Chapter 3

Communicating the Covid-19 pandemic

A comparison of government communication in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden

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Abstract

In this chapter, we utilise a framing analysis to compare Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish government communication during the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. The results show that the perceptions of the seriousness of the crisis and the expected challenges facing Scandinavian societies were shared by all three governments, but they framed their communications slightly differently. Though based on common perceptions of an extraordinary threat to society and efforts to demonstrate national solidarity, a key component of the differences between the three Scandinavian prime ministers' framing of the crisis was related to the issue of political control: One prime minister had come to office with the intention of assuming full political control in crisis situations, another framed management of the crisis in accordance with the delegation of power, and the third sought balance between expert agencies and political control through transparency and openness.

Keywords: government frames, crisis communication, crisis exploitation, Scandinavian countries, Covid-19 communication strategies

Introduction

In this chapter, we compare the communication strategies of the Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish governments and examine the differences and similarities across these states. Theoretically, we depart from the notion of crisis as both a

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threat and an opportunity, where the framing of crisis severity paves the way for political action (or inaction). From this perspective, a political crisis can be understood as a calculated act in which successful actors manage to exploit the situation to their advantage by demonstrating action, strengthening credibility, and pushing through new policies (Boin et al., 2009). Inspired by previous research in the field of political crisis communication, we apply a framing analysis (see Nord & Olsson, 2013). In accordance with this framework, we explore the Scandinavian governments' communications through three frames: responsibility, managerial, and morality. The responsibility frame deals with questions related to the origin of the crisis, its severity, and solutions for ending the crisis. The managerial frame deals with an actor's skill to promote their own management of the crisis. Finally, the morality frame is about morals, emotions, and values.

Our aim with this chapter is to compare government communication in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 to answer the following research question:

RQ1. How were the responsibility, managerial, and morality frames addressed in government communication in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Political leaders' crisis communications

To study the government communication of Covid-19 in the Scandinavian countries, we applied a framework developed to understand how leaders make communicative use of crisis characteristics through the application of various frames. The power of frames lies in their ability to categorise and connect pieces of information, and in so doing, reduce complexity to single coherent stories that have ideological and political implications (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1992). It is through frames that actors fight over the legitimacy of values and principles (Canel, 2012; Entman, 2003; Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014). Frames are particularly powerful when an issue emerges on the agenda quickly and in an unpredicted way, like when a new crisis strikes society. In order for leaders to succeed in their crisis communication efforts, they must be able to create a convincing story that explains what has happened, why it has happened, the repercussions, how it can be resolved, who can be relied on, and who is to blame (Boin et al., 2016). In short, the causes of a crisis can be framed as exogenous (located outside the realm of the responsible actors) or endogenous (responsible actors are the source of the problem). An exogenous framing provides political actors with more room to maneuver and more control over the communication process (Boin et al., 2009). When crises are framed as endogenous, communica-

tion strategies become focused on blame avoidance and defending reputations. How the causes of a crisis are framed is therefore, at least to a certain extent, constrained by the nature of that crisis. At the same time, the causes of the crisis are also an important aspect of the contested framing.

Crisis communication efforts often end up in various "blame games" (Hood, 2011), as there is much to be gained for actors who succeed in framing the crisis to their own advantage. According to Brändström and Kuipers (2003), blame games are characterised by actors' strategic choices based on three dimensions: severity (how bad the situation is, or was), agency (how it might have happened), and responsibility (who is to be held accountable). Blame games are in themselves a sign that an issue has been politicised. The level of politicisation differs based on the characteristics of the crisis and on the actors' ambition and resources. For example, previous research tells us that crises involving military threats from an outside enemy or terrorist situations tend to be characterised by societal and political rally-around-the-flag syndromes, and are accordingly depoliticised (Boin et al., 2016; Falkheimer & Olsson, 2015). From a journalistic perspective, these events (most often wars) tend to be characterised by the suppression of core journalistic norms, such as objectivity and factuality (Katz & Liebes, 2007; Reynolds & Barnett, 2003; Olsson & Nord, 2015). Other types of events may be more open to interpretation. It should also be noted that crisis events tend to change character over time. What started as an event framed as exogenous may well become an endogenous crisis over time as actors, for example, make various managerial mistakes or become embroiled in scandals related to the crisis at hand.

