EU response to the coronavirus pandemic: Citizens' views and expectations

SUMMARY

Citizens’ expectations regarding European Union (EU) policy involvement and spending in healthcare and economic growth were already increasing before the coronavirus pandemic. These rising expectations created a gap between their demands and their evaluation of current EU action. At the same time, trust in the EU is at its highest level for a decade, and higher than the average level of trust in national governments.

Apart from the direct consequences for health, the pandemic caused a wide spectrum of financial difficulties for people in the EU. A fear of future loss of income and widespread uncertainty became the prevailing emotional status of Europeans, although the level of hope is also considerable.

The EU response to the pandemic aligns with citizens’ preferences for areas of priority action and spending, especially with the introduction of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) recovery package. However, neither the scope of EU competences, nor the flexibility of EU finances, allow for immediate and full closure of the gap between citizens’ preferences and their evaluation of EU action. Citizens’ evaluation of the measures implemented by the EU to combat the coronavirus pandemic and its consequences are almost equally divided between the positive and negative. In the context of the pandemic, there is a significant change of preference among Europeans regarding the size of EU financial means. An absolute majority of Europeans would like the EU to have more competences (66 %) and greater financial means (54 %) to fight the pandemic. This leads to the hypothesis that a lack of sufficient EU competences is a factor contributing to a degree of popular dissatisfaction with the EU in its response to the coronavirus pandemic.
Public expectations prior to the coronavirus pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic occurred in a context of already increasing citizen expectation regarding EU policy involvement and budgetary spending in areas that are strongly and directly affected by the pandemic itself – in particular healthcare and economic growth.

According to a series of Eurobarometer surveys related to perceptions and expectations of EU citizens and carried out for the European Parliament prior to the coronavirus, EU citizens’ support for even greater EU involvement in the health and social security policy area grew from 63 % in 2016 to 69 % in 2018. Although there were significant differences in perception of this policy across the European Union, even in the Member States with the lowest demonstrated support in 2018, almost half of the population demanded increased EU involvement in healthcare. The strongest support for increased EU action was almost consensual – 93 % in Cyprus.

Desires for an increase in EU spending on social affairs and employment, public health, and economic growth have been a priority for people in Europe. In 2015, social affairs and employment was the policy area with the highest support from citizens in terms of EU spending, followed by public health and economic growth. The share of Europeans who would like to see healthcare as an EU budget spending priority demonstrated significant growth – from 32 % in 2008 to 41 % in 2015. Although there was a decrease of two percentage points between 2008 and 2015, economic growth is still the third most preferred area for EU budgetary spending, supported by 38 % of the citizens.

The rather high level of expectation of and preferences for EU policy and budgetary involvement creates a gap with the evaluation of current EU action on health. The gap has been growing, owing to the increased pressure of citizens’ expectations even before the coronavirus pandemic. In 2018, 38 % of the European population evaluated the EU’s involvement in health and social security policies as adequate and 48 % evaluated it as insufficient. Even beyond opinions on healthcare, it seems that the gap between expectations and evaluation of EU involvement is mostly driven by high expectations rather than by evaluation of EU actions. These high expectations at the start of the pandemic are the background to the highest level of trust in the EU for the last decade (44 %) and consistently higher than trust in the respective national governments (average 34 % trust), according to Eurobarometer surveys.

EU response to the coronavirus pandemic

Regardless of current citizens’ expectations and the new situation caused by the coronavirus pandemic, EU policy-makers and leaders can act only within the limitations of the EU Treaties and the competences they provide to EU institutions. In the area most directly related to the pandemic, healthcare, the EU has only supporting competences – the primary responsibility for public health and healthcare systems lies with the EU Member States.

In its 2019 State of Health in the EU, the European Commission underscored concerns about the resilience of EU healthcare systems. According to the 2020 European Semester country-specific recommendations, the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the existing structural challenges related to health system effectiveness, accessibility and resilience. The enormous strain during the coronavirus pandemic revealed gaps in the way public health emergencies are addressed. According to the EU’s post-coronavirus public health strategy, the pandemic has shown that the EU needs more coordination between Member States during a health crisis; more capacity at EU level to prepare for and to fight health crises; and more investment in health systems, to make sure they are ready for future challenges.

