

INGSA CASE STUDIES

VASCOVY – PANIC AT THE BORDER

Emergency Response – Risk and uncertainty in a digital age

Grant Mills, Vaughan Turekian, Lara Cowen, Peter Gluckman



COPYRIGHT: THE BELLONA FOUNDATION UNDER CC BY-NC-SA 2.0



*This work is licenced for non-commercial reuse,
with attribution to INGSA and named authors, and link to <http://ingsa.org>.
See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/> for more info.*

VASCOVY – PANIC AT THE BORDER

Emergency Response – Risk and Uncertainty in a digital age

Background and context

Vascovy is an advanced democratic republic of about 10 million people, centrally located in its region. Its ruling party is seen as centrist with vocal parties to both the left and right in opposition. Its geography, with good harbours on its north-west coast, means that it is a transit and logistics point for a number of neighbouring landlocked countries with a collective population of about 60 million.

The country's capital, Monserrat, is located inland on the junction of two rivers and located close to the western border with the country's larger neighbour, Graznavia. Graznavia has a population of ~25 million but whose economy has been faltering under a nationalist populist government that is sometimes described as near-fascist in Vascovy's rather free press.

While there are considerable historical tensions between Vascovy and Graznavia dating back over 200 years, relating to differing languages and religious history, the Government of Vascovy has been courting Graznavia due to their growing role as an energy producer. Recently, in a token diplomatic gesture, Graznavia agreed to support Vascovy's campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council.

Currently, Vascovy imports the majority of its energy from Energia, another country on the other side of the gulf with extensive nuclear capacity and some hydroelectric resources, via a 70 km undersea cable, resulting in high energy prices. The Vascovian Government is keen to diversify their energy sources, for energy security and because lowering citizen's energy prices is an important political issue.

While relations with Energia have in the past been very good, political and populist change in Energia is leading to rumors, which have not been refuted, that Energia will increase their pricing of exported energy by 35% when the current supply contract to Vascovy expires in 2 years' time.

Graznavia has recently expanded their energy production capacity by upgrading and expanding an aging nuclear power plant close to the border with Vascovy and within 50 kilometers of Vascovy's capital. They are keen to sell surplus energy to Vascovy. Opponents in Vascovy have attacked the government, accusing them of not exerting enough pressure on Graznavia to build the new reactors elsewhere, in exchange for a favourable deal on energy imports.

Elements of the public, including a growing environmentalist party and a small but growing ultra-nationalist fringe, object to buying energy from Graznavia, the former because of their anti-nuclear stance and the latter because Graznavia is seen as untrustworthy and Vascovy should not be reliant on their historical enemy.

The regional power, Norvenia – with a population of 140 million and authoritarian rule – is also suspected of using digital platforms to whip up dissent amongst protesters in Vascovy. Some protests have been violent, with injuries but no deaths. Tear gas has had to be employed on several occasions. It is suggested that the Norvenian government stands to lose influence in the region if Vascovy and Graznavia form stronger ties.

Many of the countries in the region are signatories to the Regional Union Agreement (RUA), a transnational grouping that primarily exists as a block on Norvenian influence. Geo-politically, Graznavia is an important member of the group, but is also the most likely to disagree with the other heads of state, and is the 'difficult sibling' of the RUA.

Even so, Norvenia still exercises considerable influence and power in the region and has been running military exercises with Graznavia close to the Vascovian border. This has caused the relationship between Vascovy and Graznavia to sour once again and has culminated in the Vascovians recalling their ambassador from Graznavia. Tensions in the region are heightened.

You are a member of the Vascovian government's Emergency Response Committee and social media has just lit up with news from just across the border.

SCENARIO



Situation Clock T = 0

Facebook shows images of smoke billowing into the air; shaky video of a Graznavian farmer pointing at the plume on the horizon, sitting low over the trees. The key words you can pick out are 'explosion' and 'nuclear plant'. In the background, some people are seen running towards the situations; others are running away. The video is going viral. Other videos of questionable authenticity follow.

Media outlets around the world are reporting on the video even though there is no consensus on what has happened. There is no immediate response from the Graznavian media or government.

Then the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) releases an announcement that their local monitoring equipment has detected a spike in radionuclides in the region around the new Graznavian reactor. The dose is low but the IAEA indicate that it is consistent with the first stages of a nuclear event.

The Prime Minister of Vascovy calls together the Emergency Response Committee, of which you are a member, demanding advice.

Questions for Discussion

- **What is the problem you are trying to solve?**
- **What are the actions – reactive or pre-emptive – that you should be considering?**
- **What information is going to be required to make any of these decisions? How will you get this information?**



Situation Clock T = 4 Hours

The eyes of the world are now on Graznavia and the government has moved fast to officially deny that there is any ongoing danger.

