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DEFEN-CE:

Social Dialogue in Defence of Vulnerable Groups in Post-COVID-19 Labour Markets

EU-Level Report

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29TH SEPTEMBER 2023

European Union



This report was
financed by European
Commission Grant

No. VS/2021/0196

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented health crisis that has caused far-reaching life consequences. The impact of COVID-19 and the measures that aimed to protect lives have triggered a social and economic crisis across the globe. This crisis calls for social scientists and researchers to study the shortcomings in social and economic preparedness and responses to the pandemic. The Social Dialogue in Defence of Vulnerable Groups in the Post-COVID-19 Labour Markets project (the DEFEN-CE project), funded by the Directorate-General for Employment, the European Commission, aims to examine institutional strategies and power relations in social protection and policymaking and policy implementation to protect labour markets and workers by analysing the governance of vulnerable groups in (post) COVID-19 labour markets as well as to produce research-based knowledge and expertise on the protection of vulnerable groups at the EU level, in the EU Member States and in the candidate countries. This report emphasises the institutional strategies and power relations among social partners and stakeholders at the EU level and highlights key findings from country case studies. The research questions are threefold.

- 1) What public policy and social dialogue measures targeting the selected vulnerable groups were implemented for employment and social protection during the COVID-19 pandemic 2020–2022?
- 2) How and to what extent did social dialogue play a role in the implementation of the social and employment rights of selected vulnerable groups in the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022?
- 3) What lessons and opportunities does the COVID-19 pandemic provide for strengthening social dialogue at the EU level?

DEFEN-CE employed a mixed-method approach combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The data are comprised of datasets, policy documents, scientific literature, existing statistical data, and semi-structured interviews. In this EU-level research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 respondents: representatives from the European Parliament, trade unions, non-governmental organisations, and a European federation organisation representing domestic employers.

It is important to note that the research team invited representatives from the European Commission to participate in the interviews but received no reply. (See the list of respondents in the appendices).

DEFEN-CE's EU-level study aimed to contribute to social dialogue research and the theoretical understanding of vulnerability. Relevant concepts and approaches to deepen our understanding of vulnerability are employed as the foundation for identifying 'vulnerable groups' in connection to the labour market. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is to identify the lessons learned by pinpointing crucial areas of policy development and implementation and necessary coordination mechanisms among social partners and by showcasing best practices.

The report consists of four sections. It begins with Section 1, 'Contextual Information', which discusses institutional variations across the European Union, followed by Section 2, 'COVID-19 and Its Impact on Vulnerable Groups', which offers an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on work and the labour market, COVID-19 measures and social policy responses, labour market and social vulnerabilities, and power relations among the social partners. In Section 3, Partners and Social Dialogue in Defence of Vulnerable Groups, key findings from our interviews with EU-level social partners and stakeholders are presented. Section 4, 'Conclusion and Lesson Learned', is the final section of the report.

1. Contextual Information

This report analyses the role of social dialogue in defending vulnerable groups in the labour market, which the European Commission (2010: 9) defines as "some groups within society face a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion compared with the general population". This definition usually includes groups such as the disabled, migrants and ethnic minorities, homeless people, children, isolated elderly, and low-income families (especially lone parents). Questions relating to vulnerable groups are generally considered the concern of welfare states. This section outlines the institutional variations in social dialogue in the European Union by introducing the different types of welfare states, labour relations and employment protection and assistance regimes. It also discusses multi-level European social dialogue and the key actors.

European welfare states are diverse, and each welfare state is institutionalised according to its own specific logic and is based on national legacies and national circumstances. Consequently, labour relations and unemployment regimes also vary greatly between different European regions. Table 1, below, summarises the main differences between the European welfare states. European social policy, or Social Europe, has been assigned the challenging task of finding unity in such diversity. With large variations between national welfare state models and limited EU-level competencies to affect social-affairs policymaking at the Member State level, the impact of Europe has been limited.

	Anglophone	Nordic	Centre	Southern	Eastern
Political Economy	Liberal (uncoordinated)	Coordinated (central)	Coordinated (Sector)	Mixed (State Intervention)	Transition/FDI dependent
Labour relations	Pluralist	Corporatist	Social partnership	Contentious	Fragmented
Welfare State	Liberal	Universalist	Conservative	Conservative/familyist	Conservative/residual
Unemployment protection	Mainly Unemployment Assistance, (UA) low Employment protection legislation (EPL)	Ghent-Unemployment Insurance (UI), medium EPL	UI and UA, medium EPL	Mainly UI, high EPL	UI, residual UA, low EPL
UA: Unemployment Assistance (means-tested); UI: Unemployment insurance; EPL: Employment Protection Legislation					

Table 1: Typology of Institutional variations in Europe. Source: Ebbinghaus and Weishaupt (2022: Table 1, page 184)

Diversity is also the main characteristic related to labour market governance. Table 2, below, illustrates the multilevel structures in which social partners at the Member State and EU levels, national authorities, and the European Commission engage in European social dialogue. European social dialogue officially includes the discussions, consultations, negotiations, and joint actions of organisations representing both employers’ and workers’ interests. Traditionally, social dialogue can take the form of either a tripartite dialogue involving public authorities or a bipartite dialogue between European employers and trade union organisations. At the EU level, European social dialogue is enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), and it refers to the bipartite work of the social partners at an inter-sectoral level between the European Trade Union Confederation and employers’ organisations as well as at a sectoral level between the European trade union federations and their counterparts among the employers’ organisations. In addition, as part of European

polycymaking, social partners participate, for instance, in Tripartite Social Summits (where social partners meet directly with the Presidents of the Council and the European Commission) to discuss macroeconomic policy and employment-related issues, and social partners at the EU level must be consulted on all issues relating to employment and social affairs (TFEU Article 154). Member States, however, differ considerably in the organisation and functioning of social dialogue (Keller & Weber 2011). In addition, concern has been expressed about the low participation of national actors in EU-level policy-making processes.

Actors	Responsibilities
National Social Partners	The main responsibility for implementation of Policies and Directives Translation of Documents (if necessary) Dissemination of autonomous agreement and information Discussion/negotiations between social partners Developing implementation measures Reporting on implementation activities
European Social Partners	Assistance and advice (translation, best practices) Coordination and monitoring of activities Yearly progress reports and final implementation reports Interpretation of ambiguities (where requested)
National authorities	Subsidiary and non-obligatory role in implementation, e.g., through regulations or legislation
Commission	Assistance and financial support (if necessary) Monitoring and assessment

Table 2: European Social Dialogue: Responsibilities in the implementation process

Source: European Commission (2009)

2. COVID-19 and Its Impact on Vulnerable Groups

In this section, the COVID-19 Pandemic is scrutinised in relation to its impact on work and the labour market in the European Union, followed by a brief description of the EU-level COVID-19 responses concerning the labour market and social vulnerabilities. The section draws on secondary sources collected during desk research.

