



# Policy Communication Report

Coherent Communication

Sustainable Governance  
Indicators 2022

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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 = Ministries are highly successful in aligning their communication with government strategy.
- 8-6 = Ministries most of the time are highly successful in aligning their communication with government strategy.
- 5-3 = Ministries occasionally issue public statements that contradict the public communication of other ministries or the government strategy.
- 2-1 = Strategic communication planning does not exist; individual ministry statements regularly contradict each other. Messages are often not factually consistent with the government's strategy.

### Canada

Score 9

The Liberal government's communication policies are more open than those of its Conservative predecessors. Ministers are responsible for coordinating communications between their departments, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the Privy Council Office (PCO). However, the Prime Minister's Office has not fully relinquished its control over ministers and departments. The PMO's objective is still to deliver coherent messages to the public. The prime minister conducted regular televised briefings during the pandemic.

Both the PCO and PMO are typically highly successful in coordinating communication from all departments – both from a political and administrative perspective. This was particularly borne out during the pandemic when messaging around health and safety measures, as well as around government programming was critical.

### Sweden

Score 9

Improved communications dovetails with increasing coordination among the government departments. Recently, 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. It implies that cabinet ministers carefully

assess invitations from radio and television 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; indeed, in some ways it may even have been too successful. The media have cited increasing problems in accessing ministers and other representatives of the governing parties. This has the potential to harm the production of knowledge and undermine scrutiny of the public sector. There is also increasing frustration with the GO'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 (Dahlström, Pierre, and Peters, 2011; Erlandsson, 2008; Jacobsson, Pierre, and Sundström, 2015).

In terms of multilevel governance, municipalities often express their frustration with public agencies regarding a one-way communication flow, in which they are expected to provide information upward, but relatively little information trickles downward, and not in a timely fashion. In the context of the pandemic response, municipalities pointed out that they were often not given sufficient advanced warning regarding upcoming contagion mitigation measures (Sparf et al., 2021).

Citation:

Dahlström, Carl, Jon Pierre and B. Guy Peters. (eds.) 2011. "Steering from the Center." Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Erlandsson, Magnus. 2008. "Regeringskansliet och Medierna. Den Politiska Exekutivens Resurser och Strategier för att Hantera och Styra Massmedier." *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift*. 110: 335-49.

Jacobsson, Bengt, Jon Pierre and Göran Sundström. 2015. "Governing the Embedded State." Oxford University Press.

Sparf, Jörgen, Evangelia Petridou, Mikael Granberg, and Beatrice Onn. 2021. "Kommunal Organisering av Pandemirespons: En Realstudie av Lokal Resiliens." MSB: 1792. <https://rib.msb.se/filer/pdf/29736.pdf>

## Australia

### Score 8

Australian governments have traditionally made considerable efforts to align their policy priorities with the messages that they communicate to the public. A number of factors have helped in these efforts: a tradition of very strong discipline across all the major political parties (perhaps the strongest among the Westminster democracies); a tradition of suppressing dissent within the parties (often by the threat of deselection at the next election); strong adherence to the Westminster doctrine of collective cabinet responsibility; and an activist mass media and political opposition that seeks to exploit any apparent policy divisions within the government.

Governments were relatively unstable between 2007 and the onset of the pandemic, rendering coherent policy communication more difficult. In a range of policy fields

(e.g., economic policy, foreign policy and climate change policy), governments have been unable to publicly communicate a coherent policy agenda. However, since the arrival of the pandemic, the Morrison government has been able to return to the previous more coherent communication policy pattern.

Citation:

<http://theconversation.com/is-the-morrison-government-authoritarian-populist-with-a-punitive-bent-126032>

## Denmark

Score 8

Effective communication is increasingly important for policymakers, and communication strategies and media attention have become important aspects of politics, and political survival depends on efficient communication. The PMO plays an important role in communication, but many ministries have upgraded and employ 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.

The nature of coalition governments, which are typical in Denmark, can occasionally 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*. 4. udg., 2017.

## Ireland

Score 8

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, as well as between ministries and the government has lacked coherence. Statements regarding healthcare and housing, to give two examples, continue to lack clarity and consistency, with inadequate coordination between the ministry and the government about what is planned and feasible in these areas.

The creation of Irish Water was characterized by a serious lack of transparency and coherence. The government's attempt to remove Irish Water from the general

government sector and have it treated as a commercial state-owned body in the national income accounts was dismissed by a judgment from Eurostat in 2015: “Eurostat considers that Irish Water is a non-market entity controlled by government and should therefore be classified within the government sector.” In 2017, domestic water charges payable to Irish Water were abolished and money already paid to Irish Water was repaid.

The government’s communication with the public throughout the COVID-19 pandemic was widely perceived to have been successful and one of the reasons Ireland managed the crisis comparatively well (Colfer and O’ Brennan, 2021).

Citation:

Colfer and O’ Brennan (2021)

The complex details of the treatment of Irish Water in the national income accounts were discussed in an exchange of views between the Irish Central Statistics Office and Eurostat: see <http://www.cso.ie/en/surveysandmethodology/nationalaccounts/classificationdecisions/classificationofirishwater/>

## Latvia

### Score 8

In the spring of 2020, the State Chancellery established a Strategic Communication Coordination Department with a mandate to implement and promote the development and coordination of strategic communication capabilities in the public administration.

Coordination of messages is ensured in several ways. First, a meeting led by the State Chancellery takes place weekly, with the heads of communication for the structural units of the ministries participating. This addresses the topical issues of the week. Both ministers and ministerial spokespeople have been participating since January 2022. Second, a Digital Information Space Security Working Group has been established, which meets with institutions responsible for specific subject areas at least once a quarter under the leadership of the State Chancellery to discuss issues. Third, the State Chancellery compiles and disseminates common messages and talking points after government meetings and Crisis Management Council meetings (for COVID-19). Fourth, the State Chancellery not only coordinates and organizes press conferences after weekly government meetings, but also plans and coordinates the organization of interdepartmental press conferences in cases where planned policies are likely to have significant impact on the daily life of the general population (e.g., COVID-19 lockdowns). And fifth, the State Chancellery chairs the monthly Government Communication Coordination Council, which includes the heads of the ministries’ communication units.

The Strategic Communication Coordination Department of the State Chancellery has also established an information monitoring and analysis system. In 2020-2021, this resulted in the production of more than 480 monitoring reports on topics including COVID-19 and vaccination, the hybrid attack on Belarus at the EU’s borders,

misinformation, education, the formation of the state budget, and weekly reports. These included recommended actions, and were distributed to ministries.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the State Chancellery has since March 2020 operated a one-stop website and telephone hotline that provide all current information on COVID-19 issues in Latvian, Russian and English. The “one-stop-shop” principle allows citizens to receive all relevant information in one place, in a coordinated way, instead of conducting individual searches on the websites of each ministry and institution.

