



Report of the second EMRIC policy period

2019-2023

“A period of learning”



Introduction

This is a report on the second policy period of the permanent EMRIC partnership covering the years 2019–2023. The permanent partnership was established in 2014 (thus celebrating its 10th anniversary this year!) and has just concluded its second policy period of five years.

As usual, a multi-year plan has also been drawn up for this policy period, with the following key points: implementation of operational agreements through exercises and training, keeping those agreements and conventions up to date. Communication, both between partners in before and during incidents, but also communication with citizens and PR deserved extra attention, according to the steering committee. These key issues are being taken up by the cooperating partners, who are represented in EMRIC's 14 bodies. An important role is also played by the EMRIC office, which coordinates the cooperation, provides its expert advice and writes and edits the documents and agreements.

What became of it?

What came of it? A lot, but not everything that was planned. Because this 5-year period was characterised by three major incidents with euregional impact, namely: the Covid crisis, the floods and the fires in the High Fens in Belgium. During these incidents, EMRIC cooperation more than proved its worth. More on that later.

These crises did mean that planned matters such as the updating of (public law) agreements, the updating of planning, implementation through training and exercises and PR fell behind schedule and could not be picked up until 2023, the last year of this policy period.

How was EMRIC involved in the major incidents in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine?

The incidents mentioned were very diverse in type, but all had a major euregional impact. The EMRIC partnership there showed how valuable it is.

Let's start with the cooperation in the Covid-19 period that lasted from February 2020 to May 2022. The first cases of Covid were reported in our Euregio in the Kreis Heinsberg. The control room there immediately reported this to the other control rooms in the EMRIC context. A few days later, there were more cases of Corona in our Euregio. The liaisons in the crisis staff at the EMRIC partners kept each other constantly informed about the situation in their countries; sometimes there was mutual contact up to three times a week. This information exchange was very useful and citizens could be well informed about the situation in their neighbouring region.

NB: in our Euregio, borders no longer exist: people live, work, recreate and study in neighbouring foreign countries.

Pretty soon, the national or federal authorities in the three countries came up with measures and these measures were quite divergent or sometimes even diametrically opposed. Therefore, the EMRIC office started comparing the measures announced in the three countries side by side; by topic, such as border traffic, schools, restaurants, shops, contact professions, travel, vaccination strategy and so on. All themes important to citizens were elaborated. A total of 150 such overviews were produced by the EMRIC office during the 1.5-year corona period. So this is an average of two overviews per week - in the three languages of our Euregio, of course - following yet another new measure in one of the three countries.

These overviews were quickly discovered by national authorities and also used there by ministers and ministries. Thanks to the PANDEMERIC project subsidised by Interreg Euregio Meuse-Rhine, led by EMRIC, additional staff could be added to the EMRIC office for the duration of the project. This was very welcome in this hectic period. The national measures from the overview were converted as much as possible into euregional measures to make things easier for the euregional citizens. An information exchange platform for sharing information between the services in EMRIC was also set up by EMRIC. For products from the other project partners in PANDEMERIC, please refer to the website pandemic.info. It would go too far in this report to describe them in detail here.

And then... the floods!

In July 2021, the Euregio Meuse-Rhine was hit hard by floods, especially of smaller rivers, in some places even resulting in deaths. There was also a great deal of material damage: houses, schools, shops, etc. were flooded. Citizens in the affected areas were in real need. Unfortunately, the euregional assistance agreements made in the framework of EMRIC did not help: every partner needed its own people and resources far too much for its own region.

However, the liaisons did return to action and with success: meaningful information was shared about the situation at home and its possible impact on neighbouring countries. Of course, this disaster is not comparable to the Covid crisis. That lasted 1.5 years while the floods can be described as a flash disaster. Consequently, the exchange of information had to be fast and often went well, but EMRIC also found shortcomings: lack of time due to the hectic situation led to people in the crisis staff forgetting to inform neighbouring countries and the liaison, which in turn led to unclear situations for citizens. This had to be improved. Once again, however, EMRIC was offered a grant by Interreg Euregio Meuse-Rhine and from this the Marhetak project was born.

For EMRIC, this brought many benefits: not only could additional staff be recruited again for the duration of the project, the agreements regarding risk and crisis communication were also

tightened up, a scientific study was published in the context of Marhetak on euregional risk assessment at the time of incidents, the possibilities (in fact necessity) for improved coordination between the crisis units (at all crisisstaff levels) and how to evaluate together during and after the incident. Four e-learnings were made with the above-mentioned themes and, not unimportantly, the services in EMRIC informed the services responsible for water management of the information needed to better handle the crisis.

Fire in the High Fens

In May 2023, a major fire raged in the High Fens in Belgium on the border with Germany. There, operational assistance arrangements worked extremely well! The Belgian leadership from the Hilfeleistungszone DG (German-speaking Community) requested help from its German neighbours from the Städteregion Aachen, handed over the leadership of a deployment section to the leader from the Städteregion (entirely in accordance with EMRIC agreements); this leader saw that, in terms of deployment capacity, he could not manage with his people and resources alone and called in his South Limburg colleagues. Result: German and Dutch units working together on Belgian territory to fight the peat fire. A textbook example of euregional cooperation! This worked thanks to the fact that the leadership knows each other through the many meetings as part of EMRIC, that people therefore trust each other and know and respect each other's systems. We are proud of it and especially proud of our colleagues in EMRIC.

So what has become of the multi-year plan?

As already mentioned, not all ambitions in the multi-year plan were achieved within the described 5-year period due to the above-mentioned major crises. After all, not only the people working within EMRIC in the various bodies were busy doing their main task: fighting disasters and crises. The EMRIC office was busy as well: reviewing measures, fulfilling liaison functions, attending evaluation meetings, talking to ministries that things should be different for the border regions and so on. The run-up taken in 2019, the beginning of this policy period, did not continue due to the crises, but day-to-day relief work continued as usual: EMRIC still counted around 1,000 cross-border deployments on average during this period. From 2023, the bureau could look forward to an expansion of our personnel capacity by one person and in that year all plans were resumed: the exercises, the e-learnings, the kick-off sessions for the trainer pool, meetings. Details can be found in our annual reports 2019-2023 which are on the EMRIC website (emric.info).

During this policy period, new themes within EMRIC were taken up, as diverse as digital exploration. The Crisis Management and Disaster Management Focus Group was also established during the last year of this period. This group deals with risk and crisis communication, euregional disaster response plans, evaluation, liaison, events, among others.

Communication and PR

In terms of communication and PR, EMRIC was very active in the recent period. The new website was built and filled, social media like Facebook and LinkedIn were regularly updated with messages about EMRIC's many activities. EMRIC has become highly visible and is often mentioned as an example in Europe, to national governments and other partnerships.

The future

In its two-day meeting in October 2022, the members of the EMRIC Steering Committee decided to continue cooperation in the same way as in the previous 10 years. A new multi-year policy plan has been written and a Service Level Agreement has been created. EMRIC looks forward to expanding the cooperation even further and thereby working towards an even safer Euregio Meuse-Rhine for all its citizens, tourists and passers-by.

