

An explorative comparison study on policy, messages in the media, and trust in The Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium throughout the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract:

The public's trust in the government is required to ensure the compliance of measures that include behavioral responses, especially during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, citizens' trust for The Netherlands, Belgium and Germany throughout different phases of the pandemic will be researched using Eggers et al.'s (2021) model for building trust in the government. This explorative and comparative analysis of a variety of datasets provides a high-level snapshot overview of the differences between the countries' approaches to cushion the social, financial and health issues due to the pandemic. The research question for this study is 'How do policies, measures and trust signals in the media relate to citizens' trust in Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands throughout different phases of the pandemic?'. Trust signals in the media are studied by a content analysis of the heads of the states' press conferences throughout the pandemic to provide more insight into the narratives from the government.

The research provides provisional conclusions that throughout the pandemic, the countries remained around the same level of trust. The Netherlands and Germany saw a comparable trend in trust: the highest levels of trust pre-pandemic, and a decline in trust throughout the pandemic. Additionally, from the measures, we found no relationship between the timing or strictness of the measures and trust. Regarding policies, it was also noticeable that larger spending and a larger variety of policies do not relate to trust. Lastly, no relationship was found between the trust signals in speech and citizens' trust in the government.

The findings confirm and further illustrate the complexity of trust. For further research, we suggest studying the relationship between trust and the governmental approach through surveys and quantitative data. Additionally, it is recommended to research contextual factors such as social media.

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Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of 2019 produced an unprecedented economic, health and social crisis (Bel et al., 2021). The rapid spread of the virus demanded countries to enforce measures to decrease the spread of the virus. Citizens turned to their government to cushion the social, economic and health consequences of the virus (Bel et al., 2021). This includes measures such as social distancing, lockdowns, mask-wearing, and the closing of shops and restaurants. These measures were disruptive to both professional and personal environments; businesses became under threat, workers became at risk and people were increasingly dealing with loneliness and social stress (Syed et al., 2021). Governments aimed to reduce the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic through policies providing income support and broader expenditure measures (Mintrom & O'Connor, 2020).

In this paper, when mentioning 'policies' these are related to the policies put in place to cushion the economic and social effects of the pandemic. Examples of these policies are policies to support businesses to stay afloat, protection of workers and programs to prevent social hardship. When 'measures' are mentioned, these refer to the health measures put in place to lower the spread of the virus. For example, social distancing, the closing of shops, quarantining, etc.

Even though countries implemented restrictive measures at the beginning of the pandemic, the timing and composition of the measures differed. Even within relatively similar EU countries (Toshkov, Carroll & Yesilkagit, 2021). On the other hand, governments were also sharing information, and coordinating their responses (Schnabel & Hegele, 2021). For the measures to be effective, a high level of support and compliance from the public is needed (Hollingsworth, Klinkenberg, Heesterbeek & Anderson, 2011). Studies suggest that the public's trust in the government is necessary for the compliance with measures that include behavioral responses (Brezzi, González & Prats, 2020; Chanley, Rudolph & Rahn, 2000; Shanka & Menebo, 2022). Therefore, better insight into the relationship between trust in the government and governmental actions is of importance.

Problem description, importance, and focus

Studying trust in the government during the COVID-19 pandemic is complex. Because, on the one hand, trust is a belief that is influenced by many different factors. On the other hand, the COVID-

19 pandemic is a unique phenomenon which puts people, countries, and businesses in situations they have not been in before. Additionally, remarkable about this pandemic is that there was also an “infodemic” (Bel et al., 2021). This refers to the large amount of misinformation that has spread during this time. Information that is spread regarding the pandemic and the COVID-19 virus affects on the governments’ abilities to mitigate the spread of the virus (Melki et al., 2020).

The focus of this paper will be on The Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. These countries are in many ways similar, all three of them are western EU countries. However, regardless of their similarities, there are also differences between the countries concerning trust, policies, and measures. Statistics have shown that in Belgium trust is relatively low compared to The Netherlands and Germany ("Living, working and COVID-19 data", 2022). Noteworthy about Germany is that they have implemented a larger number of policies for financial support compared to the other countries. Their COVID-19 measures were relatively strict, and compared to Belgium and The Netherlands, there were no shortages of hospital beds in Germany (Engler et al.,2021).

Noticeable about the Dutch approach is the ‘intelligent lockdown’. This became a catchphrase in the government’s communication, with other terms such as ‘social distancing’ and ‘the new normal’ (de Haas, Faber & Hamersma, 2020). This approach was based on individual responsibility, in contrast to the majority of European countries, the Dutch government relied mostly on moral pressure to its citizens to stay at home.

This study aims to provide a high-level snapshot of the differences between the countries in their approach. This approach will be studied by comparing the governments’ policies, measures, and messages in the media to citizen’s trust in their government. These are factors are complex, and thus, the results will be general and provisional. This exploratory research aims to find trends in the studied factors throughout three different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic for each of the three countries. The first phase is the first lockdown, the second phase is the first summer following when society was gradually reopening, and the third phase is the beginning of 2021; a time of various strains of the virus and the beginning of vaccinations.

Overview of existing literature

To obtain a better view of the existing literature, we will first provide an overview of the literature about the relationship between governmental trust and messages in the media. The included bodies of research were primarily conducted outside of the COVID-19 pandemic context. Then, existing

literature regarding these topics will be discussed for each of the three countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, existing comparative research on the same topics will be provided.

Existing research independently of COVID-19

Narratives are of great importance in the shaping of the public's expectations and fears (Narlikar & Sottilotta, 2021). This is because the narratives and information a person receives influences their behaviors and attitudes (Lee, 2003). Notably, Rainey (1997) mentions that the attitude regarding trust in the government is often based on misinformation, they argue that incorrect information can reinforce existing biases about the government. Research from Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003) shows that sociopolitical factors can influence trust in the government. This includes media, economic climate, expectations and public perceptions. This trust is necessary for democratic countries since they rely on citizens to operate effectively (Grimes, 2006).

Research has shown that trust in the government relates to government performance, as well as public relations (Yang and Holzer, 2006; Uslaner and Brown, 2005). Thomas (1998), argues that a citizen's trust in the government is shaped by their policy expectations. Other studies also suggest that a decline in trust is tied to lower citizen satisfaction and poor government performance (Van Ryzin, 2007; Welch & Moon 2005).

The Netherlands

Research from a Dutch survey (Schraff, 2020) at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that strict measures, such as a lockdown, did not influence citizen's trust. Seemingly, as the number of infections increased, political trust also increased. This research suggests that scientific assumptions about determinants of political trust become less relevant during a crisis such as the pandemic. However, according to Schraff (2020), the shift in trust is not driven by the lockdown or specific measures, but rather by the intensity of the crisis. These findings are in accordance with Groeniger et al.'s (2021) longitudinal study of Dutch households. This study showed that during a time of strict measures trust in public institutions increased. Additionally, the study suggests that citizens appreciate strict measures during an acute time of crisis.

According to Kuiper et al. (2020), the Dutch government focused on morals and self-discipline when implementing measures, rather than repression. They studied data from an online survey which showed that compliance of Dutch citizens was high and that the government's approached worked as hoped. Chambon et al. (2021) argue that perceived efficacy and support for

the measures were crucial in shaping public attitudes towards the government during the COVID-19 crisis.

Belgium

Research from Belgium regarding trust in the government and the government's approach is limited compared to The Netherlands and Germany. However, notable about Belgium's situation during the COVID-19 crisis is that the country was also experiencing a political crisis. Namely, the Belgian government was unable to form a new federal government. Popelier (2020) shows that this resulted in a decreased amount of trust in the government. Furthermore, the government's communication during this time was inefficient due to the political crisis, which contributed to the decline in trust. Since Belgium's political system is characterised as dual federalism, meaning that governance is divided between the federal and state level, the government struggled to coordinate actions. (Popelier, 2020). This was especially an issue after the first phase of the pandemic.

Germany

Research on data from the German National Education Panel Study (Britmann, 2021) showed that life satisfaction decreased at the beginning of the pandemic, which negatively influenced trust in the government. The data found that individuals with low trust in the government before the pandemic had a stronger decrease in trust compared to people with high trust pre-pandemic. A study on de beliefs towards the COVID-19 measures in Germany (Haan et al., 2022), showed that the communication of the political leaders affected the expectations of the public. Specifically, they found that when political leaders gave televised press conferences, people changed their expectations of the measures. Namely, citizens usually appeared more accepting of the extension of the measures (Haan et al., 2022).

In contrast to Belgium, Germany's decentralized, the federal system did not seem to negatively influence their ability to manage the COVID-19 crisis (Hattke & Martin, 2020). In Germany, municipalities are independent of the governments in matters including crisis management and healthcare. Nonetheless, successful collective action during the COVID-19 crisis resulted in the prevention of overwhelming the country's healthcare system (Hattke & Martin, 2020).

Theoretical framework

Before explaining the theoretical frameworks, which will be used as a base for this research, the notion of trust will be discussed first. Trust is a phenomenon that is present in all relationships. The phenomenon is perceptual, meaning that it is a matter of personal feelings (Renjen, 2020). Regarding trust in the government from a citizen's perspective, this paper adopts the definition "Confidence in the actions of a government to do what is right and perceived fair" (Easton, 1979).

Choi et al. (2012) demonstrate how policies relate to citizens' trust in the government in their model of Antecedents and Consequences of Public Trust in Government. This is an extensive model illustrating how the nature of the government's policies influences the public's trust. The model was created by combining various conclusions from the literature on the relationship between citizens and the government. According to this model, governmental factors that relate to trust are competency, responsiveness, bureaucratic policies, ethics, consistency and transparency. This model also includes contextual factors, which are political ideology, social capital and media influence.

In Eggers et al.'s (2021) model for building trust in the government, there are two foundational attributes to build and sustain trust: competence and good intent. Competence is the ability to deliver the promise, whereas intent refers to the meaning behind the actions. It is important to note that good intent and competence are not mutually exclusive factors, but rather relate to each other symmetrically. According to this model, competence and intent can be shown through four trust signals which have been proven to contribute to trust in the government. Competence includes the trust signals capability and reliability, and intent includes humanity and transparency.

