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Greek Government's Communication Approach during the Covid-19 First Wave¹

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Abstract

The present policy brief draws from an empirical dissertation research, which took place during the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic, in Athens, Greece. The main assumption of this interdisciplinary work is that Greek government's Covid-19 emergency communication and crisis management approach (during the first wave of the pandemic) can be described by the Pragmatic Complexity Communication Model (PCOM), according to which communication involves an emergent complexity of reciprocal relationships and levels of interaction. This assumption is examined and validated through a qualitative research process, using an online open-ended questionnaire and focusing on a group of government officials and a group of correspondent journalists. The subsequent analysis also highlights the intimate links between government's emergency communication (and crisis management) approach and the so-called "reformist culture", that is, an extrovert, pluralist and anti-populist way of government, emphasising preparedness, collaboration, consistency, coordination, trust and community. This results in specific policy considerations and recommendations regarding governmental Covid-19 response in general.

Keywords: Pragmatic Complexity Communication Model; emergency communication and crisis management; Covid-19 pandemic effects; complex government; trust; resilience; strategic foresight; Greece.

Introduction

Growing systemic complexity and interdependence have made a large variety of systems (economic, public health, cyber, etc.) susceptible to irreversible and cascading failure. The Covid-19 pandemic can be perceived as the widespread result of systemic properties, such as *emergence*, that is, a dynamical process whereby a situation arises through the local interaction of a number of actors and influences, without any intention to create that situation (Hynes, 2020).

The pandemic came unexpectedly in the West as a superspreader-driven "black swan", an extreme fat-tailed process (Taleb, 2020) owing to an increased global connectivity. It seems that all national and supranational governments were unprepared for it, although governing in principle pertains to strategic reflection and anticipation (Tufekci, 2020). Anticipation scenarios assume futures thinking

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and specific structures for the implementation of emergency measures, based on clear responsibilities and experts' participation (Kiel, 2020).⁴

Governments worldwide now have the opportunity to develop and adopt a *systemic, anticipatory approach* to reinforcing resilience, as a response to the massive interconnected challenges facing contemporary societies, in contrast to “conventional” or “traditional” approaches of risk assessment and management focusing primarily upon hardening systems so that they are able to absorb threats before breaking. These approaches are inappropriate, prohibitively expensive or both for many of the issues national and supranational governments will have to deal with (Hynes, 2020). In parallel, strategic communication processes are required to embrace the emergent complexity of reciprocal relationships and levels of interaction (Güler, 2012).

In general, only limited research has been conducted so far to investigate and understand the actual perceptions of organisational key agents within a national government, especially concerning the effectiveness of a governmental emergency communication model. The overall methodological perspective addressed by the present study is to generate and promote such understanding, as well as to ascertain if any disparity exists between these key agents and use that knowledge to act in more informed and effective ways for performing emergency communication models, also finding links to current issues of social dynamics and political culture.

This policy brief draws from an empirical dissertation research, which took place during the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic, in Athens, Greece. Our particular research objective is to carefully examine and purposefully discern how central agents (or high-degree centrality agents) within and around the Greek government (decision-making officials and journalists), deemed as an *organisational complex system* (Cairney, 2015), actually perceive the effectiveness and value of the applied communication emergency alert model, under the catastrophic threat of Covid-19 pandemic in its first wave (February-May 2020). The study concisely elaborates on the populism debate and consistently follows a theoretical framework based on qualitative complexity and complex networks, nonlinear dynamical systems, learning behaviours and organisational culture, ultimately aiming to offer practical recommendations.

