

CORONAVIRUS **OVERCOMING THE DIFFICULTIES**

FRANCE AND ITALY, DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION STYLES AND PARALLEL POLITICAL DRIVERS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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Broadcasted simultaneously on television and social media to reach all possible targets of institutional communication in the current emergency phase, the speeches of the Italian Premier Conte of 11 March 2020 and of French President Macron of 16 March 2020 reflect their personalities and different communication registers and leadership visions, but also identical strategies to face the health, economic and social emergency deriving from the Covid-19 crisis. Equally, the response given in both countries was significantly belated compared to the speed of spreading of the pandemic.

As for the general health context at the date of the speeches, observing the evolution of the number of cases and victims ascribed to the virus, one sees Italy ahead of France by about eight days. When Italy registered 200 cases and six victims on February 24, France was close to such figures on March 2, with 191 cases and three victims. Substantially the same size of the problems could be observed when the Hexagon counted “officially” 1.784 patients and 33 victims on March 10, and Italy had crossed that threshold on March 2, with 1.694 cases registered and 34 victims the day before.

The first difference between either political approach is to be found in President Macron's speech, about 20 minutes long, in highly institutional style, copiously employing expressions such as “*The Nation will support its children*”, “*long live the Republic, long live France*” and the like, whilst the address by Premier Conte, lasting just over 9 minutes, does not feature the solemnity of an exceptional, but rather a stage of an ongoing dialogue with Italians. To, exemplify, the Premier recalls how “*just a few days ago [he asked them] to change [their] deep-rooted lifestyle habits ... aware that it was a first step ..*”.

However, despite the difference in tone, the strategy of proceeding gradually so that everyone can understand and accept difficult times is common to both leaders. President Macron insists that “*... as the days follow the days, as the problems succeed the problems, we will have to adapt ourselves, in connection with the insights given by the scientists and the concrete experiments ...*”¹, preparing the French for quarantine measures which are bound to continue for quite some

¹ “[...] *A mesure que les jours suivront les jours, que les problèmes succéderont aux problèmes, il faudra, en lien avec les éclairages donnés par les scientifiques, des expériences de terrain, il faudra nous adapter.*”

time². This graduality allows for the adoption of decisions which, if applied all at once, would be resisted or forcibly accepted³. This is also important as it directly impacts on their implementation by persuading citizens to go along with a whole array of objective restriction to individual freedoms and fundamental rights. In other words, the common path is to make citizens consciously accept “*sacrifices*” rather than resorting to curfews and sanctions as means of deterrence⁴.

These measures were presented in view of future shared objectives, by employing a series of down-to-earth metaphors close to the average citizen by Premier Conte⁵ and of much more emphatic and high flying language by President Macron⁶. However, the common denominator is a forward-looking vision: make unpopular decisions accepted by presenting them as “painful now but necessary for a brighter future”.

President Macron's speech chiefly rested on three drivers.

First, dramatize. To exemplify, he expressly speaks of war, repeating six times “*we are at war*”.

Second, seize the occasion to deliver guidelines and regulatory directions. Again to exemplify, he matter-of-factly informs the French people about new provisions which considerably tighten those illustrated only four days earlier in another speech to the nation.

Third, seize the political opportunity. President Macron dwells on the strategies adopted by his government, other concrete initiatives taken or planned, aid put in place and the means of funding it, altogether guaranteeing that “*no French will be left without resources, whatever it costs*”⁷.

The speech of the Premier Conte pursued instead the obvious purpose of reassuring and soothing down his audience. Understanding for the difficulties encountered by all and delivering copious thanks to all exposed categories (medical and healthcare personnel, researchers, civil protection personnel, personnel making essential sector function, etc) are coupled with a strong appeal to national pride⁸ and solidarity values of Italy, through a quotation from German sociologist Norbert Elias, for whom there are no societies without individuals nor individuals without societies, there is instead a “community of individuals”.

Through very different styles, the messages of both leaders show a similarity in the alternation of communication registers: inform, keep the community cohesive at a time of danger, inconvenience and restriction of individual freedoms and rights, encourage compliance with the rules, but even more invoke moderation and personal responsibility, as population is flocking to supermarkets in search of durable food, in reality over-perceiving the crisis (in fact, no shortages of food or medicines or failures in distribution chains worth speaking of were registered in either France or Italy).

This recalls the well-known “fireside chats” of American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt who used them to communicate bad news and crucial decisions to the nation. The fireplace was obviously not real. It was a way to say that the president spoke to the citizens as “one of them”, as they would chatter in front of a fireplace: openly, relaxedly and in an easy language. In fact, the

² “*Dès demain midi et pour 15 jours au moins, nos déplacements seront très fortement réduits [...]*”

³ The American linguist Noam Chomsky gives the following definition of a gradual strategy: “*the gradual strategy aims at an acceptance to an unacceptable degree of measures, just applying them gradually, dropper, for consecutive years, so that many changes that would have brought about a revolution if they had been applied once have been accepted by people.*”

⁴ “*Je vous demande des sacrifices pour ralentir l'épidémie [...]*” “*Il nostro sacrificio di rimanere a casa [...]*

⁵ [...] *Rimaniamo distanti oggi per abbracciarci con più calore, per correre più veloci domani [...]*

