FACTSHEET

Living, working and COVID-19 (Update April 2021): Mental health and trust decline across EU as pandemic enters another year

Introduction

To capture the economic and social effects of the coronavirus pandemic, Eurofound launched a large-scale online survey across the European Union (EU) in April 2020. Entitled *Living, working and COVID-19*, the aim of the survey was to investigate the impact on well-being, health and safety, work and telework, people's work–life balance and financial situation. To date, three rounds of the survey have been fielded. Launched in April 2020, when a large part of European society was shut down following the onset of the crisis, the survey set out to gauge the immediate social and economic effects. A second round took place three months later, in July 2020, when society across Europe began to re-open again following the first, intense lockdown. The third and latest round was fielded in February and March 2021 during a resurgence of COVID-19 cases, leading to further or extended lockdowns in many Member States.

This factsheet presents a selection of main findings from the latest round of the e-survey and provides a picture of how the social and economic situation of Europeans has evolved during one year of closures and restrictions. While the rapid development and rollout of vaccines across Europe gives reason to hope that the end of the pandemic is now a real possibility, delays in their delivery as well as unforeseen health risks have slowed down the vaccination process, further stalling the full re-opening of society.

The Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey is open to anyone aged 18 and over with access to the internet and to date almost 190,000 responses have been collected.[1] *Acknowledging that the sampling methodology is non-probabilistic, the data are weighted to reflect the demographic profile of the sample in terms of age, gender, region and education of each Member State and for the European Union as a whole. As such, the e-survey provides useful insights into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's lives, allowing for comparisons between countries, different groups of respondents and, importantly, between the three rounds.*[2] *The third round includes new questions about people's own experience of the disease, attitudes about the vaccines and the vaccination programmes, trust in science and pharmaceutical companies, and the use of and trust in social media.*

A year of closures and restrictions

By March 2021, most Europeans had experienced a full year of restrictions on economic activity, mobility and social interactions, with several countries going through a series of full lockdowns. Early responses by governments were similar, with strict measures introduced straightaway, followed by a divergence of measures that depended on health and economic data.[3] Overall, however, much of Europe was under comparatively strict lockdown in spring 2021. This section will highlight some of the most important developments in European society during the past year in terms of employment, working from home, schooling, well-being and access to healthcare.

Job loss during pandemic shows no sign of recovery

A year after the first businesses closed due to the outbreak of COVID-19, 10% of respondents who had been employed before the pandemic were now unemployed, an increase of two percentage points from the situation in the summer of 2020 (8%) and double the figure of spring 2020 (5%) (Figure 1).[4]

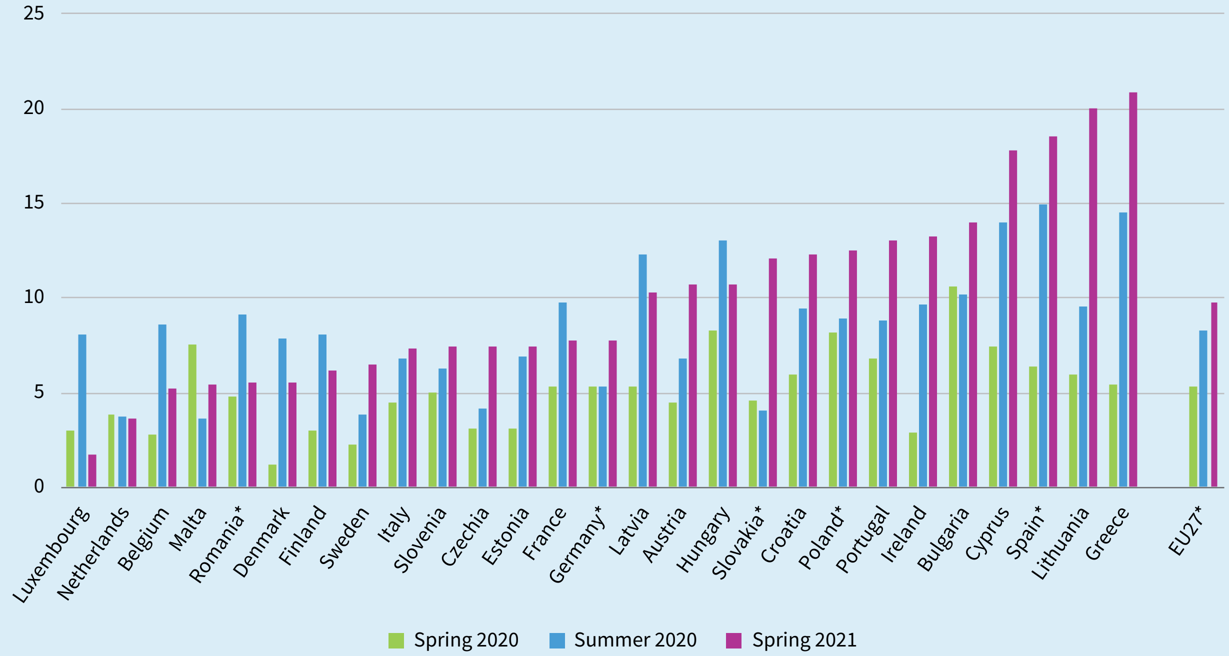
1 For the EU27, the sample consists of 138,629 cleaned responses: 67,685 from round 1, 24,144 from round 2 and 46,800 from round 3.

2 This report presents findings from the cross-sectional analyses of the three rounds of data collection carried out to date. However, the e-survey also includes a panel component, whereby the evolution of the same respondent can be tracked over time. For further information on methodology, please see https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/topic/covid-19

3 Evidence from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, cited in The Conversation, 24 March 2021: What we learned from tracking every COVID policy in the world.

4 Data from Eurostat show that in addition to the usual peaks in the number of absences from work in early January, mid-August and late December, there were two further peaks in April and November 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Eurostat News, 24 April 2021: Temporary lay-offs from work record high in 2020).

Figure 1: Respondents who lost their job (of those who were employed before the pandemic) by country, EU27 (%)



Notes: **Statistically significant difference (p=0.05) compared to summer 2020. In round 1, data are based on the question 'During the COVID-19 pandemic have you lost your job(s)/contract(s)?'(answer: Yes, permanently). In rounds 2 and 3, the data are based on current employment status compared with employment status in the month before the pandemic began.*

In spring 2021, men were more likely to be still unemployed after losing their job during the pandemic than was the case in the summer of 2020 (10% compared with 8%), while no such increase was measured for women. Young people aged 18–29 were most likely to have lost their job, with 17% now unemployed compared with 9% of those 30 or over.

At the same time, job insecurity among those who had a job (feeling that it was 'very likely' or 'rather likely' that they would lose their job in the next three months) was worst at the beginning of the pandemic (33%), improved significantly by the summer (24%) and worsened again in the spring 2021 lockdown (26%). Job insecurity in spring 2021 was relatively similar across genders and age groups.

Fewer people working from home, while appetite for it increases

Despite more severe restrictions being imposed throughout Europe in early 2021 compared to summer 2020, the e-survey results show that teleworking was now less prevalent (Table 1). In spring 2021, working exclusively from home was most common in Ireland (48%) and least common in Croatia (9%) and Bulgaria (10%), while the largest drop in working only from home was recorded in Spain (from 46% to 21%) and Italy (from 48% to 26%). In several other countries, the incidence of working from home increased, notably in the Netherlands (from 22% to 37%).[5]

Meanwhile, the proportion of people who worked exclusively from the employer's premises increased in most countries, especially in Denmark (from 41% to 66%) and Cyprus (from 43% to 67%). There was an increase in the proportion of people combining working from the employer's premises and from home in spring 2021 – a mode of work that was markedly more common in western than in eastern Member States, especially in Austria, Finland, France, Luxembourg, Malta and the Netherlands.

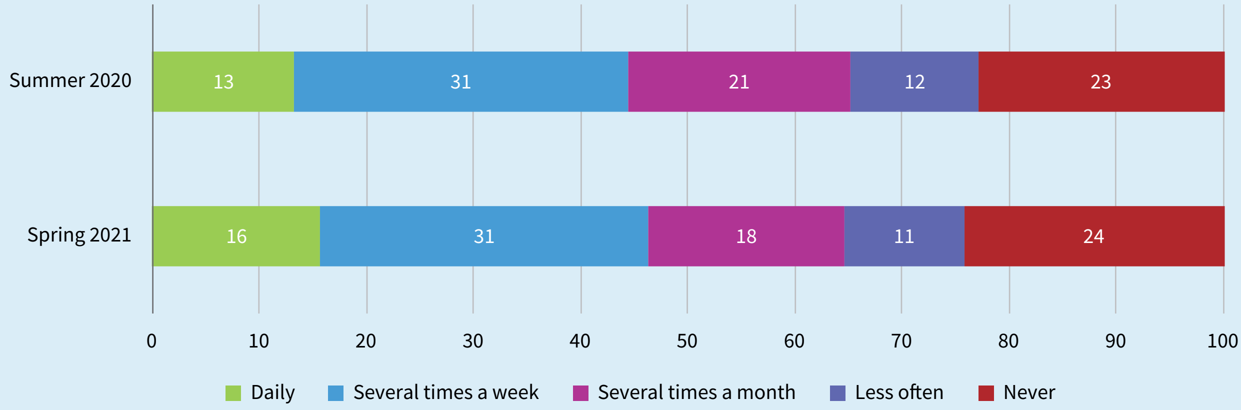
Table 1: Location of work and average hours worked during the pandemic, EU27 (%)

	Summer 2020	Spring 2021
Home only	34	24
Combination of home and employer's premises/other locations	14	18
Employer's premises/other locations only	52	59
Average % of hours worked from home (overall)	35	36
Average % of hours worked from home (for people who worked from home)	77	73

While the incidence of working from home has declined in the latest phase of the pandemic, the preference to do so every day has increased since summer 2020 (Figure 2). Most employees still express a preference to combine working from home and from the employer's premises. The most popular choice being to work from home several times a week.

5 The figures for the Netherlands are in line with a large nationally representative study that found that 35% of employees were working exclusively from home in November 2020 (TNO: *De impact van de COVID-19 pandemie op werknemers*).

Figure 2: Preference to work from home post-pandemic, EU27 (%)



While in summer 2020 the wish to telework over the long term (at least several times a week) was similar among men (44%) and women (45%), by spring 2021 women were more likely to have this preference (49% compared with 43% of men). In the period from summer 2020 to spring 2021, the increase in the preference to work from home was strongest among those currently working only from home (from 62% to 73%), but it was also significant among those who were currently combining working from home and from the employers' premises (43% to 53%). There was no change in view among those working only at their employer's premises (26%), which in part probably reflects the types of jobs that cannot be done from home.

Poorer work–life balance for women with young children

The difference between men and women in terms of work–life balance, particularly for parents of young children, has been documented in recent times and is confirmed in all three rounds of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey.

As the pandemic progressed, the biggest increase among parents reporting they were too tired after work to do household tasks was found among women with young children, particularly women with young children who worked only from home (Table 2).

On the other hand, being worried about work when not working decreased through the three e-survey rounds, from 29% to 24% for men, and from 31% to 28% for women. This suggests that workers may have improved in their ability to separate their work time from their free time the longer they worked from home.

Most parents have had enough of online schooling

In spring 2021, over half of all parents (57%) indicated that their children participated in online schooling. In five countries, the rate was over 80% (Lithuania, Romania, Greece, Portugal and Slovenia), while in France it was just 25%.

