

TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper started from Mattei Doggan's research, which emphasized that trust institutional trust is plummeting, generating a political crisis. In recent years, armed conflicts and financial, health, and refugee crises, faced by EU nation states have produced not only socioeconomic tensions, but have also shaken the citizens' trust in both national and supranational institutions.*

Institutional trust is important due to the fact that it directly illustrates people's support towards national and supranational organizations. Political scientists, such as David Easton and Pippa Norris, have argued that trust in institutions is an indicator of organizational efficiency.

Institutional trust has been extensively researched, from a numerical perspective, illustrating how it has evolved over time. However, the way in which peoples' levels of trust changed during and after a period of crisis and what are the factors which influenced these attitude shifts are fairly undocumented.

Due to the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic occurred recently, there is a lack of literature regarding the way in which citizens' trust in national and supranational organizations has evolved before, during and after the period of the Coronavirus. This research, which analysis the influence of the health crisis on institutional trust, provides valuable insights, by illustrating the factors which contributed to the deepening of the crisis generated by the lack of trust.

This paper provides an in-depth analysis that identifies what factors influence the attitudes of Romanians, Bulgarians, Poles and Hungarians towards national and international institutions.

The research method is secondary data analysis of the Eurobarometer. In this paper, I included data collected from the Spring Standard Eurobarometer between 2018 and 2023, which mostly evaluated trust in national and supranational organizations. I began with frequencies and crosstabs to present the general trust towards institutions. Afterwards, I used Pearson Correlation, regression and factorial analyses in order to identify the attitude predictors towards trust in national and European institutions.

The results were mixed. While Poles and Hungarians had more trust in national institutions than Romanians and Bulgarians before Covid, during the pandemic these differences decreased. However, Romanians and Bulgarians perceived European Institutions more positively during the pandemic. Younger and more educated people tended to have more trust in supranational institutions, regardless of nationality. Moreover, Polish people tended to regain trust in national institutions after Covid faster than others.

Key-words: *institutional trust; crisis; income; place of residence; national institutions; european institutions.*

Introduction

Modern day society is characterised by a series of unpredictable changes. Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has coined the term liquid modernity in order to emphasize these societal shifts, which impact both the society as a whole and the citizen as an individual. On one hand, he considers that in modern times, societal changes are unpredictable, marked by constant "ambiguities and insecurities" (Bauman & Haugaard, 2008, p.127). On the other hand, the

average citizen is directly influenced by the constant change which takes place in society. As a consequence of the constant uncertainties, the individual is forced to sought "shelter inside the miniature, diminutive realm of personal life-politics" (Bauman, 2000, p.52). However, I believe that this individual beliefs are reflected into the person's trust regarding national and supranational organisations. Thus, this paper is important because it emphasizes the way in which the unstable times of modernity are influencing trust towards institutions.

The events generated by the Covid-19 pandemic represent the embodiment of the warning issued by Bauman, through which he cautioned us of the inevitability of the appearance of a “world devoid of stable and trustworthy meaning”(Bauman, 2000, p.113). I believe that the lack of trust observed by Mattei Doggan represents the manifestations of Bauman’s warnings.

Even if we live in dangerous times, it is important to maintain our calm in order to determine what are the factors which have contributed fluctuation of trust levels. Crisis like the one created by the Covid-19 pandemic are extremely rare, even less frequent than once in a researcher’s lifetime. This allows us to evaluate the effectiveness of the theories issued by researchers such as Urlick Beck or Mattei Doggan. Second, it enables us to gain a deeper perspective regarding the crisis generated by the lack of trust, as it was phrased by Mattei Doggan. Thus, we are able to observe if, and under what circumstances, citizens regain trust in institutions during challenging times. Third, we will identify the factors which influence peoples trust during dire times. Thus, this research through this research not only will illustrate the evolution of trust during perilous times. It could also stand as a guide of good practice for policy makers, through which they can improve their decisions during times of crisis.

In his earlier research, Mattei Doggan has identified a prolonged crisis generated by low levels of institutional trust, described as “persistent, international, structural, and rational” (Dogan, 1997). The lack of trust emphasized by Doggan’s research occurs during a time marked by the “expansion and consolidation of democratic regimes across the world” (Sztompka, 2006). Thus, Doggan presents us with this paradox, in which former communist countries were becoming more democratic, while consecrated democracies such as the US, UK or France became less democratic. In the following part of my paper, I will present perspectives developed by scientists from multiple area of expertise in order to explain this paradox.

2. Theories of trust

In this segment of the paper, I am going to discuss a few of the main theories which address

the issue of trust. In this segment I will include four different perspectives, from political scientists such as Pippa Norris, David Easton and sociologists such as Urlick Beck and Eric Uslaner. Trust in institutions is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon. Thus, the operationalisation process for this variable arises issues even for the most experienced sociologists.

2.1. Democratic deficit

The concept of democratic deficit was coined by British academic and former MP, Richard Corbett around the 1980’s in order to emphasize the issues faced by the European Institutions. Generally, this term describes the situation which occurs when there is an “imbalance between the public’s demand for democracy and the perceived supply of democracy” (Norris, 2011, p.103). However, this term can gain two slightly different meanings, based on the type of institution with which it is associated.

On one hand, the term refers to a situation in which “institutions and their decision-making procedures may suffer from a lack of democracy and accountability” (EUR-Lex, 2024). In this scenario, it is linked mostly to national political organisations. On the other hand, when this term is associated with European institutions, it acquires a slightly different, more personal meaning. It denotes a “perceived lack of accessibility or of representation of the ordinary citizen with respect to the EU institutions” (ibidem).