In this model, capability refers to the citizen's belief that the government can effectively meet their expectations. Examples of this trust signal pertain to ensuring that public employees are competent, ensuring that services are accessible and that the programs are of good quality. Reliability can be shown by the government consistently showing its capability. Thus, by consistently delivering good-quality services and keeping to promises. Humanity is about the government showing that they care for the citizen's experience. This can be done by showing empathy, valuing the broader good of society, and respecting people regardless of background.

Lastly, transparency can be indicated by openly sharing information and motives accurately and honestly.

Both S. Choi et al. (2012) and Eggers et al.'s (2021) models agree on several levels. Whilst divided differently, both models use trust signals that can fall under competence and intent. The difference is that S. Choi et al.'s (2012) model of Antecedents and Consequences of Public Trust also includes contextual factors.

In this thesis, W. Egger et al.'s (2021) model on building trust will be used as a base for studying which trust signals the governments demonstrate in their speeches. Additionally, to provide further context on the varying governmental approaches, a clear overview of the implemented measures and policies will be provided.

Interdisciplinarity

The concept of trust is complex and draws on several disciplines. For this study, different approaches will be used. Governmental trust is a psychological factor that is influenced by many measurable and immeasurable factors. By studying the way governments demonstrate trust signals in speech, a sociological and political contextual approach is developed. The sociological approach is provided by researching how the pandemic and actions of the government relating to citizen's trust in the government. A political context is added by studying the differences in the messages political leaders demonstrate towards the citizens. Additionally, a policy approach is derived by studying the differences in measures and policies.

Relevance

From the literature review, we can see that there is limited information about the messages governments' put out to their citizens regarding the pandemic. These messages are important to study, as citizens were turning to their governments for answers and guidance. Additionally, with regard to the scientific relevance, this paper will contribute to the scientific field by studying how assumed relationships may change due to a crisis. The uniqueness of the COVID-19 pandemic questions assumptions in scientific work regarding policies and trust (Devine et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has vastly changed society. For example, working, shopping and social life have fundamentally changed due to the virus.

This research also has implications for the policy field as it provides an overview of the difference between these countries. This can increase policymakers' knowledge about what other countries are doing, to possibly learn from. For policymakers, trust from the public is of great importance due to its relationship with the compliance of health measures.

Research question

For this research, trends in trust, policies, measures and trust signals in the media will be researched. The research question is: 'How do policies, measures and trust signals in the media relate to citizens' trust in Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands throughout different phases of the pandemic?'. Additionally, the following sub-questions will be researched: 'How does trust in the government relate to the trust signals in the media?' and 'How do the different types of policies and measures relate to trust in the government?'.

We expect to find trends between the level of trust in government, the trust signals in the media, and the implemented policies and measures. Specifically, it is expected that countries that show more trust signals in the media have higher levels of trust. Additionally, we expect to find a trend between the types of policies and measures that are implemented, and the level of trust. It is expected that countries that have quickly implemented strict measures at the beginning of the pandemic experienced higher trust. Lastly, we assume that countries with larger expenses and a greater variety of policies for financial and social support have higher levels of trust.

Methods

Design

This research is a comparative analysis of a variety of existing data sets. The exploratory research intends to provide further insights into the relationship between governments' policies, measures and messages in the media. The aim is to find whether there are notable differences, similarities and shifts in these factors throughout the phases for Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Procedures

Through mixed methods, policies, measures, trust and trust signals in the media will be studied throughout three phases of the pandemic for each of the countries. The first phase is the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This period began at the start of February until the end of April 2020.

The second phase lasted from June to August 2020, which was the time where measures were gradually lifted. Lastly, the third phase was indicative of various strains of the virus and the beginning of vaccination is from January to March 2021.

Data from Eurofound will be used to provide an overview of the policies put in place for the three countries (“Eurofound COVID-19 EU Policy Watch”, 2022). The Policy Watch contains information about the responses of the government and social partners to cushion the social and economic impact of the pandemic. The policies are divided into categories such as “Supporting businesses to stay afloat”, “Reorientation of business activities”, and “Measures to prevent social hardship”. Additionally, information from the International Monetary Fund (“Policy Tracker”, 2021) on government spending as a percentage of the countries’ GDP will be demonstrated to provide further context (“Fiscal Monitor Database of Country Fiscal Measures in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic”, 2021). This data is from the beginning of the pandemic to September 2021, and thus not sectioned throughout the three phases.

Data on country response measures to COVID-19 from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (“Data on country response measures to COVID-19”, 2022) will be used to produce an overview of the countries’ implemented measures. This is to provide further background on the measures citizens had to obey throughout the three phases. Examples of measures are the closing of schools, masks obligations, and a ban on events. Stay-at-home measures are regarded as relatively strict, and partial measures are relatively less strict.

Citizen’s trust in the government will be researched by using several descriptive statistics. For all three countries, this consists of data from Eurofound (“Democracy and trust during COVID-19”, 2022), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (“Government at a Glance”, 2022), and the Eurobarometer (“Eurobarometer”, 2022). All data is from large-scale surveys that measure trust in the government for each of the three countries and surveyed throughout different phases of the pandemic. Some results include data from a phase pre-COVID, for further context to the situation pre-pandemic. Lastly, for Germany and The Netherlands, other longitudinal surveys on trust in the government are added to the results. No relevant data was available for Belgium. For The Netherlands, this is data from the RIVM (“Communicatie en vertrouwen”, 2022) and for Germany from the Statista Research Department (“Trust in German

government during COVID-19 2020-2021 | Statista", 2022). This information will be used to contribute to a more extensive examination of the changes in trust in the government.

To acquire more information about the messages the governments’ put out in their media, press conferences from the heads of the states throughout the three phases will be analyzed. This will be done using content analysis. Eggers et al.’s (2021) model for building trust in government will serve as a base to find which trust signals are mentioned by the heads of the state in the press conferences. See figure 1 for Eggers et al.’s (2021) model with the trust signals, including examples of how the trust signals can be demonstrated.

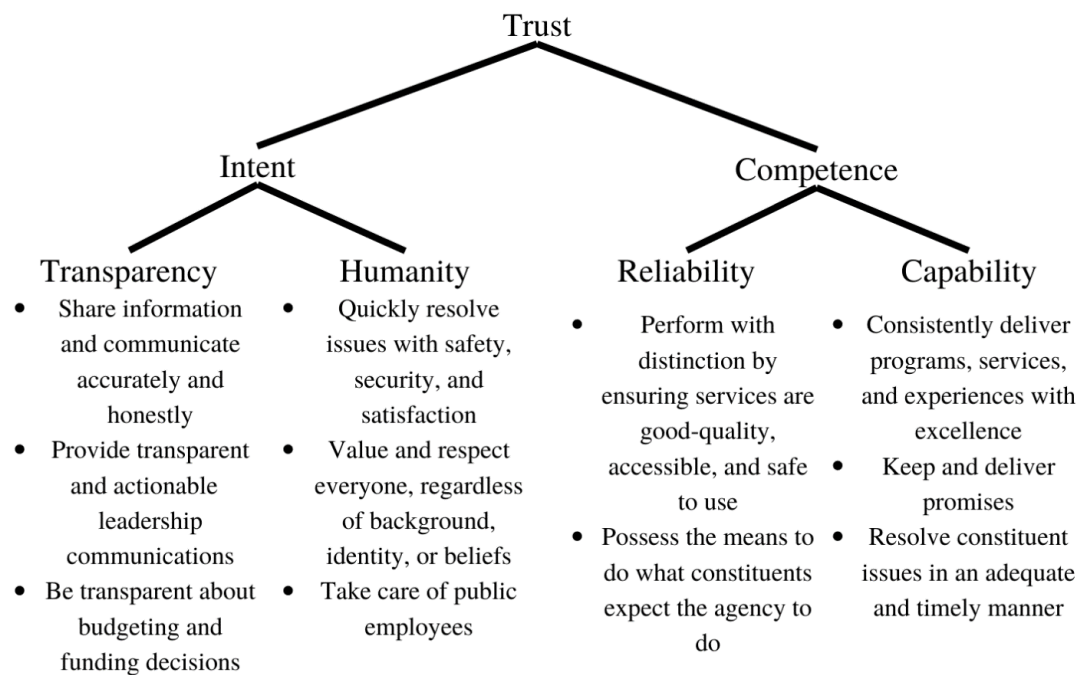


Figure 1: Eggers et al. (2021) model for building trust in the government

The content analysis showed that some of the trust signals were differently present in the press conference speeches than presented in the model. Therefore, some slight adoptions were made to the model. See figure 2 for the adopted model and examples of how the trust signals were demonstrated in the press conferences. In figure 2 capability and reliability are combined in one trust signal, as these factors are difficult to distinguish in speeches. Lastly, from the analysis, we found that besides showing reliability and capability, the heads of state also demonstrated the opposite. Therefore, this trust signal is divided into ‘positive’, where they show the trust signals, and ‘negative’, where they show their inability regarding competence.

