Article

Crisis Communication and Resilience: Are Russian and Latvian Speakers in the Same Boat?

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic is testing the ability of the national governments to manage a crisis by covering policy sectors, which are decisive for health, well-being, sustainability of individuals, and society at large. Communication plays a crucial role in situations when society is at risk. Communication is a source of prevention, action, mitigation, and empowerment. Therefore, the ways and means of how national governments and governmental institutions implement adopted strategies, and how they make their actions understandable and reasonable to their societies, become an important element of crisis management at large. Diversification of the modern information environment makes governments' communication even more complex. The media landscape, especially social media, impact reality's perception, including crisis and emergencies. As a result, governments are struggling with different forms of messaging and a choice of narratives to be shared with the broader public or societal groups. Considering the existing division in the perception of political realities between Latvian and Russian-speaking communities, Latvia is a case of particular interest for analysis. The article aims to explore how the society has been led through the current crisis communication-wise by the government and what strategies are used for the particular linguistic groups. The article looks at the main factors influencing the perceptions of the Russian-speaking community in Latvia and the main reasons for the existing divergence between perceptions of Latvian and Russian-speaking representatives. The study is based on focus group interviews organized authors.

Keywords: COVID-19; minorities; Russian speakers; crisis communication; Latvia

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a test for Western democracies and resilience at large. Threats to their values and national systems, which have been enormous for many years, have illuminated the potential and limitation of the governmental institutions—the Western liberal democracies have undertaken so many duties that state has become larger and weaker at the same time (Raudseps 2021, p. 8). The health, well-being, and sustainability of societies have been challenged. In crises, effective governmental communication and leadership are considered central to addressing threats, making them understandable for citizens, and motivating for actions. Successful crisis communication has the potential to promote trust, confidence, and readiness to follow the guidelines of the government (Hyland-Wood et al. 2021, p. 2). Taking into account that effective crisis communication is not merely about messaging, it requests ongoing engagement with communities (Hyland-Wood et al. 2021, p. 2). Therefore, the ways how governmental institutions implement adopted strategies, and how they make their actions understandable and reasonable to society become an important element of crisis management. Decision-makers are forced to consider cultural diversity, ideology, value differences, and many other socio-political factors. The modern information environment makes governments' communication even more complex. The rapidly changing media landscape leaves an impact on the human perception of reality, including crises and emergencies. This produces increasing challenges in policymaking and, thus, communication.

The split between Latvian and Russian speakers and differences in perceptions of socio-political realities has created several challenges for policymakers, including in terms of crisis communication. The Latvian society has historically formed as a composition of two linguistic communities. The official language is Latvian, but the Russian language also occupies an important place in the private sector/sphere. According to the Central Statistics Bureau (CSB), 36% of the country's residents are Russian speaking (CSB 2019). According to the National Language Act, all information provided by national regulatory authorities must be in the official language, although other languages may be used for the provision of services in municipalities.

The article aims to find the ways and means on how the government's crisis communication has proceeded during three phases of the crisis with particular attention to the ways and means on how Russian speakers have been addressed and whether there any differences in communication with the titular nation and minority. The authors will analyze the causes of success and failures and identify the most relevant lessons from crisis communication in a multi-lingual society. To answer these questions, the authors will begin with providing the working definition of "crisis communication", as well as identify key features of multicultural crisis communication, which will be used for the analysis of communication of the Latvian government, as well as to identify whether it reaches the Russian speaking audience or not. Thus, the research questions are as follows: does crisis communication of the Latvian government reach all the groups in the society, including the Russian-speaking minority?

The article will illustrate how society has been led through the current crisis communication-wise by the government and the strategies used by the public and particular linguistic groups. Then, we intend to look at the main factors influencing the perceptions of the Russian-speaking community in Latvia and the main reasons for divergence between perceptions of Latvian and Russian-speaking representatives.

2. Conceptual Framework for Crisis Communication

This article summarizes the theoretical findings that are particularly important while carrying out an empirical study to determine whether the government of Latvia has realized effective communication for all social groups, including linguistic minorities such as Russian speakers. To find the analytical framework for it, the authors intend to focus on crisis communication theories and integrate them with multicultural public relations theory. This empowers measuring whether the government's messages during the crisis have been clear and bred the sense of public safety or, on the contrary, have undermined it for all the groups of the Latvian society. It also means intent to focus on governmental crisis communication strategies, which might or might not reduce uncertainty and tension, inhabitant confidence in decisions, and their involvement in security building, or which may harm decision making and further crisis management.

Since the disease's outbreak has had a fundamental impact on people's feelings of anxiety, perceptions, everyday habits, and media consumption, as well as on their responses to governmental rules and guidance, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the tone and created far more intensive crisis communication research than ever before. The theories applicable to crisis and crisis communication analysis cover multiple disciplines: communication and public relations, anthropology, psychology and cognitive science, sociology, and political science. Crisis communication is related to managing uncertainty, crisis response, crisis resolution, and learning from the crisis (Ulmer et al. 2007, p. 13). It includes many tasks, including maintenance or improving confidence in the information manager or spokesman. In the case of this article the Latvian government and its representatives. In this article, the authors intend to build a theoretical framework for analyzing Latvia's crisis communication case.

Crises are unique moments in the history of any social organization (Ulmer et al. 2007, p. 5) and can be described as incidents or events that cannot be managed by the existing control mechanisms (Jones 2000, p. 37). It means that if an event is not a crisis itself, it

becomes a crisis only in case it endangers the function or even the existence of the social institution itself, or its legitimacy and credibility. It creates the necessity to introduce new solutions that correspond to the specific nature of the events. In other words, each crisis will involve elements of low probability or surprise, high-damage impact threat to an existing order, the ambiguity of a cause, and limited time for response (Ulmer et al. 2007; Crandall et al. 2014). Thus, one can conclude that crises involve events belonging to the "un" category. They are unexpected, unwanted, unthinkable, and often unmanageable (Boin and Hart 2007, pp. 42–43).

