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European Crisis Communication Study



Centre for Fair Political Analysis has [analyzed](#) the crisis communication of four European leaders from the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak to the

first re-openings (from the end of February to the end of May). We were curious to see how the crisis altered the approach of politicians compared to the findings of our earlier study on their relationship towards European values. CFPA analyzed public appearances, televised speeches and videos posted on social media platforms for Angela Merkel, Boris Johnson, Emmanuel Macron and Viktor Orbán. Despite the prevailing assumption that the virus will “change everything” our study showed a high level of consistency in the political narrative of the leaders.

As presumed, there were differences in the way the countries handled the crisis owing to the differences in their political system and political culture, nevertheless the most significant fault line between the politicians we looked at was the use of combat rhetoric. While Angela Merkel and Boris Johnson preferred a non-confrontational approach, battle exhortation became the primary mode of communication for Emmanuel Macron and Viktor Orbán. This may seem surprising at first but we have previously shown that the French President and the Hungarian Prime Minister communicate very similarly. They often shed light on the same problems even when they talk about them in a very different style. For example, ever since the beginning of Macron's term, the protection of European and French sovereignty has been at the top of his agenda. The issue of sovereignty was heavily present in his speeches throughout the pandemic as well. Accordingly, he promoted the reduction of national and European dependency on certain products such as masks and ventilators and supported the local manufacturing of these. Calling for sovereignty and solidarity, Macron asked for French citizens to come together to overcome the virus which he called an invisible enemy that can only be defeated through national unity.

Despite the similar messages, the narrative of Emmanuel Macron and Viktor Orbán was quite different. Viktor Orbán saw

his opposition as an obstruction to the crisis management efforts while for Macron the virus was the public enemy. In Macron's narrative, European and national sovereignty are not exclusive and this was present in his communication of the crisis as well. As we have shown previously, according to his view, the extension of European sovereignty is the basis of the extension of French sovereignty and the geopolitical repositioning of France. Macron is therefore communicating very much in line with his previous remarks. The only change? He tried to speak to citizens in a unifying way meant to override his earlier political losses from the yellow vest protests directed against his reforms. Perhaps it is exactly because of this consistent mode of communication that he could not benefit from the otherwise successful crisis management.

Viktor Orbán's consistency could be seen in the fact that his earlier messages concerning migration or George Soros did not disappear altogether, they became subordinated to his new narrative. This could be due to the fact that contrary to Emmanuel Macron or Boris Johnson he was not in need of a new strategy. As for the British Prime Minister, while at first he tried to downplay the graveness of the events, especially after he had contacted the virus, he used the pandemic to try and change his image from the controversial pro-Brexit politician to that of a unifying leader. Though he is seen as a populist

politician, as he comes from a well off family it was very important for him to be seen as someone who understands the problems of everyday people. The virus gave him an opportunity to do this as over time his communication became completely technical, non-confrontational and based on the opinions of experts. In comparison, German Chancellor Angela Merkel was unchanging.

She stuck to her non-confrontational mode of communication which in part is due to the nature of the German federal system but more importantly because she is aware of the fact that her popularity grows when she talks about topics which are not controversial. This was the case during the first wave of the pandemic as well when her popularity rose to the highest level since 2017.

All in all, we can say that while the crisis management bound the hands of the leaders in terms of communication, each politician tried to turn the pandemic to his or her advantage, either to strengthen their position or to change the way they were seen by voters. It is interesting to see how different outcomes were attained by the two leaders who had the most in common concerning their messages. This was due to the differences in their personalities as well as in their country's political culture. While Orbán adapted a successful strategy to



suit the crisis Macron tried to change the framing of a narrative that had previously caused him political loss. Moreover, as his scapegoat was the virus, though he had an “enemy” he did not have someone he could hold politically accountable. His experiment therefore shows that it is not enough to be consistent, one has to react to the demands of citizens as well.