In general, parents seem to have become frustrated with online schooling by spring 2021. While in mid-2020, 29% of parents said they were satisfied with online schooling, this has now decreased to 26%. Parents were also less likely to agree that online schooling was a positive experience for their children (30% in 2020 compared with 24% in 2021) and for them as parents (25% compared with 20%), particularly for women working exclusively from home (from 29% to 21%).

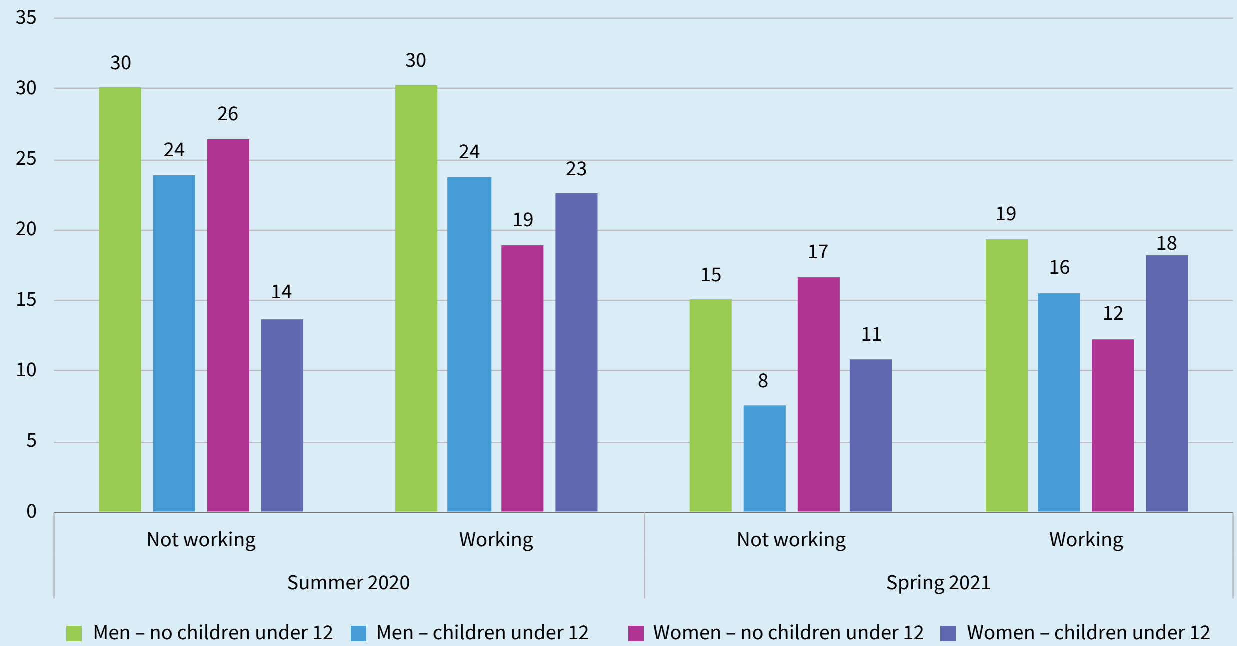
By spring 2021, only 16% of parents say that they would like more online schooling in the future for their children – this compares with nearly a quarter (23%) in the middle of 2020. Men with young children who are currently not working are the least likely to express a desire for online schooling (Figure 3).

Table 2: Proportion of parents declaring they are too tired after work to do household jobs, EU27 (%)

			Summer 2020	Spring 2021
Men	No children under 12	Worked from employer's premises	25	26
		Worked only from home	23	23
	Children under 12	Worked from employer's premises	27	20
		Worked only from home	24	24
Women	No children under 12	Worked from employer's premises	30	36
		Worked only from home	30	30
	Children under 12	Worked from employer's premises	38	44
		Worked only from home	31	39

Notes: *Green = lowest value, red = highest value.*

Figure 3: Proportion of parents declaring they would like more online schooling for their children, even when the pandemic is over, EU27 (%)



Note: *Changes over time are statistically significant for all groups of parents, except for women who have small children and are not employed.*

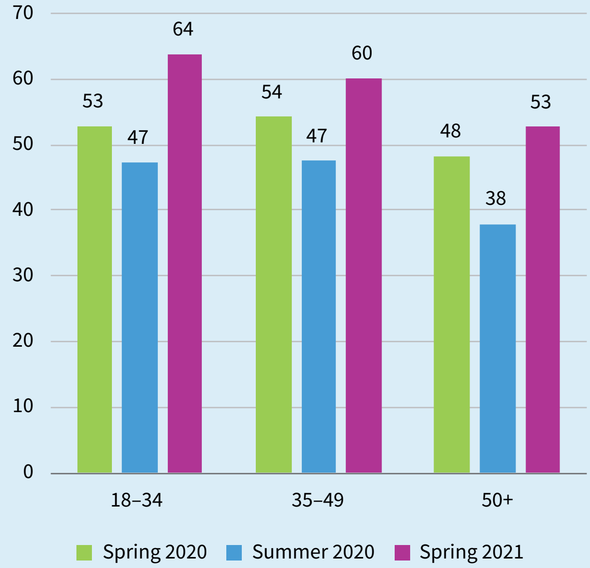
Fall in mental well-being across all social groups

The e-survey records a decline in mental well-being in the EU as a whole, measured using the WHO-5 mental well-being scale (0–100), based on the frequency of positive feelings over the previous two weeks. Mental well-being was found to have decreased from 53 to 45 on average across the EU27 between e-survey rounds 2 and 3 in summer 2020 and spring 2021, after having improved from early in the pandemic (49 in round 1). The deterioration in mental health is especially evident among those who have lost their job: in summer 2020, this group had a WHO-5 score of 42 but in spring 2021 it plummeted to 35.

A significant decrease in mental well-being is recorded across all age groups since summer 2020, with WHO-5 scores for all groups now below those recorded in spring 2020, during the first lockdown. As in the previous e-survey rounds, people aged 50 years or over have better mental well-being scores in round 3 than younger groups (47 compared with 43 for those aged 18–34 and 49 for those aged 35–49), but this older group also experienced a large drop in average mental well-being (from 55 in summer 2020 to 47 in spring 2021). As Figure 4 illustrates, almost two-thirds of people (64%) in the youngest age group (18–34 years) are at risk of depression.

Well-being among women between rounds 2 and 3 decreased from 51 to 44 and among men from 55 to 47 (not illustrated). Across age and gender groups, the lowest mental well-being in spring 2021 is registered among women aged 18–24 and women aged 35–44 (41 for both groups), though the largest drop in mental well-being occurred among men aged 18–24 (from 54 in summer 2020 to 44 in spring 2021).

Figure 4: Risk of depression by age group and e-survey round, EU27 (%)



Note: *Based on WHO-5 mental well-being index. People with a WHO-5 score of 50 or lower are considered to be at risk of depression.*

In spring 2021, there was an overall increase in negative feelings, such as tension/anxiety, loneliness, and feeling downhearted and depressed, across most social groups in the EU (Table 3). An increase in depressive feelings was recorded particularly among younger groups (+13 percentage points for both young men and women), while the highest increase in loneliness was recorded for women over 50 (+13 percentage points).

Table 3: Proportion of respondents reporting having negative feelings by age and gender, EU27 (%)

		Summer 2020			Spring 2021		
		Tense	Lonely	Depressed	Tense	Lonely	Depressed
Men	18–34 years	34	25	21	46	35	34
	35–49 years	30	21	19	41	31	32
	50+ years	22	18	15	28	26	23
Women	18–34 years	45	30	28	52	38	40
	35–49 years	38	22	27	49	34	39
	50+ years	24	18	17	35	30	29

Notes: *Green = lowest value, red = highest value. All differences between the two time periods are statistically significant. Any discrepancies between the figures in the text and table are due to rounding.*

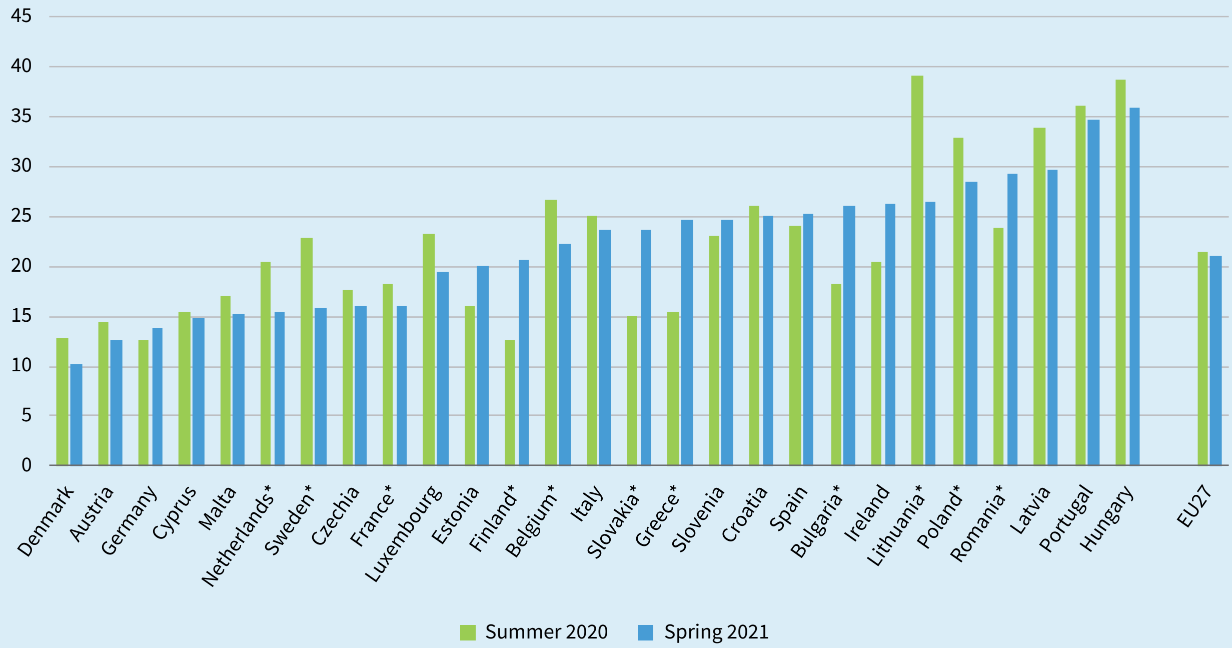
Disruptions to essential health services

The pandemic initially disrupted the provision of public services, including essential healthcare, preventive screening and mental healthcare. While healthcare provision in general returned relatively quickly in most countries, the e-survey data show that there are still issues with healthcare access in parts of Europe. Over a fifth (21%) of respondents have missed a medical examination or treatment during the pandemic – this proportion remaining similar across the EU in rounds 2 and 3 – while there was an increase in several countries and a decrease in others (Figure 5). Significantly, the unmet need for healthcare was most common in Hungary, Portugal and Latvia, with a worsening situation since last year in some countries and an improvement in others (notably in Lithuania).

The main reason given for lack of healthcare access in spring 2021 was that appointments were not available due to the pandemic, followed by the existence of waiting lists – the same top two reasons cited in summer 2020.

