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SPAIN

Managing the uncertain while facing economic collapse

Sergio Pérez Castaños and Alberto Mora Rodríguez

Political context

The COVID-19 outbreak in Spain took the newly created coalition government by surprise. For the first time in 40 years of modern democracy, Spain has a coalition government formed by the traditional labour party (PSOE) and the former communist party, now in an electoral coalition with a smaller party called United We Can (UP). This government came from the 2019 ‘year of elections’ in which there were up to five different elections, two of them national. The first, held in April, led to a deadlock in government and voters were called again in November. This call depicted a quite similar Congress, but by the end of the year an agreement was achieved.

The government formed in January 2020, and the greatest number of members (17) in it, including the Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, are designated as PSOE. The parties govern Congress with no majority, leaving them to continuously negotiate within the political branches to get policy working. Summing up, from those elections, the coalition gets 155 seats from an overall of 350; 120 from PSOE and 35 from UP based on a vote of 40.8%, 28% for PSOE and 12.8% for UP.

Chronology

When this chapter was completed in early September 2020, there were around 283,000 official cases in Spain and up to 29,000 deaths from COVID-19.¹ To reduce the spread of the virus, there were several actions taken by the government. First, on March 14, the State of Alarm² was declared through Royal Decree 463/2020. This suspended some civil liberties such as the freedom of mobility, forcing citizens to stay inside their homes and to only go out for essential

activities such as work or grocery shopping. But, due to the rapidly increasing cases of COVID-19, the government decided two weeks later on what they called 'freezing of all non-essential activities' and the general confinement of any person not working in essential economic areas. This had a clear impact on the economy and unemployment levels increased to 9.3% during March alone.³ To help the economic situation, the Commission for Reconstruction was created by Congress. Its aim is to develop certain lines of action to get the economy back on track, approving fund allocation, tax benefits or unemployment measures, among others.

This generated a new system that allowed entrepreneurs and business owners to close their offices and companies and temporarily fire workers with the compromise of hiring them back when everything goes back to normal. This is called the Temporary Work Regulation Expedient (ERTE) and led to thousands of people losing their income and job.⁴ Hand in hand with this, the government created the so-called Minimum Vital Income. This is a guaranteed minimum income system that worked with other existing social benefits. These measures were passed by the government on May 29 and by Congress on June 10, counting on the support of almost all the political groups except the far-right political party, VOX, which abstained.

During all this process, there are several important dates to point out. The first one is the first appearance of the Director of the Centre for Coordination on Sanitary Alerts and Emergencies (CCAES), Dr Fernando Simón, on February 2, as the first case was detected in Spain on January 31 in the Canary Islands. When the cases 'jumped' into continental Spain, by February 24, the press conferences became more and more frequent, often held on a daily basis.

The next important media event was on March 13, when the government declared the 'State of Alarm' and the lockdown began. On this day, Prime Minister Sánchez (PSOE) spoke to the nation and explained the measures being put in place such as the reduction of mobility, the mobilisation of the military to help the police and the health services and the most novel one, the creation of four 'super ministries' in charge of the main areas of importance⁵ during the pandemic. The plurality of profiles in the Crisis Cabinet responds to the need for establishing different communicative strategies as there are several actors with different strategic and operative needs in terms of communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020).

From that moment on, every week there was a joint press conference held by all those four ministries plus some of the main actors fighting the pandemic, such as the director of the National Health Institute or the General Director of the Police. Every Saturday, the Prime Minister would address the nation announcing new measures or modifications during the State of Alarm.

Of all the different challenges the government had to overcome, the most important was regarding the lack of sanitary materials for first responders. This, combined with press conferences in which there were no questions allowed, led to the development of a more aggressive opposition discourse. During the first

weeks, almost all political factions supported the government measures but, since April, the discourse among the main opposition parties became more and more belligerent. This led to several civil society initiatives such as popular demonstrations against the government and its ‘suspension of civil rights.’⁶

Despite this, every day since the lockdown began, at 8 pm citizens spontaneously came to their windows to clap. These so-called ‘sanitary claps’ had the objective to highlight the job that first responders were doing. This happened since March 14 up to late May, when the severe restrictions were lifted. See Table 12.1.

Analysis

How did the government manage the crisis?

