

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING TRUST IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC. A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to explore strategies that can be used to build and maintain trust in public institutions in times of crisis. It is well documented that trust in public institutions facilitates citizens' compliance with restrictive measures, and therefore it is an important resource in times of crisis. In particular, we highlight the importance of crisis communication strategies in a changing and uncertain environment, maintaining transparency and credibility of public institutions, demonstrating empathy, competence and openness, educating stakeholders and the public, and collaborating with relevant stakeholders. In the final part of the paper, we reflect on how strategies to build trust in non-crisis situations are different from the strategies adopted during crisis situations. The analysis is based on the systematic analysis of journal articles published on the topic of trust in public institutions since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords: trust, crisis communication, coronavirus pandemic, credibility, trustworthiness.

1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic put a lot of demands on public institutions to change the style of making decisions in a rapidly evolving environment, while financial resources were limited. Trust in public institutions appeared as an important element to mediate citizens' compliance with mandatory measures, some of which were very restrictive on individuals' freedom. It was a rapidly changing situation, with limited knowledge on how to act, and therefore it was difficult for public institutions to maintain their credibility.

Trust is a key ingredient that can ease the activity of public institutions in times of crisis, and therefore it was an extensively researched topic in the coronavirus context. Research showed that trust in public institutions influences citizens' willingness to comply with mandatory regulations and to adhere to the advices of health authorities during the coronavirus pandemic (Kumagai and Iorio, 2020; Fahlquist, 2021; Lalot *et al.*, 2020; Elgar *et al.*, 2020; Hassing Nielsen and Lindvall, 2021). For example, research conducted in Slovakia in April 2020 on a sample of 1,000 respondents showed higher compliance with social distancing measures and the use of facemask requirements among people who trusted public institutions. Bargain and Aminjonov (2020) found that the decline in the human mobility for non-necessary activities (such as recreation, work and transportation) around mid-March 2020 was significantly higher in European regions that had a higher level of confidence in authorities prior to the coronavirus crisis. In Norway, a country that has a high level of trust in government, a large proportion of the population was willing to voluntarily download an application developed by the government to provide data about population movement. Kukovič (2022) showed that in countries with high levels of political trust citizens have accepted without much hesitation measures to protect public health. However, vaccine acceptance was not only contingent on the trust in public institutions responsible with the authorization of the vaccine, but also with the trust in the research community which produced the vaccine (Szilagyi *et al.*, 2021; Schmelz and Bowles, 2021; Goodwin *et al.*, 2022). Bagasra *et al.* (2021) showed, based on research that examined ethnic differences on the willingness to get the anti-coronavirus vaccine, that trust in the scientific community was higher among citizens who received at least one dose of vaccine. In addition, Christensen and Læg Reid (2020) highlighted the importance of credible public leaders who can inspire people during threatening and uncertain situations.

Even though trust in public institutions increases citizens' compliance with regulations, trust is a double-edge sword because too much trust and low perceived risk of infection leads to low compliance with risk management measures (Wong and Jensen, 2020) or to naive beliefs that the government is managing the pandemic (Devine *et al.*, 2021, p. 277). Hartley and Jarvis (2020) showed that in Hong Kong the previous experience of citizens with a pandemic compensated for the low level of trust in public institutions, and individuals and organizations adopted distancing and hygiene measures before the government officially introduced them.

Building trust in public institutions contributes to enhancing citizens' willingness to support or to reduce opposition to policies intended to contain the spread of coronavirus. The goal of this paper is to analyze different measures to build trust in public institutions

during times of crisis based on the experience accumulated during the coronavirus crisis. In the second section of the paper, we briefly analyze the main changes in trust in European Union member states during the coronavirus pandemic, while in the third section we analyze the strategies to build trust during crisis situations. The paper will conclude by reflecting on the differences between strategies to build trust in times of crisis and non-crisis.