I believe that the different definitions of this term stem from at least two sources. On one hand, there is the physical distance between the individual and national or European political institutions. He perceives the national institutions closer than the supranational ones. The proximity to the national institutions allows him to observe their actions more thoroughly. I consider that proximity towards institutions leads to increased awareness and a faster reaction from people towards inappropriate actions among state representatives and other public servants. On the other hand, 78% of the respondents from the latest Eurobarometer survey said that they “are not very or not at all familiar” (European Commission, 2025) with the principles of the daily activities of the EU institutions. Moreover, according to the report of the research How much

do we know about the EU? A survey about communication and disinformation, almost half (46%) of the respondents (Federazione Italiana Diritti Umani, 2021) did not know that there is a division between the three main European institutions, respectively the European Commission, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament. Thus, there is a lack of knowledge, regarding the activities of European institutions which might contribute to negative attitudes towards these supranational political actors.

The research conducted by Pippa Norris greatly contributed to the understanding of the democratic deficit phenomenon. Her approach is interesting because she treats it as a disease, and presents the main symptoms, the diagnosis and even shows a glimpse of its evolution, if the proper measures will not be taken in time. First, it is important to understand that "the size and distribution of democratic deficits" (Norris, 2011, p.102) differs from country to country. In order to assess its magnitude, Norris evaluated multiple factors, such as "institutional confidence, feelings of nationalism or attitudes toward democratic governance and rejection of autocracy" (Norris, 2011, p.102).

She believes that feelings of nationalism can be evaluated using a scale "constructed of two items: (V75) Willingness to fight for one's country in a war, and (V209) Feelings of national pride" (Norris, 2011, p.109). Nationalism is a very abstract factor, thus it is difficult to be measured. The two variables used by Pippa Norris are suitable to measure the evolution of the phenomenon from a quantitative perspective.

It is important to emphasize that nationalism should not be confused with patriotism, even though both variables might be considered different forms of national attachment. On one hand, nationalism "concerns the desire for the dominance of one's own nation over others" (Sidanius et al., 1997, p. 106). On the other hand, feelings of patriotism, which are described by "extroversion or national self-assert" ((Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989, p. 257) are usually triggered by "an outside threat" ((ibidem p.258). However, in her research, Pippa Norris, measures nationalism from two distinct perspectives. On one hand, she evaluates the respondent's attitude towards national pride. On the other hand, she goes a step further and

evaluates his willingness to take part in activities which will positively impact his country.

Cosmopolitanism

Paul Statham and Ruud Koopmans concluded that the crisis of the democratic deficit is influenced by the "crisis of the political community as a basis for national identities" (Koopmans & Statham, 1999, p.227), which is characterised by the "increased immigration and cultural heterogeneity". (Ibidem). I agree with the authors, on the idea that democratic deficit might stem from a political crisis. However, I do not share their belief, according to which the aforementioned political crisis stems only from the cultural differences which occur between immigrants and the local population. My scepticism is fueled by the fact eastern European nations, such as the countries which I have included in this paper "only recently became places of interest for migrants" (Pripp, 2024, p.173). Thus, the explanation proposed by Koopmans and Statham is not universally valid among all the EU-member states. I consider that the differences are not caused only by cultural distinctions, but are rather generated by the peoples' attitudes towards EU values and principles.

For example, according to a special Eurobarometer conducted in 2020, citizens from Poland and Romania "are more likely to have low or medium-low agreement with EU values than on average (European Commission, 2021, p. 94)". At the same time, Bulgaria and Hungary register the "highest score on conservation values" (ibidem p. 13)", which means that they uphold values such as "security, societal security, conformity and tradition" (ibidem, p. 12).

This type of perception toward European values does not directly translate into euro-scepticism. It rather illustrates a lower level of acceptance of the principles of cosmopolitanism, which encourage us to perceive the world as a place with fewer geographical and physical boundaries and delimitation. The basics of these concepts were the cornerstone of the "supranational forms of governance grounded in democracy" (Warf, 2020 p.421), such as, but not limited to the United Nations or the European Union.

All forms of cosmopolitanism, including the

European one, are based on the principle that “cultural models are emerging and articulating new visions of social order and which crystallize in different forms, discourses, speeds, and agencies” (Delanty & Rumford, 2005, p. 32). However, it does not mean that national identities will disappear. Cosmopolitanism rather focuses on multiple ideas, such as creating a network of institutions meant to provide the legal and conceptual framework, free trade and promoting a cosmopolitan culture. (Cheah, 2006).

The political institutions of the European Union, such as the European Commission or the European Parliament are the organisations which design and implement the legal functioning framework, in order “come to grips with very large problems” (Hannertz, 2007, p.71). Moreover, the E.U., as an organism functioning on the principles of cosmopolitanism, boasts with its single market, common currency and border free travel. It also upholds the principles of non-discrimination and equal treatment (European Union, 2025).

I believe that attitudes towards cosmopolitanism usually reflect in people’s perception of supranational organisations. Thus, a person who perceives the European Institutions as organisations which are out of its reach should not be labeled a nationalist, because he might have low trust in his own national institutions. For this reason, I am going to compare the levels of trust in national organisations with those in supranational ones, in order to see if democratic deficit towards national institutions is reflected in democratic surplus in supranational institutions.

