Polarization, Cohesion, Trust, and Institutions in an Era of Polycrisis

2024 Editorial Committee

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Acknowledgements

Issue Introduction

Established in 2018, the Undergraduate Journal of Politics, Policy, and Society (UJJPS) is an emerging interdisciplinary academic journal that publishes peer-reviewed work of undergraduate students in the social sciences and humanities. This undergraduate journal provides a medium for aspiring academics to explore and showcase current debates in their respective disciplines, while gaining practical experience within the realm of analytical thinking, researching, and publishing.

The 2024 issue explores the theme of *Polarization, Cohesion, Trust, and Institutions in an Era of Polycrisis*. This theme is relevant as current global systems are increasingly defined by several interacting crises crossing ecological, social, economic and technological domains–known as "polycrisis" (Søgaard Jørgensen et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic, the Russo-Ukrainian war, and the growing climate crises require multidisciplinary strategies. These challenges raise critical questions about the role of polarization, trust, and cohesion in shaping the resilience of democratic institutions and global governance. The ten contributions to this issue from all over the world including the University of Bern (Switzerland), Corvinus University of Budapest (Hungary), University of South Alabama (USA), and Nanyang Technological University (Singapore) provide insight into how these dynamics interact within the rapidly evolving environment of the 21st century.

The opening article, *The Influence of Local Government Transparency on Community Perceptions During EU Green Transition: Case Study of Velenje,* by Zoja Krenker investigates how local government transparency influences community engagement during green transitions. The case study of Velenje, Slovenia employs the qualitative analysis of municipal statements, resident surveys, and civil initiatives, highlighting how discrepancies in perceived transparency undermine public confidence. The article concludes that transparency is essential for citizen participation and trust in sustainable development.

In the following article, *Identity, Populism and Decentralized Governance: The Italy-Albania Migration Agreement,* Kaltra Asllani and Vanesa Bani analyze and discuss the often-fraught topic of immigration, and how the European Union has failed to develop a new form of collective identity despite many years of increased immigration. The authors study different political actors over time and how they have utilized ethnonationalism to provoke anti-immigration sentiments in the hearts and minds of constituents. Through a case study of the Italy-Albania

Migration Agreement they explore why these anti-immigration sentiments have become so strong, and how the European Union may have to develop a new type of political thinking towards immigration, one that is inclusive of both their values and human rights. Overall, this article provides deep insights into the reasons for the popularization of anti-immigrant rhetoric and the rise of populism.

The third article of this issue, *Social Media and National Solidarity: Rise of Ukrainian Language Use on Telegram During the Russo-Ukrainian War* by Maksim Beleziakou examines the use of Ukrainian and Russian language throughout time. Analysis of 290,000 posts on the platform Telegram reveals the shift to primarily Ukrainian language use over the course of the war since 2022.

In the fourth article of this issue, *Local Responses to Global Humanitarian Crises: Grassroots and Mutual Aid Perspective,* Ruben Kleeb addresses criticisms of humanitarian organizations and posits that grassroots organizations can address needs that larger institutions choose to, or must, overlook, for various reasons. Through the aid efforts of smaller, community-driven organizations, the traditional top-down humanitarian models are challenged, and aid efforts are firmly set within the needs of those affected by humanitarian crises, allowing for positive change to be made.

Continuing with the focus on international institutions, the fifth article of this issue by Fahmy Fadzil, *Polycrises and the Design of International Institutions: A Conceptual Mapping* presents an original conceptual framework, based on both theories of polycrisis and the rational design of institutions, to analyze international organizations and their responses to polycrises. The author employs this framework to analyze case studies from the global energy, transport, and healthcare systems, providing key insights into the existing limitations of international organizations' responses to polycrises. The case study highlights potential pathways to improve the response of global governance systems to globalized and systematic vulnerabilities in an interconnected world.

The sixth article of this issue Vernon Kow's *Crisis Management in Hong Kong: A Comparison of Governmental Response to the 2014 Umbrella Revolution and 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement* employs a crisis framework to examine the differing approaches of Hong Kong Chief Executives Leung Chin-Yang and Carrie Lam during the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. While Hong Kong is no stranger to mass protests, these two movements are unique case studies in their scale and duration to analyze how various factors interact with governmental crisis management strategies to (de-)escalate crises. This article

concludes that while the success government crisis management strategies can be evaluated by the de-escalation of crises, the effectiveness of these strategies is context-dependent.

In the seventh article of this issue, using Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, Loo Hui En examines how cultural differences influence government crisis management during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on Wuhan, China, and New York City, United States of America in the article *When East Meets West: Impact of Cultural Differences on Crisis Management during COVID-19*. The analysis found that Wuhan's collectivist, restrained, and long-term oriented culture enabled rapid, unified actions, while New York City's individualistic, indulgent, and short-term oriented society faced delays due to prioritizing individual freedoms. The article recommends that culturally attuned public health strategies are crucial for effective crisis management.

The eighth article, *The Impacts of Mass Media on Political Polarization: Bridging the Great Divide* by Kennedy E. Williams discusses polarization produced by mass media in the context of the United States of America. The author argues and offers original interviews with two opposing parties Alabama Representatives into how polarization is not as acute as portrayed in the media. Instead, political polarization is exacerbated by modern media, and when polarization does occur, it promotes political participation.

The penultimate article featured in this issue, *The Impact of Discursive Convergence on Institutional Trust: Analyzing the Role of Shared Language in Political Discourse* by Luka Rtveladze speaks on discursive convergence, the phenomenon where different political actors or entities adopt the same vocabulary and apparent agenda resulting in a unified discourse despite potentially divergent underlying practices or decisions. This discursive convergence can bridge divides among political actors and empower citizens by cultivating a shared narrative that encourages collective engagement, trust, and democratic processes paving the way for more resilient governance and active civic participation. The paper concludes that inclusive language has a great importance that cannot be overstated. Politicians must employ language that acknowledges the legitimacy of differing viewpoints and training programs aimed at enhancing communicative competences among political leaders, elected officials, and public servants should be initiated to support this shift towards discursive convergence.

This issue concludes with Ilayda Erdogdu's article, *Trust and Disaster Management in Turkey: A Critical Assessment of the 1999 and 2023 Earthquakes* which examines disaster governance and

institutional trust in Turkey in the wake of the 1999 and 2023 earthquakes. The author reveals how systemic corruption in the construction industry and ineffective government disaster response lead to the erosion of public trust. The article provides recommendations for improved disaster governance, highlighting the importance of strong relationships between governmental agencies and civil society organizations.

Each article reflects the undergraduate scholars' intellectual and creative insight, highlighting their contributions to ongoing debates. As editors, we are proud to showcase the dedication and innovation of these young scholars and hope this issue inspires further discussion and research.

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The Influence of Local Government Transparency on Community Perceptions During EU Green Transition: Case Study of Velenje

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Abstract

This article examines the role of transparency in democratic governance during green transitions. Drawing on the context of the European Union's environmental policies and the case study of sustainable development projects in Velenje, Slovenia, I explore how transparency affects community engagement and public support for green transition projects. My article examines the discrepancies between different actors' perceptions of transparency, and argues that transparency is critical for enhancing legitimacy, efficiency, and citizen participation. Applying a qualitative case study approach, my research draws on a comparative analysis of municipal statements, civil initiative perceptions, with added insight from resident surveys. Findings reveal that perceived transparency discrepancies between local government and residents can weaken public confidence and cooperation, highlighting the need for open communication and accountability to foster collaborative, sustainable development.

Keywords: Local Government Transparency, Democratic Governance, Green Transition, Public Trust, Community Engagement, Sustainable Development, Environmental Policy.

Introduction

In recent years, municipal governments worldwide have increasingly prioritized sustainability initiatives to address environmental challenges, align with international climate goals, and promote the well-being and development of their communities. The success of these initiatives, relies on the concept of public trust—the belief and confidence citizens have in institutions to act in the public's interest, transparently and effectively, while balancing competing interests (Cook et al., 2005). Public trust is essential in encouraging cooperation and reducing resistance to governmental decisions, particularly in projects with environmental, economic, and social implications. The green transition refers to the shift from traditional, fossil-fuel-based economies toward sustainable, low-carbon systems. This involves changes in energy production, industrial practices, and urban development to mitigate climate change and promote environmental resilience (European Commission, 2021). Transparency plays an important role in this context, as it strengthens legitimacy, fosters trust, and ensures community buy-in for green transition projects (Abdulraheem et al., 2018).

The European Union (EU) has set ambitious sustainability and climate goals, such as those outlined in the European Green Deal, which aim to transform Europe into a carbon-neutral continent by 2050. These objectives require member states to implement local-level green transition initiatives while managing social and economic impacts. Sustainable development, as defined by the Brundtland Commission (1987), entails meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, balancing environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Achieving these goals demands active community engagement and transparent decision-making processes to build trust and mitigate resistance.

This paper examines the relationship between local government transparency, community engagement, and perceptions of sustainable development during the green transition, using Velenje, Slovenia, as a case study. As a city navigating the challenges of transitioning from a coal-based economy to a sustainable future, Velenje offers valuable insights into how transparency influences public trust and community support in the context of green initiatives. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to inform strategies that can be applied to similar municipalities across Europe.

Research Question

This study addresses the research question: How does local government's transparency influence community engagement and perceptions during the green transition, as illustrated by the case of Velenje, Slovenia?

Hypotheses

Several hypotheses are proposed to explore the relationship between transparency and community perceptions in Velenje:

1. Transparency and Trust: A perceived lack of transparency correlates with lower trust in local government and increased resistance to green transition initiatives.
2. Environmental and Social Impact: Specific green infrastructural projects are perceived to negatively impact the local environment and quality of life, despite general community support for green transition goals.

To address these inquiries, this study conducts a literature review on sustainable development, transparency in governance, and EU green transition policies with an empirical analysis of community perspectives in Velenje. Data was collected through surveying community members and municipal representatives, and by examining media coverage of the conflict between the municipality and the local civil initiative, fighting against environmental degradation. Comparative analysis of different perceptions helps us understand views on transparency, involvement levels, and the social and environmental impacts of ongoing projects

The findings from Velenje contribute to current research on sustainable transitions and community engagement, providing practical recommendations for local officials and policymakers across the EU. By highlighting the importance of transparent practices, this study aims to improve public trust in green initiatives, open a path to smoother implementation of sustainability projects, and ultimately promote stronger and better connected communities. Through this case study, the paper offers broader insights into the role of transparency in fostering public trust and community cooperation—key factors in achieving the EU's environmental targets and supporting sustainable urban development across Europe.

Literature review

The EU plays a critical role in enhancing local government transparency and community involvement in sustainability. Its Green Deal, launched in 2019, sets ambitious goals for sustainable economies, focusing on circular economy, renewable energy, and sustainable mobility with financial support for local governments when it comes to sustainable project implementation (Green Deal Going Local Handbook, 2023). The EU's focus on transparency and accountability motivates local governments to communicate openly with residents, aiming to build trust and cooperation in green transition efforts (Environmental data: Commission, 2018).

However, there is a risk of co-optation of the green transition by neoliberal "green growth" narratives which often ignore evidence that carbon reduction policies can perpetuate inequality (Bumpus & Liverman, 2008; Büscher & Fletcher, 2015). Transitioning away from coal is just one aspect of a larger societal and technological shift and for the workers who rely on the hydrocarbon economy for jobs, the key concern is what follows. The concept of "just transition", one of the essential parts of the Paris Agreement backed by labour unions and local organizations, advocates for protecting fossil fuel workers from bearing the brunt of the shift to low-carbon economies (UNFCCC, 2015). Switching from fossil fuels to green energy introduces new technologies and new infrastructure which should in turn create new job opportunities and encourage local labour markets, while also decentralizing energy production and developing local expertise beneficial for both the local economy and infrastructure maintenance (Gollier & Rohner, 2023).

In their article on sustainable development in Slovenia Deželan, Maksuti, and Uršič (2019) emphasize that its successful implementation relies heavily on local application and cooperation. However, implementations are often hindered by rigid and standardized planning approaches. While these methods enable complex structural interventions, they can also have unintended consequences on broader societal structures and often lack flexibility. The authors argue for adaptable strategies that engage communities and analyse development through the perspective of grassroots initiatives, supporting the work of Healey (1997), Albrechts (2006), Salet & Faludi (2000), and Soja (2000), who highlight the value of bottom-up planning in complex, community-centred projects (Deželan et al., 2013).

Effective local development planning is crucial, and it's essential to include input from local stakeholders, ensuring their voices are not overshadowed by the dominance of official procedures or powerful interest groups. In Slovenia, municipalities oversee economic and

sustainable development. Due to the lack of formally established regions, they engage directly with all parties to support community welfare and protect local environments. Research highlights that achieving sustainability requires inclusive strategies and collaboration with local communities during the development process (Deželan et al., 2013).

While Slovenian citizens generally support sustainable initiatives, ineffective communication and insufficient sharing of information between residents and planning institutions has led to distrust in government communication. This can fuel conflicts over local planning. However, researchers emphasize that conflict is unavoidable when it comes to sustainable planning and should be viewed as a tool for adjusting the planning system to current needs and trends. A key factor in tackling these obstacles is improving the communication between planners and users to address emerging requirements. Planners need to adjust their tactics to involve all stakeholders efficiently, minimizing the risk of costly adjustments later in the implementation process (Deželan et al., 2013).

This need for better communication and stakeholder engagement aligns closely with theories on transparency, especially in the context of the green transition, as clear and open processes are essential for successful implementation.

Transparency in governance involves making government actions, decisions, and information accessible to the public, fostering openness and accountability. It's become a key factor of what we understand as successful democratic governance, preventing corruption, enhancing legitimacy and citizen participation, while also improving efficiency, and holding public authorities accountable for their actions (Florini 1998; Hood 2006; Roberts 2006). At its core, transparency allows citizens make informed decisions and actively engage in public affairs, which ultimately contributes to a more inclusive society (Gupta, 2008). Beyond these functions, transparency has increasingly been recognized as a democratic goal in itself, with some advocating for it as a fundamental "right to know" (Birkinshaw, 2006).

The concept of "transparency optimism" suggests that increased transparency can lead to greater trust and stronger relationships between governments and citizens (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). However, studies indicate that transparency alone may not always enhance trust as expected; instead, perceived transparency—how transparent the government seems—often plays a more significant role in shaping public opinion (De Fine Licht, 2011). For instance, people are more likely to support decisions they perceive as transparent and fair, even if they do not directly

engage with the information provided (Tyler, 2000). This perceived fairness, linked to transparency, is critical in building trust and acceptance of green transition policies.

In the European Union (EU), transparency is a core principle, crucial for maintaining trust, ensuring accountability, and upholding democratic values and advocating for the rights of citizens (European Union, n.d.). By encouraging transparent governance, the EU aims to strengthen the legitimacy of its decision-making processes and enhance citizen engagement (Schnell, 2024). This principle is especially significant in the context of the EU's Green Deal and environmental policies, where transparency is expected to foster community support and participation in sustainable initiatives.

Transparency also plays a pivotal role in the green transition by encouraging public involvement and influencing community attitudes toward sustainable initiatives. The EU integrates transparency into its environmental policies to build public trust and address concerns about the impact of green projects, aiming to foster active public participation and prevent misleading practices like greenwashing. For instance, Directive (EU) 2024/825 empowers consumers to make informed green choices by improving transparency around environmental claims and addressing unreliable or misleading "green" labels, helping ensure that environmental claims are accurate and verifiable (European Parliament and Council, 2024). Additionally, the EU's Green Claims Directive addresses greenwashing by enforcing credibility standards for environmental claims, which enhances consumer confidence and supports companies genuinely committed to sustainability (European Commission, 2024)

Transparency also underpins the EU's climate commitments, such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement, where the EU prioritizes clarity and comparability in reporting emissions and mitigation progress (UNFCCC, 2015). The EU's Climate Transparency Report further supports this by offering detailed public data on emission targets, mitigation progress, and long-term climate goals, with the intention of bolstering public trust (EU Climate Transparency Report, 2021).

Additionally, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union mandates transparency in decision-making, ensuring that citizens have access to environmental information (European Union, 2007). This is complemented by the Aarhus Convention, which requires EU Member States to make environmental information publicly available (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 1998). The EU also promotes green budgeting to enhance transparency around climate-

focused spending, as set forth in collaboration with Member States and the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2022, allowing citizens insight into the allocation of funds for climate objectives (European Commission, 2022). By involving citizens in decision-making, the EU aims to make local sustainability efforts more effective and gain support for green initiatives.

Understanding the impact of transparency on public perceptions is essential for evaluating the green transition in Velenje. Transparency, particularly as perceived by the community, affects public trust and engagement with sustainable development initiatives. By framing Velenje as a case study, this paper seeks to contribute broader insights into how transparent governance can shape community support for green transitions, offering useful lessons for similar EU municipalities.

Case Study of Velenje

A nationwide research conducted by Danes Je Nov Dan institute evaluated the transparency of Slovenian municipalities in 2020, contributing significant insights into broader trends. The study revealed that 95% of municipalities failed to reach half the possible points when rating their transparency on a scale of 0-100. This exemplifies extensive problems in open governance, with the highest-rated municipality (Municipality of Ljubljana) scoring only 67.2 points. Velenje ranked 166th out of 212 municipalities with a score of 33, sharing it's position with 8 other municipalities. This ranking reflects significant shortcomings in transparency and suggests that Velenje, like many other Slovenian municipalities, struggles to meet even the basic expectations of open governance (Danes je nov dan, 2021).

The town of Velenje, located in the northeastern part of Slovenia, accounts for roughly 36.000 inhabitants, making it the 6th largest municipality. Historically known for its coal mining industry, the town has been significantly shaped by this economic legacy, with decades of industrial activity heavily centred around the Premogovnik Velenje coal mine and the TEŠ power plant. Governed by a municipal structure, Velenje doesn't have a regional intermediary, so the local government carries primary responsibility for development. The town's transition from a coal-dependent economy to sustainable development has been marked by a strategic departure from coal mining as the main pillar of the local economy, with the municipality taking steps to

develop tourism, technology and pharmaceutical sectors in anticipation of the coal mine closure (Mestna občina Velenje., n.d.).

Following the environmental guidelines set by the European Commission, Slovenia's Ministry of Infrastructure started public consultations on a national plan to eliminate coal and revamp coal regions. This plan is focused on cutting carbon emissions by 55% by 2030 and includes the phased shutdown of Premogovnik Velenje and TEŠ. Initially, the halting of coal mining was scheduled for 2054, but the revised plan, impacted by the EU's environmental policies, proposes an earlier deadline of 2033, to speed up the nationwide transition to industries with lower environmental impacts (Pohorec, 2021).

Environmental considerations have played a pivotal role in shaping Velenje's transition strategy. The municipality's development is guided by several key plans that align with EU and national directives, such as the Sustainable Urban Strategy until 2030 (TUS), the Vision and Strategy of Velenje until 2025 (VIS), and the Local Energy Concept (LEK). At the national level, documents like the National Energy and Climate Plan (NEPN), the National Strategy for the Exit from Coal, and the Area Plan for the Just Transition of the SAŠA Region (Šaleška-Savinjska Region) set the framework for these initiatives. Two laws currently under preparation—the Act on the Gradual Closure of the Velenje Coal Mine and the Act on the Restructuring of the SAŠA Region—aim to facilitate this transition. Additionally, the municipality works to meet EU-level environmental requirements, such as the "Do Not Significantly Harm" (DNSH) principle, and address goals for climate resilience, energy efficiency, and carbon neutrality. These frameworks collectively guide Velenje's approach to achieving a sustainable post-coal economy (Attachment 1, Mestna občina Velenje, n.d.).

In 2024 the municipality received the EU's 2024 Green Leaf Award for its efforts in encouraging sustainable growth, environmental awareness and providing a commendable example that other municipalities can follow on the path to "greening" their economy. The Green Leaf Award signifies the EU's endorsement and brings financial and consultative support to help Velenje implement sustainable practices and green technologies. Velenje's approach to the green transition aligns with several of EU's environmental policies, particularly the European Green Deal, which mandates carbon reduction and promotes a circular economy. The Green Leaf Award gives towns, such as Velenje, additional incentives and recognition for sustainable efforts, underscoring Velenje's role as a model for post-coal cities. These policies frame Velenje's efforts

within a broader EU strategy to reduce emissions and support just transitions in former coal regions, positioning the city as a pilot case for sustainable urban development (European Union, 2023).

Velenje's economic transition has been marked by the development of various infrastructural projects, particularly affecting districts like Stara Vas, home to around 1,200 residents. These projects are supposed to rejuvenate the town's economy and create new jobs which will fill the employment vacuum that will accompany Premogovnik Velenje's closure, a coal mine that currently employs about 2,000 locals. Velenje's coal mining history has also influenced community perceptions of environmental issues, with a rapidly growing sentiment for sustainable practices as the town prepares for a post-coal economy (Pohorec, 2021).

The city's active civil society, particularly groups like Prva razvojna iniciativa Stara vas, plays a crucial role in championing public welfare and scrutinizing new infrastructural projects, such as the expansion of the industrial zone with a new section for an economic and business zone – the EPC – and the waste disposal plant projected to be moved to the immediate vicinity of Škale Lake and residential neighbourhoods. They advocate for improvements in stakeholder transparency, environmental justice, and equitable urban development, representing the main concerns of residents in the context of these changes (Pohorec, 2023).

Methodology

This qualitative case study combines field observations and a comparative analysis of public statements given by the municipality and the local civil initiative, with additional insights provided by a survey of residents. This approach helps us better understand community sentiment, engagement and perceptions of the town's green transition. These methods provide insights into how local municipal plans and EU support shape urban development, environmental governance and community responses during Velenje's green transition.

Field observations were conducted in the areas most affected by the infrastructural developments, such as Stara vas and Škale Lake. In my observations I focused on the visible impacts of three prominent infrastructural projects, parts of which are all concentrated in the 1km² area, roughly 50% of which has long been occupied by residential and recreational spaces. These projects include the waste disposal and EPC zone expansion as well as the development of a statewide highway, meant to facilitate better connections between the

northeastern regions and the rest of the country. Data was collected through photographic documentation, field notes, and site mapping, which help contextualize resident responses and highlight potential environmental disruptions affecting public sentiment.

Comparative analysis consists of municipal statements provided via a structured interview, civil initiative publications, and media reports which provide data on official perspectives and community perceptions of challenges the community has experienced during this transition. These method helps us better understand the positions of different stakeholders, municipal transparency and alignment of EU environmental policies with real life experiences.

For additional insight into resident experience comparative analysis also includes results of a survey (Attachment 2), which targeted residents of Stara vas district who are directly affected by the development of projects. Given the demographic profile, where some residents lack digital knowledge and access, a mixed method approach of online surveys and door to door questionnaires was chosen. This strategy allowed for broader demographic inclusion, particularly reaching older residents. Out of approximately 1200 residents, we managed to obtain 46 responses (about 4% response rate), which while providing essential insight into resident's experience, makes standalone assessment difficult due to a limited sample size. Surveys were conducted over two months, to maximize response rates. While a larger sample size would increase validity, this initial response provides a foundation for understanding local perspectives.

The survey used a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions to capture both the extent of support for and concerns about the green transition. Participants were asked about their knowledge of the projects, perceived benefits or disadvantages, trust and perceptions of local authorities' transparency, and the current and anticipated impact on their quality of life. This data was analysed using thematic coding to identify prevalent community attitudes and specific areas of concern.

All this data is thematically analysed and compared based on the major reoccurring themes, in the results section to present a comprehensive understanding of the current situation.

Results

Field Observations

In our field observation segment, we focus on three major development projects Stara Vas,

Velenje, all concentrated within a 1 km² area, roughly half of which has historically been designated for residential and recreational purposes. These projects include:

1. **Construction of the Third Development Axis (3. razvojna os):** A state highway intended to improve regional connectivity and economic development.
2. **Establishment of the Stara Vas Economic and Business Zone (EPC):** A new industrial zone designed to attract investment and promote sustainable business practices.
3. **Development of a Waste Disposal Plant:** Planned in close proximity to residential areas, raising environmental and public health concerns.

These projects present significant opportunities for regional economic restructuring and infrastructure development. However, they also present substantial challenges, particularly regarding environmental degradation, reduced quality of life for residents, and issues of transparency in municipal planning and execution.

Figure 1: *Map 1 – Synthesis Map of Selected Contents of the PN MO Velenje (2020)*

Note: The diagonal red section represents the location of the new highway, the purple section to the right is EPC – economic business zone, next to that in yellow is the residential area. The light

green triangle in the middle of the residential area represents a local park. Residential area continues north of the park, bordering on a forest in the north, marked dark green. The purple section in the middle of the dark green is the proposed location for the new waste disposal plant.

1. Construction of the Third Development Axis (3. razvojna os)

The Third Development Axis is a major infrastructure project connecting northeastern parts of the country with the centre via Velenje, spanning 31.5 km across its northern sections. It includes tunnels, viaducts, bridges, and galleries, with key portions near Stara Vas involving the Škalsko Lake Section (Section B) and Konovo Section (Section H). These are projected to include viaducts, a tunnel, realignments of local roads, stormwater management, and landscaping. Initiated in March 2023 and coordinated by DARS (State highway organization of the Republic of Slovenia), the project is set for completion by September 2025 (DARS, 2023). Public consultations have occurred, but changes made post-presentation have raised transparency concerns.

The revised projection involves a change from an open viaduct to a covered trench near Stara Vas, which mitigates some visual impacts but exacerbates environmental degradation, noise pollution, and the loss of recreational spaces. Forested areas acting as natural buffers are being disrupted, impacting ecosystems and reducing quality of life for residents. Expanded waste disposal plant plans further habitats threaten. Construction has also caused traffic disruptions, particularly along routes to Škale and Konovo.

2. Economic and Business Zone Development

The Stara Vas Economic and Business Zone (EPC) is central to Velenje's strategic growth, aiming to foster innovation and sustainability through a circular economy framework. With EU Recovery and Resilience Mechanism funding contributing to its €1.43 million budget, the zone offers urban proximity, green transport options, and a business incubator to support startups and collaboration between businesses and education (EPC, 2023).

However, the project has sparked local concerns. Construction is occurring just meters from homes, causing noise, traffic, and the loss of recreational green spaces, including meadows and streams. A community of guerrilla gardeners, mainly elderly residents, has also been displaced, severing ties to subsistence farming and social connections.

The shift from residential to commercial land use, which was previously projected for the area, underscores the city's economic priorities but disrupts longstanding community expectations and quality of life. While the EPC promises economic growth, balancing development with environmental preservation and residents' well-being will be crucial as the project progresses.

3. *Waste Depot Expansion and Forest Clearing Concerns*

The proposed temporary waste depot expansion in Velenje aims to centralize environmental infrastructure, including waste collection and processing facilities. The project will facilitate activities such as vehicle dismantling, waste sorting, and material recovery, supporting the region's shift toward a circular economy. However, the expansion necessitates the construction of new facilities within 100 meters of nearby residential properties, raising significant environmental and community concerns. The plan also includes upgrades to access roads and utility infrastructure, enhancing operational efficiency (Mestna občina Velenje, 2022).

Figure 2: *Photo of New Waste Disposal Centre Relocation Proposal*

Note: The new waste disposal centre is being relocated from its existing location (on the right hand side) into the forest (outlined by the blue line). ZAVOD ZA GOZDOVE RS/OE NAZARJE

The companies behind the projects have recently transferred leadership from local investor Tomaž Ročnik to his daughter. The investor shares a controversial history with the city's investments and infrastructural projects with some not reaching completion or being poorly made. Ročnik was also recently convicted of tax evasion, causing concerns about the transparency and validity of municipal cooperation with him (Cirman & Modic, 2023).

One of the most contentious issues is the required deforestation to make way for the new depot and the planned Third Development Axis. The forest currently acts as a natural buffer, mitigating noise, providing recreational opportunities, and shielding residents from the microclimatic effects of nearby Škalsko Lake. Its removal is expected to intensify noise and environmental disruption, particularly during construction. Local residents have voiced concerns about the project's impact on their quality of life, as well as the potential for long- term ecological degradation.

Comparative Analysis of Municipal, Civil Initiative, and Resident Perspectives on Infrastructure Development in Velenje

For the purposes of comparative analysis, I initially conducted a thematic analysis of 16 media articles from 9 different local, regional, and national media outlets presented in a table below for clarity. These articles include in-depth interviews and public statements from prominent members of the civil initiative. Additionally, I incorporated two posts from the Facebook page of Prva razvojna iniciativa Stara vas, which explain the initiative's mission.

Table 1: *List of Media Publications Reporting on Prominent Infrastructure Development in Velenje*

Media Outlet	Number of articles	Content
Delo	1	Coverage of municipal development projects and civil initiative environmental concerns.
Necenzurirano	2	Coverage of companies that bought municipal land and intend to construct a landfill
Nova24TV	1	Reporting on local development and opposition by civil groups.
Naš čas	3	In-depth reporting on Velenje's infrastructure projects and local responses.

Radio Študent	2	Critical perspectives on environmental and urban development issues, interviews with civil initiative members.
RTVSLO	1	Reporting on local responses regarding landfill expansion and deforestation
STA (Slovenska Tiskovna Agencija)	1	Coverage of diverging interests of the municipality and the local initiative
Večer	2	Articles on public attitudes regarding infrastructural developments and investors behind projects
Velenjčan	3	Localized reporting, with detailed coverage of both municipal and civil views.

To capture the municipal perspective, I analyzed 15 informational articles regarding the implementation of the presented infrastructural projects, published on the Velenje municipality's official website (velenje.si), alongside a structured email interview conducted with municipal representatives. The analysis also included responses from residents of Stara vas, gathered through a survey. While only 4% of the Stara vas population responded to the survey, the open-ended responses provide valuable insights into residents' experiences with ongoing construction projects and the regional restructuring process.

To conduct comparative analysis, I first conducted a brief overview of municipal interview statements and the declarations of the Prvarazvojna iniciativa civil initiative, posted on Facebook. Using a thematic analysis of the media material, I identified five prevalent discourse themes — Environmental Impact and Degradation, Proximity to Residential Areas, Legal Context, Community Engagement and Transparency Perceptions, and Broader Urban Development Goals and Preservation. For each of the five themes I will present the municipality's official position, followed by the civil initiative's perspective, and conclude with insights from the residents.

The perspectives of the Velenje Municipality and the Prva razvojna iniciativa Stara vas illustrates contrasting views and approaches to urban development and transparency. From the municipality's standpoint, decision-making processes are underpinned by adherence to legal

provisions, as they emphasize that "transparency in decision-making is ensured by complying with the legally prescribed provisions for adopting spatial plans. All current procedures (steps) in the adoption of spatial plans are published on our website." (Attachment 1).

The municipality also highlights efforts to engage the public through a combination of mandatory and voluntary mechanisms, stating, "we inform the general and interested public of events related to participation opportunities, such as the presentation of initial concepts or workshops (legally non-mandatory), public hearings, and public displays of spatial plans (legally mandatory)." However, the acknowledgement that "public participation at such events is typically low" points to challenges in fostering meaningful engagement (Attachment 1).

In contrast, the Prva razvojna iniciativa Stara vas contends that the municipality's development plans reflect a prioritization of industrial expansion over environmental and public health concerns. The civil initiative is especially critical of the waste disposal site expansion near Škalsko Lake, citing risks of environmental degradation, including deforestation and harm to the lake's ecological and recreational value. They also argue that projects located near residential areas fail to adhere to recommended safety distances, posing potential health risks.

The initiative further challenges the transparency of municipal processes, pointing to perceived shortcomings in public consultation and alleging that resident input was largely disregarded in final decision-making. Concerns about possible conflicts of interest, particularly involving municipal partnerships with controversial business figures, underscore their distrust. The civil initiative's advocacy reflects broader community frustrations over insufficient engagement and the perceived undermining of Velenje's historical identity as a "city in a park."

These discrepancies are further explored in the comparative analysis that follows, with additional insights provided by residents' responses to the questionnaire on their experiences living next door to prominent infrastructural projects.

Comparative Analysis of Key Themes

A. Environmental Impact and Degradation

Municipal Perspective: The municipality asserts that the planned infrastructure are necessary for supporting the growing industry sectors and will comply with environmental regulations. They

emphasize that measures will be taken to mitigate the impact on the Škale Lake area, including noise reduction and environmental protection standards.

Civil Initiative Perspective: The Prva razvojna iniciativa Stara vas contends that the proposed development will lead to significant environmental degradation, especially through the deforestation of the area around Škale Lake. They argue that the forested area currently serves as a natural barrier against highway noise and microclimatic influences of the lake, while also representing a thriving ecosystem, home to many kinds of wildlife. Expanding the waste disposal site is seen as an exacerbation of what is already a significant environmental burden on the community, following the strain on the environment already caused by the building of the highway and the EPC zone, which threaten valuable ecological and recreational spaces.

Resident Responses: Residents echo concerns about the environmental impact, particularly in terms of noise pollution, habitat destruction, and the loss of green spaces. There is also apprehension about long-term ecological degradation due to the proximity of waste disposal facilities and the EPC zone to a recreational lake and residential areas. A noticeable increase of wild animals, such as mice, weasels and foxes has been wandering residential areas since begining of construction, which has also displaced a community of guerila gardeners in the area of EPC.

Figure 3: *Residents' perception of infrastructural changes, Questionnaire for Stara vas Residents on Transparency 2024, 1ka*
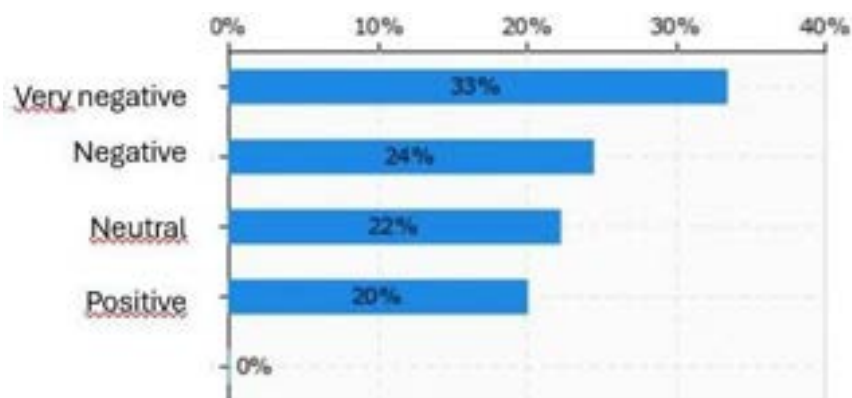
B. Proximity to Residential Areas

Municipal Perspective: Municipal officials innitially argued that the location of the waste disposal and EPC economic business zone, near residential areas is unavoidable due to spatial limitations and will adhere to Slovenian legal requirements, downplaying residents' concerns. The municipality later agreed that some changes are necessary due to the proximity to the residential areas and that the planning process includes public consultation and adherence to legal requirements.

