

HOW TRUST IN GOVERNMENT INFLUENCES VACCINATION ATTITUDES?

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Abstract

In times of crisis national governments and institutions are responsible to protect their citizens and implement comprehensive strategies to effectively lower the negative consequences. If they have a previously established relations based on mutual trust this would result in higher levels of support and confidence in their actions. The calls for united front against the threats would receive wider positive response and people would be more willing to make sacrifices for the common good. The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic put this relation to a stress test. In countries like Bulgaria, where trust in government was undermined years prior to the crisis, the results were rather negative. The mortality rate is the highest in the European Union, and the vaccination rate is the lowest. How trust in the national government and its institutions might have influenced the peoples' choice to willingly and consciously comply with the adopted measures in Bulgaria is the main question in the present article.

Key words: government, institutions, trust, vaccination, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence and further uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed the world. The health and socio-economic impact of the disease were rather unexpected and severe. At present - two years later, people and governments all over the globe are still struggling to overcome the consequences. Despite the fast development of vaccines, significant part of the population remains vulnerable either because of limited access or because people hesitate or choose not to trust them. While the first reason is explainable, the second is alarming. In turbulent times national governments are those who are expected to lead the society through the critical situations by implementing sound crisis management strategies. If these crises are health-related, they might also include promotion of vaccination. The trust of the citizens in their national government and responsible institutions is a key prerequisite for the emergency policies and measures to take effect and be successful. If trust exists we could expect a wider support for the crisis actions and a positive response to the call for vaccination. If it does not exist or is undermined, people would be more unwilling to comply and more susceptible to hesitation and denial. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization listed vaccination hesitancy as one of the top 10 global

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health threats (WHO, 2019). Ever since the vaccination process started in the European Union, Bulgaria significantly falls behind the other member states. The main purpose of the following analysis is to reveal if the Bulgarian citizens' hesitancy and reluctance to vaccinate might come partly as a result of their prior distrust in the state capabilities to secure their welfare.

1. WHY TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND INSTITUTIONS IS IMPORTANT?

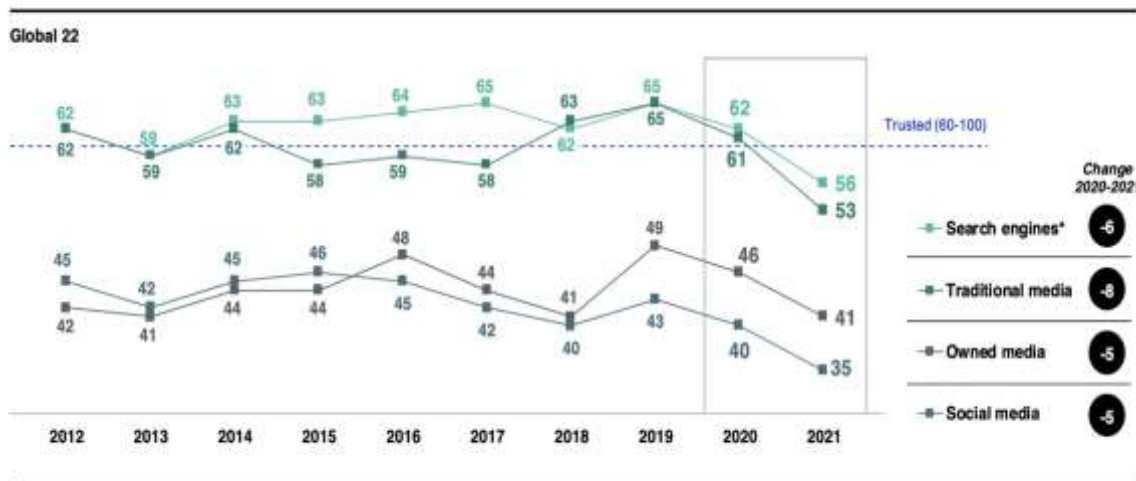
A comprehensive understanding of the importance of trust in government and in institutions is provided by The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, 2021) and the Organization for economic co-operation and development (OECD, 2013). They recognize it as a key foundation of any society and an essential prerequisite for political systems to be legitimate and sustainable. A high level of trust in government might increase the efficiency and effectiveness of its actions and could also improve compliance with rules and regulations. Since they are never perfect their effectiveness depends on the extent to which people see them as fair and legitimate enough to outweigh the benefits of non-compliance. For example, the adherence to the rule of law is regarded as a key driver of trust in government. Core levels of trust are necessary for the fair and effective functioning of government institutions and could influence the individual behaviour in ways that could support desired policy outcomes such as voluntary participation in vaccination campaigns. There are many complex and interrelated factors such as economic, social and environmental issues that affect trust in institutions. Despite it largely depends on national specifics, in countries where declines in public trust have been most distinct in recent years, evidence indicate that two interrelated factors have significantly contributed – economic insecurity and perceptions of poor or corrupt government performance.

