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# ASSESSING RISKS. A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CONFLICT EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS[1]

## SZACOWANIE RYZYKA. KRYTYCZNA PERSPEKTYWA WOBEC SYSTEMÓW WCZESNEGO OSTRZEGANIA PRZED KONFLIKTAMI

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Systemy Wczesnego Ostrzegania przed Konfliktami (SWOK) tworzą analizy ostrzegawcze, mające na celu zwrócić uwagę decydentów na potencjalne kryzysy międzynarodowe oraz uruchomić akcje prewencyjne. Dlaczego jednak w wielu przypadkach systemy nie spełniają swojego zadania? Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje się krytycznego przeglądu teorii wczesnego ostrzegania oraz koncepcji wyjaśniających ich niepowodzenia. Pozwoli na lepsze zrozumienie roli SWOK w zapobieganiu konfliktów oraz przybliży modele wykorzystywania specjalistycznych ekspertyz na poziomie międzynarodowym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Zapobieganie konfliktom, Systemy Wczesnego Ostrzegania, niepowodzenia Systemów Wczesnego Ostrzegania

## Introduction

Conflict Early Warning Systems (CEWS) are commonly associated with conflict prevention and preparedness to disasters. Mostly embedded in governmental and non-governmental international organizations they aim to produce a very specific type of risk assessment that allows for timely responses to unwanted and threatening events (Zenko and Friedman 2011). The underlying assumption of early analysis is that all threats develop with time and incubate in a way that can be discerned, tracked, assessed, and responded to in a timely manner. Thus the belief, that with enough knowledge and time people can avoid or at least mitigate dange-

rous situations. With this principle in mind, governments and international organizations have spent substantial funds to develop technologies and methodologies of data analysis so that politicians can make educated decisions about future policies and actions (See: Sullivan and Wirtz 2007).

Nonetheless, in the wake of several interconnected international crises, including the Arab Spring, the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis, the whole concept of early warning has been strongly contested (Heisbourg 2015; See: Martineau 2010; Noutcheva 2015). The main criticism is concentrated on the so-called warning-response gap: How does it happen that in spite of advanced knowledge, international community could not prevent some of the most tragic humanitarian crises? To what extend early warnings can be considered effective? Why decision makers do not always act upon the warnings? This paper addresses these questions, providing a critical review of the early warning concept and its practical application. In doing so, it will provide a better understanding of the specific nature the warning-response gap and expertise utilization in the high-level political environment.

## Conflict Early Warning System – basic concepts

Early Warning System can be described as *any initiative that focuses on systematic data collection, analysis, and/or formulation of recommendation, including near real-time risk assessment* (Austin 2004: 2). It is a system that, in theory, is supposed to deliver effective information (i.e. warnings, risk assessments) in a manner that allows decision makers and individuals to prepare for and respond to dangerous situations (Matveeva 2006). Modern early warning systems can be traced back to the 1950s and the development of professionalized intelligence services. Throughout the Cold War period early warnings, including risk assessments and security prognoses, were considered as one of the most reliable and guarded products of intelligence communities (Davis 2006). Everything changed after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when intelligence agencies laid off approximately 30% of their analytical staff (Jones 2007). This army of analysts quickly found a place in different types of employment, including private and non-governmental sector. This way, the mid 1990s marked the time, when early warning transformed from exclusively classified knowledge to more open source intelligence, available for everyone with access to the Internet (See: Gill and Phythian 2006; Otto and Meyer 2012). This resulted in rapid proliferation of think-tanks, NGOs and INGOs, which started to incorporate the systems into their portfolio. It generated a momentum for development of methodologies applicable in numerous fields including conflict prevention, economy, life and

earth science, medicine, and many others (O'Brien 2010). Nowadays, risk analysis and early warning units exist in most security oriented governmental agencies; non-governmental organizations working on conflict prevention, humanitarian aid, climate change, etc.; and financial corporations. Presently, early warning systems rely primarily on open source intelligence and encompass a dynamic network of actors, technologies and resources closely interlinked with each other (Choo 2009).