Finally, the Strategic Communication Coordination Department conducts regular research on public sentiment and attitudes, including COVID-19 issues. In 2020-2021 a total of 13 studies were conducted (nine of them in 2021). The results are regularly presented to ministerial spokespeople, as well as to the Crisis Management Group (Operational Steering Group or OVG) led by the State Chancellery, which makes decisions on COVID-19 issues in the country. Thus, communication aspects and public attitudes are taken into account in the coordination of issues between ministries, and in policy-planning and decision-making processes more generally.

Citation:

1. Cabinet of Ministers (2020) Regulations of the State Chancellery, Available at: <https://www.mk.gov.lv/valsts-kancelejas-reglaments>, Last accessed: 10.01.2022.

## Luxembourg

### Score 8

Political communication in Luxembourg is carried out at several levels (local, national, state, European), and through several channels and tools, including direct communication (press briefings, statements, public debates, meetings with citizens), and indirect communication (websites, press articles, reports, interviews to mass media). In recent years, the use of social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) has significantly expanded.

Press briefings have traditionally been the government’s main method of communicating. Following the Council of Ministers meetings on Fridays, the prime minister holds a weekly public press conference (which is broadcast live on the YouTube channel of the government) intended to communicate the body’s work. Press conferences are also regularly held by ministries, public administrations, government agencies and associations. All ministries have communication services with official press officers (spokespersons), but in most cases it is the ministers themselves who directly give statements to journalists. Government members are encouraged not to voice disagreement in public, so as to give the impression of unanimous decision-making. Reporting directly to the prime minister, the state Press and Information Service (SIP) works to coordinate a coherent and wide-ranging government communication policy.

As part of the Ministry of State, the Department of Media, Connectivity and Digital Policy supports the development of a diverse media landscape, and is in charge of electronic communications and the postal service, and oversees data protection issues.

Every year, the prime minister delivers the State of the Nation speech to the Chamber of Deputies. This constitutes the government's declaration regarding the economic, social and financial situation in the country. All ministries (including the state minister) release annual reports that are also published on their own websites.

Citation:

The Luxembourg Government. <https://gouvernement.lu/en.html>. Accessed 14 January 2022.

The Luxembourg Government. Information and Presse Service (SIP). <https://sip.gouvernement.lu/en.html>. Accessed 14 January 2022.

"State of the Nation 2021." Xavier Bettel (12 October 2021). [https://gouvernement.lu/en/gouvernement/xavier-bettel/actualites.gouvernement%2Ben%2Bactualites%2Btoutes\\_actualites%2Bdiscours%2B2021%2B10-octobre%2B12-etat-de-la-nation.html](https://gouvernement.lu/en/gouvernement/xavier-bettel/actualites.gouvernement%2Ben%2Bactualites%2Btoutes_actualites%2Bdiscours%2B2021%2B10-octobre%2B12-etat-de-la-nation.html). Accessed 14 January 2022.

## Norway

Score 8

There is a long tradition of coalition governments in Norway. The present government, elected in 2021, is a center-left coalition holding a minority in the parliament. 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 acting coherently, and going to great lengths to avoid airing disagreements in public, at least on key priorities. It is also common for ministries to offer their opinion on issues – sometimes publicly – which allows for the demonstration of differences of opinion across ministries regarding problems and their solutions. Communication of government policies is often dealt with by the line or sectoral ministry responsible for the issue at stake.

## Switzerland

Score 8

Government communications have professionalized in recent years. In the 1940s and 1950s, the chancellor (and thus the government spokesman) used to tack a note "There is nothing to report from today's Federal Council meeting" on a blackboard. By 1997, a new law states that the Federal Council "shall report to the public in a timely and comprehensive manner on its activities" (Vatter 2020: 271-280).

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 to 2007 period, when the Swiss People's Party's (SVP) Christoph Blocher participated in government, communication was less coherent than before and afterward, and the country's politics shifted, taking a more populist, aggressive and confrontational tack. 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. The government includes two SVP members who have little incentive to increase communication coherence. The following factors have contributed to this decline in the coherence of government policy communications:

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

Having said this, it needs to be emphasized that in international comparison (e.g., in comparison with the German or Austrian federal governments) Switzerland's federal ministries are most of the time highly successful in aligning their communication with government strategy.

Overall, as digital transformation proceeds, government communication is increasingly influenced by and conducted through various media forms, including social media.

Citation:

Hinterleitner, M. & Sager, F. (2019). „Krisenmanagement und Risikovermeidung“, in *Blackbox Exekutive*. Eds. A. Ritz, T. Haldemann & F. Sager. 409-427. Zürich. NZZ Libro.

Raupp, Juliana and Jan Niklas Kocks (2019): *Regierungskommunikation*, in: Ritz, Adrian, Theo Haldemann and Fritz Sager (eds.): *Blackbox Exekutive. Regierungslehre in der Schweiz*, Zürich, NZZ Libro, 373-388.

Vatter, Adrian 2020: *Der Bundesrat. Die Schweizer Regierung*. Zürich: NZZ

## United States

Score 8

Under normal conditions, politically appointed leadership in every agency means that executive agencies and departments will typically have coordinated their messages with those responsible for the White House communications strategy. Agency press releases and statements on politically salient matters are often cleared with the White House and will be planned for consistency with the president's priorities and political strategy.

During the Trump presidency, the White House press office was heavily engaged in defending or obscuring Trump's many false claims and inconsistent positions. The Washington Post has counted more than 30,000 false or misleading claims (including repetitions) during Trump's four years in office.

The Biden administration has repudiated Trump's communication and policymaking style and has embraced a return to a more traditional approach similar to the one witnessed during the Obama years. This attempt to "return to normalcy" in public communication is a central characteristic of the Biden administration.

## Finland

### Score 7

Since the prime minister's position 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 a tradition of broad-based umbrella coalitions that accommodate diverse interests and ideological shadings serves to diversify communication. This was true of communications from the Sipilä government, which were notably vague and often undecided, reflecting tensions or even conflicts between the Finns Party and the other government parties. The first months of the Rinne government, which was ideologically broader than the Sipilä government, revealed internal disagreements between the coalition partners with respect to a number of policy areas. The existence of an agreed-upon and fairly detailed government plan in principle serves to streamline communications. However, the Sipilä government demonstrated that the plan can be interpreted in different ways by different parties, and the same conclusion seemed appropriate for the Rinne government. At the end of 2019, Rinne resigned as prime minister and was replaced by Sanna Marin, who has been highly successful in aligning her communication with government strategy.

As infection rates rose again, the government reintroduced the state of emergency in March 2021, along with fairly strict lockdown measures in the most affected areas. In addition, the government took the contentious decision to concentrate all communication activities in the Prime Minister's Office under the Emergency Powers Act.