Methodological considerations

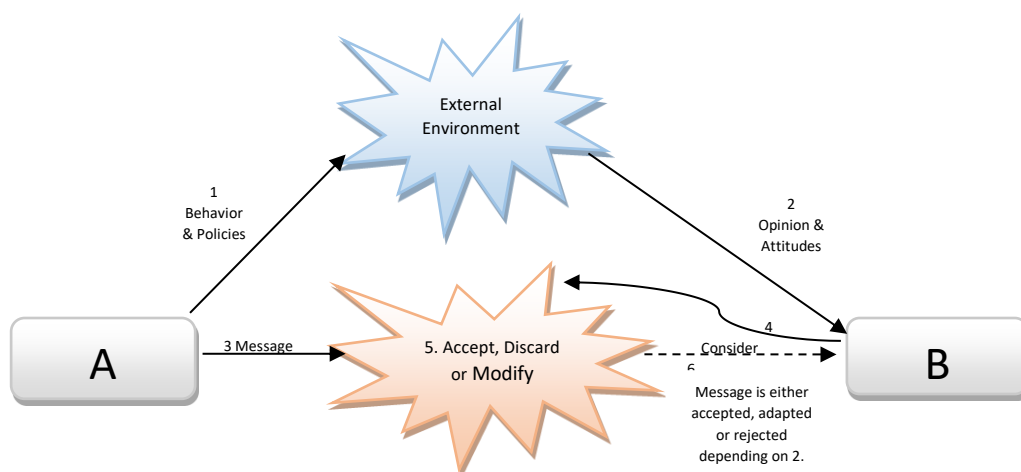
A main assumption of the present study involves the use of complexity theory (Stacey, 2007) and “complex government” approach (Cairney, 2015) as a frame of reference to describe the Greek

⁴ See also the relevant work of Tsekeris and Zeri (2020a, 2020b).

government's Covid-19 response. In this analytic setting, outcomes are studied and understood in terms of the “whole” policymaking system, *greater than the sum of its parts* (Cairney, 2012; Geyer & Rihani, 2010). In particular, the Greek government's crisis management and emergency communication model, applied during the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic, is assumed to be described in terms of the Pragmatic Complexity Communication Model (PCOM) (Corman et al., 2007; Tatham, 2008).

According to PCOM (Corman et al., 2007; Tatham, 2008), as shown in Graph 1, communication is an emergent feature of a self-organised complex system (constantly interacting with its external environment) wherein the participants (or agents) mutually and reciprocally interpret and evaluate each other's opinions, attitudes, behaviours, intentions, expectations, thoughts and motivations. This dynamical model heavily draws from Niklas Luhmann's (1995) communication theory, which overtly breaks with the oversimplistic notion of communication as an activity of sending a message from one mind to another.

Figure 1: Pragmatic Complexity Communication Model (PCOM)



Source: Corman et al. (2007)

Following purposive/non-probability sampling, a qualitative method is utilised in order to study the involved population. More specifically, to gather data and find evidence for the topic under investigation, it has been followed a qualitative questionnaire method. Two similar online open-ended questionnaires were administered (through the WhatsApp application) to a group of ten government officials and a group of ten correspondent journalists. The procedure was launched on July 7th and closed on July 13th 2020. According to the various ethical codes, the research was conducted on the understanding that the information provided was anonymous and confidential. The total responses collected have been 20 (10 from each group).

The qualitative method (online open-ended questionnaire) adopted to explore the Greek government's communication model has been qualified as appropriate given the research aim focusing on 1) deeply understanding current phenomena and the uniqueness of a situation rather than testing hypotheses, 2) assessing complex social dynamics and relations embedded in the case under investigation, and 3) suggesting some practical lessons and theoretical implications based on findings from an in-depth analysis of the exemplary case of Covid-19 response practices in Greece from February to May 2020.

The analytic findings pertain to the emergence, identification and reconstruction of categories and subcategories and, eventually, of recurrent themes and subthemes, after carefully reading the material several times. In summary, the major themes that appear in the final phase of the analysis involve (a) the exploitation of uncertainty and futures literacy, (b) multilayer communication and the importance of collaboration, (c) the prioritisation of scientific expertise and human values. In order to reach conclusions, the coding of these themes was compared to the themes drawn from the literature of the theoretical background. By this comparison, the insights on Covid-19 crisis administration model as a version of PCOM were revealed.

