

Organizational resilience in national security bureaucracies: Realistic and practicable?

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Resilience is increasingly highlighted as a necessary organizational property in national security bureaucracies. This article explores the resulting management dilemmas via interviews with Danish executives, who attempt to balance resilience, fiscal austerity and democratic accountability. It concludes that the resilience agenda inspires relevant organizational adjustments, including more external networking and internal resource variety. But austerity limits resilience to budget-neutral forms, and fear of blame games limits the space for innovation to stay abreast with evolving risks. The article calls for a critical reappraisal of how much resilience to expect from public sector organizations and for more research into the boundary conditions of organizational resilience in the public sector.

1 | INTRODUCTION

How should a Western democracy faced with an ever more complex and multifaceted landscape of threats and hazards organize to protect the safety and security of its citizens? Specifically, how could it strengthen the ability of public sector organizations in the fields of emergency management, police, intelligence and defence to understand, anticipate, prevent, contain and respond to dynamic and complex challenges to national security and societal safety?

Increasingly, policy planners and analysts have seized on the concept of resilience—a term that originates in the science of physics and denotes the ability of a system to quickly return to equilibrium after an external disturbance (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008; Shaw & Maythorne, 2013). Modern societies, the argument goes, face a variety of predictable and unpredictable threats and hazards, have countless vulnerable points and depend on complex and interconnected infrastructures that might fail in unanticipated ways. Therefore, it is argued government agencies, businesses and civil society need to cultivate the ability to respond flexibly to a wide range of potential contingencies. They need the ability to handle familiar threats and hazards as effectively as possible. And they need the ability to improvise, learn and quickly adapt

to cope with unfamiliar and surprising threat or hazards, in sum to become more resilient (Allenby & Fink, 2005; Dahlberg, Johannessen-Henry, Raju, & Tulsiani, 2015; Edwards, 2009; Flynn, 2008; Homeland Security Advisory Council, 2011; Ramo, 2009).

Organizational resilience research has highlighted the importance of trust, networks between different agencies and levels of government, ongoing interaction between technical expertise and a wider social context, innovation and collaboration across from the boundary between state and civil society (Comfort, 2005, 2012a, 2012b; Fitzgerald & Lupton, 2015; Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003; Termeer & van den Briok, 2013). It has also been noted, however, that realizing resilience amidst other pressures and expectations directed at public sector organizations might not be straightforward (Longstaff, 2010, 2012; Stark, 2014).

But despite the increased prominence of resilience as a guiding concept in national security discourses, little research has focused on how much and which kind of resilient organizational designs and practices are compatible with the everyday pragmatics of government.

This article aims to contribute to fill the gap. It explores the managerial challenges and dilemmas associated with calls for public sector organizations to become more resilient. It does so via semistructured interviews with executives in Denmark's national security bureaucracy. Specifically, it asks how they negotiate conflicting pressures pertaining to resilience, austerity and accountability. As elaborated below, researchers distinguish between different forms of organizational resilience. In the exploration of how the executives balance conflicting pressures, resilience, in line with the expectations formulated in policy discourses, is understood to comprise the ability to handle

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both familiar threats and hazards and the ability to respond to unexpected trouble by learning and adapting (Dahlberg et al., 2015; Homeland Security Advisory Council, 2011).

The article shows how the executives seek to introduce elements of organizational resilience via “virtual reserves”¹ and general, flexible contingency plans. But also that fiscal austerity and a fear of blame games² limit how far they are likely to travel down the road of delegating authority, investing in and making space for experimentation and innovation to stay abreast with evolving risks. A perceived need to demonstrate political accountability via hierarchical control together with the executives’ preference for linear, rational and planning-oriented leadership further constrains the room in which resilient organizational practices might unfold.

The findings indicate the need for a reappraisal of the boundary conditions of organizational resilience when it comes to public sector organizations. The widespread presence of resilience as a goal and a solution in national security discourses might serve to inspire relevant organizational adjustments, but organizational resilience is not a silver bullet for handling an increasingly complex landscape of threats and hazards within fixed or shrinking public sector budgets.

The article first reviews existing organizational resilience literature to extract insights about practical requirements and potential, inherent tensions of resilience organizing and leadership. It then turns to the Danish case and outlines the landscape of threats and hazards that Denmark and Danish government authorities are facing. It zooms in on the challenge posed by an evolving threat from terrorism and the resulting need for flexible, adaptive and collaborating government agencies. The analysis juxtaposes insights from the organizational resilience literature to the priorities, and leadership preferences of executives in Denmark’s national security bureaucracy to begin to draw a picture of which kind of resilient organizational designs and practices are realistic in a public sector context. The article concludes with a suggestion of topics for further research.

