

HANDBOOK ON CRISIS COMMUNICATION FOR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Jakov Bojovic | Juliana Dahl | Maria Luisa Andrisani



Jakov Bojovic is a Research Fellow at the European University Institute and Scientific Coordinator of the EUI Global Executive Master.

Juliana Dahl is Principal Speechwriter and Spokesperson at the European Stability Mechanism.

Maria Luisa Andrisani is a European Commission official who contributed to this Handbook during her Visiting Fellowship at the European University Institute.

European Stability Mechanism, European University Institute, 2025.

The views and opinions herein do not necessarily reflect those of the authors' organisations of affiliation.

Catalogue Number: DW-01-24-010-EN-N

ISBN: 978-92-95223-64-6

DOI: 10.2852/6574199

Citation: *Bojovic, J., Dahl, J. and Andrisani, M. L. (2025). Handbook on Crisis Communication for Public Institutions. European Stability Mechanism, European University Institute*

CONTENTS

PREFACE: EUROPEAN STABILITY MECHANISM	01
PREFACE: EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE	02
INTRODUCTION	03
PRINCIPLE 1: PREPARE AND ANTICIPATE	05
PRINCIPLE 2: STEAL THE THUNDER	07
PRINCIPLE 3: MAKE COMMUNICATION PART OF POLICY	10
PRINCIPLE 4: ADJUST TO AUDIENCES	12
PRINCIPLE 5: AVOID THE BOOMERANG EFFECT	15
PRINCIPLE 6: SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE	17
PRINCIPLE 7: LISTEN AND SHOW EMPATHY	19
PRINCIPLE 8: NEVER LET A CRISIS GO TO WASTE	21
CONCLUSION	24
ENDNOTES	25



Pierre Gramegna
Managing Director,
European Stability Mechanism

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”
- George Bernard Shaw, Nobel Prize winner for Literature

Communication is a challenge, let’s be humble about it.

In an increasingly interconnected and fast-paced world, the ability to communicate effectively during a crisis has never been more critical. Throughout my career, I have witnessed first-hand the profound impact that communication can have on managing crises and building and maintaining trust. Public trust is essential for the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), the institution that I manage. The ESM was created at the height of the euro crisis with the mandate to safeguard financial stability in the euro area.

Over the years, the ESM has developed a robust framework for crisis management, to which it now adds a strong emphasis on communication with this project. It has become clear that communication can be used as a policy tool, an important element of programme success and reputation overall.

I believe that crisis communication is as difficult to improvise as crisis measures. Crisis communication is the first direct measure that citizens feel in crisis management, as reforms and policies are usually felt with a time lag, especially when it comes to financial crises. This highlights the importance of communication as a policy tool, which is one of the aims of this handbook.

This publication, a collaborative effort between the European University Institute and the ESM, serves as a guide for effective public crisis communication. It draws on an extensive review of relevant literature, executive trainings, interviews with thought leaders, and best practices developed over the years. It also incorporates invaluable lessons the ESM has learned throughout various crises.

I would like to thank those who contributed to this project for their commitment. My appreciation also goes to the various interviewees, among them José-Manuel Barroso and Klaus Regling, who generously shared their insights, forming the foundation of this handbook. You can find the full list of names on page four of this handbook. I am convinced this handbook will serve as an invaluable resource for anyone involved in crisis management.

**George Papaconstantinou**

Professor of International Political Economy
Acting Director, Florence School of
Transnational Governance
European University Institute

Crisis communication presents both threats and opportunities to public institutions and their leaders. It can make or break them. Preparing for crises can make them more resilient when a crisis puts them in the spotlight.

The European University Institute (EUI) is an intergovernmental organisation and a research university based in Florence, Italy. As a transnational hub for policy learning, the EUI has, beyond its signature postgraduate research programmes, offered over 600+ executive education courses with 23,000+ participants across sectors.

The project on crisis communication, developed by the EUI jointly with the ESM, is a prime example of how executive education and high-quality research can work together.

Policymakers and institutions such as the ESM can bring useful lessons from direct experience of communicating in a crisis; and academic institutions are well equipped to draw conclusions from large bodies of literature and systematic interviews. Inputs from both institutions can come together in the form of case studies, interactive training sessions, and publications such as this handbook on crisis communication for public institutions.

This handbook provides public institutions and their leaders with actionable advice on how to communicate in a crisis. It would not have been possible without the help of our interviewees, policy leaders who we thank for giving us their time and sharing their perspectives. It also draws from over 80 academic papers and books on crisis communication reviewed for this project.

We hope this Handbook will inform and inspire further discussions between academia and policymaking, and more projects that connect them, for better policies and societies.

INTRODUCTION

“Crisis communication is the lifeblood that fills the knowledge demands created by a crisis, allowing people to make sense of the crisis.”¹

All crises demand communication under high levels of pressure and uncertainty. How institutions communicate in those moments can be as consequential as the decisions or actions taken.

Poorly executed crisis communication can exacerbate an ongoing crisis or trigger a new one. When done correctly, it can enhance both an organisation’s reputation and the acceptance of its crisis response.

Four common characteristics of crises according to Professor Paul Argenti²:

1. The element of surprise
2. Having to do a lot of explaining despite insufficient information
3. The quick pace of events
4. Intense scrutiny by the media

This handbook on crisis communication is primarily for public institutions, such as governments or international organisations, and comes with the recognition that crisis communication is more complex for public institutions than for private companies.³

Public institutions must balance different and sometimes conflicting interests and ensure that their communication is both effective and legitimate.

Public institutions are also responsible for addressing and offering solutions for wider societal crises, while private companies mainly deal with reputational or organisational crises.