2. Evolution of trust in the context of the coronavirus pandemic in the European Union member states

The analysis of Eurobarometer data regarding trust in the national government shows that trust fluctuated over time (the analyzed period was between spring 2016 and autumn 2021). However, between autumn 2019 and summer 2020, 22 EU member states (including UK) faced an increase of trust in government. The highest increases were in Cyprus (15%), Denmark (15%), Netherlands (15%), UK (13%) and Germany (11%). In other countries, the level of trust in government decreased, for example in Bulgaria (-9%), Slovenia (-6%) and Belgium (-5%) (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

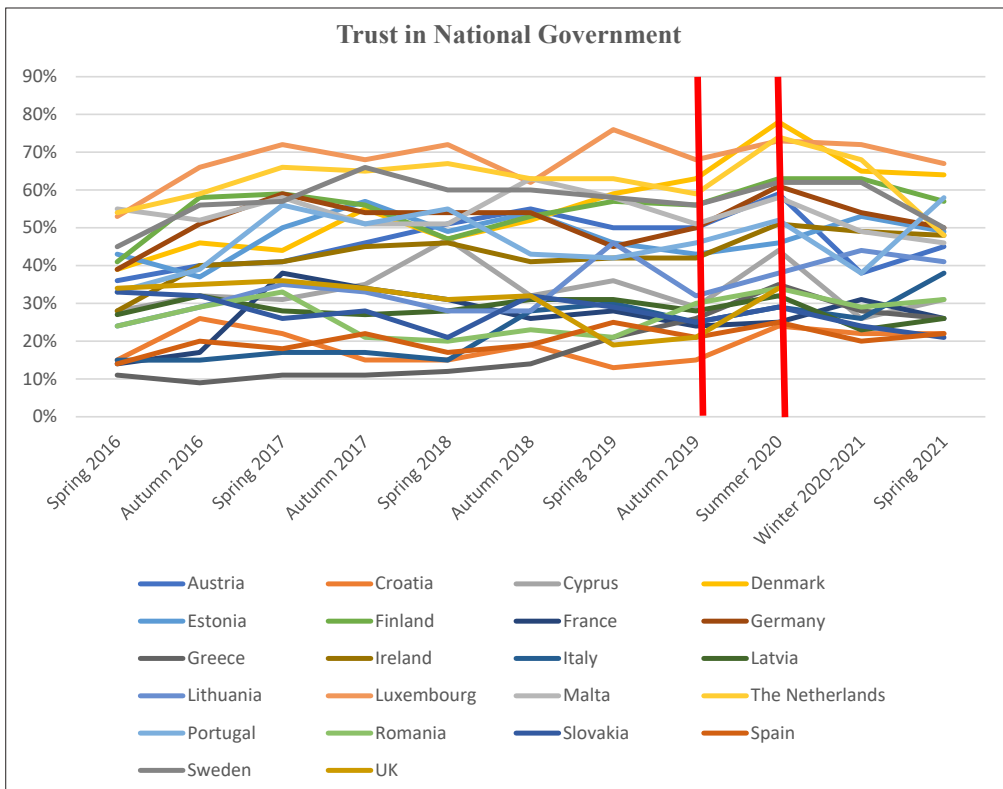


Figure 1: Trust in National Government in EU member states between spring 2016 and spring 2021

Source: European Commission, Eurobarometer (2016-2021)

Table 1: Trust in National Government between autumn 2019 and summer 2020

	Autumn 2019	Summer 2020	Difference 2019–2020		Autumn 2019	Summer 2020	Difference 2019–2020
Austria	50%	59%	9%	Italy	25%	29%	4%
Belgium	35%	30%	-5%	Latvia	28%	32%	4%
Bulgaria	28%	19%	-9%	Lithuania	32%	38%	6%
Croatia	15%	24%	9%	Luxembourg	68%	73%	5%
Cyprus	29%	44%	15%	Malta	51%	58%	7%
The Czech Republic	40%	40%	0%	The Netherlands	59%	74%	15%
Denmark	63%	78%	15%	Poland	34%	34%	0%
Estonia	43%	46%	3%	Portugal	46%	52%	6%
Finland	56%	63%	7%	Romania	30%	34%	4%
France	24%	25%	1%	Slovakia	25%	29%	4%
Germany	50%	61%	11%	Slovenia	31%	25%	-6%
Greece	26%	35%	9%	Spain	21%	25%	4%
Hungary	48%	46%	-2%	Sweden	56%	62%	6%
Ireland	42%	51%	9%	UK	21%	34%	13%

Source: European Commission, Eurobarometer (2019–2020)

Comparing the changes in the level of trust between autumn 2019 and summer 2020 with the changes in the levels of trust in the previous years, we notice that in the case of some countries similar increases or decreases took place previously. However, these changes were totally different from the trends observed in the past for 9 countries. The countries that registered the highest increases were Austria (9%), Croatia (9%), Cyprus (15%), Denmark (15%), Germany (11%), Greece (9%), Ireland (9%), The Netherlands (15%) and UK (13%). However, the Eurobarometer data collected in winter 2020-2021 shows a predominant decrease of trust in government in the majority of EU member states (see Table 2).