Nationalism can be also perceived from the way in which people relate to supranational institutions. In the case of our paper, these organisations are represented by European institutions such as the European Commission which is the executive branch and the European Parliament which holds the legislative power.

Out of all of these factors, I consider that institutional confidence is the most important, because it illustrates not only how content are the citizens, but also how willing they are to rely on national institutions in times of crisis.

Diffuse support

British political scientist, David Easton illustrated that political institutions do not always

need the direct support of citizens in order to be able to function. He coined the term diffuse support in order to illustrate that institutions can function even though they do not benefit of the population’s direct support. Easton believes that low levels of trust do not predict an inevitable collapse of the institution. The explanation stems from his perceptions regarding institutional trust. He perceives institution as reservoirs, which, in time accumulate peoples’ trust. In times of crisis, in which peoples’ direct support toward institutions decreases, they begin to rely on the trust (sympathy) which they have collected over time.

Moreover, he considers that this is the secret practice which guarantees the survival of democracy, even in times of crisis. One of the main principles on which a democratic state is based implies that the relation between the state and its citizens is built upon “consent, not force” (Urbinati, 2010, p. 131). Thus, by using the diffuse support, institutions rely on existing support and avoid to apply extreme measures when they try to pursue citizens to comply with their new laws. This is how governments managed to convince their citizens to abide to the health regulations imposed during the covid-19 pandemic. However, even if this theory is correct, it raises a very difficult question. If in times of crisis, political institutions rely on the diffuse trust, how do the institutions which never benefitted from their population trust manage to survive the times of crisis. Moreover, if they do not benefit of public support, how are they able to impose different restrictions during Covid without coercing its citizens, thus violating the principles of democracy.

Trust in times of crisis

Until the XXth century, risks were perceived as dangers which can be observed and predicted. People were certain of the consequences of these risks. However, everything changed in 1986, after the Chernobyl explosion. Since then people became aware that modern day risks were different, because they were invisible and unpredictable (Beck, 1992). Moreover, Ulrich Beck considers that the consequences of the modern day crisis have global effects, which cannot be measured or predicted by experts.

The Covid19 Pandemic can be considered a

modern day crisis for multiple reasons. First, because it was an event which affected the whole world, regardless of geographical location, social status, education, sex etc. Second, it was an invisible, yet present risk. Third, even though, as previously mentioned, health experts declared the ending of the Covid-19 pandemic back in 2023, its consequences will still affect us for an indefinite period of time (Leong et al., 2021). Lastly, but most importantly, the Covid 19 pandemic represented a period of time of uncertainty, during which, experts could not give precise answers to people questions.

Trust during Covid-19

The Covid Pandemic is considered one of the most impactful global events which occurred in the XXIst Century. Even more than two years after the director general of the World Health Organisation declared that the public health emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic has come to end, its consequences are still looming at a global level, as the public health experts have predicted.

As I have previously mentioned, during times of crisis, people are scared of uncertainties and require reassurances. When experts are unable to soothe the anxious public, chaos tends to install. As a direct consequence, nobody can accurately predict how people are going to react. However, in time, through the means of social scientists from different fields, such as psychology, sociology or political science, peoples' unusual behaviour begins to be explained through thorough research.

During and after the Covid-19 pandemic, scientists research peoples' behaviour, especially their attitudes towards organisations, in order to determine if and in what way this kind of crisis has influenced institutional trust.

Daniel Devine and his colleagues have conceptualised multiple ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic can impact peoples' trust in political organisations. In the following section of this paper I am going to discuss the relationship between policy "implementation, compliance, risk perception and mortality" (Devine et al., 2020, p.5), and how these factors are influenced by institutional trust, thus revealing "what kind of role institutional trust eventually had on the wider picture" (Oksanen et al., 2020).

I believe that the relationship between institutional trust and citizen's compliance towards rules imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic should be perceived as a two-way road. Evidence supporting this statement stems from Goldstein's and Wiedemann's findings, according to which "political trust also plays an important role in producing policy compliance" (Goldstein & Wiedemann, 2021, p.18)

First, they evaluated how people react to the sanitary policies implemented by different governments. Here, they focused on two distinct criteria. First, they looked at the different types of policy implementations. Second, they considered the timing of the policy implementation.

I believe that this issue is crucial, for multiple reasons. First, because it represents an indicator of the efficiency of different national organisations, including both political and non-political ones. Second, because it illustrates the continuous levels of citizen's trust towards institutions. The research conducted by Toshkov and his colleagues is relevant for the topic of my research, because they broke down government efficiency into multiple categories, in order to easier assess the efficiency of the policies used to tackle the effects generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, such as "General governance capacity; Political institutions; Government type; Party-political ideology; Crisis management capacity; Health care capacity and organization; Societal factors" (Toshkov et al., 2022). These indicators can be grouped into two distinct categories. On one hand, there are the ones which evaluate the efficiency of the actions conducted by political actors, from "federal, regional and local levels" (Pattyn et al., 2020, p.605). Due to the fact that I am conducting a longitudinal study, I will only include political institutions on a national level, such as the Government or the Parliament.

On the other hand, they also took into account non-political institutions, such as health organisations or crisis management organisations. I do not include them in my research, because they are not mentioned within the eurobarometer instrument. However, I believe that peoples' attitudes toward these organisations are somewhat reflected in their attitude towards political ones.