Civil Initiative Perspective: The civil initiative raises alarm over the waste disposal's proposed location within 100 meters of residential areas, far below the typically recommended distance of 300-600 meters in Slovenia. They argue that the close proximity of hazardous and non-hazardous waste processing facilities poses significant health risks to local residents, particularly in terms of air quality and noise pollution.

Resident Responses: Surveyed residents largely agree with the initiative's concerns, noting that the proposed location of the waste disposal site feels unreasonably close to their homes. Many residents are particularly worried about the potential health risks of living near such facilities, further exacerbating their dissatisfaction with the project. Residents also report that innitially, a green belt of 30m was planned between the EPC zone and the first houses, however from field observations and resident accounts in some cases EPC construction zone starts only 2m from the nearest residential properties (Attachment 2).

C. Legal Context of Waste Disposal

Municipal Perspective: The municipality has emphasized that the waste disposal project is still in the early stages, subject to review and legal processes. The mayor has assured residents that legal compliance was met, framing the project as an essential part of Velenje's modernization efforts and suggesting that all planning complies with legal and public consultation requirements.

Civil Initiative Perspective: The initiative points to a history of collaboration between the municipality and Tomaž Ročnik, a controversial local business figure with ties to the development. Before his conviction he passed the ownership of companies planned to operate the waste disposal, to his daughter, Zala Ročnik. Ročnik's conviction for tax evasion has raised concerns about conflicts of interest and the integrity of the municipality's planning processes. The civil initiative argues that the transparency of these dealings is highly questionable, especially considering the past sale of land to Ročnik's company.

Resident Responses: Residents are divided on the matter of legal transparency, with some expressing skepticism about the fairness of municipal decisions, especially regarding land sales and business interests. There is a general sense of unease about the influence of local business figures like Ročnik, and some residents believe these connections undermine the legitimacy of the planning process.

D. Community Engagement and Transparency

Municipal Perspective: The municipality highlights public consultations as a vital part of the planning process, with officials claiming that community concerns are actively taken into account. Despite low attendance at these forums, they argue that the process has been transparent and participatory.

Civil Initiative Perspective: The initiative criticizes the public consultation process, claiming that it lacks genuine community engagement and fails to consider alternative, environmentally sustainable solutions. They argue that residents have not been adequately informed or consulted, leading to a lack of meaningful involvement. In response, the civil initiative has organized petitions gathering over 300 signatures in a few weeks and is prepared to escalate the issue legally and through direct action.

Resident Responses: The questionnaire responses indicate widespread dissatisfaction with the municipality's engagement efforts. A large portion of residents feels that their opinions have not been adequately considered, and that the municipality has failed to provide clear, comprehensive

information about the projects. Many respondents noted that they felt excluded from discussions on major local developments, contributing to a growing sense of alienation from local governance.

Figure 4: *Residents' satisfaction with municipal transparency, Questionnaire for Stara vas Residents on Transparency 2024, 1ka*
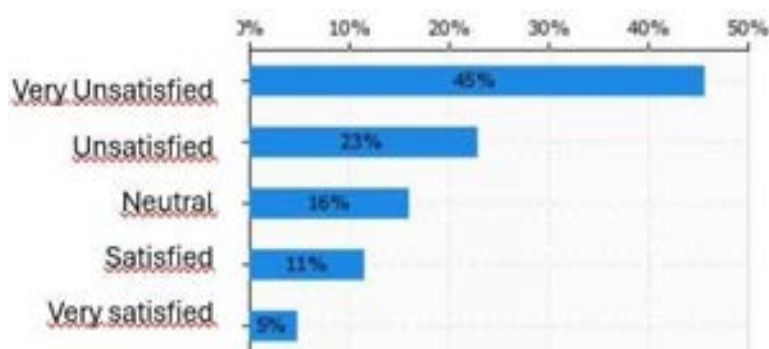
E. Broader Urban Development Goals vs. Preservation

Municipal Perspective: Local officials maintain that the new projects, such as the waste disposal expansion, are necessary for the city's economic growth and modernization. They argue that the industrial developments align with Velenje's broader goals of urban renewal and economic diversification.

Civil Initiative Perspective: The civil initiative views these developments as a direct threat to Velenje's identity and conception as a "city in a park," a concept rooted in green spaces and sustainable urban planning. They argue that prioritizing industrial expansion over environmental integrity undermines the city's original design and fails to balance modern economic needs with ecological preservation.

Resident Responses: Many residents agree with the civil initiative's concerns, feeling that the increasing focus on industrial growth is compromising the quality of life in Velenje. There is a

sense that the city's vision as a green and livable place is being undermined by short-term economic gains.

The comparative analysis reveals a stark contrast between the municipality's commitment to development and the civil initiative's and residents' concerns about environmental protection, public health, and transparency. While the municipality emphasizes legal compliance and economic growth, the Prva razvojna iniciativa Stara vas argues that these developments threaten the very fabric of the community and its environment. Resident feedback aligns largely with the initiative's concerns, particularly regarding environmental degradation, proximity to residential areas, and a lack of sufficient communication and community engagement.

Discussion

This case study aimed to explore the perspectives of the municipality, the civil initiative Prva razvojna iniciativa Stara vas, and residents on the infrastructural developments in Velenje.

The goal of these investments is to restructure the economy to withstand and thrive within the EU's strategic energy transition away from fossil fuels to greener industries and energy sources.

The findings revealed significant tension between the municipal perspective, which emphasized economic development and legal compliance, and the concerns of the civil initiative and residents, which focused on environmental degradation, health risks, and insufficient community engagement. The ongoing tension between municipal authorities and civil society in Velenje highlights a broader challenge facing many post-industrial cities: how to balance the need for economic development with the protection of environmental and community interests. In Velenje, this challenge is compounded by a history of controversial business dealings and an increasing sense of mistrust between the municipality and its residents.

The civil initiative's critique of transparency and governance resonates with broader discussions in urban studies about the role of citizen activism in challenging development projects that seem to undermine environmental sustainability. Previous studies on municipal decision-making and community opposition to urban developments (eg. Ruming, 2017) highlight similar tensions between development goals and community concerns. This research's findings align with

these studies, particularly regarding the role of powerful local actors and the lack of meaningful community consultation.

The findings suggest that municipalities should place greater emphasis on transparent communication and genuine community involvement in the planning process. Failure to do so risks legal challenges and significant public distrust, as seen in Velenje. The civil initiative's actions illustrate the importance of grassroots activism in holding municipalities accountable. It may also signal a growing demand for more participatory governance models in small cities transitioning to post-industrial economies.

When it comes to the hypotheses, we can conclude that a perceived lack of transparency in the context of this study leads to lower trust in local government and increased resistance to green transition initiatives. From the community responses, we can also conclude that the infrastructural projects discussed in this study are perceived to negatively impact the local environment and community quality of life, despite the overall support for green transition goals.

One limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size of survey respondents (46 individuals), which may not fully represent the views of the entire Stara Vas community. Additionally, while the study examines public statements and survey responses, it does not account for other forms of local opposition, such as informal community groups or digital activism.

Future research could explore the role of social media in mobilizing community opposition to municipal projects, especially as digital platforms play an increasingly significant role in community activism. Further studies could also focus on the long-term impacts of such developments on community well-being, particularly in terms of public health and environmental quality.

Conclusion

This research highlights the importance of transparency when it comes to fostering community participation and shaping attitudes toward green transitions in the case study of Velenje. Open communication, trust, and collaboration are significantly influenced by transparent decision-making processes. While the chances of improving trust through transparency may be limited, there is a strong link between transparency and perceived procedural fairness, which influences public trust and acceptance. Therefore, promoting transparency is essential for the success of sustainable development initiatives.

In conclusion, the case of Velenje highlights a growing tension between municipal development plans and community priorities, emphasizing the need for more inclusive, transparent decision-making processes that prioritize environmental sustainability and public health. As Velenje transitions from its coal-based economy to more diversified industries, this conflict serves as a crucial case study for cities worldwide grappling with the complexities of balancing industrial growth with community well-being and environmental protection.

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Identity, Populism and Decentralized Governance: The Italy-Albania Migration Agreement

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Abstract

The European Union started as an elite-driven project focused on meeting mostly economic needs. Gradually, it transformed into a complex entity that aims to incorporate sensitive issues like immigration into its agenda. This jurisdictional transformation has not been matched by a parallel transformation of collective identities. In many member-states, populist politicians have tried to exploit this gap by capitalizing on the citizens' fears. Findings show that ethnocentrism among national actors can intensify EU politicization, particularly during times of crisis. Through the lens of post-functionalism, this analysis explores the role of national identity in shaping immigration policy, highlighting the 2023 Italy-Albania migration agreement as a case study. The shift towards decentralized governance and externalization of border controls caused by the 2015 migration crisis raises ethical concerns about human rights implications. The EU appears to have no choice but to find a balance between incorporating public preferences to reduce conflicts while keeping its values intact.

Keywords: Identity, Decentralization, Italy, Albania, Migration, Populism.

Introduction

Immigration is neither a new phenomenon nor an issue with a deadline. Given the diverse conditions migration has entailed throughout history, addressing its challenges requires careful planning and proper adjustment to the circumstances of each case. In this context, the European Union appears unprepared. As many theories have pointed out, the EU shows a pattern of attempting to secure public support by emphasizing the economic benefits of cooperative policies. However, regarding immigration, public opinion remains mostly indifferent to financial advantages, such as immigrants' ability to provide essential labor, even amidst declining fertility rates. With our analysis, we aim to explore the process of identity construction and its effect on policy implementation through the theory of post-functionalism. We examine why the issue of immigration provokes strong public reactions and how national actors, such as political parties, employ ethnocentrism to contribute to the politicization of the EU. Furthermore, we analyze the immigration agreement between Albania and Italy, in an attempt to critically assess the shift towards decentralized governance. We recognize the theoretical merits of this approach while raising concerns about its practical implications on human rights.

Theoretical Framework

The European Union, like all transformative initiatives, originated from a pioneering idea centered on prosperity and peace in a region that had endured a history of relentless turbulence (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Verdier, 2005). The initial vision of primarily economic cooperation gradually blossomed into a sustainable architecture of jurisdiction, providing solace from the instability that had plagued people for many years. The success demonstrates that it was the right path taken at the right time. However, it must be acknowledged that the EU was established during times that, while challenging, were arguably less complex than the present. Consequently, the theories and frameworks formulated during its early stages inevitably reflect this relative simplicity. Theory, in general, is a tool whose functionality depends first and foremost on accurate observations of reality to provide feasible explanations for empirical puzzles (Lakatos, 1970). In other words, theories can begin to predict what "might be", only through a comprehensive understanding of "what is".

Given that the European Union started as a community whose foundational goal was post-war economic reconstruction, neo-functionalist ideas, which emerged prominently in the 1950s,

emphasized the significance of economic gains as a key driver of cooperation among states. According to this theory, unforeseen economic opportunities arose due to the strong bond of support developed between supranational institutions and transnational interests. This highly beneficial partnership inevitably led to a reinforcing cycle, facilitating further integration. Another component that explains this phenomenon is found in "The Uniting of Europe," where Haas claims that the recognition of political elites and interest groups as critical elements of integration can be attributed to the bureaucratized nature of European organizations, where decisions were made despite the indifference or even opposition of the general public (Haas,1958).

In the 1960s, several instances that revealed reluctance towards deeper integration began to occur. Notable among them were the Empty Chair Crisis and the rejection of the Fouchet Plan. An attempt at interpreting those obstacles was introduced through the theory of Intergovernmentalism. This approach claims that every decision regarding the trajectory of EU integration reflects the specific preferences and interests of individual states. This means that the future of the union highly depends on negotiations between national governments. (Hoffmann, 1966).

In light of the above, it can be concluded that despite their differences, both neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism share a similar logic when it comes to two of the most important assumptions that they make. As a result, their interpretation of contemporary dynamics can appear rather limited. Firstly, they engage in debates where the importance of economic preferences in the process of integration is the main focus. Secondly, neo-functionalism emphasizes the significance of supranational institutions, while intergovernmentalism focuses on the influence of national governments. Consequently, both underestimate the increasingly important role of public involvement in decision-making within the EU.

Post-functionalism, as proposed by Gary Marks and Lisbet Hooghe, attempted to adopt a leading role in filling this theoretical gap by adding to the equation variables such as political identities and the politicization of issues. One of their main goals was to provide a complete understanding of how public attitudes impact the road toward European integration by examining the unprecedented shift from what they described as a state of "permissive consensus" to one of "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe & Marks, 2009)

Postfunctionalism: Addressing and Overcoming the EU's Communication Deficit

As previously mentioned, the importance of the general public in assessing the future of European integration had long been underestimated. This perception can be attributed to a plethora of reasons, but they all boil down to the communication deficit within the EU. Specifically, for many years there was a prevalent belief that citizens' attitudes towards the European Union's initiatives and conflicts were superficial and inconsistent since these issues appeared disconnected from national agendas due to their sui generis nature. Furthermore, accurate information regarding developments in the EU was limited due to the scarcity of specialized media outlets and the language barriers across the EU. As for national media outlets, their contribution is almost non-existent since their focus is primarily on domestic issues. Another factor that adds to this deficit in communication is the absence of direct political representation since the EU lacked an effective supranational party system (Schmitter,2009). National parties did very little to fill this gap. Due to the perceived lack of public interest, they made the conscious decision to steer away from EU issues. Only when they realized the potential of winning electoral votes did they start adding those issues to their political agendas, to weaponize them.

According to the theory of post-functionalism, the EU has recognized this disconnect between its institutions and the public and as a result has made many attempts at tackling it, to enhance transparency and public engagement. However, it must be acknowledged that these efforts have not always succeeded or produced the expected outcomes (Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007). Perhaps the most notable among these endeavors is the Maastricht Treaty, which introduced numerous reforms, including the ordinary legislative procedure. This procedure stands out because of the increased legislative powers it granted to the European Parliament. It effectively transformed it from a primarily consultative body to a co-legislator with considerable authority. The treaty also established the concept of European citizenship, which, among other things, includes the right to vote. Moreover, mechanisms such as the European Citizens' Initiative were established to encourage direct public participation. However, in implementing these reforms, the EU did not fully account for certain inherent human characteristics related to identity, which would, over time, work to distort public perceptions of the EU.

Despite the popular belief that public support for the EU is mainly driven by perceived economic benefits, reality, as it always tends to be, is more complex. McLaren argues that economic rationality has a significant impact only on the perspectives of those who benefit most

from it, or more specifically those who possess a higher education, wealth, and the ability to travel (Mclaren, 2006). In contrast, most people make decisions based on ethnocentric tendencies. This tendency stems from a primitive human instinct to identify with and protect one's community, to favor one's in-group and undervalue out-groups, as a means of protecting individual egos (LeVine and Campbell 1972). Furthermore, it is a crucial factor in understanding how national cohesion functions, since it specifically explains why people are willing to make sacrifices (including, in our case, financial ones), particularly when cultural integrity is perceived to be at stake.

This concept is extremely useful in framing our analysis, as ethnocentrism is the logic that guides the construction of shared identities. People manage to form their in-group by detecting similarities that can be either physical (such as a specific skin complexion) or internal (shared history, beliefs). One less obvious factor that highly affects the outcome of the process is proximity (Cialdini, 2021). More specifically, the attitudes and decisions of individuals depend on whether their sense of territory is narrow or expanded. This is why a more exclusive national identity result in increased euroscepticism. When people do not perceive the rest of the EU as part of their in-group, they are less willing to support its policies, especially when they are led to believe that those policies pose a threat to their in-group (the individual's country of origin) (De Vries & Edwards, 2009).

Here, it is necessary to be reminded of the fact that due to the EU's complex governance structure, the public may not directly experience the beneficial outcomes of decisions made in Brussels. And even if they do, they often fail to recognize them due to the communication deficit that was previously described. As a result, public opinion is heavily dependent on cues from national actors, who may choose which issue to mobilize based on strategic considerations (such as a potential win in domestic elections) rather than the proper informing of the public. Catherine de Vries and Erica Edwards argue that populist conservative parties are crucial in the creation of this dynamic.

Political parties in general, due to the competitive structure of the system, have to strategically select issues to mobilize in public forums based on their potential to create incentives for electorate support. This approach is purely strategic and depends on various factors: political parties are more likely to discuss issues that 1) align with their historical patterns, 2) do not cause internal conflict, and 3) distinguish them from other parties. Those criteria can be useful in understanding why extremist parties monopolize EU-related discussions. Historically, the EU has

been a project highly endorsed by mainstream parties. This occurs due to the fact that, although the definition of 'mainstream' is quite dynamic, some of its most common characteristics include ideological moderation and economic liberalism (Moffitt, 2021). Both of those elements align with the institutional direction that the EU pursues (Hooghe et al., 2002). The desire of mainstream parties to not contradict their established positions, combined with their failure to mobilize EU issues as a means of differentiation, gets translated as a reluctance to criticize the EU and creates a void that challenger parties readily exploit. This dynamic results in challenger parties dominating the discourse surrounding the EU (Kriesi, 2007). Their preferred method of enhancing their appeal is to instill bias by weaponizing ethnocentrism and negatively framing EU issues.

Identity Politics, Populist Narratives, and Multilevel Governance Theory in the EU

Ethnocentrism is the force behind the drive of individuals to protect their in-group, which in our discussion, is their nation-state. This protective power gets activated mostly when people perceive threats in two specific areas: First, in-group members share a notion of cultural superiority that must remain untarnished. This belief, closely tied to religion, is particularly prevalent among older, conservative, less-educated males who fear losing their social capital and openly oppose new norms since they view them as a road to moral corruption (McLaren, 2006). Second, there is a fear of losing national resources. In-group members antagonize outsiders out of concern that resources such as jobs and social welfare might be taken away from them. This behavior reflects a primitive human characteristic, so prevalent that it has been a central focus of analysis in theories like realism since the very first attempts at international cooperation.

The asymmetries revealed by the economic crisis of 2008 as well as the harsh policies the EU adopted, paved the way for feelings of distrust and uncertainty to surface in public opinion. Before the EU could overturn this negativity, the refugee crisis unfolded, and its controversial handling created ideal conditions for anti-immigration rhetoric to blossom among populist parties. More specifically, they opposed mainstream parties by depicting them as blind followers of EU orders and therefore undeserving of the public's trust. At the same time, they portrayed themselves as defenders of cultural values and champions of economic justice. Their strategy depended on developing narratives that distorted perceptions of reality and capitalized on public fear. For example, in both the UK and Germany, the strongest anti-immigration sentiments came from areas where immigrants were less likely to settle (since they were less educated, poor regions). This

indicates that the anti-immigration stance is not necessarily a direct response to the presence of immigrants, but rather a reaction to the fear ingrained in them of losing already scarce resources. Those are the regions that populist parties specifically target since they recognize the chance to effectively trigger anxieties about resource scarcity. The two main takeaways of this dynamic are the undeniable impact of negative framing that populist parties weaponize and the tendency of struggling individuals to vote based on emotional responses rather than rational analysis.

This observation aligns with the concept of multilevel governance introduced by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks. They state that authority can be exercised at different levels due to the sui generis nature of the EU and the structural complexities of governance. On one hand, there is the option of centralized governance, which is mostly associated with the logic of functionalism since it can provide extended economic benefits due to the optimal spatial scale of public goods (Hooghe et al., 2020). However, as mentioned previously, people's actions are not solely driven by functional optimality, especially in times of high stress, such as those we experience nowadays. For instance, due to the politicization of the issue, legislation about immigration at the EU level is particularly challenging to implement. Immigration is perceived through a crisis lens, continuously presented as a threat to both the cultural integrity and the economic stability of a country. Another important variable to add to the equation is the significant asymmetry within the EU, as different countries have been obligated to accept different numbers of immigrants. To address this heterogeneity and to respond effectively to citizens' concerns, member states are almost required to shift towards decentralization. Decentralized governance makes sure that the particularities of each community are being taken into account, and consequently, the public feels that their concerns are being heard. One way to bypass EU centralized decision-making is through informal law. In the area of immigration, this can take the form of bilateral agreements between EU and non-EU countries. A recent example is the migrant deal between Italy and Albania. The two states chose to negotiate terms directly instead of relying on EU-wide legislation.

Historical Context

From its unification and the subsequent establishment of the single state of Italy in the late 19th century up until 1976, the country experienced a long history of mass emigration. During this period, economic and political instabilities caused millions of Italians to leave their homeland in search of better living conditions.

On the contrary, migration issues only became prominent in the mid-1970s, when Italy transitioned from a sender to a destination country. The first influx of immigrants was a form of asylum-seeking and educational migration, mainly consisting of students and political dissidents originating from regions ruled by authoritarian regimes, namely Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia, who were in desperate search of safety and educational opportunities (Zincone & Caponio, 2005). On the other hand, economic-based immigration flows became prominent in the early 1980s, creating a new contradictory social and economic reality. In societal perception, this new phenomenon was deemed pathological, as it was amplifying the country's already existing problems such as unemployment and social disparity. Meanwhile, the labor market and certain socioeconomic actors had a completely different perspective, viewing immigrants as valuable contributors in the workforce. (Ambrosini, 2011). Nevertheless, especially during the 1990s, with the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the surge of illegal migration became extremely pressing for both the Italian government and society.

Italy's first attempt to regulate this influx of immigrants was Statute 943 of December 1986, otherwise known as Foschi Law (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2018). This Act introduced regulations regarding the employment of foreign workers, such as the requirement of legal residency, but it also ensured their protection from inequalities in the labor market. Apart from regulations regarding legal workers, the Act also took measures to facilitate their integration into society (Refworld - UNHCR's Global Law and Policy Database, 2024).

In the course of time, Italian migration policy started gradually becoming more and more politicized, especially from the 1990s onwards, heavily influenced by the significant shifts of the domestic political landscape, leading to a more deliberate effort in terms of border control and restrictive laws.

The first Italian law that addressed the issue of immigration as a whole was enacted in 1990 with the so-called Martelli Law which aimed to combat illegal migration and integrate immigrants into the workforce under certain conditions. It also included specific criteria for legal entry and stay in the country. The most significant provision, however, was the right to asylum, as stipulated in the Geneva Convention of 1951, which applied to all qualifying individuals regardless of their country of origin (Komada, 2011).

Another significant piece of legislation was the Turco-Napolitano Law enacted in 1998, which stipulated the establishment of temporary detention centers and provided undocumented immigrants with the right to healthcare access. Secondly, regarding employment regulation, the Act introduced a "sponsorship system", which allowed immigrants to obtain a temporary entrance permit on the condition that they had a sponsor that would support their initial stay and guarantee their pursuit of employment. Lastly, individuals could enter the country through annual quotas set by the government, referring to the annual number of immigrants that the country could facilitate and successfully integrate into society. In order to financially support this integration process, the Act established a National Fund (Zincone & Caponio, 2005).

Another key milestone was the Bossi-Fini Law, enacted in 2002, which significantly illustrated the tendency towards progressively more restrictive migration policy in Italy. Some of the most important provisions of this Act included employment requirements and increased entry and residency control. Specifically, the only immigrants that were allowed legal entry and residency were those with work prospects and secure jobs, dependent children with severe health issues, and parents over the age of 65 with no children in their country of origin. Additionally, upon application or renewal request for residence permit, immigrants were obliged to provide fingerprints, aiming at increased security by tracking and identification processes. Finally, undocumented immigrants faced enforced deportation with fast procedures as part of a broader effort to combat illegal migration (Komada, 2011).

Despite migration becoming an official EU policy by the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999, Italy continued facing the immigration issue unilaterally. In addition, Article 13, introduced by the Dublin II regulation (2003), which mandates that the first EU country a refugee enters is responsible for processing their asylum application, placed a disproportionate burden on Italy as a frontline state (Karolewski & Benedikter, 2018).

That was the case until Europe was hit with the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the subsequent civil wars in regions of the Middle East and Africa. During that time, millions of asylum seekers crossed the borders of the EU, causing an unprecedented immigration and humanitarian crisis (Karolewski & Benedikter, 2018). This crisis led the EU to adopt the European Agenda on Migration on May 13, 2015, which highlighted the need for stronger cooperation amongst states and common procedures in order to enhance border control, secure fair treatment towards immigrants, and balance out the asymmetries faced by host countries (*European Agenda*

on Migration, n.d.). According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, this catastrophe marked a dark chapter in history, as, in 2015, over a million refugees reached the borders of Europe by sea, and almost 4,000 are believed to have tragically lost their lives on the journey (Gaynor, 2023).

Shift of Narratives: From the 2018 Elections to the Rise of Brothers of Italy in 2022

As it was previously stated, since the turn of the century, the securitization of immigration has become the new dominant narrative. The reason for this shift can be attributed to a plethora of reasons, namely, economic distress, political distrust, and social inequity. Specifically, the rise of populist and nationalist political parties could be considered a direct response to the disappointment of society towards previous governments' practices and the disregard of their views, concerns, and demands. The instrumentalization of society's fears and complaints became the new rhetoric for political populist parties, which claimed to interpret the people's needs better than anyone in order to gain electoral recognition.

A closer scope on Italy's political landscape from 2018 onwards can only confirm this new narrative. The 2018 elections in Italy were marked by the unprecedented victory of two leading parties, the League (Lega) and the 5 Star Movement (MoVimento 5 Stelle/M5S) which unanimously decided to join their forces and form a coalition government (Holloway et al., 2021). From one perspective, their success can undoubtedly be attributed to one of the key strategies they had in common: their populist rhetoric. The 5 Star Movement, on the one hand, heavily relied on an antipolitical sentiment, which in practical terms meant the instrumentalization of society's distrust towards traditional institutions into an anti-corruption narrative. As a matter of fact, the M5S underlined its neutral stance in the political spectrum, which became a leading factor in its electoral success. (Pinto, 2020). The M5S, indeed, was able to draw support from various social groups, gaining approximately 32% of the total votes. (Henley et al., n.d.). On the other hand, the League heavily relied upon its anti-immigration narrative, combined with the rather complex issues of globalization and multinationalism, as well as their impact on culture and national identity. (Pinto, 2020). As a result, this strong populist stance resonated with a significant part of society, leading the party to gain almost 18% of the total votes (Henley et al., n.d.).

However, due to the inherently unstable nature of coalitions, the government formed in the 2018 elections, led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, only lasted for almost a year. Fifteen months into the governance, the leader of the League, Matteo Salvini, decided to withdraw from

the coalition in a failed attempt to trigger elections. Amidst a period of political crisis, Giuseppe Conte formed a new coalition government with the 5 Star Movement, the Democratic Party, and other smaller center-left parties to avoid early elections. His second governance, however, only lasted 16 months, until January 2021. Deeper political instability and internal disagreements correlated with the pressure of COVID-19 and the economic crisis led to a stalemate and, ultimately, his resignation (BBC News, 2021).

The inevitable collapse of the government was followed by the formation of a new broad six-party coalition, led by Mario Draghi, at the request of the President of Italy, Sergio Mattarella (BBC News, 2021). Draghi's government adopted a more technocratic approach, focusing on economic recovery and the effective management of the pandemic. His leadership, apart from being a stabilizing factor for Italy, both domestically and internationally, was also crucial in mitigating the populist and nationalist rhetoric that led the country into a political crisis (Holloway et al., 2021). Similar to his predecessors, Mario Draghi's governance ended prematurely, mostly due to opposing opinions inside the coalition. On July 21, 2022, Mario Draghi resigned from the position of Prime Minister, and, subsequently, two months later, early general elections were held in order to resolve the political stalemate. (Amaro, 2022).

The elections of 25 September 2022 unfolded within a state of political instability and turmoil in which the resurgence of populist and nationalist narratives was inevitable. The frequent changes of government were perceived as a deeper indication of structural dysfunction and political corruption. The public was deeply instilled with mistrust, perceiving this disappointing instability more as a game of power than a genuine effort of the government to address the deeper problems that plagued society. (Martella & Roncarolo, 2022). Nevertheless, the outcome of the parliamentary elections was not unexpected. In reality, citizens had quite limited options. During the period 2018-2022, Brothers of Italy (Fratelli D' Italia, FdI), under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, was the only right-wing party that remained consistent in its opposition out of any coalition formed. In the course of time, FdI started gaining progressively more recognition as people started resonating with their electoral agenda, which underlined not only the need for social and economic reforms but also stricter border controls, immigration policies, tighter collaboration with the EU, and better advocacy for identity and sovereignty policies. (*Programma Elettorale Del Movimento Politico "Fratelli D'Italia Con Giorgia Meloni,"* 2022). Inevitably, the 2022

elections were marked by the victory of Brothers of Italy, which gathered approximately 26% of the total amount of votes (Clarke & Voce, 2022).

Externalization Of Migration Policies: Latest Developments

As it can be observed, over the last three decades, Italy has progressively been externalizing migration policies as part of a greater strategy to mitigate irregular migration and ensure border security. Especially since the 2015 crisis, the management of these policies has become a top priority for both the EU and certain member states directly affected by the consequences of uncontrollable migration flows, leading to the adoption of stricter securitization measures and externalization deals. Notably, the 2016 EU-Turkey migration pact was one of the first major supranational efforts towards these steps. Following this trajectory, in 2017, Italy also signed an externalization agreement with Libya aimed at stricter border control, smuggling prevention and the repatriation of immigrants detained at sea back to their country of origin. Italy, too, has a long history of cooperation with the Tunisian government since 1998, focused on the regulation of migration flows through border control and the criminalization of illegal migration. (Martini & Megerisi, 2023).

Continuing along this path, Giorgia Meloni, since her election as the Prime Minister of Italy in 2022, has further evolved the externalization efforts through close cooperation with Albania. Both Meloni and her counterpart, Edi Rama, taking into consideration previous collaborations, such as the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1995, the Protocol for Counterterrorism and Human Trafficking in 2017 and their geographic proximity along with mutual interests, unanimously agreed to extend their cooperation in migration and asylum policies. (Qeveria Shqiptare Keshilli i Ministrave, 2023).

Case Study: The Italy-Albania Agreement

The Italy-Albania migration agreement was signed by the heads of government and publicly announced on November 6, 2023, provoking many opposing opinions. Key elements of the protocol, which was officially made public in November 7, and intended to remain valid for 5 years, included the establishment of two extraterritorial detention centers in Albania, and specifically the regions of Shengjin and Gjader. According to the agreement, the two detention centers will collectively have the capacity to accommodate approximately 36,000 immigrants and

asylum seekers annually, and a maximum of 3,000 individuals at once. As stated by the Italian government, these detention centers will process only those immigrants captured solely by Italian authorities outside of Italian or other EU territorial waters. However, it was pointed out that vulnerable individuals such as children and pregnant women will not be subjected to this agreement. Furthermore, each center is provisioned to fulfill distinct purposes. Specifically, the Shengjin center, due to its proximity to the port, will facilitate the disembarkation, identification and asylum processes, whereas the Gjader center is intended to function as a detention and repatriation facility. Lastly, all procedures and operations will be subject to both Italian and European law, in total accordance with the human rights standards. (Amnesty International, 2024; Carrera et al., 2023).

Consequently, Italy will be responsible for both the establishment and coordination of these infrastructures, including legal and administrative procedures, economic and health support. On the other hand, Albanian authorities will only be responsible for regional security and guarding. Finally, the agreement was ratified by the Italian parliament in December 2023, whereas, the Albanian parliament, due to concerns about the agreement's constitutionality, ratified it two months later, in February 2024. (Bytyci, 2024). The implementation of the agreement is scheduled to begin its functionality by May 2024. (Amnesty International, 2024; Carrera et al., 2023).

Discussion: Human Rights Implications

As expected, this bilateral agreement faced strong criticism from a wide range of opposition parties, NGOs and several human rights organizations, particularly regarding its legitimacy and the possible violation of human dignity. According to both European and International Law, as well as principles and guidelines, Italy is obliged to protect the rights of people in distress, treat them humanely, and most importantly ensure their timely disembarkation. Nevertheless, according to the protocol, the disembarkation is provisioned to take place in the Shengjin center in Albania, which not only contradicts the aforementioned laws but also endangers peoples' safety and health. Undoubtedly, the agreement has also been accused of being driven by populist and nationalist motives, emphasizing strict border controls and the shift of migration and asylum policies into third countries, usually more disadvantaged. Lastly, apart from being accused of setting highly unrealistic objectives, this externalization effort also jeopardizes the violation of

the non-refoulement principle, the right to asylum seeking and prolonged detention. (Amnesty International, 2024; Carrera et al., 2023).

The agreement is a concrete example of how externalization policies are deeply influenced by populist narratives that prioritize national sovereignty and identity over fundamental human rights. The case study of the Italy-Albania agreement showcases that in times of crisis, national actors often weaponize ethnocentrism, especially when matters of discussion in the political arena concern controversial and fragmented policies, that appear to threaten member-states sovereignty. As it can be concluded, Italy, in the face of such pressures resorted to prioritizing national interest, highlighting the conflict between national sovereignty and supranational governance.

Following the 2015 migration crisis, the externalization of migration and asylum-seeking policies seemed like the only logical solution for both member states and the EU as a suis generis supranational actor. Nevertheless, externalization policies are not always a viable and long-term solution to these problems. Despite the fact that they seem to offer temporary relief from immigrational pressures, in the long run, new corridors and treacherous pathways are engraved, restoring pressures in their initial levels, and most importantly creating a perfect environment for the emergence of atrocities such as human trafficking, smuggling, slavery and torture, endangering people's lives. Solutions to such stalemates require a more comprehensive approach and can only be found through solidarity and enhanced cooperation between the EU and its member states in complete accordance with European and International conventions for fundamental human rights and dignity.