In this context, the European Commission envisions a European Health Union, which aims to better protect the health of European citizens, to equip the EU and its Member States to better prevent and address future pandemics, and to improve the resilience of Europe’s health systems. The initiative builds on the lessons of the coronavirus pandemic and includes policies that would strengthen EU medical and scientific agencies and create a common pharmaceutical strategy for
Europe. Securing coronavirus vaccine supplies is probably the most visible EU healthcare measure for citizens. Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides has stated that the plan for a European Health Union is ‘living up to citizens’ demands for more Europe in the area of public health’.

In addition, the European Commission proposes to set up a new EU Health programme, EU4Health, aimed at filling these gaps, strengthening health security and preparing for future health crises. The three main priorities are tackling cross-border health threats; making medicines available and affordable; and strengthening health systems. The EU4Health proposal is in line with the European Parliament’s consistent calls for a coherent EU public health policy. Parliament also calls for the creation of a European health response mechanism, to improve the preparation and coordination of the response to health crises, as well as for stronger mandates for the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and of the European Medicines Agency (EMA).

The crisis resulting from the coronavirus pandemic goes beyond consequences directly related to health. At the outbreak of the pandemic, the EU responded with a range of measures and adjustments to numerous policies, as well as by mobilising and redirecting resources. Those measures included the EU helping to repatriate people, coordinating measures to limit the spread of the virus, distributing medical equipment and promoting research into treatment and a vaccine.

From the start of the crisis, the European Parliament has called for ambitious financial aid for the worst-affected sectors, and the European Commission has responded with financial packages to support healthcare systems and to alleviate the economic impact of the pandemic in Member States. The Commission has put forward a range of measures, adjusted some of its policies and mobilised EU funds to assist EU citizens and mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, as well as to offer financial support to third countries. In line with Parliament’s demands, the Commission has used the existing flexibility and margins within the budget to the fullest. Examples include the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative, which provides funding for Member States' investments in healthcare action to fight Covid-19, and provides support for the labour market and business, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, in all affected sectors. The Emergency Support Instrument and the Union’s Civil Protection Mechanism provide further funds to meet the needs of European health systems in combating the pandemic, making extensive use of the flexibilities embedded in the EU budget. A further contribution from the EU budget also helps partner countries deal with the impact of the coronavirus.

Just a couple of months after the coronavirus outbreak, the EU created a plan to support economic and social recovery from the consequences of the pandemic. The agreement reached between the European Parliament and the Council Presidency on the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework and Next Generation EU (NGEU) is unprecedented in terms of the overall amount available and the innovative solutions enabling financing of the extraordinary needs in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. The novel financial package is based on the €750 billion NGEU temporary European recovery package for 2021-2023 and on the €1.1 trillion EU budget for 2021-2027.

Public perception of the response to the coronavirus pandemic

Apart from the direct costs that those infected by the virus have paid with their health, or even life, the coronavirus pandemic also completely disrupted citizens’ daily lives and created shockwaves in the functioning of public and private spheres. Citizens’ opinions have been evolving in parallel with the development of the pandemic and the measures taken by national and European authorities, especially in the area of healthcare and regarding the mobilisation of EU funds to assist the mitigation of the socio-economic impact of the pandemic.
Coronavirus affecting our lives

The coronavirus pandemic has spread across the entire European Union, and all Member States report problems and disruptions. Despite that, citizens’ personal experience differs significantly across the Union. According to survey results, European citizens experience a wide spectrum of financial difficulties due to the pandemic. The frequency at which they experience each of these difficulties does not change significantly throughout the pandemic and the hardship experiences reported in May, June and October 2020 are very similar. The most widespread of these being loss of income, which is the case for 27% of EU citizens in October 2020. As many as 44% of Hungarians and 42% of Spaniards, but only 12% of Luxembourgers, have lost income. The second most widespread financial consequence is the use of personal savings, which 23% of Europeans – as many as 40% of Bulgarians and 39% of Estonians, but only 11% of Danes – have experienced.

Although citizens in all Member States are affected by the economic downturn, there is a significant difference between EU countries in the share of citizens who have not experienced any financial difficulties (see Figure 1). More than half of the citizens of Luxembourg, Denmark, Malta, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden and Germany have experienced no financial difficulties because of the pandemic. Conversely as few as 20% of Greeks and 21% of Bulgarians have not experienced financial difficulties. Citizens of Member States with lower GNI tend to report financial difficulties more frequently.