The focus on blame rhetoric departs from a notion of crises as threats. However, crises represent not only a threat, but also an opportunity where successful outcomes boost political parties, their preferred policy options, and individual actors (Boin et al., 2009). Defensive strategies should therefore be complemented by more active frames related to managerial competence and morality. Moreover, frames must be coherent and mutually reinforcing. They should also pay attention to and be aligned with media logic dynamics (Nord & Olsson, 2013).

This study applies a framework previously developed by Nord and Olsson (2013), according to which successful crisis communication consists of a coherent mix of responsibility, managerial, and morality frames. Responsibility is a widely applied frame in news media and crisis communication settings and has been directed at coverage that deals with evaluations of crisis management response, focused on the media's allocation of blame (Coombs, 2004; Djerf-Pierre et al., 2014; Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007). The responsibility frame deals with questions related to the origin of the crisis, its severity, and the possible solutions for ending the crisis. The most difficult communication challenges come when the crisis is framed as severe, and governmental actors are con-

sidered responsible for its occurrence. The managerial frame is related to the actor's ability to promote their own handling of the crisis. Finally, the morality frame is about morals, emotions, and values. Morality frames derive their power from resonating with the underlying culture and moral assumptions in society and are therefore easily recognised and understood by the audience. Such frames make appeals beyond the single frame and the story at hand. A classic example is the David-versus-Goliath narrative from the Bible as a way of describing the power differences between actors and creating sympathy for the one portrayed as David.

Method and material

In order to study the use of frames, we collected additional data from government websites. The texts of all public speeches, press releases, and extracts from press conferences published during March–June 2020 that expressed government views on the Covid-19 crisis were included in the analysis. Data were collected from three distinct types of websites in all three countries: those related to the government in general, to the prime minister's office, and to the ministry responsible for public health. The websites analysed are listed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 *Analysed government communication websites*

	Government	**Prime Minister's Office**	**Ministry of Health/ Social Affairs**
Denmark	www.regeringen.dk	www.stm.dk	www.sum.dk
Norway	www.regjeringen.no	www.regjeringen.no/smk	www.regjeringen.no/hod
Sweden	www.regeringen.se	www.regeringen.se/statsradsberedningen	www.regeringen.se/socialdepartementet

Comments: Material from 1 March–1 June 2020 was included in the analysis. The websites were searched by the authors in August–September 2021.

Only public and officially released statements by members of the government were considered. The three websites selected for each country were assumed to be the most central for finding government framing of the Covid-19 pandemic, while other ministry websites were generally more focused on the practical consequences of the pandemic related to distinct policy areas. The quotes referred to in this chapter are illustrative examples of responsibility, managerial, and morality frames promoted by government members in the three countries during the analysed time period. We have translated the quotes provided in this chapter; they are not officially authorised English translations.

The empirical sections below discuss the differences and similarities among the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish governments. The first section compares the contexts of governmental communications in terms of action and response to the development of the Covid-19 pandemic. The second section compares governments' use of responsibility, managerial, and morality frames when addressing the public about the crisis.

Government communications in context

As is normally the case in stressful situations, the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 resulted in increased support for the political parties in government, and especially for the Scandinavian prime ministers. Previous political conflicts were to a large extent replaced by political consensus between government and opposition parties in the face of this new and serious external threat to society. Politicians from diverging ideological camps "rallied around the flag", that is, they came together in support of their respective governments. This happened in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in the initial phases of the crisis (Baekgaard et al., 2020; Esaiasson et al., 2020; Hassing Nielsen & Lindvall, 2021). Scandinavian governments also used similar rhetorical leadership strategies: They appealed for solidarity, and as a result, they initially gained increased public support (Björkdahl et al., 2021). Later on, public support for governments in Scandinavia declined as a result of both unsuccessful crisis management and political ideology (Johansson et al., 2021). In the initial period of the crisis, however, governments generally strengthened their position politically, and their framing of crisis management was important to the domestic debate that followed as the Covid-19 virus spread (for an in-depth discussion of rally-around-the-flag effects in the Nordics during the pandemic, see Johansson et al., Chapter 13).