Conclusion

Being a frontier country of the European Union and positioned right into the heart of the Mediterranean Sea, Italy has always been a crossroad of continents, confronted with constant migration issues and unexpected crises. The developments in recent decades, and especially the migration crisis of 2015 created fertile ground for the emergence of ethnocentric rhetoric, the instrumentalization of nationalist sentiments and the subsequent amplification of polarization and euroscepticism. There is no question that as a democratic nation, Italy, and more specifically, each successive government, has to respond to society's demands. The need to cope with such demanding problems from the very beginning of its course as a modern state led Italy into a deeper search for new strategic innovations, even outside of its territorial borders. The case of the Italy-

Albania agreement is a representative example of this trajectory, that highlights not only the complexities of such strategies but also their long-term ineffectiveness. The analysis underlines the challenges that arise in the process of balancing often contradicting factors: national sovereignty, public discourse, and human rights obligations. Further research regarding this matter could only shed light on alternative methods of migration management that address both national concerns and prioritize collaborative and humanitarian initiatives.

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Social Media and National Solidarity: Rise of Ukrainian Language Use on Telegram During the Russo-Ukrainian War.

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Abstract

This study examines the notable linguistic change in the Ukrainian public sphere on popular political Telegram channels after the Russo-Ukrainian war escalated in February 2022. Despite official initiatives to promote the use of Ukrainian, Russian was historically important in Ukrainian media and public discourse. The study reveals a striking shift from Russian to Ukrainian language usage by examining over 290,000 posts from four of the most popular Ukrainian political Telegram channels between February 2022 and October 2024. The proportion of Ukrainian-language content increased from an average of 20% to over 95% across these channels. This tendency reflects a reinforcement of Ukrainian national solidarity and a collective response to external aggression. This highlights how social media platforms like Telegram serve as reflectors and amplifiers of societal transformations, offering valuable insights into the interplay between political crises, language use, and national solidarity in the digital age.

Keywords: Ukraine, Language Use, Telegram, Russo-Ukrainian War.

Introduction

More than half of Earth's population uses social media regularly, and this proportion is still growing (Kemp, 2022). The time usage of social media is also steadily on the rise, taking attention away from traditional media and leisure amenities. Emerging as tools for social interactions, social media platforms also serve as entertainment, news, and media platforms, aggregating a bigger audience than any traditional media outlet (Pew Research Center, 2024). For many, this becomes the primary source of political information (Newman et al., 2022, p. 11). The personalized nature of social media content and its rapid spread makes it influential in shaping collective identities, societal norms, and building solidarity.

The start of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war on February 24, 2022, has not only significantly changed geopolitics in Eastern Europe, but also fundamentally affected Ukrainian society. One significant consequence of this effect is an observable shift in language usage on social media platforms, particularly Telegram. Historically, both Russian and Ukrainian languages have coexisted in Ukraine, with Russian often dominating the media and public discourse (Bilaniuk, 2005, pp. 13-36). However, this political crisis has caused a greater focus on the importance of the Ukrainian language, especially as a symbol of national identity and resistance.

Telegram, with 900 million users globally, is particularly popular in Ukraine, and other post-Soviet states (Telegram, 2024). Its features, such as minimal censorship, ease of information spread, and the ability to create large public channels (authors united with their followers in one space), have made it a hub for news sharing, political mobilization, and community building during the conflict. Unlike other social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, X, or Facebook), Telegram's open policies create a space of unfiltered and raw communication. This makes it a unique case for studying the interplay between social media and national identity building during a political crisis.

Telegram's role in political mobilization and political protests has been extensively documented, highlighting its significance as a tool for communication and coordination under restrictive regimes. Telegram was used as a tool to coordinate decentralised protests in Hong Kong in 2019, enabling demonstrators to plan their activities covertly and avoid official monitoring (Su et al., 2022; Urman et al., 2021). Similarly, Telegram channels emerged as the main means of protest planning and unfiltered news distribution in Belarus following the disputed 2020 presidential election, successfully bypassing state-run media and internet shutdowns (Gabowitsch, 2021; Mateo, 2022; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). In Russia, despite governmental attempts to ban

Telegram, it has remained a crucial platform for opposition figures and activists to mobilize supporters, share dissenting opinions, and organize rallies (Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019; Herasimenka, 2022). These cases demonstrate contemporary Telegram's political influence, underscoring its capacity to organize protests, foster solidarity, and challenge traditional media in the spread of the information.

This study examines the quantitative shift in language use on prominent Ukrainian political Telegram channels since the escalation of the war. Statistical observations indicate a significant transition from the dominance of Russian language content to a prevalent use of the Ukrainian language in posts and media. This linguistic shift is not only a change of communication preferences, but reflects a reinforcement of Ukrainian national identity in response to external aggression.

Understanding this phenomenon is crucial in grasping the nature of the identity formation process and changing societal norms in response to the political crisis. Also, it highlights the role of social media as a reflector and amplifier of these transformations. Lastly, it contributes to the larger discourse on how social media platforms affect areas including political mobilization, opinion formation, and communication.

The purpose of the article is to investigate how language use on public Telegram channels indicates the relationship between the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the rise of Ukrainian national identity. By analyzing text data from the most popular political channels and visualizing the linguistic trends through wartime, it seeks to illustrate how the political crisis can influence linguistic expressions in social media. In particular, the prevalence of Russian and Ukrainian language use in political Telegram channels will be examined.

Language as an aspect of National and Political Identity

Language is a central element of identity, acting as the glue between expression, belonging, history, and ideology. The Russo-Ukrainian war presents a compelling case where language, specifically Ukrainian, has become central to the discourse of national identity and solidarity. Ukrainian language has come to be associated with national independence and autonomous statehood, standing in resistance to Russian influence. The emphasis on the Ukrainian language demonstrates how a linguistic issue can have a political significance, covering themes of nationhood and political identity (Kulyk, 2016, p. 91).

National identity refers to a shared sense of belonging to a particular group, often constructed through inherited elements, e.g., history, culture, and language. Benedict Anderson's (1991, p. 134) theory of "imagined communities" and claim that "print-language invents nationalism" explain how shared language fosters national solidarity and creates a sense of belonging that binds people who have never met in person. Through language, people participate in a collective narrative, allowing them to place themselves within the broader social structures with shared goals and beliefs. This collective narrative is especially prominent in times of political crises, as language becomes a symbol of unity, resilience, and independence (Sereda, 2016, pp. 8-15).

Throughout history, nations used languages to foster their collective identities and to differentiate themselves from external influence. For instance, the rebirth of Hebrew in Israel is an example of how language can play a formative role in nation-building. Hebrew, once a primarily religious language, has been used as a unifying language of Israel state for all members of the multilingual Jewish Diaspora and therefore constructed a unique Israeli identity separate from Jewish identities worldwide (Spolsky & Shohami, 1999, p. 10).

Moreover, language is a potential marker of political identity, often defining who belongs to a particular ideological or cultural group and who does not. Political identity encompasses a group's alignment with specific political ideologies, values, and movements. Therefore, if language is associated with political beliefs and partisanships, it becomes more than a means of communication. For example, in Belgium, language choice between French and Dutch has indicated political allegiance, leading to political tensions and regional divisions within the country. In this case, the languages were drawing political borders, in which different political communities pursued their own cultural and political goals (Von Busekist, 2005, p. 155).

Language and national identity are closely intertwined. Thereby language plays the role of a marker of collective identity that separates one group from another. Moreover, it can be "a central thing around which the nation is organized" (Bonvillain, 2016, p. 318). In Ukraine, this becomes a rallying point to organize a nation against Russian aggression, serving as a marker of solidified community. Recent studies show that the language forms a significant component of national identity in Ukraine, especially in regions where the dominance of the Russian language was historically pronounced (Kulyk, 2018, pp. 128-134; Yarotska, 2024).

Russian and Ukrainian Languages in Ukraine

Although Ukraine could be classified as a bilingual country, as both Ukrainian and Russian are spoken on its territory (Pidkuimukha, 2022, p. 2), historically, the status of those languages has reflected broader political and social processes. In the early 1920s in the Soviet Era, a policy of "korenizatsiia" (indigenization) had taken place, promoting national languages among the indigenous population in Soviet Republics. Therefore, the Ukrainian language was promoted in the territory of Ukraine (Martin, 2001, pp. 75-122). Later, since the Stalinist period in the 1930s, the Russian language was systematically introduced in public sphere, e.g., in education and administration, offering wider opportunities for social mobility (Slezkine, 1994, p. 443).

Soviet language policy in Ukraine was characterized by a systematic promotion of the Russian language, leading to increased Russification. Russian was emphasized as the language of interethnic communication and was associated with modernization and social mobility (Bilaniuk, 2005, pp. 43-45). Ukrainian, while still taught in schools, was often marginalized in higher education, urban areas, and government administration (Pavlenko, 2008, p. 282). By the end of this era, Russian had become the dominant language in major cities such as Kyiv, Kharkov, and Odessa, where it was the primary language of communication in public life and the workplace (Arel, 1995, p. 598). In contrast, Ukrainian remained more prevalent in rural areas and western regions of the country, where it was preserved as the language of daily life and cultural traditions (Kulyk, 2011).

After gaining its independent statehood in 1991, the Ukrainian government endeavored to restore the Ukrainian language at the state level, emphasizing it as a symbol of national autonomy and identity (Bever, 2011, p. 2). In addition, there have been various policies promoting the Ukrainian language in public life, schools, universities, and documentation (Kulyk, 2013, p. 283). Despite these initiatives, the Russian language remained highly prevalent and influential, particularly in the Eastern and Southern regions where most of the people still communicated primarily in Russian (Kulyk, 2016).

Figure 1: *Language of communication at home*
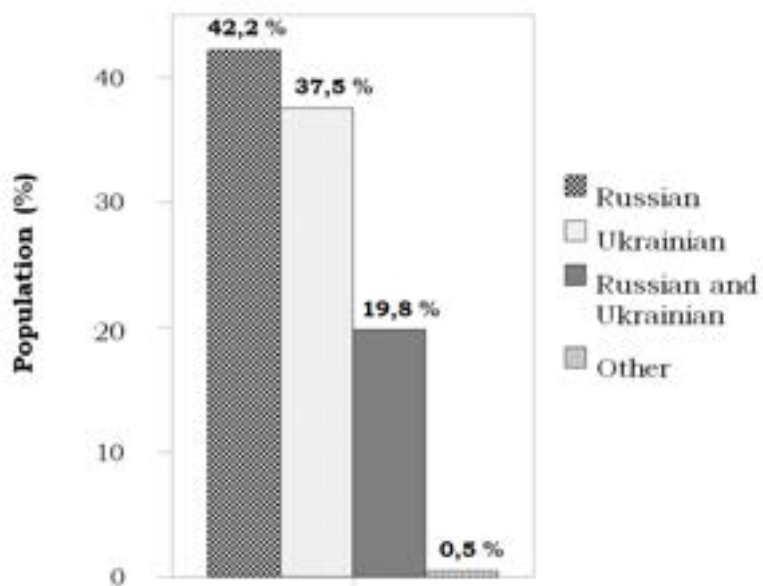
Note: Figure reproduced from Shevchenko, 2015, Data from UCEPS, 2002.

Figure 2: *Language of communication at work*
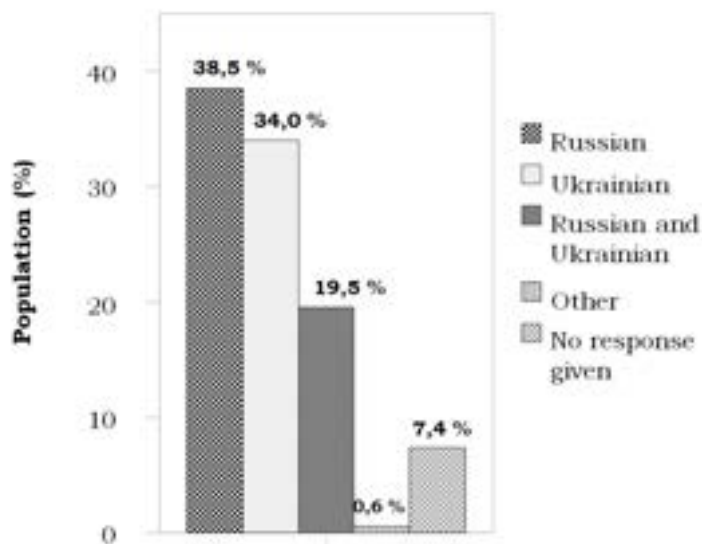
Note: Language of communication at work. Figure reproduced from Shevchenko, 2015, Data from UCEPS, 2002.

Figure 3: *The share of citizens for whom Ukrainian is their native language*
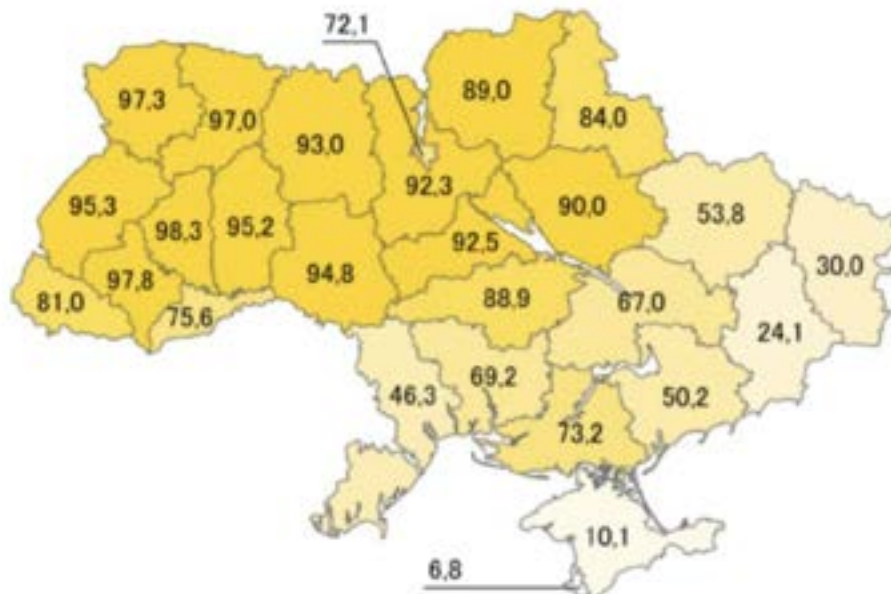
Note: Figure reproduced from Verbytska et al., 2023, Data from All-Ukrainian Population Census 2001.

      After the Russian annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian state introduced legislative measures to ensure the primacy of the Ukrainian language. Legislation in 2017 solidified Ukrainian as the main language of instruction in educational institutions (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2017). Later, in 2019, the use of Ukrainian language in public administration, services, and the media was additionally regulated by amendments to the state law (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2019).

      Public opinion has also turned in favor of the Ukrainian language. Surveys conducted after 2014 show that the number of people who consider Ukrainian their main language has increased (Sereda, 2016) , and civic-minded citizens considered Ukrainian as a national symbol (Henke, 2021, p. 10). However, despite this trend, Russian continued to hold cultural and practical significance for many, particularly in Russian-speaking communities, indicating that the shift toward Ukrainian as a national symbol was significant but not comprehensive or final.

      While post-2014 policies have strengthened the role of the Ukrainian language in state affairs, they have also exposed linguistic divisions, especially in the eastern and southern regions (Kulyk, 2016). These regions, in which the Russian language historically prevailed, have had

problems adapting to the growing promotion of the Ukrainian language, leading to ongoing tensions. In cities such as Kharkov and Odessa, Russian is still widely used in everyday communication and some residents perceive this shift as marginalization, arguing that their cultural identity is closely tied to the Russian language. This view emphasizes that while Ukrainian language promotion is gaining momentum at the national level, full linguistic unification remained difficult (Arel, 2018).

The language situation in Ukraine has been increasingly complicated and is still changing since the full-scale war began in February 2022. In an effort to strengthen Ukrainian national identity and lessen Russian cultural influence, the Ukrainian government has increased intensified derussification. In fact, these practices also included removals of monuments associated with Russian historical figures, renaming streets and public spaces that bear Russian names (Gironi, 2023), and promoting the exclusive use of Ukrainian in official settings. Furthermore, an additional legislation was introduced to limit the use of the Russian language in education, media, and public administration (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2022; Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). While many Ukrainians view these actions as necessary steps towards expressing national sovereignty and independence, they have also raised concerns about the rights of Russian-speaking citizens and the potential for deepening societal divisions (Mick, 2023, p. 147). Although the situation remains fluid, and it is challenging to draw definitive conclusions while the country is still in a state of war.

Empirical Analysis

Telegram is a cloud-based messenger application, that combines features of secure and private messaging with public broadcasting functionalities. Unlike other social media platforms, such as X or Facebook, which primarily focus on user-generated content sharing and social networking, Telegram offers a unique blend of features. It supports group messaging with up to 200,000 members, and channels that allow for one-way broadcasting to unlimited audiences (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022, pp 128-129). That makes Telegram an effective tool for disseminating information to large groups or people. Moreover, Telegram's minimal content moderation and resistance to censorship provide a relatively unfiltered place for communication, contrasting with the more regulated environments of other platforms.

This study focuses on Telegram channels that function as communities for news sharing and political discourse among Ukrainian users. These channels act as hubs where individuals can access real-time updates, share information, and engage with content related to the ongoing military conflict. By analyzing these channels, this paper aims to identify patterns and changes in language use that reflect broader societal changes and identity formation processes within Ukrainian society. Specifically, by examining the prevalence of Ukrainian over Russian languages within these communities, the language choice signifies alignment with a certain national identity.

The most followed Ukrainian public Telegram channels covering political topics were identified using the web service TGStat – https://uk.tgstat.com/politics. The following four channels were selected as the most relevant due to their focus on merely political content:

Table 1: *List of public Ukrainian Telegram channels*

Link	Original Name	Name in English	Number of Followers
t.me/truexanewsua	Труха⚡Україна	Truekha⚡Ukraine	2,568,276
t.me/lachentyt	Лачен пише	Lachen writes	1,528,274
t.me/u_now	Україна Сейчас | УС: новини, політика, війна	Ukraine Now | UN: news, politics, war	1,322,555
t.me/okoo_ua	Всевидящее ОКО | Украина	The All-Seeing Eye | Ukraine	1,126,540

They primarily disseminate political news, provide real-time updates on military and emergency situations, offer information on humanitarian aid, and analyze ongoing political developments. Due to their extensive reach and similar content focus, these channels potentially attract a largely overlapping audience of Ukrainian users who seek timely and reliable information about the war and its societal impacts. Telegram's platform restrictions limit access to detailed demographic and engagement data for large public channels, making it difficult to differentiate specific audience segments or to assess how various these user groups are.

Next, all publications since 24th February 2024 were extracted from those channels in .JSON format using Telegram API for further data analysis. This data collection method ensures that a substantial amount of content was gathered for quantitative analysis. However, there are

limitations to this approach. For instance, the analysis excludes private channels and groups, as well as smaller or emerging public channels. Furthermore, the data analysis was limited to text-based posts, excluding multimedia content such as images, videos, or voice messages, which may also contain significant elements pertinent to the study.

Table 2

Name in English	Number of posts N
Truekha⚡Ukraine	72,351
Lachen writes	40,089
Ukraine Now | UN: news, politics, war	123,366
The All-Seeing Eye | Ukraine	55,536

Datasets were meticulously prepared for data analysis using the R programming language. The initial step involved cleaning the data by removing any rows that lacked textual information and eliminating unnecessary columns to focus on relevant measures. To accurately identify the language of each post, I utilized the "cld2" (Compact Language Detector 2) library. The "cld2" library employs a probabilistic model based on n-gram analysis, which examines sequences of characters to determine the language of a given text. Specifically, it categorizes each message as either "ru" for Russian or "uk" for Ukrainian by detecting unique linguistic patterns and character distributions inherent to these languages, being effective in processing both formal and informal linguistic expressions. However, it is important to note that the "cld2" library is limited to processing only textual data, meaning it cannot analyze non-textual elements such as images, videos, or multimedia content within the posts.

Following language identification, the messages were further organized by their month and year of publication to facilitate temporal analysis. The proportion of Russian and Ukrainian language usage was then calculated for each channel on a monthly basis, providing insights into language trends over time. To effectively visualize these trends, I employed the "ggplot2" library, which enabled the creation of comprehensive graphs. These visualizations illustrated the fluctuations in language use by time.

Figure 4: *Language Use Prevalence Over Time in the Telegram Channels*
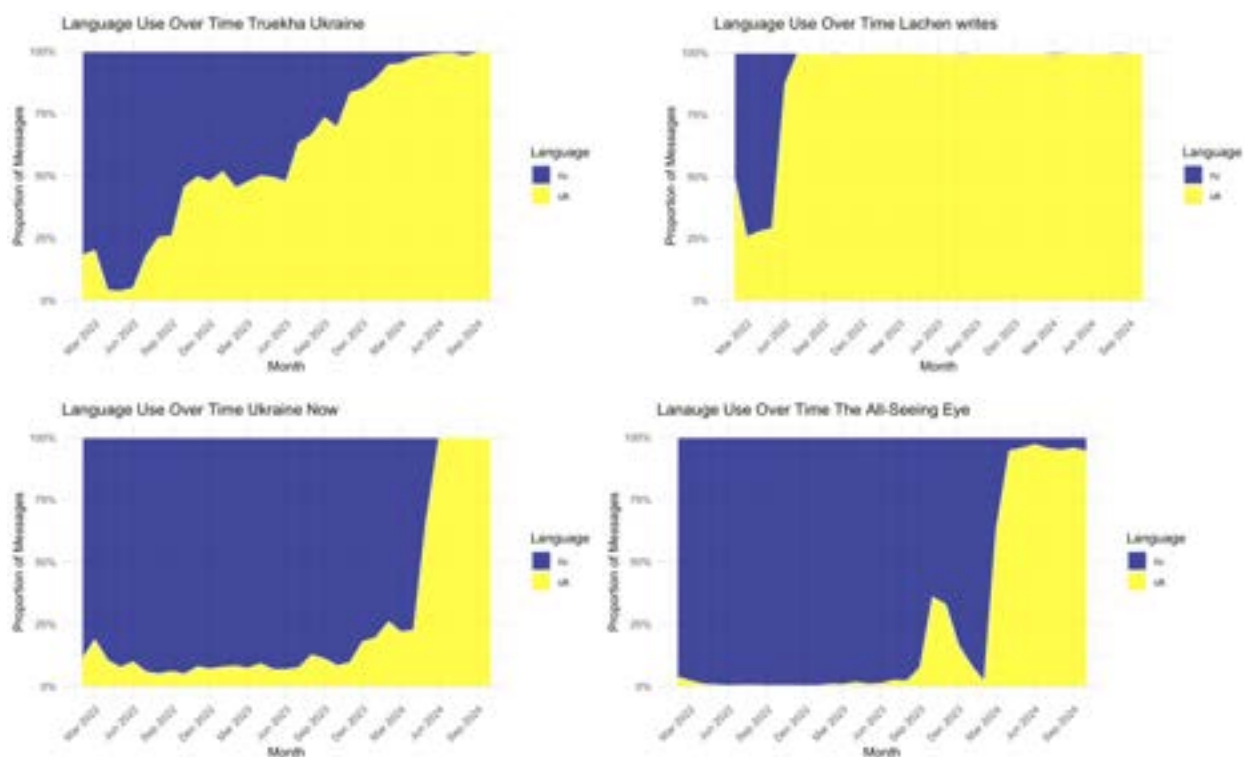
Although the dynamics of language change in the above channels are different, the general pattern is applicable to all cases. At the time of the outbreak of full-scale war, Russian remained the main language of publications in Ukraine's most popular Telegram political channels. However, after two and a half years, the situation has changed tremendously and now Ukrainian dominates as the language of publications.

Table 3

Name in English	Proportion of "ru" in Feb'22	Proportion of "uk" in Feb'22	Proportion of "ru" in Oct'24	Proportion of "uk" in Oct'24
Truekha ⚡ Ukraine	0.82	0.18	0.00	1.00
Lachen writes	0.52	0.48	0.01	0.99
Ukraine Now | UN: news, politics, war	0.89	0.11	0.01	0.99

The All-Seeing Eye	Ukraine	0.96	0.04	0.06	0.94

Conclusion

The research reveals a significant shift from a dominance of Russian-language content to a prevalent use of the Ukrainian language in the most prominent Ukrainian political Telegram channels. Initially, at the onset of the full-scale war in February 2022, the Russian language remained the primary language of publications in the most followed channels. However, by October 2024, Ukrainian had overwhelmingly become the dominant language, with its proportions reaching up to 99% in some cases.

The linguistic shift to the Ukrainian language on social media is more than a mere change in preferences. It does reflect a reinforcement of Ukrainian national identity in response to the external aggression and the willingness of Ukrainians to insulate themselves from Russian influence. The widespread adoption of the Ukrainian language on social media platforms symbolises national solidarity, unity, and resistance. It underscores how language functions as a powerful element of national identity, acting as a means of both expressing and belonging.

However, these findings also raise important questions about the broader linguistic landscape in Ukraine. Does the current dominance of the Ukrainian language on these Telegram channels indicate a comprehensive shift in language preference among all Ukrainian citizens? Or does it reflect a self-selecting bias, where Russian-speaking users may have migrated to other channels or platforms that continue to use Russian as the primary language of communication?

These open questions point to the possibility that while the Ukrainian language has become prevalent in online communities, particularly those associated with national identity and political discourse, Russian may still hold significance for many Ukrainians. It suggests that Russian-speaking users might not participate in mainstream political communities or choose other platforms where their preferences are maintained. Future studies could investigate whether some niche Russian-speaking Ukrainian communities have emerged or migrated to other platforms. Additionally, qualitative research involving user interviews could provide insight into individual language choices and the motivations behind them.

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Local Responses to Global Humanitarian Crises: Grassroots and Mutual Aid Perspective

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Abstract

With the increasing intensity of humanitarian crises, the efficient implementation of humanitarian responses becomes more challenging. While humanitarianism is enacted through the guiding principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence, organisations often still become entangled in bureaucratic, political, and economic constraints influencing how, where, and what aid is introduced. This paper examines how grassroot organisations navigate the broader humanitarian system and how ow they address needs that larger institutions often overlook and overcome the limitations of institutionalized humanitarian frameworks. Through community-driven initiatives, humanitarian discourse is shifted towards more need-based humanitarianism. Findings suggest that grassroots networks challenge the traditional top-down humanitarian model and ensure that aid efforts are rooted in the actual needs of the affected. This underscores the importance of inclusive, bottom-up strategies to reshape humanitarian discourse and ensure aid that is both relevant and equitable.

Keywords: Humanitarianism, Humanitarian Crises, Grassroots Organisations, War, Conflict, Refugees.

Introduction

Despite significant improvements in preparedness to respond to crises, the risk of disasters and humanitarian crises has grown globally over the past decade (European Commission. Joint Research Centre, 2024)**.** Humanitarian assistance presents the response to these crises. It aims to save lives, prevent suffering, and uphold human dignity (Humanitarian Principles, 2024)**.** Humanitarianism is guided by four principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Humanity drives the goal to alleviate suffering and help people in need. Impartiality should ensure that humanitarian actions are based on needs, without discrimination based on race, nationality, gender, religious beliefs, political opinion, or class. Neutrality requires that humanitarian actors do not take side in conflicts or engage in political, racial, religious or ideological controversies. Independence mandates that humanitarian actors remain autonomous, free from political, economic, or other non-humanitarian influences. The actors in humanitarian aid include states, who for example provide asylum to refugees, international organisations, who distribute funds and define the mechanisms of humanitarianism, such as the four principles, NGOs, who implement humanitarian assistance, and ordinary citizens performing assistance to each other.

Through these multiple subjects being active in the humanitarian landscape, humanitarianism seems to be operating within a complex network of international and local organisations. According to Barnett (2010), this landscape has an inherently top-down nature, where institutions are formulated within the bigger organisations and implemented downwards. This creates a humanitarian order (ibid. 2) where the different actors must adhere to established rules, norms, and values. Funding and resources inside the humanitarian system are distributed from the top to the smaller organisations. This raises critical questions about who has the authority to decide what actions will be implemented during a crisis, and what is deemed as a priority. Therefore, despite the aim to be apolitical, humanitarian actions risks being influenced by political and economic factors.

The principle of humanity creates an aura of moral untouchability around humanitarian action, linked to feelings of solidarity and compassion (Fassin, 2012). Humanitarian assistance appears always righteous as it aims to help people. This moral high ground makes it difficult to criticise the effectiveness and motivations behind humanitarian actions, as highlighted by Fassin, who argues that we experience an epistemological shift within the humanitarian discourse. Through the "language of compassion" (ibid. 6) suffering is emphasized over systemic issues such

as injustice and inequality. This shift influences what aid is introduced and how it is delivered, legitimizing humanitarian action under the guise of the humanitarian argument.

With its focus on compassion, humanitarian actions prioritize sustaining the humanitarian system (Cullen Dunn & Kaliszewska, 2023) over addressing the actual needs of the affected. Investments are often made inadequately, and the provided assistance is late, inappropriate, and insufficient (Gingerich & Cohen, 2015). The individual, for which humanitarian aid is intended for, moves out of the spotlight. Performing humanitarianism becomes more important than meeting actual needs. At the heart of this discourse, we seem to encounter re-evaluations on power dynamics and authority within humanitarian aid organisations.

Recent scholarship (Cullen Dunn & Kaliszewska, 2023; Fechter & Schwittay, 2019) has increasingly emphasized the role of grassroots humanitarianism in challenging existing power dynamics. In this paper I will examine how grassroot humanitarianism and mutual aid networks manage to bypass political and economic influences. I argue that these forms of uninstitutionalised aid manage to address actual needs and therefore draw away from the language of compassion and escape the humanitarian discourse. Through a literature review I aim to identify the major themes inherent in the humanitarian discourse. By analysing three specific cases of grassroot humanitarianism and mutual aid networks, I ask how grassroot organisations navigate inside the humanitarian discourse. How they manage to escape the discourse. What possibilities and solutions they offer for the broader humanitarian discourse to promote a more need based and effective approach to aid.

Methodology

To investigate the research question, I will use a comprehensive mix of data to enable a detailed and multi-layered analysis. I will use the critical discourse analysis approach to analyse literature reviews, qualitative interviews, and media contributions such as podcasts and articles. Critical discourse analysis is an advanced method of discourse analysis that explicitly deals with power and inequality relations. It attempts to analyse the connection between linguistic means and discursive actions as well as their interaction with political, social, and institutional reality (van Dijk, 1993). Discourses not only reflect social relations but also actively co-constitute them (Jäger 1993: 19). On the basis of a literature review, I want to determine the dominant discourses and analyse how these discourses reproduce or challenge power relations. I pursue a connection

between theory and practice, whereby the analysis is not only theoretically based, but also aims at practical, socially transformative action. I achieve this by analysing three different case studies. The case studies serve as examples to show where there are opportunities to step out of the discourse and where there are risks of reproducing power relations.

The first case study relates to research on Swiss asylum policy that I conducted in 2022 as part of a research exercise at the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Bern. Central to the current work is an interview with Mark, the founder and project manager of a humanitarian organisation in Bern that is committed to the integration of refugees. During this research, I was active as a volunteer for the association and worked closely with the people for whom humanitarian aid is intended. The second case study concerns another interview. My interviewee, Peter, founded a humanitarian organisation in Odessa during the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This interview will provide insights into how grassroots humanitarianism emerges at the margins of bureaucratic procedures and processes, enabling a faster introduction of aid in conflict zones. In the third case study, I will analyse a podcast[1] (Fundira, n.d.) about mutual aid networks in Sudan. It encompasses a talk between a journalist from 'The New Humanitarian,' an independent newsroom, Hajooj Kuka, a humanitarian worker and external communications officer for the Khartoum State emergency response rooms (ERR)[2], and Francesco Bonanome, a humanitarian affairs officer with UNOCHA[3] Sudan. The podcast discusses the humanitarian situation in the civil war in Sudan and the integration of mutual aid networks into the humanitarian market.

By coding the transcripts of the interviews and the podcast, I will identify overarching themes and analyse how these themes form narratives and relate to the discourse in humanitarianism. Through this methodological approach, it is possible to gain an in-depth understanding of the discourses in the field of grassroots humanitarianism and mutual aid and to analyse their influence on humanitarian practice.

Literature review

In this literature review, I will focus on identifying and analysing the key themes that emerge within the humanitarian discourse. Examining how these themes influence the principles

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[1] The podcast is published on the independent newsroom 'The New Humanitarian'

[2] Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) relate to mutual aid networks in the Sudan civil war

[3] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

and practices of humanitarian action will reveal the complexities and potential contradictions inherent in the field. The review will serve in establishing a theoretical framework, through which the case studies can be analysed.

The evolution of humanitarian action has been marked by shifts in discourse and narrative, particularly regarding the portrayal of human suffering. According to Fassin (2012), there has been a transition towards what he terms the "language of compassion," where the focus has shifted from articulating injustice to emphasizing suffering. This shift has profound implications for how humanitarian interventions are framed and justified. Underlying issues such as injustices and inequalities risk to be overshadowed. Interventions are not introduced to meet the people's needs, rather they are performed for the purpose of humanitarian acts. The change in meaning leads thus to the legitimization of humanitarian actions through the humanitarian argument (Fassin 2012: 7).

Fassin's critique leads us to examine how humanitarian strategies are implemented by the actors on the ground. One prevailing approach to humanitarian aid delivery is institutionalised top-down development. Policies and interventions are formulated by organisations and implemented downward. The actors involved in performing this institutionalised aid play diverse roles in providing assistance, shaping policies and influencing the discourse around humanitarianism. Although most of these agencies claim to be nonprofit organisations, functioning outside the logics of capitalism and capital accumulation, they often operate as if they were capitalist (Cullen Dunn and Kaliszewska 2023: 21). They rely on fundraising processes, which involves raising new funds for every new crisis. These processes are time intensive, the donors demand transparency of the money flow, which pushes the organisations to provide aid that meets the donors demand for transparency as well as the efficient use of financial resources (ibid. 22). Here we enter a political economy of aid, where the upkeep of the organisation through economic flows becomes more important than covering the aid affected people actually need (ibid. 19).