When facing a sanitary crisis, preparation is essential, and this has been the main topic for political and media confrontation in Spain. Despite Spain being structured internally into 17 regions, each with competences about Public Health, it seemed clear none of them or Central Government were ready for the situation that unfolded. The main issue to underline here is that at the beginning of the crisis the situation was being downplayed during the speeches, mostly in an attempt to limit social alarm, which caused a negative readiness to face the incoming situation throughout the system. This only changed after March 12, when the Prime Minister stated that ‘The Government, in Coordination with the Regions, will take whatever measure needs, when and where it is needed’ foreshadowing the State of Alarm.

The following period of management was characterised by a periodical and constant feed of information from the government to the media. Each actor had a clear purpose: from the ministers in announcing new measures, to the technicians providing daily information. From March 16, the most relevant measures and a weekly summary was reserved for the Prime Minister, who every Saturday addressed the media. The strategy of naming technical speakers in crisis situations is quite usual. Thanks to the legitimacy and neutrality that they provide, it limits the rejection from citizens. In this sense, Dr Fernando Simón was a key speaker. Nevertheless, his knowledge, pedagogic skills and calm when addressing the media did not make him immune to criticism from the political opposition, mostly focused on his minimising of the risk in January.

The communication strategy of the government aimed to demonstrate all measures were supported by science, constantly referring to both national and international epidemiological and health experts. But social unity was encouraged by the warlike language used by the Prime Minister, including elements such as ‘war,’ ‘battle,’ ‘frontline,’ ‘common enemy,’ ‘weapons’ or metaphorical rhetoric such as ‘The enemy is not awaiting, it went through our defences long time ago. Now the wall to contain it is in everything that we have built as a country and community,’ ‘Every one of us have a specific mission in this battle’ or ‘We are deep in a vital stage in the battle against the virus.’ These messages

TABLE 12.1 Spain chronology

<i>Date</i>	<i>Diffusion of COVID-19</i>	<i>Key official actions</i>	<i>Key communication events</i>
January 1	Unofficial infection starts.		
24		The Ministry of Health (MH) defines the criteria to be tested for COVID-19.	
31	First positive case.		The director of the CCAES during a press conference states, 'There will be a couple of cases.'
February 25	Five new positive cases.	MH decided to get tests for every sick person with pneumonia symptoms.	
26		MH changes the risk level from 'low' to 'moderate.'	The president of the Spanish Epidemiology Society states, 'There will be no held up hospitals in Spain.'
March 2	Infected toll exceeds 100.		The director of the CCAES begins to address the nation and media every day.
3	First person dead and tested for COVID-19.	MH recommends celebrating every sport event with no public attendance.	
7			When asked about March 8 demonstration, the director of the CCAES says that 'it does not seem to be a risk element.'
9	Infected toll exceeds 1,000.	Spanish Government cancels every event for more than 100 people.	
10	Infected toll exceeds 1,500.	World Health Organisation (WHO) declares global pandemic.	
11	Infected toll exceeds 2,500.	Schools are closed in every Spanish region.	
12			President Sánchez announces an economy plan holding a more dramatic attitude.

14	Death toll exceeds 100.	The State of Alarm is declared for 15 days by royal decree.	
15	Infected toll exceeds 5,000.	National quarantine begins.	President Sánchez announces that there would be 5 super ministries in charge of managing the crisis.
16		All borders are closed.	Weekly briefings by the Prime Minister commence.
18			The King addresses the nation followed by anti-Monarchy demonstrations.
27	Death toll exceeds 5,000. Infected toll exceeds 56,000.	Government forbids by royal decree to fire employees under Temporary employment regulations (ERTE). A second State of Alarm is declared.	
30	Death toll exceeds 7,000. Infected toll exceeds 85,000.	Every non-essential activity remains closed for 7 days.	
April 9	Death toll exceeds 15,000. Infected toll exceeds 152,000.	Congress approves the extension of the State of Alarm until April 26. Economic activity is activated again.	President Sánchez states the implementation of a 'Minimum Vital Income to help families in distress.
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17	Death toll exceeds 20,000.	The government changes how to count deaths.	Government officials declare data is not 'real' since every region counts cases and the deceased differently.
22		Congress approves new State of Alarm from April 26.	President Sánchez declares that sanitary material such as mask will have a government-controlled price.

