

**SGI** Sustainable Governance  
Indicators 2009

Steering Capability

# Policy communication report



*Indicator* Coherent communication

*Question* To what extent does the government implement a coherent communication policy?

*30 OECD countries are sorted according to their performance on a scale from 10 (best) to 1 (lowest). This scale is tied to four qualitative evaluation levels:*

- 10-9 = The government coordinates ministry communication to align with overall strategy.*
- 8-6 = The government seeks to coordinate ministry communication. Contradictions are rare.*
- 5-3 = Ministries develop their own public communication. Statements occasionally conflict.*
- 2-1 = No strategic communication planning exists. Ministry statements regularly conflict.*

## United States

*value 10*

The U.S. administration is successful at coordinating the communication of its departments. Contradictory statements are rare, though they do occur. In general, the current Bush administration has excelled at managing its public communications strategy in a coordinated and cohesive manner (“staying on message”). To a degree, however, this also reflects an administration that does not tolerate dissent from the core White House position.

The Bush White House has made it clear that department press officers, who are political appointees, are viewed as being part of an administration press-relations team. There have been very few, if any, episodes of departments issuing press releases or other statements that were incompatible with the Bush administration’s line.

Annotation: Lawrence R. Jacobs, “Communicating from the White House,” in *The Executive Branch*, edited by Joel D. Aberbach and Mark A. Peterson, (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 174–217.

## Australia

*value 9*

Governments have made considerable efforts to align their policy priorities with the messages that they communicate to the public. This was particularly true under the post-1996 Coalition government. The consistency in communication has been aided by very strong party discipline and a tradition of intolerance of dissent within the parties, by strong adherence to the Westminster doctrine of collective cabinet responsibility, and by an activist mass media and political opposition which has sought to exploit any apparent policy divisions within government. On rare occasions, individual members of the governing party have taken a dissenting

position and “crossed the floor” to vote against the government. This has been more common for members of the National Party, the smaller of the two parties in the coalition government. Interdepartmental coordination of government public communications is high. It is rare for contradictory statements to be issued or for ministers to contradict one another. This reflects tight control by the PM and the cabinet of all major policy announcements.

## Canada

*value 9*

The Canadian government has developed a sophisticated communications policy to ensure that communications across governmental departments and agencies are well coordinated, effectively managed and responsive to the diverse information needs of the public. The current government is very effective at communicating with a single coordinated and coherent voice. The government is very centralized with respect to messages advertised both within and outside the government. The government also constantly monitors its communication with the media to ensure that its voice is coherent and that its message is well received by the public.

## Iceland

*value 9*

According to the West Nordic administrative tradition, every minister is responsible for the state institutions subordinate to his or her ministry. Therefore, every minister has the power to make decisions without consulting others. Nonetheless, ministers contradict each other very rarely, and try to reach decisions by consensus.

The coalition government in power during the period under review appeared to be especially harmonious; as far as could be seen from the outside, no significant disagreements erupted within the coalition during this period. This has largely been true throughout its long tenure, from 1995 to 2007, even though the two coalition partners were old adversaries in the political arena. Other coalitions in the past have seen more disagreements emerge in public.

## Luxembourg

*value 9*

Neither the government nor any individual minister has a spokesperson. Important decisions and events are announced at press conferences held in person by the minister involved. However, the prime minister clearly takes a leadership role in governmental communication. The most important issues are announced by the prime minister after the weekly meetings of the government council. The prime minister also acts as the spokesperson of the Tripartite Coordination Committee. Furthermore, through the government’s Press and Information Service, which is under his direct authority, the prime minister efficiently coordinates the public communication of government members.

## Portugal

*value 9*

The government that has been in power since March 2005 has been extremely effective at coordinating communication with the ministries. In fact, the success of this coordination has led the media to criticize the government, claiming that there is excessive “centralization” of authority in the PMO and that the ministers are too much under the control of and influence by the PMO. There were a few ministers who stood out in their willingness to vocalize dissent, but this could be attributed more generally to their public persona in the media.

## United Kingdom

*value 9*

A meticulously planned, coherent and successful communication policy lay at the heart of the Labour government’s strategies under Tony Blair. Throughout his tenure as prime minister, Tony Blair proved to be highly skilled at cultivating a desired image and message, otherwise known as “spin.”

Spin doctoring was key to securing the government’s role as the “primary definer” of policy issues. The twin goals entailed ensuring consistency in the government’s public reasoning and minimizing media profiles of dissenting voices by keeping MPs’ public speeches in line with the government’s desired message, and by defining what should be reported and how the government was to be presented in the media.