The government tried to pass laws containing even stricter restrictions, but was forced to back down after the parliament's Constitutional Law Committee criticized the proposal. The incident made clear that the government lacked sufficient legislative tools to contain the epidemic. Furthermore, municipal elections were postponed from mid-April to June at the last minute, exposing weaknesses in pandemic preparations.

A third controversial item of public discussion concerned the prioritization of vaccinations in the most affected areas. The question became politically contentious, and the government was not able to implement the decision early enough to reduce hospitalizations and mortality.

## France

### Score 7

Government policy communication is usually subject to centralized control by the executive branch. One of the preoccupations of the executive 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.

Hollande's government communication was poor and messy. In contrast, Macron has defined a new strategy: precise indications about his program during the presidential campaign, a commitment to implement these policy measures fully and speedily, and strict control over communication by the Élysée staff. This has conferred a significantly higher degree of coherence on governmental communication. However, due to a lack of coordination between ministers, the presidential services and the political movement which supports Macron (the REM), this communication policy has displayed flaws in practice, triggering changes in the organization of the Élysée communication unit. Macron's distrust of the media has not helped, and the relationship between the media and the President's Office is far from optimal. The result is a highly critical press, which tends to compete with social networks, and which has prioritized form and style over substance. As communication is highly centralized and technocratic ministers are often unskilled in advocating for their policies in the public sphere, the capacity of the executive to communicate with the public has been rather poor. In addition, the public's overall distrust of political elites makes official communication extremely difficult. The problem is further aggravated by the proliferation of fake news on social networks.

## Israel

### Score 7

In recent years, there has been a shift toward creating a more "open" government and improving the government's communications. Nevertheless, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Israel failed to implement a consistent and proactive crisis communication plan. The agencies responsible for communicating policy measures were uncoordinated and biased, their efforts were often met with suspicion and confusion, and the legitimacy of the measures was questioned.

According to a report issued by the State Comptroller, the government response to the need to provide information regarding the COVID-19 crisis and methods to deal with it differed from the Plan for National communication in a Civilian Emergency.

Important positions in the communication array established in the Prime Minister's Office according to a 2007 government resolution were not filled at the time of the outbreak. Therefore, the array did not operate as planned. In addition, the Ministry of Health, which was required to lead government communication efforts, lacked the requisite infrastructure and professional tools. These were supplemented during the crisis, at a time when infection rates were rising, without taking into account the preparations made and resources already invested in the years preceding the crisis (State Comptroller and Ombudsman 2021).

Israel lacks a body specifically designed to handle public communications. The figures most prevalently identified with the responses and restrictions were, by large, politicians (Gesser-Edelsburg et al. 2020). The lack of such a body led governmental agencies to fulfill this role (Shtreckman 2020), although these agencies were neither designed nor had the professional staff to do so. As a result, government communications suffered from delays in providing information, which led to confusion and public frustration (Carol 2020). In the initial stages of the pandemic, the Ministry of Health launched a Telegram channel to provide data about the pandemic's situation, and the ministry's assessments and guidelines. The ministry also published a public dashboard with information about the spread of the pandemic. However, various governmental agencies have held different sets of data on the spread of the virus, and their policy recommendations and communication varied significantly (Efrat, 2020). The absence of a single, seemingly unbiased, broadly agreed, authoritative, source has not helped to gain the public's trust in the measures taken (Knesset News, 2020).

Citation:

State Comptroller and Ombudsman (2021), "The State of Israel Response to the Covid-19 Crisis." Retrieved from: <https://www.mevaker.gov.il/sites/DigitalLibrary/Documents/2021/COVID-19/2021-COVID-19-001-EN.pdf>

Efrat, Boaz. 2020. "Three agencies, zero transparency: Covid-19's data debacle of the Ministry of Health." Walla News, June 21, 2020 (Hebrew). <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3368464>.

Gesser-Edelsburg A, Cohen R, Hijazi R, Abed Elhadi Shahbari N. 2020. "Analysis of Public Perception of the Israeli Government's Early Emergency Instructions Regarding COVID-19: Online Survey Study." J Med Internet Res, vol 22, No 5 (2020), May 15, 2020. <https://www.jmir.org/2020/5/e19370/>.

Shtreckman, Rotem. 2020. "Israel's communication efforts caught Covid-19." The Marker, March 14, 2020 (Hebrew). <https://www.themarker.com/allnews/premium-1.8674539>.

Carol, Maya. 2020. "'The chaos in public Information': Why do we still not understand the corona guidelines?." Shakuf, November 11, 2020 (Hebrew). <https://shkifut.info/2020/11/hasbara/>.

Carol, Maya. 2020. "Transparency instead of threats: This is how the fight against Corona should be conducted." Shakuf, August 20, 2020 (Hebrew). <https://shkifut.info/2020/08/corona1/>.

The Knesset Website. 2020. "Public Information in the Corona Crisis: The National Security Council has withdrawn its hands; the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Defense have not yet completed the establishment of a coordinated system" (Hebrew). Retrieved from <https://main.knesset.gov.il/News/PressReleases/Pages/press14092020C.aspx>

## Malta

**Score 7** The Labor Party, now in government since 2013, has been credited with strong communication strategies under the present leadership, particularly during election campaigns. Once in government it initially adopted normal channels, including the Department of Information, which is the state's primary communication channel, as well as individual ministerial communication channels. However, the run-up to the 2017 EU presidency helped refine the party refine its communication strategy and tools, and it today has a broad strategy which includes an e-government service. Ministers give daily briefings when launching policies and projects. These are normally associated with campaigns that include social media. Overall, this strategy seems to be working well, with the government enjoying unprecedented levels of trust compared to the EU average, though trust ratings dipped slightly in 2019 – to 58% compared to 63% in 2018.

Citation:

How the Maltese government spend over 2.5 million in social media ads. Malta Today 07/11/17

Times of Malta 06/11/18 MFSA spends €210,000 for communications advice

<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/trust-in-malta-government-is-highest-in-the-eu-survey.697362>

<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2019-08-06/local-news/Eurobarometer-58-of-Maltese-trust-the-government-6736211853>

<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2018-12-22/local-news/63-of-Maltese-trust-government-Eurobarometer-6736201196>

Euro -barometer trust ratings 2019

Malta Today 14/02/2022 GWU suspends chief editor Victor Vella

## Mexico

**Score 7** The communication performance of the current administration is based on the communication skills of the new president. As a populist, AMLO relies heavily on public communication. The daily press conferences at 7 a.m. are not addressed to the press, but are rather a means of directly communicating with the public. So far, no other politician or ministry has engaged in strategic communication, and major contradictions in government communications have not occurred. In some senses, this personalistic style has led to a highly coherent government communication style. At the same time, this seems to be an unsustainable strategy in a complex policy environment where communication ultimately needs to respond to complex issues in ways that go beyond populist rhetoric.

