

Trends in Trust in Public Institutions in Hungary 2017-2023

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Abstract

The trust in governments is a topical issue today in good governance context. Three national representative primary surveys of similar methodology and size were compared: one in 2017, one in 2020 and one in 2023. Our present study focuses on a segment of these surveys, the evolution of trust and its situation in 2023 for three groups of public institutions. We have not only surveyed the trend in trust, but also several demographic factors to answer the reasons for the change. We have examined the evolution of trust by age, educational attainment, frequency of internet use and the location and type of the respondent's municipality. This gave a trend over six years, which can be indicative for policy makers: the trend is downwards on the nationwide average, but there are positive exceptions. The present survey allows us to identify which institutions, areas and users have improved and which have tainted in terms of public confidence. The degree of change is to determine the urgency of intervention.

Keywords: *E-Government, Trust, Local Governments, Government Offices, Public Institutions.*

Introduction

Trust can be considered as an important indicator of the quality of public governance. Institutional trust is a multidimensional concept providing a measure of how people perceive the quality of, and their association with public institutions in their countries. Government investment to improve the level of trust and confidence is particularly important during times of political and economic crises (OECD, 2023).

Based on global data processing from the Welcomes Global Monitor and the Worldwide Governance Indicators it is evident that trust is associated with higher degrees of government effectiveness, even when income per capita is considered (see BOSIO 2023). This association can be self-fulfilling: where citizens and the private sector trust public institutions they use public services more frequently, thus creating new demands for new services. The importance of such investigation can further be underlined with the statements of the above report, namely, that the trust in public institutions is positively correlated with the perceived level of corruption. When the government produces high-quality public services and they are perceived as free from corruption, citizens tend to have more trust in it.

Our previous study has also concerned the evolution of trust levels. Budai's study (BUDAI, 2017), within the framework of a 2015 survey, pointed to the factors behind the development of trust levels, such as the frequency of information provided to the public, the form of interaction between the office and the customer, the success rate of administrative procedures, the comprehensibility of interactions, the responsiveness of the office as components that improve trust, among others.

The question we sought to answer was how customers' perceptions of trust changed across three types of institutions:

- Government Offices, Tax Offices, Consumer Protection and Land Registry Offices
- Document Offices

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- Local Governments

However, not only the improvement or deterioration of trust, but also the underlying respondents' demographic characteristics provide interesting explanations, such as age, education, frequency of internet use and the location and type of the respondent's municipality. This gives a trend over six years, which is indicative for policy makers, as it indicates where intervention is needed.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review Concerning Trust in Public Institutions

"It is trust, more than money, that makes the world go round" according to the Nobel Prize winner STIGLITZ, J. E. (2013). For good and improved governance programming conceptual framework and insights are needed. Trust is a key component of the social contract as it is evident in both political theories and urban development practice. Therefore, the drivers and consequences of trust are important to know when dealing with the topic. First, there are two different aspects of trust: the horizontal trust (the trust that the members of a community have in each other) and vertical trust (the trust that the members of a community have in the institutions). See SAPIENZA (2021).

One of the basic issues of the studies and researches on the trust in government regards the quality of governance and the political trust. As it is pointed out the political trust has been declining worldwide, i.e. not only in the developed world, but in developing and transitional countries, too. However, since political trust is demanded for the legitimacy of governments, researchers like us are investigating the factors influencing political trust in governments and in public institutions with several variables. As it is found by KHAN (2016), when exploring the relationship between the quality of government and political trust in developing and transitional countries, special literature is not precise in defining the connections between the quality of governance and political trust. Our research is also trying to supplement the knowledge regarding the links between the social factors and the trust in government.

(Since this study focuses mainly on the changes of trust in public institutions in a Central European country, Hungary, it can be interpreted as measuring and recording the consequences of a specific form of vertical trust.

In 2023 in the OECD countries, a higher share of people (44%) had low, or no trust in their national governments via their institutions, than high or moderately high trust (39%). See OECD (2023). Citizens who feel insecure financially, or who have low levels of education, females, the young are considered to have lower levels of trust in government and public institutions. However, the largest group of citizens' lack of trust is associated with their sense of having or not having the right to intervene in government actions. This is the key driver of trust in government. According to the above-mentioned OECD survey of 2023, 69% of respondents feel that they have the right to influence the actions of public institutions and consequently they are likely to trust in their national governments, while there were only 22% who felt they had no such possibility at all and thus, had no trust in their governments.

In general, in the OECD countries the satisfaction with the provision of the main human public services, like health, education and administration is relatively high, though satisfaction with health care and education systems did decline over the past two years and further monitoring is recommended. Trust in public institutions and agencies lies in the usage of the personal data of citizens only for legitimate purposes only. The everyday personal data transfer in interactions between citizens and public institutions are the key drivers of trust in the civil service and government.

Regarding the future prospective of trust in government, only around 40% of the respondents believe that the governments will be able to balance the interests of the young and old generations; will be able to regulate artificial intelligence appropriately or to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These results can be due to the lack of confidence in public institutions as well.

In theory, the basis of trust can be generated of either of the following two processes:

Cognitive trust because of rational processes, based on empirical observation, experiences from real life.

Affective trust because of emotional processes, originating from socialization, education, family traditions, beliefs, political views and personal identity.

According to the 2013 summary by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) edited by Joseph E. Stiglitz, professor at the Columbia University, the drivers of confidence in the governance system used for analyses are the following:

Design drivers, when trust derives from an *ex-ante* evaluation of how the governance system is designed. The acceptance or the criticism of it is exposed to the political preferences of citizens.

Performance drivers, when trust derives from an *ex-post* assessment of how the system performs. The keywords to measure the performance drivers of trust include effectiveness, fairness and responsiveness.

The *effectiveness* of the governments' public institutions can be analysed via their functioning, like the quality of public service delivery; the economic management of public institutions; the institutions' responses to shocks, like the governments via public institutions are able to protect citizens from external shocks, or not.

The *fairness* of the governments' public institutions can be analysed via their managing public resources for the purpose of common good; the equality in treating the customers in an impartial way; and the promotion of the fair distribution of economic resources.

The *responsiveness* of the governments' public institutions can be analysed via the degree of their being responsive and receptive to citizens' views, claims, proposals, reports, and aspirations; accountability, whether public institutions appropriately deal with legitimate grievances; and respect whether the functioning of public institutions is informed by respect for the citizen's or not.

Methodology

Before introducing the methods of our research, we think it appropriate to refer to a research performed in Mexico (ARELLANO, 2016). In 2003 the Mexican government initiated a program to increase citizens' trust in the government. However, trust in the Mexican government did remain extremely low and still decreasing. The referred research found that the program oversimplified the social and political dynamics and impacts of the public institutions. As is instructive conclusion, we can draw that social and political factors have to be considered whenever we try to analyze the relationship between the trusts in government and public institutions and organizations.

In empirical studies, survey questions are typically used to measure trust. One of the findings of CARLSSON et al (2018) is that generalized trust is only weakly correlated with trust in specific institutions, when elicited by using survey questions. Therefore, they suggest that generalized trust is not an appropriate measure of institutional trust and that more specific institutional trust measures should be used. Consequently, we used institution specific surveys for government agencies, like document offices having the most frequent visits by the citizens, then tax, consumer protection and land registry offices.

The quantitative data presented in this study on attitudes, use and evaluation on public services was part of an impact assessment research focusing on digital public administration development interventions (see BUDAI et al 2023).

Selected and cultivated data was collected in the Survey of public attitudes towards the use and perception of the public administration of 2017 and 2023. Data collection periods took place between 02/24/2017-03/20/2017 and between 01/17/2023-02/21/2023. Data collection method was the same in years, survey

questions and items were identical in both years' questionnaire to maintain reliability for comparable longitudinal analysis.

