



The political nature of public institutions in disaster management

One of the crucial defining traits of public institutions is their political nature (Frederickson, Pallas, 2; Liu and Horsley, 3). They are established by political decision, are subject to politicians and are strictly regulated by numerous normative acts and individual decisions. Thus, public institutions depend to a great extent on the will of one or several elected officials, who are sensitive to their public popularity ratings. Many times this traps public institutions in “blame games” between politicians. While only one or a few politicians are responsible for the direct results of the institution, political rivals might be tempted to assign blame for any failings not only to that particular politician but also to as widely as possible according to the required political line. According to Frederickson and Pallas (2016, 2): “As a result PSOs often end up in blame games between political actors with little or no chance to protect their own interests”. This phenomenon emerged in Romania, for instance, after the Apuseni plane accident in January 2014, a plane crash which led to two deaths and several injuries of doctors heading to harvest organs for transplantation. At that time, the then-prime-minister Victor Ponta blamed not only the Aviation Authority (ROMATSA) but also the Special Telecommunications Service, even though the latter was not responsible for the rescue operations or for tracking the location of the victims of the crash. Thus, public communication by state institutions must pay attention to the sensitivities of the politicians who are entrusted with supervising it, but also with those of potential future power-holders. Any spill-over effects resulting from any miscommunication are to be crucially avoided. Naturally, one can expect that communication that has any political impact will be avoided as much as possible. Another example of how blame can be assigned on institutions entrusted with disaster management without this having any connection to their actual performance is offered by Brandstrom (2016). She analyses the media framing of the way the government of three Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden and Finland) responded to the 2004 Asian tsunami disaster. She concludes that the actual level of blame put on the respective government for the way they evacuated their citizens was not connected to actual performance. Brandstrom argues that more blame was put on the Swedish Prime-Minister as opposed to the Norwegian and Finnish ones, because the number of Swedish dead had been far higher and because the Prime-Minister had centralized disaster management competences. This led to the emergence of a blame game between the Prime-Minister and the Minister of Foreign affairs, as well as the opening of an official inquiry (Brandstrom 50-54).
Note: See source document for full reference.

Applicable to:

Stakeholders: [Power relations](#), [Norms/values](#)

Disaster Phases: [Prevention](#), [Preparedness](#), [Response](#), [Recovery](#), [All disaster phases](#)

Types of Actors Concerned: [Government](#), [Law enforcement agencies](#), [National civil protection body](#), [Local authorities](#), [Military](#)

Hazards: [Natural hazards](#), [Man-made non-intentional hazards or emergency situations](#), [Man-made intentional hazards](#)

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