



## From Openness to Accountability: Transparency in EU Institutional Communication

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### Abstract

Transparency in institutional communication is vital for fostering public trust, accountability, and democratic legitimacy in the European Union (EU). This study examines how EU institutions transition from promoting openness to implementing accountability mechanisms, addressing challenges like disinformation, public skepticism, and declining trust. Using case studies of key EU initiatives such as the Brexit negotiations, the 2015 Refugee Crisis, and COVID-19 measures, the study assesses the effectiveness and limitations of transparency practices. Findings reveal that while strides have been made in fostering openness through accessible information and public consultations, challenges persist, including uneven implementation, limited public participation, and the restricted reach of digital tools. The study highlights the need for more inclusive communication, greater investment in public engagement strategies, and enhanced use of technology to improve accountability. These insights contribute to advancing governance reform and rebuilding public trust in EU institutions.

**Keywords:** Transparency, Accountability, EU Institutional Communication, Public Trust, Democratic Legitimacy, Governance Reform, Public Engagement

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### 1. Introduction

Transparency is a cornerstone of governance, economics, and social organization, crucial for fostering robust and trustworthy institutions. It involves open access to information regarding institutional decisions, policies, and activities, ensuring accountability and promoting public participation. Hood and Heald (2006) describe transparency as a "window" through which the public can monitor and evaluate institutional performance, while Grigorescu (2003) defines it as the ease of accessing information about public institutions' decisions and actions. This principle is fundamental to good governance, aiming to bridge information asymmetries between institutions and citizens. In academic literature, transparency is closely tied to accountability. Lindstedt and Naurin (2010) argue that transparency creates the conditions necessary for effective accountability, enabling citizens to hold public and private actors accountable for their actions. Similarly, Habermas (1989), in his public sphere theory, underscores transparency's indispensable role in democratic functioning, granting citizens access to information and promoting active participation in decision-making processes.

Transparency is a multifaceted concept, underpinned by several critical principles that enhance its effectiveness. A primary tenet is access to information, which enables citizens to engage with public policies, decisions, and processes. Fox (2007) highlights that such access fosters public trust and enhances civic participation. Without openness, the

relationship between institutions and the public risks becoming opaque and exclusionary, undermining democratic values. Accountability is equally vital; it ensures that public institutions justify their actions to the public. As Alemanno (2014) notes, decision-makers must remain answerable to the public, aligning governance practices with societal expectations and ethical standards. However, accountability is effective only when information is clear and accurate. Hood and Heald (2006) emphasize that misinformation or ambiguity can erode trust and distort public understanding. Therefore, transparency relies on both the availability and quality of information.

Proactivity is another key dimension of transparency, requiring institutions to take the initiative in publishing significant data. Meijer (2013) stresses that proactively releasing information demonstrates institutional commitment to openness, shifting the responsibility of seeking information from citizens to institutions. This approach promotes a culture of transparency that is accessible and anticipatory. Yet, proactivity alone cannot guarantee inclusiveness. Curtin and Leino-Sandberg (2016) argue that true transparency must address the diverse needs of all societal groups, ensuring equitable access for marginalized communities.

For transparency to be effective, several enabling conditions are necessary. A robust legal framework is essential, providing the structural foundation for transparency through laws and policies that protect the public's right to information. Diamandouros (2006) emphasizes the importance of freedom-of-information legislation in institutionalizing transparency. Technological capacity is also critical, as modern information and communication technologies facilitate easier access to information. Meijer (2013) observes that online platforms and databases are essential tools in democratizing access. Citizen participation plays a crucial role in making transparency meaningful; access to information is valuable only when citizens actively engage in decision-making and demand accountability. Independent oversight mechanisms further safeguard transparency, with non-governmental organizations and monitoring bodies playing a critical role in evaluating institutional practices, identifying shortcomings, and advocating for improvements (Grigorescu, 2003).