The qualitative analysis showed only a few differences and disparities in perceived value and impact between groups of governmental agents and nongovernmental agents (i.e. correspondent journalists), as well as many similarities, something that signifies the dynamics of complex reciprocal relationships and interdependencies, including a collective (or community) coproduction of Covid-19 response. This can arguably be thought as key part of the satisfactory policy reaction to the pandemic in Greece.

Discussion and elaborations

The results therefore cast light on the full picture behind the (widely acknowledged⁵) Greek government's effective response to Covid-19 first wave. This effectiveness can be mainly theorised as the process and outcome of a rapid "collective coproduction" (in autopoietic systems theoretical terms), that is, a collective contribution to the delivery of achieving desired common goals. In addition, a significant role in Greece's successful management of the crisis has arguably been played by specific qualities, clearly shown in respondents' accounts, such as:

- **scientific literacy** within government, including the adequate understanding of scientific evidence and its nature;

⁵ See for instance: <https://www.oecd.org/economy/greeces-response-to-covid-19-has-been-swift-and-effective-but-tackling-long-standing-challenges-also-key.htm>

- **statistical literacy** and proper perception and identification of substantive risk factors;
- **foresight literacy**, in the sense of exploiting weaknesses to build positive future narratives and an adaptive resilient recovery process.

The latter signifies another major finding resulting from the thematic (qualitative) analysis, which pertains to the energetic adoption of a kind of strategic foresight and futures thinking, particularly on behalf of the decision-making government officials. This profoundly relates to flexibility, dynamic openness and the outward-looking, anti-populist “reformist culture” (Diamandouros, 1994), which is much needed to cultivate trust and better the response to new pandemic waves. In such context, effective and agile coordination goes hand in hand with pluralism and *cognitive diversity* (Syed, 2020).

Diversity makes fundamental contributions to system performance and underpins system level robustness. It therefore allows for multiple responses to external shocks and internal adaptations, but also drives novelty and innovation (Page, 2010). In other words, while the Covid-19 pandemic represents a significant threat, the rationale that every crisis also bears opportunities for sustained innovation and learning did work.⁶ A practical demonstration of this crisis-as-opportunity rationale is the ongoing digitisation of the public services, which has already been remarkably accelerated with the launch of the governmental portal Gov.gr, providing more than 650 e-services. The Greek Ministry of Digital Governance has also helped teleworking of critical public services to more than 10,000 employees and provided a platform for all public bodies to conduct secure and high-quality teleconferences (Tsekeris, 2020).

In policymaking terms, the dimension of trust needs special analytic attention. Trust in government and trust in others plays a significant role in generating inconsistent policy compliance by citizens (Goldstein & Wiedemann, 2020), while belief in conspiracy theories is related to distrust in government (Kim & Cao 2016). Evidently, trust-building and public health messages are better amplified by local voices, in combination with reliable information from national leaders and central health officials. In particular, messages offering in-group models for norms (e.g. members of your community) may be most effective. Also, enlisting trusted voices has been shown to make public health messages much more effective in changing behaviour during epidemics (Bavel et al., 2020).

⁶ In the empirical research setting, the majority of both government officials and correspondent journalists argued for “*crisis as an opportunity*”.

A good example of such a trusted voice is the internationally reputed Yale Professor Nicholas Christakis.⁷

In some sense, the strategic communication model applied by the Greek government (Mitsotakis administration), during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, could arguably offer best practice evidence on crisis management. Evidently, such best practice evidence pertains to practical orientations, useful lessons (at this point in time) and general mechanisms that public leaders need in order to steer through the crisis in the months ahead. First, effective communication is a key pillar of crisis governance. Second, adopting a whole-of-society approach is of particular importance in this massive health crisis. Finally, implementing evidence-based strategies grounded on historical as well as current scientific data is paramount, rather than acting based on what is politically expedient (i.e. fearing the political cost) (El-Taliawi & Van Der Wal, 2020).