Data and methodology

Three waves of online panel surveys have been conducted for the European Parliament by KANTAR, with fieldwork conducted in April-May, June and September-October 2020. The data collected are representative at the national level according to gender, age, and regional quotas. The first wave does not cover the following Member States: Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Malta. The sample covers the population of 27 EU Member States, aged between 16 and 64 years old (in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden), or 16 and 54 years old (in Bulgaria, Czechia, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia).

The present briefing covers only some of the data collected by these surveys. For full information on each wave, see the reports of the EP Public Opinion Monitoring Unit – from May, June and October. These reports also cover the variations in opinion of Europeans across socio-demographic groups such as gender, age and education level.

Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, Parliament’s Directorate-General for Communications has also produced an overview of national public opinion surveys in the Member States during the pandemic.

Figure 1 – Experience and expectation of financial difficulties

Source: EP public opinion survey.
difficulties more frequently. Further policy and economic analysis is needed to draw a full picture of the reasons and consequences of this situation, and attention should be paid to the risk of increased inequalities resulting from the pandemic.

If we look at people’s expectations for future impacts of the pandemic on their personal income, the results demonstrate a rather different picture. There are no large differences between the reported anticipation of future loss of income from citizens in different Member States. As can clearly be seen in Figure 1, we cannot link the level of this negative anticipation to current experience of financial difficulties. Expectations of future impact on personal income is present in all Member States, without large differences between them.

European citizens’ emotional experiences during the pandemic are rather negative. As presented in Figure 2, people’s most dominant emotion across the Union is uncertainty, reported by half of the Europeans surveyed in October 2020. The most frequent negative emotions are related to broadly defined experiences of lack of reliable, suitable, or functioning coping mechanisms (uncertainty, helplessness, frustration). ‘Anger’, a negative emotion with a more destructive character, is the least common of the researched emotions – shared by only 16% of European citizens. On the positive spectrum, ‘hope’ is the second most commonly experienced emotion in general and the most popular positive emotion, reported by 37% of European citizens. ‘Confidence’ and ‘helpfulness’ are the least popular of the researched emotions, with the sole exception of ‘anger’. Looking at the emotional response at European level over time, there is a slight strengthening of the spread of positive and weakening of negative emotions during the summer months. This positive change parallels the improvement in the epidemiological situation, health related data and restrictive measures. However, data from the autumn bounce back to values closer to those in spring 2020. The ratio between or the ‘combination of uncertainty and hope is the overall theme’ as discussed in the May survey report.

Significant differences exist among the expressed emotional status of the citizens of different Member States. Although the negative emotion ‘uncertainty’ is the most widespread amongst EU citizens as a whole, the positive emotion ‘hope’ is the most widespread emotion in five Member States (Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Sweden, and Latvia) and is equally spread with ‘uncertainty’ in two Member States (Germany and Austria). In Romania, the difference between ‘hope’ and ‘uncertainty’ is seven percentage points; in Bulgaria – four; in Estonia and Sweden – two. At the other end of the emotional spectrum with significantly more people experiencing ‘uncertainty’ over those experiencing ‘hope’, are Greece, Spain (a 38 percentage point difference in each country), and Cyprus (a 41 percentage point difference).
Views on national and EU policy actions in response to the coronavirus pandemic

Policy measures and their consequences or trade-offs

Over the last year, various policies have aimed at limiting the spread of the virus and at fighting the negative economic consequences of the pandemic. Often, these two aims are framed as opposites in public discourse, and many citizens perceive them as such. When Europeans are asked to evaluate the effect of Covid-19 related restrictions by saying if the health benefits are greater than the economic damage or vice versa, their responses are split. In October 2020, 51% of EU citizens consider the economic damage as ‘greater’ and 49% think that the health benefits outweigh the economic damage. In May 2020, more people considered health benefits to be greater than economic damage, with a difference of 14 percentage points. This difference decreased to 8 percentage points in June, and subsequently in October, the predominant opinion has reversed, although only by one percentage point difference.

The restrictions in each Member State have been somewhat different and changing over time. Each country would therefore need an individual in-depth analysis of the factors behind that trend. In October 2020, more people evaluate the health benefits of the measures as greater than the economic damage in 10 Member States, especially in Malta (72%) and Romania (61%). In the other 17 Member States, only a minority agrees with that opinion, especially in Bulgaria and Hungary (28% in each country) and Slovenia (29%). These very different reports from the Member States need to be analysed further in the context of the health and economic conditions in each country.