2.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Work and Labour Market

After first appearing in China in early December 2019, COVID-19 infections in Europe were first detected in Italy in February 2020. In March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared it a global pandemic, and the world witnessed a dramatic rise in infection rates thereafter. In April 2020, COVID-19 cases were found in all EU Member States (see e.g. Bontempi 2021). Over the course of one year, the European Union witnessed 40 million confirmed COVID-19 cases, and over 900,000 COVID-19-related deaths (between March 2020 and March 2021) (Degryse 2021).

Impacts on economic growth

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union (EU) experienced a severe, 5.9%, drop in economic growth in 2020. The pandemic required extreme containment measures and impacted several sectors of the economy. The year 2021 witnessed a strong but partial upturn, with a growth rate of 5.4%. Despite this rebound, however, the EU suffered another setback in 2022, with economic growth declining, also as a consequence of a new emerging crisis: the war in Ukraine. (OECD, 2021; Eurostat, 2023c).

The deep economic downturn added to the already high death toll and caused substantial economic suffering. The implementation of severe containment measures resulted in the closure of substantial sectors of the economy, resulting in a drop in economic activity and a loss of confidence in the face of increased uncertainty. Except for Ireland, all EU members witnessed GDP declines ranging from 1%

to 11% in 2020. The countries most affected were those that had no choice but to impose the most stringent lockdown measures or that contained economic structures that were particularly vulnerable to such restrictions (Business Europe, 2022; Eurostat, 2023c). As Figure 2, above, shows, there was already a noticeable economic resurgence in the latter half of 2020. However, tensions have risen as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, increasing pressures on the European gas market and even raising the prospect of severe gas shortages (International Monetary Fund, 2022). Both crises began to push up global commodity prices, particularly oil and food prices. To overcome gas supply bottlenecks and encourage renewable energy, the EU has introduced initiatives to diversify energy sources and make infrastructure investments to alleviate risks. These efforts have been aided by initiatives such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the SURE instrument (OECD 2021), which will also be discussed in the next section. Furthermore, growth in the Euro area, though not at the same rate, remained solid in 2022, as shown in Table 3.

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022
GDP	1.6	-6.3	4.2	4.4
Unemployment rate (%)	6.9	7.3	7.6	7.2
Fiscal balance (% of GDP)	-0.6	-7.1	-7.1	-3.7
Public Debt (Maastricht, % of GDP)	80.6	94.3	97.0	95.8

Table 3: GDP and unemployment rate and its effect on fiscal balance and public debt in EU27 from 2019–2022

Source: OECD Economic Outlook: Statistics and Projections (database).

It is important to note that the crisis has disproportionately impacted service sectors that rely on low-skilled jobs, potentially exacerbating inequality and poverty levels (OECD, 2021) The surge in non-performing loans poses a threat to financial stability and could impede the exit of inefficient firms, thereby hindering resource reallocation and overall economic growth. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected the EU, plunging it into a recession, measures taken to address energy diversification, infrastructural investment, and economic recovery initiatives offer hope for a strong rebound and sustained growth. Nevertheless, there remain challenges, such as inequality, poverty, and financial instability, that must be effectively addressed for a comprehensive recovery to occur (OECD, 2021; Eurostat, 2023c).

Impacts on labour markets

The EU achieved a record-low unemployment rate of 6.4 percent during the summer of 2019, and unemployment remained below seven percent until the spring of 2020. The start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing waves of societal restrictions exerted an immediate and significant impact on the European economy. The unemployment rate across the EU27 increased from 6.5 percent in March 2020 to a peak of 7.8 percent in August 2020. Notably, the deployment of several regulations aimed at protecting the European labour market aided in the reduction of further unemployment. For example, the temporary unemployment assistance fund (SURE instrument) issued loans to EU Member States worth up to 100 billion euros. In addition, in response to the pandemic, various national job retention programmes were established or extended. The combined furlough schemes of the United Kingdom, France, and Germany accounted for approximately 23.2 million jobs (Eurostat, 2023a).

In the second year, there was a steady improvement in employment figures, which eventually returned to pre-pandemic levels, averaging 6.1% in 2022, 18 months after the outbreak began. Figure 2, below, depicts the unemployment rate in the European Union (including the Eurozone) from 2019 to 2023 (Eurostat, 2023a).

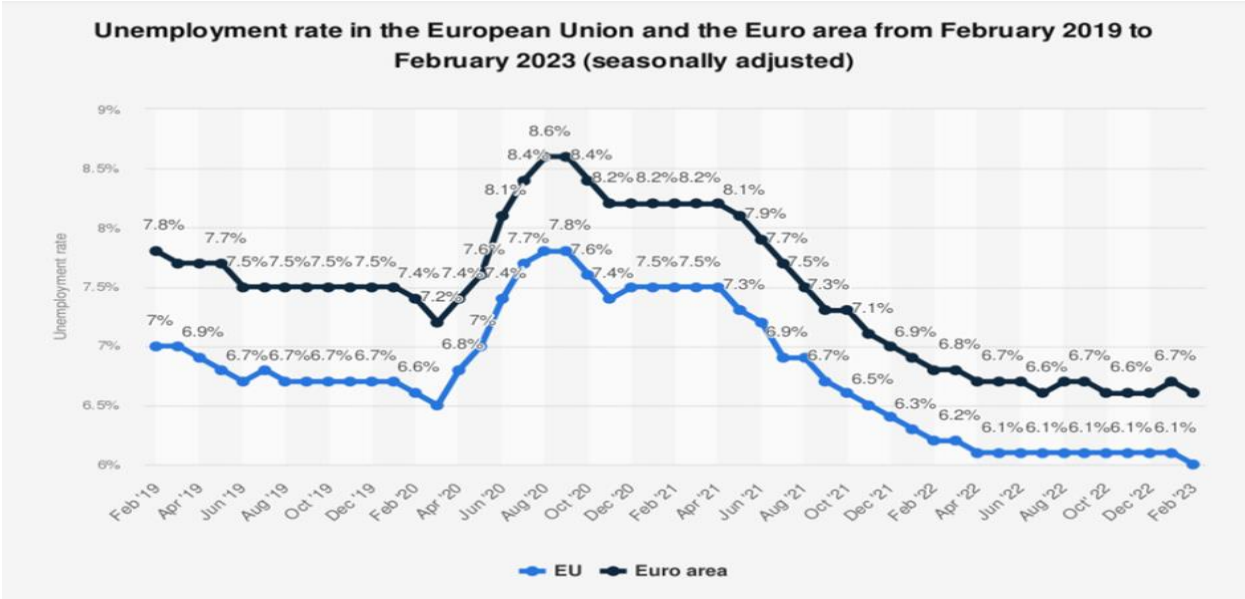


Figure 1: Unemployment rate in the EU (and Euro area) from February 2019 to February 2023

Source: Eurostat (2023a)

This pattern of unemployment dynamics reflects the substantial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the European labour market. The initial rise in unemployment was a direct consequence of widespread societal restrictions and economic disruptions. As governments implemented various measures to mitigate their impact, including job retention schemes and financial support, the unemployment rate gradually decreased. However, the overall recovery trajectory and long-term implications for the labour market warrant further analysis and investigation.