Devine and his colleagues considered that

citizens from countries with higher institutional trust were more compliant with the limitations imposed during the pandemic. Even though I agree with this statement, I consider that there are certain limitations and exceptions.

It is generally acknowledged that higher levels of institutional trust are reflected into peoples tendency of respecting instructions issued by both experts and politicians in key-places. As a result, we should consider the fact that institutional trust can have a negative impact. If the trusted person, either health expert or politician issues a statement which contradicts public health policies, it might produce negative consequences, alternating “the perceived net benefit of adherence and, thereby, impact policy compliance” (Goldstein & Wiedemann, 2021, p.19). This might tend to occur in countries where populist political parties are not governing, but rather are part of the opposition. Moreover, they are consolidating their power by gaining new followers among the citizens who do not trust the government or do not accept anti-covid measures.

Compliance is a very vague term. For this reason, I will talk mainly about compliance towards social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic. As expected, a positive correlation between institutional trust and compliance towards social distancing has been recorded during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, contrary to popular belief, lack of institutional trust was not associated with a complete rejection of social distancing. However, it rather registered a weak positive correlation with social distancing (Olsen & Hjorth, 2020, p.9) and other measures recommended by the health experts, such as “frequent handwashing and avoiding crowded spaces” (Han et al., 2021, p.9) Compliance towards the COVID-19 vaccine, is also influenced by trust in political institutions (González-Melado & Di Pietro, 2021; Hill et al., 2023; Cristea et al., 2022). However, none of the researchers differentiate between political and non-political institutions or between national and supranational ones. Thus, I consider institutional trust to be an important factor which directly contributed towards people’s compliance with the advice given by health specialists. Thus, at a certain level, institutional trust contributed to fewer cases and decreased death rates.

Institutional trust influences not only attitudes

towards the experts’ recommendations but also peoples’ perception of the gravity of the crisis. As I have previously mentioned, it is very difficult, even for experts, to accurately provide a model which predicts the true dimensions of the risks generated by modern crisis. For this reason, it is very important that people understand that each crisis brings its own consequences, which are rarely foreseeable. In order to be able to tackle any kind of events people need to clearly perceive all of the risks, without minimizing them. Dryhurst and her colleagues identified that risk perceptions can be directly influenced by factors such as personal experience, different values, social relations, institutional trust, and personal knowledge (Dryhurst et al., 2020). I believe that these factors can be grouped into two different categories. On one hand, there are intrinsic ones, such as social values and beliefs, which stem from personal experience. On the other hand, there are the extrinsic factors, such as trust in health experts, trust in public institutions, which originate from the person’s previous interactions. Based on previous experience and knowledge, people are going to assess the possible dangers linked to future events. Thus, institutional trust is important. National institutions should be aware that low levels of trust registered in the previous years are going to coerce people into perceiving public policies from a negative perspective, even if their impact might be positive. I believe that this situation might occur even if the public policies in questions have been successful in other countries. For this reason, it is important for national and supranational institutions to be aware of people’s perceptions towards them. Moreover, in times of crisis and uncertainty, these institutions need to proactively convince citizens that their actions are beneficial. This way, people will be receptive of the governments indications and will truly perceive the risks posed by the pandemic. Moreover, people who trust the government will act accordingly to the recommendations made by the experts.

Socio-demographic factors

Researchers have proven in multiple papers that sociodemographic variables such as gender (Xiao & McCright, 2013; Mukherjee, 2020), age (Li & Fung, 2013; Bailey & Leon, 2019), education (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012;

Ugur-Cinar et al., 2020), income (Lipps & Schraff, 2020; Bobzien, 2023) and many more have a great influence towards peoples trust in institutions.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic radically shifted our lifestyles and also the ways in which we perceive the world. Thus, in the second part of this chapter, I will illustrate the way in which the influence of the sociodemographic factors towards institutional trust has changed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Previous research has shown that the COVID-19 crisis not only “prompted institutional trust” (Falcone et al., 2020, p.12) but also has shifted the way in which people perceive institutions. For this reason, I also included in my research data from two years before the pandemic, in order to have a clear image of the dynamic of institutional trust.

I established a chronology of the events in order to have a clear timeline which helps us to understand the reasons behind the shifts of institutional trust.

According to health professionals, the timeline of the Covid-19 pandemic consists of three key moments. The first phase, in which the number of cases is growing globally, at a rapid scale. Besides an increase in the number of cases, a pandemic is also defined by the outreach of the virus, which has to spread worldwide. (World Health Organisation, 2025). Thus, health professionals declared the second phase of the health crisis, when the Covid-19 virus has spread globally, becoming a pandemic. I believe that this phase defines most of the pandemic. The third phase began when WHO declared we are entering the endemic phase, marked by a decrease in the number of cases. One year later, in 2023, WHO declared that the pandemic ended, but experts from multiple fields believe that it will still generate negative effects if it "continues to spread, evolve, and cause economic and health burdens" (Rzyski et al., 2023).

The second perspective is presented by political scientists, economists and policy makers, who believe that the time line of the Covid-19 pandemic comprises six key moments. The first stage occurred when national and supranational political organisations acknowledged the existence of a crisis generated by the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2. This time was marked by the implementation of the

anti-covid measures, such as social distancing and mandatory usage of masks in public places. I also consider that the anti-covid vaccination campaign took place during the first phase, even though it started in 2021. The second phase was marked by a decrease in the intensity of the anti-covid measures, in the summer of 2020. The third phase, was marked by the second wave, which occurred between the autumn of 2020 up until the end of the winter, in February 2021. The last phase researched lasted until August 2021. The fifth phase started with the Omicron mutation, which caused less severe symptoms but spread faster, leading to a greater number of infections but also contributing to the herd immunity, which allowed the health experts to classify Covid endemic. Finally in the sixth and last phase, marked the end of the Covid pandemic.

