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Multilevel Governance and Political Leadership: Crisis Communication in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Johanna Schnabel, Paul Anderson and Fabrizio De Francesco

Consistency in crisis communication is a key aspect of effective political leadership during crises, but can be difficult in multilevel systems due to the number of leaders and fragmentation of policymaking powers. The literature on multilevel governance suggests that centralisation enhances consistency in crisis communication while decentralisation leads to inconsistency. Consistency in crisis communication is also expected to depend on whether leaders coordinate crisis management. Comparing crisis communication in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper shows that centralisation does not automatically lead to consistent crisis communication. At the same time, decentralised decision-making does not necessarily undermine consistency. Overall, crisis communication tends to be more consistent when leaders coordinate crisis management.

Keywords: crisis, political communication, COVID-19, political leadership, multilevel governance, federalism

Introduction

Political leadership is a key dimension of effective management of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Boin et al., 2021; Chattopadhyay & Knüpling, 2021, pp. 300–301; Forster & Heinzel, 2021, pp. 1299–1300). During emergencies, citizens tend to rally around their leaders (Bol et al., 2021; Mueller, 1970). As decision-makers in chief, political leaders have the final authority over government responses to crises and are held responsible for the quality of their decisions, while symbolically, they become a

point of reference for the entire national community in crisis (Ansell et al., 2014). An essential part of political leadership is public communication (Boin et al., 2016; McLean & Ewart, 2020; Rauh, 2022). During emergencies, the community expects from its leaders guidance, action, and information on what needs to be done, what is being done, and why (Boin et al., 2016). Because the way governments communicate to the population can determine public support for crisis measures and, by implication, compliance (Boin et al., 2016), communication is a key aspect of effective crisis management (Warren & Lofstedt, 2022). It is especially important during the initial phase of a crisis.

To create support for crisis measures and promote compliance, leaders must provide a clear and consistent message to build trust and support for crisis measures (McLean & Ewart, 2020, p. 71; Warren et al., 2021, p. 285). Inconsistency can lead to public confusion and frustration, which is likely to undermine adherence to crisis measures.

Scholars of political leadership assume consistency to be more difficult in federations, quasi-federations, or regionalized states because several leaders—those at both national and subnational levels—share responsibility for crisis management and communication with the population (Boin et al., 2016, p. 65; Broschek, 2022; McLean & Ewart, 2020). Multilevel systems are expected to experience fragmented crisis communication driven by political leaders' rivalry, partisan differences, information asymmetries, or unequal financial and administrative capacities.

To investigate whether multilevel systems really fail at crisis communication, this article examines the communication of non-pharmaceutical interventions during the

COVID-19 pandemic in multilevel systems.[1] The literature on multilevel governance suggests that whether crisis communication is consistent depends on the level of centralisation of crisis management (Hegele & Schnabel, 2021). Consistent crisis communication is expected to be more likely when policy responses are decided by the central government. Centralised crisis management is associated with quick, decisive, and uniform policymaking. Conversely, a decentralised crisis response involves decisions made by subnational leaders, who can tailor them to local circumstances (Capano & Lippi, 2021). These leaders may not speak with one voice, especially when different parties are in government.

Besides the degree of centralisation, consistency in crisis communication also depends on whether leaders coordinate crisis management (Hegele & Schnabel, 2021). When leaders jointly discuss and agree on measures, their communications to the public are more likely to be similar. Conversely, uncoordinated crisis management can be expected to lead to differences in leaders' crisis responses, conflicting messages, and even open conflict between leaders.

Focusing on Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom (UK), we examine the *extent* to which there was consistency between national and subnational leaders' communications in the government response to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and assess *whether* centralisation and coordination are associated with consistent crisis communication. We examine communication around key crisis moments, specifically the introduction and subsequent easing of containment measures,

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[1] Non-pharmaceutical interventions refer to measures that do not depend on medication, vaccinations or other medical measures. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, these included measures such as hand washing, social distancing and self-isolation.

drawing largely on press releases and press conferences of national and subnational leaders. While Germany, Italy and the UK are three well-established European multilevel systems, they differ in the level of de/centralisation of crisis management and the extent to which governments actively coordinated COVID-19 responses.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, we present a taxonomy that provides a basis for analysing consistency in political leaders' crisis communication. We use this taxonomy to compare the experience of crisis communication in multilevel systems. Second, we enhance the understanding of the role of political leadership as an area of analysis within the study of multilevel governance. As Broschek attests (2022, p. 2), 'the systematic study of leadership has been largely absent from comparative federalism scholarship' even though it is crucial for the functioning of multilevel systems, particularly their ability to manage crises.

Using COVID-19 as a case study, our paper shows that, contrary to expectations, centralisation of crisis management does not automatically lead to consistent crisis communication. The role of subnational leaders in the implementation and enforcement of decisions made at the central level leaves room for inconsistencies. Crisis communication tends to be more consistent when leaders actively coordinate crisis management. Coordination explains the consistency we observed even when crisis management was decentralised.

Political leadership and crisis communication

Crises are characterised by high threat, urgency, and deep uncertainty. They are 'a phase of disorder in the seemingly normal development of a system … during which the normal ways of operating no longer work' (Boin et al., 2016, p. 5). During crises, media

and public opinion are more attentive to political leadership than in normal times, increasing pressure on political leaders to ensure an effective and immediate response. Citizens expect political leaders to provide a quick, decisive, and comprehensive response to reduce uncertainty, mitigate the threat and ultimately identify how to overcome the crisis (Ansell et al., 2014; Boin & Lodge, 2021).

For Boin et al. (2016, p. 4), effective crisis management by political leaders during a crisis thus entails the accomplishment of a combination of tasks. Besides a quick and prompt reaction, understanding of the crisis, the mobilization of sufficient resources, and the adoption of critical and well-calibrated measures and their implementation, effective crisis management involves clear and consistent communication from political leaders to citizens. Consistency in crisis communication is crucial to build trust and support for crisis measures and persuade citizens of the legitimacy of policy responses to foster compliance (Boin et al., 2016, 2021; Forster & Heinzel, 2021; Garland, 2021; McLean & Ewart, 2020; Rauh, 2022; Schmidt, 2022; Ulmer et al., 2007; Warren & Lofstedt, 2022).

Indeed, followership, and in the case of crises such as a pandemic, compliance with measures, is dependent on an understanding by citizens that a leader 'is genuinely concerned with their interests' (Reicher et al., 2014, p. 152). Compliance is more likely if people accept the decisions of their leaders and 'believe in what they are doing' (Reicher et al., 2014, p. 153). Hence, leaders must be able to command the respect of citizens. This mirrors an understanding of effective leadership in pluralised societies based on communication, influence, and persuasion rather than a hierarchical relation between government and citizens (Wardman, 2020, pp. 1094–1095).