Furthermore, public institutions face a growing decline in trust from the general population. According to the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, 63% of people globally believe government leaders are “purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations”.⁴

In many crises it is paramount that citizens understand and are supportive of the government’s responses. Effective crisis communication can help in establishing trust and mutual ownership of the crisis responses.

The wording used in communications is how the crisis response first reaches the citizens. It is the first measure through which the public perception of the reforms can be formed, as results of concrete measures take time to materialise. This highlights the importance of communication as a policy tool, which is one of the aims of this handbook.

Crisis communication is also increasingly complex due to the increased speed with which information and misinformation spread in the era of social media. This has created opportunities for organisations to reach their audiences quickly and to monitor their responses. It has, however, also put them under an increased level of scrutiny. Both immediate action and continuous communication are often requested.

This handbook is the result of a year-long crisis communication project of the EUI School of Transnational Governance and the ESM. The aim of the project was to produce key principles of crisis communication by connecting research and practice.

The most relevant research on crisis communication was summarised in a background paper co-published by the two institutions.⁵ The practical experience was brought in through interviews with high-level public officials and practitioners who had experience in public crisis communications, as well as journalists, and academics. The two partner organisations have also developed three in-depth case studies, organised an academic workshop, and an executive training on crisis communication.

The handbook is organised around eight key principles of crisis communication:

1. Prepare and anticipate
2. Steal the thunder
3. Make communication part of policy
4. Adjust to the audiences
5. Avoid the boomerang effect
6. Speak with one voice
7. Listen and show empathy
8. Never let a crisis go to waste

For this handbook, we interviewed high-level policymakers, journalists, and academics:

- **José-Manuel Barroso**
former President of the European Commission
- **Marco Buti**
former Director-General for Economic and Financial Affairs at the European Commission
- **Sarah Crowe**
former Crisis Communications Chief of the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- **Stefaan de Rynck**
former senior advisor to Michel Barnier, the Brexit Negotiator for the European Union (EU)
- **Detlef Fechtner**
Deputy Editor in Chief of *Börsen-Zeitung*
- **Pierre Gramegna**
Managing Director of the ESM and former Minister of Finance of Luxembourg
- **Winni Johansen**
Professor of Corporate Communications, Aarhus University
- **George Papaconstantinou**
EUI Dean of Executive Education and former Minister of Finance of Greece
- **Klaus Regling**
former Managing Director of the ESM
- **Christoph Rosenberg**
former Deputy Director, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Communications Department
- **Bob Traa**
former IMF official, former Governor of the Central Bank of Curaçao and Sint Maarten

To be successful in crisis communication, an organisation needs to prepare as if for emergencies with regular full run-throughs/rehearsals. As **Sarah Crowe**, former Crisis Communications Chief of UNICEF, said in her interview for this handbook:

“If you have not prepared to deal with a crisis before it unfolds, you won’t get it right. Any big organisation needs to have a crisis communication plan well in advance and it needs to be rehearsed.”

An organisation’s pre-crisis reputation plays a large role in the perception of its communication during a crisis. While a negative reputation can itself evolve into a crisis, a positive reputation can help improve the perception of its communication.

There are four fundamentals for preparing and building an organisation’s pre-crisis reputation:

1. Stakeholder management
2. Signal detection
3. Prevention
4. Preparation

One of the common threads found through 38 interviews with chief communications officers in a 2018 study led by Yan Jin is the importance of putting into place strategies to communicate with stakeholders about the crisis prior to the crisis.⁶

Organisations should facilitate open and honest communication with their stakeholders in which they are able to share their concerns with each other around potential crises. An organisation’s reputation is built upon good relations with stakeholders, which are like a “reservoir of good will that can help it overcome the negative effects of the crisis”⁷ once a crisis hits.

Our interview with **Christoph Rosenberg**, former Deputy Director of the Communications Department at the IMF, recounted how the IMF builds relationships with local stakeholders:

“We have spent many years cultivating our relationships with what we call ‘the Fund watchers’: reporters who follow the Fund, influencers, think tanks, civil society...it is important that you know them and you have a relationship with them. We would convene them for off-the-record briefings so that they get the context and understand our work.”

Such continuous relationship building and open communication in the pre-crisis stage may decrease the amount of stigma that surrounds financial institutions. It is exactly during the pre-crisis stage that organisations should investigate any potential source of stigma.

According to **Winni Johansen**, crisis communication expert and professor:

“You need to know whether you are stigmatised or not. You need to have an idea about your crisis history, but also about the perception of you as an institution and that may be quite hard.”

Organisations should also actively detect early warning signs of a potential crisis and process such information to prevent the identified risk or issue from developing into a crisis. To collect warning signs, organisations should resort to the most comprehensive sources, including social media analytics. Communicating about high potential risks in the pre-crisis period shows seriousness but may also be unwelcome or dismissed by politicians who may be focused on the short-term and may also suffer from an overly optimistic bias. One solution to this is to continuously communicate and build relationships with the broader public and stakeholders outside the policy decision-making circles.

Importantly, a preparation phase readies the organisation for a crisis that could materialise should the identified risks or issues not fully be addressed by prevention measures.

Christoph Rosenberg emphasised the importance of:

“Establishing clearly in quiet times the internal clearance mechanisms: Who says what? And if there is a press line, who needs to sign off on it, and who has to see it? Basically, to be clear in your head and in your institutional arrangements how you deal with a crisis, so when it [the crisis] comes you are in auto mode, and everybody knows what to do.”

An organisation’s crisis communication plan should contain the information needed on how and what to communicate during a crisis. It should include, among other things, structured information on processes and persons responsible, contact information of key media, related organisations and stakeholders, key messages, sample briefings, press releases, and social media messages.