(Continued)

TABLE 12.1 (Continued)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Diffusion of COVID-19</i>	<i>Key official actions</i>	<i>Key communication events</i>
26	Death toll exceeds 23,000. Infected toll exceeds 200,000.	Children under 14 years-old can go out for one hour.	First of the 14 conferences with regional prime ministers. All of them held online.
May 2		Government prepares 4 different phases in the post-lockdown process.	
4		Phase 0 begins. Many businesses can open up again.	
6		A new State of Alarm is passed.	
8	Death toll exceeds 26,000. Infected toll exceeds 223,000.	Phase 1 begins in some parts of the country.	
14		Commission for Reconstruction begins to work in Congress.	
18		Masks become compulsory on public transport and in indoor public spaces.	
20			President Sánchez publicly asks for forgiveness if any mistakes have been made.
22		Phase 2 begins in half of the country.	
June 3		Congress approves last State of Alarm.	
8		Phase 3 begins. Almost everything back to normal.	
10		The Minimum Vital Income is approved.	
21	Death toll exceeds 28,000.	The State of Alarm ends. The country begins the so-called 'New Normality.' Masks compulsory in any public area.	Last of the 14 conferences with regional prime ministers held.

aimed to reinforce the exceptionality of the situation and appeal to the political and public opinion unity to earn legitimacy and social support. The seriousness transmitted with the warlike rhetoric was matched by the measures adopted, mobilising almost 20% of GDP in economic measures. The main objective was to face the health, economic and social crisis, elements that were emphasised in all the speeches and that would take form in the measures published in the 17 royal decrees approved from March to June.

The other dimension emphasised in speeches was the international scope of the problem, a strategy of minimising the guilt and sharing the burden with other organisations and governments. In this sense, the Prime Minister stated that ‘the world is facing a war against a common enemy to every citizen wherever they live’; adding pressure on the European institutions and looking at them and their compromise to solve the situation: ‘Europe cannot and would not fail, it has to be up to the challenge.’⁷

In terms of communication management, there were a significant number of pro-government communicators who, in prime time, were called on to speak about the measures. Likewise, the government created the hashtag #Estevirusloparamosunidos (#WeStopThisVirusTogether), which was widely used across online communities.

From an accountability point of view, the Prime Minister appeared 14 times in Congress and celebrated 14 conferences with the regional prime ministers. The Minister of Health appeared 13 times before the Parliamentary Commission. As stated before, the Commission for the Reconstruction was created. Likewise, between March 12 and June 21 the government held a total of 187 press conferences⁸ and up to 47 meetings with societal agencies.

The government response was not free of mistakes both in the technical dimension and in the communication area. In addition to the lack of anticipation and the delay in the acquisition of medical elements, several mistakes were made which provided the political opposition with ammunition to attack the government management of the crisis. This, combined with social media agitation, provoked several demonstrations, but they were small and biased by social class. Among the most important mistakes were the constant modifications to the measures, such as the definition of which workers are catalogued as essential, or the use of masks to avoid the spread of the virus. Another well-criticised issue was the very small amount of time between new measures being approved and when they came into effect, with almost no time for the affected economic sectors to adapt themselves.

In the technical area, changes in how statistics regarding new cases and deaths were reported created fear and insecurity, even more when adding up all the data provided by regions did not result in the same numbers stated by the government. Likewise, a longstanding problem was the purchase of medical supplies that were against medical standards.

During the first weeks there were also several speakers that provoked some confusion on who was leading on measures. This, combined with the quite long

press conferences and the enormous amount of questions asked, increased the probability of making mistakes. One clear example is a statement given by the Chief of the Civil Guard, who affirmed that the police force was fighting fake news to minimise opposition to the government. This was interpreted by the opposition to mean the government was using the police to pursue their own political interests.

There were also delays in addressing the media, calling the media to be present at a certain hour and appearing much later, and the selection of questions made by the Press Secretary meant that several media outlets decided not to cover those press conferences for a while. Additionally, there were mistakes in coordination and cooperation across levels of government. The clearest example is that every Sunday there were meetings with all the regional prime ministers, but all the measures that were supposed to be discussed had already been announced during Saturday's press conference. There were also divergences among the parties in the government coalition, which gave the impression there was no internal cohesion and that there was no leadership and coordination among ministries.

