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## **Italian government's pandemic communication from Giuseppe Conte to Mario Draghi: between 'leadership building' and 'crisis resolution'**

**by Sofia Ventura**

### **Introduction**

Italy was the first European country to experience the spread of the Sars-Cov-2 virus. Besides, it was the most hit country for several weeks, in the Western world at least.

Two different governments have been in office during the first two years of the pandemic. The second Giuseppe Conte's government managed the pandemic's first year. Before becoming prime minister, Conte had worked as a private law professor and corporate lawyer. Therefore, he came to lead his first executive as a political outsider. After the general elections of 2018, the 'neither leftist nor rightist' populist party Five Stars Movement (M5s) had proposed his name as a 'guarantor' of a right-leaning coalition. Sustained by the M5s and the far-rightist and populist party Lega, first Conte's government took over in June 2018. Slightly over one year, in August 2019, the Lega's leader Matteo Salvini withdrew his party from the government coalition. After a month of negotiations and heated debates, Conte formed a new executive, which took over on September 5, 2019. This time the executive rested on a centre-left leaning majority. It included once again the M5s, the centre-leftist party Democratic Party and some minor parties. Among them, there was the former prime minister Matteo Renzi's new personal party, Italia Viva. Italia Viva withdrew from the coalition in December 2019. Conte's failure to convince some centre-right and mixed group MPs to join his government majority obliged him to resign.

A new government took over in February 13, 2021, under the leadership of the former head of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi. Draghi had been called by the Italian president of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, to overcome a political impasse which, according to the president himself, could have jeopardised the pandemic management. During the 2021 end-of-the-year press conference, Draghi himself spoke, to this regard, of a «call of a very high order». Almost all the political parties entered the new majority, except for the far-right populist party *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy), led by Giorgia Meloni, and a small leftist party, *Sinistra Italiana* (Italian Left). Therefore, the new government majority acquired the appearance of an 'emergency' grand coalition. At the same time, Draghi's government appeared to be a «government of the president». That is a government whose leader is chosen by the president of the Republic due to the absence of a majority able to express a potential prime minister.

This essay focuses on the different communication styles adopted by the two heads of government involved in Italian pandemic crisis management until the end of 2021. The emphasis on leadership reflects the government leaders' central position when a crisis occurs: «When major disruptions do occur [citizens] expect [leaders] to provide a comprehensive response and recovery operations, embody the collective determination, punish the guilty (or take the blame), and learn the right lesson» (Ansell, Boin and t'Hart, 2014: 1). Regarding government communication, it is expected to be different from party political or electoral communication «due to its orientation to the broader public good» (Canel and Sanders, 2016:2). However, we know that governments can metamorphose into instruments «designed to sustain an elected official's public popularity» (Blumenthal, 1980: 7). Consequently, they can act as they were «into a perpetual campaign» (Ibidem). The permanent campaign phenomenon has moved forward with the mediatisation of politics (Mazzoleni and Shulz, 1999) and the concomitant phenomenon of self-mediatisation (Esser, 2013), that is, the adaptation of political actors to the media logic (Altheide and Snow, 1979). Such a phenomenon has become a generalised feature of contemporary politics, investing many aspects, comprising government activity. Indeed, the «media stage has become the primary place where political executives receive legitimacy for their actions», to the point that the latter «cannot avoid undertaking a process of self-mediatisation» (Campus 2020, 8). The governments' adaptation to the media logic can be interpreted as finalised to increase their popularity and the opportunities for their leaders to win back the power. It can also be viewed as finalised to gain public opinion support for public policies. However, popularity itself can be functional to implement government policies. Then, to disentangle the different goals underlying the governments' self-mediatisation is not an easy task.

This last point appears even more salient when leaders and governments deal with a crisis. How much, for example, do government leaders exploit the crisis to strengthen their leadership as a value in itself? Or, how much do they act mainly oriented to crisis resolutions? To this regard, for example, Cristian Rauh, to answer the question «How can we distinguish a crisis manager from a crisis exploiter? » suggested looking at how a crisis is communicated. «In the 'framing contests' of crisis interpretation – he wrote – an executive interested in exploiting the crisis should thus send comparatively more alarmist communication signals». In other words, «the crisis exploiter will frame matters as an emergency in a much more pronounced and, relative to the original crisis-triggering events, much longer-lasting manner» (Rauh, 2021: 4-5). Admittedly, this suggestion is probably too restrictive compared to the phenomenon complexity. Nonetheless, it shows the relevance of the proposed research question: imaging a continuum from a communication strictly oriented to crisis resolution to a communication aiming to the leadership consensus as a value in itself, where can we collocate Conte's and Draghi's crisis communication? In order to answer this question, the paper focuses the analysis on three macro-domains: media-personalisation, self-mediatisation and spin-doctoring; governance and public stage; meaning-making.

### **Media-personalisation, self-mediatisation and spin-doctoring**

From the end of February 2020 – when the pandemic outburst – to the end of January 2021 – when Giuseppe Conte resigned – the Italian government's crisis communication developed around the Prime minister persona. Conte dominated the political scene and the Italian hybrid media system during that year. His speeches and press conferences on the health or economic decrees in response to the COVID-19 pandemic stood at the core of the government crisis communication. They were broadcast on both national TV channels and digital platforms. From the end of January to December 2020, Conte held thirty press conferences dedicated to the Covid-19 crisis management. Quite clearly, during Conte's leadership, the Italian government's crisis

communication turned out to be a manifest example of the 'controlled media personalisation' phenomenon. According to Gideon Rahat and Ofer Kenig, «controlled media personalisation occurs when messages sent by political actors increasingly originate from, and are preoccupied with, individuals – at the expense of political groupings» (Rahat and Kenig, 2018: 119-120). This kind of personalisation went along with extensive use of the prime minister's decrees (DPCM, *Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri*). The DPCM is an administrative tool utterly free from any control (neither a Presidential control nor a Parliamentary one). Through the DPCMS, the government imposed many lockdowns measures and, consequently, restrictions on citizens' constitutional rights. According to many legal experts (Celotto, 2020), the use prime minister Conte made of them infringed the Constitutional provision according to which individual rights and freedoms may be subjected to limitation only by law.

