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Manufacturing Government Communication on Covid-19

A Comparative Perspective

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Philippe J. Maarek
Editor

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Introduction: Similar and Dissimilar Patterns of Government Communication on COVID-19



Philippe J. Maarek

Exactly a century ago, the so-called Spanish Influenza caused between 20 and 40 million deaths, maybe more, in three successive waves between 1918 and 1919. But when a new disease, called “COVID-19” began to appear in China at the end of 2019, triggered by the “SARS-CoV-2” virus, this was initially looked upon with disdain around the world. Governments and populations had only retained the memory of two recent similar viral outbreaks, namely the first SARS-CoV, in 2002–2004, and the H1N1 flu in 2009–2010. Likewise starting in Asia, these two outbreaks had ended up needlessly alarming the rest of the world. The second scare was even seen as money badly spent organizing huge, but useless, vaccination campaigns, as in France in 2009–2010.¹ But today, this ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic has undeniably established that the exponential expansion of humanity in all its aspects since the industrial era, allowing it to conquer the Moon, also left it vulnerable to a microscopic virus in the twenty-first century, just as it had occurred with the Spanish Influenza epidemic a hundred years before.

¹In France, the then Health Minister Roselyne Bachelot organized a national vaccination campaign costing about 1,5 million Euros, which was very quickly rejected, since the virus had not in fact caused a world pandemic as feared; it was disastrous for her political career at the time (see for instance <http://www.politique.net/2009101201-cout-de-la-grippe-a.htm>); the COVID-19 pandemic gave her credit retrospectively—and she was even again part of a Government.

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While these lines are being written, COVID-19 has already struck all around the world between three and five times, between 2019 and 2022. Its main branches, Delta, Omicron and its variants, have affected nearly 500 million persons and caused at least six million deaths, probably much more. Certainly because the first two viral outbreaks of the twenty-first century had not turned into a World pandemic, most of the countries were initially thrown off guard, and Governments frequently made contradictory statements about it, which did not help their credibility.

In France, for instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, an emergency stock of hundreds of millions surgical masks, constituted after the H1N1 virus scare, had recently been destroyed,² and masks were absent from drugstores and pharmacies. A fact overlooked by the Government Health Minister at the time, Agnès Buzyn, who declared on January 26, 2020, that masks were not necessary for protection against the virus.³ Even as late as March 18, 2020, the Health Ministry Director, Jérôme Salomon, affirmed in a press conference that masks should be reserved for doctors and nurses and were useless for healthy individuals, especially outside.⁴ But this was only 2 days after the French President Emmanuel Macron's notorious televised address to the French people that France was now "*at war with the virus.*"⁵ So it was challenging to understand what to make of Government Communication!

France is only one example among many others of the difficulty for Governments to communicate efficiently during a crisis, particularly an unpredictable crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Government communication about such crises is obviously a delicate and complex matter. Maria-Jose Canel and Karen Sanders have already established, in their 2013 edited volume, that Government communication is considerably more complex than that of the corporate sector,⁶ and one of the first comparative books to appear after the first wave of the pandemic clearly showed how tentative were the initial responses of the various countries dealing with it.⁷

In June 2021, scholars from nearly 20 countries or regions gathered electronically for an International conference organized by the "Sic.Lab. Méditerranée" Research Lab of the "Université Côte d'Azur" in Nice, with the assistance of the French Center for Comparative Research in Political and Public Communication, to compare their governments' attitude, and their communication against the COVID-19

²https://www.lemonde.fr/sante/article/2020/05/07/la-france-et-les-epidemies-2017-2020-l-heure-des-comptes_6038973_1651302.html

³https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/entry/contre-le-coronavirus-agnes-buzyn-deconseille-lachat-de-masques_fr_5e2e163ec5b6d6767fd6c826

⁴<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7ssju8>

⁵<https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/16/adresse-aux-francais-covid19>

⁶Sanders, K., & Canel, M.-J. (Éds.). (2013). *Government Communication Cases and Challenges*. Bloombury Academic.

⁷Lilleker, D., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M., & Novelli, E. (Éds.). (2021). *Political Communication and COVID-19 - Governance and Rhetoric in Times of Crisis*. Routledge.

pandemic.⁸ For the present book, they agreed to extend their research to the beginning of 2022, and I express my gratitude to them for their willingness to do so and for the quality of their work.⁹

Today, well into the COVID-19 pandemic, their studies provide a useful update on the topic. They interestingly reveal that although Government attitudes and actions against the pandemic were sometimes quite different, ranging from the complete lockdown of a whole country or continent, as in Australia, to the open borders policy of Sweden, the frame of their communication presents more similarities than dissimilarities—though, of course, dissimilarities also exist.

1 Similar Patterns of Government Communication

Many similar configurations of Government communication appeared, despite differences of attitude toward the pandemic. Three similar patterns may be grouped as:

- Government Communication Behavior in General.
- Calling on (hiding behind?) Experts for Help.
- Communication Techniques.

