

# War metaphors have not proved very effective in COVID communication in Italy

November 1 2021, by Camillo Papini

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At the peak of the pandemic, Italians got used to watching the press conferences of Giuseppe Conte, who was in his second term as Italian prime minister (from 5/9/2019 to 13/2/2021), to keep people posted on

the evolution of the health crisis. But how effective were the live TV and social media interventions of the former prime minister in reassuring the population?

To answer this question, Vincenzo Galasso of Bocconi University, and its BAFFI CAREFIN, IGIER, CESifo & CEPR research centers, and Carlotta Varriale of the Bocconi Department of Social and Political Sciences have conducted the study "The Effectiveness of Leaders' Public Communication During COVID-19," which analyzed, thanks to the REPEAT Project real-time survey, [public opinion](#) on Conte's statements before and after his public speech on March 28, 2020.

The subject of the government's announcement was the plan to support the economy, especially in favor of workers and families in difficulty. An overall positive judgment emerges on the management of the crisis, which first avoided accusations of failure to take responsibility for the pandemic situation (in English the so-called blame avoidance) and, consequently, reduced the possibility that a feeling of widespread anger could take hold among Italians. In particular, there was a favorable reaction precisely to the adequacy of actions to support the economy.

Yet, Conte's use of warlike language (also chosen by other foreign political leaders) to explain the details of the efforts to contain COVID did not translate into greater public confidence in the government. The survey also highlighted that "the positive impact of the former prime minister's speech was essentially limited to the workers directly interested in the economic aid being communicated, compared to the rest of the male population," Varriale emphasizes. "The reason is that, probably, the workers affected by the measures paid more attention to the quantitative details of the subsidies put in place."

Furthermore, looking in particular at the opinion of the female public, "the war language adopted had less appeal among women," adds

Varriale. "Perhaps it would have been useful to rely on a lexicon more linked to issues of family and health. This was the model followed by Chancellor Angela Merkel, based more on [scientific evidence](#), which could have been an alternative to reassure larger sections of the population and maximize political approval of lockdown and aid measures."

**More information:** Vincenzo Galasso et al, The Effectiveness of Leaders' Public Communication During Covid-19, *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2021). [DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.3844502](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3844502)

Provided by Bocconi University

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