Eurostat estimated that there would be 13.028 million unemployed people in the European Union (EU) in April 2023, with 11.088 million in the eurozone (EA) (Eurostat, 2023a; Eurostat, 2023b). In comparison to April 2022, this represents a reduction of 212,000 unemployed people, with a reduction of 203,000 for the eurozone (Eurostat, 2023a).

Impacts on poverty and social exclusion

In the EU, approximately 95.4 million individuals were estimated to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2021, accounting for 21.7% of the total population (Eurostat, 2022). Among unemployed individuals aged 18 years and above in the EU, nearly two-thirds (64.5%) were identified as being at risk of poverty or social exclusion in both 2021 and 2020. Additionally, in 2020, over two-thirds (66.2%) of unemployed individuals aged 18 years and above, as well as 42.9% of inactive individuals (excluding retirees), were at risk (ibid.). By comparison, the risk of poverty or social exclusion for retirees stood at 19.2%, while it was 11.8% for employed individuals (SGI, 2022; Schengen, 2022).

Table 4, below, depicts the data collected by a Eurostat survey (Eurostat 2023) on people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, which highlights the persistent challenge of poverty and social exclusion in the EU, with a substantial proportion of individuals affected across different categories and years. It demonstrates how the risk of poverty and social exclusion has risen from 2019 to 2022. Moreover, it underscores the importance of targeted policies and interventions to address these issues and work towards achieving the EU 2030 poverty target indicators.

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022
EU-27	21.1	21.6	21.7	21.6

Table 4: People at risk of poverty and exclusion in EU27 2019–2022

Source: Eurostat. (2023). People at risk of poverty or social exclusion – EU-SILC survey

2.2 COVID-19 Measures and Social Policy Response

2.2.1 GENERAL REACTIONS IN THE MEMBER STATES

The DEFEN-CE national reports offer an extensive view of the public policy responses in selected countries. This section provides a short and general overview of the developments in the Member States. In reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, European policymakers took similar steps, such as curtailing economic activity, encouraging social separation, and prohibiting large gatherings. Policymakers imposed mobility restrictions in response to multiple waves of infections, which while aiming to protect lives also curtailed economic activity and (unintentionally) exacerbated existing vulnerabilities. Typically, these measures included the closure of schools, universities, and non-essential enterprises. Although the aims and fundamental nature of the restrictions were similar, their specifics, implementation techniques, and duration differed between European countries. Most European governments, including France, Germany, and Spain, introduced legislative steps to support these restrictions in mid-March. Several nations, including Sweden and the United Kingdom, elected not to adopt strict regulations and instead relied on voluntary behaviours to curb the spread of the virus and potentially develop herd immunity (Petridou, 2020; Colfer, 2020). While the importance of these measures in saving lives is now abundantly clear, it is worth mentioning that the repeated lockdowns led to a severe economic contraction that surpassed the impact of the Global Financial Crisis, leading to a significant deterioration in labour markets across Europe (Ando et al., 2022; NIHR, 2020).

The initial reaction in the Member States was to compensate for the economic losses of companies and secure jobs. The key measures adopted by the Member States to support businesses (to save companies and, in the meantime, maintain people in employment) were financial investments in firms, loans, and credit guarantees. Moreover, in many countries, tax obligations and social contributions were suspended (European Commission 2023c; Myant 2021). However, as the country reports of the DEFEN-CE project show, support was not given to all affected sectors, and, for example, the self-employed and precarious workers often received less help.

The lockdown measures imposed during the pandemic exerted an uneven impact in the Member States, affecting not only different economic activities within the labour market but also various groups of workers. These restrictions exacerbated existing inequalities, exposing the vulnerability of certain unprotected segments, such as gig workers (Stephany et al., 2020), and accelerating pre-existing trends towards job automation (Pouliakas, 2018) and remote work (Eurofound, 2020a). The profound impact on labour markets led to a significant divergence between compensation per employee and compensation per hour. This disparity became evident during the early stages of the pandemic, particularly in the second quarter of 2020. While compensation per employee experienced an annual decline of 4.7%, compensation per hour witnessed a notable increase of 9.3%. However, these differences began to weaken in the third quarter of 2020 (Dias da Silva, et al., 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic also accelerated existing trends of business transformation toward automation and digitalization. As companies adapted to remote work and sought to minimize human contact, they increasingly invested in technology and automation solutions. This shift has led to changes in the skills required for many jobs, with a greater emphasis on digital literacy and remote collaboration abilities. The results also highlight the exacerbation of existing inequalities in the labour market. Certain demographic groups, such as young people and low-skilled workers, have been disproportionately affected by the economic downturn caused by COVID-19. Moreover, travel restrictions and border closures disrupted the flow of migrant workers, particularly in sectors heavily reliant on foreign labour, such as agriculture and care work. The reduced availability of migrant workers created labour shortages and affected the functioning of these industries. Similarly, youth unemployment rates soared during the pandemic, and consequently young people entering the job market face greater challenges in finding stable employment opportunities.

2.2.2 EU-LEVEL POLICIES

Prior to the outbreak, the European Commission and the European Parliament had struggled over the EU budget in the aftermath of the departure of the UK, or Brexit. However, the loss of lives and the threat of economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic motivated the Commission and the Parliament to support Member States in their crisis response through health and civil protection administrations. EU policies in these respects were coordinated by the ECDC (European Centre for

Disease Prevention and Control) and the EMA (European Medicines Agency), and the European Commission's DG for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO).

The EU's priorities were thus, on the one hand, **to protect public health** and, on the other hand, to **mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic** (see, e.g., Atanasova et al 2021). We list the most crucial policy responses below (European Commission, 2023h), and these responses are analysed further regarding their significance and effects, based on the interview data, in Chapter 3.

