

# TACKLING THE COVID-19 CHALLENGE

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS  
in Austria, Germany and the Netherlands



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IMPRINT

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A L L I A N C E

## WHY CRISIS COMMUNICATION MATTERS IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19.

The COVID-19 crisis is a challenge for all of us no doubt, and in these times of universal struggle accurate information and the use of adequate communications channels is of paramount importance. Best practice sharing and the exchange of knowledge and skills will be key to address the crisis communication challenges ahead of the world of business & politics.

Therefore, this brief initiative of Crisis & Litigation Communicators Alliance attempts to lay out a short assessment of government communications and measures around the COVID-19 crisis with particular focus on Austria, Germany and the Netherlands. While being similar in terms of their demographics and GDP per capita, the crisis response of the three countries varies, as evaluations by the Deep Knowledge Group (<https://www.dkv.global/covid>) and others suggest.

It is our mission to put the circumstances in comparative context with the communications in other countries (best practices/lessons ). While there are still many question marks on how the situation will stabilize in the end, we find that already now much can be said about what went wrong and what worked, which tools countries used, and how they shaped their crisis and risk-communication.

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# AUSTRIA

GOVERNMENT ADVERTORIALS, WEBSITES AND EVEN TV SPOTS WERE RELEASED WITHIN 2 DAYS AFTER THE LOCKDOWN MEASURES.

## **BACKGROUND**

Sharing a border with the heavily hit Italy has taken its toll on Austria with over 14.000 confirmed cases of the Coronavirus across all Bundesländer (political regions). There have been heavy debates on the realistic accessibility of tests for the virus and the limits to its application on a grand scale, so the government has introduced a targeted approach – on a as needed base. In Austria only patients with clear symptoms are being tested, with a more lenient approach towards individuals active within the medical profession (i.e. doctors, nurses, caretakers, ambulance personal). The Austrian epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak is in the region of Tirol, which until further notice is under complete lockdown.

## **POLITICAL RESPONSE**

Since March 16th the Austrian Government has taken the extraordinary measures to implement social contact restrictions in close to all aspects of “normal” day to day life. Only those direct contacts should be maintained which are absolutely necessary and otherwise telephone or other technical means should be used. Everyone can thus make a valuable contribution in the fight against the spread of the Coronavirus.

This means:

■ **Traffic restrictions**

Restrictions were introduced according to the COVID-19-Measures Act.

■ **Quarantine measures in certain areas**

In Tyrol all 279 Tyrolean communities are under quarantine. In Vorarlberg, Salzburg and other tourism destinations municipalities were quarantined for 14 days. No one is allowed to enter or leave these communities. Excluded are matters of covering basic needs, providing services of general interest or getting to work.

■ **Events completely prohibited**

No more than 5 individuals ought to meet at any one place at a time; excluded from this are individuals from the same household who may remain within close contact. Furthermore, exempted from these measures are those activities that serve to combat the Coronavirus.

■ **Education facilities are closed**

This includes schools, kindergartens & universities.

■ **Restrictions in trade and gastronomy**

From Monday, March 16, shops that do not serve the basic supply will remain closed. Explicitly open will be grocery stores, pharmacies, drugstores, post offices and banks. From Tuesday, March 17, 2020, restaurants will be completely closed. Food supply will be ensured by supermarkets and delivery services.

■ **Restrictions for visits to the hospital**

Relatives of persons who are hospitalized are requested to refrain from visiting the sick or to keep visits to the sick to a minimum. Here too, telephone contact is recommended.

■ **Entry bans**

Entry from Italy is no longer permitted unless a medical certificate of health can be presented. There is a partial lockdown to other Austrian borders, e.g. Germany, Czech Republic with transport being open, but individual travel severely limited.





### **GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS**

Based on a “pandemic law” from the 1950s a taskforce protocol dividing the responsibilities and coordination of a crisis (medical or other) was in place. The official implementation of formal restrictions on March 16 by the government, although implemented with a slight delay after the initial hiccup in Tirol, can be seen favourably, with round the clock press releases, and coordinated media responses from the government, and local authorities.