Purpose & objective

This study contributes greatly towards the research of eastern europeans trust towards national and supranational institutions during times of crisis. The longitudinal analysis, which spans for half a decade, identifies certain typologies of institutional trust.

The purpose of the study is to evaluate Eastern Europeans levels of institutional trust.

The General Objective of the study is to identify the levels of trust towards national and supranational institutions.

The Specific Objective consists in establishing if and in what way do socio-demographic variables, such as income or place of residence influence peoples' trust towards political institutions.

Operationalization

I applied administrative concepts in order to classify the different types of institutions, in: national political institutions (Parliament; Government) from each of the four (4) EU member states included in this research (Romania, Bulgaria, Poland and Hungary) and european (European Parliament; European Commission)

Operationalised concept: institution

category of institution: national and european

type of national political institution: Parliament, Government

type of European institution: European Parliament, European Commission

years in which the Eurobarometer surveys were applied: 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022

socio-demographic variable: place of residence, difficulties in paying bills.

Operationalised concept: peoples' trust

Trust measured through: respondents' interest towards institutions

Main Hypothesis (Hs): Eastern European Nations have higher levels of trust towards European institutions than national ones.

Secondary Hypothesis:

I. Financial insecurity determines lower levels of trust towards national institutions than European ones.

II. People from bigger urban areas will display more positive attitudes towards institutions than those living in small cities or villages.

Methodology

As I have previously mentioned, the countries included in this research are Bulgaria, Romania, Poland and Hungary. None of these countries were part of the USSR. However, they were under the influence of the Soviet Union. USSR imposed its domination onto these nations by “placing their candidates in positions of dominance within all the postwar Eastern European governments(Hensel, 2023)”. Thus, at a certain level, all of the countries included in the analysis share certain historic elements. Moreover, previous research has shown that “disparities between expectations and perceived performance are evident in many post-communist

states, including Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Serbia.” (Pippa p. 114).

All of the four countries became members of the European Union around the same time. While Hungary (European Commission, 2019) and Poland (Kolodziejczyk, 2016) adhered to the EU on May 1st 2004, Romania and Bulgaria, became full members of the European Union a few years later, on January 1st 2007.

The main research method which I have used in this paper is the Secondary Data Analysis. The data was retrieved from five distinct waves of Eurobarometer. This research meets all of the three conditions in order to be considered a Secondary Data Analysis. First, because my work does not have the same objective as the original source of data. The main purpose of the Eurobarometer is to present the opinion of EU citizens towards multiple issues, which are not limited to institutional trust. Second, all of the data was collected and processed before I began my research. Thus, data was not modified after I have started this paper. Lastly, I have processed the data in SPSS before I have included it in my paper.

Data analysis

In the following segment of this paper, I am going to present the data resulted from the statistical analysis such as frequencies and cross tabs (Fig. 1).

Hungary is the country which registered the biggest percentage of people who trust the government, exceeding 50% of the people without financial struggles. Moreover, income does not seem to influence trust in government, because we can observe that the levels of trust are high. Another interesting fact is that the number

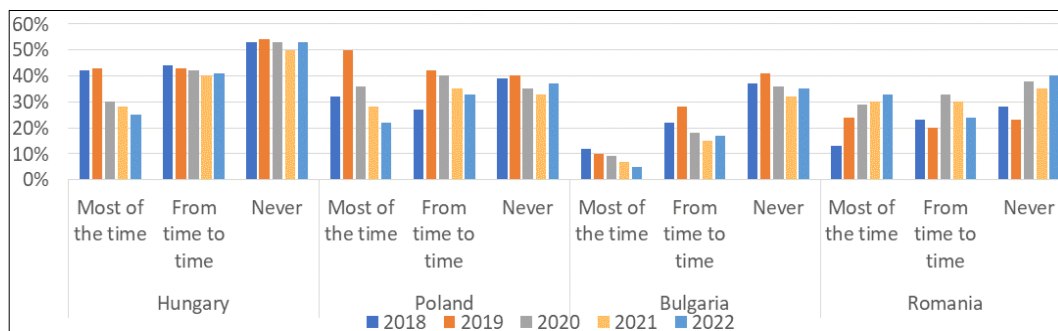


Fig. 1 Difficulties Paying Bills X Trust in Government

of people with financial difficulties seem to have decreased during Covid. Moreover, the number of people who never had financial problems increased. Poland and Romania register somewhat similar levels of trust towards the national government, especially among people who never had difficulties paying bills in the previous year. However, there is a slight difference. While Polish had more trust in government before the pandemic began, Romanians without financial issues began to entrust the government more during the pandemic, reaching 40%. Bulgaria is an interesting case, because it registered similar levels of trust among those without financial issues with its peak in 2019 (51%). However, those with occasional or prolonged financial issues were the eastern Europeans with the lowest trust in national government, occasionally registering less than 10% (Fig. 2).

