



# Trust in eGovernmental Services within the North Sea Region 2020

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A report to present the results of an international survey conducted within the framework of the project "Like! - Building a Local Digital Innovation Culture"

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# Trust in eGovernmental Services 2020



## Centre of Trust Research (CoT)

The Centre of Trust Research (CoT), which is located at the University of Vechta in Germany, has been empirically investigating the significance of trust and mistrust in various areas of social interaction since 1998. The CoT is focused on providing solutions to concrete and distinct problems: up to this date, the theory behind the concept of trust and mistrust (Schweer, 2017) has been applied to projects in the field of organized sports, business and organisations, as well as in the context of sustainability and education. Within the "Like!" project, this research background is now transferred to the experiences and attitudes of citizens and public administration employees (i.e., civil servants) in the context of digital services provided by public authorities. For further information about the work of the CoT please visit our website: <https://www.uni-vechta.de/paedagogische-psychologie>

# Trust in eGovernmental Services

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# About us

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Scientific Head of the Department of Educational Psychology and the affiliated CoT along with the affiliated Centre for Sport Psychological Counselling and Support (Challenges) at the University of Vechta. His central research and consulting focuses are:

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Lecturer and research associate at the University of Vechta since 2004. Further activities:

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You can find out more about the wide range of subject-specific scientific publications, the many years of experience in advising and supporting organisations the various activities as a reviewer and lecturer at: <https://www.uni-vechta.de/paedagogische-psychologie/prof-dr-martin-kw-schweer/>



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- » Research assistant at the University of Groningen in the project „StudieBuddies“, studying peer-learning in higher educational settings



# Welcome

# Introduction

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Enjoy the Like! Trust Report 2020. Be a part of a digital innovative future and be with us.

Digitalization is certainly one of the major challenges our society is facing at present and it is becoming increasingly important in all areas of life: for example, many procedures involved in information, communication and administration, are already being offered in digital form at universities and local authorities. Even though these innovations are typically welcomed by the addressees, they are also associated with scepticism and concerns. Building trust, is therefore of central importance for dealing with societal challenges (such as digitalization) in a critical and beneficial manner – especially when considering its function as a psychological mechanism for reducing complexity and generating a subjective feeling of security (Luhmann, 2014; Schweer, 2017).

The purpose of this research project is therefore to determine the status of trust and mistrust in eGovernment within the framework of the EU-funded joint project "Like! Building a Local Digital Innovation Culture". With reference to the dynamic-transactional paradigm (e.g. Rauthmann, 2017), the development and experience of trust and the use of eGovernment is seen as the result of a complex interplay between personal (e.g. media competence, previous experience with public authorities) and situational (eGovernment offerings) factors (for the differential theory of trust and mistrust see Schweer, 2017). A corresponding survey instrument was developed on the basis of both quantitative and qualitative preliminary studies.



In the end, a transnational quantitative online survey of citizens (to be specific, this survey targeted anyone using digital services provided by authorities, not just those who possess a respective state citizenship) and public authority employees (i.e., civil servants) was conducted in order to collect relevant attitudes and other factors influencing the development of trust and mistrust in the context of eGovernment.

In accordance with the differential-psychological perspective, the focus was primarily set on the heterogeneity of the addressees, which mainly emerges from the disparate learning experiences with digital media. Based on selected empirical findings from the research project, the following section discusses tendencies of trust and mistrust among citizens and government employees from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdoms. The exploratory analysis provides indications for a trust-enhancing design of digital services.

## Introduction

# The Initial Situation - the concept of eGovernment

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## Trust - the necessity to advance the quality and innovation of public administrations

The subject of the present report cannot be categorised in a uniform research strand, but rather presents itself as a crosscutting theme of various disciplines. In established definitions, the term “eGovernment” (abbreviation for Electronic Government) describes the simplification and implementation of information, communication and transaction processes through the use of information and communication technologies within public authorities (see German Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2018). Digital services include, for example, the provision of information, application forms in the context of official procedures and appointments, online tax returns or the possibility of registering a vehicle online. At the latest since the eGovernment laws passed in Germany in 2013 (Federal Law Gazette, 2013; 2017), the legal framework for the implementation and expansion of eGovernment services has been created, mainly in order to contribute to time and cost savings for public authorities and citizens - particularly at the municipal level.

eGovernment processes take place between public authorities and citizens or companies. Both communication and business scientists have addressed requirements for the design of eGovernment services before, especially with recourse to knowledge about eBusiness. In many cases, an equivalence of content is assumed in this respect (see Brücher & Gisler, 2002). A psychological perspective has rather rarely been adopted in the past (cf. Lucke, 2014; Alzahrani, Al-Karaghoul & Weerakkody, 2017), even though it is precisely this perspective that reveals the essential discrepancies between eBusiness and eGovernment. This can be exemplified by the motivation for using digital services: In the context of eBusiness, usage is primarily aimed at satisfying needs and improving the quality of life; whereas in eGovernment, the focus is primarily placed on the fulfilment of obligations, for example when filing a tax return.