Organisations should also use the non-crisis times to organise skill-training sessions for their staff and leadership on crisis communication, on topics such as media relations, stakeholder management, social media strategies, among others. In-depth case studies, and role-play simulations can be especially useful in preparing for high-pressure situations in a controlled environment.

A crisis communication plan should not be too long, nor too rigid. As academics Olsson and Eriksson point out, “the more detailed a crisis plan is constructed, the more difficult will it be to carry out in the wake of a chaotic crisis, requiring room for spontaneous actions”.⁷

Organisations that become aware of a crisis face the choice of remaining silent and waiting for the crisis's eventual disclosure by another source, a strategy called "responding to the thunder", or quickly self-disclosing by "stealing the thunder".

Research on organisational crises shows that when an organisation uses the stealing the thunder strategy, it limits negative media attention.⁸ By self-disclosing a crisis and communicating all the known information about it at that time, an organisation shows that it has nothing to hide, increasing its credibility and earning trust.

Former President of the European Commission **José-Manuel Barroso** emphasised the importance of speed in an interview for this handbook:

"You should stay as much as possible ahead of the event. Because sometimes it happens that political decision-makers or the people at administration level want to postpone the issue. It is typical wishful thinking that the issue will disappear. It will not. When you believe there is a problem, even if it is the beginning, the best is to face it, not to procrastinate, and to have a strategy for it. When you believe there is an issue that is boiling up, you should be in contact with all those people who are involved, and those who have the responsibility for decision and communication, to create a group to manage it as much as possible proactively. Stay ahead of the problem, stay ahead of events, do not procrastinate."

What makes quick communication challenging is ensuring the continued accuracy of the information and of the position that is communicated.

The 1990 Perrier's benzene water contamination case is an example of hasty communication in the absence of full information. Two days after the benzene contamination crisis broke, but before identifying the source of contamination, Perrier confidently informed the media that the crisis was limited to its North American market. Only three days later, it was discovered that the impact was much larger and affecting Perrier's entire global market, which forced the company to correct its communication, losing credibility with its customers.

In complex situations, it may be worthwhile to initially communicate only a holding line, like "we are aware, and we are looking into the issue". A shared sentiment in many interviews for this handbook is that in crises, organisations must avoid being reported on as unable to comment on the issue. The holding line should soon be followed up with more substantial statements.

According to research, another advantage of stealing the thunder is that it gives organisations an opportunity to frame the crisis narrative in their own way.⁹ Narratives are defined as simplified versions of reality that offer chronological explanations of events (such as crises) and descriptions of characters (people or countries) as victims, villains, or heroes. Narratives often have an emotional dimension linked to broader worldviews and values that people hold.

More than ever before, crises now unfold as framing contests. In the case of the pandemic, through shifting characterisations of different actors, a “honeymoon period of ‘experts-led’ crisis response heroism had worn off, [...] government truths were being challenged more and more, as the language of ‘we’ gave way to ‘us and them’ (e.g. ‘the unvaccinated’).”¹⁰

If the first opportunity to frame the crisis is missed, others will seize the narrative. As **George Papaconstantinou**, Finance Minister of Greece during the euro area crisis, pointed out:

“One of the problems is that the narrative will be formed by the first person who says it, and then you have got to undo the narrative.”

When stealing thunder, organisations should also be aware that during crisis communication times other actors will offer their own competing explanations. Often, crises become narrative battlefields.

Examples of narratives from different actors in the Greek debt crisis include:

1. It's the previous guy's fault
2. Reforms are necessary to address long-term problems
3. The government is selling out the country
4. The EU is saving its banks, not Greece
5. Austerity kills
6. We do not owe the debt
7. Greece needs to solve its own problems
8. Helping Greece helps all euro countries

To prepare for those scenarios, organisations should anticipate responses, map the different potential narratives, identify holes in those narratives they can exploit, and think of potential inconsistencies in their own narratives.

As **Winni Johansen** pointed out:

"I very much like to compare the crisis arena with a game of chess. If you want to win a game of chess, you need to know what your possibilities are and what the others will probably do, because then you can adapt."

When stealing thunder, organisations should also choose the appropriate messenger to break the news, a top-level official who can speak on behalf of the organisation and inform stakeholders about the actions that will be taken. If the situation allows it, organisations should also be prepared to change the messenger should the messenger's popularity wane, jeopardising the effectiveness of the crisis response.

Communications should not be an afterthought of policy making but an integral part of the process. This is especially true in crises when communication can make or break the policy measures.

As **Pierre Gramegna**, Managing Director of the ESM, pointed out in his interview for this handbook:

| *“Crisis communication is as difficult to improvise as crisis measures.”*

Crisis communication literature presents a useful overview of different approaches and strategies organisations can follow. The appropriate strategy to choose depends on contextual factors, including the type of crisis that the organisation is dealing with and whether it can be considered responsible for the crisis.

The most comprehensive list of strategies and tactics used by various organisations was presented by Timothy Coombs in his situational crisis communication theory: ¹¹

1. Ethical base response – explain the crisis to the stakeholders

- a) Instructing information: telling stakeholders what to do to protect them from harm
- b) Adjusting information: telling stakeholders what happened and what actions are being taken

2. Denial cluster – seeking to avoid crisis responsibility

- a) Stating that no crisis exists
- b) Attacking the accuser
- c) Scapegoating

3. Diminish cluster – downplaying the crisis

- a) Minimising the organisation’s responsibility for the crisis
- b) Justification by minimising the perceived damage of the crisis

4. Rebuilding cluster – accepting crisis responsibility

- a) Compensation
- b) Apology

5. Bolstering cluster – secondary strategies

- a) Reminding the stakeholders about past good work
- b) Ingratiation by praising stakeholders
- c) Explaining how the organisation too is a victim of the crisis

Once a strategy, narratives, and messages are agreed upon, organisations must keep repeating them. It is a big mistake to think that if they are pursued once, the communication will take care of itself. Narratives need to be simple and repeated all the time. Organisations should come up with phrases that encapsulate their narratives and repeat those phrases through different channels.