Thus, DPCMs and the press conferences devoted to them became the core of the crisis management scene. Notwithstanding the occasional presence of one or more ministers (i.e. the minister of economy and finance, the minister of health, the minister of education), the 'main character' was always the prime minister (Novelli, 2021: 139).

The press conferences and the public declarations, broadcast through a plethora of channels and platforms, became the stage of highly personalised communication. For example, at the beginning of March 2020, in the occasion of his speech to the country on the new lockdown measures, Conte chose to speak «only through live-streaming on his personal Facebook page so that the national broadcast television RAI - Radiotelevisione Italiana had to connect to the private platform to report on which dramatic policies were going to be enacted» (Rullo 2021). Later, due to the controversies triggered by this choice, his speeches and press conferences were broadcast directly by the TV public channels. However, he did not renounce his personal Facebook page. Instead, he continued to use Facebook for all his formal communications, together with Twitter and Instagram: «the prevailing trend was to deliver monologic, disintermediated speeches» (Novelli 2020: 139). These speeches reflected Conte's will to establish a personal relationship with the citizens/followers, «anchoring his public profile to his personal biography rather than to the official position he occupied» (Ceccobelli and Vaccari, 2021: 6).

The exploitation of Facebook as a direct means to address citizens during the pandemic resulted in an impressive increase of followers (from one million in January 2020 to over three million at the beginning of May) (Rullo, 2021). Furthermore, in the first three months of the pandemic management, he tripled his fans on Instagram and doubled his followers on Twitter<sup>1</sup>. The high level of engagement (comments, shares and reactions) of Conte's social media pages, and particularly Conte's Facebook page, confirmed the success of his communicative strategy during the pandemic (Ceccobelli and Vaccari, 2021: 7), at least from the point of view of his popularity growth. Indeed, as has been observed, the extensive and intensive use Conte made of digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic probably represented the basis of a metamorphosis of his leadership: «the effective use of digital platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly helped confer him popularity and strengthen his role in the Italian political scene» (Rullo and Nunziata 2021: 311).

However, Giuseppe Conte did not overlook the traditional media's role in forging opinions. Not only his Facebook videos were usually broadcast live by the most important television channels, but the in-depth use of web communication did not prevent him from resorting to television performances<sup>2</sup>. Throughout the last year of his government, he frequently appeared in the most

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<sup>1</sup> Adnkronos, *La tv fa il consenso politico, detta l'agenda e parla a tutti. I social seguono*, 28 May 2021. [https://www.adnkronos.com/la-tv-fa-il-consenso-politico-detta-lagenda-e-parla-a-tutti-i-social-seguono\\_5neVYAHZCtsKl6e9Oi3UXO?refresh\\_ce](https://www.adnkronos.com/la-tv-fa-il-consenso-politico-detta-lagenda-e-parla-a-tutti-i-social-seguono_5neVYAHZCtsKl6e9Oi3UXO?refresh_ce)

<sup>2</sup> Youtrend, *Quanto parlano i politici italiani in Tv?*, 26 January 2021.

known Italian talk shows. On the last Sunday of February 2020, after the first cases of Coronavirus disease among the Italian population were registered, he took part in five entertainment and infotainment shows <sup>3</sup>, reassuring the citizens that the situation was under control and the government was adopting all the necessary measures. According to a recent study, the communication developed through press conferences and live streams would have had a positive repercussion on the people perceived propinquity toward the prime minister. In turn, this propinquity would have resulted in a positive change of public opinion about the prime minister and, by way of this positive opinion, about his government and its effectiveness (Cecalupo, Scarci, Marini and Livi, 2020).

Conte's communication also spread through frequent interviews in national newspapers. During his first government (June 2018 - September 2019), he released fifty-six interviews, 3.73 every month on average. During his second government (September 2019 - January 2021), the number of interviews rose to eighty-one, 4.7 interviews every month on average. From March to December 2020 (that is, the months dominated by the pandemic crisis), fifty-one interviews appeared in the prominent national newspapers, 5.1 per month; almost all concerned the issue of pandemic and its economic and health management as well as the political and institutional conflicts which aroused around it<sup>4</sup>.

Government communication also took advantage of the recurring press conferences of the Civil Protection Head, Angelo Borrelli, and the COVID-19 Emergency Commissioner, Domenico Arcuri. According to the law decree of March 17 2020 (article 122), Arcuri had the task of implementing and overseeing «all useful interventions to tackle the health emergency, organising, acquiring and supporting the production of all kinds of instrumental goods useful to contain and fight the emergency itself». Notwithstanding the circumscribed nature of his mission, during his continuous press conferences – held from the Civil Protection seat or the pressroom of Palazzo Chigi – Arcuri addressed a great variety of issues, going well beyond its tasks. For example, directly (and paternalistically) speaking to the citizens, he frequently addressed issues like the virus nature, the pandemic evolution or the required people's behaviour, therefore receiving enormous media attention. From his appointment (March 18, 2020) to his substitution (March 1, 2021), his name appeared in 498 national press article's titles<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, he often gave interviews to infotainment programs and national newspapers. Thus, the Emergency Commissioner's extraordinary figure acquired a significant role in the government's communication, acting as a sparring partner of the prime minister.