However, the role of the government also differed between the three Scandinavian countries. As has been noted by previous observers, the national health agency had a strong influence on pandemic response in Sweden, while the Danish and Norwegian responses appear to have been driven more distinctly from the offices of their respective prime ministers (Parliament of Denmark, 2021; Petridou, 2020; Rubin & de Vries, 2020). Nonetheless, even if crisis management and government actions varied between the three Scandinavian countries, responsible political leaders in all three countries were key players in communicating the crisis (for a discussion of how the different administrative traditions and models of governance in the Nordic countries influenced the different responses to the pandemic, see Sandberg, Chapter 2).

A distinctive feature of the Danish government in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis was the somewhat unexpectedly rapid action taken when the pandemic struck the country in late February 2020. It has been clearly documented by

both academic studies and political commentators that the government – and the Social Democrat prime minister, Mette Fredriksen, in particular – was quick to take control of the overall policy-making process, implementing measures that went beyond those recommended by the Danish Health Authority [Sundhedsstyrelsen], centralising power in the prime minister's office rather than other ministries and health agencies, and ordering the health authorities to work within the paradigm of precaution rather than proportionality, as the National Health Agency and its director, Sören Broström, had initially suggested (Parliament of Denmark, 2021). The strategy for handling the pandemic was regularly coordinated and defended in public by Fredriksen and Broström, but they did not always share the same perceptions of risk and the required action.

The leading role of the Danish prime minister in the public debate in early 2020 is confirmed by content analysis of news media coverage of key actors during the initial phase of the pandemic. The findings show that Fredriksen clearly dominated the news compared to Broström. Fredriksen's presence in the media reached the highest level in March 2020, when she announced extensive lockdown initiatives in several press conferences. Although media exposure later declined for both actors, the prime minister sustained three times the daily mentions of the health agency director (Rubin et al., 2021).

The leading role of Fredriksen and the strict restrictions implemented in Denmark were immediately strongly supported by other political parties in parliament, on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Political opposition in the initial stages of the pandemic has been described as weak, not consolidated, and internally divided. The mutual understanding over the measures lasted for some time, but the rigorous nature of the regulations, the lockdown, and its consequences gradually generated more criticism from the opposition parties, which politicised the issue as time progressed (Hassing Nielsen, 2021).

One of the studies (Rubin & de Vries, 2020) reveals how leading Danish experts and politicians changed their sense-making in response to the outbreak of Covid-19. Interestingly, sense-making appeared to run along two parallel trajectories. In the early phase of the Danish Covid-19 response, it appears that sense-making was not in alignment, which contributed to a decision-making process in which mistrust and disputes were openly expressed. The study refers to an incident when the director of the Danish health agency denounced the closure of borders, stating that it was a political decision with no scientific merit and which lacked substantive evidence (Rubin & de Vries, 2020). Fredriksen responded that too many lives would be put at risk if the government based its decisions only on existing scientific evidence (Nielsen, 2020). She also questioned the Danish health agency's reliance on scientific evidence. This public exchange illustrates how the two main actors subscribed to very different sense-making at a critical juncture in the management of the pandemic (Rubin & de Vries, 2020).

Norwegian government communication displayed both similarities with and differences from the Danish case. As in Denmark, Norwegian political leaders played a dominant role in crisis management and communication and emphasised the precautionary principle when explaining restrictions and the shutdown of societal institutions and services. In contrast to Denmark, however, the leading politicians and public health authorities in Norway seemed to be more unified in their analyses of the developing situation and the most effective response to the pandemic.