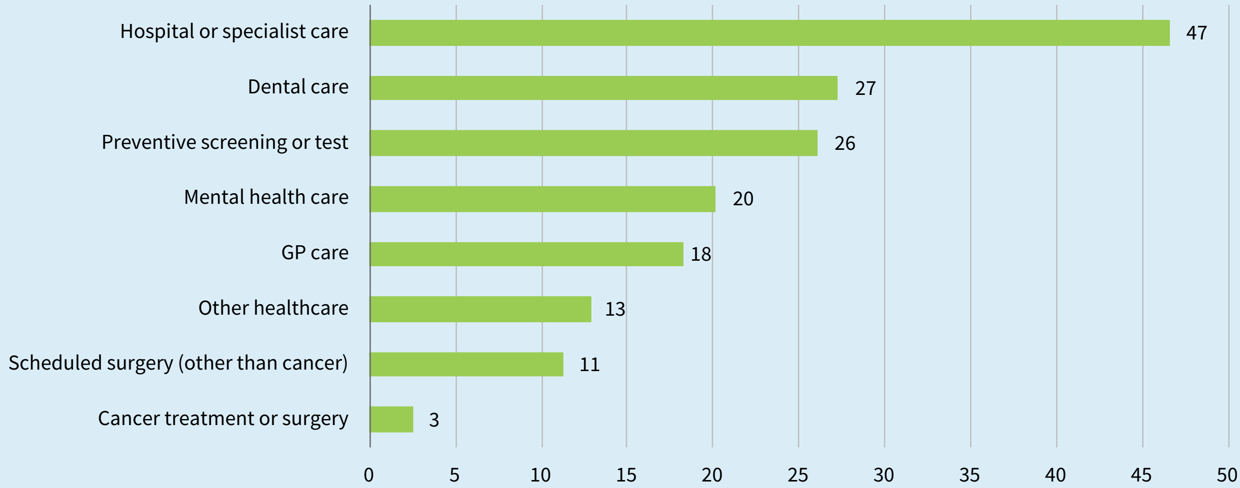
In the latest e-survey round, 18% of respondents across the EU as a whole answered 'yes' to the question as to whether they still currently have a medical issue for which they could not get treatment. Positive answers were most common in Hungary (36%), Poland (32%) and Latvia (29%), while this was the lowest concern in Denmark (6%) and Czechia (8%). Figure 6 illustrates the most common types of unmet healthcare need measured at EU level in spring 2021.

Figure 5: Unmet need for healthcare during the pandemic by country, EU27 (%)



Note: *In summer 2020, the reference period was 'since the pandemic began' while in spring 2021 it was 'during the past 12 months'.*

Figure 6: Unmet need for healthcare by type of healthcare, spring 2021, EU27 (%)



Satisfaction with support measures

In rounds 2 and 3 of the e-survey, respondents were asked about the kinds of support they had requested or received during the pandemic. In addition, they were asked whether they were satisfied with the support measures introduced during the pandemic.

Increased need for support, coupled with delays and unmet needs

Overall, by the spring of 2021, 38% of people had requested support of some kind or another during the pandemic. A third (33%) received at least one type of support, while 7% have had at least one request rejected.

Turning to Figure 7, it is evident that during the pandemic many people sought support from public authorities, NGOs, charities as well as friends and family. In the case of many support types, claim rates have increased since the summer of 2020. In terms of support from public authorities, by the spring of 2021, roughly one in ten Europeans had (successfully or unsuccessfully) claimed unemployment benefit, support with expenses, or other support from public services to help with living expenses or household needs.

Despite the widespread adoption of extraordinary support measures, it is clear that there was a large degree of unmet need for support. For example, in spring 2021, one-third of those who had requested support with expenses had had their request rejected. In addition, high demand and processing delays probably explain the relatively high numbers of individuals who await decisions to be made about support. The findings show that, by the spring of 2021, one in ten people who had requested paid sick or care leave were still awaiting a decision.

Table 4 presents the proportions of people who have (successfully or unsuccessfully) claimed or requested different types of support since the start of the pandemic, by current employment status. As the table shows, unemployed people are the most likely to request most support types. In addition to business-related support, over a fifth of self-employed people have requested support with non-business expenses, and this group, along with unemployed people, have made the most requests for wage support (11%).

One in ten employed Europeans have also requested wage support or paid sick leave or paid care leave. The same level of demand for paid sick or care leave is also seen among people who are unable to work due to a long-term illness or disability – a group also likely to request support in the form of other types of public services, and support from NGOs and charities. Retired individuals are the least likely to request any type of support.

The huge need for support in European society in general is reflected in the extent of support sought from relatives and friends. Overall, the e-survey shows that one-fifth (20%) of all respondents have looked for this informal support, and relatively few have had these requests rejected. The groups most likely to look for support from relatives and friends are unemployed people (44%), students (32%) and people who are unable to work due to a long-term illness or disability (31%).

Figure 7: Requests for different types of support measures, summer 2020 and spring 2021, EU27 (%)

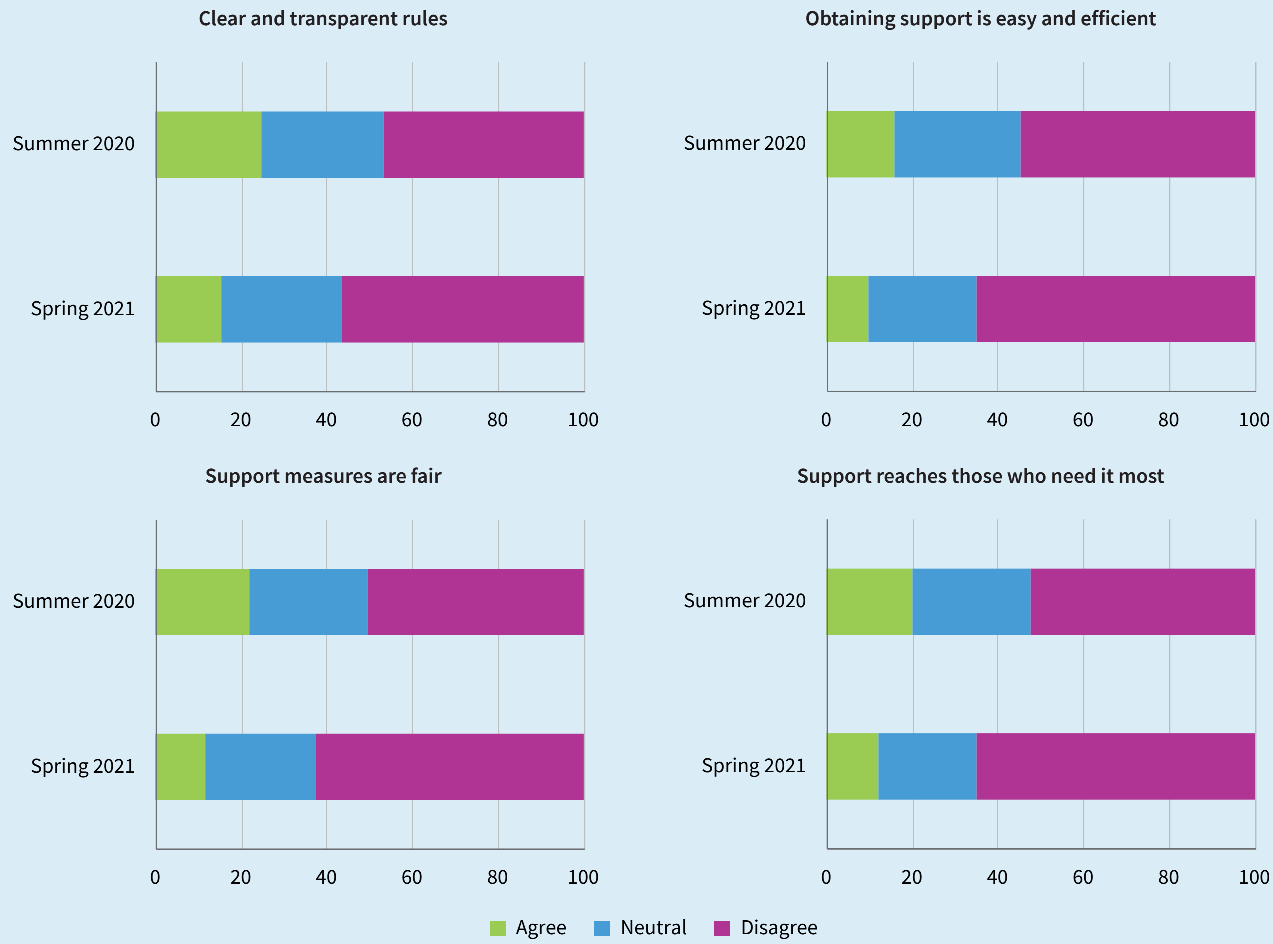
Notes: *Support with expenses: Deferral, reduction or cancellation of tax, bill, mortgage, loan or debt payments; For business: support with expenses: Deferral, reduction or cancellation of tax, bill, loan or debt payments; Other support from public services: Help with living expenses or household needs (e.g. benefits, allowances, vouchers, food).*

Table 4: Request for support by employment status, EU27 (%)

	Employed	Self-employed	Unemployed	Ill/disabled	Retired	Homemaker	Student
Support with expenses	7	22	23	11	4	9	4
For business: support with expenses	0	26	0	0	0	0	0
Unemployment benefit	6	5	54	11	1	5	4
Wage support	9	11	11	5	1	3	3
Paid sick leave/paid care leave	10	3	8	10	1	5	2
State aid to businesses	0	38	0	0	0	0	0
Other support from public services	5	10	28	21	5	13	14
Support from NGOs and charities	2	3	14	11	2	6	4
Support from relatives or friends	13	26	44	31	12	25	32

Note: *See notes to Figure 7. The table shows the sum of 'Have received', 'Have requested but have not yet received' and 'Have requested but the request was rejected'.*

Figure 8: Views about pandemic support measures, summer 2020 and spring 2021, EU27 (%)



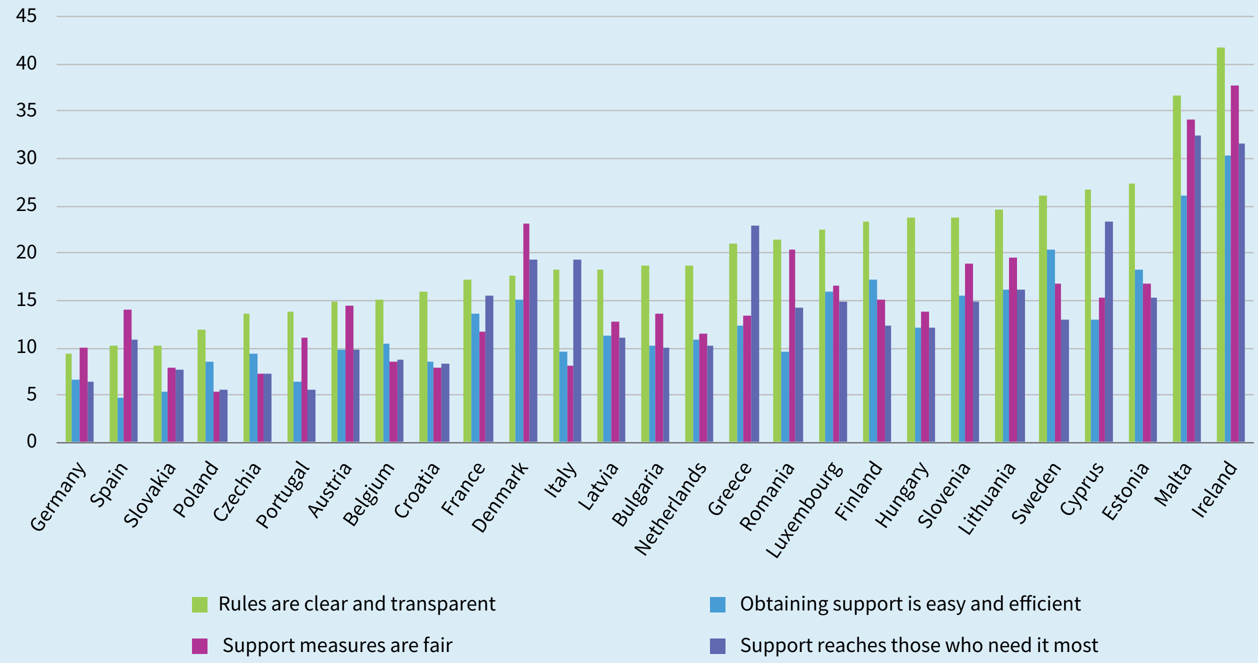
Declining satisfaction with pandemic support measures

The public's satisfaction with support measures has fallen markedly since the summer of 2020. In rounds 2 and 3 of the e-survey, respondents were asked to give their views about the extent to which the pandemic support measures and the administrative procedures to obtain them are clear, easy, efficient, fair and well-targeted.