The sudden increase of the government support in times of crisis is well documented in the literature, and the authors have labeled the effect as ‘rally-round-the flag’ effect (Hetherington and Nelson, 2003; Edwards, 1997; Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021; Schraff, 2021; Bækgaard *et al.*, 2020; Dietz *et al.*, 2021) or remobilization-of-trust (Wollebæk *et al.*, 2012). At the beginning of 2020, the health threats posed by the coronavirus pandemic affected all groups from the society and therefore, in some countries, the crisis generated population solidarity and a high level of cooperation between political parties (Bol *et al.*, 2021). Hassing Nielsen and Lindvall (2021) argue that coalitions of groups who are often political opponents formed in the context of the pandemic. However, in countries with high partisan polarization and low levels of trust, citizens did not rally around the government, as it was the case in France (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021). One possible argument for the rally-round-the flag effect is that citizens try to offset the uncertainties created by the pandemic by rallying around the national government, while the media priming influences citizens’ perceptions of the government actions (at least during the start of the pandemic)

Table 2: Percentage change of trust in National Government between autumn 2016 and spring 2021

	Autumn 2016 –Spring 2017	Spring 2017 –Autumn 2017	Autumn 2017 –Spring 2018	Spring 2018 –Autumn 2018	Autumn 2018 –Spring 2019	Spring 2019 –Autumn 2019	Autumn 2019 –Summer 2020	Summer 2020 –Winter 2020–2021	Winter 2020–2021 –Spring 2021
Austria	1%	5%	5%	4%	-5%	0%	9%	-21%	7%
Belgium	0%	6%	-8%	10%	-13%	-1%	-5%	11%	0%
Bulgaria	6%	1%	-1%	-6%	3%	3%	-9%	4%	-1%
Croatia	-4%	-7%	0%	4%	-6%	2%	9%	-2%	0%
Cyprus	-1%	4%	12%	-15%	4%	-7%	15%	-18%	5%
The Czech Republic	-10%	4%	6%	0%	9%	3%	0%	-21%	9%
Denmark	-2%	11%	-8%	5%	7%	4%	15%	-13%	-1%
Estonia	13%	7%	-8%	5%	-8%	-3%	3%	7%	-4%
Finland	1%	-3%	-9%	6%	4%	-1%	7%	0%	-6%
France	21%	-4%	-3%	-5%	2%	-4%	1%	6%	-5%
Germany	8%	-5%	0%	0%	-9%	5%	11%	-7%	-4%
Greece	2%	0%	1%	2%	7%	5%	9%	-7%	-2%
Hungary	4%	9%	-2%	2%	0%	0%	-2%	-7%	6%
Ireland	1%	4%	1%	-5%	1%	0%	9%	-2%	-1%
Italy	2%	0%	-2%	13%	2%	-5%	4%	-3%	12%
Latvia	-4%	-1%	1%	3%	0%	-3%	4%	-9%	3%
Lithuania	6%	-2%	-5%	0%	18%	-14%	6%	6%	-3%
Luxembourg	6%	-4%	4%	-10%	14%	-8%	5%	-1%	-5%
Malta	6%	-7%	0%	12%	-5%	-7%	7%	-9%	-3%
The Netherlands	7%	-1%	2%	-4%	0%	-4%	15%	-6%	-20%
Poland	7%	-4%	-1%	5%	5%	-4%	0%	-8%	2%
Portugal	17%	-5%	4%	-12%	-1%	4%	6%	-14%	20%
Romania	4%	-12%	-1%	3%	-2%	9%	4%	-5%	2%
Slovakia	-6%	2%	-7%	11%	-3%	-4%	4%	-5%	-3%
Slovenia	4%	-4%	2%	4%	12%	-4%	-6%	-6%	6%
Spain	-2%	4%	-5%	2%	6%	-4%	4%	-5%	2%
Sweden	1%	9%	-6%	0%	-2%	-2%	6%	0%	-12%
UK	1%	-2%	-3%	1%	-13%	2%	13%	-34%	0%

Source: European Commission, Eurobarometer (2016-2021)

