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**From Global to Regional: how Political Communicators
made sense of Covid-19 Crisis.
Evidences from 2020 Italian Regional Elections**

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Master's Thesis



Abstract

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Described as a “paradigm shift” event (Michelson, 2020), the Covid-19 pandemic is challenging all humans activities worldwide. Such disruptive event can be labelled as a **crisis**, which is described as an **episode of uncertainty threatening high priority goals** (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

Despite this critical situation, 206 different relevant elections has been held globally since February 2020 (IDEA, 2021). This occasion offers to us a unique opportunity to observe how electoral campaigning dynamics have been recently challenged by the pandemic. Specifically, the aim of this Master Thesis is to understand how this crisis could have “*influenced*” Political Communicators (PC) during last Italian Regional Elections (IRE). In particular, on one hand this Master Thesis will analyze and describe how PCs made sense of the context (RQ1), while on the other hand it will identify how those interpretations have triggered different responses to the crisis itself (RQ2).

After having reviewed other case studies of elections during the Covid-19 crisis, I briefly discuss Crisis Communication in order to give more consistent attention to **Sensemaking Theory**. Originated from the work of Weick (1979, 1988, 1993), this theory is about the process of human meaning-making and the consequent reactions due to the ongoing alterations of our social contexts. Sensemaking Theory will enable us to understand how this process arose in the experiences lived by the expert professionals that were involved in this research. I will complement this theoretical framework with **Crisis Exploitation Theory** (Boin, 't Hart & McConnell, 2009), which shares with the previous theory a symbolic, social-constructivist and interpretative foundation. According to this theory, crisis are at the very base of political competition. In this case, Crisis Exploitation Theory will be used to comprehend how crisis has been differently framed by PCs, and with which consequences.

The methodology used for this research is set to be individual semi-structured digital interviews. Such approach will enable the emersion of individual experiences with a wider reflections about them. In total 12 PCs have been interviewed, covering 6 out of 7 of the voting Regions.

The main conclusions are that: **a sense of emotional negativity and uncertainty** pervaded the social and cultural context of IRE, further conditioned by an already unstable political scenario. Moreover, also logistical decisions for developing IRE has been seriously unsettled, since **a sense of indeterminacy** was felt due to a lack of retrospective feedbacks. In this situation, the only PCs who seemed to have a clear understanding were the ones who worked for **incumbent Governors**. Their advantaged position, allowed them to linearly conclude their sensemaking processes. Hence, this turned to be an advantage also for their communication responses, since they exploited attacks and blames from other competitors, giving scant leeway for other PCs to discuss their issues. Nevertheless, this did not inhibit other PCs attempts to strategize the crisis, and spread their frames.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Sensemaking, Covid-19, Political Communicators, Italian Regional Elections

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Francesco Maria Parente

Cava de' Tirreni - 18/08/2021

1. *Introduction* - About a Unique Opportunity

Our times are characterized by an increasing level of connectivity (Castells, 2000). At the beginning of the Third Millennium, the **Covid-19 pandemic** leaned on this connectivity. It all started on December 2019, when the first cases of the SARS-CoV-2 were spotted in the city of Wuhan (Liu, Kuo & Shih, 2020). Nowadays, the whole cases registered are over 203 million, with more than 4 million of deaths (WHO, 2021). In this moment of uncertainty the role of politics has been pivotal for responding to the challenges in act. One of the first Western countries where the Covid-19 had an impact was **Italy** (Sylvers & Legorano, 2020). After its first case (20/02/2020), the over 128.000 deaths cast Italy as the European nation with the overall highest number of total deaths by Covid-19 (ECDC, 2021).

Despite this harsh reality, many political elections have been held worldwide. In this Master Thesis I am going to discuss and research the specific case of the **Italian Regional Elections** (IRE) that were held between the 20th/21st September 2020 in 6 Regions¹ (Veneto, Liguria, Puglia, Campania, Toscana and Marche), with over 13 millions of entitled voters. The critical context of political elections during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis can offer us **a unique opportunity** to observe how such crisis might have affected the ways of campaigning for Political Communicators. With an ongoing crisis at different societal levels and a disheartened humanity, Political Communicators (PCs) had to give their best to run election campaigns. Acting as a “liaison” between their candidates and the public opinion (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2019), they had a crucial role in interpreting ongoing changes.

1.1 Problem

IRE are held in Italy every 5 years. For some Regions, this appointment happened during the peak of the pandemic. This situation can be described as a **crisis**, because it is “an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies” (Coombs, 2012, p. 2) and is “inevitable *and* by definition *an* interdisciplinary event” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 2). Indeed, started as a health crisis, the pandemic generated backlashes in different aspects of our lives, producing negative effects at economical, social and cultural levels (Rubinelli, 2020).

Operating in such context, PCs job and outputs have been heavily influenced. Given a civic and ethical importance of how the democratic mechanism of election unfolded during the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Matlosa, 2021), studying this situation is needed. My Research wants to provide an opportunity to observe these mechanisms from within, as well as how PCs job could have changed. Therefore, in the next pages will be presented an updated review of “how Covid-19 *influenced* Political Communicators” during 2020 IRE, by analysing how these communicators “made sense” of their contexts and strategised it.

Problem Statement

There has not been any investigation on how political communicators campaigned during IRE, in light of their interpretations and reactions related to the Covid-19 crisis.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this Thesis is **to explore** how the Italian PCs made sense of the Covid-19 crisis, and thus **to understand** how they adapted their strategies during IRE. For achieving this purpose I will carry on a qualitative research for understanding the context and the different viewpoints directly from those people PCs who worked during last IRE. Hence, I have conducted individual semi-structured digital interviews, to address the following R.Q. :

RQ1: How did political communicators made sense of their electoral campaign context during the Covid-19 crisis?

RQ2: How did political communicators strategized their interpretations of the crisis during last IRE?

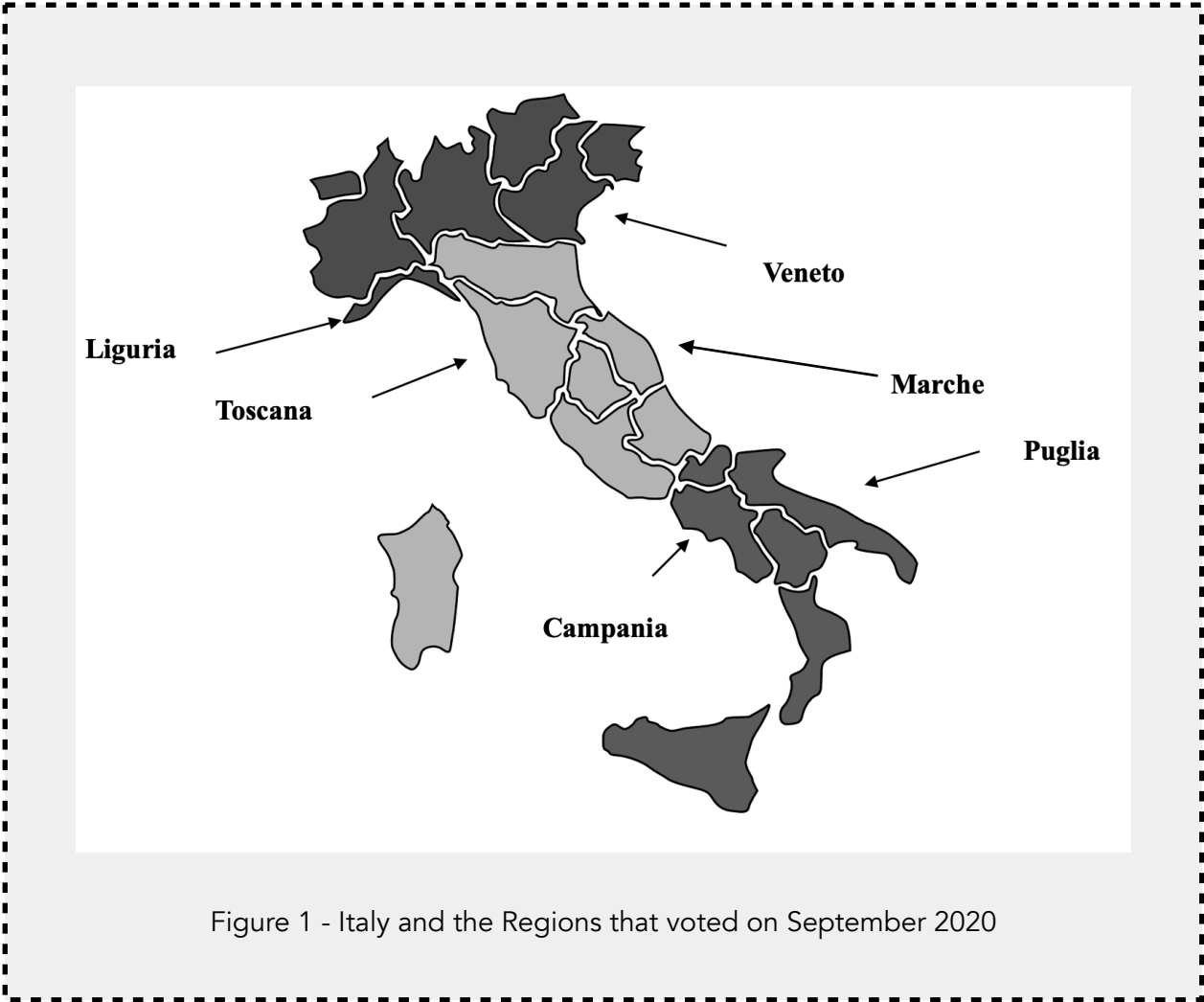
In dealing on with these research questions I've found the Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1979) very useful. Few researches have been carried out on Sensemaking in the realm of Political Communication in a crisis context, focusing on the perspective of political professionals (Salomonsen & t'Hart, 2020, p. 441). If we consider that PCs can act as "boundary spanners" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) of Political Parties, we can assume that PCs position is highly relevant in their sensemaking process, and can play a certain influence over the enactment and interpretation of critical events. Indeed, if sensemaking is always a collective process, it is from the individual level that is possible to assess the degree of a crisis (Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010). Therefore, my Thesis can offer valuable insights for both academic researchers and practitioners, demonstrating how Sensemaking and Crisis Communication are intertwined in the domain of politics. Moreover, an overlooked theme in Sensemaking and crisis seems to be that of emotion (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Indeed, having as focus the role of PCs during crisis, and also how they emotionally reacted to it, this Thesis has a **descriptive** function which can fill the aforementioned gap. Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic "offers the unique opportunity to study Sensemaking within a context that is enormously complex, novel, and rapidly changing" (Christianson & Barton, 2020, p. 1), providing that the present research is **exploratory** in its nature.

1.3 The voting Regions: a brief portrait

Table 1 summarizes some relevant informations which provide a quick overview of the context in which the Regional Elections took place on September 2020², while Fig. 1 shows geographic positioning of the voting Regions.

Regions	A Number of inhabitants	B GDP per capita	C Monthly income for graduates	D Unemployment rate
Liguria (Genova)	1.524.826	32.300 €	1.300 €	7.3%
Veneto (Venezia)	4.879.133	33.700 €	1.300 €	6.4%
Toscana (Firenze)	3.692.555	31.900 €	1.260 €	6.9%
Marche (Ancona)	1.512.672	27.700 €	1.167 €	8.1%
Campania (Napoli)	5.712.143	18.900 €	1.020 €	18.7%
Puglia (Bari)	3.953.305	18.900 €	1.020 €	14%

Table 1 - Main socio-economical factors of the 2020 voting Regions



2. Literature Review - Campaigning during Crisis

In the next paragraphs I am going to present some features observed in the literature of campaigning during crisis, which is described as a dynamic context. Afterward, an overview of the most recent campaigns during Covid-19 crisis will be offered in order to highlights recent trends.

2.1 Political Elections during Crisis

Strömbäck & Kiouisis (2014) reflected on the fact that even a well planned communication strategy is not enough for winning an election; unexpected events may occur, thus posing uncalculated challenges. For instance, when a catastrophic event happens during the unfolding of a campaign, is quite obvious that the reputation of leaders can be undermined (Coombs, 2007). On the same time it can offer an opportunity for opponent groups to raise their voice. Merolla, Ramos & Zechmeister (2007) pinpointed **leaders' charisma** as a personal characteristic which can mitigate the reputation of political leaders during crisis. Charisma has some recurrent and common traits in the literature, but it is also a “contextual phenomena” and “latent construct” that crisis can magnify (Yukl, 1999). Indeed, as Edelman (1977) noted, incumbent elites “sell” more efficiently their frames to the media, perhaps because “individuals project charisma onto a leader whom they believe is capable of restoring feelings of efficacy undermined by the crisis” (Merolla, Ramos & Zechmeister, 2007, p. 32). Hence, before 2004 US Presidential Elections, the authors (*ibid.*) tested three different hypothesis aimed at proving a bond between charismatic leaders and crisis events during electoral campaign. The hypothesis in their study were all accepted, which confirmed that: “under conditions of crisis, people perceived Bush as **more charismatic** (H1). Second, elevated perceptions of charisma increased **tendencies to overlook poor performance** by Bush (H2). Third, heightened perceptions of charisma increased willingness to

engage in self-sacrificial behavior on behalf of Bush (H3)” (*ivi.*, p. 33). Considering that during that time US witnessed the 9/11 terrorist attack and was involved in a war-conflict, this research (*ibid.*) underlines that during period of crisis a charismatic leadership have both emotional and behavioural consequences. With a more detailed study and broader sample, Williams *et al.* (2009) showed also that, in the same context of 2004 US both **crisis perception** and **voting behavior** was mediated by charismatic leadership. Another following study explored **authentic leadership** (Williams *et al.*, 2012), described as “a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate” (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008, p. 95). The difference between a charismatic leader and an authentic leader is that the latter is able to build a more personal and emotional relationship with the public/voters, therefore he does not just *persuade* about a “vision”, but rather *create trust* in it (Williams *et al.*, 2012).

Even if personal characteristics play an important role in order to gain voters’ sustain during crisis, they are not enough. Indeed, **policy responses** during crisis could provide more concrete effects on voting behaviour. Eriksson (2016) analyzed the case of the natural disaster caused by Storm Gudrun and the fall of Swedish Social Democrat party at the Parliamentary Elections after it. Storm Gudrun hit Sweden in January 2005, and caused the death of 7 people, the destruction of 75 billion of m³ of woods, blew down 5000 km of electrical cables and revealed the weaknesses of the Swedish emergency response system. Her case study (*ibid.*) showed how inadequate policy responses affected in the long-term a well consolidated political party such as the Swedish Social Democrat, which, after governing for many years, lost the elections in 2006, 2010 and 2014. The case of Storm Gudrun is essentially about voters punishment for insufficient policy response. Conversely, good performance of an incumbent, on an economic level, can foresee his re-elections, as Fair (1978, 2002) have tested in the case of the US Presidential Elections. Nevertheless, such objective factors (*eg.* policy formulation and economic performance) have to be compared to the cultural context as sustained by Abney and Hill (1966).