Caused by the anticipation of cost and time savings, there has been considerable scientific and public activity on this topic

in recent years; mostly driven forward by initiatives of state institutions. In many cases, however, rather pragmatic approaches are being pursued, focusing on the evaluation and comparison of national eGovernment structures (see European Union, 2016; United Nations, 2016). In addition, the emphasis was mainly placed on the requirements resulting from citizens' media use (see Initiative D21 e.V., 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2015), while government employees have so far received no attention either as actors or as recipients.

01.



#### Definitions

**Trust** can be understood as the subjective security to be able to put oneself into the hands of other people or even institutions (Schweer, 2017).

02.



**Mistrust** is the social attitude or subjective feeling of not being able to put oneself in the hands of other people or institutions, without being exposed to a subjectively high risk of abduction or potential damage (Schweer, 2017).

03.



In their function as perception filters, **trust** and **mistrust** are contributing to the reduction of complexity (Luhmann, 2014; see also Schweer, 2017); it can be assumed that both phenomena are moderating the perception and evaluation of eGovernment in this respect.

04.



**eGovernment** (abbreviation for Electronic Government) describes the simplification and implementation of information, communication and transaction processes through the use of information and communication technologies within public authorities (see German Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2018).



#### Trust research

The construct of trust is taken up in the debate on eGovernment in various publications, but it is often reduced to concerns about data protection and security issues only (see Angelopoulos et al., 2020; OECD, 2008). There are isolated studies in which trust is differentiated more closely in a context-sensitive manner (Alsaghier et al., 2009; Nixon, 2016), and aspects relevant to trust are also taken into account in studies on the influences of perceived transparency (see Song & Lee, 2015) or on the quality of digital government services (e.g., Hien, 2014; Venkatesh, Thong, Chan & Hu, 2016). However, even where trust-related aspects are examined in more detail, the exploration is usually limited to citizens' perspectives (Alzahrani, Al-Karaghoulis & Weerakkody, 2017), so there are hardly any papers available that explore the specific meaning of trust and mistrust in the context of government employees; this is particularly relevant as this group ultimately serve as representatives of the authorities to the public. Moreover, these studies rarely consider trust and mistrust as two independent constructs, and barely recognize the heterogeneity of users, which arises, among other personality traits, from digital skills (Alzahrani, Al-Karaghoulis & Weerakkody, 2017).

Trust is a central social resource for coping with social challenges such as digitalization. Without trust in governments, markets and institutions, support for necessary reforms is difficult to mobilise, particularly where short-term sacrifices are involved and long-term gains might be less tangible. Accordingly, there is broad consensus that the construct of trust can be regarded as a central variable for the acceptance and the successful implementation of eGovernment structures (e.g., Cai, Loon & Wong, 2018; Ranaweera, 2016). In the view of that, in the scientific literature it is also assumed that a lack of trust could be a key influencing factor with regard to the intranational disparities between the actual utilisation of eGovernment and the eReadiness of a country - eReadiness in this context refers to a country's ability and state of readiness to participate in the electronic world (i.e., country's ICT infrastructure and the ability of its government and citizens to utilize those; see Mahmood, Osmani & Sivarajah, 2014).

With the aim of making digital innovations trustworthy and thus attractive, the question currently arises as to which factors are relevant in building trust in digital services of public authorities. This report addresses the research gap described above and examines the constructs "trust" and "mistrust" as central variables of acceptance in the eGovernment context. The starting point of this research is the dynamic-transactional paradigm, which considers the acceptance of eGovernment as a complex interplay of situational and personal influencing factors (see Fig. 1, p. 009). On the basis of this paradigmatic approach, the differential theory of trust and mistrust (Schweer, 2017) takes particular account of the heterogeneity of users. Furthermore, research findings on media use and technology acceptance will be integrated.



## Preliminary Research

A series of quantitative and qualitative preliminary studies have been conducted in order to capture the broadest possible range of views from citizens and public authority employees. For this purpose, a variety of survey methods were used, deployed for example at public citizens events and online. The measuring instrument, which is based initially on the theoretical framework model (Fig. 1, p. 9), was developed on the basis of the results of these quantitative and qualitative preliminary studies and modified in cooperation with the partners from the "Like!" project. The investigation aims to determine the status of trust and mistrust in eGovernment services; key factors that were surveyed included the media competence of users, the willingness to communicate with government employees using media, and the extent to which government agencies work reliably. Respondents in the preliminary studies included, among others, public administration employees, students, citizens and, among them, asylum seekers who also use eGovernment structures.

The investigation instrument developed in the first work packages was first subject to a pretest. The resulting final questionnaire could then be distributed to residents and civil servants in the participating countries throughout Europe.