On the surface, humanitarian action is guided by the principles of impartiality, neutrality, and humanity, aimed at providing assistance to those in need without regard to political considerations. While it purports to be impartial and neutral, humanitarian action is inevitably shaped by political, economic, and social factors. The allocation of resources, prioritization of interventions, and access to aid are often influenced by geopolitical interests, donor agendas, and power dynamics, undermining the ideal of impartiality (see Barnett, 2010; Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2014).

In the traditional landscape of humanitarian research, academia predominantly focuses on established actors, particularly large NGOs, and governmental organisations. However, a notable shift has occurred in recent years, with increasing attention directed towards grassroots humanitarianism (Cullen Dunn & Kaliszewska, 2023; Fechter & Schwittay, 2019; OECD, 2019; Roepstorff, 2020). This emerging trend highlights the growing engagement of ordinary citizens and less formalized, non-professional groups in humanitarian practices.

These smaller agencies often emerge out of crisis situations. The locally affected individuals are the first on the scene and therefore the first to initiate humanitarian action (Fechter and Schwittay 2019: 1770). This sort of aid forms informal practices that occupy and function mainly at the margins of the larger humanitarian apparatus. They often operate independently of institutions and bureaucracy and position themselves vis-à-vis more institutionalized forms of aid.

Harrell-Bond (2002) argues that an asymmetrical relationship arises when performing humanitarian work for individuals, especially for people on the move. Humanitarian aid workers assume a role of authority by acting as donors of humanitarian aid. They possess something that the affected, who are reduced to the role of victims and are thus only known through their hardships (Colson 2003: 2), need. They are made dependent on the recipient – donor relationship and are symbolically disempowered (Harrell-Bond 2002: 55). The humanitarian workers gain authority and power over the recipients.

Themes that emerge from the literature about humanitarian assistance concern an overall shift in the discourse. Through the focus on compassion rather than injustices, the visibility and morality of aid are prioritized over its effectiveness or relevance to those it aims to serve (Fassin 2012: 7). Humanitarian actors are operating within a humanitarian order where they must adhere to rules, norms, and practices that govern humanitarian action (Barnett 2010). The policies and interventions are formulated by bigger organisations and implemented downwards. Therefore, , we experience an institutionalized humanitarianism, with an inherently top-down nature. The interventions risk not taking the actual needs of the affected people into account and only serve the upkeep of the organisation through economic flows, addressing the humanitarian market and the political economy of aid rather than actual needs (Cullen Dunn and Kaliszewska 2023). Despite the top-down nature of humanitarian actions, we still see an emerging grassroots humanitarianism. The locally affected individuals are the first to initiate action and interventions. Even though the inclusion and strengthening of local actors is a key theme and goal inside the humanitarian

discourse (Roepstorff 2020: 285), the implementation to strengthen those actors and to address issues of unequal power relations and inefficiency does not seem as easy.

To examine if these themes found in the literature correspond and translate to humanitarian action on the ground, I will use case studies to explore specific instances of humanitarian response. These case studies will help to determine whether the identified themes — such as the shift towards compassion, the top-down implementation of aid, and the role of grassroots initiatives — are reflected in real-world practices and outcomes. Through this analysis, we can better understand the practical implications of the current humanitarian discourse and its effectiveness in meeting the needs of affected populations. At the same time, we will explore the possibilities grassroot humanitarianism and mutual aid networks offer to step out of the dominant discourse.

Case Study I

In this first case study, the centre of attention is set on an interview with Mark, the project manager of an association that is committed to the social integration of refugees. The association is located in Bern and is organised entirely through volunteer work. It is led by local community members and refugees who run various activities, which include German lessons, German tutoring, assistance with job applications, computer courses, playing games together, and generally creating space for basic and daily needs. The focus doesn't lie on organised courses with regulated structures and hierarchies, but on a relaxed get-together where everyone should feel comfortable and welcome.

I define the association as a grassroots organisation because there is no top-down institutionalisation. On the contrary, the association's field of activity advocates for a bottom-up approach. Refugees are asked what they need, and the programme is adapted accordingly. The organisation operates independently from government agencies, large NGOs, or corporate interests and maintains autonomy in decision-making processes and prioritises community needs over external agendas.

The conducted interview sheds light on the intricacies of organisational structures and the implementation strategies of humanitarian aid in the form of providing asylum to refugees. My interviewee talks about how the asylum system exacerbates the often already strained mental state of refugees. He says that the refugees are not met where they actually are, making them even "sicker." The institutions inside the asylum system are responsible for this and ultimately make

successful integration impossible. Mark pointed out that this way of integration reflects what the majority of the population supports and what the state, as a humanitarian body, is willing to fund. There seems to be a misalignment between the policies handling the integration of asylum seekers and the actual needs of refugees.

The main theme that emerges is the endangered participation of those affected. What the refugees truly need is not discussed in a participatory and inclusive manner. In this discourse, people in the asylum system are portrayed as having no power to influence what would improve their situation.

For Mark, volunteering presents itself as an independent form of humanitarian aid. Volunteers have the freedom to determine what they deem useful without being constrained by the larger humanitarian governance, which considers political and financial interests. This independence allows the grassroots organisation to address aspects that are not recognized otherwise.

One important aspect of what they try to do in the association is to blur the boundary between helper and help recipient by integrating the refugees as volunteers. The association includes the refugees in the humanitarian aid instead of excluding them, with refugees performing humanitarian aid themselves in the form of establishing a communal sense of togetherness and inclusivity for other refugees. Therefore, the association positions itself on the side of the people they accompany, promoting a relationship built on trust between the workers in the association and the people coming there. This ability to build deep and personal relationships allows for a better understanding of the core issues.

Case Study II

The second case study concerns a humanitarian grassroot organisation founded during the outbreak of Ukraine war in Odessa. Peter, originally from Bern, found himself amidst a humanitarian crisis when he was visiting friends and family in Ukraine in winter 2022. Surrounded by displaced people in need, he started his own form of helping by networking on social media. He began to build a platform where those who provide help can contact those who need help, and an organisation started to build. He began collecting funds, mainly through social media through donors from Switzerland, so that he could directly support local actors.

Peter admitted that he is horrible with paperwork. With no regard for bureaucratic procedures, he let the funds first run through his private bank account then through the one of his friends, and eventually establishing an association account. People active in politics started to support him and his fund raising. The organisation started to take on a bigger dimension. More funds were gathered from bigger personalities in Switzerland. Back in Odessa, he started supporting local actors and organisations with the funds he raised.

The story of Peter illustrates several core themes that are reflective of larger issues within humanitarian aid efforts: the agility of grassroots initiatives, the empowerment of local actors, and the risks of delivering aid in conflict zones. The following interview excerpts offer insights on the dynamic landscape of humanitarian aid during crisis.

"We were promised by the Red Cross or some other organisation, they would bring a roof, this is fine. But it's not fine, the roof has to be here now, so I quickly went to buy one and I put it there. I said, the other roof from them can then be put next to it. But the roof never came. A lot of things were promised, from many organisations. Help was promised but it never arrived, out of bureaucracy reasons. Or it arrived way too late."

The grassroots approach allows for more flexibility and independence from the slow operational tempo of larger organisations. This theme is illustrated by Peter's ability to adapt quickly to changing situations, such as purchasing and installing a roof immediately when larger organisations failed to deliver on their promises.

"[…] but then when we needed [the help] at the beginning they weren't there. Exactly these quick interventions, this is this what… yeah, what really was needed. People from big organisations told me, people like you are needed, such small independent people, who just put in the effort. Who forward information. For example, are intervening and saying, 'hey we can do that like this.' And who are also taking risks, which they cannot take. People who went to help in Ukraine, some of them were evacuating and put their life on the line. They wanted that. You cannot expect that from a worker from the Red Cross."

Here the interviewee highlights the willingness of local volunteers to take significant risks, including putting their own lives on the line. This portrays a harsh reality of working in conflict zones. Professional workers from NGO's cannot be expected to put their life on the line. The professionals do not have the same affiliation with the place and people. For the locals putting in the effort into humanitarian work means so save their kin, community, and home. This theme highlights the personal commitment and bravery involved in grassroots efforts.

"The Red Cross and others, they started to hire people, locals. But it was always taking some time. Until they facilitated structures. And in a war… you know when you have a storm somewhere and it is over, you can go there and easy tidy up. But in a war you never know what happens. […] this is also really difficult for the big organisations. They want to build something and suddenly it just gets occupied. […] and I am flexible. When I noticed I can do something there, I went there. And I mainly supported the local people and the local NGO's. […] sometimes I did stuff myself and sometimes I just supported and they also knew better, what has to be done. This is also a thing. They were all disappointed from those big organisations. I heard it the whole time for eight months. Where is our help? Who is helping us?"

In conflict situations, the need for rapid response highlights the limitations of bureaucratic processes in traditional aid organisations. Those often delay or prevent timely aid delivery. This issue underscores the advantages of grassroots organisations, which, due to their less structured nature, can respond more quickly and effectively.

Another important theme in this excerpt is the involvement of local actors. Peter emphasizes the importance of knowledge and expertise of the locals, who inherently understand their own as well as their community's needs better than outsiders. My interviewee is performing direct interventions while working with the people inhabiting the affected area. He himself is on site and able to access what is needed. When he doesn't know or can't assess it himself, he asks and supports the people there, with what they need specifically. This is highlighting the significant advantages of local empowerment in humanitarian responses.

While questioning my interlocutor about the relationship between humanitarian workers and aid receivers and the hierarchies this relationship can constitute, a narrative about the

complexities of power dynamics and the personal awareness of those dynamics within humanitarian efforts emerges. Peter acknowledges the inherent power dynamics present in humanitarian aid, where volunteers and workers naturally assume a position of authority. But his narrative contains a contradiction. When asked about where he has seen these dynamics, he puts the focus away from the humanitarian workers on to the aid receivers. He says, he is feeling sorry for the people he helps, which highlights a strong empathy for those in need. However, at the same time he puts an emphasis on the gratefulness of aid recipients. This forms a narrative which goes along the line of the language of compassion. Through the depiction of my interviewee, the receivers of humanitarian aid are portrayed as poor and helpless. Here, we find a narrative, where the informant justifies himself and his actions. It portrays an ideology, that he is the one who helped them, that he is the benefactor, who supports the people who are suffering. This representation strips aid recipients of their agency and reinforces the saviour complex in aid providers. It perpetuates the donor-recipient narrative, where the latter are seen as passive and dependent.

Case Study III

Due to the ongoing civil war in Sudan nearly 10 million people have been forcibly displaced and over 2 million have fled the country. The fighting between the two military factions has claimed thousands of lives and created a major humanitarian crisis (UNHCR, 2024). Because of safety reasons international NGOs and the United Nations were forced to evacuate most their staff in spring 2023 when fighting escalated (Abbas and Abdalhadi 2023: 5). Due to the lack of outside help and interventions the only thing the Sudanese people could do was to help themselves. This led to the formation of decentralised mutual aid networks - known as Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), which are "self-organised, volunteer-driven hubs at neighbourhood and locality level which provide aid and support to area residents and the internally displaced" (ibid. 6). The key function of ERRs comes down to the provision of basic medical care and food, making these things accessible through networking, mobilising, and problem solving (ibid. 7).

ERRs are mainly financed through contributions from their volunteers and communities. Some of them were able to reach international attention and draw in donations from outside the country through social media channels (ibid. 9). But as these means of financing are limited, ERRs hope to receive from international funds from international NGOS and the United Nations (ibid.

9). These external funds can only be received once the emergency rooms have been officially registered with the Sudanese government's Humanitarian Affairs Commission, receiving a legal status for carrying out humanitarian activities. Although registration might bring some benefits, the process is extensive and slow. It risks bringing the organisations under control by the state forcing them to become more hierarchical in structure and loosing autonomy (ibid. 10).

To further explore the dynamics of the decentralized efforts of ERRs, we turn to an excerpt from the podcast. This excerpt provides an example of how community-led initiatives naturally evolve to address immediate needs.

Kuka: "[…] the first thing that started wasn't lack of food, it was lack of cooking gas, and we needed to cook together. And that's when we went down to a school and people started cooking. The first example was in Ombada, and then people started copying it. Women started cooking, and then people started doing different activities, and there was a women's break room that started. And then slowly, we started noticing when we started having a protection group, is that the women's break room is a place that is a women's only room, which is the safe room. And when we have children, we started teaching them and doing stuff, then we created a child-safe space. So slowly, we started noticing that what we did naturally actually fell into this idea of what humanitarian aid is. […]"

A key theme relates to the adaptability and responsiveness of these grassroots humanitarian efforts. The ERRs did not start with a fixed plan but evolved naturally as different needs were identified and addressed. This demonstrates a bottom-up approach and highlights the organic development of initiatives in the ERRs. Those initiatives don't have a predetermined intention towards an existing need in mind and enact humanitarian aid on this intention. On the contrary, the help that is introduced is acted out around a developing need. This demonstrates how grassroots efforts can naturally embody humanitarian values. The communal aspect of these activities, such as cooking together and creating shared spaces, underscores the importance of solidarity and collective action in addressing humanitarian needs.

In the following excerpt, the UNOCHA representative talks about the integration of the ERRs into the humanitarian system.

Bonanome: "[…] in order to keep them agile, I think the accountability needs to be shifted back towards the organisations that are engaging with these groups. There are modalities to do it, there are modalities to still collect information, and even writing, reporting, through just simply collecting information through these groups, but avoiding the situation or having these groups involved for weeks in reporting and writing back. Because this is not their main purpose, their main purpose is to respond, to be in the streets, and be agile and directly engaging with the communities on a daily basis. So that's where the discussion needs to start, that's exactly where the approach needs to change."

Here we find a theme which is related to the transformation of the ERRs into formal organisations though implementing them into the humanitarian system. To be recognized as humanitarian actors and eligible for funds, ERRs must adhere to specific modalities, especially data collection and processing. However, this requirement often diverts resources away from direct aid. ERRs lack the capacity and structures for extensive data management. Treating them as typical NGOs restricts their efficiency and fights their actual purpose – to introduce aid quickly as it arises. Bonanome highlights the need for a new approach to support ERRs and mutual aid networks effectively, not forcing them to adhere to the modalities necessary for receiving international funds, by putting the responsibility for accountability not solely on the ERRs.

The following excerpt highlights the significant challenges faced by local humanitarian efforts due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and delays in funding. Despite promises of financial aid from the UN, the process of obtaining funds is hindered by bureaucratic procedures.

Kuka: "[…] we got to the point where that's it, they get all the OKs, everybody's down, let's do it, and somebody was trying to put it on the computer system, and they weren't able to do it, because this computer system would not go forward. So they had to actually wait for another two weeks or something to change something in the computer system to even allow us to go forward. […] And we're talking about urgency. This is an emergency response. This is where every day we're losing time, somebody's getting killed, somebody's getting raped, somebody's getting hungry. We have volunteers who just give up thinking that we just keep promising them. So they start leaving. […]

Everyday we're trying to give them a call, it's like 'Okay, so did we get the money?' It's like, 'Oh, no, not yet. So what's happening, somebody needs to sign, something needs to happen.' So the bureaucracy is so crazy that we've just been sitting there, promising people, 'Hey, we're gonna get stuff' to the point that I stopped trying to ask people 'Don't get us more data, don't do this. Let's just get this money, wait for it to get this money and then we can go forward.' The amount of times we collected data is just crazy, and it's really hard to get data at this level, and data keeps changing because people keep moving. So right now, our biggest thing is there's no urgency. The moment we have to do something, we have to actually fall back onto mutual aid, fall back on to our own communities to do anything that's at the level of [...] being emergent [...]"

Key themes that emerge from this excerpt relate to promises by the bigger organisation that were not kept or were being implemented too slow, as well as the challenges in data management and the difficulties of collecting and maintaining up-to-date data in a rapidly changing and mobile population. There are significant delays caused by bureaucratic processes, which hinder the timely delivery of funds. These delays directly impact people's lives, leading to hunger, violence and death, revealing the urgency of the crisis. Unfulfilled promises and prolonged waiting periods are frustrating the local volunteers. Because the ERRs cannot rely on the slow and bureaucratic process of receiving international funds, they have to fall back on mutual aid and community efforts, when external support is delayed.

This last excerpt shows how the ERRs are caught in a difficult dilemma. Initially thriving on local resources made available by the community members, becomes impossible as the civil war prolongs, and resources get scarce.

Kuka: "[...] In the beginning, we had resources, so people had food in their houses, they used to bring it in, people were getting money, people were doing things. So these soup kitchens were working, and people got used to these communal kitchens where they come together and they talk and they laugh. [...] we're talking about millions of people, six months into it, not getting paid, the economy just collapsing, and getting to the point where I have to depend on [international funds]. It's not like that luxury that

we had in the beginning of having diaspora and everything. So I think the shift is, it's still community-based. Nobody's getting paid. All of us are volunteers who are actually paying out of pocket and spending money and leaving our lives behind […]."

The theme emerging from this excerpt concerns the limitation of the ERRs and their reliance on partnership with NGOs and the UN. To continue to provide aid they are compelled to seek resources and help from outside the community. But despite the economic collapse, the spirit of community-based volunteerism persists. Volunteers are committed, paying out of their own pockets, and dedicating their time and lives to support each other. But the survival and effectiveness of ERRs depend heavily on partnerships with local NGOs, international NGOs, and UN agencies. These partnerships provide essential support and resources that ERRs cannot manage alone. ERRs recognize their limitations and do not attempt to take on all tasks themselves.

Discussion

In this discussion chapter, I will examine the dynamics of grassroots and mutual aid humanitarian efforts as contrasted with institutionalized humanitarian organisations. By drawing on the local association in Bern, the grassroots organisation in Odessa, and the case studies of the ERRs in Sudan, I aim to analyse how these organisations navigate the challenges of resource scarcity, dependence on larger aid structures, and inherent power dynamics. This section will explore the narratives of autonomy, adaptability, and volunteerism that characterize grassroots initiatives, and how these narratives both align with and diverge from traditional humanitarian discourse.

Grassroots organisations such as the ERRs and small local associations in Bern demonstrate a shift away from the "language of compassion" to a focus on addressing immediate, practical needs. These initiatives do not frame their actions primarily around moral imperatives but rather around the tangible needs of their communities. They do this through uninstitutionalised help. An institutional humanitarian organisation would come to a crisis with the intent to provide aid to people in need. This intent comes with a certain picture or perspective in mind, what the people affected might need and therefore influences what the aid will look like- imposing pre-designed solutions without fully understanding local context and local needs.

Furthermore, this top-down approach translates to the Swiss asylum system. The state as a humanitarian actor has a certain conception of a refugee and what a refugee needs. This conception influences the structure of the institutions responsible for the integration and granting of asylum to refugees, resulting in the institutions to address those images and conceptions rather than the actual needs of the affected.

The cases studies show that in grassroot humanitarianism and mutual aid networks the humanitarian aid develops organically around an emerging need. Therefore, the need constitutes the help not vice versa. Humanitarian aid in those cases is not about the visibility and morality of aid, it is more about helping your next-door neighbour, providing your community with food, giving each other a sense of belonging and community. Only through the coverage of the need are informal structures such as mutual aid networks formed. Through this bottom-up development combined with the funds and resources not being provided by international organisations - stemming from inside the community in the case of the ERRs in Sudan and coming from private donations in the case of the grassroot organisation in Odessa – the mutual aid networks and grassroot humanitarianism are less likely to be caught up in what Dunn (2023) framed as the political economy of aid – and which I would frame as the humanitarian market.

As demonstrated in the case studies, these organisations operate with a high degree of autonomy from political and economic influences. I argue that this autonomy is specifically what makes them efficient and agile in addressing needs. Where institutionalized aid is guided by the humanitarian order and has to adhere to norms and rules, resulting in slow bureaucratic procedures, the grassroots organisations can prioritize immediate, community-driven responses and adaptability to changing circumstances. This autonomy not only enables efficiency and agility, but also a community-based decision making. For example, the association in Bern adapts its program on the direct input from refugees, ensuring that their activities remain relevant and grounded in actual needs. This is made possible through fostering personal relationships with those they help and seeing the affected as human individuals making the recognition and addressing of the actual need possible.

Throughout the case studies, the ideology that directs bottom-up assistance is more effective than channelling aid through large organisations becomes prominent. My informant in Odessa highlights the advantages of grassroots initiatives, where he serves as a direct intermediary between donors and recipients. This contrasts sharply with larger organisations, whose funds often

get lost in bureaucratic procedures that delay and sometimes completely prevent effective aid delivery. The interviewee expressed his own as well as others strong sentiment of disappointment with large organisations, noting that they frequently arrive too late, fail to deliver on their promises, or are reluctant to take necessary risks, leaving the local people feeling abandoned. A similar resentment is found with the ERRs in Sudan. Funds are promised, but take too long to arrive. These expressions of disappointment and unmet expectations towards large organisations capture a critical perspective, questioning the effectiveness of institutionalised humanitarian aid.

Despite their strengths, grassroots organisations face significant challenges that threaten to limit their autonomy and effectiveness. One major issue is the scarcity of resources, like material goods such as food but also funds in the form of money. As those resources within the community become depleted, these organisations often need to rely on external funding. This reliance on partnerships with larger organisations, such as NGOs and the UN, are necessary to continue their aid efforts. But it also means to be able to receive funds, they must adhere to the rules and modalities formulated by the humanitarian order (Barnett, 2010). These modalities in the case of the ERRs include providing proof of accountability and therefore redistributing their capacity to data collection and processing, which decreases their already limited capacity. Grassroots organisations are caught in a dilemma: they either cannot provide enough aid due to resource limitations, or they risk losing their autonomy and becoming part of the bureaucratic humanitarian machine to secure external funding. Being integrated into the humanitarian market leads to a dependence that risks not only compromising their grassroot nature but also being absorbed into hierarchical structures and losing the very agility and efficiency that makes them effective. This problem does not only exist with the ERRs in Sudan but also applies to the grassroot organisation in Odessa. While the organisation solely relies on private donations, which allows for more flexibility and less dependence on institutional funding, this model has its own limitations. When private donations dwindle or cease, the ability to provide aid is compromised. Additionally, the risk remains that privately funded initiatives start to prioritize the collection of funds to maintain a monetary flow with the goal of sustaining the organisation.

Volunteerism emerges as a key theme in initiating grassroots efforts and mutual aid networks. It is the volunteers from the crisis affected communities who initiate and sustain humanitarian efforts. A question that arises here, concerns power dynamics that might be hidden in the volunteer system. My informant from Bern describes volunteering as an independent form

of humanitarian aid where volunteers have the freedom to introduce the humanitarian efforts they deem as useful. This can risk establishing hierarchical power dynamics. The volunteer assumes a position of authority towards the recipient of aid. It is the volunteer who can decide what aid is introduced and who will receive the aid.

My analysis reveals that grassroots humanitarian efforts cannot entirely escape hierarchical structures. These structures are found in the relationship between the bigger humanitarian bodies and the smaller organisations. At the same time, we also find an unequal power relation between the subjects who perform humanitarian aid and the recipients of aid. The founder of the humanitarian organisation in Odessa, acknowledges such power dynamics but deflects attention away from himself, when I asked him about it, suggesting he does not personally wield such power. This perspective, however, does not eliminate the existence of these dynamics within his operations. On the other hand, the project manager in Bern, is more reflective about these inherent power dynamics and admits that their organisation is still grappling with these issues. One strategy they use to mitigate them is integrating refugees as volunteers, who then assist other refugees. This approach aims to blur the lines between helper and recipient, promoting a more egalitarian structure within the organisation, where the donor of aid can also relate to the personal experience of being in the role of the recipient of aid. In the podcast analysis, we see that power dynamics in the ERRs are not necessarily inherent through the community-led mutual aid networks. But the representative of the ERRs does not address how the actual beneficiaries feel about the aid provided. This omission highlights a potential gap in understanding and addressing the perspectives of those receiving aid.

Growing attention towards grassroots efforts in the humanitarian discourse is confirmed by the example of the ERRs in Sudan. These organisations are receiving more recognition, and their importance is acknowledged. Due to their willingness to stay in potential conflict zones and their personal connections and involvement with those affected by the crisis, they are able to reach the Sudanese population in ways that NGOs aren't able to. Similarly, the organisation in Odessa builds trust by partnering and working closely with local citizens and volunteers. The association in Bern also fosters trust by providing refugees with a sense of welcome and belonging. NGOs, coming in as outsiders, may be unable to establish such a foundation of trust. Although the ERRs have lately received increasing international attention and recognition, the association in Bern and the organisation in Odessa do not receive the same level of acknowledgment.

Grassroots and mutual aid networks find ways to escape the conventional humanitarian discourse by focusing on immediate, practical needs and maintaining a high degree of autonomy and flexibility. However, they continue to face challenges related to resource scarcity, dependence on external funding and inherent power dynamics. The next and final chapter provides an overall conclusion, summarising these findings and discussing the wider implications for humanitarian practice and policy.

Conclusion

The dynamics found in the literature about humanitarianism are reflected in the actions performed by humanitarian grassroots and mutual aid efforts on the ground. Fassin's (2012) discussion of the "language of compassion" and the prioritization of visibility and morality over effectiveness and structural inequalities is mirrored in the outside pressures grassroots organisations face. The political economy of aid (Cullen Dunn & Kaliszewska, 2023) highlights how fundraising processes can lead to a focus on organisational sustainability rather than the needs of those affected by crises. Grassroots organisations risk falling into this trap as they navigate the complex landscape of humanitarian funding and accountability. The sustainability of those bottom-up initiatives is challenged by resource limitations and the need to engage with the larger humanitarian system.

Nevertheless, the case studies present ways to escape the humanitarian discourse. Through the focus on practical needs and the evolvement of aid around those needs we turn away from the language of compassion. In the examples discussed, humanitarian aid is introduced to address injustices rather than to highlight suffering or saturate the humanitarian market. The autonomy and independence of the organisations and networks enable them to achieve this.

Throughout the analysis, multiple suggestions emerge on how to improve and make humanitarian aid more efficient. Grassroots and mutual aid networks are not efficient in the traditional sense of reaching the most people, collecting, and using funds quickly, or covering the largest areas in conflict regions. From this perspective, they may seem slow and ineffective, with minimal funding, reliance on volunteers rather than professionals, and limited capacity for large-scale projects like evacuations. However, their efficiency lies in their ability to identify and address immediate needs directly. This approach challenges the traditional top-down humanitarian model. It ensures that aid efforts are rooted in the actual needs of the affected population and tailored to

local contexts, rather than being driven by morality and visibility. By putting the focus on the subject grassroot humanitarianism and mutual aid ensures a bottom-up approach, providing an alternative to conventional humanitarian practices ensure a more holistic humanitarian approach, it is essential to include the perspectives of the individuals receiving aid. By asking them questions such as: "How do they perceive the aid they receive? Where do they feel it falls short? And what improvements would they suggest?," we can better assess the relevance and impact of humanitarian efforts. Only through this inclusive approach can we truly analyse if and how existing power structures and dynamics are being challenged or reinforced.

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Polycrises and the Design of International Institutions: A Conceptual Mapping

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Abstract

The modern world is facing increasingly interconnected global crises, or polycrises, where systemic vulnerabilities amplify collective challenges. This paper examines the role of international organizations (IOs) in managing these crises, focusing on how their inherent design influences crisis generation and prolongation. Drawing from a conceptual framework that integrates the dynamics of polycrisis with institutional design, the study explores interconnected global energy, transportation, and healthcare systems. Critical dimensions of IOs' design—membership, scope, centralization, control, and flexibility—are analyzed to assess their impacts on stressors, triggers, and crises. These case studies highlight how structural limitations hinder IOs' crisis management capabilities. By rethinking IO design, this paper contributes to the understanding of how global governance address the complexities of an interconnected world.

Keywords: Polycrisis, International Organizations, Conceptual Mapping, Institutional Design.

Introduction

> *"Crises and deadlocks when they occur have at least this advantage, that they force us to think." – Jawaharlal Nehru, first prime minister of India*

Presently, stories of crises engulf our newsfeeds: the modern world faces an unprecedented multiplication of global crises, ranging from environmental degradation to economic instability and a health crisis. These crises do not occur in isolation; they are deeply interconnected, further amplifying their collective impacts. Scholars and policymakers have prioritized understanding the interconnectedness of these crises and the mechanisms of polycrises.

While globalization has facilitated international cooperation, it has also exacerbated the complexities of global crises due to the inherent interdependence of trade, travel, tourism, and information flows. For example, trade interdependence leads to supply chain vulnerabilities where a crisis in one region can quickly impact production and distribution worldwide (Crawford, 2024). Such a crisis may also cause economic disruptions in tourism-dependent economies (Xion & Tang, 2023). Interconnected information flows, allowing real-time access to the global financial market, have also increased market volatility (Catalán et al., 2024). These are some of the pathways through which globalization supports the spread of crises. To resolve these interconnected crises, forums to conduct problem-solving discussions are needed. Global platforms, such as international organizations (IOs), are forums that allow for parties to converge and deliberate responses to crises. Still, existing research often overlooks the role of IOs in either mitigating or amplifying these crises through their design and decision-making processes.

This paper seeks to fill this conceptual gap and aims to investigate how the rational design of IOs affects their capacity for crisis management and explores how such design limitations have contributed to the generation and prolongation of the interconnected global crises, called polycrises. Therefore, I address how the rational design of IOs hinders effective crisis management and contributes to the generation and prolongation of polycrises. This paper begins by defining the concept of polycrisis and reviews the current literature on the rational design of IOs. A conceptual framework is presented and applied to the case studies of global energy, transportation, and healthcare systems. Finally, the paper concludes with key findings and limitations of this research, as well as potential directions for future research.

Background

The term 'polycrisis' describes the causal entanglement of multiple crises across global systems, resulting in outcomes more significant than the sum of their parts (Lawrence et al., 2024). Primary characteristics of polycrises include multiple causations, non-linearity, and inter-systemic feedback loops, which all complicate prevention and mitigation efforts. For instance, climate change is a common stressor, amplifying food insecurity, water scarcity, and risks to public health. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic response halted transportation systems delaying the distribution of essential medical supplies, revealing vulnerabilities in global supply chains (Gu et al., 2023). As these examples illustrate, there is a need for robust international cooperation to address the issue of crisis entanglement.

Globalization is central to connecting systems through trade, finance, and communication. While global interconnectedness enables economic growth and cooperation, the consequences of financial crises, pandemics, and climate change demonstrate how it amplifies vulnerabilities. As forums for discussion and cooperation, IOs were designed to manage such challenges. However, they often lack the structural capacity to effectively address the complexity of polycrises. For example, the World Health Organization's (WHO) voluntary compliance model and fragmented decision-making hindered its COVID-19 response (Jones & Hameiri, 2022). As such, if one understands the inherent limitations of IOs' design, their ability to manage crises effectively can be enhanced so that they have the capacity to address polycrises.

Literature Review

This section reviews the literature on the concept of polycrisis and its causal mechanics, and examines the rational design of IOs. This review highlights how gaps in understanding of institutional design have contributed to the amplification or mitigation of polycrises.

Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement

Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement (Lawrence et al., 2024) explores and describes the interconnected nature of contemporary global crises. The authors define a global polycrisis as "the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects" (Lawrence et al., 2024, p.2). Such entanglement

generates emergent harms of greater significance than the total sum of each of the harms that each crisis entails in isolation.

Lawrence et al. (2024) identifies principal characteristics of the global system that contributed to the emergence of polycrisis, including 1) multiple causes and non-linearity, 2) hysteresis, 3) boundary permeability and 4) "black swan" outcomes. First, the complex interplay of various factors within and across global systems leads to multiple causes and non-linearity of crises. These have resulted in the difficulty of tracing the cause-and-effect relationships, of which predicting interventions' consequences might prove complex. Second, hysteresis means that once a system has undergone a fundamental shift, it cannot simply return to its previous state, even if the original conditions are restored. For example, as is the case of the irreversible melting of ice sheets in Antarctica due to global warming. Third, boundary permeability indicates that global systems' interconnected nature and causal processes transcend traditional boundaries such as administrative, social and scientific boundaries. Lastly, "black swan" outcomes highlight the potential for underestimating extreme crises because immediate and probable risks are the sole focus of decision-makers. These key features of global systems are paired with causal mechanisms that enable crisis entanglement across multiple global systems.

Causal mechanisms that drive polycrises were also extensively discussed, of which Lawrence et al. (2024) propose a framework based on the relationship between stresses, trigger events and crises. Stresses mean slow-moving processes accumulating over time, weaking the resilience of the global system and increasing the risk of crises (Lawrence et al., 2024). Cases of stress can include climate change, economic inequality, and the depletion of natural resources. On the other hand, trigger events consist of the fast-moving processes that interact with stresses to propel a system out of equilibrium (Lawrence et al., 2024). Prominent examples include pandemics, financial crises, and political disturbances. Finally, crises are unexpected non-linear events that cause significant distress and pain to the well-being of humans; in other words, this is a situation when a system is far from equilibrium and enters a state of disequilibrium (Lawrence et al., 2024).

The relationship between stresses, triggers and crises is most evident in the Mediterranean region. Climate-induced migration may act as a stressor to social systems and when combined with a trigger event like an economic downturn, this can lead to a political crisis, as seen in Syria (Scheffran, 2020). Thus, these causal mechanics can provide frameworks for the analysis of real-world cases, demonstrating how a polycrisis is generated. Further, Homer-Dixon et al. (2015)

analyze similar notions of the causal mechanisms of stress, triggers and crises in their work of *Synchronous Failure: The Emerging Causal Architecture of Global Crises*. In this article, the authors note the systemic architecture that explains the interconnectedness of global crises and explain failures as the result of interconnected systems' exposure to synchronous stresses and triggers (Homer-Dixon et al., 2015). As such, the concept of synchronous failures complements Lawrence et al.'s (2004) causal mechanics of polycrisis, providing a deeper understanding of how systemic vulnerabilities can transform common stresses into a polycrisis.

Lawrence et al. (2024) posits that the interplay of these causal mechanisms result in primary mechanisms which helps to explain the entanglement of crisis across multiple global systems. Common stresses happen when the same stress affects multiple systems, and these stresses interact. For example, climate change is a common stress that affects food supply, water resources and even human health (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021). Further, domino effects also occur when a crisis in one system either triggers or amplifies a crisis in another system. The COVID-19 global supply chain disruptions caused economic instability and social unrest, demonstrating the domino effect. Additionally, inter-systemic feedback explains how feedback loops are seen as self-enlarging for crises in distinct systems, such as how climate change can cause resource scarcity and conflict amongst countries, hindering international cooperation in tackling climate change (Gleick, 2014; Homer-Dixon T. F., 1994).