Hungary again registers the highest levels of trust toward. However, Hungarians with financial issues registered lower levels of trust in Parliament compared to the Government. The

evolution of mistrust towards the Parliament can be clearly observed among Hungarians, regardless of their financial success. However, this is more prominent among those with financial issues. Poland is another interesting case, because there are no significant levels of trust towards the national parliament, regardless of income variable. Moreover, in 2019, Polish citizens with occasional financial problems registered a slightly higher level of trust than those without financial issues. The lowest levels of trust towards the Parliament were registered among Bulgarians who dealt with constant financial issues. On average, no more than 5% of Bulgarians with lower incomes trusted the Parliament. At the same time, less than a fifth (20%) of Bulgarians who dealt with occasional financial issues trusted the parliament. In general, less than a third of Romanians trusted their parliament, regardless of their income or financial issues. Overall, respondents from the four countries tend to have less trust in the National Parliament than in their Government (Fig. 3).

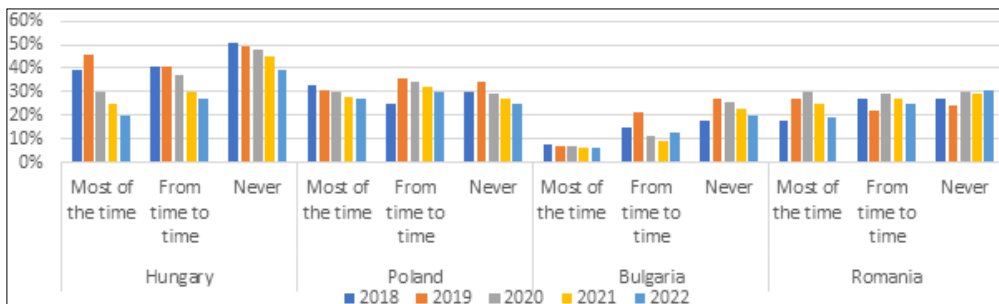


Fig. 2. Difficulties Paying Bills X Trust in Parliament

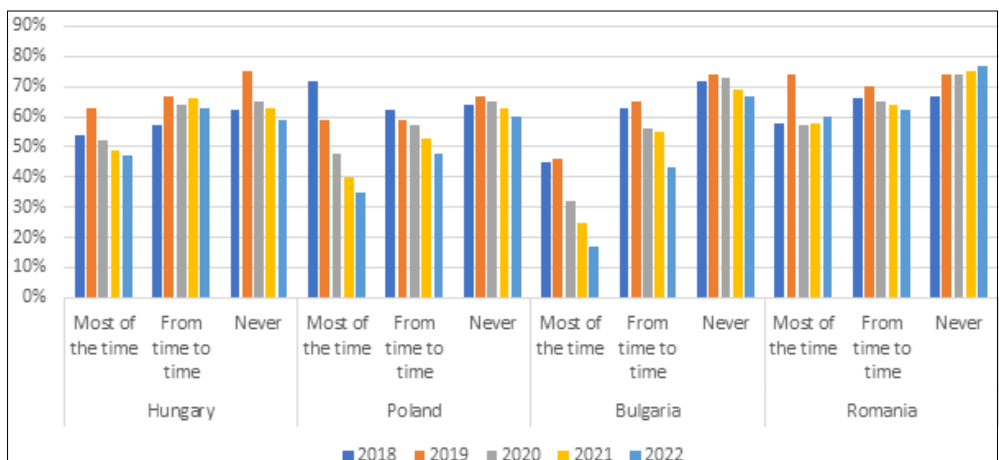


Fig. 3. Difficulties Paying Bills X Trust in European Parliament

Respondents from all the four countries tend to have more trust in the European Parliament than in their national one. Hungarians registered the highest levels of trust in 2019. Interestingly enough, those with recurrent financial issues and those without any financial issues recorded the highest levels of trust in the parliament. Hungarians which struggle with financial issues kept a relatively stable level of trust within the 5 years period which we analyzed. Polish people trust in the European parliament decreased. The intensity of this regression positively correlates with their income. The same situation can be observed among Bulgarians. The case of Bulgaria is interesting because those with financial problems register the lowest percentage of trust towards the Parliament, but those without financial issues have similar levels of trust with the other three countries included in my research. Romania is another interesting case for multiple reasons. First, because it registers high levels of trust regardless the respondents financial situation. Second, it is the only country which registers an increase of trust towards the EU parliament during the Covid pandemic, which rose from 72% in 2020 to 78% in 2022 (Fig. 4)

In general, the citizens of the eastern European countries included in my research perceive the European Commission in a positive manner. However, there are significant differences which are influenced by financial difficulties. Trust towards the European Commission in 2019, when European elections occurred. After the election, trust dropped among

people with financial difficulties. Thus less than a third of Hungarians (30%) and almost a fifth of Polish (23%) and Bulgarians (20%) with constant financial issues trust the EU Comissions. Hungarians without financial issues began to lose trust in the EU commission from 2020 (70%) until 2022 (60%). Simultaneously, trust towards the EU commission among Bulgarians without financial issues did not fluctuate before or during the Covid-19 pandemic. Around 70% of the Poles trusted the European Commission during the Covid pandemic. Romanians registers the highest levels of trust, rising from 69% in 2019 to 78% in 2022. Around two thirds of Romanian with few financial issues maintained their trust, while Bulgarians registered a significant decrease, from 65% to 42% (Fig. 5).