### **CRISIS COORDINATION**

The Coronavirus crisis falls under the domain of the SCMT, the „State Crisis and Disaster Management“, which aims to avert, eliminate or mitigate the consequences of imminent or actual disasters. Located in the Ministry of the Interior, this crisis team, which is set up on an ad hoc basis and is currently chaired by the Deputy Director General for Public Security, Franz Lang, coordinates all necessary measures at federal level against the Coronavirus. All relevant or somehow affected ministries are represented. The committee meets permanently. In the case of the corona outbreak, the technical leadership is provided by the Health Ministry, which has set up its own Coronavirus task force under the chairmanship of Minister Rudolf Anschober (Greens). The Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor are also coordinating political response.

### **TOOLS AND INSTRUMENTS**

Press conferences are given frequently (almost daily) depending on announcements. Austria has focused on channelling individuals with corona symptoms to a single phone-line (1450) where people showing symptoms can have a flying testing team taking a test in their home, so they do not have to move. However, the capacity of this emergency number appeared to be too low, causing delays in testing and long call waiting times. Government advertorials, websites and even TV spots were released within 2 days after the lockdown measures. Most recently the “Stop Corona” App has been released by the Red Cross, which enables users to digitally “shakehands” on an anonymous basis. This allows individuals, when developing symptoms, to trace their contact network. While provided on a voluntary basis, there are discussions of rolling out a mandatory version.

### **GOOD PRACTICES**

From the moment in early March, when the severity of the situation became clear the government was extremely active in communicating frequently (daily) and supporting measures by an early media campaign. It appeared that most political parties, as well as media and experts shared a common opinion about the response and there was little debate over the measures taken. Only around Easter, with signs that the apex of the pandemic might have been reached, political parties and some experts as well as media voiced criticism.

FROM THE MOMENT IN EARLY MARCH, WHEN THE SEVERITY OF THE SITUATION BECAME CLEAR THE GOVERNMENT WAS EXTREMELY ACTIVE IN COMMUNICATING FREQUENTLY (DAILY) AND SUPPORTING MEASURES BY AN EARLY MEDIA CAMPAIGN.

#### **ABOUT SMJ PARTNERS**

SMJ Partners constitute a communication agency specialized on delicate cases. Litigation PR, crisis PR and reputational work are the key business areas, in which they provide communication services of highest quality for their clients in Austria and abroad.

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#### **LESSONS LEARNED**

The first reported cases of Covid-19 go as far back as February 25 to an Italian couple on holidays in Korneuburg Tirol. However, it was the further development, slow communication on behalf of the state authorities of Tirol, and as a result delayed federal measures, which have led to an international outcry (particularly the case of Ischgl) about the failure of the responsible leadership to tackle the virus in its early stages. The result as mentioned above is a total lockdown of the region.

The Ministry of Health caused confusion as it ordered that no more than five people who do not live in a common household may gather for Easter. After some excitement - the decision was clarified once again: accordingly, a household may receive visits from another five people who are not registered at this address. „This means that four people are already living in the common household, for example, but five people may still join them,“ the ministry said. This caused final confusion - which the ministry later admitted. Clemens Auer, special representative in the Ministry of Health, clarified the situation after a couple of days, according to Auer, the intention was to stop „corona parties“ at Easter with the decree. Auer did not explain why the decree was necessary in addition to the existing initial restrictions but referred the resolution of the issue to Monday.

#### **PROBLEM OF FAKE NEWS AND FALSE INFORMATION**

Austria has experienced various degrees of fake-news related incidents. The government, and media response to this situation has been a rather well coordinated effort and has been addressed adequately by installing a “Fake News Taskforce” which was put in place under the coordination of the home office and comprised of experts from security/ journalism to monitor and report fake news, so government could react immediately.

