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HOW DID THE NORDIC-BALTIC COUNTRIES HANDLE THE FIRST WAVE OF COVID-19?

A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

What is this project?

When the Covid-19 virus struck Europe in 2020 with the full force of a pandemic, eight countries allied in the Nordic-Baltic region immediately faced a challenge to their hard-won partnership. For three decades Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden had been building a common purpose. How would that friendship respond to the greatest health scare in a hundred years? This report aims to answer this question by looking at developments in the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) through a Strategic Communications lens.

Why a Strategic Communications lens?

To understand fully the pandemic that gripped these eight partner states is to paint a picture that goes beyond the number of human lives lost or the rise in unemployment, fall in national economic growth, and assumption of state debt so punitive to their taxpayers. Any complete picture would also tell the story of how governments chose to speak to their electorates, and how civil society would respond to unprecedented measures imposed in peace time: curbing individual freedoms, it may be assumed, would elicit a consequent questioning of trust between government and governed.

All states communicate strategically. But that is not to say they engage in Strategic Communications. Which is understood as the shifting and shaping of significant discourses in societies. It aspires to change the way people think and behave; in other words, to achieve a strategic effect. Inevitably, such an ambitious task requires separating out diverse audiences and honing particular approaches to appeal to those audiences' attitudes and grievances. In trying to achieve a strategic effect – in

short, change – the strategic dimension of the term Strategic Communications sees strategy as focused on the long term; more specifically, its proponents play the long game. However, the NB8 members in early 2020 would find themselves facing a national crisis on a scale they had not experienced since the Second World War. Uneven levels of preparedness, despite repeated warnings from global health officials that dated back to the early years of this century, would suddenly demand governments act in ways for which their populations had not yet been prepared. By the time the scale of the pandemic had been recognised by scientists and politicians, governments could be excused for having resorted to short term reactions expressed through crisis communications. The latter, however necessary, live in constant tension with long term communications. The aim, after all in Strategic Communications, is to ensure consistency and coherence between the demands of today and the ambitions of tomorrow. How did the NB8 fare?

The answer is not simple, especially when faced with the conundrum brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. From the outset, it was clear that the pandemic was as much political, economic, and social in its effect as it was bio-medical in its nature. Governments across the world have since faced hard choices in balancing these threats against the well-being of their citizens while retaining friendly relations and long-term objectives in international politics.

The Nordic governments started from a strong position. The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) make up the world's eleventh largest economy[1]. Their populations show high levels of trust in government structures and law enforcement, and demonstrate a high degree of confidence in their partner states.[2] The same cannot be said of the Baltic countries. By comparison, trust in government is low[3] and their economies are less prosperous.[4] Consequently, the Nordic countries spend above the European average on healthcare, whereas the Baltic countries allocate significantly less. This context would influence the decisions of governments and the subsequent debate. The Baltic countries would find themselves trapped between trying to maintain their under-funded health systems throughout stricter lock-downs, while at the same time fearing for the consequences for their economies.

Methodology

This publication is written under the aegis of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and its multi-year project researching the Nordic-Baltic region. For NATO, the Nordic-Baltic region is of growing importance to Europe's changing security order. Not all Nordic countries are members of the Alliance, but NATO enjoys close cooperation too with partner nations Finland and Sweden who are also contributing partners of the Centre of Excellence.

This report examines the communications strategies of all members of the NB8 during the first six months of 2020. During those months, the Covid-19 virus reached Europe. And soon the first cases were reported in France (January-February), a global pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation (11th March), and the first wave of Covid-19 infections swept through a locked-down Europe (March-May) before countries gradually re-opened as the first wave seemed to abate (June). As the Covid-19 virus continues to spread, further time must elapse before more meaningful analysis of the consequences of the pandemic can be drawn. Nevertheless, by separating out one particular period encompassing the first wave in Europe, it is possible to single out the various approaches adopted by the NB8 to tackle the pandemic.

This publication captures key points of political debate which framed policy decisions during the first wave of the pandemic in the Nordic-Baltic region. It further analyses those developments through the lenses of persuasion and coercion, lives and livelihoods, linguistic choices, and societal responses. In some cases, the researchers witnessed crisis management focused on immediate concerns; in others, Strategic Communications, pursued with long-term objectives in mind.

Our researchers have drawn on information from public broadcasters of the eight countries as their primary source, and consulted other mainstream media, freely available policy documents, new and existing legislation, as well as country subject matter experts using questionnaires and interviews. The objective has been to crystalise dominant conversations around the Covid-19 pandemic in each country, and to bring out aspects that underlined regional cooperation or revealed a certain distancing between them. We trust this publication will offer constructive comparative data from the region, and encourage further reflection on how best to balance Strategic Communications with crisis management.

Which key areas are explored ?

The report looks at the different strategies Nordic-Baltic countries applied to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic from national, regional, and international perspectives. The key areas the report explores are:

- The national approach in each of the eight member countries;
- The balance between persuasion and coercion in steering societies to complying with government measures;
- The debates surrounding increased support for lives and livelihoods.

As the case studies reveal, governments reacted differently, drawing on the historical consciousness and experience from

previous crises, considering the shape of the national economy and healthcare, as well as employing regional diplomacy.

Which Strategic Communications questions are raised and why?

In the context of the Nordic-Baltic project run by the NATO StratCom COE, the central Strategic Communications question arising from the case studies were:

- Was the region equipped to act effectively and offer mutual support during a crisis?
- Did the member governments achieve a desired behaviour change at home?
- Were they able to position their countries internationally and strategically?

CHAPTER 1

THE NORDIC-BALTIC EIGHT AND CRISIS COOPERATION

- A short introduction to the Nordic-Baltic format
- A short overview of the EU/NATO membership and relationship
- An inquiry into what advantage the region derived from regional, EU, and NATO cooperation?

The Nordic-Baltic Format: Regional, EU, and NATO Cooperation

'If Baltic and Nordic countries agreed on a common position in the most crucial issues, the Baltic Sea Region would have a high chance of becoming the leading player in the EU.'[5]

The Nordic-Baltic region shares historic trade and socio-cultural ties that go back centuries. The best known associations include the Hanseatic League, a trade and defence union of the Late Middle Ages, and the Kalmar Union of the Scandinavians created to counter the dominance of the Hanseatic League. In the 20th century, the three Baltic countries were separated from their northern neighbours for fifty years behind the Iron Curtain. During which time, the Nordic countries were

strong supporters of Baltic independence. Symbolically, Iceland was the first country to recognise the restored independence of Lithuania, then Estonia and Latvia. When the Soviet Union dissolved, active engagement between the Nordics and the Baltics was restored. In 1992 the NB8 was established as a platform to discuss and coordinate important regional and international issues.

The NB8 was initially called the 5 + 3, referring to the cooperation of the Nordic five with the Baltic three. Nordic cooperation has a well-established institutional foundation, having had the Nordic Council of Ministers as its governing body since 1971. Similarly, Baltic cooperation is governed by the Baltic Council of Ministers through the Baltic Assembly established in 1991. The rotating NB8 chairmanship was initially filled by the Nordic countries, expanding to the Baltic countries only in 2008.

At present, the eight countries constituting the Nordic-Baltic region, share common goals in security, economics, and politics, while diverging on certain policy aspects. The divergence is most visible in their approach to membership in international organisations: Sweden and Finland are not members of NATO, while Norway and Iceland are not members of the EU. The fifty years under Soviet occupation have also resulted in differences arising between the Nordic and Baltic subgroups from their economic and socio-cultural settings. Still, all of the countries recognise the geo-strategic importance of their region and show a genuine will to work together to strengthen its position. Witness: within the EU the Nordic-Baltic members have created a Nordic-Baltic Six group to defend their shared interests.[6]

There is also regional cooperation in the security domain. Following the end of the Cold War, there was a growing tendency in Europe to create cooperative formats to protect regional security, reflecting traditional patterns of collaboration and conflict.[7] The Baltic Sea region is no exception. The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO), which in 2009 unified existing security cooperation arrangements between the Scandinavian countries, was joined by Iceland. The Baltic countries would also become strongly involved with the NORDEFCO.[8]

Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia, Nordic-Baltic countries have been particularly alarmed by their big neighbour's revisionist behaviour, increased attempts to manipulate their national information space, and its intimidating rhetoric. Russia has strong military, economic and political interests in the Baltic Sea and is particularly displeased with the increased NATO presence in the region.[9] NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, deployed to the Baltic countries and Poland in 2017 as a response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, has been a prominent target for Russia; so too was increased Swedish and Finnish cooperation with the NATO alliance.[10]

> Following the renewal of Nordic-Baltic cooperation in 1992, the first shock to hit the region was the 2008-2009 global financial crisis.

For NATO, the Nordic-Baltic is an important region from the perspective of Baltic Sea security, especially since 2004 when the three Baltic countries joined the Alliance. With the relationship between NATO and Russia deteriorating as early as the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, the importance of being able to secure NATO's eastern border and take rapid action in the Baltic Sea has increased.[11] That cannot be achieved without NATO's close engagement with non-member states such as Sweden and Finland, as well as with existing Baltic Sea security formats such as NORDEFCO.

Nordic-Baltic Cooperation in Times of Crisis

As for the NB8's ability to react to a crisis, certain mechanisms exist. But more could be done. Given the region's proximity to Russia and recognising that the relationship between NATO and Russia is at its lowest ebb since the Cold War, the possibility of escalation and conflict in the Nordic-Baltic region has increased. The Baltic Sea is an obvious area for accidents to occur or for provocations that might lead to confrontation between the West and Russia.[12] Consequently, the Danish Centre for Military Studies has argued for establishing a Nordic-Baltic Schengen for defence. It would entail a coordinated political and administrative effort to identify and remove obstacles to the rapid deployment of troops and materiel across Nordic–Baltic borders via air, sea, and land. In addition, it would involve ensuring the necessary political and legal frameworks and streamlining national infrastructures.[13]

Moreover, any kind of social, economic or political crisis of national origin has the potential to spill over borders and escalate into a regional security crisis. In this context, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Bureau has been advocating for increased regional preparedness for transboundary crisis management[14], emphasising that the current institutional preparations of these nations and their ability to organise a response are insufficient. To deal with transboundary crisis there is a need for

transboundary cooperation with new kinds of political-administrative arrangements.[15]

In the Baltic Sea region, the formal, institutional formats to help national governments address transboundary crisis are: the European Union, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the Nordic Council, Nordic Investment Bank, and NATO. The NB8 format has a less formal character and hence does not serve as a formal venue for regional crisis management. Its founding document is the co-operation agreement of 1992 between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly, followed by the 1997 agreement. It is periodically reviewed, setting priorities and outlining action plans for regional cooperation.[16] Importantly, it does not speak directly to regional crisis management.

Following the renewal of Nordic-Baltic cooperation in 1992, the first shock to hit the region was the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. In 2010, a Wise Men's Report on Baltic and Nordic Co-operation was published, authored by the former Prime Minister of Latvia, Valids Birkavs and former Minister of Defence of Denmark, Søren Gade. It declared 'the global financial and economic crisis has proven our interdependency and made it even more important to cooperate both internationally and regionally'.[17] Indeed, the crisis brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the inter-dependency of the region. It also demonstrated that the region had learned a lesson from the global financial crisis. Since the Nordic and Baltic banking systems are heavily integrated, in 2010 the eight countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation and coordination on cross-border, financial stability.[18] A specific financial stability instrument was created: the Nordic-Baltic Cross-Border Stability Group. The MoU was updated in 2018, followed by a joint exercise in financial crisis management in 2019.[19] As this report demonstrates, although all economies inevitably suffered from the Covid-19 virus, none of the Nordic-Baltic countries ran into financial problems during the first wave of the pandemic. The financial assistance mechanism from the Nordic Investment Bank (NIB) contributed to the region's stability. NIB is an international financial institution owned by all eight of the Nordic-Baltic countries and is designed to exercise a stabilising role during economic crisis.

During the first wave of the pandemic, the NB8 also cooperated in repatriating their citizens. Less than a week after the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 a global pandemic, the Foreign Ministers of the NB8 agreed that they would work together to ensure transit for EU and EEA citizens and permanent residents returning home – if necessary by establishing transit corridors. They also decided to establish a network of consular directors to exchange information, best practices, and possible practical measures to help citizens and permanent residents of their countries return home.[20]

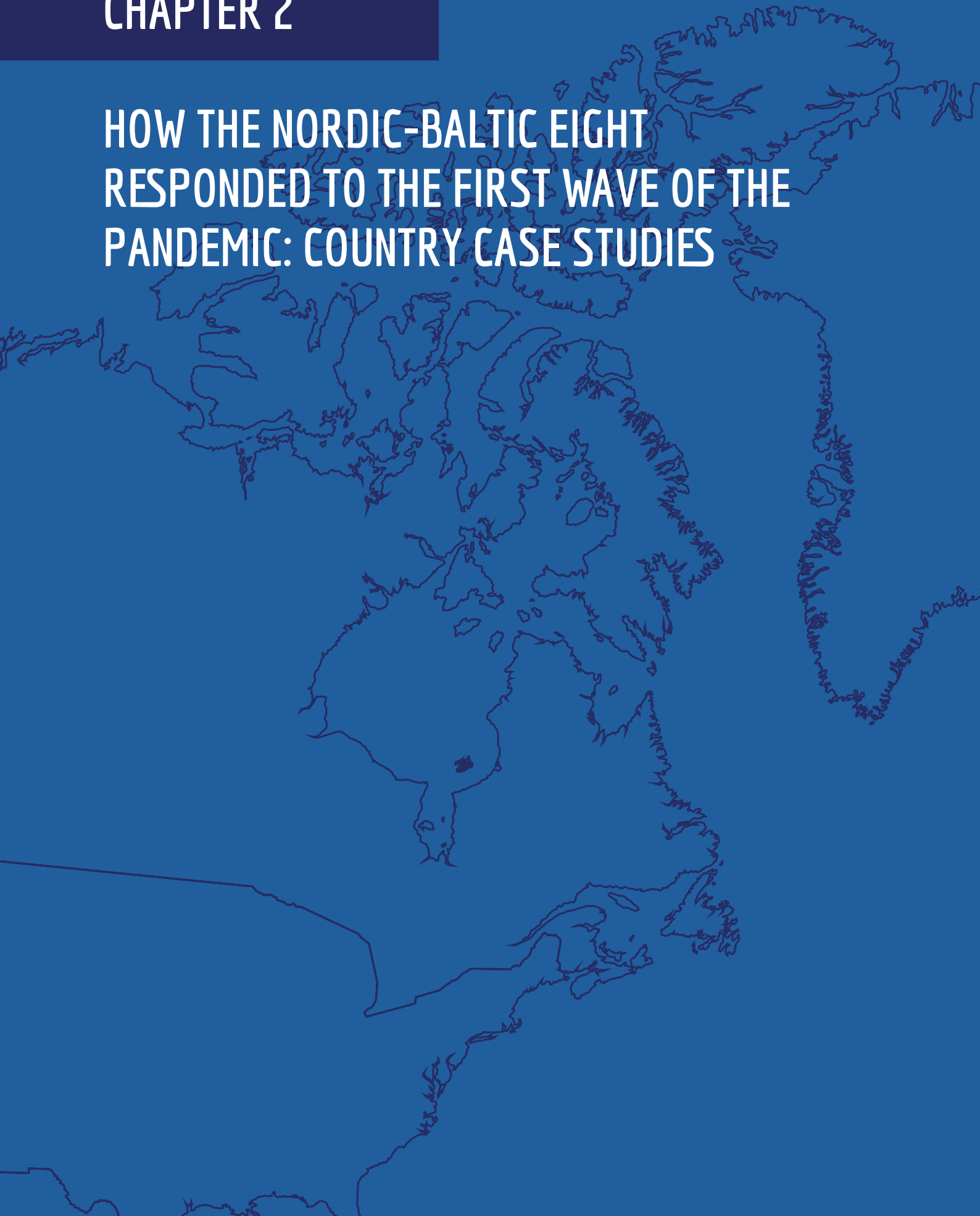
Regional attempts to maintain open borders were pursued during the pandemic. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania created the Baltic Bubble (also known as mini-Schengen) as an internal travel zone during the pandemic.[21] Unfortunately, due to varying infection rates, it survived only between May and September 2020. Still, it offered an opportunity for Baltic politicians again to proudly promote historic Baltic unity and brotherhood between its peoples. At the same time, when the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, and Norway reopened to one other in mid-June 2020, a decision was taken to exclude Sweden due to its different approach to pandemic management and higher infection rates. Subsequently, the Swedish Foreign minister was quoted as saying that this decision had created wounds that would take time to heal.[22] But the question remains – would the Nordics have done any better had they coordinated and chosen a single regional approach to handle the pandemic? Or better still – had the NB8 opted for a joint approach?

What of the NB8's cooperation with NATO and EU on crisis management? The answer depended on who had membership of which organisation. NATO members – Iceland, Norway, Denmark, and the Baltic countries – have coordinated closely with NATO during the pandemic. Beyond employing existing mechanisms for crisis response involving their military structures, countries have had the chance to provide and request support through NATO's Pandemic Support Trust Fund which assists NATO's members and partners in need, and functions as a tool of public diplomacy. Through the Trust Fund, Latvia has provided 9,000 litres of surface disinfectant to Ukraine[23], and Lithuania donated 25,000 disposable suits for biological protection to Moldova[24]. The Trust Fund has also provided several NATO members with ventilators and medical supplies.[25] At the same time, NATO has ensured continuity of its own operations, including the Enhanced Forward Presence in the Nordic-Baltic region. This has had the effect of preventing the pandemic crisis from impacting military readiness.[26]

The EU, meanwhile, would set out to play an important role in coordinating a common European response to the virus outbreak. This would involve making centralised vaccine purchases on behalf of its member states. What would subsequently prove to be a constrained approach to acquisition and supply lies beyond the scope of this publication and invites careful analysis in the future. However, what can be said is that the EU sought to communicate on behalf of its member states and encourage a unified approach to avert what would eventually come to be labelled by journalists as vaccine nationalism, and to avoid a less than coordinated response to securing and distributing PPE (personal protective equipment) across the Union.[27] In this context, Sweden as an EU member state took on the role of negotiator with the EU to help non-EU members Iceland and Norway acquire vaccines through the EU cooperation project.[28]

CHAPTER 2

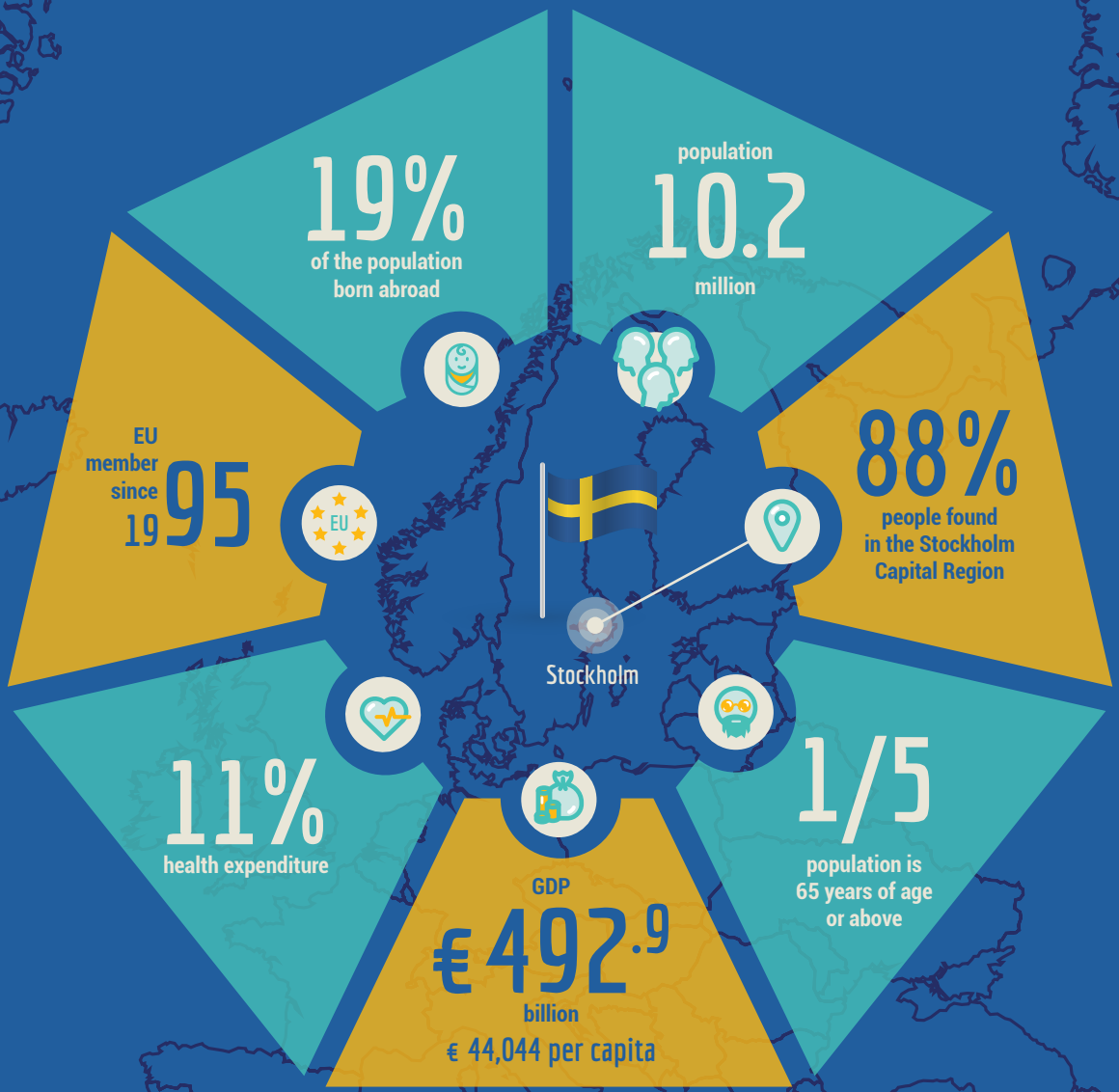
HOW THE NORDIC-BALTIC EIGHT RESPONDED TO THE FIRST WAVE OF THE PANDEMIC: COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