Indeed, alongside subjective perceptions and objective responses, as discussed before, in the literature also **the role of media** has been taken in consideration, as the mean which connects publics and political organizations. Garfield affirmed that: “mass media

serve as the primary source of information during disasters, especially prior to, during the initial impact, and in the immediate aftermath” (2007, p. 59). Furthermore, Forbes Bright & Bagley highlighted that: “media lay the foundation for recovery from disasters as they communicate the needs of the community to the public” (2017, p. 472). Nevertheless, the authors noted that the main “concern is not if the government has the material and political capabilities to react to the disaster, but also if the disaster is pertinent to political culture, given other events and topics in the **media agenda** immediately following the disaster” (*ivi.*, p. 472). Therefore if a disaster overlaps with an election, its media coverage can be enhanced or ignored accordingly to the political agenda and its communication strategy during the campaign (*ibid.*). It is the case of the Baton Rouge Flood and Hurricane Matthew that happened during 2012 US Presidential Elections: the first one was debated, and thus framed, with blame attribution against the other candidate, with the media “seemed to focus more on the presidential candidate’s response to the flooding than on the flood victims themselves, leaving recovery secondary to how the candidates responded” (*ivi.*, p. 474); if the first case was “just politicised” by candidates, the second case was merely unspoken by media, since it coincided with the release of the scandal of the Trump-Billy Bush tapes.

As we can see, the literature about Political Elections in times of crisis has been developed among the issues of **charismatic** and **authentic leadership**, **policy formulation** and the **media agenda**. We will now give a closer review of the specific crisis that we are analysing in our thesis: the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.2 Political Elections during Covid-19

It is without any doubts that also the Covid-19 crisis has had its impact in the world of politics. Herrera *et al.* (2020) found that strong measures which promoted health above all, improved the view that citizens have of their representatives, as also Fetzer *et al.* sustained (2020). On the other hand, a survey conducted in 11 European countries by the European Council on Foreign Relations, showed the main patterns of EU citizens’ perceptions towards their Governments during the Covid-19 pandemic (Krastev & Leonard, 2020). The major insights are the following:

1. “The number of people who have **lost trust in the capacity of the government to act** is larger than the number who have become **keener on government intervention** in the wake of the crisis. [...]” (*ivi*, p. 4);
2. “A majority of citizens in most member states **do not trust experts and the authorities**” (*ivi*, p. 7);
3. The visions of **Eurosceptics** and **Europeists** has been reversed, where “many nationalists appear to have realised that European cooperation is the only way to preserve the relevance of their nation states. On the other hand, many cosmopolitans have seen that, in a world squeezed between Xi Jinping’s China and Donald Trump’s America, Europe’s best hope for preserving its values lies in strengthening its own “strategic sovereignty” rather than relying on global multilateral institutions” (*ivi*, p. 3).

These findings exemplify how voters opinion can have been unsettled by the Covid-19. We will now give a closer look at how those changes have been reflected during different Elections that occurred around the globe.

First of all, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused many delays in the opening of the polls, and campaigning were limited and reorganized. James & Alihodzic (2020) discussed about the effect of postponing elections during the Covid-19 pandemic. Citizens engagement during the electoral campaigns “become more emotive and less rational during natural disasters, both online and in how politicians respond to each other” (*ivi*, p. 351). But more pertinent question can be about the limitation of democratic participation by different candidates in times of the Covid-19. Strzelecki (2020), for instance, discussed how the Polish Premier Duda exploited his position during the epidemic through a wide media presence, whereas his opponents were not being able to have the same coverage due to the lockdown. It is also the case of the independent candidate for Mayor of London Rory Stewart, who quit is candidature, blaming that the Covid-19 restrictions made him impossible to run the campaign (Lydall, 2020). In addition to the “incumbent exploitation” of the pandemic, the problems have been also

logistic, since “the delivery of elections is reliant on huge workforces” (James & Alihodzic, 2020, p. 355) and “counts often take place in crowded areas such as halls or within polling stations where social distancing is difficult [...]. Touch-screen equipment, or sharing pens to mark a ballot or to sign a voter register, are opportunities for the transmission of infectious diseases” (*ivi*, p. 349). The authors concluded that “the case for postponing elections should be evaluated by democratic concepts of **electoral integrity**, rather than international laws and practices [...] *but* there is no one-size-fits-all solution because the nature of the natural disaster will vary” (*ivi*, p. 358). For instance, *The Commonwealth Secretariat* released a briefing paper for managing elections during the Covid-19 pandemic targeted to find a balance “between taking steps to protect the health and safety of citizens and safeguarding democratic rights and freedoms through the conduct of genuine elections” (2020, p. 4).

Another angle that concerns how Covid-19 has impacted the world of politics, is about how candidates incorporated in their policy agenda the topic of public health. In the case of the incumbent and re-candidated US President Donald Trump, it is manifest that during his last period in charge he “denied the danger of the virus and misled the public about the problem” (Hatcher, 2020, p. 614). Given the pivotal and decisive role that politics has on public health (Oliver, 2006), the way in which President Trump discussed about the Covid-19 during the pre-electoral period has created confusion and exposed to extreme danger the US public health. According to Hatcher (2020), Trump’s agenda on the Covid-19 pandemic misled the communication about its risk through 3 different set of frames: he did not recognised Covid-19 as a **problem**, he inappropriately commented on **local Governors and other politicians** who wanted to apply more suitable responses, he misled the public about **policy and procedures** (such as the use of face masks, the adoption of social distancing and the administration of untested drugs). Mazzetti (2020) led back these choices to his election race, assuming that severe measures if would have been adopted could have brought the US to an economic recession, and thus to unfavourable conditions for his re-election. As the author synthesized: “being re-elected seemed more important than containing the virus” (*ivi*, p. 5). This punishment for Trump’s administration at the polls can be justified by the theory of **retrospective voting**, where the incumbent’s performance is taken into account by citizens, whose arising perceptions are the evaluative basis for their vote

preference. According to Ashworth: “voters look to the past to decide how to vote, but they do so from purely prospective motives. And precisely because they are behaving rationally [...] The idea is that voters apply a backward-looking standard to evaluate incumbents (or incumbent parties), throwing out candidates who did not meet the standard” (2012, p. 187). Indeed, Baccini, Brodeur & Weymouth (2021), tested the impact of Covid-19 on Trump’s political support during the electoral campaign, which mirrored the failure of his administration during the pandemic. The authors in their research found that the support was smaller “in States without a formal stay-at-home order, in states that Trump won in the 2016 presidential election, in swing states and in urban counties [...] finding some evidence that COVID-19 cases affect voters’ mobilization, measured as the number of votes cast in 2020 compared to 2016” (*ivi*, p. 741).

If Trump’s political communication during the pre-electoral period showed his scanty approach to the problem, conversely the case of the New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern proves great leadership abilities in contrasting the pandemic (McGuire *et al.*, 2020). McGuire *et al.* (2020), have found that PM Jacinda Ardern succeeded to manage the Covid-19 crisis thanks to her genuine language and balanced mix of decisiveness and empathy. The authors have analysed her messages on different media and found how her narrative developed according to the stage in which the pandemic was unfolding in New Zealand. One of the interesting thing that was discovered is the “power of engaging with the **media** and **social media channels** to shape perceptions of authenticity and approachability” (*ivi*, p. 374) of her leadership. Indeed, during the unfolding of the pandemic, PM Jacinda Ardern through “discursive devices, images of social solidarity and information outlining both responsibilities and ‘success’” (*ibid.*) has had a transparent and encouraging commitment in mobilising the New Zealander population, which reached the lowest level of contagion and deaths in the world (WHO, 2021). This is in line with Sobral *et al.* (2020) study on leadership *sensegiving* during the Covid-19. The authors sustained that “effective sensegiving frames in their communications with the public, leaders can avoid mass panic, facilitate collective sensemaking, and foster the adoption of the desirable behaviors by the citizens” (*ivi*, p. 761). Her confirm as PM during New Zealand 2020 elections can be another proof of the retrospective vote. Indeed, also Herrera *et al.*, in a study which compare Covid-19

infections with policy changes in 35 countries, found that “governments that placed more weight on health outcomes versus economic outcomes gained political support” (2020, p 20).

Considering that Covid-19 crisis is a global crisis that: “is creating a paradigm shift that is realigning every system in every industry across the global at once – in an instant” (Michelson, 2020), PCs should have remained “open to new information, perspectives, contingencies, interpretations, and alternatives” (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2001, p. 159). Therefore next chapter will directly address the topic of how sense is made during crisis, which are episodes characterised for their inherent ambiguity and interpretative difficulties (Sobral *et al.*, 2020).

3. *Theoretical Framework* - Does it Make Sense?

In this chapter I develop my Theoretical Framework, which is intended to put order and give sense to the present research. Since “theories put phenomena into meaningful systems” (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 104), for the present Thesis I am using **Sensemaking Theory**. This theory will guide us in interpreting how PCs perceived and managed the crisis. In particular, **Critical Sensemaking** (Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010) will enable us to understand sensemaking as an organizational process which unfolds differently for every organizational role. In addition, **the influence of emotions** in this process will be considered (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Considering that the application of Sensemaking in Crisis Communication arose from a social constructionist and interpretivist approaches, another Theory which is focused on the flows of meanings through symbols, is **Crisis Exploitation Theory** (Boin, 't Hart & McConnell, 2009).

3.1 **Crisis Communication and Sensemaking**

The etymology of the word crisis comes from the Greek words *krisis* and *krinein*: the first one was used in the medical field to describe the turning point in illnesses, while the second is a verb which means to choose, to separate. This duality is also present in the Chinese word of crisis, *wēijī*, which is composed by two ideograms *wēi* which connotes threat and danger and *jī* which can be translated as opportunity³. This fact sheds light on the complexity of what crisis are. Natural disasters, famine and contaminations, pandemics, and many other critical events are part of our life and are what we can label **crisis**. They are impossible to avoid and when they happen they take place as systemic and interdisciplinary events. But if we recall to our memory the second etymological meanings of crisis, sometime those critical events can be seen also as opportunities for learning and changing.

Therefore, studying crisis is important for understanding how to pass over and learn from them, which explains why so many scholars and practitioners have been interested in its different aspects. Indeed, **communication** is crucial in those events, to signal harms and threats, as well as pushing for needs and aids, and to connect and to mobilise different publics and organizations. Emerged from Risk and Crisis Management, Crisis Communication has become an independent research area and discipline (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). Nevertheless, it is still strictly related to the heredity of Public Relations, because crisis “are inherently **public and imply** organizations trying to **manage crises within** complex relationships that influences the choices organizations make, *where* core stake at risk in a crisis *are* the **relationships** between an organization and its stakeholder” (Diers-Lawson, 2020, p. 27). Coombs (2010) synthesized that a crisis is **a violation of some expectations held by any stakeholders or broadly in a given community**. In their normal routine, different and specific groups of people can observe that some aspects of their lives is not anymore as they expected them to be, and start to perceive the situation as risky and threatening in their social context. This perception of a potential danger undermining the status quo, imposes the behaviour of the impacted groups of people to be changed. But not all the threats and risks can be labelled as a crisis: it depends on the magnitude of its effects, and on their “**personal, community and cultural perception**” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 3). Therefore, the perception of what is happening is crucial in realizing the nature of a crisis (Salomonsen & 't Hart, 2020). Sellnow & Seeger (2013) identified three general attributes which give a broader definition of what is frequently perceived as a crisis, which are: **violated expectations**, a **threaten for high priority goals** and **immediate response**. Moreover, crisis can be single and episodic event, whereas some crisis can be a “series of interacting and cascading events” (*ivi*, p. 7).

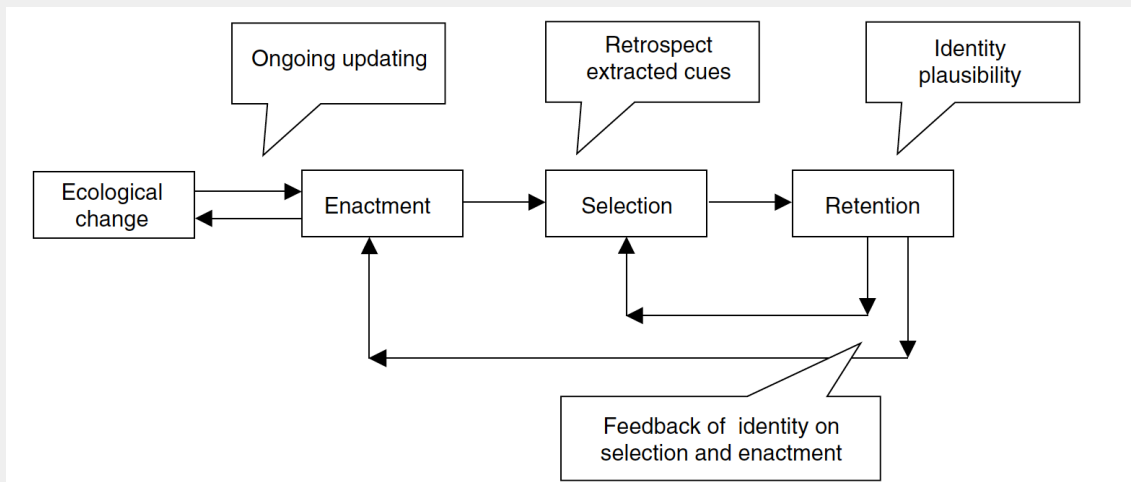
Therefore, when thinking of the cause of a crisis, it is unequivocal to think also about the issues of responsibility, as it is usually manifest after a crisis emerged, when discourse of blame attribution follows. Taking back the concept of crisis not only as materially constructed, but also as a **perceived phenomena** (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013), this can provides the usefulness of communication during crisis. Rejecting the traditional transmission model of communication (*eg.* Shannon & Weaver, 1949), most of Crisis Communication scholars adopt a constitutive paradigms (*eg.* Berger &

Luckmann, 1967) which emphasise the complexity of communication processes, the fluidity between sender and receiver, as well as a focus on the creation of meanings. Sensemaking Theory, early originated in organizational studies, is a thorough explanation of this meaning-making process during crisis.