A representative sample of 2500 people (N1) in 2017 and 2000 people (N2) in 2023 were interviewed. During the sampling procedure, the addresses and persons to be contacted were randomly selected from an official address register. i.e. sampling frame. For each sampled address, at least four additional addresses were provided and pre-scheduled, with the same demographic characteristics of the person to be contacted. A supplementary follow-up survey completed the fieldwork. During the recruitment process, several layers of quality assurance framed the work, with systematic, quota-based telephone verification procedures and continuous central on-line monitoring of the progress of the data collection and the data received. The raw empirical sample produced by the data collection was made accessible for analysis after appropriate coding, data cleaning according to methodological standards and, in some cases, imputation.

The resulting empirical sample databases are representative of the Hungarian adult population aged 18 and over, by gender, age, educational attainment, and settlement type and county.

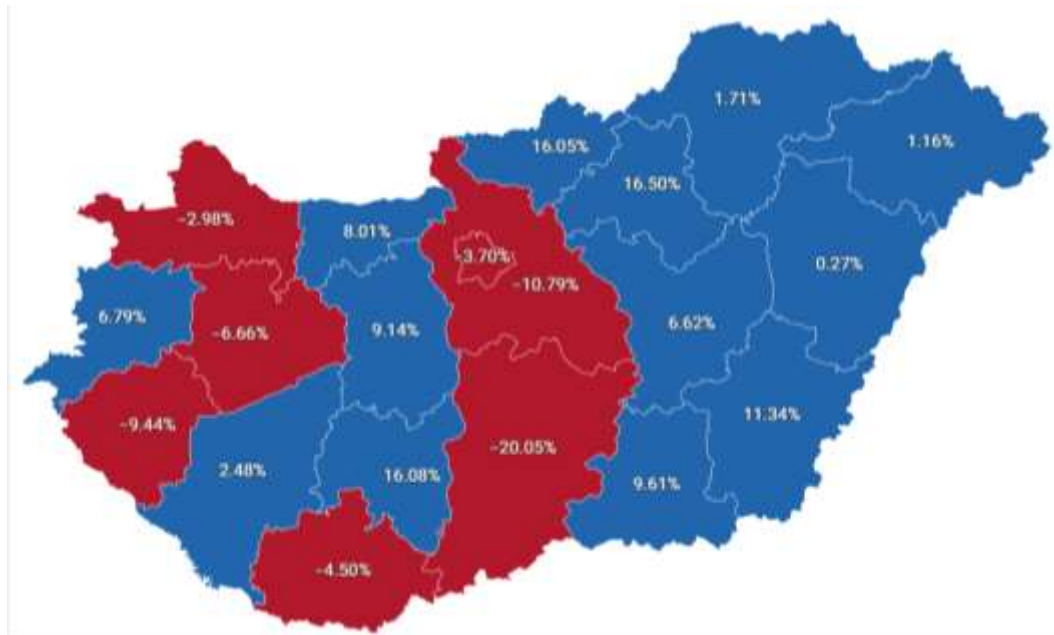
The surveys were carried out using a Tablet-Assisted Personal Interviewing (TAPI) with a professional data collection network with nationwide coverage, with the assistance of 156 well-instructed interviewers, using both flashcards and response item listing. The supporting tools made it easier for the respondent to review the scales and response categories, and for the interviewer to handle the questionnaire's skipping instructions and logical relationships more quickly and without errors. This meant that the recording contained fewer errors and could keep within the realistic time limit of 40-50 minutes, without stretching the respondent to significant fatigue, which reinforced validity.

Table 1. Distribution of Background Variables in the Sample

	Changing	2017		2023	
		Number of items (persons)	%	Number of items (persons)	%
No	Male	1174	46,9	944	47,2
	Female	1331	53,1	1056	52,8
Urban type	Budapest	460	18,4	361	18,0
	County seat, city with county rights	533	21,3	395	19,7
	Other city	642	25,6	644	32,2
	Village, hamlet	870	34,7	600	30,0
Age	18-29 year old	534	21,3	331	16,5
	30-39 year old	414	16,5	309	15,4
	40-49 year old	506	20,2	398	19,9
	50-59 year old	380	15,2	318	15,9
	60-69 year old	480	19,2	318	15,9
	70 -	190	7,6	326	16,3
School education	Up to 8 th grade primary school	804	32,1	281	14,1
	Vocational	575	23,0	622	31,1
	Secondary school graduation	739	29,5	793	39,6
	Higher education	387	15,4	304	15,2
	Inactive	966	38,8	726	36,4

Figure 1. Trust Levels in Government Agencies, NTCA, Consumer Protection, Land Registry, 2023**Source:** own editing

The shift in confidence levels between 2017 and 2023 shows an interesting pattern. An important indication is that the already low confidence levels in the Central Hungary region have fallen further. This is also notable because the number of cases handled by offices in this region is outstanding. The Counties of Bács-Kiskun and Zala suffered a spectacular loss of confidence. At the same time, Nógrád and Tolna Counties showed an improvement of over 16% and were among the most trusted areas. This is joined by Csongrád-Csanád County, which improved by almost 10% to become the third most reliable area.

**Figure 2.** Change in confidence levels in government agencies, NTCA, Consumer Protection, Land Registry between 2017 and 2023**Source:** own editing

In another approach (reliable/unreliable), we also examined the displacement by age group. Here again the trend is negative, except for the 60+ age group. However, for the 40-59 age group, nearly one in six respondents (14.7%) rated institutions as unreliable, which is a significant deterioration compared to 2017.

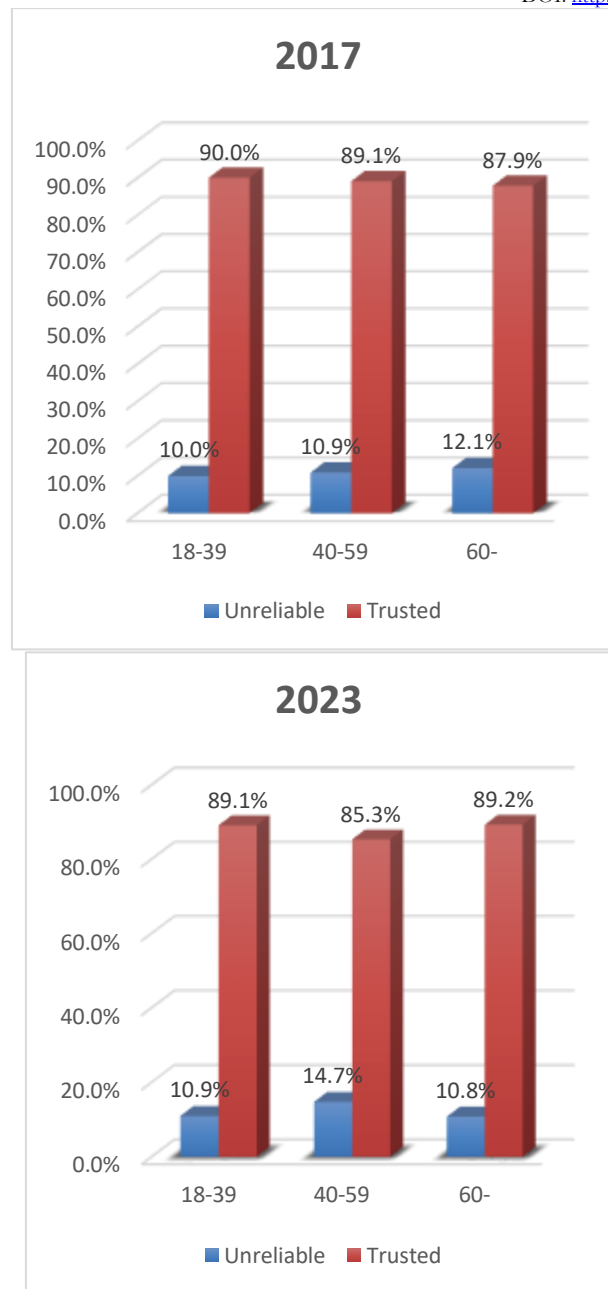


Figure 3. Change In Confidence Levels in Government Agencies, NTCA, Consumer Protection, Land Registry, in 2017-2023, By Age Groups

Source: own editing

Educational attainment had a different effect on the decline in confidence. Among those with the lowest and highest levels of education, there is a similar decline of around 3% points, while for those with secondary education; the decline is a fraction of that, at 0.6% points.