- ✓ In March 2020, President von der Leyen established a COVID-19 response team. In the following month, the state aid measures were approved by the Commission. The measures aimed to support businesses and safeguard employment in the Member States (European Commission 2023b). Over the course of 22 months, from March 2020 to December 2021, EUR 3.1 trillion was approved to support national measures; out of this total amount, approximately EUR 940 billion was granted to businesses (European Commission 2023c).
- ✓ In May 2020, the European Commission presented **NextGenerationEU** (NGEU), the hallmark European recovery plan, with a budget of EUR 750 billion.
- ✓ In September 2020, the Council of the EU approved the EUR 87.4 billion **Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE)** assistance instrument to assist Member States in providing income replacement for workers who were unable to work.
- ✓ In February 2021, The European Parliament adopted the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)** to provide financial support to Member States. While the RRF primarily focused on climate and digital targets, there was encouragement for Member States to include measures addressing vulnerable groups as well.
- ✓ In 2021, the Porto Social Summit was also held, with agenda points on the revival of the EU economy after the COVID-19 pandemic and the commitment to implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Overall, in addressing the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictions, the European Commission has emphasised the implementation of policies to support businesses, save jobs and target income inequalities, including the SURE instrument, the RRF, and the adoption of a directive on minimum wages to mitigate the economic impact of the crisis and support individuals and businesses during this challenging time.

2.3 Labour Market and Social Vulnerabilities

The COVID-19 pandemic socially and economically impacted the populations of EU Member States. Lockdown measures were put in place across Europe with the aim of saving lives; nonetheless, they adversely affected the European labour market.

It is well known from labour studies of prior financial and economic crises that vulnerable groups, such as the youth, migrants, and the poor, are disproportionately impacted (Birkmann, et al, 2022; Sanfelici, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic affected the entire population, while simultaneously deepening existing inequalities between those who suffered the most and those who faced lesser challenges. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), approximately 2.7 billion workers, which accounts for 81% of the global workforce, have been affected by full or partial lockdown measures. Furthermore, around 1.25 billion workers, equivalent to 38% of the worldwide workforce, are employed in sectors experiencing a significant decline in output and facing a high risk of job displacement (ILO, 2020).

In Europe, the government-imposed lockdowns that commenced in March 2020 followed a similar path, effectively pausing public life and causing entire industries to come to a standstill (Seemann et al, 2021). The disintegration of global value chains, full or partial closure of international trade routes, border lockouts, temporary business closures in a variety of economic sectors, strict social segregation policies, and tightened hygiene protocols which restricted the mobility of people are just a few disruptive factors contributing to severe negative effects (Chivu and Georgiescu, 2021). Further, the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated the situation, particularly affecting the cost of commodities like electricity and animal food. This has raised the cost of living across Europe and led to the displacement of Ukrainians (Zwysen et al., 2023).

In regard to the impact of COVID-19 and social vulnerabilities, the pandemic has undoubtedly weakened people's ability to exercise their social rights in various aspects of life, and more people have experienced insecure working and living conditions, accentuating already existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities and inequities (*ibid.*). For example, according to the Fundamental Rights Agency (2022), the negative economic and social repercussions increased as the pandemic progressed, with a

growing number of people feeling socially ostracised and a larger number struggling to cope financially compared to pre-pandemic levels (see Figure 2 below).

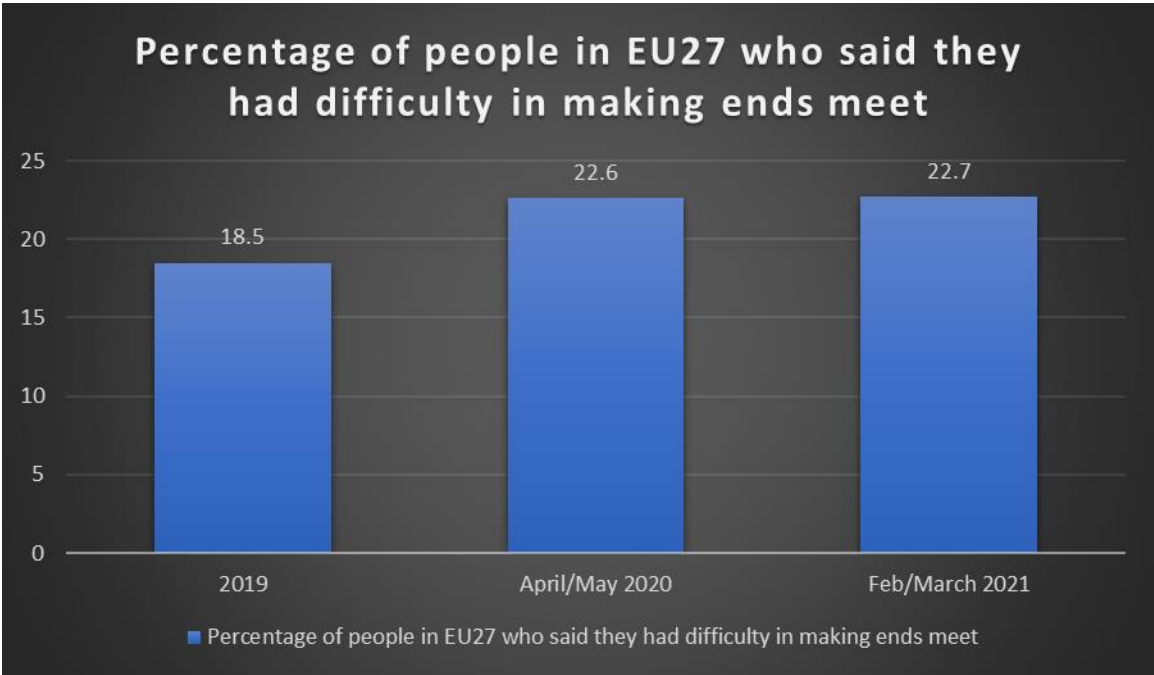


Figure 2: Percentage of People in EU27 who said they had difficulty in making ends meet from 2019–March 2021

Source: Fundamental Rights Agency (2022), Eurofound (2020a), Inability to make ends meet- EU-SILC survey

Furthermore, the pandemic has weakened the labour-market attachment of many vulnerable groups. A recent study by Zwysen et al. (2023) highlights the employment status of such groups, including the unemployed, self-employed, temporary workers, and part-time workers, within the European Union (EU) from 2019 to 2023. Their findings indicate that young individuals in part-time or temporary employment are disproportionately represented. Additionally, those with lower qualifications were found to be at a heightened risk of exposure to temporary contracts, exacerbating their vulnerability and exclusion during the recovery phase of the pandemic. In parallel, individuals working in precarious roles, such as platform workers, initially faced potential exclusion from the benefit and compensation programmes implemented by Member States to mitigate the impact of employment restrictions during the pandemic as specific forms of social assistance were limited to those engaged in formal

employment. This had significant implications not only for individual work circumstances but also for the overall functioning of businesses (Mah & Andrew, 2022; Eurofound, 2023b).