Weick described crisis as a cosmology episode where people “suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together” (1993, p. 633). Since sensemaking “tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world” (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409), it is especially in analysing crisis that this theory has found applications (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013; Frandsen, 2020). Crisis are defined by Weick (1988) as “low probability and high consequences” events, which by challenging the basic assumptions and believes of an organization, open to sensemaking questions. “What does this mean?” or “What should I do?” ... These are classical questions that occur during crisis events.

Originating from the pragmatist paradigm in modern social science (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010), **Sensemaking** Theory is about the ongoing meaning-making by individuals, through a process cues’ extraction from a bracketed portion of reality (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005) which “occurs when discrepant cues interrupt individuals’ ongoing activity, and involves the retrospective development of plausible meanings that rationalize what people are doing” (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 551). In this way Sensemaking is the flow of meanings, from the people to the outer world, and vice versa, being a process of social construction where meanings represent integral part of the process itself (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010). Sensemaking was theorised as processes which goes through 3 stages: **enactment** (organizations enact and their actions determine a sense of the situation), **selection** (organizations interpret the feedback from the outside) and finally **retention** (organizations learn something about this inward/outward exchange and use it for the next enactment). For this reason, sensemaking is a **retrospective process**: by following a retrospective thinking, people make sense of the present through the past, while projecting to future approximations. So sensemaking is a process where new meanings and old ones are constructed through enactment of actions (Weick, 1988). Those actions are all the communicative behaviours and artifacts which

through different languages (oral speech, written text, actions...) put meanings into existence. The whole model is circular and Graph 1 schematises it.



Graph 1 - The sensemaking process (from Jennings and Greenwood, 2003; adapted from Weick 1979, p. 132)

Gioia & Chittipeddi (1991) in their ethnographic research of organizational change, expanded Sensemaking Theory by introducing the concept of **sensegiving**. “Sensegiving is concerned with the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (*ivi*, p. 411).

3.2 The Flows of Meanings During Crisis

In Weick’s Sensemaking Theory, organizations are used as the unit of analysis, because sensemaking is the “ongoing activity underlying the process of organizing” (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010, p. 30). In our case, political parties will be the organizations from which observing the cosmology episode of the pandemic. As all the others, these organizations evaluate their possible actions through a degree of their **appropriateness**, based on the **plausible meanings** retrieved from their enactment. Nevertheless, along this process, it

is possible to note how much individual roles are subject to different “possibility of appropriate interpretations of meaning” (Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010, p. 190), depending on the organizational knowledge (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2004) known by each employee. Indeed, in each organization there are specific group of people involved in different process of sensemaking. This highlights the ongoing and situational dimension of sensemaking: the past shapes the present, and the present shapes the future, according to the different organizational perspectives available. Considering the distribution of power in our case, Political Communicators are key players within election campaigns, and thus we can assume they have a “privileged” position within the sensemaking process, since they tend to seek for an overall gaze of the campaign.

Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) wrote a detailed overview of how **emotions** have been discussed among the Sensemaking literature, since crisis can activate both **negative and positive** emotional responses. One of the first characteristics that the authors noted is that emotions arising during an “ecological change” (see Graph 1) have the power to bias the cues from the surrounding environment, since they interrupt the cognitive processes (Easterbrook, 1959). In particular both **felt and expressed emotions** affect the sensemaking process:

- negative felt emotions are the most frequent during crisis, and if they arise *before* the sensemaking process, they can potentially limit the perception of relevant cues (*eg.* alarming informations), being “especially likely to impede sensemaking” (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 567), while negative expressed emotions have the power to affect group sensemaking, since verbal and physical emotional feedbacks have an highly contagious effect (Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson; 1994; Vendelo & Rerup, 2009);
- on the other hand, positive felt emotions are able to broaden the scope of attention (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2002) and widen the categorisation of clues (Murray *et al.*, 1990), while Mayer *et al.* (1992) discussed how positive emotions - both felt and expressed - can lead to an overestimated and superficial interpretation of the context.

Moreover, felt emotions have a role in influencing the **triggering**, the **shaping** and **concluding** phases of the Sensemaking process on the individual level (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013).

Sensemaking Theory is a useful model for both crisis prevention and crisis management, because it frames crisis as those unexpected events which require both emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses (Weick, 1990). Indeed, Weick (1988, 1990, 1993) has specifically discussed about crisis situations with the use of Sensemaking Theory, as many others did (Frandsen, 2020), claiming that already “initial responses do more than set the tone; they determine the trajectory of the crisis” (Weick, 1988, p. 309). In this view, even “small structures and short moments can have large consequences” (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 410). The enactment, as a process of doing for making sense and structuring reality, is framed as an emerging quality during crisis, which is related to the concepts of **commitment**, **capacity** and **expectations** (Weick, 1988). Commitment is the most visible part of enactment, because once that decisions are made and actions are enacted they become perceivable. Therefore, commitment brings as a consequence issues of attention, justification and further commitments. Subsequently it follows the extent of capacity employable during enactments. Capacity expresses the way in which different roles within the hierarchy are able to enact, where different roles stimulate different level of sensemaking. This can affect the perception of crisis as well, “because people see those events they feel they have the capacity to do something about” (Weick, 1988, p. 311). Expectations are the last concept used by Weick (*ivi.*), which influences enactment responses, since it is what set the level of expected actions and results available. Once through an enactment a sense of normality is interpreted, the sensemaking process can be defined as concluded (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) because individuals and organisations will keep operating as they are used to be operating.

3.3 Enacting during Political Crisis

Drawing from previous studies and disciplines (Boin, 't Hart & McConnell, 2009; Bostdorff, 1994; Coombs, 2007; Entman, 1993; Christensen, 1997), Coombs (2019) found some differences between crisis in the business domain and the ones in the realm of politics. Some of the main findings are that political communicators are much more likely **to engage in framing battles** than their corporate colleagues, and therefore are much more likely **to use crisis exploitation** (*ibid.*).

't Hart (1993) expanded the perceptual dimension of crises by highlighting how crisis are deeply rooted in the affective domain. In the realm of politics, crisis, once activated, triggers a collapse of the familiar symbolic frameworks that was used to legitimate the previous status-quo. Indeed, “the currency of crises in political terms is the erosion of trust and legitimacy in the institutions and elites that govern us” (Salomonsen & 't Hart, 2020, p. 443). As Boin, 't Hart & McConnell pointed, crisis “open up political space for actors inside and outside government to redefine issues, propose policy innovations and organizational reforms, gain popularity and strike at opponents” (2009, p. 82). The authors in their case studies advanced the **Crisis Exploitation Theory (CET)**, defined “as the purposeful utilization of crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter levels of political support for public office-holders and public policies.” (*ivi*, p. 83). Because of the uneven and socially constructed nature of critical events, the authors suggested that political actors, in order to exploit a crisis, can build three different set of frames: **denial**, **threat** and **opportunity**. In the case of the last two, when a crisis is recognised as such, politicians report its causes as ‘endogenous’ or ‘exogenous’. These reactions can bring different backlashes, that range from “blindness” to “alarmism”. Nevertheless the main focus of CET is not just the identification of the frames, but rather “how the clash between them produces particular types of political and policy consequences” (*ivi*, p. 88). CET is completed by a “game-matrix” of consequences which arise when a crisis occurs both on the political (Table 2) and policy level (Table 3).

Critics	Absolve blame	Focus blame
Incumbents		
Accept responsibility	<i>I. Blame minimization:</i> Elite escape likely	<i>II. Blame acceptance:</i> Elite damage likely
Deny responsibility	<i>III. Blame avoidance:</i> Elite escape likely	<i>IV. Blame showdown:</i> Elite damage, escape, rejuvenation all possible

Table 2 - Crisis exploitation on Political level (from Boin, 't Hart & McConnell; 2009, p 89)

Change advocates	Press for policy paradigm shift	Press for incremental reform
Status-quo players		
Resist policy change	I: policy stalemate <i>or</i> politically imposed paradigm shift	II: policy stalemate <i>or</i> politically imposed incremental adjustment
Contain policy Change	III: major and swift rhetorical/symbolic change; more incremental substantive change	IV: negotiated incremental adjustment

Table 3 - Crisis exploitation on policy issues (from Boin, 't Hart & McConnell; 2009, p 90)

Thus, accounting that the CET is **situational**, it also recognizes “actor propensities” as a factor among the construction of the events. For instance, “long-time government leaders are much more likely to adopt defensive postures than newly incumbent leader” (*ivi*, p. 99). Therefore generally, “actors in the world of politics manage meaning making and communicate to win the framing contests through which crises are constructed politically as well as the communication performed when accounting for crisis” (Salomonsen & 't Hart, 2020, p. 439).

Within political crisis Coombs (2019) made a distinction between **operational** and **symbolic crisis**. The first one is about operationalization processes that fails in their procedures (*eg.* a law which created negative effects), while the second is used to describe a crisis which damages intangible asset, such as reputation (see the first lines of 't Hart, 1993). On the other hand Salomonsen & 't Hart (2020) distinguished between **situational** and **institutional** crisis. “Situational crises are those in which the source of the perceived threat outside the system that bears the brunt of it. [...] Crises become institutional when the dominant understanding of their origins and escalation is one that emphasizes endogenous factors [...] Institutional crises are more palpably and inherently political, because they then activate a politics of investigation, accountability and blame” (*ivi*, p. 443). According to the Salomonsen & 't Hart (2020) when a situational crisis develops into an institutional crisis, the level of communication involved changes from tactical to strategic, because the meaning-making process in this situation questions deeply rooted senses. Therefore, as also noted by Coombs (2019), in those

situations few members of the management must be concerned with strategising the crisis, both if the organizations involved is the accusing or the accused. Salomonsen & 't Hart (2020) identified three generic cases when a situational crisis escalates into an institutional one: the first is in a context influenced by the **timing**, since incidents and crisis tend to occur in proximity of elections; the second case sees the **importance of media** and their agendas, because when “media are already pre-occupied with critical perspectives on persons, policies and scandals [...] the incident at hand is more likely to be ‘endogenized’ into an institutional crisis narrative” (Salomonsen & 't Hart, 2020, p. 445); the third type is accrued by **political frames and narrative**, since the wrong “story-telling” can magnify more systemic problems. For the fact that politics play the role of giving order to our lives, during political crisis politicians attempts should be aimed “to reduce public and political uncertainty and inspire confidence in crisis leaders by formulating and imposing a convincing narrative” (Boin *et al.*, 2017, p. 79). In the meaning-making process of political crisis “other actors in the political system are relevant too, since crisis events, narratives and imagery can be experienced and evoked not just by elected politicians” (Salomonsen & 't Hart, 2020, p. 442). Boin *et al.* (2017) advised seven steps for managing a functional sensemaking process during political crisis:

- 1) A clear distinction between the people engaged, where strategic frames are decided by politicians and communication tasks are done by communicators;
- 2) A clear understanding of our hyper-connected world, of both its technologies as well as its processes, since this acknowledgment can foster the preparedness;
- 3) Specific experts employed for providing informations must inform with accurate and relevant facts;
- 4) Despite the hyper-mediality of the communication strategies, all the meanings must sound as one-voice;
- 5) Include new-media and not exclude classic-media;
- 6) Understand everything that should be communicated and what should not, without underestimate the importance of communicating transparently;
- 7) Communicate is essential, but without actions those meanings reflects emptiness. Therefore communications should be targeted at performing supportive behaviours and symbolically enhance proactive behaviours by both political actors and citizens.

4. *Methodology and Research Design* - How We are Going to Interpret Things

After having confronted different methodologies, I chose **individual semi-structured digital interviews** because its interpretative epistemology (Prasad, 2018; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019; Brinkmann, 2013) is based on the sharing of meanings in the unfolding of experiences. Indeed, such research methodology fits the purpose of the present Thesis which is based on **descriptive and explorative approaches**: the use of interviewing is coherent with the whole theoretical framework used, because both allow to conceive **interpretations** of reality as an intersubjective phenomena. Those interpretations function as elements of analysis, providing the ground for describing specific situations and contexts lived by interviewees. In particular, **qualitative methods** “tend to approach questions of social reality and knowledge production from a more problematized vantage point, emphasizing the constructed nature of social reality, the constitutive role of language” (Prasad, 2018, p. 7). **Qualitative theory** is interpretative inasmuch as it aims at understanding the different interpretations of experiences, conceiving them “as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world” (*ivi*, p. 13). Moreover, both interviewing (Meretoja, 2014) and Sensemaking (Laroche 1995; Lant 2002; Weick 1993) are theorised as enactment of actions and exchange of symbols, giving the possibility to explore human experience also as a **symbolic interaction**. Here “the world cannot be known as such but is brought about by acting upon it. It does not lie there ready to be interpreted, but has to be made sense of” (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010, p. 31). In this way, knowledge is understood to be originated from subjective interpretations of reality, which in the literature is referred as the **social construction of reality** (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Nevertheless, those subjective interpretations are mediated through the use of shared symbolic schemas of knowledge, such as the language or behaviours. Those interpretations are better understood as intersubjective, because underlining its shared nature will overcome the limit of a mere subjective reality. **Symbolic interactionism** is the most suitable

paradigm for the present research, because its “emphasis *is* on individual sensemaking, expressed through its detailed development of the role of the self in the construction of reality” (Prasad, 2018, p. 19). It was Mead (1977) who theorised that people, in order to make sense of a situation, decide which role to enact, thus projecting already some of the possible circumstances if they take a given behavioural choice. According to Mead, people interpret a situation by staging different roles which correspond to the expectations of a context. So roles and identity are **an adaptation to the context and also a construct of it**, because “humans have the capacity to resolve blocks to ongoing activity by internally manipulating symbols to review and choose among potential solutions” (Stryker, 2008, p. 17). Therefore, the role that one takes, is due by the context and vice versa, where the roles are enabled by communication, and communication depends on the interaction and exchange of meanings, which is “constantly being modified through a series of individual interpretations” (Prasad, 2018, p. 21) among the engaged parts. To this extent, the **perceived and the enacted roles** are behavioural and cognitive symbols exchanged inside and outside individuals, which generate new knowledge to people. Therefore our focus is on those multiple identities, roles, meanings and contexts as phenomena of negotiation. Indeed, multiple realities exist, and through interviews the researcher has the function of let them emerge and observe how interviewees self-identify and perceive their role in the narrated events. I argue that the use of interviews can provide a window over those meanings generated in those contexts, because it allows to reproduce and to grasp a situated knowledge by a person as well as the contextual beliefs in relation to other social actors. Nevertheless, if semi-structured interviews are the predominant method in qualitative studies (Brinkmann, 2013), Ha & Boynton (2014) found that those are underrepresented in Crisis Communication researches. In the next paragraphs I will explain the method in more details.

