

Europe's Differing Leadership Styles in the Coronavirus Crisis

GMF Experts

From France to Turkey, the coronavirus crisis has affected Europe's countries differently and been met with widely varying political responses. Many leaders, it seems now clear in hindsight, were a bit slow to react, but then most soon enough reacted decisively. While Germany's Angela Merkel was late to take on the leadership of her country's response and immediately chose a rhetoric of compassion, other leaders were quick to employ war-time rhetoric and activism. Despite fractious political constellations in many countries, governments were able to respond with high degrees of political unity. However, as Europe tentatively enters "phase two" and the public's patience with lockdown measures are fraying, unity too, is likely to face increasing strain. Below, GMF experts from six countries provide portraits of their leaders' crisis leadership.

Inconsistent Wartime Leadership in France

"We are at war," President Emmanuel Macron insisted during his March 16 address, calling for national unity in the battle against the coronavirus and announcing the beginning of a strict lockdown, as well as reaffirming the role of the welfare state. By contrast with his usual speeches, he assumed the role of commander-in-chief. He also launched the "Resilience" military operation to provide logistical support where needed. A couple weeks later, faced with declining public confidence, Macron was compelled to acknowledge many mistakes that had been made regarding shortages of essential medical supplies and handed the government the responsibility to present a concrete plan that would ensure a successful end to the lockdown on May 11.

The controversial announcement by Macron about re-opening schools on May 11 was an example of the divide between the initial attitude of a wartime commander and the actions following it. This was immediately followed with confusing "exceptions," leaving many questioning the government's capacity to make sure that a second wave of infections can be contained.

There are alleged tensions between the president and Prime Minister Edouard Philippe. This has been visible in the two sometimes contradicting each other publicly. Macron is strongly pushing for the lifting of lockdown measures on May 11, and has rejected a possible "geographically adapted" end of the restrictions, whereby parts of the country less affected by the virus would see people regain their individual freedoms faster—a sensitive topic in centralized France. Yet, in his address to the National Assembly on April 28, the prime minister presented a plan that would divide the country's departments according to the current occupancy

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rate of reanimation units and new daily cases, in order to reflect the local capacity to ease lockdown measures. The prime minister remains much more cautious and insists that in order not to face a second wave, the reopening needs to be very gradual and geographically differentiated. The contradicting and successive back-and-forths between the different members of the government has pushed mayors to step up and take decrees; for instance, to require citizens to wear facemasks when outside.

France is suffering from a grave crisis of trust in the government, with only 24 percent of respondents in one poll saying they are satisfied with the way Macron is handling the coronavirus crisis. Government officials calling masks “useless” when France was facing a severe mask shortage and “necessary” a few weeks later, or the call to open schools on May 11, deemed premature by many, are examples that can explain the latest poll showing that 6 in 10 respondents do not think the government will succeed in lifting its lockdown measures. This is aggravated by the numerous accounts in the media of Germany’s successes in containing the virus, and of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s scientific approach compared to Macron’s war-like rhetoric. There have been repeated calls for France to follow Germany’s example.

Milan Seghier, program coordinator, Paris office

Cautious, Compassionate Leadership in Germany

In the coronavirus pandemic, Chancellor Angela Merkel so far has demonstrated again her strength—the cautious approach of a scientist, based on facts and expertise. But the crisis has also, once more, exposed her weaknesses: the failure to take risks by acting early and decisively, and the failure to communicate her strategic choices.

In the early days of the crisis, when the virus struck in Wuhan and then in Lombardy, the chancellor was almost invisible. When hordes of Germans returned from ski holidays in early March, bringing the virus with them from Austria and Italy, almost nothing happened. One or two weeks were lost. After much hesitation, the (soft) lockdown came, but rather later than in, say, Austria or France; Germany was not leading.

