

# Relationship Between Attitudes Towards Government Communication About COVID-19 and Political Affiliation in North Macedonia

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**Abstract.** Apart from vaccines, communication is the second most effective tool in combating COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this paper is to examine attitudes towards government communication about COVID-19 during the second wave of Pandemic (October 2020 to December 2020). The attitudes towards government communication were already formed after the initial first wave. The sample consisted of 100 respondents in total, with equal gender representation. Members of two main political parties were included in the sample. Half of the sample were members of VMRO-DPMNE, while the other half were members of SDSM. Significant differences were found in the attitudes towards government communication on all aspects between members of opposing parties. The explanation is related to the political beliefs in a polarized society. The findings provide valuable recommendations for designing government communication related to future pandemic.

**Keywords.** Attitudes; Government communication; Covid-19; Party membership

## 1. Introduction

After a period of several months, the situation with COVID-19 pandemic and its severity mounted. It is worth noting that one section of the public inevitably resorted to creating perceptions of risk, while another section expressed hesitancy due to mistrust of government policy. The negative impacts resulting from the new measures opened a possibility for criticism and tended to further inflame polarized discourse. The flow of information was provided by political representatives and the Crisis Management Center, which was built on the foundations of government actors [1]. This situation enabled the Government to gain more credibility in the eyes of the public, which undoubtedly depended not only on transparent information, but also on the quality and efficiency of its work. On the other hand, the opposition criticisms became an important catalyst for public discourse. Additionally, the media had a saturation of politically opposing views about the developments surrounding the coronavirus. In the case of divergent views,

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driven by the behavior of political elites who shape the frames and mental models people use to interpret events, there are attempts to bolster party support by shaping the public's perception of reality [2].

As COVID-19 was an unexpected phenomenon, there are not many studies that examine attitudes of opposing parties towards communication of the government. The goal of the research is to examine attitudes of party members towards communication of the government during pandemic in the period October 2020 to December 2020, which refers to the second wave of the pandemic. There is research that covers political affiliation and crises management, but the gap lies in knowledge about emergent communication strategies in times of pandemic in polarized society. The research question is examining differences in attitudes among members of two main opposing parties towards communication of the government.

## **2. Attitudes Towards Government Communication**

The Covid-19 pandemic politicization and political identification have not proven to be resilient, but rather the political leanings tend to color risk perception politically [3] and adherence to public health recommendations has been shown to be strictly politically driven [4]. Many studies have shown a consistent and relatively strong effect of political attitudes regarding beliefs and concerns in public responses to the pandemic. Politics and political values have a greater influence on the magnitude of the threat feeling from Covid-19 than objective indicators such as the number of confirmed cases.

The main premise is that political ideology tends to selectively expose political adherents to risk in a way that allows them to demonstrate their political party membership thus permeating the research question of whether there is a difference in perception of government communication about Covid-19 between members of the party in power and the party in opposition. At the same time, it should be taken into account the fact that for the majority of the public, the source of scientific knowledge is the media, which refers to the fact that the individual evaluation of social risk will depend on their exposure to the media. Another important view is that the evaluation of risk and trust in institutions depends on the view of the party elites with whom they share self-identification.

The main point of view that is examined in this research are the attitudes towards the Government communication as the steering core of the Covid-19 crisis. In the crisis management process, the public expects transparent information about the size of the crisis [5]. As an important part of the Government's regulatory responsibilities in providing safety policies are the manifestations of its management capabilities. From a research perspective, the kinds of policies needed to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 have one characteristic that demands them to be considered a partisan issue. Although the problem has entered wide scientific domain certain studies show that government interventions are poorly interpreted by the public. The element of trust is found across recent studies and has been shown to tend to influence risk perception [6]. Research shows mixed findings on trust in political leaders with the crisis [7].