3. Social Partners and Social Dialogue in Defence of Vulnerable Groups

This section presents the findings from interviews with 11 respondents from EU-level stakeholders – the European Parliament, trade unions, and non-governmental organisations – to examine the social dialogue elements of policies aimed at defending vulnerable groups in the labour market. The section first discusses which groups these stakeholders identified as vulnerable and which EU-level COVID-19 measures and policies (see section 2) they highlighted during the interviews.

The remainder of the section focuses on how different EU-level social partners interacted in mobilising social dialogue, namely, what mechanisms of social dialogue could be detected. Finally, we explore how the different EU-level actors evaluated their role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1 Which vulnerable groups were represented by the social partners?

‘Vulnerability’ has no universal definition. Scholars and experts from various disciplines often employ the concept to serve their own purposes and interests in response to different contexts (Shitangsu 2013). Most commonly, however, the understanding of vulnerability overlaps with such concepts as risk, exposure, deprivation, resilience, adaptive capacity, and marginality.

Nevertheless, in reference to the European Commission’s (2010: 9) definition presented in section 1, vulnerability is generally equated with poverty and social exclusion vis-à-vis the general population. Vulnerable groups commonly include the disabled, migrants and ethnic minorities, homeless people, children, isolated elderly, and low-income families (especially lone parents).

The findings from our interviews suggest that the COVID-19 crisis **gave rise to vulnerability that was linked to a broader set of social, economic and health risks. Moreover, it often affected**

particular groups of workers as well as diverse sectors of employment. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic was seen to worsen the vulnerabilities of those ‘classic’ groups that are central to the socio-economic understanding of vulnerability as related to poverty and social exclusion.

The respondents identified several groups who were in a **disadvantaged position and/or were under-represented in the labour market, including:**

- **women,**
- **the elderly,**
- **LGBTIQA+,**
- **lone parents (especially single mothers),**
- **low-income and minimum-income workers,**
- **low-skilled workers,**
- **persons with disabilities,**
- **care workers,**
- **migrant workers,**
- **non-standard workers,**
- **the self-employed,**
- **undocumented workers,**
- **seasonal workers,**
- **ethnic minorities.**

Vulnerability was strongly linked to certain sectors and working conditions during the pandemic.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic exerted a profound and far-reaching effect on **vulnerable worker groups across various sectors and industries.** Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a new understanding of vulnerability among workers. During the first wave of the pandemic, essential workers, those working on the frontline, were seen to be particularly vulnerable due to the high medical risks that they faced in their work, which could not be performed remotely. Such individuals included health and care workers, workers in food production, retail, security, cleaning and sanitation, and transport and those workers in manual and technical occupations. During the first wave of the pandemic, such workers lacked protective clothing and equipment, for instance respiratory protective

equipment (RPE), which exposed many groups of workers to substantial risks. Nonetheless, even among these groups of ‘vulnerable’ workers, inequalities existed between sectors. Such inequalities were reflected in the response of one interviewee from UNI Global Union: *while hand clapping or applause was given to essential workers in public healthcare facilities, those working in private facilities were ignored, let alone private security guards, cleaners, domestic workers, and home care workers who were also in vulnerable situations.*

Although many respondents were concerned about the vulnerabilities of essential workers, some also attached vulnerability to those who could work remotely. According to them, such workers experienced vulnerability due to a poor work-life balance and limited support from employers. In addition, the issue of gender was also raised in the interviews, as the pandemic was seen to worsen gender inequality in the home because care tasks often fell to mothers (see also Yerkes et al. 2022). A major concern expressed in the interviews was, however, related to **workers across different low-paid or seasonal sectors and their working conditions during the pandemic.** According to the respondents, these workers often lived in inadequate housing provided by employers and worked in unhygienic working environments where social distancing guidelines were often ignored by employers. Examples of such workers were those in the construction sector, workers in meatpacking factories, or domestic workers. Furthermore, a respondent from the European trade union IndustriAll observed that, in some countries, the vulnerabilities of these workers could be linked to the weakness of social dialogue: in countries where social dialogue was weak, collective bargaining or other interventions could not occur.

Intersectionality

Even though the word pandemic suggests that COVID-19 affected us all (in Latin ‘*pan*’ means all, everyone, and ‘*demos*’ means people), it impacted different groups and regions unevenly. Nonetheless, across Europe, it strengthened the pre-existing inequalities that shape vulnerabilities amongst marginalised groups (for a similar finding in the US, see Parolin 2023). As can be seen from the list of vulnerable groups identified in the interviews, many were vulnerable already prior to the outbreak. The interviews, however, showed that vulnerability was not only related to certain socio-demographic groups. Rather, it resulted from various social stratification processes that drove multiple elements of exclusion and marginalisation. This **intersectional nature of vulnerability** was, for instance, evident from the situation of undocumented workers during the pandemic. These workers simultaneously

suffered from poor access to the labour market, poor housing, poor working conditions, and inadequate wages and incomes, and moreover received limited or restricted access to protection and public services. A respondent from the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) reflected on the identification of vulnerable groups thus:

There is, however, an element that is common to all the categories identified, which is the over-representation of these workers in non-standard forms of employment. Basically, while they are suffering more precarious working conditions, be it in terms of having jobs for which they are not granted access to social protection or short-term contracts, or, as is the case, unfortunately, for many migrant workers [they] are subjected to abuses in which they are not granted any [employment] contract mainly because they have not yet access to a status of European citizenship which allows them to work, so they were subjected to perhaps the most precarious situations across the pandemic.

The shut-down of public services created vulnerabilities

The disruptions caused by the pandemic had significant implications for **employment support systems and services**, exacerbating the challenges faced by these already marginalised populations. The findings indicate that certain groups, such as low-wage workers, gig economy workers, and those in informal employment, experienced heightened vulnerability during the pandemic. These individuals faced a multitude of difficulties, including loss of income, job insecurity, and limited access to essential resources. Many were confronted with the harsh reality of choosing between risking their health by continuing to work or facing financial hardship by staying at home. Accessing financial support proved to be a major obstacle for vulnerable workers, as they encountered various barriers to accessing government assistance programmes or were ineligible due to their employment status. The lack of comprehensive social protection measures further intensified their vulnerabilities, leaving them without a safety net during times of crisis. In addition to financial challenges, vulnerable workers faced barriers to accessing adequate healthcare. Limited access to health insurance, a lack of paid sick leave, and precarious working conditions hampered their ability to seek medical care or take time off when required. This situation not only endangered the health and well-being of these workers but also had broader implications for public health and the overall containment of the virus.