2 | RESILIENCE RESEARCH: ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGNS, PRIORITIES AND PRACTICES

Which organizational designs, capabilities, habits and behaviours does it take to match a complex and dynamic landscape of threats and hazards? Increasingly, political and academic interest has centred on the concept of resilience. The analytical interest in organizational resilience has supplemented earlier research into the causes of organizational failures and accidents (Reason, 2000; Sagan, 1993) by zooming in on how and why organizations thrive despite uncertainty and complexity, and how they withstand external shocks, learn from adversity and adapt to a dynamic environment (Lee, Vargo, & Seville, 2013). Organizational resilience has been conceptualized in a variety of ways. Some definitions emphasize the ability to accommodate change without catastrophic failure, others the ability to respond to and recover from singular, surprising events. Some emphasize a combination of these abilities. While the concept was originally used in the natural sciences to denote the ability of a system to return to status quo after

an external disturbance (Norris et al., 2008; Shaw & Maythorne, 2013), it is more often used in organizational studies to denote the ability to adapt and learn, that is move beyond the status quo (Boin & van Eeten, 2013; Fitzgerald & Lupton, 2015; Hollnagel, Nemeth, & Dekker, 2008; Limnios, Mazzarol, Ghadouani, & Schilizzi, 2014).

Case studies of instances of successful crisis management, studies of private sector companies that thrive in volatile markets and studies of so-called high-reliability organizations (HROs) have sought to empirically identify and describe organizational designs and behaviours that seem to go with resilient performance (Comfort, 2005; Hamel & Valikangas, 2003; Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999).

The studies of HROs—organizations that operate complex, hazardous technologies in dynamic environments and in a nearly failure free fashion—point to a number of characteristic attitudes, behavioural patterns, norms and values that apparently permit these organizations to cope with complexity and surprise. They include the capacity to improvise and use what is already at hand to create novel solutions to unexpected problems; a virtual role system by which each group member has an understanding of the organization in its entirety and the roles performed by others, permitting each member to support or take over from other members in case of need; a high degree of individual open-mindedness and curiosity and a recognition that even if past experience is helpful, each situation is potentially novel; respectful interaction between group members, which permits the organization to capitalize better on the entire stock of available knowledge. They also include a strong focus on learning and on exchange of experience via dense internal communication (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Weick et al., 1999).

Additional organizational behaviours which have been highlighted include horizon scanning to detect early signs of change, continuous experimentation, a willingness to rapidly redeploy resources away from existing activities towards new areas and a willingness to accept that small, experimental steps and effective feedback are more appropriate than grand designs, strategies and plans (Hamel & Valikangas, 2003; Longstaff, 2005).

Other researchers have pointed to the formal and structural characteristics of resilient organizations. These include a flat hierarchy to enable fast reactions to environmental changes, a variety of resources and skills to increase chances that the system can match whatever comes at it, loosely coupled subsystems to ensure against cascading failure, maintenance of a reserve capacity to buffer against unexpected trouble, and functional redundancy in critical systems to ensure that core functions can be upheld even under conditions of partial system breakdown (Godschalk, 2003; Lee et al., 2013; Longstaff, 2005, 2010; Parker, 2010; Wildavsky, 1993).

Some researchers distinguish between an organization’s ability to handle threats and hazards, using pre-existing and preplanned capabilities, and its ability to respond to unexpected trouble by learning, changing and developing new capabilities on the go. These abilities are termed, respectively, first-order and second-order resilience (Hollnagel et al., 2008; Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003; Lee et al., 2013). First-order resilience entails handling known threats and hazards effectively

and efficiently via tried and tested technologies and countermeasures, possibly via central control, and via rules and regulations that embody the organization's experience and historical knowledge. Second-order resilience, in contrast, requires the cultivation of a capacity to bounce back from negative surprises via delegation, fast feedback and a licence to experiment and improvise when standard solutions come up short (Wildavsky, 1993). Researchers have pointed out that realizing *both* first- and second-order resilience and switching between a rule-following mode and improvisation represents a major organizational challenge (Boin & van Eeten, 2013; LaPorte & Consolini, 1991). Nevertheless, as discussed in the introduction, current policy discourses and documents seem to present public sector agencies with an expectation that they display both first- and second-order resilience. Public sector agencies are called upon to anticipate, prevent or effectively contain familiar risks, while rapidly adjusting and adapting when facing an emerging unfamiliar threat or hazard (Dahlberg et al., 2015; Edwards, 2009; Flynn, 2008; Homeland Security Advisory Council, 2011).