4.1 Methodology

Different forms of qualitative methodologies exist and have been used by researchers and practitioners. I analysed their advantages and disadvantages, as Brinkmann (2013) suggested to do, arriving at the decision that the individual semi-structured interview is

the most suitable method. For instance, discussing about private issues, such as working with politicians, should not be favourable in focus groups. In addition, since I am interested in personal interpretations rather than dynamic interactions of a group of people, the individual semi-structured interview sounds more plausible. According to Brinkmann, **semi-structured interviews**

“make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee. Semi-structured interviews also give the interviewer a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself, rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide”

(2013, p. 22)

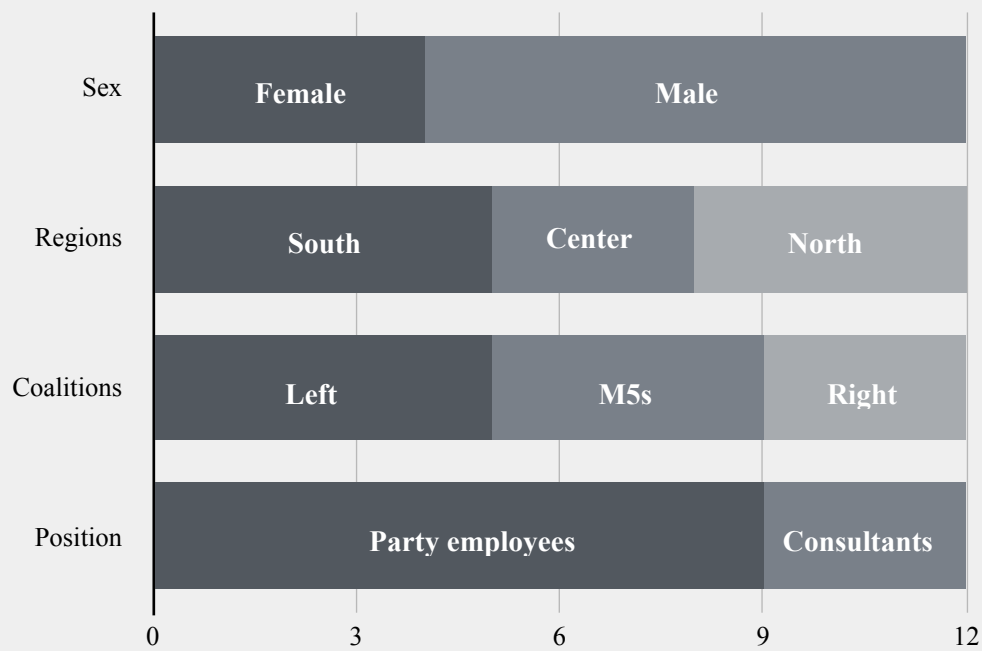
Moreover, its aim is to obtain “descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, p. 3). In this methodology, meanings should never rely upon the individual interpretations, but rather they arise from complex forces which are not dependent by the individual willingness, but are influenced by internal and external conflicts (Butler, 2005; Frosh, 2007). For this reason, “it is important to be open to multiple interpretations of what is said and done in an interview” (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 25), thus being aware that meanings are not fixed but fluid and situationally created. However, in the practice a focus on ambiguity and validity must be taken. I will address this in Paragraph 4.5.

More specifically, I have opted to conduce the semi-structured interview with the use of digital videocall platform. **Digital interviews** have been chosen because of constraints of pandemic. Digital interviews are “concurrently interactive communication *where by* [...] using the web camera, the interaction will be comparable to the onsite equivalent for the presence of nonverbal and social cues (Stewart & Williams, 2005; Sullivan, 2012). However, a “head shot” provided by webcam will create obstacles in observing all of the participant’s body language (Cater, 2011)” (as cited in Janghorban, Roudsari & Taghipour, 2014; p. 1). Since I will be more interested in listening than seeing, I will not take much care of the spatial and visual representations of the interviews, but on the same time I will be committed to establish a good internet connection and to place myself in a setting which will show myself as it would have happened in a real life and synchronous experience.

Finally, I personally claim to adhere to a “**romantic** approach” (Roulston, 2010) to qualitative research, where the interviewer is portrayed as who wants to “obtain revelations and confessions of the interviewees by intimacy and rapport” (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 13). This can be matched with a “traveller approach” to interviewing, which describe the interview as a journey, and that “journey may not only lead to new knowledge, the traveller might change as well” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019, p. 20). Since my whole research project has an exploratory and descriptive nature, I personally think that this posture can facilitate the emerging of memories and sensations about past experiences through an active engagement with the interviewees. In spite of this, I will pay a lot of attention in avoiding a too much assertive type of interview, trying instead to foster a **receptive interviewing** style (Brinkmann, 2013), thus giving more space for the interviewee to speak and to be less driven by the interviewer. In Appendix 1 the pilot questions are reported. Before I started each interview I have had 5/7 minutes to break the ice and to claim the important things required during the interview, as well as their rights and options available.

4.2 Sources of Data

The sample is composed by the Political Communicators who worked during the last Italian Regional Elections (IRE). Therefore, the only contingent factor required is to have been involved in one of those campaigns, including both political party internal employees and private consultants who contributed to IRE. For this reason, my interviewees can be also categorized as **expert interviewees**. Experts are “agents bearing specific functions within an organizational or institutional context, *who* (re)present solutions to problems and decision-making-processes” (Meuser & Nagel, 2005, p. 74, as cited in Abels & Behrens, 2009, p. 139). The concept of expertise is conceived as an intrinsic quality held by a group of people, as well as the outcome of the external forces who generate domain of expert knowledge in our societies (Collins & Evans, 2007; Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2009). The overall sample is of 12 interviews, for details see the next graph.



Graph 2 - A display of the main aggregated data of the sample

Despite the method used is individual semi-structured interview, 2 interviews have been split in 2 appointments. The average length of the conducted interviews is around 110 minutes. Since my sample is anonymised, I have used the acronym PC - which stands for Political Communicators - followed by a serial number, in order to identify the interviewees (see Table 4).

	Role declared	Age	Prior experience	Interview length
PC1	Press Officer and Social Media Manager	< 55	Yes	01:38:14
PC2	Spokesperson and Communication and Media Manager	< 35	Yes	01:10:06
PC3	Communication Consultant	< 35	Yes	00:55:33
PC4	Communication Campaign Coordinator and Social Media Advertiser	< 40	Yes	01:42:35
PC5	Press Officer and Communication Manager	< 40	Yes	02:09:16
PC6	Communication Manager	< 35	No	02:11:34
PC7	Communication Manager	< 25	Yes	02:07:46
PC8	Communication Campaign Coordinator and Organizational Secretary	< 45	Yes	01:16:30 + 01:20:08
PC9	Press Officer	< 50	Yes	01:42:54
PC10	Campaign Manager	< 40	Yes	00:51:52 + 01:10:42
PC11	Press Officer and Social Media Manager	< 30	No	01:04:36
PC12	Communication Manager	< 45	Yes	01:54:38

Table 4 - A brief presentation of interviewees

4.3 Sampling Approach

Because my sample is represented by communication professionals who work with undisclosed and private informations, trying to reach those people has not been an easy task. Lilleker, noted that “interviews can provide immense amounts of information that could not be gleaned from official published documents or contemporary media accounts” (2002, p. 208). For reaching my sample I applied two different approaches: two interviewees were contacted through personal contacts who helped me in reaching them (convenience sampling), while seven were indirect and new contacts, which then have also helped me to get in touch with the remaining three professionals (snowball sampling). For the ones that have been contacted for the first time by myself, I have searched online who managed communication for the specific candidates, and then I wrote an email which expressed my intentions (*ibid.*). In total I have contacted 22 people. 5 did not reply, other 5 denied the opportunity of being involved in the interview, and 12 responded positively. With the ones who accepted, later on I had a phone call in order to explain with more details my research project, reassuring them about the privacy terms of the research as well asking them if they had any question. This could have fostered positively our relationship and allowed me to be perceived with good intentions and proper research attitude. Probably, this has had a positive impact on my reputation in their views, which according to Marland and Esselment (2019) is a good asset for researchers who wants to get in touch with political interviewees. Indeed, I have observed that all of my sample from the beginning asked me to address them with the 2nd singular person rather than the 3rd singular person pronoun, which is used in Italian language for formal conversation. This can be a signal of openness and of good relationship with the interviewees.

4.4 Data Collection

Since myself and the interviewees are Italians, interviews were conducted in Italian. In addition, for assuring the scientific and legal quality to my sample, all of them have signed a consent form, which is an agreement on the purpose of the research and how data will be treated.

I have used Zoom[®] for conducting the semi-structured interviews. This platform offers the possibility to record the video-call. After having interviewed and recorded the different interviewees, I have transcribed on a cloud writing software (Documents by Google Drive) the whole interviews, including also nonverbal utterances (laughs, pauses, deep-breaths...). I have started to transcribe interviews in parallel with conducting the remaining interviews. While transcribing them I have searched for the most valuable meanings for my thesis expressed by the interviewees and thus started to create a code for patterning and gathering the different themes emerged in the interviews. Nevertheless, for assuring a complete level of anonymization of the excerpts that I have reported in next chapter, all the references to Regions, candidates, political parties and competitors will be changed with Region/candidate/competitor/political party X, Y, Z, where X will always be referred to the things for which the interviewee worked. The acronym FMP, reported in the next chapter, stands for my initials.

4.5 Analysis Plans and Procedures

Most of the interviews analysis are said to be a form inductive-analysis (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019), and mine will follow as well this type of knowledge-making process: I have some ideas that I want to explore, but I don't have specific hypothesis to falsify. **The plan and procedure** can briefly be synthesized as follow: while transcribing the interviews I started to look for thematic patterns among them and trying to understand if those different themes identified can be clustered among categories. I have not relied upon predetermined codes, but rather identified them directly during the analysis, which Gibbs (2018) refer as data-driven coding. After re-reading several times the transcribed interviews, I was be able to clearly see how the different interviewees share and express their meanings. At this point in time it has been necessary to infer about the adherence of those patterns towards the two Research Questions and elaborate about the hypothetical assumptions which can be drew upon. Hence, each thematic-category has been disassembled in different codes, each of them labelled with an acronym. Secondly I put them into a table, where the different codes and categories are described (see Appendix 3). Afterwards, for storing themes, categories and the transcribed interviews, I

have manually used the software NVivo® in order to quickly code them and organize the informations.

This analysis procedure is a mix of the three procedures reviewed by Brinkmann & Kvale (2019), where the authors suggested that typically the focus of qualitative analysis can be on **meanings**, on **language** and on **theoretical implications**. The most important object in the analysis procedure is to unveil the interpretations shared by my sample, which means to go “beyond what is directly said to work out structures and relations of meaning not immediately apparent in a text. In contrast to the de-contextualization of statements by categorization, interpretation re-contextualizes the statements within broader frames of reference” (*ivi*, p. 125).

Nevertheless, the main concern for this kind of methodology is about the reliability and validity of the interviews. Brinkmann & Kvale (2019) pointed out, “**reliability** pertains to the consistency and trustworthiness of research findings; it is often treated in relation to the issue of whether a finding is reproducible at other times and by other researchers” and “**validity** refers in ordinary language to the truth, the correctness and the strength of a statement. A valid argument is sound, well grounded, justifiable, strong and convincing” (*ivi.*, pp. 142-143). Since quantitative methods are easier to check on their reliability and validity, it is not the same for the intersubjective knowledge produced by qualitative ones. Therefore, rather than conceiving those two concepts in a positivist manner, authors (*ibid.*) suggested to focus on **the craftsmanship quality of the interviews**. A first suggestion that goes in this direction is for the researcher to verify if what he wants to investigate is what he is investigating. A second important improvement is about the type of questions formulated during the interviews: the interviewee has to be validated by himself, with the use of questions aimed at testing the validity of his claims. Indeed, “the task of the interviewer is to clarify, as far as possible, whether the ambiguities and contradictory statements are due to a failure of communication in the interview situation, or whether they reflect genuine inconsistencies, ambivalence and contradictions of an interviewee’s life situation” (*ivi*, p. 17). For this reason follow-up questions, reasoned on an active-listening basis, are important to test the validity of the interviewee’s meanings. Another way to validate the interpretation of evidences is to use member validation procedure, “which involves taking research evidence back to the research participants [...] to see if the meaning or

interpretation assigned is confirmed by those who contributed to it in the first place” (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003, p. 276). For accomplishing this type of validation, I have sent back the transcription of each interview to the interviewees in order to ask them about the correct transcription of their words.

On the other hand, regarding the reliability, this is conceived in qualitative methods as the concern of “the **replicability** of research findings and whether or not they would be repeated if another study” (*ivi*, p. 270), but also can be referred to the **trustworthiness** (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or the **consistency** (Robson, 2002) of the interviewees. Indeed, since reliability is a positivist concept used by quantitative methods, in the qualitative research other more suitable concept have been adopted, stressing both the internal as well as the external possibility that the interpretations are coherent with the meanings expressed and thus they can be applied also to further studies (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). One way to solve the problem of internal reliability is the use of follow-up questions as I have already said. In addition, regarding the external reliability, Seale (1999) suggested to underline the role of self-reflexivity accounts of the interviewer during the research in order to express the researcher position. Providing this information can help new researcher to “replicate” or “transfer” the same context that was present during previous studies. Therefore, next paragraph will address directly this issue.

4.6 Reflexivity Statement and Ethical Consideration

The reason why I have chosen to problematize the phenomena of Political Communication Campaigning, comes from a personal willingness to develop my career in the field of Political Communication. This means that I have been collecting informations about this field in many ways: by reading the newspaper, by choosing how to build my academic career or when I search open positions in the job market. This is important to address, because if on one hand having a knowledge fosters the interest, on the other hand it can creates some bias. Acknowledging this issue has helped me to calibrate the asymmetric tension which takes place in qualitative methodologies between the interviewer and the interviewees (Brinkmann, 2013; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019). Therefore, I am going to pay more attention during the interviews in two ways: first and foremost to act with “qualified naïveté” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019), showing

openness to the unexpected and thus allowing interviewees to simplify its explanations; secondly because of the expert role that my sample represents, I will show - if the case - some more advanced knowledge so to ask them deeper interpretations of their memories. This last approach is also sustained by the importance of establishing with interviewees a credible relationship, because relevant questions will establish more focused responses (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003).

Moreover, my passion for Politics in general had given me through the years an increasing interest in finding a political alignment with some ideals and parties. This factor can represent a threat for the research that I am conducting. Therefore, I have closely given attention to avoid politically aligned and biased questions, also while communicating during the pre-interviewing period. It is of my pure intent to provide a neutral and scientific piece of research.