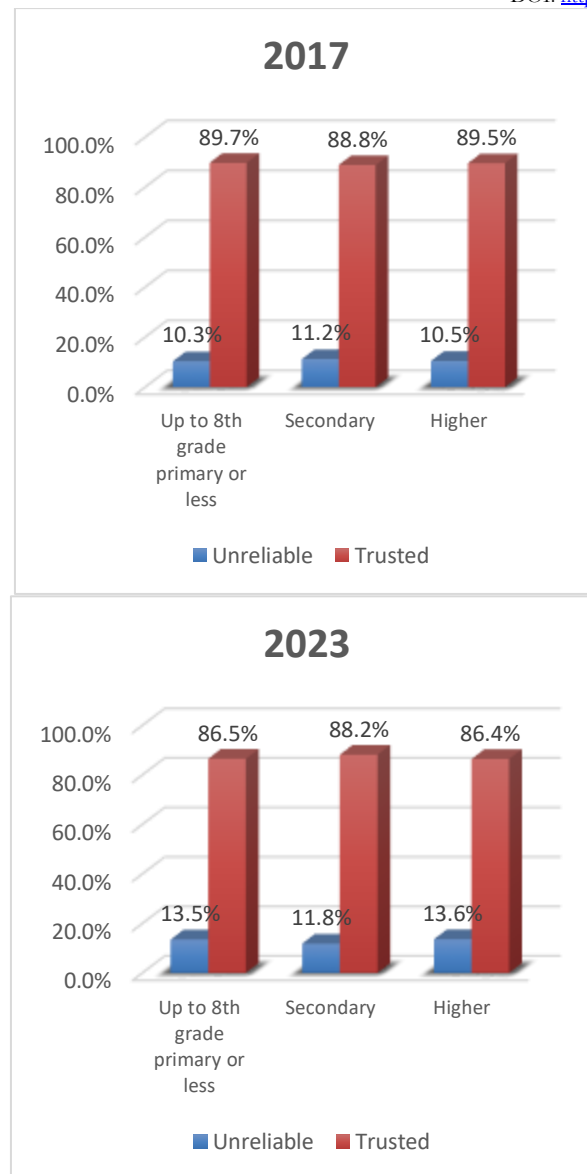


Figure 4. Change In Confidence Levels in Government Agencies, NTCA, Consumer Protection, Land Registry, 2017-2023 By Educational Attainment

Source: own editing

The biggest loss of confidence was among frequent users. So that 3.2 percentage point decline in this group is only slightly offset by an improvement in confidence among infrequent internet users.

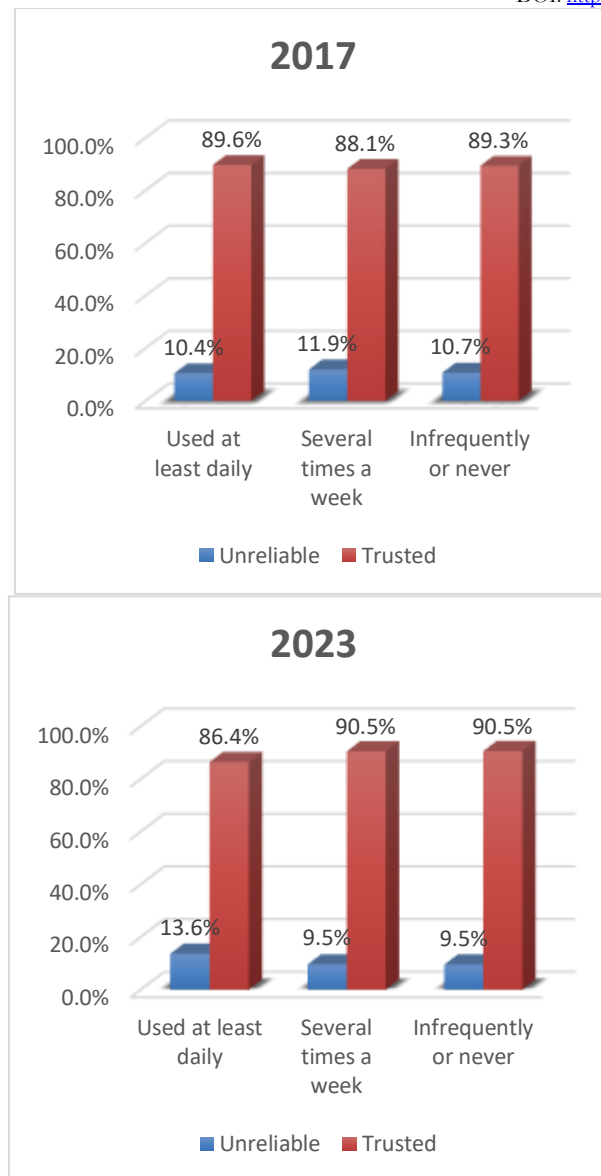


Figure 5. Changes In Trust Levels in Government Agencies, NTCA, Consumer Protection, Land Registry, 2017-2023, As A Function of Internet Usage

Source: own editing

While the confidence level of municipalities (and practically county seats) remains unchanged, the decline is due to cities and Budapest. The former showing a 3.5 percentage point drop.