This paper focuses on Conflict Early Warnings Systems (CEWS), which put emphasis on complex international crises, violent conflicts and man-made disasters. CEWS can be divided into several groups depending on the source of analysis, generation of the system and methodology. The first typology concerns the so called commissioned (governmental) and non-commissioned (non-governmental) early warning analysis. The commissioned analysis originate mostly in international organizations. Here, the United Nations and its various agencies, European Union, NATO and OSCE are considered as the biggest hubs of commissioned early warning analysis (Davies and Gurr 1998). International organizations produce very specific risk assessments crafted accordingly to their political purposes and organizational structures (See: Zenko and Friedman 2011). The non-commissioned analyses, also called open source, are embedded in non-governmental and international non-governmental organizations. It is the NGOs and INGOs that produce the majority of the global warning signals. They represent approx. 70% of the whole analytical input into the early warning systems worldwide (Alihodžić 2012: 59).

Both types of early warnings have their positive and negative aspects. A commissioned analysis has much better access to the decision maker. It is also perceived as more reliable and up-to date as it usually feeds on information which are gathered with governmental resources (Phythian 2013). In that sense, the commissioned analyses have a higher probability of utilization at political level. On the other hand, non-commissioned early warnings are believed to be much more responsive and diverse in terms of sources of information (Harff and Gurr 1998). They usually use local sources and networks to gather necessary intelligence. The INGO-based early warnings also utilize a vast array of lobbing techniques to advocate for rapid responses and their own recommendations. In that sense, they can be more effective in engaging multiple political actors at both grass-root and high political levels.

The second most popular typology focuses not on the organizational origin, but the method of data gathering. Kumar Rupesinghe offers to divide early warning systems into three generations, depending on diversity of sources and origin of information (1992). The first generation of early warnings is considered the least diverse and advanced. It is placed outside

monitored zones feeding mostly on secondary data. The second generation amends this approach by utilizing field monitors, i.e. representatives of an organization temporarily located in the proximity of the monitored zones and responsible for gathering primary data (Alker, Gurr, and Rupesinghe 2001). The third generation is placed directly within the conflict zone, building not only on secondary data but also human intelligence acquired in the field. It usually relies on locally collected information and diverse network of contacts, including NGOs, journalists and academics.

The third differentiation refers to methodologies used to process early warning information. Alexander Austin proposes four methodological categories: *quantitative, qualitative, mixed mechanisms, and networks* (2004). Most early warnings systems utilize a mixed mechanism, linking quantitative prognostic analysis with qualitative risk assessments (Rusu 2001). The idea is to provide decision makers and international community with the most up-to date and comprehensive knowledge about crisis situations. Quantitative methodology is also used to create data sets, which are then re-used for further analysis. The last type of early warning methodology is based on networks and redistribution of information via Internet and other early warning systems. Austin also differentiates early warning systems in accordance to the specific activities they undertake: *networking, lobbying, monitoring, model data analysis, and redistribution of information*. Most INGO-based systems not only monitor crisis situations, but they also lobby for specific responses. As indicated in Table 1, a closer overview of most popular early warning systems shows that they do not limit themselves to one area of intervention or methodology. The most effective systems utilize the whole range of possibilities in order to 'make a difference' in terms of conflict prevention and crisis mitigation.

**Table 1.**

| Early Warning System | Activities | Profile |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 |
| **International Crisis Group (ICG)** | Lobbying<br><br>Conflict monitoring | The International Crisis Group is probably the best known early warning system focusing on the advocacy for conflict prevention and monitoring activities. The ICG comprises field analysts who stay long term in a specific regions such as Central Asia, Africa, South America, especially Columbia and the Balkans. The analysts generate up-to-date, on-the-ground reports about the latest changes in the situation which are then processed at the offices in Brussels, Paris and Washington. From there, they are distributed to the board members, comprised of former prime ministers, foreign ministers and advisors, who then lobby the recommendations with key policy makers. |