## Netherlands

**Score 7** The Informatie Rijksoverheid service responds to frequently asked questions by citizens over the internet, telephone and email. In the age of “mediacracy,” the government has sought to make policy communication more coherent, relying on the National Information Service (Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst, RVD), which is formally a part of the prime minister's Department for General Affairs, and whose Director

General is present at Council of Ministers meetings and is responsible for communicating policies and the prime minister's affairs to the media. The government has streamlined and coordinated its external communications at the line-ministry level.

Another effort to engage in centralized, coherent communication has involved replacing departmentally run televised information campaigns with a unified, thematic approach (e.g., safety). 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 emotions and needs of their families. Another example is the long series of press conferences by the prime minister and the minister of public health during the coronavirus crisis, which were still being held as of the time of writing (January 2022).

The continuous technological innovation in information and communication technologies has led policy communication to adapt to the new possibilities. New developments are focused on responding more directly to citizen questions, exploring new modes of behavioral change, and utilizing internet-based citizen participation and communication channels in policymaking. Moreover, algorithms are being used by the tax agencies, and in the delivery of public services to citizens. For example, in 2011 the Dutch government decided to participate in the global Open Government Partnership. But in 2017 the Dutch government was criticized for structurally misleading and insufficient communication on issues of animal disease and food safety due to prioritizing agricultural interests over public health. In the coronavirus crisis, priorities were turned around, with public health issues taking priority over economic, social and cultural dimensions. In general, government communication occurs in an increasingly challenging media environment in which competition, polarization, trolling and “fake news” represent major challenges. In 2019, in response to repeated criticism that the language used in official communications was unclear, the government decided to create an “Instant Clarity Brigade” (Direct Duidelijk Brigade) to assist departmental policymakers in writing more understandable proposals, rules and decrees (Jip-en-Janneke taal). Considerable criticism was voiced about the increasing and abundant use of communication experts – estimates ran as high as 800 such experts in 2020 – in government, compared to the ongoing loss of expertise in the civil service and the insufficient use of experts in (government-sponsored) think tanks. In journalistic and academic circles, the feeling was that the thin line between government communication and information and propaganda defending government policies is becoming more and more blurred.

In 2020-21, policy communication had only one focus: coronavirus crisis management. The Dutch communication experts followed a complex strategy of communication. One theme was shifting between two communicative registers: that

of communicating order in the crisis through informing and instructing, based on expert knowledge; and another that focused on showing empathy with those nudged into compliance, with this taking place through listening, interpreting and narrating. A second theme was openness about the government's "dilemma" logic – that is, sharing with the public the government's efforts to balance often contradictory considerations and assumptions in its policy decisions. The major contradiction here was between the public health considerations and the values of the medical profession advocates and the values predicated on economic, social, cultural and psychic well-being held by those who advocated putting a higher priority on keeping the economy and society running. After initial successes and a rally-around-the-flag effect, the strategy gradually fell apart, as it ran up against the public's tolerance for sustained uncertainty associated with "broken promises" and repeated delays of a clear exit. The clarity of policy communication also declined due to the political competition in the March 2021 election campaign; not to mention strong polarization later in the pandemic around stricter measures (evening/night curfew, strict lockdown periods) and stronger efforts to persuade people to comply with recommendations (for vaccination, use of a coronavirus pass as condition for access to hospitality sector establishments and larger cultural and sports events). The polarization went beyond the logic of crisis management itself, and became highly political when stricter measures and nudges were interpreted as anti-constitutional and as infringing on personal and civic liberties.

Citation:

G. Rijnja and M. Bakker, Reikende handen: communiceren in ongewisse tijden, in: V. Wijkheid and M. van Duin, eds., 2021. *Lessen uit de coronacrisis: het jaar 2020*, Den Haag: Boom Bestuurskunde, 217-231

Trouw, Omtzigt, October 8, 2021. Stop liever geld in doordacht beleid dan een leger aan voorlichter.

Nationale Ombudsman, 5 April 2016. Het verdwijnen van de blauwe envelop. Een onderzoek naar de digitalisering van het berichtenverkeer met de Belastingdienst. (zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl, accessed 8 November 2019)

overheidsexpertise.nl/communicatie (overheidsexpertise.nl, accessed 8 November 2019)

NRC Next, 24 October 2019. De Direct Duidelijk Brigade moet teksten overheid weer begrijpelijk maken.

## New Zealand

### Score 7

New Zealand has a tradition of highly coherent and cohesive cabinets. While the previous government (2017-2020) – a minority coalition formed by Labour and New Zealand First, and supported by the Green Party – struggled to communicate a coherent policy program during the first few months of its term, the current Labour-Green coalition has communicated a more unified position from the start. However, certain policy differences have become apparent – in particular, in relation to the question of how to cool down New Zealand's overheated housing market (Smyth 2021). In 2020, information leaked that Prime Minister Ardern had placed a gag order on cabinet members, instructing them not to speak to the media in relation to the government's COVID-19 response (Newshub 2020).

That said, the current prime minister is an adept user of social media, particularly Facebook, in promulgating policy information to a broad audience. At the same time, both she and her ministers continue to use the more traditional press conferences following cabinet meetings. These have been supplemented by 1 p.m. press conferences sometimes held as often as daily during surges in COVID-19 cases. The television broadcasts of these events have proved popular with the general public.

Citation:

Newshub (2020) "Leak: Jacinda Ardern gags ministers on discussing COVID-19 response." <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2020/05/leak-jacinda-ardern-gags-ministers-on-discussing-covid-19-response.html>

Smyth (2021) "New Zealand's housing crisis poses big test for Jacinda Ardern." *The Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/2ec734f0-23b4-4aef-9675-f89d357ce0e1>

## Portugal

Score 7

Communication became considerably more challenging during the pandemic period, given its rapidly changing dynamics and policy responses. The government was fairly effective in general. However, it was certainly not flawless in this regard, as the prime minister himself recognized in a press conference in November 2020.

Citation:

Borges, L. (2020), "'A culpa é toda minha. O mensageiro transmitiu mal a mensagem', diz Costa," *Público*, available online at: <https://www.publico.pt/2020/11/12/politica/noticia/culpa-mensageiro-transmitiu-mal-mensagem-costa-1939017>

## Spain

Score 7

A press office in the prime minister's entourage and the government's spokesperson try to conduct coherent communication planning. Ministries tend to align their statements and press releases with government strategy. The conservative PP government (in office through May 2018) did not have a well-developed communications strategy. The management of the Catalan conflict was perhaps the best example of this problem, with unconvincing and contradictory statements released both internally and abroad. The PSOE government launched a more thoughtful national and international political communications strategy

Spain's government used scientific experts in its institutional communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the government improved communication with trade unions (UGT and CCOO), the main business association (CEOE) and autonomous communities. However, scandals linked to appointed ministers and among the coalition partners (e.g., regarding the labor market reform) ultimately limited the coherence of the communication strategy. In July 2021, a cabinet reshuffle replaced the state secretary of communication; one goal was to improve policy communication and internal coordination within the PMO and the Ministry of the Presidency.