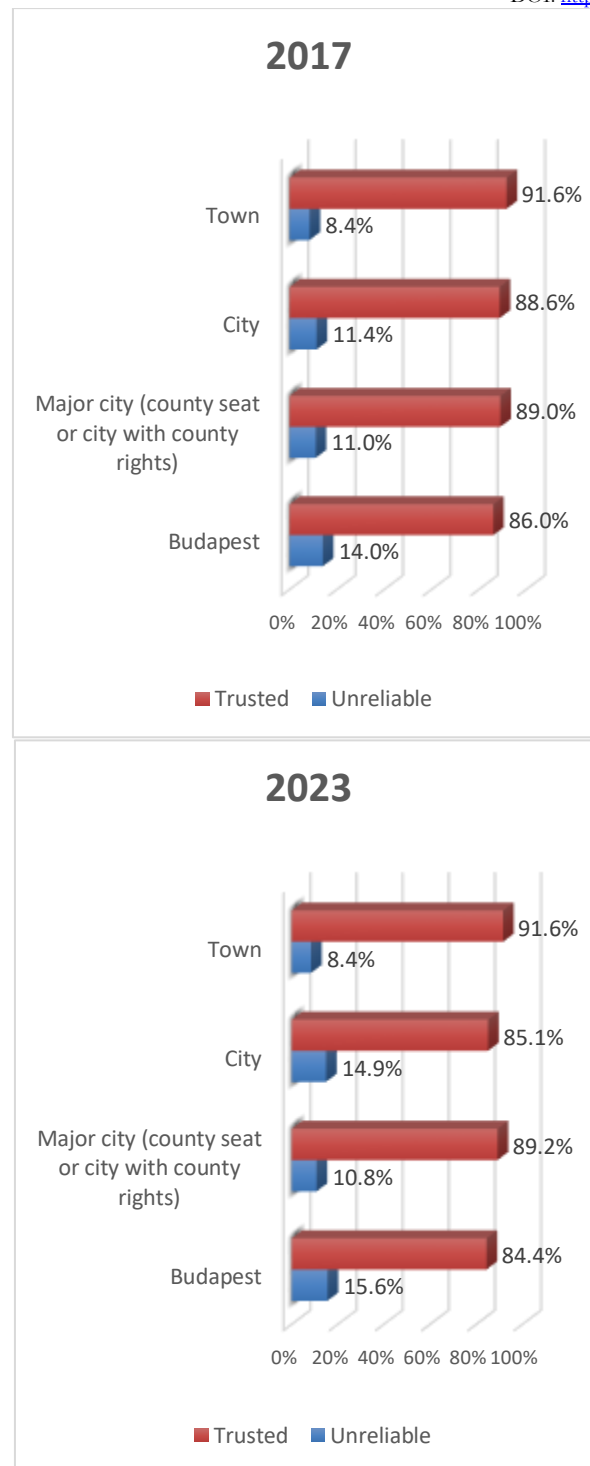


Figure 6. Changes in Confidence Levels in Government Offices, NTCA, Consumer Protection, Land Registry, 2017-2023, By Type of Settlement

Source: own editing

Dividing respondents' household income into three groups and looking at the two points in time, it can be seen that between 2017 and 2023, the confidence of low- and high-income earners improved the most, by 3.3 and 2.4 percent respectively.

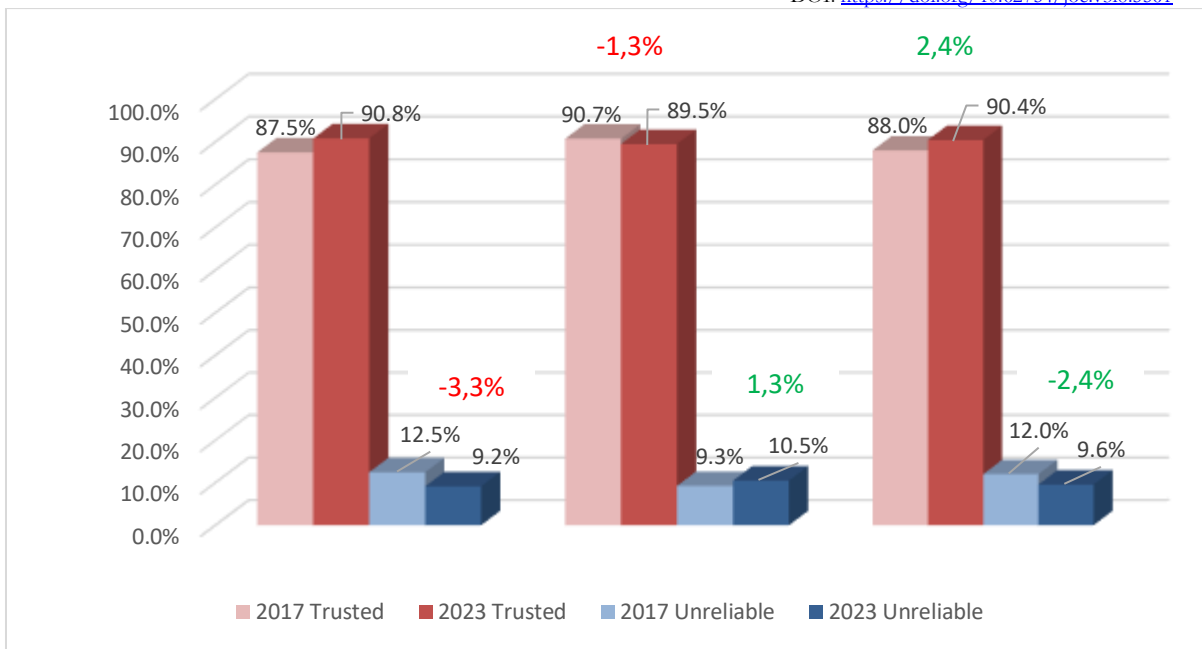


Figure 7. Changes In Confidence Levels in Government Offices, N'TCA, Consumer Protection, Land Registry, 2017-2023, As A Function of Household Income

Source: own editing

Evolution of Trust in Document Offices and Government Offices

The national average level of confidence in document offices and government offices decreased more than the previous group. While in 2017 they scored 3.2965, in 2023 they scored 3.2157, a drop of 2.45 percentage points. The 2017 leader's value of 2.6857 was raised to 2.98 by the last one (Somogy) in 2023. In other words, in 2023 we are not really talking about "rather unreliable" government windows. At the same time, the highest scores have also moved upwards, and while the most trustworthy document offices and government offices in 2017 had a score of 3.68 (Bács-Kiskun County), the 2023 winner (Nógrád County) has a confidence level of 3.9466.

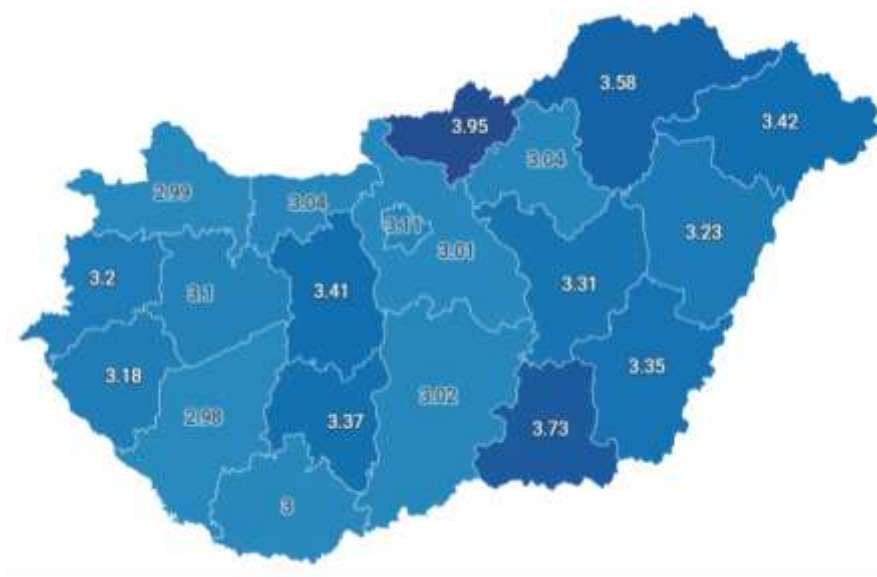




Figure 10. Change In Confidence Levels at Document Offices and Government Offices Between 2017 And 2023, By Age Group

Source: Own Editing

There is also a decline in all three categories by educational attainment, but the loss of confidence among those with tertiary education is particularly marked. In this group, the proportion of people rating government offices as untrustworthy more than doubled, rising from 7.4% to 15.2%.

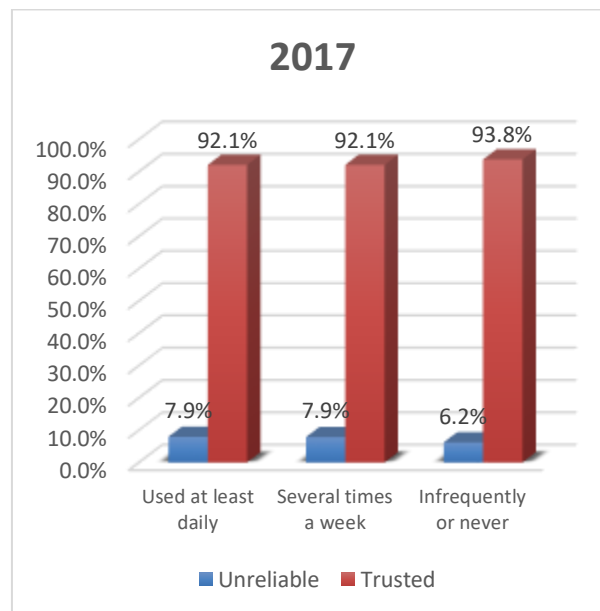




Figure 11. Change In Confidence Levels Among Document Offices and Government Offices Between 2017 And 2023, By Educational Attainment

Source: own editing

The biggest loss of confidence in this institutional group was among those who rarely or never use the internet, which also seems to have doubled compared to 2017. While in 2017, 6.2% of infrequent or non-users of the internet considered document offices and government offices unreliable, in 2023 this figure will rise to 13%. This drop of nearly 7% is particularly striking compared to the 1-2% increase in the other two groups.