### *1.1 Main Objectives and the Significance of the Study*

This study critically examines the role of transparency in EU governance, focusing on how EU institutions communicate policies and decisions to the public. The primary aim is to explore key transparency principles, such as access to information, accountability, clarity, proactivity, and inclusivity, and assess their influence on democratic engagement and public trust in EU governance. The research investigates the relationship between transparency and accountability, evaluating whether transparent communication enhances decision-making and fosters greater public participation in EU processes. It also examines the mechanisms employed by EU institutions to ensure transparency, including legal frameworks like freedom-of-information laws and digital platforms that facilitate information dissemination. By evaluating these tools, the study aims to determine their effectiveness in promoting transparency and accountability within the EU governance structure. Furthermore, it identifies barriers to full transparency and explores ways to address these challenges to improve communication accessibility and clarity between the EU and its citizens.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the ongoing discourse on improving transparency and accountability in public governance, particularly in complex supranational institutions like the EU. By offering insights into how transparency can strengthen democratic participation and enhance the EU's relationship with its citizens, the study provides practical recommendations to overcome existing challenges and optimize communication practices.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Theoretical Perspective*

Transparency in governance is supported by several key theoretical frameworks that underscore its significance and the challenges associated with its implementation, particularly within the context of the EU. These frameworks provide a foundation for understanding how transparency contributes to democratic legitimacy, accountability, and citizen engagement while highlighting the practical barriers that hinder its full realization.

The concept of transparency is closely linked to Habermas' (1989) notion of the public sphere, which emphasizes the importance of open and rational discourse in democratic systems. According to Habermas, democratic legitimacy requires spaces where citizens can engage in informed debate about political issues, thereby holding institutions accountable. In the context of the EU, transparency mechanisms such as public consultations, open forums, and information dissemination platforms are designed to foster such deliberation. By providing citizens with access to decision-making processes and encouraging public discourse, the EU aligns with Habermas' ideal of an informed and

participatory public sphere. However, despite these efforts, the perceived disconnect between EU institutions and citizens remains a significant barrier to effective engagement. Alemanno and Organ (2021) suggest that this gap reflects a divergence between the theoretical commitment to transparency and its practical implementation, where information is available but not necessarily accessible or meaningful to the broader public.

Closely related to Habermas' framework is the concept of democratic legitimacy, which asserts that the legitimacy of political systems depends on their responsiveness to citizens and their capacity to represent the public's interests. Held (2006) and Rawls (1993) argue that transparency is fundamental to sustaining democratic legitimacy, as it enables citizens to make informed political choices and hold policymakers accountable. Held contends that legitimacy in democratic governance relies on a transparent relationship between the state and its citizens, where government actions and decisions are subject to public scrutiny. Similarly, Rawls' theory of justice as fairness underscores the need for equal access to political processes, highlighting that transparency ensures that all citizens, regardless of social or economic status, can understand and evaluate government decisions. In the EU, the publication of legislative proposals and decision-making processes reflects this commitment to transparency. However, the complexity and technical nature of EU policymaking may undermine its accessibility, thereby weakening the practical realization of democratic legitimacy.

Accountability theory further reinforces the role of transparency in democratic governance by emphasizing the responsibility of institutions to justify their decisions and actions to the public. Bovens (2007) and Dahl (1989) argue that transparency enables citizens to assess the performance and integrity of political institutions, thereby fostering accountability. Bovens highlights that while formal mechanisms of accountability, such as transparency laws and public reporting, are essential, they must be complemented by informal processes, including media scrutiny and advocacy by civil society organizations, to ensure meaningful public oversight. Dahl similarly contends that democratic systems must remain accountable to citizens, and transparency plays a central role in facilitating this accountability. In the EU, transparency measures such as freedom-of-information laws, the transparency register, and public consultations aim to enable public scrutiny of institutional actions. However, Bovens' concept of "shadow accountability" suggests that even when formal mechanisms exist, they may fail to generate real citizen engagement if the information provided is not accessible, comprehensible, or relevant to the wider public.