How successfully this acute crisis is managed in the last instance will mostly depend on how well each government is able to face it head-on and bring society on board, while communicating and coordinating effectively with stakeholders. Social systems are by nature responsive and adaptive, and this crisis presents a unique future-oriented learning opportunity. This is a strong test for our governance systems, including the digital ones, and today's collective response will shape the future for years to come (El-Taliawi & Van Der Wal, 2020).⁸

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The aforementioned "complex government" nonlinear approach can possibly provide adequate pragmatic lessons of crisis management and teach policymakers and political reformers about diversity and complexity so that they are less surprised when things go wrong (Geyer, 2012; Cairney, 2015).⁹ Another important dimension of this approach involves embracing uncertainty and combining coordination with novelty and innovation, as shown in the case of the ongoing digitalisation of the Greek public sector services.

⁷ Prime Minister Mitsotakis tweeted: "Had a very interesting conversation with @NACChristakis about our action plan for COVID-19 and our health system. We're basing our strategies on sound scientific advice, and Greece is very privileged to have such eminent scientists to call upon, wherever they may be." (Prime Minister GR, 10:05 PM · Mar 23, 2020).

⁸ Furthermore, coordinated efforts across individuals, communities, stakeholders and governments to fight the spread of disease can send strong signals of cooperation and shared values, facilitating reorganisation of previously considered out-groups and in-groups into a single community with a common destiny (Bavel et al., 2020).

⁹ See also the Armenian President Armen Sarkissian's substantial and complexity-friendly argument on *quantum politics*, that is, how quantum physics inspired him in the difficult fight against Covid-19 (Sarkissian, 2020). In the same sense, a *quantum strategic communication* approach could arguably play a key role in countering different kinds of unexpected threats (including hybrid threats).

Of course, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the emergency communication emphasis on both personal responsibility and public adherence to simple hygienic rules is irreducible. In parallel, Greek government's foresight policy framework signifies links between crisis management and the so-called "reformist culture", that is, an extrovert and pluralist way of government, emphasising preparedness, collaboration, consistency, trust and community. These qualities are the opposite of today's dominant form of politics: populism (see Painter, 2020). Moreover, a number of policy recommendations can be further investigated.

On the one hand, policy makers must evolve and adapt their strategy to help produce the wide dissemination of evidence throughout a messy policy process, such as by working with local governments, public bodies and stakeholders to "co-produce" meaningful measures of effective interventions in particular areas. On the other hand, they must recognise that policy-relevant knowledge is not just about the "evidence" of a problem; it also requires specific knowledge of how the policy process works and how any solution will fare (Cairney, 2015).

Policy recommendations should additionally include concerns about *resilience*, regarding the anticipatory containment of systemic threats (Hynes, 2020):

1. Ensure that systems are designed to be resilient, i.e. recoverable and adaptable.
2. Develop methods for quantifying resilience so that trade-offs between a system's efficiency and resilience can be made explicit.
3. Control system complexity to minimise cascading failures resulting from unexpected disruption by making necessary connections controllable and visible.
4. Manage system topology by designing appropriate connections and communications across interconnected infrastructure.
5. Add resources in system-crucial components to ensure functionality.
6. Develop real-time decision support tools integrating data and automating selection of management alternatives based on explicit policy trade-offs in real time.

For the time being, governments also need to embrace the following practical considerations to effectively manage the so-called Covid-19 transition (Habersaat, 2020):

- 1) implement a phased approach to a "new normal";
- 2) balance individual rights with the social good;
- 3) prioritise people at highest risk of negative consequences;

- 4) provide special support for healthcare workers and care staff;
- 5) build, strengthen and maintain trust;
- 6) enlist existing social norms and foster healthy new norms;
- 7) increase self-efficacy;
- 8) use clear and positive language;
- 9) anticipate and manage misinformation;
- 10) engage with media outlets.

Last but not least, national and supranational governments should proactively appreciate and manage the dynamical characteristics of complex global systems and problems. The consequences of failing to do this can be immense (Helbing, 2013). Overall, it is required more interdisciplinary empirical research on both structural transformations and agents' behaviours, perceptions and attitudes, which could arguably contribute to improving and optimising emergency communication and strategic foresight models and plans for governmental reorganisation and institutional redesign.

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