Clarity of message is central to consistent crisis communication. Inconsistency can lead to public confusion, mistakes, perceived inequities, frustration, and ultimately

non-adherence to crisis measures (Independent SAGE, 2020; Warren et al., 2021; Warren & Lofstedt, 2022). Hence, scholars of risk governance recommend that '[g]overnments must avoid confusing or inconsistent regional implementation and communication of interventions' (Warren et al., 2021, 285).

Leaders' ability to promote compliance with crisis measures is a particularly important factor in the context of public health crises reliant on non-pharmaceutical interventions, such as social distancing (Seale et al., 2020). This is especially the case in the early phases of such crises where crisis management is constrained to non-pharmaceutical interventions in the absence of medication or vaccinations.

While pivotal, consistency in crisis communication is challenging for political leaders, not least in the context of competing crisis narratives, which can hinder rational responses to the crisis as well as encourage 'politically damaging blame games' (Boin et al., 2021, p. 8). Consistent crisis communication can be complicated by the existence of political leaders at different levels of government, increasing the possibility of conflicting narratives, rivalry, and blame shifting (Boin et al., 2016, p. 65). Hitherto, research on political leadership has tended to focus on national leaders and the relationship between international and national levels, neglecting the comparative assessment of the interaction between national and subnational leaders (Wanna, 2014). Therefore, it is not clear under which conditions multilevel governance really undermines consistent crisis communication.

Crisis communication and multilevel governance

In multilevel systems, several leaders are responsible for crisis management, including communication with the public. The reason is that in multilevel systems, (at least) two orders of government exist, with each level empowered to take decisions in ambits

within their purview (Hooghe & Marks, 2003, pp. 236–237).[2] While this division of authority can also occur between a supranational and national level, our focus is on multilevel governance within the state, that is on the national and subnational level. Besides the division of authority, multilevel governance is shaped by the interaction of the different governments, which are interdependent in many ways because powers are shared or because policy problems cut across jurisdictions (Benz, 2009, p. 21).

Multilevel governance within the state can prove helpful in managing crises given the information advantage of subnational governments and their responsiveness to local needs and preferences (Kincaid, 1995). Yet, multilevel governance can also challenge an effective crisis management response, making it 'hard to share information, organize a rapid response, and speak with one voice' (Boin et al., 2014, p. 421). Given the existence of several leaders—a national leader and subnational leaders—multilevel governance may lead to inconsistent crisis communication. In multilevel systems, it is not uncommon for subnational leaders to juxtapose their political objectives or leadership styles with those of national leaders (Wanna, 2014), creating opportunities for blame shifting, burden shifting, and shirking (Bednar, 2009). Subnational leaders may contest the communication of national leaders due to intergovernmental competition, pre-existing conflicts, partisan and ideological differences, electoral incentives, information asymmetries, or unequal financial and administrative capacities.

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[2] Hooghe and Marks (2003) identify two types of multilevel governance. Our conceptualization refers to Type I governance, which is about territorial units, specifically about the relationship between orders of government.

We hypothesize that the degree of consistency in crisis communication in multilevel systems depends on the way powers are divided between the two orders and on the extent to which governments interact to coordinate their crisis responses.

In multilevel systems, powers can be divided in different ways. In particular, the division of powers can be centralised or decentralised. We use the terms centralisation and decentralisation to capture whether the bulk of powers are allocated to the central government (centralisation) or to the regions (decentralisation) (Dardanelli, 2022, pp. 19–20). Whether a specific power is centralised or decentralised is defined in the constitution or in ordinary legislation. In the case of concurrent powers, that is powers shared between the different levels, the distribution of authority ultimately depends on whether or not the central government passes legislation. Our focus is on the authority to decide on the introduction or easing of non-pharmaceutical measures to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

If crisis management is decentralised, meaning regional governments are in charge of deciding and implementing most measures, we can expect the disadvantages of multilevel governance to materialise (Toshkov et al., 2022, pp. 1015–1016). Given the distribution of authority in favour of the subnational level, several leaders are at the forefront of crisis management, and are likely to convey different messages about what is being done, what needs to be done, and why. Centralised crisis management by contrast, that is, when the central government is responsible for deciding most measures, can be assumed to facilitate more consistent crisis management. Consequently, we expect that:

(E1) If crisis management is centralised, consistency in crisis communication will be more frequent.

Besides the degree of de/centralisation of crisis management, consistency in crisis communication also depends on whether and how successfully leaders jointly determine crisis measures, which we refer to as intergovernmental coordination (Hegele & Schnabel, 2021). Coordination can occur vertically between the central government and the subnational governments or horizontally among the subnational governments. For the purpose of our study, coordination means that governments actively agree on the introduction or easing of measures (and their timing). While governments may also coordinate in other ways (for instance, exchange information) (Peters, 2015; Schnabel & Hegele, 2021, pp. 539–544) and while policy alignment may also be a sign of mutual adjustment or similar problem perception or ideology, we expect consistency in crisis management specifically when they jointly discuss and agree on measures because then they are most likely to align their responses and messages to justify them.

When the central government decides on most crisis measures but subnational leaders have some responsibilities in the implementation and enforcement of policy responses decided at the central level, inconsistency in crisis communication is still possible. Subnational leaders may openly resist central action due to ideological differences or a lack of capacity, for instance. If the central government seeks agreement of the regions before deciding on measures, reducing the risk of opposition, crisis communication can be expected to be more consistent.

In short, we expect that when governments coordinate most measures, crisis communication is more consistent:

(E2) If crisis management is coordinated, consistency in crisis communication will be more frequent.

To coordinate their decisions, governments can use different mechanisms. Coordination often occurs at intergovernmental meetings (Schnabel, 2020). While it can be expected to be particularly likely in countries with well-developed intergovernmental councils, there is evidence that governments in countries with less well-functioning bodies also coordinated their crisis responses (Schnabel & Hegele, 2021, pp. 554–557).

Conceptualizing consistency in crisis communication

Political leadership in times of crisis revolves around five components: sense making, decision making, meaning making, termination, and learning (Boin et al., 2016). Decision making and meaning making are determined by sense making. Sense making does not make for effective crisis management unless it is translated into actions and messages communicated by leaders. Our conceptualization of crisis communication in multilevel systems thus focuses on decision making and meaning making. Put differently, we examine on how political leaders present to the public what is being done and why once they have made sense of the crisis. We contend that crisis decision making and meaning making are two different but interlinked dimensions of leaders' crisis communication.