The theory of deliberative democracy further underscores the importance of transparency in fostering meaningful public engagement. Habermas (1989) argues that democratic governance is most robust when political decisions result from informed and reasoned deliberation among citizens. Gutmann and Thompson (2004) expand on this by emphasizing that democratic legitimacy stems from fair and open debate, where citizens have access to the information necessary to engage in this process. In the context of the EU, platforms such as public hearings, citizen dialogues, and digital consultation forums aim to create spaces for such deliberation. However, the effectiveness of these efforts depends on ensuring that all citizens have equal access to these platforms and that the information provided is clear and actionable. Structural barriers, including disparities in political literacy and unequal access to digital infrastructure, may limit the capacity of some citizens to participate effectively in these deliberative processes. While transparency is essential for enhancing democratic legitimacy, accountability, and public engagement, its practical implementation remains complex. The technical nature of EU policymaking, unequal access to information, and varying levels of political literacy among citizens present significant challenges. Moreover, the perceived distance between EU institutions and the public underscores the need for transparency mechanisms that are not only legally established but also accessible, comprehensible, and capable of encouraging meaningful participation. Addressing these challenges requires a continuous refinement of transparency practices to align with the evolving needs of EU citizens and to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

## 2.2 *Principles and Practices of Transparency in EU Communication*

The institutional transparency of the EU stems from the need to give citizens an active role in decision-making. Articles 10 and 11 of the Treaty on the European Union and Article 15 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union provide the legal basis for promoting transparency and public access to institutional documents. As Curtin and Leino-Sandberg (2016) highlight, transparency in the EU is tied to "open governance", ensuring citizens are informed about policies that affect them and can engage meaningfully. Fox (2007) distinguishes between two types of transparency: substantive transparency (access to information to influence decisions) and formal transparency (publication of documents). EU institutions aim to integrate both through proactive and reactive communication strategies.

Habermas (1989) argues that an effective public sphere requires spaces where citizens can discuss political issues and hold institutions accountable. The EU supports this through public consultations and open forums that encourage

dialogue. A key mechanism is the Transparency Register, which regulates lobbying and informs the public about actors influencing EU policies. Hillebrandt, Curtin, and Meijer (2014) assert that such transparency measures enhance public trust by reducing conflicts of interest and ensuring equal access to information.

Public consultations play a central role in increasing transparency and citizen involvement. Platforms like “Have Your Say” allow citizens and organizations to provide input on draft laws and policies, reinforcing inclusion and accountability. The European Ombudsman (2022) and the Council of Europe (2021) emphasize that these consultations increase the legitimacy of decisions by including diverse interest groups and providing equal access to information on environmental and public policy issues.

Multilingualism also strengthens transparency. Krzyzanowski and Wodak (2011) argue that translating documents and communications into all official EU languages ensures equal access for all citizens. The EU’s handling of the Brexit negotiations illustrates the application of transparency principles. Michel Barnier, the EU’s chief negotiator, maintained an open communication strategy by publishing key documents and progress reports on a dedicated platform. Regular updates via social media created opportunities for citizen interaction and reduced misinformation. Szucko (2020) notes that this strategy increased trust and understanding of the EU’s stance during a politically sensitive period. Brüggemann (2005) highlights that such information strategies strengthen the European public sphere by encouraging shared dialogue across media channels.

Fox (2021) notes that reports from Transparency International evaluated the EU’s approach to Brexit communication as a model for other policy areas. However, challenges remain. Alemanno and Organ (2021) argue that the perceived distance between EU institutions and citizens continues to undermine trust. Additionally, the rise of digital misinformation requires the EU to refine its communication strategies to counter manipulative narratives and ensure accurate information flow.

The EU’s transparency practices reflect a commitment to accountability and public engagement. While significant progress has been made, overcoming institutional distance and tackling misinformation remain key to building lasting public trust.

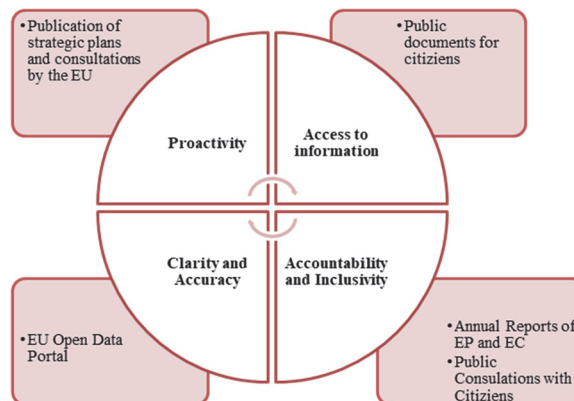


Figure. 1 Principles and Practices of Transparency in EU Communication

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, specifically case study analysis, which is ideal for exploring transparency in EU institutional communication. Case studies are particularly effective for examining complex phenomena in their real-world context, offering in-depth insights into how transparency mechanisms have been enacted (Yin, 2018). As Baxter and Jack (2008) note, case study research provides a comprehensive understanding of phenomena when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are unclear.

