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Chapter 6

Government communication in a comparative perspective

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Abstract

This chapter hypothesises that there is a trend of centralisation in government communication – a move upwards in the political executive towards central coordination and control. We test this argument empirically through an inventory of elite interview evidence and a four-country comparison including two case studies – Finland and Sweden – as well as two case illustrations – Lithuania and Poland. Based on, altogether, over 80 interviews with political journalists and political/media advisors or press secretaries in the four countries, the chapter analyses how government communication is structured. The cases of Finland and Sweden offer support for the centralisation hypothesis while those of Lithuania and Poland point out its limitations. We thus conclude that the extent to which government communication is centralised varies across contexts and that the variation is patterned.

Keywords: centralisation, coordination, executive, government communication, professionalisation

Introduction

Government communication is a central feature of political life. Over the past few decades, growing resources dedicated to communication has been a prominent trend in the organisation of political executives. It seems as though governments everywhere have allocated more and more resources to communication, both in terms of expenditure and personnel. Yet, despite the importance of communication for governance, it has been insufficiently recognised, conceptualised and explained in standard accounts of political executives. However, in contrast to its virtual neglect by political scientists, the theme has received considerable attention from political communication researchers.

This chapter sets out existing research on government communication and then proceeds to explore and compare government communication in different contexts. Our chapter is driven by the following question: Is government communication already centralised or undergoing further centralisation, becoming more hierarchical and top-down in its structures and coordination mechanisms?

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We make two central contributions to the literature. First, we offer a theoretical argument for why and when government communication might tend towards centralisation or decentralisation. We argue and hypothesise that there is a trend of centralisation in government communication – a move upwards in the political executive towards central coordination and control. We submit that the push toward centralisation may be driven, at least in part, by professionalisation and a growing need and pressure for information and media management by the chief executive.¹ At the same time, however, we claim that centralisation or decentralisation is not a matter of either/or, but a matter of degree. It is a moving target, subject to change over time. Second, from an empirical perspective, this chapter offers the first systematic and comparative study of government communication across four cases: Finland, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden. Previous contributions on government communication primarily address bigger, Western countries, whereas systematic research on the cases covered here (especially Finland and Lithuania) is rare. Drawing on over 80 interviews, we carry out a detailed analysis of Finland and Sweden and provide more illustrative evidence from Lithuania and Poland. The interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2017 (mostly in 2016). The unique data set includes roughly the same number of respondents from both media and political elites. Specifically, it consists of interviews with media/political advisors or press secretaries and top-level civil servants who held communications-related positions in each respective government as well as political journalists in the four countries. In addition, we draw on official documents, particularly pertaining to government communication structures, policies and strategies. The interviews were semi-structured, based on a common interview guide, and the interviewees were granted anonymity (for more details on the data, see each country's chapter in this volume).

Before proceeding any further, however, we must explain why centralisation of government communication is a topic worth investigating. As outlined in the introductory chapter of this volume, political science scholars have noted a clear tendency towards empowerment of prime ministers and their offices (PMOs), or what Poguntke and Webb (2005) have labelled the “presidentialisation” of parliamentary regimes. Several factors have contributed to this development, from the personalisation of politics (Karvonen, 2010), including extensive media coverage, to increasing international contacts on the part of prime ministers (Johansson & Tallberg, 2010). Centralisation of government communication is plausibly also driven by the growing unpredictability and fragmentation of party systems. In coalition cabinets in particular, the desire to speak with one voice provides an incentive to centralise communication to the PMO. Hence, there is a need to pay attention to the interplay between government communication and the broader empowerment of prime ministers.

The chapter proceeds in four steps. In the first section, we outline the foundations of government communication as a field of research – conceptually, theoretically and empirically. The second section presents the empirical analysis of Finland and Sweden, examining how government communication has evolved in recent decades. The third

section addresses the extent to which the Finnish and Swedish experiences are shared by Lithuania and Poland. We conclude the chapter by discussing the main findings and their broader implications.

Government communication: Concepts, theories and applications

In this section, we map the essentials of the scholarly field of government communication, an emerging subfield within political communication. In particular, we address three dimensions: conceptual foundations, professionalisation and empirical studies of government communication.

Conceptual foundations

Government communication research looks, among other things, at political executive institutions in their communication aspects – the dimension we are particularly concerned with in this chapter. Government communication here denotes the study of structures and processes that take place in the relationship between the governmental and public spheres. Some scholars adopt a broad definition of government communication to also include public sector organisations, notably public sector administrative agencies. These are, however, beyond the scope of our study. We conceive of, and focus on, government communication as *central executive* government communication, encompassing the executive as the cabinet, the PMO, the line ministries and all units for communication at this central executive level. Comparatively, this complicates things, since there are many countries where administrative agencies and ministries form an integrated whole. In Finland and Sweden, however, public sector administrative agencies are at least formally more independent.

We conceptualise government communication as an organisation or practices for communication purposes exercised by and through political executive authority structures. We focus particularly on the structure of government communication, as we seek to identify institutions responsible for communication in political executives. A key point we would like to emphasise is that government communication, in essence, is about politics: how to either attract or avoid media coverage influences government communication practices and may promote institutional change in political executives. Political executives, and the PMO in particular, probably also strive for streamlined and cohesive communication, and individual parties or ministers may have their own needs in terms of signalling their views to their electorates, especially in coalition cabinets. This underlines the essentially political nature of government communication.

