



Quality of Public Communication, as a Determinant of Romanian Citizens' Trust in Public Institutions

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ABSTRACT

While the phrase 'public service' commonly refers to public bodies based on legal principles, it can also be understood as the services rendered to the public. Therefore, fostering the relationship of trust between services and citizens – as the users of these public services – involves thinking very finely about attracting audiences and the interactions between users and politicians through public communication, regardless of the channel used. The low use of open data and information in public action translates into a poor level of trust towards public institutions in Romania, with no clear vision to urgently improve the situation. In order to change the architecture of the data of public interest, the central institutions must act towards the citizen's environment choice and therefore, will improve the public trust in institutions.

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1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen the development of the idea that the rise of information and communication technologies since the 1980s could renew democratic participation and political engagement through digital tools, while overcoming growing distrust of with respect to the traditional political and administrative systems. At the same time, reflection has emerged on how digital instruments and online public communication can influence the citizens' participation and interaction with the public institutions and public officers.

This context is currently part of the development of a knowledge society, in whose framework public relations and citizenship are increasingly at stake, due to factors such as improper public communication, insufficient or hard to reach public data and information, ineffective participation tools for the citizens, obsolete instruments for public service delivery. The development and management of communication mechanisms, tools, and platforms have become imperative for maintaining and extending a relationship of trust at a distance between the public institutions and citizens.

Over the past 20 years, public communication has developed and has acquired real legitimacy. As an interface between citizens and institutions, public communication helps to give meaning to public and political life. Today, it is one of the pillars necessary for the functioning of democracy and for building political trust. As a general understanding, public communication is the set of messages issued by public authorities and public services, of whose objectives are to improve civic knowledge, facilitate public action and building trust.

Three main public actors generate public communication: central public institutions (national Parliaments, Governments, European institutions, etc.), bodies providing a public service mission (public establishments, joint bodies, semi-public companies, national companies, associations, etc.) and local authorities (regions, departments, communities, municipalities, etc.). This article aims at studying the impression on the main central institutions by the general population, by researching data and information provided by the European Commission regarding trust among Romanian citizens and observing how Romanian central institutions communicate relevant data and information to the public.

2. Theoretical background and overview

Public institutions in general play a significant role within a state, as they ensure the national functioning. The public sector represents an important sector in every country, determining various aspects in citizens' life, as for example, issuing of civil documents or school enrolment of children.

The most important institutions in a democratic country are the Presidency (or, if case, the Crown) institution, the Parliament, the central Government and ministries, with all the central subordinate agencies

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and departments. These all together are in the front line of governance, having the main responsibilities for the administrative act. Below, there are the regional and local public institutions that are subordinate to the central ones, but on their own have complete authority within the region they operate.

All over the world, governments use public communication as the main instrument they have in defining their relationship with its citizens. Public communication is mainly presented as formal communication, which tends to exchange and share information of public utility, as well as to maintain social ties, and for which the responsibility lies with public institutions (Zémor, 1995, p.72). According to the first article of Law no. 544/2001 in Romania, “the free and unrestricted access of the person to any information of public interest is one of the fundamental principles of relations between persons and public authorities, in accordance with the Romanian Constitution and international documents ratified by the Romanian Parliament”, transposing into Law the citizens’ right to be informed of the central institutions and municipalities’ affairs. This legal document establishes institutional communication as a public service, based on principles of neutrality and equality of public service. The public information and communication can only cover topics of public interest and support public action, with simultaneous acts to fight misinformation. To be effective, these measures must be rooted in the principles of open government, including transparency, in order to strengthen citizens’ trust in public institutions (Cristache N. et al, 2019).

To present, the academic views are not conciliated yet, with respect to definition of trust, as a relative concept, although important in many ways. The importance is commonly agreed for different purposes, like conflicts mitigation, facilitation of teamwork, promotion of effective responses to crises, enabling desired behaviours, etc. Thereby, trust is strongly connected to the ability of the administration to deliver to citizens data and information. In the past years, in the framework of public communication, emerged the concept of open data. This concept can be translated as it is, meaning that data and information that are open to the public, which can access freely, usually by a trustworthy channel (mainly an online source) using the accessed data in own interest. Considering this definition, data and information acquire significant value for public institutions, and this value is expected to be translated in increased efficiency and productivity of public service delivered, alongside with building trust.