To protect my sample from a sense of uneasiness, I have always clarified my research goals and nature. Moreover, I have reassured them that all the research project will be guaranteed by the European norm about privacy (GDPR). Indeed, a consent form which makes explicit the purpose of the research and how I will manage the sensible data have been signed by both the sides (see [Appendix 2](#)). The consent form guarantees to the interviewees the anonymization of the personal data and the possibility to access as well as to delete all their data.

Another ethical concern which has to be highlighted is represented by the topics discussed in this Thesis: working for Politics and discussing about a catastrophic tragedy such as the Covid-19 pandemic. For sorting out those two problems I have excluded from the pilot questionnaire the questions discussing private and sensible informations related to the last Regional Elections, as well as avoiding questions which can open to much criticism towards the opponents. In addition, I have been sensitive while discussing about the pandemics, without any attempts to discuss about the tragic side of the story.

The last point which can be identified as a threat is the time distance between the events described and the interviews. IRE took place on September 2020, while I conducted the interviews between April and May 2021. Therefore, while searching for solving this problem, I found the possibility to include for the participants the use of mind-maps. Wheeldon (2011) used this method and found that between who used mind maps and

who did not in his study, the one who used it gave more in-depth responses about their interpretations. I have used this method only to help my sample both to easily retrieve their memories (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003) and to express also non-linguistically their experiences (Fleckenstein, 1996) and thus to conceive more openly their concepts. Fine (1992) argued that studies based on symbolic-interactionism see language as the main shaper of the meaning-making process, therefore, to simplify the development of this research, I will not use those mind maps as part of my data.

As a last step, before conducting the interviews, I have confronted my pilot questionnaire with a close friend of mine who works in the field of psychology and two other friends interested in political communication in order to test them. I was focused on discussing with them about how much those questions can put at ease the interviewees, and how easily they can trigger past experiences to be retrieved without discomfort, as well as questions' coherence to my research questions. Thanks to their feedback I have readjusted my pilot questionnaire.

5. Findings and Analysis - What Happened?

The experiences that I have heard, transcribed and analysed represent a rich database to respond to my Research Questions. In order to create a narrative development, I have gathered the most significant insights in two main macro areas, which can tell us more about “*what happened?*”:

1) The Impact of Covid-19 on the Electoral Context

This section is the synthesis of how the participants perceived their contexts during the unfolding of the campaigns as well as the impact caused by the Covid-19 in the political, social and cultural dimensions.

2) Communication and Responses to the Crisis

Here are discussed the communicative choices taken by the Political Communicators during the 2020 IRE.

5.1 The Impact of Covid-19 on the Electoral Context

In this section I am going to elaborate on how the 12 PCs interpreted the evolving context, shifting their focus to its different salient aspects. In this regard, Sensemaking (Weick; 1988, 1993) will work as the lens through which we can understand how the meaning-making process is articulated. In particular, our attention will be on those factors which are perceived as highly influential in determining it as a crisis episode.

5.1.1 The National Sentiment

Italy resulted to be one of the most damaged countries since the outbreak of the pandemic (Statista, 2021). With many touching images related to the health crisis

circulating in the media, this could have caused a **form of collective trauma** among the population (Garfin, Silver & Holman; 2020). The pervasiveness of alarming news, combined with the impediments imposed by the lockdown, has had its effects on people. Indeed, already James & Alihodzic (2020) found how emotions have been an important element in other electoral campaign happened during the Covid-19 crisis. In our case, emotions have been overall perceived as negative, connoting an adverse ground for 2020 IRE.

PC7: “[...] those Regional Elections has been very, very different, with a communication campaign which was collocated... in **an ominous time frame**. [...] The most shocking ever pandemic, which has involved emotions, sensations and, let’s say, the collective thoughts and in a certain way also some of the communication dynamics. Hence I remember... **the fear**, [...] **to do politics** in the most usual way [...] was even hard to imagine.”

Pollice & Miggianno (2020) analysed **Italian national identity** which arose in the media-debate around and through the single-issue of pandemic. If the Italian “resistance” against the “enemy” has been narrated as heroic (Spedicato & Spagnolo, 2020), it has been also distressing and exhausting, due to the schizophrenic and hypermediated news-cycle about Covid -19 (Colonna, 2020). Moreover, along with the catastrophic number of deaths and the wearing out effort of medical staffs, the whole crisis brought out the many social discrepancies, highlighting regional imbalances (Rubinelli, 2020). For instance, while describing the surrounding climate of IRE, PC12 described it as:

PC12: “it was... a climate of ... **uncertainty**. A climate in which [...] there wasn’t any enthusiasm that you can experience in any other campaign. The electoral campaign is like when you start a [...] football final [...] where all the fans are galvanized and start saying “we will win [...]” [...] I experienced this feeling in other electoral campaigns - 2018, 2019 also with the last European campaign *which* [...] I have experienced in first person - [...] *but now* **there wasn’t any enthusiasm**. There wasn’t from anyone else I mean, [...] and there was a lot of tension. Tension that was carried [...] also [...] in the words [...] of the other opponents where [...] I perceived so much **evident anger**, rather than the excitement and enthusiasm that one must have in these cases, when we face an election [...]”

PC5 translated those feelings by using the concept of fear, which activated a vicious circle between politicians, citizens and the media, characterizing negatively the electoral moment.

PC5: “[...] I have a memory, which is the memory that fueled the entire electoral campaign and characterized it, which is that of **fear**. [...] It emerged at the beginning of the [...] campaign. I didn't expect it could have characterized it in such a constant way during the whole electoral campaign... and [...] I think all the candidates understood it, when *everyone* realized that **it was not possible to impose the typical issues on the agenda** of an electoral campaign. [...] In this electoral campaign the characterizing theme was that of fear [...], and even the classic themes of an electoral campaign ... [...] did not take root. [...] We tried to do a series of initiatives about job policies, but we realized that... the attention of the press, which usually follow us, or TV, or social media was almost non-existent. [...] There was not any engagement produced on the web about our job policies proposals. You were able to talk about the issue only if you were able to link it to the fear of Covid, such as “will we keep it? Will we catch up with our business? Am I back on the pitch? [...]”

FMP: “[...] so there was this shared feeling, as you say, of fear that we can say overwhelmed any political proposals...”

PC5: “I can tell you more: it not only overwhelmed them. I can say that the fear during an electoral campaign erases. It erases everything that was there before it. [...]”

What can be assumed is that the whole context has been negatively perceived, with the Italian population exhausted and shocked by the lockdowns. Hence, the urgency of the crisis did not make possible for any other issues to enter the public debate, except for what was related with the pandemic. As noted by Pollice & Miggiano, “the Covid-19 topic *passed from primacy to the monopoly of the national agenda setting*” (2020, p. 175). In this situation, the enactment of actions for dealing with the pandemic was limited: nobody could have done something to block the contagion and its socio-economical effects, thus creating **a sense of impossibility**. As we have seen through the words of the interviewees, this resulted to have been connected with felt negative emotions. As supported by Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) negative felt emotions can hamper the process of cues extraction and thus biasing the bracketing of reality, entailing an imperfect sensemaking. It seems that the meaning attributed to the pandemic phase was translated as an already-defeat for the campaign, causing resignation and pessimism, affecting the **shaping** and **concluding** of sensemaking (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence; 2013).

5.1.2 The Political Background

Another influencing factor during the 2020 IRE has been the unstable political framework that Italy has been witnessing since the last Parliamentary Elections in March 2018 (Vassalo & Shin, 2019) and European Elections in 2019 (Chiaramonte, De Sio & Emanuele, 2020). In fact, Italy showed its political imbalance with **3 different National Governments along the same Legislature**. With a shattered political scenario different parties formed different alliances for IRE. In the unfolding of a campaign on the ashes of the Italian first wave⁴, this ongoing political turmoil between the different parties has been an hurdle to face as well for the PCs who worked for the IRE.

FMP: “[...] you cited the fact that you started late ...”

PC11: “Of course.”

FMP: “What is the reason for this delay?”

PC11: “Well is due to... the political choice to create this particular hybrid between Party X1 and Party X2. They are still fighting today! [...] so the delay is due to *internal* quarrels [...] all this is diriment. I mean, this caused delays in programming, delays in drafting the program, delays in the preparation of Candidate [...]”

PC1: “[...] *we had to wait until* June for X's candidacy, because Party X2... didn't want X's candidacy⁵ and therefore created some obstacles, and when we arrived on June for X's candidacy the coalition was heavily tested by these internal disagreements. And in my opinion ... internal disagreements have strongly influenced the electoral campaign... and therefore also... communication. For example, I felt a lot of loneliness. I mean, [...] communication *could have* benefited from *a better cohesion*, but instead we did not obtain any benefit... from this disconnection.”

This constant uncertainty and high instability have amplified the **identity crisis** of some parties. For instance PC12 expresses how he perceived the activists' engagement during the last Regional Election.

PC12: “With Party X [...] in order to [...] organize a successful event, we were used to think it as very easy because it was enough to say “today there is X in this given square [...] the phenomenon was such a catalyst that it was more difficult to keep people away, in short, than to make them come. Party X has gone through a very complicated phase, [...] in short ... the various criticisms regarding ... [...] the situations in which they had to reach a compromise [...] created disaffection on the part of many activists who felt betrayed [...]”

Additionally, some frictions occurred even between the National and the Regional Institutions, generating **political short circuits** which contributed to a further disorientation for PCs.

PC10: “[...] because it was a match with three players.”

FMP: “Three players? What do you mean?”

PC10: “I mean, there was [...] the candidate X, there was the Incumbent Y and the National Government. At that the time the Government ... has been disputed in relation to [...] the management of the pandemic, so from this point of view Candidate X was somewhat in a short circuit: on one hand he can criticize Incumbent Y, but since X coincided as a political sign with the National Government, he could not particularly attack the latter. [...] So... it was a... match with 3 players: Regional-opposition, Regional-Government, National-Government. [...] Situation that worsened further because the National Government often... made certificates of esteem to Incumbent Y, in those weeks and months. [...] It was a message... very... very destabilizing for... poor Candidate X.”

Leaving aside the individual political interests, what can be assumed is that political allies, activists, and citizens in general has lost trust of the party they were used to support. This political scenario can be interpreted as burdened by the pandemic, since all the different aforementioned political actors could have had a serious collapse of their sensemaking processes in relation to IRE.

5.1.3 Logistics Matters

IRE were originally planned to happen in April 2020. Hence, another element which notably impacted in the meaning-making process of the confusional situation concerns the **pragmatic aspects** of an election.

Historically elections are not held during **summertime** in Italy (Magliocco, 2018), because of its association as a leisure time, to be spend as a break from “everyday duties”. Nevertheless, IRE, were **postponed, at the very last moment**, at the end of September 2020 due to the severe restrictions of the first lockdown. Therefore, with a foreseen and hoped low rate of contagion between the months of June and August, summer was set as the only available time span.

In fact, the summer of 2020 matched with the end of the almost-three-months **lockdown**, lasted between March and the end of May, known as the first wave. On one

hand, as discussed in [5.1.1](#), this resulted to lead into a **detached campaign**, because of the disinterest by citizens due to both the summer-factor and the psychological recovery after months of isolations; on the other hand this implied the IRE to be managed with a completely new approach, since **the safety of an electoral campaign** had to be reinvented, with still strict logistic parameters to be observed as James & Alihodzic noted (2020).

One of the first considerations that emerged, is that those conditions impacted on the emotional side of working as a PCs. With the physical closeness as the main vector of virus transmission, the typical electoral mass gatherings had to be rescheduled and redesigned. In the context of IRE this has been an obstacle to both the professional creativity and to the surrounding spirit of the campaign. A characterising feature in sensemaking is retrospective reasoning. This mean that people obtain the meaning of an episode through a comparison with their previous experiences. PC9 compared the emotions he lived during his previous experiences to the one lived during IRE, so to express how his mood has been negatively impacted by the dramatic contingencies.

PC9: “**It's frustrating campaigning like this**. It's not funny because you can't walk around, you don't see people... I mean... election campaigns are... a wonderful adrenaline rush! You see thousands of people, you hang around till late, you also have fun, you party [...] meet different people, [...] This year it was such a negative mood [...] *moreover* it was a virtual electoral campaign. (pause) All this stuff ... was very awful.”

The strict regulations imposed by the lockdown deprived the whole population of their affections for several weeks. The lack of physical contact has been a serious psychological matter for the Italian population that had negatively affected their mood (Ansa, 2021). This problem is highlighted by many interviewees as well, since Elections are remembered for their “crowd baths”⁶. This implied new logistic consequences, as observed by PC6:

PC6: “[...] what first had to be a **crowd bath**, [...] and you were aiming for a crowd bath event, now instead you didn't have to aim for it, and you must have rigid protocols. **Everything changed**, so you had to say to people: “you must be accredited first, we must have the name and surname, the lists ... and that is all matters that change precisely because for safety reasons in short.”

In a situation in which the PCs, political parties and the electorate find themselves for the first time to live an election like this, it generated a **shared sense of indeterminacy**. In particular, the lack of similar experiences to compare with the actual one, made feel the PCs a **sense of unpreparedness** for how to handle the situation, resulting in an incomplete sensemaking process. Moreover, with a limited availability of people to be focused to follow IRE, this factor has stressed the working condition of PCs, posing a tough challenge on their workload expectations. Therefore, the enactment required a stronger commitment for them to run the campaign.

PC1: “*This was the first time, and I hope it will never happen again, that regional elections are held after summer. [...] Why do I say this? Because facing an electoral campaign during summer is something that had never happened before, so you have to invent an electoral campaign* in the summer, when the Italians [...] came out of months of imprisonment. For months in which they had stayed at home and therefore had no desire [...] to listen to speeches, to connect to platforms [...] but during last summer for the citizens of Region X, used to electoral campaigns with the offices opening, the committees opening, all this was impossible to do. So the electoral campaign was heavily influenced by Covid [...] **we were not prepared**, I mean we suddenly had to re-do everything”

All together these logistic circumstances got worse if considering the fact that it is not just the work of a single professional figure to be redesigned, but a whole organizational apparatus that must synchronise itself to ongoing changes, due to the uncertainty of the moment. A mess if we consider that these organizational apparatus already started to work before the pandemic, as declared by PC8.

PC8: “[...] The pace of the electoral campaign is pressing and transforms the fact that the work is prolonged over time into **backbreaking work**. [...] it’s an exhausting job that in any case it has consumed you. It was like if you were start running but you still don’t know if this race will be ... a 100 meters or a marathon: if you start with the 100 meter sprint and then it turns out to be a marathon, it is easy that at some point you will find yourself behind, with strategies, with themes, but above all your candidate, [...] who can never be replaced. [...]”