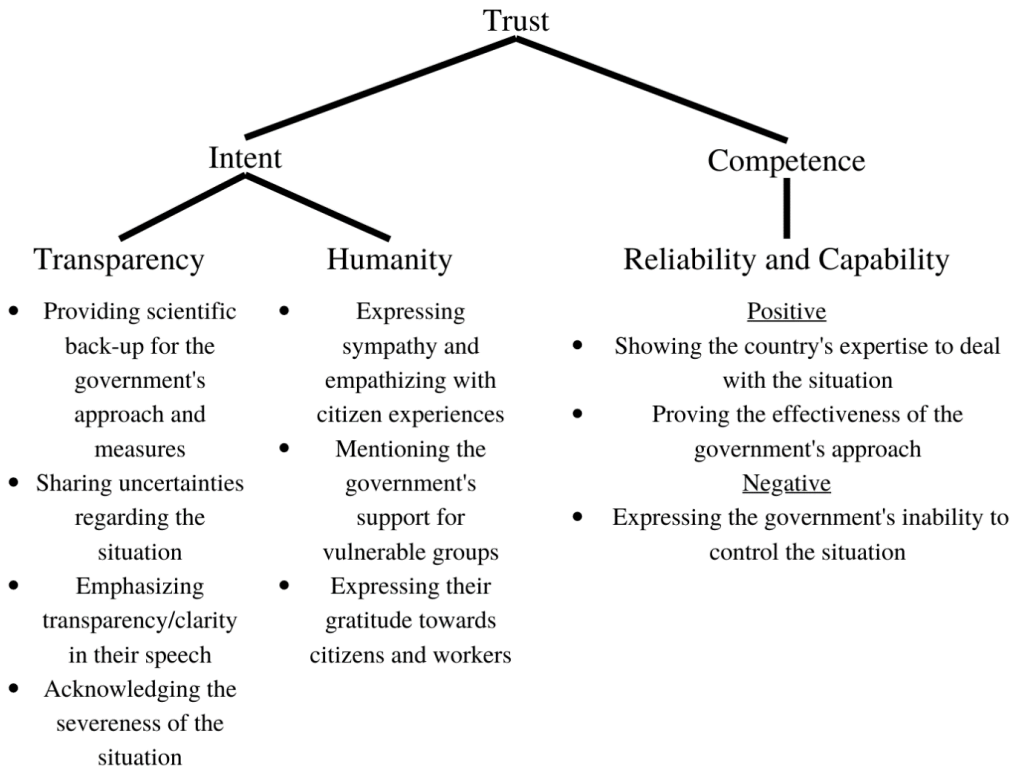


Figure 2: An adapted model for building trust from content analysis

Conceptualization and operationalization

See Appendix A for an overview of the quotation codes and the associated references.

Humanity

Expressing sympathy and empathizing with citizen experiences

This relates to when the speaker expresses sympathy for the consequences of the virus and the measures. This can be shown by expressing compassion towards people experiencing negative consequences due to the virus, for example, Rutte *At the beginning of this speech, I would like to express my condolences to the families of those who have since died from the virus. I wish everyone who is in the hospital or is recovering at home a speedy recovery and strength* (NL-P1). We have also found that the speakers demonstrate sympathy by relating to the negative experiences citizens encounter due to the pandemic. For example, Merkel during the first phase of the pandemic, *Millions of you cannot go to work, your children cannot go to school or kindergarten, theatres and cinemas and shops are closed, and, perhaps what is most difficult, we all miss social encounters*

that we otherwise take for granted. Of course, each of us has many questions and concerns in a situation like this, about the days ahead (GE-P1).

Mentioning the government's support for vulnerable groups in society

Humanity can also be shown by acknowledging the struggles vulnerable groups have to deal with during the pandemic. This factor relates to when the speaker explicitly mentions sympathy, support, or acknowledgement towards vulnerable groups, which includes children, the elderly, refugees, etc. Wilmès does this during the first phase of the pandemic by saying *As you can see, many decisions are also made in the areas of mobility, asylum and support for the most vulnerable people (BE-P1).*

Expressing their gratitude towards citizens and workers

In their speeches, the heads of the country at times express their gratitude, this shows that they recognize the value of their citizens and workers during the pandemic. Gratitude is often clearly indicated by the speaker, such as by Merkel in the second phase of the pandemic: *I can only thank once again from the bottom of my heart for the support of the vast majority of citizens. We know that this virus is an impertinence for all of us (GE-P2).* Rutte recognizes the value of the citizens by saying *And I can't say it often enough: we did that together, we achieved that together (NL-P2)* during the second phase of the pandemic.

Transparency

Providing scientific backup for the government's approach and measures

Providing scientific back-up for the government's approach provides citizens with more insight into why certain choices are being made. Sometimes speakers show that their choices are scientifically supported by naming the people that have been involved in creating the approach, instead of explaining the science behind it. Rutte provides scientific backup in the third phase of the pandemic by saying *I'm not going to overwhelm you with numbers, but I can't help mentioning 3 of them. 1: At the moment, two-thirds of all new infections in our country are of the British type. 2: The latest scientific insights are that the British variant is about one and a half times more contagious than the classic, the old variant. And 3: the last known R-number of the old variant is about 0.85, which means that the virus is pushed back. But the last known R-number of the British variant is almost 1.3, which means that the number of infections is doubling every week (NL-P3).*

Wilmès shows that the government's approach is scientifically supported in the second phase of

the pandemic: *Since the start of the covid crisis, we have been working closely with health experts. Their recommendations are important guidelines for us, they guide us in our decision-making* (BE-P2).

Sharing uncertainties regarding the situation

This relates to the speaker admitting that there are insecurities or uncertainties about the measures and the situation in the country. This can be due to a lack of information about the virus, or uncertainty about the effect of the measures. An example of a speaker that mentioned this is Rutte in his speech at the beginning of the pandemic: *Because we all crave certainty. Towards a clear plan. Then you can do this again, then you can do that again. But the reality is that 100% certainty cannot be given, as much as we would like to* (NL-P1).

Emphasizing transparency in their speech

At times, speakers have explicitly mentioned that they are being transparent, or that they try to share information as clear as possible. For example, Rutte during the first phase of the pandemic, *As a government, we want to be as clear as possible about this, but also as honest as possible. Because we all crave certainty* (NL-P1). Around the same time during the pandemic, Merkel says *This is part of what open democracy is about: that we make political decisions transparent and explain them. That we justify and communicate our actions as best we can, so that people are able to understand them* (GE-P1).

Acknowledging the severeness of the situation

This is when the speaker mentions the problems that have been caused by the pandemic or puts emphasis on the seriousness of the situation. An example of this is Merkel in the third phase of the pandemic, she acknowledges the severeness of the situation by saying, *Even so, we must take the danger posed by this mutation very seriously; At least that's what I can only recommend to all of us* (GE-P3).

Reliability and Capability

Showing the country's expertise to deal with the situation

This factor corresponds with providing scientific backup, however, the difference is that this factor focuses on when the speaker demonstrates that the country has the expertise and resources to deal with the threats COVID-19 poses. Merkel shows this in the second phase of the pandemic by saying

This was only possible because we have a very strong health system across the whole of our country (GE-P2).

Proving the effectiveness of the government's approach

Proving the effectiveness of the government's approach relates to speech where the speaker reflects on the measures that have been taken, and how these have been successful. This relates to situations where the speaker says that measures have shown to work and the situation is improving. In the third phase of the pandemic de Croo says *We have delivered that performance while in our country we try to keep schools open as much as possible and as large a part of the companies as possible continue to work, even if it is with mandatory homework. In many countries, even that is not possible (BE-P3)*. Another example is Merkel in the third phase saying, *This shows that the tough cuts that people in Germany have had to take for weeks are beginning to pay off, and it basically shows that the effort is worth it (GE-P3)*.

Expressing the government's inability to control the situation

This factor has a negative effect on reliability and capability. It relates to speech where the speaker admits that the government is struggling to control the situation, is unsure about the effectiveness of their approach, or is unable to provide citizens with information. Examples of this are Merkel *In addition, we are currently struggling with the fact that all our efforts against the virus cannot ignore one danger. A danger threatens our efforts, and we see that danger a little clearer today than we did at the beginning of the year (GE-P3)*, and Rutte *When we made the decision on the curfew, we already knew that we couldn't say today how much the curfew will affect the virus (NL-P3)*, in the third phase of the pandemic.

Data analysis approaches

The descriptive statistics will be divided by country and phase of the pandemic. The course of governmental trust will be compared to the findings of trust signals in the media, measures, and policies.

Consideration of ethical aspects

When analyzing the results of the information about trust in the government, messages in the media, and implemented policies and measures it is important to remain aware of the confirmation bias. The theoretical framework and literature review before the study, results in certain expectations. Researchers can tend to search for results that confirm their theoretical framework and

expectations. To prevent this, awareness is needed to avoid this, as it is necessary for the validity of the research.

Furthermore, because of the explorative nature of the research, it is important to be transparent about the procedures. Lastly, it is important to be aware of interpretation and unwarranted conclusions, this research has limited information and only presents a small part of the problem. Therefore, the findings of this research will be descriptive about which trends can be reported, rather than conclusive about relationships.

Results

Trust in the government

See Appendix B for an overview of the data on citizen's trust in the pandemic throughout the three phases for The Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany.

The Netherlands

The overview of data regarding trust suggests a decline in trust throughout the three phases of the pandemic. Remarkable is that the data from the Eurobarometer and the OECD both demonstrate that citizen's trust before the pandemic is lower than during the third phase of the pandemic. Compared to Germany and Belgium, The Netherlands demonstrates the highest level of citizen's trust in the government.

Germany

The trend from Germany shows to correspond with the trend in The Netherlands. The data suggest a decline over time during the pandemic, however, comparing pre-pandemic to the third phase trust has increased.

Belgium

The datasets show that Belgium has the lowest level of citizen's trust in the government. However, the datasets do not correspond in the direction of change in trust. Eurofound demonstrates a decline throughout the pandemic, while the Eurobarometer shows an increase in people that tend to trust their government. In contrast to the Eurobarometer, the OECD shows a decline in trust when comparing pre-pandemic to the third phase.

Messages in the media: Trust signals in speech

The Netherlands

In the speech in the first phase of the pandemic, humanity is a very common trust signal. Rutte expresses sympathy to people that have dealt with deaths and relates to feelings of uncertainty. *Many people will recognize the feeling that we have been on a roller coaster in recent weeks that seems to be getting faster and faster. You wonder: is this really happening? Because the measures taken here and elsewhere are unprecedented for countries in peace* (NL-P1). He also expresses his gratitude to people following the measures and essential workers. In the second phase, humanity is noticeably less present, here he only shortly mentions the sacrifices people had to make and expresses his gratitude to everyone. During the third phase, empathy is shown towards retailers and consumers. He also demonstrates his care for children, and the people working with them.