1.1 *Government Communication Behavior in General*

War Rhetoric

Several countries decided from the start to dramatize the situation, commonly deploying warlike rhetoric. Alexander Frame, Gilles Brachotte and Afef Selmi detail in their chapter dedicated to France how President Emmanuel Macron used the metaphor we already quoted, “*We are at war*,” a strong figure which Deqiang Ji and Lu Liu indicate as frequently implied in China. It was also directly employed by Spanish Prime Minister Sánchez and other representatives of the Spanish Government, as Marta Rebolledo and Jordi Rodríguez-Virgili tell us. In Poland, Malgorzata Winiarska-Brodowska mentions that one of the main Government Communication slogans was “*War on the virus*.”

⁸The program may be consulted at http://ceccopop.com/?page_id=1263

⁹Our esteemed colleague Anastasia Grusha was also part of the conference, but COVID-19 struck hard her and her family, preventing her from contributing to the present book.

The Initial Politics of the Ostrich

The unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic, despite the two previous viral outbreaks alerts in the twenty-first century, initially led to very similar governmental communication, giving unsatisfactory answers. A lot of countries were not at all prepared for this kind of pandemic. The most revealing and worrisome fact was that during the first few months, protective masks were mostly nowhere to be found, not only in France but nearly everywhere. Amazingly, instead of confessing to the problem, many countries' communication decided to downplay the need for masks. In Poland, as in France, at the beginning of the pandemic, in February 2020, Health Minister Szumowski openly denied the contribution of masks: "*They do not help, they do not protect against the virus, they do not protect against getting sick.*" Žaneta Ozoliņa and Sigita Struberga remind us that the Latvian Government tried the same communication policy of the ostrich. This contrasted, of course, with the speed at which many countries in the Asia-Pacific adopted masks—where they were anyway more commonly worn, notably because of the pollution problems in a lot of megalopolises. For instance, as explained by Sera Choi and Jangyul Robert Kim, one of the most efficient and quick communication efforts to promote the generalization of wearing masks was South Korea, one of the regions of the world where COVID-19 did not initially cause extensive damage.

Paradoxically, masks were as well a prevalent ground for rejection in several countries, somehow dividing the world into two distinct parts in that regard. In these countries, another common factor was a lack of recognition of the pandemic severity by the politicians in charge. This was clearly the case with the American President Donald Trump, as established by Marion Just, Joseph Saraceno, and Ann Crigler, a pattern also found with Brazil's President Bolsonaro, as pointed out by Andrea Medrado and Adilson Cabral. Sometimes, Government Communication encouraging the wearing of masks was contested by conservative media groups, like Murdoch Press, as explained by Sally Young for Australia.

1.2 *Calling on Experts for Help*

Probably the most common factor in Governmental Communication concerning COVID-19 was the much-publicized call for scientific help. Of course, pandemic and virus experts were needed by Health Ministers and Heads of States to advise on the adoption of appropriate measures. But they also wanted the specialists to help justify their decisions—if not to hide behind a "scientific" opinion when it came to enforcing the harshest measures.

One of the most explicit cases here was certainly France, where from March 2020 on, brand new expert Councils and Committees started to appear and multiply in a few weeks: a "Higher Council for Public Health," a "COVID-19 Scientific Committee," a "Research and Expertise Analysis Board," and lastly a "Scientific

Committee on COVID-19.” The consultation results of all these bodies were then brought to the “Health Defense Board,” a variation on the permanent “Defense Board,” which sits next to the French president if there is a threat of war.¹⁰ Incidentally, this did not prevent Emmanuel Macron from taking a few bold decisions against the experts’ advice at the end of 2021, when he eased the safety precautions, obviously to keep his popularity afloat during the winter holidays.¹¹

Many other countries acted in the same way. A Spanish “Technical Management Committee for the coronavirus crisis” was quickly formed, in Israel a “Corona Commission” was set up, as indicated by Hillel Nossek, a “Government Advisory Group” was created in the United Kingdom, as discussed by Tabitha A. Baker and Darren Lilleker, etc. Małgorzata Winiarska-Brodowska reports that in Poland, Prime Minister Morawiecki did not originally follow this trend, but, rather late into the pandemic, in November 2020, he finally gave in and established an “Advisory Medical Council.” The record in that matter is apparently set by Italy and Giuseppe Conte’s Government, which used about 15 advisory boards, composed of scientific experts, professional managers and bureaucrats, as noted by Sofia Ventura. Finally, a similar but somehow specific case was Sweden. Lars Nord explains that the Government initially let the “Public Health Agency” communicate directly with citizens concerning the way the pandemic was to be treated—with an unstated “herd immunity” level of infection to be reached, hidden in the background.

Government Communication also suddenly highlighted experts. A duo composed of a Government representative and an expert often publicized the main measures against the pandemic on radio and television. Sometimes, a leading appointed expert would appear frequently, to give more or less reassuring daily or weekly news about the COVID-19 situation. The Director of the Health Ministry Jérôme Salomon, had that role initially in France, the famous epidemiologist Jurijs Perevoščikovs in Latvia, as Fernando Simón, the Director of the Spanish Ministry of Health’s Alert and Emergency Coordination Center, and so forth. In the United States, even Donald Trump’s COVID-19 press briefings always included his special pandemic appointee, Dr. Antony Fauci. These experts were candidly transformed into de facto Government spokespersons.