Exactly what is meant by government communication varies from author to author. For instance, Pasquier (2012: 1) defines government communication broadly as:

all the activities of public sector institutions and organizations that are aimed at conveying and sharing information, primarily for the purpose of presenting and

explaining government decisions and actions, promoting the legitimacy of these interventions, defending recognized values and helping to maintain social bonds.

Pasquier (2012: 2-3) distinguishes between several types of government communication. First, there is the government-wide communication involving the structures for communication under the auspices of heads of government or ministers. Second, there is communication emanating from the administration. While administrative communication in theory is highly factual, “it can also acquire a political quality depending, for example, on when the information in question is released”. Other types are, typically, communication activities pertaining to public policy, effectively constituting policy instruments. The next type, involving institutional communication, “consists in enhancing the visibility and influence of the organization”. The final type is crisis communication. Moreover, government communication research typically employs a multilevel analysis by looking at micro, meso and macro levels in the organisational structure (e.g., Esser & Pfetsch, 2004), including “meso-level central government structures” (Canel & Sanders, 2014: 104).

Canel and Sanders (2013: 3) note that the task of defining government communication can be approached at different levels – “looking at its actions (what *it does*) or looking at what *it is*”. For instance, defined as a policy tool (what *it does*), Howlett (2009:2 4; see also Hood & Margetts, 2007) sees government communication as a policy tool or instrument to give effect to policy goals: “the use of government informational resources to influence and direct policy actions through the provision or withholding of ‘information’ or ‘knowledge’ from societal actors.” Two examples of such tools are information and advertising.

In order to capture the full range of the possibilities of government communication, Canel and Sanders (2013: 4) suggest the following (working) definition of government communication:

The role, practice, aims and achievements of communication as it takes place in and on behalf of public institution(s) whose primary end is executive in the service of a political rationale, and that are constituted on the basis of the people’s indirect or direct consent and charged to enact their will.

While attractive in its breadth, this definition too is rather imprecise. Building on their previous work, Canel and Sanders (2016: 450) later defined government communication broadly as the:

area of practice and study of communication directed to key publics in the pursuit of both political and civic purposes. This communication is carried out by executive politicians and officials, usually in a managed way, working for public institutions that are constituted on the basis of citizens’ indirect or direct consent and are charged to enact their will.

This understanding of government communication focuses on *executive* communication and is widely defined as seeking not only *political* but also *civic* purposes. As we

emphasised above, government communication, of course, has a political dimension. Canel and Sanders (2016: 451) also take this into account:

Government communication must deal with considerable complexity in terms of goals, structures, and resources. It always has a political dimension and, in this sense, is always political communication which yet is, or is expected to be, differentiated from party political or electoral communication through its orientation to the broader public good.

Here, we find a cross-fertilisation between government communication and the likewise emerging fields of government or political public relations (e.g., Lee, 2008; Lee, et al., 2012; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011) and strategic communication (e.g., Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). These publications look mainly at presidential communication in the United States.² Indeed, Canel and Sanders (2013: 3) noted that this literature “is often used to refer solely to top-level executive communication at the presidential or prime ministerial level...”, or what Sanders (2011: 257) described as the “West Wing Approach”. Canel and Sanders (2014: 100) have further shown that political communication scholars have produced most of the research in the field, with the following implications:

Government communication research in political communication has first focused on *chief* executive communication strategies, neglecting the multilayered character of government communication; and second, it has emphasized government communication’s *strategic* function as designed to gain and hold onto power; and finally, it has explored the exercise of government communication in the context of and in response to highly *mediated* environments.

Another approach treats government communication as a process and practice in public affairs or relations. For example, Hiebert (1981) presents a model of the *government communication process*, showing how the parts of the process of organising and communicating fit together. Hiebert (1981: 8) notes that many different decisions must be made in the process; first, one must decide upon one or more of four different strategies: withholding, releasing, staging and persuading. In each of these communication strategies, a variety of communication techniques can be used, each to a different effect (see also Graber, 2003: 237). The model also covers policy considerations and is deeply political.

Studies on government communication also include historical perspectives, implying that historical factors may shape today’s government communications. For one, lessons of the past may explain the trend in government communication to move away from a reactive approach to a more proactive approach.

Part of the government communication literature looks at trends in specific aspects of government communication, including staffing. This involves various practices, notably the way the role of the press secretary is evolving and actually plays out in the executive branch of government (e.g., Seymour-Ure, 2003). Here, we find studies on

government news management (e.g., Lieber & Golan, 2011; Pfetsch, 1998). Among other things, this literature encompasses communication strategies and the action repertoire of news management as well as political system factors such as presidential versus parliamentary government and communication roles, and institutions of government news management. Pfetsch (1998: 82) observes:

The role interpretation of the press secretary, as well as the forum for informal and interpersonal exchanges between government spokespeople and the media, vary in each country. [...] Every government maintains a more or less political public relations apparatus that varies in the degree to which professional political marketing methods are used to further government policies.