In a multidisciplinary approach, trust is defined as “a psychological state in which one accepts being vulnerable to another, in relation to the expectations one may have of that person, of his intentions or behaviors” (Rousseau, 1998, p.394). Two key components characterize this definition: the intention to accept one’s own vulnerability and the positive hope that the other’s intentions or behaviour will be well hearted. Thereby, several challenges complicate the development of a relationship of trust in nowadays society. First, the uncertainty that characterizes the experience of modern citizen, both at workplace and in private life. One of the effects of feeling insecure is the way one think about the future, which results in a reduced ability to establish complex interactions. Second, uncertainty regarding job and finance, education and health promotes the development of anxiety and a set of negative emotions towards the main public actors considered responsible about these primary needs of the population and most of the time, failing to accomplish. Given the variety of approaches in trust’ building and management, there have been identified three levels of trust: macro-confidence (with respect to state, electoral system, etc.), mistrust (in public policies such as security, health, education) and micro-confidence (considering over-the-counter services).

The primary vectors of municipal public communication are the mayor and elected officials. They carry a personal word, which can be institutional or political, and embody the community. Depending on the size of the municipality, the communication function can be provided by the cabinet, by a press officer or, more often, by the communication manager, of whose department implements the strategy in the field; the other departments can also communicate about sectorial policies and the projects in their responsibility. Considering the strategic dimension of communication in the framework of public action, its’ role in building citizen’s trust in the institution, it lies at the border between the administrative and the political areas. Attached to the institution and its elected officials, public communication undoubtedly includes a political dimension. On the other side, it is fact that politicians do a lot of work to gain the trust of its followers, as they are the first ambassadors of the community they belong to. However, the political leaders must also respect the principles of equality and neutrality in the public communication, whether if they speak as private persons or on behalf of their institution.

Public communication implies primarily the residents, which does not represent a uniform target. Depending on their specificities (activities, age, residency), the impact of communication channels towards them is different. Communication also targets the individuals which activate in the national/municipality area, without residing there, as workers, students, opinion leaders, persons in transit for a short period of time or just beneficiaries of some public services (medical care, transportation, etc.). Public communication also extends beyond the concerned area to foreign investors, companies, tourists or other categories of persons, which, will get into contact with the country of issue.

3. Research methodology

To achieve the proposed objective of this study, the authors considered the statistical research, as this approach is suitable, based on the specific conditions, namely:

- willing to understand and analyse psycho-social patterns of large groups or a specific population in their natural context.
- research in the field of common behaviours, adopted by the people without necessarily being aware of what they do, how they do it and why they do it.
- research regarding delicate topics, where it is expected that the respondents do not talk very open.
- research regarding groups of population, which find harder to verbalize what they do, think and feel like children or categories with a low educational level (Mucchielli, 2002, p.27).

The word 'observation' is widely used in scientific literature in many forms and with different meanings. But as a general definition, observation has three accepted meanings: anthropological observation, experimental observation and fieldwork observation (Adler & Adler, 1994, p.377).

The first accepted meaning of observation is, a direct observation, as agreed by the early anthropologists, as a general process of immediate contact of the researcher with the reality. In this context, observation is translated from the reality, as it is perceived by the researcher through his/her own senses, to subsequent developments, generating data and information, aimed to acquire knowledge upon the studied situation.

In the experimental observation, the researcher (observer) remains neutral, not interfering in the development of the observed actions. The situations that are being observed are very well determined and categorized, with very specific conditions that are previously established, and the result consists of precise, measurable behaviours (Chelcea, 2004, p.391). Within this type of observation, the researcher establishes from the beginning, in every detail, the conditions for carrying out the observation (the time frame of the observation, a detailed agenda and people involved in every stage of the observation, the places of observation, the people, institutions and platforms that are being observed).

