

SGI Sustainable
Governance
Indicators

2015 Policy Communication
Report
Coherent Communication



Indicator

Coherent Communication

Question

To what extent does the government achieve coherent communication?

41 OECD and EU 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 effectively coordinates the communication of ministries; ministries closely align their communication with government strategy. Messages are factually coherent with the government's plans.
- 8-6 = The government coordinates the communication of ministries. Contradictory statements are rare, but do occur. Messages are factually coherent with the government's plans.
- 5-3 = The ministries are responsible for informing the public within their own particular areas of competence; their statements occasionally contradict each other. Messages are sometimes not factually coherent with the government's plans.
- 2-1 = Strategic communication planning does not exist; individual ministry statements regularly contradict each other. Messages are often not factually coherent with the government's plans.

Australia

Score 9

Australian governments have traditionally made considerable efforts to align their policy priorities with the messages that they communicate to the public, which has continued over the review period. This habit has been aided by a number of factors: a tradition of very strong discipline across all the major political parties (perhaps the strongest among the Westminster democracies) and a tradition of suppressing dissent within the parties (often by the threat of de-selection at the next election); strong adherence to the Westminster doctrine of collective cabinet responsibility; and an activist mass media and political opposition which will seek to exploit any apparent policy divisions within government.

Finland

Score 9

Since the position of the prime minister is one of *primus inter pares* (first among equals), rather than one of absolute leadership, it is natural that the government's policy positions are advanced through discussion and consultation, rather than through directives and commands. Furthermore, as directives and commands would challenge the principle of freedom of speech, such communication would probably be regarded as illegitimate and foster opposition. In practice, therefore, contradictory statements are rare. However, the fact that Finland has tradition of broad-based umbrella coalitions, which accommodate many diverse interests and ideological shadings, serves to diversify communication to some extent. The existence of an agreed-upon and fairly detailed government plan, on the other hand, serves to streamline communications.

The current government of Alexander Stubb is a coalition government of four parties, having lost two parties during the summer of 2014. The current government has a thin majority with 101 from a total of 199 MPs. It is worth noting that, as the Speaker of Parliament belongs to the governing SDP party, the Speaker has no vote. This increases the importance of effective and coherent coordination within cabinet and between the coalition parties.

Hungary

Score 9

The PMO seeks to coordinate and control the government's communication. It places regular "success stories" in the government-controlled media, which are often based on a dubious interpretation of statistics and border on propaganda. Ministers have tended to follow the wording of the prime minister in their own statements. For that reason, the cabinet has often been derided as a "parrot chorus." After the 2014 parliamentary elections, a National Communications Office was established within the PMO, with the goal of creating even stronger discipline and coordination. However, ministries provided contradictory information in the context of the U.S. visa affair and the demonstrations against the Internet tax, thus showing that the coherence of government communication is far from perfect.

Netherlands

Score 9

The service Informatie Rijksoverheid responds to frequently asked questions by citizens through the internet, telephone and email. In the age of "mediacracy," government has sought to make policy communication more coherent, relying on the existing instrument of the National Information Service (Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst, RVD), formally a part of the prime minister's Department for General Affairs, whose director general is present at Council of Ministers meetings and responsible for communicating policy and the prime minister's affairs to print and other media. The government also tries to streamline and coordinate its external communication at line ministry level. In 2011 there were some 600 information service staff left for all departments (795 in 2009). Another effort toward centralized, coherent communication involves replacing departmentally run televised information campaigns with a unified, thematic approach (e.g., safety). All these efforts to have government speak with "one mouth" appear to have been fairly successful. For example, the information communicated by the government regarding the downing of a passenger plane with 196 Dutch passengers over Ukraine on 17 July 2014 and its aftermath was timely, adequate and demonstrated respect for the victims and the needs of their families.

Citation:

4de Voortgangsrapportage Programma Vernieuwing Rijksdienst, September 2009, pp. 11-12.