As Figure 8 illustrates, in summer 2020, 16% of all respondents agreed with the statement that obtaining support is easy and efficient. By spring 2021, this figure had fallen to 10%. Meanwhile, the share of respondents holding the view that the support measures reach those who need them most dropped from 20% to 12% over the same period. The decline in perceptions of transparency and fairness is even more acute: the share affirming that the rules for obtaining support are clear and transparent fell from 25% to 15%, while the share expressing the view that the support measures are fair fell by almost 50% – from 22% to 12%.

Examining data from the spring 2021 round of the e-survey, Figure 9 highlights differences in levels of satisfaction with pandemic support measures across Member States. It is evident that, while satisfaction with support measures is low and declining over time, there are considerable cross-country differences. For example, particularly low satisfaction was evident in Czechia, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain (where no statement reached agreement from 15% of people). Conversely, all statements reached at least a 15% agreement level in Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Slovenia.

Figure 9: Views about pandemic support measures by country, spring 2021, EU27 (%)



Impact on people's financial situation

Rise in financial inequality

The e-survey provides an insight into people's financial resilience during the pandemic – over 50% of respondents can be classified as having a financially fragile situation, meaning in this context that without an income their savings would not be enough to maintain their usual standard of living for more than three months.[6] While overall there has been little change since the start of the pandemic in levels of financial fragility, this varies considerably according to people's socio-economic position.

As Table 5 shows, the proportion of workers who are financially fragile is almost the same as in summer 2020 but lower than one year ago. There are considerable differences between employees with a permanent and temporary contract, even if the gap between the two groups is now narrower. For unemployed respondents, including those who lost their job during the pandemic, the proportion that is financially fragile is higher in spring 2021 compared to summer 2020. The e-survey also points to an increase in the share of retired respondents who are financially fragile.

Table 5: Proportion of financially fragile respondents by employment status, EU27 (%)

	Spring 2020	Summer 2020	Spring 2021
EU27	**57**	**53**	**54**
Employee	57	51	50
Employee with permanent contract	Not asked	50	49
Employee with temporary contract	Not asked	67	62*
Self-employed	55	47	48
Retired	48	47	53*
Unemployed	74	73	77*
Lost job during pandemic	78	72	75*
Requested and received financial support	Not asked	64	64
Requested but did not receive financial support	Not asked	77	81*

Note: *The survey question was: 'If your household would not receive any income, how long would your household be able to maintain the same standard of living?' The table shows the sum of 'no savings' and 'less than 3 months'. *Statistically significant difference (p=0.05) compared to summer 2020.*

6 Financial fragility is a concept used by Demertzis, Domínguez-Jiménez and Lusardi in their article on whether a household's lack of capacity to face shocks could itself become a source of financial instability: Bruegel, 2 July 2020: The financial fragility of European households in the time of COVID-19.

Financial fragility is widespread among those whose request for some form of financial support had been rejected, and is higher in spring 2021 than in summer 2020: 52% of this group reported they had no savings at all and 29% indicated that they would not be able to get by on savings alone for more than three months.[7]

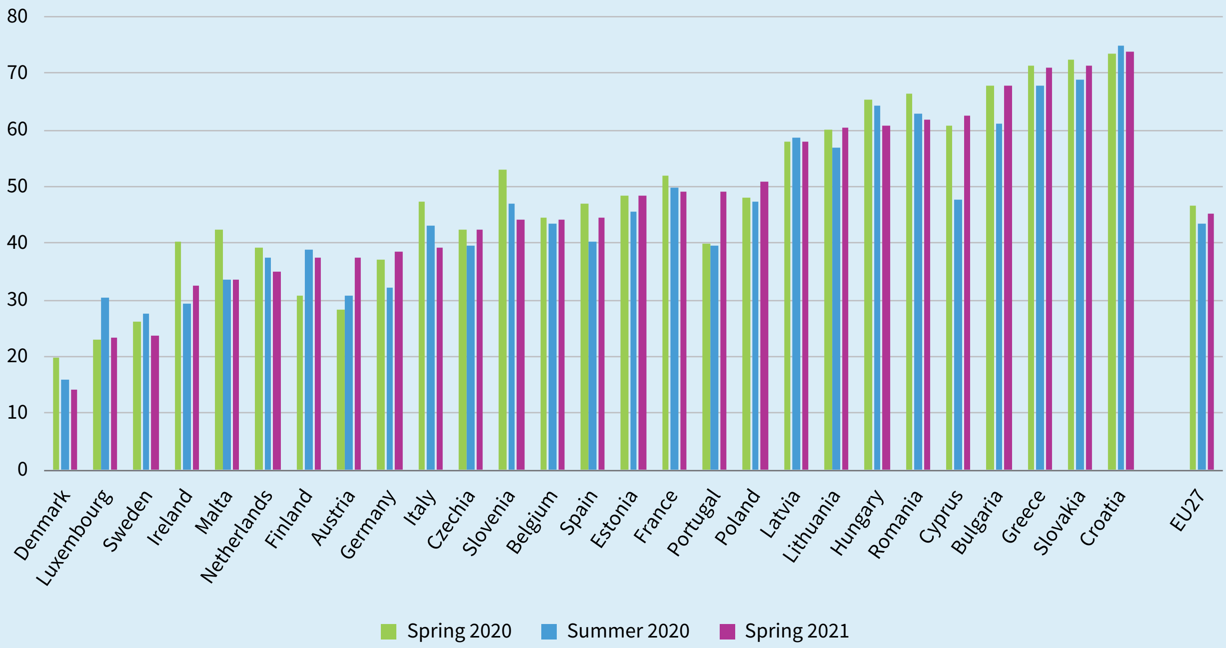
Further sociodemographic comparisons show that the proportion of respondents in a financially fragile situation (not illustrated) went up from 51% to 55% for those aged 50 and older between summer 2020 and spring 2021, while it decreased among those aged 18–34 (from 52% to 48%). Among those aged 35-49, there was no change.

Most vulnerable finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet

As has been well documented in official statistics and large probability-based surveys such as Eurofound's European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), the financial situation of households varies considerably between Member States. The e-survey displays a similar pattern. Using 'making ends meet' as a subjective proxy, the e-survey shows that in spring 2021 those reporting that their household has difficulties making ends meet ranges widely, from 14% in Denmark to 74% in Croatia (Figure 10).

Significant increases in the proportion reporting difficulties making ends meet are recorded among respondents that were already in a more precarious situation. Over 8 in 10 people who requested financial support but did not receive it, who lost their job during the pandemic or who are unemployed report in spring 2021 that their household has difficulties making ends meet. Retired respondents are also now more likely to report difficulties while the situation for employees and self-employed people did not change significantly between summer 2020 and spring 2021.

Figure 10: Proportion of respondents reporting difficulties making ends meet by country, EU27 (%)



Notes: *The survey question was: 'A household may have different sources of income and more than one household member may contribute to it. Thinking of your household's total monthly income, is your household able to make ends meet…?' The figure shows the sum of 'With great difficulty', 'With difficulty' and 'With some difficulty'.*

7 The financial support measure consists of the following five items: deferral, reduction or cancellation of tax, bill, mortgage, loan or debt payments; unemployment benefit; wage support; paid sick or paid care leave; other support from public services to help with living expenses or household needs. In spring 2021, 27% of respondents indicated that they requested one or more of these forms of financial support.

Table 6: Proportion of respondents reporting difficulties making ends meet by employment status, EU27 (%)

	Spring 2020	Summer 2020	Spring 2021
EU27	**47**	**44**	**45**
Employee	41	36	35
Employee with permanent contract	Not asked	35	35
Employee with temporary contract	Not asked	38	34*
Self-employed	58	49	46
Retired	42	40	45*
Financially fragile	69	67	69
Unemployed	80	79	81
Lost job during pandemic	80	77	83*
Requested and received financial support	Not asked	56	56
Requested but did not receive financial support	Not asked	79	84*

Notes: *For information on the survey question, see notes to Figure 10. *Statistically significant difference (p=0.05) compared to summer 2020.*

Utility bills are a problem for 4 out of 10 unemployed respondents

In spring 2021, more respondents reported they were behind with their utility bills and with telephone, mobile and internet payments than in the previous round of the e-survey (summer 2020). As Table 7 shows, financially fragile respondents report being in arrears more often than average. However, as in the previous two rounds of the e-survey, the proportion of respondents reporting payment problems is even higher among the unemployed – 77% of this group are classified as being financially fragile. The spring 2021 round of the e-survey points to a further rise in the proportion of unemployed respondents reporting arrears in utility bills, telephone, mobile or internet connection payments, and informal loans. The proportion that is behind with rent or mortgage payments has gone up again to the same level recorded in spring 2020.

Less pessimism about personal financial situation

The proportion of respondents who negatively assess both their past and future financial situation decreased in the third round of the e-survey compared to the two earlier rounds. In spring 2021, just over a quarter of respondents (26%) believe their financial situation got worse in the past three months or will get worse in the next three months – this compares with almost four in 10 (38%) having this view at the onset of the pandemic and just over a third (34%) in summer 2020. This more positive assessment holds for most sociodemographic groups, in terms of both their past and future financial situation.