The other actors in play

Political opposition has not been homogeneous nor supportive of governmental measures or their consistency during the most critical stages. Thus, while regional and the left-wing parties have supported the government, the right-wing parties (the conservatives (PP) and VOX) have been critical of the government's management of the crisis. The opposition's main argument was to depict the government as clumsy and incompetent. One of the key discursive frameworks used by these parties was to try to connect the mobilisations held in Madrid during Women's Day, March 8, with the fact that this city and region was, by far, the most affected by the virus. Likewise, there were references to the lack of democratic guarantees. This face-off between the two major political parties, PSOE and PP, saw the regions become the major battlefield as conservative-ruled regional governments attacked central government over the lack of funds, sanitary materials and the responsibility for elderly residences, one of the most affected groups. There was such an aggressive tone in Congress that the President of the Chamber had to call order and threaten to suspend the session several times and publicly denounce the behaviour of representatives. The media was also polarised and aligned with one or another party.

Despite this, we have to point out two outstanding phenomena: the first one is the clear position of several well-known television commentators who were the most critical of the government; the second is the inclusion of clear fake stories in well-established media platforms' news bulletins. The uncertainty of the moment and the context of growing political polarisation created the perfect environment for fake news to flourish. This fake information is powered by political news flows (Flores-Vivar, 2020) as the main objective is to disseminate

misinformation for political advantage (Amorós-García, 2018: 35). In this sense, while normally, fake news spreads within pseudo-media outlets with no rules or editorial process at all, this content also appeared in trusted mainstream media bulletins. But this forced media to also publicly refute this information, as well as public institutions. In this sense, the so-called ‘verifiers’ have increased their visibility as fact-checkers and have helped in denouncing fake news and facilitating real data or information (Paniagua-Rojano et al., 2020).⁹ The Centre for Sociological Research, which polls public opinion monthly, found 66.7% of the population believe that information and news should be controlled by establishing just one official source.¹⁰

Conclusion

Communication management in Spain took on a choral structure with a strong presence of government members reinforced by the work of technical experts. There has been a continuous flow of information emphasising measures were justified by the legitimacy of science and the internationalisation of the crisis. The government also appealed to a national effort of collaboration and solidarity. Despite the missteps and errors, the exceptionality of the moment which tends to reinforce the position of government, known as the ‘rally a round the flag’ effect (Mueller, 1970: 21), the activation of strong economic measures and the difficulties held by the opposition in generating a solid contra-argument made the government’s approval ratings quite stable. On the other hand, there has been a growing political, social and media polarisation which combined with the upcoming economic and social crisis foretells increasing levels of institutional disaffection in the upcoming years.

Notes

- 1 Data from Ministry of Health: www.mscbs.gob.es/profesionales/saludPublica/ccayes/alertasActual/nCov-China/home.htm
- 2 This exceptional regime is included in the Spanish Constitution article 116.2 and when activated, several basic rights can be suspended such as mobility, occupation of private sector companies or public prices fixation, among others. The first time it is declared, it can be done by the government and only for 15 days. From that moment on, it is necessary to count on the support of the majority of the Congress.
- 3 This 9.3% of increase in March is added to the 7.9% increase in unemployment during April and 0.7% during May.
- 4 The exact number affected by these measures can be found at: www.mitramiss.gob.es/estadisticas/reg/welcome.htm
- 5 These were Transportations and Communications, Health, Interior and Defence. All of them ruled by PSOE.
- 6 Examples of these demonstrations were those that took place in mid-May in the conservative Salamanca district (Madrid), or the one against masks, held on August 16 also in Madrid.
- 7 Both sentences are included in the speech given by the Spanish Prime Minister on April 28, video available at: www.lamoncloa.gob.es/consejodeministros/resumenes/paginas/2020/280420-consejo_ministros.aspx

- 8 Twenty of them made by the Prime Minister, 80 by ministers, 43 by technical members of the government and 44 by experts.
- 9 Two major examples have been Maldita (<https://maldita.es>) and Newtral (www.newtral.es).
- 10 These related to question number 6 (Pregunta 6) in the poll: www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/-Archivos/Marginales/3260_3279/3279/es3279mar.html

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