The shifting crisis also entailed a shifting focus on vulnerability

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health of workers in all sectors became a key concern of the social partners, but, as Europe was entering a new crisis from February 2022, some of this remained in the background. The economic hardship of workers was accentuated by the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the mounting energy/inflation crisis in 2022 and 2023. Several respondents argued that inflation and the rise of energy prices increased overall living costs, but again the impact was strongest for those who had suffered during the pandemic. Simultaneously, however, high inflation has also impacted middle-class workers, who prior to the new energy/inflation crisis were not considered vulnerable.

To conclude, the interviews suggest that, at the EU level, vulnerability during the pandemic concerned more than simply exposure to particular hazardous situations or economic risks. Rather, it also involved social and employment risks shaped by a person's intersectionality (age, gender, ethnicity, for example), social context and political and institutional factors (policy measures targeting particular groups, in particular), and by their own or collective ability, capacity or resilience to cope with these risks. Another key finding points to the temporal and spatial changes of social vulnerability: vulnerability was not static and changed over time.

3.2. Which policies were discussed by the social partners?

In section 2.2.2, we listed the main policy instruments designed and/or implemented during the pandemic. Below, the main findings from the interviews are presented with regard to the key policy instruments used to defend vulnerable groups in the labour market.

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)

The EU-level respondents elucidated a myriad of policy-based responses employed to combat the far-reaching ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. One significant policy instrument mentioned was

the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), an all-encompassing set of 20 principles that serves as the basis for an array of initiatives geared towards improving working conditions, promoting equal treatment in the workplace, providing educational and training opportunities, bolstering social protection, and fostering an equilibrium between work and personal life. The EPSR, although not codified into hard law, has cemented the European commitment to advancing the social dimension of the European Union. The EPSR was proclaimed in 2017 by the European Parliament, the European Council, and the European Commission. The Social Summit in Porto in May 2021, in the midst of the pandemic, took new steps towards implementing the principles through a joint action plan and the adoption of the Porto Declaration on social affairs. One of the key implementations of the EPSR is the first European Employment and Social Rights Forum, held in November 2022. In this forum, representatives from the European Commission, policymakers, academics and other stakeholders discussed, among other societal problems, the energy crisis and green transition opportunities. The EPSR came with an action plan providing a framework for actors at the EU and Member-State levels to act in promoting social protection and inclusion, improving working conditions and access to education and training, and balancing between work and personal life, as argued by one NGO representative. It was seen as an essential policy tool for the European Commission to further create new laws to protect and safeguard social rights. One of the respondents from a knowledge institute reflected on the importance of the EPSR thus: *the European Commission [is] supported by the European Pillar of Social Rights, which gives them really a strong mandate to intervene in the social field* – for example, through the Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages and the Work-Life Balance Directive.

The SURE instrument (Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency)

The EPSR was an important step for the further development of Social Europe, but as for defending the vulnerable during the pandemic, it was rather a symbolic gesture. By contrast, one of the most important measures introduced by the Commission to defend the European labour market and preserve employment during the time of the outbreak was seen to be the establishment of the **SURE instrument (Supporting to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency)**. In September 2020, the European Council approved SURE as proposed by the Commission. Consequently, EUR 100 billion in loans was

provided to Member States to cover the expenses of national short-time work schemes and measures to support the self-employed and mitigate the shock to national labour markets (European Commission 2023f). SURE was considered an exceptional instrument that encompassed national unemployment insurance schemes in Member States during the pandemic (Vandenbroucke et al. 2020). Due to the subsidiarity principle, most matters related to social and labour market policy are considered national affairs, and the EU has no legal competencies to regulate these issues. Due to this and the lack of ‘common European tax revenue’, organising “traditional” social security is difficult at the EU level, nor have the member states previously accepted that the EU possesses such competencies. Therefore, in this sense, **SURE was a ground-breaking step** towards a more encompassing EU social policy. In 2020, the SURE instrument provided support to approximately 31.5 million employees and self-employed people and about 2.5 million firms. In 2021, 9 million people and about 900,000 firms were covered by the SURE instrument (European Commission 2023f).

For highly indebted countries, SURE soft loans were significant because “interest rates remain unchanged for the entire period of the loan and that the bonds issued by the Commission remain equally distributed” (Alcidi and Cordi 2021: 48). However, SURE soft loans were insufficient to tackle the sudden rise in public debt in all countries, with Italy and Spain being prime examples (Schmid 2020). Another criticism of the SURE instrument was that “SURE financing was unconditional. It could be used only for eligible spending that included job retention schemes and other crisis-related programmes” (Drahokoupil and Müller 2021: 18). Each country in the EU-27 ran their own job retention schemes, including short-time work schemes and wage subsidies, and not all Member States used SURE financing (Drahokoupil and Müller 2021).

The respondents from trade unions interviewed for this study all emphasised that the SURE instrument did not specifically target any particular groups in the labour market and, in terms of the national-level measures financially supported by SURE financing, Member States were able to design and implement their own programmes as they wished. One respondent from a knowledge organisation offered his personal reflection on the impact of the SURE instrument:

In [the] Member States, the coverage [by the SURE financing] was different in terms of the scope. Some workers who were perhaps self-employed were included in some countries, but in other countries, they were not so in a way that created some new inequalities. Overall, our assessment [of the SURE supported measures] is that without these, it would have been much worse. But these measures still created some inequalities

that could have been prevented, so they had some serious side effects. For me, this will be the main measure that came up and who was in charge, it varied from Member States to Member States.

The side effects referred to by this respondent manifested themselves in the form of ‘inequality’ between the Member States – since the deployment of SURE financing varied from country to country – and between vulnerable groups within countries because some such groups were not included in national job retention schemes.

It is therefore crucial to examine how *social partners at the national level* were involved in designing and implementing job retention schemes financially supported by SURE financing and what disparities emerged as a result of the diverse coverage and scope of these job retention schemes.

Recovery and Resilience Facility

Another important COVID-19-related measure mentioned was the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). The RRF is a temporary recovery instrument designed to mitigate the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the largest component and core of ‘NextGenerationEU’. NextGenerationEU (NGEU) is an 806.9-billion-euro instrument aimed at supporting vulnerable groups and enabling modernisation based on each country’s implementation. NGEU was preceded by SURE (European Commission 2022c).

