

Perception of General Health Risks About COVID-19 Among Members of Opposing Political Parties in North Macedonia

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Abstract. COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly created many health risks when it appeared at the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020. The aim of this paper is to examine perception of general health risks during the second wave of Pandemic (October 2020 to December 2020). For this purpose, a questionnaire that explores different risks during COVID was created. The study included a survey with a specific target group which was chosen purposefully from members of opposing political parties in N. Macedonia in order to explore potential differences. 100 respondents in total were included in the sample, consisting of 50 respondents from two main political parties (VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM) in the country. The findings show that there were no differences between members of opposing political parties when it comes to aspects related to general health risks during COVID. The conclusion stated that results are related to beliefs of members of political parties in the efficacy of well-known measures. The findings provide excellent background for creating strategies for management of public perception in situations with health risks.

Keywords. Health risks; Perception; Covid-19; Party membership

1. Introduction

Prior to March 2020 people didn't worry about getting sick or facing different health risks in public [1]. The initial cases of COVID-19 became public on December 31, 2019, when China first reported registered cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology [2]. The disease soon spread globally as a result of human migration and close contact, fueling public panic. Like most countries, N. Macedonia was not able to avoid COVID-19 and in late February 2020, the Ministry of Health registered the first case of COVID-19 [3]. Intercepted by the leadership of the technical government at that time, the copying mechanisms emphasized the bypassed constructive cooperation, and determined the already opposing positions of the two largest parties, Socijal Demokratski Sojuz na Makedonija (SDSM) and VMRO-Demokratska Partija za Makedonsko Nacionalno Edinstvo (VMRO-DPMNE), which could not ensure a common consensus regarding

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decision-making and implementation of measures [4]. Instead, a convenient ideological scenario for crisis management entrenched party interests.

Three weeks after the appearance of the first case [3], that is, on March 13, 2020, President Stevo Pendarovski declared a state of emergency in the territory of the entire country, initially for 30 days, which was later extended [5]. The state of emergency implies strict restrictive measures that abruptly stopped the linear flow of life habits and caused a great impact on social, economic and political aspects. A day later on March 14, 2020, the Government established the coordination crisis headquarters [6], where Government officials stepped into the role of communicators and coordinators to respond to this challenge by introducing various policies in an attempt to control the transmission of the virus. Under the many uncertainties surrounding the coronavirus, the public has needed to rely on the Government, political leaders, scientists and the media to obtain information about the pandemic.

The subject of this research is perception of general health risks that occurred among members of opposing parties in the period October 2020 to December 2020. This period is referred to as the second wave of the pandemic. The research question examines whether there is a difference in perception of general health risks that occurred among members of opposing parties. The research is important for creating strategies that can be used in emergency planning and when public faces health risks. The contribution to knowledge lies in the usage of specific information, while the intended outcome is knowledge which specific risks to communicate and address in the future in uncertain situations in a highly polarized society.

2. Risk Perception as a Social Construction

The public faces risks on a daily basis [7]. Some of those risks are individual, while others are on a societal level. The common factor is that some of them are overestimated, while other risks are underestimated. Some researchers argue that risk is not a definitive entity because the public tends not to respond to the physical impact of measurable and quantifiable risks [8]. Others emphasize the need to focus on the significance of the psychological, social, and cultural contexts associated with risk [9]. This means that the public is subject to a different risk assessment, which depends on a complex layer of elements that influence the acceptance, rejection, reduction, avoidance, or control of the occurrence of the risk. In the case of COVID [1] the members of the public must protect themselves both from the virus and fear in the same moment. The responsibility is individual because the fear response will grow if a person overestimates the risk. The study of risk perception attributes behaviors and different exposures that people face in relation to their beliefs, knowledge, values, and attitudes [9].

The general public experiences the risk of Covid-19 indirectly and directly [10]. Direct exposure and negative effects of the virus encourage increased perception. On the other hand, those who do not have direct experience rely on the scientific community and government recommendations to assess and protect against the threat. Those audiences who do not experience it directly and cannot make personal relationships only have a virtual experience with the effects of the risk through the media [11].

Subjective identification with a political party provides reference points of perspective through which one's (ir)rational behaviors can be explained and makes space for the creation of social environment through political information and decision-making. From this point of view, influenced by cultural and social imaginaries, different social

groups (defined by ideological affiliation) evaluate differently what a threat is and how acceptable it is [12]. The abovementioned notion states that there is no such thing as an objective risk, but socio-cultural contexts in which they are constructed and perceived.