In sum, government communication is characterised by, and can be conceptualised as: (1) the institutional and organisational structures; (2) the process; and (3) the managerial aspects. The last of these includes the role of staff, what they actually do and where the lines are drawn between government employees who are non-partisan versus partisan. The question arises if all these government communication institutions and practices are institutionalised to the extent that there is institutional stability. Amidst change, or what may seem to be dramatic or radical change, there may well be more continuity and stability (e.g., Bellamy & Taylor, 1998). In any event, government communication comes with professionalisation, a phenomenon discussed in greater depth below.

Professionalisation of government communication

Professionalisation is a distinctive feature of modern political communication, including government communication. Professionalisation denotes the social process whereby an occupation – such as in communication – transforms itself into a true profession and by which the qualified are demarcated from the unqualified. The term *professionalisation* also describes the development of a separate group of professionals with their own values and standards (Freidson, 2001).

Professionalisation is identified as one of the future challenges for government communication research (Canel & Sanders, 2013: 309, 2014: 101). In the words of Canel and Sanders (2016: 455):

The definition of what is understood by professionalism and professionalization of government communication is also a task that challenges both researchers and practitioners. For example, in countries such as Poland and Sweden, studies have shown that increasing resources and developing a strategic communication capacity is seen as a step forward in professionalization. In the United Kingdom and Australia, on the other hand, this trend has spurred controversies about governments using their resources to pursue partisan goals and employing “spin” to manipulate the public and the media.

These changes have a number of practical implications, including for the definition of the role of the public administration in government communication (Canel & Sanders, 2016: 455). As Canel and Sanders (2013: 309) note, professionalisation in the meaning of “more strategic and resourced government communication” entails the risk of more manipulative communication. They further note that, for better or worse, digital technology through various platforms is one of the key developments in government communication. Obviously, these technological innovations must be accounted for if we are to understand the role and practice of government communication as it operates today (Raupp et al., 2018).

In this chapter, we are mainly interested in the consequences of professionalisation in relation to centralising/decentralising effects. We focus on the relationship between professionalisation, involving professions and centralisation; that is, whether potential centralisation is driven by the evolution and possible institutionalisation of these professionals.

Communication professionals can be expected to establish their own professional knowledge and status, and they are not elected politicians but employed in the government offices to perform their communication duties. The Swedish case chapter includes references to research on so-called “policy professionals” in Sweden (Garsten et al., 2015; see also, for example, Svallfors, 2017). This broad category, to which press secretaries belong, consists of political employees who often have a background in party politics and PR/communication; they are not politicians and not elected to any office. According to this previous research, press secretaries shape the public statements of ministers and work both against and with the media and may punish or reward journalists for their work. For example, these professionals may develop their own professional values relating to communication. However, policy professionals may be a less homogeneous category than implied in previous research.

To reiterate, political actors have been forced to develop strategies of news management “that mainly are entrusted to spin doctors and media professionals. In the process, sources of political information have become more and more professionalized” (Mancini, 1999: 240). Research on professionalisation of political/governmental communication usually studies elections and not everyday relations, which should be subjected to closer scrutiny (Canel & Sanders, 2014: 103; Holtz-Bacha, 2016). However, in our view, such professional communicative activities and strategies are not easily separated. Resources of the executive may be used to win elections; especially as politics resembles a “permanent campaign” (Blumenthal, 1980). Pfetsch (1998: 70-71) observes “the professionalization of political public relations” and underlines the “permanent campaign” between elections. Pfetsch simultaneously notes that the “approach of governments to public information has changed from a rather traditional press release policy—based on interpersonal exchanges between politicians and journalists—to a professionalized and specialized process of strategic communication controlling the flow of news”.

An ongoing process of professionalisation may generate a tendency toward uniformity in staffing arrangements. In his research on prime minister-media relations,

Seymour-Ure (2000, 2003) observes an ongoing process of centralisation in executive systems partly driven by the institutionalisation of staff functions, notably the office of press secretary to premiers. This development impacts on both the job of the PM and the relationships between political and non-political staff. Specifically, it may disturb such long-established principles as civil service non-partisanship and ministerial responsibility by blurring ministerial and civil service roles. A downgrading of the traditional civil service style of departmental information work may also follow. And, most notably, this may produce increasing centralisation of government media management.

Research suggests that processes of professionalisation and institutionalisation of staff functions explain tendencies toward the centralisation of governmental communication (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2007; see also Sanders & Canel, 2013, further below). Papathanassopoulos and colleagues (2007: 18) summarise as follows:

All the chapters [including that on Sweden] have identified a process of centralisation, both within political parties but also in government, that has created a tight framework for the control and conduct of communication functions. In probably all cases, more care has been taken to deal with communication, and to reflect and alter the processes and content of communication to meet the challenges that have arisen from the changing nature of media, changing nature of government and the changing nature of the parties themselves.

The ongoing professionalisation contributes to the consolidation of a particular political communication culture. In the same vein, Pfetsch (2014: 8) presents evidence of professional cultures, not only of journalists but also of political actors and their spokespersons, and of the importance of the roles of political spokespersons in media-politics relationships. Here, we find a crucial connection with the media, which arguably facilitates centralisation within the executive. Intended or not, responding to media requires the executive centre to control information in more complex processes of steering or governance (e.g., Dahlström et al., 2011; Jacobsson et al., 2015).