The Strategic Communication Unit in the Prime Minister’s Office met every Thursday to coordinate reports to the press and define a weekly news grid in which the ministers’ public appearances and the topics they were to discuss were set. No minister was allowed to opt out of an appearance or to make unilateral decisions on issues. To achieve maximum impact, agenda-setting was coordinated with timetables for major cultural or sports events. Political attacks on the opposition were also integrated into the communication strategy. For long-term planning, the weekly communication strategy was brought in line with the prime minister’s 12-month calendar schedule. Despite all these efforts at cohesive communication, there were occasional leaks and unattributed briefings, which compromised the government in seeking to speak with one voice.

## Denmark

*value 8*

In principle, each ministry is responsible for its own communications with the wider public. However, the government also tries to maintain a coherent policy line and speak to the public with one voice. In general, the coordination of communication – whether formally via the government’s Coordination Committee or more informally on a case by case basis – has been effective. Nevertheless, major problems have

arisen when there have been political disagreements between ministers. For example, the minister for ecology and the minister of finance have issued contradictory statements regarding the necessity of combating climate change. Furthermore, in summer 2007, a number of leading ministers made statements that were flatly at odds with each other on the question of whether tax reductions were advisable in the current situation, and if so, what specific kind reductions they should be.

## Finland

*value 8*

The position of the prime minister being one of *primus inter pares* rather than one of dominant leadership, attempts at “speaking with one voice” are advanced by means of consultation rather than by directives and command. Furthermore, as any such directives would conflict with the principle of freedom of speech, they would probably be regarded as illegitimate, and stimulate opposition.

When in 2007 Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen recommended that ministers should refrain from commenting publicly on matters that were under consideration in ministries other than their own, his request was received unfavorably in the media as well as among his colleagues. Nevertheless, contradictory statements are in practice rare. Interestingly enough, they have lately tend to pop up with regard to matters of foreign policy, a policy sector that earlier in postwar Finland was marked by near-unanimous anxiety and deference.

## France

*value 8*

The strict hierarchical organization of the French government provides for a coherent communication policy, in which individual ministers generally follow or pursue the aims or guidelines of the prime minister or president. This is also built into the structure of the French political system. President Sarkozy does not take the overall external communications of his government any less seriously than did his predecessors. He has repeatedly criticized numerous ministers, as their public relations work has not fulfilled his expectations.

## Ireland

*value 8*

Article 28.4.2 of Ireland’s Constitution provides that “the government shall meet and act as a collective authority and shall be collectively responsible for the departments of state administered by the members of the government.” As a result of this provision, all members of the Cabinet are required to give public support to the government’s position on any given matter. This tendency for the Cabinet to present a united front is further strengthened by the role of the prime minister, who is alone empowered to nominate or dismiss ministers.

Finally, the Government Information Service and the Government Press Office operate under the auspices of the Department of the Taoiseach. Ministries also have their own press departments and press officers. These offices occasionally release contradictory statements, the most frequent of which involve figures inconsistent with those released by the Department of Finance. However, such instances are relatively rare in Irish politics owing to the existence of provisions for collective responsibility and the power of the prime minister mentioned above.

## New Zealand

*value 8* Although recent governments' multiparty nature has increased the potential for contradictory statements, strict cabinet rules have allowed the government to coordinate policies properly, including communication policies. Individual officeholders do, at times, make statements which do not fully support the cabinet's view, but as far as procedures are concerned, the government seems to be able to coordinate communication policy effectively.

## Norway

*value 8* Norway has had coalition governments in recent years. The previous center-right minority coalition government on occasion had severe internal disagreements which reduced its ability to communicate with one voice. For instance, the Iraq war was a divisive issue within the coalition. Internal disagreements are not uncommon in the current center-left majority coalition government either, although public contradictory statements seem to occur less frequently. Cabinet members who disagree with specific policies avoid voicing their criticisms in the press.

## Sweden

*value 8* The government always aims to communicate in a coherent manner. Although it generally succeeds in doing so, on rare occasions it falls short. Regarding this issue, there are also differences between the single-party government the Social Democratic Party (SAP) led before the 2006 election and the center-right coalition government currently in power, which has been generally less successful than its predecessor.

A lack of coherency in government communication usually stems from a conflict between the minister of finance and another line minister. In a typical case, the minister of finance will publicly discuss some kind of budget reduction in the other minister's area of competence and that minister's response will publically oppose any such reduction. This has happened for both Social Democratic single-party governments and the center-right coalition.

However, in the case of the center-right coalition, incoherency could also stem to some degree from unsolved political questions between different parties within the government. Indeed, contradictions between the public statements of ministers tend to occur more frequently when there is a coalition government in which the parties are torn between promoting their own priorities and those of the government as a whole. Nevertheless, arguments and disagreements among ministers are usually contained within the cabinet for as long as possible.

