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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ANALYSES

Strengthening EU Intelligence and Preparedness: INTCEN's Strategic Role in a New Security Era

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Abstract:

The European Union Intelligence and Situation Centre (INTCEN) is pivotal in shaping the EU's security strategy amid evolving global threats. This research, conducted in response to the comprehensive Niinistö report on *Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness*, explores how INTCEN contributes to EU intelligence, crisis management, and strategic foresight. The Niinistö report emphasizes the urgent need for robust anticipatory measures and cross-sectoral cooperation, framing this analysis within the broader EU preparedness context. By examining INTCEN's current role, this study highlights its significance in proactive intelligence dissemination and its potential expansion to meet future security demands. The discourse aligns with Niinistö's vision of an integrated and resilient Europe capable of preempting and mitigating threats effectively.

Key words:

INTCEN, EU Intelligence, Strategic Foresight, Preparedness, Civil-Military Cooperation, Cybersecurity, Hybrid Threats, Public-Private Partnerships, Crisis Management, Resilience, Situational Awareness, Security, Transparency, Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT), Cross-Sectoral Integration

1. Introduction

INTCEN, or the Intelligence and Situation Centre, is an integral part of the European Union's foreign and security policy framework. Established in 2011, INTCEN emerged from the earlier European Union Situation Centre (SITCEN), which was created in 2001. The need for a more integrated intelligence approach within the EU became apparent after the 9/11 attacks and subsequent global security challenges.

Over the years, INTCEN has evolved to address various geopolitical changes and threats, including terrorism, cyber threats, and hybrid warfare. Its establishment was part of a broader effort to enhance the EU's ability to respond to security challenges and to foster greater cooperation among member states.

INTCEN is based in Brussels, Belgium, within the European External Action Service (EEAS), which is responsible for the EU's diplomatic and foreign affairs. The center's primary functions include collecting, processing, and analyzing intelligence from member states, partner countries, and open sources, as well as providing strategic analysis and situational awareness to EU decision-makers, particularly in the context of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). INTCEN supports EU missions and operations, particularly in crisis management and conflict prevention.

INTCEN's operations focus on various high-stakes areas, such as threat analysis, crisis response, and cybersecurity. Through continuous threat assessment on issues like terrorism, transnational organized crime, and geopolitical instability, INTCEN enables the EU to anticipate risks and respond to crises. A vital component of INTCEN's role is its collaboration with EU institutions, such as the European Commission, European Parliament, and the Political and Security Committee (PSC), as well as with external allies like NATO. This collaboration strengthens the EU's collective security posture and creates a unified response to security threats.

Key achievements of INTCEN's intelligence efforts include enhancing migration monitoring in the Mediterranean and Balkan regions, improving the EU's

response to illegal migration flows, and streamlining coordination with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX). INTCEN's support in tracking cyber threats and disinformation campaigns, particularly during critical political events like elections, has fortified the EU's cybersecurity and safeguarded democratic processes.

INTCEN is a critical component of the EU's security architecture, enhancing the Union's ability to anticipate and respond to complex security challenges. Its focus on intelligence analysis and situational awareness ensures that EU policymakers are well-informed, enabling them to make strategic decisions that enhance the security and stability of the region.

2. The Integral Role of INTCEN in EU Security Policy

In understanding the broader implications of intelligence in EU diplomacy, it's essential to recognize how the integration of INTCEN within the EU's diplomatic framework contributes not only to real-time decision-making but also to the overall resilience and adaptability of EU policy in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. Intelligence today extends beyond traditional espionage to include real-time intelligence analysis, predictive threat assessments, and anticipatory responses, all of which enable EU diplomats to act proactively rather than reactively. The intelligence provided by INTCEN supports this proactive approach by helping the EU identify patterns in global events that could signal future security risks, particularly in areas like cyber threats, hybrid warfare, and regional destabilization.