### 2020

#### Report

Analysis of the questionnaire and distributing the results

#### Pre-test of the final instruments

Pre-testing the final online questionnaire among 50 citizen and 50 civil servants in Germany

### 2019

#### Interview

Interview with Prof. Dr. Schweer; published in the Like! Magazines

#### Developing instruments

### 2018

#### Qualitative research

Semi-structured interview survey of 21 citizens and 17 civil servants in Germany (N = 38)

#### Quantitative research II

Questionnaire distributed among Students at the University of Vechta, Germany (N = 82)

#### Quantitative research I

Questionnaire distributed among citizens and refugees in Germany (N = 85)

### 2017

#### Creating Ideas

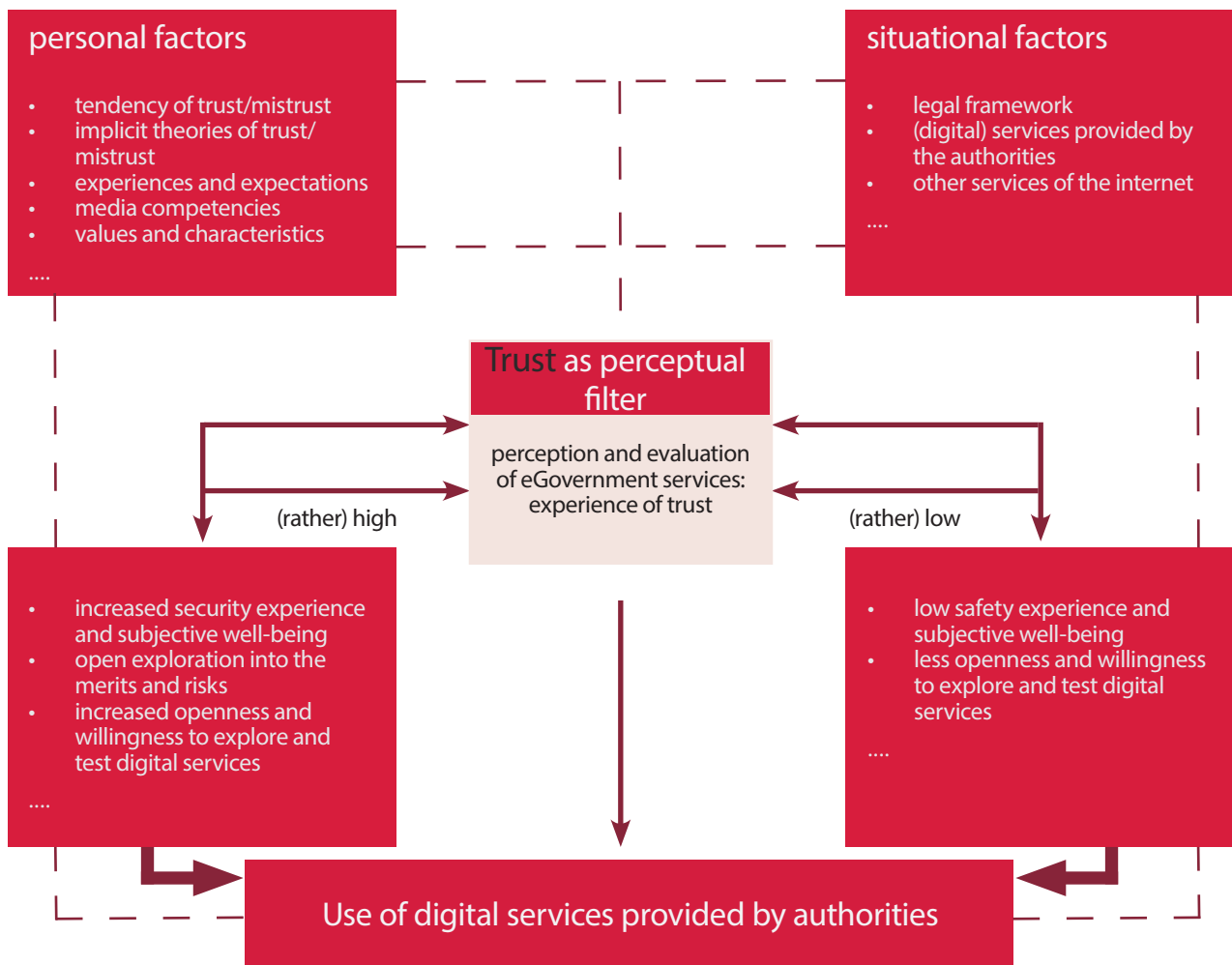
Literature research, outlining the framework

### 2016

#### Startup

Coactively cooperating with Like! partners





**Fig. 1. Framework model of the differential theory of trust and mistrust in the context of eGovernment**



#### Final Instrument

The survey instrument for this study was designed by incorporating the results of the preliminary studies into existing scales of the differential trust and mistrust theory of Schweer (2017, see Fig. 1), while items relating to the model of technic acceptance model were also considered (see Venkatesh & Bala, 2000; 2008; see also Bannister & Connolly, 2011; Becker et al., 2014; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). In sum, the final questionnaire is pertaining three main topics on the subject of trust and mistrust: attitudes and beliefs about