## Switzerland

*value 8*

The Swiss government's strict collegial organization provides for a coherent communication policy, in which the seven members of the Federal Council follow the body's majority decisions. This holds true even if the council comes to a split decision of four to three votes. However, the government's internal cohesion has been challenged in recent years by growing polarization between the political right and the political left.

## Mexico

*value 7*

Given the balance of power within Mexico's presidential system, communication and coordination is essentially a matter for the President's Office. One of the principal functions of the President's Office is the coordination of all governmental communications, with reference to presidential objectives. Cabinet secretaries can communicate with the public within their areas of competence, but the president is responsible for communicating the overall government strategy. The most important public communication event is the president's annual government declaration in front of the National Congress.

In 2005 and 2006, the government's communication strategy was inconsistent, due to intraparty conflict between the president and other high ranking PAN members, and to the president's declining authority as a result of upcoming presidential elections. The Calderon administration has regained control over the coordination of communication.

## Netherlands

*value 7*

Since 2006, the ministers have met regularly at the Ministry of General Affairs in order to streamline their communication to the public and thereby insure that the government speaks with one voice. Nevertheless in a coalition government with at least three different parties and specific political personalities, it is not always possible to actually accomplish this goal. When differences between coalition partners are strong, it may well happen that the public perceives the government as

having several voices.

The government is currently developing a logotype shared by all government ministries in order to insure that government information can always be easily identified as such. For example, on public television, commercials aired by the government to inform the public about policy developments are branded “Postbus 51.” In 2006, the government made significant investments in publicizing its “Postbus 51” branding tool in the hopes of increasing its effectiveness.

## South Korea

*value 7*

The government ordinarily speaks with a unified voice, as a result of prior coordination between ministries. Some important policies are announced by the president or his spokesperson, after consultation with ministries concerned. However, contradictory statements do occur, especially on the part of ministers.

## Spain

*value 7*

The Communication Office exists within the Ministry of the Presidency, and is responsible for coordinating the government’s entire information policy, both internally and externally (via the mass media). The incumbent officeholder conducts strategic communications planning for the government, but does not hold the post of spokesperson. The minister of the presidency and the first deputy prime minister act as spokespeople, in addition to his or her original portfolio.

In practice, however, it took the present Spanish government its first year in office to manage to “speak with one voice.”. Contradictory statements were frequent at the beginning of the legislative term. The two most important examples include declarations by the ministers of culture and of housing, concerning the preparation of particular legislation that had to be denied, a posteriori, by the vice president. During the last two years of the government’s term, the vice president, Maria Tereza Fernandez de la Vega, has excelled in her role as communications coordinator between ministries and as spokesperson for government strategy.

## Turkey

*value 7*

There is a spokesman for the Council of Ministers who makes public declarations on behalf of the Council. However, some important ministers also make contradictory private and public statements to other members of the government. A spokesman’s office was also established for the prime minister, which caused further complications in the attempts at coordinating “one voice” in communications for the government.

In matters of economic, social and foreign policy, the government generally speaks

in unison, and the prime minister is able to easily conduct and focus his communications. However, when it comes to cultural issues, such as religious identity, the meaning of Turkishness (in regard to Kurdish issues) or national history – issues that deal with state ideology – some members of parliament, ministers or even the head of parliament may act on their own and interfere in governmental politics.

## Hungary

*value 6*

The Gyurcsány government has tried hard to achieve a coherent communication policy. It created a government communication center in the Prime Minister's Office, with a state secretary in charge of coordinating the communication of all ministries and agencies. This center takes part in the governmental decision-making process and proposes coordinated communication strategies for all laws under preparation. In practice, however, the different opinions and policy preferences of the two coalition partners and of individual ministers result in occasionally contradictory statements. The problems with implementing a coherent communication policy are also evidenced by the high turnover of staff in the communication center.

## Japan

*value 6*

The government has traditionally laid great stress on communicating its policies. The so-called White Papers, often released annually, are one important conduit through which ministries and other agencies publicize their achievements, policies and problems. Although increasingly common, these are criticized for providing only vague policy statements, along with a bewildering variety of data. Moreover, they have been used in the power struggles among ministries to stake out policy territory. In general, communication has suffered as issues have become more complex. For example, whereas former decades' economic plans could concentrate on the prospective growth rate, the growth rate as a policy variable has lost importance, and utterances on the economic prospects are now more vague. It is doubtful whether the government has spoken with one voice in recent years. The strengthening of the chief cabinet secretary's role in recent years has helped somewhat, as the officeholder doubles as government spokesman, handling press conferences and frequently speaking off the record to reporters. With an intimate involvement in policy-making, this official is well placed to give a valid, coordinated view on government priorities and actions.