Regarding the news management, it is worth emphasising the central role Conte's spokesman and head press office, Rocco Casalino (a former reality Tv star), played. During the two Conte's executives, he developed a continuous activity of public relations with the media in order to manage the prime minister's public appearances and control their 'realisation'. Such activity was finalised to ensure the consistency between media and government narratives. For example, to this effect, Rocco Casalino renewed a practice inaugurated during Renzi's government. He created WhatsApp chat groups to provide news and 'interpretations of political events' to the press and TV journalists<sup>6</sup>. In general, he acted a quite aggressive spin-doctoring, mixing false, accurate and plausible

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<https://www.youtrend.it/2021/01/26/quanto-parlano-i-politici-italiani-in-tv/>

<sup>3</sup> Virgilio Notizie, Coronavirus in tv: la maratona del premier Conte ospite ovunque, 24 February 2020.

<https://notizie.virgilio.it/coronavirus-in-tv-la-maratona-del-premier-conte-ospite-ovunque-1213099>

<sup>4</sup> Online archive of the Chamber of Deputies' Press review.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>6</sup> Conversation of the author with the deputy director of *Huffington Post Italy* Alessandro De Angelis, June 2020; Enrico Dalcastagné, *Riempire il vuoto. I silenzi di Draghi alla prova del tempo*, ZetaLuiss.it, March 1 2021, <https://zetaluiss.it/2021/03/01/i-silenzi-di-draghi-alla-prova-del-tempo/>

information<sup>7</sup> to create a sort of soap opera from which to source different plots. In some cases, prime minister Giuseppe Conte participated in this spin-doctoring, exploiting his direct relationships with newspaper directors.

This particular spin-doctoring also characterised the Coronavirus crisis period. In particular, leaks and drafts circulating among the media anticipated almost every government's or prime minister's decree. However, in some specific provisions, their content was later contradicted by the official text. Furthermore, the fact that many press conferences took place behind schedule (sometimes late in the evening) often raised suspicion that the decrees' final texts ultimately resulted from the public and stakeholder reactions to the anticipated news.

Unlike Giuseppe Conte, Mario Draghi has never owned a social account. Moreover, throughout the 2021 year, he did not give interviews to the press. After all, he rarely had conceded interviews to the Italian or the international press in his previous professional roles. He did not participate in any talk show; he did not release any televised interview. He only spoke through formal public speeches: press conferences, national and international institutional speeches, ceremonies. Concerning his communications about the pandemic, from March to November 2021, Draghi held ten press conferences from Palazzo Chigi (the prime minister's seat). The first Draghi's government crisis press conference from Palazzo Chigi, concerning a new DPCM containing partial reopening measures and new restrictions, took place on March 2, 2021. However, it was held by the minister of Health, Roberto Speranza, and the minister of Regional Affairs, Maria Stella Gelmini, in the prime minister's absence. Draghi held his first conference press only on March 19 to illustrate a new law decree to provide economic recovery for workers and entrepreneurs damaged by the pandemic restrictions. A week before, he had broken his silence on the pandemic issue for the first time, speaking from the vaccination centre of Fiumicino, near Rome.

The news concerning the pandemic government's management was communicated only through press conferences. The conferences were broadcast by the leading private and public TV channels and the official social accounts of Palazzo Chigi. To inform citizens about the adopted government's measures, Mario Draghi did not use occasional informal meetings with the journalists (for example, after an event), like the recurring Conte's *punto stampa* (press point), nor live streams.

Furthermore, two out of ten of 2021 Draghi's press conferences on crisis management (March 19, March 26, April 8, Aprile 16, May 20, June 18, July 22, September 2, October 7, November 25) only consisted of questions and answers, without the prime minister's introduction. One or two ministers always took part in the press conferences with the prime minister, charged with illustrating the measures' details according to their competencies.

Draghi's limited media exposure, the circumscription of the latter to formal events, the absence of the superposition between Draghi's personal figure and his public role in the hybrid media system, which was, in turn, scarcely exploited, offer the picture of a moderate controlled media personalisation. Nonetheless, the role of 'commander in chief' of Mario Draghi has never been under discussion. For example, according to a recent article concerning the activity of the prime minister's office Facebook page during the pandemic, Conte's and Draghi's governments show an almost equivalent degree of personalisation. As a matter of fact, in either case, about one-third of the posts displayed audio-visual material regarding the prime minister. The difference between them lies, instead, in the kind of personalisation. In particular, the authors distinguish between 'professional personalisation' (contents dedicated to the premier's institutional activity), 'informative personalisation' (contents dedicated to government's decisions concerning the pandemic) and 'emotional personalisation' (contents aiming at establishing an emotional connection between the leader and the citizens). Thirty per cent of Conte's government Facebook

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<sup>7</sup> Anonymous source.

posts belong to the last category. On the contrary, in Draghi's case, only two per cent of the Facebook posts exhibit the emotional dimension (Amoretti, Fittipaldi and Santaniello 2021). This result is consistent with the already stressed two premiers' different attitudes toward searching for a direct link with 'the people'.

Notwithstanding a limited controlled media personalisation, premier Draghi received impressive attention from the media. In other words, he was the protagonist of an extensive 'uncontrolled media personalisation', namely the personalisation produced by media behaviour (Rahat and Kenig, 2018). He received significant attention from the press and from the newscasts<sup>8</sup>. Despite his absence from the social networks, his 'web reputation'<sup>9</sup> in the first hundred days of his premiership reached a remarkable level: five times as much as the one reached by Conte in the first five months of his first government<sup>10</sup>. The data concerning May-September 2021 confirmed this trend<sup>11</sup>.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the peculiarities shown by Draghi's government news management. A strong impression and many comments produced the phrase Draghi addressed to his ministers during his first executive meeting: «We communicate what we do. We yet have not done anything, so we do not communicate anything»<sup>12</sup>. A new style had entered into Palazzo Chigi. This change led some leading journalists to argue that the new government would have marked the, at least temporary, sunset of spin-doctoring<sup>13</sup>, intended as a «strategic framing» aimed at «delivering a message with the "right" scripting to lead journalists to pick the preferred category for accentuating the message» (Esser, 2008: 4783). In this regard, according to the pundit and political scientist Massimiliano Panarari, the new communicative approach introduced by Mario Draghi and his highly professionalised communication team would have implied the decline of the previous governmental news management. Specifically, it would have put an end to the news management based on backstage rumours, that is, the so-called, in the Italian journalistic jargon, *retroscenismo*<sup>14</sup>.