(1) authorities (9 items), (2) digitalization (13 items) and (3) eGovernment (26 items; including data protection issues). An additional scale included questions about digital citizen participation services, such as opinion polls, votes and petitions (8 items). Despite that, civil servants were asked to respond to seven additional items relating to the digital progress of the authority or workspace in which they operate. Demographic data included questions about the subject's age, gender, population size of the place of residence, the highest degree obtained so far as well

as their migration background (6 items). In total, the questionnaire consists of 69 items (plus 7 items that were exclusively surveyed among public administration employees), which are measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = „strongly disagree“ to 5 = “strongly agree”). The completion took about 10 minutes, was anonymous and voluntary. The survey was translated from German language into English, Dutch and Danish. To ensure the clarity of the items, the questionnaire was pre-tested by Like! partners.

# Interreg - Trust in the North Sea Region

## Methodology

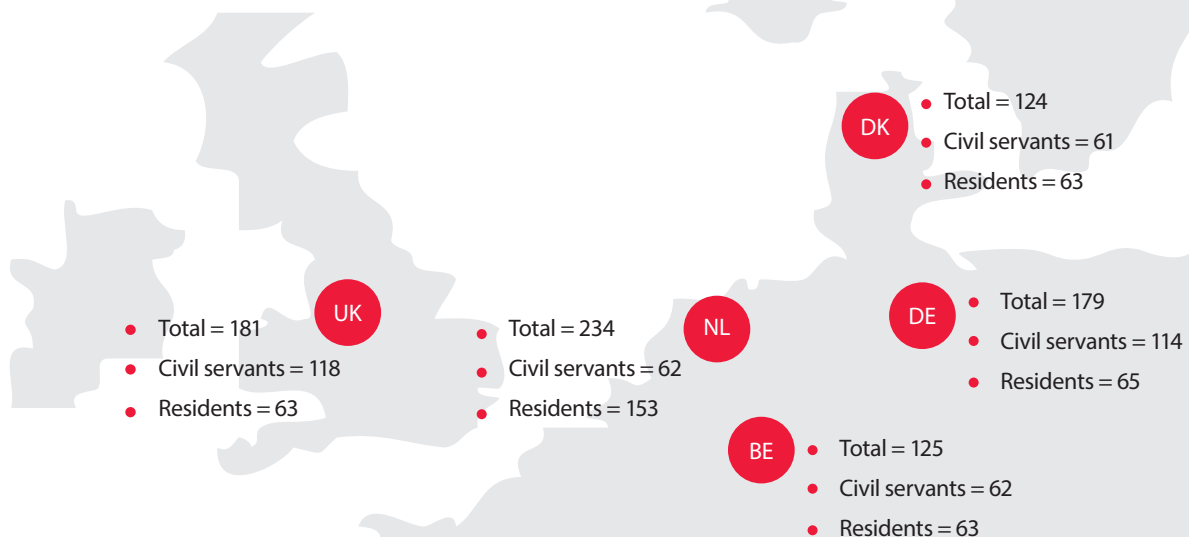
### Participants

Online survey in five countries within the North Sea Region

1000+ respondents

All fieldwork was conducted between September 2019 and December 2019

- Denmark (DK)
- Germany (DE)
- Belgium (BE)
- Netherlands (NL)
- United Kingdoms (UK)



### Procedure

In order to recruit appropriate participants, an external research access-panel was commissioned. To be specific, about 60 participants of each respective condition (i.e., civil servants and citizens for each respective country) were recruited by this means to ensure a wide and diverse spread among the desired target groups (those participants were incentivised for their

contribution). The remaining participants were recruited in cooperation with within the Like!-partners, each distributing the survey within their own social media and newsletter channels. Informed consent were obtained prior to the inquiry. The survey was generated and presented online by the use of the UNIPARK software (EFS Survey by Questback, 2017) and was accessible via mobile devices and any kind of web browser. Every eligible participant

was presented with all scales in the same order. Within the scales, questions were randomised. Subjects had the possibility to omit to the questions on their behalf, which lead to some missing data. The results presented in the following give a first overview about the findings of the main examination.