In general, the political leadership in Norway worked closely with public officials and public health experts. The major decisions by the national government on how to respond to the pandemic were taken by the cabinet in close collaboration with the Norwegian Directorate of Health and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. There were, however, some exceptions to this consensus around necessary action. For example, the Norwegian government initially implemented more radical initiatives than those recommended by the health agencies, such as closing schools and banning the use of vacation homes (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020).

One study of the Norwegian crisis communication concludes that it was generally characterised by clear, timely, and repeated messages. Communication was performed jointly by political leaders and expert agencies (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020). However, this partnership did not result in equal visibility in the public debate in Norway. As in Denmark, the Conservative Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, was clearly the most visible person in the media as she announced the initial national social distancing initiatives (Rubin et al., 2021).

The Norwegian government decided on a paternalistic strategy, defining the situation as dramatic and maintaining that drastic measures would lead to a better long-term outcome. They suggested that the virus threatened Norwegians' way of life, that it might completely overwhelm the healthcare system, and the widespread existence of non-symptomatic cases, which came close to scaremongering. They also argued that "life and health" considerations and the precautionary principle should predominate (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020).

In Sweden, the government is ultimately responsible for national health policy, and thus for the strategy to combat Covid-19. The Public Health Agency of Sweden [Folkhälsomyndigheten] deals with public health issues, and the government normally follows the advice of the expert authority, even if politicians have some discretion to take different decisions if they evaluate that the situation requires it. This more expert-driven public leadership is consistent with Sweden's administrative system, which guarantees central agencies a high degree of quasi-decisional autonomy (Christiansen et al., 2016; Petridou, 2020; Öberg & Wockelberg, 2016). However, some critical commentators have pointed out that this autonomy for agencies has not prevented the government from taking political initiatives in other policy areas (Calmfors, 2021).

Several observers have noted in the Swedish response to Covid-19 that the relative absence of political initiative in the process and a considerable degree of depoliticisation were remarkable aspects from a comparative Nordic perspective (Petridou, 2022). Ministers repeatedly indicated that they saw their role as acting on requests from the Public Health Agency, if and when such requests arrived. The director general of the Public Health Agency, Johan Carlson, declared in mid-March 2020 that his agency was "holding the baton, very clearly" (Andersson & Aylott, 2020: 6).

However, the Swedish government's low-key role at the beginning of the pandemic was not directly exposed to public debate, as the issue was not politicised much at that time. This may have been partly due to a tradition of political ceasefires [borgfred] during severe national challenges. Non-politicisation might also have been promoted because of the unexpected support from the opposition for light-touch and largely voluntary restrictions. The far-right Sweden Democrats did urge the sort of response seen in other European countries, including school closures, and in early June, its party leader called on state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell to resign. However, even the Sweden Democrats kept a generally low profile in the initial phases of the crisis. Given this political background, it is reasonable to suggest that there was little appetite in the Social Democrat government to do anything other than delegate as much as possible in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic (Andersson & Aylott, 2020).

Media content analysis from Sweden differs from what was noted in the other Scandinavian countries. In Sweden, the news media gave the most prominence to the state epidemiologist for much of 2020. He appears to have been more publicly visible a few weeks earlier than anyone in Denmark or Norway, but Sweden's strongest surge in media coverage for both the prime minister and the state epidemiologist occurred one week later than surges in Denmark and Norway. Notably, however, the gaps between the Swedish media's mentions of the prime minister and of the leading national expert were markedly shorter than Denmark's or Norway's. The prime minister eventually became more prominent than the state epidemiologist as Sweden implemented social distancing initiatives more similar in scope to Denmark's and Norway's during the second wave of the pandemic (Rubin et al., 2021).

Both the government and the Public Health Agency of Sweden declared their support for a strategy based on individual responsibility to counter Covid-19. The key elements of the strategy were citizens' own actions and a sense of personal responsibility to limit the spread of infection (Lindström, 2021).