| 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|
| **Fund for Peace** | Lobbying<br><br>Producing data sets | The Fund for Peace is one of the leading Early Warning Systems, monitoring weak and falling states. It employs a comprehensive approach to the early warning, engaging both grassroots and policy levels decision makers. The Fund has been present in over 50 countries, lobbing for conflict prevention and networking leading regional and international organizations, academics and peace journalists. One of its biggest accomplishments is an advanced early warning software - Conflict Assessment System Tool (CAST). It is a content analysis product that provides conceptual framework and data gathering methodology for measuring conflict risk and humanitarian vulnerabilities. The Fund for Peace is responsible for the development of The Failed States Index, an annual ranking of 177 countries across 12 indicators that is published by Foreign Policy magazine. |
| **Minorities at Risk (MAR)** | Producing data sets | Minorities at Risk is an open accesses university-based initiative focused on the prognosis of future violent rebellions instigated by groups who are most at risk. MAR studies the conditions under which a group can mobilize and start a rebellion. The project is not a traditional early warning system, as it does not provide a near real-time analysis and risk assessment. However, it does indicate potential hotspots on the basis of history of lost political autonomy and active political, economic, and cultural, discrimination. MAR issues data sets on irregular basis. |
| **NATO Intelligence Warning System (NIWS)** | Conflict monitoring | NIWS is a system designed to support NATO decision makers in crisis situations. It "provides warning of any developing instability, crisis, threats, risks, or concerns that could impact on security interests of the Alliance and monitors de-escalation of a crisis" (Kriendler 2006: 2). It feeds on the existing NATO intelligence capabilities such as International Military Staff Intelligence Division or Terrorist Threat Intelligence Unit. |
| **UN Global Pulse** | Information redistribution Networking Conflict monitoring | The Global Pulse Project focuses on monitoring of socio-economic impact of international crises on the most vulnerable populations. It is an UN-based analytical and technical monitoring platform, designed to collate existing UN data sets to improve early warning analysis concerning international crises and challenges to the poor. The project's objective is to create a network of UN-based early warning technologies and develop new forms of data analysis, based on open source intelligence. |
| **EU Country Strategy Papers (CSP)** | Conflict monitoring | Country Strategy Papers are the essential to the EU early warning system. CSPs are prepared by the European External Action Service (conflict prevention units and respective delegations) with an input |

| 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|
| | | from the Member States. At first, the analysis was designed to support the European Development Fund and the donor community but with time it changed into a risk assessment analysis. The standard Country Strategy Paper consists of 1) framework of relations between the EU and the country of interest; 2) country diagnosis; 3) assessment of past and present cooperation; 4) strategy for future actions. The latest edition of the papers covers 141 countries. |

(Source: International Crisis Group Webpage 2016; Fund for Peace Webpage 2016; Minorities at Risk Webpage 2016; Global Pulse Project Webpage 2016; European External Action Service Webpage 2016; Kriendler 2006)

A number of international organizations, INGOs, and governments embraced conflict prevention as a priority objective and invested considerable resources into creating capabilities for early warning and response (Beswick 2012; Rasmussen 2001; Zenko and Friedman 2011). Yet, the effectiveness of the system and the direct link between analysis and political action still needs to be discovered. Even the system, which is capable of the most accurate risk assessment, is useless unless there is an effective model of its utilization at political level. A substantial body of literature claims to have identified "missed opportunities" and gaps in the global conflict prevention framework (De Franco et al. 2011; Zartman 2010). However, the research on conflict prevention has not contributed substantially to global peace efforts to the extent it supposed to. As David Nyheim claims in his analysis of the international response to Rwandan genocide – today's world is no better prepared to handle genocides and international crises than it was all these years ago (Alker et al. 2001).