Regarding transparency, Rutte mentions in the first phase that experts are used to make decisions regarding measures. He admits that he is unsure about the duration of the measures and acknowledges that a large part of the citizens will be infected by the virus. According to him, it can take up to months, or even longer, until group immunity is achieved. In this speech, Rutte does not acknowledge the severeness of the situation. During the speech in the third phase of the pandemic, factors regarding transparency are limited. He does shortly emphasize transparency, by saying *As a government, we want to be as clear as possible about this, but also as honest as possible. Because we all crave certainty. Towards a clear plan* (NL-P3). He mentions *We are in an exciting and also uncertain phase of the corona crisis* (NL-P3) because the number of cases is declining, but a variant of the virus is emerging that spreads quickly.

Concerning to the factors for reliability and capability, Rutte demonstrates in the first phase of the pandemic the experts that are working at the RIVM. Nothing is mentioned about the effectiveness of the country's approach or its inability to control the situation. During the second phase, effectiveness is mentioned, he says *Without all the measures, without that responsible behavior from all of us, we would have been estimated to have had about 135,000 hospital admissions and more than 35,000 corona patients in intensive care. Places that we could never or never have achieved, peaks that we could never have coped with, numbers that would have really disrupted our country socially, economically and socially* (NL-P2). During this phase, Rutte does not express the government's inability to control the situation. This is contrasting with the third

phase, as he says *But the reality is that 100% certainty cannot be given, no matter how much we would like to* (NL-P3), and *When we decided on the curfew, we already knew that we couldn't say today to what extent the curfew will affect the virus* (NL-P3).

Germany

Merkel shows most of the factors regarding humanity in the first phase of the pandemic, and this decreases throughout the phases. In the first phase of the pandemic, empathy is shown by saying *These are not just abstract numbers in statistics, but this is about a father or grandfather, a mother or grandmother, a partner – this is about people. And we are a community in which each life and each person counts* (GE-P1) and *I know that this is asking a great deal of us. Especially when times are hard, we want to be close to one another. We show affection by staying close, and by reaching out to each other* (GE-P1). Merkel also dedicated a large part of her speech to showing gratitude to people working in healthcare and essential workers. During the second phase, humanity is almost only shown by mentioning the government's support for vulnerable groups in society. Merkel says *The pandemic is affecting people very unequally. It makes entire sections of the population particularly vulnerable. I am thinking of older people, those in need of care and their relatives, families with children in cramped living conditions, students whose part-time job is no longer available, job seekers who are now more numerous and who are having a harder time, small business owners who are struggling for their professional existence fear, and to artists. We have to pay special attention to all of them. We have to keep trying to support them and make them offers* (GE-P2). In the third phase, Merkel shows empathy in a comparable way as during the first phase, saying *These aren't just numbers. These are people who died in loneliness. These are fates. These are families who mourn them. We have to keep reminding ourselves of that as well* (GE-P3). During this phase she also thanks the majority of the virus for their support and patience.

Regarding transparency, it is noticeable that Merkel did not provide scientific backup for the government's approach throughout the three phases. While she does mention that she has been talking to experts, it is unclear how the experts contribute to the government's approach. She does acknowledge the severeness of the situation through all three phases. In the first phase, she says *Things are already very difficult for the economy, for major companies, and also for small businesses, for shops, restaurants and freelancers. Things will get even more difficult in the weeks to come* (GE-P1), the second phase *Yes, you have to reckon with the fact that some things will be*

even more difficult in the coming months than they are now in the summer (GE-P2), and the third phase *We are in a very difficult phase of the pandemic* (GE-P3).

Reliability and capability are mostly shown by Merkel by mentioning the country's expertise to deal with the situation. In the first two phases, she puts a clear emphasis on their healthcare systems and experts. In the first phase, she says *Germany has an excellent healthcare system, perhaps one of the best in the world. We can take solace in this* (GE-P1), and the second *This was only possible because we have a very strong health system across the whole of our country* (GE-P2). In the first phase, she expresses the government's inability to control the situation by saying that the effectiveness depends on the behavior of citizens. During the second phase, this factor is not mentioned, and in the third phase, she says *In addition, we are currently struggling with the fact that all our efforts against the virus cannot ignore one danger. A danger threatens our efforts, and we see that danger a little clearer today than we did at the beginning of the year* (GE-P3). This indicates that they are becoming more able in handling the situation.

Belgium

At the beginning of the pandemic, the trust signal humanity is very present. Wilmès shows empathy and relates to citizen's feelings and experiences, for example by saying *Know that I, like you, cherish our freedoms in the depths of my being. The sacrifices we make are very great, especially for those who are alone* (BE-P1). She expresses gratitude to police and healthcare workers and mentions that the government is working to support the most vulnerable people. During the second phase of the pandemic, none of the factors for humanity are present. De Croo shows humanity in his speech during the third phase, he empathizes with citizen's experiences by saying *We know that a lot of people are corona tired today. That's perfectly normal* (BE-P3), and *This week, a lot of attention was paid to the difficulties of students and young adults. Justly. But we know that many other groups are also having a hard time. Grandparents who haven't hugged their grandchildren in months. Single people that feel isolated at home and fight against isolation. And let's not forget all those people from the catering industry, event sector, cultural sector for whom it is hard* (BE-P3).

Noticeable about transparency is that it corresponds with humanity throughout the phases; a lot of transparency in the first phase, limited in the second phase, and then an increase in the third phase. During the first phase, Wilmès provides scientific back-up by saying *Experts agree that the*

effect of our efforts can already be seen in how the virus is evolving in Belgium. This can be clearly seen from various indicators such as the rate at which the virus is spreading, or how quickly the number of beds occupied in our hospital wards is doubling (BE-P1). She admits that she is unsure of the duration of the virus and acknowledges that infections and deaths will increase. During the second phase, Wilmès only mentions that they are working with health experts that guide in decision-making.

Remarkable regarding the factors for reliability and capability is that the country's expertise and the effectiveness of the country's approach are often mentioned throughout the three phases. Their inability to control the situation is only demonstrated in the first phase by saying *At the moment no one can say exactly when that [lifting of the measures] will be (BE-P1)*, and during the second phase *Which means the epidemic is gaining momentum again, it said very modestly (BE-P2)*. Expertise in the first phase is shown by mentioning the collaborations with the pharmaceutical sector. During the second phase, Wilmès says *But the Belgium of today is not the same as that of February. In a few bad months we have built impressive expertise in health crisis management with the help of the medical and scientific worlds. We have learned to work together in a hitherto unseen way between the different federal states (BE-P2)*. The effectiveness of the countries is the most present factor regarding reliability and capability throughout all three of the phases. Examples are Wilmès during the first phase *It [the measures] has ensured that until now we have been able to prevent our hospitals and in particular our intensive care units from becoming oversaturated (BE-P1)*, the de Croo during the third phase, *We have achieved this while we are trying to keep schools open in our country as much as possible and as many companies as possible continue to work, even if it is with mandatory homework. In many countries, even that is not possible (BE-P3)*.

Implemented measures

See Appendix C for timelines of the implemented measures, and "Data on country response measures to COVID-19" (2022) for an overview of the abbreviations.

The Netherlands

On the 12th of March, the first set of measures were implemented. The Netherlands started with partial measures, but throughout the days enforced stricter measures. On the 13th March, a stay-home order for risk groups was introduced. Within a week this changed to a recommendation for everyone to stay at home. During the first phase of the pandemic, and mostly in March, measures

were put in place to close the public life. In the second phase, strict measures were lifted and partial measures were introduced. Towards August partial measures were also being lifted. During the third phase, the measures started to get stricter, with a lockdown starting on the 23rd of January. Compared to the other countries, The Netherlands has more changes in measures and greater use of partial measures.

Germany

The timeline on the implemented measures in Germany demonstrates that Germany was relatively early with implementing COVID-19 measures. On the 14th of February, the German government introduced quarantine for international travelers. Throughout the first phase, the government further implemented measures to reduce the spread of the virus. Much earlier than The Netherlands, Germany introduced a mask mandatory during this phase. During the second phase, measures were being (partly) lifted. During the third phase, not many measures were put into place or lifted, as a large set of measures was introduced between the second and third phase.

Belgium

Belgium implemented the first measures on the 10th of March. Compared to The Netherlands, there were relatively few measures around this time, but these were relatively strict, and few of the measures were partial. Between the first and second phase partial measures were introduced, of which some were lifted during the second phase. Similarly to Germany, many measures were put into place between the second and third phase of the pandemic. During the third phase, even stricter measures were implemented.

Implemented policies

See Appendix D for timelines of the implemented policies and more information on the types of policies per country.

The Netherlands

The first two support packages were implemented announced in March and May, and respectively implemented in April and July. The policies include direct subsidies, income support for people in employment and deferral of payments or liabilities. The second phase included more direct subsidies and active labor market policies such as training and subsidized job creation. During the third phase supports for spending, stimulus packages and deferrals of payments were introduced. Throughout the three phases, the Dutch government implemented 33 policies to cushion the social

and financial impact of the pandemic. 4.3% of the GDP was spent on equity, loans and guarantees, and 10.3% was spent on additional spending and foregone revenue in the health sector. Compared to Belgium and Germany, The Netherlands has the smallest diversity in policies. Moreover, The Netherlands is the only country that does not have “Support for parents and carers”, “Occupational health and safety”.

Germany

The timeline of the policies in Germany shows that financial aid was implemented in April during the first phase of the pandemic. This included income support for people in employment, deferral of payments or liabilities and access to finance. During the second phase of the pandemic, no policies were implemented to cushion the social and economic impact of the pandemic. Between the second and third phase, a second package of financial support was implemented. In January 2021, at the beginning of the third phase, some additional policies were put into place to support parents and caregivers, protect vulnerable groups, and provide direct subsidies. In addition to the federal government, many local governments also announced measures to support their citizens and businesses. In Germany, 27.8% of their GDP was spent on equity, loans and guarantees, and 15.3% was spent on additional spending and foregone revenue in the health sector. In total, Germany implemented 60 policies throughout the three phases of the pandemic, with an equal amount of diversity of policies as Belgium.