#### **SMJ PARTNERS AND COVID-19**

SMJ Partners helped some of their clients and their communications teams to respond to the situation. As a neutral follower of the crisis and specialist PR institution they saw it as their duty to follow an ethical code of conduct and assist the people's efforts in this time of crisis. SMJ Partners set up a Twitter-Feed @coronafakes with the hope to assist in the fight against false information in Austria.



# GERMANY

THE EDUCATION OF THE POPULATION AND THE RELATED MEASURES IN CONCERT WITH THE MEDIA STARTED QUICKLY.



## **BACKGROUND**

The number of infected persons tested in Germany is neither exceptionally high nor exceptionally low. However, the number of fatalities is relatively low. Individual states such as Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, but also North Rhine-Westphalia and the city-state of Hamburg are heavily affected. There reasons vary: Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg have borders with the heavily COVID-19 affected nations Austria, Switzerland and France. In North Rhine-Westphalia, the carnival is blamed. The city-state of Hamburg has a high infection rate, because of the infection-spread from Austrian ski resorts like Ischgl. The health care system is well prepared for an expected wave of IC-patients and everything indicates that there will not be a collapse like in other states. Germany is also expecting a considerable number of deaths, but not to the extent of Italy, Spain or even the USA. The number of available tests and their evaluation is at a high level, and therefore the possibility of slowing down the spread.

## **POLITICAL RESPONSE**

Germany is a federal system with very strong federal states. Accordingly, the restrictions on civil liberties were very different, especially in the initial phase. While Bavaria took a very restrictive course from the beginning, the Berlin state and city government hesitated with restrictions. This initially led to friction between the federal states. Only after a meeting between the heads of the states and the federal government did the measures become largely standardised and a relatively nationwide lockdown occur, based on the „recommendations“ of the federal government. This includes:

### ■ **Traffic restrictions**

Everyone should stay at home as much as possible. If outside the house, one should maintain 1,5-meter distance from others. No more than 2 persons should walk side by side on the street, except families or persons from one household. All group activities are banned.

### ■ **Education facilities are closed**

Schools and kindergartens are closed.

### ■ **Restrictions in trade and gastronomy**

All restaurants, bars, etc. are closed. Shops are closed with few exceptions: supermarkets, food stores, liquor stores, bike shops. They can stay open but must maintain a strict door-policy to guarantee 1,5 – 2-meter distance between customers. Food markets remain open.

### ■ **Restrictions in public space**

If necessary, municipalities are allowed to close of parks, markets, squares, etc. Playgrounds and public spaces are closed including all sport facilities (indoor and outdoor).

### ■ **Entry bans**

Borders are closed, only transportation of goods is allowed.

### ■ **Fines**

Heavy fines will be imposed on those who do violate the given measures.

## **GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS**

Germany has a very good health care system and a high number of intensive care beds, which also allows the admission of patients from severely affected areas of Italy and France. The number of available tests was increased very soon, giving the authorities a good overview of infection hotspots.

It took a certain time until it became clear not only to politicians, but also to large parts of the population, that this was not a „normal flu“. The education of the population and the related measures in concert with the media started quickly. The possibilities to be tested were expanded. The fact that measures were implemented, and appropriate tests were available early on led the slowing of the spread. However, there were also loopholes for infected persons: air travelers and vacationers returning home from crisis areas were not screened or quarantined at German airports.

## **CRISIS COORDINATION**

The federal government has established a corona coordination and issues „recommendations“ to the individual states. The individual ministries have developed strategies for their respective areas of expertise, in particular the Ministry of Health and the Federal Ministry of Economics. Closely associated with this is a commission of experts (Robert Koch Institute, virologists, epidemiologists, etc.).

## **TOOLS AND INSTRUMENTS**

Many Germans recognized the seriousness of the hour when Chancellor Angela Merkel gave a television address, which is very rare. She made clear that the situation was „the greatest challenge since the Second World War“ and appealed to public spirit and discipline of the Germans in the fight against Corona. The Federal Ministry of Health used all available distribution platforms to educate the population. Regular press conferences with experts followed.

