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Framing Covid-19: A comparative analysis between institutional and press communication in Finland and Italy in 2020

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Abstract:

In the present work we focus on institutional communication in a period of crisis. In particular we are interested in the communications of the Italian and Finnish governments during the health emergency raised by the COVID-19 pandemic. We analyse and compare two press releases given by the Italian and Finnish Prime Ministers at the very beginning and at the end of the so-called first stage of the pandemic. The analysis aims at i) describing the effectiveness of the speeches applying six parameters that we previously identified as crucial for efficient communication, and ii) exploring the lexical choice of the Prime Ministers in relation to it.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Crisis Communication, Infodemic, Institutional Communication, Storytelling*

1. Framing the study

The consequences triggered by the spread of the pandemic, unleashed following the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, are still incalculable, after a year and a half from the first confirmed case in China. The initial impossibility and the general difficulty of stemming the spread of the disease in a highly globalized world have put the economy of most countries in crisis, without distinction. The pandemic has highlighted, in many cases, the weaknesses of government and health systems, it has shaken the foundations of corporate organizational systems and has redesigned the ways in which knowledge and information are used and provided. The spread of the epidemic and the attempts to remedy it have forced humanity, in essence, to question everything. No sector has therefore remained unscathed, immobile or equal to itself in recent months. The areas most affected

by this paradigmatic revolution are, above all, medicine, science and politics, but the element that stands out most strongly in this case analysis, as a whole, and for the aim of this paper, is undoubtedly the communicative one. As in crisis situations in general, also in the COVID-19 pandemic communication has gained utmost importance. The kind of communication involved by the COVID-19 emergency can be considered crisis communication along the lines of Reynolds and Seeger (2005) who discuss the communication types during crisis and identify the crucial differences between crisis and emergency communication. In crisis communication due to a health emergency, health authorities generally track the origin of the disease, undertake actions to stop the contamination, issue warnings and recalls, and provide the public with information about the symptoms, treatments and ways to avoid exposure (Fischhoff and Downs 2001; Ulmer and Sellnow 2000 as in Reynolds and Seeger 2005: 44).

The pervasive use and massive success of social media, starting from early 2000s, have led to the redefinition of the power relationships within communication exchanges and, despite the many benefits, have fuelled some trends and generated real informative disorders. In this article we focus on institutional and press communication in Italy and in Finland, and we leave aside the communication spread through social media and the related networks. It is well known that solid leadership, empathy, and alignment of science and politics are crucial factors for clear communication. Even though Finland and Italy can be considered as equally good representatives of good communication in the pandemic scenario with their frequent, truthful and clear institutional communications, we aim at describing here how the language of these communications may vary in terms of lexical choice and discourse structure and how and in which measure clearness, truthfulness, coherency, and empathy emerge. For this purpose, we focus on two talks of the prime ministers and on the day after communications in the main newspapers in two different moments in Italy and in Finland. It is well-known in current communication literature (Albu and Flyverbom 2019; Menon and Goh 2005) that effective institutional communication during a crisis necessarily involves a variety of elements. Two of the most common fallacies are communicating too less or too much to the selected audience (Casalegno and Civera 2016).

For the purpose of this study, we take into consideration the following parameters (adapted from Casalegno, *et al.* 2020) as crucial elements for efficient institutional communication:

1. Harm-reducing, honest and accurate information;
2. Simple and quick message;
3. Clear objectives and goals and how they are presented;
4. Provision of proof of tangible actions;
5. Coherency among institutional communications and media (press);
6. Communication strategies.

In this paper we first present how the COVID-19 emergency has developed in Italy and in Finland and then we aim at investigating how the above mentioned six parameters emerge in four official communications given by the Italian (2) and the Finnish (2) governments in two different moments of the COVID-19 health emergency. In particular, we focus on the lexical choice and syntax of the discourses and report on what kind of differences, if any, can be observed in the communications of Italian and Finnish prime ministers. Finally, we observe the COVID-19-related headings in two national daily newspapers in Italy and in Finland (*Corriere della Sera* and *Helsingin Sanomat*, respectively) in order to check how many headings are on the governmental communication of the day before and if and how lexical choice and communicative strategies differ.

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 resumes the beginning of the pandemic in Italy and in Finland. In section 3 different types of challenges faced by institutional communication and information channels are presented. Section 4 starts the second part of the paper devoted to the talks of the Prime Ministers and to the day-after newspapers. In Section 5 the results are discussed from a comparative point of view and Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. *The story so far*

On February 11th 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO from now on) announced that the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus was named COVID-19. On January 30th, 2020 the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS from now on) confirmed the first two cases of COVID-19 infection in Italy and on February 21st, it confirmed the first autochthonous case in Italy. Finally, on 11th March 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 to officially be a pandemic after 3 months when China broke out the first outbreak of coronavirus disease in December 2019 in Wuhan city¹ (population 11 million). When the Chinese government quarantined the city of Wuhan in mid-January 2020 to prevent the spread of COVID-19, authorities in Europe had not imagined that the coronavirus would threaten them so invasively. While the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Italy was on January 30th 2020, and additional cases of COVID-19 infection emerged in Codogno (Milan), the Italian government imposed a quarantine a month later on February 21th, 2020 for infected people and their contacts and for those who came back from China. Subsequently tighter measures were imposed for northern Italy, with the declaration of the so-called Red Zones on March 8 “*Decreto Zone Rosse*” ‘Decree on Red Zones’ and with the “*Decreto #iorestoacasa*” ‘#stayathome decree’ on March 11th, 2020 imposing a total lockdown of public life. Moreover, from March 22nd “*Decreto Chiudi Italia*” ‘Close Italy Decree’, it was forbidden to go in public parks, playground areas, and to play outside. Sports activities were allowed only near residences. In order to counter the spread of the pandemic and monitor its progress, the app *Immuni* was launched in Italy from June 2020. The experimentation started in four regions at first and was then extended to the whole national territory. It has been quite contested and the number of downloads has been very low. At the beginning of the second wave in Italy, in autumn 2020, Giuseppe Conte and his staff did not mention the app once as part of their strategy confirming that it has been a failure. At the time of this writing, about eighteen months have passed since the first confirmed case in Italy and there have been reports of over 182.209.207 COVID-19 cases worldwide and 3.945.829 million deaths globally, and 166.772.587 recovered.² Specifically in Italy (population³ 59.258.000), there are 4.258.456 COVID-19 cases, 127.500 deaths and 4.076.274 recovered. At the time of this writing Italy is experiencing a *White Zones* phase in which movements are allowed and restrictions are very limited and people are not wearing masks outdoors.

In Finland (5,548,361 population)⁴, there are 95.168 COVID-19 cases, 969 deaths and 46.000 recovered.⁵ The first suspicions case that the virus had arrived in Finland were aroused on 24 January when a Chinese tourist visiting Inari, Lapland, was brought to the Ivalo Health Centre suffering from flu-like symptoms but the first coronavirus case in Finland was diagnosed

¹ <<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>> (06/2021).

² <<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>> (06/2021).

³ <<https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/257243>> (06/2021).

⁴ <<https://www.populationpyramid.net/it/finlandia/2021/>> (06/2021).

⁵ <<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/finland/>> (06/2021).

for a Chinese tourist in a holiday resort in Lapland on January 29th 2020. On February 13th 2020 COVID-19 infection was included in the list of generally hazardous communicable diseases by amending the Government Decree on Communicable Diseases. However, the situation with the spread of COVID-19 in Finland started to evolve only in early March, boosted by travels to the Alps during the winter holidays in February. COVID-19 epidemic was considered to have started in Finland in mid-March soon after the WHO had announced the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic. On March 16th 2020 the Finnish Government announced a state of emergency due to the coronavirus outbreak and consequently it implemented several strategies in order to improve social and physical distancing which aimed at slowing the spread and protecting especially groups at risk. So far, Finland has been successful in restraining the pandemic. Compared to many countries, the pandemic landed in Finland relatively late. This fact allowed early implementation of restrictive regulations and recommendations. However, these measures which have been obeyed well by the population have probably had several negative, unintended consequences (Tiirinki *et al.* 2021) defined as changes brought by an intervention other than those it aims to achieve (Jabeen 2016). They can be far-reaching and just as important as the intended consequences and they can affect all groups of the population as well as all sectors of society (e.g. health, education, environment, economy, law). As stated in the study conducted by Turcotte, Gali and Ridde (2021) there is scientific evidence suggesting that COVID-19 mitigation measures can trigger a wide range of desirable and undesirable unintended consequences within and outside of healthcare systems.

The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (*Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos*, THL from now on) is the main national statistical and registry authority for the health and social sector, and it is also responsible for collecting the COVID-19 data. The COVID-19 data are released at the THL website. The collected data have been published daily from the start of the pandemic. However, THL has been criticized for not giving out detailed information on the deaths and patients treated in the hospitals. For instance, the breakdown of the cases according to age and sex was not initially reported. Detailed data on intensive care were only released weekly by the IC Coordinating Office. THL has also been criticized for not releasing the methodological details and assumptions used for modelling the epidemic.⁶ There is also no published data on contact tracing as there is no tracing in the successively developed app *koronavilkku* (downloadable since 31.8.2020) through which only the information that one could have been infected in the previous 14 days is provided. This is said to protect sensible information and the privacy of citizens.