## Early Warning - Response Gap

The link between knowledge and policy making theoretically appears to be straightforward - a good analysis delivered in an accessible form to policy-makers, results in a good policy-making based on relevant research findings and accurate recommendations (McLean, Patterson, and Williams 2009). However, the reality suggests otherwise. The problem of responsiveness to early warnings is closely connected to one of the most important questions in the field of conflict prevention – how to unpack political will (Dabelstein 1996; Harff and Gurr 1998)? There have been several important findings that brought social scientists closer to answering this question. Their findings can be divided into two basic

themes. The first one is technical, connected to the manner of how early warning analysis is produced and delivered to the decision makers. The second theme is related to socio-psychological aspects of political action, focusing on the way warnings are framed and perceived by politicians and their constituents.

Contemporary early warning does not only comprise of analysis and prognosis but also contains certain "technical features" that are supposed to make early warning analysis more usable for decision makers. An example of such a feature is policy guidelines included in early warning analysis, so that "warnees" would have an idea about risks and options for intervention (Davies and Gurr 1998). The purpose of such recommendations is to give a clear signal of who, how, when and under what circumstances should intervene in order to prevent or mitigate a crisis situation (Matveeva 2006: 16). Additionally, such recommendations are supposed to be effective and at the same appealing to decision makers', linking knowledge with practice and generating actual political responses. As Adelman and Surkhe put it, early warning is supposed to be a tool for policy making, something that not only facilitates but generates political action (1996).

In reality, it is extremely difficult to craft a plausible warning with a set of policy recommendations. *The very notion of warning implies not only superior knowledge on the part of the communicator of warnings, but also the assumption that the communicator knows what the recipient 'needs to know' and what the recipient 'should do', that is, the 'warner' is acting in the best interest of the'warnee' or alternatively in accordance with overriding universally accepted normative principles* (Meyer et al. 2010). The task becomes even more difficult looking at the level of high politics, where a policy maker may be influenced by a series of factors including personal preferences, domestic politics, organizational interests, or his conception of threat and security (Walraven 1998).

In that respect, two fundamental theories were introduced in the early stage of research on warning-response gap – strategic targeting and process link theories. Strategic targeting theory is built on the assumption that *the greater familiarity early warning analysts have with policy making mechanism, the easier it will be to write warnings intended for specific responses by those mechanisms, and more likely it will be for policymakers to match these warnings to the mechanism they control* (Davies and Gurr 1998: 230). At the same time, the theory indicates that such a model is applicable only if advanced inter-organizational information sharing and communication mechanisms are in place. It assumes that the "warner" and "warnee" operate in the same security environment, within one state, alliance or organization – which is not always the case.

Process link theory, on the other hand, introduces more user-oriented model of analysis making, putting more responsibility on the shoulders of analysts and knowledge producers. Thus, in order to overcome the warning-response gap it proposes to *provide dynamic conflict profiles that explain indicators of political instability in relation to existing priority focal points in conflict prevention mechanisms* (Davies and Gurr 1998: 232). The process link theory suggests that crisis situation should be sliced into priority sectors and handled or linked to the respective institutions responsible for targeted area of intervention (Meyer et al. 2010). In that respect, early warning reveals itself not as a singled out report but the whole network of sub-analysis specializing in relevant policy areas.

In the socio-psychological approach warning-response gap goes beyond levels of accuracy, organizational settings or access to decision makers. According to Meyers, the reasons hiding behind the gap and political inertia may be much more mundane. He points out that analyzing the dynamics of potential conflict does not tell you how to make a convincing case for action (Meyer 2005). Early warning providers have to take into account several additional factors such as differences between "potential responders with regard to their policy priorities and risk appetite, their respective instruments for preventive action (including costs and lead-time), their personal and institutional political agendas as well as electoral cycles " (Meyer et al. 2010: 250). Analysts and decision makers belong to different communities, speak different "languages" and have different interests (Whittall 2010). For most of the time, early warning analysts and conflict prevention advocates do not understand the specifics of high-level politics and high-stake interests that influence them (Arnoldi 2009). Politicians, especially those who make decisions, weight and perceive risks differently. They often have to take under consideration multiple interests that do not have to align with conflict prevention actions (Goertz 2004).