Fieldwork is the third meaning of observation as a qualitative research method, and it implies activities of data collection on site. It often combines direct observation and/or distance observation, interview and documentation. In this case, the researcher is physically present, being either an eyewitness or a participant of the observed event or situation. The observations are exploratory and seek to discover new things. The fieldwork observation starts with an acquaintance stage for the researcher, getting familiar with the people, situations and actions that he intends to observe. The observations are not instrumented from the researcher, there is no research protocol, no observation sheets, just facts neutrally observed. The data recording is not done using standardized tools (like observation sheets), allowing the observer freedom to use field notes, photographs, and audio-video recordings. Also, the researcher may interact to the subjects under study, not only to observe them in silence nor to be only a direct witness. However, as the possibility to interact to everyone or to anyone at any time is limited, the researcher has to find persons which, through their position, have relevant knowledge about the facts under observation. In this case, the informant helps the researcher to understand better the situation.

Irrespective to type of observation chosen, the researcher determines a certain category of population to be observed, namely one or more social groups that have a connection with the researched problem. Such groups can be:

- a country's population at large, which, due to their opinions and behaviours, can determine a majority opinion or a majority behaviour that is considered to be decisive for research topic;
- a socio-demographic category: for example, employed adults, married individuals or Roma population;
- a social group, formal or informal, which can be delimited in space and time: a village/town, neighbourhood, a religious community, a school, an organization, a political party etc.;
- a set of individuals who have several common characteristics: for example, individuals who participate in a street demonstration or users of a medical service, adolescents in urban or rural areas.

The different categories above have a direct contribution to the research study. Therefore, in research, the author can choose to address only the individuals and the groups that have direct connection with the situation observed or/and the ones with a more indirect connection. When the population or groups studied in the research are small, the research covers their entirety and observed as individuals. In the case of large groups, considering the reasons of resources and time, the researcher extracts a sample, based on scientific principles with respect to representativity.

The observation research can take place in two types of social spaces: open or public space – with free access, allowing the observer to conduct the research without any formal approval (e.g., public spaces; living spaces of socially recognized minorities, as subject to social policies; public institutions' websites, containing relevant data and information, freely accessible); and, secondly, private spaces – where access to information is conditioned by a formal and/or informal approval from a superior authority.

4. Data and discussion

According to official data, the Romanian public administration comprises 73 central institutions, 3480 public bodies linked to central administration, 3187 city halls, 42 prefectures and 41 county councils, 6234 learning institutions and 515 medical units, 248 international missions and 170 national missions (embassies and consulates) and 83000 NGOs. Recognized as public service providers, the public communication they deploy is aimed to foster the expression of citizenship, participation in democratic debate, and promotion the usage of public services. These institutions ensure the cultivation of decisions regarding public policies, help to give meaning to public and political life, and have as a strategic mission the functioning of public action in a trustworthy environment.

By analysing the main objectives of the public institutions listed above, the authors consider that public communication must comply six main general missions:

- civic, enforced by law: to report on the actions of the institutions, to make public decisions clear, to promote democratic life and participation of citizens to the decision-making processes;
- societal: to shed light on collective issues (civic-mindedness, prevention, health, etc.) and seek to change individual behaviour;
- public information: to contribute to the proper functioning of public services by ensuring they are accessible openly and freely;
- promoting communities and regions, aimed to contribute at the economic and touristic activities development, as prerequisite for sustainable growth;
- animation: to support cultural, sporting, associative, economic and social activities of a community;
- an internal mission: to inform the employees, the teams and all individuals working in public offices at all levels, thereby contributing to an effective public management.

These missions can be easily identified in central public institution, rather than in smaller public agencies, departments or in local institutions. For example, a local public health department that covers a community of 30.000 inhabitants doesn't have a mission to promote the community economically or for touristic reasons, although have the other missions above detailed. Or a public museum in a rural area has a mission of promoting the community culturally, though doesn't have the societal or the civic ones to change behaviours or to promote the democratic life.

Considering the objective of this paper, i.e., the Romanian citizens' trust in their public institutions, built upon public communication, the research is based on public available data on various European institutions websites. As there has been stated above, the free and unrestricted access of the person to any information of public interest is one of the fundamental principles of relations between persons and public authorities. Fig. 1 contains the latest available data, with respect to open data availability among EU member states in 2023.