Hungarians registered the highest levels of trust towards their national government, sometimes exceeding 50%. The highest levels of trust were registered before the pandemic, among people from big cities (56%) and remained stable during the Covid pandemic. Hungarians from Rural areas and small/medium cities also registered the highest levels of trust in the National Government. Polish people from rural areas (almost 50%) had more trust in the National Government than their countrymen from small, medium and big cities (less than 30%). In Romania, somewhat of an opposite phenomenon occurred. Romanians in rural areas (about 35%) and those from big cities had similar levels of trust towards the National Government during

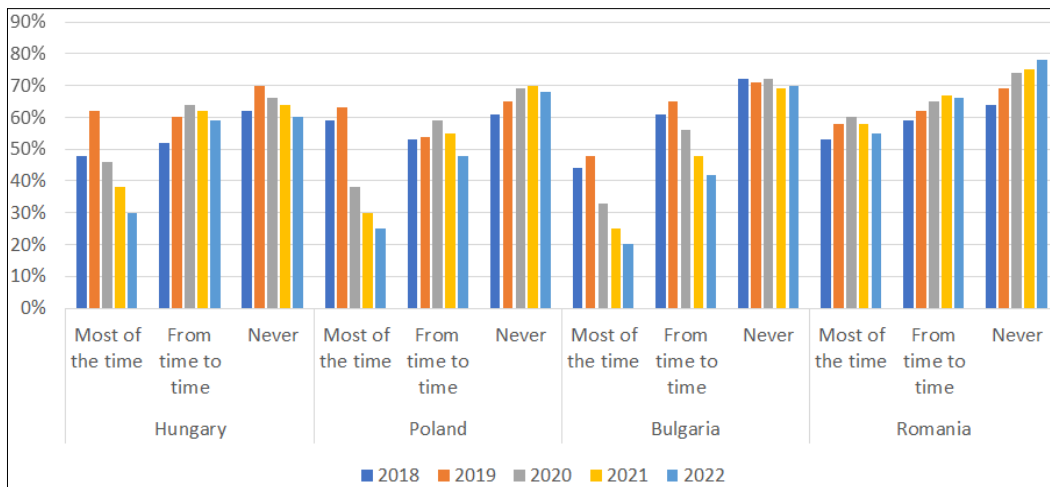


Fig. 4. Difficulties Paying Bills X Trust in European Commission

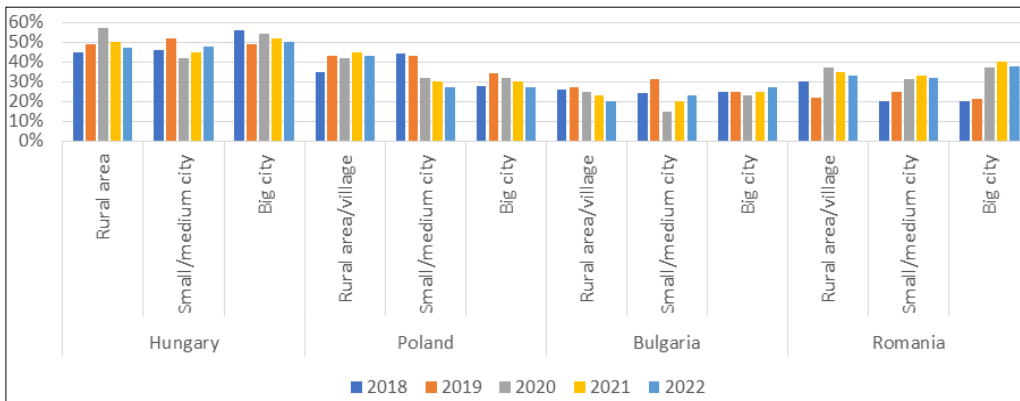


Fig. 5. Place of Residence X Trust in National Government

the pandemic (around 40%). At the same time, less than a third of Romanians from small/medium cities trusted the national government. Bulgarians registered the lowest levels of trust towards national government. Less than a third of Bulgarians trusted their government, regardless of the place of residence (Fig. 6).

Less than half of Hungarians living in Rural areas and small cities trusted the national Parliament. Those living in bigger cities had a higher level of trust, of over 50%. Respondents from the other three countries had lower levels of trust, regardless of their place of residence. Around a third (37%) of the Polish people living in rural areas trusted the national parliament during the Covid Pandemic. At the same time, Romanians managed to recover their trust in national parliament. In rural areas it rose from 30% in 2020 up to 37% in 2022. In urban area, regardless of their dimension, parliamentary trust rose from around 20% in 2020 up to over a third

(37%) in 2022. The lowest levels of trust were registered among Bulgarians. Less than a fifth trusted their parliament, regardless of their place of residence. The lowest levels of trust were registered in 2020, when almost one in ten Bulgarians living in urban areas trusted their parliament (Fig. 7).

