often affected by local low-intensity conflicts as well as creeping conflicts and regions fraught with social and economic problems, usually located in distant countries, or failing states. The list of potential global crisis locations is thus unidentifiable and unpredictable.

Early warning mechanisms have been adopted both by state decision-makers and international organisations, but to a different extent. While the methodology itself is not controversial or problematic, the use of the resulting forecast is debatable and it requires persuading the international community to take decisive preventive actions as well as make active efforts to solve a specific crisis. What gives rise to this approach is not only the aforementioned profit and loss account but also the lack of understanding of the impact local conflicts exert on global security as well as the conviction that these conflicts are stable and will soon dissipate. However necessary, the forecasts prepared in this way do not, therefore, guarantee that extensive action plans for crisis prevention are created at the international level. For some decision-makers, however, early warnings are of great importance. Bearing in mind that globalisation processes lead to growing

interdependencies in every area and level of functioning of states and societies, it can be assumed that crises of a local nature may produce the effects experienced by the international community, whereas the indicated tendency will only intensify in the future. Nowadays, it is the internal social crises related to, *inter alia*, national, ethnic and racial issues that pose a challenge to global security as they have a high conflict-generating potential, along with political and economic issues.

### **Early warning mechanisms in non-governmental organisations**

The genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia and Somalia in the 1990s were the experiences that prompted the initiatives to seek cooperation, exchange information, avert crises and respond to them. In various places around the world, qualitatively new conflicts escalated, mainly of a national, ethnic and religious nature. These sparked conflicts of varying intensity, influenced on regional and global security. The structures responsible for continuous monitoring and forecasting which operated in international organisations and particular countries, proved inefficient. This resulted from the lack of effective mechanisms of action and protocols, as well as actual active measures, which would be based on the forecasts provided. It is worth noting that the first-generation systems (Nyheim 2014) functioning at the beginning of the 1990s were characterised by narrow, centralised structure, focused on providing specific decision-makers with information regarding potential crises, but above all on justifying and corroborating the decisions and actions already taken in specific locations. The forecasts were prepared based on information from various sources that had been collected and processed by the information management team and analysts. At that time, the analytical infrastructure was being developed. The forecasts were created only for the needs of specific recipients and were poorly integrated with decision-making processes in responding to potential crisis.

Furthermore, the above-mentioned situations had been predicted based on early warning mechanisms, yet they were ignored by the international community. It is worth noting that the forecasts were prepared primarily by international governmental organisations, including the United Nations. The lack of reaction from the international community revealed a certain kind of niche to be filled by organisations not burdened by the political interests of their members, but willing to act to avert a crisis. This situation created an area for the development of non-governmental organisations whose objective is to promote security.

It should be stressed that every governmental and non-governmental organisation uses its own, specifically designed and developed instruments for its own needs, despite the existing general methodological assumptions that underlie early warning mechanisms. Nevertheless, early warning mechanisms participate in the forecasting, simulation and risk analysis process as well as the assessment of the probability of future events. Both qualitative and quantitative models are used to analyse data pertaining to current and potential conflicts, along with the assessment of their evolution. Their comprehensive and detailed description can be found in the literature on the subject (Joseph, Carment 2000; Austin 2003).

Organisations researching the issue of security and conflicts which influence global politics include the following: the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (SIPRI), the *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, the *International Crisis Group* (ICG), the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, or the *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, *Swiss Peace Foundation*, *Heidelberg Institute of International Conflict Research*. What distinguishes international non-governmental organisations operating internationally in the area of global security, is their agency in international relations and their impact on the decision-makers in particular countries. Similarly to transnational corporations, they have the ability to operate continuously and consciously above and across national borders. In principle, the activities of non-governmental organisations aimed at research on security, peace and conflicts imply that they pursue their own goals and tasks for their own account and for the benefit of the entire community. Given that objective, it is possible to claim that the intention of the international NGO's founders is to act for the benefit of the entire international community. This, in turn, would imply that these organisations are of an impartial nature, they act and engage in activities in an objective manner, while the primary goal of their functioning is to establish peace in the world. Thus, they do not and should not play a service role to individual states, groups of states or interest groups.