2.1 Phases of the Covid-19 Pandemic and Measures of containment in Italy

In Italy as the health system is regionally based, COVID-19 emergency actions are based on a general lockdown imposed by national authority and then management at local level by 21 regional authorities. Therefore, the pandemic response plan developed by each region led to different approaches. It is possible to identify three main waves since the beginning of the pandemic in Italy.

⁶This seems related to a general willingness to avoid any kind of *over-communication* (or *infodemic* as formulated in Zaracostas 2020) that can create fear and confusion instead of reassuring the population and thus be self-defeating for the purposes of the government.

First wave - *Lockdown and 3-phase split:*

Phase 1: Lockdown (March 9 to May 3 2020).

Phase 2: Relaxation of containment measures (May 4 - June 14 2020).

Phase 3: Coexistence with COVID-19 (June 15 - October 7 2020).

Second wave - *Resumption of the infection:*

8 October - 5 November: new restrictive actions.

From 6th November: containment for different scenarios (Curfew and establishment of yellow, orange and red zones), Measures for the holiday season (December 21 - January 15 2021), Establishment of white zones (from January 16 2021).

Third wave - *The spread of variants:*

Tightening of containment measures (6 March - 25 April 2021).

Relaxation of containment measures (from 26th April 2021).

Re-openings and Green Certification.

The first lockdown began around 21st February 2020, covering ten municipalities of the province of Lodi in Lombardy and one in the province of Padua in Veneto, and affecting around 50.000 people. The lockdown was initially meant to last until March 6th. Citizens were permitted to leave their homes to look for supplies such as food and medicine, to go to workplaces or to schools was not allowed, and public gatherings were prohibited. Train services also bypassed the region. Early on Sunday 8th March 2020, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced the expansion of the quarantine zone to cover much of northern Italy, affecting over sixteen million people, restricting travel from, to or within the affected areas, banning funerals and cultural events, and requiring people to keep at least one metre of distance from one another in public locations such as restaurants, churches and supermarkets. Conte later clarified in a press conference that the decree was not an “absolute ban”, and that people would still be able to use trains and planes to and from the region for proven work needs, emergencies, or health reasons. Additionally, tourists from outside were still permitted to leave the area. Restaurants and cafes were permitted to open, but operations were limited to between 6:00 and 18:00, while many other public locations such as gyms, nightclubs, museums and swimming pools were closed altogether. Businesses were ordered to implement “remote working” to permit their employees to work from home. The decree, that was into force until 3rd April 2020, additionally cancelled any leave for medical workers, and allowed the government to impose fines or up to three months’ jail for people caught leaving or entering the affected zone without permission. The decree also implemented restrictions on public gatherings elsewhere across Italy. With this decree, the initial “Red Zone” was also abolished (though the municipalities were still within the quarantined area). The lockdown measures implemented by Italy were considered the most radical measures implemented against the outbreak outside of the lockdown measures implemented in China. At the time of the decree, over 5.800 cases of coronavirus had been confirmed in Italy and 233 deaths. A draft of the decree had been leaked to the media late on Saturday night before it went into effect and was published by the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, resulting in panic within the to-be-quarantined areas and prompting reactions from politicians in the region. The newspaper *La Repubblica* reported that hundreds of people in Milan rushed

out to leave the city on the last trains on Saturday night, as a part of a general rush to leave the new expanded red zone. *La Repubblica* later reported that this was an exaggeration and that, through an analysis of telephone cells, less than 1.000 people had left Milan for the Southern regions on 7th March; by comparison, on 23rd February, about 9.000 people left Milan towards South Italy. However, within hours of the decree being signed, media outlets reported that relatively little had changed, with trains and planes still operating to and from the region, and restaurants and cafes operating normally. According to the Ministerial Decree of 26th April 2020 the masks had become mandatory in confined spaces or outdoors when the possibility of maintaining the necessary physical distance is not possible or guaranteed.

2.2 Phases of the Covid-19 Pandemic and Measures of containment in Finland

In Finland the action plan for implementing the Government's hybrid strategy divides the COVID-19 epidemic into three phases. This classification is used to assess the development of the epidemic and the need for recommendations and restrictions and to ensure that they are appropriately targeted in the state.

1. *Perustaso* "baseline" summer 2020 (June-beginning of September). The epidemic is at stable level, and incidence is low. Local and regional transmission chains occur only occasionally. Contamination chains are manageable, and the people exposed can be traced without delay. New cases are either random isolated cases or most of them are detected among people in quarantine.

2. *Kiihtymistaso* "increasing stage" (traceability of the contaminations, hospital situation under control). The epidemic is accelerating, and regional incidence is higher than at the stable level. This may mean that the percentage of people testing positive is above one and that large-scale exposures occur.

Contact tracing manages to identify a significant proportion of the sources of infection. There are many local and regional transmission chains.

3. *Leviämistaso* "diffusion stage" (20-25 cases in 7 days; less than half of the contaminations can be traced; problems in the hospitals). The epidemic continues to accelerate. This may mean that the percentage of people testing positive is above two and that the need for inpatient and intensive care is projected to increase. Cases are spreading at the regional level or more widely through the population. Contact tracing is becoming more difficult.⁷

In Finland the first press release given by the government on the COVID-19 epidemic dates to 27th February 2020. This very first communication the Prime Minister Sanna Marin and the Council of Ministers want to reassure the population on the diffusion of COVID-19 in Finland. It is said that Finland is not involved in the pandemic, that the cases are sporadic and even in case of a wider diffusion Finland has well enough human resources and sanitary devices to face it. The epidemiological situation is being monitored at the regional and national levels. Regional and local authorities decide on introducing or lifting measures according to the epidemiological situation. On 6th May 2020, the Government adopted a resolution implementing a plan for a hybrid strategy to manage the COVID-19 crisis. The plan aims to prevent the spread of the virus in society, to safeguard the carrying capacity of the healthcare system and to protect people, especially those in risk groups. The action plan for implementing the hybrid strategy, adopted in autumn 2020, guides the authorities in managing the COVID-19

⁷ <<https://stm.fi/koronavirusepidemian-tasot>> (06/2021). The translations in the text are by the authors if not otherwise indicated.

epidemic. It sets out the criteria used to determine the phase of the epidemic. The action plan has been updated for January-May 2021. The action plan was supplemented with the new tiers of prevention measures on 26th January 2021. In its resolution on 6th May 2021, the Government stated that the use of nationwide tiers of COVID-19 prevention measures could be discontinued. On 16th March, the Finnish Government, jointly with the President of Finland Sauli Niinistö, declared a state of emergency due to COVID-19. 272 laboratory-confirmed cases caused by COVID-19 had been diagnosed in Finland by 16th March 2020 at 2 PM. The head of THL, Markku Tervahauta, told MTV3 that the actual number of COVID-19 cases might be 20-30 times higher than what had been confirmed by testing, due to the fact that testing was limited to risk groups, the severely ill, and healthcare workers. On 16th March, the Government also announced they had decided to take the following measures by issuing a decree on implementing the Emergency Powers Act (*valmiuslaki*). The measures were scheduled to be in place until 13th April, after approval by the Parliament of Finland, but were later extended to 13th May. The state of emergency was dismissed on 16th June 2020.

- All schools are closed, not including early education.
- Most government-run public facilities (theatres, libraries, museums etc.) are shut down.
- Critical personnel are exempted from the Working Hours Act and Annual Holidays Act, both in the private and public sector.
- At most 10 people can participate in a public meeting, and people over the age of 70 should avoid any human contact whenever possible.
- Outsiders are forbidden from entering healthcare facilities and hospitals, excluding relatives of critically ill people and children.
- The capacity of social and healthcare will be increased in the private and public sector, while less critical activity will be decreased.
- Preparations for the shutdown of borders will start, and citizens or permanent residents returning to Finland will be placed under a two weeks quarantine.

The political and governmental systems differ in Finland and in Italy in many ways. In particular, in Italy every new set (or loosening) of restrictions was given through a decree while in Finland such kind of decrees do not exist and the government has provided (and is still providing) suggestions and recommendations instead of Italian-style imperatives. In Finland, in the worst moment the state of emergency (*poikkeusolot*, 13th March 2020) has been declared and consequently the Emergency Powers Act came into force. Through it a series of restrictions and economic aids have become possible and have been implemented.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 emergency both Italian and Finnish governments have released official communications on weekly basis (or even daily in some moments). Between the beginning of the health emergency and the present writing 122 official communications have been released by the Finnish government and 24 decrees by Giuseppe Conte.

3. Information pollution

The uniqueness of this unprecedented event significantly emerged in communicative responses as well. The COVID-19 pandemic has been and still is a problem that goes beyond the medical-epidemiological field. In fact, since its emergence, this issue has also contributed to, and has been accompanied by, a global spread of another type of pandemic phenomenon, but of an informative nature, equally dangerous and difficult to control. In mid-February, the

World Health Organization announced that the new coronavirus pandemic was accompanied by an *infodemic* of misinformation (2020).⁸

In an information society like the current one, the very high media coverage and the diffusion of news, statistical data and live scientific results, have produced an unprecedented social, anthropological and communicative emergency on a worldwide scale. This information mode, made possible and strengthened by algorithms underlying the new media and their own design, conceived to maximize the dissemination of information with a virtual *cascade effect*, no longer taking into account the complexity of the information as a parameter of reference. Moreover, all the subjects (citizens, stakeholders, companies, scientists and politicians) are using the same communication tools sharing the same platforms which are all owned by private companies (e.g. Facebook, Twitter and Google), often with polarized outcomes. As suggested in Crocchi (2020), the functioning of the current news market perpetuates the polarization of news, but the area of popular concern has recently focused on exposure to ideological difference in online media. Social networks and online communication have considerably transformed political communication and public discourse. Over the past two decades, changes in communication technologies have affected the very nature of how citizens relate to each other and to their governments, shaping a new public sphere (*ibidem*: 397).