## Austria

*value 5*

Despite the existence of a Federal Press Service in the Federal Chancellery, which seeks to maintain coherent governmental communication, the Austrian government still often speaks with many voices. On the one hand, this modest degree of coherence is due to the competitive relationship between the coalition parties, which

can often take differing or even contradictory positions. On the other hand, the ministries' autonomy allows for independent communication policies toward the public. Efforts to implement a coherent communications policy by the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition (2000–2007) were undermined by intra-coalition conflicts.

## Belgium

*value 4*

While the liberal-socialist government of Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt sought to coordinate its communications through consultation procedures, there were nonetheless several contradictory statements issued as liberal and socialist members of the government on one hand and Flemish and Walloon politicians on the other often expressed different or even conflicting opinions. Nearly all Belgian citizens had the impression that the government did not speak with one voice. This, supposedly, was one of the main reasons for its defeat in the June 2007 elections.

Federal coalition governments usually consist of at least four different parties from different political camps, and by constitutional mandate, from different sides of the country's linguistic divide. The parties often therefore have different, if not conflicting, policy preferences as well as political styles. Frequently each coalition member party attempts to "pull the bed sheet toward itself" in political communications. Every party attempts to place blame for unsuccessful policies on another coalition partner. The issue, therefore, is not one of individual ministers effectively coordinating communications but one of coalition parties failing to do so intentionally. The communication problem is sometimes further aggravated by the respective presidents of coalition parties. When they are not themselves members of the cabinet, they will quite often bypass even their own party members in government office to take the lead in political communication.

## Czech Republic

*value 4*

The coherence of the government's communication policy is low. The weak institutional position of the prime minister and the fact that the Czech government has been a coalition government with a narrow majority have both worked against the establishment of a coherent communication policy. For example, in a number of cases, ministries have publicized contradicting messages. However, it is not unusual for ministers to say that they do not like – but are forced to accept – what is being done.

## Germany

*value 4*

The federal government's Press and Information Office is responsible for the government's official communication policy. However, this giant department cannot

guarantee genuinely coherent communication.

Experts note that cabinet members are generally unwilling to commit to speaking with a single voice. Under the grand coalition, in which both partners have sought to establish a clear and distinct profile for the next election, this disharmony has grown worse. There have been no major attempts to improve communication policy in the period under review.

## Greece

*value 4*

The government and the prime minister have not achieved the goal of “speaking with one voice.” In the period under review, there was often disagreement among ministers, which was also publicly discussed in the press. This caused the press, and particularly the opposition, to question the cabinet’s coherence. Loose ministerial coordination and the lack of proper steering mechanisms at the level of the Prime Minister’s Office allow individual ministries to make unpredictable and contradictory pronouncements on new policy measures. In some policy areas, such as foreign policy or security, the government does offer more coherent communication, but in areas where policy measures may have an electoral cost, ministers often publicly display disagreement.

## Slovakia

*value 4*

The government does not effectively coordinate its communications. The Dzurinda government gave some effort to formulating a coherent communication strategy in cooperation with the World Bank (“Strategic Plan for the Communication on Reforms in Slovakia”) but failed to speak with one voice as different coalition partners pursued their own communication strategies. The strong tradition of departmentalism means that the ministries are keen on retaining their authority in informing the public within their particular domains. The Fico government has also failed to develop a coherent communication policy, as evidenced by the prime minister’s need to “correct” other ministers’ statements on policy.

## Poland

*value 3*

The Polish government has suffered from the lack of a coherent communication policy. The PiS government’s information policy was highly contradictory. The leaders of the three parties of the governing coalition, all of whom were represented in government, pursued their own independent communication policies. Line ministries called their own press conferences and often ignored the government spokesman and his office, so that the government overall did not speak with one voice.

## Italy

### *value 2*

Italian governments (the Berlusconi and Prodi cabinets are not an exception) are particularly weak in communications. Even if in principle, only one cabinet speaker is identified to explain the position of the government, government ministers are continuously able and willing to express their personal position without coordinating such comments with the prime minister or his office.

Disputes over the government program and ministerial bickering are normal in Italian politics. This state of chaotic communication stems also from the weak constitutional position of the prime minister and the still-weak coordinative powers of the government office. A further blow to the powers of the prime minister and his position as *primus inter pares* is his inability to dismiss ministerial colleagues. That is also why the government spokesperson is generally not able to speak or act for the government and the ministers as a whole.

After some months of contradictory statements by different ministers, the Prodi government explicitly decided in March 2007 that the prime minister's speaker should be the one and only voice for the government. But this decision has had almost no consequence.

This report is part of the Sustainable Governance Indicators 2009 project, which assesses and compares the reform capacities of the OECD member states.

More on the SGI 2009 at [www.sgi-network.org](http://www.sgi-network.org)

## Contact

Andrea Kuhn, Dr. Leonard Novy, Daniel Schraad-Tischler

Bertelsmann Stiftung

Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256

33311 Gütersloh

[www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de)