In fact, there is an impressive literature, on political action and inaction. One of the best known theories is the so called by-stander effect. The theory suggests that political inaction can be explained by: lack of interest in the situation, intimidating circumstances, group members who enable each other's inaction, and insufficient benefits of the intervention (Levine and Thompson 2004). Levine puts interests and motives on the top of the list using the dichotomies such as egoism vs. altruism as the main cause of inaction. The by-stander effect and its variations have been used to attempt explaining the lack of international response to some of the most contemporary international crises. As Martineau indi-

cated, the Arab Spring as well as the refugee crisis raised all the red flags in the early waning community, yet nothing has been done to mitigate them (Martineau 2010). It has been suggested that the main international players, who did very little to deal with the upcoming crises, encouraged the political inaction of the whole international, and especially European community (See: Coen 2015; Heisbourg 2015; Novotný 2015).

Meyer and Miskimmon, on the other hand, argue that political actions cannot be explained by simple question - Do we care about x? (2009). They are more relative and dependent on the situational priority of goals. In the regard the real question should be – "How much do we care about x in comparison to y and z and…?" (Meyer et al., 2010: 561). In this perspective, the interests of the potential or targeted intervener can be changed by domestic and international advocacy, emphasizing the importance of intervention and by framing a humanitarian crisis as a national or international security issue (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998). That is why early warning systems often act as lobbing groups, trying to highlight the importance of interventions and responses to specific international crises. Such lobbing activities can exploit political agenda of a specific country or organization, security culture or concrete political interests (See: Princen 2011). Regardless, as a part of their lobbying activities, the systems aim to indicate immediate implications of political inactions and potential political and other costs to the targeted responders (O'Brien 2002). The issue with this approach is that the real attention is usually diverted from conflict prevention to negative implications of the crises (Zartman 2015). This often leads to providing early warnings when a crisis situation is fairly advanced and negative impact on the international community is evident. In such cases conflict prevention turns into conflict management and early warnings act more as a tool for monitoring the development and potential escalation of the crisis, than an analysis that is supposed to initiate preventive measures.

## Conclusions

Early warning analysis represents one of the most sophisticated tools for conflict prevention. It originated in intelligence services in order to become a widely utilized instrument among governmental and non-governmental institutions. The sole purpose of early warning systems (private or governmental) is to take the claim of surprise from the decision makers' hands and supplement it with a comprehensive and advanced security analysis. This however, on numerous occasions proved

to be problematic. The warning-response gap is evident and the history of intelligence failures, neglected international crises and genocides provided enough proof to show that international community and conflict prevention policies are far from perfect.

In this regard, it would be easy to dismiss early warning systems as effective tools for conflict prevention. Nowadays, the majority of international actors concentrate much more on reactive policies, with primary dominance of crises management, instead of preventive actions. Experts and scholars have already indicated numerous technical flaws embedded in early warning analyses. The most outstanding issues can be narrowed down to technical and political problems that have rendered the systems ineffective. Sometimes early warnings are lost in the institutional architecture, informational system, or desktop of the decision maker. Sometimes, the analysis is rejected because it does not align with political interests. However, does it mean that early warnings are obsolete?

There is little evidence showing that early warnings actually worked, because successes of conflict prevention are not as evident and spectacular as its failures. The systems struggle with numerous problems, but they are still an important element of humanitarian and conflict prevention actions, which mitigate and alleviate human suffering all around the globe. It should be noted that even with overcoming the technical shortcomings, conflict prevention will always be dependent on political climate and willingness of decision makers'. Thus, even the most accurate and timed early warning analysis may be ineffective due to political reasons. The research on intelligence and conflict prevention failures is still in its embryonic stage. What it requires is advanced empirical study on early warnings perceptions among high-level politicians, models of knowledge utilization in international organizations, early warnings systems' networking patterns and lobbing techniques. The systems' role in conflict prevention actions is still very much understudied and hopefully the future project will shed some light on early warnings systems and their role in the recent international crises.

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