Organisations should make sure they eventually have the actual policy responses in place, addressing the root causes of the crisis. They should not expect to be able to simply talk themselves out of a crisis.

Within its strategy development, organisations should pay special attention to the role of imagery in public communication. Images often have a lasting effect on people's perception of events.¹² Once striking images become embedded in the public imagination, it becomes increasingly difficult to reach them through communication. They become a filter through which new information is processed.

For example, during the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s, a photo of the former IMF Managing Director Michel Camdessus sternly standing above former President of the Republic of Indonesia Suharto as he is sitting at a table and signing the package of structural reforms became a symbol of the perceived loss of sovereignty.

Our interviews with IMF officials shed light on this episode. According to **Bob Traa**, a former IMF official we interviewed for this handbook, the image that was created is rather accidental and did not reflect the reality.

“He was just waiting for the President to have the opportunity to sign. I’m sure it was not the way it was presented in the newspapers. But this is one of the things that happens. It became a very big problem, and it was very awkward.”

The real cause of this incident was a lack of strategic thinking around communication at the time, as **Christoph Rosenberg** of the IMF confirmed:

“The IMF communication department at the time was very small, with just a handful of press officers, and entirely focused on Western, mainly US-based media. There was not much of a communication strategy beyond putting out press releases on an ad hoc basis, if at all. I am sure we did not have any in-depth relationships with local media... After that incident, we learned the importance of explaining ourselves in an organized and proactive manner.”

Since the Asian crisis, it has become clear that communication can be used as a policy tool, an important element of programme success and reputation overall.

Crisis communication literature as well as our interviews have also focused on the form of communication: how to ensure the message reaches the audience and is well understood. First and foremost, plain and simple language is essential in crises. According to **Sarah Crowe**, it makes your organisation's narrative much easier to be picked up by the media:

“What journalists do is they tell stories. So, you have to consider what makes a good story. It is things like finding the characters, the context, the sights and sounds, the plots, the setting. And it is the beauty of using language that is crisp and brief.”

Clarity of communication helps avoid misinterpretation and unwanted reactions, whether economic or political; it helps transmit or restore confidence to prevent or end bank runs on financial institutions and markets.

In its 2024 communication strategy, the IMF emphasised the need for:

- i. transitioning Fund communications from “doing more” to being more selective;
- ii. strengthening communication channels and platforms controlled by the Fund, such as IMF.org and IMF Blog;
- iii. uniting its traditional media operations with social media;
- iv. deepening engagements with local/regional media and stakeholders (which includes early engagements to strengthen understanding of the local socio-political context and further integrating communications in operational work); and
- v. on internal communications, continuing to bolster staff community and dialogue on institutional priorities.¹³

Bob Traa also pointed out an important distinction:

“Be simple but not simplistic. This is actually difficult because invariably these crises are complex. Otherwise, it wouldn't be a crisis. The government would have already resolved it. So, in order to be simple you need to use simple language that people can understand. But there's nothing simplistic about it, because if you do not understand the problem, you cannot explain it in a simple way.”

The need for clear and effective communication becomes even more acute if the chosen crisis response measures are completely new. For example, the unprecedented nature and seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic compelled central banks to move beyond traditional monetary policy, adopting additional or new strategies like quantitative easing, foreign exchange intervention, and, in some cases, debt monetisation.¹⁴ Clear communication of these crisis measures was essential to help the public comprehend and accept them, shape market expectations, and enhance their effectiveness.

Coming up with key messages regarding the nature of the crisis and the responses is of equal importance.

Moreover, the concept of signal-to-noise ratio was also introduced as an important consideration in central bank communication.¹⁵ The focus in communication should be on the real message, while minimising any associated noise. Hence, more communication is not necessarily better, especially if it adds more noise around the message.

There are situations in which giving clear and simple answers is not favourable. The concept of strategic ambiguity means that an organisation may strategically decide to use words and messages with multiple possible interpretations. In a crisis, the future is uncertain and policy measures might change as the situation unfolds, hence the messages might change over time or become incorrect.¹⁶ However, strategic ambiguity can only be a short term strategy as it can be seen as cowardly or a sign of weakness.

A similar point was raised by **Detlef Fechtner**, Deputy Editor in Chief of *Börsen-Zeitung* and a senior media reporter with experience from several crises, in his interview for this handbook:

“Be as concrete as you can, leave out the other things and stop giving us room for interpretation. Avoid giving leeway for speculations as it creates a mess of different understandings. We love details because they protect everybody in the room from going into the wrong direction.”

Crisis communication should also be targeted towards different stakeholders, who should all be able to understand how the crisis responses address their needs and concerns. The first thing to do is to map the different audiences and their characteristics. Often, different aspects of the crisis response will have to be emphasised to different audiences and in different communication styles. This can become challenging in high pressure crisis situations where different audiences will be listening at the same time.

George Papaconstantinou also touched upon this balancing act in his interview, saying:

[As a country,] You have the audience of the [financial] markets and your creditors, and you have the internal audience, and you need to speak two different languages. Unfortunately, they all watch you at the same time. Somehow, you need to blend the narratives. In a financial crisis, when you are talking to the markets, you are going to focus more on what you will be doing to make sure you have sustainability of debt. But you also need to say this has a social cost, which politicians need to take into account. It is important because it is about people’s lives. And when you talk as a domestic politician, you can talk about the social cost as much as you want, but you also need to bring in the sustainability issue.