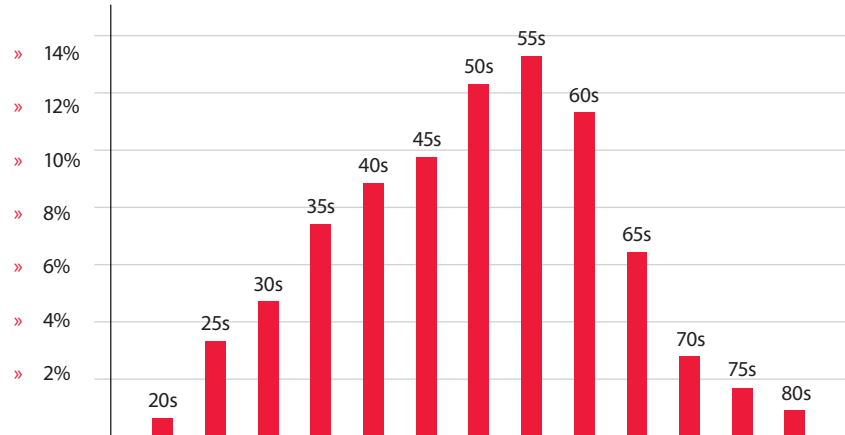
# Trust in eGovernmental Services

## Demographic Statistics

### Participants

In total, 1088 subjects whose ages ranged from 19 to 84 years ( $M = 50.76$ ,  $SD = 12.31$ ) participated in this online study. After cleaning incomplete responses, data from 843 participants acquired from Belgium ( $N = 125$ ), Denmark ( $N = 124$ ), Germany ( $N = 179$ ), the Netherlands ( $N = 234$ ) and the United Kingdom ( $N = 181$ ) were recorded. The ratio of male and female participants was approximately the same across most conditions.

Fig. 2. Age distribution



Men: 50.3%



Women: 49.6%



Divers: 0.1%



Fig. 3.  
Education

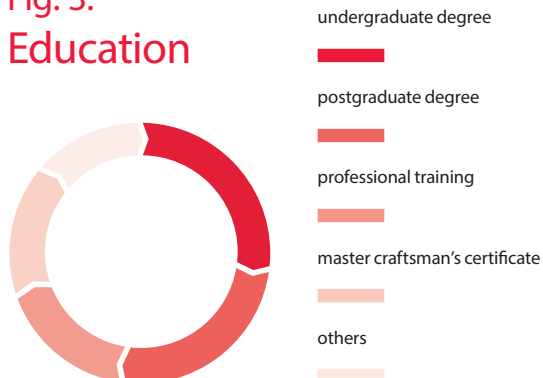
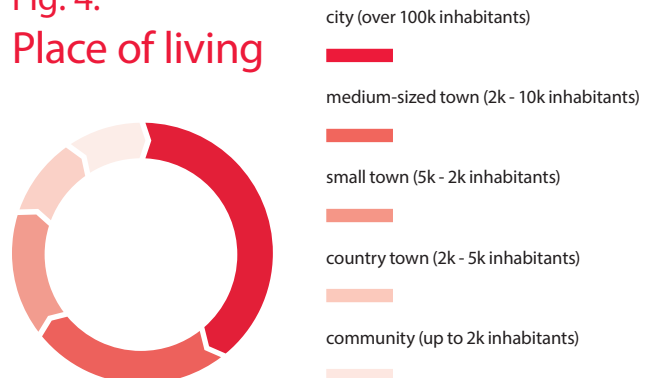


Fig. 4.  
Place of living







# Trust in eGovernment

## Cross-country comparison

### Results

Overall, about half of the respondents show (rather) high levels of trust in digital services offered by public authorities (i.e. 49.8% of the respondents answered with "somewhat agree" or "strongly agree"), another 30.7% are undecided in their assessment. A comparison of the levels of perceived trust between the participating countries reveals that the proportion of respondents with (rather) high trust is

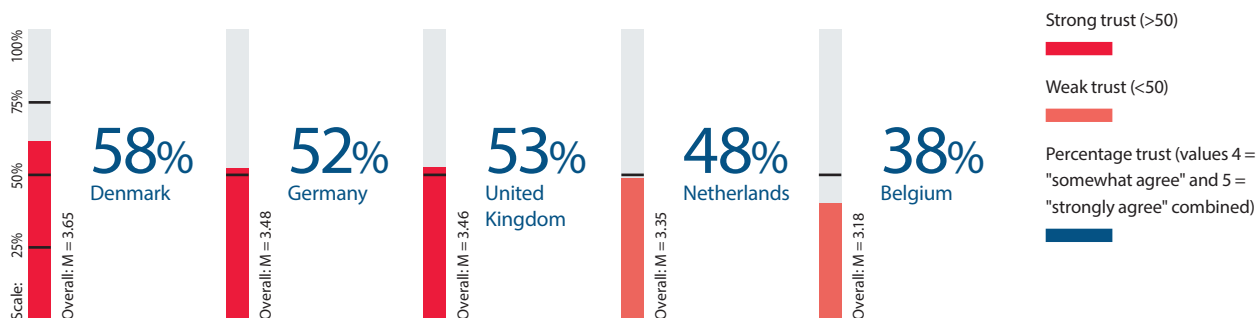
comparatively high especially in Denmark (58.1%). By comparing the group of civil servants with residents, an interesting finding becomes apparent almost across all countries: the proportion of public administration employees with (rather) high trust in eGovernment is larger overall, in some cases considerably larger, than for regular residents (mean difference = 11.8%); the greatest differences in this respect are found among those surveyed

in the United Kingdom (24.5%). This discrepancy between the internal and external perspectives could be attributed to the similarly disparate distributed level of trust in the digital competences of public authorities, given that only 36.3% of residents express (rather) high trust in this area, while 57.5% of civil servants attribute (rather) high digital competences to themselves and their colleagues (mean difference = 21.2%).