¹⁰It should be added that the Government also used private consulting firms which was contested later by a Senate Committee, which exposed it and the problems caused by its frequency. It seems, moreover, that McKinsey, one of the main agencies called in by the Government for COVID-19 pandemic advice, had not paid a dime of taxes in France on its fees: https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/03/18/rapport-du-senat-sur-les-cabinets-de-conseil-l-opposition-denonce-un-scandale-d-etat-et-fiscal_6118123_6059010.html

¹¹<https://www.journaldunet.com/management/vie-personnelle/1494913-confinement-des-limitations-le-31-decembre/>

1.3 A Common Stock of Communication Techniques

Of course so-called legacy media were used for Government communication. This was nearly always the case for the announcement of the main lockdown or strongest anti-COVID-19 measures. Television and radio were also the first choice for proclaiming that lockdowns and the like were lifted, in broadcasts that obviously felt much more gratifying to the politicians. These appearances on legacy media had quite high audiences. For instance, the French President Emmanuel Macron's declaration of war against the virus, which we mentioned above, fetched an unheard-of audience of about 35 million television viewers.¹² On the other side of the Channel, in the United Kingdom, the superb, sober speech by Queen Elizabeth II of April 2020 got an audience of 24 million.¹³ Legacy media also conveyed dozens of ad campaigns on safety precautions concerning the virus, devised, of course, by Government Communication Agencies.

Day-to-Day Communication

If anything could have boosted the use of the Internet and Social Media, the COVID-19 pandemic was it. The day-to-day stage was mostly occupied by electronic media at every step: information updates, registering to test, registering to be vaccinated, proving that you had got your shots, traveling.

In most of the countries, day-to-day pandemic communication took two forms, the usual up-to-date website material, and, more directly, text messaging to contact citizens personally. Text messaging was even used to target the indigenous Australian population. In many countries, specific text messages were sent to warn people that they had been close to an individual carrying the virus. It was the case in South Korea, in France, or in South Africa, as pointed out by Herman Wasserman, and Japan, as related by Leslie Tkach-Kawasaki, etc.

Registering to Test or to Get the Vaccine Shot

In order to test people or to offer vaccine shots on such a large scale, the Internet was most commonly used. Sometimes, as in Japan, this was also possible thanks to a newly existing optional registration system, the "Juki-net." It allows all residents, foreigners included, to complete an individual national registration intended to facilitate future administrative requests. The pandemic made Juki-net use jump from 15% to more than 45% in a matter of weeks. Otherwise, registration systems proper to the pandemic were quickly set up. In order to avoid scaring citizens

¹²<https://www.leparisien.fr/culture-loisirs/coronavirus-35-millions-de-francais-devant-l-allocation-de-macron-un-record-d-audience-absolu-17-03-2020-8281773.php>

¹³<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-52183327>

concerning improper use of these systems, the potential uses of the registration data were frequently limited. One could even remain unidentified, with personal data needing permission to leave the smartphones, as in France or South Korea—where “drive-ins” were erected to test people without them having to step out of their cars! At the opposite extreme, in China, registration was mandatory, with probably the strictest system. In that country, there were dire consequences if one did not register, starting with being stuck at home throughout the pandemic without being able to set foot outside.

In a few countries, like France, part of the registration to get a vaccine shot was left to the private sector. There, a successful French tech unicorn, “Doctolib,” normally used for booking doctors’ consultations, became the main tool for vaccination appointments.

Proving that you Got your Shots and Traveling

In most of the countries studied in the present book, apps were specifically created to record the proofs of tests and/or vaccination. The most interesting case was the European Union. Inna Šteinbuka explains how the European Commission aptly introduced a “European Covid Certificate,” which included a QR code legible in its 27 countries, which greatly facilitated travel. The EU Commission also devised an efficient information system, called “Re-open EU,” based on both a website and Android and IOS apps. It is able to deliver to citizens and travelers all the needed knowledge about local measures and restrictions concerning COVID-19 in each country of the Union. As an interesting consequence, this efficiency, also evident in the buying and sharing of vaccine stocks, strengthened the European Union—an unexpected positive side effect of the pandemic!

In Communication terms, this meant that the QR code, legible everywhere, became the new universal pass for citizens and travelers. Usually, of course, its use was not mandatory, but in a few countries like China, traveling out of your hometown, not to mention outside your region, is only allowed when the QR code allows it.

Being stuck at home due to the lockdown and having nothing else to do than to connect to legacy and electronic media, and being able to leave one’s home only when one got the necessary QR Codes, considerably increased the use of social media and electronic communication tools. The problem was, of course, that this left out people who were not literate in this kind of communication, or did not possess, or could not afford, such tools. Without a smartphone or at least a computer connected to the Internet and a printer, citizens could most often not even go to their favorite restaurant next door, nor get new shoes or clothes, since QR codes were the keys to these possibilities.