At the time of COVID-19, understanding this *information pollution* is determining to more effectively manage the practical and concrete interventions that the emergency requires. Information pollution in its broader sense implies a large spectrum of phenomena which may affect communication at various levels, manifesting themselves as a unicum or simultaneously with others. The direct and indirect impacts of information pollution are difficult to quantify but there is undoubtedly much evidence of it in the narrative of the COVID-19 so far. For the aim of our discussion, we consider the conceptual framework for examining information disorder introduced by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) where they identify three types of information disorders (Dis-information, Mis-information and Mal-information) distinguishing elements (agent, message and interpreter), phases (creation, production and distribution) and purposes among them. Much of the discourse on *fake news*, for instance, conflates three notions: mis-information, disinformation and mal-information.⁹

Today the complexity of communication is so manifold that it is unrealistic to attempt to describe it in an exhaustive way. Among all the possible perspectives, at least two seem significant for the aim of this paper. The first is the perspective of the sender. In this context, it seems legitimate to distinguish between institutional figures, communication professionals (e.g. journalists and opinion leaders) and a third macro-category “other” that does not fall within the previous two and include all non-official channels of information. The second perspective inevitably concerns the media used. Nevertheless, there are at least three possibilities: institutional media (the website of the Government, the Ministry of Health, etc.), media outlets (newspapers, television broadcasts, etc.), social media (in the broader meaning: Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, etc.). Social media represent great novelty compared with the previous global emergencies as they also play the crucial role of filters (e.g. filter bubbles) or echo chambers (Pariser 2011;

⁸ <<https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19>> (06/2021).

⁹ They distinguish between the three disorders as follows: *Mis-information* is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant. *Dis-information* is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm. *Mal-information* is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere.

Bakshy 2015). These two perspectives are inevitably intertwined, although in different ways. For example, a speech by the Prime Minister can be disseminated both from the institutional website of the Government, and from the press, and from social media and social networks. On the contrary, a post on Facebook by a non-institutional or professional figure will hardly go beyond the confines of social networks. But that doesn't mean it will have a lower spread.

The development of e-Government and the availability of online information for citizens varies considerably across the EU Member States. According to a 2020 Eurostat survey, the percentage of regular web users who refer primarily to institutional communication channels in Italy, is significantly lower than that of other European countries, such as Finland, Germany or France.¹⁰

People increasingly use the internet to carry out their daily tasks. Over the past years, the use of e-Government has also gained popularity as it enables citizens to obtain information at any moment or carry out administrative tasks remotely. In 2020, 47% of people in the EU aged 16-74 had obtained information from the websites of public authorities during the last 12 months prior to the survey. This share increased substantially compared with 2008 (33%). Citizens of all ages use public authorities' websites to obtain information. The share of people that reported to have done this in the last 12 months was highest among the 25-34 years old (59%), followed closely by those 35-44 years old (56%). Although older citizens were less likely to use public authorities' websites to get information, more than a quarter (26%) of citizens aged 65-74 had used government websites for this purpose in the last 12 months. In 2020, the highest shares of people that used the websites of public authorities to obtain information in the last 12 months were recorded in Denmark (89%), Finland (85%), the Netherlands (81%) and Sweden (79%). In contrast, only 10% of citizens in Romania had obtained information from public authorities through their websites. This was also not common in Italy and Bulgaria (both 19%).¹⁰

Many surveys have been conducted after the spread of the pandemic and the global experience of lockdown and restrictions, and at the time of writing, some significant data regarding media consumption and trusted sources of news emerge. According to a survey from April 2020, Italian people considered TV newscasts the most reliable news source regarding the coronavirus (COVID-19). The Government followed in the ranking with 48% of individuals seeing it as a reliable news source. News shared by friends and family were perceived as more reliable (20%) than radio (17%).¹¹

¹⁰ <<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20210306-1>> (06/2021).

¹¹ All data in the report comes from a GlobalWebIndex custom survey conducted between March 31st and 2nd April, which tried to gather at least 1.000 Internet users, aged between 16 and 64, for 17 countries including: Australia, Brazil, China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Philippines, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, UK and USA, India, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland. The answers were collected based on age, gender and education. In some countries, a small number of responses were found for groups 16-24 or 55-64 in these cases responses were associated with adjacent age groups. For this wave 2 the Italian champion is made up of 1.075 users.

News sources regarding the COVID-19 pandemic perceived as reliable in Italy, in 2020, by type

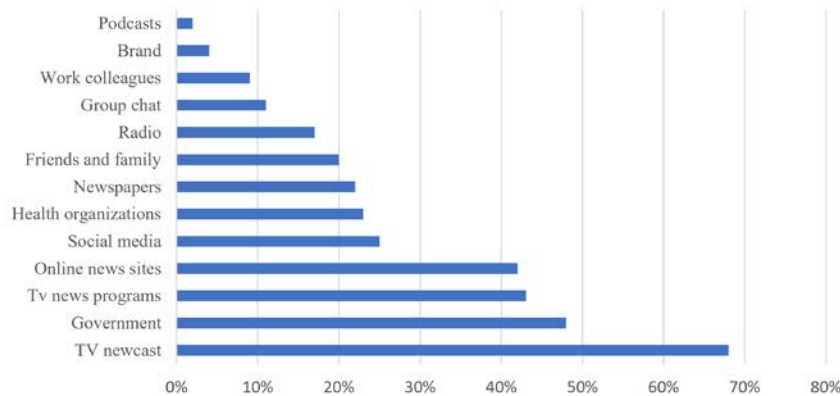


Table 1. News sources regarding the COVID-19 pandemic perceived as reliable in Italy, in 2020, by type (Statista 2020a)

As for the most trusted sources of coronavirus news in Finland in the same year, television news and newspapers were considered the most trusted sources for information about the coronavirus (COVID-19). For around 70% of Finns, TV news was the most trusted news source, followed by newspapers with a share of 60%. One third of the respondents had the highest confidence in radio news, while other news sources, especially online, were not considered as trustworthy.

Most trusted news sources for information about the COVID-19 in Finland as of April 2020

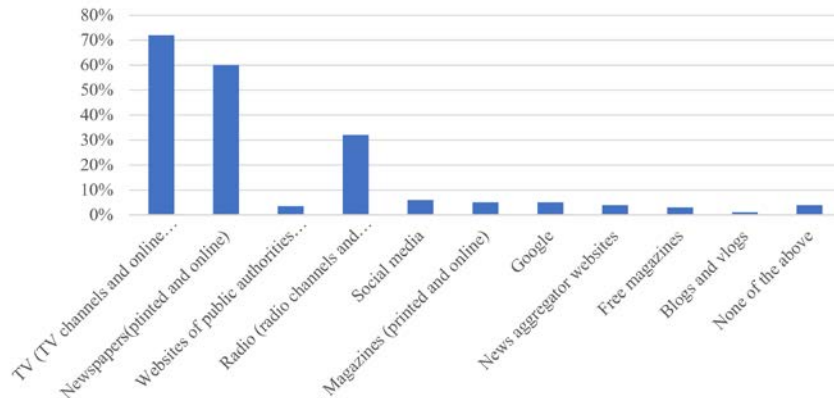


Table 2. Most trusted news sources for information about the COVID-19 in Finland as of April 2020 (Statista 2020b)

The most significant element that emerges from these surveys is that the audience (intended as recipients of the message) perceives social media as less reliable for receiving truthful information on the progress of the pandemic; in fact, within the broad spectrum of information disorders it is possible to trace the greatest responsibility of spreading fake news to social media (and its users). The pervasive use of social media and the spread of misinformation among them forced

some governments, such as the Italian one, to adopt hybrid communication strategies where, for instance, the official statements of the Prime Minister were announced and posted on his official Facebook profile (see section 6). For the aim of this study we analyse the institutional communication intended as communication realized in an organized manner by an institution or its representatives with the main aim of setting a good relationship between the institution and its potential public (Lever *et al.* 2002). It aims to establish quality relationships between the institution and the public with which it relates, to achieve social notoriety and adequate public image for the purposes and activities of the institution itself in terms of Public communication (La Porte 2021). Institutional communication, as mentioned before in the paragraph, is not immune to certain information pollution as well. For instance, at the beginning of March 2020, the Italian government was involved in a serious episode of *Mal-information*, defined as the genuine information that is shared to cause harm. This includes private or revealing information that is spread to harm a person or reputation (Wardle and Derakshan 2017). The draft of the government decree of the 8th March 2020 with the new strict measures to fight the coronavirus ended up in the main online newspapers – in Italy and in the world. According to the CNN online newspaper, that document was provided to them by the press office of the Lombardy Region who denied any involvement. This serious episode of news leaks caused a real crisis communication example within the broader emergency scenario caused by the pandemic.