INTCEN's focus on intelligence as a preventive measure aligns with the EU's strategic goals of maintaining stability on its borders and protecting its internal security. With the rise of non-state actors, digital threats, and unpredictable state behavior, intelligence must encompass a broader scope that includes both traditional and non-traditional sources of risk. The EU's approach to intelligence integration within its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) highlights this shift toward multi-dimensional security. As the CFSP evolved, INTCEN's

mandate grew to incorporate these new security dimensions, from assessing political instability and economic vulnerabilities to forecasting the impacts of climate-related crises on migration patterns. These anticipatory intelligence capabilities not only inform EU decision-making but also enhance the EU's ability to lead international cooperative efforts, such as those addressing climate change, refugee crises, and energy security.

INTCEN's role in addressing the EU's border security challenges underscores its utility in protecting both internal and external EU stability. The Mediterranean and Balkan regions, which have historically served as transit points for migrants and extremist networks, present persistent challenges for EU border security. As Fägersten (2015) highlights, INTCEN's capacity to assess and predict shifts in migration flows has helped the EU mitigate cross-border risks more effectively. For example, INTCEN's intelligence on illegal migration routes, combined with on-the-ground insights from EU member states and neighboring countries, has allowed the EU to streamline its border protocols, strengthen its coordination with FRONTEX (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), and implement preventive measures that help secure EU borders. INTCEN's monitoring of potential "jihadist returnees" from conflict zones, particularly from Syria and Iraq, has furthered these protective measures, as it allows EU officials to respond preemptively to security threats posed by returning foreign fighters.

3. INTCEN's Cyber Threat Assessments and Public-Private Partnerships in EU Security

In the digital realm, INTCEN's monitoring, and assessment of cyber threats are crucial for maintaining EU security. Cybersecurity and the proliferation of hybrid threats, including disinformation and cyber intrusions, are increasingly central to the EU's diplomatic security strategy. INTCEN's role in this domain includes identifying potential vulnerabilities in EU digital infrastructure and analyzing state and non-state actors' cyber capabilities. As cyber threats become more sophisticated, INTCEN's intelligence reports provide EU officials with insights into emerging risks that could disrupt EU operations or influence public opinion.

For instance, by tracking disinformation campaigns during critical political events, such as elections, INTCEN enables EU policymakers to implement countermeasures that protect democratic processes and public trust. INTCEN's assessments in this area thus enhance the EU's resilience against digital and informational attacks, contributing to the stability of the EU's internal political climate.

The Niinistö report underscores the value of public-private partnerships in bolstering cybersecurity and infrastructure protection. By fostering collaboration with private sector stakeholders, such as telecommunications and energy companies, INTCEN can enhance its threat detection and mitigation capabilities. This collaborative approach ensures a multifaceted defense against increasingly sophisticated cyber and hybrid threats.

In the report is highlighted the critical role of private-sector cooperation in EU preparedness, especially in cybersecurity and infrastructure protection. INTCEN's collaboration with private entities, such as telecommunications and energy companies, could enhance threat detection and mitigation efforts. Such partnerships ensure that intelligence gathering extends beyond public domains, creating a robust, multi-faceted defense against cyber and hybrid threats.

The persistence of hybrid threats, including disinformation, cyber interference, and economic coercion, which continuously challenge the EU's stability, are mentioned in Niinistö's report. In line with this, INTCEN's mandate could expand to intensify its monitoring of "foreign information manipulation and interference" (FIMI), particularly during high-stakes events like elections. Strengthening intelligence capabilities to counteract disinformation and hybrid threats directly contributes to the EU's resilience, protecting democratic processes and public trust from malign influences.

4. INTCEN and EU Collaboration: Enhancing Civil-Military Synergy and Mutual Resilience

INTCEN's support in managing EU responses to global and regional crises is also significant in enhancing the EU's leadership on the world stage. The ability of INTCEN to synthesize data on various geopolitical events, such as the Arab Spring, the Libyan and Syrian conflicts, and the Russian annexation of Crimea, has enabled EU diplomats to navigate complex diplomatic landscapes more effectively. For instance, the EU's response to the Syrian civil war and the resultant migration crisis was informed by INTCEN's analyses, which provided EU policymakers with a nuanced understanding of the factors driving refugee flows and the potential for regional spillover into neighboring countries. Such intelligence has been critical in forming policies aimed at stabilizing affected regions, including support for refugee host countries and collaborative efforts to manage migration with neighboring countries like Turkey.