UN and OECD also recognize the critical importance of trust in government in time of crisis. If there is distrust this might lead to less willingness of citizens and business to obey the law and to make sacrifices during the critical situation. This might result in raised costs for government and negatively affect its efficiency. Public trust is necessary to effectively address major health crisis. Evidence from previous health-related emergencies like SARS, H1N1 and Ebola revealed that high public trust was crucial determinant for successful responses. The present experience with COVID-19 also shows that higher levels of confidence in national public institutions is associated with lower national COVID-19 mortality rates.

The importance of trust in government and institutions is key element especially in time of crises. People are more willing to comply with emergency measure in societies with higher levels of trust. The timely measures are vital but what happens when the critical situation constantly evolves? Citizens' patience and understanding begin to deplete and so does their trust in the responsible authorities. OECD (2021) reports that despite the initial "rally around the flag" effect seen early in the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries at present observe increasing levels of distrust in government capacity to handle the crisis and implement coherent policies. The World bank (Pradham, 2021) also points out that while in May 2020, trust in governments increased for a brief period since people recognized them as leaders in the fight against COVID-19, it later sharply fell.

Francis Fukuyama, a renowned contemporary philosopher and sociologist, also discussed the topic of pandemic and the political order few months after the crisis emerged (Fukuyama, 2021). He argues that the factors responsible for successful pandemic responses are state capacity, social trust, and leadership. Countries who had all three - a competent state apparatus, a government that citizens trust and listen to, and effective leaders, have performed impressively, and limited the damages. Countries with dysfunctional governments, polarized societies, or poor leadership have done badly, leaving their citizens and economies exposed and vulnerable. Fukuyama says that “fractured media environment caused by the Internet and social media” also rendered negative impact as it provides “rich material for populist demagogues to exploit.” In support of the latter, in 2021 as per the Edelman trust barometer global report, trust in all information sources reached record low levels (Edelman, 2021) as shown below:

Figure 1: Trust in each source for general news and information (%)



Source: Edelman, 2021

At regional level a survey conducted by Eurofound in March 2021 revealed that citizens in 26 of the 27 EU countries had less faith in their national governments than when COVID-19 lockdowns began in March 2020. People in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Greece and Poland registered much lower support for their governments than a year ago (Emmott, 2021), which might come as result of perceived poor government performance. We could expect that crisis might negatively affect the trust in national governments but at the same time the prier existence of trust is perceived as one of the key factors that contribute to effective and successful actions in times of crisis.

2. DO TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AFFECTS VACCINATION ATTITUDES?

The link between trust in national governments and institutions and the vaccine hesitation has already attracted the attention of researchers and renowned international organizations long before the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature review reveals interesting findings that are summarized below and will serve as a basis for the upcoming analysis.

Verhoest et al. (n.d.) provide extensive review on researches that confirm the positive relation between trust in government and vaccine uptake. They also point that general (dis)trust in government is extended to (dis)trust in vaccines. During a health crisis government develop and implement crisis management strategies, whose success strongly depends on public compliance with the measures, incl. vaccination. Stopping the spread of the virus and allowing societies to return to normal would only be possible if the population is sufficiently immunized and herd immunity is achieved. However, high pressure to develop and apply a new vaccine as quickly as possible create a context of uncertainty in which trustworthiness of government and of (scientific) expertise are particularly important. Presented are also examples from previous health crises such as the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. A study in Netherlands evinced that higher levels of trust in government associates with a higher intention to adopt protective measures and a higher intention to accept vaccination. Trust is therefore viewed as is an important determinant of the public's acceptance of the government's health crisis strategy, including vaccination. It could be analyses in several dimension as the first is trust in government (and health care professionals/experts) in general. The second encompasses the crisis-related trust in government to control the spread of the virus/to handle the crisis in a good way, while the third refers to trust in information sources: government, hospitals, medical experts, NGOs and media.