Communicatie Online, Nog honderd persvoorlichters bij ministeries, juni 2011
(www.communicatieonline/nieuws/bericht/nog-honderd-persvoorlichters)

Overheidscommunicatie (rijksoverheid.nl, consulted 26 October 2014)

Sweden

Score 9

Improved communications dovetails with increasing coordination among the government departments. During the past couple of years the government has developed and implemented a more coherent communications strategy. The flow of communication from government departments and the PMO is now carefully controlled such that only a very limited number of officials are authorized to engage the media or other actors outside the core of government.

This strategy is very similar to the communications strategies today used in countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom. This strategy implies that cabinet ministers carefully assess invitations from radio and TV and, perhaps surprisingly, frequently decline those invitations if they cannot control the format or if they are to debate with representatives from the opposition.

This strategy has been rather successful; it may even have been too successful. The media are increasingly complaining about problems with access to ministers or other representatives of the governing parties. There is also increasing frustration with the government's tendency to be slow in providing the media with public documents. Even among several agencies there is now frustration about the decreasing access to government departments and government information.

Citation:

Dahlström, C. J. Pierre and B. G. Peters (eds) (2011), *Steering from the Center* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).

Erlandsson, M. (2008), "Regeringskansliet och medierna. Den politiska exekutivens resurser och strategier för att hantera och styra massmedier", *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 110: 335-49.

United States

Score 9

With politically appointed leadership in every agency, executive agencies and departments carefully coordinate their messages with the White House communications strategy. Agency press releases and statements on politically salient matters are often specifically cleared with the White House. During 2012 and 2013, a minor scandal developed over the administration's formulation of a public response to a terrorist attack on U.S. diplomatic offices in Benghazi, Libya. Eventually, the White House released 100 pages of e-mails detailing discussions between the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the White House. In the end, it appeared that most of the revisions were prompted by the State Department and

CIA, rather than the White House, and were motivated more by concerns for accuracy than political effect. Regardless, the episode indicated the extensive involvement of the White House in public communications. However, such communication was less effective during the 2013 Internal Revenue Service (IRS) scandal, which involved evidence that the IRS had used political criteria in choosing to investigate the tax-exempt status of a large number of ideologically conservative groups.

Canada

Score 8 The current government has centralized its communications functions in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). All departmental policy communications must be approved by the PMO. This process effectively coordinates the communications (or lack of communications) of ministries, and aligns any departmental message with the government's overall communications strategy. In practice, however, there have been instances displaying an obvious lack of coordination in managing communications with the media. Media leaks – deliberate or not – are still part of the Ottawa process at both the political and bureaucratic levels.

Chile

Score 8 Each new government designs its own communication policy. As a result, strategic communication often tends to be rather haphazard at the beginning of a presidential term, but improves as the administration gains experience. The Sebastián Piñera government showed a fairly high number of communication lapses, particularly in its early days, while the current Michelle Bachelet government has at least thus far demonstrated more coherent communication.

Denmark

Score 8 It is important for a government to effectively communicate its policies to its citizens. In Denmark communication strategy and media attention have become important aspects of politics, and political survival depends on efficient communication. Good communicators are more likely to get ministerial posts than poor communicators. The PMO plays an important role in communication, and in recent years prime ministers have employed media advisers.

There are only a few examples of ministers speaking out on issues that were not in accordance with the government's policy. In such cases, the prime minister will act swiftly and a corrective statement will follow from the minister in question – or he or she will most likely be replaced.

However, the fact that Denmark usually has coalition governments can in some cases create problems in policy communication. This may arise both due to different viewpoints within the coalition and the need for the different government parties to communicate their views and visions, especially as the next election approaches.

Citation:

Henning Jørgensen, *Consensus, Cooperation and Conflict: The Policy Making Process in Denmark*, 2002.

Jørgen Grønnegård Christensen et al., *Politik og forvaltning*. 3. udg., 2011.