To conclude, governments in Denmark and Norway played a more dominant role in crisis communication, while the Swedish government took a more passive role in relation to the Public Health Agency. Diverging perceptions of the crisis emerged between governments and authorities in Denmark and Sweden, but not to the same extent in Norway. In the next section, we analyse govern-

ment communication in the three countries, with a particular focus on the use of responsibility, managerial, and morality frames.

Government communication frames

Our research question asks how responsibility, managerial, and morality frames were reflected in the Scandinavian governments' communications during the Covid-19 pandemic. When actors engage in crisis framing, the first and most crucial issue is to decide how to communicate the magnitude of the event (Boin et al., 2009). In order to maximise resources and provide support for controversial and innovative actions, the situation must be portrayed as extraordinarily difficult and troublesome. However, if governmental actors plan to maintain existing routines and protocols, crisis definitions do not have to be equally alarming.

The Scandinavian governments perceived the spread of Covid-19 in early 2020 in fairly similar ways in the beginning. Initially, the governments mainly reflected the views of their national public health agencies that this was a regional outbreak with limited risk of spreading beyond East and Southeast Asia. The topic was not yet at the top of the political agenda in Scandinavia, and government statements were rare. However, the situation changed dramatically when the virus was discovered in Europe, and especially in Italy, where high death rates and insufficient healthcare resources exposed the challenges that could be expected. On realising that no country could remain unaffected by the virus, leading politicians in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden then had to communicate the crisis to the public.

The countries each faced the same serious situation, and all three governments initially referred to extraordinary global developments and the sacrifices required by every citizen for a tough time ahead. The perception of crisis and the expected challenges facing Nordic societies were shared by the Scandinavian governments, but each framed its communication slightly differently.

In general, the Danish government and Prime Minister Fredriksen (Social Democrats) defended their actions and justified their positions by referring to the new and serious threat to Danish society, as well as the need to protect the citizenry at all costs. Fredriksen was especially influenced by the situation in Italy and other parts of Europe when she argued for a strict lockdown in Denmark. She recalled the reasons for her decisions in a later interview:

> This was a matter of life and death. I can still see the images of the rest of Europe before my eyes. (DR Politik, 2020)

The Danish government characterised the pandemic as an "extraordinary situation" with great consequences for society. In a press conference, Fredriksson

addressed the situation in Italy and the lack of healthcare resources, pointing out that this was not a fantasy future scenario, but reality. She therefore asserted the necessity of applying the precautionary principle when dealing with the pandemic:

> We should face up to the spread of the virus with more force. This can only be done if we do it together and if everyone is aware of the seriousness of the situation. We should stand side by side. We should take care of each other, but in different ways than we usually do. As Danes, we normally come together by being close to each other. Now, we must come together by keeping our distance from each other. (Danish Prime Minister's Office, 2020)

The situation in Denmark was portrayed as extraordinary, which opened up possibilities for swift and strong action by the government. In Denmark, there was no sign of references to the responsibilities of actors outside the political sphere. On the contrary, the government took full responsibility for all actions taken and consequently addressed the need for political decision-makers to take the lead. The arguments generally emanated from morality frames that emphasised the need to protect the nation and its people from the disease and underlined the extraordinary character of the crisis. The drastic government decisions taken at the beginning of the pandemic were defended by moral reasoning as actions and efforts to avoid the disastrous situations already occurring in other countries, and to some extent also by government rhetoric referencing managerial frames on the competence and capability of political leaders. The precautionary principle was central for the government, even in phases of the crisis when national public health agencies made different evaluations of the situation.

Some observers noted that Fredriksen had addressed the need for the Prime Minister's Office to take the lead in the political process in relation to other ministries and public agencies long before the pandemic. Since she took office following the 2019 elections, she had argued that Denmark should be governed based on political principles and motivations rather than the evaluations and recommendations of experts in the public sector (Kragh, 2021). According to a parliamentary report, the Danish government also decided not to follow the advice from the public health agency in early 2020. The Danish Ministry of Health also lined up alongside the Prime Minister's Office, instead of backing its own agency (Parliament of Denmark, 2021). There is no doubt that the Danish government decided to react strongly because of the perceived seriousness of the situation, but also that the strong position taken by the Prime Minister's Office made the crisis management and communication strategy possible.