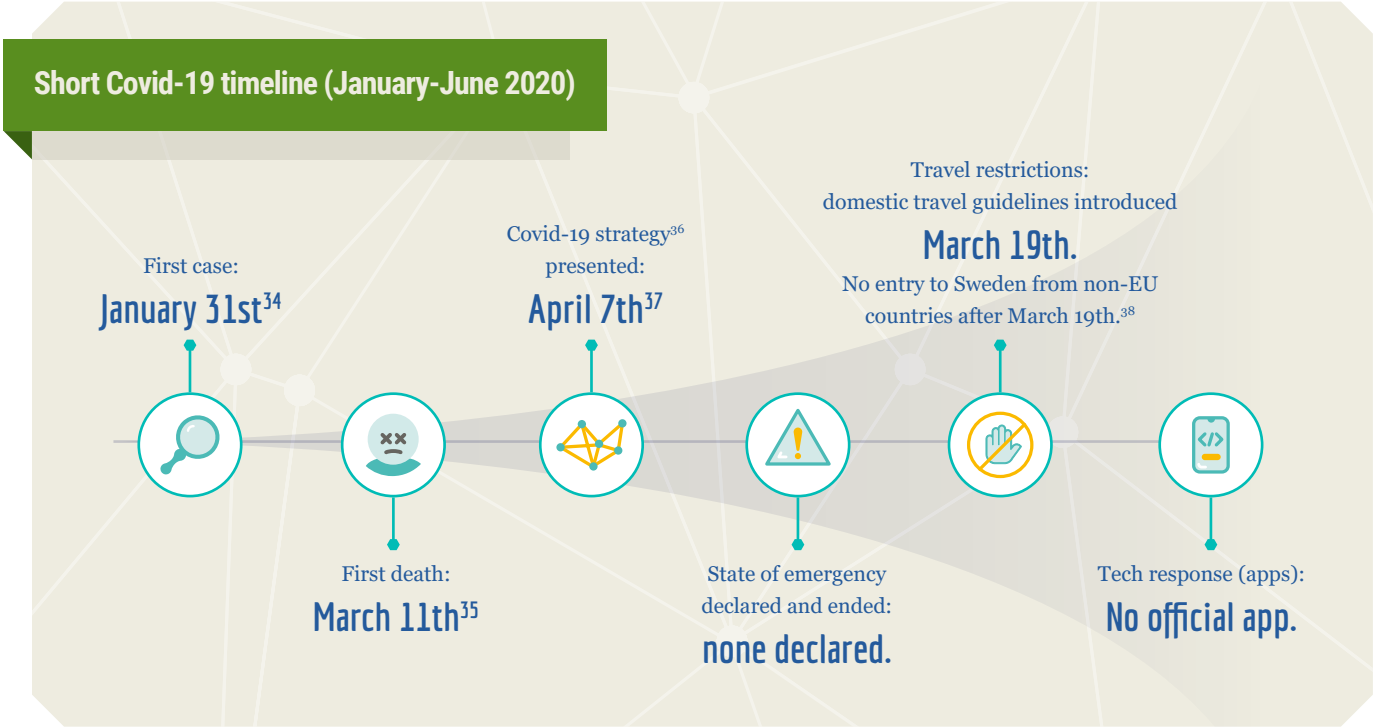


SWEDEN

Context

Sweden has a population of 10.2 million with 19% of the population born abroad.[29] The country has an urban population of 88% with the highest concentrations of people found in the Stockholm Capital Region.[30] Just over one-fifth of the population is estimated to be 65 years of age or above.[31] The country's GDP (PPP) is estimated to be € 492.9 billion (€ 44,044 per capita) with a health expenditure of 11%.[32] It has been an EU member since 1995.[33]





Country response to Covid-19

Sweden adopted a different approach from its neighbours in the NB8 and EU with fewer bans and an explicit responsibility placed on individuals. It was one of the countries hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic measured by the number of deaths per capita compared to its NB8 neighbours.[39] The Swedish strategy has invited criticism from internal political actors due to few coercive measures being applied.

Historical consciousness

A Swedish model for crisis management has been used in different crises in recent years, and is generally considered to have been successful. Although certain evaluations of crisis responses have criticised the Swedish model for responding too slowly and hindering fast and decisive action when faced with a threat.[40] This was noted during the 2004 Tsunami in South East Asia when many Swedes lost their lives.[41] The 2009 experience with Swine Flu is also believed to have had an impact on Sweden's less regulated approach to the Covid-19 pandemic and the population's perception of the crisis. At the time, the Public Health Authority urged the population to be vaccinated, only later to discover side effects, particularly with children.

Overarching approach

'The overall objective of the Government's efforts is to reduce the pace of the Covid-19

virus's spread: to "flatten the curve" so that large numbers of people do not become ill at the same time'.[42] The Strategy in Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic document is broad, without specific numbers, measures or rules. It contains a general passage referring to high levels of trust in government agencies in Swedish society.[43] It also illustrates how, in general, the Swedish population acts responsibly – namely, in line with government guidelines.[44] Note: these are guidelines and recommendations, not rules and laws.

The Swedish model for crisis management is built on three principles:

- Responsibility: The party in charge of a particular activity under normal circumstances is responsible for that activity in a crisis.[45]

- Similarity: During a crisis, measures adopted should be consistent with the way operations are conducted under normal conditions. Every day activity should, where possible, be conducted in the same location as under normal conditions.[46]

- Proximity: A crisis should be handled where it occurs, by the municipality or region in question. Only where resources prove inadequate, will state efforts come into play.[47]

Consequently, Sweden's strategy appears to favour persuasion rather than coercion. It entails national politicians maintaining their distance from local management of the crisis, and following the above principle of responsibility in crisis management.

From March 2020, the Public Health Agency, the National Board of Health and Welfare, and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency held daily joint press conferences on the Covid-19 situation.[48] Press conferences were broadcast live on public service radio and television, and regularly attracted around one million listeners and viewers[49]: approximately 10 % of Sweden's population tuned in each day. From 10th June, the press conferences were held bi-weekly.

The government did not participate in daily press conferences dedicated to the Covid-19 pandemic in line with the model for crisis response. The prime minister and government nonetheless made public appearances commenting on the pandemic.[50]

As the Swedish strategy differed radically from most EU countries, the government produced translations of it at the beginning of April.[51] The style of writing captured in English translation indicates that it was written for a foreign audience which might have little knowledge of Sweden. The strategy emphasises the high level of trust in Swedish society and in the government as a key reason for success.[52]

With a divergent approach from its neighbours, Sweden faced higher mortality

At the beginning of the pandemic, Sweden's approach appeared to meet with success; the government enjoyed high levels of support, and there was a party political truce for the first months.

rates than elsewhere in the Nordic and Baltic region. Sweden continuously updated its pandemic management measures, but the overarching approach, focusing on persuasion and individual responsibility rather than legally enforced restrictions, remained the same. The differing and somewhat less decisive response has been attributed by some analysts to Sweden's bureaucratic system where expert agencies take the lead rather than politicians, to society's inclination to follow recommendations, and to the idea of the welfare state being primarily an economic project which should not be jeopardised by shutting down the economy.[53] The strong emphasis on protecting civil liberties reflected in the Swedish Constitution has also played a role.[54]

At the beginning of the pandemic, Sweden's approach appeared to meet with success; the government enjoyed high levels of support, and there was a party political truce for the first months.[55] Gradually, death rates per capita in Sweden increased unlike in other Nordic countries; the political truce ended, and the strategy came under intense scrutiny.[56] In the beginning of June 2020, the leader of the conservative opposition party highlighted a perceived lack of action from the government.[57] Although the Prime Minister admitted to having failed to protect the most vulnerable, he defended the strategy.[58]

The discourse became more polarised following April when 22 researchers from a range of top Swedish universities and research institutes publicly called for the Public Health Agency to step down, and for politicians to take swift and radical measures to prevent further spread of the virus.[59] They referenced the neighbouring Nordic countries' perceived more successful handling of the virus. A major criticism (albeit contested to this day) was that Sweden's strategy was not changed sufficiently as new facts exposing the progression of the virus emerged. The head

epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, confirmed, that if more information about the virus had been available at the outset, Sweden would have acted differently.[60] Most countries would admit to a large degree of uncertainty in designing their initial strategies. One of the arguments Sweden puts forward is that there is no sufficient evidence that differing strategies have actually resulted in considerably better outcomes for the societies in question.

Linguistic lenses - Key expressions

Flattening the curve[61] was an expression used in daily Covid-19 press conferences throughout the period to describe the Swedish strategy, with a specific graphic attached to illustrate it.[62] The curve aims to lower the speed of the spread, to avoid a peak in cases and risk overloading the health services.[63] By consistently employing the term *flattening the curve* – not to stop the virus, but to let it run a slower course – it can be inferred that Sweden's approach to intervention was less direct than that of its NB8 counterparts.

We must all help out. This term is notable for two reasons. First, the phrase and its variants were frequently used in daily press conferences to highlight the individual responsibility of citizens.[64] Second, the Public Health Agency based their work on the Communicable Diseases Act which emphasises an individual's responsibility in limiting the spread of the infection.[65] This gives a normative quality to the phrase.

Public access to information. A preexisting national helpline handled general inquiries about the new virus in Swedish and English. Information in official minority languages has been available continuously through Swedish public service radio, which was referred to by various government agencies.[66] The Stockholm Region launched a regional helpline in March providing information in six additional languages.[67] It was extended to the whole of Sweden in June.[68] These do not have the same official status and cannot be expected to claim equal priority. It should be noted that five months elapsed following the first case before accurate information was made available in additional languages.

Persuasion versus coercion

The sliding scale between persuasion and coercion is a constant topic of discussion in Strategic Communications.[69] In Sweden, measures were in principle similar to those of other NB8 countries – closing external EU borders, banning visits to care homes, and imposing strict regulations for restaurants.[70] However, no fines were introduced since they had no basis in the existing legal infrastructure, system of governance, or public opinion.[71] The country's response was, consequently, more persuasive than coercive compared to other NB8 countries.

Coercive measures were aimed at businesses, trade associations, and restaurant owners.[72] Ultimate responsibility

fell on restaurant owners to prevent overcrowding by their clientele, while the latter were urged to conform.[73]

The principle of individual responsibility was constantly present. This was evident through enhanced recommendations to work from home, limit physical social contact, and refrain from travelling – exemplified by the March publication of the Public Health Agency of Sweden: 'Consider if trips are really necessary'.[74]

Major criticism of Sweden's approach was consistent with earlier crises despite updates to the crisis handling strategy.[75] The approach was attacked in editorials of the largest Swedish newspaper, Dagens Nyheter (DN). DN argued that it gave too much leeway to professionals, and kept politicians away from direct action.[76] The inferrence from this argument is that professionals act less coercively and more cautiously than politicians, leading to unnecessary high numbers of cases and deaths.[77] It should, however, be noted that the government enjoyed high levels of support during the first few months, and there was a general sense of pride among the population at the distinct Swedish approach to the pandemic.[78]

Lives and Livelihoods

The government emphasised that this crisis necessitated increased spending. The additional support was distributed in diverse sectors to safeguard life, health, and people's ability to support themselves financially. It had three main priorities:

- Additional support to relevant government agencies – the Public Health Agency for more staffing, and National Board of Health and Welfare for purchasing testing kits and medical materials.[79]

- The government started to pay the first day of sick leave, normally not compensated. This was to incentivise people to stay at home if they showed symptoms and lessen the pressure on health care services.[80]

- Introduction of temporary rules to protect businesses, avoid layoffs, and maintain liquidity for companies to mitigate the direct economic impact of the virus.[81]

However, as the Minister of Finance is a political appointment, this entails the usual proviso that the incumbent politician will make every effort to ensure calm and stability in the situation.

During the first six months of 2020, the government presented nine additional budget amendments to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.[82] It was estimated that up to 300 billion SEK (30 billion Euros) would be allocated to the crisis package.[83] The Government's position had been clear from the start: the government would be

responsible for all additional costs related to the pandemic. The Minister of Finance, Magdalena Andersson, on numerous occasions reiterated Sweden's strong state of financial preparedness.[84]

Regional coordination

Nordic

The normally well-functioning Nordic cooperation changed considerably during the first months of 2020. There were two main reasons.

First, all Nordic countries except Sweden closed or restricted their national borders. Normally, cross-border flows are seamless, and many Swedes live on one side of the border but work on the other. This is particularly the case in the Öresund and Haparanda regions as well as along the Norwegian border. Although all heads of government claimed that this was a strictly science-based decision, it still affected the image of seamless and integrated Nordic cooperation.[85]

Second, the higher infection rate witnessed in Sweden compared to its neighbouring countries strained the normally well-functioning relationships between the countries.[86] This did not necessarily impact official relations between the countries, but affected the image of the Nordic countries as united and cooperative. When borders closed and Swedes were no longer welcome for business, leisure, or to see family, there was widespread disappointment at the perceived failure of Nordic solidarity.[87] The Swedish interior minister commented that they hoped for greater openness towards Sweden from their immediate neighbours.[88] However, there was never any outspoken criticism by Sweden towards the governments of other Nordic countries.

EU/EAA

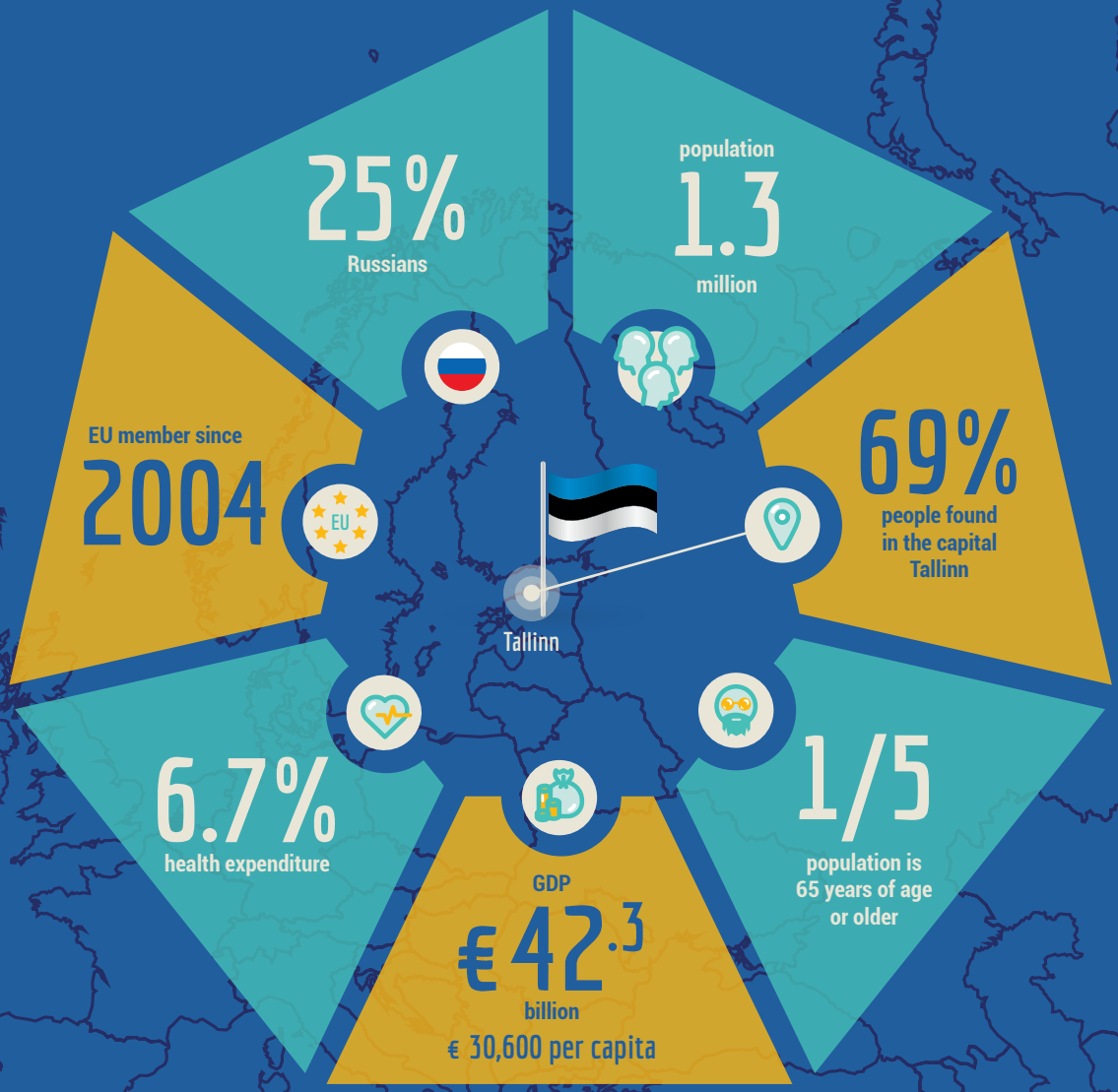
A clear case of Swedish-EU coordination was over the closing of the Swedish border for non-EU entries on the 19th March, arising from an EU recommendation.[89] The Swedish minister for the EU also impressed the importance of stronger EU cooperation to mitigate the impact of the virus.[90]

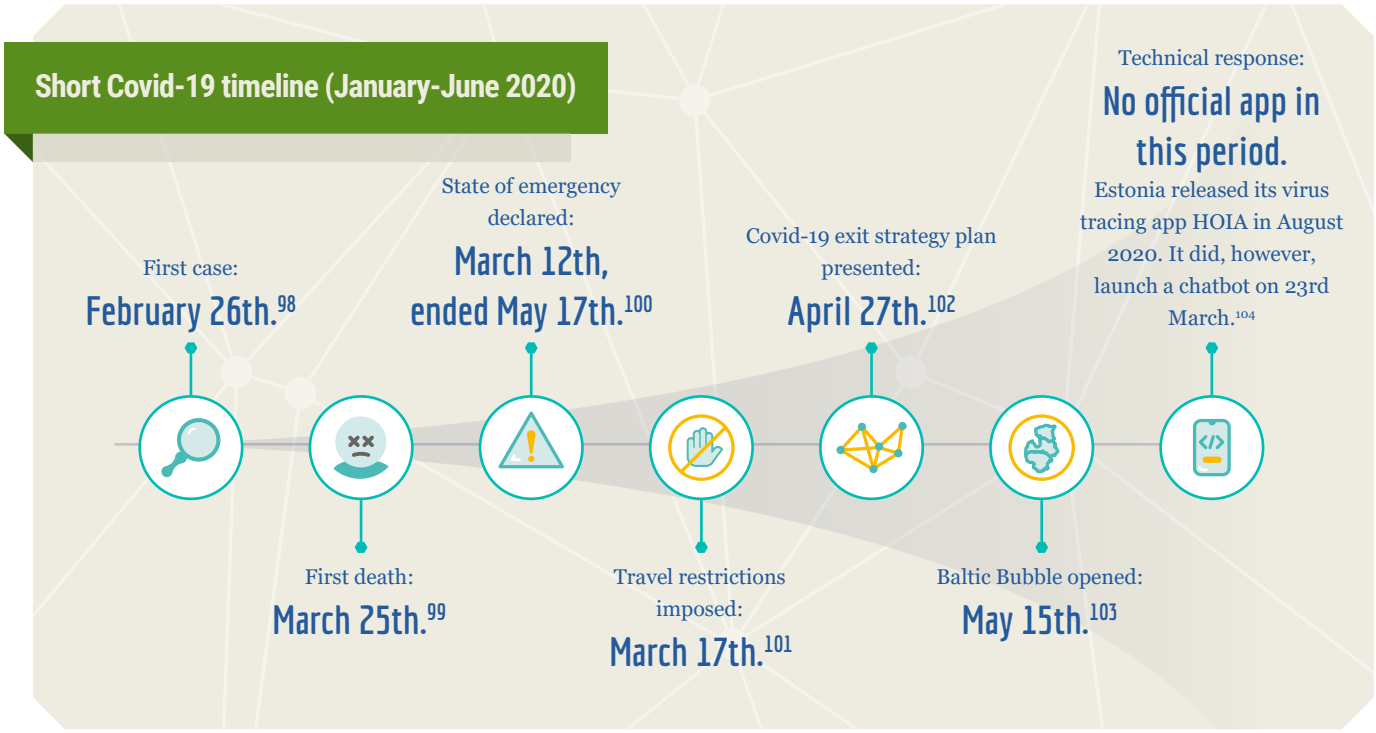
In April, the minister for Foreign Affairs underscored Sweden's official view that the EU was one of its most important vehicles for cooperation, and that in times of crisis they needed more cooperation, not less.[91] This emphasis on greater EU coordination may be interpreted as mild criticism of EU and Nordic countries which closed borders driven by national concerns instead of following the EU-wide recommendation of closing only external EU borders. The Swedish EU-commissioner, Ylva Johansson, strongly urged EU countries to open their internal borders at the beginning of June.[92]

ESTONIA

Context

Estonia has a population of 1.3 million with a sizeable minority of 25% Russians.[93] The country has an urban population of 69% with the highest concentration of people found in the capital Tallinn.[94] Just over one-fifth of the population is estimated to be 65 years of age or older.[95] The country's GDP (PPP) is estimated to be € 42.3 billion (€30,600 per capita) with a health expenditure of 6.7%.[96] It has been a member of the EU since 2004.[97]





Country response to Covid-19

Historical consciousness

Estonia's history is similar to its Baltic neighbours' with a fifty-year Soviet occupation followed by only thirty years of restored independence. During these three decades, Estonia has changed considerably from a Soviet socialist republic to a developed and highly digitalised, democratic society. Former President Lennart Meri, said in 2001, 'Estonia is now a normal, boring country'.[105] This comment suggested the country had freed itself from the Soviet legacy to move forward like any other European country.