During the pandemic, the government frequently communicated its assessment of the situation as well as the rationale behind the measures taken. However, despite the daily taskforce briefings and numerous press conferences by members of the government, the management of communication has been widely questioned. The main criticisms have to do with delays in providing information, the lack of consistent and sufficient data, and the lack of clarity.

Citation:

Moreno, Á.; Fuentes-Lara, C.; Navarro, C. (2020). "COVID-19 communication management in Spain: Exploring the effect of information-seeking behavior and message reception in public's evaluation." *El profesional de la información*, v. 29, n. 4, e290402. <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2020.jul.02>

## United Kingdom

Score 7

Compared with the culture of secrecy of earlier decades, government has become much more open in the United Kingdom in recent years. This is due to a combination of the Freedom of Information Act passed by a Tony Blair-led Labour government, and a willingness to use the internet to increase transparency and open up government. The government website ([gov.uk](http://gov.uk)) provides extensive information on government services and activities, and has been redesigned to be more user friendly. It is also a single gateway website, which aims to facilitate greater coherence in line with the government communications plan.

On international measures, such as the Open Data Index or OECD government assessments, the United Kingdom scores well and there is clearly a strong push from within the administration to enhance communication, for example, with a strategic communications plan and a single communications budget.

However, while the mechanisms of communication were laudable, communication proved to be difficult in the period between the Brexit referendum and the completion of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. As with so many facets of governance, the settlement of Brexit resulted in a return to more coherent communication. On the whole, messages around the pandemic have been both clear and informative for the public, despite some differences of emphasis between the departments responsible, especially those covering healthcare, on the one side, and business and the economy, on the other. However, more could have been done to highlight why, despite claims to be following the science, governments (in this instance, of all four nations of the United Kingdom) took certain decisions.

Communication around the many charges leveled against Number 10 about parties has been shambolic.

Citation:

OPM Approach: <https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/> is an open site with short articles on the OPM approach  
<https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/communications-plan/>

## Hungary

Score 6 The Orbán government has radically streamlined policy communication. Most Fidesz politicians avoid journalists. At public events, they do not give interviews, but confine themselves to reading out texts written by the Cabinet Office, the government's central lie factory. The government also seeks to control the agenda by launching new topics to divert public attention away from problems raised in the media that can reflect poorly on Fidesz. Government communication is not designed to communicate information, it is a propaganda instrument aimed at bringing public discourse in line with the prime minister's and governing party's will. To achieve this goal, it uses fake news and manipulative strategies.

## Iceland

Score 6 The government of Iceland generally speaks with one voice. However, in the so-called West Nordic administrative tradition, where ministers are responsible for institutions subordinate to their ministries, every minister has the power to make decisions without consulting other ministers. Nevertheless, ministers rarely contradict one another and generally try to make decisions through consensus.

However, the 2009 – 2013 left-wing cabinet proved to be an exception to this tradition since three Left-Green Movement parliamentary members withdrew from the governing party coalition. Despite this internal dissent, the cabinet coalition held together to the end of its mandated term. Under the 2013 – 2016 center-right cabinet comprising the Progressive Party and the Independence Party, the situation reverted to the traditional Nordic practice. The leaders of the two coalition parties sometimes issued conflicting statements, but this did not result in any open conflict.

In April 2016, events took a dramatic turn following the publication of the Panama Papers, which exposed Prime Minister Gunnlaugsson (Progressive Party) and Finance Minister Benediktsson (Independence Party), among others. Gunnlaugsson resigned in disgrace. Thousands of protesters took to the streets in Reykjavík as in 2008, forcing the government to advance the upcoming parliamentary election from April 2017 to October 2016. These events constitute the clearest example of open conflict in an Icelandic cabinet in recent years.

Shortly thereafter, an alleged breach of trust led to the breakup of the Benediktsson cabinet (January – September 2017). After only eight months in power, the center-right three-party coalition collapsed when Bright Future, a junior partner, announced that they were ending their coalition with the Independence Party due to a serious breakdown of trust within the government in connection with the prime minister's father's recommendation letter of "restored honor" for a man convicted of pedophilia. Benediktsson, despite having been informed about this by the minister of

justice, kept this matter to himself until a parliamentary committee compelled the ministry to release this information to the press. This affair reflects the pervasive culture of secrecy that permeates Icelandic politics.

The first Jakobsdóttir right-center-left cabinet (2017–2021) passed without any notable, public intragovernmental disputes. The second Jakobsdóttir right-center-left cabinet was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the three-party coalition managed to coordinate its responses and actions.

## Italy

### Score 6

Italian governments have in general coordinated communication rather weakly. Ministers and even undersecretaries have often been able and willing to express their personal positions without coordinating their comments with the Prime Minister's Office. Under the second Conte government, the prime minister had sought to affirm his communication primacy, but was frequently challenged by the very vocal leaders of the coalition partners. During the Draghi cabinet, the prime minister has asserted a rather clear pre-eminence in the field of government communication. The voices of the other ministers and party leaders have been overshadowed.

## Japan

### Score 6

Policy communication has always been a priority for Japanese governments. Ministries and other governmental agencies publish regular reports on their work, including white papers and other materials.

However, the triple disaster of March 2011 seriously undermined the population's trust in governmental information, due to the lack of transparency and the failure to deliver timely public information. The degree to which Japan's public trusts the government has since recovered somewhat, but according to the Edelman Trust Barometer 2019 survey, only 39% of citizens trust the government, a significantly lower share than in many other countries.

The LDP-led coalition has pushed through its policy priorities more assertively than earlier governments, while giving less consideration to dissenting opinions. This is partly a result of Prime Minister Abe's strategic move to create new decision-making bodies such as the National Security Council and the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs which in turn strengthened Cabinet Secretariat's coordinating capacities and reduced the voices of dissenters within and outside of the LDP coalition.

