

# Coping with COVID-19

## Provisional crisis management lessons from six small countries

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### Executive Summary

This report presents the key findings of the MSB project ‘The COVID-19 Crisis: Mapping the response efforts of six countries’ (Ärendnr 2019-00211; *Tilläggsbeslut*). We closely studied six smaller countries – Sweden, Norway, Finland, Netherlands, Portugal, and Ireland – to assess how they dealt with the challenges imposed by the first two waves of the COVID-19 crisis. The variance in response has been significant. Ranging from fairly relaxed approaches (Sweden, the Netherlands) to stringent lockdowns (Norway, Finland, Ireland and Portugal), countries formulated and imposed a variety of measures that differed over time – and sometimes quite significantly between the first and second waves.

As tempting as it may be to define ‘best practices’ or successful outcomes, it is too early to draw strict conclusions. Even if we could agree on what would be the best, a good or even an acceptable response, epidemiologists are still collecting the data and running their analyses. We have only, for the moment, crude indicators such as number of deaths, economic damage, and psychological upheaval. Even correlations between lockdowns and lower death rates are highly disputed. It will take time before anything resembling a best approach is given. Even then, findings will be context dependent.

This executive summary summarizes our findings and discusses them in light of debates taking place in the literature on crisis management. Four categories structure that discussion:

- Early recognition of the creeping crisis,
- Delivering an effective response,
- Working with experts; and,
- Maintaining public support.

### Recognition of a creeping crisis

Creeping crises like COVID-19 usually unfold over time and often in plain sight. All the countries studied in this project had ample time to recognize the impending threat (the early drama in Italy was unfolding for the world to see). Here are some patterns we found in our research:

- *Overconfidence characterized the early response in most countries.* Crisis management scholars urge practitioners to prioritize imagination over ‘wishful thinking’. Amongst the countries we studied, most seemed surprised – twice. First, when the virus caused the early deaths in March 2021. Then, when the second wave hit in the fall. Many policymakers succumbed to a form of wishful thinking, projecting optimism and suggesting the virus would pass by their country. This was especially the case in Sweden. Portugal, Finland and Norway were more alert: policymakers

admitted they were vulnerable and that the crisis would hit their country as it had in China and Italy.

- *An ongoing failure of imagination.* Once bitten, twice shy – or so the saying goes. We might expect overconfident policymakers in the first wave to learn their lessons, and be more alert when the second wave came into sight. Amazingly, policymakers in several countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands and Ireland were surprised all over again. Wishful thinking trumped learned (and painful) experience. It seems only Portugal, Finland and Norway made serious efforts in the summer to prepare for what looked to be a second wave. They were prepared to act – and they did when the growing number of infections announced the second wave.
- *The dominant role of scientific scenarios.* When uncertainty runs high and critical decisions must be made, scientific modelling often comes to the rescue. The effect of various policy measures (for instance, closing the schools or restaurants) is then explored against optimistic, realistic and ‘worst-case’ scenarios. There is nothing wrong with this management strategy, and we saw in several countries that scenario thinking was used to guide the decision-making process, especially as worst-case scenarios unfolded. But scientific scenarios compete with other considerations including a political instinct not to ‘scare’ the public or the time-honored tradition in government to project confidence – rather than concern.
- *Illusions of national self-sufficiency.* Most countries in our study assumed in the early days of the first wave that previous preparation and experience was sufficient to deal with the emerging threat. In some countries, this proved accurate. Finland’s well-known ‘war footing’ meant it had large stockpiles of PPE, as did Portugal. Sweden projected confidence and cultivated an image of self-sufficiency, suggesting countries like Italy were in trouble because of poor preparation (and turned down Italian requests for supplies via the EU’s Civil Protection Mechanism). Sweden and Ireland were eventually caught short-handed in supplies and reached out for help.