(Edwards, 1997). Dietz *et al.* (2021) conducted web-based research among 1,385 German citizens in September 2020, and found that fear of COVID-19 is the dominant factor that explains the formation of the support for government during the coronavirus pandemic. Similarly, Rump and Zwiener-Collins (2021), based on a national survey conducted on

German population in March 2020, provide additional evidence that the initial increase of the societal trust in public institutions was an emotional one, and it did not depend on the government decisions to manage the pandemic. Hetherington and Nelson (2003) argue that citizens rally around a leadership figure out of patriotism as the leader represents rather a national symbol of unity. Previous studies on other international crises (such as terrorist attacks) showed that the magnitude and longevity of the rally effect varies from large support that lasted for more than a year, to medium and small support that lasted few weeks or months (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021). Several studies (Edwards, 1997; Bengtsson and Brommesson, 2021) showed that the public confidence in leaders and national government is of short term, and the effect is larger among the individuals most disposed to support the government response in the first place (Jørgensen *et al.*, 2021; Chatagnier, 2012).

The analysis of Eurobarometer data shows that by winter 2020-2021, citizens' confidence in national governments decreased in the majority of EU member states. Table 3 shows the percentage changes in trust in National Government, National Parliament and public administration between autumn 2019 and spring 2021. The largest decreases of trust in the National Government were in the UK (-34%), Austria (-21%) and Czech Republic (-21%), Cyprus (-18%), Portugal (-14%) and Denmark (-13%). Trust in the National Parliament declined in the UK (-33%), Denmark (-16%), Austria (-14%), Czech Republic (-12%) and Cyprus (-10%). In the same period, trust in public administration declined in most of the countries, with the highest decreases taking place in Slovenia (-16%), Lithuania (-13%), Cyprus (-10%), Czech Republic (-10%) and Poland (-10%). The percentage change of trust in these institutions continued to decline between summer 2020 and winter 2020-2021, and winter 2020-2021 and spring 2021, even though the decline slowed down.

Trust in regional authorities registered moderate increases between autumn 2019 and summer 2020; the largest increase being in the UK (11%), Greece (12%), Croatia (9%) and Cyprus (8%). However, by winter 2020-2021, trust in regional authorities declined in the majority of EU member states (see Table 3). The largest decreases were in Lithuania (-16%), Slovenia (-14%), and Cyprus (-10%) and Romania (-10%). Even though it is not the goal of this paper to explain the decreases of trust in public institutions in different countries, it is important to highlight that trust is highly contextualized and depends on the particular cultural circumstances, public policies adopted by each country to contain the spread of the coronavirus and the pre-existing trust in political leaders.

Table 4 shows the percentage change of trust in health and medical staff between summer 2020 and winter 2020-2021 and winter 2020-2021 and spring 2021. Trust increased in countries such as Bulgaria (10%), Belgium (8%) and Czech Republic (8%), which registered the highest increases, while in other countries, such as Romania (-7%) and Poland (-7%), trust decreased. However, the decline is not so significant as in the case of other public institutions. Future research should investigate factors that influence the change in the perception of trust in different public institutions.

Eurobarometer data shows that, after an increase of trust in public institutions, trust started to decline. Countries that registered high levels of decline in National Government, reported declining levels of trust in other public institutions. Therefore, the situation le-

Table 3: Percentage change in trust in National Government, National Parliament and public administration between autumn 2019 and spring 2021