Risk assessment is rarely unanimous, as the social construction of risk cannot escape the dynamics of democratic pluralism. Political conflicts and moral debates greatly influence risk assessment. In a mediatized society [13] in which new dangers emerge, their centrality can only increase. The strong influence that political ideology has on people's preferences and descriptive beliefs about the world is done in part by influencing the way people seek information. In turn, the ways in which individuals acquire and evaluate information shape their political views. Researchers consistently find that party loyalty strongly colors citizens' views of political candidates, policy issues, and "objective facts" [14]. In other words, individuals' commitments to a particular party identity come first and strongly influence what individuals believe about descriptive and normative facts, as well as what public policies they prefer.

The cognitive-cultural is a model of risk perception that distinguishes two ways in perceiving risk [15]. The first way is a reflection from or towards the group of belonging. It is important to note that there is a reflective function in this relationship. A reflective effect occurs because individuals with similar values will have similar attitudes that correspond to shared values. Thus, in-group versus out-group perceptions of party ideology tend to emphasize the complex nature of how risks are perceived and how those perceptions may be rooted in the ideology associated with group membership. Another way individuals perceive risk is according to what reinforces their commitments to the group to which their views belong [16]. This perception could be independent from the best available evidence and sometimes in conflict with it [17]. The second way relates to the cultural-cognitive aspect of risk perception and explains why groups with opposing political views tend to disagree on important social topics. At the level of party memberships, there is an internal categorization of affiliation that assesses the interconnectedness and thus the groups have different norms of behavior. One study [18] explored differences among opposing party members in perception of media headlines from opposing political actors. He found a difference in the perception of political communication related to COVID-19 which is in favor of own political affiliation.

Disagreements about risks, whether concerning the magnitude or meaning that the risk produces, arise not only from a lack of rational consensus, but also from subjective experience in which past impressions, evaluations, and knowledge are generated. In other words, the coronavirus pandemic cannot be fully understood if the emotional aspects are not taken into account, i.e. fear, panic, hope, etc. Certain authors [19] point out that social psychologists have long considered emotion an important component of cognitive processing that can produce an emotional response if influenced by political messages. Also, emotions should be taken into account, because it is not easy to know which of them will prevail in a given situation. Findings from another study [20] suggest that emotions have influence in occupational context regarding attitudes in organization.

3. Methodology

The study involved surveying 100 individuals, 50 from the VMRO-DPMNE opposition party and 50 from the ruling SDSM party, all aged 18 or above. For this purpose, a questionnaire was created on Google Forms, and the survey link was emailed to members

of the two major Macedonian political parties: VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM. The sample was purposive, and the approach involved reaching out to people in local party groups through mutual connections of the author. Approximately half of the participants from both parties were women. Data collection took place between March 2021 and June 2021. Participation in the survey was voluntary and completely anonymous. All variables, except demographics, were measured using a self-evaluation scale corresponding to a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree or 1 = not at all concerned and 5 = I am very worried. Questions about risks (different aspects) were formulated based on different government recommendations [4] and recommendations of organizations [1,5]. The aspects are shown in table 1 in the section results.

Having in mind the goals of the research, the hypothesis claims that there are no differences in general health risks between members of the party in power and members of the opposition party. The prediction is based on the premise that when it comes to own health, members of different political parties will adhere to general recommendations issued by the government, although for example members of the opposing party don't agree with some of the recommendations. In order to test the proposed hypothesis, a t-test for independent groups was used and the analysis consisted of comparison of perceptions of health risks between members of opposing parties.

4. Results

The results present the analysis of differences in general health perception (table 1).

Table 1. Comparison between members of SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE about perceived general health risks.

Aspects	Average SDSM members	of SD	Average VMRO-DPMNE members	of SD	t value	P value
1. How concerned are you that you could be exposed to Covid-19?	3.32	0.19	2.92	0.16	0.36	p>0.05
2. I am afraid that I will get sick from Covid-19	2.98	0.14	2.85	0.16	0.36	p>0.05
3. I think I will hardly survive if I become positive for Covid-19	1.98	0.16	1.99	0.19	0.92	p>0.05
4. I am afraid that I would pass Covid-19 to someone close to me	3.87	0.22	3.27	0.18	0.04	p<0.05
5. I am worried that I or someone close to me will lose my job	2.62	0.13	2.6	0.12	0.85	P>0.05
6. It really worries me when someone around me sneezes or coughs without covering their mouth	3.27	0.18	3.14	0.14	0.24	p>0.05
7. The more the virus spreads the more likely I am to get it	3.63	0.24	3.21	0.16	0.12	p>0.05
8. I feel free to share a bottle of water with a friend	1.53	0.17	1.73	0.15	0.30	p>0.05