Next, the chapter will provide an overview of previous empirical research.

Empirical studies of government communication

Government communication has not just been undertheorised. Excluding literature on governments more generally, spin-doctoring more specifically and presidential communication in the United States, empirical studies of government communication are limited.

The volume edited by Sanders and Canel (2013), *Government Communication*, which includes 15 countries around the world, from Europe, among them Poland and Sweden, to countries as far afield as Chile, Australia and China, is the most comprehensive comparison. Summarising the country studies, Sanders and Canel (2013: 290-291) conclude (with particular attention to organisational structure):

As communication channels and objectives have become more complex, including – for example – the development of social media and citizen engagement goals, so governments’ organizational structure has become more specialized in a number of countries. [---] The units tend to be centrally located within government with communicators assigned specific tasks...

In almost all cases, the creation of centralised units shows some development of strategic capacity (Sanders & Canel, 2013: 299). Likewise, one common theme was the rising number of those employed in communication tasks by governments across the world, including in central executive government communication (Sanders & Canel, 2013: 303-304). Examining the broader picture, Sanders and Canel (2013: 309) conclude:

A common trend in all countries is a move towards giving more relevance and importance to communication in terms of capacity – structures, processes and knowledge. Practically every author charts a significant shift of institutional and human resources into government communication although, in several countries, the 2008 economic crisis has prompted budget and staff cuts.

As for non-partisanship, where communication is understood as being directed to serve the public rather than the political party in power, Sanders and Canel (2013: 302) report that “non-partisanship of government communication receives the most comprehensive underpinning in Sweden, Germany and the United Kingdom”. They further note that these countries “have developed extensive policy and/or guidance regarding the requirement for non-partisanship in government communication” (op. cit.). One indicator here is political appointments and the role of government spokespersons, with significant variation between the countries. Whereas this has not been the traditional practice in Sweden, it is fixed in Poland, which is among the countries where both political appointees and civil servants serve as government spokespersons (see more below and in Chapter 4 of this volume).

With regard to Sweden, Sanders and Canel (2013: 306) argue that “it has not developed a high strategic capacity: The changes reported by Falasca and Nord have produced a government communication structure that is flat, decentralized and rather fragmented”. Arguably, this was and remains an underestimation, both of the state-centredness of Swedish political culture and of the centralisation and coordination of the government communication structure (see more below and in Chapter 5 of this volume). However, Falasca and Nord (2013: 42) observe the introduction of new functions and departments “to improve coordination and efficiency of communication activities”. Significantly, the recent changes they observe suggest that government communication is becoming “more politicized”, used in part to promote political parties in government to facilitate their electoral success. Falasca and Nord (2013: 40) conclude that “government communication in Sweden has become professionalized to a considerable extent due to the expansion of the communication organization and the number of communication professionals as well as to the new emphasis on communication practices and strategies”.

Observing the rapid development of communication capacities in all parts of government organisation since the 1990s, Falasca and Nord (2013: 41) see this development from different perspectives:

either as a natural reflection of the increased information demands from the media and the public, or as an independent expansion of capacities in order to maintain influence in the public debate and keep the initiative in the political agenda-setting process. Perhaps, the most accurate way to explain this development is as arising out of a combination of both external and internal driving forces.

Yet, Falasca and Nord (2013: 41) conclude that, in the Swedish case, “the organization of government communication and its strategies is still rather fragmented. It is difficult to coordinate a unified communication strategy for the different ministries and departments as well as between politically employed and civil servant communicators”. They further note that more research is required in order to conclude how government communication in Sweden has gained strategic capacity.

In the chapter on Poland, Anaszewicz and Dobek-Ostrowska (2013: 161) observe that the government spokesperson “has a leading and coordinating role in the field of government communication, although there is no subordination between the government spokesperson and other spokespersons in ministries and other offices. The lack of subordination can cause some difficulties of coordination ...” Anaszewicz and Dobek-Ostrowska (2013: 167) conclude that “there is absence of both central management in government communication as well as clear structures and managerial rules for this communication”. As we discuss further below, there is a clear tendency in Poland towards decentralisation.

Other recent empirical literature includes works demonstrating how mediated communication practices and logics influence the behaviour of political bodies, for example central governmental organisations. Denmark reveals a “functional politicization”, reflecting “the involvement of civil servants in communicating and planning strategic external communication for pure political purposes related to their minister’s role as minister and being part of a government” (Salomonsen et al., 2016: 210). Likewise, the Norwegian experience shows blurred lines between politics and administration in communication. Figenschou and colleagues (2017: 411) “find that ministerial communication in Norway is strongly centred on the minister in both reactive media management and the proactive promotion of the minister and new policies”. Again, the divide between politically appointed staff and communication experts who are civil servants and subjected to rules regarding non-partisanship is not clear cut. The authors further underline the evolution and effect of the professionalisation of government communication.

Having set out the theoretical and empirical underpinnings, we will now turn to our comparative cases and analysis.

Comparing Finland and Sweden

We now test our hypothesis about centralisation in government communication: are Finland and Sweden following what appears to be a general trend of centralisation in the communication of governments?