2 Some Indications about Government Communication Dissimilarities

Apart from these important similarities, two main kinds of dissimilarities may be found among the Government Communication Policies on the pandemic, for the various countries studied in the present volume. These relate to the consequences of the diverse concrete choices made by some countries in the fight against the pandemic and to differences in cultural and ethical profiles.

2.1 *The Consequences of Different Lockdown Choices on Government Communication*

The first difference in communication came from the decisions about lockdown. Roughly three categories of countries may be observed:

- Countries with no lockdown at all.
- Countries with an on-and-off lockdown, following the ups and downs of the pandemic.
- Countries with very harsh lockdowns.

Countries with no Lockdown at all

The archetype of this category is evidently Sweden. In that country, no lockdown measure was forced on the citizen, and generally no specific mandatory measure was taken against the virus. Swedish citizens were only “advised” to wear masks when using public transportation or counseled to be vaccinated. Access to Sweden from abroad remained authorized, as long as you could prove at the border that you were not carrying the virus, and most of the time without even any quarantine. Many thought that this “Swedish exceptionalism” was intended to get herd immunity against the virus as quickly as possible, but the arrival of COVID-19 variants made this impossible. Interestingly, this freedom, if one can call it that, came with very little Government Communication efforts. The politicians mostly conveyed epidemiologists’ and health specialists’ advice without much-added input. But Sweden kept to this policy—though Government Communication became stronger after some time.

This set Sweden apart from its Nordic neighbors, like Latvia, where Žaneta Ozoliņa and Sigita Struberga show us a pattern of a succession of Emergency Laws triggering surges in Government Communication, as in many other countries studied here.

Countries with an on-and-off Lockdown

This was the case for the majority of countries analyzed in the present book, and, to our knowledge, for most of the rest of the world. The ups and downs of the pandemic and its successive variants provoked reactions, which gave rise to more or less stringent lockdowns. Usually, governments tried not to ask too much from their citizens, with hesitations that disorientated them unfavorably.¹⁴ Juliana Raupp thus demonstrates the subtle semi-lenient methods of Chancellor Angela Merkel. She stuck as closely as possible to the advice of the main German pandemic authority, the Robert Koch Institute, never asking more of her people than what was deemed strictly necessary.

Overall, between the lack of preparedness of many countries against COVID-19, leading to these initial communication glitches about masks or alleged “miracle” treatments, and the ups and downs of Government communication, citizens’ trust in Government Communication diminished. This phenomenon was particularly clear in the United Kingdom because of the Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s polarizing stance and sometimes apparently whimsical decisions.¹⁵ Most of the present book authors expose this increased problem of credibility, which is certainly one of the lessons to be learned from the Government Communication difficulties and mishaps concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. It is presented in a thorough case study by Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, Antonis Armenakis and Achilleas Karadimitriou. They demonstrate pertinently that each new cycle of Government communication further undermined the trust of the Greek citizens. Another case of lack of credibility handicapped the Polish Government Communication because it kept overloading messages, hence confused with layers and layers of information.

Countries with Very Harsh Lockdowns

This was largely the position of countries in East Asia and the South Pacific Areas. We can read in the book chapters relating to China, South Korea, Japan, and Australia (and we could have added New Zealand) that severe lockdowns were introduced there—and some are still in force. Melbourne’s inhabitants endured 260 days of lockdown!

Traveling to these countries was also forbidden for most of the pandemic duration, even for citizens trying to return home. About 30,000 Australians who had the bad luck of being out of the country at the beginning of the pandemic were locked out. They had to wait for weeks before being allowed in again, with the

¹⁴ Anastasia Grusha named this the “Roller Coaster effect” during our initial 2021 Nice conference, which led to the present book

¹⁵ Another strange move was French President Emmanuel Macron paying a visit to Professor Didier Raoult in Marseilles, to discuss the virtues against the virus of his “miracle remedy,” the hydroxychloroquine, which was later formally forbidden despite this professor of medicine’s protests and rear-guard fight.

hardship of a long quarantine in designated locations. Likewise, China was such a case and still is, the precise territorial grid of the country, under the powerful hand of the Communist Party, helping to enforce a strong policy of virus containment and an absolute lockdown for whole regions.

2.2 Compensating for Various Kinds of Cultural Differences

Some countries had to adapt their Government Communication to perceived cultural differences. Three countries were particularly concerned by this phenomenon: South Africa, Israel, and the United Kingdom.

In South Africa, the sociocultural context meant that the main parts of the English language-based Government Communication had to be translated into the 11 languages of the country, often with adaptation as well. In Israel, the issue was communicating efficiently to each four core groups of Israel's population: the "modern" Jewish majority, the Orthodox Jewish part, the more recent Russian descent Jewish population, and the non-Jewish minority. This task was complicated further because these four core groups are also subdivided into cultural groups that are so different that they are sometimes nearly antagonistic: Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, and, among the non-Jews, Christian, Druze, and Muslim.