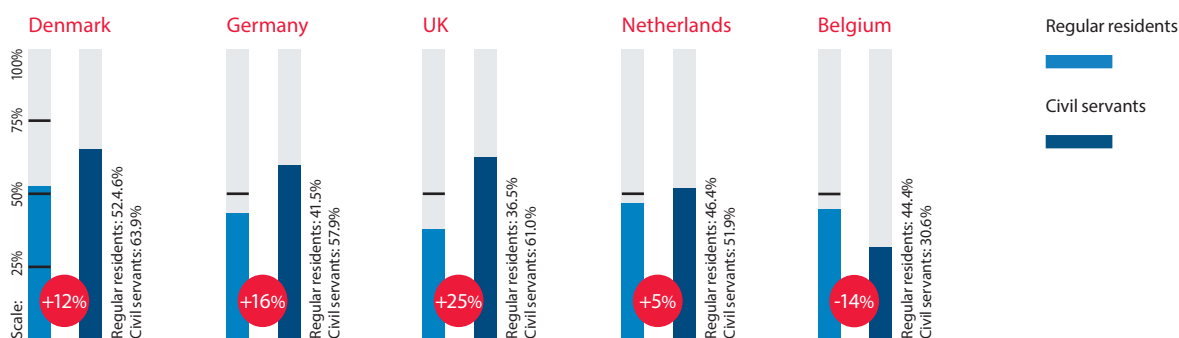
**Fig. 5. Trust in eGovernment**

"In principle, I have trust in the digital services provided by public authorities."



**Fig. 6. Trust in eGovernment - residents vs. civil servants**

in comparison are regular residents and civil servants



# Media competencies & Digitalization progress

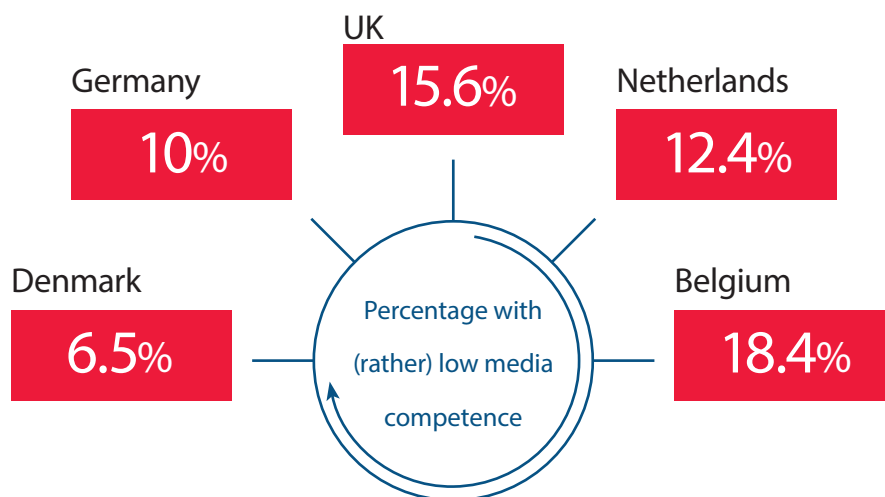
## Cross-country comparison



**Fig. 7. Media competence ratings**

"I am competent in dealing with digital media."

& "In case of problems with applications (e.g., buggy apps), I usually know how to help myself."



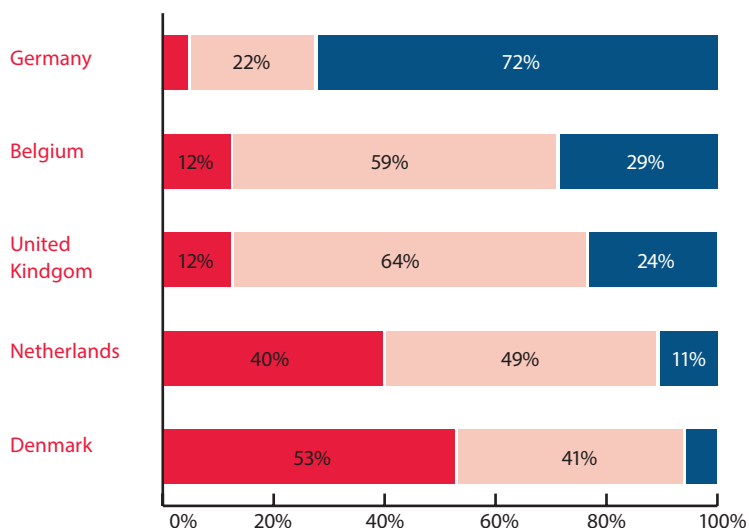
Overall, 70.6% of all participants describe themselves as at least somewhat competent (scales with added item values results in decimal numbers, accordingly values >3.5 are used as separation value) in dealing with digital media issues. It is also interesting to note that the younger the participants are, the more likely they rate their digital competence highly ( $r(842) = -0.27, p < 0.001$ ) - possibly an indication of the media affinity of the so called "digital natives".