Existing research on public sector resilience has highlighted the importance of trust between different agencies and levels of government, innovation and collaboration across from the boundaries between state and civil society (Comfort, 2005, 2012a, 2012b; Fitzgerald & Lupton, 2015; Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003; Termeer & van den Brink, 2013). But it has also been pointed out that resilience in public sector organizations could be hampered by values and constraints specific to the public sector. Longstaff has suggested that continuous experimentation to stay abreast with a dynamic risk picture is difficult to combine with governments' obligation to treat citizens equally (Longstaff, 2010). And Stark shows how EU and UK crisis managers feel a need to demonstrate competence via the existence of plans and procedures regardless of whether preconceived plans and procedures help or hurt in terms of handling complex and dynamic risks (Stark, 2014). It has also been pointed out that fiscal austerity might constrain the ability of public sector organizations to display resilience by rendering structural resilience traits such as redundancy and strategic reserves infeasible (Longstaff, 2012; Stark, 2014; Walker & Salt, 2006).

In sum, even as the resilience agenda has proven attractive to analysts and policymakers as an apparent answer to a complex, dynamic and ever-broader range of threats and risks, realizing it amidst other pressures and priorities in public sector organizations might not be straightforward. National security bureaucracies and the executives who lead them probably need to balance conflicting agendas. Insights into how they do so could throw needed light on how much resilience to expect from national security bureaucracies and sharpen our awareness of how context matters when it comes to organizational resilience. The following sections explore this via a Danish case.

3 | THE DANISH CASE: RESPONDING TO EVOLVING THREATS AND HAZARDS

There is no Danish word for resilience. Yet, the same basic thrust of thinking as the one evident in American, Australian and British

policy discourses is clear when Danish policy documents call for Danish society and Danish public sector organizations to become more robust ("robust"), agile ("omstillingsparate") and flexible ("fleksible") to match an increasingly complex and dynamic landscape of threats and hazards (DEMA, 2013; Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste, 2013; Politiets Efterretningstjeneste, 2010).

Denmark was chosen as case because Denmark, as a small, open, democratic country with strong links to the world outside, finds itself exposed to threats and hazards typical for a much broader set of Western countries. They include cyber threats, organized crime, extreme weather, new diseases and veterinary hazards that spread with globalization and with a warming climate (DEMA, 2012a, 2012b, 2015; Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste, 2015). The ability of Danish authorities to prevent, contain and respond to evolving threats and hazards has been tested by torrential rains, storm surges, hacker attacks and food hazards over recent years. While postevent evaluations have generally found that responsible agencies performed well, they have also pointed to shortcomings, for example in efforts to preventively reduce societal vulnerabilities, cope with evolving threats early on and involve a sufficiently broad group of actors and organizations in the efforts.³

The challenges of staying abreast with evolving threats and collaborating in sufficiently broad networks of actors are particularly evident when zooming in on the threat from terrorism (DEMA, 2012a, 2012b; Rigspolitiet, 2015).

Since the 2005 publishing of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammed by a Danish newspaper, *JyllandsPosten*, Denmark has been the target of several terrorist plots by militant Islamist groups and solo terrorists.⁴ Some plots were foiled by authorities, and others flew under the radar: In 2010, one of *JyllandsPosten's* cartoonists was attacked in his home and narrowly escaped injury; in 2013, an Islam critical writer was attacked by a gunman (Politiets Efterretningstjeneste, 2015); and in 2015, another gunman attacked an event on freedom of speech and, hours later, the central Synagogue in Copenhagen, killing two (Rigspolitiet, 2015). The authorities' own evaluation in the wake of the 2015 shootings highlighted, amongst others, a need for stronger abilities to process and act on incoming information about potential secondary targets, the need for better operational situational awareness, and for better collaboration across from organizational boundaries to detect and cope with mutating threats early on (Rigspolitiet, 2015).

The profile of the perpetrator of the 2015 shootings—an individual with a history of petty crime and drug abuse—seemed to confirm a trend that had earlier been noted by authorities: the increased attraction of militant networks and propaganda to individuals with a criminal record or with mental illnesses (Politiets Efterretningstjeneste, 2015; Rigspolitiet, 2015). This trend accentuates the need for collaboration across from traditional boundaries between intelligence services, police, prisons, probation services, social services and the mental healthcare system and the need for innovation in terms of preventive and containment measures.

In sum, the resilience of Danish authorities has been tested by an evolving landscape of threats and hazards, including terrorism. Postevent evaluations have documented the ability of government agencies to contain and respond to such hazards, but also found shortcomings.

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

To explore how the everyday pragmatics of government shape the boundary conditions of resilience in public sector organizations, semistructured interviews were carried out with twelve chief executives in Denmark's national security bureaucracy.⁵

The executive perspective was considered interesting not because the executives were expected to be personally engaged with frontline resilience activities, but because they were supposed to be at the forefront of negotiating potentially conflicting pressures and expectations directed at their organizations. Their ways of doing so were expected to play a significant role in determining the size and nature of the room, in which resilient organizational practices could unfold within their organizations.