Actually, also Draghi's communication team developed a news-management strategy (even if the "WhatsApp method" seemed to have been discarded<sup>15</sup>). However, rather than 'spin the news', it appeared more interested in signalling the issues, decisions and acts more relevant for the

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<sup>8</sup> Maurizio Serra - Youtrend, *I politici presenti in tv nel primo trimestre 2021*, 27 April, 2021.

<https://www.youtrend.it/2021/04/27/i-politici-piu-presenti-in-tv-nel-primo-trimestre-2021/>

<sup>9</sup> The 'web reputation' is measured through an indicator that uses quantitative and qualitative data like citations and positive opinions drawn from web 1.0 and web 2.0.

<sup>10</sup> Reputationscience, *I primi 100 giorni del Governo Draghi. Nonostante il 'silenzio', cresce la web reputation del premier*, 24 May, 2021.

<https://www.reputationscience.it/analisi-i-primi-100-giorni-del-governo-draghi-nonostante-il-silenzio-cresce-la-web-reputation-del-premier/>

<sup>11</sup> Reputationscience, *Cresce la web reputation del premier. Tra maggio e settembre + 85%, sentiment positive nel 75% dei casi*, 26 Octobre, 2021.

<https://www.reputationscience.it/analisi-cresce-la-web-reputation-del-premier-tra-maggio-e-settembre-85-sentiment-positivo-nel-75-dei-casi/>

<sup>12</sup> C. Verdelli, *Il capitale della fiducia per ricostruire l'Italia*, in «Corriere della Sera», 16 February 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Author's conversation with the deputy director of *Huffington Post Italy* Alessandro De Angelis and the correspondent to the newspaper *La Stampa*, Fabio Martini.

<sup>14</sup> *Retroscenismo* comes from the term *retroscena*, backstage, which indicates what happens behind the political scenes in the Italian language. It has become an actual journalistic genre in the last few years.

<sup>15</sup> Open, *Dopo Casalino a palazzo Chigi arriva Paola Ansuini: chi è la donna della comunicazione «essenziale» di Mario Draghi*,

<https://www.open.online/2021/02/17/chi-e-paola-ansuini-portavoce-mario-draghi/>

government. In addition, contrary to Conte's government news management, all the news they provided to the media turned out to be true<sup>16</sup>.

This new style clearly emerged from the press conferences held by Mario Draghi to inform about and explain the government measures to face the pandemic crises. Draghi's spokesperson Paola Ansuini, former communication manager of Bankitalia (the Italian central bank), managed these press conferences, which, compared to the press conferences of some of Draghi's predecessors, were held more formally and respected schedule. Also, they appeared more respectful of the role of journalists, with whom the prime minister never indulged in polemics, as sometimes took place during Conte's press conferences.

### **Governance and public stage**

Compared to Conte's government, during 2021, Draghi's executive made more moderate use of the highly criticised DPCMs<sup>17</sup>. However, government's pandemic management implied the marginalisation of the parliamentary activity and the centralisation of the policy process in the prime minister's office during both Conte's and Draghi's executives (Amoretti, Fittipaldi and Santaniello 2021). As a matter of fact, the significant drop in the prime minister's decrees use during Draghi's government corresponded to an equally significant increase in law decrees<sup>18</sup>.

Concerning Conte's crisis management, it was also marked by the crucial key appointing authority he assumed inside the crisis governance (Rullo 2021). As has been observed, «While the country has been waiting decades for effective reforms aimed at simplifying ordinary administrative procedures, governments usually have opted for exceptional measures to deal with disasters: extraordinary powers and procedures, 'fast-track' measures, and temporary solutions». This 'model' was also adopted during the pandemic crisis and managed through the «coexistence of the suspension of ordinary administrative proceedings and fast-track special procedures» (Di Mascio, Natalini and Cacciatore, 2020: 622). For example, «special procurement procedures have revolved around the appointment of an Emergency Commissioner to act on the government's behalf» (ibidem: 623).

The use of exceptional methods was further made apparent by the plethora of temporary advisory policy units (about fifteen) created by Conte and labelled by the media 'task forces'. These task forces were composed of scientific experts, professional managers and bureaucrats. They had the task of advising the government about health, economic and other policy matters related to pandemic management. However, an analysis of how the task forces worked (Galanti and Saracino, 2021) concluded that, except for the Scientific and Technical Committee (*Comitato Tecnico-Scientifico*, Cts), many of them had little influence on government decisions. Instead, they mainly served the government's legitimation needs and its will to share responsibilities for difficult decisions (Ibidem: 15). In other terms, the shaping of this task forces structure appeared to be, albeit partially, finalised to support the prime minister's image and government. It seemed to meet the desire to build the image of a government and a prime minister strongly motivated to take charge of the pandemic crisis, which made full use of the best available human resources. Furthermore, the structure appeared functional to a reputation protection strategy to avoid potential future blame (Capano 2020: 340) because of the government's opportunity to share responsibilities.

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<sup>16</sup> Anonymous source.

<sup>17</sup> Openpolis, *Perché l'abuso dei decreti legge può diventare un problema*, 6 July 2021.