Citation:

Edelman, 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer – Japan, <https://de.slideshare.net/EdelmanJapan/2019-edelman-trust-barometer-japan>

Hideo Hayakawa, Japan's Statistics Scandal: The Need for New Approaches, Nippon.com post, 18 March 2019, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00475/japan%E2%80%99s-statistics-scandal-the-need-for-new-approaches.html>

## South Korea

### Score 6

In Korea's presidential system, the president's office dominates the government communication strategy. Ministries do occasionally issue mutually contradictory statements, but rarely openly contradict statements issued by the presidential office. Early in his tenure, President Moon placed a high priority on communication with citizens. He engaged in more frequent and more direct communications with the public, including meetings with citizens over beer at a bar in Seoul. Moon also launched a presidential petition system, which has been widely used by citizens, particularly youth. The government responds to all presidential petitions with more than 200,000 signatories. However, President Moon's communication with the public dwindled in more recent years. A survey (by an opposition party member) reported that Moon held fewer press conferences than his liberal predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun (though a similar number as conservative predecessors Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak), and fewer such engagements than other heads of state (e.g., French President Emmanuel Macron or Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe). In early 2021, Moon's new chief of staff said that President Moon wanted to expand his public and media engagement going forward – citing COVID-19 as one factor in Moon's less-active-than-promised engagement in 2020.

The Moon administration was lauded for its responsive communication policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Korea's emphasis on communicating accurate and up-to-date information to the public helped manage the spread of misinformation and inspire public trust. At the height of the pandemic, the government held twice-daily, televised press briefings. It also operates a 24-hour hotline and portal site. This transparent and timely communication encouraged voluntary public compliance and bolstered the policy legitimacy of the Moon administration. Koreans' rate of acceptance of the government's performance in dealing with the pandemic is above average compared to 14 high-income countries.

#### Citation:

Brookings Doha Center. "Policy & Institutional Responses to COVID-19: South Korea," June 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/MENA-Covid-19-Survey-South-Korea-Dyer-June-14-2021.pdf>.

Do, Je-hae. "Moon Lacking in Public Communication." *The Korea Times*, September 17, 2020. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/09/356\\_296229.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/09/356_296229.html).

Do, Je-Hae. "President Moon Wants to Communicate More, Says His New Chief of Staff." *The Korea Times*, February 6, 2021. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/11/356\\_303667.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/11/356_303667.html).

## Austria

### Score 5

In the past, government communication was largely dominated by individual ministries. This form of communication has usually been seen as a means of promoting coalition party agendas (and the agendas of the respective ministers involved), rather than the agenda of the government.

The past decade has seen a strong trend toward coordinating and centralizing government communication, however. Initially, this included an agreement to use one press officer for both governing parties. In late 2017, the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition established a new style of centralizing political communication (“message control”), which marked a significant departure from the style of previous coalitions. This new regime, which effectively centered on the chancellor and the vice-chancellor, has continued under the ÖVP-Green government (in office since early 2020), despite its temporary implosion during and in the immediate aftermath of the “Ibiza scandal” (2019).

The coronavirus pandemic became a major challenge for government communication. Observers (and in particular supporters of one of the opposition parties) criticized a major lack of transparency and many confusing U-turns on government policies. Given the major tragedies involved, respondents also criticized the government, arguing that government communication was strongly focused on depicting the government as “being in control” at the expense of more substantive forms of communication. In particular, the inconclusive communication of the government’s plans for a fourth complete lockdown in late 2021 was widely perceived as a “communication disaster.”

Citation:

<https://viecer.univie.ac.at/corona-blog/corona-blog-beitraege/blog97/>

<https://orf.at/stories/3236296/>

## Czechia

Score 5

Under Prime Minister Babiš, government communication was less cacophonous than under the previous Sobotka government. However, rather than any proper coordination, the streamlining of government communication reflected Babiš’s power over ANO ministers and the coalition partner, the Social Democratic party. The MAFRA-owned media (Babiš’s media conglomerate) created scandals around every instance in which Social Democratic ministers dared to issue public statements contradicting the official government line, while ANO ministers who fell out of favor with Babiš were quickly replaced.

## Germany

Score 5

In a formal sense, the federal government’s Press and Information Office is the focal point of 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. There is a persistent tendency of coalition partners to leverage their profile to the disadvantage of the other

government parties. This problem was an issue in the last coalition and, naturally, more so with the approaching election.

During the pandemic, there were few problems with harmonized communication among the federal ministries. However, the federal and state governments proved unable to harmonize their coronavirus responses, which was due in large part to the states' right of autonomy in determining their policies.

The previous government's communication on the issue of climate change was by comparison to other issues more coherent. It was also seemingly unified in its communication of new welfare state-related policies such as the basic pension ("Grundrente"), which came on the heels of tough. This suggests a slight improvement over the dramatic controversies that marked the years of the migration crisis.

Having demonstrated strict confidentiality throughout their coalition talks and having signaled a strong sense of unity during their first few months in office, the new government appears to be doing well with regard to coherent communication.

## Greece

### Score 5

After the change in government in 2019, the prime minister, the government's spokesperson and the minister of finance, along with other ministers, regularly conveyed messages which were in line with the government's strategy in different policy sectors. Compared to the past, strategic communication and planning improved in 2020–2021.

Instances of government ministers communicating contradictory messages were rare. Furthermore, the government made use of the Presidency of the Government (i.e., the reorganized Prime Minister's Office). Established in July 2019, the Presidency of the Government includes, among other units, the General Secretariat for Communication and Information.

There are designated government officials to communicate the government's strategy. The government's spokesperson regularly meets with and informs the press. The general secretary of government coordination periodically makes public announcements, clarifying the position of the government. Moreover, during critical moments, the prime minister addresses the Greek people via live TV broadcasts. For example, the prime minister delivered such an address when the government imposed a lockdown in March 2020 to prevent COVID-19 from spreading through the country.

Following the turbulent 2015–2019 period, in which political communication was as polarized and unpredictable as the political scene itself, government communication

has become much more coherent. A central theme of the post-2019 communication strategy has been “normality,” with the New Democracy government implying that it was time for Greece to become a typical, normal EU-like market economy and parliamentary democracy. This has evidently been a successful strategy, as New Democracy’s popularity has remained high since it won the parliamentary elections of 2019. In 2020–2021, New Democracy’s approval ratings were consistently higher than the approval ratings of its main competitor, Syriza.

## Lithuania

### Score 5

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 Office of the Government attempts to coordinate these activities and provides the public with information about the government’s performance. For instance, a unified government portal that aims at providing relevant information to the citizens about the performance of the whole government (the cabinet, the Office of the Government, ministries and government agencies) was launched in 2015.

In a 2015 report, the OECD recommended that the core government rebalance its engagement with other institutions by emphasizing its role as a facilitator of exchange and dialogue across government and with non-state stakeholders, rather than primarily focusing on top-down communication.