Yet then the hour of Merkel finally came. The chancellor took over and gave speeches, impressing Germans with her not only calm determination, but also emotional compassion. There seemed to be a perfect fit: an unprecedented health crisis and a former scientist, turning scientific knowledge into governance. The decision to lock down was supported by a broad consensus; Merkel and her party got a boost in polls.

The number of fatalities has been significantly lower than in France, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Beds in intensive care units remained empty. But after weeks of staying home, Germans started to ask questions: How can we at the same time fight the virus and keep social life and economic activity alive? Is the price in terms of economic crisis worth it? Why do scientists change their opinion so often?

In the difficult moment after the lockdown, when societies face tough choices and when solidarity with the vulnerable is at risk, political leadership is crucial. Yet Merkel has little more to offer than the message that the country must stay the course, must remain vigilant. What she fails to offer is a clear strategy, and a vision how Germany could shape the new normal: the balance between the fight against the pandemic with a revival of social and economic life.

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While there is a wide array of creative approaches to the challenges of the pandemic, the lack of leadership from the top leads to an increasing split into two camps: those who support Merkel's line of remaining cautious, and those who downplay the threat and think that the price of massive disruption is too high. If the crisis deepens, which is quite possible, we may see a polarization between social Darwinists and those in favor of solidarity with the vulnerable.

Even those who are with Merkel start to wonder why things are moving so slowly and ask: Where is the app? Why did it take so many weeks until the government supported wearing masks, and so long until masks were available? Why is there no national task force to provide guidance and support for schools?

As during the refugee crisis earlier, Merkel started with high public support but failed to provide answers when people started to ask harder questions. It turns out that the lockdown was the easiest part. Now the chancellor must get out of her comfort zone and present a wider strategy to a country that is increasingly stressed and irritated.

Uli Speck, senior visiting fellow, Berlin office

Late in Action, Grand in Communication in Italy

In early February, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte—like everyone in the Italian political landscape—dismissed the risks from the coronavirus pandemic. He later started realizing the mounting challenge, but leadership was not decisive early. As the crisis unfolded, Conte tried to portray himself as a calm leader. He privileged, particularly in the beginning, communication via the internet, talking to Italians on Facebook. Some commentators defined this as the contemporary version of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's radio "fireside chats:" approaching the public without mediation to announce bad news and crucial decisions. This approach sparked criticism as he did not use traditional institutional channels such as parliament, nor did he use public broadcasting (though as the crisis deepened, he changed his approach). The press conference in which he announced the national lockdown was delivered via web late on a Saturday night.

Conte often uses the "Royal We," the rhetorical choice aimed at amplifying the importance of the message. In literature and poetry, this rhetorical choice is used to strengthen the emotional connection between writer and reader. It is likely that Conte adopted this style to reinforce this bond. Indeed, one of the crucial features of his communication style was to strengthen the perception of the public being involved in the process. He has carefully avoided a top-down approach, which historically does not resonate well with the Italian public. As some commentators said, Conte has been trying to do "moral suasion" rather than imposing clear-cut solutions. He has also attempted to craft specific messages through catchy slogans. For instance, when announcing "Phase 2," he launched the slogan "If you love Italy, keep the distances," which was widely shared on social media.

Conte used particular war rhetoric, saying that Italy was "at war" with the virus, but he always tried to deliver his message quietly. He also made several "high" cultural references, such as to Winston Churchill and his "darkest hour" speech. This is a classic element of Conte's rhetoric, and not only in times of crisis: coming from academia and not being a "real" politician, he wants to maintain the image of being close to the people but not entirely like "the people."

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The only “incendiary” moment the prime minister had was when he accused in a televised press conference two opposition leaders, Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, of spreading “disinformation.” While this was condemned by the opposition parties and some commentators for being authoritarian, it enhanced his popularity among citizens who do not like the current opposition leaders. Polarization has intensified after an initial phase of the crisis in which the political landscape tried to be united.