## **GOOD PRACTICES**

Angela Merkel's television address made the gravity of the situation clear to even the most ignorant German citizen. The Chancellor was widely praised for her speech. She explained the planned measures and the restrictions on freedoms and asked for patience and understanding.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

In the meantime, a handful of virologists and experts determine the opinion, fired up the media. Many virologists, carried by the media have reached stardom, facing an increased number of critics of the drastic measures. This battle for sovereignty of interpretation is also causing increased uncertainty among citizens and a growing call for relaxation of the measures.

## **PROBLEM OF FAKE NEWS AND FALSE INFORMATION**

The fake news and disinformation about COVID-19 comes mainly from right-wing and esoteric circles. Allegations that the virus was introduced by immigrants could be traced back to disinformation campaigns from Russia, among other things. These fake news and disinformation campaigns, however, are still rather marginal in their effect. The media regularly oppose the disinformation and expose it in articles, contributions, broadcasts,

## **NAIMA SLS AND COVID-19**

There were numerous enquiries for litigation support from law firms advising clients who have suffered massive financial losses due to forced company closures. Clients from the health care and elderly care sector entrust us with classic crisis communication around the COVID-19 crisis.

We ourselves hold back when it comes to gaining capital out of the drastic measures, e.g. in the form of lawsuits against the state or against the individual state governments. We believe in the measures that have been taken.

## **ABOUT NAÏMA STRATEGIC LEGAL SERVICES**

NAÏMA Strategic Legal Services is a highly specialized communications agency with core competency in litigation PR. We develop complex communication strategies for companies, NGOs, associations, and their top representatives, as well as for prominent figures in business, politics and entertainment. The company operates from Berlin in various countries in Europe and North America.

The logo for NAÏMA, featuring the word "NAÏMA" in a bold, white, sans-serif font with a stylized dot above the 'I', set against a dark blue background.



THE FEDERAL MINISTRY OF  
HEALTH USED ALL AVAILABLE  
DISTRIBUTION PLATFORMS TO  
EDUCATE THE POPULATION.



# NETHERLANDS

## **BACKGROUND**

The Netherlands has been hit severely with many people being infected with COVID-19 and 1039 deaths related to the Coronavirus (until March 31, 2020). At the time of writing, the number of COVID-19 infections is unknown, due to the limited number of tests available. In the Netherlands, infected people that visit a hospital are the only people that are being tested. The Dutch epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak is in the southern province of Noord-Brabant.

## **POLITICAL RESPONSE**

The Dutch government implemented the first set of measures to combat the spread of COVID 19 on March 9. On Monday March 23, Prime Minister Mark Rutte announced a tightening and broadening of existing measures and called it "an intelligent lockdown". These rules will be in place until April 28, but government officials have warned that these can be extended and/or adjusted based on how the epidemic develops. The current restrictions are:

### ■ **Traffic restrictions**

Everyone should stay at home as much as possible. If outside the house, one should maintain 1,5-meter distance from others. Up to 3 visitors in the house are allowed, as long as a distance of 1,5-meter can be guaranteed.

### ■ **Education facilities are closed**

Schools and universities are closed.

### ■ **Restrictions in public space**

All sport facilities (indoor and outdoor) are closed and all group activities are forbidden. All events until June 1 are cancelled.

### ■ **Restrictions in trade and gastronomy**

All restaurants, bars, etc. are closed. Shops can stay open, but must maintain a strict door-policy to guarantee 1,5-meter distance between customers. If necessary, municipalities are allowed to close off parks, markets, squares, etc.

### ■ **No entry Bans** – Borders remain open.

### ■ **Fines** – fines upon violation are installed.

In short, this is not a complete lockdown like in Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, etc.

## **GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS**

A protocol dividing the responsibilities and coordination of a medical crisis was in place. However, this crisis demonstrated the medical systems cannot bear the high number of infected patients. Measures were taken almost simultaneously with many other Northern European states. As an increasing number of patients is taken to IC, a national medical coordination centre was set up to better manage patient distribution and bed capacity.