Since the dedicated teams to run the campaigns have to cover multiple tasks simultaneously and to do them as quick as possible, their work is perceived as stressful and overwhelmed of tasks. For this reason some electoral staff succeeded in making sense with an expansion of their teams, strengthening them with other professionals in

charge of the logistical aspect of the campaign, in order to prevent any disorganization, and thus lost of sense (Boin *et al.*, 2017).

PC2: “[...] it was difficult to manage precisely from the point... of distances... of respecting the rules ... we have one person in the staff who was renamed as **Covid Manager**, who was in charge of going to the places, making inspections, checking that we had everything, to keep the right distances. [...] At times we seemed too exaggerated, because we have to remember that at that moment the perception of Covid, [...] was lower, but since we still represented the Institution [...], we are committed first of all to do our duty, [...] being an example was fundamental.”

If framed as a systemic problem, new logistical contingencies, together with the unstable political background and the psychological distress of Italians, all these limits turn to affect the overall communicative flow. Communicating both externally and internally has been feeble and highly variable, during the last IRE. While describing how he perceived executing his communication job during the last IRE, PC10 affirmed:

PC10: “They have been Regional Elections very different from the others, very tiring, they were regional elections in which the classic paradigms of the construction of an electoral path were completely skipped, also because **the agenda was dictated by the virus and therefore not [...] from communication strategies**. The pandemic was the real protagonist [...] of the electoral debate [...] normally whoever dictates the agenda wins, right? [...] Since there was no type of agenda to dictate, because the agenda was precisely dictated by [...] the development of the pandemic, **it made the organization of work much much more difficult**, as well as making it more difficult from a practical point of view [...]. So it was a decidedly anomalous electoral campaign.”

Due to the fact that campaigning in the described conditions is experienced for the first time by all the PCs, we can justify the general unpreparedness as a consequence of the sensemaking process. Indeed, without any previous similar experiences to retrospectively compare with, and in addition with the aforementioned negative emotions lived, the meaning-making process has not been fully developed, thus not generating a complete sense of the situation for the interviewees (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Therefore the level of commitment of the enactments has been heavily limited by the contingencies.

5.1.4 Competitors in the Arena

Given the seriousness of the moment, Italian Institutions coordinated together in order to provide the first responses to the sanitary crisis. Through TV and digital screens, different **Institutional figures** started to give daily public speeches or press conferences for updating about how the unfolding of the pandemic was affecting the new regulations in act. Despite these strict rules, a recent study (Fetzer *et al.*, 2020), which takes also in analysis Italy, demonstrated how such strong regulations has **increased the level of trust of citizens towards their Government**, as also Herrera *et al.* (2020) found in their analysis. PC5 observed how this is something unusual for Italians, through the following words:

PC5: “[...] the Italian Prime Minister have never had such high ratings. Whoever has governed in our Republican history has always been unpopular. [...] the Premiers of our country [...] reach an approval rate in the electorate that is high in the initial phase, defined as the "honeymoon with the electorate", but after 3/4 months the descending phase begins: it is inevitable. The ancient rule of communication: who governs lose consensus. [...] but Conte⁷ in all that phase **succeeded to increase the consensus despite the fears** that was in the country [...]. But he grew up because he was a point of reference because, with fear people clung to the... Premier. Despite the criticism, Conte's press conferences, at the most unlikely times of the day, had become something highly expected as if the national football team was playing. [...] I believe that there will never be in the country ... an interest in politics and institutional roles as it was at that time.”

PC7 justified this strong followership towards the Premier as a consequence of the emotional side of the rhetoric used during the first part of the lockdown as found also by McGuire *et al.* (2020).

PC7: “[...] So let's say, in the Conte Bis⁸ the crisis was precisely an identity crisis, of the community it was exasperated. Isn't it? Precisely, there was a dramatization [...] the malaise of the Italians at a certain point became the malaise of the Prime Minister who had become almost a little, let's say, the ... the warrantor of everything. [...] Let's say, it was [...] a **"family man" approach**. Isn't it? We weren't probably used to this is in politics, until 4 months ago. Hence, perhaps there was a loss of authority for trying to get to the same level and suffer together [...].”

Starting to be perceived **as a lighthouse in the fog**, in the first part of lockdown the Institutions involved were mainly from national level. Nevertheless, an uneven spread of the pandemic among the Regions created the opportunity for Regional Governors to open an internal debate against National Government. By putting local interests ahead

of national ones, different Regional Governors started requesting more policy-making autonomy (Pollice & Miggiano, 2020). This sudden change in authoritarian rhetoric and in the formulation of policies **from central to local**, has amplified the sense of uncertainty. There has been “a mix of inadequate institutional coordination and insufficient and unclear central guidelines which ultimately produced uncertainty, which together had a direct impact on policymakers [...] and citizens in general” (Malandrino & Demichelis, 2020, p. 138).

Despite this national-local conflict, what emerged as an element of novelty was the wide presence of various Institutional figures in the different media. Especially local authorities, such as Mayors or Regional Governors, started to have a greater popularity as never experienced before. The interviewed PCs, as PC10 did, indicted that this phenomena have influenced the electoral outcomes during the pandemic.

PC10: “Even in smaller realities [...] that [...] went to the vote [...] last September⁹, **Political Communication has been squeezed by Institutional Communication**. That is: the communication of the Institutions, which was not necessarily institutional in terms of characteristics - perhaps it was also political -, but [...] it covered what should have been traditional political communication. In fact, I believe you can find [...] that 90% [...] of the electoral deadlines that allowed ... a renewal of the incumbents, they won [...]. Which is a much higher average than that [...] of previous years, when perhaps other dynamics were blowing [...] where [...] it was possible to ride the wave of the idea of change, and ... in the 90% of the cases the incumbent lost in front of a request for change. [...] Institutions has won, [...] because the spaces of communication were compressed, and because in a phase of uncertainty and ... dramatic crisis, as was the one determined by Covid, there wasn't the desire to... let's say, to endure, political communication and there was not even the desire to risk a change ... from the institutional point of view.”

Therefore, by having a certain advantage for being the authorities in charge, incumbent Regional Governors had their influence on last IRE. Indeed, coherently with a recent political trend that connotes the political competition dynamics have become more “region-centred” than in the past (Bolgherini & Grimaldi, 2017), Regional Governors gained more popularity. Indeed, “between March and June Italian politics was de facto frozen, suspended, overwhelmed by the emergency” (Vampa, 2021, 166). This sense of constant contact to be kept between Institutions and the population was a fertile ground for setting an acceleration towards an hypermediated Institutional communication of

Regional Governors (Giordano, 2021). Some of my interviewees described their different Regional contexts as follows:

PC6: “[...] there was a media overexposure by all the Governors of the Regions who were also at the head of the task-forces, that practically did not campaign [...] It's very sad to tell as an expression, but **it is Covid that campaigned for him**. It is sad to say, but unfortunately ... and obviously when ... the TVs have to give updates on the Covid, [...] they call the Governor of the Region who is in charge at that moment, and it is obvious that this is proper. Citizens must be informed at that time by the highest authority. So obviously there was this overexposure for which [...] you are not campaigning properly, but you are on all national and local TVs and ... you have this on your side [...]”

PC12: “[...] With the pandemic, Incumbent Y [...] opened a window for 30/45 minutes. Officially he gave communications regarding the Covid emergency, therefore institutional service information, but that was clearly also **the possibility and opportunity for him for the political attack** on the Government, on the opponent, in short, to campaign, I would say, badly concealed very often. *In those livestreams*, clearly, there was no contradiction and therefore it was difficult to reply. This was a difficulty we had throughout the election campaign [...]”

PC9: “[...] our opponent was incumbent, [...] and used... the context ... of the health emergency to set up a palimpsest of broadcasts in which he was the only and absolute protagonist... (pause) so it aired, live, on all private televisions, every day from 12 to 13:40/13:45 for months. [...] in reality **it transformed it in a sort of well organized stage**, in which children sent drawings for the Governor, the farmers sent eggs to hatch during the Easter period... (pause) in short, everything and more. Journalists were rarely able to ask questions.”

What is lamented is the fact that the incumbents are communicatively ambiguous: they both represent an Institution and a candidate. By ignoring this second aspect of their figure, incumbent candidates kept on relying on the power asymmetry between them and their competitors. In particular, a specific characteristic of last IRE is that in 4 of the 6 voting Regions, the incumbent recandidated themselves, and won in all of them. PC2 and PC3 both worked for two incumbent Governors. Their words can be interpreted as a validation of what is said in the above excerpts about the preponderance of institutional communication over the political one.

PC2: “basically **we did not do a pure electoral campaign**, [...] there wasn't any electoral campaign [...] we did not have the job as it could be during *previous situations* [...]”

PC3: “[...] **My candidate's electoral campaign never started** (laughs) [...] the management of the pandemic is in itself the electoral campaign. There has never been a day when he said “I'm

candidating” [...] He was already the Governor, I mean, it's different. [...] it was not a real electoral campaign, where we clashed on issues... **the electoral campaign was essentially, the virus, the management of the pandemic. Stop.** [...] The strategy was that he had to behave as commander in chief, as the Governor. [...] He has never behaved communicatively as if he was in challenge. [...] And this worked.”

The case of incumbent exploiting their position is also amplified by their **charismatic leadership**, whose perception in case of crisis can be heightened (Merolla, Ramos & Zechmeister, 2007; Williams *et al.*, 2009). Giordano (2021) highlighted how this personal characteristic has been managed by local Governors in order to handle the pandemic crisis and at the same time to gain more consensus. What can be advanced here is a total collapse of the sensemaking process, where citizens opted to adhere with the incumbent Governors' frames: given a limited vision of their own environment due to negative emotions (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), citizens made sense of their electoral choice through a confirmation of the Governor in charge.

At last, a positive sensemaking is found to have happen on those PCs who previously experienced other crisis. This has been a moment for learning. Indeed, in the sensemaking process **retention** is the phase in which the extracted cues are retrospectively confronted with the previous ones, and when a plausible assimilation of the two brings to a better understanding, a sense is then retained. As we have seen in the previous paragraphs, the interviewed PCs have found a sense of uncertainty, which caused different level of initial unpreparedness. Nevertheless, few interviewees succeeded at enduring with the crisis stress, thanks to their previous crisis (Boin *et al.*, 2017).

PC2: “we *previously* found ourselves managing a very strong emergency [...] with our communication team. So, this... personally formed a lot for me, because at that moment I was the head of the Press Office of our Region [...] However, managing such a strong emergency situation allowed me to work well in a team, to have... the skills or in any case... how can we say, the clarity of dealing with *certain* situations [...] So by applying the past experience we were able to manage a team where organization is essential. In the sense that everyone has to do his job, everyone has to know what to do, one cannot live for the day, in the sense that the day is lived, because clearly ... one cannot program above all the contents, the controversies and what a election campaign. But you can program who has to manage them.”

PC7: “you must know that *one of our Province* has been substantially characterized by 2 particular events [...] *Therefore* we also worked through an organization chart that had been drawn up [...] that I had to stick to, in case of escalation, of problems, *where*, let's say, I had to come into play. *Therefore everyone* knew well they had to call me, I knew well what I had to, let's say, which plan would be better to overcome that difficulty and at some point I also had found the right reasons to be able to sweeten that defection.”

5.2 Communication and Responses to the Crisis

Above, I reported the different senses made about the context, highlighting the various ecological changes that have triggered a cosmology episode. I will now be focusing on the enactments which happened at the downstream of the sensemaking process. Several responses were activated after each of the PC reflected on the crisis context they were living during IRE.

5.2.1 How to React ?

Given the impossibility to run a classic electoral campaign, the only possible way that seemed plausible for many of my interviewees was to run completely their campaigns on **Social and Digital Media** (SDM). As sustained by Weick (1988) the concept of enactment is resulting from the **commitment**, the **capacity** and **expectations** of the individual in relation to the situation. Indeed, the decision of campaigning on SDM, was sustained by a professional diligence (commitment) in carrying on an adequate campaign despite the problems (capacity), since it was the only possible way to reach effectively the voters (expectations). Indeed, as claimed by some interviewees:

PC8: “[...] There was a phase in which social networks changed the way of doing politics. Then [...] **the pandemic has accentuated it**, isn't it? Because it was no longer possible to meet people, larger events could not be held, only small circumstantial events could be held and just if needed [...]”

PC1: “[...] With the IRE and Covid, door-to-door, even that kind of face-to-face relationship, shaking hands, giving each other two kisses ... **everything was forbidden**. [...] It was necessary to use more social media. And therefore being able to talk to everyone through social media, even to those who did not use social media. [...]”

More specifically about the capacity, PC4 believed that campaigning on SDM has some **objective constraints**, such as the financial availability and a good technical quality in crafting the contents to be shared online.

PC4: “[...] We should have instead gone into an electoral campaign [...] mediated by... digital tools. Digital tools that unlike face-to-face meetings, do not rest on the candidate's legs, but on the committee's **financial capacity** [...]”

[...]

FMP: “I wanted to ask you, what changes between these two models [...] ?”

PC4: “Excluding the fact that digital requires much more *money*, with the same financial capacity there are **resources and technical needs**. For instance, it is necessary to have at your disposal [...] some evocative photographs. You can't run a campaign on social media and then win the tug-of-war with all the other contents that transit on Facebook and Instagram, with... some... amateur images. [...]”

Also PC5 agreed on the fact that campaigning is heavily dependent upon the financial outlay by the political committee. A significant difference is made by the media on which to invest, because SDM offers the possibility to **target at the micro level** users characteristics and thus to tailor a specific message for each electoral cluster.

PC5: “[...] campaigns are strongly... **conditioned by investments**. That is, on how much candidates spend on an electoral campaign, because if I spend more [...] I can better target my audience; the more resources I have, the more specialized companies are able to better target my audience [...]”

On the other hand, PC8 affirmed that social media advertising is something that inflates and dopes the communication of a political party. Indeed, the interviewee sustained that an **organic communication** is more efficient for electoral purposes.

PC8: “[...] there is a difference between a post that has 100 likes and another post that has 100 likes, which is independent ... from the content and theme. If I take two identical posts that have the same result, what makes the difference is how much the result they got is, a natural result, that is, it only happened because your audience somehow, shares what you say and in a spontaneous and natural way has decided to reward you with a reaction. [...] Which is the problem? [...] If I get likes everywhere, the like I get maybe aren't from my region and **therefore doesn't count for an electoral competition**. Or I receive a like because "I vote Party Y but this time you said something I like, but I don't vote your Party, because I'm already a convinced voter." And therefore forcing the hand, in a non-organic, non-natural result, is not necessarily a good strategy. [...]”