### Delivering an effective response

The question on everyone’s mind is: what worked? While ongoing developments caution against speaking about the effectiveness of specific measures, our six cases offer some revealing findings:

- *Every country controlled the first wave.* Let us start with the most elementary observation: despite the different early responses, every country eventually brought the virus to heel. In March, the crisis swept the continent. Several months later COVID-19 cases plummeted. This simple observation prompts the question why variance in response did not lead to variance in control. The second wave was much more challenging, or so it appears. It took much longer to control in each country.
- *Legal frameworks were challenged.* The imposition of limitations on personal freedoms requires a firm legal basis in liberal democracies. As countries had to broaden their crisis management toolset to control the pandemic, they encountered the limitations of legal provisions. This posed an interesting dilemma: creatively explore the limitations of existing provisions, as in Portugal, or consider legal reforms, as in Ireland and the Netherlands. Sweden, Finland and Norway did both: having exploited existing laws to their limits, they initiated legal reforms. Norway

approved a far-reaching ‘Corona Act’ and Finland an ‘Emergency Power ‘Act’. Sweden’s was more modest, rather late (January 2021), and used only to a limited extent.

- *The rise of the precautionary principle.* An often-heard argument in the official explanation of policy choices has been “better safe than sorry”. When governments embrace the so-called precautionary principle, they refuse to do anything that is not proven to cause damage. This obviously places a huge burden on scientists, who must somehow prove that, for instance, opening the restaurants will not cause any damage. Yet, we have seen the rise of the precautionary principle in several countries – especially when it comes to loosening of standing crisis regimes.
- *Public instructions varied.* All governments in our studies struggled to issue clear public guidance on how to behave during the crises. Some considered highly detailed instructions, hoping that the public would listen and understand nuance (as in Norway and Sweden). Others instead issued blanket, generic guidance that was, in principle, unmistakable (Ireland, Portugal). We don’t know yet which strategy worked best, but these decisions say something about how governments view their citizens. Assumptions about national characteristics or even cultural superiority may have played a role here, with Northern European countries in our studies assuming their citizens were ‘responsible people’ who did not have to be told in detail how to behave. Those were the words of the Dutch prime minister. The Swedish prime minister pleaded with citizens to use their ‘common sense’.
- *Different lessons were learned after the first wave.* Crisis management during the first wave could be construed as a success in most countries. Some governments congratulated themselves, encouraged their citizens to enjoy the summer, and breathed a sigh of relief. The Swedish government appointed a commission, asked agencies to draw plans for a new outbreak, but then largely took a break for the summer. Other governments understood that summer was a good time to learn the lessons – what could have been done better? – to prepare for a second wave. These countries retained travel restrictions, rather than return to the ‘open borders’ paradigm, which, was not well-suited to this pandemic.

### Working with experts

Managing a pandemic always casts the relationship between politicians, experts, and the public in sharp relief. In our case studies we found this relationship strained in several ways:

- *The failure of official expertise.* There is no escaping a sobering fact: pandemic experts underestimated the timing and vehemence of the first wave. Their predictions were wrong. Most crisis responses were therefore late and not evidence based. Experts eventually updated their models to get a mental grip on the looming danger, but the trust of experts was compromised following the first wave (the shift from high trust in the first wave to rapidly decreasing trust in the second wave is striking in, for instance, Sweden and the Netherlands). This dynamic was further complicated by the lack of clarity from some scientific quarters, leaving policymakers without clear guidance. Experts simply could not provide policymakers with anything resembling a ‘best approach’ despite an abundance of data. Policymakers had to navigate through the ‘fog of war’ that characterizes most cases of severe crisis management.