<https://www.openpolis.it/perche-labuso-dei-decreti-legge-puo-diventare-un-problema/>

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem

The fate of the most publicised (by the media, but overall by the same prime minister) task force represents a clear example of general Conte's attitude of conceiving the policymaking process as a communication opportunity. A Committee of Economic and Social Science Experts, named after his chief, Vittorio Colao's well-known manager, was installed in April 2020. It was charged with elaborating the measures for the economic restart after the first lockdown.

Notwithstanding the prime minister's great relevance initially conferred upon it, the Colao Committee's work received relatively poor attention. The final report delivery, which took place without any formal recognition, coincided with the start of a ten days meeting, the 'General Estates' (Stati Generali). The Prime Minister's Office had organised it « to solicit ideas for what to do with the recovery funds from business, trade unions, and other stakeholders» (Jones, 2021: 11). The matters at stake were the same as those the Colao Committee had faced. Even if Vittorio Colao had the opportunity of presenting his report during the 'general estates' meeting, the government, in turn, presented his autonomous plan. How many proposals of the Colao commission were taken into account in the following elaboration process of the Recovery Plan remained a mystery. Nevertheless, the ten days of the 'general estates', which had been organised in the luxurious location of Villa Pamphili, in Rome, from where Conte held his press conferences to inform about the 'progress of the work', turned out to be a relevant occasion to draw the prolonged attention of the media. Incidentally, the 'general estates' results remained undefined.

Contrary to Conte's government, sustained by a 'political' coalition, Draghi's government was born as a 'technocratic led partisan government' because of the mix of technical (eight) and political (fifteen) ministers. However, the key ministers, such as the minister of the Economy and Finance, the minister of Justice, the minister of Technological innovation, were chosen among non-partisan-technical figures (Garzia and Carremans, 2021: 108). It seems that Mario Draghi aimed to create a sort of cabinet inside the executive, formed by non-partisan members he could trust. At the same time, precisely like Giuseppe Conte, Draghi exploited his appointment power, changing some crucial figures at the head of institutions like the Cts, the Civil Protection department, the National Institute of Health. In particular, he appointed a new Special commissioner for the emergency: General Francesco Figliuolo, charged with the radical reorganisation of the vaccination campaign. Then, he replaced the highly criticised and mediatised manager Domenico Arcuri.

In addition, the new government reduced and reshuffled the Cts membership and created a unique spokesperson to end the cacophony of the Cts's members recurring interviews that had characterised Conte's period. To manage the health dimension of the crisis, Draghi created a variable-geometry structure. That is, a control room (*cabina di regia*) under his direct control, formed by Cts experts, one political minister for every party belonging to the governmental majority, the ministers involved in the issues at stake. Party leaders were excluded. Another control room was created to implement the PNNR, the National Plan of Recovery and Resilience, delivered by Draghi's government to the European Commission at the end of April 2021. It was put under the supervision of the Prime minister's office and coordinated with the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the ministers in charge of the different aspects of the plan and possibly regional authorities. On October 14, an advisory committee for the PNRR implementation, formed by representatives of regional and local authorities, interest groups, the university system, and other civil society groups, was created inside the prime minister's office.

Therefore, similarly to his predecessor, Draghi resorted to an emergency structure. However, contrary to him, his governance seemed designed to internalise<sup>19</sup> the crisis policymaking. Indeed,

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<sup>19</sup> C. Bertini, *Interview with Sabino Cassese*, in «La Stampa», 30 May, 2021; A. De Angelis, *Il metodo di Draghi per cambiare la politica*, in «HuffPost», 28 May 2021. <https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/il-metodo-di-draghi-per-cambiare-la-politica-it-60b0eba6e4b0c5658f930779>

the policy structure not only was put under the prime minister control (as in Conte's case) but ultimately developed inside the government. On the contrary, as we have seen, Conte's governance, with its task force system, had externalised many functions, at least in appearance. In this regard, it is worth recalling that the former prime minister, shortly before his resignation, had envisaged an umpteenth task force of six managers external to the government to implement the Recovery Plan.

In sum, the perspective adopted by the government under Draghi's leadership seemed finalised to build effective policymaking rather than exploit the policymaking as a communication tool. In this regard, the planning of the vaccination campaign provides a good example. On December 12, 2020, Emergency Commissioner Arcuri had announced the launch of the vaccination campaign through the placement of stands to use as vaccination centres in all the Italian squares. Designed by a famous architect, the Milanese Stefano Boeri, they should have been marked by an enormous primrose (the campaign vaccination symbol) drawn on the roof. A very emotional and full of hope video advertisement followed the announcement. The stands should have become operational on January 15, 2021. However, when Conte resigned at the end of January 2021, they did not exist yet. After some weeks since his installation, Draghi's government fired Arcuri, abandoned any idea of (expensive) stands and primrose, appointed General Figliuolo as new Emergency Commissioner, and entrusted him the national coordination of the vaccination campaign, which, at last, really started.

### **The meaning-making**

When a crisis emerges, «people expect their leaders to reduce uncertainty and provide an authoritative account of what is going on, why it is happening and what needs to be done» (Ansell, Boin and t'Hart, 2014: 9). In crisis management literature, the task of formulating a convincing narrative to reduce public and political uncertainty (Boin, t'Hart, Stern and Sundelius, 2017, 78) is called meaning-making. Both Giuseppe Conte and Mario Draghi developed their meaning-making; both interpreted the current situation and illustrated the measures adopted. However, they accomplished this task somewhat differently. Their communication goals have turned out to be sharply contrasting.