Since Sensemaking is an ongoing and circular process, it is possible also to reflect on the sense made of these enactments. Different reflections have been made about campaigning on SDM. Here is quoted an excerpts which concern the **retention** phase of sensemaking. PC3 claims to have learned from this experience that this form of communication is important for future campaigns.

PC3: “the thing that taught me *IRE* is that [...] disintermediation works more and more, you don't have to worry about having a good reputation on the media... or going through the press... but to have direct contact through the channels that allow us to talk... directly with the voters. This is what works the most and it is thanks to Facebook and social networks in general that this can be done.”

Through the use of SDM, other strategies have been used. For instance, PC6 in order to reconnect genuinely with the electorate and respond to the Covid-19 crisis, run a charity crowdfunding.

PC6: “[...] at a certain point we put online on our site [...] the map of solidarity, which was practically a map of the whole Region X with all the associations that offered a charity service during the period of lockdown, such as [...] carrying the groceries, or bringing the medicines, because we realized that at that moment it was a useful thing we could do, even if a little far from politics, however people at that time needed answers because there was panic [...]”

Due to the limitations on mass gatherings, some PCs overcame this constraint with another approach for organizing meetings. Instead of meeting a wide audience, some of my interviewees preferred to focus mainly on institutional stakeholders in order to have a top-down communication with their electorate.

PC2: “[...] we have made meetings that are more B2B than street meetings. [...] We met all the categories individually and we were also accused by the opposition of evading the debate, but... our choice to debate was precisely with the people [...] We chose to work on people, with perhaps more restricted meetings, but talking about contents. [...]”

PC5: “[...] not being able to organize conferences... more than the other election campaigns, it was important and significant to meet the representatives, like the Order of Engineers, the Order of Doctors [...] because they were the vehicle to speak to a wider audience [...]”

Another reaction to the sense made of the Covid-19 crisis is based on the use of rhetorical strategies. Given the sense of uncertainty and sufferance, some PCs decided to intervene incisively on the languages in order to let their candidates speak with a more suitable tone of voice and vocabulary.

PC12: “we took some posts from 6 months earlier and we made the same type of content 6 months later, in the middle of the pandemic... and we realized that the attitude that citizens were asking us before and had a lot consensus, 6 months later collected only criticisms even quite ruthless. Everyone understood it that **the tone had to be moderated, it had to be very conciliatory, it had to be dialoguing at all institutional levels** and the political ... was forced to become an Institution. That is the person who had to tell the citizens what to do. There was no longer the attack, there was no longer clearly the... complaint but there was simply listening and the proposal”

PC3: “people in moments of difficulty and fear look for a language that is... how to say **inchoative**, that is "here and now" is not "we are solving the problem" ... "we are doing the thing ..." ... last night for example I heard during Otto e Mezzo¹⁰ someone talking about budget variances¹¹ : "we are working precisely on this" ... this is very wrong! Because you have to say that you have already solved it, that you have already done it [...] you cannot say "we are working ... we are doing [...]". So *my candidate* has always used this form of language, communicating as he was always on track and never saying something that will be done in the future. At least if something will be done, you must say when, in what times, from which day. In a moment of great... fear, of great malaise, of great discomfort, to have a political personality who... talks to you in a clear and incontrovertible way gives the feeling of security. [...] this in my opinion worked at that moment.”

On the other hand, PC7 decided to tackle the electoral apathy with an online and offline strategy: her party met citizens and bound with its activists directly on the beach, while translating those moments in audiovisual contents to share on SDM.

PC7: “since we were still doing a different election campaign and in the summer, I organized a tour on the beaches, where for each single stage there were also meetings with the digital activists, and the candidate President. We also tried to make some videos, which could highlight the motivations for why to support the candidate President: we made this videos in collaboration, precisely, with volunteers, with small contributions, a maximum of 1 minute and 20, that could tell in a few words the reasons... for which we were going to support the candidate.”

The last response which is worth to mention is about the use of “renowned voices”. Since the only authoritative voices during the Covid-19 pandemic that could have grasped the real situation brought by the virus were scientists. More specifically, in all

the countries the national epidemiologists were called in order to provide technical answers for mitigate the diffusion of the virus. If framed within the sensemaking process we can claim that epidemiologists have been an objective viewers of the crisis (Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010). Therefore, despite what Krastev & Leonard found about the distrust about experts by Europeans (2020), epidemiologists played the role of sensegivers (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and some PCs used purposefully their advices (Boin *et al.*, 2017) in order to gain a more institutional voice.

PC10: “My role was to make contact with Professor X, and let me explain everything I could understand, since it isn't my job, and hence study everything I could study about the spread of pandemic, and thus report to my candidate, which the mistakes, according to Professor X, was committing for underestimation or for convenience, the Governor in our Region”

5.2.2 Exploiting the Crisis

Given that the Covid-19 crisis has been the monopolised issue during the 2020 IRE, the topic gave large leeway for attacking the various competitors. Hence, a discussion to be made is specifically about CET (Boin, 't Hart & McConnell; 2009), and therefore on how the sensegiving process has been managed in order to win the political contest. Nevertheless, as the Boin, 't Hart & McConnell (2009) claimed, the focus of CET is on the results of the conflict between different frames.

PC10: “minor opponents tried to attack our candidate in a competition logic. I mean there was this competition where Party Z1 and a little bit more Party Z2 attacked our candidate, we chose to... not answer... just to avoid this effect... of debate. I mean... our reasoning, done in a coarse way, is that they are candidates which counts 2/3%, we must defend our 20% and try to make it grow, thus **we do not have to start arguing** with them because we can only lose, substantially. (pause) Very trivially Governor Y did essentially the same to us.”

PC11: “our Region, in May of last year, was the Italian Region [...] with the highest mortality rate and... according to us it was doubtless that it was also due to the privatization of health care that Governor Y wanted to import. [...] Hospitals have found themselves in great difficulty, whereas Region X is an elderly region and the elderly are the people who have suffered most from Covid, it seems evident to me, that we had to say this and report it. This has been so much part of our communication. [...] instead Governor X many times to these ... our sacrosanct invectives, since he was aware of being bigger ... more advantageous, probably, in the polls he was already the most structured, **he didn't even answer**. [...] And so this put us in difficulty because we were looking

for a direct confrontation, obviously, with him. He was very smart. Think Governor Y never wanted a direct confrontation with Candidate X on TV.”

Considering that the PC10 and PC11 worked for the Regional opposition, we can see how they tried to attack the incumbents, who denied their blames. This assumption is confirmed by the other PCs who on the other hand worked for the incumbents.

FMP: “Have you ever been told "Governor X was wrong in managing Covid ... Governor X must be criticized on this ... ”

PC2: “It was all about “Governor X got it wrong about Covid”.”

FMP: “How did you justify it? How did you respond to these criticisms?”

PC2: “**We have never responded to the opponent's criticisms.** Never.”

FMP: “So, correct me if I'm wrong, the role of communication, as far as your job is concerned, was to ignore the criticism of this type of conduct, right?”

PC3: “Yes ... **basically we ignored them**, that is the strategy was that he behaved as commander in chief, as the Governor. He has hardly ever been a candidate. He has never behaved communicatively as if he were in challenge. That is, he had no challenger. He continued to be the Governor of the Region until the last day. And this worked.”

PC4: “[...] depending on the crisis you have to understand... what compensation methods you can exercise. Quite often we try to pass the crisis with soft declarations... how to say, with a re-reading of the message, but this tends not to work [...] Indeed, we avoided ... *to respond to provocations*, in order to not give further breath to a media controversy [...]. That is, you must “**never follow the VietCong in his tunnel**”.”

The last angle to be discussed is how the media ecosystem dealt with these framing contests. Media are generally more interested in political crisis than the ones happening in the business domain (Coombs, 2019). In the case of the 2020 IRE, during the first part those attacks did not found any space in the news, while during the second half media became again interested to them.

PC9: “when you are in the electoral campaign *the media* give you more or less space, because it is in the interest of the newspapers and the media to do a little bit of rumpus, to catalyze attention, [...] but not this time. Nothing. Everyone knew and everyone said clearly, including fellow journalists, “Incumbent Y will wins. Stop. You don't ... you don't interest me.” ”

PC6: “I had a strong perplexity, because when the newspapers called you they would ask you maybe “what do you think of this statement of that candidate? [...] What’s your political comment

on this?" But then I noticed the difficulty when you made proposals [...] **there was only political controversy but there is no space for programs**. And I told them "should we try to talk about programs, because you are basically just interested in the political controversy" [...] I did not want to just bring out questions like ... "I argue with him for that statement [...]" I also want to tell you then "today I did this ... I will do this is because I think it is right for my Region" [...] And I think there were two parts of the election campaign, that is: (pause) when there was the Covid emergency the controversies went a little in the background [...] then there was the second part of the electoral campaign in which there was a lot of return, from a point of view in the newspapers, to beat on the political controversy. [...]"

As Forbes Bright & Bagley (2017) highlighted, how media coverage is developed during crisis overlapping with elections, is dependent on their agenda and to the relative cultural background. Indeed, PC6 with her words confirmed this analysis, where media in the second part of the lockdown were focused only on the framing contest between candidates, while the cultural sensibility during the first part of the crisis was to not plump the impatience.

5.2.3 How Would They Have Liked to React?

The last question in my interviews was how they could have improved their campaign if they could go back in time. With this kind of formulation it is implicitly addressed the concept of **retention**, as the last phase of the sensemaking process, where the learnt meanings from previous experiences are retained and used for future sensemakings. In PCs' answers we can find different angles about how they can improve their next campaigns during complex crisis. As we have seen in [5.1.3](#) logistics has been seriously questioned during last IRE. Thus, PC8 highlighted that to broaden the electoral staff could have been a solution to the logistics problems encountered.

PC8: "If I could go back what would I improve? ... I would find a person before arriving in the electoral phase, [...] who can be in charge of managing [...] the calls to agencies, to book trucks, to book ads spaces, to call TVs, to get financial quotes, all these aspects... to take care of the documents, like the bureaucratic sheets that you have to produce [...] because these things overwhelmed me and ... they made me work more [...]"

If the enlargement of the electoral team can be a plausible solution, this will not be possible without a financial boost, which can sustain also different types of investments.

Indeed, PC7 wishes to pay more energies for fundraising activities in order to have a wider media presence.

PC7: “Well if I could go back I would look for more sponsors, in order to have more economic resources, so to invest even more in traditional media. The messages of this campaign were shared through the new media. So, essentially we forgot... the production of billboards [...]”

On the other hand, another lesson learned from the interviewees is about the internal organization before the IRE. In particular the matter of timing could have been beneficial in preparing the whole campaign, especially in the case of an outsider challenging an incumbent Governor.

PC10: “[...] in hindsight... if I could... know in advance that Covid would be there, I would have started the electoral campaign a year earlier. Because in an electoral campaign against a strong candidate, such as incumbent Y, who had a unique narrative around himself, [...] you don't move consensus in 6/7 months ... among other things, we didn't even know when he would go to vote, they moved the hypothetical date of the vote 3/4 times and you didn't see the finish line. Therefore, but this concerns politics, you had to start at least a year earlier and build a very strong campaign, basically for which there must be a lot of breath and a lot of fuel - also in financial terms -, [...] until you take it apart, there is no room for anything else.”

PC11: “*I would change* the organization upstream, I couldn't do it myself, but on my knees I'd pray someone else to definitely improve it. And I would ask those who chose our candidate to choose him in December, not in May. Thus with an organization that starts earlier, and better organized, I don't say we would have won but ... ”

Lastly, PC12 underlined the importance of the physical presence during an electoral campaign. The interviewee affirmed that this factor could have been resolute for the electoral apathy and the negative mood experienced during the pandemic, as discussed in 5.1.1.

PC12: “I'd try to be a lot more in the crowd and a lot less in the newspapers. That is, I would invest as many resources and time as possible to meet as many citizens as possible, because our message through the newspapers, which are in free fall, I hardly think it arrived. [...] **I would exploit more the human image and characteristics of our candidate.** For the physical aspect... for tone... for the way in which she arises, also for dialectic... for her extreme sensitivity that manifests... convinces everyone already only in approaching, beyond of the arguments it brings. So I would try to humanize the character more and more [...] *so that everybody could have had* somehow in their life to whom blindly trust and to whom to entrust their life.”

6. *Discussion and Conclusions* - Evidences from 2020 Italian Regional Elections

2020 IRE has been an important election for their unprecedented scenario. The 12 PCs that I have interviewed offered us a precious source that narrated us how their work has been challenged by the pandemic crisis. The main findings are about how this crisis has been interpreted, and how these interpretations could have subsequently triggered different strategic responses. A first overall conclusion is that this unexpected “paradigm shift” (Michelson, 2020) brought by the Covid-19 crisis has seriously questioned Sensemaking as we knew it, because the huge amount of information available, the derangement of emotions and the limited and changed capacity of enactments have turned it into a more complex and hyperdynamic process (Christianson & Barton, 2020). If considering communication strategies and tactics as enactments in the sensemaking process of the PCs, I will discuss the main conclusions by integrating the two Research Answers (RA) according to the three phases of Sensemaking Theory. The two broad answers can be synthesized as follow:

RA1: A sense of impossibility to operate, unpreparedness and indeterminacy to fully grasp the situation pervaded generally last IRE, with different PCs attributing this to the socio-economical, political and logistical contingencies. These sensations have been heavily influenced by the overall negative mood lived by the PCs. Contrariwise, previous crisis experienced has strengthened the sensemaking process.

RA2: PCs managed to respond with strategies almost all related to the use of SDM. Also rhetorical choices, audience retargeting towards institutional stakeholders, and the adoption of experts has been used a response to the limitations. In the framing contests between different challengers, incumbent Governors succeeded to win, since the context allowed them to ignore blames.

Lastly, all of the three **gaps** have been filled: through the use of interviewing (Ha & Boynton, 2014) to analyze the problem from the perspective of professionals (Salomonsen & t'Hart, 2020), including emotions in the sensemaking process (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

6.1 Enactment

The term **enactment** is referred to people's actions which "bring events and structures into existence and set them in motion" (Weick, 1988, p. 306). What is pretty evident through the words of the interviewees is how difficult has been their job during last IRE. This is mainly due to objective and subjective forces which influenced the sensemaking process and limited the possible enactments.

On one hand PCs had many logistical constraints that limited their work. It has been **the first mostly digitalized campaign** conducted. All the interviewees agree on the fact that SDM were essential for filling the void opened by the pandemic. Despite the benefits brought by SDM, this element of novelty has also had some negative effects, since both the professionals involved and the electorate **were not used to engage** in an almost full virtual campaign. If this new scenario created a precedent which can be useful for future election campaigns, the lack of previous references made it hard to manage a context in which physical events have always been pivotal. Therefore, campaigning in this situation has limited PCs **capacity**.