With regard to the progress of digitalization processes in a European comparison, Germans see by far the greatest need for action ( $M = 4.03, SD = 0.89$ ). In contrast, both in the Netherlands ( $M = 2.67, SD = 0.75$ ) and in Denmark ( $M = 2.36, SD = 0.91$ ) only few respondents believe that other European countries are further ahead with digitalization processes.



**Fig. 8. Digitalization progress**

"Other European countries are more advanced regarding digitalization processes."



Percentage say "somewhat agree" or "strongly agree"

Percentage say "neither agree or disagree"

Percentage say "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree"



## Trust in authorities

### Cross-country comparison

#### Results

If one turns a close look at the work of public authorities, over half of the total respondents express their trust in them (i.e., 61.4% of the respondents answered with "somewhat agree" or "strongly agree"). Denmark has, again, the highest proportion of those who trust public authorities to a (rather) high degree (80.6%) and Belgium the lowest (36.0%); however, in Belgium the proportion of respondents who are yet indecisive is relatively high; specifically 40.8% opted

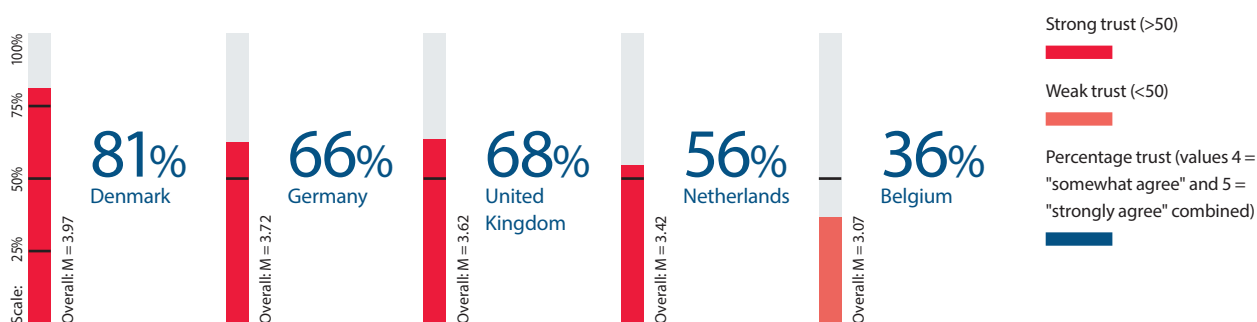
for "neither agree nor disagree"). This trend can also be observed in the general attitude towards public authorities and the attitudes towards data security in public authorities – that means, in countries with a more widespread trust in the work of public authorities, authorities are also seen more positively overall. Considered transnationally, it is shown that trust in public authorities is significantly related to trust in eGovernment services ( $r = 0.44$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, the correlation analysis indicates that the

more negative experiences respondents had with public authorities, the less they trust them ( $r = -0.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); vice versa, trust in authorities also promotes positive experiences with them. On the one hand, it is thus essential not to examine the structures the field of eGovernment in isolation; on the other hand, it is evident that trust is built up based on experience and therefore can only barely be promoted permanently by individual (marketing) measures.



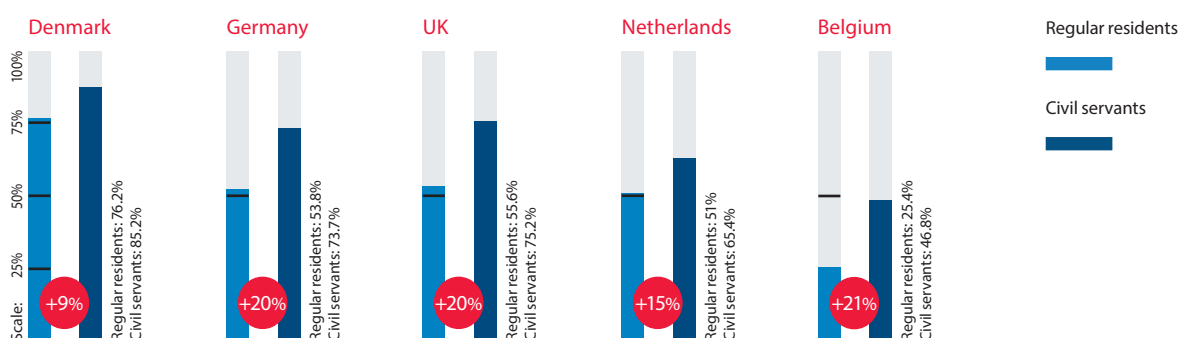
**Fig. 9. Trust in authorities**

"In principle, I have trust in the work of authorities."