In South Africa and in the United Kingdom, Government communication was additionally hindered by scandals, which emphasized cultural differences. Political minorities in South Africa lost much credibility when the Minister of Health, Zweli Mkhize, was accused of favoritism in his ministry's communication contracts. In the United Kingdom, the cultural "we-ness" of Britishness was put under serious strain when scandals started to emerge in Boris Johnson's entourage. Its overt breaches of the lockdowns were spectacularly exposed. There was, first, Johnson's close advisor Dominic Cummings's escapade outside London although he had COVID-19 symptoms, then the whole cabinet staying for inebriated night parties on the 10 Downing Street premises, when it was absolutely forbidden for "ordinary" citizens to hold such gatherings.

2.3 Playing Down (or Up) the COVID-19 Pandemic

A final major difference in Government Communication came from three countries whose leaders kept downplaying the pandemic in very similar ways, partly because they did not fully understand its seriousness, but mainly because they had decided to focus on maintaining their respective country's economies. In the United States, Donald Trump's attitude was stable in that regard, and he even sometimes publicly disregarded or chastised his chief pandemic communication expert, Antoni Fauci. In the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson's apparently erratic behavior toward the pandemic is in part explained by his wish to preserve the economy. He sought to keep

the promises he had made when leading the country to Brexit. As for Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, his disdain for the pandemic and his sole concern to maintain economic transactions were so excessive that he was constantly clashing with regional state governors.

At the other extreme, we find the governing politicians of some countries, who played up their part in fighting the pandemic in order to enhance their image and their leadership. This was particularly obvious in Italy. The change of Prime Minister during the pandemic exposed the fact that Giuseppe Conte had overplayed his hand compared to the more sober but very efficient communication from his successor Mario Draghi. In general, the latter did not appear on social media, and addressed the public only rarely, when it was absolutely necessary, a posture which nevertheless made him quickly and easily be assigned the role of “commander in chief” much more so than his expansive predecessor.

3 Conclusion

The above few lines only give a hint of the rich contents, and the quality, of the present book 18 chapters. They compose a large group representative of the various Government Communication patterns on COVID-19 in the world during the first 2 years of the pandemic.

They have been divided into five parts according to the strongest links between these policies:

- Part 1—The countries where central and vertical Government Communication strategies were dominant.
- Part 2—The countries where the Pandemic Communication was not the monopoly of Governments but shared (or contested) by Local Government institutions.
- Part 3—The countries where the Pandemic Communication was clearly subject to their leader’s decisions, not to say whims—France can also be added here
- Part 4—The countries where trust in Government Communication about the pandemic was undermined.
- Part 5—And finally, in France and Japan, two case studies of electronic and social media use, and its importance in relation to the Government Communication on the pandemic.

To draw one or two conclusions from this introduction, one could first insist on the rise in social media practices caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has its positive sides, of course, but also negative aspects. Electronic media leave out non-negligible categories of the population, and are much less easy to connect with in low-income countries. People having no or very little access to them are

left behind the ones who know everything about QR codes and the like. Moreover, electronic media have broken the monopoly of the legacy media top-down communication, allowing any individual to broadcast to all connected persons in the world. However, this also seems to have induced a considerable expansion of fake news and “conspiracy theories.” These are easily conveyed by social media and reinforced by the tautological effects of badly controlled artificial intelligence, if not by overt disinformation and cyberwar.¹⁶ This has often led to quite a lot of mistrust in Government Communication, damaging its efficiency in fighting the pandemic.

To be more positive, one could rejoice in the fact that some countries have learned to work together better, due to shared efforts against the pandemic. This was obvious in the case of European Union countries, unexpectedly becoming more united than ever. They managed to buy their vaccine shots jointly and built common economic recovery plans on a scale that no one would have believed possible before COVID-19.

Another point, regarding research into Political Communication, is the interesting expansion of Government Communication in general, because of the huge needs created by the pandemic. While COVID-19 uncovered the lack of preparedness of many countries and, more broadly, the inability to deal with a crisis, it also demonstrated the necessity to respond, and to put Government Communication on the table, so to speak.

Finally, from a wider perspective, it is very pleasing to be able to mention that some countries have capitalized positively on their image, by now convincing the vaccine or medicine inventors and manufacturers to adapt their prices, or even waive their patent rights for lower-income countries. A double win!

References

Full references to this chapter are to be found in the notes.

Website Consultation (*for the Whole Book*)

Websites were consulted by the authors between October 2021 and late March 2022.

¹⁶Millions of pages are now written or are being written about this phenomenon. The main references can be found in the various chapters of this book.

Part I
Organizing Centralized Government
Strategies

Pros and Cons of the EU Response and Communication during COVID-19 Crisis



Inna Šteinbuka

1 Introduction

Common European Commission communication culture is grouped broadly around a widely shared mission to “build Europe” and “advance the European project.” The Commission’s agenda setting involves identifying broad EU system objectives and persuading people to support them. It necessitates explaining long-term goals, defining common interest, and mobilizing arguments in favor of a political vision on how to achieve better citizens’ lives in the future (Nugent & Rhinard, 2019). How does this concept work in the times of crisis?