In addition to managing traditional and digital threats, INTCEN's intelligence operations are instrumental in fostering cohesion among EU member states. Intelligence sharing is a vital component of EU diplomacy, particularly in forging unified responses to global crises. Reflecting Niinistö's call for integrated EU preparedness, INTCEN's intelligence-sharing and strategic analysis can support both civilian and military efforts. As crises often require comprehensive responses, aligning intelligence capabilities with EU civilian and military resources enables the Union to coordinate robustly across sectors, fortifying its resilience against diverse threats. The EU's stance on sanctions, particularly those imposed on Russia following the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine, exemplifies the role of intelligence in creating policy cohesion. INTCEN's detailed intelligence reports on Russia's military activities and economic vulnerabilities helped EU member states align their policies, ensuring a coordinated approach to sanctions. This alignment is critical for maintaining the EU's credibility as a unified political bloc and strengthening its influence in international affairs. Moreover, INTCEN's intelligence-sharing framework has fostered trust among member states, creating a reliable information network that supports collaborative decision-making on critical security issues.

The Niinistö report calls for stronger civil-military coordination to support comprehensive EU preparedness. INTCEN's collaborative model can be leveraged to bridge civilian and military efforts, enhancing mutual resilience. This approach enables the EU to respond effectively to complex crises, underlining the importance of intelligence in coordinating joint actions across sectors.

Niinistö introduces the “*single security*” concept, which implies that any breach of a member state's security affects the EU as a whole. INTCEN's collaborative approach with national intelligence agencies reflects this principle, working to identify and mitigate threats that transcend national borders. By enhancing intelligence sharing, INTCEN helps uphold the EU's collective stability and protects its citizens from cross-border threats.

The operational dynamics within INTCEN reflect a balance between the sovereignty of member states and the collective security benefits of intelligence cooperation. By operating as an intelligence analysis center rather than a traditional intelligence agency with autonomous intelligence-gathering capabilities, INTCEN allows EU member states to retain control over sensitive information while contributing intelligence assessments relevant to EU foreign policy. This model of intelligence integration—where member states provide finished intelligence products rather than raw data—has proven effective in ensuring that national security concerns are respected, while also promoting a collective understanding of threats that necessitate a united response. This approach has allowed the EU to navigate the complexities of multilateral intelligence cooperation while maintaining a cohesive stance on pressing security issues.

However, this operational model does come with certain limitations. Since INTCEN relies primarily on intelligence provided voluntarily by member states, it lacks the authority to mandate intelligence-sharing, which could create gaps in the intelligence picture if certain member states are reluctant to share critical information. Furthermore, this model limits INTCEN's ability to gather primary intelligence, relying instead on finished products provided by national agencies. While this approach mitigates concerns around sovereignty and confidentiality,

it can sometimes result in a fragmented view of complex situations that may require more granular intelligence. To address these limitations, some policymakers and scholars advocate for a more formalized EU intelligence agency, which would enable more comprehensive intelligence collection and analysis capabilities. However, such a transition would require careful consideration of EU member states' concerns over sovereignty and the need for robust oversight mechanisms to ensure accountability.

5. Balancing Secrecy, Transparency, and Public Trust

One of the ongoing challenges for INTCEN is balancing intelligence secrecy with the EU's commitment to transparency and democratic accountability. While intelligence operations typically demand confidentiality, EU principles require mechanisms that maintain public accountability, especially given past incidents, such as U.S. surveillance on EU allies, which have highlighted the diplomatic risks of intelligence operations. Niinistö's report underlines that public trust in EU intelligence is essential for societal resilience. INTCEN's transparent communication practices—such as integrating OSINT (Open-Source Intelligence)—could bolster public confidence in the EU's intelligence frameworks, fostering public resilience by ensuring citizens remain informed and supportive of the EU's security strategies. INTCEN addresses these issues by incorporating open-source intelligence (OSINT) where possible. OSINT allows the EU to share non-classified intelligence with the public and international partners, fostering transparency without compromising sensitive information. This approach not only mitigates ethical concerns but also strengthens public trust in EU institutions and aligns with the EU's democratic values.