Few months after the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, Trent et al. (2021) conducted an online survey among adult population in five large cities - Sydney, Melbourne, London, New York City, and Phoenix. They were chosen due to their varying COVID-19 incidence both at the time of the survey and prior. The cities also differed in terms of trust and confidence in national government. The results revealed that lack of trust and confidence in government authorities increases the likelihood of vaccine hesitancy and refusal. In Sydney and Melbourne, higher trust and confidence in government were associated with greater likelihood of willingness to receive the vaccine. However, in NYC and Phoenix, where trust and confidence in government were relatively low overall, individuals with higher trust were less likely to be vaccinated. This result however is explained with local specifics in crisis response - in the US routine public health measures such as masks and vaccines have been politicised.

In Denmark Yousuf et al. (2021) analysed the perspectives toward governmental trust, vaccination, myths, and knowledge about vaccines and COVID-19. The survey was distributed in December 2020 through the largest Dutch national newspaper *De Telegraaf*. A total of 24 722 participants completed a digital survey including demographic information, governmental trust on COVID-19 vaccination, vaccine hesitancy, and myths and knowledge about vaccines and COVID-19. The findings suggest substantial societal polarization surrounding vaccination, based predominantly on governmental distrust and belief in misinformation. Despite the limitations of the study, the data clearly reveal the polarized views on governmental trust, trust in science, and the level of social responsibility between vaccination-hesitant respondents and provaccination respondents.

In December 2020 Jennings et al. (2021) conducted a similar survey in the United Kingdom, researching the connection between trust and vaccine hesitancy along with belief in conspiracy theories, and spread of misinformation through social media. They authors point out that trust is a

core predictor, with distrust in vaccines in general and mistrust in government raising vaccine hesitancy. Trust in health institutions and experts and perceived personal threat are vital and since an increasing number of individuals use social media for gathering health information, interventions require customised actions from governments, health officials, and social media. And where there is lack of trust in government, politics, and elites misinformation thrives. The research findings offer further support to the evidence that trust and conspiracy beliefs predict vaccine hesitancy, both generally and for COVID-19 specifically. The perceived personal threat of COVID-19 and confidence in government handling of the pandemic are associated with greater willingness to be vaccinated. Also

A more recent study published by Park et al. (2021) aimed to assess the correlation between political ideologies, government trust, and COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in South Korea. The study analyses the correlation between people's hesitancy to receive a hypothetical COVID-19 vaccine, their self-described political views, and their trust in government. The research team aimed to verify two hypotheses: (1) conservative political ideology would be related to high vaccine hesitancy and (2) low levels of government trust would be associated with high vaccine hesitancy. The results reveal that people's trust in the government's countermeasures was associated with vaccination. Self-rated political ideologies and government trust was associated with COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy. The lower people's trust in the government was, the higher their rate of vaccine hesitancy.

Artyom Jelnov and Pavel Jelnov (2021) also studied the relationship between trust and vaccination. They theoretically show that vaccination rates are higher in countries with more transparent and accountable governments. The authors found that "*countries perceived as less corrupt and more liberal experience higher vaccination rates*". They established, both theoretically and empirically, that the level of corruption, vaccination policy, and vaccination rate are related. If the government is less corrupt, it is more likely to rely on recommendations rather than adopt a compulsory vaccination policy and will observe higher vaccination rates.