Belgium

Belgium introduced their first policies in April during the first phase. These included direct subsidies, income support for people in employment and deferral of payments. Shortly after, in May, a more extensive support package was implemented that focused on occupational health and safety, income support for the unemployed and teleworking arrangements. During the second phase of the pandemic, few policies were put into place to protect vulnerable groups and support spending. In the third phase of the pandemic policies focused on the well-being of workers, access to finance and direct subsidies. In Belgium, 11.9% of their GDP was spent on equity, loans and guarantees, and 8.2% was spent on additional spending and foregone revenue in the health care sector.

Discussion

Regarding citizens' trust in the government, it is remarkable that each country remained around the same level of trust throughout the pandemic. Trust in The Netherlands and Germany remained high compared to Belgium. These countries, also saw a comparable trend in trust, namely, the highest levels of trust pre-pandemic, and a decline in trust throughout the pandemic. This is in contrast with the comparison of measures between the countries, as the measures are more similar for Belgium and Germany. Belgium and Germany implemented strict measures and were quick to introduce masks. For The Netherlands, this was different, as they often started with partial measures and extended them as the number of cases increased. Regarding policies, The Netherlands and Belgium spent similar amounts on financial and social support. They do differ in the types of policies, as Belgium has implemented a larger variety of policies. Germany spent by far the largest percentage of their GDP on financial and social support.

As regards the trust signal in speech, it was found from the content analysis that all three the countries express the most 'humanity' and 'transparency' in the first phase of the pandemic. Throughout the second and third phases, Belgium and The Netherlands went through a similar trend regarding these two trust signals. Namely, they both saw a decline in the second phase, and an increase in the third phase. This is in contrast to Germany, where 'humanity' and 'transparency' were still noticeably present in the second phase but less during the speech in the third phase. All three countries showed reliability and capability by demonstrating their country's expertise, and Belgium put the most emphasis on showing the effectiveness of its approach.

This study does not confirm the hypothesis that more trust signals in speech relate to higher levels of trust. As the trends have shown for Germany and The Netherlands, trust increased throughout the pandemic, but trust signals were mostly present during the first phase of the pandemic and to a lesser extent in the second and third phases. The data on trust for Belgium did not provide a trend in the direction of citizens' trust.

Regarding the relationship between measures and trust, the hypothesis that strict and early measures relate to higher trust can also not be supported. The Netherlands and Germany demonstrated similar levels of trust, but their trends in measures differed. Germany implemented strict and early measures, while The Netherlands was relatively late and implemented many partial

measures. Belgium had the lowest level of trust, but its approach regarding measures was similar to Germany's.

Lastly, the data also does not confirm that countries with larger expenses and a greater variety of policies for financial and social support have higher levels of trust. As Germany spent a noticeable larger percentage of their GDP on financial and social support and had the greatest variety of policies, but does not show a noticeable higher level of trust from the citizens.

That none of the hypotheses have been fulfilled, confirms and further illustrates the complexity of trust mentioned earlier in this paper. This paper adds to the existing knowledge about trust and provides more insight into trust in a unique situation such as a pandemic. For the field of policy, this paper provides a high-level snapshot that demonstrates how the different factors compare with each other throughout the pandemic and across the countries. While differences in policies, measures and trust signals between the countries, and throughout the phases can be found, there is no clear relationship between these factors and the levels of citizen's trust in the government. The large overview of the differences between the countries throughout the pandemic is a strength of this research. By comparing several governmental factors, this research contributes to comparative research that provides a better understanding of governance during the pandemic.

A limitation of this research is the subjective interpretation that is present in content analyses, this negatively influences the validity of the study. Additionally, this study is based on descriptive data, thus, the relationships between the factors cannot be concluded to be significant. Therefore, to further research these provisional results, we suggest to studying the relationships between trust and the governmental approach through surveys and quantitative data. Additionally, we recommend studying misinformation and fake news during the pandemic. As mentioned earlier, notable about the pandemic is the infodemic. These contextual factors influence the public's confidence in the government (Eggers et al., 2021). Studies suggest that the government's loss of control over the media has changed trust processes (Bel et al., 2021; Ognyanova et al., 2020; Shahsavari et al., 2020).

This study provides a multidisciplinary insight into a very complex phenomenon during an exceptional time in history. Trust in the government is of great importance to support compliance, which is crucial in times of crisis. Better understanding what influences trust is therefore necessary for democratic societies.

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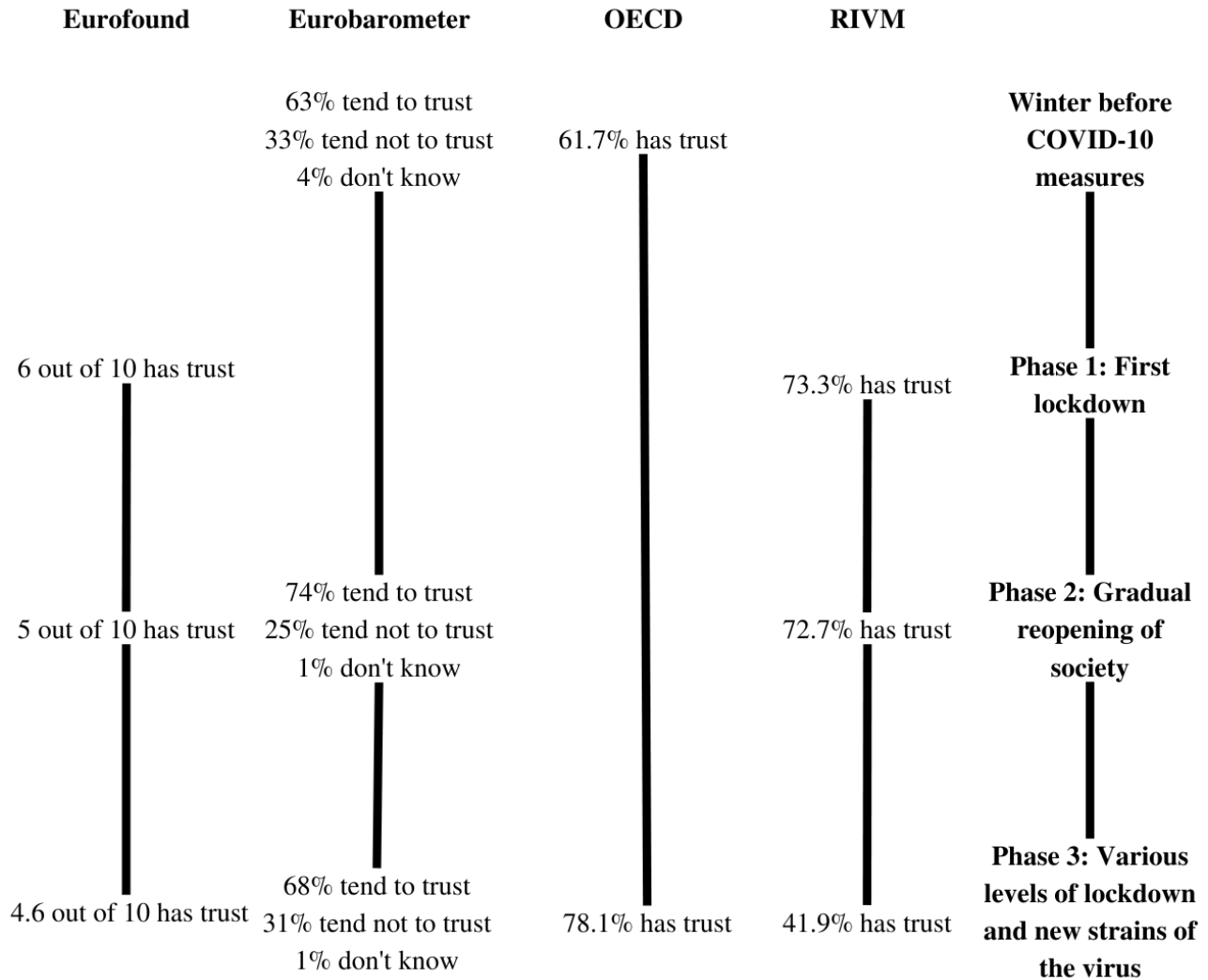
Appendixes