4. Lexical choice in the discourse of the Italian and Finnish governments: extracts of two speeches

In what follows two communications of the Italian and Finnish governments and the day-after headings on two national newspapers are analysed. The speeches are given by the then-Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte (2018-2021) for Italy and by the Prime Minister Sanna Marin (2019-present) for Finland and are representatives of two crucial moments in the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020. The first one is the first available official communication on the spread of COVID-19, and the second one is representative of the second stage when the “cohabitation with the virus”-period started. In the discourses we paid attention in particular to the lexical choice of verbs, nominals, adjectives and adverbs and in how the discourse is overall construed taking into account the six factors presented in section 1.

On the basis of the audience to which it is addressed, the genre of these discourses can be considered as both informative and persuasive: informative about the ongoing health emergency and persuasive as they aim at convincing people to comply with the restrictions and recommendations provided by the prime ministers.

	Date	Approximate word count ¹²
Italy	22.2.2020	863
	26.4.2020	3.479
Finland	27.2.2020 ¹³	2.093
	4.5.2020 ¹⁴	304

Table 3. Government communications and word count

¹²The greetings at the beginning as well as the questions of the journalists and the answers to them are excluded from word count and analysis.

¹³<<https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/hallituksen-tiedotustilaisuus-koronavirustilanteesta-ja-varautumisesta-suomesa-klo-13-30>> (06/2021).

¹⁴<<https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/10616/hallitus-linjasi-suunnitelmasta-koronakriisin-hallinnan-hybridistrategiaksi-ja-rajoitusten-vaiheittaisesta-purkamisesta>> (06/2021).

We then observe coronavirus-related headings on the day-after newspaper (one for each country) to check how many of them concern the official communication. We aim at comparing the language, namely, whether the lexical choice is similar or not, whether words with a greater impact are used or not, whether other kinds of strategies, such as the choice of verbal forms, are adopted. We focus on the news headings in particular as we consider them to represent on the one side the core of the article and on the other hand an invitation to further reading and thus having necessarily a persuasive impact on the readers (Santulli 2015).

Both Italian and Finnish governments have provided communications on the evolving situation on a regular basis since the end of February 2020. The communications are given by representatives of the governmental and/or sanitary authorities and during every communication more than one person speaks and presents the situation of her/his competence. In the present paper we restrict our analysis on the discourse of the prime ministers Giuseppe Conte and Sanna Marin.

4.1 Italy: Communication 1, 22.2.2020

The first official communication of the Italian government regarding coronavirus was released on 22nd February 2020 and it is followed by other two talks, respectively, from Roberto Speranza (Minister of Health) and Angelo Borrelli (head of the Civil Protection Department). The talk is divided into three parts.

In the first part, Conte stressed the importance of the efforts of all the parties involved, the use of the language is shaped around the concept of the meticulousness of the commitment carried out by everyone. It is noticeable how he wants to highlight the teamwork and the scrupulousness of every step taken by the Italian government by some lexical choices such as the verb *impegnarsi* 'to commit' and the corresponding nominalized form *impegno* 'commitment' and the repetition of the verb *lavorare* 'to work' and *tutelare* 'to protect'. In the second part Giuseppe Conte spends some minutes thanking many institutional figures stating very clearly that all of them are involved in the containment of the virus. The element that emerged mostly is the desire to make people perceive that the work was capillary and that it was carried out with the utmost caution. The president emphasizes the actions taken by Italy underlining the caution, the methodological rigor and the timeliness of certain choices (Italy was in fact the first country to block air traffic to and from China) through the use and the repetition along the talk of superlative adjectives as *massimo* 'best, utmost' (6 times). In the third part he accentuates the urgency of take imminent actions in the near future stressing the importance of moral rigour of the citizens by lexical choices such as: *autoresponsabilità* 'self-responsibility', *autocensura* 'self-censorship', *comportamenti* 'behaviors' (x 3). The use of adverbs are pretty noticeable: *sicuramente* (x2) 'surely', *costituzionalmente* 'constitutionally', *ovviamente* (x2) 'obviously', *assolutamente* (x2) 'absolutely' and *sempre* (x4) 'always'. In this first intervention there is only one direct reference to the *Coronavirus*, instead the noun *emergency* is used twice. What stands out the most along the talk is the massive usage of the first plural form of every verb to convey this sense of unity that we mentioned before. In the bipartition of inclusive (me + you) and exclusive (me + s/he or them) "we" (Filimonova 2005) the Italian Prime Minister uses mostly the exclusive "we" which gives a stronger leadership flavour to the whole speech and we can see behind it a willingness to increase trust to the action of the government. However, exclusive and inclusive "we" can appear even in the same sentence as in 3) below in which we have an esortative use *non dimentichiamo* 'let's not forget' and an exclusive "we" where the subject refer to the cabinet. The examples in Table 4 are directly drawn from the speech.

1) Abbiamo lavorato sino ad ora, è tutta la giornata che siamo impegnati per una riunione [...] abbiamo convocato [...]	We have worked until now, we have been busy the whole day for a meeting [...] we have summoned [...]
2) [...] abbiamo adottato un decreto legge [...]	[...] we have adopted a decree [...]
3) [...] non dimentichiamo che stiamo parlando [...]	[...] let's not forget that we are talking [...]

Table 4. Clusivity of “we” in Conte’s communication 1

In relation to the six factors presented in Section 1, the predominant ones are n.1 and 4: 1) *Harm-reducing, honest and accurate information*, which is explicitly stated by Giuseppe Conte during the talk. Lexical choices also contribute to reassuring the audience since he avoids fear-inducing words (e.g. *disease, pandemic, epidemic*); the choice of using positive and constructive words and the constant use of first person plural for verbs also convey the sense of community and unity; 4) *The provision of proof of tangible actions* also is fulfilled by the explanation of what is possible to do in case of emergency, in fact Conte and his ministers are presenting the ten rules to avoid the spread of the virus and, moreover, he wants to underline the efficiency of the Italian health system. He clarifies the reason why Italy presents a high number of infected, and what is going to be done through the new decree.

4.2 Press in Italy 24.2.2020

In the eight COVID-19 related main headings of the day-after newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, one of the most widespread newspapers in Italy, no one explicitly refers to the speech of Giuseppe Conte the day before. The headings refer to many socio-economic aspects caused by the COVID-19 emergency. In 1) and 3) the titles focus on the restrictions and closures in Northern Italy. In 2) there is a short title addressing the food issue in supermarkets. The title in 4) expresses with very few words the most urgent aspect of the emergency: the need for intensive care units. This simple and short title conveys all the dramaticity of the situation. In 7) the topic is one of the points stated by Giuseppe Conte the day before during his talk, Italy (at that time) has the highest number of cases and there is an objective necessity to explain why.

During the pandemic there has been a large use of war metaphors and military jargon both in political communications and among the media, in general. The metaphorical presentation of the COVID-19 emergency as a war is not a new invention. There are several examples and studies in scientific literature that indicate how war metaphors are employed in everyday life (e.g. in politics, business, sport, love and moreover, disease). As stated in a recent study conducted by Panzeri, Di Paola and Domaneschi:

The use of war metaphors is a widespread strategy in public speech for framing and representing the challenges to be faced. US Presidents declared war against poverty (Johnson, 1964), crime (Johnson, 1965), drugs (Nixon, 1971), cancer (Nixon, 1971), inflation (Ford, 1977); but this metaphor is so ubiquitous that it can also involve apparently not belligerent enemies such as traffic jams, sunshine and even salad. A study examined all articles published on three magazines (TIME, Newsweek and the Canadian Maclean) over a period of twenty years (1981–2000) and found that war/battle metaphors occurred in 15% of the articles. (2021: 2)

This powerfully evocative association might be dangerous because it could affect the way people conceptualize the pandemic and react to it, leading citizens to endorse authoritarianism

and strict limitations to civil liberties. The idea that conceptual metaphors actually influence reasoning has been corroborated by Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011), who showed that, when crime is metaphorically presented as a beast, readers become more enforcement-oriented than when crime is metaphorically framed as a virus. Recently, Steen, Reijniere and Burgers replied that this metaphorical framing effect does not seem to occur and suggested that the question should be rephrased about the conditions under which metaphors do or do not influence reasoning (2013). Nevertheless, the relationship between metaphor and interpretation is very close, especially in political communication. What defines the metaphorical use is therefore the connection between two lexical semantic contents and the context in relation to which they activate the search for further information, in particular in relation to the speaker. As stated in Baldi (2021), in political discourse the function of metaphor can be decisive: since it draws on two domains that correlate abstract notions to our experience of concrete realities, it is an effective way of making an abstract ideology accessible as an affective one.

Although we have not found in our analysis this type of use in the speeches of Conte and Marin, in the Italian news headings we can trace at least these words belonging to the semantic field of war: *sorvegliato speciale* 'special surveillance', *coprifuoco* 'curfew', *campo minato* 'minefield', *prigionieri* 'prisoners', *check point* and *nemico* 'enemy'. Also, in 1) words such as *chiusure* 'closures', *blocchi* 'blocks', *stop* and *no* contributes to convey a deep sense of anxiety which therefore clashes with the parameter 1) *Harm-reducing, honest and accurate information*, which instead, emerges from the institutional strategy in the speech of Giuseppe Conte the day before. Beside these lexical choices which are part of a clear communicative strategy used to convey a sense of anguish and emergence, the tone of the titles is pretty neutral except for 5) *La forza di reagire* 'the strength to react' which is more dramatic.