Political leaders make the strategic decisions – usually in consultation with other elected officials, policy advisers, experts, as well as various government agencies – thus setting the course of action and providing direction (McLean & Ewart, 2020, pp. 63–64). While communication is not the primary purpose of decision making, decision-making is a dimension of crisis communication. By making decisions, leaders communicate to the population what they consider to be the most effective, feasible, or desirable measures, and what rules must be respected.

Usually, leaders announce and explain their decisions via public statements such as press releases and press conferences. By addressing the public, they show their understanding of the crisis and its implications for society, and thus 'shap[e] people's understanding of a crisis' and build 'public support for their policies' (Boin et al., 2016, p. 69). This is part of the meaning making process whereby leaders 'attempt to reduce the public and political uncertainty caused by crises' (Boin et al., 2016, p. 69) by explaining what is happening and why; what the consequences are; how they can be addressed; who is responsible; and can also be about what went wrong.

In multilevel systems, *decision making* can result in policy similarity or policy difference. Policy similarity means that governments adopt or ease similar measures, indicating a shared perception of what needs to be done. Conversely, policy difference means that leaders take dissimilar approaches to address the crisis, signalling to the public that they disagree on policy instruments and/or timing. For instance, non-essential shops may remain open in one part of the country, while being closed elsewhere.

With regards to *meaning making* there can be agreement or disagreement. Agreement means that leaders convey similar messages when announcing their decisions, while disagreement represents explicit contestation of measures, timings, or jurisdictional authority or the adoption of a different narrative to justify their decisions. Policy similarity is not a prerequisite for agreement. For instance, a subnational leader may opt to ease restrictions while signalling their agreement with the decision of another leader to tighten measures given different circumstances.

	Decision making	
	Policy similarity	**Policy difference**

Meaning	**Agreement**	Consistency	Partial consistency
making	**Disagreement**	Partial inconsistency	Inconsistency

Table 1. Conceptualizing consistency in crisis communication in multilevel systems

The intersection of policy similarity or difference in decision making with agreement or disagreement in meaning making results in four cells (Table 1). *Consistency* in crisis communication is achieved if there is policy similarity (governments adopt similar measures) and agreement in meaning making (governments support each other's measures and adopt a similar narrative). Conversely, crisis communication is *inconsistent* if there is policy difference in decision making and disagreement in meaning making, meaning that leaders adopt different measures, openly contest each other's measures or their timing or have different narratives. Crisis communication by leaders in multilevel systems is *partially consistent* when there is policy difference in decision making but agreement when leaders inform the public. For example, some leaders may close schools and others may keep them open, but they do not contest each other's decisions. In so doing, leaders indicate that they share the same perception regarding the measures to be taken due to varying infection levels in different places. Because policy difference can be driven by different infection levels and given our focus on communication, we consider that the message leaders convey when informing the public is more important for consistency than the decisions they make. In other words, if there is policy similarity but disagreement, communication is *partially inconsistent*. For instance, governments may take the same measures, producing policy similarity, but use different narratives to justify the decisions.

Research design

Case selection

The cases we selected are Germany, Italy, and the UK. They are all multilevel systems in which the subnational governments are responsible for many aspects of public health and health care. Following Leuffen (2007), we selected those cases based on a theory-guided typology whose two dimensions are the de/centralization of crisis management and coordination of crisis responses (Table 2). [3] Given the variation in configurations we expect to find different outcomes in terms of consistency of crisis communication.

		Crisis governance	
		Centralised	Decentralised
Coordination	Most measures	*n/a*	Germany (lockdown and easing phase) UK (lockdown)
	No coordination/ few measures	Italy (lockdown and easing phase)	UK (easing phase)

Table 2: Case selection

In Germany, the management of a public health crisis is decentralised. The *Infection Protection Act* (*Infektionsschutzgesetz*, IfSG) authorises the 16 constituent

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[3] In highly centralised countries there is little need for coordination, which is why this configuration is not relevant to our analysis.

units, the *Länder*, to impose a range of restrictions to limit the spread of infectious diseases. The federal government only regulates borders and international travel. Moreover, it is assigned the role of coordinator. In the UK, the management of a public health crisis is also rather decentralised. Separate Public Health Acts cover Scotland, Northern Ireland, and England and Wales. In Italy, the management of a public health crisis is based on a vertical subsidiarity principle established within the Civil Protection Code (Codice della Protezione Civile) whereby the highest level is the declaration of a state of emergency for a period of up to 12 months allowing the central government to centralise crisis management. A state of emergency was declared on 31 January 2020.

The three countries also vary in the number of policy measures that were jointly determined—which, in the case of Italy and the UK, changed over time.

During the first wave of the pandemic, the federal chancellor and the minister-presidents, Germany's subnational leaders, met frequently using the format of the Conference of Minister-Presidents (*Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz*, MPK) and jointly decided on most policy measures (Hegele & Schnabel, 2021). Leaders adopted joint resolutions, which the federal government published on its website as a press release. Each meeting was followed by a press conference with the federal chancellor and two subnational leaders, the current and past MPK chairs. Although fewer measures were jointly determined during the easing phase, the *Länder* easing several measures on their own, the federal chancellor and the minister-presidents still co-decided most measures.

In Italy, the national government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic during the lockdown phase was characterised by an uncoordinated approach which predominantly excluded input from subnational governments (Cavino, 2020, p. 6). This is with the exception of two ordinances establishing so-called 'red zones' in Lombardy and Veneto, which were co-signed by the Health Minister and the Presidents of the two

regions in February 2020. As the pandemic progressed and subnational contestation of the centralising approach grew, there was increased coordination between central and subnational leaders (Marchetti, 2021, pp. 135–136). A Decree of the Minister of Health of 30 April 2020 provided for joint risk assessment with the regions through a specific Control Room. A Law Decree of 16 May 2020 required consultation of regional presidents, which, however, "was rather a formal exercise" (Palermo, 2021, p. 106), though led to Health Minister ordinances being co-signed by the regional presidents. Despite these improvements in coordination, measures were still largely determined by the central government (Alber et al., 2021, p. 26).

In the UK, in the first wave of the pandemic, almost all decisions announced and implemented by the UK, Scottish, and Welsh governments were jointly determined under the auspices of the UK Government's Civil Contingencies Committee (COBRA) (Anderson, 2022, p. 146). This resulted in unprecedented levels of intergovernmental interaction in March and April 2020. As the first wave of the pandemic evolved and COBRA's coordinative role declined, interaction became less frequent. In the easing phase, most measures were not coordinated and each government decided on the easing of measures on its own.