	National Government			National Parliament			Public administration		
	Autumn 2019– Summer 2020	Summer 2020– Winter 2020–2021	Winter 2020–2021 –Spring 2021	Autumn 2019 –Summer 2020	Summer 2020 –Winter 2020–2021	Winter 2020–2021 –Spring 2021	Autumn 2019 –Summer 2020	Summer 2020 –Winter 2020–2021	Winter 2020–2021 –Spring 2021
Austria	9%	-21%	7%	4%	-14%	6%	5%	-7%	-1%
Belgium	-5%	11%	0%	-8%	11%	1%	-1%	0%	2%
Bulgaria	-9%	4%	-1%	-6%	2%	0%	-4%	6%	-5%
Croatia	9%	-2%	0%	5%	1%	0%	8%	-2%	4%
Cyprus	15%	-18%	5%	-2%	-10%	6%	7%	-10%	4%
The Czech Republic	0%	-21%	9%	2%	-12%	5%	4%	-10%	8%
Denmark	15%	-13%	-1%	13%	-16%	2%	4%	-3%	-2%
Estonia	3%	7%	-4%	4%	-1%	-10%	1%	0%	-2%
Finland	7%	0%	-6%	1%	2%	-3%	0%	-1%	-3%
France	1%	6%	-5%	-3%	7%	-4%	3%	1%	1%
Germany	11%	-7%	-4%	4%	-3%	-4%	3%	-5%	2%
Greece	9%	-7%	-2%	4%	0%	1%	10%	-9%	9%
Hungary	-2%	-7%	6%	-3%	-4%	4%	5%	-2%	2%
Ireland	9%	-2%	-1%	8%	-3%	1%	6%	-3%	-2%
Italy	4%	-3%	12%	-1%	1%	7%	-2%	2%	3%
Latvia	4%	-9%	3%	3%	-1%	3%	3%	-8%	6%
Lithuania	6%	6%	-3%	3%	11%	-4%	7%	-13%	2%
Luxembourg	5%	-1%	-5%	10%	2%	-6%	1%	2%	-5%
Malta	7%	-9%	-3%	1%	1%	-4%	12%	-7%	-1%
The Netherlands	15%	-6%	-20%	9%	-4%	-16%	8%	-1%	-12%
Poland	0%	-8%	2%	-2%	-6%	4%	4%	-10%	8%
Portugal	6%	-14%	20%	5%	-4%	5%	7%	-8%	10%
Romania	4%	-5%	2%	-4%	-1%	3%	2%	-6%	4%
Slovakia	4%	-5%	-3%	5%	-5%	-1%	7%	-5%	2%
Slovenia	-6%	-6%	6%	-4%	-7%	4%	5%	-16%	13%
Spain	4%	-5%	2%	0%	-3%	2%	7%	-3%	5%
Sweden	6%	0%	-12%	6%	-3%	-14%	4%	-1%	-5%
UK	13%	-34%	0%	12%	-33%	0%	14%	1%	-8%

Source: European Commission, Eurobarometer (2019–2021)

gitimizes the question of what national governments should do in order to maintain and increase trust in public institutions in times of crisis?

Table 4: Percentage change in trust in regional authorities and health and medical staff between autumn 2019 and spring 2021

	Regional authorities			Health and medical staff	
	Autumn 2019 – Summer 2020	Summer 2020 – Winter 2020–2021	Winter 2020 – Spring 2021	Summer 2020 – Winter 2020–2021	Winter 2020–2021 – Spring 2021
Austria	0%	0%	-1%	-2%	-1%
Belgium	4%	-4%	1%	8%	-2%
Bulgaria	-1%	3%	0%	10%	-7%
Croatia	9%	0%	3%	1%	-3%
Cyprus	8%	-10%	2%	-3%	-3%
The Czech Republic	1%	-1%	2%	8%	-4%
Denmark	6%	-5%	-1%	5%	-2%
Estonia	2%	1%	-3%	2%	0%
Finland	-1%	-1%	1%	1%	-1%
France	4%	0%	-2%	-1%	0%
Germany	3%	-4%	2%	1%	-2%
Greece	12%	-5%	0%	2%	-9%
Hungary	7%	-1%	0%	6%	3%
Ireland	4%	-3%	-4%	1%	-4%
Italy	-1%	6%	3%	3%	-2%
Latvia	0%	-1%	5%	-2%	2%
Lithuania	6%	-16%	1%	5%	1%
Luxembourg	-1%	1%	-1%	-1%	0%
Malta	7%	-3%	0%	0%	4%
The Netherlands	4%	2%	-15%	0%	-2%
Poland	4%	-8%	5%	-7%	6%
Portugal	9%	-7%	15%	2%	1%
Romania	2%	-10%	7%	-7%	4%
Slovakia	4%	-1%	-1%	7%	-2%
Slovenia	4%	-14%	12%	0%	-3%
Spain	10%	-8%	4%	1%	-1%
Sweden	3%	-2%	-6%	0%	-2%
UK	11%	-2%	-6%	-	-

Source: European Commission, Eurobarometer (2019–2021)

3. Methodology

The goal of this paper is to analyze strategies to develop and maintain trust in public institutions in times of crisis. The focus of the analysis is on European Union member states; however, since the pandemic was global, we included in the analysis the experiences of different countries worldwide whenever it was relevant. The analysis is based on the systematic analysis of journal articles published on the topic of trust in public institutions since the start of the pandemic. We aimed to identify a diversity of strategies, and, in particular, we looked for experiences of different countries that adopted different approaches to containing the pandemic. In addition, we analyzed journal articles that have a rather more general perspective on developing trust during the coronavirus crisis. We acknowledge that building trust in public institutions in times of crisis is very situational and depends on the pre-established trust and cultural and political context of different countries (Offerdal *et al.*, 2021; Kuhlmann *et al.*, 2021). However, we aimed to draw a general picture of strategies rather than conduct a bibliometric analysis of all the articles published on this topic. In the final part of the paper, we will reflect on how strategies to build trust in non-crisis situations are different from the strategies adopted during crisis situations.