On the whole, the government continues to lack a coherent communication policy today. While contradictory statements are rare, they do occur to varying degrees depending on the particular government and the elections calendar. The Skvernelis government (2016 – 2020), composed mostly of nonpartisan ministers (so-called professionals), faced difficulties in coordinating its communications on policy priorities and reforms undertaken. This was particularly evident in 2018 and 2019 due to pending election campaigns, changes in the composition of the governing majority and preparations for the 2020 parliamentary elections. The Šimonytė government (which came to power 2020) has not been immune to communication difficulties either. For example, a major scandal broke out when it was discovered that shipments of Belarusian fertilizers were being transported via Lithuania, despite Lithuania’s vocal political support for sanctions against the Belarusian regime. Part of the reason for the scandal were mismanaged expectations about what the sanctions would entail. Furthermore, both the Skvernelis and Šimonytė governments faced difficulties in communicating a coherent strategy regarding the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government also failed to clearly communicate the goals and rationale of its foreign policy strategy regarding Taiwan and China. As a result, a poll carried out in January 2022 showed that 60% of Lithuanians were opposed to the government’s foreign policy on this issue, and only 13% were in favor.

## Citation:

OECD, Regulatory Policy in Lithuania: Focusing on the Delivery Side, OECD Reviews of Regulatory Reform, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2015 [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/regulatory-policy-in-lithuania\\_9789264239340-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/regulatory-policy-in-lithuania_9789264239340-en).

## Slovenia

**Score 5** The Janša government started its term just one day after the previous Šarec government declared COVID-19 an epidemic. COVID-19 heavily influenced the Janša government's communication with the public and media, and various governmental officials and expert groups often made incoherent announcements. In addition, the relationship between the government – especially Janša himself and some of his own party ministers – on one side, and several media outlets were very antagonistic, almost hostile from the start. Some elements in the media took a very tough approach toward the Janša government, actively supporting anti-government activities. Meanwhile, Janša and his party continued their hostile and distrustful relationship with most of the media. In the second half of the term, however, ministerial communication became more coherent and there have been fewer instances of incoherent communication. Compared to his predecessors, Janša has exercised an authoritative leadership style. As such, unlike under previous governments, there have been almost no contradictory statements from different coalition partners.

## Bulgaria

**Score 4** Government communication in Bulgaria exhibits a relatively low degree of coherence. The various ministries' communication activities are not centrally coordinated, so it is easy for the media to identify inconsistencies and contradictions in the information they release and the positions taken. This tends to be more pronounced under coalition governments in which the various ministries are headed by representatives of different parties.

Public announcements and communications were often intended to hide rather than highlight and explain the true intentions behind proposed regulations and policies.

The expansion of public decisions and hearings in 2021 and 2022 has been intended to improve communication. In some cases, these measures have achieved a better level of coherence in areas such as judicial reform. However, communication and arguments in the area of the 2022 state budget have been rather inconsistent.

## Chile

**Score 4** 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. During the period under review, the government's communication and coherence regarding public announcements worsened significantly. Several announcements were perceived by the public as contributing to and accelerating the generalized discontent and social crisis. Incoherence and lapses in the field of government communication were particularly noticeable during the October 2019 protests and the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. For instance, in announcing the curfew, President Piñera announced that "we are at war," a statement that he withdrew two days later and followed up with a public apology. Furthermore, the then-serving health minister publicly declared that the government had been unaware of the overcrowded housing conditions experienced by a large population of vulnerable families, especially in the Santiago Metropolitan Region. As a political response to this questionable management, President Piñera decided to appoint a new minister of health in June 2020, at the peak of the pandemic.

Citation:

El Mostrador, "En medio de la pandemia del Covid-19, Mañalich reconoce que en Santiago "hay un nivel de pobreza y hacinamiento del cual yo no tenía conciencia", 28 May 2020, <https://www.elmostrador.cl/dia/2020/05/28/en-medio-de-la-pandemia-del-covid-19-manalich-reconoce-que-en-santiago-hay-un-nivel-de-pobreza-y-hacinamiento-del-cual-yo-no-tenia-conciencia>, last accessed: 13 January 2022.

Centro de Investigación Periodística (CIPER), "Ensayando la comunicación de crisis en plena crisis", 1 April 2020, <https://www.ciperchile.cl/2020/04/01/ensayando-la-comunicacion-de-crisis-en-plena-crisis>, last accessed: 13 January 2022.

Centro de Investigación Periodística (CIPER), "Piñera, el discurso político como una cartera de inversiones", 12 December 2019, <https://www.ciperchile.cl/2019/12/12/pinera-el-discurso-politico-como-una-cartera-de-inversiones>, last accessed: 13 January 2022.

## Estonia

Score 4

Government ministries have remarkable power and autonomy. Ministers from the various coalition parties sometimes make statements that are not in line with the general government position or have not been properly discussed by all the coalition partners. This tendency has become more pronounced since 2019 and continues despite the cabinet change in 2021. Ministers from the different coalition parties and top-level civil servants issue contradictory statements, a pattern that has intensified due to the extraordinary COVID-19 crisis.

## Poland

Score 4

Ministerial communication is coordinated by the Government Information Center, a department of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. It regularly reports on government activities and connects to other ministries' press departments. However, information provided by ministries has tended to be selective and highly propagandistic. As conflicts within the governing coalition have increased, government communication has become less coherent. Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro (Solidarna Polska) has often clashed with Jarosław Gowin (Porozumienie),

first minister of science and higher education, later minister of economic development, labor and technology, and Prime Minister Morawiecki. In the case of the “Polish Deal,” numerous open conflicts among ministers have erupted.

## Romania

Score 4 Despite the fact that the Chancellery of the Prime Minister was tasked with taking care of public relations and communication with mass media, the Romanian government continues to lack a coherent communications strategy. Individual ministries issue fragmented releases and public trust in government communication is low. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these shortcomings allowed misinformation to run rampant leading to increased infection and death rates, and lower vaccine uptake. Romania and its local health authorities lacked a clear communication strategy implemented at a national level and did not have a clear risk management or crisis communication procedure.

Citation:

Cernicova-Buca, M.; Palea, A. An Appraisal of Communication Practices Demonstrated by Romanian District Public Health Authorities at the Outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 2500. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13052500>

## Slovakia

Score 4 The center-right government newly formed after the 2020 parliamentary elections is comprised of four parties that cover an ideologically broad spectrum and have leaders not known for their team-player skills. As a result, government communication has sometimes been chaotic, with different ministries issuing contradictory statements. The cacophony culminated in March 2021 when Prime Minister Igor Matovič ordered Russian Sputnik vaccines despite the fact that the cabinet had not approved this action. The replacement of Matovič as prime minister by Eduard Heger in April 2021 has slightly improved the coherence of government communication. Communication has become less polarized, even in those cases in which individual coalition partners did not vote for government projects such as those advanced by Sme-Rodina with regard to hospital reform and the national park reform.