Appendix A: Overview of codes from speeches

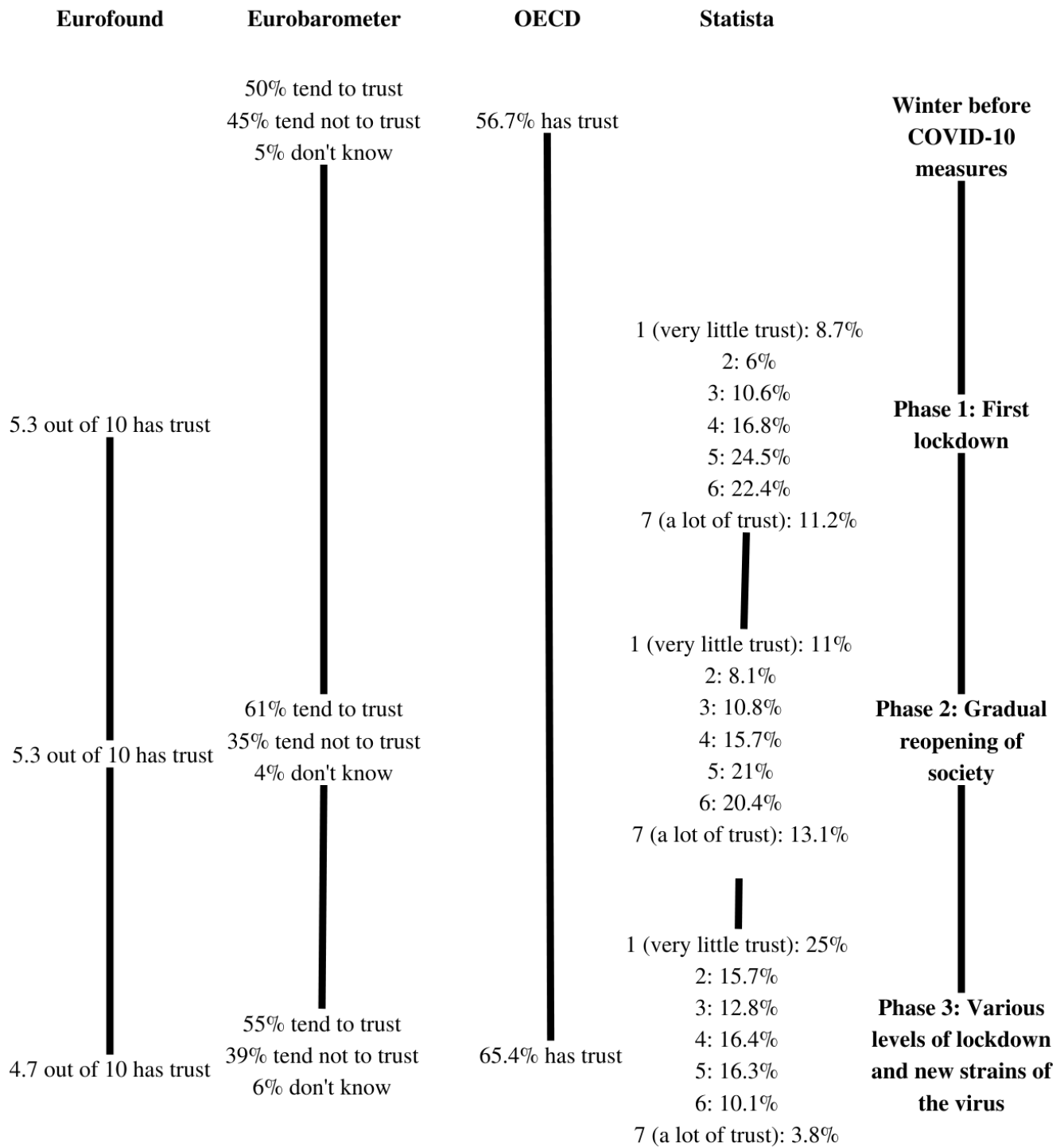
Code	Reference
NL-P1	Mark Rutte. (2020). <i>TV-toespraak van minister-president Mark Rutte</i> . Retrieved from https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2020/03/16/tv-toespraak-van-minister-president-mark-rutte
NL-P2	Mark Rutte. (2020). <i>Letterlijke tekst persconferentie minister-president Rutte en minister De Jonge na afloop van crisisberaad kabinet (24-6-2020)</i> . Retrieved from https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/mediateksten/2020/06/24/letterlijke-tekst-persconferentie-minister-president-rutte-en-minister-de-jonge-na-afloop-van-crisisberaad-kabinet-24-6-2020
NL-P3	Mark Rutte. (2021). <i>Letterlijke tekst persconferentie minister-president Rutte en minister De Jonge (2 februari 2021) Mediatekst 03-02-2021 Minister-president Rutte en minister De Jonge geven een toelichting en beantwoorden vragen over de verlenging van de lockdown</i> . Retrieved from https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/mediateksten/2021/02/02/letterlijke-tekst-persconferentie-minister-president-rutte-en-minister-de-jonge-2-februari-2021
GE-P1	Angela Merkel. (2020). <i>An address to the nation by Federal Chancellor Merkel</i> . Retrieved from https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/statement-chancellor-1732296
GE-P2	Angela Merkel. (2020). <i>Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel am 28. August 2020</i> . Retrieved from https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-am-28-august-2020-1781008
GE-P3	Angela Merkel. (2021). <i>Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel zur aktuellen Lage</i> . Retrieved from https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-zur-aktuellen-lage-1841788
BE-P1	Sophie Wilmès. (2020). <i>TOESPRAAK VAN DE EESTRE MINISTER</i> . Retrieved from https://www.sophiewilmes.be/nl/toespraak-van-de-eestre-minister/
BE-P2	Sophie Wilmès. (2020). <i>Persconferentie naar aanleiding van de Nationale Veiligheidsraad 15/07/20</i> . Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QojeOah5J5Q&t=359s
BE-P3	Alexander de Croo. (2021). <i>Inleiding bij heropening</i> . Retrieved from https://www.premier.be/nl/inleiding-bij-heropening-kappers