As the study was exploratory and using elite respondents, it was decided to rely on semi-structured interviews (Aberbach and Rockman 2002). The interviews did not approach the question of the feasibility of politically stated resilience goals directly, but probed for potential complications and dilemmas via clusters of questions about approaches to cope with the current landscape of threats and hazards, external stakeholders and their expectations, organizational priorities and change goals, management thinking and specific management activities.

The subsequent analysis mapped the interview data against the insights about resilient organizational designs and habits extracted from the literature analysis. Specifically, the analysis sought to establish (i) whether the non-resilience-related organizational development goals and priorities of the respondents were compatible with the designs and habits of resilient organizations or whether they appeared to work at cross purposes, (ii) which aspects of organizational resilience appeared compatible/incompatible with the experienced reality of the executives, (iii) whether the respondents' way of practicing leadership appeared conducive to resilient organizational practices or not.

5 | RESILIENCE AND THE EVERYDAY PRAGMATICS OF GOVERNMENT: HOW EXECUTIVES IN DENMARK'S NATIONAL SECURITY BUREAUCRACY NEGOTIATE CONFLICTING PRESSURES

How do the executives in Denmark's national security bureaucracy negotiate conflicting pressures pertaining to resilience, austerity and accountability? Which kinds of organizational resilience appear compatible with their experienced realities? How much room do their

organizational priorities and leadership approaches leave for the designs and behaviours identified by organizational resilience research?

5.1 | Balancing austerity and resilience

The literature review led to the expectation that public sector executives face conflicting pressures and that a resilience trait such as having a strategic reserve might be particularly difficult to combine with austerity. The interviews explored the matter in part via asking the executives to talk about their most prioritized organizational goals in general, in part via questions about the landscape of risks and their strategies for coping with it.

In general, and not surprisingly, the executives confirmed the existence of a complex and dynamic landscape of risks, pointing out how threats and hazards continually evolve and how they increasingly cut across organizational and international borders. This was true for the executives who handled security threats such as terrorism (respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7), and it was true for executives with responsibility for handling broader natural, man-made or technological threats and hazards (respondents 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12). They added to the picture a handful of additional characteristics of their organizational environment that further underscored the presence of conflicting demands: tight budgets,⁶ divergent stakeholder expectations as to products and services, a me-first attitude amongst recipients of government services and 24/7 media coverage with a tendency to zoom in on single issues (respondents 1, 2, 3, 7, 9).

To begin to map how the executives translated these pressures into organizational priorities and how they balanced them, the respondents were asked to talk about their most prioritized organizational goals. Figure 1 shows the most frequently mentioned goals and the number of respondents who point to each of them. Most respondents mentioned more than one goal.

The answers seem to confirm that austerity looms large, also in national security bureaucracies. The most frequently mentioned priority was to build and sustain credibility with external stakeholders by delivering quality products and services within budget and on time. Many respondents emphasized that the consequence of not doing so was political interference with daily business and an increased likelihood of future budget cuts due to a general loss of organizational credibility (respondents 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12). The second and third most frequently mentioned priorities—to rationalize and automatize routine tasks, and to establish a better resource overview via stronger information management systems—were also linked to the need to be, and to be seen as, fiscally responsible and to demonstrate efficiency in the administration and use of public funds (respondents 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9).

Whereas the first three priorities seem to reflect an austerity agenda, the last three priorities are more in tune with aspects of organizational resilience identified by existing research: strong networks (respondents 5, 6, 9, 12), dense internal communication (respondents 2, 4, 9, 11) and resource variety (respondents 2, 3, 5, 6). The common theme in the accounts of the executives who