Evidence from Finland

The Finnish case study (see Chapter 2) draws on 21 in-depth interviews with political journalists from all major media (n=12), civil servants at the PMO who either work primarily on communications matters or supervise such efforts as senior-level civil servants (n=5) and political advisors who have worked for recent prime ministers (n=4). The study also draws on a variety of governmental documents about communication structures and strategies. It establishes a relatively clear trend towards centralisation of government communications to the PMO. Moreover, it underlines the central role of party-political advisors at the PMO, while the civil servant media staff there seek to maintain a neutral position.

As a result of constitutional changes enacted since the late 1980s, the government has emerged from the shadow of the president as the main executive. The PM is the political leader of the country, making the way in which the government and the PM handle their communications more important than under the old constitution. Moreover, it is necessary to remember that Finland is typically governed by ideologically heterogeneous multi-party coalitions that often bring together parties from the left and the right (Karvonen, 2014; Karvonen et al., 2016). This should also create pressure towards more centralised coordination, as otherwise potentially contradictory messages from the line ministries or the junior cabinet parties might jeopardise government decision-making.

To begin with, we distinguish between political communication and civil servant communication. This is directly relevant in terms of our centralisation hypothesis as the increasing role of party-political assistants signals the attempt to control information flows and media relations from the centre (the PMO). The former refers to the immediate political staff of the PM and ministers, i.e. the special advisors, including political assistants or political advisors. The latter refers to the civil servant communications staff of the PMO, called the “government communications department” (GCD), and other ministries’ communications departments. The political advisors normally come and go with each minister, whereas the civil servants are bureaucrats who often spend their entire careers in the same ministry. While the number of party-political ministerial assistants has increased quite considerably, it is still rare for a minister to have an assistant that only deals with press matters. Instead, the assistants have broad duties, including acting as policy advisors. We refer to these actors as *political advisors*.³

Journalists see the role of political advisors as much more important than the role of civil servants. In the case of the PM, his chief advisor is the main channel through

which he can be reached when direct access is not possible. In contrast, the GCD is seen as having an almost “ceremonial role” in handling official government communications. One advisor’s account of their role is very telling of the position of advisors in terms of power: “We, the political advisors, function as a filter between the PM and the GCD.” However, according to both civil servants and political advisors, the main ministers (i.e. the leaders of cabinet parties) have the last say on communication strategies. As a rule of thumb, the more salient the issue, the more coordination there is with regards to communication. The GCD can participate in planning and might make recommendations, but the politicians and their advisors decide on the political substance, and to some extent on the timing.

Clear, although not very strong, signs of centralisation of communications under the PM and his office emerge in the interviews. First, journalists do not regard the other ministries or ministers as that important to follow. This also manifests itself in a tendency of the journalists to focus on the political advisors even more in the case of the other ministries. Some journalists described a hierarchy of importance: after the PMO comes the ministry of finance, then perhaps ministries of foreign affairs or defence – and after those, all the rest. Thus, as a whole, the civil servant communication staffs of the line ministries are the least important actors in the whole communications scheme.

Civil servants and political advisors provided a very coherent account of the division of labour between the PMO and the ministries. The GCD is responsible for the PM’s communications and governmental communications as a whole, while the communication departments of the line ministries handle their own ministry’s/minister’s communications – much of which consists of communications about decisions taken by the respective ministers. In addition, the GCD is responsible for all the main government press conferences that are held in the PMO’s conference room. In essence, the more important matters are handled by the PMO/GCD, whereas communications regarding more day-to-day policy-specific issues are dealt with by the ministries.

However, when specifically asked about centralisation, the verdict seems somewhat divided. Some agreed that centralisation has occurred, particularly through the strategic management doctrines discussed below. Others regarded the system as quite decentralised: the ministries do produce a lot of communications of their own, and numerically speaking, they also have most of the government media staff. As one interviewed journalist put it: “It is becoming more and more ... like the PMO’s communications are the most important, and the [other] ministries are a bit subordinate. They have reorganised communications, you know.” On the other hand, a civil servant argued that “[c]entralisation has not occurred so far. Only when there are horizontal and important matters should they be labelled as strategic and shared. Thus, they can be centralised”. Referring to the Sipilä cabinet appointed after the 2015 elections, one interviewee pointed out that:

the ministers said from the get-go that they wanted to assemble communications resources together, even to the extent of appointing political communication people

– that is, “model Sweden”. [...] We have had a lot of talk about if we should have fewer civil servant media staff and more in the ministers’ staffs ... you could say, communication professionals.

One of the interviewed political advisors also saw increasing pressures towards centralisation:

There has been an attempt to condense it, but, in my opinion, there is much work to do in this regard. Sometimes there was an idea that maybe there could be only one communications department, or pool, in the PMO, from which communications staff would be attributed to the ministries. To sort of... disband the ministries’ own CDs. Well, this was not done in the state administration reform [*valtionhallinnon uudistus*] for some reason, but... gradually it will change. At the moment, the ministries have good resources to do things.

Nonetheless, some kind of balance must be maintained between central control and delegation as everything cannot, or should not, be done by the PMO. As one respondent said, “the ship is just too big for that”.