To make the analysis feasible we analysed five German *Länder* (Bavaria, Bremen, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Thuringia), four Italian regions (three regions with ordinary statutes, Campania, Lombardy, and Veneto; and one autonomous region with additional legislative power specified in the special statute, Sicily), and England and two devolved territories in the UK (Scotland and

Wales).[4] This choice is motivated by the regional variations in the exposure to the virus during the first wave and by differences regarding the parties that were in government at the national and subnational level.

We focus on the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic when uncertainty and the immediate threat were highest. By comparing the lockdown phase and the easing phase, we obtain temporal variation, which allows us to examine the consistency of crisis communication between different leaders within and across all three multilevel systems.

Operationalization

Our concept of consistency in crisis communication encompasses decisions on policy measures and the messages leaders convey when informing the public. We specifically looked for policy difference and disagreement and concluded that there was policy similarity and/or agreement otherwise. Our units of analysis are the communications about each of the measures we examined.

Concerning decision making, policy difference can relate to the measures themselves or their timing:

- **Measures**: National and subnational leaders adopted different measures to respond to the crisis and took different approaches when easing measures. For

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[4] Northern Ireland was discounted as a case study primarily for geographical reasons, whereby its location on the island of Ireland required closer cross-border cooperation with Irish than British authorities.

instance, some leaders may have ordered schools to close while others kept schools open.

- **Timing**: National and subnational leaders adopted similar measures but with differences in timing. For instance, all leaders may have decided to close schools, but some closed them one or several days after the others.

Hence, with regard to decision making we distinguish between difference of measures, difference of timing, and similar decisions. We assign communications to a policy difference cell whenever leaders adopted different measures or timing was different. However, different measures indicate a higher degree of policy difference than variation in timing. We will highlight such differences in degree in the empirical analysis.

When it comes to meaning making, disagreement can materialise as contestation of measures or timing or as differences in the narratives leaders use to motivate their decisions:

- **Contestation of measures**: National and subnational leaders criticised each other's measure(s). For example, subnational leaders may oppose the decision of the national leader to close schools throughout the country.

- **Contestation of timing**: National or subnational leaders criticised the timing of each other's measure(s). An example of such contestation is when some leaders claim that other leaders closed schools 'too late' or 'too early'.

- **Contestation of jurisdiction**: National or subnational leaders contested each other's jurisdiction regarding a policy measure, potentially creating confusion among citizens concerning the legitimacy of restrictions. For instance,

subnational leaders may oppose the central government's decision to close
schools on the grounds that education is a subnational jurisdiction.

- **Fragmentation of narratives**: National and subnational leaders used different
rationales to justify their (similar or different) decisions. For instance, some
leaders may have emphasised the need to protect the vulnerable while others
highlighted the economic well-being of the country.

Hence, when it comes to meaning making, we determine whether there was
contestation, whether it concerned measures, timing, or jurisdiction and whether
leaders' narratives were similar or different. We assign communications to an
agreement cell when there was no contestation and leaders used similar narratives to
justify their decisions. As soon as there was contestation or fragmentation of narratives,
we consider the communication of a measure as an instance of disagreement, regardless
of whether contestation concerned the efficacy of the measure or its timing.
Contestation of timing or jurisdiction indicates weaker disagreement than contestation
of the efficacy of the measure. We will highlight such differences in degree in the
analysis of our cases.

		Decision making	
		Policy similarity	**Policy difference**
Meaning making	**Agreement**	• Similarity of measures; no differences in timing • No contestation; similar narratives ⇨ *Consistency*	• Different measures or differences in timing • No contestation; similar narratives ⇨ *Partial consistency*
	Disagreement	• Similarity of measures; no differences in timing • Contestation of measures, timing, or jurisdiction or fragmentation of narratives	• Different measures or differences in timing • Contestation of measures, timing, or jurisdiction or fragmentation of narratives

		⇨ *Partial inconsistency*	⇨ *Inconsistency*

Table 3. Operationalizing consistency in crisis communication

Data

We examined communications of the main decisions concerning key events during the
first wave from the enactment of mitigation measures until the easing of restrictions
(Germany: March to early May 2020; UK: March to July 2020; Italy: late January to
end of May 2022).[5] Specifically, we analysed closures of schools and social venues;
cessation of industrial and commercial activities; bans of mass gatherings and events;
and the easing of such restrictions. We examined press releases and press conferences,
or televised addresses, to establish how leaders communicated the introduction or lifting
of restrictions (see online appendix). These were the most direct ways of
communicating with citizens during the crisis. We thus relied on the official channels
that national and subnational political leaders used to announce and explain their
decisions.

The subnational leaders we focused on were the heads of the executive of the
second tier of government—i.e., those of the *Länder* (Germany), regions (Italy), and
devolved territories (UK). A total of over 240 press releases and press conferences
published on national and subnational governments' websites and leaders' social media
accounts were analysed (see online appendix).

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[5] For a comparative overview see Plümper and Neumayer (2022).

Empirical findings

First lockdown

After the first COVID-19 cases were recorded, governments quickly imposed a range of measures to contain the spread of the virus. In the following, we describe the way leaders communicated these decisions, applying our taxonomy of (in)consistency in crisis communication.

Consistency

In the early stages of the pandemic in March 2020, there was a significant level of consistency in decision-making across all three states. In Germany, the federal chancellor and the minister-presidents of the 16 *Länder* jointly decided to ban large events (FG, 12 March) and to restrict social contact (FG, 16 March). Leaders adopted a single narrative to justify these restrictions. They highlighted the urgency to act to protect those considered most vulnerable (e.g., the elderly), to maintain health services, and to gain time until treatment or vaccines would be available (e.g., BY, 13 March; FG, 12 March; NW, 13 March). Based on scientific evidence and growing infection rates, measures were tightened in late March. Overall, we did not find evidence of disagreement among the leaders of the *Länder* in our sample regarding the measures listed above or their timing, nor did we find evidence of leaders criticizing each other. In fact, leaders repeatedly emphasised their close cooperation (BY, 17 March; HB, 13 March; NW, 31 March).