Latvia

Score 8

The government office organizes weekly coordination meetings of ministerial communication units. Communication and statements are generated by the ministries and are generally consistent. A communications coordination council sets annual priorities for the main messages to be propagated to the public. Communication messages are coordinated prior to weekly cabinet meetings. /However, this system means that partisan ministerial disagreements are highly visible.

Luxembourg

Score 8

After Council of Ministers meetings on Fridays, the prime minister holds a public press conference to communicate the body's work effectively and coherently. This weekly press briefing had been the government's main method of communicating. Whereas public press briefings under former Prime Minister Juncker were rare in recent years, public relations have been given more importance under the new coalition.

Aside from the prime minister, no government member has a press officer. Reporting directly to the prime minister, the state Press and Information Service (SIP) works to coordinate a coherent and wide-ranging government communication policy. Government members are encouraged not to voice disagreement in public so as to give the impression of unanimous decision-making. The search for consensus is one of the main traditions in Luxembourg government. In 2010, however, ministers spoke out publically over austerity, a policy that the coalition began modifying shortly after the beginning of this parliamentary term.

During the years of the Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party (LSAP) and the Christian Social People's Party (CSV) coalition, the press reported that there were some disagreement between government members, but this was never expressed explicitly by government members.

Citation:

<https://www.gouvernement.lu/4021433/attributions>

For further information: <http://www.gouvernement.lu/971432/sip>

Norway

Score 8 Norway has had coalition governments in recent years. These coalitions have worked effectively, but there will unavoidably be disagreements within any coalition, including in the current conservative-liberal coalition. The dynamics of party politics require that disagreements on important matters find some expression, leading to an occasional lack of clarity in government communications. On the other hand, Norway's coalitions have been remarkably cooperative and its cabinet members well-behaved, often going to great lengths to avoid airing disagreements in public.

Switzerland

Score 8 Switzerland's government acts as a collegial body. All members of the government have to defend the government's decisions, irrespective of their own opinion. However, in the 2003 – 2007 period, when the Swiss People's Party's Christoph Blocher participated in government, communication was less coherent than before and afterward, and the country's politics moved in a more populist, aggressive and confrontational direction. Although the current government is much more consistent in its public statements, coherence has not yet returned to the level reached in the 1970s through the 1990s. This decline in the coherency of government policy communications can be attributed to the following factors:

- the structure of the collegiate body itself, which makes it difficult to speak with one voice in the mass media age;
- the Federal Council's poor crisis management with respect to international affairs;
- political polarization, even among the members of the broad coalition government;
- the systematic distortion of the Federal Council's communications indiscretions on the part of some aggressive media outlets; and
- the Federal Council's lack of authority or capacity to sanction communications indiscretions, and inability to manage its communication policy effectively.

United Kingdom

Score 8 Compared with the secrecy culture of earlier decades, government has become much more open in the United Kingdom, through a combination of the Freedom of

Information Act passed by the Blair government and a willingness to use the internet to explain policy. The government in power during the period under review sought to distance itself from its predecessor's approach, in which "spin" was a prominently used tool, and Prime Minister Cameron also tried to avoid the appearance of centrally dictated government communication. This change of strategy made progress during the period. The recently renamed www.gov.uk website provides extensive information on government services and activities and has been redesigned to be more user friendly. The site is part of the Open Policy Making (OPM) initiative, which also includes a blog and novel approaches such as a "policy lab" that was launched in 2014. These are recent innovations that cannot yet be fairly appraised, but appear to represent a new means of enhancing communication.

An additional challenge for the government has been to communicate a common sense of purpose while retaining the distinct positions of the two parties forming the coalition. To some extent, the coalition partners have made public some of the internal policy disagreements, but it has been unclear whether this betrays a lack of coherence or simply a political desire to maintain their separate identities. Since the British public's expectation is that the government presents a unified position, going "off message" is still an easy way for politicians to put themselves into the spotlight; however, ministers tend to use off-the-record briefings. The government has occasionally suffered from this dissent with respect to the issue of European integration, but has so far managed to contain the damage.