When interpreting the findings, we must exercise caution. After all, while we asked our interviewees to reflect on developments over time (recent decades), we have no longitudinal interview data. Nonetheless, the trend towards more centralised government communication is clear, although it is not as strong as in Sweden (see below). Any causal mechanisms must also be approached with care, but three mutually enforcing explanations for the observed tendency deserve attention. Firstly, inside the government, the role of the PMO has overall become considerably stronger in recent decades. The PM has become the political leader of the country, including in European Union (EU) affairs and in foreign and security policy, which is co-directed between the president and the government. As a result, the staff and overall resources of the PMO have grown significantly. Secondly, as mentioned above, a typical Finnish cabinet is a surplus coalition bringing together parties from the left and the right. Hence, centralising communication more to the PMO appears logical if the goal is to ensure that the government speaks with one voice. Thirdly, the interviewed civil servants saw that the strategical management thinking in recent governments facilitated centralisation to the PMO. The cabinets appointed since the turn of the millennium have invested resources in improving coordination and strategic planning inside the entire executive branch, for example through various intersectoral policy programmes and government strategy documents (Kekkonen & Raunio, 2011). Obviously, this provides a further incentive for centralising government communications to the PMO.⁴ In sum, the case of Finland offers support for the centralisation hypothesis.

Evidence from Sweden

The Swedish case study – presented in Chapter 5 – builds mainly on interviews with journalists (n=10) and government press secretaries (n=11), complemented

by documentary evidence. This case study also identifies a trend of centralisation in government communication. It empirically documents major changes in the system of government communication and some of the important transitions in political/governmental communication that have taken place. In brief, professionalisation and increased resources dedicated to government communication make news management more efficient and have centralising effects on executive systems, strengthening the executive centre.

Step by step, the government has taken control of at least parts of the media coverage, as epitomised by the news management in relation to the presentation of the state budget. As one senior reporter said, “you are in their hands”. According to the experienced journalists who were interviewed, this is a typical example of how increased resources in government administration and stronger efforts to control the political news agenda are visible on a day-to-day basis. This change was also confirmed by the press secretaries in their descriptions of their work.

In the Swedish country chapter, government communication is characterised as strong. A measure of this is the extent to which resources for this purpose have increased, both in terms of funding and staffing. The resources allocated for government communication have grown significantly over the past 50 years.

As in Finland, and elsewhere, there is a divide between the party-political advisors, in this case the press secretaries in particular, and non-partisan civil servants or officials. In addition to the politically recruited press secretaries, there are the press assistants, press coordinators and press communicators, who are officially non-partisan but work closely with the press secretaries.

Another measure concerns the structure of government communication, i.e. its elements and organisation at different levels. More specifically, the structure of information or communication management within the government – how different parts of the government are coordinating their communication efforts. As shown in Table 5.2 in the chapter about Sweden, the system of government communication in Sweden has undergone a series of major changes over time, strengthening the centre. Over the past three decades, prime ministers have brought a shift to a more centralised structure for press/media coordination. The Social Democratic-Green government that came to office in 2014 further strengthened the government communication machinery through centralisation to the PMO; all press secretaries became employed by the PMO (and not by specific line ministries) and daily (morning press) meetings were introduced that were led by the chief press officer at the PMO. Communication has been coordinated to maximise the attention for the issues the government wants to promote. The unit for media coordination located at the PMO has been upgraded by a strengthened position for the chief press officer.

There are four press secretaries to the PM. Two of them do regular press secretary work. One works mainly with social media. One works with communication matters relating to the EU and foreign policy, including incoming international visits. There is also a press assistant alongside the chief press officer and the deputy chief

press officer. Moreover, there is the deputy chief press officer for the Green Party and a press secretary for the (Social Democratic) minister for policy coordination and energy. Both of them are based at the PMO. Further epitomising the strengthening of the centre, a new position was established in 2017: media strategist to the PM, a position at the level of political advisor with responsibility for the government's long-term and strategic communication. The person who currently holds this position, a former press secretary, works closely with the chief press officer and deputy chief press officer and also serves as a backup (for press secretaries) if needed – notably at the EU Social Summit in Gothenburg on 17 November 2017. In addition to the press contact function, the PMO also handles media logistics. This is one example of how chief executives through summitry have added an additional functional demand for staff handling media relations.

In all, there is more central coordination, planning and steering than before. What follows is a clear tendency towards centralisation of government communication as indicated in the interviews. In terms of the government communication process, it is evident from interviews that the job of these staff is to promote or hinder the publication of information and use communication channels to the greatest effect.

The work of the unit that provides strategic and operative support for the head of communication at the government offices (GOs) as well as technical and practical support (RK Kommunikation) is based on the document “Communication policy for the government offices”. This policy regulates the internal and external communication and is the basis for communication activities (Government offices of Sweden, 2012; it is issued by the office of the permanent secretary, which belongs to the PMO). As noted in Chapter 5, only a few of our source-side interviewees were aware of this document and nobody seemed to have read it. The interpretation is that this is primarily a document for communicators who are not political appointees. In brief, it is striking how little formalisation there is in the form of written documents on communication. The policy document describes the division of responsibilities for communication activities in the GO and the prerequisite of coordination for “good communication”. The “ultimate responsibility” for the coordination of both internal and external communication lies with the PMO. Another sign of centralisation, at least potentially, is the policy document regulating how ministers should act in social media; that is, a kind of social media communications policy (Government offices of Sweden, 2016; it is issued by the Office for administrative affairs, to which the GO communications department belongs. It also serves as the communications function of the PMO).

