

MED120 Policy Deep-Dive

Government After Shock: Connection Lost?

Managing the relationship between policymakers and citizens in times of crisis and beyond

*In cooperation with the
OECD's Observatory for Public Sector Innovation (OPSI)*

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound effects on the relationship between policymakers and citizens, sparking questions of trust and the role of political communication. In this two-hour policy deep-dive, 12 members of parliament from 11 countries – Austria, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia – explored how COVID-19 has affected representation, how protests and policy compliance have developed during the past months, and what could be done differently in the future to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

The call took place within the framework of the Observatory for Public Sector Innovation's "Government after Shock" initiative, a global dialogue consisting of over 50 events, all exploring different aspects of how government practices can improve through the current crisis.

Highlights of our conversation

The lockdown-born tensions have exposed broader political and institutional conflicts: Anti-lockdown protests and non-compliance with lockdown policies reveal other political and democratic 'disconnections', e.g. in other policy areas.

Crisis management has led to a re-shuffling of democratic institutions: Participants observed shifts in the (assumed) roles of institutions and the way different branches and levels of governance interact with each other.

“It is in emergencies that checks and balances are needed the most” although they may seem to be slowing down crisis responses. This holds for the different branches of the state but also the role of opposition of ensuring transparency.

“No one has the solution and there is no such thing as ‘the’ solution. We need to address specific controversies and specific frustrations and they cannot be addressed by one-size-fits-all solutions [...]. It is misleading to think of anti-lockdown protests as homogeneous phenomena. There are different protests in place by different categories and groups of citizens against very diverse measures at the same time”.

The mismatch between expectations and the actual results is the conundrum of policymaking: Both participants and experts expressed their view that false expectations, which cannot be met by actual policy results, can cause a loss of trust in politics.

“People do not like decisions behind closed doors”: They need to understand the rationale behind a policy in order to support it.

Policymakers face new difficulties in connecting with constituents during the lockdown: “It is difficult for us as policymakers to understand what people are feeling over Zoom”.

What can be done?

The crisis has opened new avenues for change: The crisis has shown tensions but also new forms of mutualism and a discursive opening to far-reaching change. Now, more than ever, there are opportunities to start difficult conversations and to position oneself in a discussion that will have long-lasting consequences.

Parliamentarians can do a lot outside of their parliament: “Engaging citizens is not only a way to manage the crisis but to build networks. Let people feel they have a voice in the decision-making process, channel their specific concerns to the parliament”.

- **Three nuggets from the experts:**
 - “Listen to the claims of citizens because they mean it”;
 - “Don’t assume how people are going to respond to policy”;
 - “Never waste a good crisis”.

Follow-up

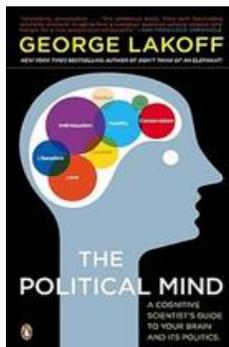
Useful resources from the experts

- Donatella della Porta, [*How Social Movements Can Save Democracy: Democratic Innovations from Below*](#), Polity, May 2020
- Nigel Harvey, [*Behavioral Fatigue: Real Phenomenon, Naïve Construct, or Policy Contrivance?*](#), October 2020
- National Democratic Institute/Coen Pustjens, [*Crisis response kit: a practical toolkit for politicians during the Covid-19 pandemic*](#), April 2020

Please note, the content of the briefings and the opinions of our guest experts do not reflect the views of the Mercator European Dialogue or any affiliated partners, but only those of the authors themselves.

MP-recommended reading

- George Lakoff, *The Political Mind*, Penguin, May 2008



A groundbreaking scientific examination of the way our brains understand politics. Lakoff, a celebrated linguist and cognitive scientist, spells out what cognitive science has discovered about reason, and reveals that human reason is far more interesting than we thought it was. Reason is physical, mostly unconscious, metaphorical, emotion-laden, and tied to empathy, and there are biological explanations behind our moral and political thought processes. Lakoff's call for a New Enlightenment is a bold and striking challenge to the cherished beliefs not only of philosophers, but of pundits, pollsters, and political leaders. *The Political Mind* is a passionate, erudite, and groundbreaking book on how the mind works and how we function socially and politically.

Keep the conversation going with the MED experts and members



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Nigel Harvey is Professor of Judgment and Decision Research at the University College London. He carries out experimental research into judgment and decision making, with a particular focus on how people use their judgment to forecast, monitor and control the behavior of systems. His other research interests include advice-taking and trust in advisors, the role of feedback in improving judgments and decisions, and calibration of subjective probabilities and confidence judgments.

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Coen Pustjens is Program Director and Coordinator of the National Democratic Institute's COVID-19 response tools for which he initiated, coordinated and authored four instruments focused on crisis communication, political decision-making during a crisis, and a practical toolkit for politicians during the pandemic. He is also active as a political advisor to international organizations and policymakers.

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Keep in contact with your colleagues! Please know that you can always find contact details of all **MED members** on the **Members-only area of the website**, which is accessible [here](#). Members are linked to all activities they participate in, as well as being organised by member states, making it easier for you to find your colleagues. Should you have issues logging in, you can contact rschalast@gmfus.org.

What more can we do to drive the conversation forward?

Remember that the Mercator European Dialogue is a network driven by MPs, hence we look forward to hearing from you and helping you as best we can to connect and work with your colleagues from across Europe in these challenging times.

If you have any suggestions on how to take the conversation to the next level, or to continue digging deeper into the urgent systemic challenges posed by COVID-19, feel free to reach out to us.