**Fig. 10. Trust in authorities - residents vs. civil servants**

in comparison are regular residents and civil servants

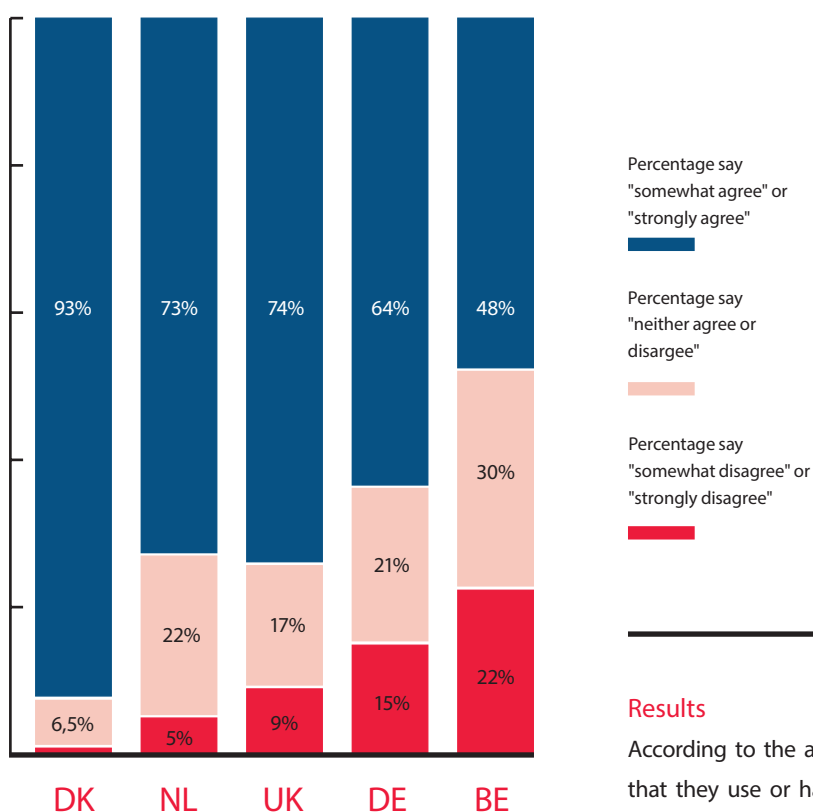






## Results

# Usage of eGovernment Services



**Note.** Usage of eGovernment services was constructed based on: „I have frequently gathered information from authorities via digital media.“, "I have communicated with authorities via digital media.", "I have handled administrative procedures via digital media.", and "I have used online offers to involve citizen's participation (for example petitions)."



**Fig. 11. Usage of eGovernment Services across the North Sea Region**

### Results

According to the analysis, in particular Belgian respondents state that they use or have used digital media from public authorities to a lesser extent (scales with added item values results in decimal numbers, accordingly values  $>3.5$  are used as separation value: after all, almost 48% stated values  $>3.5$ ). In comparison, Denmark uses eGovernmental services much more frequently (92.7%), while the remaining countries are in a medium range (63.9-74.4%). At this point, it should be noted that usage is also determined by the available offers and by the individual concerns of the users.

Nevertheless, the importance of trust becomes apparent: trust in digital services correlates with usage of eGovernmental services ( $r = 0.275$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), accordingly concrete positive experience seems to strengthen trust levels positively, while conversely, trust also promotes the acceptance of these services.

## Lessons learned

# Implications for Research and Practice

"An advancing digital economy and society impacts the routines of people, and this can only work if people trust the organisation that is accountable for that change." (eGovernment benchmark, 2019, p. 6)

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**01.** trust in eGovernment is generally less pronounced across almost all countries compared to "basic trust" in public authorities; sufficient trust for the use of digital services involves both basic trust, and trust in the digital competencies of public authorities and their staff; consequently, it is desirable not to examine eGovernment in isolation and, for example, to use synergies between personal contact to residents and online advice

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**02.** the internal view of the civil servants on the processes of digitalization is consistently more positive compared to the external view; this result gives an indication that the competencies and the commitment of the employees in this regard should be presented more transparently to the public

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**03.** a number of important influencing factors for both trust and eGovernment usage, such as the digital competence of users, can be changed indirectly by the work of public authorities e.g. through education and training; additionally authorities should respond to the different needs of the addressees by offering services that are as compatible as possible

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**04.** the trust experienced is a moderating variable in the perception and acceptance of digital services offered by public authorities; the present results provide an first overview of this context, which will be complemented by further steps in future publications, in particular with regard to differential analysis that take the heterogeneity of the users into account

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### Acknowledgments

We thank our project partners from the Municipality of Groningen, University of Groningen, Province of Drenthe, Municipality of Rotterdam, Municipality of Aalborg, Angus County Council, Suffolk County Council, Municipality of Vechta, and the Municipality of Roeselare for the translation and distribution of the survey and their helpful comments. For more information with regard to the Like! Project or related aspects, please contact us directly or visit our website: <https://northsearegion.eu/like/>

# Final remarks

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