Another development pertains to the more public role of press secretaries. Despite the traditional norm that solely the PM and ministers should speak to media, their press secretaries increasingly appear as spokespersons. This is one difference between the cases of Finland and Sweden. Otherwise, these two cases broadly follow the same pattern of centralisation to the PMO. This pattern strongly underlines the structural rather than conditional nature of central executive communication. Therefore, this pattern can be expected to last.

The research data demonstrate that there is an ongoing professionalisation of political/government communication in Sweden. Both journalists and press secretaries described increasing resources on the political side – more coordination, more press secretaries and more active work from sources to influence news reporting. Over time, the system has changed fundamentally in terms of accessibility and management. According to the experienced journalists, there is more control of information by press secretaries. A journalist with 20 years of experience in public service explained how press secretaries are being more active in limiting the possibilities of direct contact with politicians – “they are a filter all the time ... not only in contact with the government, but also with members of parliament”. All the experienced journalists confirmed this picture of increased information management.

Also, among the press secretaries themselves, it was suggested that the expansion in their numbers along with other communication staff reflected “a kind of increased professionalisation not to give a messy impression”. One press secretary emphasised the increased speed in media coverage as another explanation for more resources on communication and more coordination within the government: “Everything is much faster... when something is written on Twitter, it can be a news article.” All press secretaries are formally employed by the PMO, and coordination is strong with daily meetings. One of the present press secretaries explained:

It is a result of the spirit of the times and the demands for better control of what different parts are doing. In more intense media coverage, we need to have better control over what we are sending out ... Just basic things as ministers not having press conferences at the same time, releasing news that competes with each other ... We have a never-ending, 24-hour news cycle – everything at a crazy speed.

Journalists and press secretaries gave the same general picture of an increased level of planned communication in the government. There are many reasons for this, some political while others are connected to media development. Among the political reasons are a greater need for coordination in coalition governments and increased awareness of the role of communication in politics.

Senior journalists with 20-25 years of experience talked about press advisors as being more active and more controlling, and often present in interviews with ministers. Some ministers have press advisors by their side in all kinds of communication. One senior journalist said that the press secretary, together with the state secretary, is the minister’s most important co-worker. Another journalist said that some press secretaries are more like gatekeepers: “They see their work as protecting the minister.” Other journalists shared this impression.

Professionalisation of government communication is very much about the control of information flows from the government and leading political parties. The press secretaries work constantly to promote good news to journalists and newsrooms and to avoid spreading bad news. They do that through the control of information and also, in some cases, through negotiations with journalists. This corresponds with the

government communication processes introduced in the previous section and attests to the essentially political nature of their work.

In summary, there are clear signs of professionalisation of government communication and functional pressures for the government to be as well coordinated as possible and be able to assert itself vis-à-vis the media and public – “to speak with one voice”, instead of speaking with conflicting/different voices. Put differently, a coherent approach requires centralised media/news management and resources, simply “not to give a messy impression”, as one interviewee put it (see above). More broadly, and cynically perhaps, this is a way of sustaining the image of the state/government as coordinated, coherent and controlled (Jacobsson et al., 2015: 38). In any event, Sweden is a case in point of growing resources put into government communication, a paradigmatic example of professionalised and centralised strategic communication, of central control and coordination. In sum, the case of Sweden offers support for the centralisation hypothesis.

Illustrative evidence from Lithuania and Poland

Lithuania

The Lithuanian case (Chapter 3 by Auksė Balčytienė & Milda Malling), drawing on 20 interviews, demonstrates national specificities and trends pertaining to government communication, its structures and development based on the broader political communication system and culture. In brief, Lithuanian political culture is individualistic and personalised. Lithuania has a semi-presidential, dual executive structure. The president and the prime minister share power. While the president has substantial constitutional prerogatives, the prime minister has a very strong position as the head of the government.

According to interviewees, attempts to centralise (or decentralise) the government’s communication efforts depended on the preferences of the specific government and its constellation. During the period of our research (2014-2016), the structure of government communication was decentralised. Different ministries could make their own decisions regarding communication and coordination from the PMO was not strong. The PM’s communication team organised a weekly meeting with the press at which the government’s press office delivered the most important news. This way, those issues could potentially receive more media attention.

Coordination of government communication can be organised for specific issues, such as, for example, the refugee crisis, where several ministries coordinated their communication on a regular basis in order to provide a coherent message. In general, however, a lack of coordination is the biggest shortcoming in the government’s communication. The interviewed press advisors, but also the journalists, noticed that the functions allocated to the press advisors or communication departments are very much person dependent, which means that different ministers organised the work

of their communication departments differently. There were few written strategies or documents that were actually used when planning government communication, and the ones that existed were treated more as formalities.

In conclusion, cultural legacies continue to define power structures in Lithuania. Overall, Lithuania exhibits quite weakly institutionalised government communication. Government communication is mainly issue based where ministries are in charge of their own communication and coordination between ministries is rather limited.

Poland

Poland (Chapter 4 by Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska & Jacek Nożewski) reveals a similar pattern. As with Lithuania, the Polish case must be understood in its post-communist and specific political setting (Anaszewicz & Dobek-Ostrowska, 2013). In essence, the Polish government communication system is similarly decentralised and fragmented.