Few would challenge the assertion that the EU is experiencing extraordinary times. Recently the EU has gone through many severe crises (economic and financial crisis, migration crisis, terrorist attacks, Brexit). This unthinkable blending of various crises leads to a major identity crisis, mounting Euroscepticism and extremism and shaking popular trust in the European project. The results of the 2016 referendum in the United Kingdom were met by many Europeans with a feeling of sadness, but by others with a hope that the European project would break down. Fortunately, negative predictions have not become reality. Unfortunately, the time of hard times is not over. Today the EU like the entire world continues to struggle with the unprecedented public health crisis and related acute socio-economic challenges.

The underlying truth is that neither the EU nor the Member States were ready for any of the recent crises, specifically for the pandemic. At the same time, the EU’s response to all these crises has included a wide range of unprecedented initiatives that were designed and delivered in record time.

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The severe consequences of previous cataclysms and ongoing pandemic are forcing the EU policymakers to focus not only on the response as such but also on explaining the general public what is actually being done. It is less clear whether the explanations were well received and understood. The acknowledgment of the EU response to any crisis can succeed only when if it comes not only from people's minds, but also from their hearts.

Nowadays the problem is how to better explain to the EU citizens, what the EU institutions, in particular, the Commission has delivered to prevent or at least tangibly reduce consequences of ongoing crisis and what are future plans to improve citizens' lives. Faced with Euroskeptic parties in many of the EU Member States, European citizens need to be able to understand whether and how the EU affects their daily lives in hard times.

One of the main challenges is the abstract nature of the European Commission's public communication policy and activities. Complexity of the communication experienced during current COVID-19 crisis is twofold: explanation based on facts to achieve people's minds and emotional engagement to reach the people's hearts. Without strong emotional component, it would be problematic for the EU to win the battle with "infodemic" and defend European narratives in geopolitical struggle for influence with Russia and China.

This paper is focused on the assessment of the EU response to the COVID-19 crisis, on the communication challenges of Ursula von der Leyen's Commission compared with Jean-Claude Juncker Commission, and on the analysis of changing trends in citizens' perceptions.

2 Winning Rather Minds than Hearts

All EU institutions including the European Parliament and the European Council are responsible for the communication with the Europeans, and the European Commission has in the communication process a crucial role.

At the *political level*, the EC President and commissioners have to fully play their leadership role and to be more prominently involved in addressing citizens. At the *civil servants' level*, the Directorate General for Communication (DG COMM) is responsible for explaining EU policies to outside audiences, defining the Commission's corporative image, monitoring trends in public opinion and the media, informing the Commission on reputational risks in Member states, and coordinating the communication campaigns. As important part of the DG COMM, *the European Commission's representations* play a significant role at national level, being the extension and hub of the EC in the Member States.

One should expect that communication would not be the responsibility of the European institutions alone. It should be shared with the Member states. The European politicians across all other levels (national, local, and regional) should be co-owners of the EU delivery and partners in conveying consistent explanatory messages. In reality, quite often instead of "singing in unison" with the EU, the

Member states tend to present any success story as their success and blame the EU for any failures. In this regard, EC Representations, which are connecting in their daily work with national, regional, and local authorities, social partners, academics, journalists, businesses, cultural actors and the media, can be instrumental in engaging national partners in positive communication on the EU response and deliveries.

As public bodies, the EU institutions' communication tends to be mostly rational, based on facts and figures. Indeed the "rational" advantages of the Union can be well explained in non-emotional way. In the *business-as-usual times*, the rational explanation of the major EU success stories works well. Disappearance of customs procedures for trade between Member States, the absence of internal border control, the ability of young people to engage in student exchanges and the free-of-charge mobile telephony roaming in the EU can be well communicated in traditional evidence-based way. But most likely these achievements alone would not succeed in changing people's attitudes in the times of crises. According to Luc Van den Brande (Van den Brande, 2017), the role of the EU institutions is much broader than simply providing information. It should also be based on a degree of emotional engagement with the Union by Europeans. When times are tough, the rational explanation of the EU response is not sufficient for the public acknowledgment. The people's emotions like fear, frustration, and anger tend to overshadow any evidence-based communication and facts, especially when political leaders are helpless in finding a proper combination of facts and emotions to provide reasons for hope and confidence.

One should expect that during crisis the Union would more than usual confront the cynics and the skeptics, showing that it is delivering. In these critical situations, providing citizens with comprehensive facts and figures is certainly vital for winning the people's minds but clearly not enough. Winning the hearts of citizens is a more challenging task for politicians. Unfortunately, the abstract and sometimes poor nature of the European Commission's public communication policy and activities has not been substantially improved during the pandemic.

3 Communication Efforts of the "Last-Chance" Commission

The general public's trust in the European Union has steadily decreased since the start of the financial and economic crisis in 2008. Jean-Claude Juncker, the former president of the European Commission (2014–2019), acknowledged this worrying trend over the past decade in his inaugural speech at the European Parliament in November 2014, when he set the tone for his "last-chance Commission:" "Either we succeed in bringing the European citizens closer to Europe — or we will fail" (Juncker, 2014).