Other ways of ensuring that the messages are clear and well understood is by using symbols, metaphors, and analogies, as well as relating abstract macroeconomic and fiscal debates to people's lives.

When a statement comes back to negatively impact the organisation that issued it, it is dealing with the boomerang effect. According to our interview with Pierre Gramegna, to prevent the boomerang effect from happening, organisations should:

1. **Be honest**
2. **Be transparent**
3. **Avoid the blame game**

The importance of the first step, honesty, was highlighted by **José-Manuel Barroso** who pointed out:

“Never lie, not only because it is immoral, but also because it destroys your credibility.”

Avoiding the issues, empty phraseology, or evading responsibility at all costs can create a public perception of manipulation and erode trust. Organisations should apologise when they make mistakes and should be careful not to issue pseudo-apologies lacking in authenticity and acceptance of responsibility.

According to the “Frontiers of Economic Policy Communication” by the IMF’s Olga Stankova¹⁷, there are four ways for public institutions to restore trust through communications:

- Greater transparency and disclosure: making information publicly available and easily accessible so that the public can hold policymakers accountable
- More direct public participation with the help of new communication technologies
- Public opinion polling when it is used to lead policy to better reflect public opinion
- Better informed press coverage including by providing journalists with proper information and context

Organisations should also avoid promising quick fixes to complex, long-standing issues but give a realistic and honest view of the process through which crises would be resolved. Conversely, organisations should also avoid communication that projects hopelessness in crises. According to **Pierre Gramegna**:

“Communication needs to avoid superlatives and catastrophic scenarios, because it is a process. You want to communicate on a process which is underway and the cure that is possible.”

It is also crucial that the organisations dealing with crises are open and transparent with their stakeholders, available to the media, and willing to disclose information of public interest.

Following the negative episode during the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s, the IMF adopted a transparency policy, establishing rules around what must be communicated.

Christoph Rosenberg explained how the stereotypical view of the IMF hurt the organisation's reputation before this policy:

“At that time, the IMF prided itself on being secretive. We went into a country, like men in grey suits– and it was almost always only men– and we would go to the central bank and sit with other men in suits, and maybe smoke a cigar and talk about interest rates, and then leave, and nobody knew we came or we left. Creating the transparency policy was one of the results of the Asian financial crisis episode. But at that time, there was no obligation or practice to publish anything that we did.”

Similar views on the importance of transparency were shared by a high-level official in another European crisis, the Brexit referendum and negotiations. **Stefaan de Rynck**, former senior advisor to Michel Barnier, the Brexit Negotiator for the EU, pointed out the strategic use of transparency in the negotiation process.

“The transparency was a deliberate policy to make sure that our negotiation positions were well understood by our stakeholders. It was a method to make sure that the 27 governments, the administrations below those governments had benchmarks, anchors to base their work on. The second element was a democratic consideration, to avoid trouble in terms of ratification of trade agreements by making sure all national parliaments were involved. And then, finally, it was to avoid manipulation of information by strategic leaks, making sure that everybody's informed at the same time with the same information.”

Dieselgate is an obvious example of how dishonest communication can act like a boomerang. Volkswagen used a form of scapegoating by denying responsibility and blaming the emission-cheating software on a few engineers. Eventually, they admitted that they were aware of the manipulation. This resulted in prolonged negative publicity and a protracted suppression of its stock price.¹⁸

Another tactic that should be avoided is the blame game, which means shifting responsibility for the crisis instead of focusing on finding a common ground for solutions. This is of special importance for financial institutions which should avoid falling into the trap of domestic politics. It is frequently a challenge for EU institutions because they are often scapegoated due to domestic politicians' tendency to take credit for positive developments but blame the EU for any losses.

Another key principle of crisis communication is consistency, also known as “speaking with one voice”. This principle is particularly important when multiple organisations are involved in crisis management, like the inter-institutional and multi-level crisis environment in which EU bodies typically operate.

Inconsistent communication by financial institutions creates unnecessary market volatility and uncertainty, undermining institutional credibility and trust. As **Klaus Regling**, former Managing Director of the ESM, pointed out in his interview for this handbook:

“One needs to give good explanations, but also be consistent. It doesn’t work if different actors give different messages, which happens in many crises. The government of the country concerned may say one thing, the IMF may say something else than the [European] Commission or the European Central Bank (ECB) or the ESM. A good example of consistency is the Irish programme, which worked very well. It worked well and convinced markets quickly because the Irish government gave the same message as the different institutions and the Eurogroup. So, consistency is one of the key things.”

Consistency demands coordination. Having a clear governance structure to support coordination is important. From the beginning, this implies setting up the strategy development in an inclusive way that allows the different actors involved to co-create a response they can sign up for and stand behind. Organisations should also build internal communication processes during a crisis, that would keep the staff informed and engaged.

Research on the effectiveness of ECB communication has shown that the content of speeches by individual Governing Council members should be, as far as possible, aligned with the ECB’s official position.¹⁹

Still, flexibility and the ability to respond collaboratively to new developments is required once the early crisis days are over and the context starts to change. To avoid breaking ranks, when a crisis communication plan is designed, organisations should also agree on a broad set of principles that the individual decisions would be based on.