⁶ “[...] *Le jour d'après, quand nous aurons gagné, ce ne sera pas un retour au jour d'avant. Nous serons plus forts moralement, nous aurons appris.*”

⁷ “*tout sera mis en œuvre [...]* quoiqu'il en coûte”

⁸ “*Paese che per primo in Europa è stato colpito più duramente... diventando giorno dopo giorno un modello per tutti gli altri*”

President had taken office during a massive crisis of confidence in the banking system due to the effects of the Great Depression. American families withdrew massively their deposits for fear of losing them, and banks unexpectedly closed their counters to avoid bankruptcies. Meanwhile, millions of American had remained jobless overnight. Eventually, President Roosevelt had to close banks by emergency orders, and in his first fireside chat, designed specifically to deliver the news, he addressed sixty million citizens to explain "what has been done in recent days and why, and what will come next".

However, the fact remains that pretty strong responses, in many ways similar, arrived late both in France and Italy compared to the very fast pace of the pandemic. There is a mix of psychological and structural factors that can explain these delays, but the overarching strategy was not to create panic, also for fear of a fall of confidence and adverse economic rebounds. By abundant dosages of reassurance, however, the feel of danger faded away.

In his speech of March 16, the French president announced measures substantially equal to those announced a week earlier in Italy: in brief, quarantine and shutdown for all as long as necessary. However (perhaps not unpredictably) the government at the same time delivered contradictory messages, even allowing the holding of municipal elections on 15 March.

On 9 March, French Health Minister Olivier Véran explained the (alleged) difference between Italy and France on television: *"In the epidemic peak, the capacity of hospitals is lower than the number of patients to be treated. This is what is happening in Italy. The goal of our policy is to delay the epidemic peak, as we have been able to do to date, and decrease the volume of patients who need treatment at the same time and ensure that they always remain below the saturation threshold. Our policy serves this purpose: we cannot prevent the virus from circulating in our territory, but we can avoid having too many patients at the same time"*. Whatever the real situation, the speech undoubtedly deflated the perception of the danger.

That said, the situations in France and Italy did show a striking parallelism. Just think of the obvious initial undercapacity of hospitals and healthcare organizations whose resources were dried up by years of budget cuts. As a result, both France and Italy found themselves racing against time to increase respiratory assistance capabilities in hospitals to treat the wave of new cases, and nonetheless register thousands of victims.

The coronavirus emergency, besides the spread of the epidemic with sadly similar curves in either country, is characterized by another common denominator: the intensification of direct appeals by heads of state and government to citizens, 16 between statements and press conferences for Premier Conte, 4 speeches for President Macron.

When the (gradual) withdrawal of the restrictions commenced, the need for communication was no less relevant.

In France, on April 13, eyes locked on the camera for 30 solid minutes, the French President abandoned the war proclamations to praise the healthcare personnel and thank the French people because *"today the epidemic is beginning to mark the pace"*. He then played it safe by delivering *mea culpa*, promised to *"draw all the consequences"* of the *"shortcomings"* and *"errors"* that have taken place, starting with the lack of protective garments, disinfectants, masks and medical supplies. he invited everyone not to look ahead, and summon the courage to take *"new paths"* and *"reinvent themselves"*. *"I am the first,"* he added.

In Italy, the "phase two" program was announced on April 26 by Premier Conte in a brief speech, about twenty minutes long, at a press conference convened to announce a new Decree to be

issued by the Council of Ministers⁹, containing a second wave of emergency measures. In the previous days, the Premier had announced that the message to the people concerning the reopening of the country would be delivered on April 25th. The release date has a highly symbolic value: from the Liberation of the country from the nazi occupation and the fascist regime at the end of world war II, to that of the end of the Coronavirus quarantine. Two redoubtable enemies, and two eventual victories.

On the form, the frequent use of the plural *maiestatis* and of anglicisms by the Italian Premier indicated a certain difficulty in transmitting clear and immediately understandable contents for the average audience.

On the merits, in line with the roadmap presented by the President of the European Commission and the President of the European Council¹⁰, the speeches were once again similar: both leaders recall how “*we’re going to have to live with the virus*” and how the dates of May 4th in Italy and May 11th in France mark the beginning of recovery, not the beginning of recklessness¹¹.

In France, it is the Prime Minister who presented before Parliament the country's reopening program. The presentation, re-broadcasted on mass generalist TV channels, lasted over an hour and was of surgical precision in the announcements.

One will need to see if the magics of institutional communication will help developing an idea of the future in the short and medium term, in a situation where the health crisis is doubtless not over and the factors unknown still outweigh those of which the world has painfully become familiar with.

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Il presente articolo ha esclusivamente finalità informative e non costituisce parere legale.

This article is exclusively for information purposes, and should not be considered as legal advice.




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⁹ “Dpcm” April 26, 2020 *containing urgent measures regarding the containment and management of the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19*, *Gazzetta Ufficiale* 27.04.2020

¹⁰ Joint European Roadmap towards lifting COVID-19 containment measures, April 15, 2020

¹¹ « Un peu trop d'insouciance et c'est l'épidémie qui repart. Un peu trop de prudence et c'est l'ensemble du Pays qui s'enfonce. »

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