The definition and the primary mechanisms of polycrisis are important in helping one understand the interconnectedness of crises. The polycrises discussed are of a global scale and their impacts are often international. Hence, there are platforms in place for countries to come together and discuss issues, in hopes of mitigating or solving them. Thus, IOs come into play, and it is imperative to study them because of their role managing the discussion and directing cooperation efforts in tackling crises. The role of institutions is underemphasized in the discussion about polycrisis. This exclusion limits the capacity to understand and address specific impacts, as the polycrisis concept focus on global-scale crises, making specific outcomes challenging to predict. By focusing on an institutional perspective, researchers and policymakers are able to narrow their focus on specific systems or regions, providing a clear framework for predicting outcomes and analyzing potential solutions.

The Rational Design of International Institutions

    The Rational Design of International Institutions (Koremenos et al, 2001) analyzes the organization of major institutions and their differences to study the functionality of the institutions themselves. Koremenos et al. (2001) define international institutions as explicit arrangements negotiated among international actors that prescribe, proscribe, and authorize behavior. Five important dimensions such as membership rules, scope of issues covered, centralization of task, rules for controlling the institutions and flexibility of arrangements are identified (Koremenos et al., 2001).

    For their part, membership rules significantly impact the inclusiveness and effectiveness of an IO (Koremenos et al., 2001). For instance, the WHO's universal membership allows for global representation, but it also contributes to coordination problems, particularly during health crises (Jones & Hameiri, 2022). The scope of issues covered includes the discussions and topics covered. This is evidenced by the World Trade Organization's (WTO) expansion of scope to include cross-border investments, in addition to its initial scope of trade issues in agriculture and services (WTO, 2024b).

    Centralization measures the degree by which tasks such as decision-making are coordinated by a central authority (Koremenos et al., 2001). On the one hand, the WTO, is highly centralized, partly due to its 'Dispute Settlement Body' which ensures that any trade disagreements would be addressed uniformly and are legally binding, thereby reducing enforcement and interpretation problems (WTO, 2024a). On the other hand, moderate centralization would include the Kyoto protocol under United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Despite its centralized monitoring and reporting of emissions, the methods of implementations are left to the individual countries (Rosen, 2015).

    The fourth dimension is control, addressing how decision-making power are distributed within an institution: who decides, how were they decided and what are the mechanisms that exist to influence such decisions (Koremenos et al., 2001). A clear case of control would be the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) where control is highly centralized amongst the five permanent members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) who hold veto power.

    Lastly, the flexibility dimension measures the ability of institution to adapt to changes over time. These changes include changes in member state's preferences or in the international environment (Koremenos et al., 2001). Some prominent examples include the adaptive nature of

the *Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal*. This convention is adapted on a periodic basis through the updates of hazardous substances and waste management practices in response to the changing technological and environmental landscape (Basel Convention, 1989). In addition to the flexibility dimension, IO adaptability is also studied, as exemplified by Betts and Loescher (2010) *Refugees in International Relations*. This book highlights how the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) addresses complex interconnected crises through institutional flexibility by adapting its mandate to include climate refugees (Betts & Loescher, 2010). Thus, the UNHCR showcased its ability to respond to evolving global challenges (Betts & Loescher, 2010). Adaptability aligns with the flexibility dimension of the rational design framework, highlighting the importance of renegotiable mandates and operational adaptability in handling crises effectively.

Another key aspect that differentiates each international institutions from one another is through independent variables including distribution problems, enforcement problems, the number of actors, asymmetries among them and uncertainty about behaviors, the global context, and other's preferences. Some examples would be the comparative differences in enforcement problems of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). In these cases, member states' compliance is expected towards quota productions (Gault et al., 2000), conventions and codes (IMO, 2024f), and voluntary cooperation (UNCTAD, 2024a) respectively. Hence, context plays a role in differentiating international institutions. Both the key dimensions and independent variables will be borrowed in this conceptual map as they shed light on the design of international institutions and the consequences of each of their designs.

While existing research on polycrisis has primarily focused on the interconnectedness of global crises, there is a gap in understanding the role of international institutions in the generation and prolonging of polycrisis. By examining the rational design of IOs, exploring their structures and decision-making processes, this paper contributes to the understanding of IOs may perpetuate polycrises. This paper provides an alternative understanding of the causes of global challenges, through the lenses of IOs inherent structural design, and thus seeks to explain how the rational design of IOs hinders effective crisis management and contributes to the generation and prolongation of polycrises.

Conceptual Framework

Polycrisis from the perspective of international organizations' rational design

  I present a comprehensive framework of the relationship between polycrisis and global systems from the merging of the borrowed concepts of the polycrisis and the rational design of IOs. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework illustrating an interconnectedness of the rational design of IOs and the generation and prolongation of polycrises. This framework outlines the mechanisms through which different characteristics of IOs, such as membership rules, centralization, and flexibility, can directly or indirectly influence the dynamics of stresses, triggers, and crises within a global system. In addition, there may be spillovers as seen in the domino effect where stresses, triggers or crisis in one system can have influence over others in another system. By examining specific case studies, the effectiveness of this framework in understanding the complex interplay between institutional design and polycrisis is tested.

Figure 1: *Conceptual Map of the Interconnectedness of Global Systems and Polycrises*
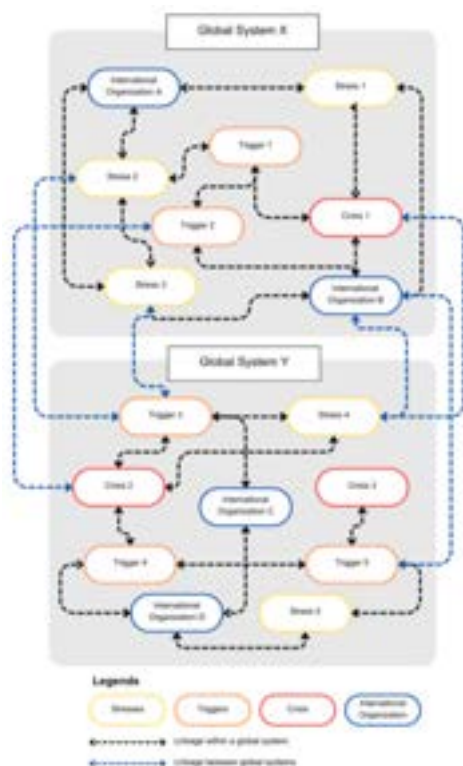
Note. The concept of global systems, stresses, triggers and crisis were borrowed from Global Polycrisis: the causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement (Lawrence, et al., 2024).

Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual framework approach to explore the relationship between polycrises and the rational design of IOs. A case study method is used to analyze three global systems of energy, transportation and healthcare. These global systems were selected due to their critical roles in global stability, their interconnectedness with each other, and their susceptibility to stresses, triggers, and crises.

The conceptual framework allows for a systematic analysis of the causal mechanics of polycrisis of which the case studies of selected global systems provide empirical validation for the framework's applicability. Data is drawn from previous research, reports produced by international organizations and documented case studies of crises that affected the selected global systems. This paper employs a conceptual mapping framework that integrates the causal mechanisms of polycrises with the five key dimensions of IO designs. This mapping allows for a comprehensive analysis of how the inherent design of IOs influence the generation and prolongation of polycrises.

Results

From energy to transportation to healthcare, global systems are interconnected as demonstrated in Figure 2. This conceptual map illustrates how these elements are connected and how analysis can be drawn from there. Table 1 outlines the key characteristics of each of the IOs analyzed.

Figure 2: *Conceptual mapping of interconnected global systems of energy, transport and healthcare*
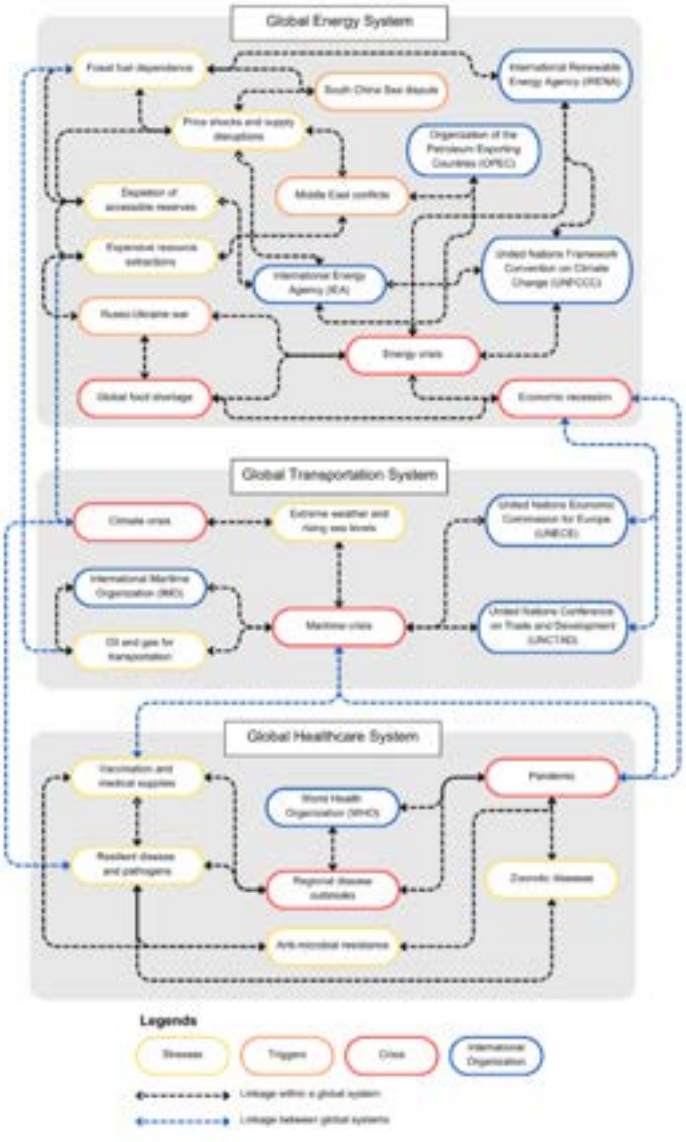
Note. The concept of global systems, stresses, triggers and crisis were borrowed from *Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement* (Lawrence, et al., 2024).

Table 1: *Characteristics of International Institutions*

International Institution	Membership	Scope	Centralization	Control	Flexibility
Global Energy System					
International Energy Agency (IEA)	Membership is limited to developed countries with selected member countries, accession countries and association countries (IEA, 2024a).	IEA are primarily focused on energy system, specifically on oil for global energy markets. It has expanded its energy system to include renewables, electricity and low-emission fuels (IEA, 2024b).	The IEA has a relatively centralized decision-making and governing body. They consist of energy ministers or senior representatives of which most of them are from the IEA member country (IEA, 2024c).	IEA's primary mechanism for compliance is through voluntary cooperation. Each of the member states are expected to adhere to IEA's principles and guidelines, but there is no formal enforcement mechanism in place (IEA, 2024a).	Flexibility of IEA can be seen from its incorporation of other energy systems apart from oil. It has adapted to the changing energy landscapes (IEA, 2024d).
Organization of the Petroleum	OPEC currently has 12 members	OPEC mainly focus on	The Secretariat is the executive	OPEC's primary mechanism	OPEC's flexibilities are seen in

Exporting Countries (OPEC)	and of which all of them are oil exporters (OPEC, 2024a).	the coordination, unification and stabilization of petroleum policies and oil markets (OPEC, 2024b).	organ of OPEC which is responsible in overseeing resolutions and decision-making processes (OPEC, 2024c).	for compliances is through production quotas where members are designated certain amount of oil production to supply global demand. (OPEC, 2024b)	its adjustment of oil production quotas in response to the changing market conditions to maintain stable oil prices (Gault, Spierer, Bertholet, & Karbassioun, 2000).
International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA)	IRENA has a broad membership which includes both developed and developing countries. As of 2024, it has 170 countries as	IRENA supports its members in their transition to a sustainable energy source, focusing on renewable energy. IT addresses a	The institutional structure of IRENA consists of the assembly, council and secretariat. The assembly are made up of one representative from each of	Like the IEA, IRENA's primary mechanism for compliance is through voluntary cooperation where each of the member	IRENA's possesses flexibility in their promotion in adopting a wide range of renewable energies such as bioenergy, geothermal and

	IRENA members (IRENA, 2024a).	wide range of renewable issues from policy development to technology transference (IRENA, 2024b).	IRENA members to discuss on programs, budget concerns and reports. The council are made up of 21 rotating members who are on a two year term each and they facilitate consultation and cooperation. The secretariat provides administrative and technical support to the assembly. (IRENA, 2024b)	states are expected to adhere to its principles and guidelines, but there is no formal enforcement mechanism in place. (IRENA, 2024b)	hydropower. (IRENA, 2024b)
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate	UNFCCC has universal membership, wherein all countries in	It covers a broad range of topics on climate	A centralized structure through the secretariat of UNFCCC	UNFCCC relies primarily on voluntary cooperation	UNFCC demonstrated flexibility through its changing

Change (UNFCCC)	the world are part of the institution. (UNFCCC, 2024)	change such as its mitigation, adaptation and finances. (UNFCCC, 2024)	which holds the responsibility in facilitating intergovernme ntal negotiations. (UNFCCC, 2024)	for compliance from its members. (UNFCCC, 2024)	circumstance s and growing scientific research and understandin g. Notable examples include the Paris Agreement. (UNFCCC, 2024)
Global Transportation System					
International Maritime Organization (IMO)	IMO has a universal membership, wherein all countries in the world are part of the institution. (IMO, 2024a)	The IMO's scope is broad, ranging from maritime issues such as safety, security and pollution prevention. (IMO, 2024b)	A centralized structure through the secretariat of IMO which holds the responsibility in facilitating intergovernme ntal negotiations. (IMO, 2024a)	The IMO's primary mechanism for compliance is through the adoption of international maritime conventions and codes (IMO, 2024f).	The IMO has demonstrate d flexibility by adapting to the changing maritime conditions and technologica l advancement s.
United Nations Economic	Membership mostly consists of	UNECE addresses socioecono	A centralized structure through the	UNECE relies on voluntary	UNECE showcased flexibility

Commission for Europe (UNECE)	European countries and small number of non-European members (UNECE, 2024a).	mic issues including transport, trade and environment. (UNECE, 2024b).	secretariat of UNECE which holds the responsibility in facilitating intergovernmental negotiations. (UNECE, 2024b).	cooperation where members are encouraged to implement national policies that are in line with UNECE's goals. (UNECE, 2024b).	over time in adapting to changing economic and social conditions in Europe. (UNECE, 2024b).
United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)	UNCTAD has a universal membership. (UNCTAD, 2024a)	UNCTAD covers a wide range of trade and development issues. (UNCTAD, 2024b)	A centralized structure through the secretariat of UNCTAD which holds the responsibility in facilitating intergovernmental negotiations. (UNCTAD, 2024b)	UNCTAD relies on voluntary cooperation where members are encouraged to implement national policies that are in line with UNCTAD's goals.	UNCTAD showed flexibility in adapting to changing economic conditions and global challenges. (UNCTAD, 2024c)

				(UNCTAD, 2024a)	
Global Healthcare System					
World Health Organization (WHO)	WHO has a universal membership. (WHO, 2024a)	WHO covers a wide range of health issues and is the leading organization in healthcare. (WHO, 2024b)	A centralized structure through the secretariat of WHO which holds the responsibility in facilitating intergovernmental negotiations. (WHO, 2024c)	WHO relies on voluntary cooperation where members are encouraged to implement national policies that are in line with WHO's goals. (WHO, 2024a)	WHO has demonstrated flexibility over time in its adaptation to a volatile health landscape. (WHO, 2024b)

Note. The table utilized the concept of the five key dimensions from *The Rational Design of International Institutions* in analysing the selected IOs (Koremenos et al., 2001).

The Global Energy System

The global demand for fossil fuel of oil, coal and gas is likely to peak by 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2023). The global energy system faces stresses such as fossil fuel dependency and geopolitical tensions. These stressors interact with triggers like regional conflicts to generate a polycrisis that consists of energy shortages and economic instability. The dependency on fossil fuel creates volatile environments where regional conflicts and disputes leads to price shocks and supply disruption pushing countries to utilize their fossil fuel reserves. For instance, the Iran-Iraq

War in the 1980s (Tahmassebi, 2003) and the Gulf War in the 1990s (Sun, 2022) led to significant price surges in oil. These regional conflicts have had profound impacts on the global fossil fuel market. These triggers would then affect crises which can occur simultaneously. Disruptions in fossil fuel supply can result in an energy crisis, halting the supply of goods and leading to global food shortages. These compounded effects have, in turn, their consequences such as aiding in economic recessions.

In such cases, IOs such as the IEA can get involved to mitigate some of these crises. Members of the IEA are obliged to keep 90-day stocks of oil supplies for use in times of supply disruptions (IEA, 2024c). Through these measures, the IEA could mitigate the stresses of supply disruption before they spiral into a bigger crisis. However, the centralized structure of the IEA only allows effective coordinated responses in theory. In reality, a reliance on voluntary compliance can undermine its enforcement capabilities during an energy crisis. In addition, the IEA's membership is limited to developed countries, excluding significant energy producers and consumers from the Global South. This lack of inclusivity reduces the IEA's capacity to comprehensively address the global energy stresses, specifically the fossil fuel dependency of developing regions.

Other IOs, like the OPEC, can also be leveraged to collectively adjust oil production levels to maintain the global supply and prices. Still, there are no clear standards or formulas to allocate most quotas, rather they are primarily ad hoc measures (Gault et al., 2000). Production quotas provide a mechanism to ensure stabilization of markets through OPEC's centralized control, but the allocation of quotas is inconsistent, and the process is opaque. This highlights the risk that internal politics can influence these processes. This may result in delays and inefficiencies in addressing triggers like price shocks. Also, OPEC's narrow scope, focused on petroleum markets, limits its ability to address broader energy stresses. Despite that, there has been expansion of scope in OPEC to include renewable energies, but the initiatives are still in its infancy stages (OPEC, 2016). This highlights OPEC's adaptability in responding to the volatile energy landscape, enabling it to address systemic risks such as market fluctuations caused by geopolitical tensions.

As such, if both, the IEA and OPEC adopt some structural or legislative changes, there are possibilities that stresses and triggers can be mitigated before they spiral into a polycrisis. For the IEA, it could broaden its membership to include developing countries and allow for more equitable crisis management. Otherwise, OPEC can formalize the quota-setting process to ensure greater

transparency and accountability of which allows for greater flexibility in adjusting prices to deter the buildup of stresses. Through the adoption of these measures, some of the stresses to the global energy system can be mitigated to deter global energy crises.

Moreover, other IOs, such as the IRENA and the UNFCCC are key players in addressing climate-induced stresses in the energy system through their focus on promoting renewable energy and addressing climate change. However, this can inadvertently amplify existing stresses and triggers within the global energy system. For example, the COP28 Agreement included the accelerated phasing out of fossil fuels (United Nations Climate Change, 2023). Additionally, stricter environmental regulations have negative repercussions that outweigh their benefits instead wherein they can disrupt production and displace employment (Dechezleprêtre & Sato, 2017). Advocacy for these regulations can also assert pressures that discourage investments in fossil fuel infrastructure leading to the increase in supply costs and potentially resulting in energy crises (Pang, et al., 2024). In that sense, IRENA and UNFCCC would further amplify some of the stresses and triggers that generate polycrises and their prolongation.

While the long-term goals of these institutions are commendable, it is essential to carefully consider the short-term implications and strive for a balanced approach that minimizes disruptions to the energy system. Thus, the IRENA and the UNFCC should include the comprehensive scoping of their goals and advocacy through incentives and mandates that address short-term crises. These allows for clearer navigation of policies and accounts for alternative approaches that could reduce stresses and triggers, thereby reducing the likelihood of a polycrisis occurring.

The crises in the global energy system have domino effects over other global systems, as seen in the linkages between systems in Figure 2. Through the inter-systemic feedback, the rising oil prices can lead to increased transportation costs, potentially affecting supply chains. The energy shortages could also hinder the production and distribution of medical supplies during health crises.

Global Transportation System

The global transportation system is the pillar of the international movement of goods and services. However, it is increasingly strained by the stresses of aging infrastructures and climate change, coupled with triggers like extreme weather events, leading to crises such as supply chain breakdowns, further contributing to the generation and prolongation of polycrises.

The fossil fuel dependency that drives expensive resource extractions, seen in the global energy system, further worsens the climate crisis through the increase in greenhouse gas emissions,

release of methane, habitat destruction and pollution (United Nations, 2024). As a result, climate change can affect extreme weather and rising sea levels, increasing the unpredictability of weather conditions that could slow or halt global transportation of resources especially in maritime trading (Environmental Protection Agency, 2024). Due to unpredictable weather conditions, maritime transportation may face increased risk and IOs, such as the IMO, have the capacity to facilitate maritime trade in these turbulent periods.

The IMO can ensure the strengthening of safety regulations and ensure a robust safety standard of which it has the authority to set some of these regulations and facilitation. Member states of the IMO need to comply due to international maritime convention and codes (IMO, 2024f). Some notable conventions include the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (IMO, 2024e) and Convention on Facilitation of International Maritime Traffic (IMO, 2024d). The IMO's centralized decision-making allows for a uniform standard in maritime safety based on these conventions. However, there is the issue of ratification and enforcement delays hindering timely responses to crises. The amendments to the IMO's earlier conventions are often delayed as they require a percentage of member states to ratify. To counter these delays, the IMO has adopted a new system of 'tacit acceptance' where an amendment will enter into force, provided there are no major objections (IMO, 2024c). As such, the IMO has demonstrated flexibility in updating its regulations in addressing emerging problems, but there remain persistent challenges in terms of prolonged negotiations, thereby reducing the IMO's responsiveness to immediate crises.

On the other hand, the UNECE and UNCTAD could provide support to the IMO by promoting and improving infrastructure and facilitating trade. These platforms can be utilized for discussions, negotiations and recommendations. However, both the UNECE and UNCTAD adopted a system of voluntary compliance for its member states (UNECE, 2024a; UNCTAD, 2024a). The reliance on voluntary cooperation demonstrates these IOs' decentralized approach, where there are limits to their capacity to enforce recommendations. In addition, the UNECE covers a broad range of topics, ranging from transportation to trade and environmental issues which facilitates addressing interlinked challenges (UNECE, 2024b). Despite this, the UNECE is solely concerned with the European context, which limits its effectiveness in addressing global transportation stresses, especially if such stresses impact non-European maritime trade.

Hence, the IMO, the UNECE and the UNCTAD, have the potential to collaborate with one another to address stresses and reduce the likelihood of triggers to prevent crises. However, it takes

great effort to cooperate and significant administrative work for interorganizational collaboration (UNECE, 2023). The creation of collaborative networks takes time and may not be achieved fast enough to address some of the emerging or ongoing stresses, triggers and crises. Therefore, polycrises go unaddressed, hence efforts should be made to ensure interorganizational collaboration.

Consequently, extreme weather due to climate change has disrupted maritime trade routes, amplifying healthcare crises, for instance, in the delay of transporting critical medical supplies (Xu et al., 2020). This linkage exemplifies how the crisis in global transportation systems can serve as a resource and channel in the generation and prolongation of polycrisis.

Global Healthcare System

The global healthcare system directly impacts human well-being. Stresses such as climate-driven disease resilience and triggers like pandemics have led to multiple health crises that overwhelmed the global healthcare infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a case study shedding light on the interconnectedness of the global energy, transport, and health systems. In this case, the stresses and triggers of the global energy system negatively impacted the global transportation system, wherein COVID-19 affected port operations. Asian ports, such as Singapore, Shenzhen and Hong Kong were affected as the pandemic halted most of their operations (Gu et al., 2023). This meant that vaccine supplies and personal protective equipment deliveries were delayed, intensifying and prolonging the pandemic (Xu et al., 2020). Furthermore, there is substantive evidence that shows that the climate crisis contributes to the resilience of diseases and pathogens (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2024). This means that there could be other future outbreaks, other than COVID-19, highlighting the volatile global health landscape.

The WHO's handling of COVID-19 was overall considered weak. Due to its inherent design as an organization, it failed to effectively tackle the pandemic. The WHO's universal membership makes it the foremost platform for international health governance. Yet, it is this diversity of member states, with varying healthcare capacities, that generated challenges for the WHO in coordinating cohesive responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the centralized decision-making structure of the WHO Secretariat was ineffective because it relied on member states to comply. This reduced the effectiveness of centralized instructions, exacerbated by the ad hoc nature and inconsistency of WHO regulations (Jones & Hameiri, 2022). Further, the

International Health Regulations under the WHO were largely ignored by its member states, as every country prioritized their own national security in adopting lockdown measures, which are not part of the WHO's pandemic planning (Jones & Hameiri, 2022).

As the leading international health organization, the WHO lack enforceable regulations which weakens its ability to ensure compliance from member states. As a result, this global response to COVID-19 was chaotic; each member state prioritized their national strategies over global coordinated efforts. Despite the WHO's best efforts in their handling of COVID-19, its ill-equipped design has aided in the stresses and triggers of which has resulted in the generation and prolonging of polycrisis.

To ensure that stresses and triggers do not lead to the generation and prolongation of polycrises in the future, the WHO can adopt actionable reforms to ensure that it has the capacity to counter future disease outbreaks or pandemics. These reforms could include strengthening enforcement mechanism for global health regulations, developing a crisis-specific taskforce for immediate decision-making, and enhancing of coordination efforts with other IOs to address inter-systemic feedback loops.

Overall, this conceptual map and its application to selected global systems highlight how IOs have the potential to mitigate stresses and triggers before they develop into polycrises. Nonetheless, this conceptual map also highlights how the inherent design of IOs have in fact generated and prolonged polycrises instead.

International Institutions as the Central Agents in the Understanding of Polycrises

My analysis demonstrates how the inherent design of IOs plays a crucial role in shaping their effectiveness in crisis response. Across the global energy, transportation, and healthcare systems, the five key dimensions of membership, scope, centralization, control, and flexibility are imperative in understanding how these dimensions influence the ability of IOs to adapt, mitigate, and solve evolving crises.

The interconnectedness of global systems highlights the importance in the need for a coordinated approach to crisis management. The failure of one system would have its domino effect across other systems, further amplifying the polycrisis dynamics. Therefore, a need to investigate and address the structural weakness of IOs requires a rethinking of institutional design.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates the critical role of IOs in managing polycrisis and by positioning IOs at the heart of polycrisis analysis, it offers a critical lens in understanding how systemic stresses, triggers, and crises can be mitigated. Through the integration of rational design and polycrisis analysis, this paper contributes to a novel conceptual understanding on how institutional structures can shape the global crisis dynamics. Besides, the conceptual mapping approach offers a valuable tool for policy makers and researchers.

The conceptual framework illustrates general dynamics between stresses, triggers, and crises, but it may negate capturing specific dynamics or nuances that are seen in the individual systems. Adding on, this paper only focused on three selected global systems and rely on secondary data which limit the generalizability of the findings. As such, this emphasizes the need for broader empirical research to assess and validate the effectiveness of the conceptual framework's applicability across diverse contexts. It is also difficult to capture inter-systemic feedback as the polycrisis dynamics involves a vast number of these feedback loops making it impractical to analyze all permutations within the scope of this paper.

Still, as global crises become complex, the ability of IOs to adapt and respond effectively will be important. Therefore, future research should explore the practical implementation of structural reforms in IOs to build a more resilient and adaptive institution that has the capacity to navigate the complexities of an interconnected world. This paper underscores the importance of institutional innovations and collaborations in its navigation of the challenges of an interconnected world.

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Crisis Management in Hong Kong: A Comparison of Governmental Response to the 2014 Umbrella Revolution and 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement

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Abstract

This essay examines the differing approaches taken by Hong Kong Chief Executives Leung Chin-Ying and Carrie Lam during the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. Both movements were unprecedented in scale and duration and challenged the legitimacy of Hong Kong's "One Country, Two Systems" (OCTS) framework. Leung's crisis management led to a relatively swift return to the status quo with minimal constitutional, legislative, judicial or social impact. In contrast, Lam's actions exacerbated the crisis, prolonged civil unrest and deepened societal divisions. Furthermore, the 2019 movement culminated in the National Security Law that resulted in an upheaval of Hong Kong's governance. Both the 2014 and 2019 movements demonstrate how Hong Kong's unique OCTS framework, public perceptions, citizens' trust in institutions and other political contexts can interact with governmental crisis management strategies to shape the escalation or de-escalation of a crisis.

Introduction

The defining aspects of Hong Kong's democratic development since its transfer of sovereignty in 1997 are encapsulated by two key events. Firstly, the 2014 Umbrella Movement was triggered by a Standing Committee of the National People's Congress ("NPCSC") decision. It determined that while Hong Kong citizens could vote for its Chief Executive ("CE"), candidates must first be nominated by the Hong Kong Government and then approved by the Central People's Government. Secondly, the months of mass protests ("Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement") from 2019 to 2020 were sparked by the *Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019*, colloquially known as the 'Extradition Bill'.

Utilising the crisis framework developed by Boin et al. (2005), this essay intends to compare the handling of each crisis under the administrations of Leung Chun-Ying and Carrie Lam as Chief Executives of Hong Kong. This essay argues that Leung's crisis management is significantly more effective than Lam's, albeit Leung was also assisted by circumstances that benefitted his efforts.

Background

Hong Kong is no stranger to mass protests – in 2003, more than half a million Hong Kongers took to the streets to oppose Article 23 (Cheung & Lee, 2022). July 1st remains the "most important date on the annual protest calendar". These protests often concern universal suffrage (Hong Kong Free Press, 2022).

2014's Umbrella Movement and 2019's Anti-ELAB Movement were selected for this study as both movements were unprecedented in scale and duration. For example, both the Umbrella and Anti-ELAB movements (1) involved more than 1 million individuals and (2) lasted for months on end and thus drastically differed from other mass protests that typically lasted a day (Hou et al., 2022; Lee & Chan, 2015). Moreover, the Umbrella Movement has been called "a watershed in Hong Kong's political culture and self-understanding" and contributed to the rise of localism and the desire to preserve the "Hong Kong Identity" (Veg, 2016; Veg, 2017). Most significantly, it marked the first time the Chinese Communist Party was directly challenged. On the other hand, the Anti-ELAB movement ultimately resulted in the passage of the National Security Law ("NSL").

The Umbrella Movement and Anti-ELAB movement saw drastically altered protest strategies that became increasingly confrontational – towards the local government and the Chinese Central Government. Thus, the 2014 and 2019 movements constituted a crisis as defined in Hart (1993), as both threatened "a breakdown of familiar symbolic frameworks legitimising the pre-existing socio-political order". More specifically, both movements indirectly and directly challenged the legitimacy of One Country Two Systems ("OCTS"), threatening the status quo of Hong Kong's unique post-colonial governance.

Literature review

Existing literature highlights that crisis management involves three distinct phases: (1) a pre-crisis/disaster phase, (2) a period of crisis/rescue and (3) a period of recovery and recovery/demise (Cohen & Ahearn, 1980; Raphael, 1986). Furthermore, Pearson & Mitroff's proposed crisis management framework evaluates the interactions between four key crisis variables: crisis type, time phases, organisational systems and critical stakeholders (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). However, all of these frameworks analyse crisis management from the perspective of a business organisation and, hence, may not apply to a government's crisis management due to the drastic difference in societal implications. Furthermore, Hong Kong's unique governance under OCTS has significantly limited the applicability of existing traditional crisis management frameworks.

A key concept more relevant to Hong Kong's context may be the crisis framework that Chan (2013) introduces. Chan first introduces the difference between a "public crisis" and a "governance crisis." While the former compel a government to act due to increasing public demand, the latter refers to a crisis that results in a significant change in policy, government personnel, or structure. While democratic systems allow for the de-escalation of public crises, such crises are almost guaranteed to be upgraded to a governance crises in non-democratic systems due to the lack of relationship between government performance and change (Chan, 2013). Hence, the options for non-democratic political crisis management are severely limited and have drastic implications. This can be seen in the context of the Arab Spring, when protestors challenged the decades of stable authoritarianism, resulting in either severe governmental societal upheaval or violent suppression of protests.

Chan (2013) also introduces the crisis development ladder, where strengthening and weakening forces play a role in determining a crisis' nature, handling and impact while explaining

why specific crises lead to government change and why others are forgotten. For example, the sources of crisis strengthening are (1) the nature of the crisis itself, (2) deliberation by stakeholders such as the media or opposition parties and (3) direct response by the people (Chan, 2013). Conversely, crisis management strategy is the source of crisis weakening (Chan, 2013).

In the context of Hong Kong's 2014 and 2019 movements, the three sources of crisis strengthening, as highlighted by Chan (2013) are present, given that (1) both are political crises that emerged from unpopular government policies; (2) Hong Kong society experienced severe polarisation as seen by the emergence of yellow and blue camps and (3) both movements saw massive protests where citizens went onto the streets to demand change. However, existing research regarding the crisis management strategies deployed in response to Hong Kong's 2014 and 2019 movements remains limited, possibly due to the recency of both events. Moreover, such literature primarily focuses on the Hong Kong regime's late-term crisis management. For example, Yuen & Cheng (2017) examine the enervation of the Umbrella Movement. The study highlighted the regime's offensive and defensive attritional strategies. On the defensive side, the government actively sought to maintain cohesion amongst elites to minimise political opportunities for protestors. This was done by utilising both incumbent advantage and punishment to maximise the perception of a united elite. On the offensive side, the regime mobilised popular dissent to form a countermovement to undermine and trivialise the movement's goals effectively, thus increasing the cost of protest participation.

While the paper explains the governmental response following the breakout of the crisis, it does not examine government crisis management strategies that potentially exacerbated the crisis during its widespread outbreak. This is a noteworthy research gap, as James & Wooten (2010) write that "it is often the handling of a crisis that leads to more damage than the crisis event itself" (p.60). This statement is reinforced by the fact that the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-ELAB movement are manufactured crises stemming from unpopular government policies. Hence, resolving such crises is even more challenging due to the erosion of trust and public relations. As such, further analysis is needed to determine whether government action ultimately contributed to the escalation of the movements.