This means building a relationship of trust between the institutions, as organisations with different traditions and setups are often brought in during a crisis. According to **Marco Buti**, former Director-General for Economic and Financial Affairs at the European Commission:

“If you have different institutions involved in future crises, you should have a much more unified communication line, so that one does not, in a sense, implicitly put the blame on the other one. I think that if you empower people on the ground and you put less constraints on them with respect to communication, you reduce the likelihood of that happening. I remember that when we discussed with colleagues from other

institutions, you try to go there with a lot of red lines, but then what happens is that journalists in the media spot where you try not to say things, so they put you even more pressure to get you into trouble. If you have put too many red lines but are not really convinced, the temptation to break ranks is higher. I think this element of empowerment, and being less defensive, might help in avoiding opportunistic behaviour. I remember that when we discussed with colleagues from other institutions, you try to go there with a lot of red lines, but then what happens is that journalists in the media spot where you try not to say things, so they put you even more pressure to get you into trouble. If you have put too many red lines but are not really convinced, the temptation to break ranks is higher. I think this element of empowerment, and being less defensive, might help in avoiding opportunistic behaviour.”

Organisations should also clearly coordinate on the messengers who will communicate, especially when it comes to politically sensitive issues. A telling lesson on the importance of choosing the right speaker happened during the Greek debt crisis. In January 2011, Greece had already been through several reviews of its programme with the Troika²⁰ and it was at the point where the pressure for a debt restructuring exercise was beginning to build. In his interview for this handbook, George Papaconstantinou, Finance Minister of Greece at the time, explained that the institutions proposed a large privatisation plan and, following an agreement on this with the Greek government, agreed that the government would communicate this. However, **George Papaconstantinou** explained what happened instead:

“The Troika does a press conference and at the end there is a question from a journalist about privatisations. And the [European] Commission representative says, ‘and we have agreed with the Greek government for a €50 billion privatisation plan’. And the journalist says, ‘sorry 50 or 15?’ ‘50’. And basically, all hell breaks loose because this is seen as Greece selling out all its assets. And this is seen as the Troika basically telling the government what to do, and the government has not announced anything. We were put in an extremely difficult situation.”

This does not mean that financial institutions should not communicate, but rather that they should coordinate well on the communication process, especially ahead of key press conferences and when it comes to issues that touch upon policy ownership and national sovereignty.

The ESM’s 2020 independent evaluation report, Lessons from Financial Assistance to Greece, concluded that “the ESM and its partners could have been more actively involved in explaining and advocating critical reforms”, and that “the lack of coordinated and comprehensive communication on the long-term reform benefits contributed to overall weak programme ownership” and “weaker programme implementation” in Greece.²¹

To effectively communicate in a crisis and win support, organisations must show they care about the views of the stakeholders and the public. Active listening can also help organisations find aspects of a crisis issue they were previously not aware of.

According to crisis communications expert **Winni Johansen**:

“You need to set up tools so that you can detect signals that something is wrong, that there is an irregularity, but also to listen to people because they sometimes have the tools for resolution. Also, in your own organisation, your own employees may have the tools. It is the staff who are the experts very often, so we need to be able to set up listening tools internally and externally as well.”

Public institutions should thus both establish channels and regular forums through which they can listen and receive feedback, and actively monitor the media and the public through surveys. They should strive to, as much as possible, “be on the ground” and use other experts, organisations, or leaders who share their views to communicate similar messages through different channels, via op-eds, statements, or other forms of communication.

During the Covid-19 crisis, behavioral scientists conducted monthly surveys of over 2,000 Canadians to track changes in risk perception, trust in government and media, and overall fatigue. These factors are essential for understanding compliance with health guidelines. The surveys also aimed to pinpoint the least followed health practices, identify at-risk groups, and assess misinformation spread. Findings emphasised the importance of personal storytelling and trusted messengers.²²

The real challenge arises when organisations face criticism for their actions. To build trust, organisations should develop relationships with their critics even before a crisis strikes and maintain an open line of communication and feedback with them during crises. The example of the IMF, brought forward by **Christoph Rosenberg**, is very telling in this regard:

“For example, before the IMF Annual and Spring Meetings we would organise roundtables with the leading civil society organisations globally. These organisations follow us and are critical, they have their own influential blogs and go to the media with their own opinions; so, engagement with them is crucial. While you may never fully get them on board, events like the Annual and Spring meetings, including an ‘IMF 101’ with long conversations with them, allow us to engage directly, dispelling stereotypes about our institution. And you know, they think of these men in the grey suits, but ... we show that there are real people [and more diversity] behind the institution. I think that is very important. I think in general, the more you can engage in person, the better.”

When communicating unpopular policies, in addition to showing empathy, literature says that the components to be emphasised are:

1. Specific policy characteristics that affect its popularity: benefits and necessity of the policy, costs of the status quo, relying on norms, values, and identity that can legitimise the new policy.
2. Ascription of responsibility of that policy: by accepting, sharing, or denying it.
3. A positive image of the policy actors showcasing competence, responsiveness, and credibility.²³

Crisis communication scholars, best practices, and case studies point to the importance of using empathy in crisis communication. For example, expressing empathy is one of the key tenets of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication model, which states that "crises create harm, and the suffering should be acknowledged in words. Addressing what people are feeling, and the challenges they face, builds trust and rapport".²⁴ Empathy helps to connect with people's emotions. Real-life examples speak to people. Conversely, purely technocratic, unemotional, and dismissive messages do not speak to people.

Showing empathy is especially important when unpopular policies such as austerity measures, which negatively impact people's livelihood, must be communicated. According to **George Papaconstantinou**:

"When a journalist in front of you, who is looking for ratings says, "Here is Mrs. (name), how can she survive on this pension?", there is no answer to that. There is none. You are trapped completely. The only way to deal with it is with a lot of humility. There is no way that you can bring data and reasoned argument to counteract the deeply personal, difficult story of the pensioner or of a person whose business went bankrupt because of your decisions of the higher taxes. And yet you have to be there trying to do it. You must show up. You need to connect with your audience on an emotional level, and use personal stories yourself."