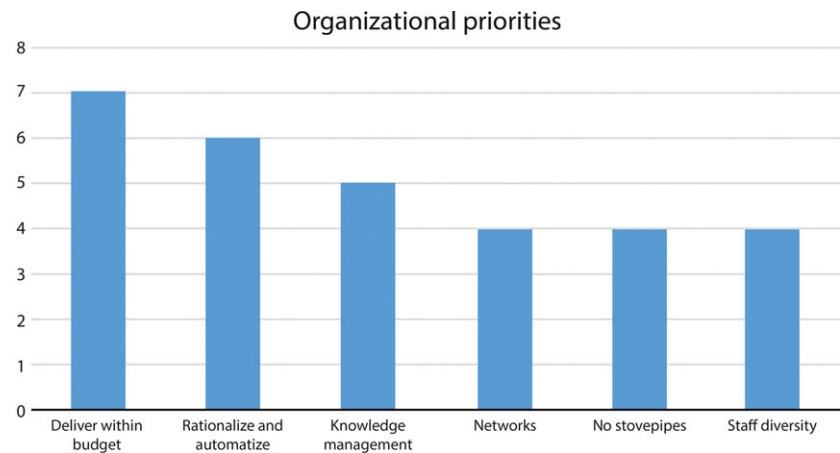


FIGURE 1 Organizational priorities and change goals

mentioned these goals is a wish to develop a more capable, innovative and flexible organization to cope with a complex and challenging environment. Collaboration across from organizational stovepipes should ensure a better ability to handle challenges that do not fit neatly into just one stovepipe, and greater staff diversity in terms of training, gender, work experience and cultural background should permit the organization to better match the challenges of an increasingly complex environment. Stronger networks should permit the organization to supplement its own resources and knowledge with the resources and knowledge of partner organizations. In the words of one respondent “That is also a part of displaying foresight, to have strong relations and networks, so you can get help to handle unforeseen contingencies and challenges” (respondent 6).

The presence of both austerity-derived goals and resilience-relevant goals could be seen as evidence that most executives (those who indicate both types of goals) seek to balance the two agendas. But what are the implications of the fact that the executives seem to give prevalence to austerity ahead of resilience?

5.2 | Austerity-compatible resilience?

To probe further, the executives were asked to talk about their strategies for coping with the landscape of threats and hazards. Most respondents were vocal about this, mentioning “virtual reserves,” and flexible contingency planning. Perhaps revealingly, their proposed ways of ensuring robustness, adaptability and flexibility to match evolving risks were supportive of or, as a minimum, not in contrast with the need to appear fiscally responsible. When asked directly, the executives confirmed that the maintenance of redundant capacity to buffer against large-scale contingencies was not realistic and/or desirable. In the words of one respondent “I’ve worked towards an integration of our high readiness forces in the day to day business [...] that is also the way to make ends meet. Sitting around and waiting, that is a thing of the past” (respondent 7). Another mentioned how his organization had settled on maintaining what one might term a “virtual reserve” instead of a real one: “The big challenge is, if you completely and totally prioritise current tasks and something new pops up, how do you swing around? We have had long discussions. Should we for example have a strategic reserve? Yes, in an

ideal world, but we cannot afford it in our daily operations, to have someone who is extra [...] Instead, we identify people who have the ability to be reassigned to new challenges. Those in the organisations, who are best able to adapt” (respondent 2). Another respondent, however, did worry about the fact that austerity precluded the maintenance of an actual reserve: “We are a small organization that might become overwhelmed by a contingency. Even if we throw in everything we have, including a mobilization of those who normally work in the private sector” (respondent 12).

Flexible and general planning as a means for coping with complex and dynamic risks was brought up by a handful of respondents (respondents 1, 5, 10, 11): “What we did in the wake of these crises [the South East Asian Tsunami and the printing of the Mohammed cartoons] was—rather banal, but it works—a crisis manual [...] It is possible to have some general categories on a check list, where almost all will be relevant in most crises. And then each crisis will add a new category, and other categories will be irrelevant in the situation. It is wrong, actually, to think about the manual as an ultimate play book. It is more like a platform” (respondent 5). In a similar vein, another argued that even if the nature of risks varies, the key elements of effective consequence management vary less: “This journalist called and asked if we had a plan for handling a meteorite strike. We said: “no, but we have a plan for handling a big hole in the ground”” (respondent 1).

It falls beyond the boundaries of this article to test how well the executives’ attempts to create austerity-compatible resilience work in practice. Do virtual reserves ensure the needed flexibility and would they prove sufficiently robust in the face of a large-scale contingency? Do front-line personnel feel as comfortable as the executives with flexibly applying general plans to specific contingencies? Denmark’s nonhierarchical culture and highly skilled work force should, in principle, represent favourable preconditions, but interviews with broader groups of staff or observation in a crisis situation would be needed before concluding on these questions.

It is important to point out, however, that flexible plans and virtual reserves/integrated high readiness forces are main downstream measures to respond and contain a threat or hazard once it has materialized. While these are important aspects of organizational resilience, resilience research also points to the importance of

continuous experimentation and innovation to remain abreast with evolving risks, for example efforts to develop new preventive interventions that combine skills from police and mental health work, and target mentally ill persons who are flirting with extremist networks.