Citation:

<https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/> is an open site with short articles on the OPM approach

Iceland

Score 7

The government of Iceland generally speaks with one voice. However, in the so-called West Nordic administrative tradition, where a minister is responsible for institutions subordinate to their ministry, every minister has the power to make decisions without consulting other ministers. Nevertheless, ministers rarely contradict one another and generally try to reach decisions through consensus.

However, the previous government proved to be an exception to this tradition. In late 2009, members of the Left-Green Movement parliamentary group, including government ministers, opposed measures brought before the parliament by the government. Later, three Left-Green Movement legislators withdrew from the governing party coalition. This brought the government close to the threshold of becoming a minority government and forced it to negotiate with the opposition on contentious issues. Jón Bjarnason, the Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture between 2009 and 2011, left the government in 2011 in opposition to Iceland's application to become a member of the EU. However, despite internal dissent, the previous government's coalition arrangement held together to the end of its mandated term.

Since the formation of the new government, comprised of the Progressive Party and the Independence Party, the situation has reverted to the traditional Nordic practice. Although, the leaders of the two coalition parties have issued several conflicting statements regarding, for example, the relaxation of capital controls.

Ireland

Score 7 Under the constitution, the government is required to act in a collective fashion and all ministers are collectively responsible for government decisions. This doctrine of collective cabinet responsibility is normally adhered to and creates a clear incentive to follow a closely coordinated communications strategy.

In some controversial policy areas, communication between ministries and between ministries and the government has lacked coherence. During the review period, contradictory views have been expressed concerning future policy in regard to health care, with inadequate coordination between the ministry and the government about what is planned and what is feasible in this area.

As previously discussed, the launch of the new water-services authority has been characterized by a serious lack of transparency and coherence.

Israel

Score 7 By law, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) supervises and coordinates activity between government ministries through a designated division. However, annual reports from the State Comptroller reveal major shortcomings in ministerial coordination, emphasizing the mutual tension and recrimination between ministries. Contradictory proclamations from different ministries are not uncommon, resulting from political power struggles within the coalition as well as from the treasury's stronghold on ministerial budgets and practices. In recent years, there has been a shift toward creating a more "open" government and improving the government's communications vis-a-vis the third sector and the public as well as within the government itself. The new emphasis on sharing and transparency has somewhat ameliorated the technical aspect of the divides, but its influence over communicating policy is still uncertain.

Citation:

Ravid, Barak and Lis, Jonathan, "After criticizing the government: Netanyahu fires deputy minister of security Danon", Haaretz 15.7.2014: <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politi/1.2377994> (Hebrew).

"Open government partnership: Progress report on action goals", Official state publication (October 2013) (Hebrew).

"Special report regarding the Mount Carmel Forest fire – December 2010 oversights, failures and conclusions," the state comptroller website 20.6.2012 (Hebrew)

“The governmental guide for sharing: A model for inter-ministerial cooperation”, Official state publication September 2013 (Hebrew).

“The Prime Ministers Division for Coordination follow up and Control,” PMO’s website

New Zealand

Score 7 The coherence of government communication strongly depends on the topic under consideration. All recent governments have been of the minority type, which has increased the chances of conflict between the governing party and its small support partners. This may include disagreement over what constitutes an electoral mandate, as well as accusations of broken promises when sacrifices have to be made during the course of the post-election negotiating process. Successive minority governments have freely acknowledged that tension is part and parcel of the governing process under a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system, with an “agree to disagree” clause being all that may separate the government from instability and collapse. That said, MMP governments have been remarkably stable, with only one early election (2002) since the advent of the proportional electoral system in 1996.

Citation:

Jonathan Boston, Innovative Political Management: Multi-party Governance in New Zealand. *Policy Quarterly* 5:2 (2009), 51-59.