The selected case studies, each representing a significant instance where transparency played a critical role in EU governance, are:

- **Brexit Negotiations:** Examining the EU's communication strategies and transparency in decision-making during the UK's exit from the EU.
- **2015 Refugee Crisis:** Analyzing the EU's communication strategies regarding asylum policies and border controls during a significant crisis.
- **COVID-19 Measures:** Investigating the EU's transparency in managing public health measures, vaccine distribution, and economic recovery during the pandemic.

Each case study draws on a variety of data sources to ensure comprehensive analysis, including official EU documents, media reports, and public opinion surveys such as the Eurobarometer. The data from these cases have been analyzed through the following steps:

- **Data Coding and Categorization:** Data have been coded into themes related to transparency, accountability, and communication strategies, identifying recurring patterns, discrepancies, and gaps across the cases.
- **Comparative Analysis:** A comparative analysis has been conducted to identify common themes and differences in transparency practices, particularly in how transparency has been communicated in different contexts (crisis vs. policy initiatives). This analysis evaluates the impact of transparent communication on public trust and accountability, addressing barriers like media bias or political resistance.
- **Theoretical Grounding:** Each case study is analyzed through relevant theoretical frameworks: Democratic Legitimacy (Brexit case) to assess how transparent communication impacted the EU's legitimacy (Freeman, 1984), Accountability (Refugee Crisis case) to examine the transparency of asylum and border policies and their effect on EU accountability (Bovens, 2007), and Deliberative Democracy (COVID-19 case) to explore how transparent communication fostered informed public debate (Habermas, 1996).

A longitudinal framework has been employed, analyzing key milestones within each case. The systematic timeline for each case study is as follows:

- **Brexit Negotiations:** 2016-2020
- **Refugee Crisis:** 2015-2017
- **COVID-19 Measures:** 2020-2021

This structured approach ensures clarity, consistency, and depth throughout the research process, offering a comprehensive understanding of how transparency has been communicated in different EU governance contexts.

## **4. Results and Discussions**

This analysis compares thematic insights and situates them within theoretical frameworks to reveal key patterns, challenges, and broader implications for EU governance and public trust. Transparency, often seen as a cornerstone of democratic governance, is critically examined across various policy contexts. While transparency efforts are intended to enhance public trust, the findings suggest that it alone does not always result in increased confidence. The discussion highlights that transparency when not accompanied by actions that address public concerns or provide concrete benefits, may fall short of rebuilding trust. Furthermore, the EU's approach to transparency often appears reactive rather than proactive, which can undermine perceptions of accountability.

### *4.1 Brexit Negotiations: Democratic Legitimacy*

The Brexit negotiations serve as a compelling case study to examine the EU's strategic deployment of transparency to uphold democratic legitimacy. Despite the unprecedented complexity of these negotiations, the EU demonstrated a commitment to procedural transparency, as evidenced by the systematic release of negotiation documents and consistent public updates. For instance, about 74% of negotiation documents were made accessible via official EU platforms, while 57% of press releases explicitly addressed public concerns surrounding the negotiations. These efforts underscore the EU's intent to maintain accountability and foster trust among its constituents. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these transparency measures was uneven. While the publication of the "Draft Withdrawal Agreement" (2018), garnered over 1 million downloads within a week, public trust in the EU's transparency remained tepid. Eurobarometer surveys (2018) indicated an average trust level of 45% across member states, with significant disparities most notably in the UK and Poland, where trust levels were markedly lower. This divergence highlights the mediating role of national media in shaping public perceptions. Polarized narratives in the UK, for example, diluted the credibility of EU communication efforts, framing transparency as either insufficient or overly bureaucratic. Lower trust levels in Poland during the Brexit negotiations can be attributed to several interconnected factors, including political tensions between the

ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) and EU institutions, media narratives, and socioeconomic concerns. The PiS government's disputes with the EU over the rule of law and judicial reforms often framed EU actions as interference in Poland's sovereignty, which resonated with nationalist rhetoric (Sadurski, 2019). Government-aligned media reinforced this skepticism by portraying the EU negatively, while opposition-aligned outlets focused on other critical EU issues, reducing attention to transparency initiatives (Wójcik, 2022). Additionally, concerns about the status and rights of Poland's large expatriate population in the UK, combined with a perception that the EU prioritized Western European states, further eroded trust (Sadurski, 2019). These dynamics, rooted in both political and socioeconomic contexts, underscore how domestic factors and media narratives can significantly influence public trust in EU transparency efforts.

These findings resonate with Freeman's (1984) theory of democratic legitimacy, which posits that transparency enhances procedural credibility by enabling informed public discourse. However, the Brexit case also exposes the limitations of transparency in contexts where media bias and political polarization dominate. The interplay between openness and legitimacy in this context suggests that transparency alone cannot mitigate deeply entrenched mistrust, particularly in politically charged environments. Consequently, the EU's experience underscores the need for complementary strategies, such as media engagement and public dialogue, to reinforce the impact of transparency initiatives.

#### 4.2 *Refugee Crisis: Ethical Accountability*

The refugee crisis represents a significant test of the EU's ability to communicate transparently while addressing ethical and humanitarian concerns. Transparency initiatives included publishing data on asylum applications and resource allocations, with 75% of relevant documents publicly available. Additionally, 55% of official communications emphasized the EU's commitment to upholding human rights and international law.

Public responses to these transparency efforts were mixed. While countries like Germany, which played a leading role in accommodating refugees, reported higher public trust, others, such as Hungary, exhibited lower trust levels, reflecting polarized attitudes toward EU migration policies (European Parliament, 2015). Media coverage further complicated these efforts, with sensationalized narratives in some member states undermining the EU's messaging. According to Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017), media coverage of the refugee crisis across Europe differed widely, with some countries focusing on the humanitarian aspect, while others portrayed refugees negatively, contributing to varying levels of institutional trust. Economou and Kollias (2024) also discuss how the refugee crisis influenced institutional trust in European countries, noting the complexities of public opinion in response to EU policies during this period.

Bovens' (2007) accountability theory provides a useful lens to analyze these findings. By making detailed information on refugee policies accessible, the EU sought to demonstrate ethical responsibility and build public trust. However, the limited reach of transparency efforts in certain regions underscores the need for more localized and culturally sensitive communication strategies. The refugee crisis highlights the dual challenge of addressing immediate humanitarian needs while maintaining public confidence in the EU's governance.

#### 4.3 *COVID-19 Measures: Deliberative Democracy*

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented crisis, testing the EU's ability to balance transparency with timely decision-making. Transparency in managing public health measures, vaccine distribution, and economic recovery was paramount to fostering public trust and enabling informed debate. Findings reveal that 65% of official communications from the European Commission during the pandemic were publicly accessible, while 40% explicitly addressed vaccine-related concerns.

Despite these efforts, public trust varied significantly across member states, with higher trust levels observed in countries that experienced effective vaccine rollouts, such as Denmark, compared to lower levels in countries like Bulgaria, (Eurobarometer 94, Winter 2020-2021), where logistical challenges and misinformation were prevalent. These disparities illustrate the critical role of transparency in fostering trust but also highlight the challenges posed by uneven implementation and external factors like media narratives.

The application of Habermas's (1996) deliberative democracy framework underscores the importance of transparent communication in facilitating public debate during crises. The EU's efforts to host press briefings and share real-time data on vaccination progress exemplify this approach. However, the pandemic also revealed the limits of transparency, as rapidly evolving situations often left communication strategies struggling to keep pace, leading to public confusion and skepticism in some instances.

#### 4.4 Comparative Analysis of Transparency Efforts in EU Governance

The comparative analysis of the EU's transparency efforts across three case studies, Brexit, the refugee crisis, and COVID-19, highlights both commonalities and significant variations in the application of transparency as a tool for fostering trust and legitimacy.