Residents from big urban areas tend to have the highest levels of trust. The highest levels of trust are observed in Poland (above 70%) and in Romania (approaching 80%). Romanians from rural areas have similar levels of trust as those from big urban areas (roughly 70%). They also register the highest levels of trust in the European Parliament among people living in rural areas. Moreover, Romanians' trust tends to increase at a steady pace, especially after 2019. Again, Bulgaria registers the lowest levels of trust, regardless of the place of residence, reaching a peak of only 66% in 2019, among people from rural areas and small urban areas. Hungarians from rural areas (73%), small cities

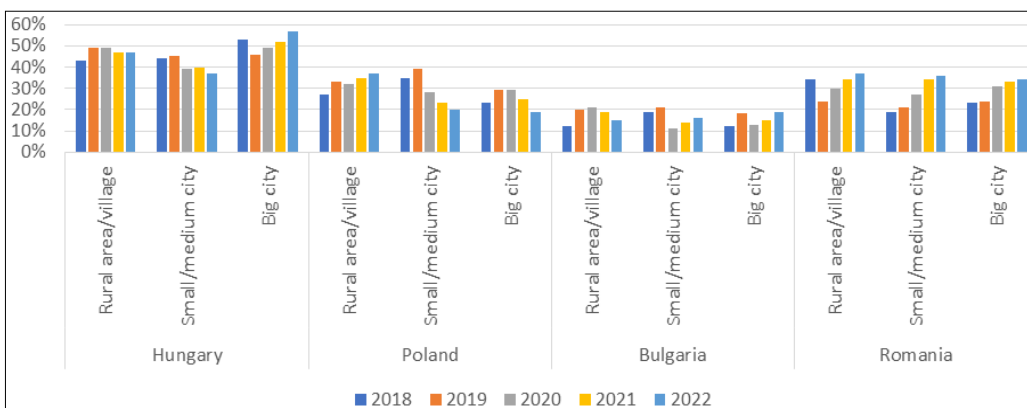


Fig. 6. Place of Residence X Trust in National Parliament

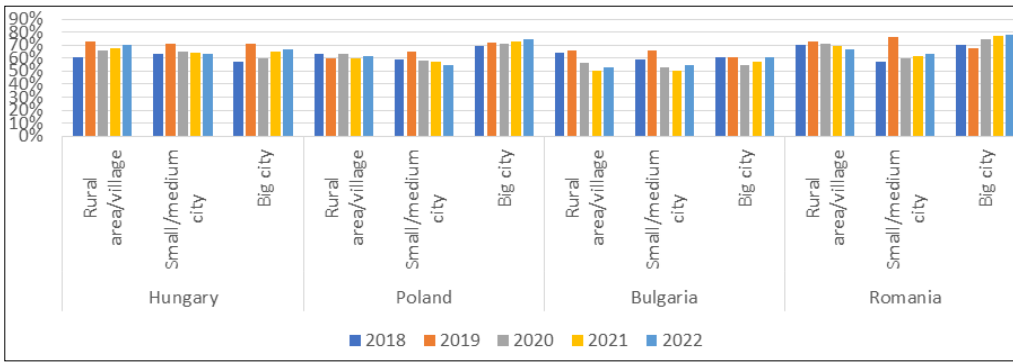


Fig. 7. Place of Residence X Trust in European Parliament

(71%) and big cities (71%) also register the highest levels of trust in 2019. Since then, continued to lose their trust during the covid pandemic, while those from rural areas and big cities regained their trust (fig. 8).

The highest levels of trust can be observed in large urban areas, while the lowest are recorded in rural areas. Romania registers the highest levels of trust in the EU Commission among those living in Rural areas or big urban areas. Those living in small urban area registered lower levels of trust, which did not exceed 60% during the Covid pandemic. At the opposite Bulgarians registered the lowest levels of trust within the EU Comision. No more than two thirds of Bulgarians living in rural area, small cities and big cities.

Conclusions

The main Hypothesis, which stated that Eastern European Nations have higher levels of trust towards european institutions than national ones was partially validated because this tendency has not been observed in all of the countries

included in this paper. Only two of them, Romania and Bulgaria registered more trust towards european institutions than national ones.

The first secondary hypothesis Financial insecurity determines lower levels of trust towards national institutions than european ones was validated. In general, people with financial issues tend to have more trust towards euroean institutions.

However, it is important to emphasize the fact that the negative corralation between between financial issues and trust towards european institutions is not as powerful as the positive correlation between income and institutional trust.

The secondary hypothesis People from bigger urban areas will display more positive attitudes towards institutions than those living in small cities or villages was validated.

In general, trust in European institutions was higher than in national ones, but sociodemographic variables such as income or place of residence greatly influence the levels of trust.

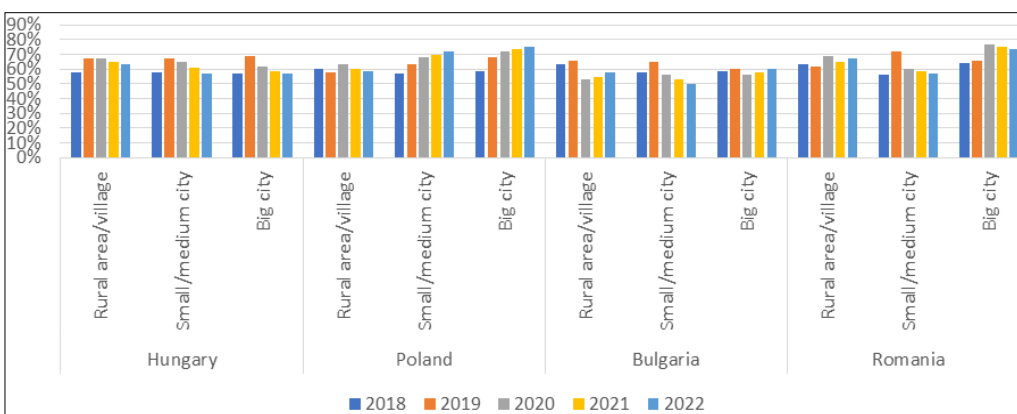


Fig. 8. Place of Residence X Trust in EU Commission

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