Appendix B: Overview of trust per country

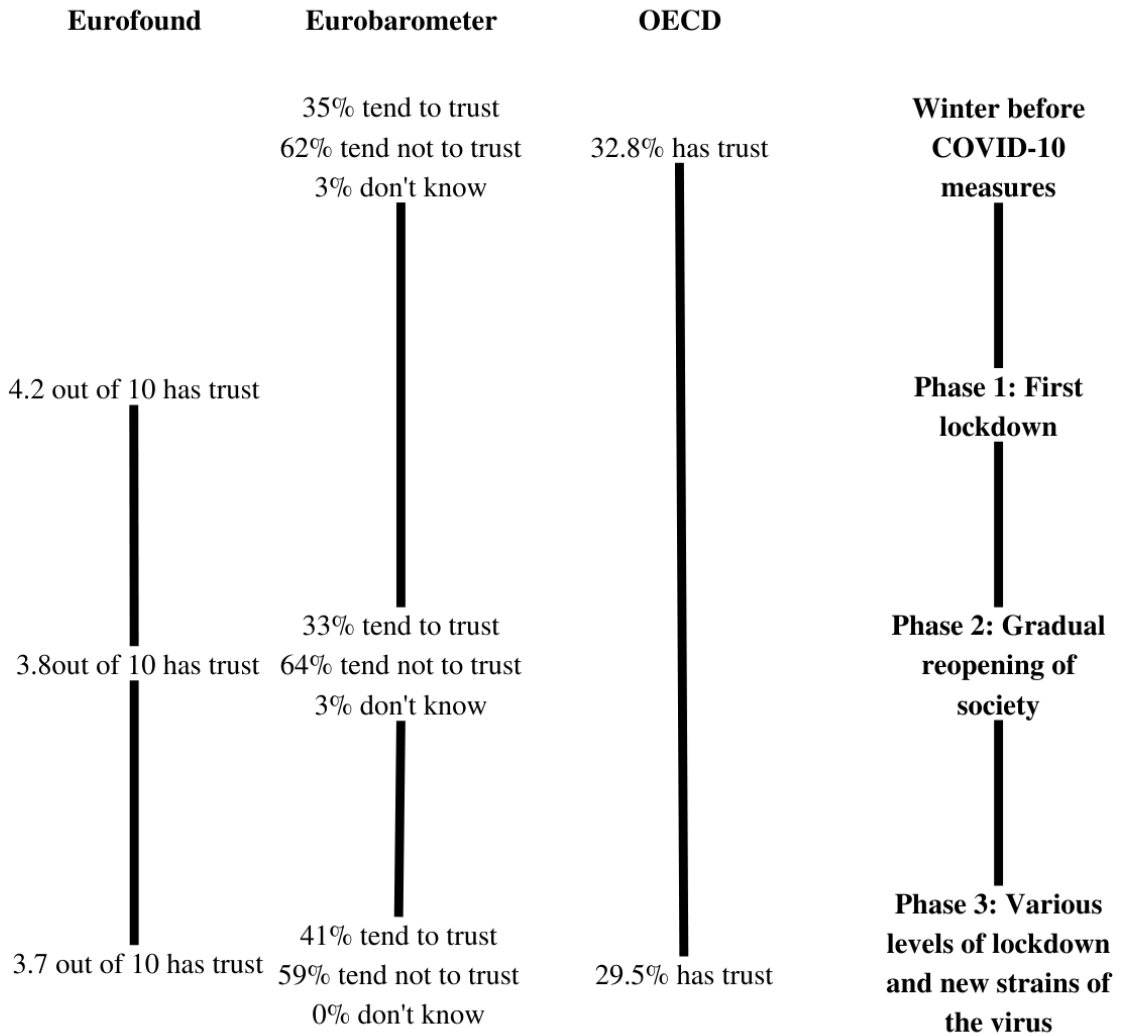
The Netherlands: Trust



Germany: Trust



Belgium: Trust



Appendix C: Implemented measures



The Netherlands

Start measure

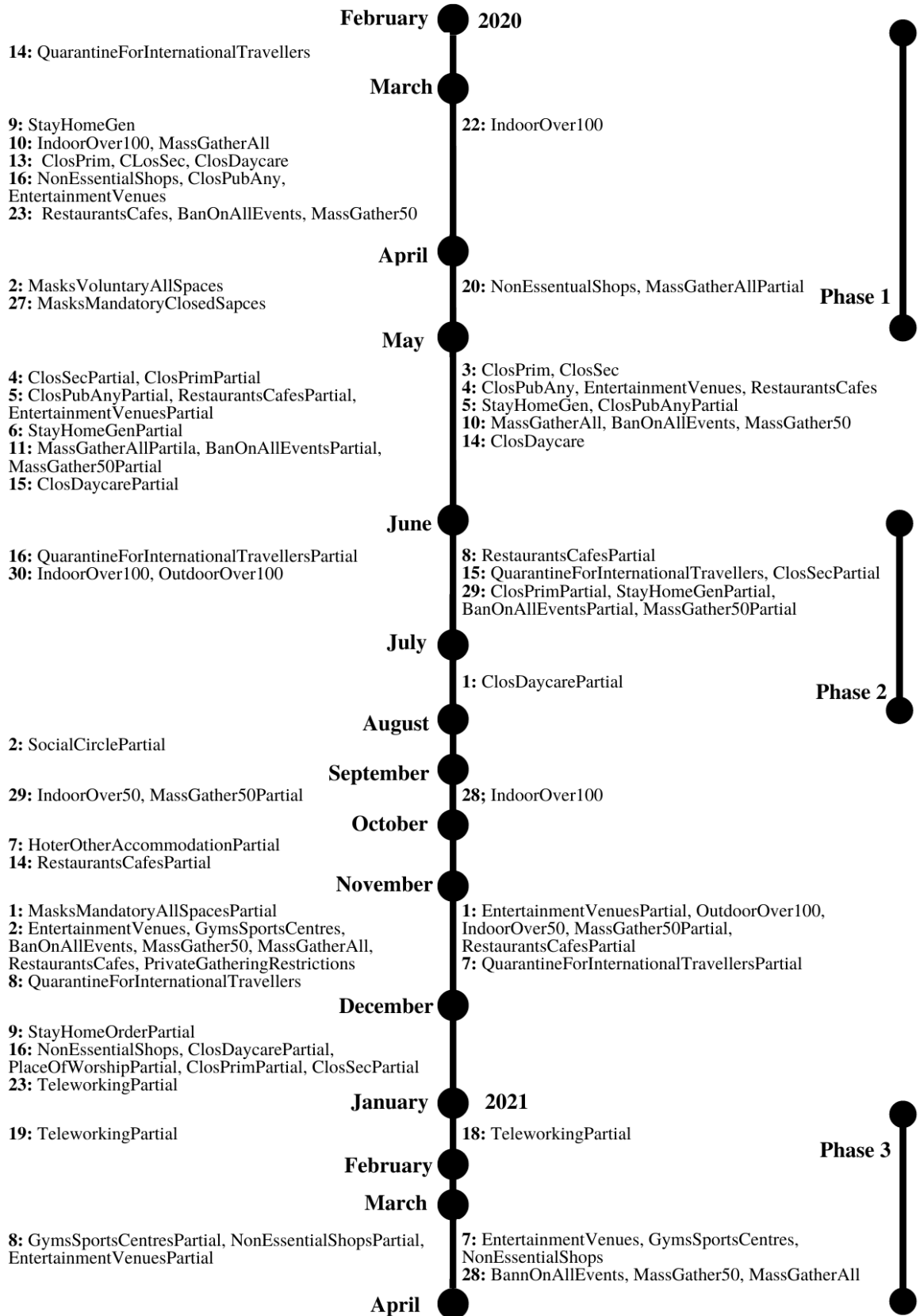
End measure



Germany: Measures

Start measure

End measure



Belgium: Measures

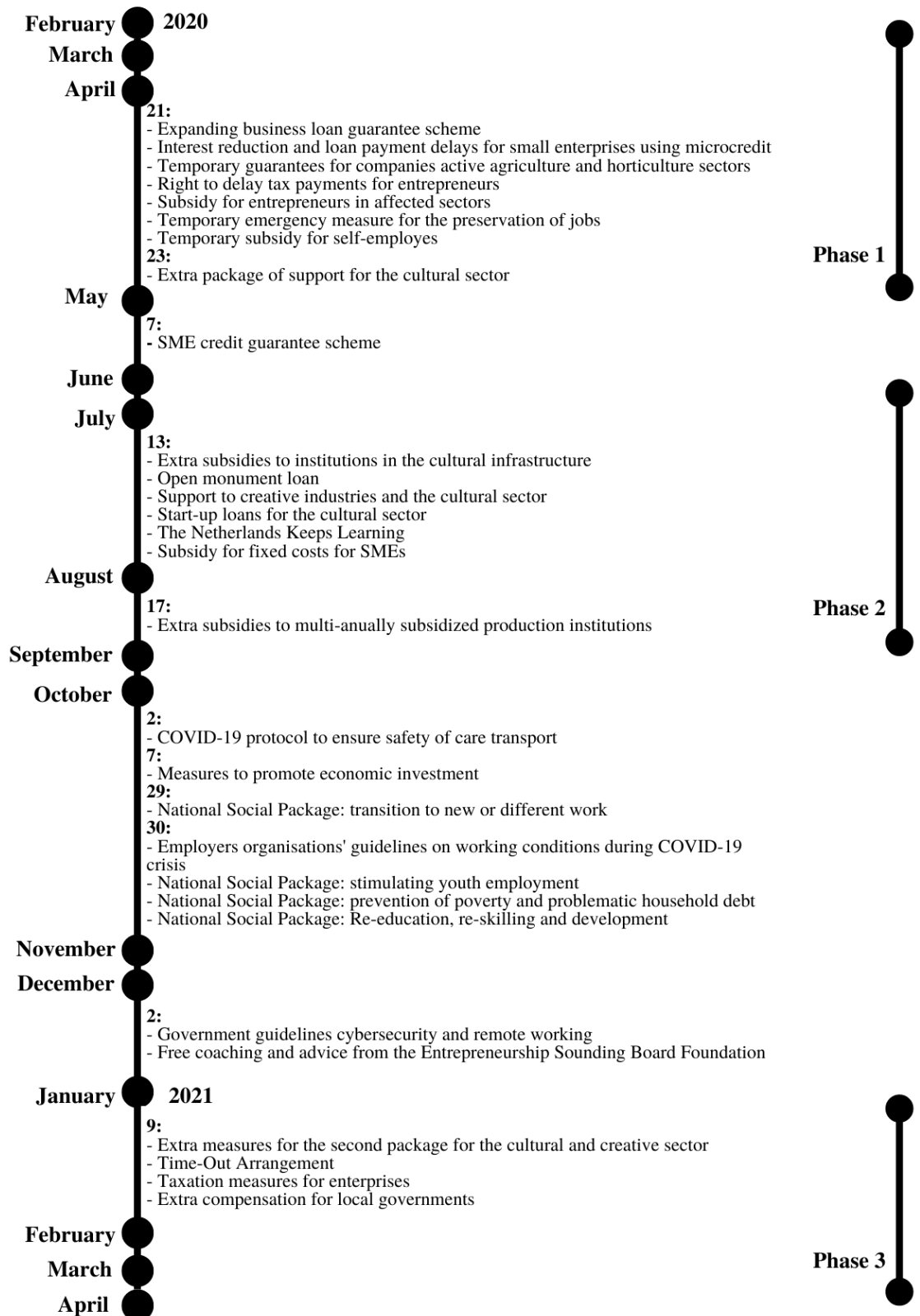
Start measure

End measure



Appendix D: Timelines of implemented policies per country

The Netherlands: Policies



The Netherlands: 33 cases

Direct subsidies: 6

Access to finance: 5

Active labor market policies: 5

Deferral of payments or liabilities: 4

Support for spending , stimulus packages: 3

Teleworking arrangements, remote working: 2

Change of production/innovation: 1

Change of work arrangements: 1

Extensions of income support to workers not covered by any kind of protection scheme: 1

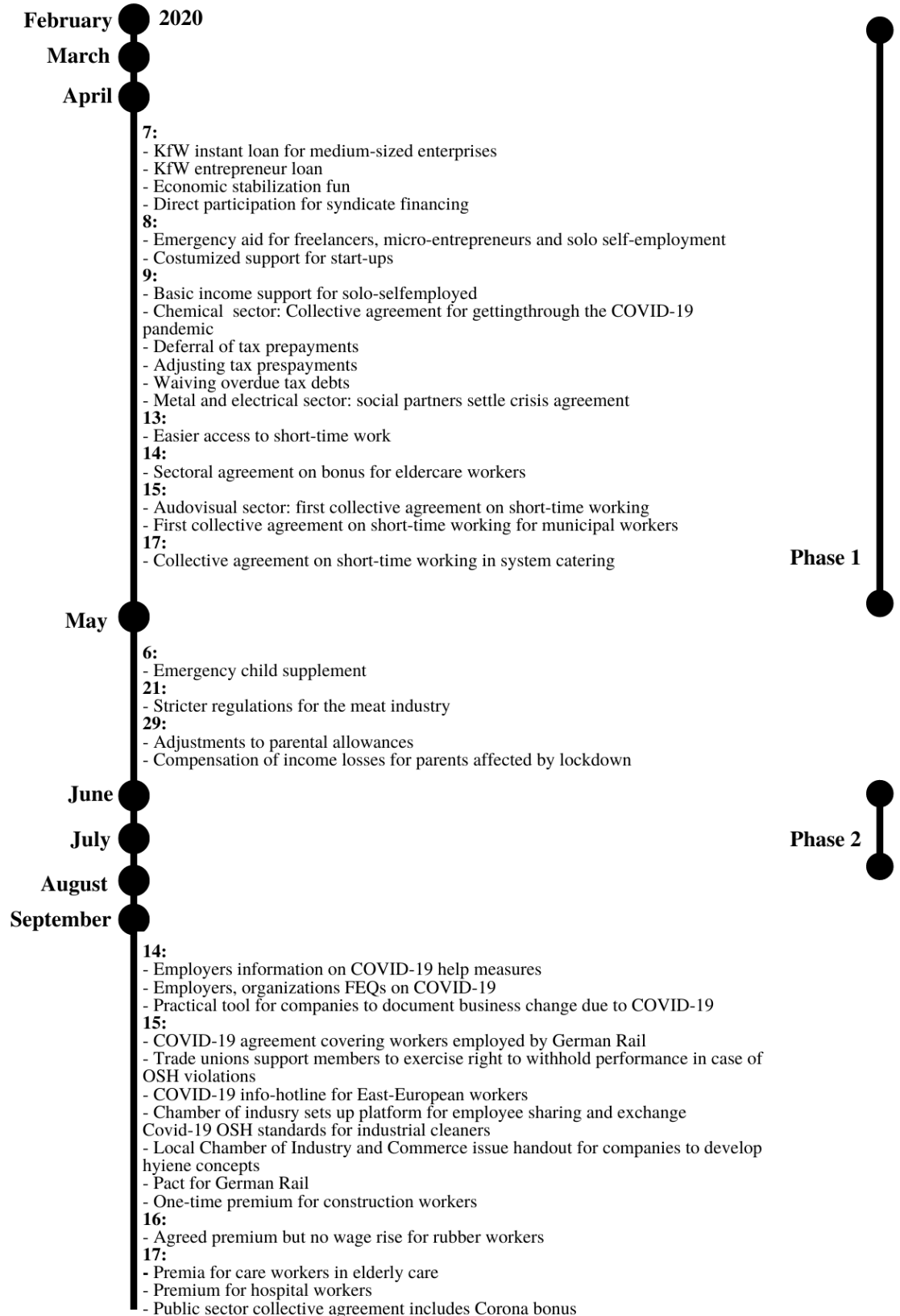
Income support for people in employment: 1