The meaning-making Conte developed throughout his press conferences shows a high level of personalisation. Indeed, he made great use of the first-person singular and first-person plural. The latter frequently assumed the meaning of "we, the government", and, at the same time, the "we, the government" was often confused with the "I, the prime minister" (Ventura 2021). Compared to Conte's meaning-making, Draghi's meaning-making shows a lower level of personalisation. In his speeches, the first-person singular and plural (where 'we' means 'My government and I') verbs are lesser frequent. For example, on his conferences press' introductory speeches and his speech from the vaccination centre of Fiumicino (see above), the first-person singular verbs are present in 8.1 per cent of the clauses on average<sup>20</sup>. The plural person (with the meaning of 'we, the government') in 5.6 per cent of the clauses. Elsewhere<sup>21</sup> (Ventura 2021), analysing Conte's conferences press held from January to June 2020, we obtained as results, respectively, 9.13 per cent and 17.36 per cent.

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<sup>20</sup> The speech Draghi held on March 12, 2021, at the vaccination centre of Fiumicino, and the ten speeches introducing the conference press concerning the pandemic management he pronounced from March 19 to November 25, 2021, whose transcripts are available on the government site ([www.governo.it](http://www.governo.it)), have been divided in propositions by the author and submitted to quantitative and qualitative analysis. In a previous work realised by the author, the same kind of analysis had been applied to the conference press' introductory speech held by Giuseppe Conte between January and June 2020 (Ventura 2021, <https://www.rivisteweb.it/issn/1594-6061/issue/8181>).

<sup>21</sup> See the previous note.

Moreover, if we take into account the first-person singular verb only when it expresses an action, a consciousness, a recommendation, a sentiment, a will, and do not count it when it is a filler word or is functional to the conference press development (e.g. "I give the floor to the ministry of Health"), the difference between Conte and Draghi increases: respectively 7.63% vs 5.49%.

In sum, in Conte's discourse, 25 per cent of the clauses of his long press conferences' introductory speeches are devoted to expressing his and his government acts, will or attitudes. Regarding Draghi, these clauses represent 12 per cent of his introductory speeches' clauses. In addition, when referring to the government, Mario Draghi often uses the third-person singular. In many cases, for describing or explaining the government's decisions, he employs terms like 'the decree' or 'the measure' or, in general, the impersonal form. Furthermore, unlike Conte's aptitude to frequently use the pronoun 'you' to address the citizens (2 per cent of the clauses), Draghi rarely addresses his fellow citizens (0,8 per cent of the clauses) directly. Finally, while prime minister Conte often made recourse to an 'inclusive we' – we, the Italians – both for inviting citizens to follow the proper behaviour and to share the problems caused by the pandemic (4 per cent of the clauses), Draghi made use of this 'inclusive we' with great parsimony (1,8 per cent of the clauses).

These data are consistent with the hypothesis that, in Conte's case, press conferences also constituted the opportunity to address the citizens to stress the role the government and its leader played in managing the pandemic. On the contrary, in Draghi's case, the press conferences resemble reports of the subsequent crisis management steps, aimed more to reassure that 'the government is at work' than to exalt government performances. In addition, in the guise of the protagonist of these press conferences, Draghi mainly seemed to address those who shape the public opinion, i. e., the press, instead of directly speaking to the public opinion.

Another aspect that strongly differentiates the meaning-making of the two Italian prime ministers has to do with the adoption of the 'apology'. The apology is a speech of self-defence finalised to maintain, repair or augment the reputation of crisis management key players (Ware and Linkugel, 1973; Coombs, 2015). Some scholars have stressed the pervasiveness of «discourse that apologises, makes excuses, or otherwise attempts to restore a favourable image» (Benoit 1995, cit. in Kent and Boatright, 2018: 515). Often «both image restoration and crisis are undertaken for the benefit of leaders or organisations rather than to serve the needs or interests of stakeholders and publics» (Ibidem). Among the apology tactics, we find the bolstering (« any rhetorical strategy which reinforces the existence of a fact, sentiment, object, or relationship» - Ware and Linkugel, 1973: 277); the denial of facts, sentiments, objects or relationships (Ibidem: 275); the scapegoating, namely shifting blame and responsibility on others, individuals or organisations.

Conte speeches mixed long and detailed illustrations of the just adopted provisions with a set of reassurances about the government's and his leader's goodwill, their good faith – proven by the transparency through which they operated – the accuracy of their work, the successes obtained. Naturally, we could interpret such reassurances as aiming to manage the high uncertainty created by the crisis. However, the fact that they were so frequent and often assumed the form of an explicit self-praise suggests the intentional strategy of bolstering. In addition, prime minister Conte often stressed the government's attitude, its activities and its accomplishments with qualifiers and qualifying adverbs like 'rigorous', 'transparent', 'meticulous', 'excellent', 'absolutely', 'intensely', 'profitably' and so on (Ventura 2021). In many cases, the bolstering strategy took the form of the evocation of Italian excellences, as the Italian Health System. In other cases, it emerged from the sweetened account of the policy process, of which every conflicting aspect, like the one between national and regional authorities, was omitted to emphasise the appeal to national unity (De Blasio and Selva, 2021: 6,8).

Furthermore, the prime minister frequently provided recommendations to citizens and public authorities, like the regional governments. However, in many cases, such recommendations took

on the aspect of a pre-emptive scapegoating instrument aimed to preserve the government's reputation. In this regard, the attribution of responsibility to citizens is especially significant. In fact, on the one side, it appeared designed to mobilise citizens and involve them in the solution of the crisis. However, on the other side, it seemed functional to the strategy of scapegoating. As a matter of fact, Conte, with a paternalistic tone (Sfardini, 2020: 70; Ruiu, 2020:10), the tone of the strict *pater familias*, reminded Italians that if things had gone wrong, it would also be their fault.

Conte's rhetoric also showed his effort to minimise problematic situations likely to embarrass his government. Thus, for example, at the beginning of the crisis, when health authorities discovered the first cases of infection among Italian citizens, he denied the seriousness of the situation, reassuring that it was all under control. Moreover, he implicitly accused the other countries of not making a sufficient number of swab tests. Another example of this 'denial tactic' (albeit an implicit one) regards the relationship between regions and governments, particularly the lack of recognition of conflicts and coordination problems in implementing crisis measures.