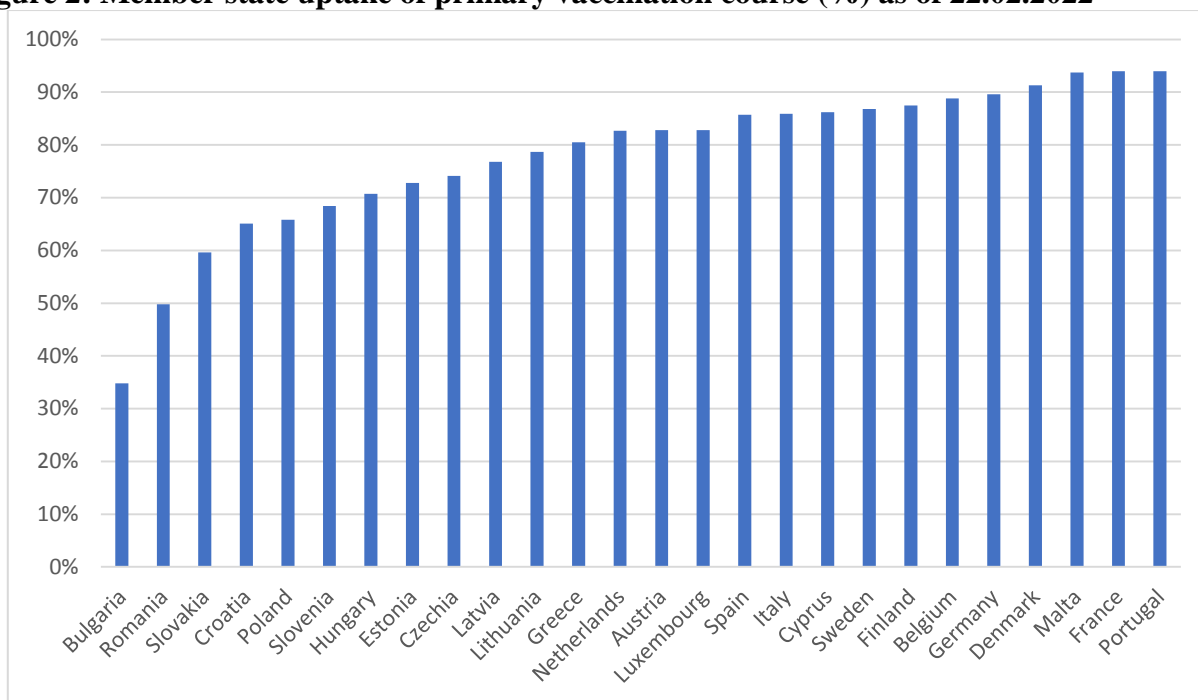
The above researches empirically proved that there is a certain proportional relationship between higher levels of trust in government and institutions and the positive attitude towards vaccination. They also reveal that trust has many dimensions and it could be challenging and difficult to measure using just one question – Do you trust your national government? Trust is influenced by many factors that may directly or circumstantially result in increasing or undermining it. They play a key role in the establishing confidence in the government actions and further contribute to its evolution.

3. IS GOVERNMENT DISTRUST A PREREQUISITE FOR VACCINATION HESITANCY IN BULGARIA?

Trust in government is multidimensional and rather complex to be measured. Its correlation with vaccination attitudes is already confirmed and various factors contribute to it - trust in different institutions, rule of law, corruption, government effectiveness, etc. Each one of them influence and shape the opinion of the people and if a national government has a history of failures it should not be surprising that citizens would not trust its policies and efforts in time of crisis.