When the Norwegian prime minster, Erna Solberg (Conservative), communicated to the public why it was imposing strict restrictions, she also referred

to the threats to citizens' life and health and underlined that the magnitude of the crisis demanded extraordinary actions:

> We are today introducing the most intrusive measures on civil society in peace time. (Solberg, 2020a)

Solberg underlined the severity of the crisis by declaring that nobody in her generation had any previous experience of a similar challenge to society. In a televised speech to the nation, she also described the high level of trust in Norway as a great asset in dealing with the current crisis:

> Generations before ours have created a society where we trust and respect each other. In good times and in bad, managing directors and industrial workers have shown up, side by side. We have built the welfare state together. When terror and disasters have hit us, we have faced the situation together. When freedom has been threatened, Norwegians have given everything for each other. This has given our country a head start that is more powerful than any weapon and more valuable than any oil fund: our trust in each other. (Solberg, 2020b)

It is also interesting to note how the Norwegian government made use of shared cultural meanings in their communicative response to the Covid-19 pandemic, where the word dugnad formed one of the meta-narratives (Moss & Sandbakken, 2021). Dugnad refers to collective local activities aimed at strengthening the common good and serves as a strong national symbol in Norway (for further examples of how the concept of dugnad was harnessed during the crisis, see Almlund et al., Chapter 6; Fiskvik et al., Chapter 11).

The uncertainty of the situation and the challenge of effective decision-making were also common themes in government communication, and the dilemmas governments were facing were sometimes openly and publicly addressed. The precautionary approach was further emphasised by Solberg in the following weeks, when she also admitted that not all the steps the government was taking were based on firm knowledge about the situation:

> The political decisions of 12 March and the following days were taken under conditions of significant uncertainty. We have more knowledge today about the virus and its development, but there is still a high degree of uncertainty. We gave highest priority to life and health, and together we managed to stop the diffusion of the virus. However, time will tell if what we did was right, and if what we did wrong. (Solberg, 2020c)

The Norwegian government declared that politicians and the public health authorities were following developments closely and were well prepared to

handle the situation. However, members of the government, for example, the health and care services minister, Bent Höje, also addressed the dilemmas they faced in political decision-making:

> We had plans to deal with pandemics long before Covid-19 appeared. We have plans to meet the specific challenges we are facing now; but regardless of how much and how well we plan, we cannot foresee every problem. Some have to be resolved gradually as and when they occur. (Höje, 2020a)

Höje also described the dilemmas politicians were facing in the decision-making process:

> As politicians, we are sometimes tempted to propose stricter restrictions and actions in order to be perceived as decisive, or on the other hand to propose softer recommendations in order to mitigate the consequences for society and get a more positive reaction from citizens and companies. Both paths are wrong. It is important that decisions are based on the best advice we can get from our expert authorities. (Höje, 2020b)

Generally open about the complexity of the current situation, the Norwegian government often returned to the fact that it was difficult to make the right decisions under severe time pressure:

> We are in a completely new situation. It has been important to act immediately. New regulations will not always be perfect. Mistakes and dissatisfaction may occur. They should be addressed later. (Solberg, 2020b)

The Norwegian government mostly communicated about the crisis using morality frames, and referring to the extraordinary threats to people's lives, public health, and the need to close down Norwegian society in order to effectively fight further spread of the virus. These frames were accompanied by reassuring statements about the government's capacity to deal with the situation. However, the managerial frames were often followed by total transparency about the difficult dilemmas politicians were facing when handling the situation.