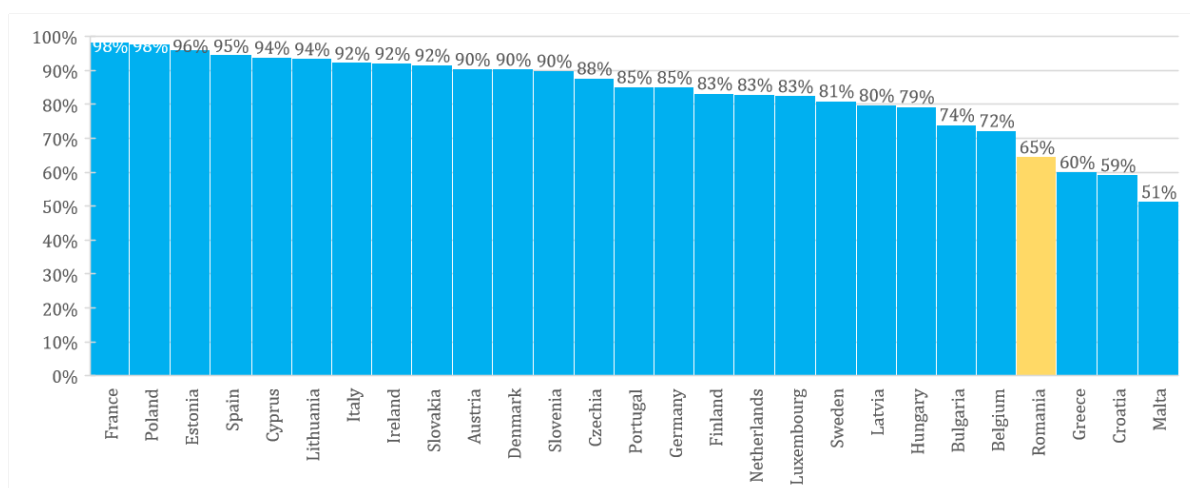


Fig. 1. Open data availability among EU member states in 2023

Source: European Commission, 2024

From this perspective, the European countries are ranked in four categories, as observable on the graph: trend-setter (scores above 95%: France, Poland and Estonia); fast-tracker (scores between 86% to 95%: from Spain to Czechia); follower (between 86% to 70%: from Portugal to Belgium); and beginner (less than 70%). As there can be observed, despite the noticeable claimed progresses, Romania continues to occupy one of the places in the latest category, which outlines that additional efforts are needed in this respect. Additionally, this conclusion is outlined by the percentage of only 1% of public institutions, according to the latest available data, that enrolled the website www.e-guvernare.ro, a dedicated platform aimed to bring them together, thereby facilitating the citizen interaction with the administration.

Another important facet of public communication is represented by the citizens' possibility to interact with authorities via electronic means; the measure built and used is represented by the usage of the internet by the individuals for interaction with public authorities, by downloading official forms. The comparative evolution of this measure in Romania and the EU-average, for the period 2010-2022 is presented in the Fig. 2.

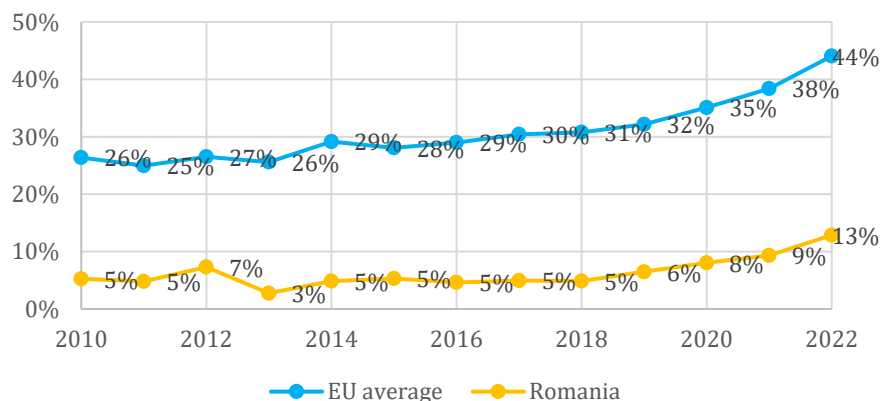


Fig. 2. Individuals using the internet for interaction with public authorities: Internet use: downloading official forms