Poland

Score 7 Ministry communication is coordinated by the Government Information Center, a department of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. However, ministers have occasionally voiced positions that differ from the government’s line. Moreover, the Government Information Center has failed to inform the citizens regularly or comprehensively about government activities.

Slovakia

Score 7 Learning from the mistakes of the Radičová government, Prime Minister Fico has put considerable emphasis on coherence in government communication. Capitalizing on his strong position in a single-party government, he has sought to control the messages of individual ministries. He has personally appeared frequently in the media, with a view to streamlining government communication.

Germany

Score 6 In a formal sense, the federal government's Press and Information Office is the focal point for communication, serving as the conduit for information originating from individual ministries, each of which organizes their own communication processes and strategies. However, this does not guarantee a coherent communication policy, which is a difficult goal for any coalition government. The persistent tendency of coalition partners to raise their own profile versus that of the other government parties explains what has sometimes appeared to be very dissonant communications policy. This became apparent during the processes involved with the partial realization of each governing party's pet policies laid out in the coalition agreement.

Italy

Score 6 Italian governments have in general coordinated communication rather weakly. Ministers and even undersecretaries have been able and willing to express their personal positions without coordinating their comments with the Prime Minister's Office. Under the Renzi government the prime minister himself (especially with the use of social media, such as Twitter) and his press office have largely overshadowed the government's other communication components. Instances of uncoordinated and contradictory communications have nonetheless taken place. This has mainly to do with the fact that information from the presidency has often anticipated the political relevance and details of measures still undergoing finalization within their respective ministries. As a result, the communicated finalized policy often differs from that policy communicated earlier by the presidency. This has required corrections in communication and has sometimes given the impression that certain government policies are not sufficiently well thought out.

Japan

Score 6 Policy communication has always been a priority for Japanese governments. Ministries and other governmental agencies have long taken pains to publish regular reports, often called white papers, as well as other materials on their work.

Recent discussion of Japanese government communication has been dominated by the triple disaster of March 2011, in particular by the lack of transparency and failure to deliver timely public information about the radiation risks of the nuclear accident. This experience may have seriously undermined citizen trust in the government, and its long-run consequences remain difficult to ascertain.

The LDP-led coalition started into 2013 with a massive and – during its first months – highly successful public-relations campaign in support of its policy agenda, particularly its “three arrows” reform agenda. This included the carefully planned timing of announcements, trips and interviews; resulting in high approval ratings. Already in 2013, however, the government started to lose touch with public opinion,

particularly with respect to the heavily criticized State Secrets Act. Later on, the stronger than expected negative effects of the value-added tax increase and low wage increases further contradicted earlier government claims. Large segments of the public were also skeptical of Prime Minister's Abe claim that the government needed a new mandate for its "Abenomics" program and for the postponement of a planned further increase of the value-added tax. In the absence of convincing alternatives, voters nevertheless confirmed the ruling coalition in the December 2014 general elections.

Citation:

Jochen Legewie, First cracks appear in Abe's PR campaign, *The Japan Times*, 08.02.2014, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2014/02/08/commentary/first-cracks-appear-in-abes-pr-campaign/#.VFfe55Mk-etF>

Lithuania

Score 6

The political fragmentation associated with Lithuania's ruling coalitions has made it difficult to formulate and implement an effective government communications policy. Line ministries and other state institutions are responsible for communicating with the public within their individual areas of competence; however, the Communications Department of the Government Office coordinates these activities and provides the public with information about the government's performance.

On the whole, the government lacks a coherent communication policy. Contradictory statements are rare but do occur to varying degrees depending on the particular government. Although the Butkevičius government announced that it would pursue a whole-of-government approach to public policy and management, the implications of this goal in terms of coherent communications had not been addressed at the time of writing. Moreover, Prime Minister Butkevičius has himself publicly made contradictory statements on such politically important issues as tax reform or the future of nuclear power in Lithuania, probably reflecting the diversity of opinions within his party and the ruling coalition, as well as changing political circumstances.