The uncertainty about future developments was addressed by all three governments in early 2020, but different scenarios were presented. The Norwegian authorities estimated that around 25 per cent of the population could be infected by the virus, Denmark calculated 10 to 15 per cent, while the Public Health Agency of Sweden mentioned figures per million of the population. The Swedish government was not keen on speculating about this topic, as demonstrated by the minister for health and social affairs, Lena Hallengren:

> I will not take responsibility for spreading the message that 25 per cent of the Swedish people could get the virus. (Hallengren, as cited in Eriksson, 2020)

In Sweden, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven (Social Democrats) made an unusual televised speech to the nation in March 2020, in which he urged stoicism and warned of coming sacrifice but was unspecific about policy (Andersson & Aylott, 2020). He emphasised the need to limit the spread of infection, to avoid a situation in which many people became seriously ill at the same time, and to ensure that resources were available for healthcare, but the speech also revolved around the theme of individual responsibility.

> We have general spread of the virus in Sweden. Lives, health, and jobs are threatened. More people will get sick and more people will have to say a final farewell to someone they love. The only way to handle this is to face the crisis as a society where everybody takes responsibility for themselves, for other people, and for our country. In this situation, everybody has a big personal responsibility. (Löfven, 2020a)

The government repeatedly claimed that it was doing whatever was necessary to save lives and protect people, but also added that the success of these efforts ultimately depended on the behaviour of Swedish citizens:

> The novel coronavirus is testing our society. The government has recently announced various initiatives to protect people's lives, health and jobs. This crisis will continue for a long time. It will be tough; but our society is strong. If everyone takes responsibility, we will manage this crisis. (Löfven, 2020b)

As a global outlier for not imposing lockdowns and introducing only minimal restrictions, the Swedish government frequently referenced a deep-seated idea about Swedish exceptionalism, which tended to involve Sweden's welfare state and gender policy (Lindström, 2021; Nygren & Olofsson, 2020). In addition, the Swedish government expressed its preparedness for the dramatic situation when the number of cases rose significantly:

> It is natural that many people are worried, but our society is well prepared. The expert authorities and our healthcare system are working very hard… we are in a marathon, we must prepare to live with this for a long time, but we will get through it and it is important that we do this together, helping each other. (Socialdemokraterna, 2020)

In the case of Sweden, the main impression given was that responsibility frames were most frequent when the Swedish government communicated with the public in the early stages of the pandemic. The notion of responsibility therefore took on another dimension in pandemic communication. Rather than being used as a way to characterise the locus of the crisis, in that responsibility for the crisis outbreak was based on external or internal sources, responsibility became

a key concept in discussing crisis mitigation. Responsibility in the context of mitigation was discussed on a scale ranging from individuals to government regulations and actions. Sweden took a much more individualised approach to crisis mitigation than Denmark or Norway. Though addressing the same basic intentions to save lives and protect people in an extraordinary situation, the Swedish government met the crisis with more voluntary recommendations and a greater focus on individual behaviour – morality frames were often embedded in a responsibility context. Responsibility frames were of course not absent from Danish and Norwegian governmental communications, but they played a fairly minor role, as stricter rules were implemented and people were obliged to follow those rules.

Concluding discussion

This study has shown that all the Scandinavian governments framed the crisis as serious and challenging, but there were interesting nuances. Both the Norwegian and the Danish prime ministers used strong rhetoric, as when Fredriksen described the situation as a matter of "life and death", referring back to initial images of the pandemic from Italy and declared that Danish society was facing an "extraordinary situation". Solberg also framed the situation as an extraordinary event and called it the toughest challenge to Norwegian society since World War II. No such strong phrases were used by Löfven in Sweden, who framed the situation as serious, but not as a crisis that called for massive governmental action. Instead, the solution to the crisis lay with the behaviour of individual citizens.