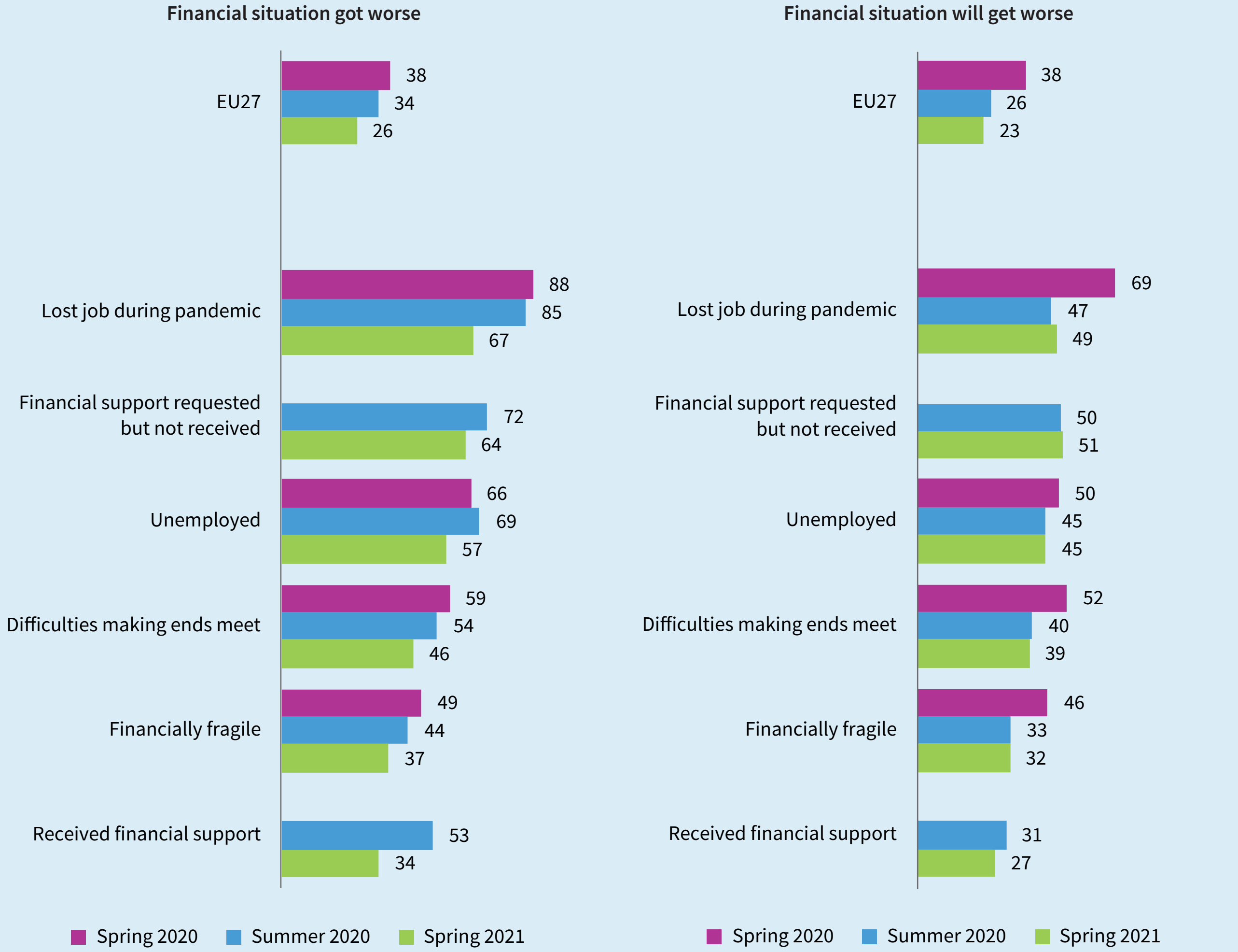
Figures 11 and 12 show the results of all three rounds, broken down by different economic situation and by country.

Table 7: Proportion of respondents reporting arrears by group, EU27 (%)

	EU27 Average			Financially fragile respondents			Unemployed respondents		
Arrears	**Spring 2020**	**Summer 2020**	**Spring 2021**	**Spring 2020**	**Summer 2020**	**Spring 2021**	**Spring 2020**	**Summer 2020**	**Spring 2021**
Rent/mortgage	8	8	8	14	14	14	23	20	23*
Utility bills	11	11	13*	18	19	22*	29	33	39*
Consumer loans	10	10	10	18	17	17	25	25	25
Telephone/mobile/internet	9	9	10*	14	15	17*	24	29	31*
Informal loans	9	9	9	15	15	15	21	22	25*
Healthcare/insurance	7	8	8	11	13	13	17	23	21

Notes: *The survey question was: 'Has your household been in arrears at any time during the past 3 months, that is, unable to pay as scheduled any of the following? Rent or mortgage payments, utility bills, payments related to loans, telephone, mobile or internet bills, payments related to informal loans from friends or relatives, payments for healthcare or health insurance, student loans.' *Statistically significant difference (p=0.05) compared to summer 2020.*

Figure 11: Pessimism about financial situation by economic situation, EU27 (%)

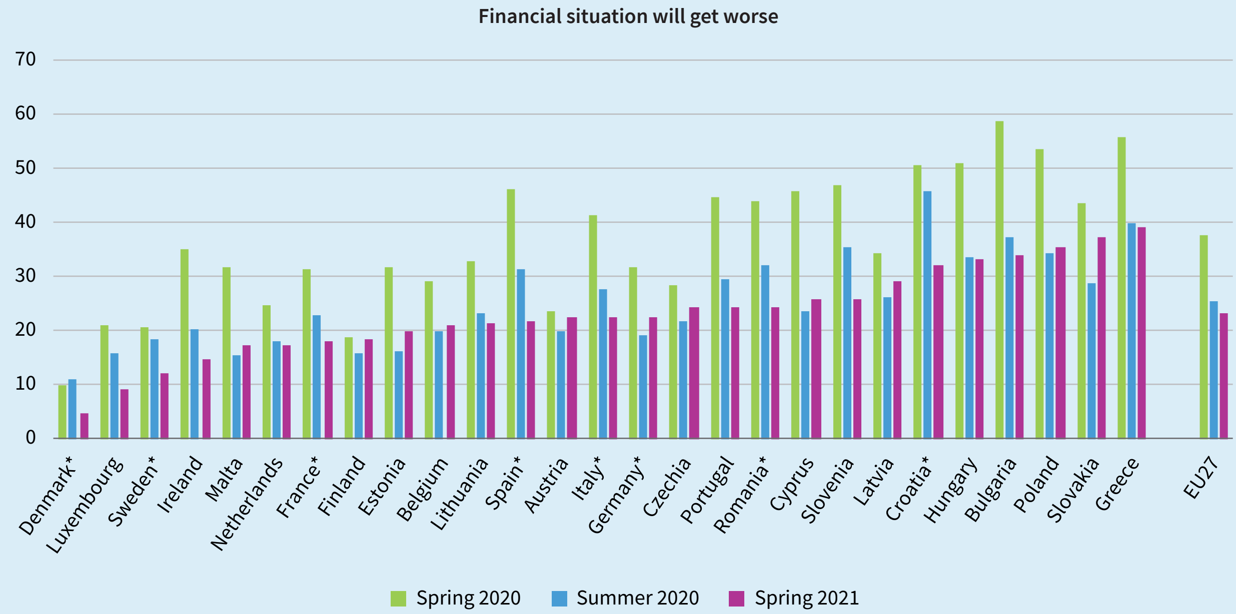


Note: *Questions about financial support were not asked in round 1.*

Respondents who received financial support are now less likely to indicate that their financial situation has got worse (-19 percentage points between summer 2020 and spring 2021). There is also a drop in the proportion of this group of respondents (those who received financial support) who state they are negative about their future financial situation, although this decrease is considerably smaller (-4 percentage points).

In eight Member States, pessimism about the future is significantly lower in spring 2021 than it was in summer 2020: Croatia (-14 percentage points), Spain (-10 percentage points), Romania (-8 percentage points), Denmark and Sweden (both -6 percentage points), France and Italy (both -5 percentage points) and Germany (-4 percentage points). The proportion of those expressing the view that their financial situation will get worse in the future ranges from 4% in Denmark to 39% in Greece. This compares favourably with the previous two survey rounds: in summer 2020, the proportion ranged from 11% in Denmark to 46% in Croatia, while in spring 2020 it ranged from 10% in Denmark to 60% in Bulgaria.

Figure 12: Proportion of respondents stating that their financial situation will get worse, EU27 (%)



Note: **Statistically significant change compared to summer 2020.*

Impact on social capital

Fall in trust levels for all institutions

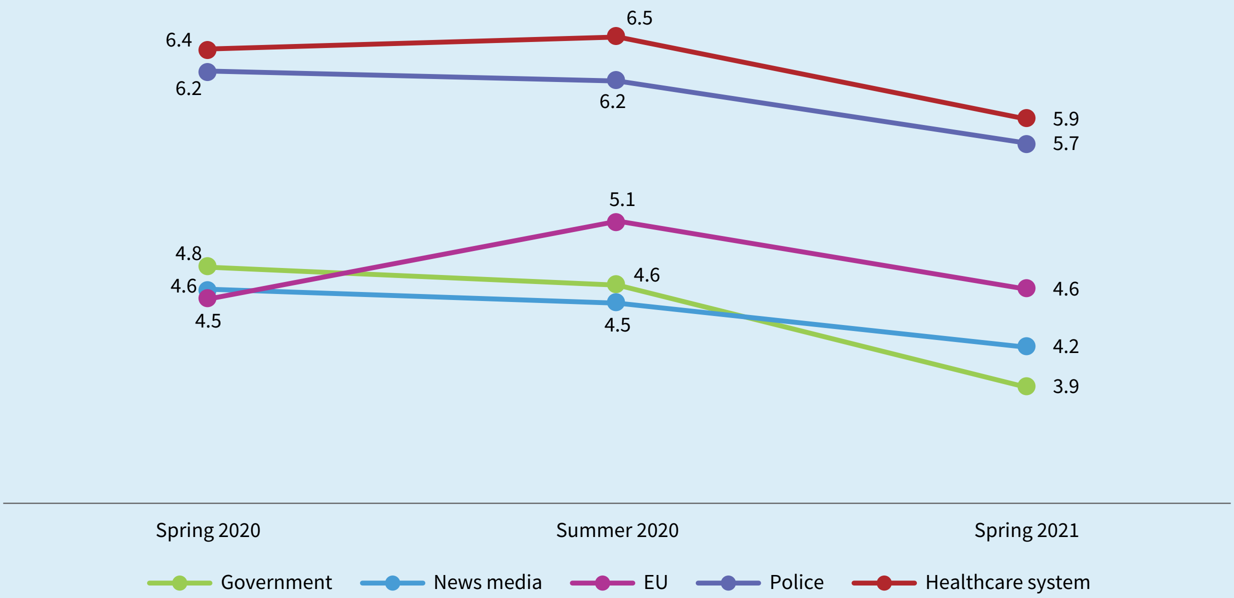
The disproportionate impact of the coronavirus pandemic on vulnerable groups (as highlighted also by the e-survey findings presented in the previous sections) further widens existing inequalities across the European Union. These developments are detrimental to people's trust in institutions. To avoid a 'geography of EU discontent', where groups of citizens withdraw their trust in institutions, the social and economic effects of the pandemic need to be tackled.[8]

In the first stage of the pandemic, overall trust in institutions remained relatively stable or even increased (in the case of trust in the EU) but by the third round of the e-survey a decline is noticeable. Five institutions have been included in the e-survey since round 1: national governments, news media, the European Union, police and the healthcare system. As Figure 13 illustrates, four of these five institutions record lower levels of trust in spring 2021 compared with spring 2020. The EU is the only institution where trust levels are not lower than those recorded a year earlier.

In the latest round of the e-survey, three new items were added to this list of institutions in the e-survey: social media, science and pharmaceutical firms. Average trust scores at EU-level for these three institutions in spring 2021 are 3.4, 7.2 and 4.6, respectively (not illustrated).