Theory and research questions

Crisis leadership refers to an individual's or administration's capacity and ability to "plan for, respond to and learn from crisis events" (Wooten & James, 2008, p.353). The public often expects policymakers to address emerging threats and vulnerabilities to avert such threats or at least limit its potential damage (Boin et al., 2005, p.1). Hence, crisis leadership is crucial to minimise economic and sociopolitical consequences while restoring public faith.

Referencing the critical tasks in crisis leadership highlighted in Boin et al. (2005), this essay will compare and contrast the Hong Kong regime's response to the 2014 and 2019 movements to determine the effectiveness of crisis-weakening forces in Chan's (2013) crisis development ladder framework. Hence, this essay will focus on the decision-making of Boin et al.'s crisis management framework to analyse the following question: How effective were Carrie Lam and Leung Chun Ying's crisis leadership performances in handling the 2014 and 2019 movements, respectively?

Another factor in why decision-making was chosen as the focus of this essay is the political nature of the 2014 and 2019 movements. Political crises differ from natural crises due to the former's allowance of a broader range of interpretations. For example, natural disasters such as the 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake and 2016's Typhoon Haiyan are reflexively and universally interpreted as humanitarian disasters. Therefore, decision-making is less politically motivated. However, the 2014 and 2019 movements implicated various stakeholders with different interpretations. Hence, the Hong Kong government was required to navigate a complex political landscape involving the strategic negotiations between pro-establishment and pan-democratic governance.

Boin et al. (2005) write that "crisis decision-making is making hard calls, which involve tough value tradeoffs and major political risks" (p.11). This essay will analyse the Leung and Lam administrations' strategies to manage their respective crises.

Analysis

Leung Chun Ying - Umbrella Movement

Leung Chun Ying's handling of the Umbrella Movement can be described as non-confrontational and even reconciliatory. Under Leung's administration, the government (1) largely refrained from using violence that could draw more drastic action from protestors and (2) appeared willing to compromise with protest leaders through weaponizing talks.

The Umbrella Movement, surveys indicated that the public only had a lukewarm reaction to occupying the main arteries of Hong Kong's central business district (Ortmann, 2015). However, early police efforts to contain the initial group of demonstrators involved the indiscriminate use of tear gas, which ironically resulted in increased mobilisation to support protestors (Chan, 2014). Notably, this firing of tear gas on 28th September 2014 was the first use of tear gas since the 1967 leftist riots (SCMP, 2014). Hence, the successful eventual occupation of Central, Admiralty and Causeway Bay was surprising for the government and protest organisers (Ortmann, 2015).

Policing and governmental tone regarding the movement softened the next day. The police employed negotiators to defuse tensions between protestors and frontline police (Ngo, 2014). Furthermore, a statement published by Leung called for the swift and peaceful dispersion of persons involved while encouraging protest leaders to consider the interest of broader society and cease the Occupy movement (The government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2014). Notably, Leung's statement did not refer to the legality of the Occupy movement but instead referred to protestors as "citizens". This de-escalation marked a drastic shift in Leung's strategy of handling the crisis, which is further elucidated by the lack of police intervention when a fourth occupation zone was set up in Tsim Sha Tsui.

Leung's strategy prevented a repeated cycle in which increased use of policing force resulted in further mobilisation from the public. Chan (2014) writes that "It is difficult to sustain a movement by continuous blockage of main roads, as the inconvenience to the public means that the movement loses popular support" (p.577). Leung's administration was likely aware of this. Hence, the focus was placed on preventing protestors from mobilising by not giving them a reason to, as public dissatisfaction and fatigue are expected to grow and engulf the movement from outside and within.

To reinforce the government's willingness to address protestors' concerns pragmatically, Leung's administration also agreed to hold talks with protest leaders. As the movement was caused by the contentious NPCSC decision, it was unlikely that such talks would be productive due to the decision being beyond the jurisdiction of the Hong Kong government. Despite this, Leung continued to agree to talks and even appointed then-Chief Secretary Carrie Lam to head efforts.

By agreeing to such talks, the Government was able to present itself as willing to concede to specific demands. Despite this, these talks also gave the Government a point of leverage in its delaying tactic and became a tool to de-escalate tensions when needed forcibly. For example,

protest leaders called for demonstrations the same day (10th October 2014) when talks were scheduled. However, the talks were abruptly called off by the Government on the eve of the planned dialogue, with Carrie Lam shifting responsibility on protest leaders, declaring that their rallying call had "shaken the trust of the basis of our talks and it will be impossible to have a constructive dialogue" (Pomfret & Baldwin, 2014). This weaponization of talks can be seen again when the Hong Kong Government announced on 15th October that it was rescheduling talks with student leaders. This announcement came following the beating of Ken Tsang, a prominent pro-democracy politician who was stabbed, kicked and on by seven police officers in a case of police brutality.

The televised dialogue between the Government and protest leaders on 21st October saw protestors laying out four key demands: (1) reversal of the August NPCSC decision, (2) endorsing civic nomination for the election of CE, (3) abolishment of functional constituencies and (4) a clear timeline to achieve these objectives (Chan, 2014, p.577). Hong Kong's leaders had no power to agree to such demands, as they needed direct approval from Beijing to make the required changes to the Basic Law. Although the Hong Kong Government displayed willingness to compromise by agreeing to submit a report to Beijing an impartial account of public sentiment regarding the NPCSC decision, this report was not legally binding. Leung's administration ultimately was successful in avoiding addressment of the protests' demands (Chan, 2014). Soon after, the loss of public support and increasing public dissatisfaction resulted in protestors giving up on the movement, which ended without much change to Hong Kong's electoral process. Under Leung's crisis management, the status quo was largely maintained without drastic escalation from protestors.

Carrie Lam - Anti-ELAB Movement

Carrie Lam's crisis management during the Anti-ELAB movement drastically differs from Leung's approach. While Leung appeared willing to compromise with protest leaders, Lam adopted a more hardline approach as seen by two critical decisions: (1) continuing the Second Reading of the Extradition Law Amendment Bill on 12th June 2019 and (2) swift declaration of protests on the same day as "riots". Under Lam's leadership, protests shifted from peaceful marches and sit-ins to more radical and militant violence.

One significant difference between the 2019 Anti-ELAB movement and the Umbrella movement is the cause of the crisis. While Beijing arguably caused the Umbrella movement, and thus the Hong Kong government had little say, Lam's government wielded notable influence in the proposition of the extradition bill itself. For context, in 2018, Hong Kong resident Chan Tong-kai murdered his girlfriend, Poon Hiu Wing, in Taiwan before fleeing back to Hong Kong. As Hong Kong and Taiwan lacked an extradition agreement, authorities were not able to charge Chan with murder, therefore necessitating changes to the existing extradition law (Cheung, 2019). However, the proposition of a mutual legal assistance agreement with Taiwan without including mainland China equates to Hong Kong's recognition that China and Taiwan are two separate legal entities. This is incompatible with the One-China policy, as China views Taiwan as a renegade province. Hence, Lam's government had no choice but to include Mainland China in this agreement, prompting widespread fears of the deterioration of OCTS and Hong Kong's judicial system. Moreover, Lam repeatedly emphasised that she was driven by compassion for Poon's devastated parents and said that the bill was not instructed or coerced by the Central Government (Lague et al., 2019). This gave the impression that Lam's administration had the power to suspend or withdraw the bill without input from the Chinese Central Government.

On June 9th, 2019, a total of 1.03 million people, as the organisers claimed, took to the streets to protest against the extradition bill (Kleefeld, 2019). Although this represented one-seventh of the entire Hong Kong population, Lam continued to double down on the bill's passage. While stating that the government "acknowledges and respects that people have different views on a wide range of issues", Lam announced that the bill's second reading will resume on June 12th.

This decision proved to be the first of many to exacerbate the crisis. Hong Kong's political structure is a hybrid regime where democratic elements exist in a broader autocratic regime. This results in a unique situation where those who hold power lack public mandate, while those who are backed by public mandate do not hold power. Hence, protests in Hong Kong became an important avenue for the public to express their views directly and influence the government (Lee & Chan, 2008). Hong Kongers had significant successes in pushing back against several governmental policies through protests. This includes 2003's Article 23 protests and 2012's anti-moral and National Education protests (Duhalde & Huang, 2019). Lam's disregard of the June 9th protests indicated the erosion of protest culture in Hong Kong, where the political power of large-scale peaceful demonstrations had been diminished. Compared to 2014's Umbrella Movement,

where demonstrators had higher regard for the rule of law, Lam's decision effectively served as justification for protestors' increased use of illegal militant-style violence. This is further exemplified by the emergence of protest slogans such as "It was you who taught me peaceful marches are useless" (Chung & Lum, 2019).

Suppose Lam's indifference to the June 9th protests is interpreted as a diminution of peaceful protests. In that case, Lam's handling of the June 12th protests can be viewed as outright hostility to citizens' right to protest. Demonstrators on June 12th successfully surrounded the entire government and Legislative Complex, preventing Legislative Council members and staff from entering the government complex (Purbrick, 2019). This further resulted in postponing the second reading to a later date. While most demonstrators outside the Legislative Complex were peaceful, a few violent protestors were able to enter Legislative Complex, and "the Police were pelted with objects from the violent front part of the crowd (Purbrick, 2019, p.6). This eventually resulted in police efforts to clear the entire crowd, effectively "engaging with the rear of the protest crowd" that was peaceful and made no attempt to storm the Legislative Complex (Purbrick, 2019, p.6). It is important to note that while the Commissioner of Police has "supreme direction and administration of the police force", he/she is still required to report to the Chief Executive (Cap. 232 Police Force Ordinance,2021). Hence, this utilisation of tear gas and rubber bullets against peaceful protests is the result of Lam's direction or conscious inaction.

Moreover, Lam was quick to characterise and generalise the June 12th protests as an "organised riot" (Hollingsworth, 2019), further displaying hostility towards peaceful protestors. This is significant as a conviction of rioting carries a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment. Moreover, this labelling of the protests as riots resulted in increased fear and outrage that Hong Kong citizens' right to peaceful assembly was being undermined. Hence, Lam's retributive use of the law further resulted in protestors giving up hope that the Government would hear their genuine concerns and dismissing the idea that compromise can be achieved through peaceful means. This resulted in further motivation for protestors to resort to radical violence to make their voices heard, thus further exacerbating the crisis.

Although Lam's administration announced on 15th June that the bill had been "suspended", the movement further evolved into an anti-governmental movement with five key demands. These demands included (1) the full withdrawal of the extradition bill, (2) the exoneration and release of arrested protestors, (3) the retraction of the classification of protestors as "rioters", (4) dual

universal suffrage for both CE and the Legislative Council and (5) the establishment of an independent commission to investigate police brutality (Wong, 2020). Violent protests to achieve such goals would continue for months until the outbreak of COVID-19 (Ismangil & Lee, 2020).

Discussion

Boin et al. (2005) state that "crisis response is not determined only by crucial leadership, but to a considerable extent, also by the institutional context in which crisis decision making and implementation take place" (p. 12). While a consequentialist comparison of Leung and Lam's handling of their respective crises indicates that the former was more effective, it should also be noted that the circumstances of the Anti-ELAB movement were arguably much more challenging.

One possible explanation for why the Umbrella Movement did not escalate similarly to the Anti-ELAB movement was Hong Kong citizens' differing perceptions of threat. The Umbrella Movement was caused by the Hong Kong Government's failure to fulfil its promises of adopting universal suffrage for electing the CE. This retraction of a policy never fulfilled in the first place resulted in Hong Kong citizens feeling less threatened, as the status quo remained unchanged. In contrast, the proposition of the extradition bill where Hong Kong citizens could be prosecuted under Beijing's judicial system marked a drastic shift within the OCTS framework. As Hong Kong remains the last Chinese territory (excluding Taiwan) that allows for dissent, Hong Kong citizens saw the extradition bill as a threat to their fundamental rights and were willing to take more radical actions to preserve the status quo.

Moreover, a series of political events from 2014 to 2019 deteriorated Hong Kong citizens' trust in the Hong Kong Government, the Chinese Central Government and the OCTS framework. In 2015, the disappearance of five staff of the publishing house "Causeway Bay Books" prompted fears that the Chinese Government was carrying out extrajudicial detentions of Hong Kong citizens (Joseph & Hunt, 2016). This resulted in blurred lines between Hong Kong and China's rule of law. Moreover, six pro-democracy and localist lawmaker-elects were disqualified in 2016 due to improper oaths following an NPCSC clarification that Hong Kong legislators were required to swear allegiance to Hong Kong as part of China (NPCSC, 2016). This was again viewed as increasing Chinese encroachment on Hong Kong and further contributed to the decline of trust in Hong Kong's political system, making crisis management more challenging. In contrast, Hong

Kong's government prior to 2014 was applauded for handling several crises, most notably SARS and the 2009 Great Recession (Siu & Wong, 2004; Zhang, 2017).

However, Boin et al. (2005) also note that the framework of five critical tasks only applies within democratic settings. Furthermore, Boin et al. (2005) highlight that the management of a crisis differs depending on the regime type. For example, leaders of a liberal democracy must operate within a political, legal and moral framework that non-democratic leaders need not consider much (Boin et al., 2005).

In liberal democracies, good crisis management is rewarded by voters electing individuals back in office. Hong Kong's status as a Special Administrative Region under OCTS makes it a unique case study in crisis management. This is emphasised by Carrie Lam herself, who said that the CE "has to service two masters by constitution, that is the Central People's Government and the people of Hong Kong" (Reuters, 2019). The Hong Kong people do not directly elect the CE. Hence, there is more room towards advancing the interests of Beijing rather than prioritising the desires of the Hong Kong people. Hence, the framework of crisis management proposed by Boin et al. (2005) may not fully apply in Hong Kong's context.

Recommendations

Hong Kong's democratic development has been drastically altered by implementing the National Security Law ("NSL") in 2020. The NSL's constitutional, legislative, judicial and social impact all contribute towards further integrating Hong Kong as a Chinese city. However, the Governments of Hong Kong and China should not completely rule out the possibility of future violent demonstrations. While Carrie Lam hailed the "instant result" of the NSL's "restoration of social stability", public outrage is likely still simmering in the background (Ho, 2020). The current image of social stability is likely the result of a lack of for citizens to mobilise against, and a spark could ignite more desperate and radical demonstrations. Although China would likely never allow for the resumption of

Hong Kong's democratic development, Hong Kong's stability still within China's interests. Furthermore, if the NSL restores political and social stability does not materialise, Hong Kong would likely see other forms of economic instability, such as mass migration (on a similar scale to the wave of migration before the 1997 handover) and the relocation of international business corporations to other nearby major cities such as Singapore. Hence, more public dialogue and

political discourse would benefit Hong Kong's future and maintenance of its image as a global city and financial hub.

Conclusion

This essay concludes that Leung Chun Ying's handling of the Umbrella Movement is more successful than Carrie Lam's handling of the anti-ELAB movement. While Leung's actions de-escalated the crisis, Lam's handling proved detrimental to crisis management. However, this essay also concludes that the circumstances of the two movements should also be considered, including the different nature of triggers and the different levels of public trust in Government before each crisis.

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When East Meets West: Impact of Cultural Differences on Crisis Management during COVID-19

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Abstract

This study examines the role of cultural differences in shaping government responses during the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) via Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory. The analysis will focus on the epicentres in the East and West — Wuhan City, China and New York City, United States — during the initial outbreak of the pandemic, on the three key dimensions: individualism-collectivism, indulgence vs restraint, and long-term vs short-term orientation. This study reveals that China's collectivist, restrained, and long-term oriented culture facilitated unified action. At the same time, New York City's individualistic, indulgent, and short-term oriented society experienced delays in implementing restrictive measures due to personal liberty concerns. The findings suggest that culturally attuned public health strategies are crucial for effective management amidst public health crises.

Keywords: COVID-19, Crisis Management, China, New York City, Public Health.

Introduction

Culture greatly shapes individuals' beliefs and affects their habits in imperceptible ways, which is why understanding cultural differences is crucial in explaining the varied responses during major crises like the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic. By analysing the two epicentres of COVID-19 in the East and West — Wuhan, China, from December 2019 to March 2020 and New York City, U.S., from February 2020 to May 2020 — this paper seeks to gather insights on how cultural variables affect government crisis management during early stages of a global health crisis. Using Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory as a framework, this comparative analysis will focus on individualism-collectivism, indulgence versus restraint, and long-term versus short-term orientation.

Background

COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, is an infectious disease that emerged in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. Within 2 months after the first case emerged in Wuhan, the virus spread to all provinces in China and over 90 countries worldwide (Yang et al., 2020). Like many other nations, the United States was soon drawn into the crisis. With the first confirmed COVID-19 case being March 1st, 2020, New York City (NYC) soon became the epicentre of the U.S. and observed over 700 COVID-19 related deaths daily by April 2020 (Covid-19: Data Trends and Totals - NYC Health, n.d.). Within 14 days of the first confirmed case, public gathering spots were closed down, which signalled the seriousness of the outbreak (Marsh, 2020; Ferré-Sadurní, 2020). With China and the U.S. being recognised as the representation of the East and West, it is reasonable to use both as case studies to examine the impact culture has on government's sense-making and decision-making in times of public health crisis.

Literature Review

Many scholars have focused on political factors to address the disparities in the way different states handled the virus (Altiparmakis et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020; Pedersen & Borghetto, 2021; San et al., 2021; Shin & Park, 2024). However, the role of cultural influences during the COVID-19 pandemic remains underexplored.

Unrelated to the pandemic, Tan (2022) discusses the significance of traditional Chinese administrative culture in public crisis management through the lens of Confucianism.

Highlighting a critical concept of having "people as the foundation", putting the well-being of people as the government's highest priority. Although there is a lack of empirical examples, this outlines how policymakers in China arrive at their decision.

Scholars, in general, agree that culture plays a big part in affecting the efficiency of public health policies during the pandemic (Shang, 2021; Hu and Liu, 2022). Shang (2021) analysed the possible reason behind mask resistance in the United States. One of the topics brought up was the contrasting theme of freedom and constraint, which ties in closely with "indulgence vs restraint" and "individualism vs collectivism" in Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory. Shang (2021) posits that the U.S. adopts a more individualistic culture, which leads to lower compliance with public health measures as compared to countries with more collectivist cultures like those in East Asia. However, the study only collects the latest comments from the mainstream media, which could introduce temporal biases as public opinion changes over time. Targeting mainstream media might also introduce certain biases as they may have similar editorial stances.

In response to Shang's study, scholars like Hu and Liu (2022) and Offe (1976) offered insights into how other individualistic countries handle similar public health directives, providing structural critiques. A study by Hu and Liu (2022) pointed out how building collective cognition was more challenging for a country with a federalist system like the U.S. due to the diversity in political beliefs and cultural background. This largely aligns with the critiques of Offe (1976), positing that capitalist states like the U.S. often face challenges to effectively manage crises.

Research by Kim and Kim (2010) and Newman and Nollen (1996) agrees on the importance of cultural values and highlights the impact of aligning organisational practices with the cultural context of the wider society. Through empirical testing, Newman and Nollen (1996) found that organisations that have a culturally congruent practice that aligns with society can positively affect their performances. Kim and Kim (2010) leveraged Hofstede's cultural dimension theory framework to explore the connection between collectivism and the adoption of collective actions, which applies to crisis management strategies during the pandemic.

The abovementioned studies highlighted the underexplored role of cultural influences in times of crisis, which requires a deeper investigation. A notable gap in existing literature is the lack of comparative studies between the responses of East and West during the pandemic from a cultural perspective. By filling this gap, valuable insights can be generated to strengthen the formulation of culturally attuned public health strategies.

Theory

Hofstede's cultural theory, developed by Geert Hofstede, can be leveraged to understand the differences between cultural backdrops. The six key dimensions (See Appendix) include power distance, which analyses the distribution of power; individualism-collectivism, which studies the integration of individuals into groups; masculinity-femininity, which refers to the differentiation of gender roles; short-term vs long-term orientation, which is the degree to which culture promotes delayed gratification; uncertainty avoidance, which assesses tolerance for ambiguity; and restraint vs indulgence, which measures societal impulse control (Nickerson, 2022). This paper will focus on individualism-collectivism, indulgence vs restraint, and long-term vs short-term orientation. These chosen dimensions directly study the extent to which societies prioritise collective well-being and balance their immediate needs with future considerations.

U.S. and China are chosen as representatives of Western and Eastern cultures respectively, due to their distinct cultural dimensions (Country Comparison Tool, n.d.). The U.S. is known to practise individualism; they are relatively high on the indulgence scale and short-term oriented (Mellish et al., 2020; Hofstede, 2010). The reason behind the U.S.' tendency to lean towards the above-mentioned aspect is largely due to its open economic structure and political philosophy. The U.S. adopts a capitalistic market that rewards individual effort and achievement and a political system which emphasises individual rights, personal freedoms, and limited government intervention with foundation principles like liberalism (Nester, 1993). Liberalism fosters an environment where individuals are encouraged to pursue their personal goals and ambitions. It also allows for free gratification of human desires related to having fun, reflecting their indulgence tendency.

China, on the other hand, is a collective society which values restraint and is more long-term oriented (Hofstede, 2010). Similar to the U.S., its cultural tendency can be traced back to foundational philosophy like Confucianism, which is greatly centred on communal harmony (Wang & Nahm, 2019). Confucianism advocates the prioritisation of collective societal stability over individual happiness. For instance, the concept of 'Li' in Confucianism refers to the code of conduct in the society which encourages adherence to ritual, manners and custom for the greater good of the society. Confucianism also stresses filial piety, where one has to honour one's parents and ancestors; this extends to planning for future generations. This exemplifies how China is

future-oriented, explaining why China is a prototype of a collectivist, restrained, and long-term-oriented society.

The paper will delve into epicentres within the two countries mentioned above, namely, New York City, United States, and Wuhan, China. The similarities and differences between the decision-making process, as well as the framing of the government will be studied. From there, the paper seeks to answer the following research question:

1. How do cultural differences affect the government's response to COVID-19 in New York City (NYC) and Wuhan?

Analysis

While many countries enforced lockdown measures to control the spread of the pandemic, the official narrative reveals the sense-making process of the government. Therefore, focus will be placed on understanding the government's rationale and priorities through their decision-making processes, which reflects deeper cultural values. Empirical data and community responses will supplement the exploration, offering insights into the manifestations of cultural values in the policy decisions and public responses.

Speed of Response of Collectivist vs. Individualist

China took a collectivist approach to handling COVID-19, which prioritised collective well-being while the U.S. took an individualistic approach, setting individual liberty as their priority. China's collectivist approach is evident in their swift response during the early stages of the pandemic, which includes the issuing of hospital directives and enforcing lockdown right when they discovered that the virus spreads from human-to-human (Qing, 2020).

On December 30th, 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission issued the "Urgent Notice on the Treatment of Unknown Pneumonia" (UNTUP), which seeks to standardise the treatment across hospitals in Wuhan for patients with unidentified pneumonia (Consulate-General of People's Republic of China in Sydney, 2020; Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, 2019). The UNTUP conveyed three key messages, which encourage healthcare professionals in Wuhan to exercise responsible leadership, practise standardisation of medical treatment, and strictly report cases to the government. This was issued shortly after pneumonia first appeared in the

Wuhan region, exhibiting the centralised nature of China's decision-making process, focusing on standardised procedures and uniformity across the healthcare sector.

In contrast to Wuhan's quick response, the NYC government was much more fragmented and delayed due to individualistic considerations. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in NYC was reported to be March 1, 2020, months after significant outbreaks had been documented in many parts of Asia and Europe, which gave the NYC government the opportunity to learn from observing how countries like China handled the outbreak. However, it was not until two COVID-19 related deaths in New York State that the state decided to announce the lockdown programme named, "Policy that Assures Uniform Safety for Everyone" (PAUSE) on March 20th, 2020. Before the PAUSE programme, gathering places such as public schools, bars, and restaurants were closed down progressively (Marsh, 2020; Ferré-Sadurní, 2020). The delayed response shows how individualistic culture influences the government's priority. The prioritisation of individualistic values and emphasis on personal choice and freedom are reflected in the government's avoidance of implementing lockdown swiftly. Thus, individualistic culture often leads to more reactive than proactive reactions to the crisis when the solution conflicts with individual autonomy.

The Narratives of Collectivist vs. Individualist

China's collectivism and U.S. individualistic culture are evident in the official government's narrative and directives. President Xi issued a statement five days after the lockdown, giving firm instructions to unite leaders across the nation battling against the pandemic (Chen, 2020). Xi's statement emphasises heavily on "unity" and "collective effort". He uses terms such as "build a community of defence", encouraging citizens to actively participate in preventive measures at a local level to maintain public health and safety. Xi's language use reflects one of the key elements of Confucianism, where societal harmony should be upheld and chosen for when it is in competing interest with individual interest (Tan, 2022). When Xi calls for citizens to "build a community of defence", he is nudging citizens to act in unison and evoke the pursuit of a collective goal, which is to control the spread of the virus. This aligns with both the collectivist value and the Confucian principle of "Li", which stresses how individuals should act in ways that contribute to the common good of society.

The manifestations of individualistic culture in the U.S. extend beyond the policies and how leaders communicate their message to the people. On March 17th, 2020, Governor Cuomo

gave a speech during a press conference to address the concerns of the citizens about the closure of public spaces (Andrew Cuomo New York Coronavirus Briefing Transcript, 2020). Less than five minutes into the conference, Governor Cuomo assumes personal responsibility for the decision made to close down public gathering spaces. His actions highlight the high level of individual leadership, rather than collective decision-making on the government level. Similar to Cuomo, the speech Former President Donald Trump gave on March 29th frequently uses pronouns like "I" to highlight his role. He also reminded Americans to take individual actions to combat the virus, which reflects the individualistic nature of the administration, as well as the embedded culture of American society (Trump White House, 2020). This shows how an exemplary American citizen should act; be self-reliant and take action on a personal level to stop the spread of the virus.

President Xi's and Governor Cuomo's speeches illustrate how deeply cultural values influence leaders' communication amidst crises. Xi's approach can foster a sense of common goal among the citizens, which serves as a motivator for individuals to unite and contain the spread of the virus. In contrast, Cuomo stresses the individual responsibility to motivate citizens, however, individual interest may not align with the government's recommendations. This leads to fragmented responses which can exacerbate the spread of the virus.

Indulgence vs. Restraint in Public Health Strategies

China's response exemplified high level societal restraint, which is evident in their strict protocol and control, while the U.S. focused on indulgence, emphasising on the freedom to fulfil one's desires. Wuhan's restrictive response included a strict prohibition against individuals and hospitals releasing information. This exhibits a tightly controlled dissemination of information, aimed at preventing unnecessary panic amongst citizens. Furthermore, the lockdown happened during the Chinese New Year period. The willingness to forgo the celebrations and indulgences shows the restrained nature of Chinese society when faced with a challenge requiring collective action (Illmer et al., 2021; Shang, 2021). This aligns with Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory, where restrained societies tend to have higher-level self-discipline and prioritise individual desires for the collective good (Hofstede, 2011). This is why the Chinese government was willing to forgo important celebrations and enforce strict control measures, emphasising on the orderly maintenance of social harmony at the expense of personal gratification.

NYC's approach was more gradual, focusing on satisfying immediate desires and unleashing impulses. Despite rising cases, public safety remained subordinate to maintaining personal freedom and liberties. This is evident in Cuomo's speech where he acknowledges peoples' social desires and gives the people advice on how to tide through the lockdown period without physical interactions, instead of addressing public health concerns. The word "public health" also only appeared once in Cuomo's speech as he spent most of the time acknowledging the social desires of the people. Further, Trump expresses a strong desire for the state to return to normalcy and mentioned to "have the planes flying" and "get even the cruise ships", reflecting the indulgent culture of the U.S., where the fulfilment of desires serves as a motivation amidst a public health crisis (Trump White House, 2020).

In indulgent societies, imposing rules that restrain people can be challenging and face resistance, even as the cases continue to rise. Hence, in times of public health crises such as COVID-19, where restraining strategies work the most effectively at the early stage of the outbreak, it complicates the government's effort to contain the virus. However, the government can leverage indulgence to motivate compliance by framing restrictive measures as a means to resume normalcy.

Comparing the two different approaches taken, having a restraint-based culture seems to align more with the policies aimed at minimising the spread of COVID-19 due to the highly infectious nature of the virus. A study revealed that around 25.67% of the population in China admitted to socialising with people outside their households during the peak of the pandemic (Lin et al., 2022). On the other hand, approximately 52% of the U.S. adult population admitted that they went out of their home even when social distancing was recommended (Jiang et al., 2022). These figures suggest that societies with collectivist and restraint-oriented cultures may have an inherent advantage in mobilising collective action during pandemics. However, this is not to say that societies with indulgent-oriented cultures are unable to manage pandemics, because framing health measures as a pathway to regain personal freedoms can be a way to motivate individuals to adhere to restrictions.

Long-term Vision vs. Short-term Focus

Further, China's investment into building temporary hospitals in Wuhan signals their long-term oriented approach, where solutions are targeted to address future challenges, while the U.S.

is focused on solutions that can demonstrate immediate results. Long-term oriented approaches often reflect the government's readiness to address challenges ahead of them through strategic planning and resource allocation. In China's case, they invested 1 billion CNY (US$142 million) and 1.62 billion CNY (US$231 million) respectively to build Huoshenshan Hospital and Leishenshan Hospital respectively to be prepared for the rising medical needs as a result of the pandemic (Cai et al., 2021). Further evidence from the UNTUP also suggests China's long-term oriented approach by nudging hospitals to create an emergency response plan without knowing what exactly causes the pneumonia. This reflects the long-term orientation behind the government's decision-making processes.

NYC's response is characterised as short-term oriented, focusing on getting immediate results to address immediate crises effectively. For instance, the introduction of the PAUSE programme is more reactive than proactive. Temporary solutions which include the closure of public schools for an undefined period of time, reflect the lack of long-term education strategy when the decision was made. In addition, Trump's aspiration to reopen the economy by Easter, despite the rising death toll, shows the emphasis on immediate recovery instead of the long-term consideration of losing labour productivity due to the rising death toll (NBC New York, 2020). Hence, it is evident that the difference in long-term and short-term approaches affects the timeline and consideration for their crisis management strategies.

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre reveals that more than one in two Americans felt that their country has done a bad job responding to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gramlich, 2020). This sentiment reflects the possible lack of strategic planning in the country, supported by studies that suggest the lack of long-term planning leads to a premature easing of restrictions, causing waves of infection (Hub staff report, 2020; Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, n.d.). In contrast, China's long-term planning allowed the government to gain high public confidence (Huaxia, 2020). This creates a self-reinforcing loop where effective governance leads to high trust, which is translated into increased compliance, which further validates the government's approach.

The comparative analysis reveals the cultural influences on the government's sense-making and decision-making processes. China's alignment with collectivist values, societal restraint, and long-term orientation allowed Wuhan to act decisively amidst the crisis. On the other hand, as U.S. society leans toward individualism, indulgence, and short-term orientation, NYC

was hesitant to implement restrictive measures, despite them being the only effective way to control the spread of the virus at that time. Clearly, a one-size-fits-all approach will not beeffective, as no one society is the same. Therefore, it is key to note the nuanced cultural dynamics in each society when managing a public health crisis.

Discussions

This paper studied the role cultural influences played in the government's responses during the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan and NYC through the lens of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory. Analysis revealed that the collectivist, restrained, and long-term orientation of Wuhan facilitated quick changes while mobilising unified action. Conversely, individualism, indulgent, and short-term orientation of NYC led to a fragmented response.

The findings largely align with past studies, reinforcing the explanatory power of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory. However, the theory fails to account for the differences in the political structures and how that affects the way the government responds to crises. In this case, a federal government system is used in the U.S. and a central authority system is used in China. The difference in governing signals a complex interaction of historical, political, and institutional factors. Nevertheless, one could argue that the institutional structures are a manifestation of the culture in society, where emphasis on individualism in U.S. society led to the formation of a federal system. Therefore, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory should be applied with broader consideration.

Recommendations

This section aims to discuss recommendations emerging from this study, from both a policy-making perspective and for future research. The analysis highlights how cultural differences in the aspect of individualism-collectivism and indulgence-restraint influence the approach the government will take, while long-term and short-term orientation affects the policy-making timeline. These findings indicate that there is not a one-size-fits-all strategy in crisis management approaches and that policymakers should take into account a myriad of cultural contexts.

Policymakers should consider adopting narratives that encourage compliance when communicating public health messages, considering cultural sensitivity. As mentioned by Shang

(2021), resistance to mask-wearing stemmed from the cultural emphasis on personal freedom. In this case, policymakers have to consider framing their narrative in a way that emphasises personal benefit, such as protecting their loved ones or ensuring personal safety; this can help nudge individuals towards compliance.

Knowing how culture plays a pivotal role in shaping government response to crisis, cross-cultural learning in global crisis management can also take place by adopting successful policies from similar cultural contexts. For example, China's swift lockdown to contain the spread of the disease can be adapted by other countries, with a more nuanced narrative that fits their cultural context. This is to ensure compliance of the citizens such that the policy will be effective. To enable better navigation of crisis management, governments worldwide should consider investing in cross-cultural training for their bureaucrats. When faced with another global crisis, this training will better equip policymakers with the knowledge to mitigate the challenges effectively.

This paper has provided a comparative analysis of how cultures influence government responses during the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan and NYC. However, with increasing global mobility and technological connectivity, cultural contexts are continuously shifting due to the blending of cultures (Story & Walker, 2016). The fluidity of nature signals that cultural dimensions may shift over time. Hence, further research could focus on mixed cultural contexts in cities like London and Singapore, with people of diverse backgrounds. If individuals maintain their cultural identities without blending into their host society, policymakers may need to develop tailored approaches to address different groups in society. A multidisciplinary approach can help to draw insights from sociology, psychology, and political science to study the complexities of culturally diverse societies.