Innovation to develop new preventive means and methods does not figure directly amongst the priorities brought up by the executives. One might suspect that experimentation and innovation, like reserves and redundancy, are difficult to combine with fiscal austerity, in part as it requires a dedication of resources and time and in part because failed experiments could be difficult to justify in a political climate with a strong focus on efficient use of public funds. When asked, almost all respondents emphasized that innovation is, in principle, very important. But also that in reality, it slides down the list of priorities. Some simply do not have budget lines for activities directed at detecting new risks and developing means and methods for coping with them. Others indicated that time is a scarce resource and here-and-now tasks often win out in the daily prioritization (respondents 2, 7, 8, 9).

All in all, the interviews seem to confirm the existence of tensions between aspects of the resilience agenda and the austerity agenda. Although the executives appear to find ways of introducing austerity-compatible resilience, other organizational resilience traits such as strategic reserves and forward-looking innovation find little space. While it would be wrong to argue that austerity is incompatible with resilience, it does appear to restrict to certain forms the kind of organizational resilience one should expect from national security bureaucracies.

5.3 | Accountability and blame games

Although the executives' accounts were generally focused on solutions, not problems, one particularly thorny theme emerged across from several interviews: a confrontational political climate combined with a zero-misses expectation, which is arguably unrealistic when risks are complex and dynamic (respondents 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11). In the words of one respondent, "When something unexpected happens, there will always be this question: 'How could that possibly surprise you?'. There is this basic expectation that we anticipate everything and contain all threats before they develop" (respondent 3).

While some respondents were confident that close communication with political leaders helped moderate expectations, others were pessimistic (respondents 3, 9, 10, 12).⁷ In the words of one respondent, "Checklists—they are in place to prevent a repeat of what has already happened. And then the terrorists come up with something new [...] It is extremely difficult to move beyond this. Occasionally, we try to loosen some of the procedures that are in place [...] But then I have to make this risk calculation: Do I run this risk? It might be very well founded, but if something goes wrong, none of the analyses that showed the adjustment was reasonable will be worth anything" (respondent 9).

Some respondents related how they seek to create "safe" spaces for innovation in areas where failures are not going to have life-and-

death consequences (respondents 2, 7, 8). Others were more cynical: "You might try to compartmentalise and create some space for innovative practices and experiments [...] But in the wake of a safety incident there will be zero space for anything. We can't say 'we are happy if we have a success rate of 99%.' That's not going to fly" (respondent 10).

Two additional issues emerged from the interviews with likely consequences for whether and how public sector executives should be expected to introduce resilient organizational designs and practices—the need to remain politically accountable and the need to have good explanations when not treating citizens the same way in the regulatory security and safety work: "In many other organisations you might set up cross cutting teams etc. to promote the development of new ideas [...] The problem is, it would be dangerous in this organisation if doubt were to emerge as to who is responsible for what and who is in charge [...] The simple fact is, in an organisation like this, the consequences of not getting the right thing done at the right moment can be very big" (respondent 3). And, according to another respondent, "...we must remain within specific rules and within our political mandate. And then there is also the question of funding—the annual appropriation bill can be quite specific. There is not much room for "play". And the fees paid by private sector companies—they are not inclined to finance a variety of idiosyncratic experiments" (respondent 9).

In sum, the interviews indicated that a perceived need to remain accountable and a fear of blame games limit the willingness to delegate authority and make space for experimentation and innovation.

5.4 | Leading for resilience?

As we saw above, the public sector context seems to render some resilient organizational designs and behaviours unrealistic, while other—networks, dense internal communication flows, virtual reserves and flexible contingency planning—are brought up and prioritized by the executives. Further research would be needed before concluding on how well the executives' austerity-compatible resilience works in practice. Yet, one way of probing within the confines of this study is to ask whether the executives' conceptions of leadership appear matched to the resilience goals they pursue. In other words, do the executives' way of leading actually promote the organizational flexibility, learning, collaboration and adaptability they are seeking via networks, closer internal collaboration, etc.?

Figure 2 shows the activities and instruments the respondents bring up when asked to explain how they lead. Most respondents mentioned several instruments and activities.

Strategic communication, that is repeating a message over time and in different organizational fora, is the most frequently mentioned activity (respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12). Next came making adjustments to formal organizational structures (respondents 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12). Six respondents mentioned strategic controlling, measurement and information systems to ensure that the management board remains in touch with whether the organization is delivering on the prioritized goals (respondents 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12).