The specifics of this article call for a more contextualized definition within political science and public administration, which would make it possible to touch on effective governance and support of society or its groups in overcoming the crisis. It is helpful to use the definition offered by Timothy Coombs. According to Coombs, "A crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs and Holladay 2007, pp. 2–3). One can conclude that the crisis endangers social institutions and affects subjective perceptions of individuals. It can provoke reviewing the worldview, existing norms, and values. A crisis has the potential to reduce the ability of individuals to make a rational decision (Lehtonens et al. 2011, p. 51). Thus, the perception component is especially important in the context of a successful democratic state's craft. The leadership faces limited time for decision making and its explaining, the overload or, conversely, the insufficient information, anxiety which results in a sharpening of societal and the government feelings.

In such situations, well-planned crisis management is needed. The term "crisis management" is not as simple as responding to what occurs. It is a rather strategic, holistic process that must be developed before the crisis itself occurs, during it, and after (Crandall et al. 2014, pp. 1–2). It includes pre-planned strategies at the organizational level and the well-defined division of competencies. To support crisis management planning and to reduce uncertainty, the academic literature offers different classifications of crisis types. One of the primary divisions is diversification between intentional and unintentional crises. The spread of a pandemic is part of the second category. On the one hand, this unintentional crisis can provoke a new resulting crisis, such as unethical leadership or poor relationships with those to be managed during the crisis. This is sometimes difficult to avoid given the stressful conditions. On the other hand, there are cases when existing adverse conditions, such as a lack of trust in public administration, increase the challenges of overcoming the crisis.

Another set of approaches for building an analytical framework of crisis management is focusing on separate stages of crisis and after focusing on successive steps in crisis management. There are several approaches for the identification of those stages. For example, Denis Smith (1990) and Bill Richardson (1994) offer three-stage frameworks, while others offer four- or even five-stage frameworks. The core which unites this division is a general three-stage framework that partitions each crisis into three main periods: the time before the crisis; during the crisis; and after the crisis (Blanchard 2008, p. 182; Crandall et al. 2014, pp. 8–11).

Effective crisis management requires understanding the sources of eventual crises and strategies for their identification and strategic planning before the crisis appears (Blanchard 2008, p. 182; Crandall et al. 2014, p. 83). Thus, this milestone of the strategic planning process eliminates some of the risk and uncertainty from the downside, allowing the organization to take more control of its fate (Banks 2000, p. 7). During the crisis event, crisis management focuses on preventing the escalation of the crisis and its negative consequences, including those connected with the public. It is essential to conduct evaluations and identify lessons learned in the post-crisis period. In all these stages, an element of communication flows through. Effective crisis management is not possible without successful crisis communication. They are intricately interlinked.

Based on the management model chosen by the organization itself, it adapts crisis communication. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the government of Latvia launched the communication before the crisis itself began. However, the article focuses on the analysis of communication in the middle stage period of the crisis.

William Rick Crandall et al. (2014) describes two dimensions of crisis communication: communication with internal stakeholders and communication with external stakeholders. The first includes the command-and-control function, updating the status of the crisis and how it has affected the organization, and the expected future. Communication with external stakeholders involves regular interaction with society or groups. It must follow a strategy that effectively deals with uncertainty and reflects the severity of the situation (Ulmer et al. 2007, p. 17; Crandall et al. 2014, pp. 199–210). These could be the government's efforts to inform the public that, for example, under the law, they must use face masks in public areas, or to ensure that a lockdown is a necessary measure to decrease the pressure on the health care system.

Since the democratic government does not have complete control over the crisis, it is necessary to carry out crisis communication to manage uncertainty, maintain control over public behavior, and mitigate potential consequences. In this case, for doing so, the messages must be clear, understandable, and directed via the most direct communication channels (Abunyewah et al. 2019, pp. 100–18). The results of a study conducted at the University of Newcastle highlight that the clarity of the message increases when precise and reliable information is given regarding the event (crisis) (Abunyewah et al. 2019, pp. 100–18). It means that crisis managers of any level should critically assess the content's clarity and reliability in disseminating information during the communication process. It also helps to understand better the factors that influence the perception of the situation in society. The same study also shows that exchanging information between senders and receivers and answering the questions diminishes the message's confusion (Abunyewah et al. 2019, pp. 100–18).

Crisis communication involves three main actors: the public sector, the private sector, and mass media. The public sector monitors crises, and, as a result, prepares forecasts and current warnings. Thus, it is the actual source of crisis information. Despite that, its information channels are relatively low-targeted, and therefore, the public sector cannot undertake successful individual external crisis communication. The private sector is the producer of crisis information, but at the same time, it might also be more successful at disseminating it. This is because the private sector has a larger audience and more information channels. At the same time, it produces less content. However, it is essential in the overall crisis communication, since it provides a relatively fresh view and disseminates information that would not be disseminated by the public sector, for example, the competence or incompetence of the public sector.

Mass media is the most influential distributor of crisis communication information. While the first two sectors mainly produce crisis information, mass media determines how crisis management is reflected, thereby creating a broader context for communication. Mass media has a significantly larger audience and far more information channels that provide almost immediate distribution and impact of the message. In addition, it is well known that the audience sees the media as a more reliable source of information than advertising, websites, brochures, and other news pieces offered by the organization or governmental institutions. For this reason, crisis communication regularly entails using the media to spread a message to the public. This is particularly the case for presenting critical messages when the media becomes the main—if not the only—source of communication by establishing a direct link between government representatives and the public.

Another fundamental issue to be discussed is the dual role of the media. On the one hand, the media can become a strong ally: it might be the primary source for providing critical information, and its publicity can provide third-party approval to organizations' messages. On the other hand, the media may be on the other side of the trench and provide negative publicity. It should be emphasized that the main part of media channels

(excluding public ones) is created for commercial reasons. Their priority is to obtain as many financial resources as possible. Therefore, the dissemination of contradictory or antagonistic information is seen as having a higher value than the disseminating relevant information since it can attract more interest and thus more earnings. Effective crisis management and prevention are not significant focuses for mass media. Mass media are giving poor management and prevention increased attention. Being aware of this trend, for government crisis communication to succeed and become as successful as possible, the government should prioritize mutual trust and cooperation between itself and different media platforms.