Matching/networking: 1

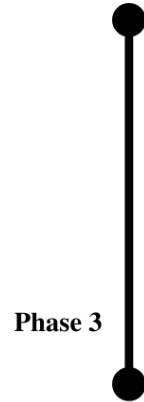
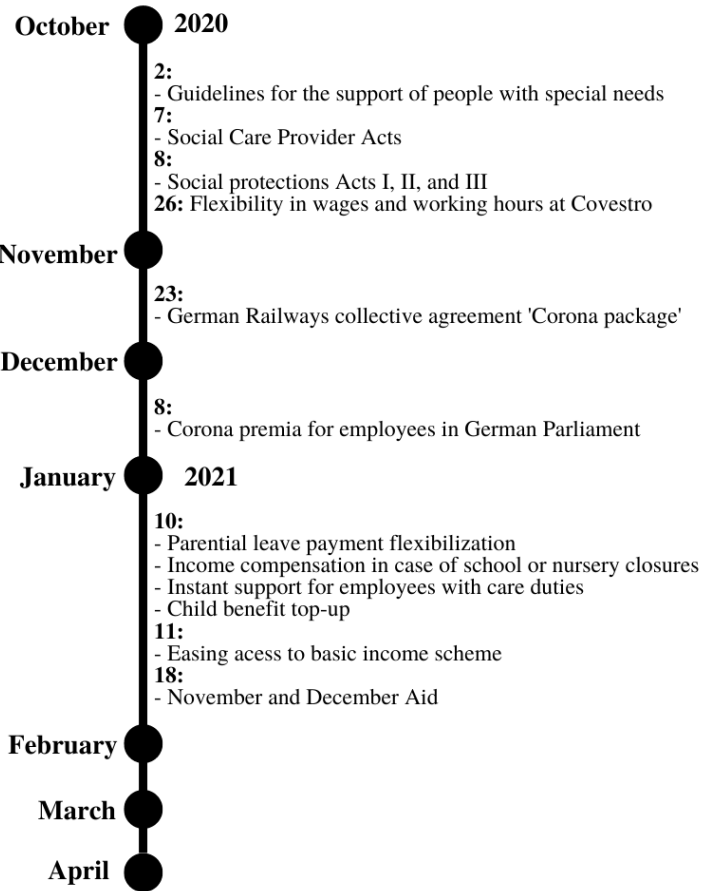
Preventing over-indebtedness: 1

Protection of vulnerable groups: 1

Germany: Policies



Germany: Policies



Germany: 60 cases

Support for parents and carers: 7

Income support for people in employment: 7

Remuneration and rewards for workers in essential services: 6

Access to finance: 6

Occupational health and safety: 5

Direct subsidies: 5

Protection of vulnerable groups: 3

Deferral of liabilities: 2

Change in work arrangements: 2

Extensions of income support to workers not covered by any kind of protection scheme: 2

Smoothing frictions or reallocation of workers: 2

Support for spending, stimulus packages: 2

Teleworking arrangements, remote working: 2

Wage flexibility: 2

Other: 2

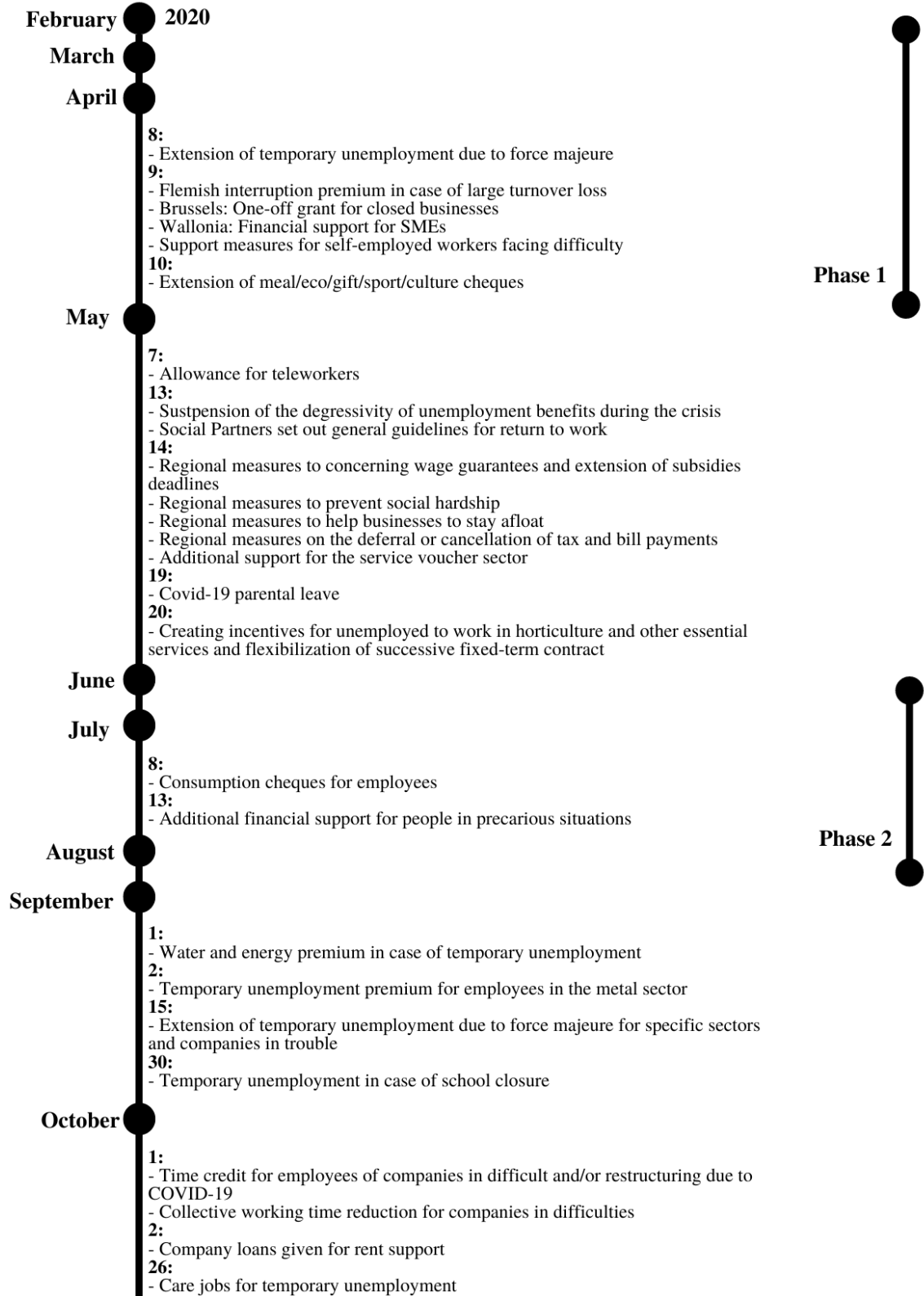
Active labor market policies: 1

Changes of working hours or work arrangements: 1

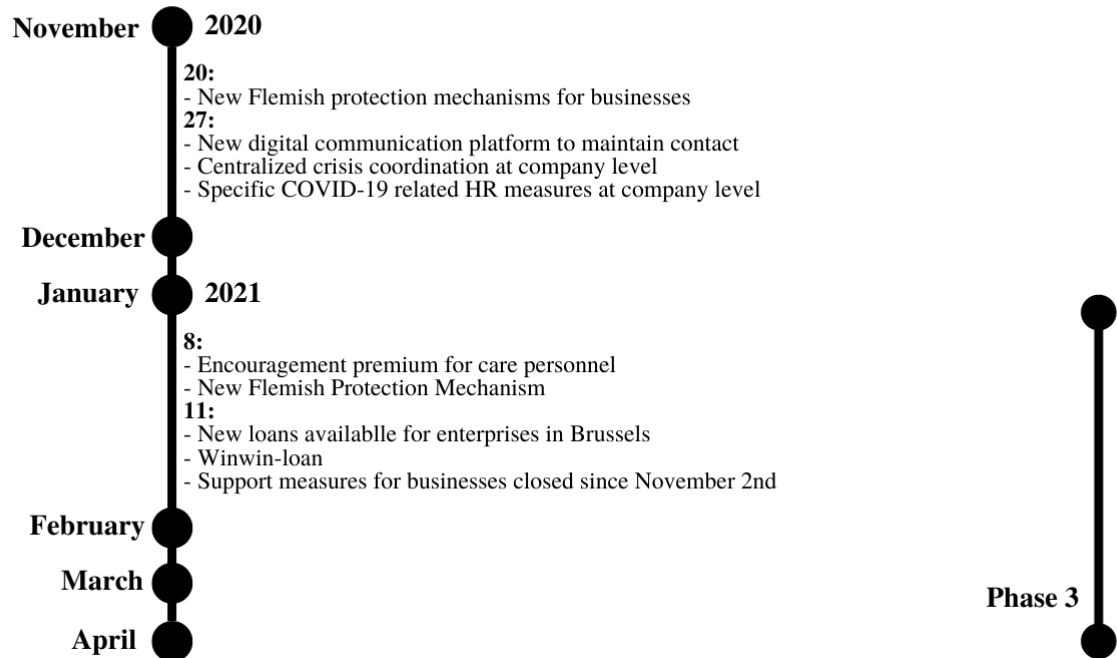
Rescue procedures in case of insolvency or adaption of insolvency regulation: 1

Well-being of workers: 1

Belgium: Policies



Belgium: Policies



Belgium: 43 cases

Direct subsidies: 6

Access to finance: 5

Occupational health and safety: 3

Deferral of payments or liabilities: 3

Well-being of workers: 3

Provision of services in kind: 2

Income support for people in employment: 2

Support for parents and carers: 2

Support for spending, stimulus packages: 2

Working time and working time flexibility: 2

Teleworking arrangements, remote working: 2

Income support for unemployed: 2

Active labor market policies: 1

Changes of management approach: 1

Extensions of income support to workers not covered by any kind of protection scheme: 1

Keeping or obtaining a safe home: 1

Mobilization of a larger workforce: 1

Protection of vulnerable groups: 1

Smoothing frictions or reallocation of workers: 1