3. Strategies to develop and maintain trust in public institutions during the coronavirus pandemic

3.1. The particularities of the administrative context during the coronavirus pandemic

In order to discuss the strategies to increase trust in public institutions, it is important to highlight some of the changes in the context of how public institutions performed during the coronavirus pandemic, which were different from non-crisis situations. Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing (2021, p. 955) argued that public leaders had to manage a variety of problems without sufficient data or with changing scientific knowledge, and to learn from experience and to look for expert advice and build alliances. Governments had to deal with the spread of misinformation about the pandemic (Sauer *et al.*, 2021; Limaye *et al.*, 2020) and with uncertainties about the risks related to the coronavirus, which hindered public trust. The number and types of actors involved in the decision-making process changed and more policy actors got involved in the management of the coronavirus crisis, such as representatives of international organizations, experts in the medical field, and pharmaceutical companies involved in the research, production and distribution of the anti-coronavirus vaccine.

3.2. Strategies to build trust in public institutions during the coronavirus pandemic

Several strategies for building trust in public institutions during the coronavirus pandemic are discussed in the literature. Researchers recommend enhancing the transparency and credibility of public institutions, developing protocols and procedures to manage the

pandemic, being proactive to update the public with the ongoing developments, building a good reputation of political leaders, and conducting regular consultations with stakeholders. In the following part we will analyze these strategies.

a) Conducting regular consultations

One recommendation to strengthen trust in public institutions is to conduct regular consultations with all affected stakeholders in the decision-making process (Kumagai and Iorio, 2020; Kikucki, 2007; Fahlquist, 2021). However, during the coronavirus crisis, governments did not directly involve citizens in the decision-making process, but rather the decisions were made by the national government based on consultations with representatives of international organizations and members of the scientific community, including doctors, researchers, members of academia and other health care professionals (Bagasra *et al.*, 2021; Dijck and Alinead, 2020). Kukovič (2022) showed that health and medical personnel gave more legitimacy to decisions as they enjoyed much higher trust compared to the political leaders. However, approaches to manage the coronavirus pandemic were different in different countries, and they ranged from politicians overlooking the scientific advice provided by the specialists (as it was in the United States at the beginning of the pandemic) to a more collaborative approach as in the Nordic countries (Christensen and Læg Reid, 2020). In addition to conducting consultations with the scientific and medical community, governments consulted stakeholders that were affected by different restrictive measures, such as associations of businesses, teachers and parents (Henderson *et al.*, 2020). In addition, collaboration with mass media and social media was crucial in order to prevent misinformation and the spread of fake news (Limaye *et al.*, 2020).

b) Demonstrating honesty and building credibility through risk communication

According to Henderson *et al.* (2020) and Offerdal *et al.* (2021), in order to maintain citizens' trust, public institutions should communicate openly and timely about the level of risk, and to be honest about the uncertainty of scientific knowledge on the efficiency of the measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus. However, crisis communication is very challenging because a large volume of information might become confusing and increase the level of anxiety among people (Wong and Jensen, 2020). At the same time, communicating quickly might be in contradiction with communicating correctly (Offerdal *et al.*, 2021). Political leaders might withhold information because of the fear of not creating panic among the population especially in the cases of uncertain information; however, citizens should be aware of the risks they are exposed to, and make informed decisions on their own. One way to address these challenges is to provide information, even if it is scarce, while acknowledging the uncertainty of the situation (Offerdal *et al.*, 2021). For example, in the case of vaccination campaigns, governments were advised to communicate in a transparent and honest way about the risks of new vaccines, without overstating the benefits or underestimating the risks (Fahlquist, 2021). Another recommendation is that leaders communicate what they do in order to address uncertainties and enhance scientific knowledge.