8 See European Parliament, April 2021: Towards a more resilient Europe post-coronavirus: Options to enhance the EU's resilience to structural risks.

Figure 13: Trust in institutions (mean scores), EU27 (%)



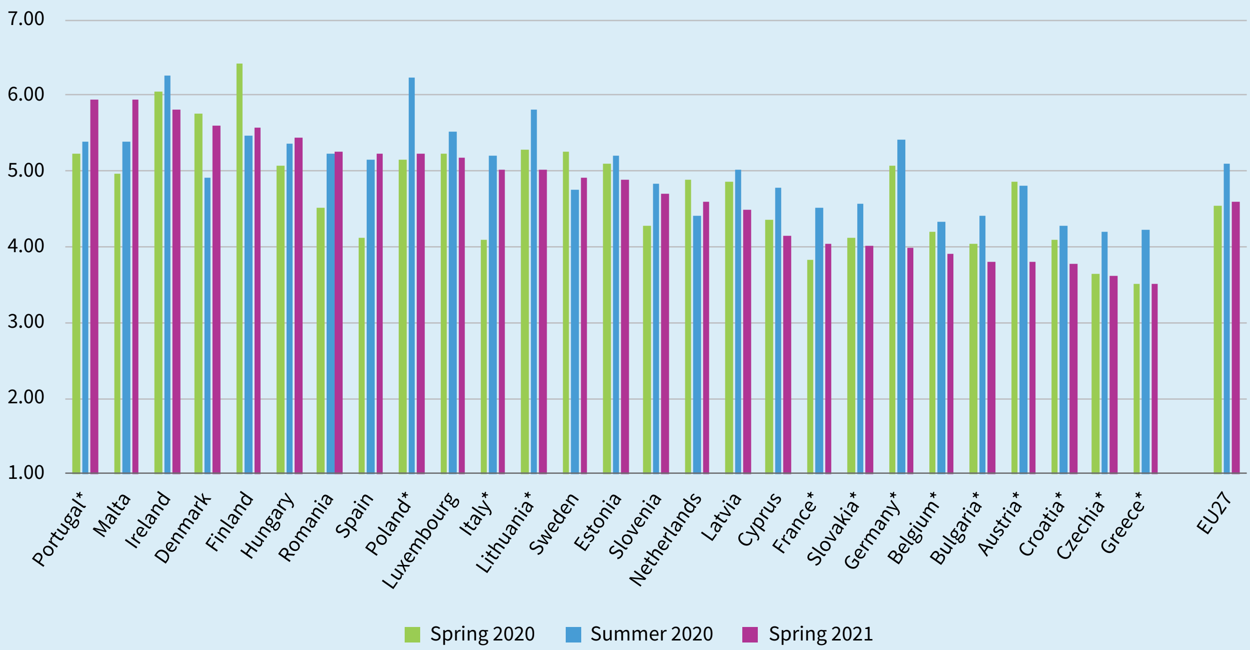
Note: *The survey question was: 'Please answer on a scale of 1–10 how much you personally trust each of the following institutions'. 1 – Do not trust at all; 10 –Trust completely.*

Trust in the EU reverts to spring 2020 low levels

The e-survey shows that trust in the EU increased after the introduction of the European Commission's temporary recovery package, NextGenerationEU, particularly in countries that would expect to benefit most from this expansive fiscal policy tool. In Austria, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden, the e-survey pointed to an opposite trend, with trust levels in the EU declining between spring and summer 2020.[9, 10]

The latest round of the e-survey – fielded amidst a new wave of COVID-19 infections and when the first signs of problems with the vaccines began appearing in the media (see next section) – offers further insight into the pattern of trust in the EU. Overall trust in the EU in spring 2021 is below the level recorded in summer 2020 and similar to the level recorded in spring 2020 (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Trust in the EU by country (mean scores), EU27 (%)



Notes: *For information on the survey question, see notes to Figure 13. *Statistically significant change since summer 2020.*

9 See Capezzone, T. and Arnstein, A. (2021), *COVID-19, policy response and trust to the EU 2021* (available upon request), a paper presented at the 15th Conference of the European Network of Social Reporting.

10 The NextGenerationEU package was launched on 21 July 2020. Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden (the 'frugal four'), later joined by Finland, initially did not support the proposal.

Table 8: Trust in the EU by sociodemographic group (mean scores), EU27 (%)

	Spring 2020	Summer 2020	Spring 2021	Change R3-R1	Change R3-R2
Tertiary education	5.4	5.8	5.3	-0.05	-0.47*
18–34 years	5.2	5.8	5.3	0.11*	-0.50*
Employee	4.6	5.1	4.7	0.12*	-0.36*
Women	4.6	5.1	4.7	0.10*	-0.43*
Kept job during pandemic	4.5	5.1	4.7	0.15*	-0.40*
Retired	4.4	5.1	4.5	0.10	-0.60*
Men	4.4	5.0	4.5	0.03	-0.56*
Self-employed	4.3	5.1	4.5	0.16*	-0.65*
Secondary education	4.3	4.9	4.5	0.20*	-0.42*
35–49 years	4.4	4.9	4.5	0.03	-0.42*
50+ years	4.3	4.9	4.4	0.09	-0.54*
Primary education	4.1	4.2	3.9	-0.18*	-0.34*
Unemployed	3.8	4.4	3.8	0.03	-0.56*
Lost job during pandemic	3.7	4.4	3.8	0.02	-0.65*

Notes: **Statistically significant difference (p=0.05). Statistically significant increases shown in green. Statistically significant decreases shown in red. R1 = round 1, R2 = round 2, R3 = round 3.*

The figure shows that in spring 2021 trust in the EU across Member States ranges from 3.5 in Greece to 5.9 in Malta and Portugal. Since the previous round of the e-survey in summer 2020, there has been a significant drop in trust levels in 12 Member States, the largest decreases being recorded in Germany (-1.4 points), Austria and Poland (both -1 point). Conversely, in Denmark (+0.69) and Portugal (+0.54), trust in the EU is significantly higher in spring 2021 than it was in summer 2020.

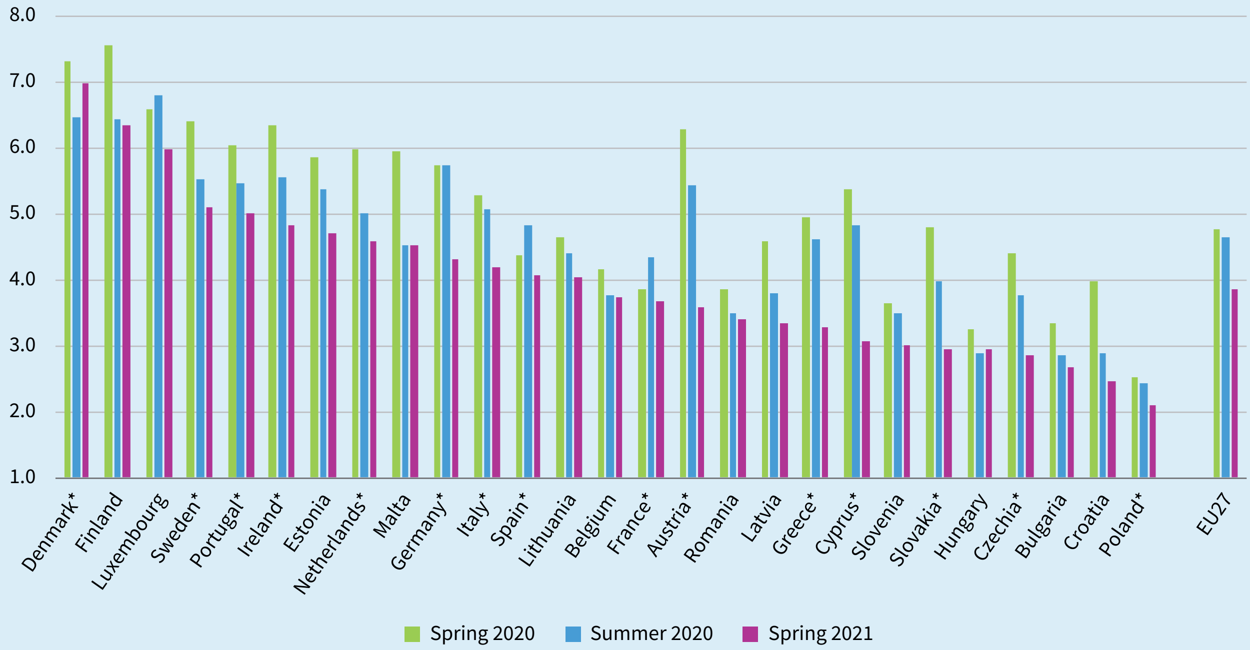
Comparing spring 2021 trust levels with those obtained a year earlier shows that they remain significantly higher in Spain, Italy, Romania, Portugal, Hungary and France. Conversely, they are significantly lower in Austria and Germany (both -1.1 points), as well as in Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands and Belgium.

As Table 8 shows, a significant decline in trust in the EU is recorded for all the sociodemographic groups included in the e-survey between summer 2020 and spring 2021; in many cases, the gains made for this indicator between the spring 2020 and summer 2020 rounds have been lost. Trust in the EU is lowest among respondents with low education levels and among those who lost their job during the pandemic.

Sharp decline in trust in national governments

An important predictor of trust in the EU is people's trust in their national government. The exponential growth of COVID-19 cases across Europe during the winter of 2020 quickly erased hopes that the virus was being contained and forced governments to put in place new restrictive measures in an attempt to control the virus. As a result of the protracted lockdowns and a slow start to the vaccination rollout in spring 2021, trust in national governments suffered and deteriorated further (from 4.6 in summer 2020 to 3.9 in spring 2021 for the EU as a whole), reaching the lowest level recorded since the onset of the pandemic. In 14 Member States, the decline was significant over this period, and in all Member States trust in the national government is now lower than it was at the start of the pandemic in spring 2020 (Figure 15). Denmark is the only Member State where a significant increase in trust in the national government in comparison with summer 2020 is recorded. In spring 2021, Poland (2.1) Croatia (2.5), Bulgaria (2.7) and Czechia (2.9) are the countries with the lowest trust in national governments. Conversely, Denmark (7.0) and Finland (6.3) are the countries having the highest trust in national governments.

Figure 15: Trust in national governments by country and survey round, EU27 (%)



Notes: *For information on the survey question, see notes to Figure 13. *Statistically significant change since summer 2020.*

Positive effect of financial support on trust levels has dwindled

Trust in the EU continues to be higher than trust in national governments (4.6 and 3.9, respectively). In the summer 2020 round of the e-survey, trust in national governments was already lower than in the spring of 2020; in spring 2021, further declines were recorded not only in many countries but also for many sociodemographic groups.

Earlier analyses found that receiving financial support has a positive impact on levels of trust in the government and trust in the EU. This impact is less apparent in spring 2021. The level of trust afforded to the national governments and the EU among those who received financial support is now much lower than it was in summer 2020. Nevertheless, levels of trust – both in the national government and the EU – remain much lower among respondents whose request for support was rejected. Even more so than in summer 2020, their verdict is particularly harsh towards the national government: the average trust level among these respondents now stands at just 2.8.