The RRF came into force in February 2021 and will end by 31 December 2026. The RRF provides financial support in the form of grants and loans to Member States based on their detailed national Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) (European Commission 2023g; Vanhercke et al. 2021). The RRF instrument differs from SURE and other previous poverty and social exclusion-related instruments in the sense that it is conditional financing and is also performance-based. Policy interventions such as the RRF illustrate the ‘hardening’ of EU ‘soft governance’ (van Gerven and Stiller forthcoming): through embedded conditionalities inherent in EU-funding, softer forms of governance (such as social policy) have grown teeth and strengthened the direct impact of the EU on national policies (van Gerven et al, 2014).

The RRF allows the Member States to address the following six pillars: green transition, digital transformation, smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth, social and territorial cohesion, health and

economic, social, and institutional resilience, and policies for the next generation (European Commission 2023g). In response to this, another respondent from a knowledge organisation suggested that because of its various foci beyond driving the recovery from the pandemic, some countries may use RRF funds to address the green transition and digital transformation rather than social issues and the support of vulnerable groups.

Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages

The Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages is also a key measure to cope with the unprecedented shock to the European economy caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the idea of the directive dates back long before the COVID crisis. The rationale behind the Directive, championed by both the European Parliament and the Council, on adequate minimum wages in the European Union is the extension of social Europe, and aims to cover the basic protection of workers in the EU (as also set out in the ESPR). An external shock like the pandemic was also a helpful illustration of the crucial role of minimum wages in protecting European employment. Low-wage and minimum-wage workers are often found in particular sectors, such as the services sector, microenterprises, and small enterprises, and in specific demographic groups, including women, younger workers, migrant workers, single parents and low-skilled workers, persons with disabilities and particular persons who suffer from multiple forms of discrimination. Earning an adequate minimum wage is necessary to support their economic recovery and well-being (Directive (EU) 2022/2041 of the European Parliament and of the Council 19 October 2022).

Schulten and Müller (2020) argue that while the objective of the Directive is clear, the means to achieve it are not. Article 4 of the Directive (EU) 2022/2041 (European Union 2022a) promotes the involvement of the social partners in collective bargaining on wage-setting. Indeed, a respondent from a knowledge institute argued that the pandemic had changed the perspectives of policymakers, promoting a greater emphasis on more *collective oriented and substantive oriented solutions*. Before the pandemic, several European instruments were focused more on individual rights. By contrast, during the COVID-19 crisis, collective rights and collective bargaining have received more attention from EU-level policymakers, and the Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages could be a concrete manifestation of this. The Directive is also considered necessary when labour markets change, for instance due to the digitalisation of work. Earning an adequate minimum wage is crucial not only for people engaged in platform work, such as Uber drivers, but also for those workers participating in the gig economy and for others working remotely. The crisis thus constituted a window of opportunity; as

one respondent mentioned, *[this] is something that policymakers were not necessarily focusing on before the pandemic.*

In sum, the adoption of the Directive on Minimum Wages was seen as an ambitious step because it established decency thresholds for minimum wages at the national level and emphasised the importance of social dialogue and collective bargaining. This directive was considered beneficial to vulnerable groups, as increasing minimum wages could potentially improve such groups' economic situation.

The *Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions* (2019/1152), which aimed to protect workers in precarious jobs, and the *Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers* (2019/1158) entered into force prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but they became important legislative acts that require the Member States to adopt laws and regulations to comply with them. The respondents considered these directives particularly important laws in respect to (remote) work during the pandemic.

The respondents also mentioned the *EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030*, adopted in March 2021, which contains “a big focus on employment”, as one respondent from an NGO representing the disability sector observed. Moreover, they remarked on *the European Commission's Action Plan on the Social Economy*, adopted in December 2021, which aims to improve social investment, creating jobs and supporting social economy actors, the 2018 *European Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships*, which aims to ensure proper jobs and decent wages, especially for young people in the apprenticeships, and the *European Care Strategy*, which was introduced by the European Commission in 2022 as the first strategy on care issues aimed at supporting care systems and improving the working conditions of caregivers.

New proposals in the making

The *Adequate Minimum Income (in progress)* could be a new measure for responding to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. On the 28th of September 2022, the Commission submitted a Proposal for a Council Recommendation on adequate minimum income ensuring active inclusion. The Proposal states that its objective is to ensure that “every person in the Union can enjoy a life in dignity”, which is considered “essential to build fair and resilient economies and societies”. The Proposal is a response to the economic shock caused by the COVID-19 crisis and the lockdown measures, which exerted “a

disproportionate impact on women and people in vulnerable situations, notably in terms of the higher burden of informal care work and more limited access to healthcare, education and relevant social services, also aggravating pre-existing limitations in access to employment'. Moreover, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has led to a significant increase in energy prices and inflation. Minimum income schemes are crucial in eliminating poverty and promoting inclusion in society and the labour market. This Proposal will be discussed by the Member States and adopted by the Council, respectively. Nonetheless, one respondent from a knowledge organisation considered it noteworthy that, when it comes to the issue of minimum income, the Commission has aimed for a recommendation (rather than a directive), which is considered a 'soft' instrument.

It is important to note that, following on from the Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages, the Adequate Minimum Income initiative is expected to represent another giant step. This is because of its benefit to vulnerable groups, as increasing minimum income could potentially improve these groups' economic situation. Another ongoing discussion concerns the Council recommendation on minimum income, which aims to provide support for those falling outside or at the low end of the labour market. Disagreement has arisen over whether this should be a directive or a recommendation, with some Member States and the European Parliament expressing reservations. The pandemic also highlighted the vulnerability of self-employed individuals, leading to the provision of income replacement benefits in 19 Member States. These benefits varied, with some countries offering benefits as a percentage of previous earnings, while others provided lump sums, often close to the minimum income of the country. Efforts were made to reform these schemes to provide better support for the self-employed in the long term.

The ***Directive on Improving Working Conditions in Platform Work (in progress)*** would represent another new measure, this time to support platform workers, who are at risk of employment status misclassification. The European Commission submitted the proposal for the Directive on Improving Working Conditions in Platform Work on the 9th of December 2021. The European Parliament and of the Council will discuss the proposal as the next step.

The ***Directive on Pay Transparency (in progress)*** was also mentioned by a representative of a trade union. This directive would be a significant step toward the right to equal pay between women and men by enhancing the enforcement of rights and obligations. The final text of the directive was recently adopted by the European Council in April 2023 (European Union 2023c).

3.2.3 Mechanisms of European social dialogue

In the previous section, a variety of measures were listed that arose in the interviews. In this section, we study the role of social dialogue in some of these measures. However, first some reflection on EU-level social dialogue is necessary. Prior to the pandemic, the EU considered the weakening relationship between the social partners to be a result of the Eurozone crisis (Anderson and Heins 2021). At the time, the EU focused heavily on economic policy and budgetary dimensions rather than social policy. The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) was established in 2017, and the integration of the EPSR into the European Semester cycle was considered the first significant move to reintroduce the social dimension to European policies. During the first half of 2020, the new European Commission attempted to couple social policy with its campaign on a climate-neutral Europe and the digital age (Anderson and Heins 2021, Stiller and van Gerven forthcoming). However, the COVID-19 crisis has interrupted the work of the European Parliament and the European Commission.