Source: authors' processing, based on Trading Economics (2024)

The above findings are completed by the situation of the individuals which had the opportunity to interact with public authorities by downloading official forms. Thereby, starting from 2010, when the national ratio was about one-fifth compared to EU-average, it evolved to about one third, which is very low, if considering that at the Community block, this ratio is expected to exceed soon 50%. In fact, the evolution in Romania is irregular, the value from 2012 of 7.3% is hardly overpassed over 8 years, in the pandemic year, by just over 8%. Although there may be noticed an increasing national trend, following the European one, the values are less than one-third compared to the latter. The above observations express the underdevelopment of online public services, and a reduced availability public of data. The reduced addressability of online public platforms is result of their poor development, which induces the citizens the feeling of need to meet an institution or with a public officer in real time. Currently, all institutions have an email address where citizens can address a letter and will receive a response within 10-15 days, as stated by the law. However, this procedure is obsolete and needs urgent remedies such as chat rooms; also, social media pages may represent a suitable option for the connection between the citizens and authorities in real time.

The other side of our study regards the trust expressed by the citizens in public institutions. The authors considered to use, in a dynamic approach, results of the latest 10 euro-barometers, as survey with sound scientific and methodologic foundations, in a comparative approach between the trust expressed at the EU-average and in Romania, in respect to three fundamental institutions, namely, the national government (Fig. 3) and parliament (Fig. 4).

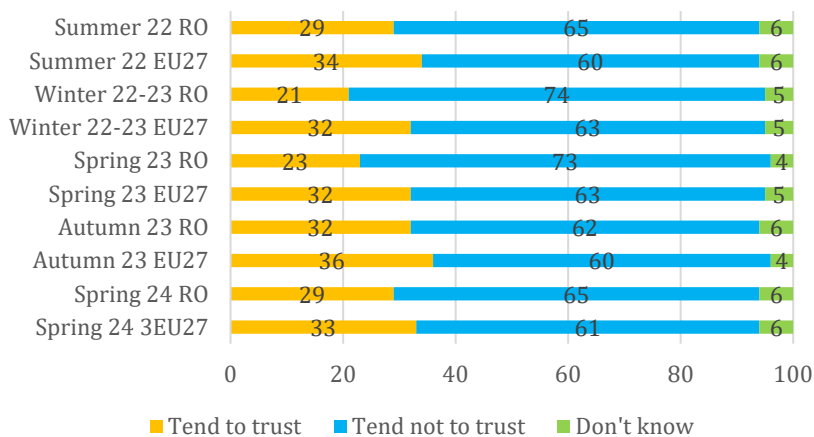


Fig. 3. Results of Euro-barometers with respect to the citizens trust in national government – EU average and in Romania

Source: authors' processing, based on European Commission (2022 – 2024)

As there can be observed, constantly, the trust of Romanians in national Government is significantly reduced compared with the general opinions expressed at the EU-level. One of the facets of public communication deployed by this fundamental executive state institution is represented by its official website. Considering the citizens' need to access public information or to interact with authorities, the user-friendly feature of the website is very limited. However, exists a dedicated portal for eGovernment services, that is, www.e-guvernare.ro, accessible from the government's website under the "useful links" tab, but this facility is very difficult to find by a person which is not familiar with the website map, the chances to access it are low indeed.