Another interesting feature is the notion of expertise and uncertainty. In both Denmark and Norway, the prime ministers made explicit reference to uncertainty in terms of the different assessments being made by scientists, agencies, and governments alike. In contrast to the Norwegian and Danish governments, the Swedish government made no reference to the precautionary principle, and there were no open disagreements between the government and the expert authority. It is open to question whether politics were being driven by experts, as seems likely in Sweden, or the experts were politically driven, as appeared to be the case in Denmark and Norway. Either way, the lack of transparency, discussion, and contestation probably made it harder for citizens to make their own assessments, or to understand the rationale behind political decisions. The Swedish Corona Commission concluded in its final report in February 2022 that "the government should have assumed clearer leadership of overall communication with the public" (SOU, 2022).

It is possible to conclude that the various government communications in Scandinavia displayed some common distinctive features in their communication

of the crisis, such as the need for national consolidation and exceptional political measures in order to handle the situation effectively. Other comparisons of the Scandinavian countries during the pandemic have also noted that governments used similar rhetorical leadership strategies, but their explanations and arguments for government actions had slightly different emphases (Bjørkdahl et al., 2021). Public trust in government was higher in Denmark than in Sweden in early 2020, mainly because politicisation of the issue came later. Trust in the Danish and Swedish governments was consistent at this time, but there was a significant drop in Sweden between April and June, a period characterised by a public debate over the high death rates in the country (Hassing Nielsen & Lindvall, 2021).

The Danish government decided early on to take a leading role in dealing with – and following that, communicating about – the pandemic. The arguments for imposing strict regulations and initially closing Danish society down were to a large extent based on a politically calculated precautionary principle, rather than on proportionality considerations inspired by scientific evidence and previous epidemiological experience. Thus, the managerial frame was emphasised more in Denmark than in Sweden.

As noted in a previous study of the Norwegian case (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020), management of the pandemic was characterised by a high degree of cooperation between the government, agencies, and the political opposition, facilitated by a political climate generally characterised by high levels of trust. We also noted how morality frames of dugnad became a key resource in the government's communication in order to make people comply with rules and regulations.

The main social science explanations for the observed differences in government communication styles have so far to a large extent focused on political and administrative relations, and the fact that public authorities are more independent in Sweden. These are important differences, but hardly the only reasons why the Swedish government communicated and acted differently. An additional factor that has been suggested is a combination of weak political and strong bureaucratic leadership, where the government delegated policy-making to the public health agency (Andersson & Aylott, 2020). In addition, there has been a documented tendency in Swedish contingency planning – for both war and crises – to promote individual responsibility as opposed to state responsibility (Larsson, 2021).

It could be argued that governments during crises, sometimes for reasons of self-interest, focus on minimising political risks by avoiding dramatic or untested measures and decisions that might backfire later, for instance, during upcoming election campaigns. The decision to disassociate political actors as much as possible from a crisis response has been called strategic evasion, where the

basic idea is to escape individual responsibility and argue that other actors in the political-administrative system have the main responsibility (Boin et al., 2009).

One of the first steps of the Löfven administration upon coming to power in 2014 was to move the Crisis Management Coordination Secretariat away from the Prime Minister's Office. From a historical perspective, this action can be easily understood, as previous Swedish governments had had bad experiences of impulsive and uncoordinated crisis management (e.g., the *Estonia* in 1994, the Tsunami in December 2004, and the migration crisis of 2015).

To conclude, Scandinavian governments' framing of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 was based on common perceptions of an extraordinary threat to society and efforts to demonstrate national solidarity in the face of future uncertainties. The relative importance of the different frames used seems to be linked to government actions and strategies. The differences between the three countries in dealing with the crisis were linked to the actual progress of the pandemic in each country, and to the different policy-making models with regard to government-public administration relations. However, to some extent, a single actor's behaviour and decisions long before the outbreak of the pandemic may have additional explanatory value: One prime minister took power with the intention of strengthening the Prime Minister's Office in order to ensure full political control in future crisis situations; another entered the political arena with the idea of delegating power as much as possible in such situations; and the third tried to balance expert agencies and political control by emphasising transparency and openness. The different actions taken illustrate the fact that crises – to some extent – are perceived as opportunities by political leaders.

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