From the start, in the agenda setting of the new Commission its political nature has been strongly emphasized, and communication was specially designed to

comply with political targets. As explained by Martin Selmayr (Selmayr, 2016), Juncker's highly influential *chef de cabinet*, being "political" for the Juncker Commission means "being up to the *political challenge of this time . . . focusing on those issues that matter . . . that overcome crisis . . . this Commission will be remembered for whether it . . . returns Europe back to growth . . . from chaos to order . . . we have to focus our energy on the existential matters being up to the political challenges of this time. . . .and to focusing on the issues that matter.*" Selmayr thus made explicit a view that the Commission had the right and even the need to address the larger population and to public sentiment. The idea behind this approach was to re-energize the leadership role of the Commission (Nugent & Rhinard, 2019).

The need of strong leadership and effective communication increased during migration crisis, terrorist attacks and received new impetus in 2016, with the referendum in the United Kingdom on Brexit. New concerns have also emerged following the outcome of the 2016 American presidential election and the new president positions on various sensitive global issues like international trade, defense policy and climate change. These developments triggered the risk of the European project destruction due to popular frustration and discontent. This, however, did not happen. One of the reasons why the hopes of Euroskeptic parties did not come true was citizens' mobilization around the European project. Strengthening EU communication in this critical situation played a crucial role.

The Juncker Commission has made a pronounced effort to improve communications (Kassim, 2015). The Commission President and other members of the Commission have been available to meet the press and to address the other institutions, particularly the European Parliament. The Commission President's informal and self-deprecating style make him accessible, let him to win trust, has allowed him to deal lightly with "difficult" personalities like Viktor Orban or Alexis Tsipras as well as with insinuations about his personal habits (Spiegel, 2014).

Juncker has shown considerable tact and diplomacy in sensitive areas of policy like Greece's financial crisis. Although he has made clear that there are limits of the EU communication on Brexit, he has taken an emollient tone, repeating that he does not want the UK to leave the EU and that he is in favor of a "fair deal" (Pop, 2015). His appointment of Hill as Commissioner for financial services appears to be a gesture of goodwill to London. Juncker has also avoided unnecessary battles. Furthermore, the Commission chose not to impose penalties on France or Italy, although they had run up deficits, but instead accepted their promises to introduce reforms (Van den Brande, 2017).

Within the Commission, Juncker's *chef de cabinet*, Martin Selmayr, has considerably strengthened the role and reputation of the DG COMM. The heads of the EC Representations of the Member states were informally "upgraded" to the ambassadors of the President. This approach has strengthened their mandate and motivated proactive communication at the national level.

President Juncker has used non-legislative instruments to re-energize the leadership role of the Commission and personally activate some high-profile policy initiatives that have been championed by his Commission (Nugent & Rhinard, 2019). For example, he ensured that his commission has been understood as the

main driving force behind the 2015 *Five Presidents' Report* on the future of Economic and Monetary (EMU) (Juncker et al., 2015). This paper aimed mostly at economic professionals simultaneously provided powerful messages for the public-at-large: "Europe is emerging from the worst financial and economic crisis in seven decades. . . . Despite the recent crisis, Euro remains the second most important currency in the world. . . . The euro is more than just a currency. It is a political and economic project . . . EMU today is like a house that was built over decades but only partially finished. When the storm hit, its walls and roof had to be stabilized quickly. . . ."

In order to increase the Commission's capacity for financial investment, which was vital to bridge post-crisis investment gap, Jean-Claude Juncker persuaded EU decision makers to generate momentum and create a new investment fund capable of generating "new money." Soon after the College assumed office, a Commission Communication was issued detailing the nature and purpose of the special investment fund known as "Juncker funds," which is now called the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) and is a major source of InvestEU funds (European Union, 2021). The creation of this strategic investment plan has been accompanied with an intensive communication campaign built around the core message: boosting growth and jobs in order to accelerate the EU post-crisis recovery.

Juncker Commission took advantage of a window of opportunity created by the economic and financial crises and build its communication with the EU Member states around the European Semester—a framework for coordinating economic policies across the EU, discussing economic and budget plans and monitoring progress throughout the year. The European Semester not only has strengthened Commission's responsibilities to oversee and guide economic and fiscal performances of eurozone member states but also provided an excellent tool for permanent communication with European citizens. Communication on sensitive welfare-linked topics like growth, jobs, prices, household income, inequality, reforms, budgetary spending, etc., is built to address not only politics makers but also various target audiences (NGOs, academics, business) and public-at-large.

Finally, an excellent example on how to re-energize the leadership role of the Commission and mobilize the citizens around the European project, was the *White Paper on the Future of Europe* (European Commission, 2021e) issued in March 2017, which advanced five possible pathways for Europe's future development. In the White Paper and five reflection papers on the European future priorities, the Commission abstained from making specific recommendations and instead created a framework for opening up the debate on the future of Europe to citizens.