In the UK, there was a substantial degree of policy similarity between England, Scotland, and Wales when it came to the imposition of restrictions in March 2020. This resulted in the publication of a co-authored 'Coronavirus: Action Plan' by the UK and

devolved governments, as well as joint decisions on advice to work from home and the cessation of non-essential contact (UKG, 16 March), the closure of schools (SG, 18 March; UKG, 18 March; WG, 18 March), social venues (UKG, 20 March), and the introduction of a national lockdown (UKG, 23 March). The co-determined strategy by all governments led to no contestation of measures and their time of adoption. Emphasising the joint approach taken by the different governments, the leaders in our sample adopted identical narratives on the necessity of restrictions based on the advice given to all governments by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SG, 17 March; UKG, 16 March; WG, 17 March).

In Italy the initial exponential rise of cases was concentrated in the Northern regions. Consequently, the first measures concerned only outbreak areas in 10 cities in Lombardy (21 February) and one city in Veneto (22 February). Ordinances were enacted establishing so-called 'red zones', prohibiting a raft of activities such as public and religious gatherings, sports and other recreational activities, the movement of residents to work outside the red zones as well as the closure of schools and non-essential shops. On 8 March such measures were extended to several other Northern provinces and regions, followed one day later by a national lockdown across all of Italy.

The first measures in Lombardy and Veneto were enacted by the Minister of Health through ordinances co-signed by the Presidents of Lombardy and Veneto, all of whom adopted a single narrative regarding the necessity of measures to halt the spread of the virus (LOM, 21 February; VEN, 21 February). Akin to Germany and Italy, we found no evidence of contestation.

In summary, we observe consistency in Germany regarding crisis communications on mass gatherings, contact restrictions, and school closures; advice to work from home, contact restrictions and the closure of schools and social venues, and

the national lockdown in the UK; and the establishment of the first red zones in Italy—with both a high degree of policy similarity and agreement announcing and justifying measures to contain and delay the spread of COVID-19.

Partial consistency

In Germany we find a few policy differences among the five *Länder* we examined, though these concerned a small number of measures and mainly timing. The timing of decisions to close non-essential shops, schools, museums, libraries, and other public premises differed between the *Länder*, though only by a few days. The policy differences we observed in these cases were not accompanied by a fragmentation of the narrative or contestation of decisions. Bavaria was the only *Land* to impose a curfew, but this was justified by the Minister-President because of higher infection rates within the region (BY, 17 March).

In Italy, all measures subsequent to the introduction of the first red zones in Lombardy and Veneto were centralised and enacted through prime ministerial decrees. Within the COVID-19 legislative framework, regions with cases of COVID-19 were allowed to introduce stricter rules when implementing prime ministerial decrees, thus resulting in policy differences (Salvati, 2022). There were also differences in timing. For instance, the national lockdown enacted on 9 March restricted the opening hours of restaurants and bars to 6:00am–6:00pm but allowed tighter restrictions in individual regions. The President of Campania thus decided to close barbers and hairdressers (CAM, 10 March), a policy that was rolled out nationally one day later alongside the closure of non-essential shops, restaurants, and bars.

When, in mid-April, the government reconsidered restrictions on book, stationery and children's clothes shops, Lombardy kept these shops closed (LOM, 13 April), and Campania opened only the latter and only for two mornings a week (CAM, 12 April). The Presidents of Campania and Lombardy did not contest the central government decision to reconsider certain shops as essential for citizens but argued that social distancing was difficult to observe in these premises. The narrative of the two Presidents was about the necessity of additional measures for protecting public health.

Consequently, we observe partial consistency concerning the closure of non-essential premises and curfews in Germany; and concerning the closure of businesses in Italy. We found no instances of partial consistency in the UK.

Partial inconsistency

Italy was the only case where we found instances of partial inconsistency. On 8 March the Prime Minister extended the lockdown by enacting 'stay at home' measures across Lombardy and 14 Provinces in Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Piedmont, and Marche.[6] Subnational leaders, however, contested the measures. The President of Veneto, for instance, criticised the national decision to extend the red zones, claiming the extension of lockdown measures in Venetian provinces was unsupported by scientific evidence (VEN, 8 March). We also found instances of contestation regarding jurisdiction. When the Prime Minister enforced a further and complete lockdown in the outbreak areas in

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[6] The 14 Provinces are Modena, Parma, Piacenza, Reggio-Emilia, Rimini, Pesaro e Urbino, Alessandria, Asti, Novara, Verbano-Cusio-Ossola, Vercelli, Padova, Treviso, and Venezia.

the 10 cities in Lombardy and one in Veneto on 23 February through a decree repealing the previous co-signed ordinances between the Health Minister and regional presidents establishing the zones, the Lombardy President criticised this as an unnecessary centralisation of power (LOM, 24 February).

Inconsistency

In Italy, the COVID-19 legislative framework allowed regional governments to enact stricter regional measures only if COVID-19 cases were recorded within their respective regions. On 24 February, schools were closed in Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna, and Liguria and Marche on the following day, more than a week before the Prime Ministerial Decree on 4 March closing all schools across the country. National lockdown measures allowed individual exercise activities, but these were banned in Campania and limited to within 200 metres from home in Veneto. The Presidents of Campania and Veneto also enacted stricter measures on shops and markets. Following the national closure of non-essential shops on 11 March, street markets selling food (exempt under the Prime Ministerial Decree) were closed in Campania (CAM, 12 March), while the Venetian President closed all shops on Sundays with the exception of pharmacies (VEN, 20 March). There were also several policy differences associated with a few measures which reconsidered certain lockdown rules. The Sicilian President, for example, disregarded a directive of the Home Affairs Minister allowing children to have a short walk outside their homes accompanied by their parents (SIC, 1 April), while the President of Campania maintained a strict lockdown (CAM, 31 March).

With regards to school closures, Prime Minister Conte warned regions not to deviate from the agreed implementation framework. The central government even challenged Marche in the courts for enacting measures without confirmed cases of COVID-19 (Malandrino & Demichelis, 2020; Rubino, 2020). While the President of Veneto encouraged the national government to pursue more rigorous measures to close shops in the lockdown phase (VEN, 20 March), the President of Campania criticised the national government for taking 'half measures' that would not solve the problem (CAM, 20 March). The narrative of inefficacy of measures was used by the two presidents to justify more stringent measure to close non-essential shops. The justification provided by the Presidents of Sicily and Campania for their decisions to maintain tight restrictions, disregarding the central government decision to reconsider lockdown rules, also showed contestation. The two leaders argued that the central government's decision was too early and based on the improved situation of the Northern regions, ignoring the situation in Southern regions. In these cases, the narrative focused on requesting stringent mitigation measures to prevent further strain on the health service.

The Italian case thus shows several inconsistencies in crisis communication where policy differences concerning schools and sport activities were justified by regional leaders who contested the decisions taken by the Prime Minister and used different narratives.