Communication is essential for managing a pandemic, and this is shown by everyday examples around the world [8]. However, such communication, apart from containing the elements of crisis communication, is also subject to a large number of factors arising from the political processing of communications. On the other hand, pandemics are not unknown phenomena and are not something that causes

uncontrollable risk. Throughout human history, there were risks that pandemics bring and that cause certain social and societal problems. Studies from that domain provide knowledge that society can learn from, instead of repeating mistakes. However, the practice shows that the examples are not followed at all, but, unfortunately, it is a matter of repetitive mistakes that the Covid-19 crisis emphasizes.

Particularities related to the COVID crisis [8] point to the idea that greater trust in government policy leads to greater compliance with health policies such as measures related to quarantine, testing, and restrictions on mass gatherings. Findings from a recent study conducted at the University of Trier in Germany, covering 170 countries [9] shows a great heterogeneity between countries. Mostly in countries with a lower death rate, trust in the regulatory bodies of the crisis increases, while media coverage decreases trust. Another study [10] that covers 19 countries around the world found that trust in government responses related to measures such as frequent hand washing, avoiding crowded rooms and social isolation varies across countries, but links public trust to adherence to public health interventions. Overall, studies aimed at understanding risk perception of the threat of Covid-19 reveal a strong correlation between risk perception and trust in regulatory bodies. In another study (not directly related to COVID), [11] the author found differences in attitudes among members of one organization.

Some of the evidence [12] imply that trust in governments and their institutions increases depending on who is in office, and that citizens generally have more trust in favorite political actors and more approved policies implemented by the party they sympathize with or share participation. This paves way for the research question about whether there is a difference in attitudes towards the Government's communication on dealing with the pandemic between the members of the party in power and the party in opposition. The main hypothesis of this research states that there are differences in attitudes between members of opposing parties towards communication of the government about COVID-19.

### **3. Methodology**

The study included 100 people, 50 from the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE and 50 from the ruling party SDSM (who were over 18 years old). The information was collected using a questionnaire on Google Forms, which was sent via email to members of the two main parties in Macedonia: VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM. This type of sample is key for testing the hypothesis because it covers members of both parties (ruling party and its main rival as opposing party). Potential members of the study were reached out in local party groups through friends. The study uses purposive sampling technique. About half of the participants from both parties were women. The period of data collection spread from March 2021 to June 2021. Taking the survey was voluntary and anonymous. For most questions, participants used a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant strongly disagree at all, and 5 meant strongly agree. Questions about attitudes towards communication of the government were formulated based on analysis of government recommendations and recommendations of international organizations that analyzed consequences of COVID-19 [1,5].

The main tested idea was whether there are differences in attitudes or how people from the ruling party and the opposition party view government communication. The statistical procedure used to check this was a t-test for independent groups. Attitudes

towards communication of the government between members of the opposing parties were compared.

#### 4. Results

The results present the analysis of differences in government communication (table 1).

**Table 1.** Comparison between members of SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE about government communication (98 df for all tests)

Aspects	Average of SDSM members	SD	Average of VMRO-DPMNE members	SD	t value	P value
1. How often do you wear a mask when you are outdoors or in the presence of other people?	3.95	0.25	3.69	0.19	0.21	p>0.05
2. How often do you wash your hands?	4.4	0.25	4.3	0.24	0.55	p>0.05
3. How often do you maintain physical distance?	3.63	0.14	3.36	0.11	0.69	p>0.05
4. The government has done many things in an attempt to prevent the spread of Covid-19	3.89	0.23	1.65	0.20	0.00	<b>p&lt;0.05</b>
5. The Government has communicated and continues to communicate clearly to ensure that everyone has the information they need to protect themselves and others from Covid-19, regardless of socio-economic status or ethnicity	3.92	0.21	1.92	0.11	0.00	<b>p&lt;0.05</b>
6. I believe the Government's reports on the spread of the epidemic and the statistical data on the number of cases of Covid-19	3.7	0.23	1.81	0.15	0.00	<b>p&lt;0.05</b>
7. The government had and has a strong pandemic preparedness team, which includes public health experts and epidemiologists to manage the national response to Covid-19	3.62	0.22	1.55	0.19	0.00	<b>p&lt;0.05</b>
8. The government has provided everyone with equally easy access and reliable testing for Covid-19 if they show appropriate symptoms	3.33	0.24	1.55	0.19	0.00	<b>p&lt;0.05</b>
9. The government has ensured that we have full access to the health services we need during the epidemic	3.24	0.18	1.41	0.20	0.00	<b>p&lt;0.05</b>
10. The government has provided mental health services to help people suffering from loneliness, depression and anxiety caused by Covid-19	3.21	0.27	1.63	0.19	0.00	<b>p&lt;0.05</b>
11. The Government and the Ministry of Health communicate transparently and continuously with and to the public during the Covid-19 pandemic	3.68	0.22	1.89	0.13	0.00	<b>p&lt;0.05</b>