The economic crisis in 2007-2009 hit Estonia and its Baltic neighbours particularly hard. It remains in the collective memory as a time of hardship.[106] The country did recover from the crisis, and entered 2020 with the lowest debt burden of any EU country.[107]

Estonia has the apperance of being a pragmatic country, and has in the last 30 years excelled at being agile and digital.[108] It has a history of seeing opportunity where others see crisis. A clear case arose during extensive cyber attacks on Estonia in 2007.[109] Estonia used the attack to promote the need to address cyber security within NATO. Shortly after the attacks,

NATO accredited the Co-operative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn.[110] Soon Estonia became known as a global heavyweight in cyber security-related knowledge, advising many other states on the matter.[111]

Overarching approach

With a population of only 1.3 million people and low population density, together with being one of the world's most technology-driven nations, Estonia may have been one of the countries best prepared for managing the Covid-19 pandemic. Although its levels of stockpiles or financial resources were not the highest of the NB8 countries, Estonia's government had the advantage of being agile. Was that sufficient when faced with an unknown pandemic?

Digital Identity

Part of Estonia's national identity lies in its high level of digitalisation, allowing for greater levels of agility in its governance at times of crisis.[112] The nation prides itself on developing its technology industries, and 99% of government services are available online.[113] This allowed the state and its services to continue working without major interruptions throughout the crisis.[114] In addition, just forty eight hours after the state of emergency was declared, Estonian civil society organised an international hackathon *Hack The Crisis* involving twenty countries to provide solutions to the Covid-19 crisis.[115] Government endorsement of the hackathon and a strong focus on digital public-private solutions throughout the pandemic proved to be of benefit to Estonia's Strategic Communications. Hence the hackathon and society's high level of digitalisation received positive reviews across international media. They were further employed by domestic sources to market Estonia to the world (hence many articles appeared in English rather than in Estonian).[116]

State of emergency

Once the WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic, Estonia's response was swift. The government declared a state of emergency within one week of the WHO's announcement.[117] According to Estonian officials, it was the boldest move during the pandemic.[118] Before declaring the state of emergency, the government's position had changed rapidly as more became known about the virus and its impact on society.[119] As late as February 27th, the Minister of Interior, Mart Helme, claimed the virus was nothing more than a common cold.[120] Although he was to be proven wrong, this indicates a tension within Estonia's ruling coalition where different political parties lacked consensus on how to approach the virus.[121] Still, Estonia managed to change its approach and agree on a stronger response. From a communications perspective, the declaration of the state of emergency was a bold move by the government, sending a clear signal to the general public as well as countries around the world that Estonia was

> Part of Estonia's national identity lies in its high level of digitalisation, allowing for greater levels of agility in its governance at times of crisis.

aware of the dangers of Covid, and ready to act.[122] Furthermore, it sent a strong signal to the domestic population that they should expect the virus to have a significant impact on their lives.

Science-based approach and creating the Covid-19 Scientific Advisory Board

From the first weeks of the state of emergency a number of research and monitoring processes were introduced to provide data-based information for decision-making. A cross-sectional study was conducted by the researchers of the University of Tartu to ascertain the prevalence of the coronavirus and progress of the epidemic in Estonia. Based on a random statistical sample, people were interviewed and tested across Estonia to give the state evidence-based data for making decisions about which measures shoudl be adopted to curb the spread of the virus.

The creation of the Scientific Advisory Board (Covid-19 tõrje teadusnõukoda) on March 20th was widely lauded as effective.[123] The Advisory Board, coordinated by the Government Office, became to all intents and purposes the main driver of Estonia's Covid-19 response. From a Strategic Communications perspective, it achieved two things:

- By placing scientists in the front line, it reassured the population that recommendations and guidelines were rooted in scientific understanding.[124]
- By removing politicians from the front line of communications, it proved to be less sensitive, as scientists are generally held to offer advice free of political motive; hence it partly removed political bias from the crisis in Estonian society.[125]

Consolidating scientific effort have allowed research and analysis to develop which have proved supportive throughout the management of the pandemic. For example, a wastewater survey was introduced to evaluate the spread of Covid-19 in

different regions.[126] Politicians continued to communicate about the Covid situation and the strategies government was adopting. But as they were no longer the main source of information, the public could take their communications with a degree of reserve, and compare the information with recommendations from the Scientific Advisory Board.[127]

Strong focus on economic response and businesses

The economy was a key aspect of official pandemic communications and response. Ministers emphasised that the 'primary goal of Estonia's state aid package is to protect people from losing their jobs'.[128] This stands in stark contrast to Sweden and Finland who emphasised that support packages or budget amendments were primarily to save lives, and secondly to address livelihoods.[129] Prime Minister Jüri Ratas held dedicated meetings with entrepreneurship organisations to discuss the economic impact of Covid-19.[130] What was perceived as a strong focus on the economy and personal livelihoods was criticised in Estonia's media, leading to debates around the government's prioritising the economy over the lives of its citizens.[131]

Linguistic – Key expressions

Unity and solidarity. In official communications, unity and togetherness were consistently promoted.[132] Notably, in the social responsibility campaign 'You go out - You spread the virus. Stay home!' launched in April.[133] The president called on all Estonians to wave a light in their windows on one evening to encourage solidarity.[134] Although the state of emergency gave rise to coercive measures, persuasive communications through solidarity were consistently used during the first months of 2020. In this respect, a consensus appears to have emerged from Estonian society that this was the right approach.[135]

Uncertainty. A key theme for Covid-19 communications during the first six months of 2020 was one of overarching uncertainty.[136] With a threat as unknown as the coronavirus was in those early months, populations had no alternative but to accept what little information they were given.

In Estonia, uncertainty was exacerbated by increased divisions within the coalition government. The pandemic was, according to some, used by politicians as a vehicle to advance their own agendas.[137] And this concern gained prominence as the divide between hardliners and softliners grew over the question of restrictions.[138] From a communications perspective, it contradicted the appeal to national unity promoted in government communications to society during the first six months of 2020.

Daily press conferences, organised by the temporary crisis communications centre of the government, featured different speakers, ranging from the Prime Minister to public

health officials. Politicians could debate the situation while information to the public continued to flow uninterrupted.[139]

Despite the uncertainty or perhaps because of it the restrictions, recommendations, and regulations from the Advisory Board were broadly accepted by Estonians.[140] Such acceptance may derive from the fact that Estonia's Covid-19 related deaths remained consistently low during the first six months of 2020.[141]

No threat to democracy. Estonia's government coalition comprised a populist party of the right at the time. Yet there was a near absence of debate around the question of removing personal freedoms even though some actors displayed illiberal democratic tendencies.[142] Thus, it might be inferred that Estonians felt broadly confident in their democracy and saw the emergency measures as simply that – temporary emergency measures that would not adversely impact levels of democratic engagement in the country.

***Public access to information*[143]**

The government provided information about Covid-19 in Estonian, Russian, and English languages with the aim of informing both domestic and international audiences.[144] Estonia opened a new helpline on March 16th to release pressure on its existing infrastructure. The hotline was serviced in Estonian, Russian, and English.[145] At its opening, the Interior Minister emphasised the importance of fast, reliable, and verified information. Thus, it could support the aims of the government's proactive communications.

During the state of emergency, the Government Office under the Prime Minister developed a service that came to be known as the Single Point of Information: a back-end database encompassing the whole of government was designed to answer frequently asked questions by the general public and functioned in Estonian, Russian, and English. The aim of the system was to keep public messages as clear and unambiguous as possible. At the peak of the first wave, the system contained over a thousand questions and answers structured according to different themes. Content automatically mirrored Estonia's central Covid crisis webpage (kriis.ee), the national crisis information hotline (1247), the online portal of the Estonia's biggest daily newspaper Postimees, and several libraries.

Russian population

For around quarter of the population, Russian is their mother tongue due to Estonia's immediate proximity to Russia and forced migration during Soviet occupation.[146] In official communications, the government was considered to have successfully provided information to the Russian minority; they admitted to being well informed, and at times even better informed than the Estonian speaking majority.[147] An April 2020 poll showed that by the third week

> A large part of the population was observed to not only comply with the regulations but also appreciate their necessity.

of the state of emergency, 97% of Russian-speaking residents confirmed they were either well informed or rather well informed about topics related to the coronavirus; one third observed that the government provided an important resource.[148] The Russian population sought information from Estonia's media (Postimees and ETV/ETV+). The conscious effort by Estonian authorities to provide information in the Russian language encouraged reliance on Estonian-origin media and decreased audience attachment to Russian-origin TV from 20 to 10%.

Persuasion versus coercion

Declaring a state of emergency sent a strong signal to the population about the severity of the situation. Border closures and restrictions followed, and school closures accompanied a ban on public gatherings and visits to care homes.[149] Despite such coercive measures, official communications were more persuasive in tone. After declaring the state of emergency, the then Prime Minister, Jüri Ratas, asked the public to pull through the crisis together, emphasising that it was not just a health crisis, but an economic one.[150] Ratas highlighted the lack of restrictions on internal movement, although some countries in Europe had implemented them. Still, the government urged the population to avoid as much close contact as possible.[151] Government strategy was reinforced by the Scientific Advisory Board, rendering the government's message more persuasive.[152]

A state of emergency leads to governments gaining extraordinary legislative and agency power. Therefore there is a risk of undermining common liberal democratic practices. To ward off such fears, Estonia's government emphasised that all restrictions under the state of emergency retained a solid foundation in healthcare and medical expertise.[153]

From the first week of the emergency situation the Government Office commissioned regular public opinion surveys to

assess the level of awareness of the public and different subgroups about the risks of Covid-19 spreading and any associated restrictions, the population's readiness to observe official instructions, as well as any specific needs the public would have during the emergency. Throughout the first months of 2020, the general public appeared satisfied with the government's handling of the crisis, and the message of unity and solidarity seems to have registered with the public.[154] A large part of the population was observed to not only comply with the regulations but also appreciate their necessity.[155] The government's Strategic Communications were, however, criticised for engaging excessively with discussions that addressed the interests of elites rather than dealing with concerns of the wider population.[156]

Persuasion through digitalisation

New digital initiatives to find solutions to Covid-19 were encouraged and supported by the government.[157] This represented an effort to maintain public spirits during a time of crisis. It can also be understood as a way of assuring domestic and international audiences that Estonia would stay true to its national identity as a digital society. Estonia also took a decision to digitalise all school materials by the end of 2020. But generally it was able to benefit from its earlier digitalisation policies, allowing for a less stressful change in the ways people and government conducted their everyday business.[158]

Lives and Livelihoods

Financial support

Estonia had enjoyed a vigorous start to 2020 with rising GDP and robust finances.[159] The country then launched an economic support programme of 2 billion Euros during 2020 to lessen the impact of the pandemic.[160] At the launch of the first financial aid package, the government stated that the main priority in designing it was to safeguard jobs to minimise unemployment.[161] Estonia was, in this sense, unique in the NB8 for placing such emphasis on livelihoods in the first state aid mitigation effort.

Estonians were most concerned for the economic consequences of the pandemic.[162] Unlike in Sweden, Latvia, and Lithuania where public health was of greater concern than economic health.[163] The strong focus on economics was criticised by former President Toomas Hendrik Ilves.[164] He pointed out that the 2008-2009 global financial crisis resonated unduly in the collective memory and in the government's response to the virus, leading to a disproportionate focus on livelihoods compared to lives.[165] This was endorsed by part of the general public; which in turn might be seen to challenge Estonia's identity.[166] Being small, agile, and digitalised may be an advantage, but if the elderly and vulnerable were to be left behind, was that really the kind of society Estonians wanted?

This debate, however, featured most prominently among the older age-group as they were most at risk from the virus. Among the young, financial and everyday aspects of a closed-down society became more tangible, with parents having to homeschool their children while unable to go out to work.[167]

Regional coordination

Baltic

In an effort to show unity and cooperation despite tough times, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania resolved to lift border restrictions between the three Baltic countries on May 15th.[168] The press release from Estonia's government outlining the Baltic Bubble emphasised its importance for mutual cooperation in the Baltics, and for reinforcing tri-state unity when faced with an external threat.[169] This may have strengthened ties between the countries and could be argued to have been a Strategic Communications success. It was also seen as a concrete way of handling the crisis, and would be used to compare favourably with the lack of cooperation around border openings between the five Nordic countries.[170]

Just as the Baltic Bubble opened up, border rules with Finland were slightly relaxed. A move that was appreciated in the business sector, given the close trade and cultural relations between Estonia and Finland.[171]

EU/EAA

Official communications from the Estonian government focused on an EU recovery plan to assist livelihoods and a swift recovery, and so avoid the region suffering an enduring economic downturn.[172] Again the immediate emphasis was placed on livelihoods in Estonia's communications. The government also applied for support from the EU solidarity fund which it hoped might mitigate direct costs incurred in the first months of the pandemic[173]

Nordic-Baltic

Estonia signed an agreement with the Nordic Investment Bank (NIB) for a loan of 750 million Euros to cover its immediate costs incurred by the pandemic.[174] As an existing infrastructure, the NIB represents a case of substantive support and collaboration between the NB8 countries.

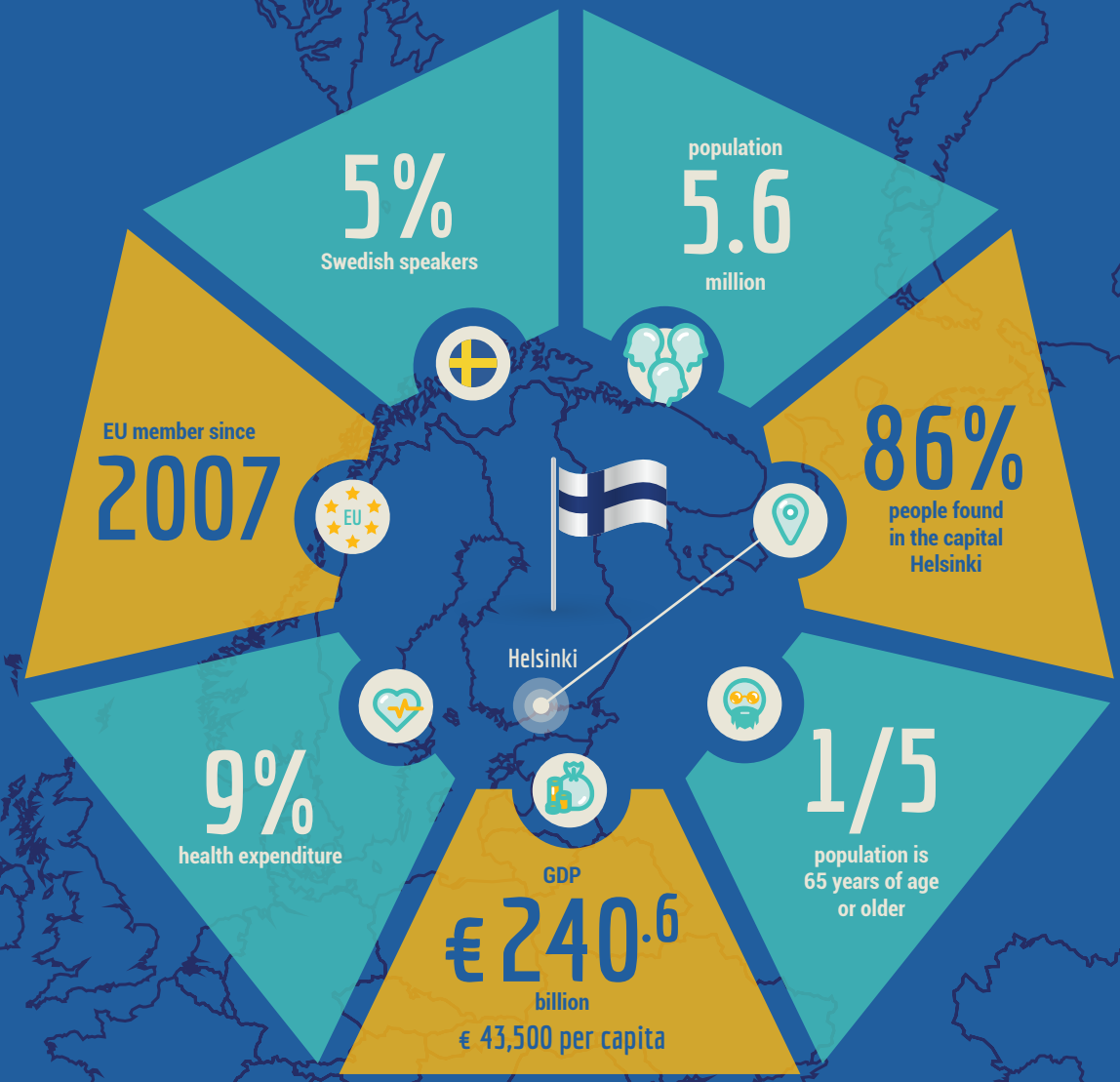
Further NB8 cooperation would be forthcoming in the educational sector where all eight countries, following an Estonian initiative, decided to share digital education tools to support education systems in fellow countries during Covid. This private initiative was co-organised with the government.[175]

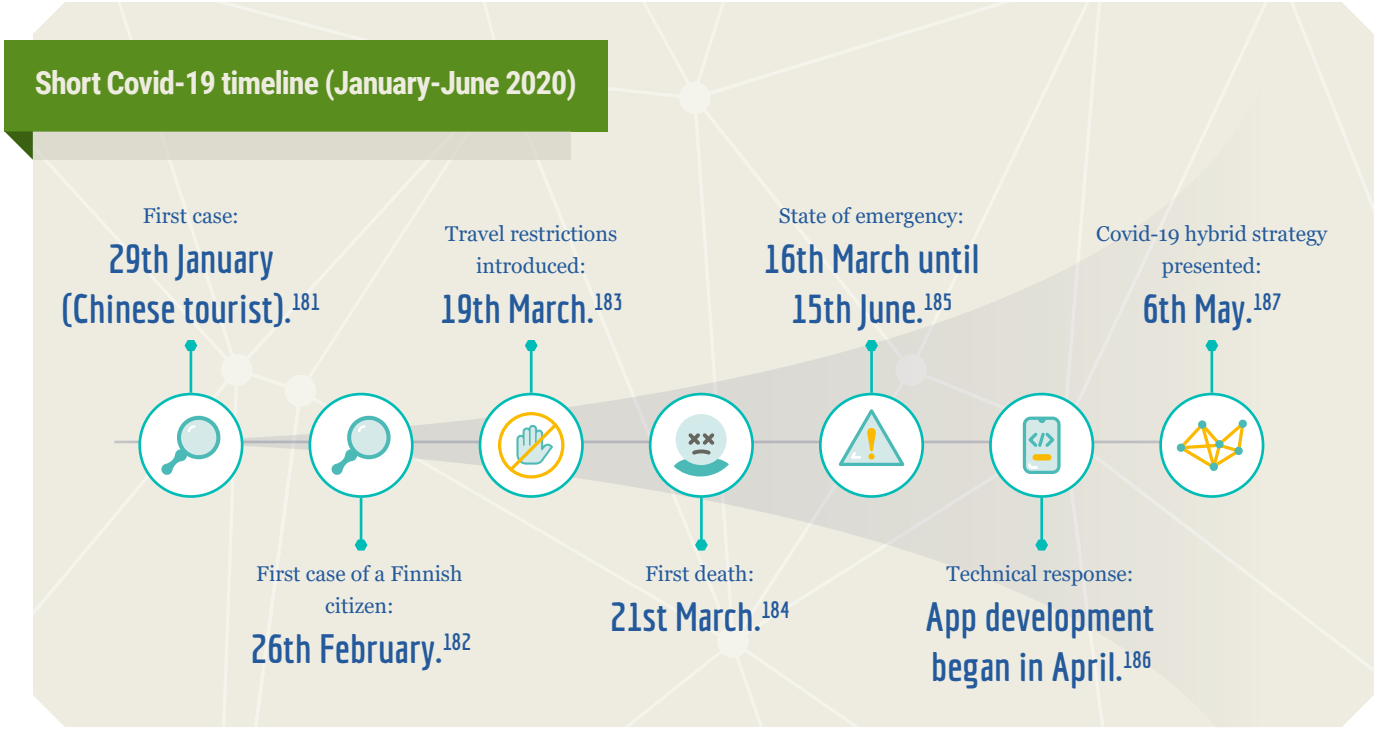
It should be noted that although the Baltic Bubble for travel strengthened the identity of the three Baltic countries as closely integrated partners, juxtaposing a united Baltic and a divided Nordic cluster, it did little to advance the idea of a unified NB8.

FINLAND

Context

Finland has a population of 5.6 million and a notable minority of around 5% Swedish speakers. Swedish is an official language alongside Finnish.[176] The country has an urban population of 86% with the highest concentration of people found in the capital Helsinki.[177] Just over one-fifth of the population is estimated to be 65 years of age and older.[178] The country's GDP (PPP) is estimated to be €240.6 billion (€43,500 per capita) with a health expenditure of 9%.[179] It has been a member of the EU since 2007.[180]





Country Response to Covid-19

Historical consciousness

Finland's recent history differs markedly from its Nordic neighbours. Its long border with Russia and strained relationship with the Soviet Union, the Finnish Winter War, the civil war, the loss of Karelia, and famine are all experiences which fall within the last 150 years.[188] These recent hardships may partly explain why societal barriers to tolerating emergency measures were lower, and particularly when compared to neighbouring Sweden. The decision to implement harsh measures very early on was seen as a contributing factor to Finland's success in containing the virus, especially when compared to Sweden and EU average infection and death statistics.[189] Finns' reluctance to form large crowds may also have contributed to a lower spread of the virus.[190]

Overarching approach

Finland based its approach on an existing plan for an influenza pandemic similar to Denmark's and Iceland's.[191] The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health was in charge of preparatory measures and started planning suitable measures as soon as the virus began to spread on a global scale.[192] Similar to Estonia, Finland was at an early stage of the pandemic when stringent measures were introduced, underscoring its ability to respond.[193]

> National preparedness is an important idea in Finland. Which was put to the test at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Leisure travel in Finland was almost completely banned throughout 2020 – a case of a robust and restrictive approach from Finland.[194] Absence of protest and a poll showing Finns coping well during the first few months of the pandemic suggest how far Finland as a society trusts the intentions of its government.[195] Such reluctance to protest and to comply in society suggests that despite harsh measures introduced on paper, there was never any serious worry on the part of Finns that their individual long-term freedoms might be affected. Or that the government might use Covid as an opportunity to shift Finland gradually away from democracy—a concern expressed in some countries.