9. I don't want to write with a pen that someone else has obviously used before me	2.14	0.09	2.49	0.15	0.42	p>0.05
10. Past experience has led me to believe that I am unlikely to get sick easily even when my loved ones/friends are sick	2.27	0.09	2.26	0.14	0.35	p>0.05
11. I prefer to wash my hands immediately after greeting someone	3.42	0.13	3.2	0.18	0.22	p>0.05
12. I am generally susceptible to flu, colds and other infectious diseases	2.07	0.12	2.21	0.18	0.84	p>0.05
13. I am more prone than others around me to catch a cold, flu or infection	2.11	0.13	2.47	0.20	0.43	p>0.05
14. My hands don't feel dirty after touching money	1.66	0.17	2.24	0.16	0.01	p<0.05
15. I am not anxious to be around sick people	2.36	0.10	2.6	0.15	0.85	p>0.05
16. How worried are you about the spread of Covid-19 in Macedonia?	3.19	0.18	3.46	0.16	0.92	p>0.05

The calculations regarding differences from table 1 show that between members of SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE there are only two statistically significant differences out of sixteen perceived general health risks ($p>0.05$). Namely, the differences exist regarding “I am afraid that I would pass it on to a close person“. In this case members of the political party SDSM agree more as opposed to the political members of VMRO-DPMNE. Another statement where these two groups differ, is the statement “I do not feel my hands dirty after touching money“. In this case the members of the political members of VMRO-DPMNE agree more as opposed to the political members of SDSM. There was no difference regarding the other fourteen aspects which emphasize the unique significance in the difference of perceived risk between the two observed groups. The results confirm the hypothesis that there is no difference in health risk perception.

5. Discussion

The research aimed to examine the perception of general health risks. The results show that general assumptions can be confirmed e.g. there is no differences when it comes to general health risks. The hypothesis indicates that the perception of general health risk of Covid-19 does not mean that it is necessarily equated with political factors, but emotional and psychological factors prevail. Members of opposing political parties from the Macedonian political bloc VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM were subjects of the research thus introducing affiliation differences as reasons for non-compliance with safety measures and risk perception. This research provided important findings that there is no significant difference in the perception of general health risks between members of the party in power and the party in opposition.

The fact that there are no differences in perception of general health risks shows that this perception does not depend on trust in the Government, but on the strength of information [10] that covers the news about the pandemic and has an impact on psychological-emotional values [21]. Also, this can be interpreted in the light of increasing the motivation to protect from risk [22] and provide greater adherence to precautions and thus higher risk aversion. In line with the abovementioned results there

are several studies that focused on measuring differences in attitudes towards Covid-19 over the course of the pandemic. These types of findings accent the fact that belief and other psychological factors have a big impact on perceived risk. One such finding comes from research done at the University of Cambridge, which measured how attitudes towards the coronavirus varied over the 10 months of the pandemic and included more than 6,000 UK residents [23]. Research results show that people's values and views, and sense of personal efficacy play a greater role in risk perception compared to more objective and cognitive factors [23]. The results from this study show that risk perception is not influenced by their affiliation but by different socio-cultural factors as found in the Cambridge study. Similar data from Canada given [24] shows that there is a consensus about trust regarding Covid-19 between political parties and the general public.

Main limitations of the research are that results cannot be generalized and sample size. Possibility for generalization is limited due to purposive sampling technique and smaller sample size. Further research should be directed at analysis of general health risks among the general population and among non-members or non-supporters of political parties in the country. Additionally, future studies can adopt random sampling techniques and a higher number of respondents.

The results clearly show that there were no differences between members of opposing political parties when it comes to general health risks. The explanation is related to beliefs of members of political parties in the efficacy of well-known measures. The research shows that political affiliation doesn't play a role in risk perception, but there are other factors. Another crucial factor is the unity of presented measures across different media and across different countries. The current findings provide excellent background for creating strategies about emergency government planning and crises management. The abovementioned results create knowledge about knowing which aspects to address in situations when the public faces unpredicted health risks.

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