The results regarding differences in table 1 show that between members of SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE there are only three aspects in which members of the opposing parties do not differ (wear a mask, maintain social distance, and hand washing). These are general measures (recommended by the government) and have no relation to the government directly. For all other aspects when government is directly mentioned, there are significant differences between members of opposing parties. The general analysis of the data, according to table 1, accents the significance of the differences in trust in the Government (p<0.05) and this is confirmed in eight out of eleven statements. In the abovementioned eight statements members of VMRO-DPMNE have expressed

disagreement with the statements e.g. low level of trust in the government, which is an opposite attitude when compared to the members of SDSM party (members of the ruling party). The obtained results are in favor of the main hypothesis.

## **5. Discussion**

In general, attitudes towards Government communication are of empirical importance for researching the effects of political communication due to their importance for public outreach and safety. The research aimed to examine the influence of political communication and political messages on the attitudes towards the Government that manages the crisis in a polarized society. The results show that general assumptions can be confirmed e.g. there is a difference when it comes to attitudes towards communication by political elites respectively for each of the parties. This indicates that there is a difference in attitudes that diverge depending on the source of origin and supports the main hypothesis of the study. The results stress the importance of affiliation to political parties. This research shows that there are differences in attitudes towards government communication related to political affiliation, which is in line with recent research that implies a connection with political parties or ideology [13].

According to the findings of the research, there is a relationship between political affiliation and attitudes towards Government communication which accentuates the distrust in the Government among the political members of the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE. Another aspect that affects the perception of Government communication are the mass media, that is, the Internet, social media and television. In the author's opinion, apart from information about the pandemic, the media also abounds with strategic elements for the political creation of public perception. In relation to results from this study, there are many studies which show the influence of party orientation and ideology. This is illustrated by another, recent study, covering ten countries in the world, where beliefs and trust in scientific evidence are also strongly influenced by party membership and political ideology [13]. The results of the conducted study are in line with another study [14] that examined differences among opposing party members in perception of political communication in times of crises. It was found that each party member supports their own party framed communication.

Regarding limitations of the research, the results cannot be generalized because of the purposive sample and the sample size. Further research should be directed at testing the hypothesis with larger samples, usage of random sampling technique and focus on communication via social media. Another important aspect that deserves further exploration is analysis of attitudes towards media statements of both ruling and the opposition party during COVID-19. Another important aspect that needs to be taken into account for further research is ethical consideration. Research finding of one study related to disaster [15] suggests that communication generally adhered to ethical principles, although occasional exceptions occurred. Nevertheless, conflicts arose that could have jeopardized ethical standards. Therefore, the authors suggest recommendations to guide ethical decision-making for communicators.

The overall results provide important findings about political aspects related to government communication. The explanation for the obtained results is related to opposing government and its communication due to political attachment and polarization of society. This kind of data calls for recommendations that improve crises management of the pandemic and foremost that any national risk should exclude political rivalry.

However, communicators should be primarily concerned with the honesty employed in conveying information [16]. Research implications are related to emergent management of crises by government in highly polarized society. Another implication that is in line with previous research [17] is identification of public concerns and issues for consideration in planning and resolution efforts. Assessing disaster responses enhances the agility and effectiveness of future emergency communication strategies. The results reveal the different perceptions of opposing parties and as previous research [18] suggests, communication is more successful when adjustment to diverse audiences is taken into account during crises management. The current findings provide excellent background for designing government communication related to COVID19.

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