- *A gap emerged between expertise and human experience.* Exacerbating the complexity of response may have been the divide between scientific rationality and human psychology – the latter struggling to comprehend the enormity of the situation and thus leading officials to delay action. We found in our studies that many responses were informed by a ‘worst-case scenario’ situation. Leaders were presented with ‘alternative futures’ in which key variables are altered. Yet when experts use worse-case scenarios, policymakers tend to either reject those scenarios or embrace them. Either way, this may lead to extreme caution on the part of policymakers, which prohibits open discussion informed by the possibility and likelihood of the various scenarios.
- *Balances shifted between political- and scientific-led crisis management.* The relationship between politics and science featured prominently in our studies. The relative roles of policymakers versus scientists, both in communicating the crisis and making decisions, shifted both within and across countries. In Portugal, politicians led from the start. In Sweden and Ireland, experts led the response through the first and at the start of the second wave (after which politicians took their places alongside the experts). In Finland, Norway, and the Netherlands, politicians took over quickly during the first wave. When politicians led, they had to make decisions that occasionally contradicted the experts – this is normal. Science cannot always provide the answers. But when policymakers distance themselves from experts, they undermine the legitimacy of those experts and can undermine the legitimacy of government actions (in Ireland and Portugal, a public spat erupted between politicians and the health authority). Questions arise in the minds of citizens about who calls the shot.

### Maintaining public support

In all our cases, governments considered carefully how to manage the crises effectively while preserving public support. Several observations emerged on this point from our studies:

- *Most publics tolerated the first lockdowns, but not the second.* In all our cases, the first wave was brought under control before people lost their patience. It may well be true that the first wave was brought under control *because* most people did not lose their patience (a hypothesis in need of testing, to be sure). It may have helped that the virus was ascribed to a danger ‘out there’ that could be beaten at home. The second wave was different. In most countries, citizens were opposed to measures before the governments imposed them (which might explain why governments were slow to impose measures). Compliance suffered. Major protests emerged, especially in Ireland and the Netherlands. Societal patience, and the ‘politics of compliance’, emerged as critical variables in understanding the response to this crisis.
- *Scandals hurt.* Citizens found it hard to always follow the rules during the COVID-19 pandemic. The same was true for some politicians. In several countries (Ireland, UK, Holland, Sweden, and most recently, Norway), politicians conspicuously failed to adhere to basic rules regarding social distancing. These moments generated mediatized scandals that undercut the legitimacy of both the politician in question and the entire crisis regime. Small incidents had significant consequences during this crisis. Scandals fueled the protests and alternative narratives mentioned above.

- *'The boy who cried wolf' syndrome.* In all our cases, governments carefully weighed decisions to impose tighter sanctions over time. They knew that overly repressive actions could backfire if citizens interpreted warnings as threat-mongering. And, indeed, it seems some individuals may have lost (and be losing) their fear of the virus, which explains compliance problems. All of this despite the fact that much evidence points towards catastrophic outcomes if sufficient measures are not taken. This prompts an intriguing question: is it possible, useful and ethical to manipulate societal fear?
- *Pragmatism and U-turns.* The pandemic offers a laboratory in which to test the effectiveness of different crisis management strategies. One such strategy regards the famed (but usually misrepresented) 'strong leader' approach while the other is the 'pragmatic' approach. While we saw evidence of both in our cases, most of our countries initially followed the latter: a trial-and-error approach that sought to adjust actions following the arrival of new knowledge. Such a pragmatic approach is possible and perhaps even desirable. But it clashes with widely held perceptions of what strong crisis leadership should look like. Citizens may not trust or respect leaders who admit that they do not know what they are doing, make policy U-turns, and essentially admit that they are muddling through. This prompts the question of how policymakers can 'sell' an experimental approach that does not adhere to traditional expectations. We were intrigued by Portugal's success in this respect: public leaders were outspoken about uncertainties and insecurities -- and public support increased accordingly.

## Conclusions

These sets of observations offer a first, comparative view of countries' early response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. Each country studied here faced the same threat and shares a broadly similar size and national characteristics. But each took quite different response paths – especially in the second wave of the pandemic. Importantly, the direction of those paths does not, at this point in time, correlate with clear 'success'. Only time and continued study can make that connection (if there is one). But the observations here make inroads to our understanding of how countries have reacted, through what challenges, and with what preliminary indications of effectiveness. We look forward to continued study of these and more countries to help establish clearer patterns relevant to informing MSB's future work.