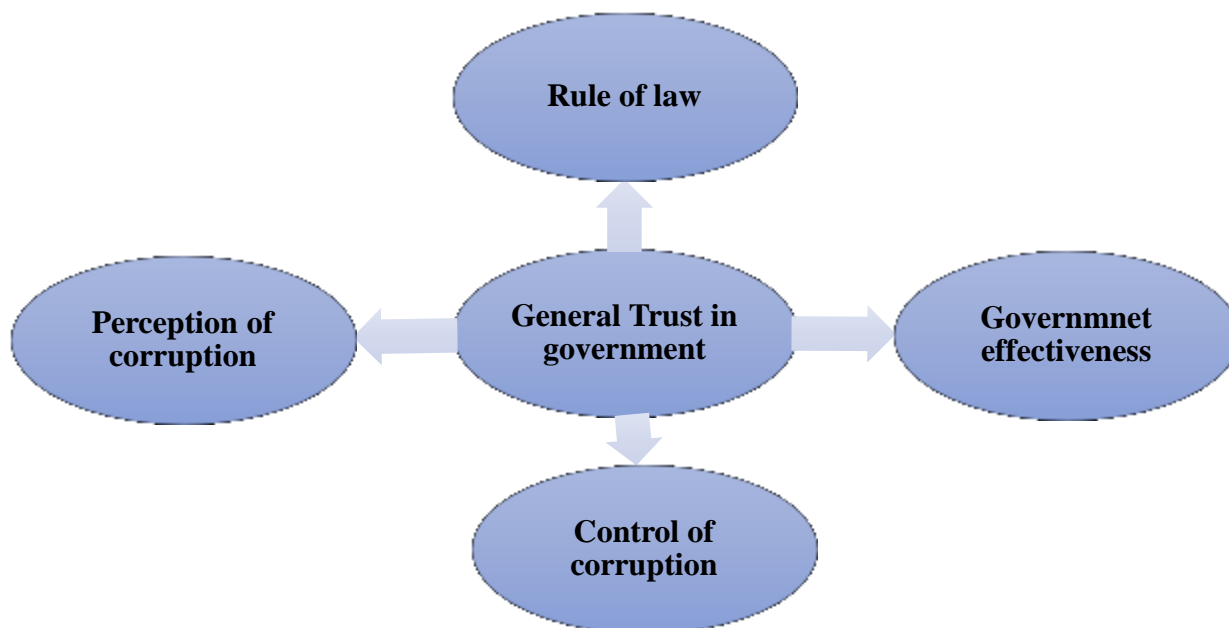
In the end of august 2021 the EU announced that the goal of 70% fully vaccinated adults is achieved (European Commission, 2021). There were differences between the countries but one member state permanently stands out – Bulgaria. At present only 35 % of its population is fully vaccinated (Figure 2). The contrast with the other countries is outstanding and the main purpose of the present analysis is to find out if the pre-pandemic levels of trust in local government and its institutions might have influenced such poor result in time of crises.

Figure 2: Member state uptake of primary vaccination course (%) as of 22.02.2022



Source: ECDC, 2022

The research is based on some of the outlined factors associated with trust in government and institutions. Part of their dimensions are captured in three indexes developed by the World bank and one by Transparency international (Figure 3). Their scores are retrieved from the database GlobalEconomy.com that provide comparable data for each member state as well as median for the region. Three of the indexes are measured in the interval between -2,5 (weak) till +2,5 (strong). Only Perception of corruption is measured differently as the score of 100 indicates that people believe there is no corruption in their country. Definitions of each index are available on the website of the database and capture different perceptions of the respondents related to public institutions, authorities, policies and corruption (TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2022).

Figure 3: Indexes used to measure government performance and trust

Source: adapted from TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2022

Bulgaria has long history of lowest score as per the index Rule of law. Ever since 2009, two years after its accession in the EU, it persistently takes the last place in the ranking. The country also remains the only member state with negative result till end of 2020. The European Commission has made many remarks through the years but despite of the measures taken, there is still much to be done. Since this factor is regarded as a key driver for trust in government, we could infer that it is compromised in Bulgaria long before the pandemic.

With reference to the Government effectiveness the situation is similar (Figure 4). The index captures a wide range of perceptions regarding the quality of public services, of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies. The Bulgarian citizens see the government's commitments as unsatisfying and despite the upward trend in the pre-pandemic 2019, the crisis led to a rash decline. The efforts of the state to implement and execute sound crisis management policies related to COVID-19 are negatively rated by the citizens. If people perceive them as ineffective, why should they trust in the authorities that implement them?