On March 9, the first measure, not to shake hands, was announced. On March 12, the Minister of Medical Care announced that everyone should stay in as much as possible and work from home. All visits to people who are 70 years of age or older and people with fragile health are strongly recommended against.

## **CRISIS COORDINATION**

As defined by government procedures, the coordinator during a virus outbreak is the Director of the Centre for Infectious Disease Control at the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment. This is a research institute that is an independent agency of the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. The Director of the Centre for Infectious Disease Control chairs the Outbreak Management Team, which includes medical representatives. This body advises the Prime Minister.

## **TOOLS AND INSTRUMENTS**

Press conferences, advertorials & websites of health authorities were used as main tools for information. Corona-related communication in the Netherlands could improve by creating a national website solely dedicated to tackle the corona epidemic and its economic impact. A one-stop-shop for all information related to this crisis.

## **GOOD PRACTICES**

The direct address to the nation of the Prime Minister on March 16 was widely considered as a success. It was in itself historic due to the fact that such a speech was last held in 1973 (The Netherlands does not have a tradition of a speech by the head of government to the people). In his speech, Rutte spoke clearly and addressed people as adults. He came across as serious, sensible and competent.

He informed people about the decision-making process which made him very credible.

Also the King held a direct address to the nation on March 20. This was also considered a success, as he expressed the emotions of the Dutch people. However, due to the historic speech of the PM earlier that week it did not have the same impact.



## **LESSONS LEARNED**

At the first corona-related national press conference on March 9, the Prime Minister announced that people should stop shaking hands. He ended the press conference by offering a hand-shake to his co-presenter.

The press conference of March 23 was viewed live by over 7 million people, almost half of the population, but it resulted in many questions. The announced measures had clear loopholes and these new measures had a different deadline than the ones already in place. Furthermore, too many ministers took the stage, no visual aid was provided and examples to clarify the new set of rules only provoked more questions.

## **PROBLEM OF FAKE NEWS AND FALSE INFORMATION**

The Netherlands did not suffer from fake-news, apart from the messages that went around on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

## **HUIJSKENS COMMUNICATIONS AND COVID-19**

Huijskens Communications advised various clients on matters related to the virus, among them a company that became the first focus of the media reporting. This concerned a day-care company where a mother of a child who visits one of the day-care branches was tested positive. She was the second recorded Corona patient in the Netherlands. Huijskens Communications acted as spokesperson and advised on all related internal & external communications.

Huijskens Communications composed several checklists and tips for companies that had to deal with communications issues related to COVID-19. Managing Partner Charles Huijskens was asked by several media, including national dailies and podcast shows, for his opinion on the government's way of communicating during this crisis.

THE DIRECT ADDRESS TO  
THE NATION BY THE PRIME  
MINISTER WAS HISTORIC  
DUE TO THE FACT THAT  
SUCH A SPEECH WAS LAST  
HELD IN 1973.

## **ABOUT HUIJSKENS COMMUNICATIONS**

Huijskens Communications is a PR agency in Amsterdam specialized in building and monitoring the reputation of companies, organizations and individuals. Huijskens Communications supports both Dutch and foreign clients in the field of financial, crisis and corporate communications.

**HUIJSKENS COMMUNICATIONS**





#### **ABOUT CLCA**

The Crisis and Litigation Communicators Alliance (CLCA) is an international network of independent, owner-managed PR firms who specialise in litigation and crisis PR. We help clients with the protection of their reputation in emergency and dispute situations. Whether a management crisis, transport disaster, commercial conflict or product recall, we have the experience and expertise to assist.

We advise on effective and timely communications strategies across all stakeholder groups including internal, client, counter-party, media, investor and political audiences. We also devise preventative and rehabilitation communications strategies pre-and post-crisis. For more information visit [www.clc-alliance.com](http://www.clc-alliance.com) or email us at: [chairperson@clc-alliance.com](mailto:chairperson@clc-alliance.com)



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