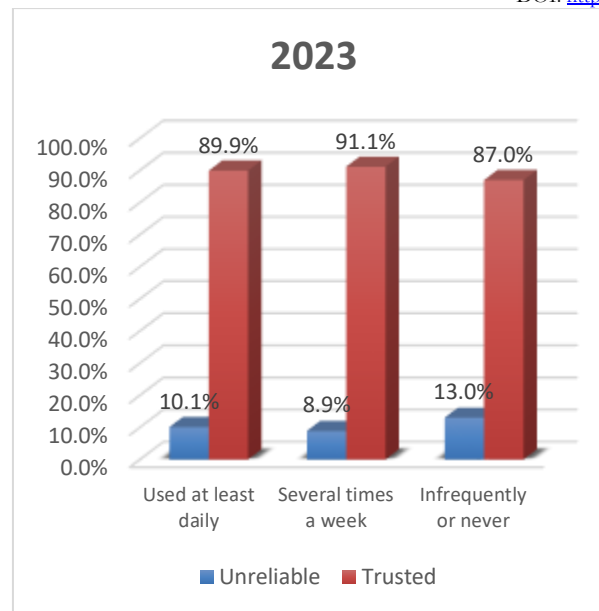
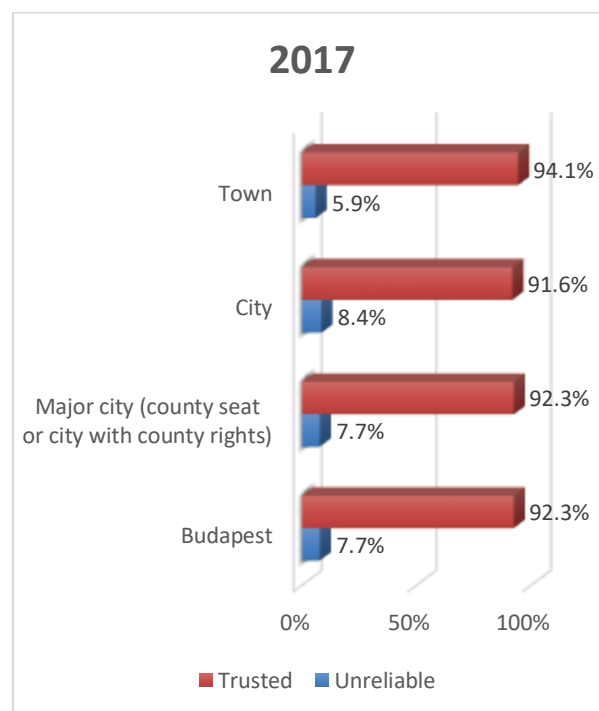


Figure 12. Change In Confidence Levels Among Document Offices and Government Offices, 2017-2023, As A Function of Internet Usage Frequency

Source: Own Editing

Budapest shows the largest drop in document offices and government offices. Here, the proportion of people who distrust the offices has increased from 7.7% to 13.5%. In terms of the extent of the deterioration, cities follow, from 8.4% to 12.4%, followed by municipalities, from 5.9% to 8.1%. The perception of government offices in large cities (county seats and cities with county rights) remained virtually unchanged.



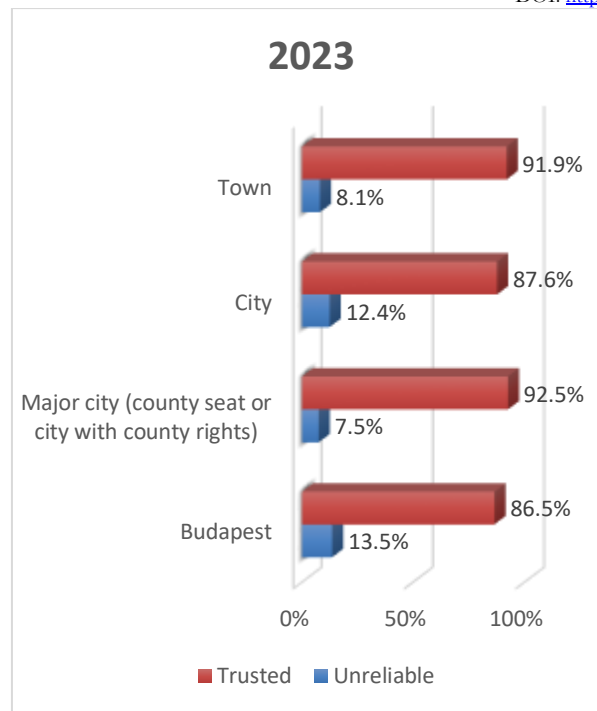


Figure 13. Change In Confidence Levels at Document Offices and Government Offices, 2017-2023, By Type of Settlement

Source: Own Editing

Dividing the household income of respondents into three groups and looking at the two points in time, it can be seen that between 2017 and 2023, the confidence of all groups decreased, with only middle-income respondents seeing a significant decrease of 4.7 percent.

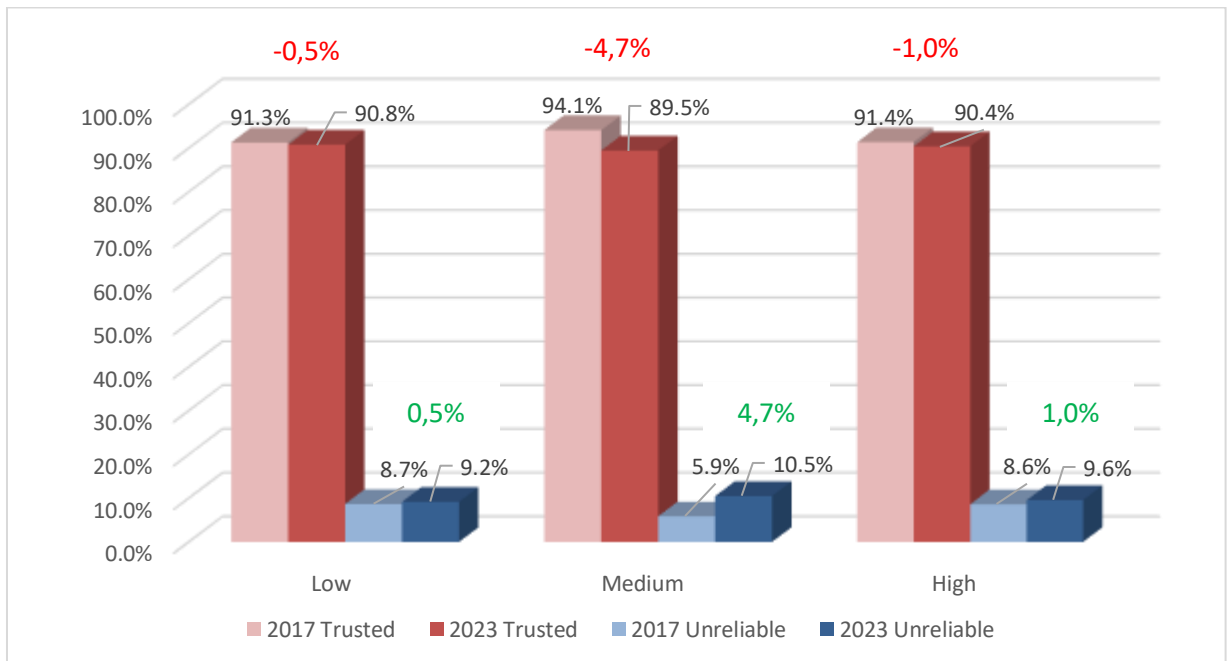


Figure 14. Changes in Confidence Levels at Document Offices and Government Offices, 2017-2023, As A Function of Household Income