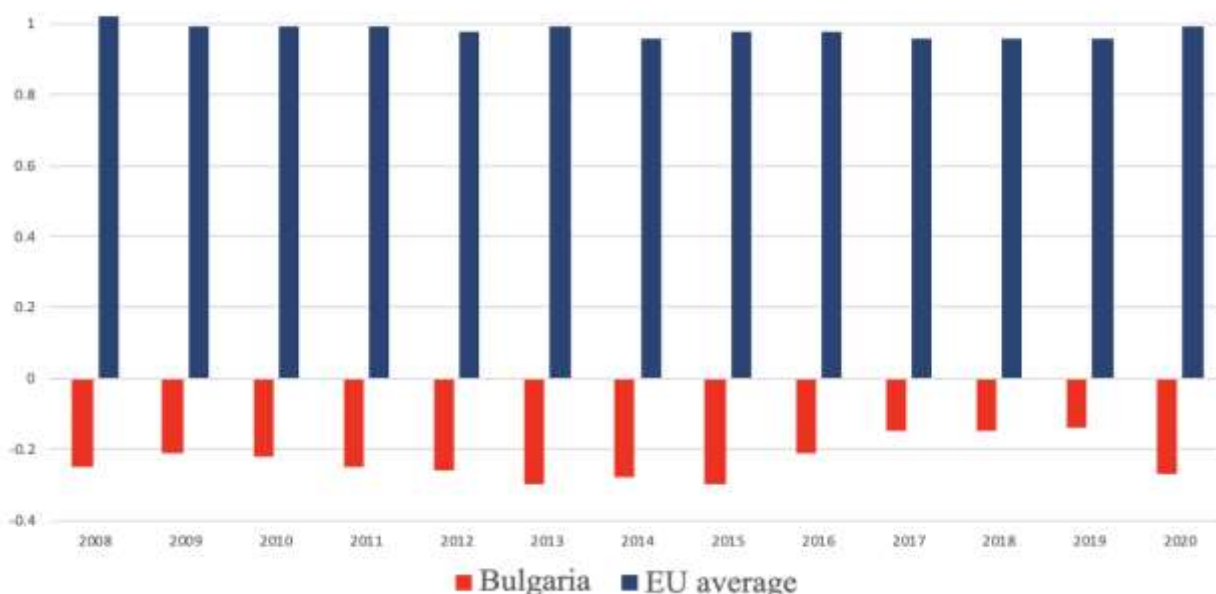
Figure 4: Rule of Law and Government Effectiveness indexes scores



Source: TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2022

Artyom Jelnov and Pavel Jelnov (2021) state that vaccination rates are higher in countries with more transparent and accountable governments. The situation in Bulgaria could be viewed as a confirmation of such statement but in a negative aspect. People clearly believe that public power is exercised for private gain and that the state is captured by elites and private interests. The pandemic only led to an increase in the negative notions and people even more do not trust that government authorities act in their best interest. The national media occasionally show and investigate cases of inappropriate and unlawful action of authorities with reference to the crisis management and thus fuel the people discontent with the public expenses.

Figure 5: Control of Corruption index scores

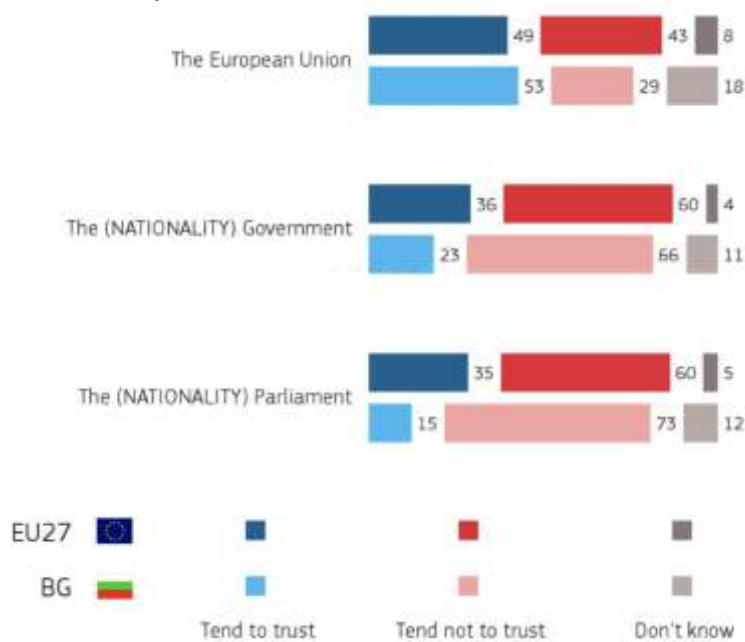


Source: TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2022

The results as per the Corruption perception index are rather close with those for the Control of corruption index. They affirm the opinion of the Bulgarian citizens that the public sector is perceived as corrupt in both administrative and political perspective and that private interests are benefited with public resources.