<p>1) Virus al Nord, chiusure e blocchi. L'emergenza: oltre 150 casi in 5 regioni. A Crema la terza vittima. Il nostro paese diventa "sorvegliato speciale", raddoppio di contagi in un giorno.</p> <p>Stop a scuole, musei, cinema e pub. No ai turisti in Duomo. E l'Austria ferma per ore un treno dall'Italia.</p>	<p>Viruses in the North, closures and blocks. The emergency: over 150 cases in 5 regions. The third victim is in Crema. Our country becomes "under special surveillance", doubling infections in one day.</p> <p>Stop at schools, museums, cinemas and pubs. No tourists in the Cathedral. And Austria stops a train from Italy for hours.</p>
<p>2) Corsa alle scorte. Gli scaffali vuoti nei supermercati.</p>	<p>Stock rush. Empty shelves in supermarkets.</p>
<p>3) E a Venezia addio Carnevale.</p>	<p>And in Venice goodbye Carnival.</p>
<p>4) Pronti 3.500 posti letto.</p>	<p>3.500 beds ready.</p>
<p>5) La forza di reagire.</p> <p>Milano che chiude e annuncia il coprifuoco è l'immagine rovesciata di sé stessa, la città che appartiene alla gente si ferma nell'anticamera della paura, smarrita, quasi rassegnata, accettando una prova che mette a rischio la tenuta di un sistema. Il coronavirus è un campo minato da attraversare con prudenza e con ogni precauzione, ma i divieti alzano barriere mai viste e sperimentate in tempo di pace.</p>	<p>The strength to react.</p> <p>Milan that closes and announces the curfew is the inverted image of itself, the city that belongs to the people stops in the antechamber of fear, lost, almost resigned, accepting a test that jeopardizes the stability of a system. The coronavirus is a minefield to be crossed with caution and with every precaution, but the bans raise barriers never seen and experienced in peacetime.</p>

<p>6) Cibo a domicilio e check point. Vita da isolati.</p> <p>La zona rossa del Lodigiano. Le forze che presidiano. Palette e divise. All'interno ci sono circa 47 mila persone alle quali è stato consigliato di rimanere in casa, ma che volendo possono uscire per le vie del proprio comune o raggiungere gli altri paesi della zona rossa. Tutti "prigionieri" della quarantena.</p>	<p>Food delivery and check point. Life in isolation.</p> <p>The red zone of the Lodi area. The presiding forces. Palettes and uniforms. Inside, there are about 47,000 people who have been advised to stay at home, but who, if they want, can go out through the streets of their own municipality or reach other towns in the red zone. All "prisoners" of the quarantine.</p>
<p>7) Milano. Un caso al Policlinico e molti uffici: lavorate da casa.</p> <p>Perché da noi così tanti malati?</p>	<p>Milan. A case at the Polyclinic and many offices: you work from home</p> <p>Why are there so many sick with us?</p>
<p>8)Le ricette globali.</p> <p>Abbiamo visto con piacere il ministro della Salute e il presidente della Regione Lombardia annunciare insieme i dolorosi provvedimenti diretti ad evitare l'estensione del contagio. E letto con soddisfazione che anche il presidente della regione Veneto ha firmato insieme con il ministro la relativa ordinanza (la legge del 1978 sul Servizio sanitario nazionale richiede solo la firma del ministro). Ma, per affrontare questo nemico non basta la cooperazione nazionale.</p>	<p>8) The global recipes.</p> <p>We were pleased to see the Minister of Health and the President of the Lombardy Region jointly announce the painful measures aimed at avoiding the spread of the infection. It is read with satisfaction that the president of the Veneto region has also signed the relative ordinance together with the minister (the 1978 law on the National Health Service requires only the signature of the minister). But national cooperation is not enough to face this enemy.</p>

Table 5. COVID-19 related headings on CdS, 24.2.2020

4.3 Italy: Communication 2, 26.4.2020

The second communication under analysis was released on 26th April 2020 at the beginning of a second stage of the emergency due to coronavirus. Italy is now moving to the so-called *Fase due* 'Second stage'. This a long talk made by Giuseppe Conte only, crucially there is no intervention of other institutional representatives. The state of emergency is still valid even if the spread of the virus is more under control. The length of the talk is mainly due to the complexity of the new norms which will be valid from 4th May 2020 on. In the first part of the talk, he underlines the complexity of the situation praising the efforts made by the citizens to contain the virus. There is a pervasive use of the verbs: *monitorare* 'to monitor', *controllare* 'to control', *verificare* 'to verify', the explicit subject of all these verbs is the Italian Government. In the first part of this talk, Conte makes a sort of claim (intended as in marketing and commercial sense) saying: *Se ami l'Italia, mantieni le distanze* 'If you love Italy, keep the distances'. This is quite unusual in the context of oral institutional communication but it may be connected to the pervasive use of (personal) social media and the tendency to homologate the syntactic choices in all his communicative channels. As we are going to analyse later in the paper, the communication strategies adopted by Giuseppe Conte and his staff are different from the one of the Finnish Government and this specific choice may also affect his language. There are not significant recurrences in lexical choices except for some nouns such as *salute* 'health' (x6), *protocollo di sicurezza* 'security protocol' (x4) and *comitato tecnico-scientifico* 'technical-scientific committee' (x4). The pervasive use of many modal verbs with the form *dobbiamo* 'we must'

(x13) is what stands out the most, the Prime Minister uses *dobbiamo essere consapevoli* ‘we must be aware’, *dobbiamo rendercene conto* ‘we must realize’, *dobbiamo rimboccarci le maniche* ‘we must roll up the sleeves’, *dobbiamo assumerci* ‘we must take on’, *dobbiamo rispettare* ‘we must respect’, *dobbiamo approfittare* ‘we must take advantage’, *dobbiamo continuare* ‘we must continue’, *dobbiamo sbloccare* ‘we must unblock’, *dobbiamo essere orgogliosi* ‘we must be proud’. All of these verbs are used with the first plural form with the clear goal to convey a sense of unity and common civil effort that must be committed by everyone. Hence, in this speech we can observe a clearly predominant use of inclusive “we”. Whereas in the first speech the Prime Minister placed himself among the authorities, being the utmost authority speaking to the country, now he is a citizen among the others, “one of us”. In 4) below we can clearly see this dislocation: *bisogna rispettare* ‘it must be respected/we must respect’ is an impersonal form that includes the speaker as well his audience, as well as the expression *teniamo conto* ‘let’s take into consideration’ an esortative first person plural, and the scientists and experts are a third part, ‘they’. In 5) the inclusive “we” is even more stressed by the pronoun *tutti* ‘all’.

4) [...] bisogna rispettare questa precauzione teniamo conto che gli scienziati e gli esperti ci dicono [...]	[...] this precaution must be respected, let’s take into consideration that the scientists and experts tell us [...]
5) vogliamo tutti che il paese riparta [...]	We all want the country to restart again [...]
6) potremmo affidarci a risentimento [...] potremmo prendercela con chiunque capiti a tiro [...]	we could rely on resentment [...] we could go after anyone who happens within range [...]

Table 6. Clusivity of “we” in Conte’s communication 2

As for the second talk of Giuseppe Conte, the main points are n.1, n.4 and, above all, n.3: 1) *Harm-reducing, honest and accurate information*; as for this point in this speech made by

the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte emerges, above all, the honesty with which he describes the efforts made by the Italian people during the first phase. 3) *Clear objectives and goals and how they are presented*; the main purpose of this talk, in fact, is the presentation of the second phase goals and new rules. The Prime Minister is very clear about the risks that this new phase may cause. He expresses his desire to grant to everyone a few days of preparation in view of the effective entry into force of the second phase’s rule which are anticipated by a clear 4) *provision of proof of tangible actions*.

4.4 Press in Italy 28.4.2020

As for the communication given on 27.4.2020 and the related day-after newspaper there is only one mention of the Prime Minister’s speech in title 1) The tone is neutral and it is just a statement on the new rules and prohibitions mentioned in the speech the day before. The sense of objectivity is given by the use of reported speech. Interestingly, in the subheading the quoted part is the last one after a brief list of the changes in the restrictions and it contains the exhortation to continue to be cautious. The fact of being quoted highlights this part and it is thus stressed as the most important information (Antelmi 2012 among others).

Four headings out of eight are related to economic matters such as financial help, funds, cuts and worries. The economic situation is the predominant theme over the whole narrative. The Chinese case is mentioned twice on the front page of the newspaper in two headings and the tone of the discussion in 2) and 8) is pretty polemic and controversial. In 2) there are clear

allegations against Chinese government alluding directly to a disinformation campaign perpetrated by Chinese authorities. In 8) the tone of the title and the discussion is both polemic and, for the first time here, personal. The author adds personal information and consideration to his piece; he also adds parenthetically a sort of request in the title: *per favore* 'please'. There are no explicit elements that allude to war related language.