National preparedness is an important idea in Finland. Which was put to the test at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Strict measures were introduced following the government's decision to announce a state of emergency for the first time since the Second World War. The government identified Strategic Communications as a key approach to crisis management early on, along with developing situational awareness and leadership.[196] In Finland, trust in government and authorities is considered to be very high, which may explain why strict measures, including roadblocks and fines, met with little protest from the population.[197]

Opening emergency stockpiles

On March 23rd, Finland took a decisive step in underlining the gravity of the virus when it opened its emergency stockpiles to supply PPE (personal protective equipment).[198] A unique feature of Finland among the NB8, the country has stockpiles built up particularly for sudden crises.[199] Although stockpiles were perhaps not pivotal, they may be seen as an important communicative tool for the government. The move simultaneously signalled the gravity of the situation – stockpiles are rarely opened up – and resonated with Finland's sense of collective identity as a well prepared and resilient country.

Linguistic lenses - Key expressions

National Preparedness. In official communications concerning the pandemic, national preparedness was a key concept highlighted by Prime Minister Sanna Marin when she mentioned *prepared* and *preparedness* seventeen times in one speech in February 2020.[200] Press releases and statements from both government and governmental agencies continued to reinforce how Finland was, and remains, well prepared for a crisis.[201] A preemptiveness enshrined in the legal system would allow for swift and proportionate measures.[202] The preparedness of the nation became a topic for debate in domestic media, often conjoined with a sense of national pride for the continuously low levels of infections and broad compliance with regulations.[203] Thus, it proved a successful government strategy to highlight preparedness as it boasted the nation's self esteem and perhaps contributed to Finns continuing to comply with restrictions throughout the period.

Public access to information

The first helpline specifically set up for the Covid-19 pandemic was introduced in Helsinki at the beginning of March to ease pressure on the normal lines of communication to the health services.[204] Around the same time a general information helpline for Covid-19 was made available by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. The helpline continues to be available in Finnish, and to some extent in Swedish and English languages.[205]

Persuasion versus coercion

State of emergency

Within a week of the WHO declaring the Covid-19 a pandemic, Finland announced a state of emergency.[206] It entailed a suspension of face-to-face teaching, border closures, and limits on public gatherings.[207] The immediate shutdown of large parts of society was well received by the public. This was attributed to the clear, calm communications of the government.[208]

Roadblocks around the Nyland region[209]

Due to a relatively high spread of the virus in the Nyland region, and following a unanimous vote in Parliament, roadblocks were introduced around Nyland between March 28th and April 19th.[210] These affected leisure travel – *necessity* became the guiding principle for the police, supported by the defence forces who carried out vehicle controls.[211]

The police reported that roadblocks were not a cause for concern; nor did they antagonise the public, but were met with a sense of understanding and compliance.[212] Although few fines were issued – only eleven during the first week – the move clearly signalled to the Finnish population the true gravity of the situation.[213] Roadblocks became a visible measure of coercion introduced by the government. The absence of vocal protest from society against the new measures

would again suggest a high level of trust toward the government and its policies.[214]

In addition to high trust in the government, Finland displays a collective identity of a resilient and prepared nation. *Sisu* is a word in the Finnish language which has no direct translation. It describes a specific type of resolve or grit in Finnish collective identity which could be attributed to its long history of hardship and having endured severe challenges. During the state of emergency, a survey recorded that 96% of the Finnish population said they would comply with regulations set out by the government.[215] Moreover, 87% of responders were happy or fairly happy to follow its lead. Although those numbers decreased after June 2020, it nevertheless represents a remarkably high level of compliance during the first months of the pandemic. Finnish *sisu* may have also contributed to the overall compliance and the low number of complaints.[216]

Publication of the Hybrid Strategy

At the start of May, Finland's Government moved from extensive restrictive measures to implementing a Hybrid Strategy based on the 'test, trace, isolate and treat' approach.[217] The strategy focused on controlled and gradual dismantling of restrictive measures while preventing the spread of the virus so as to shield risk groups and retain adequate capacity within the health system.[218] By calling it a Hybrid Strategy, the government ensured it could address any problem from protecting the health system to exercising economic measures. The idea of hybrid is also linked to uncertainty regarding the virus at that point. Which allowed for greater flexibility and adjustments to the strategy drawing on new research data and indicators for implementation.[219] The introduction of the Hybrid Strategy was accompanied by rhetoric from politicians suggesting a greater concern with livelihoods and a move away from the immediate focus on the threat to lives. [220]

Lives and Livelihoods

Proportionality

Government officials highlighted the importance of nuance and proportionality in communicating throughout the crisis.[221] It was understood that divergent target audiences might perceive messages in different ways, and could comply to varying degrees. There was an awareness of risk surrounding parts of the elderly population who might interpret messages in a more extreme form, and go on to isolate themselves from society and so endanger their own lives or psychological well-being.[222] This sensitivity lends a compassionate flavour to their communications: Finland seems to have been more acutely aware than other NB8 countries.

Finland forward, together[223]

The Finnish government initiated a campaign with the slogan 'Finland forward,

> There was an awareness of risk surrounding parts of the elderly population who might interpret messages in a more extreme form, and go on to isolate themselves from society and so endanger their own lives or psychological well-being.

together' – an inter-agency project spanning more than two years where citizens and officials are encouraged to share stories on social media about how Finland works together in a crisis. This project aims to capitalise on the importance of psychological resilience, defined as one of the vital dimensions of Finnish society and Finland's national Strategic Communications.[224] The campaign endures with a new Strategic Communications team appointed to the Prime Minister's office to advance the campaign until the end of 2022.

Financial aid

The government presented four budget amendments in the first half of 2020 to address the challenges posed by the pandemic.[225] The first in March was directed at saving lives through direct financial support to the health sector and the costs of preparedness.[226] Subsequent budget amendments favoured securing livelihoods by increasing support to businesses.[227] These measures included temporary relaxation of regulations around unemployment insurance benefits. This was in line with Finns' concern for protecting the mental health and well-being of its citizens by providing additional levels of stability to society.

Regional coordination

Nordic

Finland, like many countries around the world, closed and restricted entry to its borders.[228] Border closures led to logistical difficulties in the early days, as land borders with Sweden are barely discernible. Although commuters were allowed to cross the border, it struck many residents in the region as an unduly coercive measure that could only feed suspicion and mistrust on both sides.[229] Despite the fact that relationships at official levels did not change during this time, failure to coordinate policy across borders impacted the image of the Nordic region as an integrated alliance.[230]

EU/EAA

Finland remained engaged with the EU throughout the crisis, emphasising the

need to coordinate various issues from the economic response to the lifting of restrictions.

Consistent with many countries in the EU, Finland was among those to reintroduce temporary border controls at their internal borders – a move discordant with the EU's principle of free movement within the union. As Finland's course of action followed that of many other EU countries and lasted for only one month, it does not appear to have adversely affected the image of Finland in the eyes of other EU member states.

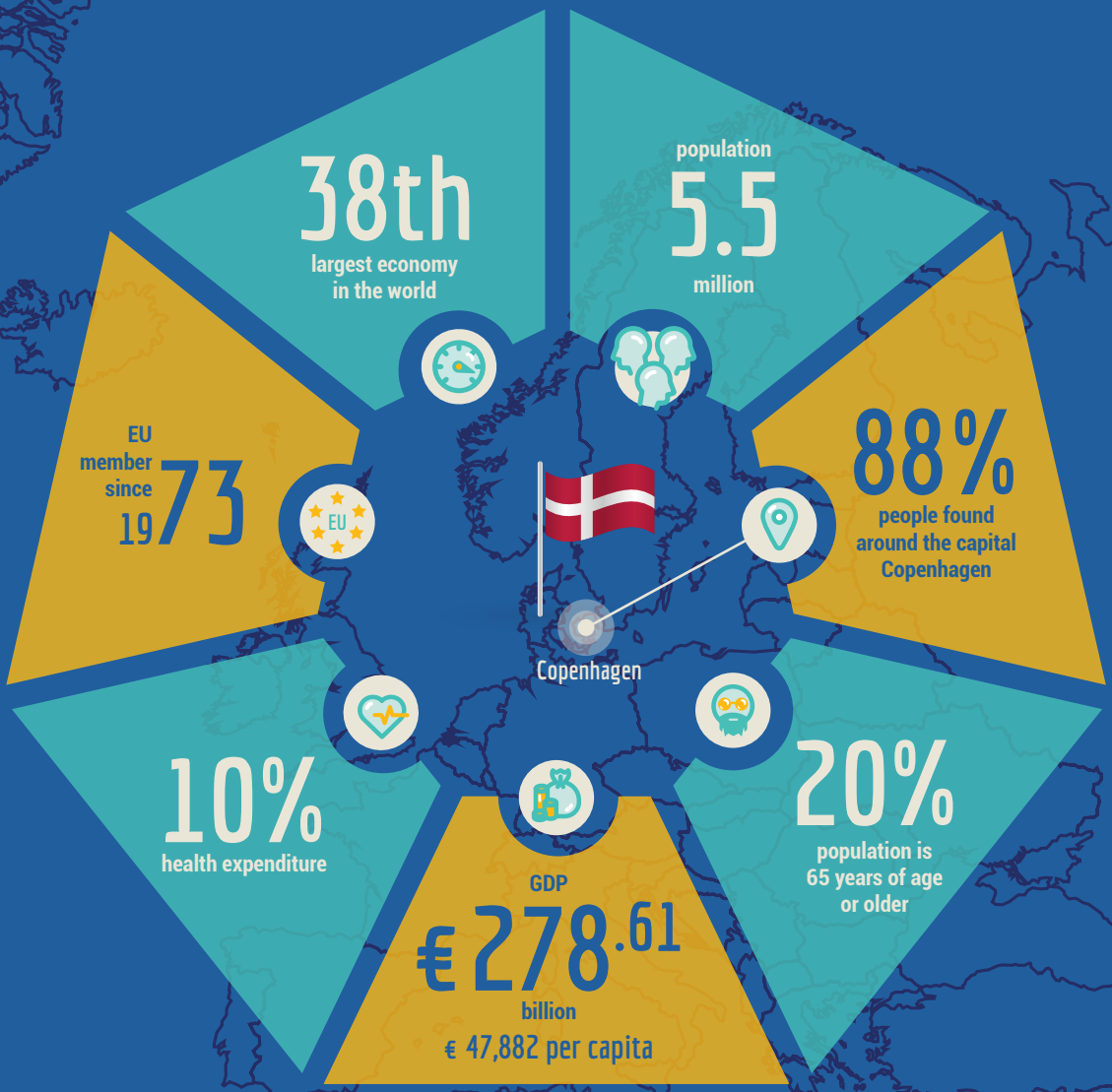
Nordic-Baltic

Finland was invited to join the Baltic Bubble towards the end of Spring 2020.[231] That the Baltic Bubble was deemed successful enough to be enlarged, signals a success for the NB8. At the same time, the negative effects arising from a near absence of Nordic state cooperation remain a bigger problem in future if NB8 identity is to be strengthened. Similar to Norway (see below), Finland struggled to administer border closures with neighbouring Sweden which reported significantly higher infection rates due to its alternative response to the pandemic. Finnish Nordic historian Johan Strang observed, 'The coronavirus crisis is a symptom that all is not well with this [Nordic] collaboration'.[232] First, there was no joint Nordic approach to tackling the pandemic. Second, the effects failed to produce any Nordic or Nordic-Baltic travel bubble at any point.

DENMARK

Context

Denmark has a population of just over 5.5 million with an urban population of 88%.[233] The highest concentration of people lives in and around the capital Copenhagen.[234] Approximately 20% of the population are over 65 years of age and constitute a high risk group of vulnerability to Covid-19.[235] The country's GDP (PPP) is estimated to be €278.61 billion (GDP per capita €47,882) with a health expenditure of approximately 10%. It was ranked the 38th largest economy in the world according to the World Bank in 2019.[236] Denmark joined the EU in 1973.[237]



Country response to Covid-19

Historical consciousness

Similar to Sweden, the 2004 Tsunami in South East Asia also affected Danish historical consciousness and their approach to crisis management. But the last crisis to have had a dramatic impact on Denmark was the 2008-2009 global financial crisis.[243] It shaped a collective memory of economic struggle in NB8 countries, including Denmark.[244] One might surmise that this collective memory guided the Danish response during the first months of Covid-19.[245] Furthermore, that this crisis led to Denmark's proactive response to the Covid-19 crisis. A clear focus on close crisis cooperation was apparent across all sectors of employment and in the early implementation of financial mitigation.[246]

Overarching approach

Denmark's approach was similar to Iceland's and Norway's, characterised by their efforts to enforce proactive recommendations and regulations to fight the virus on a national level. This was underlined when Danish authorities communicated firm measures on the same day the WHO declared Covid-19 to be a pandemic.[247] The measures implemented were strongly influenced by advice from health experts, particularly drawing on the advice from the National Board of Health.[248] Similar to Iceland, Denmark also drew heavily on recommendations from its Influenza

Pandemic Preparedness Plan of 2013.[249] However, though health experts guided the implementation of measures, it was the Danish Government that retained the final say before official implementation.[250] Therefore, in contrast to Sweden, Danish politicians held central roles in communication and decision-making during the first months of the pandemic. The political consensus on measures put forward by the one-party, minority government helped the management of the pandemic during the first wave.

Denmark's response strategy was based around three phases: Containment phase, Mitigation phase, and Gradual Opening phase.[251] Similar to Finland's Hybrid Strategy, Denmark focused on 'slowing down the spread of the virus, limiting the number of infected individuals, reducing the burden on the health system and the Danish society as a whole.'[252] This objective suggests the Danish authorities took an overarching approach, encompassing both lives and livelihoods.

Denmark was initially placed into the Containment phase: people were offered general hygiene advice, efficient diagnosis of infected individuals, isolation of positive Covid-19 cases, and confining close contacts to home-quarantine.[253] However, as the virus spread, Denmark quickly found itself moving into the Mitigation phase by 11th March.[254] During this time, the Danish population was placed under the strictest national regulations seen during the first six months of Covid-19. They were introduced a day before Norway brought in similar measures, only to be layered with persuasive communications techniques and coercive measures including bans on large groups meeting, border restrictions, and school closures.[255]

After a month of Mitigation, the Prime Minister announced the early signs of a decline in the infection rate.[256] Soon after, the Gradual Opening phase was declared.[257] Whereupon, on the 15th of April, some children returned to school.[258] Denmark was one of the first countries in Europe to allow the general reopening of primary schools.[259] The government's swift approach and early reopening gained international praise,[260] offering other countries hope for 'cautious optimism'.[261] However, Danish professional and academic commentators from diverse areas of expertise expressed concern about the reopening.[262] They argued that it was happening too soon and would seriously impact the health sector, prompting debate about normalising livelihoods at the cost of saving lives.[263]

Throughout the first six months of Covid-19, government communications prioritised engaging with Danes inside and beyond national borders. Information was delivered through an inter-agency effort: the Prime Minister, the Minister of Health and the Elderly, the Director of the National Board of Health, the Academic Director of Statens Serum Institut, the Chief of Police, and the Director of the Ministry of Foreign

> *Samfundssind* – this particularly Danish concept prioritises society over personal interest, and became a keyword in authoritative communications during the early months of Covid-19.

Affairs.[264] Close inter-agency coordination in communications and particularly firm communication during the Mitigation phase conveyed the gravity of the situation.

Linguistic lenses – Key expressions

The distribution of information was organised through several media outlets and platforms.[265]

Stand together by keeping distance. This exhortation was used on several occasions by the Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, and later heard in Queen Margrethe's address to the Danish nation. Danes were urged to work together as a community, even if they could not be together in the same place. The Prime Minister went so far as to describe it as the Danish strategy.[266] This message emphasised community feeling, appealing to social attitudes and behaviour in order to gain compliance.

When the Queen incorporated 'stand together by keeping distance' into her address, it had the effect of strengthening its aim and message: the Queen rarely speaks to the nation on specific questions.[267] More than 50% of the Danish population listened to or watched her address, suggesting a high level of interest[268], and underscoring the extraordinary situation for which the speech served as a persuasive communications tool.[269]

Samfundssind roughly translates as 'community spirit'. This particularly Danish concept prioritises society over personal interest, and became a keyword in authoritative communications during the early months of Covid-19.[270] The word was employed to motivate Danes to comply with new recommendations and regulations, speaking to social empathy and an already strong Danish sense of community. *Samfundssind* is supposed to trigger individual responsibility for the whole of society, even if one might not be personally worried about getting sick.[271]

Public access to information

Information regarding Covid-19 was provided through several lines of communication, such as press conferences on television

and radio, Facebook, and the government's official Covid-19 website.[272] These mediums provided information based on the implemented recommendations and regulations. Any information distributed was provided in Danish as well as several other languages, such as English, Turkish, Polish, German, Farsi, Arabic, and Somali.[273] In early March, communications centred on good hygiene to avoid spreading the virus; to which effect posters were produced in seven languages, but excluding Danish.[274] Coronavirus hotlines were established to provide information to those seeking further clarification.[275]

Persuasion versus coercion

Although both persuasive and coercive measures were employed in the early months of the response, Danish authorities drew more readily on persuasion rooted in *samfundssind*. Persuasion took the form of recommendations in the Containment phase – keeping one's distance, washing hands, general hygiene advice, self isolation, and home-quarantine.[276] They sought compliance from citizens without making individuals feel restricted in their daily lives. This approach was criticised by a virologist from the University of Copenhagen who called for stricter measures and argued against excessive personal discretion and responsibility.[277] Still, the Minister of Health held firm to the policy direction.[278] Balancing persuasion and coercion during the Containment phase was difficult. During those early months, the whole world found itself questioning which measures might best stem the advance of the virus.

As the Mitigation phase was implemented on March 11th the tone changed. Recommendations became advice with a sense of urgency as well as outright bans – some backed up by fines.[279] Danes were subjected to greater restrictions and to some extent coerced into compliance for fear of being penalised if they did not. The Prime Minister announced that from then on educational institutions, including daycare, would be closed, civil servants would work from home, and nightclubs, restaurants and pubs would also close for a period of time.[280] That was followed by further bans: on 17th March the Prime Minister announced a temporary ban on holding or attending events or activities where more than 10 people were gathered. The fine for non-compliance was set at 1,500 DKK (200 EUR).[281] Amendments to the Epidemic Act, unanimously enforced by Parliament, authorised the Minister of Health to implement bans on larger gatherings. It communicated the gravity of the situation[282] and Parliament's ability to achieve consensus at a dangerous time when swift action was required.[283] However, this legislative initiative drew criticism from professionals and academics for infringement of democratic freedoms;[284] it runs counter to the liberal mindset of the Nordic countries.[285]

Overall, the appeal of Denmark's authorities to the population's *samfundssind* was

successful. Community spirit and mobilisation were captured symbolically on the 16th of March when individuals organised a national clap-along to raise community spirits.[286] Although there were some breaches of the regulations, society generally reacted favourably to both persuasive and coercive measures.[287] Disobedience was rarely captured in Danish news reports. Moreover, approval ratings for the Prime Minister doubled between March[288] and April,[288] suggesting that Danes trusted their government's handling of the pandemic. No major public demonstrations against the measures were organised and no major disagreements between the political parties were apparent during those early months of 2020. It was safe to assume that Danish society had complied with the measures which probably contributed to the early reopening of society and fall in infection rates.[289]

Finally, the launch of the *Smittestop* app showed the Danish public was open to using it; on its first day, it had 245,000 downloads. That figure reportedly increased to almost 1.4 million by September (a quarter of the adult population), with 400 people logging onto the app to register they had been infected.[290] By comparison, the Latvian app *ApturiCOVID* – the first app of its

> In the early months of 2020, Denmark's government asserted its core objective as one of saving lives and safeguarding the whole of Danish society.

kind – was downloaded by 40,000 people in its first week and would be downloaded 300,000 times (one fifth of adults).[291]

Lives and Livelihoods

In the early months of 2020, Denmark's government asserted its core objective as one of saving lives and safeguarding the whole of Danish society.[292] It did not mean, however, that livelihoods were neglected.

In early March, days before Denmark introduced its strict regulations, the government introduced measures to mitigate any immediate, negative financial consequences.[293] By late March, the Prime Minister had announced the availability of three support packages for employees and companies amounting to more than 285 million DKK (38.3 million euro), promising that further compensation would be forthcoming within months.[294] Although financial measures were taken to protect people's homes and employment, these were not inconsistent with attempts to combat the negative effects of the virus in other countries' economies. Meanwhile Denmark's early and gradual reopening of society was also a policy intended to safeguard businesses. That said, the focus on saving lives was prioritised. 35.7 million DKK (4.8 million euro) was allocated to fighting loneliness among the disabled, and similar amounts to related problems.[295] Addressing mental health specifically, a short film was screened by the health authorities to demonstrate that a quick phone call could make a big difference to a sufferer.[296] This message ran on the state broadcaster TV2 and on social media platforms to reach wider target audiences.[297]

Regional coordination

Nordic

Traditionally, Nordic countries enjoy close cooperation. However, it was challenged during the first wave of Covid-19 due to

divergent policy responses. In March, Denmark, like many other countries in Europe, closed its borders, including to all Nordic countries. Nevertheless, because Norway and Iceland were able to meet the country's travel requirements, Denmark opened its borders to them before it did to Sweden and Finland.[298] Although the country's official relations did not suffer any adverse effect from border restrictions and closures with its Nordic neighbours, that sense of unity was tested.