With the development of technology and societal changes, the role and activities of the traditional media—television, radio, and newspapers—are changing, and so is the nature of their impact on society. On the one hand, the entry of new media into the public sphere has undermined trust in traditional media. On the other hand, traditional media outlets' central role has adapted to new realities and found their place in this new information environment. As a result, social media, which was once seen as unique, has now developed into a widely used source for news and participation by many actors, including government representatives and traditional media. Social media allows the transfer of news faster and further (Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith 2010).

3. Impact of Intercultural Differences and Language on Crisis Communication

Several challenges have stemmed from the increasing ethnic and linguistic diversity in European societies during the last decades (Falkheimer and Heide 2006; Eelbode 2010; Bell 2010). Monolingualism, which has historically been a standard characteristic of European modernity, has recently been put under pressure (Kraus et al. 2017). Thus, challenges of inclusion in the community of minority groups are noticeable in societies where ethnicity or linguistic belonging is a primary element of forming self-identity (Schopflin 2000). In such societies ethnic, ideological, or other tensions, exclusion, and isolation discourses (be it self-isolation or the isolation from the side of the community) are commonly seen as an integral part of the state's agenda at all levels of social life (Struberga and Kjakste 2017, p. 54), including governmental strategic communication.

Intercultural challenges are being found in most contemporary crises. As researchers, Falkheimer and Heide (2006) underline that "this is obvious when it comes to crises or disasters involving whole communities, regions or nations. But it is also a fact confronting emergency authorities in local accidents" (Falkheimer and Heide 2006, p. 182). Thus, an understanding of a need for intercultural public relations is a necessity for effective crisis communication. The theory of intercultural public relations offers several strategies for taking into account audiences' perceptions of diverse cultural identities (Sha 2006). Culture as such consists of the system of meanings that specific societal groups adopt to interpret and act according to their view of reality (Banks 2000). Ignorance towards ethnic, social, and cultural traditions or ways of life, as well as values and orientations, may lead to the use of inappropriate or biased communication, which leads to failure of strategies intended to connect organizations with the relevant audiences, while "taking complete account of the average human variations in the systems of meaning by which groups understand and enact their everyday lives" (Banks 2000, p. 20). For this reason, adopting crisis communication to a diverse cultural context has the potential to provide additional support during critical moments. It means that the communicator needs to have several message skills: (1) ability to understand language (message skills); behavioral flexibility (to look appropriate in the eyes of the target audience); (3) interaction management (ability to initiate interactions in different cultural contexts); and (4) social skills (a capacity for empathy) (Jandt 2007).

In this context, trust has significant importance. If members of the society "do not trust authorities and their communicators, it is very hard to reach and influence them during the crisis. The cultural background is one relevant factor behind the trust, and it is not uncommon that persons with a foreign non-western origin, with experiences from

authoritarian regimes, have low trust in emergency authorities" (Falkheimer and Heide 2006, p. 182).

Existing psychological biases are no less important. Richard M. Perloff (2021) warns that "attitudes on political issues can be fiercely held. Symbolic attachments characterize strong attitudes, linkage to core social values, certainty (people are convinced their attitude is correct) and extremity (strong attitudes are on the extreme ends of political distribution)" (Perloff 2021, pp. 236–37). Several studies demonstrate that solid attitudes adjust our view of reality and our perceptions according to the beliefs. Thus, "political messages—blogs, speeches, debate performances, and ads—run up against blockage of psychological selectivity" (Perloff 2021, p. 239). Those confirmation biases are highly influential during crises, when the strong need to change, bias exists.

During crises, the primary function of communication is to maintain interactions with multiple audiences, who hold diverse expectations, and often count mainly or only on media coverage of critical events (Cho and Gower 2006). Thus, the specific media space determines the views of groups regarding the crisis. It means that there is a chance to reach the target audiences if the government has been successful in building good relations with different media outlets (not only mainstream) and has used appropriate messaging.

4. Research Methodology

To analyze Latvia's government's communication strategy towards Latvian and Russian speaking communities, identify similarities and differences, as well as assess its perception by communities themselves, the study uses several sources of information and research methods leading to data sets relevant for the conclusions. Whereas attention is drawn to the government's communication with the public, and the public's response to the messages received, we use: (1) secondary data from various public opinion surveys conducted by different groups of researchers; (2) the results of the focus group interviews; (3) the monitoring of the communication of major State institutions (the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (from now on SPKC), the Emergency Medical Service (hereinafter NMPD), the Ministry of Health, the Cabinet, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs); and (4) semi-structured interviews with communication specialists of State institutions (to achieve a higher degree of transparency, interviews were anonymous; a total of 6 specialists in this field were interviewed).

To collect the public perceptions about the Latvian governmental communication and assess effectiveness during two phases of the COVID-19 pandemic and phase of the vaccination beginning, a qualitative research design was applied. Focus group interviews (from now on FGI) were used for data collection. The choice of this method is based on the conclusion that FGI generates opinion sharing and yields more accurate information about what respondents think than do other research methods (Cyr 2016, pp. 233–34). The grounded theory approach was used to analyze data. The application of both focus group interviews and grounded theory methods provided an opportunity to gather in-depth information about participants' views and perceptions. Then, they were integrated into the interpretations of the research.

The criteria for selecting FGI participants were predefined. Participants had met the following criteria: (1) having experienced analyzed periods of the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia; and (2) having received information about COVID-19. The target audience of the pandemic's crisis communication is the whole society: a sample for the FGI was selected with a variety of regional belonging, different ethnicities, different linguistic belonging, variety of occupations, and age ranges. Five FGIs with 40 participants who were at least 18 years old voluntarily agreed to participate in the research.

The interview guides and structures were pre-prepared according to the study's focus. A preliminary FGI was conducted with the "test FGI" in Riga. The aim was to test the logic and topicality of the questionnaire. After receiving feedback from the participants on the "test FGI", six major questions were identified. Two focused on knowledge, emotions, psychology of linguistic groups. Two questions focused on channels of information about

COVID-19. Two questions were related to the messages (content and forms) about COVID-19 in Latvia. The FGIs were conducted between September and December 2021 in five regions of Latvia (both urban and rural areas: Riga, Liepāja, Jēkabpils, Daugavpils district, Ļaudona). Each discussion process lasted from 1 up to 1.5 h.