Conclusion

By examining how Wuhan and NYC responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper highlights the impact of cultural differences on the government's response. Through the lens of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, empirical evidence shows that a society with long-term orientation, restraint, and collectivism can lead to swift, decisive measures. Conversely, if countries lean towards an individualistic, indulgent, and short-term oriented society, the implementation of restrictive control may not be well-received by the public.

The abovementioned findings are valuable to policymakers and health authorities in designing culturally sensitive approaches in times of public health crisis. This is because culturally appropriate narratives leveraging on societal values may improve compliance with measures or policies. Governments can benefit from cross-cultural learning by adapting successful strategies employed in societies with similar cultural contexts to fit their own. Scholars can also improve the explanatory power of the Hofstede Cultural Dimensions Theory by exploring the evolving cultural context in multicultural societies.

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Appendix

Summary of each aspect of the Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory

Power Distance Index (PDI)	PDI refers to the degree of inequality of power in society. Societies with high PDI tend to be more hierarchical and individuals accept that everyone has a place in the rankings without any need for justification. However, societies with low PDI tend to distribute power more equally (Hofstede, 2011, p.9). For example, in a higher PDI workplace, managers are more likely to ask employees for their views as compared to a lower PDI workplace. Raising questions in lower PDI workplace can be seen as constructive while those in higher PDI can be seen as disruptive and challenging the authority.
Collectivism vs. Individualism	In an individualistic society, individuals focus more on themselves, their needs and personal goals. Collectivist society, on another hand, places greater emphasis on collective well-being and collective goals (Hofstede, 2011, p.11).
Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)	UAI refers to societies' tolerance for ambiguity. This dimension reflects how threatening change is to their culture. Society with high UAI has low tolerance for uncertainty and they are known to minimize uncertainty through implementing strict rules. Conversely, societies with low UAI are more accepting of taking risks and they are more tolerant of change. Unknown and ambiguity is more accepted in societies with low UAI (Hofstede, 2011, p.10).

Femininity vs. Masculinity	This dimension looks into the extent a society values traditional gender roles. Courage, competitiveness and strength are often values associated with masculinity. Cooperation, quality of life and nurturing are qualities associated with femininity. Hence, a society that is more feminine will place more focus on nurturing their citizens and are likely to have better maternity leave policies. Conversely, a masculine society will focus on increasing competitiveness for all, and it is more likely for them to have more women in leadership positions (Hofstede, 2011, p.12).
Short-Term vs. Long-Term Orientation	Societies that are long-term oriented focus on goals that delays short-term success. They encompass traits such as persistence and practice delayed gratification. However, societies that are short-term orientated are more inclined to put emphasis on quick results (Hofstede, 2011, p.13).
Restraint vs. Indulgence	This aspect measures societal impulse and desire control. A high indulgence society allows relatively free gratification, and a restraint society tends to suppress it by placing rules and regulations (Hofstede, 2011, p.13).

The Impacts of Mass Media on Political Polarization: Bridging the Great Divide

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Abstract

The dispersion of mass media impacts political institutions' views on polarization. The dominant explanation for this trend is that news, social media, and political ads significantly affect how individuals view the world around them. The internet is considered a way to enhance people's lives, so what people view or hear via these institutions is generally regarded as factual. In this study, I use previous research from the National Library of Medicine, chapters from The Handbook of Media and Mass Communication Theory, data from YouGov, data from Political Polarization in the American Public, and personal statements from interviewed individuals. Contrary to widespread belief, polarization is not a significant issue dividing our country; instead, it is a false reality created by fake news and propaganda. With the rise of media viewing, political tension, and social divide, polarization has become a significant factor in political debate and the outcomes of politics.

Keywords: Polarization, Misinformation, Political Parties.

Introduction

"The news is supposed to be a mirror held up to the world, but the world is far too vast to fit in our mirror. The fundamental thing the media does all day, every day, is decide what to cover — decide, that is, what is newsworthy" said American journalist Ezra Klein. Political polarization, defined as "the ideological distance between opposed parties" (Talisse, 2024), has become a prominent issue in American society. The role of mass media in amplifying this phenomenon has raised questions about the reality of this cleavage. Is political polarization as significant as it seems or is it an exaggerated narrative fueled by the media to further create political tensions and social divides? To answer this question, the essay will discuss existing research on political polarization, use data from Pew Research Center, YouGov polls, and interviews with Alabama state representatives. The findings suggest that political polarization is not a significant issue dividing our country; instead, it is exaggerated by media viewing, political tension, and social divide.

Literature Review

Political polarization has become highly prominent in our nation's society. Existing research shows the amplification of polarization through the dispersion of mass media, impacting political institutions' views on polarization. Fortner and Fackler (2014) explore the agenda-setting role of media, specifically how the media, through covering certain issues, influences public discourse and key topics. The article from the Pew Researcher Center, *Political Polarization in the American Public* (2003) also examines these claims. It demonstrates the steady increase over the years of ideological separation in the two political caused by the influence of mass media (Political Polarization in the American Public, 2023).

Furthermore, research from the National Library of Medicine discusses how modern technology and mass media disperse disinformation and misinformation in a way that does not allow the full facts of the matter to be seen. Their findings indicates that mass media uses "fake news" and misinformation to distort reality, and thus cause polarization.

Methods and findings

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, with data from Pew Research Center, YouGov polls, and interviews with state representatives. The research presented in this paper has been

conducted with data collection from the United States of America and does not include the effects of mass media or political polarization on any other nations.

The YouGov's article is used to compare the opinions of Republicans and Democrats on policies when it comes down to voting. The article is to share information on 100 policies supported by majorities of Democrats and Republicans. This article is used to prove that when it comes to policy making, the desires of the opposing political parties are not necessarily opposite from one another.

The final source of information used for this research was personal interviews. These personal interviews were conducted by asking five questions to two selected House Representatives in Alabama from opposing political parties. The individuals being interviewed speak on their opinions on polarization, the effects of mass media, and polarization's effects on politics. Finally, this research paper uses a counter-examination from The Berkeley Political Review (Cholbi, 2024). This review discusses the positives of polarization and how it can be used for good and provides several instances and ways in which polarization can be used for the promotion of political participation (Cholbi, 2024). Through the examination of these sources, the research proved that mass media does have a significant effect on politics, which further polarizes the two main political parties. Each source used for this research offers a different perspective as to why this polarization is occurring so rapidly.

Analyzing Mass Media's effects on Politics and Policy

Figure 1: *Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values*
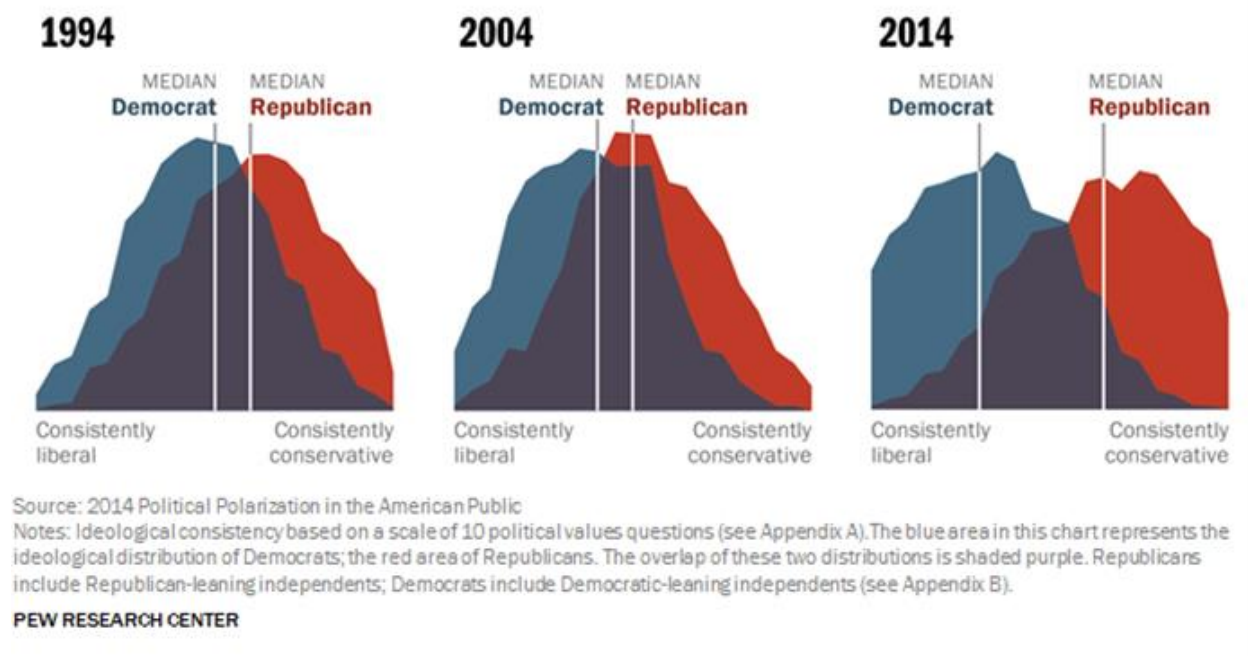

Figure 1 represents the two prominent ideological spectrums: the conservative/republican position and the liberal/republican position.

To analyze the meaning and complexity of political polarization, it is essential to explore how the mass media has affected politics and society. According to the National Library of Medicine, digital spaces are a fertile ground for fake news campaigns and hate speech, aggravating polarization and posing a threat to societal harmony (2023). Informational technology, such as the news broadcasters and social media, are methods for people to stay informed on current events. Several news stations run twenty-four hours, offering constant updates about what is happening. These news outlets rely on grabbing the viewer's attention, frequently resulting in exaggerated or over-amplified descriptions of events. The National Library of Medicine adds, "Its crippling effects are now accompanied by rising calls for action on online disinformation, which threatens to polarize society and destroy democratic life. For example, the term 'fake news' gained popularity during the 2016 U.S elections to create a sense of urgency and, in a sense, scare people

into taking action because they are led to believe the situation is worse than it is. These tactics include using social media and online platforms to increase the spread of disinformation and hate speech" (The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A Cross-country Configural Narrative, 2023). This form of hate speech impacted the 2020 elections because of social media's rise in prominence, as politics are a breeding ground for disinformation and hate speech (The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A Cross-country Configural Narrative, 2023). This statement alludes to polarizing political parties increasing interaction, as people feel they must choose one side absolutely to make a change happen.

The desires and goals of opposing political parties are not necessarily as different from each other. Figure 1 shows that although the divide between parties has increased in the last twenty years, the divide is not as significant as it has been portrayed in the media. The figure also shows the divide slowly increasing due to the rise in the media's reach. Social media was nonexistent when these graphs started in 1994, and television media was sparse. The final image depiction is from 2014, when social media was rising, and 24-hour news sources were gaining attention. This figure further demonstrates a divide, but it is not as divided as we are led to believe, proving the role of the media in further creating a divide.

Mass Media and Polarization Effects on Votes

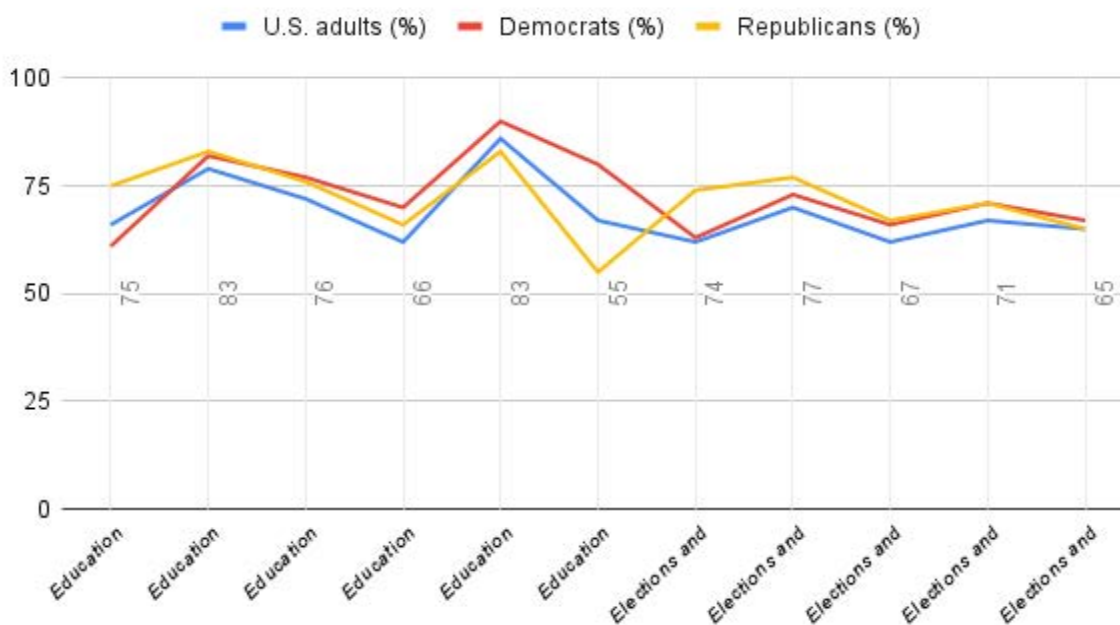**Figure 2:** *Voting comparison between Democrats and Republicans*

Figure 2 uses data from YouGov to construct a graph of the polls between 2020 and 2022. Some polls were conducted in partnership with news organizations, such as the Economist and Yahoo News, while others were conducted internally by YouGov's U.S. News team. There is some variation in each poll's sample and methodology. For instance, some polls are restricted to U.S. adult citizens while others are representative of all U.S. adults. Questions were asked in a variety of formats and included a variety of response options, though all included a neutral option of "not sure" or "don't know" (Orth, Bialik, Mckown-Dawson, 2022). The lines are used to represent the close correlating opinions between Democrats, Republicans, and US citizens. The main purpose of the graphs was to examine whether mass media and polarization affect the outcome of the votes. After researching thoroughly and creating charts to demonstrate this research, it can be seen that the votes and ideologies, although more polarized than in past years, are not as divided as it seems through the media.

Another central question is whether the votes represent publicized political polarization. Figure 2 proves that although the voting is publicized to be vastly different, the votes that come in are closely related. This graph from YouGov lists several policies, including education policies and election results. The media leads individuals to believe that this divide is by a percentage as

high as 75 percent (Orth, Bialik, Mckown-Dawson, 2022). Still, the highest separation percentage between Republican and Democratic votes in these policies is only 14 percent (Orth, Bialik, Mckown-Dawson, 2022).

Chapter 14 of The Handbook of Media and Mass Communication Theory explains why this trend occurs. The chapter describes how the media depicts how we view the world outside in our minds, bringing what we imagine to a visual for the world to see. Mass media's primary purpose is to provide an explanation for information we see and information that we citizens do not have immediate access to. The media is intended to act as a liaison between the people and the unknown entity.

This handbook on theory also places the main aspects of agenda setting. Agenda setting, or what the media chooses to portray, can be categorized into two sections: basic agenda-setting and attribute agenda-setting (Fortner, 2014, p. 252-254). Basic agenda-setting is "to focus public attention on a small number of key issues and topics," and attribute agenda-setting is "media's attribute agenda influences the salience of these attributes on the public's agenda" (Fortner, 2014, p. 252-254). What is published on the news and social media platforms is much more than a relaying of information; instead, it is a relaying of an agenda. Different mass media sources are promoted and funded by opposing groups, creating a great divide or polarization. When a source relays an exaggerated or the most extreme version of what is occurring on opposite sides of the occurrences, it is easily viewed as highly polarized. If the media were just to produce the information and not set one of the stated agendas, the polarization levels would be noticeably smaller. However, two primary levels of agenda-setting are listed, and a third one is being explored. This third level is the picture that we see in our heads. However, the media's influence is limited to the individual's interpretation. Much of mass media's production at the third level is presented or written based on how they feel people will respond.

Mass Media and Polarization Effects on the Political Party System: Interviews

Polarization is regarded as a great divide between the political parties in our nation, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Two interviews were conducted with Alabama state representatives of opposing political parties. The Interview with Republican State Representative was conducted in person, and the interview with a Democrat State Representative, was conducted online through email. Both individuals were asked the same five questions: (1) Please introduce

yourself: what is your name, what is your position, and what is your political affiliation? (2) How would you define polarization regarding the government? (3) Do you believe mass media affects polarization? (4) Is the government genuinely polarized, or is this just something we as people have created to continue to divide ourselves? (5) What could we do to close the gap of polarization and unite our nation? For anonymity purposes, House rep. 1 refers to the Republican Representative, while House rep. 2 refers to the Democrat Representative.

The first individual interviewed was a Republican state representative for the Alabama House of Representatives. In answer to Question 2, House rep. 1 believes polarization is "the move towards extremes and less from moderation and/or the center of government as far as the direction of the policies we follow" (House rep. 1). The rep believes that polarization regarding political parties is not a straight line, and he uses a horseshoe analogy to describe this: you get so far left that you go back right again, or you get so far right that you go back left again. Or, in a sense, just a loop with a large gap that bounces you from one side to the other or in a back-and-forth rotation.

For question 3, House rep. 1 believes that society is heavily influenced by the news and social media, creating "clicks." For instance, roughly 75% of people just want the best thing for the whole; he says the other 25% are trying to make the state better; they just have different philosophies on how to get there, stating that the main 25% is where disagreements occur. House rep. 1 states, "If we are getting along, those policies and information don't get clicks. No one is writing a story about Republicans and Democrats writing together and working together to fix a problem. When the information becomes scandalous or makes one party look worse than the other, that's what people will pay attention to or sense and describe it as clickbait, creating polarization. Instead of publicizing the 75% that agree and want to work together, we are publicizing the 25% with vastly opposing views to get viewer attention" (House rep. 1 October 18, 2024).

Furthermore, House rep. 1 finds that the mass media focuses on how to keep people's attention for an extended period. They do that by providing some form of entertainment, not just telling the news but instead giving the information based on what they believe people will want to see—the heavy slant that became more prominent as media grew and grew. The media is trying to differentiate themselves from others, so they must say something eye-catching and memorable. Interviewer 1 gives the example of saying the world is on fire; people will pay attention and want to support the person putting out the fire, but if you just say this one field is on fire, people aren't paying as much attention.

Answering my final question, the House rep. states that polarization has vastly changed over the last several decades. Since the 1968 U.S elections, the commission was created, which changed how the public began voting in the primaries. House rep. 1 finds the most notable change to be the perspective of the voters, "the parties were no longer supporting who they thought would make the best pitch that could get the vote of the general's whole, but instead, they are trying to reach the far right or far left voters because it is guaranteed 25% of their votes; they are racing to the edge because these people are dedicated, they come out to vote, and they spread the word through their influence on media" (House representative 1, October 18, 2024).

Interviewer 1 believes people want to get to the extreme because they win the primaries, which influences people who may have had a medium view to come out and vote for the primary election. The silent majority is lost; instead of focusing on attracting the silent majority and bringing the people in the middle over to one side or the other, we are now totally focused on the extremists, which is what's publicized in the media. So, in a sense, polarization is created.

The following individual interviewed was a Democrat State Representative, named Interviewer 2. The House rep. describes polarization as "a major difference of political views with little to no willingness to compromise or even consider another perspective"(A. Clark personal communication, October 21, 2024).

 Interviewer 2 bridges into the second question on the mass media effect of polarization by saying, "Yes. Today, the public is given more polarized news media choices to boost ratings. Consumers tend to watch and read more antagonistic and one-sided broadcasts and articles rather than unbiased news" (A. Clark personal communication, October 21, 2024). This statement by House rep. 2 is very similar to the statement made by House rep. 1, both Representatives believing that the news has become more polarized to boost ratings and that consumers view what is popular. Most consumers will not view both sources and even a middle ground. We, as viewers and consumers, watch what's easiest to find, and the easiest mass media to find are those of polar opposite viewpoints.

In answering the next question, the representative court believes that polarization exists, but not necessarily in the way that we, as the people, view it as existing. She states, "Polarization often results from power struggles among political parties and leaders. I believe both the government and the people are polarized on issues such as immigration and the economy, but I agree on many issues. Many lawmakers tend to vote the way we believe our constituents want us

to vote to get re-elected rather than vote our conscience based on our knowledge and research that is presented to us on given subjects" (A. Clark personal communication, October 21, 2024).

Lastly, Representative Clark was asked what we could do to bridge this gap or this Great Divide. "That's a million-dollar question, and I do not know the answer. However, we can start by respecting each other, regardless of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, and live the oath that we recite each time we pledge allegiance to our flag as one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all" (A. Clark personal communication, October 21, 2024). I believe this quote from the representative clerk is powerful in many aspects but makes the point that polarization is not something that's going to change overnight. Still, it's a process that we, the people, have to start ourselves to close this great divide. After interviewing both representatives from opposing political parties, I could see many similarities in their answers, further proving my point that polarization is not what we see in the media, but a deeper-rooted issue mainly caused by mass media as a whole.

Counter examination: The Positives of Political Polarization

Although it can be seen through data and research that the effects of mass media on political polarization have created a divide, this research offers a counter to how polarization could be beneficial. Cholbi (2024) states, "while polarization is often seen as harmful, it has significant benefits for democratic engagement and accountability". This article describes how polarization could be beneficial and why there's such a stigma around polarization. The first section this article is broken up into or speaks about is the anxiety around the idea of polarization. When individuals feel that their friends or neighbors believe very differently from them, they get anxious about being around them and may be led to end a relationship. Next, the article talks about diagnosing the problem. Why are people viewing polarization negatively? Why has this become an issue? The article states again that political polarization is not negative but instead used to amplify engagement and politics in the government by the everyday citizen. The article also provides information showing that political polarization keeps the candidates and their elected positions accountable because they have a much more active following that is aware of their successes and mistakes. The article's main statement regarding polarization is that "While polarization has challenges, it is crucial for fostering awareness, accountability, and meaningful democratic

engagement" (Cholbi, 2024). Indeed, since polarization causes opposing views to clash, citizens are more likely to be politically active to prevent the opposite party from decision-making.

Conclusion

Political polarization is an issue plaguing our nation and continuing to grow and attract attention. It has become highly prominent in our nation's society. This polarization is amplified through the dispersion of mass media, impacting political institutions' views on polarization. The million-dollar question is, how do we bridge this great divide? The answer to this question may be unknown, but we must begin by taking action as this nation's people. It requires a collective effort to counter misinformation and promote respect for differing perspectives. We, the people, created this nation, and to bridge this Great Divide, we, the people, must take action. Although it is unclear what it looks like for us to take action, it is evident that it needs to occur, and this begins with us, the people.

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The Impact of Discursive Convergence on Institutional Trust: Analyzing the Role of Shared Language in Political Discourse

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Abstract

In the contemporary landscape characterized by heightened political polarization, the complexities of effective communication among institutions, political entities, and the public have intensified yet remain paramount for fostering mutual understanding and trust. Hyper-partisanship poses significant challenges to governance by eroding collaborative efforts and diminishing public confidence in elected representatives. To mitigate the adverse effects of such divisiveness, strategies that promote a collegial atmosphere among opposing factions and reinforce decorum within legislative sessions are of considerable importance. At the core of this discourse is the concept of discursive convergence, which pertains to the emergence of a shared lexicon among heterogeneous actors within the political sphere and is instrumental in shaping public trust in political institutions. This convergence facilitates the development of collective narratives that empower civic engagement, as evidenced by Bosnia and Herzegovina's "building bridges" campaigns, where metaphorical and symbolic communication evoke shared values and promote reconciliation among diverse groups. Conversely, Turkey's framing of its refugee policy through familial metaphors illustrates how rhetorical strategies can significantly shape public perception and institutional trust while revealing tensions that may exist between prevailing narratives and actual policies. As such, it is imperative that political leaders strategically leverage language to foster dialogue, accountability, and civic participation, enhancing trust and cooperation among stakeholders and fortifying resilient governance in an increasingly fragmented political milieu. Ultimately, examining the interplay between communication strategies and public trust is crucial for understanding the mechanisms that underpin effective governance within a politically polarized environment.

Key Words: Discursive Convergence, Trust, Language, Polarization, Social Media, Dialogue.

Introduction

In contemporary political climates marked by hyper-partisanship and the fragmentation of public discourse, effective communication among institutions, political figures, and the populace has taken on new dimensions of complexity and significance. Establishing a foundation of shared understanding and language is critical for enhancing trust and fostering genuine dialogue. Hyper-partisanship has increasingly permeated political institutions, the effectiveness of governance is put to the test. This polarization not only hampers collaboration among elected officials but also diminishes the public's perception of their representatives (McCafferty, 2017). To counteract the detrimental effects of hyper-partisanship, political leaders can adopt several strategies. It is crucial to treat political adversaries as colleagues, promote collaboration within legislative committees, and commit to elevating the standards of debate and decorum in legislative sessions. These approaches can help mitigate divisiveness and foster a more constructive political environment (Starke, 2018).

At the heart of these dynamics lies the notion of discursive convergence—the phenomenon where different actors or entities adopt the same vocabulary and apparent agenda, resulting in a unified discourse despite potentially divergent underlying practices or decisions (Homburg, Pollitt, Van Thiel, 2007). This divergence and emergence of shared language can be seen as foundational to the cultivation, or erosion, of institutional trust. As political entities strive to resonate with the public's sentiments, the discourse surrounding governance, policy, and civic participation becomes a vital arena where trust is forged or dismantled. Understanding the nuances of discursive convergence and its impact on institutional trust is essential for various stakeholders, including policymakers, political analysts, and engaged citizens. This leads to the following research question: How does discursive convergence affect institutional trust in contemporary political environments? As we delve deeper into this exploration, we situate ourselves at the intersection of linguistics, political science, and sociology, where the common threads of language weave a complex tapestry influencing trust, engagement, and the health of our democratic institutions. Convergence, in this context, refers to the coming together of like-minded users to form an in-group that reinforces shared beliefs and opinions, often leading to the creation of echo chambers or bubbles that differentiate themselves and resist outside perspectives. This dynamic allows individuals to express their viewpoints and establish collective identities, while also targeting and marginalizing those with differing views on controversial issues (Johansson, 2021).

In an environment when information dissemination occurs at unprecedented speeds and social media amplifies both voices and vitriol, the stakes surrounding discursive convergence have never been higher. Understanding its role in cultivating or undermining institutional trust may provide valuable insights into strengthening democracy and rebuilding the connections that so often seem frayed in today's polarized environment (Victor Pestoff, Taco Brandsen, Bram Verchuere, 2011). By unpacking the intricate layers of discourse and trust, we embark on an inquiry that is timely and essential, one that seeks to illuminate the pathway to a more engaged and trusting civic culture amidst the challenges of the contemporary political landscape.

"Building Bridges" and Metaphorical Language as Instruments for Balkan Unity

The interplay between language and trust in institutions is not merely an academic concern but one deeply rooted in the lived experiences of citizens who navigate an increasingly intricate political landscape. Public trust is the confidence that citizens have in government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to act transparently, efficiently, and honestly in their operations, particularly regarding the allocation and use of resources. This trust is essential for fostering public support and participation, as it significantly influences individuals' willingness to donate and support funding initiatives (W. W. Wenga, C. K. Wooa, Y. S. Chenga, T. Hoa & I. Horowitzb, 2015). Moreover, fostering discursive convergence not only aids in bridging divides among political actors but also empowers citizens by cultivating a shared narrative that encourages collective engagement and trust in democratic processes, ultimately paving the way for more resilient governance and active civic participation. In order to achieve this, political leaders must prioritize the establishment of a common lexicon that transcends partisan divides, allowing for a more cohesive understanding of issues and potential solutions among diverse constituencies. This requires an intentional effort to engage in dialogue that prioritizes empathy and mutual respect, as well as recognizing and addressing the legitimate concerns of various groups within society (Johansson, 2021). The strategic use of language, stories, metaphors, and symbols plays a pivotal role in either advancing or hindering issues on the political agenda, underscoring the process of social construction through which societies collectively define and interpret the nature and causes of problems, as highlighted by media scholars who explore how issues capture journalists' attention, the methods through which journalists and their sources utilize symbols and narratives to clarify complex topics, and the reactions of news consumers to

these issues and symbols (Edelman, 1977), while also engaging with the literature on problem framing in government and mass media that has been effectively applied to studies of focusing events (Entman, 1993), further illustrating how framing theory argues that participants in policy debates construct narratives about problems to fit into news-gathering routines that render the story both efficient and compelling, thereby motivating action from supporters, inaction from opponents, or both (Bennet, Howlett, 1992).

The Balkan region, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina, is an instructive case study for examining the consequences of low social trust and its implications for political discourse. Recent surveys reveal that approximately 60 percent of respondents express little trust in courts, parliaments, or the government (Balkan Public Barometer, 2023). Notably, the 2023 survey indicated that Bosnia and Herzegovina had the highest level of distrust towards local authorities among Balkan nations, signaling a significant crisis of public trust in the country (Balkan Public Barometer, 2023). Further emphasizing this crisis, data from the European Values Study reveals that an overwhelming 90.4% of citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina believe that one cannot be too careful when dealing with others. These responses indicate an equal expression of low social trust among men (9.4%) and women (9.8%) (European Values Study, 2019). This pervasive sense of distrust extends not only between individuals but also towards institutions, highlighting the overarching challenges facing society and governance.

In response to this critical issue, which has roots partially in the region's militaristic conflicts, Bosnian civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations have initiated campaigns aimed at reconstruing trust among citizens. These campaigns frequently utilize similar metaphorical language centered on "building bridges," reinforcing the idea of connection and reconciliation. Initiatives such as "Building Bridges - Breaking Walls" by Mresvu, "Bridges Across Borders", "Project Bridge" financed by UNDP, exemplify these efforts. Additionally, the Catholic Relief Services funded "Project for Positive Changes in Society and Bridge the Divide in Bosnia," and the "Most Mira" (Bridge of Peace) campaign led by Sigrid, alongside a civic engagement campaign featuring the film "Building Bridges: Crossing Entity Lines in Bosnia," funded by Humanity in Action, further highlight the focus on fostering trust and solidarity. This symbolic language of bridges, prevalent in promotional campaigns, also reflects a deeper historical connection to the cultural mythology of Yugoslavia. Ivo Andrić's Nobel-winning work, The Bridge on the Drina (1977), stands as a poignant representation of this metaphor and its enduring

significance in the collective memory of the region. Just as Andrić's bridge serves as a powerful symbol of connection and understanding, contemporary campaigns strive to embody and promote these ideals in a society that continues to grapple with the legacies of conflict and a pervasive atmosphere of distrust. The use of metaphorical language, such as "building bridges," serves not only as a mechanism to communicate the aims of these campaigns but also as a catalyst for fostering a shared narrative that can bridge divides. By invoking the familiar and powerful symbolism of bridges, these campaigns effectively encourage individuals to rethink their perceptions of each other, as well as their relationships with institutions. Addressing distrust requires not only action on the ground but also a concerted effort to reshape the prevailing discourse around trust and cooperation.

In conclusion, the interplay between language and institutional trust is a significant factor in shaping democratic engagement and public confidence in the political system. The necessity for trust is underscored by the realities faced by citizens as they navigate an increasingly complex political landscape, where confidence in governmental and non-governmental organizations is essential for public support and active participation. As evidenced by the low levels of trust reported in Bosnia and Herzegovina—where a staggering 60 percent of respondents express skepticism towards governmental institutions—this situation creates a serious challenge for effective governance and civic engagement. The strategic use of language, particularly through a common lexicon and metaphorical narratives, can serve as a powerful tool for bridging divides and fostering a sense of collective identity among citizens, thus enhancing trust in democratic processes (Homburg, Pollitt, Van Thiel, 2007). Campaigns aimed at rebuilding social trust in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which use the metaphor of "building bridges," exemplify how symbolic language can articulate a vision of reconciliation and connection while encouraging individuals to redefine their perceptions and relationships with both each other and institutions. This approach does not merely aim to address distrust but seeks to reshape the broader discourse around cooperation and empathy, creating an environment where constructive dialogue can flourish. Ultimately, the emphasis on discursive convergence and inclusive narratives is crucial for cultivating a more engaged citizenry willing to participate in governance and contribute to societal resilience. As Bosnia and Herzegovina continues its journey of healing and rebuilding, the efforts to establish a shared narrative anchored in understanding and cooperation will be vital for fostering a cohesive and trustworthy society.

Framing Solidarity: Language, Institutional Trust in Turkey's Refugee Policy

In light of the pressing need for effective governance in a climate of hyper-partisanship, it is crucial to understand how the strategic use of language can both illuminate and obscure political realities. The act of framing issues not only shapes public understanding but also affects the nature of political engagement and institutional trust (Mark Bovens, Stavros Zouridis, 2008). For political leaders, recognizing the importance of narrative construction is not merely a communication strategy; it is a fundamental aspect of governance in a democratic society. Discursive convergence, the phenomenon where consistent terminologies and concepts become prevalent across governmental and political discourses, significantly shapes this narrative landscape, influencing how policies are perceived and implemented (Pollitt, 2001). Politicians must be aware that their choice of words and the stories they tell can either deepen divisions or promote unity. When political adversaries frame their discussions through adversarial language, it reinforces a combative atmosphere that alienates constituents and complicates consensus-building efforts. Conversely, employing inclusive language and highlighting common goals can create a political environment where collaboration thrives. This collaborative approach is particularly crucial in legislative committees, which have the potential to serve as groundwork for cooperative policymaking if leaders prioritize mutual respect and common objectives over partisanship. In this context, as (Salamon, 1987) articulates, the relationship between nonprofits and government can be viewed as a partnership or contractual arrangement, where government finances public services while nonprofits deliver them. Adopting a narrative that emphasizes shared responsibilities and goals can further enhance this partnership, fostering an environment conducive to effective governance and service delivery. The phenomena of discursive convergence and its impact on institutional trust merit a more comprehensive exploration, particularly in light of recent global events that have exacerbated political divisions and questions of trust in governance. As the world continues to grapple with challenges such as climate change, public health crises, and socio-economic disparities, the importance of language as a tool for building trust and engagement becomes paramount. Political leaders, institutions, and civil society must recognize that their communication strategies can either foster a culture of collaboration or deepen the existing divides that characterize contemporary political discourse (Dunmire, 2012).