c) Holding a certain degree of control over access to information

Studies showed that if citizens trust that public authorities provide them with accurate information, and no essential information is withheld, they are more willing to comply with vaccination (Szilagyi *et al.*, 2021). However, communication strategy during the coronavirus pandemic required a certain degree of control over the amount and type of information, the time of releasing the information and the messengers to communicate the information. For example, governments communicated once a day the statistics about the development of the coronavirus pandemic in order to prevent overwhelming citizens with too much information. Many studies showed that members of the scientific community, such as doctors, primary care physicians, researchers and other health professionals, were more credible messengers than politicians (Bagasra *et al.*, 2021; Kukovič, 2022). Crisis communication involves censure of social media channels in order to contain the spread of fake news (Khemani, 2020), and to ensure that the population has access to accurate information. Governments partnered with social media to identify, verify and remove inaccurate information (Limaye *et al.*, 2020). Governments regularly monitored the information discussed about the coronavirus pandemic in the traditional media through supervising bodies (such as Audiovisual Council in Romania), and sanctioned media companies that allowed presentation and discussion of information in a biased way. However, Limaye *et al.* (2020) argue that there should be a balance between securing access to accurate information and allowing diverse voices, including those that are critical to government decisions.

d) Communicating message of unified action

Another important strategy to increase trust during a crisis is through sending simple messages that emphasize national unity, solidarity and common effort. Political leaders who adopted such a public discourse succeeded in nudging people to adhere to recommendations of health authorities, and to increase trust in government (at least in the first part of the pandemic). For example, Mazey and Richardson (2020) and Sauer *et al.* (2021) praised the prime minister of New Zealand for framing the government response to the coronavirus crisis as citizens' response and for building national unity among political opponents. Similarly, Christensen and Læg Reid (2020) showed that the Norwegian government communication strategy of appealing to solidarity and collective action enhanced citizens' trust in government.

e) Expressing reliability and empathy

Reliability of a leader is related to his/her integrity, credibility and competence, and it facilitates the coordination of people to voluntarily comply with recommendations without the need of sanctions (Cairney and Wellstead, 2021). Sauer *et al.* (2021) highlighted that acknowledging that crises generate a lot of fear, anxiety and sacrifice among citizens, therefore showing empathy, can help build trust in public institutions. However, authorities who publicly acknowledged citizens' sacrifices, but privately failed to abide by the same restrictive rules damaged public trust and worked against recommended rules. In several countries mass media reported cases of high-profile political figures (presidents,

prime ministers, ministers, senior advisers) who were caught breaking the rules during the lockdown, and those situations generated large dissatisfaction among citizens who felt that only they have to strictly obey the rules, not also the politicians. In some cases, politicians publicly apologized for their misconduct or paid the due fines. In a few cases they resigned in order to preserve the credibility of the public institutions. Such highly scrutinized cases undermined the citizens' trust in government, and strengthened the belief that political leaders have different standards to be held accountable for than the citizens with whom they are supposed to empathize (Sauer *et al.*, 2021).

f) Improving performance of public institutions

One of the most important factors that influence trust in public institutions is citizens' satisfaction with their performance (Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2003; Olofsdotter Stensöta and Bendz, 2020). Few studies investigate the impact of the policies to contain the coronavirus pandemic on citizens' trust in public institutions. One such study was conducted by Hassing Nielsen and Lindvall (2021), who investigated whether there was a difference in the citizens' level of trust in public institutions in Sweden and Denmark based on the differences between the public health policies adopted by these countries. The authors surveyed citizens' perceptions in March, April and June 2020, and they found that trust was a little higher in Denmark than in Sweden, which indicates that policies have an effect on trust, but the effect was not very large. The two countries adopted different policies in the beginning of the pandemic.

It is important to highlight that since the pandemic was global, citizens constantly compared the performance of their government with the performance of other governments to manage the crisis, and the perception of public trust was influenced not only by the performance of their national governments, but also by the comparison with the performance of other governments.

g) Developing protocols and procedures to manage the pandemic

These protocols guided the action of public institutions and citizens in different domains affected by the coronavirus pandemic, such as traveling (developing clear rules upon which citizens are allowed to enter a country and requirements regarding quarantine), closing the schools and switching to online education, local quarantine when infection rate is above a certain threshold, treatment of COVID patients and the list of hospitals that can treat COVID patients, testing system of the public and of children in school, tracing contacts, etc. (Henderson *et al.*, 2020). In addition, public institutions developed practices to regularly disseminate accurate information and to identify misinformation. In a changing and uncertain environment, protocols give a certain degree of predictability and clarify the decisions that would be made in certain situations. Therefore, while the decision making process was rather centralized at the beginning of the pandemic, in the second part of the pandemic decisions were rather decentralized to local authorities, as long as they followed the general guiding rules established through national protocols and procedures.