EU/EAA

Collaboration between the EU and Denmark was rarely a cause for concern during the first wave; indeed Denmark called for greater EU collaboration.[299] But like most NB8 countries, Denmark also enforced border closures in March to non-Danish travellers and non-permanent residents – consequently other EU member states.[300] This policy showed EU member states willing to favour initiatives designed to prevent the rapid spread of the virus. Which in turn undermined fundamental EU principles of unrestricted movement within the Union.

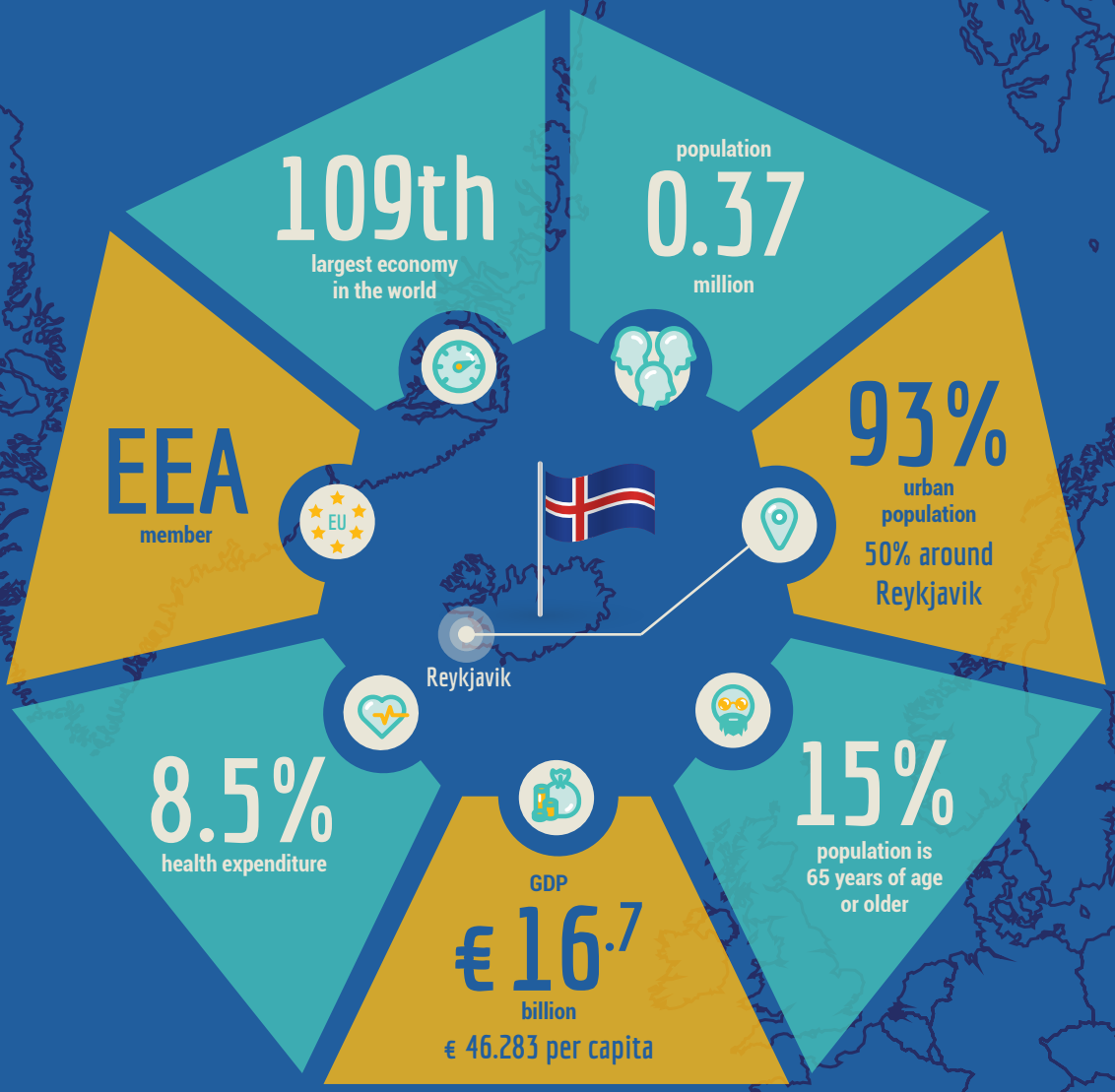
Nordic-Baltic

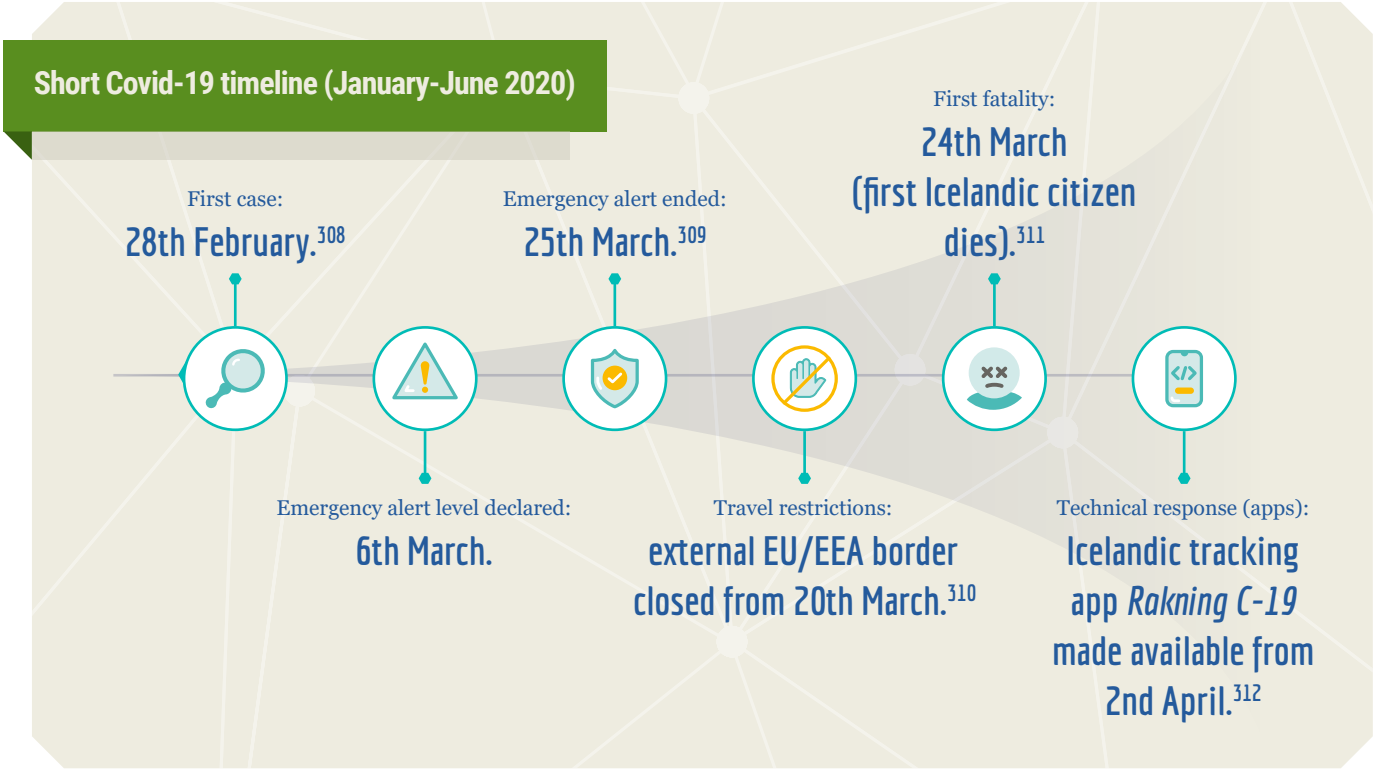
NB8 communications around the pandemic were set at ministerial level in early March.[301] Discussions primarily took place in video conferences where ministers discussed the need for cooperation. However, the only implemented coordination was seen through a new network of consular directors who were tasked with repatriating citizens stranded abroad and returning them safely to their countries within the NB8.[302]

ICELAND

Context

Iceland has a population of just under 370,000.[303] The country has an urban population of 93.3% and 50% of them live in or around the capital, Reykjavik.[304] Roughly 15% are aged 65 or over, therefore in the high risk age group.[305] The country's GDP (PPP) is €16.7 billion (€46.283 per capita) with a health expenditure of approximately 8.5%. It was ranked the 109th economy in the world according to the World Bank in 2019.[306] Iceland is not an EU member but an EEA member.[307]





Country response to Covid-19

Historical consciousness

Among its NB8 allies, Iceland is the only country accustomed to natural emergencies in the form of extreme weather conditions, avalanches, volcanic eruptions and frequent earthquakes.[313] Such events suggest that Icelandic society might be predisposed to complying with authorities and experts in times of crisis.[314] In the early months of the Covid-19 outbreak, Iceland's population and authorities could draw parallels with previous crises.[315]

Like other NB8 countries, Iceland's economy suffered greatly during the financial crisis that began in 2008.[316] At an early stage, the Government communicated clearly that they were better prepared for Covid-19 as a result of the 2008 experience.[317] Significantly, 80% of respondents to a poll in March stated they were more concerned about the economic effects of Covid-19 than its impact on health.[318] Mindful of this sentiment, the government acted promptly, providing large amounts of financial help in those early months.[319]

Overarching approach

The small and accessible population offered a considerable advantage in tracing the spread of the virus and managing the pandemic response.[320]

Iceland's early response was driven by a collaborative approach whereby politicians allowed the health authorities and experts to take a scientific lead.[321] Transparency, i.e. truthful and timely provision of available information about the crisis, guided the expert- and government- driven approach,[322] and should be viewed as a communications tool used by experts to raise awareness, and build support and trust around recommendations and regulations.[323]

To deal with the pandemic, Iceland applied its Civil Protection Emergency Levels, which consists of three phases: *Uncertainty*, *Alert*, and *Emergency*; and the National Pandemic and Influenza Preparedness Plan, which is one of three types of emergency plans in the Icelandic Civil Protection. By the 27th January, two weeks before the WHO declared the coronavirus to be a global pandemic, Iceland was already introducing its Uncertainty phase.[324] That was followed by a further anticipatory measure: on 6th March, five days before the global pandemic was declared, and as soon as Iceland had detected its first case of person-to-person transmission, the country's Chief Epidemiologist together with the Civil Protection Department of the National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police instigated the highest phase of civil protection – the Emergency level.[325] Iceland's authorities drew heavily on the existing Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Plan when enacting this measure. Triggering the Emergency phase did not lead immediately to any dramatic change in society. However, it communicated strongly that further changes were to come.[326]

Although Iceland enforced firm regulations, it never imposed a complete lockdown of society.[327] Iceland's authoritative response would be seen in the way they used persuasion, making recommendations around personal hygiene, and softened otherwise coercive regulations to restrict public gatherings that would incur fines and partial school closures.[328]

In order to analyse and sequence positive coronavirus samples, Icelandic agencies cooperated with the private company deCODE Genetics, a subsidiary of the American multinational biopharmaceutical company, Amgen. This type of initiative involving a private company providing temporary free testing and investing its own resources in tracking the spread of the infection was unprecedented. Throughout the crisis, deCODE Genetics worked hand-in-hand with Iceland's Directorate of Health. This partnership allowed Iceland to instigate screening early in the pandemic and produce an in-depth understanding of the viral spread and asociated symptoms. Free testing offered by deCODE Genetics for a time to any willing Icelander helped to detect and research asymptomatic and mild cases.[329] The initial controversy over data protection was quickly resolved by classifying deCODE Genetics' screening as clinical work.[330] This partnership, providing valuable early insights into the nature of the pandemic, drew international attention and

> Although Iceland enforced firm regulations, it never imposed a complete lockdown of society.

contributed to raising Iceland's profile. In the early months, Iceland, with its pioneering approach to private-public partnership, tested proportionately more individuals than most countries.[331]

In addition, the *Rakning C-19* tracking app, downloaded by some 40% of Icelanders, was well received by the population[332] but did not prove to be a game-changer in contact tracing.[333]

Various key communicators were evident during the first six months. Namely, the Chief Epidemiologist, the Director of Health, and the Chief Superintendent at the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management.[334] Often they were referred to as 'the triumvirate' or 'the trio', becoming the face of Covid-19 information, and were viewed as a source of trust as they emphasised their transparency[335] and humility.[336] Rather than display an uncomfortably draconian attitude, their communications remained sympathetic and accessible, always foregrounding evidence-based thinking in their attempts to educate the population.[337] Consequently, the public felt that it had retained some freedom of choice in complying with the recommendations and regulations. Public trust in these three individuals has never dropped below 90% during the pandemic.[338]

The key communicators also stressed they did not have all the answers[339] – in an attempt to win over the public, this represented a communications tool to demonstrate that the Covid-19 virus was new to everyone in this climate of uncertainty. While the triumvirate occupied the foreground, the Government and Prime Minister made frequent appearances, particularly at dedicated government press conferences.[340] Where, nevertheless, the Prime Minister would highlight the need for the expert-driven approach.[341]

Linguistic lenses - Key expressions

Certain themes were repeated during the dissemination of information by public figures and on online platforms.

Personal and collective responsibility. Authorities drew on variations on a theme of responsibility during the early months – working together and community spirit in a time of crisis.[342] The Chief Superintendent at the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management observed 'we must do this, each person for themselves and all together'.[343] The Chief Epidemiologist saw cooperation as the key to combating the virus.[344]

In response, a catchphrase emerged in Icelandic society: 'I Obey Víðir'. This phrase rhymes in the Icelandic language and it became a catch-all signal for people to give their best effort to contain the risk of infection. The phrase incorporates the name of Civil Protection and Emergency Management Division manager Víðir Reynisson, a prominent figure in Iceland's pandemic response.[345] A sense of togetherness prompted this catchphrase – to obey Víðir was to demonstrate that one was part of the community, and despite the connection to police authority, it had a sense of levity and humour, while simultaneously highlighting the high degree of authoritative legitimacy attached to the police force.

Public access to information

Dissemination of information was diverse – a blend of daily press conferences until mid-May, the official Covid-19 website, covid.is, and information campaigns.[346] By providing information, the aim was to educate the public to make evidence-based decisions about following the guidelines.[347] Perceived primarily as positive, some negative reactions were however forthcoming, suggesting government agencies in March had failed to address minority groups.[348] 15% of the country's population does not speak Icelandic, which makes distributing information more challenging.[349] Minority groups reportedly felt ignored during these vital communications stages.[350] Following these complaints, the communications problem was resolved with provision in eleven languages.[351]

Persuasion versus coercion

Before the Emergency Alert level was declared in March, measures inclined more towards persuasion. Agencies urged and recommended that people keep their distance and wash their hands, while providing transparent information[352] in an appeal to Icelanders' sense of personal responsibility without limiting their way of life. As in Latvia and Denmark, both tone and measures would gradually change once the virus began to spread and a sense of pandemic fatigue started to set in.

After declaring the Emergency on the 6th March, measures shifted from a persuasive, to a more coercive tone – recommenda-

tions would be replaced by restrictions and outright bans. March was characterised by firmer regulations such as closing colleges and universities and banning large gatherings.[353] Fines and imprisonment for severe violations were introduced. Although fines were rarely used and no one was detained.[354] Measures are assumed to have arisen from the need to exercise caution and not because of extensive lawbreaking.[355]

Alternative methods of persuasion included a new social distancing song featuring famous Icelandic musicians and the triumvirate.[356] The song adapted a well-known melody, rewriting the text to highlight the importance of following the regulations, working together and obeying Víðir.[357]

Although these measures impacted society as a whole, former members of the Icelandic parliament criticised them for being too relaxed.[358] They argued that the Government should take stricter measures to eliminate the spread of Covid-19 and not simply contain it.[359] With a less than complete lock-down, people nevertheless felt measures to be adequate and should stop short of overly regulating society.[360] At the end of April, an International Gallup poll, revealed that 96% of Icelandic respondents were satisfied and trusted the authoritative handling of the virus to date.[361]

Lives and Livelihoods

The Icelandic Government communicated from an early stage that their 'priorities were to limit the pandemic's damage to our citizens' health and our social and economic infrastructure'.[362] These words would later be carried over into several initiatives.

Covid-19 impacted all economic sectors in Iceland during the first six months. Many livelihoods were affected. As a pillar of the economy, tourism was hit especially hard due to travel restrictions.[363] The government was quick to communicate to the population that economic relief would be introduced, and on the 10th March, the economic action plan was announced.[364] The plan focused on 'extending tax deadlines, providing relief for tourism services, creating a marketing campaign for tourism, increasing benefits, developing infrastructure projects and cooperating with the Icelandic Financial Services Association'.[365]

The plan was subsequently carried out through a three-step package during the spring of 2020.[366] The financial contribution received a mixed response in April in newspaper editorials. In the tourism sector some saw the measures as exceeding expectations while others criticised them for not prioritising the sector sufficiently.[367] This underlined conflicting conversations in society around financial support.

Support for the economy could be seen in the way that travel inside the country was permitted from May. The government went so far as to provide Icelanders with domestic travel vouchers: 5,000 ISK (33 Euros) was distributed to each Icelander

Personal health, particularly mental health, was impacted by the restrictions which limited people's ability to socialise.

in the full knowledge that this token amount would have little impact.[368] However, it was to be a symbolic gesture reflecting the government's efforts to maintain support across society.[369]

People's health was valued through efficient and strict implementation of recommendations and regulations: the state aimed to save lives, especially those in high-risk groups.[370] Iceland like other NB8 countries, experienced a period of medical swab shortages due to high demand.[371] In turn, this led to the Chief Epidemiologist voicing his concerns following a clear failure of communications on the swab shortage.[372]

Personal health, particularly mental health, was impacted by the restrictions which limited people's ability to socialise. Consequently, mental health services received a financial boost of 540 million ISK (35 million euro) to include communications campaigns promoting the need to safeguard citizens' mental health.[373] A 'phone friends scheme' was introduced where volunteers signed up to make regular phone calls to people who lived alone and were over the age of eighty five – a way of mitigating the negative health effect.[374]

One-off wage enhancements were granted as a mark of gratitude to individuals working in the health sector, recognising the increased pressure of working hours and the increased chance of infection.[375]

Regional coordination

Nordic

Nordic cooperation was most apparent during March and April. Nordic Ministers addressed the issue of their citizens stranded in Nordic countries due to closed or restricted borders.[376] Governments acted by reaffirming that they were working towards Nordic solidarity. It drove their efforts to repatriate those stranded.[377] Their exchanges further addressed the need for longer-term cooperation in post-Covid times to re-energise Nordic tourism and trade.[378]

The Chief Epidemiologist of Iceland meets regularly with Nordic counterparts. Such meetings happened almost weekly throughout the pandemic. The Director of Health and Chief of Police for Civil Protection also maintain regular contact with Nordic counterparts.

EU/EEA

Iceland is not part of the EU, but it is an EEA/EFTA member state.[379] Nonetheless, close ties with the EU were evident during the first months with the establishment of a non-exclusion agreement.[380] Iceland was not to be excluded from the preliminary EU ban on exports of medical equipment outside the EU, reinforcing cooperation between Iceland and the EU.[381]

Like other NB8 countries, Iceland restricted and closed its external borders to foreign nationals.[382] Though this initiative runs counter to the principle of free movement between Schengen member states, it was implemented as essential to suppress the spread of the virus.