On the other hand, the psychological wounds opened by the Covid-19 have not made possible for PCs to make sense of IRE as a normal campaign, and therefore directly impacted on the level of **expectations**, and connoted it with a negative mood. Nevertheless, Mills, Thurlow & Mills (2010) affirmed the sensemaking process is dependent on the role of the sensemaker. Indeed, from the specific point of view of incumbent Governors, the **timing factor** made it possible to keep it as a **situational crisis** from their perspective, instead of an institutional one (Salomonsen & 't Hart, 2020). If broadly Covid-19 pandemic can be defined both as a symbolic (Coombs, 2019) and institutional crisis (Salomonsen & 't Hart, 2020) for its high level of complexity, with a low contagion during summertime, Regional Governors managed to be sensegivers (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) of security and trust. Therefore, the PCs who

worked for incumbent Governors succeeded in their enactments due to their privileged position, and thus operated more easily. The main conclusion is that **different level of sensemaking** could have been possible during last IRE, due to the different roles played by the PCs, where the ones working for incumbents were the most advantaged.

Moreover, to summarize how strategic responses were enacted, I can mention the use of **charity crowdfunding** (which is an enactment coherent with the dramatic contingencies), the use of “**B2B communication**” (as an enactment that has overcome the mass gatherings), **adequate rhetoric choices** (in order to enact a linguistic choice that could have reconnected with the electorate) and the adoption of **institutionalized sensegivers** (as an affirmed voice to communicate a sense of authority).

In the end, regarding the CET (Boin, 't Hart & McConnell, 2009) we have seen how in crisis political parts are **engaged in framing contests** in order to impose their vision of the word. This specific enactment has shown that both challengers and incumbents were involved in CET, but with different approaches: incumbents denied their responsibilities and challengers blamed them. This resulted to be the “Blame Showdown”, the 4th scenario foreseen by the CET game-matrix (Table 2), confirming that **incumbent are advantaged during crisis** (Boin, 't Hart & McConnell; 2009). Moreover, also the media play an important role (Salomonsen & 't Hart, 2020) in the unfolding of IRE, since they let drop into oblivion their role to inform about elections, without underlying the importance of democratic pluralism.

6.2 Selection

The phase of **selection** is characterised by sorting the surrounding informations and comparing them with previous data, in search of a plausible similarity. Humans simplify the cues and stimuli of an ecological change through “heuristic rules and repeatedly cycling through them, *underscoring* the interpretative, less rational nature of decision making” (Jennings & Greenwood, 2002, p. 201). As said before, the absence of previous similar experiences can have had an influence also in the selection phase because of the quali/quantitative scarcity of cues to be extracted. Nevertheless, PCs who were involved in **previous crisis** had at least a tested organizational apparatus on how to deal with the informations and manage them, thus favouring a less chaotic selection.

Indeed, the level of complexity of Covid-19 crisis is amplified by its many layers which had intertwined different aspect of the electoral campaign. In particular, the diffused discomfort of Italians resulted in a perceived electoral apathy. If the electorate was perceived as less interested in IRE, PCs had difficulties in understanding on what to focus for their electoral programs. In addition, the already unstable political scenario was stressed by the pandemic, giving to PCs a mutable frame on how to interpret the situation. All this is accentuated by the **interference of emotions** in the sensemaking process. As Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) pointed out, both felt and expressed emotions influence the sensemaking process, especially in its selection phase. Indeed, the interviewees have all expressed how the negative emotions perceived during IRE had affected their work. In particular, negative emotions have the power to limit sensemaking process, leading people to narrow and biased visions of the surrounding environment (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). This has affected PCs job, translating the selected cues to **a diffuse sense of unpreparedness and eventually of pessimism**. In addition, some interviewees expressed also some positive emotions, but I have deliberately excluded them from the analysis because of their neutral effect on the selection phase.

6.3 Retention

The last phase of Sensemaking is **retention**, defined as the process where plausible meanings attributed to a situation get stored and thus trigger retrospective thinking, leading to further sensemaking processes (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Different “lessons” have been learned by the 12 PCs, which can be substantially categorized in 4 topics, which I personally think can be considered as tethered together for an overall response for future complex crisis. First of all logistics and organizational issues have to be taken into account in order to reduce the level of confusion. The interviewees claimed that **a larger team** could have benefited the organization of the campaign, with more people to be involved in specific tasks, and ready for unexpected events to happen. In addition to this, a better **fundraising activity** could have provided more economic resources useful for a more penetrating campaign. Regarding the lack of physical contact, candidates should have aspired for a more **empathetic presence**, as a solution

to the emotional distress lived by citizens, and thus for reconnecting more directly with them. Lastly, the factor of **timing** is something that cannot be controlled, since crisis happen by nature unexpectedly. Therefore, what can be underlined is the importance of preparing crisis-plans, as PC2 and PC7 had learned in their previous cases. All this are considerations with hindsight. The only spontaneous reflection made has been explicitly referred during the interviews is made by PC3 about the importance of SDM, as **an opportunity to disintermediate** with the citizens.

6.4 Limitations and Future Researches

Even though I provided a rich sample for the present research some limitations can be find. First of all IRE were held September 2020, while I conducted the interviews during April 2021. Thus, this time span could have influenced the accountability of the interviewees. In addition, a more organisational-based level of analysis, and less individual-based, could have been adopted, which could have fit better with Sensemaking. In addition, the presented case study is a contingent phenomena, since it is rooted in a local context, thus it has to be anchored to a specific cultural dimension.

Nevertheless, the present research can stimulate further researches. A notable suggestion could have been to integrate other methodologies - especially quantitative ones -, and different samples, in order to better triangulate the phenomena, and thus provide a denser analysis. Indeed, if the study conducted by Krastew and Leonard (2020) highlighted a decreased in government's trust during Covid-19, it can be useful to understand why the opposite happened in IRE, for instance with a research which can encompasses citizens behaviour in relation to a media analysis. This will probably suggest us new insights on the difference between charismatic (Williamsa *et al.*, 2009) and authentic (Williams *et al.*, 2012) leadership during crisis. Moreover, the whole phenomena could have been integrated with an even more critical perspective on the power exercised by SDM, highlighting the intricate relationship between politics, technology and economy.

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1 - (Pilot Questionnaire of “From Global to Regional: how Covid-19 *“influenced”* Political Communicators. Evidences from 2020 Italian Regional Election”)

“Breaking the ice”

1. Let’s start with two easy questions: how old are you and which was your role during last regional elections?
2. It’s been a while, in general what do you remember of last regional elections? Tell me about the context.
3. How did you react when you understood that you were going to campaign in that context?
4. Which adjectives would you use to define this electoral campaign and its climate?
5. How did you interpret the challenge of working in this context?
6. How did your candidate perform during last regional elections?
7. What has changed the Covid-19 crisis in the world of politics?
8. Have you ever worked for other kind of campaigns?
9. Follow-up

The job

10. Specifically tell me in details what was your job during last regional elections.
What did you do?
11. Which are the attitudinal characteristics of the job you did during the last regional elections?
12. Was there anything in your work during the election campaign that you found less clear? Did you have any recurring doubts?
13. To what did you give more weight to during last electoral campaign?
14. Were there other colleagues with whom you managed the communication?
15. What was it like working as a team with them during this latest election campaign?
16. Have you encountered some difficulties related to Covid-19?
17. Follow-up

The job during the pandemic

18. Would you like to tell me about a typical working day during the last election campaign? Try to describe it to me in detail
19. So which was the impact that your role as a communicator in this situation?
20. When and How the campaign started?

21. More specifically, what has represented the Covid-19 crisis for your electoral campaign?
22. Did it affect somehow the postponement from April to September for your communication strategy?
23. What has changed in your way of managing communication in relation to your previous electoral campaigns?
24. Which were your biggest concerns in the organisational phase of the campaign?

Communicating during the pandemic

25. How is your role in electoral communication linked to the Covid-19 crisis?
26. Was the communication damaged or did it benefit from the presence of Covid during the election campaign?
27. What were the communication objectives that your electoral campaign pursued?
28. How were these goals defined? According to what process?
29. Has anything changed compared to previous experiences?
30. Which was the process that you have for getting the useful informations for the election campaign?
31. What were the main variables during your election campaign? I am referring to those factors that in a positive or negative way could affect the communication campaign, and therefore you have tried to keep under control.

32. How do you think the perception of the electorate has changed due to Covid-19 on politics?
33. In your work for the last election campaign, did you identify specific election clusters? If so, how do you think the perception of Covid-19 has changed among them?
34. How did you have to relate to these different audiences?
35. Did you have the opportunity to monitor your candidate's level of consent in the pre-election period? If so, in what way?
36. What were the main messages and themes in your campaign?
37. So how could this communicative style be defined?
38. How has the Covid-19 theme been interpreted for your electoral campaign?
39. Could you tell me in proportions, or in percentages, which media you relied most on during the campaign to reach your target?
40. And why exactly these?
41. If you could go back what would you improve in your communication campaign?

Appendix 2 - Consent Form

Personal data

Full name

Citizenship

Place of Residence

Date of Birth

Gender

Date of participation

Type of activity

Semi-structured interview

Interviewer

Francesco Maria Parente

Purpose

Data collection for Thesis research

Information to be provided to the data subject according to article 13

This document is drafted according to article 13 of the Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 which requires me to inform you that:

- (a) the controller of this data is the undersigned Francesco Maria Parente, born on 17 September 1994. I will control this data personally, hence no representative for any purpose whatsoever.
- (b) The data I collect are your demographic data and a recorded interview. They will be processed for the exclusive purpose of performing academic research, in particular for the MSc in Strategic Communication at Lund University in Lund, Sweden. All data will be completely anonymized in the final work.
- (c) The legal basis upon which I process your data is your consent, given according to article 6 of the Regulation.
- (d) I do not intend to transfer your personal data to a third country or international relation to which there not exist or exists a negative decision by the Commission.
- (e) I will store your data in my personal computer, in an encrypted folder that requires a password. I am the only person who knows the password. I will keep your data for the time needed to complete my research project. In case the need to keep them for more time arises, I will inform you about the circumstances and ask for your new consent.
- (f) You have the right to access, rectify, or erase your personal data, as well as to restrict the processing, as well as the right to data portability.
- (g) You have the right to withdraw your consent at any time, without any consequence affecting the lawfulness of processing based on consent before its withdrawal.
- (h) you have the right to lodge a complaint with a supervisory authority.

Consent release

By signing hereunder, I, _____ give my consent to be processed and to be treated my data, including my recorded voice during a semi-structured interview conducted by Francesco Maria Parente, for the purposes outlined above.

Place, date Signature

_____ - ____/____/____ - _____

Appendix 3 - Codes

<i>Codes</i>	<i>ID</i>	<i>Explanations</i>
Category 1 : The Social Context and the Impact of Covid-19		
The Sense Made	c1.1	How they made sense and perceived the whole context? Here is expressed the meaning understood of the situation that all the participants experienced.
The Problems Encountered	c1.2	During the unfolding of the campaigns all the interviewees faced different problems, which can be related to the different aspects of the Regional Elections and their contexts.
Comparing with Other Experiences	c1.3	Since sensemaking is a retrospective process, it is relevant to connect the 2020 Regional Elections with their previous experiences. Therefore if someone compared this experience with previous one it will be identified with this code.
The Emotions Involved	c1.4	This code is the expression of the emotions that my sample lived and reported me during the interviews.
The Political Context	c1.5	All the informations concerning the previous political situation in that specific region or at the national level, will be reported here so to add another descriptive element in the context
Category 2 : The Electoral Campaign		
The Campaign	c2.1	How was perceived specifically the campaign from their point of view? Which were the general definition of the campaign? Which were the elements and the dynamics of the campaign?
The Perceived Electorate	c2.2	Here is discussed how the electorate was perceived during the campaign.
Using Metaphors	c2.3	Some of the interviewees expressed their feelings of the campaign through the use of metaphors. They will be reported as they can show more symbolic insights of their perceptions.
Competitors in the Arena	c2.4	Since the electoral campaign is a competition between different competitors, here I present the main concerns and reflections about the competitors of each participant.
Teamwork and the Coalitions	c2.5	This code is about the teamwork both in term of the other professionals involved in the communication as well as the other people from the same coalition who the interviewees had to relate with.
Category 3 : Communication and Responses to the Crisis		
Goals and Objectives	c3.1	Here will be addressed more specifically which are the goals and the objectives set for the Regional Elections.
The Strategy or the Tactics Employed	c3.2	In this code will analyzed the communication strategies and tactics used for achieving the aforementioned communication goals.
Themes and Messages	c3.3	Which were the themes and messages which composed the electoral agenda? Here I report what the interviewees claimed about the topics discussed during the electoral campaigns.
The Media Ecosystem	c3.4	A closer look to the composition, as well as the dynamics, of the media ecosystem of each campaign will be taken in consideration for understanding which have been the media that composed the communication strategy.
Previous Crisis	c3.5	Importance will be given to the previous crisis that the interviewees have already experienced, in the case if they used them to compare them with the electoral campaign.
Framing Contexts / Crisis Exploitation Theory	c3.6	Here will be analyzed the purposeful use of crisis and framed issues in order to exploit the competitors during the campaigns.

Appendix 4 - Notes

¹ In total 7 Regions went to vote, but I have excluded Valle D'Aosta for its specific-statute autonomy.

² A, B, C and D values have been obtained through ISTAT researches (the national statistical institution), available at: <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=18460>; <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/251960>; <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=25999> and <http://dati.istat.it/index.aspx?queryid=20744>

³ Even though the word “jī” not necessarily means “opportunity”, but it can be broadly interpreted as such (<http://pinyin.info/chinese/crisis.html>)

⁴ The first wave of Covid-19 in Italy started in February 2020 and ended at the beginning of June 2020, therefore was collocated antecedent the IRE

⁵ It is assumed that Candidate X is representative for Party X1, while Party X2 as part of the same coalition

⁶ It is a typical Italian idiomatic expression which is referred to those events aimed at gathering huge masses.

⁷ Conte is the surname of the Italian Prime Minister, who was at the Government during the whole Covid-19 crisis.

⁸ The second Government lead by Conte since the beginning of the legislature, lasted between September 2019 and February 2021.

⁹ During the 20th and 21st September 2020 also some Municipalities had to elect their Mayors

¹⁰ It is the name of a famous journalistic in-depth television program

¹¹ The speaker is referring to the state support for the economic crisis due to the pandemic