Building public trust is essential for effective EU preparedness. The Niinistö report emphasizes raising public awareness of threats while avoiding unnecessary alarm. INTCEN's use of Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) can play a pivotal role in maintaining transparency, thereby fostering public

confidence. Integrating timely, declassified information into crisis communication helps combat disinformation and reinforces societal resilience.

Enhancing transparency in EU intelligence operations could involve increasing the use of open-source intelligence, which allows for a more transparent intelligence product that can be shared with the public and international partners without compromising operational security. Open-source intelligence (OSINT), which relies on publicly available information rather than classified sources, could serve as a complementary asset to INTCEN's existing intelligence framework, allowing for greater transparency in situations where classified intelligence is not strictly necessary. This approach could also help address ethical concerns by providing EU citizens with a clearer understanding of how intelligence contributes to public safety and foreign policy, thus strengthening public trust in EU institutions.

Niinistö's report identifies crisis communication as essential in maintaining public trust and preparing citizens. INTCEN could enhance this effort, sharing timely, declassified information with the public during crises to combat disinformation and ensure accurate narratives. This approach not only enhances transparency but also strengthens public resilience by keeping citizens informed during critical moments.

6. The Future of INTCEN: Integrating Strategic Foresight and Advancing Toward an Autonomous EU Intelligence Agency

The potential evolution of INTCEN into an autonomous EU intelligence agency remains a key discussion among policymakers and experts. Proponents argue that a centralized EU intelligence agency could provide more robust and timely intelligence independent of member state contributions. Such a transition would empower the EU with primary intelligence-gathering capabilities, enhancing its ability to address cybersecurity, counterterrorism, and regional conflicts directly. However, this shift would require significant legal and structural changes,

particularly regarding oversight mechanisms to ensure operational accountability. In aligning with the EU's 2024–2029 strategic vision, INTCEN's expanded role supports the Union's proactive approach to security, reinforcing its position as a resilient and globally influential actor. Niinistö's emphasis on unified preparedness reflects this trajectory, ensuring INTCEN's intelligence strategies remain adaptable, responsive, and central to the EU's collective security goals.

The transition would also need to balance concerns over member state sovereignty with the collective benefits of centralized intelligence capabilities.

To maintain member state support, any move towards an autonomous intelligence agency would need safeguards respecting national security interests and assurances against centralized power misuse. Thus, INTCEN's evolution presents both opportunities for enhanced security capabilities and challenges in aligning operational efficiency with democratic accountability. Its trajectory will shape the EU's capacity to respond effectively to complex security challenges and maintain stability within its borders while upholding democratic values.

The Niinistö report highlights the critical need for enhanced strategic foresight within the EU's preparedness framework. This anticipatory approach involves analyzing potential crises, such as climate-driven migration and hybrid warfare, to inform proactive policymaking. Integrating such foresight into INTCEN's operational model would align with the EU's broader strategic goals of preempting threats and enhancing decision-making capabilities.

In conclusion, INTCEN's role within the EU represents a critical fusion of intelligence and diplomacy, enhancing the EU's capacity to navigate complex security challenges while maintaining alignment with democratic values. Through its integration within the EEAS, INTCEN has demonstrated the strategic benefits of intelligence in modern diplomacy, enabling the EU to respond proactively to threats and fostering cohesion among member states in addressing global crises. As intelligence becomes an increasingly integral component of diplomatic strategy, the continued evolution of INTCEN will be vital to the EU's ability to maintain its influence on the global stage.

Nonetheless, as INTCEN potentially transitions toward a more autonomous intelligence role, ensuring transparency and accountability will be essential in preserving public trust and safeguarding democratic principles within EU foreign policy.

Glossary:

- **INTCEN**: *European Union Intelligence and Situation Centre*
- **SITCEN**: *European Union Situation Centre*
- **CFSP**: *Common Foreign and Security Policy*
- **CSDP**: *Common Security and Defense Policy*
- **CTG**: *Counter-Terrorism Group*
- **FRONTEX**: *European Border and Coast Guard Agency*
- **EEAS**: *European External Action Service*
- **INTCEN**: *European Union Intelligence Analysis Centre*
- **OSINT**: *Open-Source Intelligence*
- **SIAC**: *Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity*
- **WEU**: *Western European Union*
- **SatCen**: *EU Satellite Centre*
- **FIMI**: *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference*

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