Vaccine rollout and rise in vaccine hesitancy

While it is universally acknowledged that vaccines play a crucial role in defeating the COVID-19 pandemic, the vaccine rollout in the European Union in the first part of 2021 has been beset with complexities. Member States are facing continuous challenges related to the limited supply of the vaccines, which significantly affects the planning and efficiency of the vaccine rollout. Moreover, there has been a failure to deliver persuasive and clear communication regarding the efficacy and safety of vaccines.

While these hurdles are related to larger institutional issues, they have had a profound impact on overall attitudes towards vaccines.

Vaccine hesitancy is an ongoing and increasing concern that may undermine the capacity of Member States to implement a strong vaccination programme, covering all the European adult population and leading to herd immunity in Europe as quickly as possible.[11]

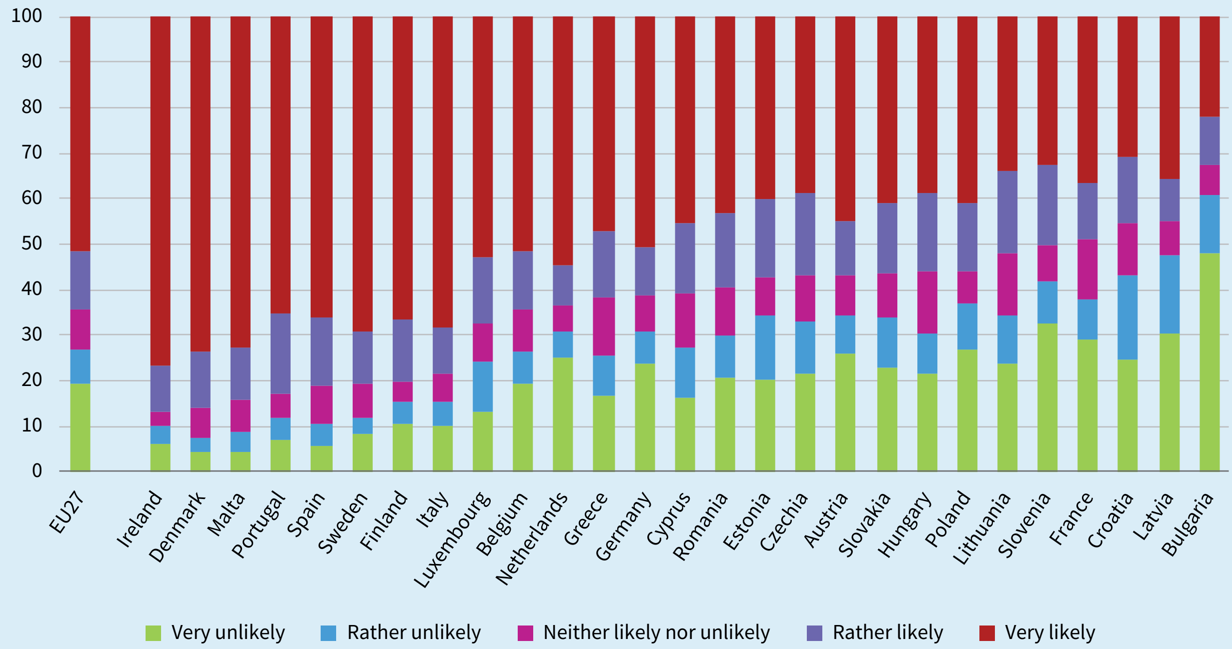
Table 9: Trust in the national government and the EU by financial support (mean scores), EU27 (%)

	National governments			EU27		
	Summer 2020	Spring 2021	Difference*	Summer 2020	Spring 2021	Difference*
No need for financial support	4.7	4.0	-0.65	5.2	4.7	-0.46
Received financial support	4.8	3.8	-1.01	5.1	4.6	-0.51
Financial support requested but not received	3.6	2.8	-0.87	4.2	3.8	-0.41

Note: **All changes between summer 2020 and spring 2021 are statistically significant (p=0.05). Any minor discrepancies in the data shown are due to rounding.*

11 The World Health Organization (WHO) defines 'herd' or 'population' immunity as the 'indirect protection from an infectious disease that happens when a population is immune either through vaccination or immunity developed through previous infection'.

Figure 16: Stated intention to take vaccine by country, EU27 (%)



Note: *The survey question was: 'How likely or unlikely is it that you will take the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available to you?'.*

According to the e-survey, in February/March 2021, around 64% of people living in Europe stated that they would be 'very likely' or 'rather likely' to take the COVID-19 vaccine when this becomes available to them (Figure 16). Conversely, more than a quarter of respondents (27%) took the opposite view, stating they would be 'very unlikely' or 'rather unlikely' to take it. Interestingly, the share of people who state their intention to take the vaccine in Europe would seem to be lower than in the United States: a recent Pew survey found that 69% of the US public intend to take a COVID-19 vaccine (an increase from 60% in November 2020).[12]

The stated intention to get vaccinated varies considerably among Member States, with an important east–west divide discernible across the Union. With the notable exception of Austria and France, the intention to get vaccinated is over 60% for all western Member States – with Nordic and Mediterranean countries, Denmark and Ireland having even higher rates – while among eastern European countries the rate is dramatically lower, ranging from 59% in Romania to 33% in Bulgaria.

Higher vaccine hesitancy among men, prime age group and people outside the labour market

In terms of sociodemographic characteristics, a clear picture emerges: men (29%) are more vaccine hesitant than women (25%). People in the prime age group (aged 35–49 years) are more sceptical about vaccines (29%) than young and older people (26% and 27%, respectively).

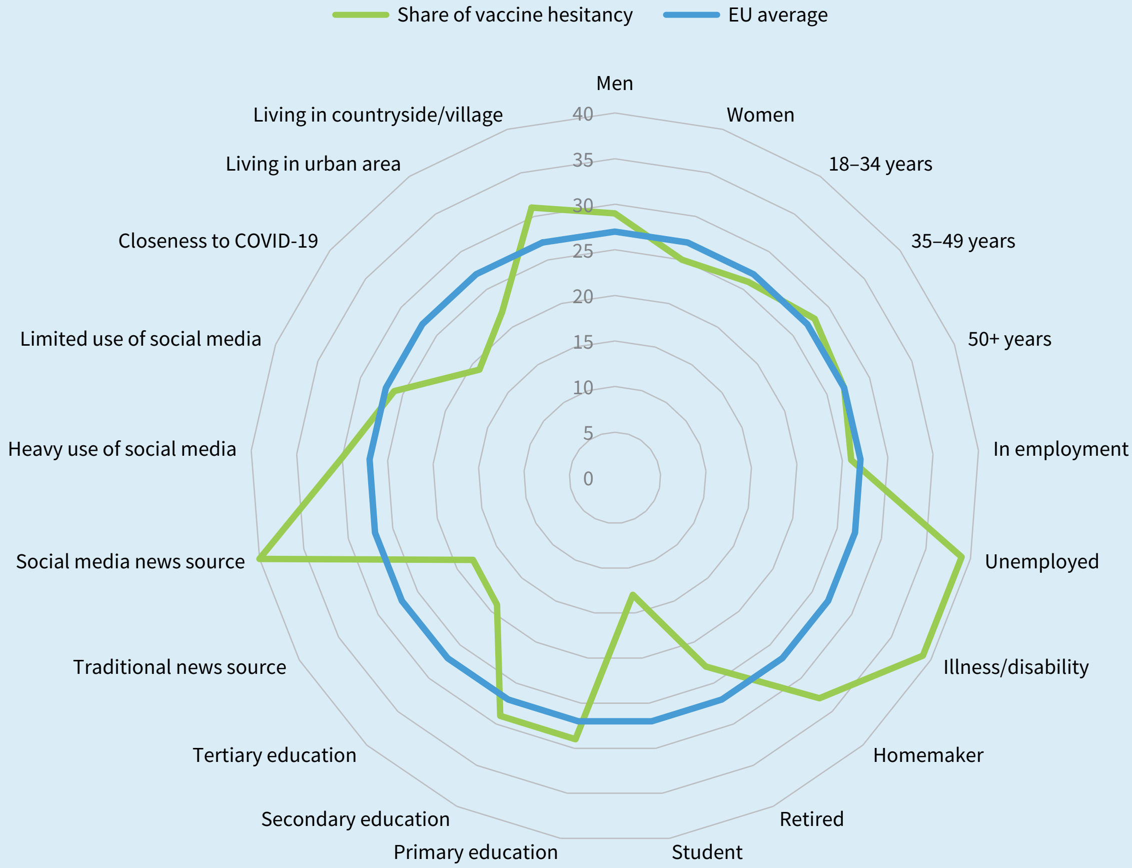
Unemployed people (39%), those with a long-term illness or disability (39%) and full-time homemakers (33%) are more vaccine hesitant than people in employment (26%) or people who are retired (23%). The least vaccine averse are students (13%). Finally, people living in sparsely populated areas, such as the countryside and small villages, are more vaccine hesitant (31%) than urban dwellers (22%).

When social media is the primary source of news, vaccine hesitancy surges to 40%

In terms of vaccine hesitancy, factors which are very relevant are personal experience of COVID-19 and the type of media used as one's source of information. The results of the e-survey reveal that having close personal experience of the effects of COVID-19, such as knowing someone who died of the disease, reduces vaccine hesitancy greatly. Only 19% of those who have been personally close to the disease are vaccine hesitant; for those with no such personal experience, the figure is 28%. Furthermore, and more importantly, the time spent viewing social media and what type of media is used as the main news source has a huge influence on vaccine hesitancy. While heavy social media users (three or more hours daily) are slightly more hesitant (30%) than others (26%), the proportion rises to 40% among those who use social media as their primary source of news (Figure 17). Among those who use traditional news sources (press, television and radio) as their primary source of information, the proportion of vaccine sceptics is as low as 18%.

12 Pew Research Center, 5 March 2021: Growing share of Americans say they plan to get a COVID-19 vaccine – or already have.

Figure 17: Sociodemographic characteristics of people with vaccine hesitancy in Europe, EU27 (%)



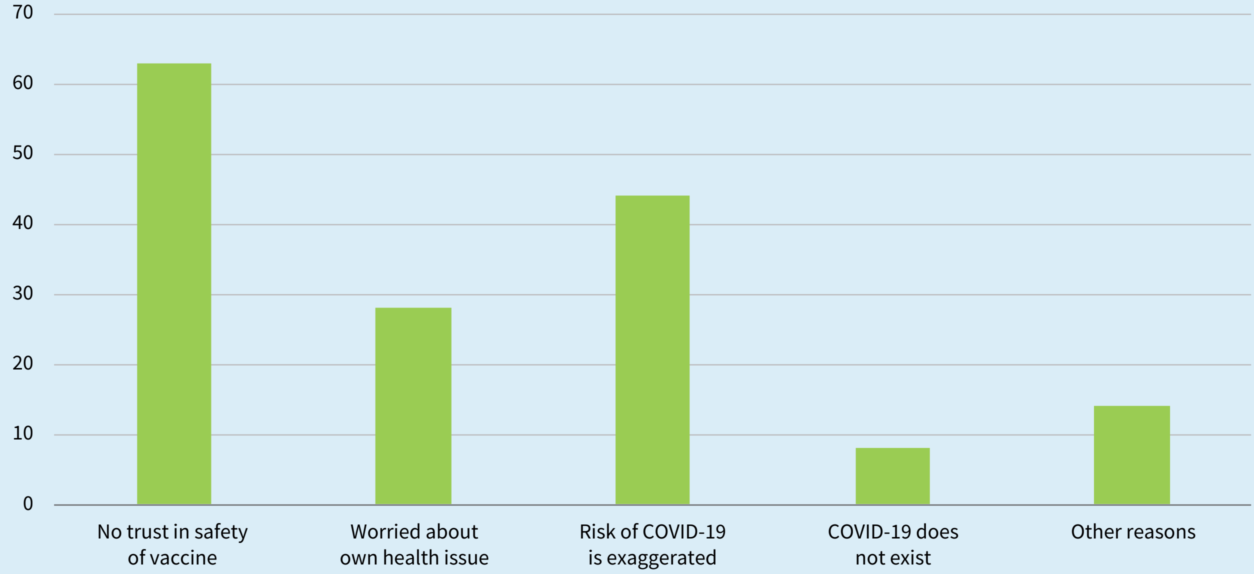
Note: *The figure depicts the percentage responding 'rather unlikely' and 'very unlikely' that they will take the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available.*

Multivariate analysis confirms these findings and points to the following as significant predictors of vaccine hesitancy: living in a sparsely populated area, being self-employed or unemployed, having an illness or disability and, in particular, using social media as the main source of information and spending a long time on it. Conversely, being a student, living in a populated area, knowing someone who had COVID-19 or died from it, all greatly decrease the likelihood of being vaccine hesitant.