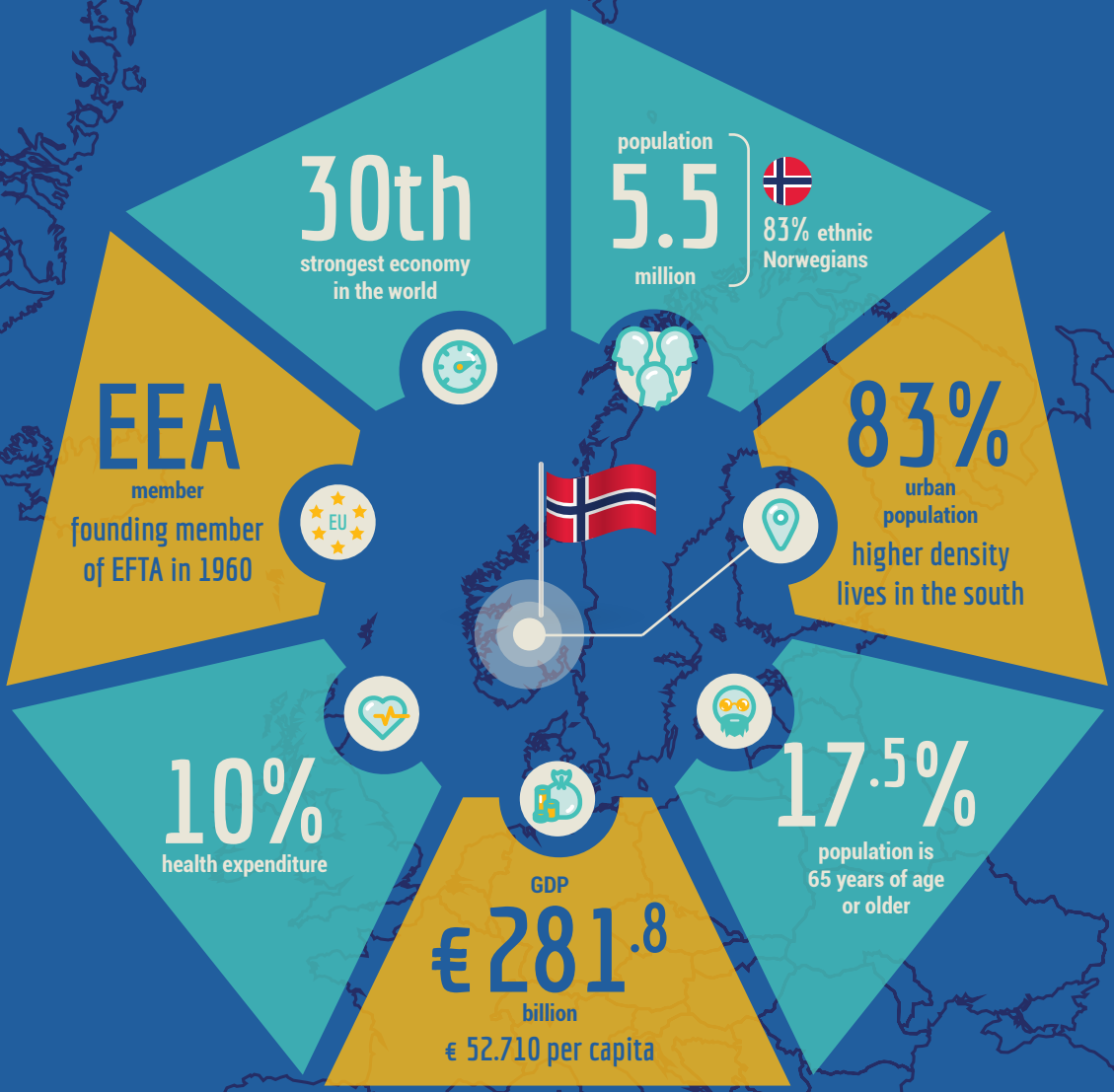
Nordic-Baltic

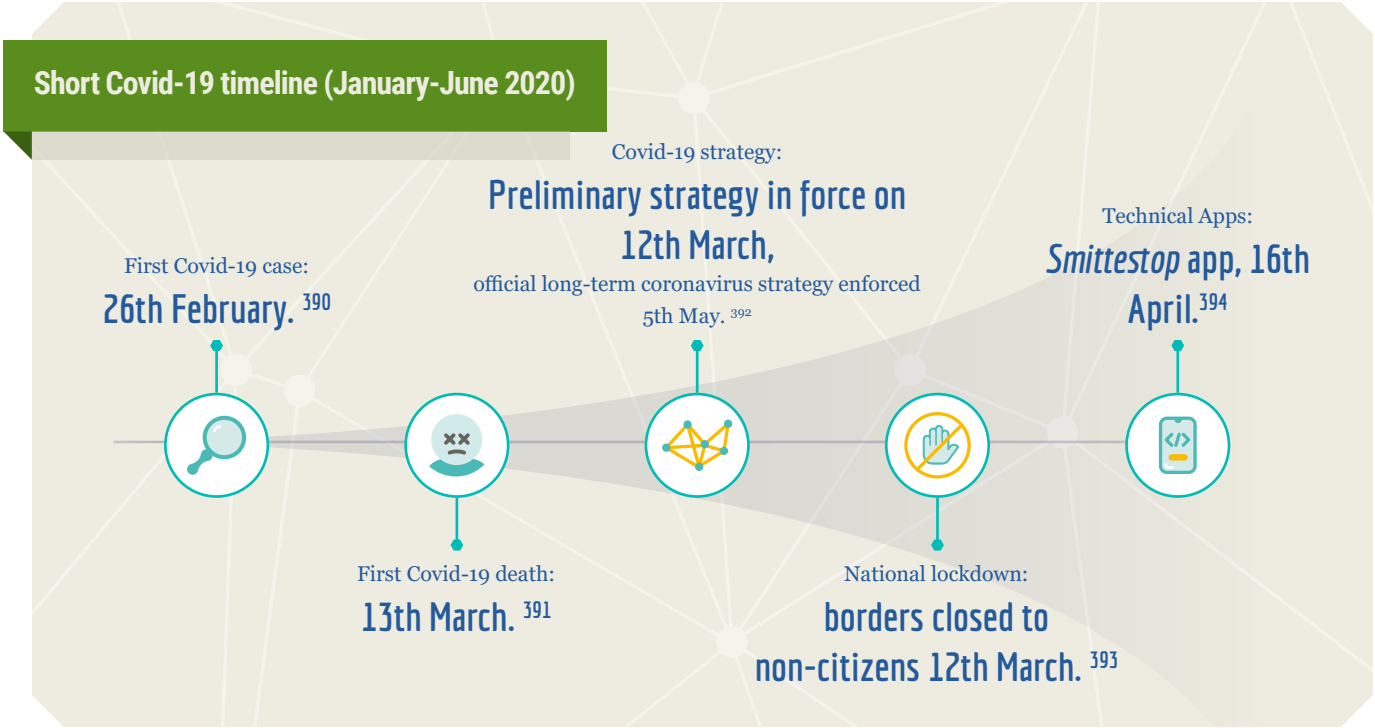
Echoing the cooperation between the Nordic states, the most noticeable NB8 coordination was to be seen in communications efforts directed at cross-border travel. States emphasised their committment to ensuring that individuals stranded across the eight countries could return home in spite of border restrictions.[383]

NORWAY

Context

Norway has a population of just over 5.5 million, with around 83% ethnic Norwegians.[384] Roughly 17.5% of this population are aged 65 and over[385] and are in the Covid-19 high-risk group. The Norwegian population is spread across the country. However, a higher density of individuals lives in the south than in the north.[386] The Norwegian urban population is 83%.[387] Norway has a GDP (PPP) of €281.8 billion (€52,710 per capita) with a health expenditure of 10%, and was ranked 30th strongest economy in the world according to the World Bank in 2019.[388] Norway was a founding member of EFTA in 1960. Today the country is a member of the EEA and cooperates with the EU.[389]





Country response to Covid-19

Historical Consciousness

Previously, the crisis that had the greatest impact on Norway's collective memory was the terrorist attack of 22th July 2011 which highlighted the absence of a coordinated response plan for a national crisis.[395] The responsibility for crisis coordination was subsequently amended and assigned to the Ministry of Justice and Emergency Preparedness.[396] Following which changes, there were signs of improved cross-sectoral and inter-agency coordination during the first six months of Covid-19.

Although the terror attack identified this failing, it also shocked the nation, prompting a general sense of community spirit and national togetherness.[397] That same spirit would reemerge during Covid-19, when authority and media lines of communication appealed to it.[398]

Overarching approach

As in Denmark and Iceland, Norway's approach could be characterised as anticipatory and collaborative. The government led it, but recommendations from health experts guided it.[399] This close cooperation with health experts was revealed when the government provided the Norwegian Directorate of Health the legal right to enforce preventative measures.[400] Responsibility for crisis management across sectors was brought under the Ministry of

The strategy's core objective was to suppress the virus by enforcing firm preventative measures such as quarantine, isolation, and travel restrictions to limit the burden on the health services.

Justice and Emergency Preparedness at a ministerial level when the situation indicated the virus would impact all sectors.[401]

Overall, the collaborative response was further evidenced by information distributed through joint press conferences, supporting a strong desire for national community spirit.[402] The disseminators varied. In contrast to Sweden, key political figures were central and included the Prime Minister, the Health and Care Services Minister, and the Minister of Justice,[403] the Director of the National Institute of Public Health, and the Director of the Norwegian Directorate of Health.[404] As in Denmark, the monarch, King Harald V, gave a speech to the nation. Which further emphasised the gravity of the situation; the King rarely addresses the nation on specific matters, and the speech may be understood as part of a broader campaign of persuasion.[405] Several different lines of communication taken together sent out a strong message of close inter-agency cooperation throughout the first six months of Covid-19.

Norway's preliminary response strategy appeared on the 12th March. It attempted to employ persuasive and coercive techniques through recommendations and regulations and was referred to as *the strike down strategy*.[406] The strategy's core objective was to suppress the virus by enforcing firm preventative measures such as quarantine, isolation, and travel restrictions to limit the burden on the health services.[407] The strategy was characterised by its focus on bringing the R number below 1 – the R number is used for rating a disease's ability to spread – and was considered an important indicator of whether preventive measures were working.[408] The R rate should be understood as a communications tool to help individuals monitor the spread of Covid-19.

Although the Norwegian approach seems collaborative, there were conversations around which strategy to adopt. NRK, a Norwegian broadcaster, attempted to highlight this tension by pointing out that the National Institute of Public Health and

the Norwegian Directorate of Health had recommended alternative, preliminary plans to the government.[409] In reply, the Directorate of the National Institute of Public Health stated that no significant tension existed between the two agencies since at that time it was still impossible to ascertain which measures would be more effective.[410] Which highlights how difficult expressing confidence at a moment of uncertainty would prove, particularly during a crisis.[411] At the same time, considering different options could only strengthen democratic checks and balances.

Building on the idea of democratic balance, the new *Corona Law* is of note. The *Corona Law* was written to facilitate firmer measures being rapidly deployed in a national crisis.[412] Fifteen high profile Norwegian lawyers argued that this new legislation should have involved more transparency since it was created and implemented in a very short time and, allegedly, in secret.[413] Lawyers criticised the law for granting the government excessive power and allowing it to circumvent the normal legal process. They questioned why they had not involved the lawyers association and judges association.[414] It would appear the purpose of the law had been to streamline the legal process during the crisis to save lives and protect the health sector. [415] Such critique suggests that governments might place more emphasis on the transparency of their actions and communication to avoid resistance during crises.

In May, the Norwegian authorities presented the official long-term Corona Strategy, referred to as the *control strategy*.[416] The new plan retained the same objective as the *strike down strategy* – to ensure that health services provide help to all citizens and save lives.[417] By contrast, it favoured increased control measures such as greater testing, quarantine, isolation, and infection tracing while society was gradually re-opening.[418] At this stage, authoritative communications continued to target maintaining community spirit.[419]

Linguistic lenses - Key expressions

Key expressions were seen in state communications during the first six months.

Nasjonal Dugnad. *Dugnad* means an individual participates in voluntary communal work with a group of people on a local or a national level.[420] The word derives from the Norwegian tradition of volunteering when a community needs help. It appeals to Norwegian collective identity,[421] and unites the Norwegian community, appealing to personal and collective responsibility in everyday life.[422] Such is its keen sense of responsibility and place in Norwegian society that failure to join the *dugnad*, invites social opprobrium.[423] No one wants to be seen not to participate.[424] This persuasive communications tool was employed to gain community spirit, togetherness, and national compliance to recommendations and regulations. Covid-19 was positioned as a crisis and a *Nasjonal Dugnad* 'that

everyone had to take part in, together, and on behalf of the Norwegian community'.[425]

Public access to information

Information relating to Covid-19 was widely disseminated through daily press conferences.[426] However, the state developed dedicated Covid-19 information hotlines, together with Covid-19 specific sections on authoritative websites and automated chat services.[427] They could ease the pressure of calls on emergency hotlines.[428] Information was further distributed via text messages – municipalities sent out specific recommendations and regulations based on an individual's location.[429] The government distributed information in several languages to all parts of Norwegian society.[430]

Persuasion versus coercion

In Strategic Communications, there is a constant push and pull between persuasion and coercion. Calibrating the two can be challenging in times of crisis where the state strives for compliant attitudes and behaviour from society. To gain such compliance from Norwegian society, as in other NB8 countries, authorities used a blend of measures.

Before implementing the *strike down strategy* on the 12th March, measures were characterised by persuasion drawing on recommendations and advice.[431] This included maintaining personal distance, advice on washing hands, and discouraging non-essential travel.[432] These measures appeal to Norwegians' sense of personal responsibility and *nasjonal dugnad,* and won support with little criticism since they had no significant impact on their way of life.

However, after the 12th March, the most coercive regulations to be seen in peacetime appeared.[433] Regulations implemented included school closures, bans for stays in holiday cabins, restricting and closing national borders to non-citizens, and fines.[434] This represented an overall change in tone and gravity. And as modes of persuasion gave way to coercive measures, so the the criticism increased. That said, when the Directorate of Health undertook proactive measures, they committed to evaluating all measures iteratively and on a rolling basis.[435] Such reassurance was a short-term communications tool designed to maintain calm; measures were to be read as timely and proportionate to prevent push back from Norwegian society.

Although minimal, some resistance was forthcoming, most significantly following the cabin ban before Easter break, which imposed a fine of 15,000 NOK (1,400 Euros) or ten days in prison.[436] The ban may have been severe but government communications sought to ensure that small municipalities could deal with the virus's spread and that individuals from bigger cities did not carry it with them.[437] Nearly 10% of the population owns cabins, and the Government saw the potential

threat that travel to cabins might cause to smaller communities.[438] The cabin ban was unpopular during the Easter holidays which are important to Norwegians;[439] Norwegian traditions are rooted in being outdoors, skiing, and family time spent together in brighter, cold weather.[440] It is a time to escape the city to embrace nature's calm; by being denied it, people were even more disappointed during an already challenging time.[441]

Further tensions arose from domestic travel restrictions and divergent regulations at regional and local authority levels. Certain municipalities in the north of Norway enforced stricter coercive measures under the Communicable Disease Act's legal rights.[442] Due to the variable spread of the virus in Norway – higher in the southern part of Norway, lower in the less populated north – local authorities embraced further regulations on quarantine and entry rules as a prevention measure.[443]

The mayor of Vardø stressed, 'we do not live five minutes away from the hospital as in Oslo, so we must have stricter measures here in the north'.[444] This statement illustrates Norway's demographic and geographic differences, but also highlights a resort to more coercive measures when persuasive measures were not deemed sufficient. This was in contrast to recommendations at a national level,[445] suggesting a tension between the municipalities and government, and further underlines how the north of Norway rejected southerners travelling to the north during the pandemic: after all, having contracted the virus, how might northerners receive medical help in time?

The *Smittestopp* app was launched on the 16th April amid criticism.[446] State communications tried to persuade people to download the app to track and trace the spread of the virus.[447] Downloading the app spoke to *nasjonal dugnad*. [448] However, the initiative met with suspicion while users hesitated to reveal personal data. [449] That same distrust of the app was endorsed by Amnesty International, who claimed it was one of the most intrusive in the world.[450] Consequently, the app's first version was short-lived and officially shut down in June.[451]

Despite limited criticism, Norwegian society was broadly positive. There were neither large demonstrations nor sustained critique towards the measures. Indeed, a survey in April demonstrated this positivity when 77% of the electorate confided the government had enforced the appropriate measures,[452] suggesting sustained, high levels of trust in the government.[453] Particularly in the Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, for providing clear lines of communication in a calm manner.[454] By contrast, only 6% thought the government had taken the wrong turn.[455] And for the government's part, in May they complimented the Norwegian population for committing to *nasjonal dugnad* and taking personal responsibility.[456]

Lives and Livelihoods

The Norwegian government implemented a wide range of measures, affecting both lives and livelihoods. The Government, meanwhile, pledged its full support in mitigating the worst of the effects.[457]

Government was especially aware of the impact of the virus on the economy. They declared the economy robust in order to highlight Norway's economic preparedness.[458] A comprehensive economic strategy would support this conviction; it was built around three phases under the rubric: 'targeted, effective and reversible'.[459] Consecutively, each phase targeted avoiding bankruptcies; supporting business and industry; and directing broader measures to keep the economy functioning.[460]

Support took the form of securing health care equipment, increasing intensive care spaces in hospitals, introducing business and industry compensation schemes, extending unemployment benefits, and increasing access to student loans.[461] By early April, these measures had cost the country more than 139 billion NOK (13.3 billion euro).[462] Economic assistance met with a mixed response; it was begrudgingly remarked that the assistance was a good starting point.[463] However, the difficult situation faced by students featured prominently in the media where journalists, students, and politicians criticised student assistance for being contingent on taking out further loans and incurring new obligations.[464] Students voiced their concern about taking up the offer for fear of storing up problems for the future.[465]

Due to Covid-19 uncertainty, the government was eager to demonstrate compassion

towards children and teenagers during those early months. Press conferences explicitly targeted the young. They explained the nature of the virus and to whom they could turn if afraid.[466] Health Minister, Bent Høie, would attract public approval following a powerful speech to the country's teenagers.[467] His words were well-received when he thanked them for putting their lives on hold.[468] It served to humanise an alien situation. And it was his honesty in particular that met with praise together with his down-to-earth handling of the problem.[469]

Regional

Nordic

Nordic cooperation played out initially at the ministerial level as it tried to deal with repatriating citizens just as the world was gradually closing down. Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs was reassuring: 'we are close to each other in the Nordics, and have a long tradition of helping each other. In this crisis, Nordic solidarity and unity give us strength'.[470]

For all that, little mention of Nordic cooperation was to be found in Norway's media. Swedish and Norwegian policies were reported in stark contrast. Indeed, Norway's resolute action led only to confusion and tensions over cross-border restrictions.[471] Both Swedish and Norwegian communities who regularly travel across the border were caught by surprise;[472] border coordination is usually smooth and close.[473] Which raised the question whether clarity of communication had also fallen victim to the virus.

The contrast in approaches led Oslo to keep most of its Swedish border closed to leisure travel and tourism in June, unlike Finland, Iceland, and Denmark.[474] These border regulations may not necessarily have damaged the Nordic countries' solidarity, but they did affect the traditional image of a close-knit alliance.

EU/EEA

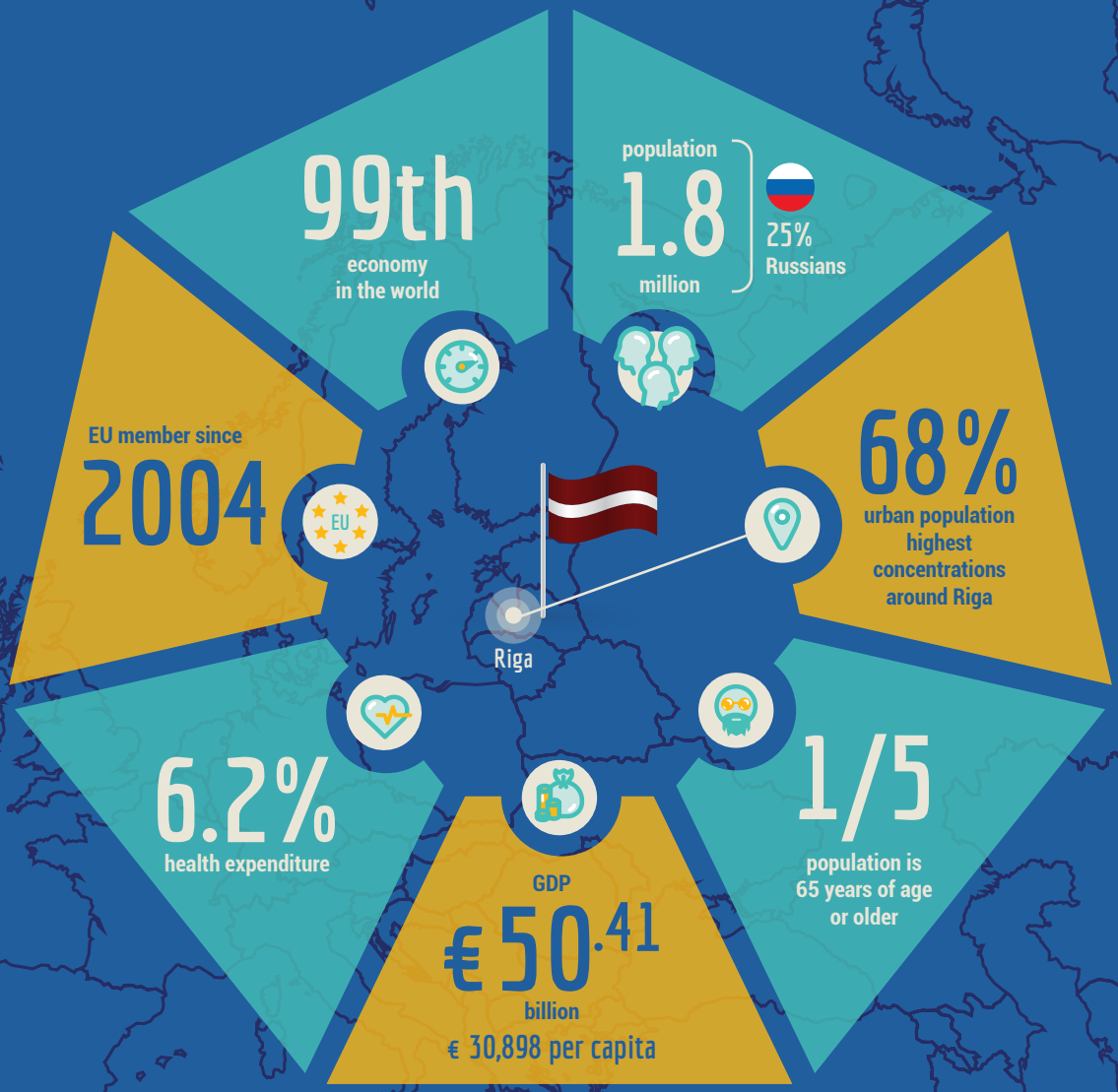
While not a part of the EU, ties remain strong through close collaboration and membership of the EEA.[475] Prime Minister, Erna Solberg took a lead role in the EU Coronavirus Global Response Summit in May to show economic and political support.[476] This involved working closely on promoting collaboration on vaccine development which continued during the crisis.[477]