Drawing on 23 interviews, the country experts note that government communication in Poland is based mainly on cooperation between a spokesperson for the PM and a spokesperson for a particular ministry. Government communication is thus professional inasmuch as the activities of particular spokespersons are supported by the government information centre and coordinated by the PM's spokesperson. However, the structure of communication is decentralised and press secretaries of ministries are free to present and communicate information in consultation with the minister without any real control by the PMO. Many decisions are made in accordance with guidelines from the party/government. Journalists perceive press secretaries as shields for politicians in press-politics relations.

Civil servants do not have an independent position, and there is a process of politicisation of communication staff. A significant number of spokespersons are members of political parties, and they speak in the name of the ruling party and their leaders. The PM plays the main role in the government communication process; political advisors are located just below and civil servants come last. At the same time, for the first time since the collapse of communism in 1989, the leader of the ruling Law and Justice Party, Jarosław Kaczyński, has no official position as the president or prime minister. However, he plays a fundamental role in politics and, in fact, decides on government policy. All official state functionaries are in his shadow. Notwithstanding the recent dramatic changes in Poland, including in its media system, there is nonetheless considerable stability at the intersection of the media and everyday politics. One explanation for this might be that existing journalist-source relations have developed over time and remain stable despite the political change.

In conclusion, the analysis of government communication in Poland shows that a key characteristic of the system is fragmentation or decentralisation, which makes it difficult for the executive to maintain a centralised managerial approach.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have established that centralisation in government communication is the predominant observable pattern in Finland and Sweden, relatively more so in Sweden and less so in Lithuania and Poland. The results show that we have discovered some patterned variation. Finland and Sweden offer support for the centralisation hypothesis, while Lithuania and Poland point out the limitations of the centralisation hypothesis.

In their analysis of media and politics in Sweden, Strömbäck and Nord (2008: 119) found “no reason to expect the Swedish political communication system to change dramatically”. However, the changes or transitions in political/government communication that have taken place are more fundamental than recognised in previous research. Notably, a more central or strategic coordination approach has emerged over time. This supports the centralisation hypothesis and the presence of a functionalist logic. The media generates functional pressures for the centralisation of government news management. Amidst the increasing fragmentation of the media landscape, we have identified a clear trend of centralisation in the political executive, particularly in Sweden but in Finland as well.

In conclusion, empirical evidence on the development of government communication in both Nordic countries paints a relatively homogeneous picture. The trend in Finland and Sweden is clear: Centralisation, with PMOs to an increasing extent being responsible for government communication while the role of media/political advisors has grown at the expense of civil servants. By way of comparison, the Lithuanian and Polish systems can be described as relatively fragmented with relatively thin coordination and strategising from the centre. Lithuania and Poland exhibit decentralised government communication systems, where ministries are more independent in their communication. Hence, there are close resemblances between the Lithuanian and Polish systems with respect to how their government communication structures and practices have evolved. Their experience illustrates another insight into government communication: the limits of central control and of hierarchy of roles (Graber, 2003: 58). Moreover, decentralised communication can also be professional, provided that the decentralised approach is intentional and coordinated from the centre. In our view, such coordination is not really happening in Lithuania and Poland.

While the extent of centralisation clearly varies among our cases, we have identified a general move towards a stronger executive centre – a trend that is very likely to continue. As outlined in the introductory section of this chapter, political scientists have uncovered a trend towards empowerment of prime ministers. Also, public administration scholars have argued that there is a strengthening – via an increased capacity to coordinate and control policy – of the prime minister’s office at the heart of government (e.g., Dahlström et al., 2011; Kolltveit, 2015). As a result, the centralisation of government communication should be understood in the context of broader empowerment of prime ministers and their offices. Furthermore, govern-

ments throughout the world feel increasing pressures to centralise as they face the challenge of “speaking with one voice”. Here, the fragmentation of party systems, including the rise of populist or nationalist parties, and the ensuing need to build often quite ideologically heterogeneous coalition cabinets contributes to centralisation of communication. Other plausible driving factors are fake news and threats associated with information leaks. This chapter joins other recent contributions in showing the tendencies towards central control of government communication (e.g., Downer, 2015; Marland et al., 2017; Peters, 2016). At the same time, our findings suggest that existing research, which is heavily focused on Western states, underestimates cross-national variation in government communication.

Notes

1. In this chapter we use the terms “head of government”, “premier”, “prime minister” and “chief executive” interchangeably. We also use the terms “press secretary”, “media/press advisor” and “political advisor” interchangeably. They are politically appointed. In Finland, there are not any specific “media advisors” (in the PMO or line ministries) – instead, they are political advisors that also deal with media and carry out communication duties.
2. For an overview, from a leadership perspective, see Cohen (2014). Key works include Grossman and Kumar (1981), Maltese (1994) and Kumar (2010).
3. See Chapter 2 and Figure 2.1 therein for a more detailed account of the structure of government communications in Finland.
4. As also became evident in the interviews, the current government led by Sipilä is probably the most interdisciplinary of all Finnish cabinets, with a large number of horizontal projects, meaning that the GCD has more coordination duties than before.

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