Analysis of Freedom of Information Requests on Transparencia.be

Results Report

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Executive Summary

Dataset: 4,265 FOI requests submitted through Transparencia.be (2016-2025).

Key Findings:

- **Low overall success rate (36.3%)** - Only one-third of requests result in disclosure.
- **Nearly half remain unanswered (48.4%)** - The "asleep" category represents a critical bottleneck.
- **Topic matters significantly** - Success rates range from 22% to 47% depending on topic.
- **High-accountability requests face resistance** - Sensitive governance topics have lower success.
- **Authority type predicts outcomes** - Local Territorial Authorities (37%), which handle 78% of requests, outperform Federal Institutions (29%); Provinces/Regions lead (42%) while Social Housing Institutions trail (15%).
- **Request characteristics matter** - Positive tone boosts response likelihood (+18%); longer requests reduce success rate (-29%).

Implications: Belgian public administrations exhibit strategic non-responsiveness, particularly for requests touching sensitive governance areas. The high "asleep" rate points to systemic delays warranting policy attention.

4,265	36.3%	48.4%	15.3%
Total Requests	Success Rate	No Response	Refused

1. Data and Methodology

1.1 Dataset Overview

The original Transparencia.be export contained **5,902 requests** in three languages: French (~85%), Dutch (~13%), and German (~0.3%). For this analysis, we focus on the **French-language corpus**, which after data cleaning and topic modeling quality filters yields a final sample of **4,265 requests** (2016-2025).

Variable	Description	Summary
Request Year	Year of submission	Range: 2016-2025
Request Length	Word count	Mean: 217 words, Range: 19-1,328
Sentiment Score	Normalized tone (z-score)	Mean: 0.03, Range: -5.5 to 6.2
Topic	Thematic classification	6 topics via LDA
Authority Type	Administrative category	12 typologies
Gender	Inferred from name	Male 54%, Female 32%, Unknown 14% (not inferable from name)

1.2 Analytical Approach

Following Trautendorfer et al. (2023), the pipeline includes:

1. **Text Preprocessing:** French-only filtering, lemmatization, boilerplate removal
2. **Topic Modeling:** LDA identifying 6 thematic topics
3. **Sentiment Analysis:** Normalized sentiment scoring
4. **ASP Classification:** Accountability-Seeking Potential levels 2-4
5. **Statistical Analysis:** Chi-square, correlation, multinomial regression

1.3 Response Status Distribution

Status	Count	Percentage
Successful (Disclosed)	1,550	36.3%
Not Successful (Refused)	651	15.3%
Asleep (No Response)	2,064	48.4%

2. Topic Analysis Results

Using LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation), we identified six thematic topics in the request texts. Each topic was assigned an Accountability-Seeking Potential (ASP) level ranging from 2 to 4. ASP measures how much a request pressures the administration for oversight or accountability: Level 2 (Medium) covers routine information requests; Level 3 (Medium-High) involves budget or procurement scrutiny; Level 4 (High) targets sensitive governance areas like police conduct or council decisions. Higher ASP requests are expected to face more administrative resistance.

2.1 Topic Distribution and Success Rates

Topic	ASP	Requests	% Total	Success Rate	vs. Avg
Urban Planning & Neighbourhood Issues	2	739	17.3%	**47.2%**	+10.9
Public Finance Oversight	3	1,058	24.8%	44.4%	+8.1
Public Procurement & Administrative Policing	3	715	16.8%	37.2%	+0.9
Council Deliberations & Transparency	4	515	12.1%	31.7%	-4.7
Police & Administrative Authority Legality	4	372	8.7%	29.6%	-6.8
Governance & Municipal Finance Analysis	3	866	20.3%	**22.2%**	-14.2

Chi-square = 271.43, p < 0.001, Cramer's V = 0.178 (medium effect)

> **Key Finding: Topic significantly predicts success**
>
> Urban Planning & Neighbourhood Issues requests are more than twice as likely to succeed compared to Governance & Municipal Finance Analysis. High-ASP topics (Police & Administrative Authority Legality, Council Deliberations & Transparency) show lower success rates, suggesting strategic non-responsiveness for sensitive governance areas.

2.2 ASP Level and Success

ASP Level	Description	Requests	Success Rate
Level 2	Medium accountability-seeking	739	**47.2%**
Level 3	Medium-High accountability-seeking	2,639	35.2%
Level 4	High accountability-seeking	887	**30.8%**

Spearman r = -0.102, p < 0.001. Higher ASP = lower success probability.

3. Authority Performance

Success rates vary substantially across 12 administrative families.

Authority Type	Requests	Success Rate
Provinces, Regions, Communities, and Regional Ministers	301	**41.9%**
Public Service Operators and Infrastructure Managers	72	38.9%
Local Territorial Authorities and Public Local Entities	3,328	37.3%
Police, Defense, and Public Safety Structures	147	31.3%
Federal Institutions and National Government Bodies	132	28.8%
Regulatory, Supervisory, and Oversight Authorities	23	21.7%
Legislative, Parliamentary, and Judicial Institutions	35	20.0%
Cultural, Touristic, and Promotional Institutions	33	15.2%
Social Housing and Public Residential Institutions	60	**15.0%**

Chi-square = 63.62, p < 0.001

> **Key Finding:** Social Housing and Public Residential Institutions and Cultural, Touristic, and Promotional Institutions (15%) show nearly 3x lower responsiveness than Provinces, Regions, Communities, and Regional Ministers (42%), reflecting differences in institutional capacity or transparency culture.

4. Requester Characteristics

4.1 Gender Analysis

Gender inferred for 85.7% of sample (n = 3,656).

Gender	Requests	Success Rate
Male	2,301	**39.3%**
Female	1,355	34.2%

Chi-square = 18.91, p < 0.001, Cramer's V = 0.072 (statistically significant but small effect)

Topic Preferences: Female requesters focus heavily on Public Procurement (47% vs. 3% male), while males distribute across Public Finance (27%) and Municipal Governance (29%).

5. Predictive Factors

5.1 Multinomial Regression Results

Based on multinomial logistic regression with Asleep as reference category:

Factor	Effect on Successful vs Asleep	Effect on NotSuccessful vs Asleep
Positive Tone (sentiment_z)	OR = 1.18*** (p < 0.001)	OR = 1.20** (p < 0.01)
Request Length (log)	OR = 0.71*** (p < 0.001)	Not significant
ASP Level	OR = 0.70*** (p < 0.001)	OR = 0.74*** (p < 0.001)

Note: Longer requests reduce likelihood of Successful disclosure (vs Asleep), but length is not significant for NotSuccessful outcomes. Year effects are generally insignificant; exceptions in 2024-2025 reflect right-censoring (recent requests remain pending).

Practical Implication

Positive communication tone increases the probability of receiving any response. Longer requests are less likely to obtain successful disclosure but do not affect refusal probability. Higher accountability-seeking requests are systematically less likely to receive any response. These patterns may reflect strategic administrative behavior.

6. Conclusions

1. **Low overall responsiveness:** Only 36% disclosure with 48% receiving no response indicates limited FOI compliance.
2. **Strategic non-responsiveness:** Inverse relationship between accountability-seeking and success suggests administrations avoid sensitive requests.
3. **Institutional variation:** Substantial differences across authority types point to varying transparency cultures.
4. **Communication matters:** Positive tone increases engagement probability across all outcome categories.

These findings provide an empirical foundation for understanding FOI implementation and can inform efforts to improve government transparency in Belgium.