Mexico

Score 6

Any assessment of President Peña Nieto's communication style is necessarily provisional, as he has been in power only since December 2012. Some indications are positive, although polls show that the government is not especially popular despite low inflation and an effective legislative program. This suggests some problems with communication skills. Communication performances under recent administrations have been mixed. Former President Fox had remarkable public-relations talent, but not much grasp of policy detail. For example, the president and the Finance Ministry occasionally provided conflicting economic forecasts. Under former President Calderón, there was marked enhancement in the general quality of

official communication, but Calderón had less feel for the news. He certainly ran a much tighter ship, with a clearer government line, but there were sometimes communication problems between the security sectors. Various agencies, including the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Defense and the Attorney General, competed with each other to take the lead in fighting the drug cartels.

South Korea

Score 6 The government seeks to coordinate communication between ministries, but contradictions between government agency statements occasionally happen. Bureaucratic politics and turf rivalry take place at various levels of policy-making and communication, but contradictions among ministries can be generally mediated by the Blue House and prime minister's office.

Citation:
JoongAng Daily 12 April 2010

Spain

Score 6 The government tries to speak with one voice. A communication office (Secretaría de Estado de Comunicación) exists within the Government Office (Ministerio de la Presidencia, GO), led by Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, who also serves as the government's spokesperson. The communication office is responsible for coordinating all the government's information policy both internally (through a consultation procedure with the ministries, and by providing a press service for the entire public administration) and also externally (by informing the mass media of the government's activities, planning the political messages sent to the public and controlling institutional communication campaigns). The communication office and the spokesperson try to conduct coherent communication planning and ministries tend to align their statements and press releases with government strategy. Since the Popular Party took office in 2012, and the role of coordinating ministries' messages was returned to a deputy prime minister who also leads the GO, communication coherence has improved. Contradictions do occur from time to time, but most messages are factually coherent with the government's plans. The main problem concerning communication, is the growing distance between the government and citizens, including those who voted for the PP in the last general elections but do not understand many of the measures undertaken since then (in particular, some austerity measures or tax increases).

Turkey

Score 6 In spite of its centralized and hierarchical structure, Turkey’s executive is far from being monolithic and or able to speak with a single voice. For example, a spokesman for the Council of Ministers issues public declarations on behalf of the council, while a separate spokesman’s office represents the prime minister. Following former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s election to the presidency, and the fall 2014 accession of new Prime Minister (former Minister of Foreign Affairs) Ahmet Davutoğlu’s government, three different major sources of public communications were evident – president, prime minister and the ministers’ council. This has increased the need for a coordinated communications policy.

Citation:

Utku Çakırözer, AKP’den İki Farklı Ses, Cumhuriyet dailynewspaper, 7 November 2013, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/6855/AKP_den_iki_Farkli_Ses.html (accessed 5 November 2014).

Burcu Yiğiter (2014), What will be the European Union’s Next Move toward Presumed Polarization and Intolerance in Turkish Society?, Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University, http://eu.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2014/07/25/burcu%20yigiter_.pdf (accessed 15 December 2014).

Austria

Score 5 The cabinet uses occasional, informal policy-coordination meetings to define the general direction of government policies. Following such meetings, the government holds press conferences to provide the public with information about what has been decided. These are typically led by the chancellor and the vice-chancellor, representing the two government coalition parties.

Government communication is overwhelmingly dominated by the individual ministries. This communication is usually also seen as an instrument for the promotion of one of the coalition parties’ agendas (and of the specific minister belonging to this party), rather than the agenda of the government as such.

An interesting example of communication deficits could be observed in 2014: The cabinet (in particular the ministers for European and international affairs and integration) drafted a bill regarding the legal status of Austria’s Islamic community. What could have been seen as an attempt to improve the legal standing of a rather fast-growing minority was instead understood by the Islamic community as an attempt to isolate and treat their community according to different standards. As a result, the draft was criticized by the Islamic community immediately once it became known.