Each of the FGIs was recorded with the permission of the participants. Participants signed an agreement of informed participation in the FGI. Afterwards, FGI records were transformed into anonymized transcripts. The collected transcripts were coded into basic categories based on expected issues: channels of information; perceived messages knowledge and emotions about pandemics, vaccination, and governmental communication). Emerging topics that were pointed out during the FGI were pointed out as separate categories. After this data was converted into text, it was divided into relevant units—phases and sentences. Each unit was labeled and grouped into a subcategory. As a result, the authors draw FGI data into four sets of units—knowledge, threat perceptions, emotional responses, and behavioral responses. This logic empowered us to identify the factors which influenced government crisis communication effectiveness.

The criteria for selecting semi-structured in-depth interviews respondents were predefined. Participants had met the following criteria: (1) having experienced analyzed periods of the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia as responsible for crisis communication; (2) having prepared information about COVID-19 or having been subordinated government. A sample for interviews was selected with a variety of regional belonging and different institutional backgrounds.

The interview guides and structures were pre-prepared according to the study's focus and results of FGI. Five major questions were identified. Two questions focused on channels of information about COVID-19. Two questions were related to the messages (content and forms) about COVID-19 in Latvia. The fifth focused on self-assessment of communication. The interviews were conducted between September and December 2021 in five regions of Latvia (both urban and rural areas: Riga, Liepāja, Jēkabpils, Daugavpils district, Ļaudona). Each interview lasted from 40 min up to 1 h. Each of the interviews was recorded with the permission of the respondents. Respondents signed an agreement of informed participation in the interviews. After the interviews, records were transformed into anonymized transcripts and used as a piece of contextual information for the categorized data sets from FGI.

To demonstrate examples of the crisis communication, as well as its causes and errors, the authors looked at the two phases of the crisis caused by COVID-19 and the start of the vaccination process: (1) From 12 March 2020 (the first case of COVID-19 infection identified in Latvia on 2 March 2020), when, based on the Civil Protection and Disaster Management Law, as well as the Law On the Emergency and Exception State and the Epidemiological Security Law, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Latvia A. K. Kariņš advertised the State of Emergency throughout the territory until 12 May, when the government decided to cut the restrictions. At this stage, the highest number of people infected in one week (23 March–29 March) reached 211 (Covid19.gov.lv 2020). (2) As a trigger for the second phase, the authors chose 10 October 2020, when the government decided to reinforce the restrictions until the end of December 2020, when issues with the procurement of vaccines were first reported. During this period, the largest number of infections per week (28 December–3 January 2021) was 6167 (Covid19.gov.lv 2020). (3) The third phase began at the end of December, and to carry out the study, it was limited to 15 November 2021, when the current relief of restrictions took effect. Although the third stage chosen is significantly longer than the first two, it focuses directly on the communication of the vaccination process, which highlights many problems, including the lack of multi-linguistic communication. The highest number of infections per week during this period (18 October–24 October 2021) was 16 957. It was registered during the period when the other European Union (from now on EU) Member States were already experiencing the benefits of vaccination.

5. The First Wave of the Pandemic

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia was relatively short—from 12 March to 12 May 2020. At that time, the government faced all the inherent signs of crisis that "belong to the "un" category: unexpected, unwanted, unthinkable, and often unmanageable situations" (Boin and Hart 2007, pp. 42–54). Regardless, one can describe crisis communication as consolidated, hierarchically structured, grounded on expert analysis and assessment. On the other hand, one of the challenges to face was interinstitutional cooperation and policy coordination. Gatis Krūmiņš (2021) has concluded that its cause was a lack of an apparent crisis communication management model. These findings illuminated a need to create management and not coordinate institutions for crisis communication (Krūmiņš 2021, p. 12).

Communicators sent clear messages to the media and society in general. The leading communicators during the first wave were: government, experts, and SPKC. The main mediator was the Latvian National Television (from now on LTV). Given the early stages of the crisis and the relatively limited extent of the daily agenda, the government was able to communicate through clear messages based on the evidence provided by experts, informative, and sufficiently personal choices.

> *"Initially, we all believed in the government, which decisions were based on expert forecasts. We thought the experts knew better"* (Latvian speaker, Ļaudona)

The main messages consisted of the following elements—what is the virus, the symptoms of the disease, how to avoid the virus, and what restrictions should be observed. According to the order of the LTV News Service, the research center SKDS (from now on SKDS) surveyed the crisis, analyzing public opinion on the clarity of messages and awareness of the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government communicated through clear messages for the Latvian nationals. The main aim was to concentrate on as many people as possible. Communicators formally tried to reach different audiences in three languages—Latvian, Russian, and English. However, the information in English and Russian was not pushed through in the same way as in Latvian. According to legal regulation interpretation, the government's crisis communication mainly took place in the official language, quite close to a nationalistic approach.

> *"It is not clear why the initial nationalistic positions won and there were no reports on the COVID-19 in Russian"* (Latvian speaker, Riga)

The exceptions were rather connected with private initiatives and municipal activities. Webpages of the central state institutions provided information in Russian and English as well. However, here one should take into consideration that the older generation in the regions is not the audience of such portals.

> *"It is good that our municipality also took care of Russian-speakers. This cannot be expected from the government. It just runs after EU regulations"* (Russian speaker, Daugavpils)

The various public opinion surveys address the general assessment. In its survey "The response of the Latvian society to the pandemic in COVID-19" conducted by LU students from 18 May to 31 May, Latvia's assessment of the government's behavior during the crisis was clarified. A convincing proportion of respondents, 66% of Latvians surveyed, and on reaching 51% of Russian speakers positively valued the availability of communications and services of public administrations (University of Latvia 2020). Critical reactions followed the adoption of the first decisions, but the overall characterization of the first wave of crisis communication is to be seen as effective.