In the UK, on 12 March, the Scottish Government took the decision to advise against mass gatherings of more than 500 people, a measure not enacted by either the Welsh or UK governments until 5 days later (SG, 12 March). On the same day that the Scottish Government advised against mass gatherings, the UK Prime Minister signalled that while this was an option being considered by the UK Government, it was not being implemented because of a lack of scientific evidence that the measure would inhibit the

spread of the virus (UKG, 12 March). While acknowledging the absence of scientific

evidence to support the decision, the Scottish First Minister argued it was 'inconsistent

to have a business-as-usual message around large gatherings' (SG, 12 March). The

different decisions and narratives on mass gatherings were the only example of

inconsistency in the UK.

		Decision making	
		Policy similarity	Policy difference
Meaning making	**Agreement**	**Germany** • similar decisions on bans of large events and mass gatherings, restrictions on social contact (all 5 *Länder*) • no contestation, similar narratives **UK** • similar decisions in Scotland, Wales, and England on school closures, advice to work from home, closure of social venues, restrictions on social contact • no contestation, similar narratives **Italy** • similar decisions on the creation of the first red zones in Lombardy and Veneto • no contestation, similar narratives ⇨ *Consistency*	**Germany** • different decisions on curfews (Bavaria) • small differences in timing of closure of non-essential shops, social venues, and schools among all 5 *Länder* • no contestation, similar narratives **Italy** • smaller differences in timing of closure of personal services (Campania) • different decisions regarding reconsideration of book, stationery, and children's clothes shops (Campania, Lombardy) • no contestation, similar narratives ⇨ *Partial consistency*
	Disagreement	**Italy**	**Italy**

		• similar decisions on the expansion of the red zones in Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Piedmont, and Marche • contestation of measures (Veneto) • contestation of jurisdiction (Lombardy) ⇨ **Partial inconsistency**	• different decisions on sport activities (Campania), children's outdoor activities (Sicily), and Sunday closure of shops (Veneto) • differences in timing of school closures (Marche, Sicily) • contestation of measures (Campania, Sicily, Veneto) **UK** • differences in timing on ban of mass gatherings in Scotland • no contestation, but fragmented narratives ⇨ **Inconsistency**

Table 4. Crisis communication in Germany, Italy, and the UK during the lockdown phase

Table 4 summarises our findings on COVID-19 crisis communications during the lockdown phase of the first wave. In Germany, crisis communication by the five minister-presidents in our sample and the chancellor was either fully or partially consistent. In cases where we observed partial consistency, it was due to very minor differences in the timing of measures such as the closure of schools, sometimes of just one day. In some cases, differences in infection rates seem to explain why some *Länder* pushed ahead, while in others the differences in timing related to the internal functioning of *Länder* executives and their administrations. Overall, we observe a high degree of consistency in crisis communication by German leaders.

Likewise in the UK, there was a high degree of consistency in the crisis communications of the national and subnational leaders in our sample. Most measures

were applied throughout the country with no differences in timing and agreement over their necessity. We found one instance of inconsistency. When it came to prohibiting mass gatherings very early on in the first wave, limits were imposed at different points of time and the Scottish Government challenged the UK Government's narrative.

In Italy, crisis communication by the Prime Minister and the leaders of the four regions in our sample was much less consistent. Although we observe consistency when the first red zones were established, subsequent crisis communication was shaped by policy difference and/or disagreement. When policy was similar because it was decided at the central level and imposed throughout the country, regional leaders often contested it, on jurisdictional or necessity grounds, or narratives were fragmented. Notably, we found several measures where decisions were different and contested because regional leaders deviated from and criticized central government policy.

In general, we did not identify major differences in policy during the lockdown phase. The differences we found largely concerned the timing of measures or specificities.

Easing of restrictions

Once the peak of infections was reached, governments began to lift containment measures, often in small steps before finally easing the bulk of restrictions. Applying our taxonomy shows a few changes in crisis communication of political leaders after the lockdown phase.

Consistency

In Germany, restrictions were eased in three steps: in mid-April, end-April, and early

May. During this time, we found one instance of consistency. As agreed at an MPK meeting on 15 April (FG, 15 April a), all leaders decided that hairdressers and barbers would be allowed to reopen on 4 May (policy similarity). There was no evidence of contestation or fragmentation of narratives.

Partial consistency

At their meeting on 15 April, German leaders jointly announced that they would allow shops of a certain size (< 800 sqm), libraries, and bike shops to reopen (FG, 15 April). In-person teaching would be allowed for school leaving exam preparation and final years of schooling in a phased approach, as would be certain sessions at universities. Leaders decided to maintain the ban on mass gatherings but to allow two households to meet. The implementation of this decision differed slightly, by a few days, between the *Länder* in our sample. For instance, Mecklenburg West-Pomerania's government allowed non-essential shops of up to 800 sqm to reopen on 18 April (MV, 16 April a), while the other *Länder* set that date to 20 April. On the same day, the Minister-President of Mecklenburg West-Pomerania announced that gatherings with a maximum of 50 people would be allowed (MV, 16 April b). This preceded by several days the easing of restrictions in *Länder* like Bavaria, where gatherings of a maximum of 50 people and religious services were allowed on 4 May (BY, 28 April).

At another MPK meeting on 30 April, leaders decided to reallow religious services and that playgrounds, museums, galleries, and public gardens could reopen — subject to protective measures (FG, 30 April). The Minister-Presidents of North Rhine-Westphalia and Mecklenburg West-Pomerania immediately announced that they would ease restrictions accordingly (MV, 30 April; NW, 30 April), albeit some restrictions had already been lifted in Mecklenburg West-Pomerania (e.g., zoos were reopened on 16

April) (MV, 16 April). The Bavarian Minister-President announced several days later that Bavaria's curfew would end, and several measures would be eased (e.g., on playgrounds and, later, restaurants) (BY, 5 May). As this overview of the first step in easing the lockdown shows there was variation in the decisions announced by leaders. These policy differences, however, mainly concerned timing, and were often a matter of a few days.

After these first initial steps to ease restrictions, the bulk of restrictions were eased in early May pursuant to a joint resolution stipulating that the leaders would set the path of easing restrictions individually and a failsafe mechanism to reintroduce measures in the event of a spike in cases (FG, 6 May). Subsequently, each *Land* designed its own reopening plan. In our sample, the Minister-Presidents of Mecklenburg West-Pomerania and North-Rhine-Westphalia announced roadmaps to end lockdown (MV, 16 April; NW, 6 May) but the other *Länder* eased restrictions in a more ad hoc manner (e.g., NW, 6 May; TH, 6 May). Bremen's announcement, for example, came several days later (HB, 12 May). We did not find evidence of restrictions that remained beyond our period of investigation in one *Land* but not the others. Hence, the policy difference we observe in regard to the easing phase mainly concerned timing, which differed slightly.

