

# Maintaining trust during the COVID-19 pandemic

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing severe lockdown measures led to the largest crisis in the EU since the Second World War, both in terms of the loss of life and the socioeconomic consequences. At the same time, Europe was grappling with another fast-spreading phenomenon: the proliferation of both misinformation (incorrect or misleading information) and disinformation (deliberately deceptive information) on social media.

These developments put national and supranational institutions to the test. As compliance with lockdown measures was a first line of defence against COVID-19, maintaining trust in institutions – including the government, science and the media – was vital to ensure an effective response. However, given the rampant spread of misinformation, governments had to act fast to convince citizens of the need for restrictive measures and the importance of vaccinations.

## Policy context

In response to the socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 restrictions – such as forced inactivity in the labour market – and in a bid to keep businesses and livelihoods afloat, governments were quick to introduce compensatory measures. The EU provided €723.8 billion through the Recovery and Resilience Facility to support reforms and investments in EU Member States and make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the green and digital transitions.

## Key findings

Using data from Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, this report shows that **trust in national institutions** fell sharply between April and July 2020, following the first surge of the pandemic, and continued to decline between October 2020 and March 2021, during the second pandemic surge at the end of 2020 and the third

surge in spring 2021. Evidence from focus group interviews indicated that during the first surge of the pandemic, the initial 'rally around the flag effect' (increased support for governments because of the unprecedented nature of the situation) faded fast. The interviews testified to growing discontent as individuals became concerned about limitations on their freedoms and rights and questioned the effectiveness and consistency of policy responses.

**Trust in the EU** followed a very different path. The NextGenerationEU initiative, a more than €800 billion temporary recovery instrument, triggered a rise in trust among citizens. The greatest increase in trust in the EU was found in the western Mediterranean cluster of countries. This cluster includes Italy and Spain, the two largest beneficiaries of NextGenerationEU funding, and also includes Portugal, another major beneficiary.

The research found that any improvement in trust levels, in particular with trust in national institutions, resulted in a higher rate of **satisfaction with government's policy responses to the pandemic**. Similarly, any decline in trust led to higher rates of discontent with government policy.

The study found that individuals with a high degree of trust in institutions were more likely to be vaccinated, even if they reported being reluctant at the beginning of the **immunisation campaigns**. Respondents with high levels of trust in national institutions responded positively to all of the cited reasons for getting vaccinated, except for it being required at work and social pressure. The strongest reasons for getting vaccinated included 'protecting myself and others' and 'ending the pandemic'. The same respondents only considered one reason for not getting vaccinated: having already had COVID-19. These respondents with high levels of trust did not believe that the COVID-19 vaccine would make health issues worse.

Levels of **social trust**, which refers to respondents' views on whether other people can be trusted, are not related to the likelihood of having a COVID-19 vaccination. Individuals showing higher levels of social trust may have been more likely to get vaccinated to protect others. However, they equally may also have been less likely to get vaccinated

because they were counting on other people to reach herd immunity (a sort of free-rider effect).

In terms of **trust in the media**, traditional media is more trusted by those who cite it as their main news source, and similarly, social media is trusted more by those who prefer using it. The latter group tended to have lower institutional trust and lower satisfaction with their governments' measures to contain COVID-19.

In the focus groups, some participants felt that the media provoked fear through daily news stories on mortality rates. At the same time, some participants felt that **traditional media** did not answer their questions or inform the public clearly. For this reason, they preferred to get their information from other sources, including newer media channels and **social media**.

## Policy pointers

- Policy actors in most countries did not immediately understand the urgency of the situation, which delayed the implementation of precautionary measures. Future crises of this complexity will require new and better forms of crisis management.
- The mix of measures that governments took during the pandemic, including restrictions and compensatory measures, may not have always benefited everyone who needed them. Therefore, measures taken should be evaluated for their effectiveness, efficiency and proportionality.
- Non-pharmaceutical actions, including lockdowns and social distancing, had far-reaching effects on individuals. After the initial phase, these measures prompted outbursts of 'reactance', a strong emotional rejection of the measures, and eroded trust in institutions. This suggests that sufficient attention must be paid to devising and implementing responsible exit strategies and communicating clearly about changing circumstances.
- The communication strategies adopted by institutions can influence trust. Tackling both misinformation (incorrect or misleading information) and disinformation (deliberately deceptive information) on social media platforms should be a priority.
- The evidence shows that low institutional trust is linked to low rates of vaccination uptake. Given that trust in the health system and the pharmaceutical industry is particularly pertinent in this context, policymakers should engage in clear and continuous communication about vaccines and their side-effects.
- Addressing the economic concerns of citizens is crucial. Governments must ensure a fair and inclusive recovery from the pandemic, providing equal access to education and training, employment, affordable housing and social security in the context of the just transition framework, where no person or region is left behind.
- During the pandemic, trust in the EU remained quite high, and even increased with the announcement of its recovery plan, indicating that the EU can play an important role when crises occur.

### Further information

The report *Maintaining trust during the COVID-19 pandemic* is available at <https://eurofound.link/ef22001>

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