Moreover, even though Conte's meaning-making usually aimed at providing a harmonious picture of the government's crisis management, sometimes it assumed a polemic attitude, especially on the occasion of interviews, brief declarations or statements to the parliament. It happened, for example, in the case of disagreements with some regional authorities, to whom Conte often publicly replied. In other terms, Conte (and sometimes his ministers) did not avoid the dispute, both recalling the requirement of coordination and collaboration to face the pandemic and assuming a defensive stance, claiming to act in the name of the public good.

Finally, a quarrelsome atmosphere often marked the relationship between Conte and the media. The latter accused the government of announcing measures before their approval, limiting the opportunities for journalists' questions, lacking clarity and precisions in the announcements, and not respecting the punctuality in television events. Conte and his government, in turn, criticised journalists and the media «for leaking and precociously spreading information, which risked jeopardising the measures' effectiveness» (Novelli, 2021: 140).

To complete this picture, we must recall the figure of Domenico Arcuri. He often did not limit himself to providing information. On the contrary, Arcuri often showed his will to defend the government's decisions and acts, as he was a government member. However, in so doing, he often entered into a direct controversy with regional authorities or journalists. Sometimes, he threatened or announced complaints against some journalists who had dared to criticise him.

By contrast, Draghi scarcely exploited the bolstering strategy. In the analysed texts, the self-praises and the reference to the country's assets, as well as the emphasis on the time and efforts devolved to the crisis solution, are limited enough (respectively 2.4% and 0% of all the clauses), especially compared to Conte's case (respectively 5,3% and 1,7%, - Ventura 2021). In addition, while in Conte's discourses these clauses were enriched by many qualifiers and often represented an effective and long parenthesis in the speech, they were often incidentally expressed in Draghi's speeches.

Furthermore, Draghi did not seem particularly eager to legitimise his decisions recurring to other 'authorities' or arguments different from the inner rationality of the decision itself. On the contrary, Giuseppe Conte devoted great space to the 'narrative of decision-making' (23,20% of all the clauses), especially stressing the role of other institutions (i.e. the parliament and the Regions) and the care the government had put in recognising the relevance of their points of view (Ventura, 2020: 39-40). After all, he «repeatedly claim[ed] that his government [was] oriented to ensure the maximum degree of transparency of the policymaking process» (De Blasio and Selva, 2021: 8). Draghi's clauses referring to the policy process in the analysed corpus are 2.1% of the clauses.

As we saw, contrary to the case of Giuseppe Conte, prime minister Draghi press conferences were constantly introduced by very brief speeches. At the same time, Draghi gave more space to

the journalists' questions. His answers to the journalists confirm his unwillingness both to praise his or his government action (thirteen sentences in the whole Draghi's answer corpus<sup>22</sup>) and to dwell on the policy process transparency or inclusiveness (four sentences).

Finally, he scarcely used the scapegoating strategy. His short speeches contain 5.2 per cent of propositions that remind the citizens of their duties. We could interpret these propositions as charging people for future failures or mobilising people to follow government recommendations. Or both. However that may be, these kinds of propositions in Conte's texts are significantly more frequent (11,6 per cent) and, in many cases, overtly attribute a potential responsibility to the citizens (and quite often to the regional authorities).

Both Giuseppe Conte and Mario Draghi resorted to the traditional role of science for legitimising the measures adopted. However, there exist some differences between them. The terms 'scientists', 'experts' 'cts' repeatedly appeared in Conte's corpus (42 times, that is in 3.1% of the clauses): the hypothesis of the solid legitimising role for government's decisions attributed to the 'neutral' role of science seems confirmed (Ventura, 2021: 39-40). «The expertise and capacity of the members of Cts – wrote De Blasio and Selva – [were] used as a shield for any possible attack on the legitimacy of the government's decisions, hence providing a sort of reassurance for citizens, who can feel that those in charge know what to do» (De Blasio and Selva, 2021: 8). On the contrary, in Draghi's rhetoric, the 'science' as a legitimation tool is employed with parsimony. Indeed, the reference to scientific authorities recurs only five times, that is 1.28 per cent of the propositions (eight times in the part reserved to the responses to the press).

## Conclusion

During 2020 and 2021, the first two years of the pandemic, a substantial level of personalisation marked government crisis communication during both Conte's and Draghi's governments. In the latter case, the head of government constituted the main point of reference – but not the exclusive one – for communicating the news concerning government decisions and pandemic situation. Moreover, he received significant attention from the media, both traditional and new media. He also was at the centre of crisis management governance. However, as we have seen, he was not the protagonist of a relevant controlled media personalisation. On the contrary, he chose to keep himself away from self-mediatisation. He used only institutional settings to communicate, avoiding any superposition between his public role and his private person.

Furthermore, he built an 'internalised' governance – a kind of governance developed mainly inside the government structure –, clearly oriented to the policy goals and weakly publicised. Moreover, his meaning-making, that is, his way of presenting the situation and illustrating the resulting government's decisions, was sober, concise, argumentative. Also, it was somewhat detached from 'apology' strategies aiming at defending or exalting the leader and the government images. In addition, and consistently, he avoided putting his or his government's action in the foreground.