One of the conditions for success lies in the cohesion of government and society towards the unknown. The primary determinant was fear of both sides since such awareness existed that the distribution and impact of COVID-19 have not been studied, the risks and probability of infection are little-known, the duration, scale, and costs of the crisis are unpredictable. On the importance of the fear phenomenon in crisis, Ivan Krastev wrote:

"To contain the pandemic, people should panic—and drastically change their way of living. While all previous crises of the 21st century—9/11; the Great Recession; the refugee crisis was driven by anxiety, this one is driven by pure fear. People fear infection. They fear for their lives and the lives of their families" (Krastev 2020). In the case of Latvia, the referred "change their way of living" took place, which consisted of the almost complete suspension of work, training, services, and procurement on the ground.

The government opted for a strategy where experts played an essential role in the first phase. Most of the press conferences were attended by Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš, Health Minister Ilze Viņķele, and SPKC epidemiologist Jurijs Perevoščikovs. According to a public opinion survey conducted by the SKDS, two-thirds of the respondents indicated that the official information was trusted by the infectologist Uga Dumpis (21.6%), epidemiologist Jurijs Perevoščikovs (8.4%), medics and scientists (6.8%), Ilze Viņķele (3.6%), and Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš (2.8%) (Bērtule 2020). This result also illustrates Krastev's understanding: "Most people are very open to resting experts and heeding the science when their own lives are at stake. One can already see the amending legitimacy of this to the professionals who lead the fight against the virus. The return of the state has been made possible because trust in experts has returned" (Krastev 2020). The cooperation strategy chosen by the government in cooperation with experts was important in stabilizing its credibility and in granting legitimacy to the strict restrictions chosen in the event of an emergency. Given Latvian Residents' low level of confidence in the government and public institutions (in March 2020, only 26% of Latvia's population viewed the government's work positively) (SKDS 2020b, 03), it was a practical communication choice to combat the pandemic. In May, the positive assessment of the government's action on informing the public (62% of actions are considered appropriate), as well as the tightening of restrictions (70%) (SKDS 2020c, 05), remained. The SKDS study also confirms this carried out in September, in which about half of those surveyed are optimistic about the government's progress in combating the pandemic (SKDS 2020d, 09). According to another research, 79% of the respondents admitted that the information provided by the government and governmental institutions urged that the necessary security measures need to be taken, and the information was sufficient. In total, 78% considered information provided by the government as understandable, 51% said that the provided information ensured the government's ability to control the crisis. Furthermore, 44% of respondents evaluated governmental institutions' communication as such, increasing trust in the government and the responsible institutions. (Krūmiņš 2021). More than 85% of respondents found that the virus's spread and its risks and limits were sufficiently reported and explained (Rožukalne 2020). Furthermore, the research undertaken by the Vidzeme University of Applied Science demonstrates that 96% of respondents, whose native language is Russian, admitted that they have received all the necessary information regarding pandemics in Russian. On the other hand, it is questionable what kind of information and from where they received it, since the government's crisis communication mainly took place in the official language, and only pieces of information provided by the official web pages and some other channels were in Russian or English.

Second, anxiety was seen not only in Latvia and the Latvian public space but rather in all of Europe in general, since Europeans were observing the tragic events in Spain and Italy. It went in hand with what was going on in the Russian information space during this period. The anxiety was mixed with fear and initial denial. It is a crucial aspect to be taken into account due to the difference between the ways titular nationals and Russian speakers are searching for information. According to several studies, 66% of Latvians were searching for actual information in the content provided by the LTV and press conferences of the Cabinet of Ministers. For Non-Latvian speakers, those sources of information were not that important. Accordingly, 37% of them used the LTV as a source, while 50% were focused on the press conferences (Polesčuka 2021). Russian speakers' primary sources of information are mainly located in the Russian information space. It means that Russian speakers mainly gain information from these sources regarding COVID-19.

Third, although part of the population, Russian speakers remained outside the ongoing flow of governmental information or received it from Russian or Belarusian media already during the first wave, the protest reactions or non-actions did not follow immediately. Russian, Belarusian, and Chinese propaganda machines just started to develop their theories. Restrictions and regulations were the first measures and people were not yet tired of the crisis several months later. Moreover, restrictions were not directly connected to a very personal choice—to get vaccinated or not, to choose one or another vaccine.

> *"People have the right to have their say, yet it was easier during the first wave of Pandemic. At present, there are more and more opinions that portray stories from Russian media"* (Representative of the municipality, Rīga)

As a result, one can conclude that although the messages used in crisis communication were clear, they were based on unilateral communication given by a simplified network of different channels without a more profound analysis of the target audiences. Informing the public, which was influential in the short term, proved unsustainable in the long term, as demonstrated by the second- and third-stage government communication forms. The main problem was the lack of partnership in the communication process, insufficient research on different target groups, and preliminary analysis and evaluation of feedback.

> *"One of the greatest challenges with this government is the lack of a strategy. There are many unknowns, but so far, crisis management has been mainly reactions to what is happening. Or blindly rely on what one or two participants in government meetings say. If an opinion did not fit into this framework, it was ruled out by the crisis authorities"* (Representative of governmental institution)

At the same time, the government's crisis communication contained several flawed actions, both typical of many countries and stemming from incomplete information provided by the WHO. The most striking example relates to the usefulness of wearing face masks in limiting the spread of the virus. Since the frequency of information distributed on the use/non-use of facial masks reached 50 times per day and became strengthened in people's consciousness, people's perceptions, habits, and stereotypes had to be changed in later stages, which made it difficult for the government to communicate during the crisis and change the narrative down the line. This miscommunication had significantly increased negative consequences for further collaboration with the Russian-speaking community. This part of society, in general, has little trust in the government, public administration institutions, and Latvian media. Trust is the foundation for the legitimacy of public institutions, general involvement in political and social processes of the society, maintenance of political participation, and social cohesion (OECD 2021).

At the beginning of 2020, the State Chancellery established a Department for the Coordination of Strategic Communication to identify and analyze disinformation and develop policy-making recommendations in this area. However, as the crisis began, the department had to react swiftly and take on new responsibilities related to crisis communication. It resulted in the situation when the institution, which would be very useful for the policy coordination for the fight against disinformation and building information resilience, was directed to other duties and the primary tasks were not done as they could be.