"The ICG aims to exert influence on the agenda setting, policy making and policy implementation in post-conflict areas. It does so not only by providing policy makers with information in the form of detailed analyses and early warning alerts and by publishing widely through traditional and electronic media" (Bliesemann de Guevara 2014: p. 546). It can be, therefore, stated that non-governmental organisations are organisations that will be involved in building security in the world with equal commitment.

Regardless of the nature of the threats for which it was developed, a properly established early warning mechanism must perform several functions. First of all, it is supposed to inform about threats and weak links in a given security system. It does so through constant monitoring and consequently compiling an ordered list of threats that takes into account their degree of risk. The second function is to exchange information between the institutions which prepare the forecast and the decision-makers in particular states. Thirdly, the mechanisms should have a real influence on the actions taken by decision-makers, to which the forecast is addressed.

Over the recent years, numerous international organisations have been developing and improving their early warning capabilities. The growing interest in early warning issues results from the trend towards crisis prevention. The use of early warning mechanisms creates area and possibilities for analysis and preparation of activities. In case of an intervention, it increases the probability of resolving a crisis or mitigating its negative effects.

The process constituting the early warning mechanism entails systematic collection and analysis of data from the region fraught with a crisis or armed conflict and, subsequently, the development of a crisis forecast based on these data. As a result, early warning is developed, and methods that can prevent crisis escalation are identified.

The entire early warning system is shaped over the subsequent stages, when the early warning mechanism is developed within a given organisation, it is used to avert and mitigate crises, whereas the warning forecast is followed by actual active measures taken.

Early warning mechanisms are an organised and logical process of collecting and processing data relevant to the forecast prepared. To capture the essence of a crisis it is necessary to use quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the crisis potential. However, the greatest effects are achieved if quantitative and qualitative methods are combined (Barton et al. 2008). Furthermore, it is becoming ever more common that a network structure of some sort is considered vital. In practice, the network structure translates into cooperation with experts from different parts of the world, who not only collect and analyse data but can detect early signals of a crisis. This is because they know the realities of a given country or region which cannot be expressed in terms of quantitative and qualitative data (Trubalska 2018). The fieldwork of experts not only helps NGOs obtain information in a more efficient and faster manner, but also influences the image of a given organisation. With its extensive structure, the ICG clearly stands out in this respect. Its offices and representative offices are located in 34 countries (in the following cities: Abuja, Bangkok, Beijing, Beirut, Bishkek, Bogotá, Bujumbura, Cairo, Dakar, Damascus, Dubai, Gaza, Guatemala City, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Kabul, Kathmandu, London, Moscow, Nairobi, New York, Port-au-Prince, Pristina, Rabat, Sanaa, Sarajevo, Seoul, Tbilisi, Tripoli, Tunis, and Washington DC)<sup>1</sup>. Five advocacy offices also operate: in Brussels, New York, Washington, London, Moscow, and Beijing. The vast information network it established provides the ICG with access to the most up-to-date data from places of potential conflicts. The formula developed this way distinguishes the ICG from other non-governmental organisations and gives it a big advantage in acquiring primary data and analyses from experts operating in a given region. In respect of collecting data used to create early forecasts, the image success of the ICG has been spectacular. Access to reliable information is a powerful instrument for influencing and creating desired situations.

The operation of international non-governmental organisations in the field of security and conflicts is a multidimensional activity. There are numerous questions regarding the methodology used (Nyheim 2015; Matveeva 2006), the usefulness of the early warnings developed, as well as their impact on the international order. It seems that further research in this area is required in order to examine them and increase the awareness of the role played by international non-governmental organisations.

### **Early warning mechanism in the *International Crisis Group***

From the point of view of the subject matter, the early warning mechanisms developed by the *International Crisis Group* deserve particular attention. The ICG is a leading non-governmental organisation in the field of conflict prevention and resolution. Since 1995, when it started operating, early warning mechanisms have constituted a significant

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<sup>1</sup> See more information on the official website of the ICG – <https://www.crisisgroup.org>

objective of its activity. Its primary goal is to issue early warnings against conflicts. Furthermore, this organisation intends to influence the international community and global leaders, who have the power to take active measures in order to perform preventive actions and early response actions (see more: International Crisis Group 2019: p. 9–14). Apart from collecting and analysing data pertaining to potential crises, the research conducted by the organisation also consists of arranging a sort of schedule in the area of conflict prevention and resolution.