## Belgium

Score 3 Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, and despite the genuine attempts at regular consultation and collegial and informed decision-making regarding public health measures, government communication has regularly been filled with contradictions and dissenting voices, even from within single parties. The reason is clearly the fact that each measure may – or not – target specific sectors, and hence interest groups. Each minister or legislator caters to a different constituency, and their preferences are often misaligned. In particular, some party leaders – including those from the

federal coalition – regularly announced softer measures shortly after the announcement of restrictive measures by the federal government, sometimes either explicitly or implicitly blaming another party (i.e., Flemings or Francophones) for the measures taken. The more complicated the measures, or the more likely they were to be unpopular, and the more accusatory the tone.

The contradictory messages and flip-flopping negatively affected citizens' support for government decisions. At the end of December 2021, with the omicron wave looming, the government for instance decided to shut down theaters and other cultural activities. This decision immediately triggered a revolt in the cultural sector and in the press. Health experts advising the government ended up alleging that such measures had been taken only because policymakers had not dared to impose stricter measures affecting restaurants. In light of the opposition even the ministers who had voted for the closure played the blame game, and majority members of parliament questioned the prime minister in the House of Representatives, asking him to reconsider the decision.

This lack of coherent communication goes well beyond public health measures, however. Dissension was just as blatant following the government's announcement of an agreement to phase out nuclear power plants. This took place despite the fact that the phase out had been approved back in 2003, and was part of the government-formation agreement. In this case, the blame game was initiated by G-L Bouchez, the president of the French right-of-center party MR, who lobbied in favor of maintaining nuclear power, and was opposed by the socialists and the Greens, who reemphasized the government agreement. The compromise has been to approve a motion that both parties could interpret (or rather publicly claim) as leaning in their favor. This regular indecision, nearing populism, undermined government effectiveness and the various parties' reputations.

Citation:

<https://www.lesoir.be/414245/article/2021-12-23/la-chambre-les-partis-de-la-vivaldi-interpellent-de-croo-et-critiquent-les>

<https://www.lesoir.be/414678/article/2021-12-27/benedicte-linard-ministre-de-la-culture-ce-nest-pas-mon-role-de-demander-au>

<https://www.lesoir.be/414652/article/2021-12-26/mesures-anticovid-la-desobeissance-civile-soutenue-par-les-autres-pouvoirs>

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## Croatia

### Score 3

The Prime Minister's Office is formally responsible for policy coordination and the communication of policy to the general public through the Public Relations Service. In practice, however, ministries have often followed their own communication strategies, only to reverse their stance following criticism from the Prime Minister's Office or other line ministries. This was best exemplified during the longest strike in Croatia's history, which was orchestrated by teachers' trade unions in 2019. The

Ministry of Education and PMO were not communicating effectively in developing a coherent and common set of proposals for the negotiation process.

The failure of the government's communication strategies has been clearly demonstrated by the failure of the public-information campaign around COVID-19 vaccination. Even before the campaign was conceived, about 35% of the population said they did not intend to be vaccinated, and in early 2022, just about that percentage of the population remained unvaccinated.

However, sociologists' research have found that among those who do not intend to be vaccinated, only 45% opposed any vaccinations, and a majority of 55% simply distrust the existing coronavirus vaccine. These are precisely the citizens that the government and the headquarters for civil protection should have reached with their communications, but failed to do so.

## Cyprus

### Score 3

Government communication with the public has been increasingly confusing in 2020/2021. In many instances, announcements about COVID-19-related measures were contradictory, while intended clarifications and exceptions spread confusion. On other issues, multiple, contradicting statements from members of the government turned coherent communication into an unattainable goal.

In 2020 and 2021, the Al Jazeera network published revelations, which a government-appointed inquiry committee and the auditor general subsequently investigated, that the president and his government were involved in corruption related to the selling of passports. Their communication performance was poor and subsequent statements that attempted to justify actions were less convincing than the initial ones. Resorting to conspiracy theories and attempting to discredit critics were subsequently belied by new information, which did not help the government's credibility. Thus, improving public information and dispelling confusion saw little success in the period under review.

Communication on the Recovery and Resilience Plan was comparatively clear and coherent.

Citation:

1. Al Jazeera reports are propaganda, not journalism, Nouris says (Update 3), Cyprus Mail, 26 August 2021, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/08/26/al-jazeera-reports-are-propaganda-not-journalism-nouris-says/>
2. Our View: President is very skillful at passing the buck, Cyprus Mail, 22 October 2021, <https://cyprus-mail.com/2021/10/22/our-view-president-is-very-skillful-at-passing-the-buck/>

## Turkey

### Score 3

The extensive restructuring of the executive branch has allowed for further centralization in policymaking through the president. Policy coordination among central government institutions has remained strong, but planning, monitoring, and reporting on whole-of-government performance remains inadequate. Rules of

procedure are lacking in administrative decision-making processes, which undermines the parliamentary lawmaking process. Legislative development and policy formulation have not pursued an inclusive and evidence-based approach, but the responsibility for producing draft legislative proposals now lies with members of parliament, rather than with the government. The president has issued over one thousand executive decisions and 50 decrees, some on limited, others on extensive issues. Exactly how nine recently established presidential policy councils relate to the work of individual government departments is not clear.

During the review period, the biggest communication failure was related to the coronavirus pandemic. On 29 July 2020, following pressure from the Turkish Medical Association and opposition mayors, the Minister of Health confessed that the reported number of infected people had been changed to the number of patients showing symptoms. Another communication failure was related to the evaporation of the central bank's \$128 billion in gross reserves, for which officials gave unconvincing or contradictory explanations. The status of firefighting aircraft during an unprecedented forest fire in summer 2021 was another illustrative instance. It is still unknown how many firefighting aircraft Turkey has. Last but not least, there is no confidence in TURKSTAT figures, most notably relating to inflation and labor force numbers. According to Enag, an independent institution, the annualized rate of inflation as measured by the consumer price index for November 2021 was 58.6%, while TURKSTAT reported it as only 21.3%.

Citation:

Birgün. "AKP'den '128 milyar dolar nerede?' sorusuna bir çelişkili yanıt daha," October 29, 2021. <https://www.birgun.net/haber/akp-den-128-milyar-dolar-nerede-sorusuna-bir-celiskili-yanit-daha-363802>

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Enagrup. "Aylık Enflasyon Haber Bülteni ", December 3, 2021. <https://enagrup.org/bulten/2021kasb.pdf?v1>

## Address | Contact

### **Bertelsmann Stiftung**

Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256  
33311 Gütersloh  
Germany  
Phone +49 5241 81-0

### **Dr. Christof Schiller**

Phone +49 30 275788-138  
christof.schiller@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

### **Dr. Thorsten Hellmann**

Phone +49 5241 81-81236  
thorsten.hellmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

### **Pia Paulini**

Phone +49 5241 81-81468  
pia.paulini@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

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