Concern about safety is the biggest reason for vaccine hesitancy

According to the e-survey, the main reason for vaccine hesitancy is the lack of trust in the safety of the vaccine: 62% (Figure 18). This share is higher among those aged 18–34 years of age and lower for the other age categories. Furthermore, for 28% of respondents, concern about the effect of the vaccine on their own health issue is the reason why they are unlikely to get it. People suffering from an illness and/or some kind of disability are more likely to report this concern. Interestingly, 44% of the vaccine hesitant group believe that the risks associated with COVID-19 are exaggerated and 8% think that COVID-19 does not exist. While people who are more economically affected by the virus, such as self-employed and unemployed people, are more likely to have doubts about the existence or the severity of COVID-19, social media plays a huge role in fostering scepticism about the pandemic. Almost half (46%) of those who do not believe in COVID-19 or consider it to be exaggerated say that social media is their main source of news.

Figure 18: Reasons for vaccine hesitancy, EU27 (%)



Note: *The survey question was: 'Why is it unlikely that you will take the COVID-19 vaccine?'.*

Finally, the link between trust and vaccine hesitancy is strong. People with vaccine hesitancy have a lower level of trust in all the items investigated than people with no such hesitancy (Figure 19). Moreover, they report the lowest trust in the healthcare system (1.9 out of 10 compared with 4.8 for the non-hesitant group) and in pharmaceutical firms (2.5 out of 10 compared with 5.5 for the non-hesitant group); similarly, trust in science is much lower than among the non-hesitant group: 5.2 and 8.1, respectively. In terms of political institutions, people with vaccine hesitancy report a lower level of trust in the national government (2.6 out of 10 compared with 5.6 for the non-hesitant group) and in the European Union (4.0 and 6.7, respectively). Interestingly and very relevantly, while trust in news media among people with vaccine hesitancy is much lower (2.5) than among the non-hesitant group (4.9), the difference between the two groups is greatly reduced when it comes to trust in social media (3.0 and 3.6, respectively).

Figure 19: Trust in institutions among people who are vaccine hesitant and non-hesitant, EU27 (%)

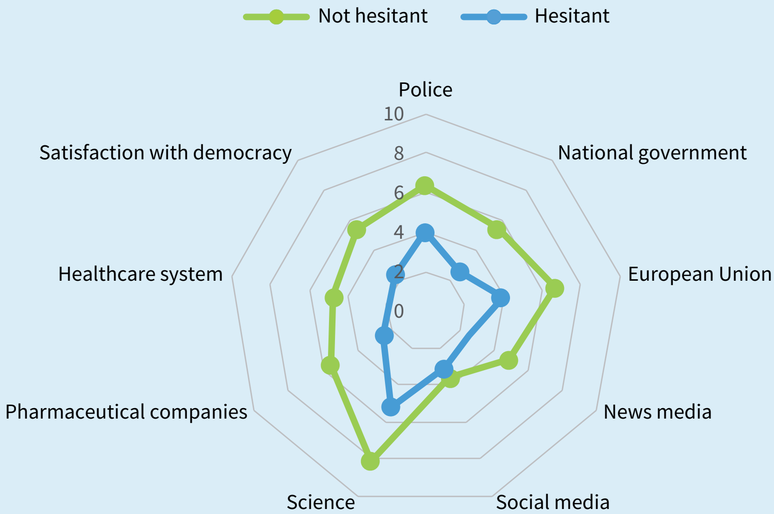
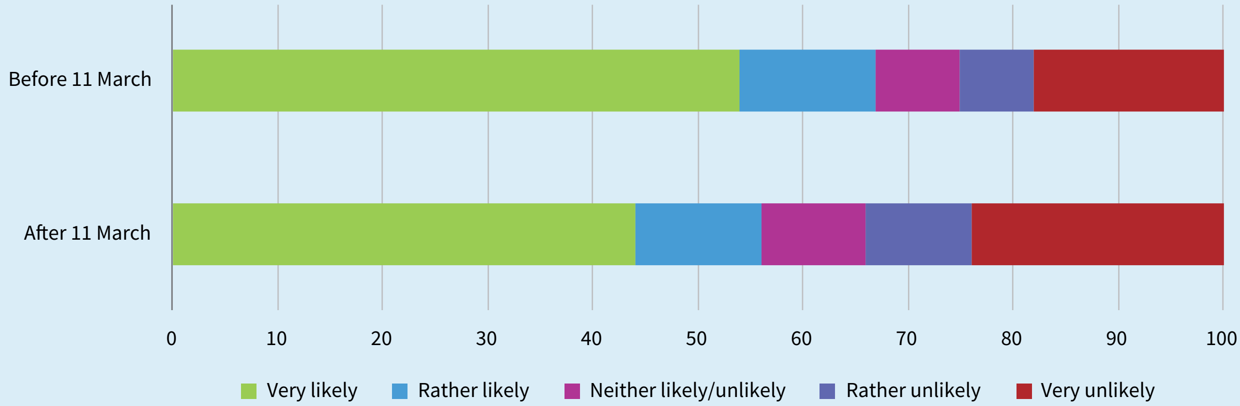


Figure 20: Vaccination hesitancy before and after 11 March 2021, EU27 (%)



Note: *The survey question was: 'How likely or unlikely is it that you will take the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available to you?'.*

Need for clear communication about vaccine safety

As the European Parliament stated in January 2021, only complete transparency can build public trust in the vaccination campaign across Europe.[13] It is clear that there is a need for clear political and scientific communication about vaccine safety. The risk is that an unclear political stance about vaccines and a less than straightforward communication over their safety may have a detrimental effect on public trust in vaccines and could foster vaccine hesitancy.

In January 2021, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) approved the use of one particular vaccine for all age groups, but a number of EU countries initially refused to recommend its use for people over 65.[14] France and Germany eventually revised their stance and approved the vaccine for people aged 65–74 only at the beginning of March, with Italy following shortly after. However, on or after 11 March 2021, many EU countries paused the vaccine rollout again that month, following reports that a very small number of people had developed blood clots after receiving the jab, while an additional four countries suspended the rollout of one batch of that vaccine.

Following further clarification from the EMA, the decision to suspend the use of the vaccine in the wake of widespread concerns has hugely damaged public perceptions of the safety of vaccines in Europe.

The results of Eurofound's e-survey show that while one-quarter of all Europeans (25%) were already vaccine hesitant prior to 11 March, this share increased to one-third (34%) after the suspension of vaccines (Figure 20). Similarly, the share of those who are 'very likely' or 'rather likely' to get the vaccine when it will be available for them fell from the figure of 67% recorded before 11 March to 56% after this date.

The increase in vaccine hesitancy is statistically significant also when controlling for the usual sociodemographic variables. The intention to get vaccinated was shown to decrease almost everywhere in Europe after 11 March. At country level, the largest decrease was recorded in Belgium (-23%), Romania and Spain (both -18%), Lithuania (-15%), France and Austria (both -14%).

13 European Parliament press release, 19 January 2021: COVID-19 vaccines: EU must respond with unity and solidarity.

14 EMA News, 29 January 2021: EMA recommends COVID-19 vaccine AstraZeneca for authorisation in the EU.

Top findings

- **Mental well-being has reached its lowest level across all age groups since the onset of the pandemic over a year ago.** This is especially prominent among young people and those who have lost their job.
- **Existing inequalities are widening because of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups.** The findings show that difficulties in making ends meet increased significantly among those already in a precarious situation.
- **Citizens' satisfaction with crisis support measures has declined dramatically, with only 12% now feeling support measures are fair, down from 22% in summer 2020.** Those who felt obtaining support was easy and efficient also fell from 16% in summer 2020 to 10% in spring 2021. Close to one in ten respondents have had a request for support rejected.
- **Trust in institutions has plummeted, especially trust in national governments which fell from 4.6 in summer 2020 to 3.9 in spring 2021.** Trust in national governments across all Member States sank below levels recorded at the start of the pandemic. Trust in the EU also fell but remains higher than trust in national governments.
- **Over a quarter of people living in Europe indicate a hesitancy toward the COVID-19 vaccine, with men revealing themselves more hesitant (29%) than women (25%).** Vaccine hesitancy is also associated strongly with low levels of trust and social media use, with countries that register low levels of trust in government registering higher levels of vaccine hesitancy.

Conclusion

Fourteen months after the first COVID-19 cases appeared in the EU, with most of the countries still going through long lockdowns, the population of Europe is showing palpable signs of extreme fatigue.

With mental well-being reaching its lowest level since the onset of the pandemic, the shares of people claiming to have lost their jobs and asking for financial support are growing. Many Europeans are in a financially fragile situation, and since summer 2020 this share has increased among those already in a precarious position. Consequently, the trust of citizens in national and European institutions decreased considerably, putting social cohesion at stake.

The crisis has heightened existing economic and social inequalities among the different generations and vulnerable groups. The protracted closure of schools is likely to amplify inequalities in education among young people and to accentuate differences in gender roles – with the tangible risk that decades of gains in gender equality could be lost in a very short time.

While the rollout of an effective vaccination campaign is essential in order to win the battle against the COVID-19 virus and finally head down the path towards recovery, clear and transparent communication about the safety of vaccines is of the utmost importance in order to assuage the concerns of citizens and address their vaccine hesitancy.

While the European Commission and the EU Member States have launched recovery funds and implemented several important initiatives to alleviate the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the results of the e-survey highlight the need for a holistic approach to support all the groups hit hard by the crisis in order to prevent them from falling further behind.

Failing to prevent the rise of economic and social inequalities among citizens and Member States risks undermining even more the already weak trust of Europeans in their institutions, as well as triggering political discontent against the European social contract that binds all of us together.

For this reason, understanding and addressing people's needs in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis will be essential in order to restore their trust in governments and in the European Union project. This could be the basis for a convincing discussion within the framework of the ambitious Future of Europe Conference, the year-long democracy exercise involving all Europeans in shaping the future direction of the bloc formally launched on 9 May.

Further information

Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey data

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TJ-02-21-636-EN-N

Publications Office
of the European Union

ISBN 978-92-897-1700-7
doi:10.2806/76802