The ICG's philosophy is conveyed by the official slogan: "Field Research. Sharp Analysis. High-level Advocacy." These three pillars constitute a systematic cycle of forecasting operations aimed at developing the early warning.<sup>2</sup> The manner of collecting relevant data is a point of reference as well as the element that distinguishes the ICG from other organisations of this type. Specifically, it uses primary information collected during field research and using the network of contacts created and developed. According to the assumptions of the organisation, they constitute the basis for global monitoring of actual and potential conflicts. Data collection is the basis for formulating forecasts and recommendations created within the analysed organisation. The data is processed using precise analysis by means of qualitative and quantitative methods. At the same time, as it was indicated above, data processing does not only consist of the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. The knowledge of the local realities exhibited by employees working in field offices plays a key role as well. The work of the ICG has resulted in numerous reports, briefings, commentaries, opinions, notes for governments, as well as films and newsletters. High-level advocacy, on the other hand, is rooted in direct, personal relationships with political leaders and decision-makers.

In the context of the analysed organisation, there are many questions about the actual impact of the ICG, as well as questions about its objectivity in the created forecasts. The authors reflect on its intention to engage more only in selected conflicts, ascribing the selectivity of the enhanced presence of the ICG to the pursuit of interests of specific entities (Bliesemann de Guevara 2014; Grigat 2014). At this point, it is also justified to emphasise the fact that references have been made over the years to the lack of involvement of decision-makers and global political leaders in specific crises. However, in the context of the influence of international non-governmental organisations in the area of security and conflict, it is reasonable to conduct research that will answer the questions about the inactivity of non-governmental organisations towards certain conflicts, especially those organisations that promote their image as active entities involved in all global conflicts.

## Conclusions

Early warning mechanisms introduced and developed in international governmental and non-governmental organisations bring many benefits to the design of potential development scenarios for potential future situations. The analysis of early warning mecha-

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<sup>2</sup> See more in *Annual Report 2013* (International Crisis Group 2013: p. 5).

nisms presented above encourages the reader to reflect on the ICG in particular as well as other international NGOs from the discussed range. The design of future potential crises is desirable in terms of risk assessment, the preparation of resources, and emergency instructions. The use of early warning mechanisms among international organisations contributed to the trend of establishing extensive operational safety systems based on these mechanisms, encompassing both the early warning and early response subsystems. This allows us to claim that early warnings play an elementary role in ensuring the security of a specific entity, provided that they are delivered to the decision-maker in a timely manner. The utility of early warnings also seems to result from its essence and scope and is not related to any recommendations for action. Perhaps limiting the scope of the early warning to a mere piece of information regarding a potential conflict would not constitute grounds for undermining the intentions of a particular organisation, as is currently the case. While the forecasts prepared by governmental organisations do not raise any doubts, as they act in the interest of their members, the reports of non-governmental organisations are scrutinised for hidden intentions and pursuit of the interests of specific countries or interest groups in the broad term.

Dilemmas and limitations related to early warning also result from the activity of the entities to which they are addressed. As shown by numerous examples from over the last thirty years, the mere access to the early warning does not translate directly into steps taken by the international community. The indicated involvement, and especially its absence, among both specific countries and international organisations as a whole, depends both on the national interests of a given country and on the political and economic consequences of this involvement, both on a local, regional and global scale. Thus, it should not be regarded as a rule that early warning is the basis for further action. In many cases, it is the contrary – all activity has been abandoned whatsoever.

Summing up, the research results demonstrate that early warning mechanisms developed in international non-governmental organisations exhibit greater flexibility and influence on political decisions. At the same time, contemporary unlimited access to information often leads to informational chaos, which makes it difficult to find factors influencing the development of conflicts. This makes it even more reasonable to use field offices and to employ experts in conflict regions, who know the conditions of a specific region well and are able to verify potential conflict hotspots, often overlooked at the international level. It all leads to the prediction that the role of international non-governmental organisations in international relations and their influence on global security will increase over the coming years. Taking into account the combination of methods of data collection and analysis by the ICG, we can predict that its role in the discussed scope will increase.

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