4. Do strategies to build trust in crisis situations differ from the strategies adopted during non-crisis situations?

In this section we reflect on how strategies to build trust in crisis situations are different from the strategies adopted during non-crisis situations. Trust in public institutions is an important element for the well-functioning of society in general. Most of the recommendations to build and maintain trust in public institutions are the same in both situations (such as, building credibility, trustworthiness, reliability, empathy of decision makers, and improving the performance of public institutions), but some of the recommendations should be particularized to the specific constraints of the crisis situations. Figure 2 summarizes our perspective regarding these differences.

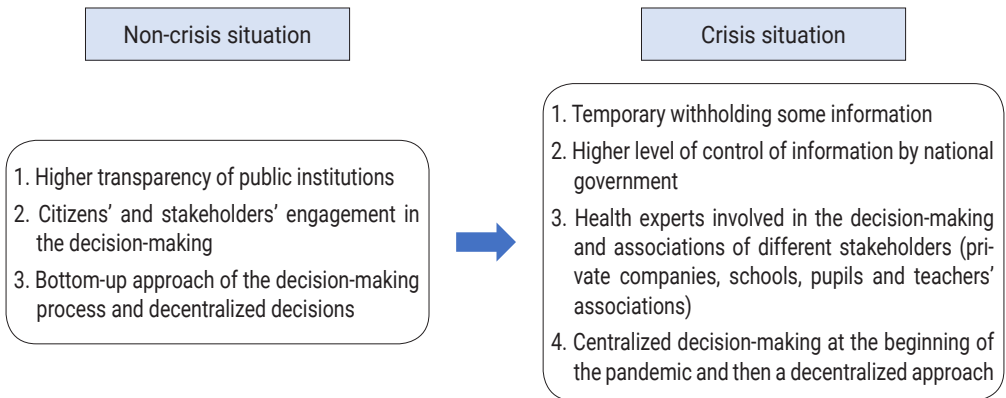


Figure 2: Building trust in public institutions in crisis and non-crisis situations

Source: Author's own contribution

One key recommendation to increase trust in public institutions is to increase the level of transparency. During crisis situations, governments hold a higher degree of control over information communicated to the public in terms of the type and the amount of information, the time of communication, and the channels used to disseminate information. Crisis communication is rather more centralized and coordinated by specialists that have a broader understanding of the multi-facets and implications of the crisis situation. Transparency involves citizens' participation in the decision-making process. However, during the coronavirus pandemic direct participation of citizens was replaced with the consultation of health experts, international organizations and associations of different stakeholders (private companies, schools, pupils' and teachers' associations, etc.). Health experts (doctors, researchers, primary care physicians, representatives of health organizations) gave more credibility and legitimacy to the restrictive measures.

Another key difference in building trust in public institutions regards the style of making decisions. In non-crisis situations, decisions are decentralized and made from bottom-up through the direct involvement of citizens and stakeholders. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, decisions regarding the containment of the pandemic were

centralized and implemented uniformly at the level of an entire country or state. Such decisions made citizens highly unsatisfied, especially those in areas with no coronavirus infection detected. However, once governments established protocols and procedures to guide the decision-making process, some of the decisions were decentralized to local authorities. Therefore, local public authorities were entitled to make decisions adjusted to the epidemiological situation at local level.

5. Concluding remarks

Trust in public institutions is important for citizens' compliance with voluntary recommendations of health authorities and with the mandatory regulations. Building and maintaining trust is challenging as the sudden increase in trust at the debut of a crisis rapidly declines. Risk communication is difficult as there are conflicting interests, and the knowledge changes as the crisis evolves. Credibility and trustworthiness of political leaders should be enhanced, as sometimes there is contradiction between their public declarations and their private behavior. Another important recommendation is to increase the transparency of public institutions while acknowledging the uncertainty of the situation, and the difficulty of making accurate decisions in a rapidly evolving context. In addition, collaboration with stakeholders that have expertise in the field is important as it gives credibility and legitimacy to the restrictive measures that citizens have to comply with.

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