



*IDEA anti COVID-19 # 9*

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# How best to communicate with the public? Findings from behavioural economics in the fight against COVID-19<sup>1</sup>

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## **Brief summary**

- During epidemics, communication with the general public is essential. Findings from behavioural economics could help with this.
- Public trust in the government and the information it provides is crucial. Trust can be strengthened through transparency and admission of any mistakes made. If the public loses trust, its behaviour becomes unpredictable.
- Uncertainty and unclear or untrustworthy information increase pressure on the public. Additional stress is a burden for society.
- Regular daily briefings from the government and the crisis committee can prove a good source of information and serve to adjust expectations within society. Waiting to hear what will be announced at an extraordinary press conference leads to unpredictable behaviour among the population.

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<sup>1</sup> This study represents the author's own views and not the official position of the Czech Academy of Sciences' Economics Institute nor of the Charles University Centre for Economic Research and Graduate Education (CERGE). Michal Bauer, Jana Cahlíková, Julie Chytilová, Lubomír Cingl, Libor Dušek, Stefano Fiorin, Ulrich Glogowsky, Johannes Haushofer, Václav Korb, Yves LeYaoaunq, Johannes Rincke, Silvia Saccardo, Simeon Schudy, Michal Šoltés and Severine Toussaert were swift to react and contribute comments on the working version of this text, for which I am very grateful. Any inaccuracies or errors are the author's responsibility. This study was produced with support from the Czech Academy of Sciences as part of its AV21 Strategy programme.

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- Information must be conveyed in simple language. People need to be able to quickly understand new regulations. They do not have the time or the mental capacity to process legal formulations.
- There is too much information. The government should endeavour to be the main source of news for the public. Second place, for local matters and details, should be taken by local authorities. This can help to weaken the spread and influence of fake news and scaremongering.
- People find it hard to understand statistics. This may result in the public underestimating the situation. Experts should explain statistics in simple terms.
- People care about others, behave according to societal norms, enforce those norms, and care how society views them. It is therefore useful to explain the crisis measures along these lines. It is also good to offer an explanation of sanctions and prohibitions, so that the public does not react negatively to them. If the government does not explain the steps it is taking, the public considers this a sign that the government does not believe the people will be willing to cooperate. Public figures can contribute substantially to establishing societal norms.
- People often fail to realise that their own behaviour affects other people's health. Illustrative examples can help them understand this better and lead to greater cooperation.
- Fear is a good servant but a bad master. Handle it with care.