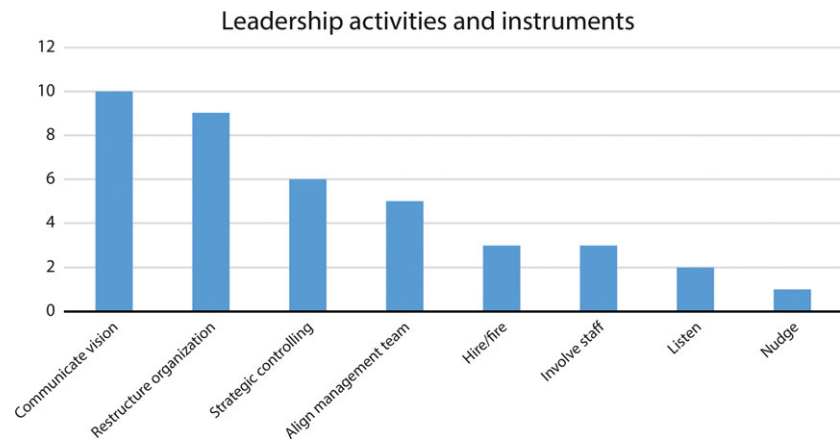


FIGURE 2 Leadership activities and instruments

Seeking to align the management team on the same goals was mentioned by five respondents (respondents 3, 6, 7, 8, 9). Three indicated that they employ hiring and firing (respondents 2, 5, 8). Three described how they seek to involve staff, for example by giving licence to propose process improvements (respondents 4, 5, 9). Two respondents indicated that they take time to listen (respondents 2, 9), and one had sought to nudge staff towards desired behaviours—more interaction across from stovepipes—via physical alterations to the office spaces (respondent 4).

As illustrated in Figure 2, the respondents seem to display a preference for classical, linear, planning-oriented leadership instruments over activities that entail listening and broad inclusion of staff in decision-making processes.⁸ Linear management might be well suited to ensure that the organization delivers within budget. It is more doubtful that it can ensure the realization of strong networks, cross-cutting collaboration and more innovation. While four of the eight respondents who bring up one or more of these goals indicated that they spend time either listening or seeking to involve staff (respondents 2, 4, 5, 9), the other four did not (respondents 3, 6, 7, 11). Certainly, it is possible to mandate networking and crosscutting teams, and to co-locate groups of staff with different skill sets. Management can communicate the reason why they believe such activities are needed, and they can set an example via personal engagement. But the degree to which this results in the desired organizational innovation and adaptability is critically dependent on the engagement, imagination, openness, mutual trust and flexibility of staff (Caluwé & Vermaak, 2003; Palmer & Dunford, 2002). Indeed, inertia and resistance were themes that cut across the interviews. When asked to talk about their approach to overcome resistance, most respondents remained within a linear, rational leadership vocabulary: via more strategic communication, via careful planning and phased introduction of change to not overwhelm the ability and willingness of staff to come along, via strategic coupling of projects that provoke scepticism with projects that have broader support, etc. (respondents 1, 2, 6, 7, 12).

The question of how to nurture the trust and individual open-mindedness required for networks and cross cutting teams to become effective is difficult to answer at a general level.⁹ This is why the leadership practices of listening and including are essential,

to understand existing perceptions and behavioural patterns and form an idea of how to proceed from there. In the words of one respondent: “It took me a long time to figure out what they really meant, when they said that the changes had a negative impact on the quality and professionalism of their work [...] I thought it was a smokescreen for defending existing privileges. As it turned out, it was about how they could relate to and serve the clients. And, lo and behold, all of a sudden we were on common ground because that was a common goal. For me this was about learning to decode [...] It was only once I understood what they were actually talking about that we could get beyond these conflicts and start concentrating on our mission” (respondent 9).

In sum, the interviews indicate that the predominant way of thinking about leadership within the public sector represents an additional barrier to resilient organizational practices, even when leaders do pursue goals that should in principle enhance resilience. Broader interviewing or observation of everyday and crisis interactions in the executives’ organizations would be needed before drawing any final conclusions on this topic, however.

6 | CONCLUSION

The concept of resilience increasingly figures in national security discourses as a guiding concept for coping with complex and dynamic threats. The implications in terms of how to lead and organize public sector organizations charged with safeguarding national security and societal safety are rarely discussed.

This article aimed to explore practical management challenges connected with the resilience agenda by juxtaposing insights from organizational resilience research with insights generated via interviews with executives in Denmark’s national security bureaucracy.

The interviews showed how the executives balance austerity and resilience-related goals, but also how austerity figured higher on their list of priorities and how it precluded certain forms of organizational resilience, for example resilience via redundancy and strategic reserves. The executives instead relied on amongst others “virtual reserves” and flexible contingency plans. The need to remain politically accountable combined with a fear of blame games seemed to

limit the executives' willingness to delegate authority and make space for experimentation to stay abreast with evolving risks. In sum, the interviews indicated that there are limits to how much resilience to expect from public sector organizations and that aspects of resilient organizing such as delegation to the front line and experimentation to stay abreast with a dynamic landscape of risks could come at the price of other public administration values.