However, in general, increasing fatigue with the restrictions can be detected (see Figure 3), although the evaluation of the health benefits of the restrictions remain highly rated. Overall, there is a five percentage point increase in the share of EU citizens who perceive the economic damage from the restrictions as greater than the health benefits between June and October 2020. The same trend is valid for all Member States, apart from the Netherlands, where there is no change. The most considerable decrease in appreciation of health benefits versus economic damage is reported in Cyprus (34 percentage points lower), Estonia and Lithuania (16 percentage points lower).

Yet another type of consequence of the measures intended to end the spread of the pandemic is the limitations on individual freedoms. When asked if the fight against the coronavirus pandemic justifies the limitations on individual freedoms, 58% of Europeans agreed (see Figure 4). However,
there is a significant variance in the replies from citizens of different Member States. Agreement with the justification for limiting individual freedoms ranges from 74 % in Finland and Ireland to 38 % in Bulgaria, Poland and Slovenia. There is a trend towards higher acceptance of limitations on personal freedoms in the western part of the Union and less so in its eastern regions. A more in-depth analysis at country level is necessary to define the reasons for this variance: either the nature of the specific limitations on individual freedoms applied during the pandemic; or a national experience of previous restrictions on individual freedoms; or other reasons.

Regardless of the exact level of acceptance, there is a common trend among citizens in all Member States that, over time, they consider limitations on individual freedoms as less justified. At EU level, acceptance of the justification for limiting individual freedoms in June was 63 %, falling to 58 % in October 2020. This decrease is least prominent in Germany and Hungary (one percentage point decrease) and most prominent in Cyprus (30 percentage point decrease).

**Evaluation of national measures**

Average satisfaction with national measures taken during the pandemic is 49 % (see Figure 5). In 14 Member States more citizens are satisfied with the national measures than dissatisfied. The highest proportion of satisfied people is reported in Denmark (77 %), Luxembourg (75 %), and Finland (73 %). The lowest proportion of citizens satisfied with the measures taken by their national authorities is found in Spain (31 %), Bulgaria, and Poland (33 % in each country).

Average satisfaction with the appreciation of the health benefits of the restrictions drops in a similar trend. In June, 57 % of Europeans were satisfied with the national anti-pandemic measures. In October 2020, that share falls to 49 % and is only one percentage point higher than the share of people who are not satisfied with the national measures.
Evaluation of EU measures

When citizens were asked to evaluate the EU actions to combat the coronavirus pandemic, their responses are split between 46% 'satisfied' and 50% 'not satisfied'. In 13 Member States, more citizens are 'satisfied' with the EU actions than 'dissatisfied'. The highest proportion of satisfied citizens is reported in Denmark (72%), Ireland (70%), and Malta (69%). The lowest proportion of citizens satisfied with EU actions is found in Austria, Greece and Luxembourg (34% in each country).

Although average satisfaction with EU action is lower than that for national measures, the differences are very small. Citizens demonstrate higher approval rates for national measures than EU actions in only 11 out of 27 Member States, and in 14 Member States, EU actions gain higher approval than national measures. The differences in the evaluations of EU actions and national measures in 10 EU countries are very small (up to five percentage points), and in Latvia and Portugal, the evaluations are equal. In only two Member States are the differences in the evaluation of the national measures and EU actions considerably different, in favour of national measures – Luxembourg (41 percentage point difference) and Austria (24 percentage point difference). Despite the lack of a sharp geographical distinction between the Member States in their evaluations of national measures versus EU actions, it should be noted that, of the Member States that joined the EU after 2004, only Cyprus and Estonia are more satisfied with their national measures than with the EU actions.

Preferences and expectation for policy actions

The EU can only respond to the coronavirus crisis within the limits of EU competences as stated in the Treaties. According to a Konrad Adenauer Stiftung survey, Brussels-based stakeholders expect that the pandemic will bring Europeans closer together. This is also the preference of the majority of the EU citizens surveyed, who call for further integration in the response to the pandemic.

Preferences for more Europe

When Europeans are asked if they would like the EU to have more competences to deal with the pandemic, 66% answer positively and only 25% negatively. Considering that the 66% desiring more competences for the EU to deal with the pandemic considerably outnumber the 46% of citizens who are satisfied with the EU action so far, it can be hypothesised that the lack of sufficient competences is a factor that contributes to a degree of dissatisfaction with the EU in its response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Almost one in ten Europeans cannot answer when asked if the EU should have more competences in the context of the current events. The share of 'don't know' answers is as high as 16% in Sweden, 15% in Denmark, and 14% in Belgium and Czechia (see Figure 6).