Source: Own Editing

Evolution of Trust in Local Government

The national average perception of local government also deteriorated marginally. While the confidence level was 3.1894 in 2017, it was 3.1545 in 2023 (a decrease of 1.1 percentage points). However, the spread of values has narrowed. While Heves County, which was the worst rated in 2017, had a value of 2.53, the worst rated municipalities in 2023 (Somogy County) had a value of 2.72. The best-performing municipalities in 2017 (in Bács-Kiskun County) scored 3.63, while the best-performing municipalities in 2023, in Nógrád County, scored 3.79.

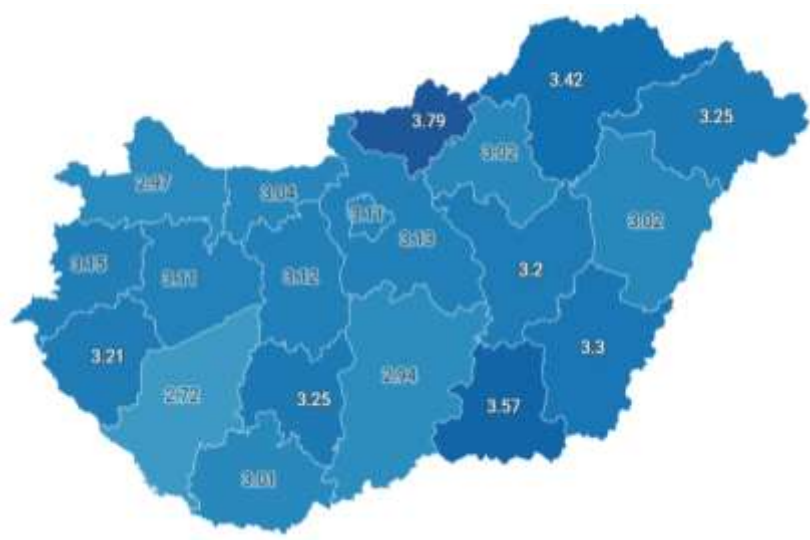


Figure 15. Overall Trustworthiness of Local Governments

Source: Own Editing

In this approach, the level of confidence in the municipalities of the capital is practically unchanged (-0.32% points). There is also a strong drop in this area in Bács-Kiskun, Békés, Hajdú-Bihar and Somogy Counties, while a significant increase is seen in Heves, Békés and Nógrád Counties.

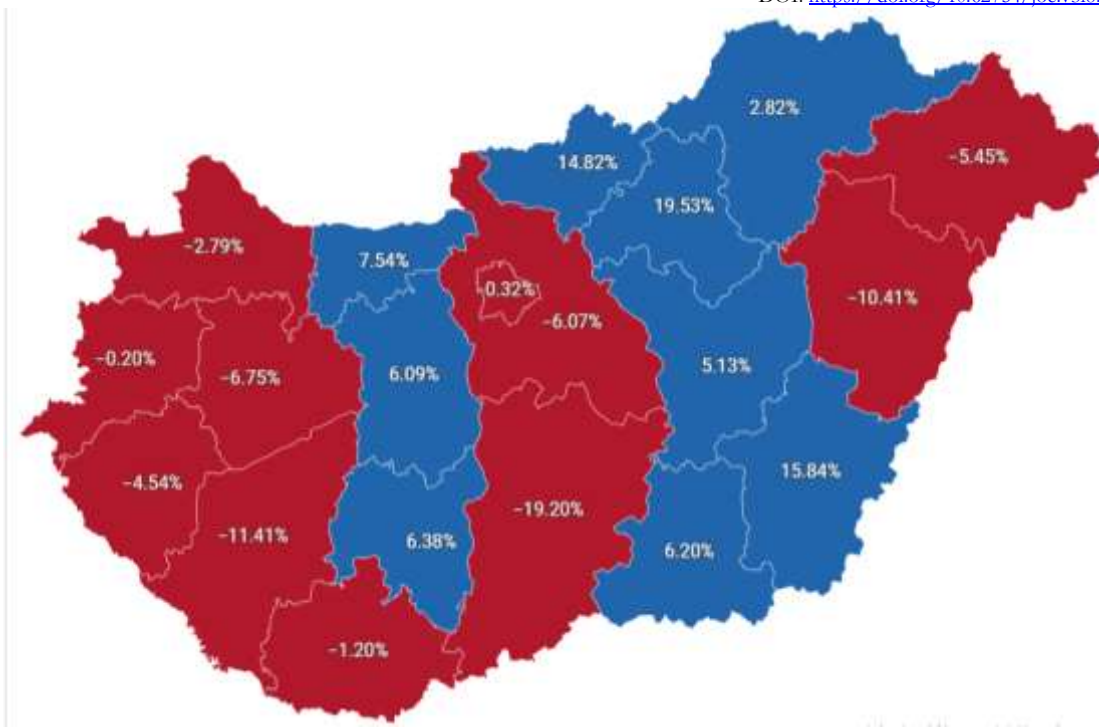


Figure 16. Change In the Overall Reliability of Local Governments Between 2017 And 2023

Source: Own Editing

In terms of age group, the first two age groups were the backbone of the loss of confidence, while confidence levels among those aged 60 and over remained virtually stagnant (down by 0.2%).

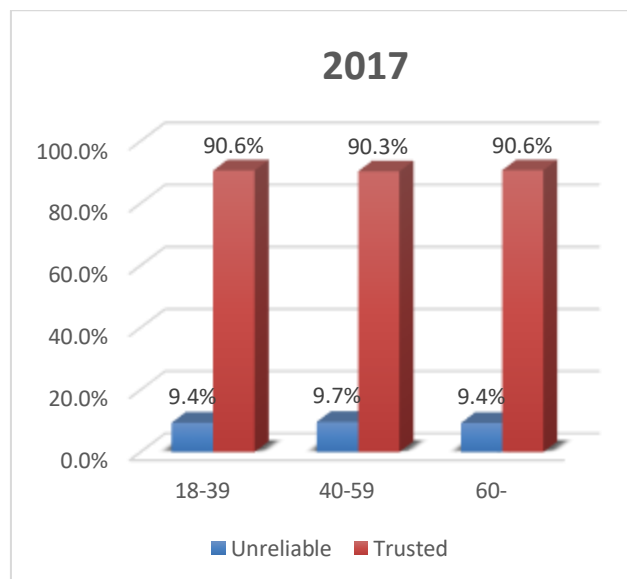




Figure 17. Change In Confidence Levels in Local Government Between 2017 And 2023, By Age Group

Source: Own Editing

In all three categories, the values for educational attainment also worsened, but again the lowest and highest educational attainment are over-represented. Those with tertiary education have the highest distrust rate at 15.6%, followed by those with 8 years of primary education or less at 13.5% and finally those with secondary education at 10%.