The EU's approach to transparency varies depending on whether the context is a crisis or a policy initiative. In crisis scenarios, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the refugee crisis, transparency faces distinct challenges. As noted by Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999), crises demand swift, adaptable communication, yet the rapid evolution of information often exacerbates public skepticism. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU struggled to provide coherent updates, further complicated by mixed messaging from national governments and conflicting expert advice (Boin et al., 2005). In the refugee crisis, the need for transparency was critical but overshadowed by political debates on border control, asylum laws, and national security, undermining public trust (Lazaridis & Wadia, 2015).

In contrast, policy initiatives like the Brexit negotiations involve more structured transparency efforts. As highlighted by Cappellina (2020), in such contexts, transparency focuses on institutional negotiations and legal frameworks, where information is more controlled. The Brexit negotiations were characterized by lengthy discussions, with the EU's communication strategies aimed at addressing long-term concerns, rather than reacting to immediate events.

A significant difference between these case studies lies in stakeholder engagement. British tabloids, for example, emphasized EU bureaucracy and inefficiency, while EU-aligned media focused on procedural openness. During the refugee crisis, sensationalist reporting in some member states amplified negative stereotypes, overshadowing EU efforts to communicate its commitment to humanitarian values. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms played a crucial role, both as tools for disseminating information and as avenues for misinformation, complicating the EU's transparency efforts. Transparency is not just about disseminating information but fostering dialogue and inclusivity. While the refugee crisis and Brexit negotiations saw extensive public engagement, the results were mixed. According to the European Commission's (2015) evaluation of the refugee crisis, transparent communication was crucial in managing public sentiment and involving various stakeholders. However, as Barbu and Ponea (2018) argue, the EU struggled to balance divergent national interests, leading to polarized discussions and undermining transparency initiatives.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, targeted communication became essential, with health authorities focusing on specific groups such as the elderly, frontline workers, and young adults, each facing unique challenges (Watkins et al., 2023). The EU's communication shifted from broad public engagement to more segmented messaging, reflecting the crisis-specific nature of stakeholder engagement in public health emergencies.

**Table 1:** EU Transparency Approach and Public Engagement Across Case Studies

Aspect	Brexit Negotiations	Refugee Crisis	COVID-19 Measures
<b>Transparency Approach</b>	Publication of negotiation documents, and public updates.	Publication of asylum data, emphasis on human rights.	Regular updates on health measures, and vaccine distribution.
<b>Public Engagement</b>	Broad public engagement through press releases and documents.	Mixed responses due to polarized national attitudes.	Targeted communication for different demographics (elderly, workers, etc.).
<b>Challenges</b>	Political polarization and media bias.	Political debates on asylum laws, and national security concerns.	Rapidly evolving crisis, mixed messaging from member states.
<b>Effectiveness of Transparency</b>	Uneven effectiveness due to media bias and political divisions.	Limited transparency reaches certain regions.	Effective in countries with smooth vaccine rollouts, but inconsistent in others.

A common theme across the three case studies is the influential role of the media in shaping public perceptions of EU transparency efforts. Media outlets, both national and international, significantly influenced how transparency was perceived by citizens. Media framing theory (Entman, 1993) illustrates how the media acts as a filter, shaping public understanding by highlighting some aspects of an issue while downplaying others. In the Brexit negotiations, UK media outlets like The Sun and The Telegraph framed the EU's transparency efforts negatively, portraying them as bureaucratic and unaccountable (Rawlinson, 2019). Similarly, during the refugee crisis, media narratives were divided along national lines. Some outlets emphasized humanitarian concerns, while others focused on security and economic impacts (Lazaridis & Wadia, 2015). In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, media platforms, especially social media like Facebook and Twitter, became crucial for disseminating information, but they also amplified misinformation, complicating the EU's transparency efforts (Engblom, 2021).