Despite the problems and impact of the crisis, Conte’s popularity has skyrocketed over the past few months. It was 64 percent in April, slightly lower than in March when it peaked at 71 percent but still high compared to a pre-crisis 52 percent rating in February. Also, his “web reputation” has risen. As a prime minister without a party and not even an elected member of parliament, it will be interesting to see how his new political capital will be put to use once the crisis is over.

Dario Cristiani, IAI/GMF fellow, Washington

Decisive and Reactive in Poland

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has taken the lead in informing people on the state of affairs and the measures taken by the government. He has held over a dozen press conferences, alone and together with other cabinet ministers. His tone is straightforward, casual, and empathetic: “The coronavirus has taken away the joy we feel when we cheer on sports events”; “I myself am a sports fan, I used to play table tennis.” Morawiecki’s attitude is one of putting himself and the government on the same footing as the public, fostering social responsibility, and showing pride in having put in place restrictive measures earlier than Western European countries. The government argues that “everything is fine in Poland” by repetitively mentioning that other countries are worse off: “We have been successful, we acted at lightning speed, pumping hundreds of millions of zloty into the Polish economy. [...] The disease in Poland is spreading much slower than in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium”; “In other countries such as Austrian, Germany, the Czech Republic they eased some restrictions before us, but there, the number of infected per million inhabitants is higher.”

The government has been decisive and united on regulations curtailing the disease and on economic stimulus packages. Minister of Health Łukasz Szumowski and the newly appointed Deputy Prime Minister Jadwiga Emiliewicz have become prominent and well-liked figures. The government’s efforts at flattening the curve have been well received, and its popularity has not faltered. People do not view the coronavirus as a calamity that laid bare the weakness of the state. Government measures have been entirely in line with people’s attitudes. The current lifting of restrictions (parks, forests, shopping malls, and hotels re-opened on May 4) goes hand in hand with people being tired of the lockdown. While coronavirus-related deaths have exceeded 600, Poles are optimistic about the near future and feel that the illness is not a threat to them.

By contrast to the prime minister and other government members, the leader of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, Jarosław Kaczyński, upset people by visiting cemeteries at Easter while they were closed to everyone else and organizing a commemoration of the Smolensk plane crash while public gatherings are banned. He has not said anything about the pandemic but has said that the controversial presidential election by mail only can take place on May 10: “There’s no evidence to show that the election cannot take place, unless the situation changes dramatically and negatively, and consequently the state of emergency would have to be put in place.”

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The election has become a political hot potato. While there are no clear voices of dissent on the coronavirus measures, between 60 and 70 percent of Poles are against presidential elections in May.

Marta Prochwicz-Jazowska, program coordinator, Warsaw office

Support for the Government Holds Steady in Decentralized Spain

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's style and rhetoric has been cautious and measured. Still, he has littered his speeches with war terms and metaphors. The use of Winston Churchill's "We shall never surrender" and language such as "When we win this war [...] we will need all the country's strength to win the post-war" have been used to justify the prolonged state of alarm. The recent reduction and limitation of the regular televised statements and press conferences by the uniformed heads of the police, civil guard, and army may indicate an intention to tone down the war framing. Speeches have contained strong praise people's exemplary behavior and civic discipline amid the strictest confinement measures in Europe. They have also been quite apolitical, with frequent reminders that the coronavirus does not consider "ideology or territory." Despite this, the political discourse of most of the opposition has been harsh and divisive. The secretary general of the conservative People's Party accused the government of "not mourning the dead" and the far-right Vox accused the government of "prostituting Spanish public television" and "installing a Gestapo."

Measures were taken late, but then decisively. There was consensus for taking strong action, such as declaring a state of alarm. But there is no such consensus supporting the highly centralized way in which decisions are taken or communicated. In a country with an almost completely decentralized health system, regional governments are being listened to, but not brought into the decision-making process or consulted in any meaningful way. Already the heads of the regional governments of Galicia, Madrid, the Basque Country, and Catalonia have called to end the state of alarm and the highly unified command system.