We did not find evidence of contestation of measures or timing among the leaders in our sample, nor did we observe a fragmentation of narratives. Leaders highlighted their agreement regarding the ongoing ban on mass gatherings and events (e.g., BY, 16 April; FG, 15 April, 30 April; NW, 30 April; TH, 30 April) and emphasised their commitment to the failsafe mechanism (e.g., HB, 6 May; MV, 7 May; NW, 6 May; TH, 6 May a). Strong agreement also existed regarding the need for the lifting of restrictions to go hand on hand with protective measures (*Schutzkonzepte*),

specifically the use of face masks and continued social distancing (e.g., BY, 16 April; FG, 15 April b; MV, 15 April, 30 April; TH, 30 April). Leaders often justified the differences in timing with reference to differences in infection rates and showed understanding for different approaches by the other leaders (e.g., FG, 6 May; MV, 15 April; NW, 15 April; TH, 30 April b). The insistence by the Bavarian Minister-President on his more cautious approach (e.g., BY, 16 April b) can be seen as implicit, though minor, disagreement between leaders regarding timing. Bavaria's Minister-President also mentioned contrasting views regarding the size of shops that would be allowed to reopen. He emphasised, however, that he supported the compromise that was reached (BY, 16 April b). Hence, despite more policy differences, there was agreement; leaders did not use different narratives or contest each other's decisions.

In the UK, there were similarities in the measures taken by England, Scotland, and Wales, but both minor and major differences in terms of timing. For example, leaders announced similar easing of rules around meeting up outdoors, taking effect in Scotland on 29 May and 1 June in England and Wales (SG, 28 May; UKG, 28 May; WG, 29 May). Restrictions, however, were eased in England by the UK Government at a much faster pace than by the Scottish and Welsh governments in their respective territories. Primary schools were reopened in England on 1 June (although not all local authorities within England followed suit) and secondary schools on 15 June, although limited to certain age groups (UKG, 28 May). Retail and hospitality sectors were allowed to fully reopen from 4 July, in compliance with measures such as social distancing, mask-wearing and table service (UKG, 23 June). In Scotland and Wales, the same measures were significantly delayed. Schools in Wales were not reopened until 29 June (WG, 10 June), while in Scotland they remained closed until August (SG, 21 May). For indoor hospitality, changes came into effect in Scotland on 15 July (SG, 10

July), but not in Wales until 3 August (WG, 10 July). In short, all three governments pursued similar policies in easing restrictions but at significantly different paces.

In the UK, as in Germany, there was a similar narrative regarding the possibility and necessity of divergent approaches given varying infection rates in the different territories (SG, 10 May; UKG, 10 June; WG, 24 April). The decision to keep schools closed in Scotland and Wales longer than in England was justified based on infection rates in the devolved territories. We found no evidence of contestation of other leaders' measures, and all governments continued to communicate similar narratives to justify their decisions.

Partial inconsistency

Decision making regarding the easing of lockdown in Italy consisted of three phases. From 4 May, the government allowed movement within the same region only for work and health reasons and for visiting relatives. In this first phase, industries re-opened. From 17 May, free movement was granted within regions, and most businesses, shops, religious premises, parks, playgrounds, and museums re-opened. On 3 June in the third phase, free movement between regions was allowed and on 11 June, cinemas, and theatres as well as other social premises re-opened. The ban on mass gatherings, however, remained for the whole country, and the government kept schools closed until September. With the second phase, common regional implementation guidelines were submitted to the central government and attached to prime ministerial executive orders on the reopening of shops, restaurants, religious gatherings, parks, and museums (Conference of Regions, 19 May; SIC, 16 May). Drafted and approved by the Conference of Regions, these guidelines led to a nationally uniform easing of measures

(LOM, 17 May; SIC 17 May). In contrast to the lockdown phase, we observe a high level of policy similarity. This was because the legislative frameworks allowed regions to further regulate, pending the adoption of a prime ministerial decree, only in cooperation with the minister of health. Furthermore, implementation at the regional level was steered through the above-mentioned detailed guidelines. This coordinated approach occurred also for the formulation of the national guidelines for the reopening of schools in September 2020 (SIC, 29 June).

We found several instances of disagreement between national and regional leaders. While the leaders of Campania and Sicily preferred a more gradual approach in the first and second phases especially regarding travel across regions (CAM, 29 April; 30 May; SIC, 30 April; 1 May), Northern leaders were keen to accelerate the easing of travel restrictions (LOM, 26 April; VEN, 3 June). The different perceptions of urgency to return to normality were predominant in the communications of the Presidents of Campania and Sicily. Both leaders disputed the pressure from the Northern regions to ease measures for economic reasons without considering infection rates elsewhere in the country (CAM, 30 May; SIC, 30 April; 10 May). Hence, we observe contestation of the pace of easing measures and fragmented narratives.

Inconsistency

We did not find instances of policy difference and/or disagreement during the easing phase.

	Decision making	
	Policy similarity	**Policy difference**

Meaning making	Agreement	Germany	Germany
		• similar decisions on the reopening of barbers and hairdressers (all 5 *Länder*) • no contestation, similar narratives ⇨ *Consistency*	• differences in timing of the reopening of non-essential shops, schools, and social venues and easing of limits on gatherings among the five *Länder* • no contestation, similar narratives **UK** • differences in timing of easing of lockdown and reopening of primary schools, non-essential shops, and social venues in England, Scotland, and Wales • no contestation, similar narratives ⇨ *Partial consistency*
	Disagreement	**Italy** • same decision on the easing of lockdown; on reopening of industries, non-essential businesses and shops, and social venues; school closures and ban on mass gatherings • contestation of timing (Campania, Lombardy, Sicily, Veneto), fragmented narratives (Campania, Sicily) ⇨ *Partial inconsistency*	No observations ⇨ *Inconsistency*

Table 5. Crisis communication in Germany, Italy, and the UK during the easing phase

Table 5 summarizes our findings on COVID-19 crisis communications during the

easing phase. Crisis communication in Germany was characterised by a high degree of

consistency, though less so than during the lockdown phase. We found consistency only with regard to one measure. The easing of most measures was shaped by partial consistency. However, policy difference among the *Länder* we examined was mainly in regard to timing. Differences increased slightly but remained a matter of days.