<p>1) Si riapre con regole e divieti. Annuncio di Conte: i negozi riaprono il 18 maggio. Niente messe: l'ira dei vescovi.</p> <p>Bar, ristoranti e parrucchieri: via libera il primo giugno. Esame di maturità in presenza. "Contagi ancora alti, serve cautela".</p>	<p>We reopen with rules and prohibitions. Conte's announcement: shops will reopen on May 18th. No masses: the anger of the bishops.</p> <p>Bars, restaurants and hairdressers: green light on 1st June. Graduation exams in presence. "Contaminations still high, caution is needed".</p>
<p>2) Sulla Cina troppe ambiguità.</p> <p>Scrive il New York Times, uno dei quotidiani più ostili a Trump dell'intero pianeta, che la Commissione europea avrebbe attenuato, su pressione dell'autorità di Pechino, un rapporto ufficiale sulle mistificazioni cinesi in tema di diffusione del Coronavirus. In questo rapporto si scriveva che "la Cina continua a condurre una campagna di disinformazione globale per sviare le accuse legate allo scoppio della pandemia".</p>	<p>Too many ambiguities about China.</p> <p>The New York Times, one of the most hostile newspapers to Trump on the entire planet, writes that the European Commission allegedly attenuated, under pressure from the Beijing authorities, an official report on Chinese mystifications regarding the spread of Coronavirus. In this report it was written that "China continues to conduct a global disinformation campaign to deflect allegations related to the outbreak of the pandemic".</p>
<p>3) Il decreto in arrivo per le partite IVA. Il bonus salirà a 800 euro.</p> <p>Bonus per gli autonomi che sale a 800 euro e di 600 per le babysitter. Un piano di circa 55 miliardi.</p>	<p>The incoming decree for VAT owners. The bonus will rise to 800 euros.</p> <p>Bonus for the self-employed which rises to € 800 and € 600 for babysitters. A plan of about 55 billion.</p>
<p>4) Fondi diretti alle imprese.</p> <p>Maurizio Casasco, presidente di Confapi: "Ora più risorse, ma i fondi vanno versati direttamente alle imprese".</p>	<p>Direct funds to businesses.</p> <p>Maurizio Casasco, president of Confapi: "Now more resources, but the funds must be paid directly to businesses".</p>
<p>5) Tagli, infezioni e pochi tamponi: i medici passano alle denunce.</p> <p>Mascherine inadatte, pochi tamponi, tagli: l'accusa di non aver tutelato chi lavora in ospedale. L'Italia è il Paese dove da anni la probabilità di prendersi un'infezione negli ospedali è la più alta: il 6 per cento. Oggi il personale sanitario – che conta 19.942 contagiati e 185 morti – attraverso i sindacati ha presentato un esposto ai Nas oltre che alle Procure di dieci regioni: contestano alle aziende ospedaliere di non aver tutelato medici e infermieri come dovuto.</p>	<p>Cuts, infections and a few swabs: doctors move on to complaints.</p> <p>Unsuitable masks, few swabs, cuts: the accusation of not having protected those who work in the hospital. Italy is the country where the probability of catching an infection in hospitals has been the highest for years: 6 percent. Today the health personnel - which counts 19,942 infected and 185 dead - through the trade unions presented a complaint to the Nas as well as to the prosecutors of ten regions: they criticize the hospitals for not having protected doctors and nurses as necessary.</p>

<p>6) Mascherine, quando usarle. Fissato il prezzo: 0,50 euro.</p> <p>Ci sarà un po' di allentamento sull'uso delle mascherine, anche se resteranno obbligatorie tutte le volte che non si riuscirà a rispettare un metro di distanza. E inoltre, sui mezzi pubblici, dal parrucchiere e nei negozi. Il prezzo? 50 centesimi.</p>	<p>Masks, when to use them. Fixed price: 0.50 euros.</p> <p>There will be some slack in the use of the masks, although they will remain mandatory whenever it is not possible to respect a distance of one meter. And also, on public transport, at the hairdresser and in shops. The price? 50 cents.</p>
<p>7) Vittime in calo, la Lombardia torna al 7 marzo.</p> <p>Ieri i morti in Italia sono stati 260. In Lombardia 56, il dato più basso dal 7 marzo. Sperando che questo sia il segnale che da giorni gli esperti si aspettavano di vedere. Ma nella regione che ha registrato ad oggi il maggior numero di decessi tornano però a crescere i contagi dopo sei giorni in discesa: l'incremento maggiore nell'area di Milano, più 463. Continua invece il calo di chi viene curato in terapia intensiva.</p>	<p>Victims in decline, Lombardy returns to 7 March.</p> <p>Yesterday there were 260 deaths in Italy, in Lombardy 56, the lowest figure since March 7, hoping that this is the signal that experts had expected to see for days. But in the region that has recorded the highest number of deaths to date, they return however, infections are growing after six days in decline: the greatest increase in Milan area, plus 463, while the decline in those who are treated in intensive care continues.</p>
<p>8) La verità (per favore) su di noi.</p> <p>Alla vigilia dell'8 aprile, quando è stato revocato il lockdown di Wuhan – un lockdown molto più rigido del nostro –, la Cina intera dichiarava 62 nuovi casi, la maggior parte dei quali importati. Il giorno precedente 32. Ieri, in Piemonte, la mia regione che non ho mai sentito così geograficamente lontana, i nuovi infetti confermati erano 394. Nella Lombardia limitrofa erano 920. Però apriamo. O meglio, iniziamo ad aprire, perché lo fanno anche gli altri, perché si avvicina l'estate e sotto sotto speriamo che il caldo ci dia una mano.</p>	<p>The truth (please) about us.</p> <p>On the eve of April 8, when the Wuhan lockdown – a much more rigid lockdown than ours – was lifted, the whole of China declared 62 new cases, most of them imported. The previous day 32. Yesterday, in Piedmont, my region that I have never felt so geographically distant, the new confirmed infected were 394. In neighboring Lombardy there were 920. But let's open. Deep down we hope that the heat will give us a hand.</p>

Table 7. COVID-19 related headings on CdS 27.4.2020

4.5 Finland: Communication 1, 27.2.2020

The first official communication of the Finnish government regarding coronavirus was released on 27th February 2020. The first talk is by the Prime Minister Sanna Marin and it is followed by other two Ministers' talks. The communication is built around the core concept of being prepared to face the arrival of COVID-19 virus in Finland. Moreover, the ministers aim at reassuring citizens on the fact that in any case Finland is prepared to face the diffusion of COVID-19 in terms of medical competence and equipment, and for the moment there is no worry at all as the attested cases are just few and under control.

The core concepts of the discourse stand out from the lexical choice as can be inferred by the repeated use of the verb *varautua* 'to be prepared' and of the corresponding nominalized form *varautuminen* 'anticipation, the being prepared to'. As can be expected, the noun *koronavirus* 'coronavirus' is highly occurring even though it is not related to the word pandemic or emergency, which are never used. Also, nouns related to authorities such as *hallitus* 'government', *valtioneuvosto*

‘cabinet’ and *ministeriö* ‘ministry’ are frequent. However, the most used noun is *Suomi* ‘Finland’ with six occurrences. This, together with the use of first person plural for verbs, as in 7) creates a common ground, a sense of community based on the opposition of two entities: on the one side ‘we, Finland’ that is well-prepared to face something challenging and potentially dangerous, on the other side ‘the other’, which is not yet defined as an enemy but just as threat that is still far from the Finnish reality, together with ‘the others’, that is other European countries compared to which Finland has excellent medical and sanitary resources. The Finnish prime minister uses an inclusive “we” that refers to the country in its entirety. Hence, even if obviously who can raise the preparation of the country consist of the health and institutional authorities, it also includes the citizens who are called to respect the indications. In addition, we also find use of exclusive “we” that refers to the prime minister + other representatives of the cabinet and of the health authorities, as exemplified in 8). The examples in Table 8 are directly drawn from the speech.

7) [...] <i>pystymme kobottaa valmiuttamme nopeasti</i> [...]	[...] we can raise our preparation quickly [...]
8) [...] olemme halunneet asiassa noudattaa [...]	[...] in this thing we wanted to obey [...]

Table 8. Clusivity of “we” in Marin’s communication 1

In addition, it is explicitly said that the official communications of the Finnish authorities are completely reliable. This again aims at creating a general sense of trust among citizens. Some adverbs in particular *tehokkaasti* ‘efficiently’, *tiivisti* ‘tightly’, *nopeasti* ‘quickly’, *jatkuvasti* ‘continuously’ can be semantically related to highlight the proper reaction of the government to something serious and unexpected (the spread of coronavirus) happening in a sudden and fast way but to which the government is reacting overall in an efficient way in addition to being in close collaboration with other entities and being continuously updated on the situation.

In relation to the six factors presented in Section 1. we can observe that:

1) *Harm-reducing, honest and accurate information*: this is explicitly stated by the Prime Minister and also emerges from the lexical choice in particular on two levels: on the one side by the avoidance of fear-creating words such as pandemic, epidemic, on the other side by the use of trust-creating words and use of first person plural for verbs.

2) *Simple and quick message*: this is clearly satisfied as both the speech itself and the sentences in it are quick and complex sentences (e.g. subordinate clauses, participial or infinitive phrases) are avoided. This is also in line with the recommendations of clear language to be used by the government.¹⁵

3) *Clear objectives and goals and how they are presented*, and

4) *The provision of proofs of tangible actions* also are fulfilled by the explanation of both what is possible to do in case of worsening of the general health situation and of what is going to be done right now (e.g. the sting of a COVID-19 coordination group formed by ministers and health authorities).