The government's communication has been almost excessive and at times unclear. There have been a few mishaps, but these were walked back or clarified relatively quickly. The daily statements by different officials, often on the podium at the same time, combined with the length of their appearances has highlighted the lack of clear, succinct messages.

Generally, Sánchez is seen as lacking in authenticity and empathy. His carefully measured tone and intended gravitas do not come across as particularly genuine. However, the prime minister—whose party won only 28 percent in the last elections and who leads the first-ever coalition government, with a tenuous majority—remains the most popular political figure on the national stage. The latest polls published show that the government's support is withstanding the crisis, with both coalition parties together losing less than one percentage point between mid-February and early May. In the same timeframe the conservative PP's popularity has gone up by the same amount, but most likely gaining that support at the expense of Vox.

It is unclear if the government will be able to muster the parliamentary support to prolong the state of alarm as it would like. Prolonging the highly centralized decision-making could be a political gamble. While seeking to concentrate the attribution of praise, it will do the same with blame. Especially considering that public support for the crisis management by the government has been much lower than that of regional government and cities. Given concerns about public health and the economy, with the latter gaining in importance as the

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former comes under control, it will be difficult for the government to maintain popularity. Especially since the economic response depends much more on factors that are out of its hands. In a country that had not fully recovered from a historic economic crisis and with an economy that is heavily dependent on tourism in terms of percent of GDP and percent of employment, these concerns will be front and center for a long time.

Paul Costello, program manager, GMF Cities program

Manufacturing Advantages Aid Erdoğan's Ongoing Image Campaign in Turkey

In its fight against coronavirus, the government tries to balance economic, health, political, and diplomatic considerations. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who normally occupies all television screens, has let the minister of health, a medical doctor, communicate with the public. Despite the apparent polarization of the political scene, the minister enjoys considerable support among citizens across party lines.

Being among the main producers of masks, personal protective equipment, and disinfectants, Turkey did not have supply difficulties to the extent that European countries had. Furthermore, thanks to considerable improvement in terms of accessibility and number of intensive care beds per capita, the healthcare system has not come anywhere near collapse in the face of the pandemic, and the death rate, which has recently started to come down, remains relatively low compared to several Western countries.

This gives the government an exceptional opportunity to present the image of a strong country for national and international audiences. This is done through medical aid to several countries, including the United States, and the repatriation of Turks from all over the world. This is for domestic political consumption as well as for more effectively leveraging the country's soft power, and it takes up a lot of space in the media. The message is exemplifying Erdoğan's statement that "When even most developed countries are desperate, Turkey beyond being self-sufficient, could help its friends."

However, not all news is good. Following the outbreak of the pandemic, the exchange rate for the dollar jumped from 6.2 to 7 liras, and the International Monetary Fund forecasts a 5 percent contraction of the economy in 2020. These developments create a serious electoral challenge for Erdoğan. Conscious that people's memories from the coronavirus days will play an important role in the elections scheduled for 2023, Erdoğan gives as much importance to perception management as to containing the pandemic.

Erdoğan is also aware that his main rival will likely be the mayor of İstanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, or another metropolitan mayor. For this reason, he is using his executive powers to prevent the mayors from boosting their public image by taking initiatives that would ease the difficulties faced by their residents in these difficult times. For example, when the opposition mayors launched donation campaigns to assist the most vulnerable citizens who had lost their incomes, Erdoğan immediately banned these and introduced his own campaign. The mayors were also accused of trying to create a parallel state by officials of the ruling Truth and Justice party, an accusation that was earlier used against the Gulenist network that was incriminated for the 2016 coup attempt. Government agencies such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs have also made statements which were certain to polarize debates among supporters of the governing and opposition blocks.

Kadri Taştan, senior fellow, Brussels office, and Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, director, Ankara office

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