6. The Second Wave of the Pandemic

The period between the first and the second waves of COVID-19 could be described as relaxation, via the development of inadequate policies, scenarios, and communication strategies. The lack of preparation for the next pandemic wave was alerted by epidemiologists and medics, indicating that the rapid number of infected persons will cause serious challenges for the healthcare system, which was under permanent crisis. Although the situation in the country was stable and there was no need for crisis communication during the summer and beginning of autumn, the incidence curve already showed a growing trend in September, and the incidence rate increased at the end of September, with a cumulative rate of 25 infected people out of 100,000 over 14 days. After this, the government activated

its crisis communication again. It was calling for a change in people's behavior in the workplaces, friend circles, so as not to gather without much need, calling for a warning that there will be severe restrictions if the situation worsens. However, the messages about the strategies during the escalation of the crisis did not follow. Therefore, both the media and civil society started to question the government's action plans for the following months. Answers or silence ensured society that there is no such strategic plan.

This lack of proactive communication that would strengthen collaboration with different social groups created a deepening rift between the political elite and society.

> *"It is unclear where the health minister was all summer. At rest. In the autumn, there was no plan and no clarity for us"* (Russian speaker, Jēkabpils)

October's rapid increase in infected persons forced the government to adopt a second emergency law (Cabinet of Ministers Order No 655, 2020) on 6 November 2020. It meant significant restrictions in all areas of public life. Although the public had experience with restrictions during the first wave, the situation in the second wave was complicated by the unclear conditions for imposing restrictions. If the public understood and accepted the messages and explanations communicated by the government during the first wave, the second wave began to draw increasingly critical assessments from different groups of the society, including media representatives. The social cohesion achieved in spring, which changed behavioral habits, was replaced by fragmentation and reduced support for governmental decisions. People even started to doubt experts' conclusions about the epidemiological situation. Although a study conducted in November concluded that around half of society welcomed governmental communication (45%) and $1/3$ supported the introduction of restrictions (30%), the positive assessment of the government's work continued to decrease.

One of the leading sets of messages the government crisis communication tried to deliver to the public was related to vaccination. It was based on encouraging discourse and the wish to raise the awareness that the strict restrictions are temporary and that the situation will be improved with the start of the vaccination process. It was promised that society would gradually return to everyday life after the critical mass of vaccinated persons was reached. Those messages were critically important to be spread. On the other hand, the communicators could not answer such questions as the start of the vaccination process, how it will be organized, or what kind of vaccines the state will deliver. The Latvian government was not prepared for the snowball effect (Zuccaro et al. 2018) in making decisions and communicating them with the public when one crisis takes over another, making decisions and communication more complex, as messages were increasing, and their clarity was reduced. It caused many doubts, distrust, and disappointment in society. Again, this process was even more intensive within the Russian-speaking community. In this context, Anatoly Golubov, the main editor of the Russian version of the most popular Latvian internet portal "Delfi" had concluded: "Although the portal is providing a large amount of information about COVID-19, the communication with the Russian speaking audience was fully lost in autumn and winter, when the government started to deliver confusing decisions and incomprehensible restrictions" (Dulevska 2021).

The second side effect was related to the increase in disinformation in Latvia, especially among Russian speakers and the population living in Latgale—the country's Eastern region. In both cases, these groups consume content transmitted by the Russian Federation's media channels more than any other region in Latvia. According to a survey conducted in October 2020, the Russian TV programs were watched by 63% of Latvia's population: 49% of the Latvian and 85% of the Russian speakers consumed this type of media content (Ministry of Culture 2020). Thus, fake news, disinformation, and propaganda campaigns reached audiences in Latvia. One set of such hostile narratives was related to discrediting vaccines produced in the West. The second set of narratives proposed by the Russian Federation was about the benefits of the Sputnik V vaccine. It included messages about the quality, high appraisal among the world's best scientists, and high demand from other states to export it.

The opinion polls demonstrate that disinformation was met with open ears among Latvian residents, especially Russian speakers, and the population of the Eastern regions of Latvia. For example, the results of an opinion survey conducted by the SKDS in February 2021 show that 23% of respondents would like to choose a vaccine and another 20% expressed their willingness to vaccinate only on the condition that they could decide which vaccine to take. Moreover, most of those surveyed, who would be interested in choosing the vaccine, would like it to be Sputnik V (SKDS 2021a, 02).

In the second phase of the pandemic, the government used the first wave's experience in crisis communication, relying on one-way communication, without partnering with social partners and civil society, without sufficiently considering the changes in psychological sentiments, general fatigue from a pandemic, the specifics of different groups of society, especially the needs of the Russian speaking community, as well as the international context.

Close government cooperation with experts began to show signs of tension, as the latter continued to insist on the strictest restrictions while the government had to choose between balancing economics and human health. Confidence in government and trust in the official information channels decreased. The public no longer paid attention to traditional press conferences. Claims that the government, and especially the Ministry of Health, had prepared for a vaccination process that would return life to a normal rhythm were questioned. This was confirmed by the SKDS public opinion survey, in which 65% of the population assessed the year 2020 as worse for Latvia than 2019. In total, 25% thought it has been the same as the previous one. Those valuations are the second-worst since 1999. On the other hand, the population's forecasts on how the events in Latvia could unfold in 2021 indicated a significant decline in optimism compared to the answers given over the past decade at the weekends. In forecasting whether 2021 would be better, worse, or the same as 2020, in total, only 18% of the population expected it to be better, 23% thought it would be worse, while 41% thought it would be the same as 2020 (SKDS 2020a).

7. The Vaccination Process

The vaccination process started on 28 December 2020. However, by the end of 2020, the expansion of the pandemic, uncertainties about the procurements of vaccines, and the vaccination process caused a new crisis. At the heart of a new crisis was the Ministry of Health officials' decision to rely on AstraZeneca's vaccine, whose approval and procurement still lingered instead of the already available BioNTech/Pfizer vaccines. Later on, the government did not learn about this decision from the Ministry of Health, but rather from the Estonian Foreign Minister's call to Latvia's Minister of Foreign Affairs. It resulted in the situation that the Minister of Healthcare of that period Ilze Viņķele was unable to explain decisions regarding the progress of the vaccination process and organize it effectively. It also highlighted the lack of policy coordination in times of crisis, the slow and inefficient decision-making process, and low administrative capacity of institutions subordinated under the Ministry of Health. Discontent with the minister's work strained relations within the government. Signs of an internal crisis began to appear in the public space.