4.6 Press in Finland 28.2.2020

In the seven COVID-19 related main headings of the day-after newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, the national and most widespread newspaper in Finland, only one title refers to the speech of the

¹⁵ <<https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/marin/government-programme/government-communications-strategy/values-in-government-communications>> (06/2021).

prime minister Sanna Marin (n. 4 below). The headings report through the mean of indirect speech what is considered the core idea of the day before speech. Indirect or reported speech is generally used not only to vehiculate neutrality but also to give a scent of authority to the information, as discussed in Antelmi (2012) among others. In this title both the verb *varautua* ‘to be prepared’ and the corresponding nominalized form *varautuminen* ‘anticipation, the (fact of) being prepared to’ are used, which are exactly the same words used by the Prime Minister in her discourse. This also shows coherence between the institutional communication given on 27.2.2020 and the day-after news on the newspaper and thus fulfils factor 5) *Coherency among institutional communications and media (press)*. The other titles refer to chronicle (n. 1, 5, 7) or are comments or deepenings on the topic (n. 2, 3, 6). All the headings make use of present tense.

<p>1) Käsidesi käy kaupaksi juuri nyt, apteekista kerrotaan: “Pitää vain toivoa, että ihmiset käyttävät sitä myös”.</p> <p>Yliopiston Apteekin arjessa koronavirus näkyy vain vähän: suusuojainhylly on tyhjillään, ja osa asiakkaista haluaa jutella aiheesta. Ihmiset eivät vaikuta erityisen huolestuneilta, kertoo apteekinhoitaja Elina Lammi.</p>	<p>Hand sanitizer sells like hot cakes right now. From the pharmacy is said: “We have just to hope that people will also use it”.</p> <p>In the ordinary day of the University Pharmacy coronavirus is barely seen: the mask shelter is empty and some of the customers want to talk about it. People don’t seem particularly worried, says Elina Lammi.</p>
<p>2) Voisiko koronavirus tarttua vierustoverilta 10 minuutin metromatkalla? Professori kertoo, miten lähikontakti määritellään.</p> <p>Lähikontakti on THL:n mukaan henkilö, joka on ollut koronavirustartunnan saaneen kanssa tekemisissä kasvotusten tai samassa huoneessa yli 15 minuuttia. Määritelmä perustuu todennäköisyyksiin, sanoo epidemiologian professori Pekka Nuorti.</p>	<p>Can coronavirus be transmitted from the person sitting nearby in a 10 minutes subway trip? A professor tells how close contact is defined.</p> <p>According to THL, a close contact is a person who has been in contact with the coronavirus positive individual in the same space or room for more than 15 minutes. The definition is based on probabilities, tells the epidemiologist professor Pekka Nuorti.</p>
<p>3) Hyvä käsihygienia torjuu koronavirusta, paniikki ei.</p>	<p>A good hand hygiene defends from coronavirus, panic doesn’t.</p>
<p>4) Pääministeri: Koronavirukseen tärkeää varautua huolellisesti, mutta samalla välttää ylimitoitettuja toimia.</p> <p>Sanna Marin antoi eduskunnalle pääministerin ilmoituksen Suomen varautumisesta koronavirukseen.</p>	<p>The prime minister: It is important to be prepared carefully for coronavirus but at the same time to avoid overscale actions.</p> <p>Sanna Marin gave the prime minister’s announcement to the Finnish parliament on the anticipation of Finland to coronavirus.</p>
<p>5) Ylilääkäri: Helsingin koronaviruspotilas voi hyvin, THL selvitti naisen lähikontaktit matkareitiltä.</p> <p>Tartunnan saaneeseen suomalaisnaiseen matkareitillä lähikontaktissa olleet henkilöt ovat eri maiden viranomaisten tiedossa. Viranomaiset ovat heihin yhteydessä. THL ei erittele tarkemmin, mistä maista henkilöt ovat kotoisin.</p>	<p>The medical superintendent: The coronavirus patient in Helsinki is good, THL examined the contacts of the woman on the trip.</p> <p>The persons that the infected Finnish woman met on her trip are known by the authorities of the different countries. The authorities are in contact with them. THL does not give details on the countries of origin of these persons.</p>

<p>6) Voiko koronavirus tyhjentää kauppojen hyllyjä Suomessa? Tietyistä älypuhelimista voi tulla pulaa jo lähiviikkoina, arvioi S-ryhmä.</p>	<p>Can coronavirus empty shops' shelters in Finland? Some smartphones can be missing in next weeks, estimates the S-group.</p>
<p>Elintarvikkeisiin ja käyttötavaroiden tuontiin virus ei näytä vaikuttavan tänä keväänä juuri lainkaan, suurostajat arvioivat.</p>	<p>The virus does not seem to have an impact on food availability and import this spring.</p>
<p>7) Ensimmäistä koronavirusrokotetta aletaan testata huhtikuussa.</p>	<p>The first coronavirus vaccine will be tested in April.</p>
<p>Rokotteet valmistuvat aikaisintaan vuoden päästä. Lääkettä tautiin pitää odottaa kauemmin. Nykyisistä lääkkeistä on jo saatu lupaavia tuloksia.</p>	<p>The vaccines will be ready not earlier than one year. A medicine for the disease could take even longer. At present there already are promising medicines.</p>

Table 9. COVID-19 related headings on HS, 28.2.2020

4.7 Finland: Communication 2, 4.5.2020

The second communication under analysis was released on 4th May 2020, when the beginning of a second stage of the health emergency due to coronavirus is identifiable also in Finland. The country is now moving towards the adoption of the so-called hybrid strategy which is based on four key actions: *testaa-jäljitä-eristä-hoida* 'test-track-isolate-cure'.

The spread of coronavirus is better under control and even if the state of emergency is still valid some of the restrictions can be now dismissed. This is evident in particular in the use of nominalized forms such as: *jatkaminen* 'continuation', *purkaminen* 'dismission'. The dismissal of the more restrictive indications should be done in a restrained and gradual way in order to control the diffusion of the virus and this is emphasized by the very frequent use of manner adverbials such as *hallitusti* 'restrainedly', *asteittain* 'gradually', *porrastetusti* 'step by step', and by nominalized forms such as *hillitseminen* 'control'. Interestingly, different from the first communication, in this one no use of first-person plural is made. However, the passive is widely used. This form can be used both with as an impersonal form (in Finnish in fact the agent cannot be expressed in this construction), as in 9), or for first person plural especially in colloquial Finnish, as in 10).

<p>9) Kun rajoitustoimia [...] poistetaan, epidemian kehittymistä ja terveydenhuollon kuormittumista seurataan ja arvioidaan tarkasti.</p>	<p>As restrictions are dismissed [...] the development of the epidemic as well as the overload of the health system are followed and evaluated carefully.</p>
<p>10) [...] voidaan asettaa rajoituksia [...] ulkotiloja voidaan avata hallitusti [...]</p>	<p>[...] it is possible/we can set restrictions [...] outdoor spaces can be opened restrainedly [...]</p>

Table 10. Clusivity of "we" in Marin's communication 2

As for the factors presented in Section 1. we can observe that:

1) *Harm-reducing, honest and accurate information*: information is honest and accurate and it is in fact reported on the consultations of the cabinet and on what are the future indications of the government (a detailed list is given).

3) *Clear objectives and goals and how they are presented*: Goals are presented clearly, as evident from explicit statements such as *Hallituksen tavoitteena on...* 'The goal of the government is ...'.

4) *Provision of proof of tangible actions* is visible from the statements about the intention to constantly control and evaluate the development of the epidemic and the related possible (over)load of health care. Moreover, it is also stated that *epidemia hillitsemisessä on onnistuttu Suomessa toistaiseksi hyvin* ‘the control of the epidemic has been for the moment successful in Finland’ a piece of information that instils self-confidence (and confidence towards the *modus operandi* of the government) in the population.

At the time of this speech, it is already clear that it’s not ‘just’ a health emergency but it is a serious worldwide epidemic emergency that has now attained Finland, too. The reality is not diminished nor trivialized (accomplishing again to factor 1) and coherently the word *epidemia* ‘epidemic’ is used.

The general sense of the discourse is ‘we have done good, now we can *gradually* dismiss some restrictions. Again, the message is quick and simple (factor 2), the core idea of ‘gradually re-opening’ is repeated and, as in communication 1, language is clear and complex structures are avoided.

4.8 Finland: newspaper 5.5.2020

As for the communication given on 4.5.2020, we find seven headings related to coronavirus in the day-after newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. Among them three titles are directly related to the communication given by the Government the day before (n. 1, 2, 6). Only title 1) contains reported speech. This gives a tone of authority to the reported information, as was the case for the reported speech in Table 9. The others are comments (n. 4) or a deepening of the current health emergency (n. 3, 5, 7). Overall, all the news related to the government’s communication are coherent with it (factor 5) and no emphatic tone is used to exaggerate the information provided by the Prime Minister. Only in title 2 the sentence *hallitus ripustaa nyt Suomen neljän sanan varaan* ‘the government hang up Finland on four words’, which hints at the hybrid strategy put in place by the government and based on test-track-isolate-cure, can be interpreted as slightly ironic and sceptic. Finally, we interpret the choice of neutral and non-dramatic lexical items as being in line with a general approach of Finnish media based on reliability, transparency and clear communication that is coherent with the official channels.