A compelling example of this dynamic can be observed in Turkey's approach to the Syrian refugee crisis. Since the onset of the civil war in Syria in 2011, the ruling Justice and Development

Party (AKP) has consistently framed Syrian refugees as "brothers and sisters." This strategic use of familial language is primarily intended to shape public perception, foster a sense of solidarity, and cultivate trust between the government and both refugees and Turkish citizens (Drewski, Gerhards, 2024). By invoking notions of kinship and collective responsibility, the AKP seeks to legitimize its open-door policy and position Turkey as a moral leader in humanitarian efforts. This framing plays a vital role in the construction of a collective national identity that transcends borders. The AKP's narrative connects the plight of Syrian refugees with Turkey's historical and cultural ties to the Arab world, establishing a shared identity that emphasizes compassion and mutual aid (Gulmez, 2023). By portraying refugees as part of a broader familial community, the government aims to mitigate social resistance to their presence. This approach has resonated with a significant portion of the Turkish populace, reinforcing the perception of Turkey as a compassionate nation willing to help those in need. However, the framing is not without its contradictions. While the AKP positions itself as a protector and supporter of Syrian refugees, the policies implemented reveal a more complex reality. Refugees are technically categorized as "guests," a label that denies them full legal protections under international refugee law. This classification allows the government greater flexibility in managing their status and the resources allocated to them. This duality creates a narrative where the Turkish government portrays its refugee policy as both altruistic and pragmatic, underlining the tensions between rhetoric and policy (Feyzi, 2017). In response, the AKP has begun to recalibrate its discourse, acknowledging the challenges brought about by the refugee influx while striving to maintain the foundational familial narrative. This evolution reflects an understanding that effective governance requires adapting to changing public sentiments and concerns. The government has increasingly emphasized themes of voluntary repatriation and the need for sustainable solutions within Syria to address Turkish citizens' worries. By acknowledging the intricacies of the issue, the AKP aims to retain public trust, striving to balance its humanitarian commitments with the realities faced by its own citizens. Moreover, the adoption of familial metaphors within public discourse highlights a broader trend in contemporary politics, where leaders leverage emotionally resonant language to galvanize support for contentious policies. In an era marked by widespread skepticism toward traditional institutions, the ability to weave emotionally charged narratives can be a significant asset for political actors.

The AKP's use of kinship language creates a sense of shared identity that transcends socio-economic divides, fostering a narrative of collective resilience and solidarity. As such, this

approach not only reinforces existing political allegiances but also reinforces civic engagement among citizens, encouraging them to participate actively in governance and humanitarian initiatives. The emotional appeal of such narratives can be particularly potent in the face of challenges, as they evoke a sense of shared purpose and community—a vital ingredient in maintaining social cohesion during times of upheaval (Gulmez, 2023). The interplay between language and institutional trust in this context highlights the necessity of a coherent, adaptable narrative that addresses both the humanitarian imperative and the socio-economic challenges faced by host communities. The AKP's experience demonstrates that the language of inclusivity must be coupled with practical policy solutions to nurture public faith in governance. Ultimately, crafting language that resonates on both emotional and rational levels can contribute to a more engaged citizenry, capable of supporting policies that promote the common good while sustaining the dignity and rights of all individuals involved.

In sum, the importance of institutional trust cannot be overstated, especially in a political environment characterized by hyper-partisanship and division. The strategic use of language serves as a critical tool for building and maintaining this trust, shaping how policies and issues are perceived by the public. As demonstrated by Turkey's approach to the Syrian refugee crisis, the framing of narratives can either foster solidarity and engagement or exacerbate divisions and skepticism. When political leaders adopt inclusive and empathetic language, they have the potential to cultivate a sense of shared identity and responsibility among citizens, thereby strengthening their connection to governmental institutions. However, inconsistencies between rhetoric and policy can severely undermine this trust if leaders fail to align their narrative with practical actions. To maintain public confidence, it is essential that political leaders not only communicate effectively but also demonstrate accountability and transparency in their governance. This dual focus on narrative construction and substantive policy implementation is crucial in reinforcing trust in institutions. As individuals perceive their leaders as responsive and trustworthy, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and actively participate in civic life. Therefore, cultivating institutional trust requires a commitment to fostering open dialogue, emphasizing shared values, and acknowledging the collective role of citizens in the democratic process. Ultimately, by prioritizing these elements, political leaders and institutions can create a resilient and engaged citizenry, paving the way for more effective governance in a rapidly changing and complex world.

Navigating Polarization Communication Strategies for Enhanced Institutional Trust

One critical dimension of discursive convergence is its relationship with social media and digital communication. As communication technology advances, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have transformed the nature of political interaction. While these platforms provide opportunities for increased dialogue and engagement, they also risk amplifying polarization and miscommunication. The immediacy and brevity offered by social media can lead to oversimplified narratives that distort complex issues. This environment often privileges emotionally charged messages over nuanced discussions, creating a fertile ground for the proliferation of misinformation and distrust in institutions. Moreover, the algorithms driving these platforms prioritize content that generates engagement—often content that aligns with existing beliefs—contributing to the formation of echo chambers. In such spaces, users predominantly interact with like-minded individuals, reinforcing shared views while diminishing exposure to alternative perspectives. This dynamic complicates the challenge of fostering discursive convergence across political divides. Recognizing the realities of social media requires that political leaders and institutions adapt their communication strategies, embracing transparency and responsiveness in real time to counteract misinformation and to promote a more inclusive dialogue. (Tyler, 2001)

In this context, the role of civil society organizations and community leaders becomes increasingly vital. They have the potential to act as intermediaries who can facilitate dialogue across ideological divides, translating complex political issues into accessible narratives. By utilizing storytelling as a means of engagement, these organizations can craft shared narratives that resonate with diverse constituencies. These narratives can focus on common values, such as community resilience or shared environmental responsibility, thereby fostering a sense of collective identity and purpose beyond traditional partisan affiliations.

Furthermore, the importance of inclusive language cannot be overstated. Political leaders can take proactive measures to craft messaging that prioritizes common ground rather than adversarial rhetoric. This entails a commitment to employing language that acknowledges the legitimacy of differing viewpoints, actively working to dismantle the "us versus them" mentality that often permeates political discourse. Through model practices, leaders can encourage a paradigm shift towards framing discussions around shared objectives and collaborative solutions. For instance, rather than merely engaging in conflict over resource allocation during a disaster

response, political actors can emphasize their partnership in serving vulnerable populations, thus enhancing trust among stakeholders and the public alike (McCafferty, 2017). Training programs aimed at enhancing communicative competencies among political leaders, elected officials, and public servants can be initiated to support this shift. These programs should focus on effective dialogue, active listening, and the application of inclusive language. By equipping policymakers with the skills to navigate contested political landscapes, they can foster an environment conducive to collaboration and innovation in governance. Essentially, enhancing these communicative skills contributes to a more resilient democratic process and can shape the trajectory of political engagement in an increasingly polarized world.

The notion of accountability must also be integrated into the discourse surrounding institutional trust. Trust is inherently tied to citizens' perceptions of their leaders' responsiveness and accountability to the electorate. Political leaders must be transparent about the impacts of their decisions, engaging in genuine dialogue regarding the challenges they encounter, as well as the strategies employed to address them (Victor Pestoff, Taco Brandsen, Bram Verchuere, 2011). In this regard, the establishment of regular feedback mechanisms—a practice observed in participatory governance—can play a pivotal role in reinforcing trust. By soliciting public input regarding policy decisions and providing platforms for dialogue, leaders can demonstrate a commitment to collaborative governance that values citizen engagement (Mark Bovens, Stavros Zouridis, 2008). Moreover, this approach aligns with the concept of co-production in public management, which suggests that citizens are not just recipients of services but active participants in the governance process. This perspective recognizes citizens as valuable assets whose insights, resources, and contributions can enhance public service delivery. When citizens feel that they have a stake in decision-making processes, their trust in institutions is likely to increase. Additionally, the dialogic exchange of ideas can foster a sense of ownership over policies, leading to enhanced compliance and support for the initiatives undertaken by government actors.

To bolster institutional trust, it is equally important to engage with educational efforts that deepen citizens' understanding of political processes and governance. By incorporating civic education programs that emphasize the importance of informed political engagement and critical thinking, educational institutions can play a vital role in cultivating a politically literate citizenry. Enhanced civic education can empower individuals to navigate complex political issues, develop informed perspectives, and actively engage in dialogue with others, regardless of differing beliefs.

(Victor Pestoff, Taco Brandsen, Bram Verchuere, 2011). It is also essential to analyze the role of symbolic gestures in enhancing trust and fostering discursive convergence. Political leaders can leverage rituals, public ceremonies, and collaborative events to demonstrate commitment to unity and shared purposes. For instance, joint press conferences between political adversaries following a significant legislative achievement can send a powerful message about cooperation and mutual respect. These gestures illustrate the potential for collaborative effort, even in a contentious environment, and can energize public interest and participation. (Victor Pestoff, Taco Brandsen, 2006)

The role of discursive convergence in shaping institutional trust is both nuanced and multifaceted. By being aware of the profound impact that language and narrative construction have on public perceptions, political leaders can develop strategies that emphasize unity, accountability, and inclusivity (Starke, 2018). The challenges presented by hyper-partisanship and information overload demand an intentional and reflective approach to communication in the political realm. Through innovative engagements, a commitment to building trust, and a focus on fostering shared language, a more vibrant political culture can emerge—one that values collaboration and enhances the efficacy of democratic governance. As stakeholders from all sectors work together to bridge divides and cultivate common narratives, we can create a resilient democratic landscape that is responsive to the needs and aspirations of all citizens.

Conclusion

The intricate relationship between language and institutional trust has emerged as a pivotal theme in contemporary political discourse, particularly in environments characterized by hyper-partisanship and polarization. As this study highlights, the concept of discursive convergence serves as a lifeline for fostering a shared understanding among diverse actors in the political sphere. By adopting a common lexicon that transcends partisan divides, political leaders and institutions can create a more cohesive narrative that resonantly addresses the public's concerns. This convergence not only enhances engagement but also cultivates a sense of belonging among citizens, underlining the importance of collective narratives in rebuilding trust. Moreover, the strategic use of metaphorical language, as illustrated by initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, reinforces the power of symbolic communication in bridging divides. These metaphorical frameworks—such as "building bridges"—embody aspirations for connection and reconciliation while providing a

relatable narrative that encourages individuals to overcome entrenched positions. By leveraging familiar symbols and shared values, political leaders can shape public perception and foster a culture of trust that promotes civic engagement. This approach highlights the efficacy of language as a transformative tool capable of reshaping political landscapes and enhancing institutional credibility.

In addressing the need for effective governance, it is essential for political leaders to embrace a paradigm shift towards inclusive dialogue that recognizes the legitimacy of differing perspectives. The use of inclusive language can dismantle adversarial rhetoric and reframe political discourse around shared goals, thereby enhancing cooperation between opposing factions. By prioritizing empathy and mutual respect in their communications, political actors can foster an environment conducive to collaboration, innovation, and effective policymaking. This commitment to dialogue not only strengthens institutional trust but also reinforces democratic norms essential for a resilient political framework. As part of the wider effort to cultivate a trusting relationship between citizens and institutions, training programs aimed at enhancing communication skills among political leaders and public servants are crucial. By equipping these actors with the tools necessary for effective dialogue and active listening, they can foster a more engaged and informed citizenry. Such programs can serve as a foundation for rebuilding trust in governance, as they empower leaders to navigate the complexities of modern political challenges and embrace transparency and accountability.

In conclusion, fostering discursive convergence is an ongoing process that requires the concerted efforts of political leaders, institutions, and civil society organizations. As these stakeholders work collaboratively to cultivate common narratives and inclusive communication strategies, they can create a more vibrant political culture that reflects the aspirations of all citizens. By recognizing the profound impact of language on public trust and embracing innovative approaches to dialogue, a resilient democratic landscape can emerge—one that is responsive to the diverse needs and expectations of its constituents. The work ahead is demanding yet vital, serving as a testament to the enduring power of language to shape democratic engagement and strengthen the foundations of governance in an increasingly polarized world.

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Trust and Disaster Management in Turkey: A Critical Assessment of the 1999 and 2023 Earthquakes

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Abstract

In the wake of Turkey's disastrous earthquakes in 1999 and 2023, this article examines the relationship between public trust, corruption, and disaster management. I demonstrate how public trust in government institutions responsible for crisis management has been damaged by ongoing systemic corruption in the construction industry. My analysis documents the decline in trust after the 1999 and 2023 earthquakes, connecting increased public discontent and political repercussions to poor disaster response and corruption. I show how civil society organizations (CSOs) consequently became important disaster management actors, filling in for the government's inefficacies. Finally, I recommend reforms that will improve accountability and transparency in Turkey's disaster governance frameworks and construction regulation. Overall, my paper demonstrates that public trust is essential in shaping institutional responses to natural disasters and public expectations.

Keywords: Disaster Management, Turkey Earthquakes, Public Trust, Civil Society Organizations.

Introduction

Natural disasters serve as an alarming indication of how powerless humans are in the face of nature's might. Turkey is situated in a unique location among some of the most active tectonic plates in the world, making earthquakes particularly intense. Considering the devastating effects of these earthquakes, one urgent question arises: how do natural disasters affect the public's trust in government agencies responsible for crisis management? I will explore the complex relationship between earthquakes and public trust in Turkey, drawing on an anthropological perspective of disasters explained by Oliver-Smith (1996), which contends that hazards are natural parts of our surroundings rather than purely unpredictable events. As a result, disasters are a test of a society's resiliency. There is a concerning narrative of distrust towards official disaster response, despite the region having a long history of earthquakes. I will show how pre-disaster corruption, insufficient relief efforts, and the diverse roles of civil society organizations (CSOs) affect public trust by examining Turkey's earthquakes in 1999 and 2023. I contend that widespread corruption in the construction industry erodes public trust in governmental institutions, and the success of CSOs highlights the disparity between government capacity and citizen expectations.

From Disaster to Discontent: The Aftermath of the 1999 Earthquakes

The 1999 earthquakes in Turkey caused significant injuries and they had a profound impact on social and political dynamics. 18,373 people died, 48,901 were injured, and 5,840 were reported missing as a result of the earthquakes that struck Kocaeli and the neighboring areas (BBC News Türkçe, 2024). Many of those who suffered severe material losses, lost loved ones, or had their homes devastated in the earthquake, went to court to fight for their rights. Contractors were named as defendants in 2,100 lawsuits that were filed following the earthquake, according to legal research (Cihat Arpacık, 2023). However, The Conditional Release and Postponement Law, passed on December 22, 2000, allowed 1,800 of the 2,100 cases to be resolved without consequences. 110 of the cases ended in convictions, and the remaining 190 were dismissed because of the statute of limitations (Alican Uludağ, 2023). This devastation paved the way for a trauma that would persist for generations in regard to public services, infrastructure, and human security.

In addition to causing a devastating death toll and significant property destruction, the 1999 Turkish earthquakes marked a turning point in the country's history by causing a significant decline

of public trust in government agencies. Corruption and the government's incompetence marred the earthquake's initial relief operations, which added to the destruction brought on by the natural disaster. According to Akarca & Tansel (2016), public opinion of the government's competence and integrity was significantly eroded due to their inability to manage the emergency response and their scandalous misuse of funds and resources.

Many structures collapsed after the earthquakes due to poor construction standards, making corruption in the construction industry glaringly evident. According to Green (2005), authorities and contractors enabled this corruption by frequently manipulating regulatory frameworks, resulting in the construction of dangerous buildings. Such dishonest endeavors exacerbated the impact of the disasters, leading to more deaths and widespread casualties. Escaleras et al. (2007) provides evidence of a general pattern in 42 nations, showing a positive correlation between earthquake mortality and public sector corruption. The chaos and uncertainty experienced after the earthquakes further deepened the effects of the natural disaster. In addition to the loss of thousands of lives, the earthquakes caused families to tear apart, psychological traumas, economic losses, and the weakening of social solidarity. Corruption and mismanagement in the construction sector, overall exacerbated the effects of the disaster.

The state's shortcomings in disaster management were made clear by this tragic incident. The public's confidence in the government was damaged by the deficiencies in rescue and relief operations. As a result, rage and dissatisfaction, erupted during the 2002 elections. Public confidence declined and citizen political preferences changed. When evaluating the aftermath of the 1999 earthquakes, it is important to consider not only the death toll and physical damage, but also the profound and long-lasting effects on governmental responsibility and public trust.

Political Accountability and the 2002 Elections

During the earthquakes and the construction of inadequate infrastructure, different political coalitions were in power, revealing a fragmented political landscape. The inability of the political parties in power during the 1999 earthquakes to retain local government in the affected areas brought to light the challenges of accountability and responsibility. This situation presented a unique opportunity to forecast public opinion in the subsequent 2002 elections, given the widespread corruption associated with the construction industry and the government's ineffective relief efforts (Özel, 2003).

The election results of 2002 demonstrated the electorate's dissatisfaction in the established political establishment. The results were largely attributed to the economic crisis that struck Turkey in 2002; however, this explanation is insufficient. Between 1980 and 2001, Turkey endured four significant economic crises under different governments, but none of them resulted in the dire electoral outcomes of 2002. (Akarca & Tansel, 2016) The election results were not merely a reaction to economic hardship; they were the result of growing discontent with state corruption and inefficiency characterizing all levels of political power.

After witnessing the corruption and bad governance resulting from all political parties involved in the construction of shoddy structures and the administrative shortcomings in disaster assistance, Turkish voters carefully assessed each party. According to the findings of Akarca & Tansel (2016), voters fairly distributed the blame when taking into account the parties' different local effects and the division of labor within the federal government. The electorate concluded that all the major parties had failed to maintain accountability and public trust after a prolonged period of poor governance.

The Rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Turkey's political landscape experienced major changes after the disastrous 1999 earthquakes and the 2002 elections, with the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The public lost trust in the ruling political parties after the 1999 tragedy because they were seen as dishonest and incapable of organizing relief and recovery activities. Turkish voters removed the established parties from parliament, underscoring a significant shift in public sentiment. When corruption extends across political divisions and credible alternatives emerge, such a response demonstrates that the population is ready to welcome reform and hold all parties accountable for their collective misgovernance. By presenting himself and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) as change agents committed to combating corruption and advancing economic development, Erdoğan took advantage of this broad dissatisfaction (Yilmaz & Colella, 2014). His ascent to power was marked by pledges to correct past wrongdoings and restore public confidence in political institutions.

The lessons learned from the 1999 earthquakes, in retrospect, extend far beyond the immediate aftermath of the disaster; they underscore the intricate problems of responsibility, public confidence, and the pivotal role that political integrity plays in shaping voter behavior. The Turkish earthquake serves as a warning about the consequences of corruption on governance and

highlights the importance of accountability and openness in reestablishing public faith in institutions.

The Implications of the 2023 Earthquake

Erdoğan's administration initially stood out for its significant economic achievements and ambitious infrastructure development plan. His administration improved urban environments and significantly boosted the Turkish economy. After 2004, there was a "building boom" because of institutional and legislative changes that provided municipalities increased authority to carry out urban redevelopment projects and promoted partnerships with private businesses (Ustaoglu & Aydınoglu, 2020). Despite this show of progress, a troubling story of corruption surfaced. With a 7.8-magnitude, one of the most devastating earthquakes to hit Turkey in decades occurred on February 6, 2023. Over 80,000 structures nationwide suffered catastrophic damage and 50,000 lives were lost (Chen et al., 2023). This tragedy exposed fundamental weaknesses in Turkish public administration and brought attention to the alarming persistence of corruption. Although Erdoğan's administration was praised for its economic expansion and revolutionary infrastructure initiatives, public safety and accountability were jeopardized.

According to officials, anti-seismic measures were followed and many of the collapsed facilities were constructed to withstand seismic activity. However, a significant portion of these facilities were built under corrupt and incompetent circumstances (Ahmed, 2023). For instance, the ground surveys necessary to construct earthquake-resistant structures were not completed adequately in provinces like Gaziantep and Kahramanmaraş. Hard materials were employed in the construction of the structures, but the region's soil qualities and groundwater levels were not taken into account (NTV, 2024). Additionally, Turkey's zoning amnesty laws gave a superficial impression of improving the existing building regulation. For instance, the zoning amnesty rule that went into effect in 2018 permitted the legalization of numerous illegal constructions in exchange for a specific amount of money. These construction projects' lack of conformity to required safety criteria can therefore be considered as one of the key reasons for the disastrous effects of the 2023 earthquake (Aylin Elçi, 2023).

Following the 2023 earthquake, it became clear that Erdoğan's government had not only failed to put effective measures against corruption in place, but also inherited the corruption it promised to eradicate. Numerous contractors were accused of fraudulent practices, and several

owners of construction companies were arrested for safety infractions and irregularities in building codes. (Alam & Ali, 2023; Çevik, 2023). Conditional amnesties further highlighted the structural issues in the building sector by allowing the retroactive approval of previously non-compliant buildings (Hubbard et al., 2023). Well-built structures can withstand the majority of seismic activity and effective construction methods can substantially mitigate the deadly effects of earthquakes (Lewis, 2008). However, Erdoğan's administration loosened regulations and expedited building licenses, often favoring a select few in the construction sector, many of whom had close ties to the regime. This not only endangered public safety, but also perpetuated an atmosphere that encouraged corruption.

Perceived corruption declined in the early years of Erdoğan's administration, but in subsequent years it has regressed to levels reported before 2002 (Kimya, 2018). The administration's accountability has shifted alongside the political climate; more government contracts were awarded to a small number of companies while fewer anti-corruption initiatives were launched. (Gürakar & Bircan, 2018) Therefore, the 2023 earthquake reveals an erosion of trust in Erdoğan's leadership and the consequences of a governance model that has fallen short of its commitments to reform and public accountability. The 2023 earthquake's aftermath has once again highlighted the shortcomings of Turkey's construction laws. The public's perception of corruption and inefficient construction inspections impacted the resiliency of infrastructure during an unforeseen disaster.

Assessing Perceptions of Corruption and Institutional Trust in Turkey

In the wake of the 2023 earthquake, Turkey's building laws need to be critically examined. There is a concerning relationship between the decline in public trust in government institutions and systematic corruption in the construction industry. According to numerous studies, the perception of corruption not only influences people's opinions toward government, but also fosters a culture of mistrust that erodes social cohesiveness and group efforts (Van de Walle, 2008; Melgar et al., 2010; Uslaner, 2004). In this context, it would be useful to show the change in the perception of corruption in Turkey over the years. Transparency International (2024) reported a stark decline in Turkey's corruption perception index, from 49 points in 2012 to a disheartening 34 points in 2023, which clearly demonstrates that the public's faith in governmental efficacy and integrity has

been severely compromised (See Figure 1). The increased perception of widespread corruption not only increases institutional distrust, but also negatively affects cooperation and solidarity in society.

Figure 1: *Score Changes in Turkey's Corruption Perceptions Index*
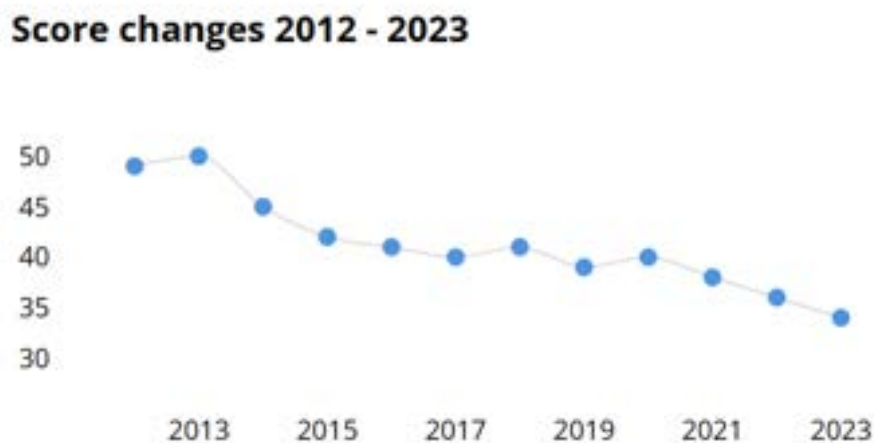
Note: From *Corruption Perceptions Index—Explore Türkiye's results,* by Transparency International, 2024 (https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023).

Systemic corruption in the construction sector in Turkey is one of the main reasons for the loss of public trust. Melgar et al. (2010) state that a high level of perceived corruption may generate a "culture of distrust." According to Saleh (2023), trust is an important element for cooperation and common interests among people. A high level of trust in countries is directly related to indicators such as economic performance and government efficiency. The decline of trust in Turkey therefore exacerbates in the context of economic instability and widespread corruption. Saleh (2023) uses the World Values Survey and shows since 1993, institutional trust has been decreasing in Turkey. In particular, trust in the government has been decreasing steadily, especially after 2009, and trust in the justice system has shown a similar trend (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: *World Values Survey in Turkey*
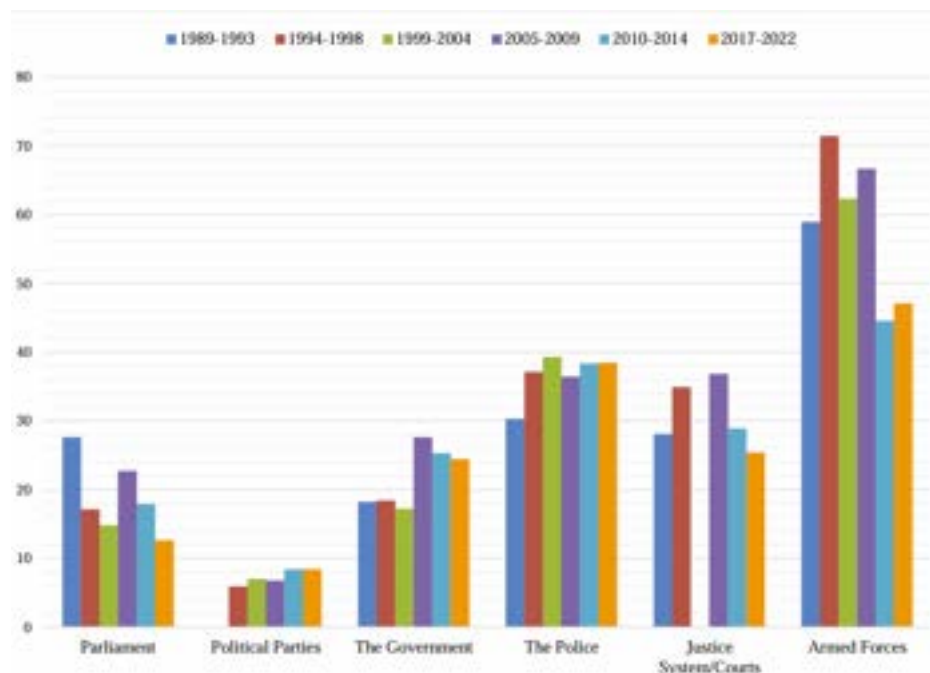
Note: This illustration was produced using data items from the World Values Survey on Outgroup Trust in Turkey. From "Different Types of Trust in Turkey: Insights From The World Values Survey," by D. Saleh, 2023, *Cumhuriyet 9th International Conference on Social Sciences*.

The nation's efforts to prevent natural disasters and improve building standards are impacted by the relationship between institutional trust and corruption. Serious issues arise, particularly in the construction industry, when high levels of corruption lead to policy decisions and construction techniques that are not in the public interest. The shoddy infrastructure in Turkey was a primary cause of the deaths and devastation during the 2023 earthquake, and the perception of corruption impacted group cooperation. Therefore, high levels of corruption, when combined with the decrease in trust in state institutions, created divisions in society and increased the risks of natural disasters. Advancing a more robust and accountable framework for future infrastructure development in Turkey requires an understanding of the relationships between perceptions of corruption, institutional trust, and construction regulations.

The Rise of Civil Society: Trust in Disaster Management

The 1999 and 2023 earthquakes offer a valuable opportunity to explore the relationship between civil society and trust, especially in the context of state corruption and the management of disaster relief. During both earthquakes, the government's inability to respond to disasters timely and efficiently revealed pervasive corruption and inefficiency in governmental institutions. As a result, civil society started to play a bigger role and fill the gaps left by the government. For urgent assistance, citizens relied on local projects and non-governmental organizations, whom they perceived as being more reliable and responsive than the government. This change promoted a renewed belief in civil society as a crucial player in disaster management while simultaneously highlighting the shortcomings of the government's response. These earthquakes highlight how civil society can be a source of hope and reliability in the face of systemic failures, boosting public trust in non-state actors even if trust declines in the government. While the centralized government lost credibility, civil society organizations (CSOs), which had historically functioned in the background of a dominant state, became crucial players in disaster relief operations and gained significant public trust (Çakı, 2020).

Previous literature has a general consensus that a "strong and authoritarian state tradition" in Turkey has hindered the growth of a vibrant civil society, resulting in "centralized and unsuccessful disaster management practices" (Özgür & Aydıner, n.d.). But after the 1999 earthquake, this dynamic was challenged as organizations such as the Search and Rescue Association (AKUT) represented a vibrant civil society capable of efficiently mobilizing resources and offering assistance (Akgüngör, 2010). As governmental agencies like the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay) faced difficulties to respond promptly, residents looked to neighbours, local groups, and outsiders for immediate help. There was a significant reliance on civil society as surveys showed that just 10.3% of earthquake survivors named governmental authorities as their main source of aid right after the tragedy (Jalali, 2002).

Calls for more cooperation between government institutions and CSOs were further heightened due to the state's incapacity to handle the situation. In disaster governance, the idea of "state-society synergy," in which civil society supports governmental initiatives while bringing attention to the issues of marginalized communities is crucial (Maskrey, 1989). In sharp contrast to the declining public trust in the state, there was a surge in public confidence in CSOs.

The lessons learnt in 1999 remained relevant during the earthquake in 2023. Once more, civil society's rapid response in 2023 was crucial and many citizens relied on NGOs and grassroots groups (Çakı, 2020). The central government, however, was once again condemned for its poor disaster response. The Erdoğan administration's persistent inability to establish a strong framework for emergency response and disaster preparedness increased mistrust, and accusations of corruption dominated the political discourse. According to public surveys, the vast majority of people looked to civil actors for assistance and support, demonstrating that in the Turkish context, civil society became associated with successful disaster response (Gill & Barnes, 2001).

Increased dependence on civil society is linked to a better understanding of social trust, which is crucial for providing efficient disaster assistance (Putnam et al., 1994). In addition to improving coordinated efforts during emergencies, the existing networks of trust within communities also provide social capital that facilitates faster and efficient mobilization of resources. A thriving civil society is more important in a society where citizens believe that government institutions are dishonest or incompetent. According to Jalali (2002), the Turkish civil society landscape has proven to be resilient and resourceful in providing help and fighting for the needs and rights of disaster victims, despite an authoritarian political system that frequently suppresses civil activity.

Furthermore, the contrasting experiences of the earthquakes in 1999 and 2023 point to a cyclical pattern of public mistrust and trust in the government, which is greatly impacted by the public's perception of the competency and integrity of governmental entities. When civil society is successful in providing timely aid, the public's confidence in these groups grows while their confidence in the official apparatuses decreases. Effective disaster management requires cooperation between the government and civil society, highlighting the need to develop both sectors' capacities to promote resilience for future disasters.

In conclusion, the development of trust throughout the pivotal periods of the 1999 and 2023 earthquakes perfectly captures the revolutionary function of civil society in Turkey. Civil society has become a crucial partner in disaster governance and a source of hope and reliability for the Turkish people as the government has battled with perceived shortcomings and corruption. As the country develops, a resilient framework for disaster governance that fosters cooperation, trust, and ultimately everyone's safety, will require a stronger bond between the government and civil society.

Recommendations for Future Disaster Management

Several important recommendations are necessary for policymakers, government agencies, and CSOs in Turkey. In light of the systemic problems highlighted, such as the decline of public trust, corruption in the construction industry, and the ineffectiveness of disaster management in Turkey, the Turkish government must first prioritize enacting strict anti-corruption regulations in the building sector. This can be accomplished by strict enforcement of current building rules that meet worldwide safety standards, improved regulatory monitoring, and open procurement procedures. Furthermore, cultivating a culture of accountability is essential. The government should implement transparent reporting procedures to allow the public to examine government actions pertaining to disaster response and preparation. In addition to restoring public confidence, this openness will promote civic participation and engagement in disaster management plans.

Additionally, there should be significant increases in cooperation between CSOs and state agencies. As essential conduits between the community and the state, CSOs have demonstrated efficacy in disaster response and recovery operations. To ensure that crisis management frameworks are inclusive and responsive, the government should actively collaborate with these groups to leverage their experience, local knowledge, and grassroots connections. Given the knowledge gained from previous earthquakes, it is also essential to fund extensive public education and preparedness initiatives. Communities can become more resilient and prepared for future catastrophes by raising awareness of earthquake risks and response procedures.

Finally, there must be a long-term plan for catastrophe management that incorporates risk mitigation techniques into urban growth and planning. This plan should prioritize sustainable practices that reduce vulnerabilities and support infrastructure integrity. Overall, these suggestions would be the first steps in creating a more transparent, accountable, and efficient governance structure that protects the welfare of its people as Turkey continues to navigate the challenges of disaster management.

Conclusion

In light of the 1999 and 2023 earthquakes in Turkey, I have critically investigated relationships between public trust, corruption, and disaster management. I have specifically drawn attention to how corruption in the construction industry has seriously damaged public trust in the government agencies responsible for disaster relief over time. The public's ingrained mistrust of

governmental response to emergencies not only makes disasters worse in the short term, but also presents long-term problems for social cohesion and governance.

Further investigation into how corruption affects public trust in diverse crisis management scenarios is crucial for future studies. Examining civil society's reaction to governmental shortcomings shows how non-state actors can successfully fill the voids created by ineffective bureaucracy. Comparative research involving other countries that experience difficulties because of natural disasters could enhance exploration on how various governance models can rebuild public confidence.

My recommendations include the need for reforms that actively involve citizens in decision-making processes pertaining to catastrophe risk reduction and response measures. To guarantee that community voices are incorporated into disaster management frameworks, future research should seek to identify effective practices for promoting cooperation between governmental authorities and civil society. Finally, it is important to examine how technological developments have improved accountability and transparency in disaster governance. Researchers should investigate the potential of digital tools and platforms to improve civic involvement, track governmental actions, and encourage civic duty. These areas of research can advance a multidisciplinary understanding of the essential components of successful disaster management for the future.

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