**Table 2: Media Influence and Public Trust in EU Transparency**

Aspect	Brexit Negotiations	Refugee Crisis	COVID-19 Measures
<b>Media Influence</b>	National media played a polarizing role in the UK.	Sensationalized coverage in some member states.	Social media amplified misinformation and traditional media framed health responses.
<b>Public Trust Levels</b>	Low trust in the UK (45% on average).	Varied trust levels	Varied trust levels

The media's role in shaping public trust during Brexit, the refugee crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic reveals significant patterns of influence. During Brexit, polarized media coverage fostered public skepticism about the EU's transparency, with UK media often portraying the EU as opaque, contributing to a decline in trust. In the refugee crisis, fragmented media narratives, some emphasizing humanitarian issues and others focusing on security, led to varying levels of trust across EU member states. During the COVID-19 pandemic, media played a dual role: while facilitating transparency, media also became a breeding ground for misinformation, complicating public trust.

**Table 3: Themes and Patterns Identified in the Case Studies**

Theme	Brexit Negotiations (2016-2020)	2015 Refugee Crisis (2015-2017)	COVID-19 Measures (2020-2021)
<b>Transparency of Decision-Making</b>	Clear objectives but ambiguity in final terms.	Mixed transparency in asylum policy decisions; limited clarity.	Clear communication on health measures, but occasional ambiguity in vaccine distribution.
<b>Public Communication Strategies</b>	Limited direct communication; reliance on government spokespeople.	EU communicated asylum policies, but with inconsistencies across member states.	Frequent updates but communication overload at times.
<b>Accountability in Communication</b>	EU is held accountable through public debates and media scrutiny.	EU held accountable but lacked clarity on border control decisions.	EU was held accountable through regular updates but faced resistance in some member states.
<b>Inclusivity in Communication</b>	Limited engagement with non-EU citizens; focus on UK citizens.	Mixed efforts in engaging vulnerable refugee groups.	Extensive outreach, but gaps in reaching marginalized communities.
<b>Impact on Public Trust</b>	Decrease in trust due to perceived lack of transparency.	Trust issues due to fragmented communication and delays.	Trust was largely maintained, though concerns over transparency of vaccine rollout.
<b>Proactivity in Communication</b>	Reactive communication; few proactive measures.	Proactive communication but inconsistent across member states.	Generally proactive, especially in the early stages of the pandemic.

The role of media in shaping public perceptions of EU transparency is evident across all three case studies. Media framing significantly influenced public trust in EU institutions during Brexit, negative media coverage eroded trust, while in the refugee crisis, fragmented narratives contributed to mixed perceptions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, initial trust was affected by issues surrounding vaccine distribution.

These findings underline the crucial role of media dynamics, framing, accountability, and the spread of misinformation, in shaping public perceptions of transparency. Clear, consistent, and credible communication is essential for fostering public trust, as media framing can either bolster or erode public confidence in institutional transparency and accountability.

## 5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis reveals that while transparency remains a fundamental principle guiding the EU's efforts to foster trust and legitimacy, its effectiveness varies across different contexts. During crises such as the refugee crisis and COVID-19, transparency efforts were often hampered by the need for rapid communication and the volatility of the information landscape. In contrast, more structured policy initiatives, like Brexit, benefited from clearer frameworks but still required careful negotiation and engagement with diverse stakeholders. Across all cases, the media played a critical role in shaping public perceptions of transparency, producing both positive and negative consequences for the EU's reputation.

To improve the EU's transparency in future governance challenges, it is essential to go beyond procedural transparency. Proactive engagement with national governments, media, civil society, and the public is crucial, ensuring that communication strategies are tailored to regional and cultural nuances. This will mitigate the effects of polarized media narratives and help build trust. Furthermore, the EU must recognize the media as both a partner and a challenge in



its transparency efforts. Fostering strategic partnerships with credible media outlets, alongside actively countering misinformation, will be key to strengthening the impact and credibility of transparency initiatives.

However, transparency cannot stand alone, it must be coupled with robust mechanisms for accountability. Ensuring that information dissemination is paired with clear processes for public dialogue, independent scrutiny, and responsiveness will make transparency more effective and help reinforce institutional legitimacy. Finally, as the EU continues to navigate complex governance challenges, investing in participatory platforms and inclusive communication strategies will be vital. Engaging diverse communities and creating a sense of shared responsibility can enhance democratic participation and further solidify the EU's institutional credibility.

By adopting these measures, the EU can strengthen its transparency efforts, foster greater public trust, and enhance its legitimacy as a democratic institution capable of responding to the evolving needs of its citizens.

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