Another interesting case of using empathy in public communication is the case of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel during the Covid-19 pandemic. Literature has documented that during the pandemic, Chancellor Merkel changed her traditional leadership communication style, which has often been portrayed as too analytic, technical, and unemotional, and instead repeatedly used empathy in her public communication to connect emotionally with the audience.²⁵

When a crisis is resolved and deemed to be over, some concerns persist, primarily: ensuring the organisation can avoid or is better prepared for future crises and that stakeholders are left with a favourable impression of how the organisation handled the crisis and will trust the organisation in the future. The two main post-crisis communication actions that address these concerns are:

1. **Learning from failures, including communication failures**
2. **Continued engagement with stakeholders to address lingering concerns they may have**

Research has identified various obstacles to organisational learning and change, such as:

- Rigidity in core beliefs, values, and assumptions
- Ineffective internal communication
- Challenges in dissemination
- Failure to recognise analogous situations elsewhere
- Maladaptation
- Minimising threats and environmental changes
- Fixation on specific events
- An overemphasis on expertise
- Neglect of external perspectives
- Lack of corporate responsibility
- A tendency to focus on “single loop” or single cause thinking.²⁶

Organisations can learn the most by evaluating their crisis communication efforts, assessing what worked and what needs improvement. To do so, the crisis communication team should collect information from different sources that provide indicators of the success or failure of the efforts, such as the people involved, pre- and post-crisis reputation scores, media coverage of the crisis, and stakeholder feedback. Organisations should also foster a climate where employees understand that the purpose of the post-crisis period is to enhance the crisis response rather than assign blame to anyone.

The lessons learned from the crisis should be shared within the organisation, the necessary policy and institutional changes should be implemented, and the acquired knowledge should be recorded and stored so as not to be lost and forgotten, thus creating an “organisational memory”.

After the internal learning and communication process, organisations should communicate to external stakeholders what they have learned from the crisis and what they will change.

Once a crisis is over, there might be lingering communication concerns in the relationship with stakeholders. Stakeholders such as citizens, customers, employees, and investors seek updates on the progress of the recovery.

Follow-up communication should provide details on recovery efforts, preventive measures to avoid a similar crisis in the future, and updates on any ongoing investigations related to the crisis.

Moreover, post-crisis communication should also be used to protect the favourable narratives of the crisis roots and the role that the organisation played in the crisis resolution. It is indeed after the crisis takes place that the public creates their perception about the performance of the different institutions.

Klaus Regling pointed out the role that continuous, post-crisis communication plays in contributing to the organisational images:

“The narrative that countries got out of the euro crisis because they implemented the necessary reforms, the ESM provided unprecedented amounts of money on cheap terms, and the ECB supported all that with unconventional monetary policies; that without the painful reforms some countries would probably have left the euro area and economic consequences would have been much, much worse for them and the monetary union—if that narrative had prevailed, then the image of the ESM would be better—less political stigma. Importantly, wrong predictions about another euro crisis when the ECB started to normalise interest rates could have been avoided. But we failed to communicate that narrative successfully. So, I think that is a clear example of bad post-crisis communication and the consequences are there.”

Researchers Andrea A. Chua and Augustine Pang examined the United States government’s communication strategies for repairing its image following the 2008 financial crisis. They analysed the approaches of Presidents George Bush and Barack Obama through official speeches and news reports, finding both utilized strategies like bolstering, transcendence, and corrective action. President Bush employed attack and differentiation tactics, while President Obama focused on contrition and symbolic diplomacy to rebuild international perception. Their findings indicated that Obama’s communication and diplomatic efforts improved global perceptions of the United States over time.²⁷

When an organisation’s image is negatively affected in in crisis, it should invest extra effort in the post-crisis period to repair its image.

In some cases, negative images can lead to stigmatisation. Stigmatised organisations must invest in building trust and repairing relationships with their stakeholders, with those stigmatising them. As stigmas are often rooted in narratives of previous crises, organisations should invest in creating and communicating more positive counter-narratives about their work.²⁸

Crises also present opportunities. Especially in the post-crisis phase, organisations should project an optimistic, forward-looking, and long-term vision of change and renewal of the organisation as it moves beyond a crisis.²⁹ Such forward-looking communication should portray the new sense of direction and purpose that developed through the crisis.

CONCLUSION

This handbook provides public institutions with eight key principles for crisis communication identified by investigating the theory and practice of crisis communication. To effectively communicate in crises, public sector leaders should thus ask themselves how they can:

1. Prepare and anticipate

- a. Are we working to improve our reputation prior to the crisis?
- b. Are we detecting early crisis signals?
- c. Is our leadership and staff being trained on essential crisis communication skills?

2. Steal the thunder

- a. Are we the first to break the news on the crisis?
- b. How do we frame the crisis event or root causes of the crisis?
- c. Are we prepared to engage in a narrative battle?

3. Make communication part of policy

- a. What is our communication strategy and tactics for this crisis?
- b. Have we decided on key phrases to be repeated in the crisis?
- c. Have we considered the role of images in the public perception of crises?

4. Adjust to the audiences

- a. Are we clear and understandable?
- b. Do we have key messages?
- c. Have we tailored our communication to different audiences?

5. Avoid the boomerang effect

- a. Are we fully honest and transparent in our communication?
- b. Have we included our stakeholders in our processes?
- c. Are we avoiding playing the blame game and instead focusing on communicating solutions?

6. Speak with one voice

- a. Do we have the mechanisms in place to coordinate the communication between different institutions involved?
- b. Are we offering the right degree of flexibility by agreeing on common broad principles?
- c. Have we chosen the right messengers?

7. Listen and show empathy

- a. Are we actively listening and collecting feedback on our crisis responses and communication efforts?
- b. Are we considering the feedback received?
- c. Has our communication been empathetic instead of technocratic?