In an official statement, the Prime Minister of Graznavia has stated that there was a minor, non-critical, event at the new reactor during a training exercise. The event was immediately handled according to protocols and was successfully contained. While there was a minor leak from a cooling pipe, the dosage was well below any harmful level, even to the workers in the plant, and there is no risk of contamination of groundwater or further radiation leaks.

The minor nature and swift containment of the event was proof, the Prime Minister said, of the effectiveness of the safety systems in place, and therefore Graznavia was fully competent to manage it on its own. They would not be allowing external assistance or oversight. A detailed report would be released once a full evaluation was done.

With the Vascovia government having recalled their ambassador, the *chargé d'affaires* has little direct access to Graznavian officials – his request by email and phone for further information is dismissed by the Graznavian foreign and energy ministries with referrals to the Prime Minister's previous announcement.

In Graznavia, the political Opposition party – who have traditionally been resistant to nuclear power – have responded with a press release saying the government had repeatedly been warned about the vulnerability of the Graznavian plant to terrorism. They have re-released their report on the risk and are getting a lot of traction.

CNN is now reporting from the outskirts of the nuclear facility, barred from getting too close by the Graznavian army. Their footage shows that smoke is still rising from the facility, fueling more suspicion of the government's statement that the situation was contained. CNN have also captured images of a number of ambulances leaving the site.

Across social media, comparisons with Chernobyl are at fever pitch, with #GraznaviaChernobyl the number one hashtag globally.

In Monserrat, protests are quickly forming, a mix of panicked citizens, driven by both green groups and ultra-nationalists. As well as shouting for a response from the Vascovia government, the ultra-nationalists are demanding an immediate closure of the border to stop people fleeing from Graznavia.

Roads out of the Monserrat are clogged with people trying to escape to the coast – a major traffic jam has formed at the motorway bridge over the Monserrat river and there is a growing sense of panic. When a car breaks down blocking one lane of the bridge, angry people use a truck to push it over the parapet into the river.

Questions for Discussion

- **What is the problem you are trying to solve now?**
- **What information, and from whom, do you need to assist you?**
- **What measures need to be put in place?**



Situation Clock T = 8 Hours

A little known global eco-terrorist group has claimed responsibility for damage to the plant as part of a broader campaign against nuclear.

In contrast, social media, and some traditional media outlets, are reporting an unattributed comment from “a Graznavian official” that the event was due to a design flaw of the new reactor, and that a full meltdown could still happen and that full control over the reactor has not been restored. No one has been able to track the origin of this story.

In response, Energia, the country that supplies the majority of Vascovy’s energy, has announced that it will be shutting down its own nuclear reactors of a similar design, until a full evaluation is made. This immediately reduces Vascovy’s energy capacity by 40%.

Updated information from Graznavia is limited, except for constant reiterations that the situation is contained. The Graznavian President accuses his political opponents of fabricating information to provoke a crisis.

The Graznavian government has clamped down on social media platforms, to try and to regain control of the narrative. They have demanded that Vascovy do the same to assist with limiting the spread of panic.

The Vascovia Stock Market has plummeted 8.5% over the day’s trading and trading is halted, potentially heralding a full crash when the markets reopen. Protests in the capital have swelled and several Graznavians have been attacked in Monserrat.

Official information from the border is that there are growing numbers of Graznavians at the border seeking to cross but no incidents have been reported to the head of the border police. Yet over social media, there are unsubstantiated videos and reports of crossings being overrun and people flooding into the country, with vague reports of people having been killed by being trampled when Vascovia border guards shut the border. These reports are being retweeted by right-wing Vascovia nationalist groups.

The Rolling Stones were scheduled to play the next day in Monserrat but all public events have been cancelled. The band was rushed to the airport but the strain on airport infrastructure has resulted in many flights being unable to take off. It is no longer known where the band is, or if they have attempted to leave Vascovy by car instead.

The Prime Minister of Vascovy announces that he has spoken to the Prime Minister of Graznavia, and has convinced his counterpart to accept a team of international experts to inspect the site, including a Vascovia representative.

In truth, there was a great deal of resistance to having a Vascovia as part of the inspection team and negotiations have considerably delayed the process and the team is only now assembling.

QUESTIONS:

- **What is the problem you are trying to solve now?**
- **How has the information you require changed?**
- **What new measures are needed?**
- **What communications need to be considered?**



Situation Clock T = 12 Hours

Vascovian cybersecurity experts in the military detect a massive increase in denial of service attacks on Vascovian utility providers and banks. They believe they originate from Norvenia. Panic is spreading and so is anger.

A Facebook post that spreads rapidly purports that the Vascovian Prime Minister had arranged for a military helicopter to take his wife and children out of the country in the first hours after the explosion at the nuclear powerstation. The Prime Minister vehemently denies this but protests grow in Monserrat.

The inspection team gets consent to enter Graznavia using a civilian helicopter.