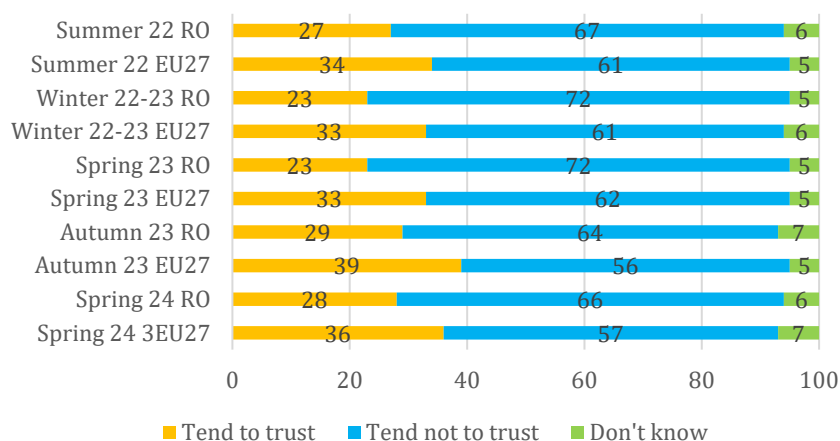


Fig. 4 Results of Euro-barometers with respect to the citizens trust in national parliament – EU average and Romania

Source: authors' processing, based on European Commission (2022 – 2024)

Public trust in national parliament is similar to the situation described in the case of Government, with values less by round a-third than in the EU. With respect to the Parliament's website, it is difficult to browse in case of is searching for public data. The Parliament represents the first among the state powers. Being in the front line of governance, the Parliament needs to seriously improve the way it interacts with the Romanian citizens. In fact, the Romanian Parliament and Government are the institutions bearing the lowest level of trust, from all the central public institutions of the country with 7%, and 14%, respectively, far away from the flagships, represented by the army (63%), church (59%), and NATO (50%), as presented in Fig. 5.

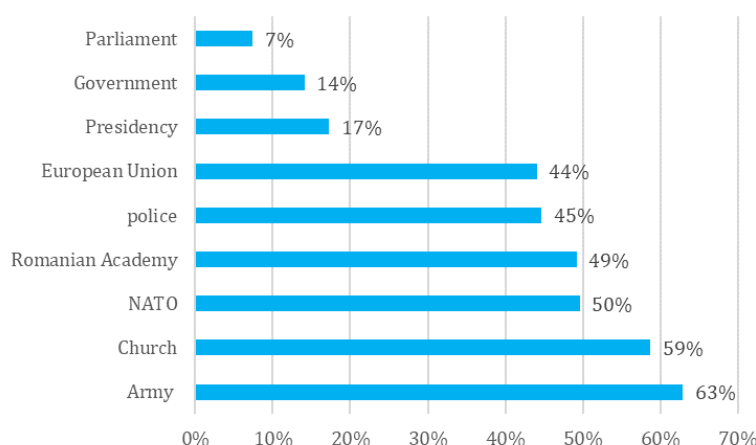


Fig. 5 Citizens' trust in Romanian national institutions

Source: Statista Research Department, 2024

One of the sources of this situation is the reduced interoperability and inter-connectivity between digital databases of the Romanian public institutions, due to different underlying technologies; yet, for many databases the digitalization is in progress.

Consistent with trust in NATO, the Romanians tend to trust rather in European institutions. Thereby, the trust in the European Union is by round one-third above the average of the Community block, over the entire considered period, as presented in Fig. 6.

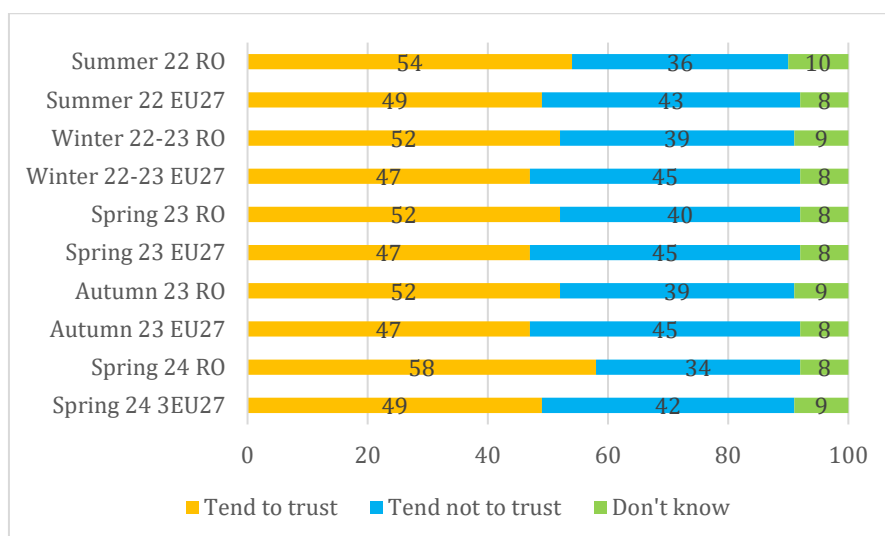


Fig. 6. Results of Euro-barometers with respect to the citizens' trust in European Union – EU average and Romania