The article relied on a Danish case study. The ability of Danish authorities to prevent, contain and respond to evolving threats and hazards has been tested in a number of contingencies over recent years, and postevent evaluations have generally indicated resilient performance, but also some shortcomings. The landscape of threats and hazards and the stakeholder expectations described by the Danish respondents probably resemble the environments of public sector executives in other European countries. Yet, whether the findings apply beyond Denmark is a question to be tested via further research.

Moreover, further research would be needed to explore whether the executives' perceptions of the political and public expectations vis-a-vis their agencies are accurate. Is it correct that the public tolerance of errors is close to zero? What is the role of the media in forming expectations? Do politicians and journalists adequately understand the challenges of seeking to manage unpredictable risks? How real is the fear of blame games? Additional research into these questions would add to our understanding of how context matters when it comes to the organizational resilience of agencies charged with upholding the safety and security of Western democracies.

Is resilience an answer to the question of how to organize, to protect the safety and security of citizens in the light of a complex and multifaceted landscape of threats and hazards? Specifically, is organizational resilience a recipe for maintaining and strengthening the ability of public sector organizations in the fields of emergency management, police, intelligence and defence to understand, anticipate, prevent, contain and respond to dynamic and complex challenges to national security and societal safety?

The Danish case indicated the need for a critical reappraisal of the boundary conditions of organizational resilience when it comes to public sector organizations. The widespread presence of resilience as a goal and a solution in national security discourses might serve to inspire relevant organizational adjustments such as more external networking, internal resource diversity and collaboration across from stovepipes. But it is no silver bullet for handling increasingly complex risks within fixed or shrinking budgets, and it raises broader democratic questions about the right balance between public sector resilience and other principles of public sector administration such as efficiency, hierarchical control with the exercise of public authority, and consistency and predictability in the administration of rules.

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END NOTES

- ¹ Virtual reserves, in the accounts of the respondents, are resources that are not actually held in reserve, but which are earmarked for being drawn out of current operations if need arises.
- ² A blame game emerges when an incident is framed as a result of failures of public agencies or officials and when the failures are presented as violations of crucial public values. Typically, the responsibility of some actors is highlighted and that of others minimized (Brändström & Kuipers, 2003).
- ³ Denmark has a strong tradition for carrying out postcontingency evaluations of both small and large contingencies. While various evaluation reports point to shortcomings and room for improvement, they generally depict well-functioning authorities that respond resiliently to a range of threats and hazards. For example, in 2011, Copenhagen was hit by torrential rains. While no lives were lost, the flooding led to substantial service disruptions and indicated several shortcomings in public and private sector efforts to reduce societal vulnerabilities in order to prevent or reduce damage from extreme weather events (DEMA, 2012a, 2012b). An evaluation of the efforts to contain a salmonella outbreak in 2008 indicated effective efforts to contain and investigate local outbreaks, but difficulties in scaling up efforts to cover a national outbreak. The evaluation also pointed to the need to involve a broader set of actors than the three government authorities normally involved (Danish Veterinary and Food Administration, 2008). An evaluation in the wake of a 2005 storm surge showed that while government agencies generally responded effectively, communication with the public and cross-organizational coordination needed improvement (DEMA, 2012a).
- ⁴ Global Terrorism Database, University of Maryland, on <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?search=denmark&sa.x=0&sa.y=0> [accessed on 4 February 2016].
- ⁵ Respondents included the commander of the Danish National Police, the permanent secretary of the Defence Department, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the head of the Danish Emergency Management Agency, two heads of the Police Security and Intelligence Service (a new director entered office during the research period), the head of the Danish Defence Intelligence Service, the head of the Danish cyber security organization (Centre for Cybersecurity), the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Transportation, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries, the head of the transportation security agency (Danish Transport Authority) and the head of the food safety agency (Danish Veterinary and Food Administration). Interviews lasted for one hour and were carried out between late fall, 2013, and early spring, 2015.
- ⁶ Two of the agencies were experiencing major budget reductions in the period when the research was carried out. The rest faced minor budget reductions. For Denmark's two intelligence agencies, the trend was reversed in the wake of the 2015 shootings in Copenhagen.
- ⁷ The head of the Security and Intelligence Service was retired from his job in the wake of the 2015 shootings.
- ⁸ For a discussion of rational and linear versus iterative leadership approaches, see Weick and Quinn (1999), Palmer and Dunford (2002) and Caluwe and Vermaak (2003).
- ⁹ The research fields of innovation management, learning organizations and safety cultures might provide inspiration as they centre on aspects of organizational life that resemble the habits and behaviours emphasized by organizational resilience research (Bessant, 2003; Hopkins, 2006; Longstaff, 2010; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

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