Belgium

Score 5 Most of the time throughout the period under review, the federal government led by Prime Minister Di Rupo managed to maintain coherent communications and avoid ministers sending contradictory signals to the public, even though political parties

came from different ideological backgrounds in a broad government coalition. The new federal government (Michel I) faces more difficulties in terms of coherent political communication, given the less-disciplined profile of the Flemish nationalist party, the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), which often pursues its own autonomous communication strategy which involves propagating a “media buzz.”

A major weakness of the Belgian political landscape is that politicians compete for votes only within their own (linguistic) community. This means that communication is then geared to address a specific community, depending on the “linguistic identity” of each minister. This may lead to situations in which a certain topic of federal interest is widely debated in one part of the country and widely ignored in the other, or is framed differently depending on the individual (linguistic) communities.

Citation:

<http://www.levif.be/actualite/belgique/michel-ier-risque-fort-de-rester-dans-l-histoire-comme-le-gouvernement-de-la-zizanie/article-opinion-365977.html>

Estonia

Score 5

Ministries in Estonia’s government have remarkable power and autonomy. Therefore, ministers belonging to different political parties in the coalition government sometimes make statements that are not in line with other ministries or with the general position of the government.

Portugal

Score 5

The government continues to find it difficult to present an effective and coherent communication strategy. Shortly before the period here under analysis, there was a change in the government department in charge of communication. The new minister – who took office in April 2013 – initially established a new model of communication, based on daily (later revised to biweekly) media briefings that began on 1 July 2013. While aiming to improve the coherency of communication, these proved short-lived, ending in September 2013. A tabloid newspaper report claimed that the decision to end these sessions was made by the prime minister, who reportedly thought this model generated “confusion.”

Since that time, the government has adopted a less formally structured communication model. However, this has not prevented communication from slipping into ineffective and incoherent patterns. One of the most salient cases in this regard was a briefing carried out by a junior minister of the Ministry of Finance in March 2014, which informed journalists that the government was planning cuts in pensions. When reports of these cuts emerged in the media, the prime minister denied the information, claiming that the reports had been no more than journalistic

speculation. When it was confirmed that the source for the news reports was a member of the government, the government stated that the information had been released by mistake, and all senior ministers – including the prime minister, the vice prime minister and the minister in charge of communications – all stated they were not aware that this briefing would take place.

At the same time, it appears that the difficulties in achieving an effective and coherent communication reflect the government's difficulties in terms of strategic capacity and interministerial coordination noted earlier in the report, rather than a failure in communication per se.

Citation:

Correio da Manhã, "Passos acaba com os briefings," 29.08.2013, available online at: <http://www.cmjornal.xl.pt/nacional/politica/detalhe/passos-acaba-com-os-briefings.html>

Bulgaria

Score 4

The coherence of government communication in Bulgaria is relatively low. The communication activities of the various ministries are not centrally coordinated, so it is easy for the media to identify inconsistencies and contradictions in the information and positions of different ministries. Inasmuch as there is coordination between different messages, it is accomplished mostly through the political cabinets and the public-relations experts of the ministries rather than as a matter of formalized administrative communication-coordination procedure. The 2013 – 2014 coalition government became notorious for attempts to hide its real agenda behind various public announcements, the most well-known example being its communication with the public regarding the South Stream gas-pipeline project.

Croatia

Score 4

Under the Milanović government, contradictory statements by different ministries have increased, and the government has done little to streamline its communication policy.

Czech Republic

Score 4

In 2009, a central Government Information Center was established with a view to improve communication within state administration and with the public. However, the Nečas and Sobotka governments, both composed of multiple parties, have largely failed to coordinate communication among different ministries. Coalition partners have been more than willing to express their different preferences and priorities, sharing these through the media. On a number of occasions, the general acceptance

of government measures by the public has suffered as a result of contradictory statements about legislation from coalition partners.