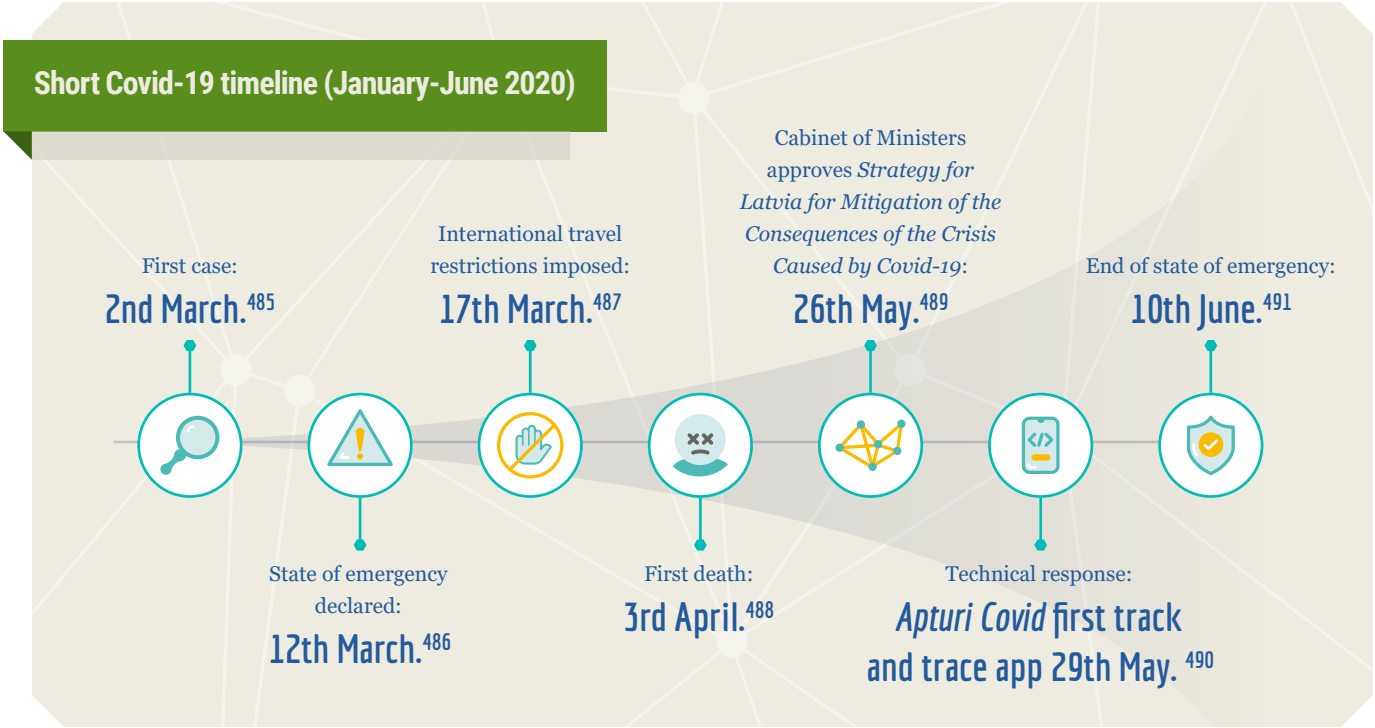
Norway further set up a health team which was deployed to Italy, an EU member state, to show solidarity and unity in times of crisis.[478] Similar to the Nordic effort, Norway also aided repatriation efforts of EU/EEA citizens throughout the first six months of the pandemic.[479]

LATVIA

Context

Latvia has a population of just over 1.8 million with a large Russian minority that makes up a quarter of the population.[480] The country has an urban population of 68.3% with the highest concentrations of people found in and around the port and capital city of Riga.[481] Just over a fifth of the population is estimated to be 65 years of age and over.[482] GDP (PPP) is estimated to be 50.41 billion Euros (30,898 Euros per capita), ranking it the 99th economy in the world with a health expenditure of 6.2%.[483] It has been an EU member since 2004.[484]





Country specific approach in response to Covid-19 pandemic

Historical Consciousness

Covid-19 brought to the fore existing systemic problems in Latvia such as an underfunded healthcare system, socio-economic inequalities, and the precarious position of students in higher education.[492] Moreover, Latvia had been among the hardest hit countries during the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, with rapid growth before the crisis and a sharp decline afterwards.[493] Some commentators opine that with the onset of the epidemiological crisis, Latvia had not fully recovered from the financial crisis with parts of society still suffering extreme economic inequalities.[494]

Overarching Approach

Latvia's approach to managing the spread of Covid-19 during the early months of 2020 was government-led with key figures such as the Health Minister and Prime Minister regularly communicating with the public. The approach was collaborative, actively heeding the advice of experts from the Latvian Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (SPKC).[495] These SPKC authorities communicated with the public through interviews and announcements on news outlets and social media.[496]

Latvia's response could be characterised as dynamic. Like Denmark, it announced a state of emergency on 12th March (the day after the WHO declared Covid-19 a

Latvia could position itself internationally as tech-savvy in crisis management, which marked a shift from addressing domestic to international audiences.

pandemic) and rapidly implemented strict travel restrictions in and out of the country five days later.[497] The state of emergency aimed to restrict movement and slow the spread of the virus, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[498]

As the pandemic continued, a practical need to 'coexist' with the virus was communicated by authorities.[499] This sentiment of life continuing alongside the virus may indicate a sense of pragmatic longevity to Latvian communications as well as an awareness of the uncertain nature of the virus.

The government's actions and communications intersected over how cautious the country should be. The state of emergency was extended between March and June, and with each extension authorities underscored a sense of caution in their messaging.[500] In April the Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš stated that despite low levels of infection Latvia 'cannot relax' due to the extensive spread in Europe.[501] In May's extension, the Health Minister Ilze Viņķele stated that 'the pandemic has not finished', highlighting its urgency.[502] Upon lifting the state of emergency in June, a press release detailed the restrictions that were to remain in place.[503]

Notably, there was consensus among the public over restrictions, according to a survey in late April / early May which saw just under 70% of respondents describe them as appropriate while only 10% thought them to be excessive.[504]

Latvia ahead of the curve. The 'Latvia ahead of the curve' video campaign demonstrated longer-term communications to international audiences.[505] Supported by the Latvian Investment and Development Agency, it drew on success stories such as the roll-out of one of the first tracking mobile applications to be endorsed nationally, Latvia's e-Parliament, and remote learning improvements.[506] Latvia could position itself internationally as tech-savvy in crisis management, which marked a shift from addressing domestic to international audiences.

In a similar vein, the public mobilised digitally with a number of tech-based initiatives, many of which materialised

from the Latvian 'Hackforce' online event designed to provide innovative solutions to the crisis. This hackathon saw the innovation of face shields, and artificial lung ventilators, while attracting over 800 people from around the world.[507] Authorities from the SPKC and Ministry of Health actively supported the initiative and engaged with the organisers, expressing interest in staging a further hackathon.[508] A dialogue between government and civic actors to encourage crisis-led innovation from the public, it could be argued, sought to position Latvia's digital efforts alongside its Baltic neighbour, Estonia, in projecting the image of a tech-savvy nation.

Linguistic lenses – key expressions

Responsibility. As in Lithuania and Sweden, various state authorities built on the theme of responsibility. Whether Prime Minister, Health Minister, SPKC authorities, or President, all stressed the need for people to take responsibility for their actions to benefit society.[509] Prime Minister announced before the state of emergency that 'the most important thing now is the individual responsibility of each person to follow the recommendations' – a message that was relayed repeatedly to the public during the early stages of the pandemic.[510]

However, sometimes the public did not comply with government recommendations and restrictions; namely, when people lied to medical staff to avoid home quarantine or to receive the Covid-19 test free, or when two hundred cars congregated at Latvia's Rumbula Airfield in violation of restrictions.[511] That said, according to SPKC authorities and the Health Minister, the Latvian public generally showed high levels of responsibility.[512]

Public attitudes to the government's initial approach saw public trust and confidence in the government rise.[513] One survey in April recorded just under three-quarters of respondents supporting the government,[514] with around a quarter holding a distinctly negative opinion.[515] The head of the polling agency noted that just 2% of respondents claimed to have no opinion – an uncommonly low figure.[516]

Public access to information

A number of oulets were used to offer places of advice/information and lines of communication. As in Lithuania (see below), businesses had access to relevant advice through the Investment and Development Agency.[517] Hotlines handled questions related to testing and Covid-related advice.[518] Latvia has a large Russian-speaking minority, so an additional website and hotline providing Covid-19 information were made available in Russian, and later in English.[519]

Persuasion versus coercion

Persuasive and creative mediums were used to attract public compliance, such

as a short video by medical staff at a Riga hospital, encouraging people to abide by the restrictions.[520] Short videos were created by a second Riga hospital and the Health Ministry during Easter to encourage people to act responsibly by not visiting their loved ones.[521] This emphasised a more persuasive approach to public compliance, but persuasive communications were driven by those non-governmental actors who most needed their message to reach audiences – namely, medical staff.

From mid-April, SPKC implemented a social advertising campaign called 'Home. Soap. Two meters.' to raise awareness about steps to prevent the spread of the virus. The slogan was quickly picked up by radio hosts, musicians and politicians.[522]

Like other NB8 countries, more coercive measures included restricting public gatherings from the end of March and up to €2,000 fines for violating the state of emergency. 550 people were fined by the end of April (the maximum fine was issued to one citizen for twice breaking the home quarantine rules).[523] State police urged people to report instances of rule-breaking, so involving the public in a more coercive programme and fostering a proactive civic role.[524]

State and municipal police played active roles. Where there was a failure to comply, both state and municipal police were authorised to move people by force to their place of residence and quarantine.[525] The state police communicated with the public frequently via social media accounts, updating them on how many violations were being pursued while also urging them to keep within the restrictions.[526] Hence frequent social media communications from state police appeared to provide an online deterrence and remind the public of a police presence.

Society mobilised in a number of ways during the crisis. Thousands of hot meals were provided for medical staff funded through donations from society, and an online network of volunteers was established to provide goods for the vulnerable free of charge.[527] These mobilisations reinforce a sense of collective social action during times of crisis and, together with digital mobilisations, paint a picture of a public that was intent on mitigating the social and economic effects of the virus.

Lives and Livelihoods

Unlike many countries, and particularly in contrast to its Baltic neighbours, Latvia did not completely shut down business activity but obliged firms to observe social distancing, stressing the need to preserve the nation's livelihoods.[528]

At the outset, the government swiftly engaged with business and industry representatives at both inter-sectoral and inter-ministerial levels.[529] The Ministry of Economics set up consultations with businesses and associations to identify the

need for aid and any problems posed by the pandemic.[530] This dialogue-driven approach between government and key audiences and stakeholders showed policy making to be multilateral, not simply unidirectional, and so encouraged engagement.

Latvia's longer-term approach involved an economic strategy which was signed off in May.[531] It was to be implemented over three years in three phases: economic stabilisation; re-orientation; and growth. The strategy deals with immediate negative consequences of the virus and addresses structural changes in Latvia's economic and employment landscape so as to rise above their pre-Covid position.[532] Furthermore, industry representatives were included in the planning process to substantiate the rhetoric in policy making with key stakeholders.[533]

Moreover, the government provided a range of support measures to different sections of the population. Support was provided to furloughed employees, the self-employed, and those who did not qualify were offered other options through the State Social Security Agency.[534] Between March and June, downtime benefits to the value of over 50 million Euros were paid out to over 50,000 employees by the State Revenue Service.[535] Support was also offered in the form of loans, tax reliefs, and rent reductions for businesses.[536]

By the end of April, the government had allocated 19.7 million Euros to the Ministry of Health to fight the pandemic.[537] Consistent with many countries during the crisis, those 'most directly involved in mitigating the effects of Covid-19' were also the beneficiaries of temporary wage increases.[538]

However, a frequent discourse among commentators and workers alike centred on Latvia's downtime benefits. By April, one third of applications had been rejected.[539] Media coverage surfaced of people who found themselves ineligible for downtime benefits, and criticism split broadly two ways affecting different parts of society. One was a disagreement over eligibility conditions related to past tax payments; the other was having to demonstrate unemployment in order to qualify for the benefit.[540] The low threshold to be eligible for downtime benefit prompted a discussion around the the number of Latvians working in the shadow economy. Covid-19 had brought an old social problem to the surface.[541]

The government's policy on downtime benefit was iterative. Consequently, a number of amendments to the measure were made.[542] It indicated an initial sense of dissatisfaction with this measure, but also showed the government having to adjust policy to widespread criticism in what ressembles a dialogue between critics and beneficiaries, and the government.

Certain sectors did mobilise during the crisis, such as the Latvian Association of Restaurants (LRB) that started a so-called

'pot revolution', encouraging people to bang pots and pans in protest to government policies – specifically for not reducing VAT for catering firms and restaurants.[543] Interestingly, the Vice President of the LRB stated that the 'pot revolution' was 'for those 40% of the Latvian population who live in poverty', underlining how yet again Covid-19 acted as a catalyst for wider conversations across society.[544] The campaign called on people outside the hospitality sector to join the protest and received support from one of Latvia's best known chefs, Mārtiņš Sirmais.[545] It also received substantial media coverage while failing to achieve significant change.

Another area to voice its discontent was the hard-hit tourism industry. Several organisations sent an open letter to Latvian European Commission representatives, demanding greater support to see the industry through the crisis.[546] This not only represented the mobilisation of a dissatisfied sector, but the appeal to a supranational institution – the European Commission – bridging a domestic affair to an external concern.

The Latvian Association of Journalists called not only on the government, but entrepreneurs and the public for support with specific ways to aid the sector. By urging the government to support financially journalism that exhibited good practice, calling entrepreneurs to move their advertising from social networks to local platforms, and imploring the public to subscribe and donate to media outlets.[547] Calls for support communicated not only directly to the government but, crucially, reached all parts of society. On 6th April the National Electronic Mass Media Council announced that it had prepared a support programme for mass media and submitted it to the Government, requesting an allocation of 1.6 million Euros to support commercial media.[548] That was followed on 27th April by a joint initiative of the Ministry of Culture and the Societal Integration Fund[549] to allocate nearly 1.2 million Euros for support of media.

Latvia may have favoured livelihoods by not imposing a complete lockdown on employers, but its business and downtime support scheme left entire segments of society feeling disenfranchised. These cases capture how communities expressed their discontent and/or need for help during the crisis before mobilising, often attracting others who shared their dissatisfaction. Government policy formulation was not simply a one-way, linear communication. Rather it witnessed pushback in the form of popular discontent.

Regional

Baltic

Early communication was established between Baltic governments at presidential and ministerial levels to discuss the respective situations in their countries.[550]

Initially, Latvia and Estonia coordinated activities across their Valka-Valga border that divides a city, highlighting a mutual need for cross-border cooperation. The flow of people crossing the international border was allowed to continue despite increasing restrictions, enabling people to continue working and living on either side.[551]

The most notable act of coordination occurred when the Baltic Bubble was set up, allowing residents of these countries to move freely between Baltic countries without self-isolating provided they had not visited countries outside the Bubble in the previous fourteen days.[552] This showcased Baltic coordination and cooperation internationally during the crisis and emphasised a unified image of the Baltic region. Latvia and Estonia also cooperated to organise The Global Hack during April 9-12, where Latvia was responsible for the economy 'track'.[553]

Nordic-Baltic

Early communications across the NB8 took place in meetings only days after Latvia had announced a state of emergency.[554] An emphasis on information-sharing, coordination, and a coherent exit strategy were tabled from which arose a coordinated effort between their consular services to repatriate fellow citizens.[555]

How Nordic-Baltic cooperation had become institutionalised was revealed when a 500-million-euro loan from the Nordic Investment Bank was extended to Latvia for support measures.[556] Nordic-Baltic coordination was thereby formalised, allowing Latvia to draw on existing financial infrastructures as a safety-net for tackling the pandemic.

EU/EAA

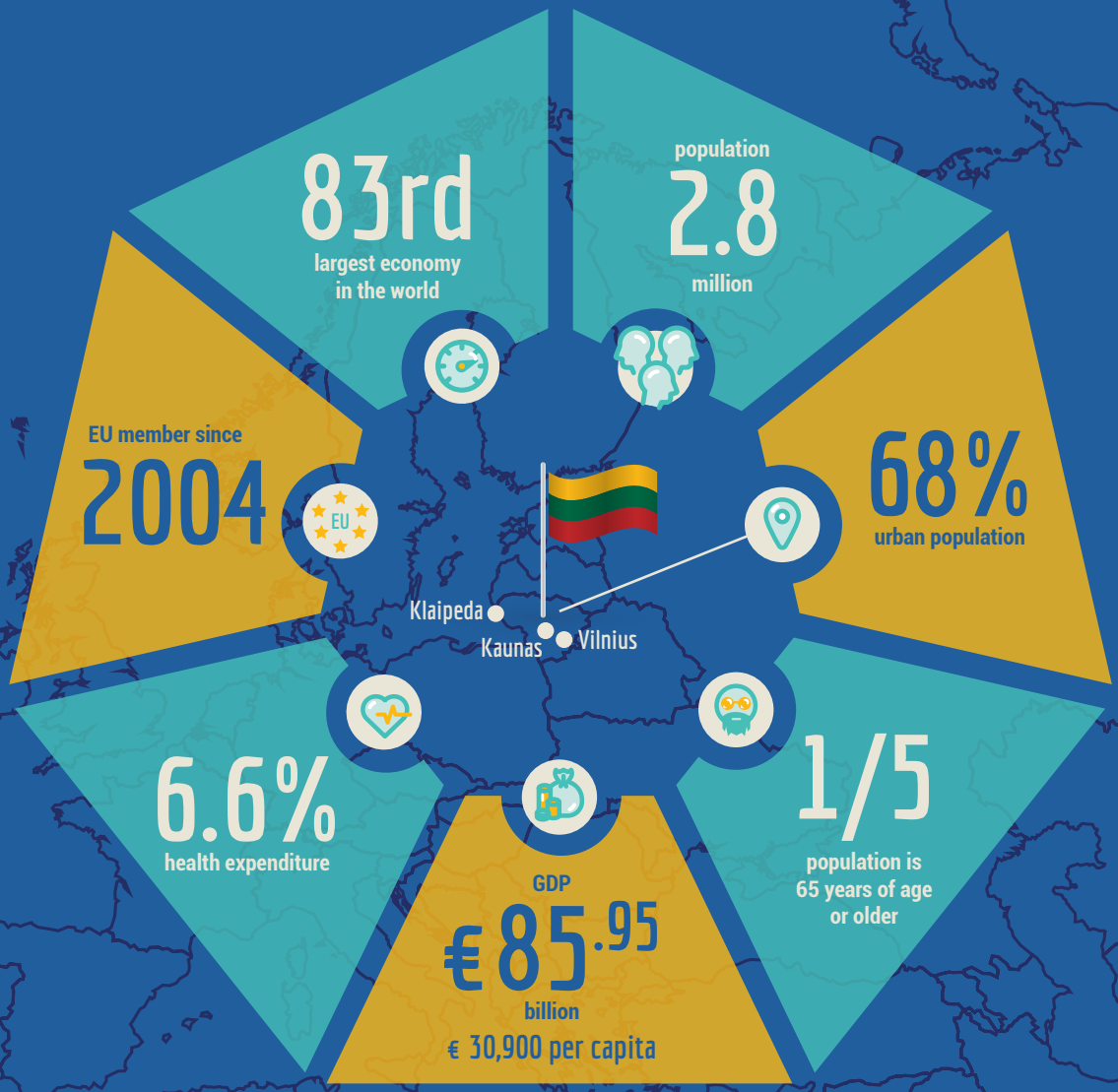
Latvia participated in the EU-instigated Covid-19 support initiative labelled *Team Europe*, and launched in April to support EU partner countries during the pandemic.[557] Under this initiative Latvia re-directed development assistance to help the EU's Eastern Partnership during the crisis.[558] Latvia would be seen to be encouraging regional initiatives to fight the pandemic.

Once restrictions began to ease and international travel beyond the Baltic Bubble was re-established, EU/EEA permanent residents were the first visitors allowed to travel to Latvia.[559] Such relaxation of restrictions pointed to Latvia's efforts to reinforce links with the EU as a national priority.

LITHUANIA

Context

Lithuania has a population of just under 2.8 million with an urban population of 68%.[560] Polish and Russian communities make up just under 6% and 5% respectively.[561] A higher concentration of people lives in Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipeda.[562] Just over one-fifth of the population is aged 65 or more.[563] GDP (PPP) is estimated to be 85.95 billion Euros (€30,900 per capita), ranking it the 83rd largest economy in the world with a health expenditure of 6.6%.[564] It has been an EU member since 2004.[565]



Country response to Covid-19

Historical Consciousness

Like many NB8 countries, the pandemic evoked associations with the country's state of economic preparedness for the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. Various authorities including the President recalled that Lithuania was in a better position to confront this crisis than it had been in 2008.[575] Which served as a reminder to reassure the public that Lithuania had grown and developed since the previous crisis and was in a stronger economic position than a decade ago.

Overarching Approach

The coronavirus response during the first months of 2020 was government-led and headed by the Health Minister who was also the State Commander of National Emergency Operations. There was significant input from the Prime Minister and cabinet who took greater control following criticism of the Health Minister's initial handling of the crisis and due to the extent of the widening pandemic.[576]

A nationwide quarantine was declared on 16th March 'to limit the spread of the virus and preserve the health and lives of the population'.[577] The lockdown saw restricted travel in and out of the country, as well as between certain parts of Lithuania, and the closure of non-essential shops among other measures.[578] Although the government approached its task in a more coercive mindset than its NB8 neighbours, measures

sometimes met resistance from various directions.

Key actors and discourses during the early stages of the crisis included:

- Tensions between the President and government crisis managers;
- Tensions between national and municipal powers;
- Tensions between the Health Ministry and medical professionals.

Lithuania was initially proactive while responding to the emerging pandemic threat. Before the lockdown, it declared an emergency on 26th February – two days after the first case was reported.[579] They announced it to increase coordination, streamline processes, and capitalise on equipment in state reserves.[580] However, the government was soon criticised by the medical community, the mayor of Vilnius, the President, and the political opposition for being too slow to procure testing reagents, secure protective equipment supplies for medical staff, and offer testing to the public.[581] This was a common criticism at LRT (national news broadcaster). The LRT's opinion pieces centered on holding the government to account and highlighting widespread dissatisfaction with the testing process and lack of protection for medics.[582]

Lithuania's crisis management was sometimes questioned, revealing a tension between the President and those charged with managing the crisis in the government. The President vetoed a measure that would have introduced price controls on certain items, criticised the Health Ministry for not joining an EU procurement mechanism for protective equipment, and criticised the speed at which subsidies were reaching beneficiaries.[583] It suggests the executive branch was not always working in unison during the crisis.

As in Latvia, Government communications were characterised by caution. The President counseled against opening up the economy too quickly. Easing restrictions was described as 'a gradual resumption of more activities' rather than 'a relaxing of the quarantine'.[584] This cautious style of public messaging was echoed by the Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis who asserted that 'although we won the battle, we have not won the war against the pandemic yet'.[585]

The government communicated its future trajectory through an exit plan and a Covid-19 Management Strategy announced in April and May respectively. The exit plan communicated short-term tangible goals and preliminary dates over the coming weeks with a cautious message that the plan remained contingent on the epidemiological situation.[586] The plan was released against a backdrop of gradual lifting of restrictions including the reopening of retailers, resumption of flights, and increases in outdoor public gatherings.[587] The government seemed

aware of the need to balance lives against livelihoods.