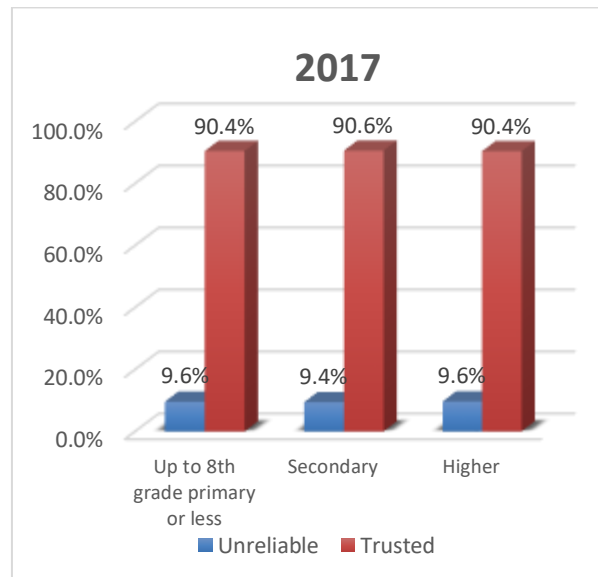
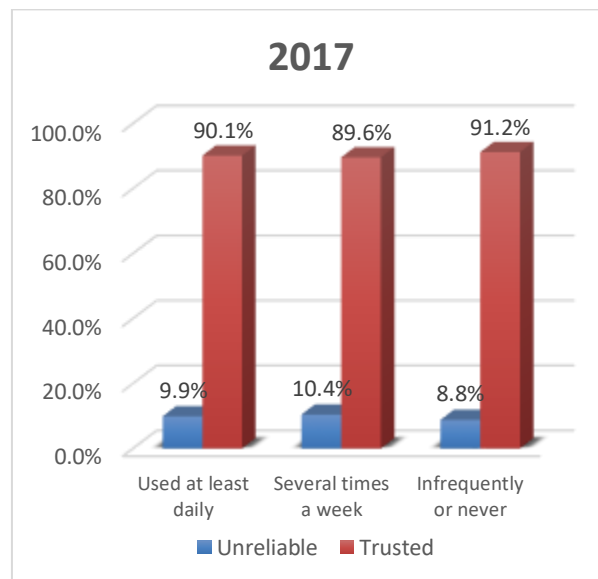




Figure 18. Change In Confidence Levels in Local Government Between 2017 And 2023, By Educational Attainment

Source: Own Editing

As in the previous round of institutions, it is the rarely or never internet users who are the most mistrustful in local government. They account for the bulk of the decline, with a 4.3% drop, while the level is almost unchanged for those who use the internet several times a week. Frequent users show a drop of 1.1%.



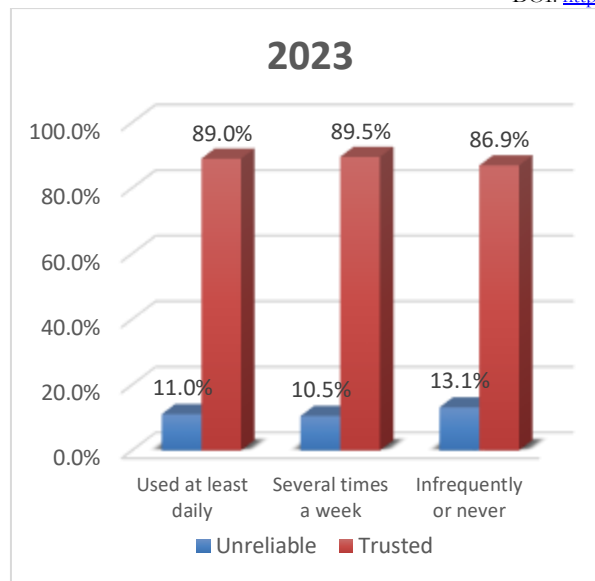
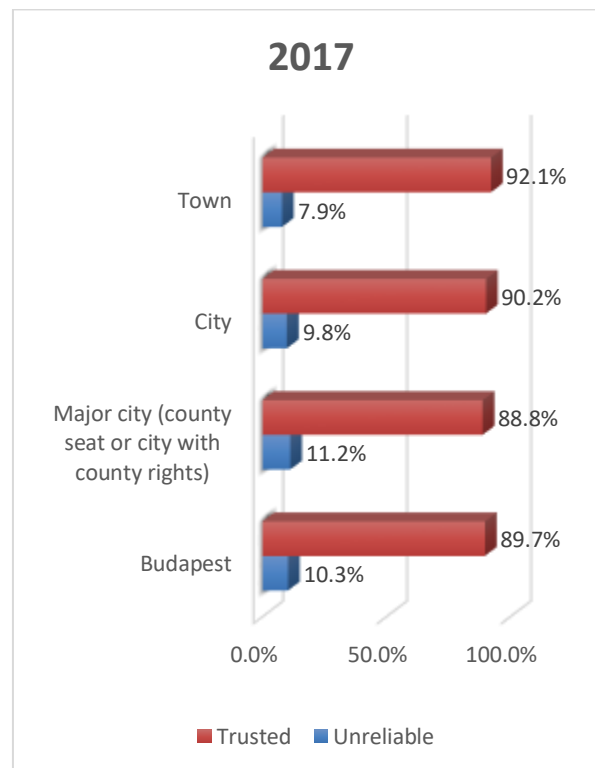


Figure 19. Changes In Confidence Levels in Local Governments Between 2017 And 2023, As A Function of Internet Usage Frequency

Source: Own Editing

Three out of the four categories of municipalities show a trend in the same direction: municipalities, cities and Budapest show a worsening trend, while large cities show a 1.7% improvement in confidence levels in local government.



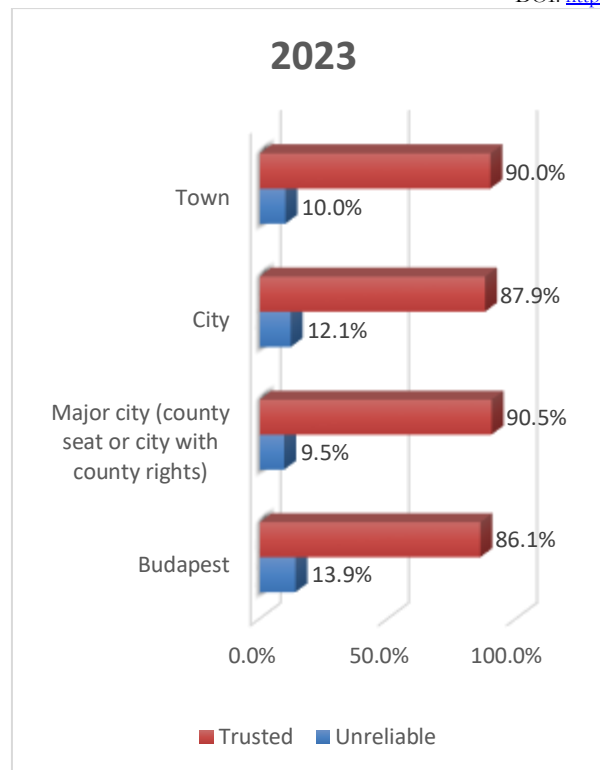


Figure 20. Changes In Confidence Levels in Local Governments Between 2017 And 2023, By Type of Municipality

Source: own editing

Dividing the respondents' household income into three groups and looking at the two points in time, between 2017 and 2023, the confidence of low-income earners increased, while that of middle- and high-income earners decreased, the former by the largest amount, 4.0 percent.