Malta

- Score 4 The official role of the government's Department of Information is to provide the public with information on government policies and plans. But this department has degenerated into a tool instead for defending government plans and policies, with a partisan slant. Ministries have come to employ their own communication officers instead, rarely consulting this central office; hence responsibility for informing the public has devolved on individual ministries. Yet as these offices do not have the resources needed to carry out this task properly, individual ministries occasionally engage public relations companies. Yet this too is often just a simple public relations exercise, and the government message may not always be factually correct or reflect the intentions behind government plans; too often the information released is of a superficial nature.

Romania

- Score 4 As the breakdown of Romania's Social-Liberal governing alliance in February 2014 underlined, the Ponta government has been only partially successful in its attempts to coordinate communication across ministries. Romanian media organizations have repeatedly reported contradictory statements issued by various ministers and the prime minister, undermining the coherence of the government's message.

Slovenia

- Score 4 The Bratušek government, like its predecessors, failed to achieve coherent communication with the public due to the prime minister's inability or unwillingness to control her various coalition partners. Only six of 14 ministers were affiliated with Prime Minister Bratušek's Positive Slovenia party, and her attempts to impose some discipline on her coalition partners through frequent coalition meetings were only partially successful.

Cyprus

- Score 3 The government's communications are channeled through the Press and Information Office, a department of the Ministry of Interior that hosts and offers logistical support to the government spokesperson. Liaison press officers are dispatched to line

ministries. Longstanding problems of coherent communication or conflicting statements have persisted to some extent, but the current government has performed much better in this regard than its predecessor. During the review period, the president of the republic made public announcements with more frequency than in previous years, as he took on a key role in presenting and explaining government decisions and policies. Individual ministers also frequently announce plans and measures on various matters.

France

Score 3

Government policy communication is usually subject to centralized control by the executive branch. One of the preoccupations of the executive branch as part of the Fifth Republic is to avoid disagreement or contradiction within the ministerial team, even when coalition governments are in power. There have been situations in which ministers expressing divergent views in the media have been forced to resign. Under the Hollande administration, the executive branch gave initially more leeway in this regard, as Hollande appears to prefer addressing differing views internally rather than have these differences of opinion be subject to external criticism. However in September 2014, the newly appointed prime minister made clear that he would not accept such public displays of dissent anymore, forcing the president to push out his dissenters.

The key problems with policy communication in France have come about as a result of the president and his administration's lack of strategic and decision-making clarity. For example, many of the choices made by President Hollande have not been in line with his campaign pledges (and thus with his party as well as voters' expectations). A poor communication of his budget-tightening measures has led to much public criticism. A succession of badly managed issues has had tremendous negative effects on policy credibility. In spite of repeated changes in the president's communication team, little progress has been made. There has never been such an unpopular president who has done so little in terms of introducing structural reforms. This rather paradoxical situation can be explained, at least partially, by the awkward style and confusion found in the executive branch's policy communication.

Greece

Score 3

Greece's improved fiscal status – manifest in the budget surplus for 2013 and 2014 – prompted the government to prematurely communicate optimism in the summer of 2014 that the country had successfully turned the corner in overcoming the economic crisis.

However, by October 2014 it became clear that international capital markets were still a danger for the Greek economy, as the spreads on Greek state bonds were

forbiddingly high. Greece needed and will continue to need an extension of credit from the Troika.

With the exception of the aforementioned overoptimistic message, individual ministries did not contradict each other in their public communication, as they worked under the close oversight of the PMO and Ministry of Finance, which has improved in recent years. The contradiction lied elsewhere: despite the obviously frail state of the economy, the sensationalist press, the extreme right (i.e., the Golden Dawn party) and segments of the left continued to communicate to the public the unrealistic prospect of reversing most, if not all, post-2010 policies after a change of government.

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Contact:

Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
33311 Gütersloh

Dr. Daniel Schraad-Tischler
daniel.schraad-tischler@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Dr. Christian Kroll
christian.kroll@bertelsmann-stiftung.de