QUESTIONS:

- **What is the problem you are trying to solve now?**
- **How has the information you require changed?**
- **What new measures are needed?**
- **What communications need to be considered**



Situation Clock T = 24 Hours

The Vascovian Prime Minister and his wife are pictured visiting Vascovian internal refugees who have moved from the border and are camped in emergency shelters in the capital. The PM does a live press conference with his wife standing next to him.

The Vascovian government is notified by the IAEA that the inspection team finds radiation readings in the area of the plant to be only minimally above background levels.

CNN reports that a commercial satellite has taken images of the nuclear plant and have been able to identify that the explosion did indeed occur in a downstream, non-critical section of the plant, away from the core. These images have been televised by CNN and placed on their website.

The international team of experts, including the Vascovian representative, have confirmed the Graznavian government's version of the event – that a human error in managing the cooling pipe backup procedure did lead to an incident, but that the plant's emergency response, and the correct following of protocol by the plant employees, contained the issue and there was never a real risk of meltdown. It was not a design flaw.

Public panic starts to subside but there are still some violent protests against the Vascovian government's connection to the plant and some extremists accuse the Vascovian government of being complicit in the cover-up. This accusation is further fueled by an accusation on 4Chan that claims that the Vascovian Minister of Environment, a multimillionaire investment banker, was a secret investor in Energia's hydroelectric company and that that company had paid a workman to stage the accident to push up the price Energia could charge Vascovy for power.

These protesters are ignoring the reality that the Energia energy company is state owned with no private investors. The Prime Minister points this out and dismissed the allegation saying has full confidence in the Minister.

QUESTIONS:

- **What is the problem you are trying to solve now?**
- **What considerations need to be made for managing the post-crisis?**
- **How has the situation changed how you might consider relating to your neighbour in future?**
- **Are there changes in the relationship that could have averted the issue?**
- **What steps might you have taken at the start that would have made a difference to the outcome?**

PHOTO CREDITS

COVER: THE BELLONA FOUNDATION UNDER CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The authors would like to thank Dalia Kreiviene and the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their insightful comments on an earlier draft.



This work is licenced for non-commercial reuse, with attribution to INGSA and named authors, and link to <http://ingsa.org>. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/> for more info.



ABOUT INGSA

INGSA provides a forum for policy makers, practitioners, academics, and academics to share experience, build capacity and develop theoretical and practical approaches to the use of scientific evidence in informing policy at all levels of government.

INGSA's primary focus is on the place of science in public policy formation, rather than advice on the structure and governance of public science and innovation systems. It operates through:

- Exchanging lessons, evidence and new concepts through conferences, workshops and a website;
- Collaborating with other organisations where there are common or overlapping interests;
- Assisting the development of advisory systems through capacity-building workshops;
- Producing articles and discussion papers based on comparative research into the science and art of scientific advice.

Anyone with an interest in sharing professional experience, building capacity and developing theoretical and practical approaches to government science advice is welcome to join INGSA.

By signing up to the INGSA Network you will receive updates about our news and events and learn of opportunities to get involved in collaborative projects.

Go to <http://www.ingsa.org> for more information.

INGSA has been supported by:

The Wellcome Trust • International Development Research Centre, Canada • Royal Society London



**International
Science Council**

INGSA operates under the auspices of the International Science Council. The INGSA secretariat is currently hosted by the University of Auckland, New Zealand.

A: PO Box 108-117, Symonds Street, Auckland 1150, New Zealand |
T: +64 9 923 6442 | E: info@ingsa.org | W: www.ingsa.org

VASCOVY – MENTOR NOTES



Time-Lapse Case study

This is a time-lapse case study, in which different situation updates need to be handed out at regular intervals during the workshop.

As well as guiding discussion, it is also up to the mentors to judge when it is appropriate for the next situational update should be handed out to participants.

Preparation for workshop

In advance of the workshop it is recommended to circulate the case study's Background and Context section to participants. This could be the day before or on the day, prior to the case, so that participants are able to have a couple of read throughs of the background information.

Ensure you have enough copies of the subsequent Situational Updates to hand out during the workshop.

Role of Mentor

The primary aim of the game is not for participants to necessarily provide concrete answers to the situation. It is for them to think about what types of information or action they might require, the difficulties of obtaining this, and what limitations might there be on receiving adequate information, and how they might get around this in order to produce an informed decision.

It is therefore not the decision that matters but the understanding of the dependence, limitations and requirements of the information flows required to make informed-decisions in emergencies.

So some questions to consider:

- What are the issues now, and what might these issues evolve to be?
- What are the risks of acting? What are the risks of doing nothing? How can you mitigate the uncertainty of the situation?
- What are the trade-off between the information that is viably available to you, and the information you would like to have?
- WHAT information do you need? WHO might be able to provide that information? WHEN – will the information be obsolete by the time you receive it?
- What structures could have been put in place before the crisis, to make information flows simpler?