The Covid-19 Management Strategy introduced five key principles: 1) protection of high-risk individuals; 2) local decision-making and treatment of cases; 3) ensuring prompt provision of information to the public; 4) evidence- and fact-based decision-making; 5) international cooperation, in particular at the European Union level.[588] Beyond biomedical considerations, a well-informed public and international cooperation were prioritised in combating the pandemic.

However, a lack of transparency and communication from the government during the crisis was a recurring theme in opinion pieces on the state broadcaster, LRT, as well as in other media outlets and social media. Which suggests broader public dissatisfaction with government communications during the early pandemic despite communications being prioritised in their management strategy.[589]

Linguistic Lenses - Key expressions

Responsibility. Consistent with Latvia and Sweden, a continual appeal to the people's sense of personal responsibility was apparent. The Prime Minister used the word repeatedly in his March address to the country.[590] Responsibility and similar concepts recurred throughout government communications with the public during those early days. They served to urge people to observe restrictions, then to praise their responsible conduct once the situation began to improve,[591] aligning with the Management Strategy's recognition of the public's role in combating the virus.[592]

Public access to information

Clear lines of communication were established during the first wave with hotlines, websites, and automated services offering information and support. These hotlines focused on health, Covid-19 inquiries, and business support.[593] A *Karantinas* app was released in a test mode with a projected release date in the autumn of 2020,[594] and the automated chat service, *Viltė*, was set up to offer fast and accessible information about the virus.[595] A deliberately digital effort was conceived to inform the public. Information was also made available by the Vilnius municipality at an early point in Polish and Russian languages (Lithuania's largest minorities).[596]

Persuasion versus coercion

At first the government adopted a more coercive stance in contrast to its fellow NB8 countries by enforcing self-isolation, and mandating those Lithuanians returning from abroad and those with Covid-19 to quarantine in accommodation allocated by the municipality.[597] Such measures led to a passionate response from the Mayor of Vilnius who publicly condemned them as being contrary to scientific consensus and a misuse of resources.[598]

> A survey conducted before the national quarantine showed 66% of those surveyed reacted positively to the government's crisis response while just under 20% were critical.

Although this measure was withdrawn after barely one day, it offered two causes for reflection.[599] First, the government's stern communications with the public to ensure compliance, and second, tensions between centralised and municipal approaches to ensure such compliance were a reminder that policies can also invite feedback and resistance.

When arrivals were permitted to isolate at home, Lithuania introduced fines for breaking quarantine regulations – over 1,000 fines were issued by mid-April.[600] Easter weekend witnessed more apparent, coercive measures such as inter-city travel bans, fines, and the use of the police and Riflemen's Union (a paramilitary non-profit organisation) to enforce restriction measures during the long weekend.[601] The Police Commissioner General described it as an 'unprecedented operation' with 15,000 drivers barred from entering various cities and over 200 people fined for breaking the rules.[602] Despite these restrictions, a high number of people still attempted to travel.

State agencies engaged in persuasive campaigns such as 'Thank you Lithuania', a cautious musical celebration, which was directed at all who had persevered during the lockdown.[603] This national show of unity was likened by the Head of the Public Information Group to Lithuania's struggle for freedom three decades earlier, layering a persuasive measure onto collective memory.[604]

The public mobilised during the crisis through voluntary initiatives. A government-backed National Volunteer Coordination Centre became a portal for volunteers to help the vulnerable during the crisis by using their cars or doing shopping for other people.[605] In addition, on social media Lithuanians collected money to help purchase and deliver much needed medical supplies to hospitals and retirement homes.

A survey conducted before the national quarantine showed 66% of those surveyed reacted positively to the government's crisis response while just under 20% were critical.[606] In June during the national quarantine, a survey showed positive responses had dropped to under 60% with criticism increasing to a quarter.[607]

Lives and Livelihoods

Controversy emerged around a Health Ministry seeking to prioritise its health workers' safety initially while there was an early call for adequate protection and testing for medical staff.[608] Despite this, by the end of March, medical workers accounted for 12% of all cases.[609] Subsequent criticism of the Health Ministry appeared extensively at the start of the pandemic and the Lithuanian Medical Movement even demanded the Health Minister be removed as crisis manager.[610] This discourse reveals a tension between the Health Ministry and medical workers at a time of crisis, but indicates how such actors mobilised against government decisions in voicing their discontent. Government decisions were not simply disseminated top down but were resisted from the ground up.

In a speech only days before a national quarantine was declared, the Prime Minister depicted the restrictions as not 'against' businesses, people, or state, but the virus.[611] This hinted at an attempt to balance preserving lives with allowing people to continue to earn a living.

After the national quarantine was announced, Lithuania launched an economic action plan with measures worth 2.5 billion Euros.[612] The Action Plan allocated 500 million Euros to the health care system with the remainder for employment and personal income protection, maintaining business liquidity, and stimulating the economy.[613]

Lithuania's authorities engaged early in dialogue with the relevant stakeholders. A meeting was held with trade and industry representatives a day after the nation was quarantined. The First Deputy Chancellor of the Government explained the importance of clear communications with the business sector and invited them to talks.[614]

The Action Plan welcomed public contributions in a Ministry of Finance press release inviting the public to 'send proposals for additional economic and financial measures'.[615] This preemptive invitation to the public and stakeholders seemed to show a desire to involve a broad representation in policy making. The press release also provided the account number for a Covid-19 Mitigation Fund which was headed by the former President and used for purchasing PPE, Covid-19 tests, and medical equipment. It invited people to join the relief efforts.[616]

Lithuania's 'Plan for the DNA of the Future Economy' would see 6.3 billion Euros

pledged to long-term investment in areas such as digitisation, infrastructural changes, and re-training.[617] Not only was this initial announcement aimed at adapting long term to pandemic conditions, but the accompanying press release presented the global economic situation as a fresh opportunity for Lithuania, thus turning a negative into a positive story.[618] Moreover, the scheme was offered for public debate and this nationwide process was to become another way of shaping policy through consultation.

Inefficiencies in providing state support bore the brunt of criticism. Even the President in his Address to the Nation became a critic in a public display of disapproval.[619] The government lowered certain criteria for eligibility for particular benefits and pledged to streamline the process via automation.[620] Overall it revealed a tension between those charged with managing the crisis and the President. Public criticism was further voiced by the tourism industry. A rally demanding greater government assistance saw picketing against funding allocation decisions of cultural institutions by one group of cultural workers.[621]

Regional

Baltic

A notable case of Baltic regional coordination was captured in the Baltic Bubble.[622] Residents of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia could travel throughout the three countries without having to self-isolate provided they had not travelled outside the region during the previous two weeks.[623] This was the first zone of free movement of its kind in the EU and highlighted sophisticated coordination on a ministerial level.[624] In its first days, the volume of travel between Lithuania and Latvia increased twenty-fold.[625] The Prime Minister also highlighted the high levels of trust in their respective health systems.[626]

Beyond the Baltic Bubble, however, Lithuania pursued its broader strategic objectives such as its opposition to the Astravyets nuclear power plant that had been built in neighbouring Belarus. This would cause tension between Lithuania and its Baltic neighbours due to Latvia's and Estonia's refusal to boycott the power supply, reminding the partners of pre-existing differences that the pandemic had briefly disguised.[627]

EU/EEA

Lithuania underlined its commitment to its EU neighbours by banning exports of PPE to non-EU countries, prioritising fellow EU states during the pandemic.[628] The country also signed a 700-million euro loan with the European Investment Bank to maintain State Treasury liquidity, drawing on an existing financial structure to mitigate the effects of the crisis.[629] However, the story was far from harmonious. The relationship was not just one of coordinated policy making. Lithuania declined to sign up to an EU tender for medical supplies; an act for

which the Lithuanian President criticised the Health Ministry. Instead they relied heavily on Chinese imports of medical supplies.[630]

Nordic-Baltic

A prominent case of Lithuania's coordination with the Nordic region was on show when the country signed a 400-million euro loan from the Nordic Investment Bank.[631] This was to contribute towards financing Lithuanian support measures and exemplified how an existing Nordic-Baltic financial structure could be employed for support during the crisis.

Disinformation in the Baltics

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Baltic countries were concerned with the potential spread of disinformation, particularly emanating from the Kremlin. Although the concern with disinformation was apparent in all Nordic-Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were particularly wary. Since the restoration of Baltic independence, the Kremlin has worked to shape public opinion and politics in the Baltic countries by driving wedges between ethnic groups, sowing distrust in media outlets and governments, and undermining NATO and the EU.[632] Historical experience and large Russian-speaking minorities who consume Russian language media make Baltic governments particularly cautious. Understandably perhaps, since investigative reports show Russian government officials, media outlets, proxy news sites, and social media accounts to have engaged in coordinated campaigns to spread disinformation on Covid-19 and Western-manufactured vaccines.[633]

At a meeting in June 2020, the Presidents of Latvia and Estonia discussed how to manage the pandemic and remarked that the levels of disinformation had increased significantly, posing a threat to their societies.[634] In a recent meeting between the Foreign Ministers of the Baltic countries and the UK, the lack of resilience shared by democratic societies against Covid-19 related disinformation was raised as a major concern. It was proposed that transatlantic partners pursue joint solutions to the threat posed by disinformation operations.[635] Baltic countries have been strong advocates for EU-level regulation to fight disinformation.[636] At the same time, Latvia has initiated a resolution since adopted by the United Nations in March 2021 to fight the spread of disinformation and misinformation, particularly in the context of the continuing pandemic.[637]

Faced with the Covid-19 crisis, populations around the world have become more vulnerable. They face fear at the level of the individual, and instability at the community level.[638] Fear hinders rational judgement, rendering society more susceptible to disinformation and talk of conspiracies.[639] As research shows, emotionally packaged stigmas – unjustified disapproval of something or someone shared by a group – exert a particularly strong effect on people.[640] Consequently, it was perhaps to be anticipated that Moscow would leverage the stigma it has been creating and attaching to NATO and its Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltics.

The pandemic has provided a new storyline for the Russian government to discredit NATO and its forces. The Canadian-led

> Distrust in vaccine and government regulation have also been promoted by domestic actors who single out anti-vax and global 'plandemic' stories; these include local politicians and businessmen.

NATO battlegroup in Latvia was targeted by a pandemic disinformation campaign in May 2020, alleging a high number of Covid-19 cases among the contingent.[641] A similar piece of disinformation targeted U.S. soldiers in Lithuania in the early days of the pandemic.[642] A case of disinformation that perhaps received the most international coverage was a forged letter sent from the NATO Secretary General to Lithuania's media and government institutions, as well as inside NATO's headquarters in Brussels, alleging that NATO intended to withdraw its troops from Lithuania due to the Covid-19 situation there.[643] As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted, it shows that various governmental and private actors use the Covid-19 crisis to spread disinformation in order to cause confusion and damage the morale and unity of NATO allies.[644]

A further problem for the Baltic governments is vaccination. Scientific conversations around vaccine development during the first wave of Covid-19 were accompanied by disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories. During the second wave of the pandemic[645], as the release of the first vaccine was approaching, these conversations intensified. After surveying approximately 26,000 respondents in 25 countries during August 2020, the YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project found widespread and disturbing levels of scepticism around vaccine safety.[646] Although in the following months vaccination had not been rolled out to any significant degree in the Baltic countries, inhabitants of Latvia remained the most sceptical with only 34% prepared to take the vaccine; at the same time, 39% in Lithuania were willing to vaccinate, and 44% in Estonia.[647] Such resistance makes these populations potentially more vulnerable to manipulation through disinformation.[648] Interestingly, sociological research data in Latvia shows a correlation between media consumption in the Russian language and a greater reluctance to vaccinate

or suspicion of vaccination.[649] Russia's attempts to discredit U.S.-made vaccines using disinformation have been discussed in The Wall Street Journal.[650] According to research by the Global Engagement Center, Russia-linked social media accounts have run a coordinated campaign to spread disinformation on various Covid-19 related topics, including vaccines.[651]

Distrust in vaccine and government regulation have also been promoted by domestic actors who single out anti-vax and global '*plan*demic' stories; these include local politicians and businessmen.[652] Such disinformation continues to pose a challenge for Baltic governments who hope to achieve herd immunity through vaccination. That problem is less prevalent in the Nordic countries, where the percentage of those willing to be vaccinated remains comparatively high. The number of those committed to vaccinate was reported in January 2021 to be 80% in Denmark[653], 74% in Norway[654], 69% in Finland[655], and 66% in Sweden[656]. Higher participation levels in the Nordic countries may be linked to greater trust in government.[657] Still, the Nordic Council Committee for Knowledge and Culture, urged by the increased levels of Covid-19 disinformation, proposed in September 2020 that a joint policy be drawn up to encourage media and information awareness in the Nordics.[658]

CONCLUSION

What are the main similarities/differences in the approaches?

Across the region crisis management was prioritised at a national level, followed by EU and regional cooperation to coordinate border management and repatriate citizens. At the beginning of the crisis, the approach of all countries was characterised by high levels of uncertainty. Initial measures were more persuasive than coercive in nature. However, as the pandemic progressed, all countries were quick to close their borders and impose varying degrees of restrictions. Sweden was an outlier, having decided to communicate a less coercive approach built around individual responsibility and persuasion. Higher infection rates prevented Sweden's inclusion in the first round of border reopenings. Sweden's Scandinavian neighbours, despite their historically close ties, remained on high alert, unwilling to allow the usual free flow of economic, leisure, and family travel.

Most countries demonstrated to their populations a high level of flexibility in their strategies, adapting to changing circumstances and evolving information about the virus. Moreover, governments seemed to choose to follow expert advice from the biomedical scientific community. Consequently, government decisions gave the appearance of being scientifically neutral and less politicised. It is difficult to talk about scientific consensus during the first wave of Covid-19 due to inadequate evidence on the nature of the virus. Political consensus played a decisive role in how countries handled the pandemic. Sweden's pandemic management was not led by politicians but experts and responsible government agencies. Although its overarching principles of pandemic management did not change, a flexibile approach allowed for particular recommendations and restrictions to be varied subject to legislative frameworks. Whether Sweden's different approach was a better choice remains under discussion, both in Sweden and abroad. But the same might be said about other countries, especially today where pandemic fatigue coupled with increasing effects on economies, invite more criticism and questioning of governments.

Finland and Iceland were two countries which stood out when measured by their state of preparedness for managing a crisis. With its 150 years of turbulent history, Finland was well prepared for this moment,

allowing it to tap into its emergency reserves and implement civil protection plans. That sentiment resonated deeply with the people who embraced their leaders' crisis measures with alacrity. Iceland was also well-versed in crisis management due to its extreme weather conditions, volcanic environment prone to natural disasters, and its memory of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. Now it was able to roll out well-prepared civil emergency plans. Other Nordic countries like Denmark and Norway seemed to build on their Influenza Preparedness Plan, attempting to adapt from familiar strains of influenza to resist an unknown mutation of the coronavirus.

A specific feature of Nordic strategies was how they expressed concern and devoted significant resources to the psychological well-being of their societies, particularly vulnerable groups such as the elderly, disabled, and young. This aspect was not so apparent in the Baltic strategies. Nevertheless, Latvia and Lithuania offered help of medical specialists to support mental well-being[659], and ordinary members of those societies took it upon themselves to mobilise around different initiatives, such as delivering food to the elderly.

The 2008-2009 global financial crisis had remained a vivid memory for the Nordic-Baltic countries (see Chapter 1: **Nordic-Baltic Cooperation in Times of Crisis**). And for some the consequences were still being experienced over a decade on. It meant that governments felt under pressure to act rapidly – not only to manage the damage which economies were already beginning to suffer from Covid-19, but also to calm peoples' minds by building their communications campaigns around the provision of support packages to individuals and businesses. However, it proved impossible to win universal approval, and governments were criticised for giving too little or too late. The challenge was less pronounced in the Scandinavian countries which were financially more robust than the Baltic countries. The Nordic Investment Bank, established by all Nordic-Baltic countries as an instrument for financial stability and economic development in the region, proved to live up to expectations.

During the first wave of the pandemic, governments around the world raced to develop contact-tracing apps to fight the spread of the virus. Latvia became the first to launch the publicly available app *Apturi COVID* (Stop COVID) at the end of May - voluntary, decentralised, and fully GDPR-compliant. That was surprising; for over a decade, Latvia's neighbour Estonia had positioned itself as the country of digital innovation. Other countries soon followed with their own national apps. The effectiveness of such apps depends on how many people download and use them. Iceland was the only positive case where around half of its population made the nationally developed app a part of their daily lives. However, it was also Iceland which admitted that it had had no real impact on efforts to detect and supress the spread of the virus.

Did NB8 states act with a Strategic Communications mind-set? The positive cases.

As their copy writers set about crafting slogans to fend off the virus, a sensitive understanding of their populations informed government communications. All countries made efforts to be sympathetic to their national identity, historical consciousness, and deep-rooted traditions.

The Nordic-Baltic countries are largely societies where individual freedoms are valued. That is perhaps exemplified by Denmark's choice of slogan to tackle the pandemic 'stand together by keeping distance'. At the same time, collective responsibility and mutual aid are strong features of the Nordic-Baltic mentality. For example, in Norway the idea of *dugnad* (communal work for the benefit of the community) resonated strongly when used in government communications. All eight countries shared a focus on unity, solidarity, togetherness and responsibility – individual and collective. Finland was the one country to engage in more targeted Strategic Communications by placing 'preparedness' and its emergency stockpiles at the forefront of their appeal. No doubt, that spoke well to domestic audiences, but at the same time it projected an image to international observers, particularly those watching from the East.

Due to their comparatively small size, these states applied the same coercive measures uniformly across the whole country. Exceptions to the rule were Finland, Lithuania and Norway who varied the measures in some areas. Finland and Lithuania temporarily blocked out a region with high infection rates. In Norway, the regions in the north who felt more vulnerable due to lack of access to centralised medical facilities, voluntarily imposed stricter measures to prevent serious outbreaks.

Government responses across the NB8 were by no means uniform. The question remains whether a Strategic Communications mind-set was employed through which risks could be evaluated, and to what extent policy makers employed a way of addressing innovative approaches in search of solutions. This would entail catering specific ways of explaining the pandemic to different segments of the population, and to cohering short-term measures with long-term societal objectives. Researchers point to a broadly consensual approach to practical measures taken by most member states, except in particular national, cultural contexts. Whether generally the long-term was sacrificed in the cause of immediate pandemic relief remains to be answered.

Did the NB8 hold firm to its aims?

The Wise Men report of 2010[660] set out to review and identify key areas for the future of NB8 cooperation. These included:

- Foreign and security political dialogue;
- Cooperation on diplomatic representations;
- Civil security and emergencies, including cyber security;
- The NB8 brand.

A further two areas included Defence cooperation and Energy (not relevant for the current research).

From the perspective of foreign and security policy dialogue, meant to increase the influence of the NB8, little was achieved during the period under review. The NB8 cooperated with the EU and included EAA members Iceland and Norway in discussions on vaccine procurement. However, no attempt was made for the region to stand out in Europe with a coordinated approach to tackling the pandemic. The one exception was the Baltic Bubble which did receive significant international coverage.

Although cooperation in diplomatic relationships was not a concern during the pandemic, the joint effort to expedite the repatriation of Nordic-Baltic citizens should be noted. Cooperation was steered at the level of Foreign Ministers, involved considerable regional coordination, and proved effective.

The pandemic was not treated as a civil emergency. Nordic-Baltic countries declared states of emergency, corresponding to their local legislative frameworks. There was no regional cooperation in this regard. Recommendations from the EU were important. But, as discussed earlier, the region itself did not strive to develop a co-ordinated approach.

Cyber security was a problem behind the scenes. As countries moved government work and education rapidly online, it was important to ensure systems could absorb the load and remain secure. That cyber security escaped becoming a serious source of incidents and criticism suggests that countries were well prepared. Nevertheless, this was at a national, not regional level. Nordic-Baltic countries cooperate in advancing cyber security. But there was no explicit attempt by the NB8 to work together during the first wave of the pandemic. Similarly, virus tracing apps were developed at a national level; there was no regional cooperation.

All of the above indicates that the priority to strengthen the NB8 brand for domestic, regional, and international audiences was not achieved. Although the Nordic-Baltic format was kept alive during the crisis through high level official contact, it had no important role to play other than to repatriate its citizens.

With the benefit of hindsight, the Nordic-Baltic region might consider certain options and possibly strengthen its brand at home and abroad:

- *Close cooperation among the medical scientific community of the region*: the Nordic-Baltic alliance could have constituted a joint board where the latest information and findings were shared and joint recommendations developed to the advantage of the region, and in the process offer a balance between their recommendations and the WHO's.

- *Learning from Iceland's lead*, where a public-private partnership delivered unprecedented levels of free testing and tracing, Nordic-Baltic countries could have brought their largest biopharmaceutical companies into a jointly funded programme with government to offer free (at least, cheaper) testing to the population and targeting data at building more effective ways of containing the virus.

- *A common space for free movement and economic activity* could have been an opportunity for innovation. The short-lived success of the Baltic Bubble, where Finland was invited to join the three Balts in late spring of 2020, pointed the way to what might have been. Had all eight countries committed more enthusiastically to coordinate pandemic mitigation measures, then a joint system of viral measurement might have been achieved capable of better monitoring a dynamic and unprecedented situation.

- Had *a common biomedical space* been introduced across the Nordic-Baltic, the region's most talented technical minds could have developed a common app not only to trace all people who had come into contact with the virus but to identify people who had fallen ill with it. Furthermore, it could have served as an electronic vaccination passport and prime source for the latest regional updates on infection rates and new pandemic regulations. In that sense, the NB8 missed a fortuitous opportunity to position their alliance and countries in the vanguard of global pandemic policy thinking, in the process strengthening its influence, promoting its brand, cohering its fellow populations into an imaginative and innovative Strategic Communications offering.

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