On 5 January, the Minister for Healthcare resigned, but the chaos of political indecision and coordination affected further crisis management and crisis communication. Instead of proactively preparing the community for operational vaccination, the government had to deal with damage control and mitigation of potential risks to society and the country at large. Public opinion polls also point to the presence of confusion. In a study conducted in January 2021, 61% of those surveyed agreed that the government itself was not aware of what precautions to take to limit COVID-19 distribution, 50% acknowledged that the government was blindly following orders from international organizations, not acting for the benefit of the people, but 48% thought that decisions were made for the benefit of a narrow group and not for most people. Only 24% of respondents pointed out that the government did everything to mitigate societal problems. Only a third (34%) of respondents, in general, have made a positive assessment of the government's efforts to combat the pandemic, while nearly two-thirds (59%) have a negative opinion (SKDS 2021b, 01). It

meant that the most significant part of the public does not see the government's actions planned in the long term, nor as sequential or meaningful. As confidence in the government correlates with confidence in official channels of information, it can be concluded that other forms of communication, channels, and messages had to be started at the communication stage of the third wave crisis.

Acknowledging the shortcomings in the crisis communication, a specialized institution to monitor the vaccination process was established at the beginning of January. Many significant errors were also made in this area. They had an increasingly negative impact on the further work of the office. Firstly, the office's scope determined its direct exposure to the Minister rather than integrating it into the common governmental system. Secondly, the remuneration of the head of the Vaccination Office was higher than the salary of the Minister, while the salaries of other employees exceeded the remuneration or equivalent positions in the State administration. Thirdly, it was initially assumed that the Bureau could continuously establish vaccination lists without involving those working in the medical sector (LSM 2021).

The initial communiqué of the Vaccination Bureau focused on announcing ambitious vaccination rate plans that were not justified, as well as it did not have a clear communication policy and strategy. Although it was claimed that, regarding communication, the Vaccination Office planned to introduce two types of messages—(1) to inform and (2) to encourage vaccination—honest communication was launched only two months after the office was created. It resulted in a vacuum of information that escalated further distrust in the society.

The establishment and operation of such an office continued to harm the attitude of the Russian-speaking community towards the solutions proposed by the government. There are several reasons for this in addition to those already mentioned. First, Russian speakers trust fewer media, healthcare, and insurance systems than Latvians/Latvian speakers. Second, this institution did not pay the necessary attention to creating communication bridges with the Russian-speaking audience. For example, the head of the Vaccination Bureau, Eva Juhņeviča, did not use the Russian language (which she has used at a sufficiently high level in the past) when she was invited to the Russian-speaking National Radio Broadcast LR4 (Polesčuka 2021). Third, several errors were made in creating advertising campaigns, and later in the marketing process itself. The campaign's content was created in a way that it was able to address those who were vaccinated or were already firmly for taking the vaccination. There was no well-developed communication towards those who had doubts or were against vaccination. The communication with the Russian-speaking audience was limited based on respect for the priority of compliance with the National Language Law over effective health communication due to its strict interpretation of use. Moreover, in Russian advertising, translation errors were made several times. The initial idea to send "vaccination newspapers" to all households in Latvia in both Latvian and Russian languages was ruined. As a result, one of the advertising campaign's plans to ease the tension in society became an impossible mission.

In early April 2021, the government was offered to reform the work of the Vaccination Bureau by integrating it into the National Health Service. The public learned of this decision from a media report about the Bureau members' unreasonably high salaries. The salary issue brought widespread discontent to the public. In the short term, nearly 20,000 signatures were collected on the online platform "Mana Balss" about the liquidation of the office. In response to this, Health Minister Daniels Pavļuts was forced to explain publicly and acknowledge the mistakes made. Later it was found out that the salaries were not as high as it was published. The source of this misinformation was inconsistent, and the communication of the institutions subordinated to the Ministry of Healthcare was inaccurate. Thus, there is no surprise that vaccination rates initially remained low due to the lack of vaccines, but later because the government and other authorities involved in the communication process also failed in their crisis communication and did not convince the doubts of those who had initially expressed low confidence in vaccination.

June's 2021 SKDS survey reported that about 44% of the inhabitants planned to vaccinate or had already vaccinated. In total, 42% of respondents said they did not plan to vaccinate and 14% were undecided. The socio-demographic profile of respondents demonstrated that lower education and income people were rather against vaccination (LETA 2021). Around 25–30% of the population based their reluctance to vaccination, were somewhat against COVID-19, on insufficient vaccine testing (63%) and efficiency—or how long will the vaccines protect them from the pandemic (60%). Another 53% expressed a desire to "know more about the side effects of the vaccine before it is accepted" (Cabinet of Ministers 2021; Bambals 2021). Strong sentiments against vaccination might be explained by several factors—starting from weak crisis communication during the second wave of the pandemic up to the effects of the infodemic.

The uncertainty was surrounding vaccination among the Latvian society and the use of Russian media and social media with misleading messages created soil for fake news and the spread of conspiracy theories. As a result, it is not surprising that population opinion polls showed support for views that vaccines are experimental and hazardous to health, that morbidity data and hospital information are not true, and that the use of facial masks is meaningless. According to the study results conducted by Riga Stradiņš University, 54% of the respondents admitted that they had encountered false news. At the same time, the study underlines that each fifth resident of Latvia cannot assess whether this has happened, and each fourth resident considers that he has not managed to counter it. Those surveyed, who found that their lives were altered by a pandemic (25%) and considered COVID-19 risks high and realistic (26% and 36%, respectively), also noted more frequently that they were aware of disinformation. Respondents aged 64–75 (9%), Latvian non-citizens (10%), and seniors (8%) have seen less disinformation. Most commonly, journalists (25%), social media influencers (14%), celebrities (13%), members of the parliament (11%), and the former Minister of Health Ilze Viņķele (11%) are identified as disinformation distributors. While asked to express their attitudes about top disinformation narratives, 30% of those surveyed agreed that COVID-19 was beneficial to politicians, 17% agreed that COVID-19 was just the same as the regular flu. About 9% of the respondents indicated that global corporations were manipulating the pandemic, 38% said they do not believe in any of the statements offered (Rožukalne 2021).