<p>1) Suomi avautuu merkittävästi kesäkuusta lähtien – Pääministeri Marin varoittaa, että tilanteen muuttuessa rajoituksia pohditaan uudestaan.</p> <p>Hallituksen johtoviisikko kertoi päätöksistä rajoitustoimien purkamiseksi tiedotustilaisuudessa maanantai-iltana.</p>	<p>Finland will open significantly from June on – the Prime Minister Marin warns that in case the situation changes restrictions will be re-thought.</p> <p>The five guiding the government told about the dismissal of the restrictions in the communication on Monday evening.</p>
<p>2) Kesäkuussa alkaa koronakriisin suuri käänne, ja hallitus ripustaa nyt Suomen neljän sanan varaan.</p> <p>Suomen päätavoite ei ole hävittää koronavirusta vaan hallitus rakentaa omaa suhteellisen avointa reittiään, kirjoittaa HS:n talouden ja politiikan toimituksen esimies Jussi Pullinen.</p>	<p>In June the big twist of coronacrisis will start and the government hang up Finland on four words.</p> <p>The main objective of Finland is not to cancel coronavirus but to build a relatively open way out, writes Jussi Pullinen.</p>

<p>3) Koronakriisi teki epidemiologeista ja virologeista planeetan tunnetuimpia ihmisiä – HS esittelee viisi julkistutkijaa, joiden päätökset voivat sulkea valtioita.</p> <p>Tutkijoiden suosituksukset sulkevat nyt valtakuntia. Koronakriisi on repäissyt epidemiologit ja virustutkijat tutkijankammioistaan valokeilaan.</p>	<p>Coronacrisis puts epidemiologists and virologists among the most famous persons in the world. HS presents five famous researchers whose decisions can close states.</p> <p>The recommendations of researchers are now closing states. Coronacrisis has ripped epidemiologists and virologists from their offices in the beam of light.</p>
<p>4) Yksittäisten päivämäärien sijaan on tärkeämpää kuvata rajoitustoimien muutosten logiikka, koska se luo uskoa tulevaan.</p> <p>Jos tartuntatautilaki ei riitä epidemian tehokkaaseen torjuntaan, voisi olla parempi korjata tartuntatautilakia kuin turvautua uudelleen valmiuslain pykäliin.</p>	<p>Instead of single dates it is more important to describe the logic of the restrictions because it gives trust in the future.</p> <p>If the law on contagious disease is not sufficient it could be better to modify that law than to use the Emergency Powers Act.</p>
<p>5) Kirjastojen ja museoiden avaamislupaus oli helsinkiläisten toiveissa jo etukäteen: “Askel kerrallaan kohti normaalia”.</p> <p>HS:n maanantaina haastattelemat kansalaiset antoivat tukensa esimerkiksi kirjastojen ja museoiden hallitulle avaamiselle.</p>	<p>The re-opening of libraries and museums was already on the wish list of people in Helsinki: “One step at time towards normality”.</p> <p>The readers of HS that were interviewed on Monday supported the controlled re-opening of libraries and museums.</p>
<p>6) Lue kattava lista siitä, miten rajoituksia nyt puretaan: ravintolat avautuvat asteittain, yli 70-vuotiaiden eristyssuositusta jatketaan.</p> <p>Suomi avaa yhteiskuntaansa asteittain kesäkuun alusta alkaen.</p>	<p>Read a complete list of how restrictions are dismissed: restaurants reopen gradually, the isolation recommendation for over 70-years old is maintained.</p> <p>Finland re-opens its society gradually starting from June.</p>
<p>7) Kaikki janoavat nyt tietoa siitä, miten epidemia etenee – THL:n mallinnukset ovat päätöksenteon ytimessä, mutta mihin ne perustuvat?</p> <p>Epidemian mallintaminen ei ole matemaattisesti mahdoton tehtävä. Uuden viruksen kohdalla joudutaan kuitenkin tekemään paljon oletuksia. Se lisää ennustamisen epävarmuutta.</p>	<p>Everybody is eager to know how the epidemic will go on: the simulations of THL are the key for decisions but on what they are based on?</p> <p>The simulation of the epidemic is not mathematically impossible. However, many suppositions need to be put forth. This increases the uncertainty of the prediction.</p>

Table 11. COVID-19 related headings on HS, 5.5.2020

5. Discussion

5.1 Communication and press 1

The Italian Prime Minister uses the noun *emergenza* ‘emergency’ whereas the Finnish Prime Minister never uses it and generally the communicative choice is centred on a more

reassuring tone. Nonetheless, the noun ‘coronavirus’ is used in both discourses marking the clearness and aiming at truthfulness and reliability. One striking difference is in the length of the communications: short and quick (but not less complete) as for the Finnish prime minister and longer and more articulated as for the Italian prime minister.

Comparing the day-after newspapers of the first communications, one Finnish newspaper’s title refers to Marin’s communication and in the Italian newspaper there is no explicit reference to Conte’s communication even if one title concerns one of the main points faced by the Prime Minister the day before the official announcement. What overall stands out from the comparison of the Italian and Finnish newspapers’ titles is the strikingly different tone that emerge in particular in the lexical choice: in the Italian ones there is recurring use of military or war terms (4 out of 8 titles) whereas in the Finnish ones the tone is much more neutral and less alarmist. Finally, only in two Finnish titles, one of which refers to the day-before speech, we observe reported speech whereas this mean of neutrality and objectivity (Antelmi 2012) is not used in the Italian titles, which on the contrary have in general a more dramatic tone.

5.2 Communication and press 2

The two communications are very different in length. This is mainly because of a different communicative strategy of the two governments. In fact, the Finnish prime minister basically resumes what will be explained in more detail by the ministers and health authorities afterwards, whereas the Italian prime minister is the one who carries out widely and in depth the whole communication of the government. Moreover, he makes use of repetitions and has a rhetorical tone speaking as he was alone the guide of the country in contrast with the first communication in which the facts, decisions and guidelines were presented as the result of a choral decision.

As for the day-after newspapers, in the Italian headings only one out of eight refers to Conte’s speech, in the Finnish newspaper three headings out of seven. Interestingly, no war or military terms are now used. The attention is focused on the health emergency at a worldwide level and the lexical choice is more controlled and neutral. Only one title has a polemic flavour (title n.8) being a critical comment on the alleged lack of complete information on the pandemic.

The Finnish titles have a neutral tone as for the first set of titles. One title differs in this sense (n. 2), in which the tone is somehow sceptical of the hybrid strategy adopted by the government. In the Italian headings three out of eight use reported speech as a means of further authority and neutrality whereas in the Finnish ones only in one heading this strategy is adopted.

As a final note on the headings of the Italian and Finnish newspapers, we did not observe use of foreignism (excluded ‘lockdown’ in Italian) even if this is a commonly used strategy in newspaper headings.

6. Conclusions

In this paper we reported on the COVID-19 situation in Italy and in Finland with specific attention to institutional risk communication. In particular, after reviewing the respective national situations so far, we analysed four official communications of the Italian and Finnish governments, and specifically the speeches of the two prime ministers, in two important moments of the health emergency started in 2020: the very beginning and the end of the first stage when there is a gradual loosening of the previous restrictions. We compared the Italian and Finnish discourses and the day-after headings on two major newspapers from a communicative perspective grounding our observations on six parameters that we identified as crucial for

efficient institutional crisis communication. The analysis indicates that both prime ministers seem to have had a reliable and efficient institutional communication, even if communicative strategies differ for some aspects: the Italian prime minister Giuseppe Conte had much longer, articulated and rhetoric talks compared to the Finnish prime minister Sanna Marin. As for the day-after newspapers the Finnish headings maintain a much more neutral and factual tone whereas in the Italian ones sometimes use war and military jargon.

The element that emerges most significantly from the comparison of the communication strategy used by the two premieres is the different use of social media which helps shape the general communication strategy. Over the last decade, political communication has developed heavily on social media to implement strategies to increase consensus. The use of social networks by international and local politicians is crucial for both practical and strategic reasons. Social networks allow them to have direct contact with the electorate, being able to address different groups of voters simultaneously and with a number of diversified messages (according to the platforms used) is certainly one of the main advantages of political social media marketing. During the greatest spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the communication plan has assumed an even more crucial value. World leaders had to manage an unprecedented situation that generated a sense of bewilderment among the citizens. During international crises, trust in government is expected to increase irrespective of the wisdom of the policies it pursues. This phenomenon has been called a *rally-round-the-flag* effect (Muller 1970). It explains the natural tendency of citizens to increase their trust in the political leader during times of crisis. This tendency was noted in moments of high tension such as the Cuban missile crisis or the attacks of 11th September 2001. Despite the different nature of this pandemic, the emergence of this tendency is – firstly – still noticeable and – secondly – amplified by a massive use of social media by political leaders. As for Italy, Giuseppe Conte has definitely focused on a communicative style emphatically centred on his figure: his press conferences were held at evening news time and they took place mainly on social media where he maintained his paternal and warm tone of voice. Some of the statement he pronounced sounded like commercial claims e.g. *Rimaniamo distanti oggi per riabbracciarci con più calore domani*¹⁶ and the above-mentioned *Se ami l'Italia, mantieni le distanze*.¹⁷ He used these phrases in the press conferences at first, and then they widely echoed from one social platform to another. Contrastingly, the choice to rely exclusively on institutional channels and leave to her Facebook profile a different role in the management of the crisis is perpetrated by Sanna Marin, despite the spread of the health emergency.

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¹⁶Let's stay distant today to embrace each other more warmly tomorrow.

¹⁷If you love Italy, keep the distances.

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