In the UK, there was also less consistency than during the lockdown phase where all but one measure was shaped by consistency. During the easing phase, most measures were characterised by partial consistency. Like Germany, policy difference mainly meant differences in the pace at which restrictions were eased. Those differences were more significant than during the easing phase, however. Hence, there still was consistency but less so than during the lockdown phase.

In Italy, we found a lower degree of inconsistency compared to the lockdown phase—though crisis communication remained less consistent than in Germany and the UK. In comparison with the lockdown phase, measures were eased in a more uniform manner across the country as we did not find evidence of policy difference. However, the leaders in our sample had different narratives about the easing of restrictions and subnational leaders contested timing. Hence, crisis communication was partially inconsistent.

Regarding the decision making during the first wave, it is important to note policy differences exclusively concerned timing. We did not find evidence of measures that were eased in some parts of the country but not in others.

Discussion

Our findings from the German, Italian, and British cases shed light on the conditions under which multilevel systems achieve consistency in crisis communication. We found several instances of consistency in all three countries among the leaders in our sample.

The findings do not confirm our expectation that there would be more inconsistency in crisis communication when crisis management is decentralised and consistency when it is centralised. Despite crisis management being decentralised in Germany and the UK, crisis communications showed many instances of consistency. In Italy, by contrast, where the central government activated emergency powers that allowed it to impose a national lockdown, there were many more instances of inconsistent crisis communication than in Germany and the UK. Hence, our findings suggest that centralisation is not necessarily better for crisis management (see also Hegele & Schnabel, 2021).

We found support for our expectation regarding intergovernmental coordination. During the lockdown phase, MPK meetings in Germany and COBRA meetings in the UK ensured that crisis communication was by and large consistent. In Italy, the only instance of consistency during the lockdown phase was when the Health Minister and the regional presidents jointly agreed on the establishment of red zones in several cities in Lombardy and one city in Veneto. Notably, decisions that were not coordinated, namely the expansion of the red zones in Northern regions and the national lockdown, were shaped by policy difference and/or disagreement. Indeed, several regional leaders lamented the lack of a promised 'protocol' for establishing uniform criteria for enacting and implementing containment measures. In the UK, the declining role of COBRA come the easing phase, which was not replaced by other means of cooperation, meant less consistency. Differences in timing became more frequent when leaders coordinated less. In Germany, we also find slightly fewer instances of consistency during the easing phase, when leaders jointly agreed that the easing of restrictions would be less coordinated. In Italy, by contrast, more cooperation during the easing phase resulted in less occurrence of inconsistency vis-à-vis the lockdown phase. Stronger collaboration—

and, by implication, improvement in crisis communication—in the easing phase could be mainly due to the central government wanting the regions to take more responsibility in future waves and transmission monitoring (Capano, 2020, p. 337).

That we found more consistency during the lockdown phase compared to the easing phase in Germany and the UK may also be driven by the strong problem pressure in the beginning of the crisis, which has been found to foster coordination (Schnabel & Hegele, 2021, p. 23). We do not find such effect in Italy, however.

Conclusion

By focusing on crisis communication, this paper has made a conceptual and empirical contribution to the literature of crisis management in multilevel systems. Conceptually, we put forward a taxonomy to capture the extent and occurrence of (in)consistency in political leaders' communications during crisis that can be used to explain crisis management in other multilevel systems in which the subnational governments enjoy at least some degree of authority over public health and health care. Empirically, we have applied our taxonomy to assess the correspondence between instances of consistency in political leaders' COVID-19 communications and different approaches in responding to a crisis, relating to the division of powers and intergovernmental interactions.

Although we contend that multilevel governance may complicate crisis management, potentially delaying the quick and coordinated action required to respond to a threat, we show that consistent communication is possible but requires institutional arrangements for coordination and the willingness to coordinate. Even in Italy, a country that perennially lacks intergovernmental coordination mechanisms, a marginal improvement of coordination in the easing phase substantially enhanced the quality of

crisis communication. The more these arrangements are developed during non-crisis times the better they work during a crisis.

Crisis management is complex and involves different political leaders taking emergency decisions at different level of governance. As we have shown, this need not be a hurdle to effective crisis management and political leadership (see also Broschek, 2022). Indeed, decentralised capacity at the subnational level can enable governments to tailor solutions to local needs and specificities, while centralisation, particularly in the context of contested narratives or jurisdictional disputes, can complicate consistent messaging and confuse the public.

As mentioned above, consistency in crisis communication is particularly crucial in the beginning of a crisis. Indeed, it was especially important in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic where governments could only rely on non-pharmaceutical interventions whose effectiveness depended considerably on public compliance. The evolution of a crisis may complicate consistency in crisis communication due do crisis fatigue and the politicization of crisis management. At the same time, consistency may also be less important the more the crisis advances. Once the most urgent threat subsides, political alternatives in the form for variation in leaders' messages may in fact be desirable in a democratic system.

Although our analysis has underlined the importance of coordination for consistent crisis communication in multilevel states, it is unlikely to be the only factor. Leaders in the UK, for example, relied on similar scientific expertise and evidence. Experts play a crucial role in helping leaders make sense of crises and design effective crisis measures. The extent to which national and regional leaders relied on expert advice and is likely to influence their crisis communication. Contemporary crisis management necessitates a multi-actor response and while we have focused on political

leaders, other agencies and experts are also relevant actors. Moreover, while German Chancellor Angela Merkel had the legitimacy and authority to make minister-presidents cooperate and was committed to cooperation, Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte had much less authority vis-à-vis the presidents of the regions and showed less inclination to collaborate. Hence, the personalities and political will of leaders are also likely to matter. The type of leaders in charge and the partisan configurations during the crisis are likely to shape intergovernmental relations, and thus influence the consistency of crisis communication. Indeed, leaders' agency and ideology influences their crisis approach (Broschek, 2022). Moreover, the scope and nature of a crisis (whether it is an economic shock, natural disaster, terror attack, or pandemic) may generate different approaches, with consistency being more of a key factor in some crises and less crucial, though still important, in others.

By examining political leadership in multilevel systems this paper enhances our understanding of how, and how effectively, democratic states respond to crises. Managing crises across different levels of government has become the norm (Boin et al., 2016). More and more countries have become decentralised, increasing the number of governments within states. At the same time, many crises cut across international, supranational, national, regional, and local boundaries. By developing a taxonomy of crisis communication in multilevel states this paper provides a framework for the analysis of political leadership in further COVID-19 waves, other states, as well as other crises.

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