The problems with crisis communication, the lack of confidence in the government, and the considerable impact of disinformation on the views of the members of society resulted in a very low vaccination rate. By October 2021, only around 36% of the population were vaccinated (Ritchie et al. 2021), while the EU average reached around 60% (in November 65.5%) (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control 2021). In October, the vaccination rate increased as a result of forced mechanisms introduced by the government, which again failed to boost public confidence in the government.

The difference between vaccinated Latvian and Russian speakers continued to increase. According to SKDS, 62% of those who speak Latvian at home, and 46% of those who speak Russian were vaccinated by the beginning of October. Then, 34% of Russian speakers and 24% of Latvians were firmly against vaccination. It is interesting that the will to stop the pandemic has inspired 58% of Latvians and 44% of Russian speakers to vaccinate. The wish to travel has boosted the motivation for vaccination by 50% of Russian and 36% of Latvian speakers (Dulevska 2021).

The following "hole", which was accentuated at the end of November, was linked to the low level of vaccination in the Latvian Eastern Region, Latgale. It was interpreted as a direct result of the impact of the informative Russian space consumption in the Latvian border areas. According to the focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews in these border areas, people do not feel convinced because of a lack of information about the vaccination process, vaccine side-effects, and other sufficient issues. On the other hand, a deeper analysis of the narratives expressed during the interviews demonstrates a lack of attention and a sense of isolation from the national agenda. People feel left alone with their problems; the off-site vaccination is delayed. Local media, which people trust most in

the regions, are forced to write regarding other topics, which the private business owners mainly sponsor due to the specific media policies in Latvia. Some of the municipalities have been active and have sent out information in Russian, but it has not been sufficient to fill the gaps in the national crisis communication.

> *"The state media policy harms the development of regional media. This has left us without a convenient communication tool in situations such as a pandemic crisis. In the heat of COVID-19 pandemics, we realized that the local and trusted communication channels were missing. This particularly applies to the provision of relevant information on vaccinations to Russian speakers"* (Representative of governmental institution)

Focus group interviews in other regions of Latvia underline the low level of confidence of the Russian-speaking community in the Latvian government, which already existed before the pandemic, but has continued to grow throughout this period. During the focus group interviews, the respondents underlined their subjective feeling of being isolated and unwanted by the government. Another layer of perception is closely connected with the influence of a deep-rooted Russian narrative that no one can be trusted—neither the Latvian nor the Russian or any other media or government.

8. Conclusions

The purpose of the article was to discover how the crisis communication realized by the government of Latvia has proceeded during these three phases of crisis, with particular attention on how Russian speakers have been addressed: are there any differences in communication with the titular nation and minority. The authors analyzed the time framing in the three periods of the pandemic in Latvia; thus, trying to see whether crisis communication responded to good practices of crisis management in multicultural societies. Although a series of crisis management and crisis communication manuals state that a well-prepared strategy helps to mitigate potential risks is an excellent recommendation, each crisis is unique and consists of too many unpredictable factors. Regardless of how well-planned and structured a government action is, it will face a series of difficulties and crossroads. Therefore, one of the lessons resulting from the study of the case of Latvia shows that flexibility and resilience of the communication system is the most important resource in the crisis management structure.

The case study of Latvia also demonstrates how important the inclusion of all groups of society in the crisis management system is during relative peacetime; thus building trust within those groups. This is the only way to make them resilient, which is extremely important during a crisis. In crises where tensions are rising, risks are increasing and overlapping, one sees a need to build a crisis management system based on the inclusion of society and civil participation in the process. It means that strong societal cohesion might be decisive for the country's well-being. In this case, the dialogue with the community enables the government to find ways of changing human behavior according to the needs of specific crisis solutions. Such crisis communication plays a crucial role in the vaccination process, in which everyone must participate to strengthen both their own and public health.

The existing division in the perception of political realities between Latvian and Russian speakers until the beginning of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic reached it, has been widely researched before. This article does not break existing conclusions regarding the composition of two linguistic communities with different views. Although, it also demonstrates division between the ways and means on how the titular nation and Russian speakers perceive and react to the COVID-19 crisis. It also demonstrates that ineffective governmental crisis communication and crisis management challenges have increased dissatisfaction in both communities. However, it has not been a motivation for a more coherent society.

The case of crisis communication in Latvia has raised questions regarding the compatibility of compulsory vaccination with the freedom of choice and the circumstances under which derogations from the National Language Law could be granted in the name of public health. For a small nation such as Latvia, protection of the language under

the National Language Law is an effective and necessary tool. At the same time, neither the right of minorities to receive information nor the public health interest can be questioned. The present day's complex and multi-layered crises require from democratic political institutions high-level resilience leading to increased flexibility to meet a diversity of unexpected challenges.

Latvia's divisions between those who are pro or against vaccination, adherents and opponents of more assertive national policy, Latvian and Russian speakers, conservatives, and liberals, create a complicated social background in which the implementation of any policy is complex and becomes particularly challenging in times of crisis. Accordingly, the issue of building social cohesion should not be overlooked. Strengthening mutual trust contributes to building a sense of security which is critical during the crisis. The second dimension, which should be taken into consideration by policymakers and communication specialists is awareness of peculiarities of societal groups, including their values, perceptions, orientations, details of formal and informal community networks, and other critical background information.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a long-term crisis, characterized by an escalation with additional side effects at various stages of its transformation. It places an additional burden on government communication and crisis management processes. The challenges to reaching social cohesion, finding ways to meet the Russian speakers' needs, and addressing them in the same manner as the titular nation, make this process even more tasking. Although the government, as a communicator, has demonstrated certain flexibility and a strong political will to solve existing challenges, crisis communication has been effective only during the initial stage of the crisis. The crisis communication of the Latvian government only partially reached representatives of the Russian-speaking community and appeared to be less effective in comparison with the dominating language group.

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