The presented data reveal that in the prepandemic period from 2008-2019 the Bulgarian government and its performance in key areas are evaluated much lower with comparison to the average values for the EU. Such results could be expected to negatively affect the general trust in government. In support of this assumption come results from a survey, conducted by Gallup International (Stoyanova, 2020). Trust in government is measured from intuitional perspective – people were asked if they trust the two institutions who embody the key functions of state governance. The results show that trust in the national parliament and government were low in prepandemic years and became even lower in the beginning of 2020. At the same time distrust maintains much higher levels from 2017 till 2019– for the parliament over 60 % and for the national government over 50 % with tendency to increase. A more recent data on trust in government during the pandemic is provided by Eurobarometer (2021). The result confirms the above negative trend – distrust in government is almost two times higher that trust during the winder of 2020/2021.

Figure 6: How much trust do you have in certain institutions (%)?

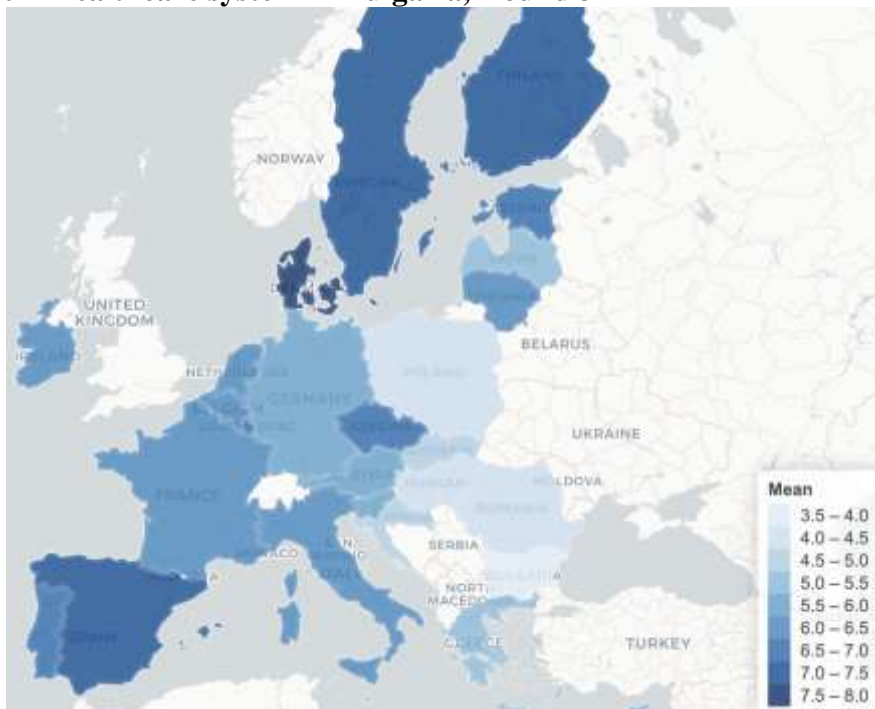


Source: Eurobarometer, 2021

After the pandemic emerged, Eurofound engaged with research on trust in government and institutions in the EU member states. The survey indicator classification is different and more detailed from the once used for the analysis of prepandemic attitudes of the Bulgarians toward its government performance. People were asked how much they personally trust seven particular institutions as well some other questions that do not fall into the focus of the present material. Trust is measured on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means that the person does not trust at all, and 10 means that they trust completely (Eurofound, 2020). The institutions that were part of the research are: the

EU, the country's government, the police, the news media, the healthcare system, science and pharmaceutical firms.