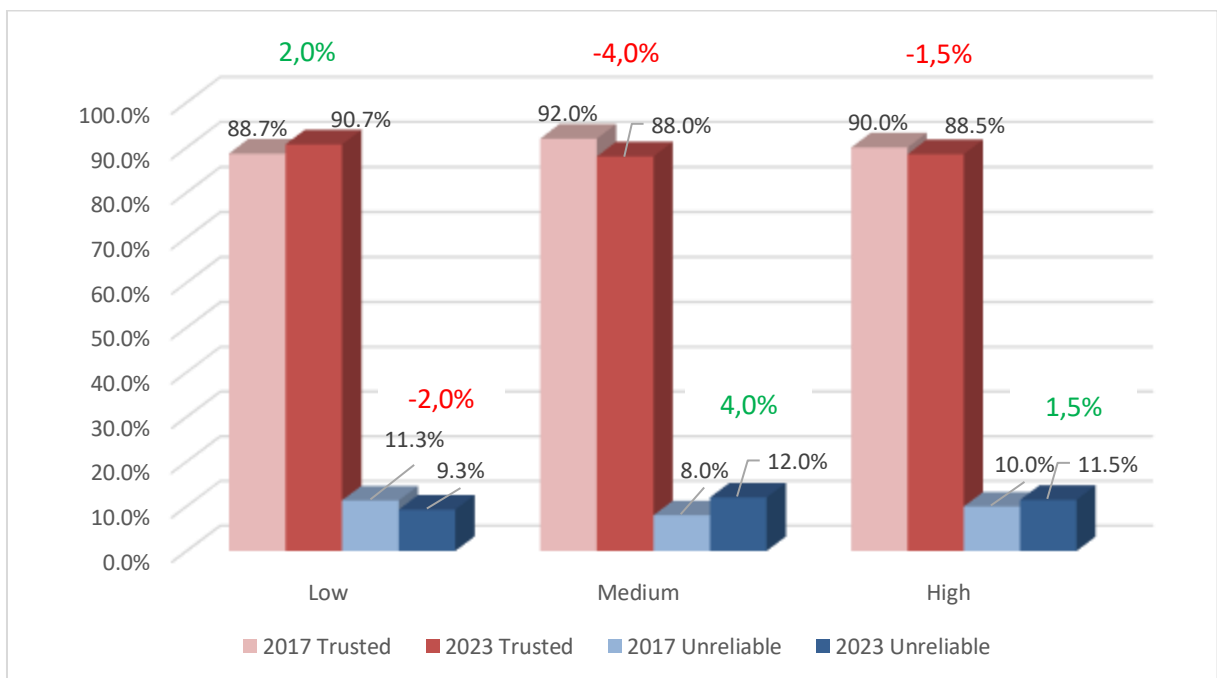


Figure 21. Changes In Confidence Levels in Local Government, 2017-2023, As A Function of Household Income

Source: Own Editing

Conclusions

The results of former measurements also show a slowly declining confidence in national governments, e.g. the Gallup World Poll found an average 40 % points decrease between 2007 and 2012. And among the institutions, the global average trust in national governments was the lowest (40 %), followed by the judicial institutions (51 %), then the educational ones (66 %), while public health care (71 %) and police (72 %) stood for the relatively strongest institutions See LONTI (2014).

Overall, in this survey, the perception of all types of institutions has worsened minimally (between 1-2.5% points, on the national average) over the past six years. The deterioration has not been monotonically decreasing, as the 2020 measurements showed a temporary increase during the COVID-19 period. By the 2023 measurements, the downward trend had resumed, nationally. However, significant local deviations from the national average are apparent. Their direction and magnitude are quite variable.

For the types of institutions examined, there are counties where the perception of all institutions shows a consistent and spectacular improvement (Nógrád, Tolna, Csongrád-Csanád, Békés, Fejér, Komárom-Esztergom, Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok), while there are areas with a deteriorating trend in terms of trust (Budapest and Pest County, furthermore Bács-Kiskun, Győr-Moson-Sopron, Hajdú-Bihar, Veszprém, and Zala Counties).

The displacement trends are even more colourful when looking at change by the four dimensions examined. Although, from a distance, the level of trust in institutions is relatively high (as the level of distrust ranges between 10 and 15%), it appears that the deterioration is concentrated in the under-60s, including the 40-59 age group. This is also where the highest levels of mistrust are found in 2023. It can also be seen that the highest level of trust among the three groups of institutions studied is in government offices, followed by local governments, then the Government Office, NTCA, Consumer Protection, Land Registry.

The most pronounced downward shifts by educational attainment are seen among the lowest and highest educated for all types of institutions. The decrease in confidence is not significant for those with secondary education. However, among those with tertiary education, we also see some types of institutions (e.g. government offices) where the share of distrust has doubled.

The frequency of internet use is associated with a lower level of distrust in local government and government offices. The less frequently someone uses the internet in this area, the more likely they are to distrust public authorities. However, the trend is the opposite for the quartet of Government Office, NTCA, Consumer Protection, Land Registry, which may be due to the dysfunctionality of the internet services of these institutions, which may have given negative feedback to frequent internet users.

When broken down by the type of municipality, respondents in Budapest reported a loss of confidence in all types of institutions. For government offices, the rate was outstanding, almost doubling. Respondents from municipalities only showed a worsening trend for government offices, while respondents from county seats reported a stagnating trend, with some (e.g. for municipalities) showing an upward trend.

When examined by household income, the confidence of respondents in the middle-income category decreased for all types of institutions. Low-income respondents' confidence increased slightly for local government and other offices. Among those in the high-income group, there was a small increase in confidence in other agencies.

These findings also provide a good indication of the types of institutions and areas where intervention is needed to reverse a negative trend. The direction and extent of the shifts described here will determine the urgency of intervention.

Interpretation of the Study in International Context

Our research and findings described above harmonize with the findings of other researches from South America, Africa and Asia respectively.

The relationship between institutional trust and organizational performance is explored by ESAU (2016). The drivers of the development of trust in context of public institutions in emerging democracies are focused on in a research regarding the leading municipality of South Africa, Cape Town. It has been pointed out that institutional trust and organizational performance are closely linked via organizational structuring and institutional capacity development that seem to be the most relevant factors for generating institutional trust.

Population can be expected to participate in the resolution of collective social problems. Governments, however, can convince citizens to feel motivated in contributing to public health management e.g. if there is a relatively strong trust in the central administration, public institutions i.e. government. There is a study analyzing the impact of trust in government on the behaviour of the local population in connection to the adoption of social isolation at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, South America (da SILVA, 2021). The findings show that trust in government positively affects people's behaviour in social isolation. Therefore the citizens' trust in government can be considered as an effective contribution to combat social crises. Gender, education, and occupation, income and the location of the homes are also found to be associated with the adoption of social isolation and trust in government. It is also found that people living in the high-risk group for epidemics are more likely to comply with restrictions and trust the government. However, this phenomenon is lasting as long as people get tested positive or show the symptoms of the disease, because after that their attitude changes, insofar as they comply with restrictions less effectively and trust the government less. This reflects the very psychological roots of trust in government and in general.

When considering the trust in government in times of social tensions or crises, we have to pay attention to another interesting research conducted in Bangladesh, Asia (HOSSAIN, 2022). There are three basic factors in managing pandemic situation: the trust in government, the sources of information, and the government actions. The majority of the local population have low trust in government and a low confidence in government actions. There is a key role of information, however. In case of Bangladesh in 2020 foreign media and foreign academic journals were the most trusted sources of information. At the same time the trust in the domestic health care administration was very low. The research findings showed that occupation and income during the pandemic, and the privately obtained information influenced the degree of trust in government. The research findings suggest that to improve trust and have an efficient social response in time of crises the governments ought to employ such an information dissemination way where there are multifaceted, reliable information channels in order to make people understand the reasons and rationality behind each government action. This policy may prove to be useful in the communication of every government action though.

Acknowledgement

Project No. TKP2021-NKTA-51 has been implemented with the support provided by the Ministry of Innovation and Technology of Hungary from the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund, financed under the TKP2021-NKTA funding scheme.

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