8. Never let a crisis go to waste

- a. Have we learned from this crisis and communicated the lessons learned?
- b. Are we addressing any lingering concerns of stakeholders?
- c. Do we have our post-crisis narrative and are we communicating it?

ENDNOTES

- 1 Coombs, W. T. (2010). Conceptualizing Crisis Communication. In R. L. Heath, & H. D. O'Hair (Eds.), *Handbook of Risk and Crisis Communication* (1st ed., pp. 99–118). Routledge.
- 2 Argenti, P. A. (2023). *Corporate Communication* (8th ed.). McGraw Hill Higher Education.
- 3 Olsson, E.-K., & Eriksson, M. (2020). Crisis communication in public organizations. In F. Frandsen, & W. Johansen (Eds.), *Crisis Communication* (pp. 419–437). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.
- 4 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report.
- 5 Andrisani, M. L. (2025). Crisis communication literature review with key takeaways.
- 6 Jin, Y., Austin, L., Eaddy, L., Spector, S., Reber, B., & Espina, A. (2018). How financial crisis history informs ethical corporate communication: Insights from corporate communication leaders, *Public Relations Review*, 44(4), 574–584.
- 7 Ulmer, R. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2010) Post-Crisis Communication and Renewal: Understanding the Potential for Positive Outcomes in Crisis Communication. In R. L. Heath, & H. D. O'Hair (Eds.), *Handbook of Risk and Crisis Communication* (1st ed., pp. 302–322). Routledge.
- 8 Claeys, A.-S. (2022). The Benefits and Pitfalls of Stealing Thunder. In W. T. Coombs, & S. J. Holladay (Eds.), *Handbook of Crisis Communication* (2nd ed., pp. 99–111). John Wiley & Sons.
- 9 Lee, S. Y. (2020). Stealing thunder as a crisis communication strategy in the digital age. *Business Horizons*, 63(6), 801–810.
- 10 't Hart, P. (2022). Teaching crisis management before and after the pandemic: Personal reflections. *Teaching Public Administration*, 41(1), 72–81.
- 11 Coombs, W. T. (2022). Situational Crisis Communication Theory: Refining and Clarifying a Cognitive-Based Theory of Crisis Communication. In W. T. Coombs, & S. J. Holladay (Eds.), *Handbook of Crisis Communication* (2nd ed., pp. 193–204). John Wiley & Sons.
- 12 't Hart, P. (1993). Symbols, Rituals and Power: The Lost Dimensions of Crisis Management. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 1(1), 36–50.
- 13 IMF. (2024). Review of the IMF's Communications Strategy. Policy Paper.
- 14 Unsal, D. F., & Garbers, H. (2021). Central Bank Communication Through COVID-19: Focusing on Monetary Policy. Monetary and Capital Markets Department Special Series on Financial Policies to Respond to COVID-19. International Monetary Fund.
- 15 Blinder, A. S., Ehrmann, M., de Haan, J., & Jansen, D.-J. (2022). Central Bank communication with the general public: promise or false hope? ECB Working Paper No. 2694/August 2022.

- 16 Johansson, C., & Nord, L. (2017). The Simple Truth: Ambiguity Works. Discursive Strategies by Swedish Public Authorities During the 2008 Financial Crisis. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 55(2), 220–236.
- 17 Stankova, O. I. (2019). *Frontiers of Economic Policy Communications*. International Monetary Fund.
- 18 Claeys, A.-S., & Coombs, W. T. (2020). Organizational Crisis Communication: Suboptimal Crisis Response Selection Decisions and Behavioral Economics. *Communication Theory*, 30(3), 290–309.
- 19 Bernoth, K., & Dany-Knedlik, G. (2020). The ECB’s Communication Strategy: Limits and Challenges After the Financial Crisis. Study requested by the European Parliament’s Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs, Monetary Dialogue.
- 20 The Troika consisted of the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund.
- 21 ESM. (2020b). *Lessons from Financial Assistance to Greece: Independent Evaluation Report*.
- 22 Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation (OCED) (2020). *OECD Report on Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward*.
- 23 König, P. D. (2016). Communicating austerity measures during times of crisis: A comparative empirical analysis of four heads of government. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18(3), 538-558.
- 24 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication*. Crisis + Emergency Risk Communication. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- 25 Wodak R. (2021). Crisis Communication and Crisis Management During COVID-19. *Global Discourse*, 11(3), 329-353.
- 26 Elliott, D., Smith, D. and McGuinness, M. (2000). Exploring the failure to learn: Crises and the barriers to learning. *Review of Business*, 21 (3), 17-24.
- 27 Chua, A. A., & Pang, A. (2012). US government efforts to repair its image after the 2008 financial crisis. *Public Relations Review*, 38(1), 150–152.
- 28 Mishina, Yuri, and Cynthia E. Devers. (2012). ‘ On Being Bad: Why Stigma is not the Same as a Bad Reputation’, in Timothy G. Pollock, and Michael L. Barnett (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Reputation*.
- 29 Sellnow, T. L., Seeger, M. W., & Sheppard, R. (2022). Revisiting the Discourse of Renewal Theory: Clarifications, Extensions, Interdisciplinary Opportunities. In W. T. Coombs, & S. J. Holladay (Eds.), *Handbook of Crisis Communication* (2nd ed., pp. 127–136). John Wiley & Sons.

EUROPEAN STABILITY MECHANISM

6a Circuit de la Foire Internationale
L-1347 LUXEMBOURG

info@esm.europa.eu
www.esm.europa.eu

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE

Florence School of Transnational Governance
Via Camillo Cavour, 65, 50129 Firenze - ITALY

stg.execed@eui.eu
www.eui.eu