Figure 7: Trust in healthcare system in Bulgaria, Round 3



Source: Eurofound, 2020

The results for Bulgaria from round 3 of the survey (15 February–30 March 2021) should not be surprising with reference to already presented data. Bulgarians do not trust either of them, but in comparison to the other member states they have the lowest level of trust in the national healthcare system (Figure 7). Its inefficient functioning is due to many reasons as one of them is the insufficient provision of medical specialists - there are whole regions in the country where people do not have access to quality healthcare service (Ivanova, 2019). As per the rest indicators, the scores place the country in the lowest three ranks. Trust in all seven institutions is eroded and people hesitate or refuse to accept their recommendations and follow their instructions. Thus they become more susceptible to misinformation and look for other options to form an opinion and make decisions whether to vaccinate. The credibility of many of the sources they turn to is often controversial and disputable but as Jennings et al. (2021) state- where there are lower levels of government trust, such sources thrive.

IN CONCLUSION - THE PREDICTED OUTCOME

The analysis reveals that the Bulgarian citizens did not trust their government and institutions long before the COVID-19 pandemic. It actually provided additional reasons to further undermine their trust. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that so many Bulgarians hesitate or refuse to vaccinate and motivate their choice on the basis of information received outside the official communication channels. Various conspiracy theories found their way to the people before the

vaccination process even started. A research from November 2020 showed that significant number of people believe that a chip would be placed in their bodies with the vaccine and 45 % believe that the coronavirus disease is artificially designed so as the pharmaceutical companies to profit (Trend, 2020). The responsible institutions tried to refute such assumptions but their efforts were rather inconsistent and even exerted opposite effect. Like the Facebook campaign of the Ministry of health under the motto “Informed! Responsible! Vaccinated!”.

Many EU member states faced vigorous protest against the implemented measures and marked fall in trust in their governments but their vaccination rates are much higher than those in Bulgaria. The distrust and tension in the Bulgarian society were significantly impacted also by the political situation in the country in 2021. The instability, combined with the socio-economic problems intensified by the pandemic, led to serious polarization in the public opinion. The lack of confidence in the actions of the officials increased the vaccine hesitancy and made people even more suspicious about the measures taken by the government. Trust takes time to be established and governments should persistently devise their policies in a way to increase it and make it stable thought time. And crisis provide the perfect environment to put it to a test. The low vaccination levels in Bulgaria should have been expected since trust in the government is problematic long before the pandemic. As the OECD pointed out the “success of vaccination campaigns will largely be influenced by the extent to which people trust the effectiveness and safety of the vaccines, the competence and reliability of the institutions that deliver them, and the principles that guide government decisions and actions”(OECD, 2021). The history of unmet expectations of the citizens in Bulgaria especially related to healthcare, made it hard for them to be convinced that the adopted measures and recommendations are in their best interest. Comprehensive actions should be taken on national level and even if they are already late with regards to the ongoing crises, they will significantly matter when the next one comes.

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КАК ДОВЕРИЕТО В ПРАВИТЕЛСТВОТО ВЛИЯЕ НА НАГЛАСИТЕ КЪМ ВАКСИНАЦИЯ?

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Резюме

По време на криза националните правителства и институции са ангажирани с дейности по защита на гражданите и с приложението на адекватни стратегии за ефективно намаляване на негативните последици. Ако съществуват предварително изградени отношения между тях, основани на взаимно доверие, това би довело до по-висока подкрепа към предприеманите действия. Призивите за единен фронт срещу заплахите ще получат по-широка подкрепа и гражданите ще бъдат по-склонни да правят жертви за общото благо. Безпрецедентната пандемия от COVID-19 постави тази връзка на стрес тест. В страни като България, където доверието в правителството е подкопано години преди настоящата криза, резултатите са крайно незадоволителни. Смъртността е най-висока в държавите от Европейския съюз, а процентът на ваксинация най-нисък. Основният въпрос, на който ще бъде потърсен отговор в настоящата статия, е как наличието или липсата на доверие в правителство и неговите институции могат да повлияят на избора на гражданите да спазват доброволно и осъзнато предприетите мерки в България.

Ключови думи: правителство, институции, доверие, ваксинация, COVID-19.

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