For all these reasons, Draghi's crisis communication during the pandemic period significantly differs from leaders' communication of other big democracies, at least major European democracies. For example, it strongly differs from Emmanuel Macron or Boris Johnson crisis communication, in both cases centred on the leader's person. Former central European banker

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<sup>22</sup> The corpus comprises Draghi's answers transcriptions available on the government site [www.governo.it](http://www.governo.it), concerning seven press conferences from 26 March to 7 October 2021.

communication instead recalls former German chancellor Angela Merkel sobriety and attitude to communicate through a 'reasoned discourse'. Even though it lacks the emotional dimension and propensity to address the citizens directly, distinguishing Merkel's communicative performances during the pandemic. In any case, Mario Draghi decisively has detached himself from the contemporary trend towards a celebrity leadership style (Ventura 2019).

On the contrary, Giuseppe Conte promptly exploited the hybrid media system to strengthen his public image during his second government. Mainly, he began to develop an in-depth, pervasive and unceasing use of traditional and new media in concomitance with pandemic management, also mixing private person and public role. At the same time, the former prime minister strongly personalised his meaning-making, which was also marked by the extensive and frequent use of the apology and different forms of external legitimation (the experts, the policy process). Conte clearly searched for a direct and emotional connection with citizens through his public discourse. Moreover, he gave relevant importance to news management and spin doctoring, adopting a rather aggressive approach to media management to assure the consistency between government's and media's pandemic storytelling. In addition, Conte also exploited the 'crisis governance' structure to communication ends. Indeed, the numerous, plethoric and publicised task forces often without a clear mission, the mediated General Estates whose results remained almost unknown, the widespread exploitation of the image of the 'government at work', reveals the intent of highlight the cruciality of the government and his leader in the crisis context and their correct and successful behaviour. Then, in so doing, he followed the way already paved by leaders like Berlusconi and Renzi, masters of Italian spectacularisation of politics (Ventura 2019).

The two different ways Conte and Draghi communicated the pandemic crisis and its management during the 2020 and 2021 years seems to reveal different communicative goals. Regarding our starting question, the analysis on the two approaches adopted by the two Italian heads of governments allows us to position them on the initially proposed continuum, stretching from a communication focused on crisis resolution to a communication aiming at leadership building and consolidation. With its institutional character, moderate mediation and personalisation, Mario Draghi's communication, weakly conceived as a tool to build a direct link between the leader and the citizens, appears to be mainly oriented to crisis solution. Conversely, the communication developed by Giuseppe Conte, strongly personalised and adapted to media logic, going through different platforms, sustained by a 'spectacularised' governance, using meaning-making to preserve and reinforce his reputation, mainly aspiring to build a direct link with the 'public', manifestly approximates to the leadership building pole.

Consequently, following the distinction proposed by Christian Rauh, while Mario Draghi presents himself as a «crisis manager», Conte appears more to be a «crisis exploiter». This difference mainly lies in the distinct political roles played by Conte and Draghi during their premierships.

Conte's entry into politics and public life coincided with his entry at Palazzo Chigi (the siege of the head of government). The prime minister role (particularly during his second government) offered him the opportunity to build an entirely new public and political career, especially as the leader of a reshuffled 5 Star Movement, which was experiencing a long term crisis, and also as the point of reference of a left-leaning coalition between the 5 Stars Movements and the Democratic Party. Consequently, the sudden need to face the COVID-19 spread turned into a new window of opportunity to exploit. At the same time, the necessity to manage the new crisis required an authority that Conte, as a new politician and a new public figure, lacked. Therefore, he was obliged to develop and strengthen his image.

By contrast, Mario Draghi, as we saw, became prime minister precisely because of his authority, his national and international background and reputation as an economist, banker and

civil servant. His crisis communication has been conditioned by his (also) technical background and the partially technical character of his government. Nevertheless, it has also been shaped by a particular situation: the necessity to realise the mission indicated by the president of the Republic. Therefore, backed by his authoritative personality and the legitimation deriving from the 'presidential call', he did not need to search for consensus for his leadership. As has been noted (Amoretti, Fittipaldi and Santaniello 2021), «while Conte strives to become a leader, the former central European banker restricts his action to the premiership». In general, Draghi's communication has benefitted – due to Draghi's background – from the recognition of being based on «the communicator's capacity for reasoned elaboration», using the words of the German political scientist Carl Joachim Friedrich (Ventura 2022).

However, the sober and authoritative Draghi's communication has sometimes become an absent communication. In particular, he was criticised for his silence after two relevant government meetings, which took place on 23 December, 2021 and 5 January, 2022. During these meetings, the executive renewed the State of emergency and introduced significant restrictions for non-vaccinated people and the mandatory vaccination for over fifty-year-old people. The 23 December, a conference press was held by the ministry of health, Roberto Speranza, and two members of the technical-scientific committee (Cts). On 5 January, any conference press took place. Only five days later, Draghi decided to intervene to explain the measures adopted by the government personally. In both cases, the government decisions were reached after a hard confrontation inside the executives. The difficulties in reaching an agreement were probably at the origin of Draghi's silence. However that may be, such difficulties were linked to the growing conflict among the parties of the majority coalition. In turn, the forthcoming election of the Republic's new president provoked the conflict. Indeed, Mario Draghi was a potential candidate. During the end-of-the-year conference press (22 December 2021), he had alluded to his availability to this role, also haphazardly affirming that his mission was at this point accomplished, thus weakening his position as head of government. Entering the «Great Game»<sup>23</sup> of the presidential election, Mario Draghi acquired a more political and less technical role and put his detached position toward consensus in danger. Could this new situation explain some short circuits in his crisis communication after one year of government? If it can, we are again confronting the dilemma between suitable government communication and the search for consensus.

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<sup>23</sup> A. De Angelis, Draghi non fa più Draghi e subisce la mediazione, in «HuffPost», 5 January 2022. [https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/draghi-non-fa-piu-draghi-e-subisce-la-mediazione-it\\_61d5e1b0e4b061afe3ae0822](https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/draghi-non-fa-piu-draghi-e-subisce-la-mediazione-it_61d5e1b0e4b061afe3ae0822)

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