Member States differ considerably in the share of their citizens supporting increased EU competences, varying between 87% (Malta) and 42% (Czechia). However, there are also commonalities between Member States – in all countries but one (Czechia), more citizens want more competences for the EU than not. Even in Czechia, the difference is only one percentage point. Also, in all but three EU countries (Czechia, Sweden and Croatia), more than half of citizens (or an absolute
A majority of EU citizens would also like the EU to have greater financial means to be able to overcome the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic – 54 % in favour versus 31 % against (see Figure 7). Although the average support at EU level for increased financial means is lower than that for increased competences, more than half of the citizens (or an absolute majority) in 14 Member States, support the idea of endowing the EU with greater financial means to fight against the pandemic’s consequences. In 21 Member States, more citizens support than oppose the idea of greater EU financial means. Only in Denmark is the share of citizens who oppose increased EU financial means considerably higher than those that support it (15 percentage point difference).

A question on citizens’ preferences regarding increased EU financial means in general has been asked in previous Eurobarometer surveys. In 2015, only 37 % of Europeans wanted to grant greater financial means to the EU, versus 47 % who were against. In the context of the pandemic, however, there is a significant change in Europeans’ preferences regarding the size of EU financial means. Moreover, there might be room for even further growth in support for increased EU financial means through information campaigns. As is often the case in surveys, a question related to budgetary matters receives one of the highest shares of ‘don’t know’ answers. In this case, the share of EU citizens who chose this answer is 15 % and it is as high as 26 % in Sweden and 24 % in Denmark and the Netherlands. The three Member States with the highest proportion of ‘don’t know’ answers are also three of the six Member States where more citizens reject increases in EU financial means than support them.

Preferences for particular EU measures

In the context of EU citizens’ preference for increased EU financial means, it is important also to consider their preferences regarding EU spending priorities (see Figure 8). The coronavirus pandemic has pushed public health to the top of the list of preferences, with 54 % of citizens recognising it as a priority. This is an absolute majority of European respondents and a significant growth in support since 2015, when EU public health expenditure already enjoyed the support of 41 % of citizens surveyed. Public health is the most important EU spending priority for the citizens of 18 Member States, with highest support in Portugal (72 %). It is a second priority in six Member States and a third in three Member States (Croatia, Finland and Slovakia). However, even the lowest registered support is shared by a considerable number of citizens surveyed, at 39 % in Finland.

Economic recovery follows public health as a spending priority, supported by 42 % of citizens surveyed. EU economic policy has received high levels of citizen support for a long time, at 40 % in 2008 and 38 % in 2015. In the context of the economic downturn due to the pandemic, it maintains strong support. Economic recovery is the most popular spending priority in three Member States (Estonia – 54 %, Latvia – 52 %, and Czechia – 46 %). In another seven Member States (Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, Slovenia, Ireland, Spain, and Slovakia), the absolute majority of citizens surveyed would like to see economic recovery as priority spending, although it is not their most popular choice among spending priorities.
The third most popular preference for EU expenditure is climate change and environmental protection. This finding is also in line with the results of the European Investment Bank climate survey, according to which 57 % of Europeans say that the post-pandemic economic recovery must take the climate emergency into account. Citizens would like their governments to promote low-carbon and climate-resilient growth.

The top two preferences for EU spending priorities are directly related to the pandemic and its consequences. Compared to the 2014-2020 MFF, the EU spending planned in the new 2021-2027 MFF and the NGEU recovery instrument includes a significant increase in support for the areas preferred by citizens. However, the size of that increase might be perceived as insufficient, as healthcare is, by far, not the single largest EU spending area.

Europeans were also asked to name their preferences for specific EU policy actions to tackle the coronavirus pandemic and its consequences. The top three policy priorities according to EU citizens should be directly related to the medical aspects of the pandemic (see Figure 8). They are: ensuring sufficient medical supplies (48 %); research funds for vaccine development (34 %); and improved cooperation between EU scientific researchers (33 %). The list of all measures that find support amongst European citizens is quite diverse and covers very different consequences or aspects of the pandemic – from improved cooperation within the EU, through security and economic aspects, to the spread of harmful information (the ‘infodemic’).