Source: authors' processing, upon European Commission (2022 – 2024)

Based on the above presented data, is obviously the enormous potential of applying new technologies in the field of the public service; however, the continuous postponement in their implementation can lead to citizens' mistrust. Understanding the features and the dynamics of public reforms is a must for the public service providers, who urgently need to increase their capacity of online service delivery and public data sharing.

5. Conclusions

Investing in public communication must be a strong, essential effort for combating misinformation and gaining public trust. In Romania, public communication currently affirms its usefulness as a tool for crisis management and implementation of public action. Although the institutions claim to make efforts to deliver access to public data and share information, Romanian administration comply only to the provisions of Law 544/2001, communicating just the demanded data, necessary through the official media channels. But to combat mistrust, it is important to provide the population complete access to public knowledge with adequate resources. It is essential for public institutions – especially to central ones – to become trustworthy and transparent sources of data and information. The Government, the Parliament and all other public institutions must be aware that they can contribute to effects of misinformation if they prefer rather not to communicate or tend to retain information; thereby, the literature emphasizes that the quality of the government is much more important than its' size (Fukuyama, 2014, p.549).

Despite the globalization of information, the Romanian citizens remain attached to information is delivered by the official public providers. This can be explained as the communication carried out by public institutions is legitimate yet not worthy of trust, although it needs serious improvements. As presented in the above graphics, only 29% of the Romanian population trusts the Government and 28% tend to trust the national Parliament, these institutions being placed at the bottom of the ranking. On the other side, about 60% of the Romanian citizens tend to trust in Church, meaning that they believe in their religion more than in their political officials, a clear expression of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001, p.148). Further, the risk avoidance is translated in regulations and behaviours control, to protect against possible abuse, situations of vulnerability and public crisis. However, trust and mistrust are not mutually exclusive, they can coexist in the same institution or in the same administration (Oomsels et al., 2016, p.5).

The direct connection between public communication and trust doesn't need to be proved, but build and developed and, in some cases, defended. It is fact that Romanian administration is in an urgent need to invest time, experts and effort towards building more efficient programs, policies and strategies aimed to lead to a higher level of trust from the citizens. In the context of this study, based on the previous data collected in the framework of surveys and reports regarding the subject, the authors consider three recommendations for the Government and public institutions at large, aimed to steer the direction towards a better public service delivery and an elevated level of trust.

Recommendation #1 – Government-held data and information must be open by default. This means that any citizen with access to a computer or mobile device and Internet can access, share and re-use public information with open licenses, all provided by public institutions that remain committed to share their data according to Law 544/2001. In addition, in our opinion, the law the right to access the information of public interest, above named, should be revised and updated. In the end, a higher access to public open data translates into better public services and higher levels of trust for institutions and politicians.

Recommendation #2 – Public institutions must decentralise open data across all institutions, agencies and departments that share common information. For assuring Romanians with a sustainable interoperable data system, all public information and the management processes behind should be thoroughly developed, with a smart data architecture easily to access and use. Open data should be reconsidered as an integrated part of the government act, not a final step at the end of the reform process.

Recommendation #3 – Public institutions must give more focus on the public communication activities. As the technology becomes gains increasing importance in the nowadays world, the public institutions should grant increased attention to the novelty solutions for data and information sharing and dissemination. As the events succeed at increasing speed, there is no room to wait or take steps back.

The public institutions, especially the central ones, of which the Government and Parliament occupy the central place should act as veritable promoters in the demarche of nationwide communication digitalization, and start to communicate better, with increased effectiveness, more transparent, and in real time.

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