Since the publication of the White Paper numerous public events across the EU, known as *Citizens' Dialogues*, have contributed to countering gloomy perspectives and improve citizens' perceptions. President and all College Members have demonstrated high political activity in dialogues with citizens in the Member States by presenting and communicating the Commission agenda, listening to ideas and engaging with stakeholders. On September 13, 2017, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, in his annual State of the Union Address (Juncker, 2017),

committed to continuing the debate on the future of Europe up until June 2019 elections to the European Parliament.

The well-established platform of *Citizens' Dialogues* in the style of town-hall debates continues to be also applied after the EP election (European Commission, 2021a) by Ursula von der Leyen's Commission.

4 The EU Response to the COVID-19 Crisis and Communication Challenges

The unprecedented COVID-19 health crisis with its heavy socio-economic implications required the speedy and adequate response from the EU and clear communication. Despite the progress, the pandemic is not yet over. In end-2021 infection rates go up in Europe, return to the business-as-usual trajectory is not happened yet and the future is uncertain. A critical look at what has been done, what has worked well, and what did not is important in order to better address the new and emerging threats of the pandemic.

Like the entire world, the EU was not ready for the pandemic, and the initial response to the crisis looked ad hoc. Furthermore, coordination and cooperation between Member States were initially difficult. When it came to working together, for instance to procure medical supplies, during the early days of the COVID-19 crisis, EU countries had unilaterally closed their borders and accused each other of hoarding personal protective equipment. The lack of solidarity vis-à-vis Italy in terms of emergency assistance was a culmination of this early trend. The reintroduction of internal border controls has been uncoordinated at the EU level and justified only by a national security-health policy frame. Another example of pure coordination is the disorganized adoption of lockdowns in the Member States.

"You never get a second chance to make a good first impression,"¹ as the saying goes. It applies perfectly to the EU pure communication during this period. As Théo Verdier, vice-président du Mouvement Européen—France noted, "for a long time, the European Commission appeared to be waiting, torn between its willingness to coordinate the different member states and its lack of authority in the health sector" (Verdier, 2020). The EU mirrored delayed response and lack of straightforward communication in the Member states.

As Théo Verdier rightly underlined, in the first wave of crisis, the EU and the Member states have been negatively affected by the narrative used by their competitors. China, Russia, and even Cuba have made, for instance, a point of making emphatic solidarity gestures towards Italy. Gestures whose level of commitment varies, ranging from essential support to symbolic actions, received far more

¹The quote has been attributed to both Oscar Wilde and to Will Rogers. But nobody has any evidence of them actually saying it.

coverage in the press, amplifies the prevailing discourse that the EU is no longer able to close ranks (Verdier, 2020).

Despite the initial stage of observation, astonishment and uncoordinated or mixed response, the EU managed rather quickly to demonstrate a high degree of adaptability. A set of measures, which the EU has put in place to confront the pandemic is a clear justification that the EU has been able to act timely and effectively. Without detailed description of the EU response measures (European Commission, 2021b), even brief summary of four response dimensions—*Vaccination strategy, European Health Union, restoring mobility and economic response*—provides a convincing picture (despite some criticism) of a wide range of unprecedented initiative designed and delivered in a record time.

The Commission has built and implemented a *vaccination strategy* to provide a diversified portfolio of vaccines for EU citizens at fair prices. This strategy, however, came under fire just as it was beginning to deliver (Deutsch & Wheaton, 2021). Being positioned as a flagship of European solidarity, the Commission's joint vaccine procurement is being accused by national authorities of being too bureaucratic and too slow. J.Deutsch and S.Wheaton argue that dozens of interviews with diplomats, commission officials, pharma industry representatives and national government aides clearly show “how a vaccine strategy that was supposed to be a forceful show of European solidarity, an assertion of the single market's buying power and a moral stand against Trumpian “vaccine nationalism” resulted in a rollout that has left the EU lagging behind the United Kingdom and the United States.” Despite the criticism, deliveries of vaccine doses to Member States have increased steadily since December 2020, and according to the EC information already in August 2021, 70% of the adult EU population were fully vaccinated.

Until pandemic crisis, health was off the radar of the European policy priorities. Health policy was considered a national competence and health issues—almost exclusively as the business of Member States. The European Union's lack of competence in the field of public health already in the first months of crisis created problems, and the COVID-19 pandemic became a catalyst of the acceptance of the EU leading role in building health policy. Since the early spring 2020, health has dominated media coverage and national and international debates. In November 2020, the Commission has taken the first steps towards building the *European Health Union* by issuing a set of proposals to strengthen the EU's health security framework and reinforce the crisis preparedness. Against this background, in September 2021, the Commission has launched the European Health Emergency preparedness and Response Authority (HERA)—a shared resource and mission control center for MS and EU institutions to better prepare for cross-border health emergency threats. Another important initiative is the Pharmaceutical Strategy for Europe, adopted in November 2020. This strategy is aimed at ensuring access to affordable medicines for patients, supporting competitiveness, innovation and sustainability of the EU's pharmaceutical industry, enhancing crisis preparedness, and diversifying secure supply chains to address medicines shortages.

The mobility of people is a fundamental value and a pillar of the European project. Since the 1995 Schengen area creation and with the abolition of passport