The preferences of citizens in each Member State evidence that ‘ensuring sufficient medical supplies’ is a top priority in 21 Member States. This makes this a rather consensual priority, despite the fact that its support ranges from 56 % in Estonia, Spain and Portugal, to 36 % in Bulgaria. The support for the rest of the policy measures draws a very diverse picture of EU citizens’ preferences.

EU support for research to develop a vaccine is a second most popular priority for the Union and a top priority for two Member States (Malta and Romania). Support amongst Member States varies significantly – between 61 % in Malta and 21 % in Slovakia. These rather diverse opinions need to be analysed further in the context of vaccine acceptance rates within each Member State. Especially as vaccine hesitancy was stated as a major public health threat throughout Europe in the 2019 State of Health in the EU report on one hand, and on the other, developing and deploying an effective and safe vaccine against the virus is seen as the most likely permanent solution to end the pandemic. As part of the work of the European Parliament’s Committee on Environment, Public Health and
Food Safety, Members highlighted the challenge of ensuring that vaccines are available as soon as possible, while at the same time building public trust in vaccination.3

Providing direct financial support to the EU Member States is a top priority for three Member States (Cyprus, Greece and Croatia), although it is only the sixth most important priority for the EU as a whole. The share of citizens surveyed within a country that would like to see this policy as a priority ranges from 62 % in Cyprus to 11 % in Denmark and the Netherlands. Such diversity of opinions makes this policy option the least consensual of the list, although it has its strong supporters.

**Conclusion**

In recent years, the EU has experienced external shocks creating crises of varying nature – financial, migrant, terrorist and now a pandemic. Just as in previous cases, Europeans increase their expectations of the EU when faced with challenges beyond the capacity of any single country to respond. These increased expectations lead to greater scrutiny of EU action in the relevant area and demands for more EU involvement and spending. At the same time, any crisis puts existing limitations of EU competences in the same area under a spotlight.

In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, there is a level of mismatch between citizens' expectations and EU competences. Citizens' main preferences for priority policies and spending can be grouped in two areas – healthcare and economic recovery. While the EU has competences related to the area of economic recovery, healthcare is mainly a national competence, and any policy evaluation should be analysed in this context.

The present public opinion surveys outline healthcare as the most preferred area of spending and EU action in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. The economic recovery is the second most important spending priority for EU citizens. Acting within its limited competences and budget, over the last year, the EU has implemented a range of measures and adjusted some of its policies. It has also managed to mobilise all its reserves and flexibility mechanisms to spend on healthcare and mitigation of the economic consequences of the pandemic.

Economic recovery and resilience are among the main EU priorities in the new long-term budget. In addition, NGEU provides a new tool in support of economic and social recovery – unprecedented in terms of the overall amount to be spent and the innovative solutions enabling financing of Member
States' extraordinary needs. Overall, the EU economy will enjoy 60% in additional funding over the next seven years, compared to the 2014-2020 situation.

The new EU4Health programme, which aims to strengthen health security and prepare for future health crises, provides an example of the new budgetary package. The EU also envisions a portfolio of policies under the European Health Union. A direct response to citizens' preference for EU policy engagement, the Union has a leading role in securing vaccines for all EU citizens and has been involved in facilitating medical supplies across Europe.

Despite all these measures, Europeans surveyed are split between 46% reporting they are 'satisfied' and 50% 'not satisfied' with EU action to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. This shows that citizens' expectations are not yet fully met. Since any evaluation of an EU policy needs to be analysed in the context of EU competences, it is important to consider that 66% of Europeans want increased EU competences and 54% want greater financial means to be dedicated to the pandemic response.

Many factors can contribute towards closing this gap between citizens' expectations and their evaluation of the EU response to the pandemic and its consequences. One is expanding the relevant EU competences and resources, as well as reviewing the underused legal bases in the Treaties. Another is investing efforts in increasing public awareness of the massive investment plan just adopted by the EU to be implemented in the coming years.

ENDNOTES

1 'Don't know' replies are not included in the visualisation of the data in Figures 3 and 5.
2 Respondents could choose up to three responses to the research questions analysed in this subsection. Therefore, the sum of all responses in one graph is greater than 100.
3 The need to work with social media platforms to help eliminate inaccurate information, which is perceived as a preferred policy priority by 14% of Europeans, is also relevant here. According to analysis by digital risk firm CounterAction, the rise in vaccine hesitancy parallels growth in the volume of Facebook posts involving potentially harmful disinformation about the vaccine in all EU languages.