Data from our interviews revealed several key insights into the extent to which the social partners influence and play a role in shaping policies within the European Union (EU). **European social dialogue, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, was found to be in a challenging situation, characterised by a lack of confidence among the social partners in the European Commission as a driving force for social dialogue.**

The integration of the **European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)** into the European Semester cycle was expected to provide a framework for more trade union involvement in the design and implementation of social and economic policy or *a strong mandate to intervene in the social field*, in the words of one respondent from a research institute. However, the influence of trade unions in European Semester decision-making has remained mixed. Moreover, the influence of trade unions on the reform programmes at the Member-State level has been found to be low or absent in many countries, with their impact dependent on historical legacies and their national-level power (Anderson and Heins 2021).

As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 crisis triggered the exceptional development of the **SURE instrument (Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency)**. One respondent from a knowledge organisation emphasised that SURE was initiated as a temporary policy instrument by the European Commission and the EU institutions with the involvement of the Member States in prompt

response to emergencies caused by COVID-19. Thus, this could be considered a ‘top-down’ measure. While SURE provided the Member States with grants and unconditional soft loans, the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)** offers conditional financing and is performance based. One respondent from a knowledge organisation reflected on this observation:

[A] lot of money provided through the Recovery and Resilience Funds [Facility] is now made conditional on implementing recommendations that were previously very soft and that didn't really have any bite.

This respondent added his concern that while the RRF was undoubtedly an important change at the EU level, it was “*not at all linked to dialogue or social partners*”. Rather, it was “*completely between the Member States and the European Commission*”, which he considered “*highly problematic*”. While there has been increased inclusion of trade unions in the RRF initiative (implementation), concerns persist regarding the disparity between the growth of companies’ profit margins and the improvement of workers’ conditions during and after the pandemic. Companies have received financial aid without mandatory requirements for involving unions in decision-making processes or engaging in collective bargaining. This imbalance highlights the necessity for robust social dialogue and policy measures that effectively address the power dynamics within the labour market.

The EU-level responses have been first and foremost top-down measures. During the pandemic, the involvement of social partners varied among Member States, with some governments consulting them, for instance, as part of their national **Reform and Resilience plans** while others failing to include them. This was also underscored in a recent Eurofound report (2023a), which suggested that social dialogue and involvement of the social partners in the implementation of RRF measures have been limited and uneven, with some Member States involving the social partners in the implementation and others not. The Eurofound report (*ibid.*) explains this by referring to the different pace of implementation in different countries. The report also highlights the insufficient time allotted for consultation, thus further limiting the social partners’ involvement. Similar findings are presented in a recent ETUI policy brief summarising the findings of a study on the implementation of the national Recovery and Resilience Plans and the role of trade unions in seven European countries. The study found national trade union involvement in the preparation of RRFs in most of the seven countries to be limited and advocated improving EU guidance and resourcing to promote better dialogue under conditions of constant time pressure (Sabato et al 2023). The respondents in our study also confirmed that the engagement of social partners during the pandemic differed considerably from country to

country, being more prominent in regions with established traditions of social dialogue, such as the Nordic countries, Central Europe, and Western Europe. They argued that it was challenging for countries with weak social dialogue frameworks to fundamentally alter the current state of affairs without significant transformations, which have faced resistance and sparked protests in certain countries.

Unlike the RFF, the **Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages** requires Member States to facilitate social partners to engage in collective bargaining on how to determine minimum salaries. The aim of the Directive is for collective bargaining coverage to reach at least 80% of workers (European Commission 2023a). Nonetheless, some of the respondents in our study raised concerns about the willingness of employers to engage in collective bargaining and about whether these negotiations would occur through formal social dialogue, or simply through consultation with the social partners, or just through information given to them.

The interviews, however, reveal that the **COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the role of the social partners, necessitating their engagement in addressing the needs of workers**, particularly those in vulnerable sectors such as direct care, cleaning, and household support. Trade unions organised action days to respond to the concerns of essential workers and express demands related to personal protective equipment, testing, tracking, and trade union rights. **At the European level, social partnerships and dialogue were utilised to underscore the significance of essential workers and issue joint statements with employers across various sectors.** These actions demonstrated the active involvement of the social partners in mitigating the challenges faced by workers amidst the pandemic.

Overall, the interviews highlighted the intricate nature of social dialogue and the multifaceted involvement of the social partners in shaping policies within the EU. The influence of the social partners varies across different policy domains and is contingent upon factors such as the state of social dialogue, actions taken at the national level, and the balance of power between employers and workers. Addressing these challenges and ensuring the meaningful participation of the social partners in the policymaking process remains paramount for fostering inclusive and fair employment practices in the EU. The willingness of employer associations is, however, in question.

There was no strict steering from the EU level to the Member States. Moreover, it has become clear from the national reports of the DEFEN-CE project that the Member States first and foremost implemented their own policies and measures. However, this is largely to be expected in light of the

prevailing subsidiarity principle and limited EU competencies in social policies at the EU level. EU-level decisions will, however, play a considerable role through large investment packages, where aid conditionality improves the Europeanisation impact, as argued previously.

The labour shortages that emerged at the end of the COVID pandemic may become a crucial factor influencing employer behaviour, leading to a shift in their approach and the adoption of more ‘socially-oriented’ practices. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that this shift was not universally observed, as some employers engaged in activities aimed at undermining unions or resisted unionisation efforts within their workplaces. These observations underscore **the persisting power imbalances and obstacles encountered by the social partners in their pursuit of equitable employment relations.**

This sentiment was further exacerbated by a recent judgment from the Court of Justice of the European Union against the Commission, which further strained the relationship and contributed to the prevailing sense of mistrust. A particular policy area that was discussed extensively in the interviews pertained to minimum income. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as the European Anti-Poverty Network and the Social Platform of European NGOs, actively engaged in lobbying efforts to advocate for a higher level of ambition in minimum income policies. Their endeavours focused on pushing for a directive rather than a Council recommendation. However, despite their activism and involvement in the policy debate, their attempts to influence the outcome met with limited success. Moreover, **trade unions, particularly those in the Nordic countries, expressed their opposition to the proposed directive**, thereby further complicating the social dialogue surrounding this issue.

3.4 How do the different EU-level actors evaluate their role during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The role of the European Commission

Since this research was not able to obtain respondents from the European Commission, the discussion on the role of the Commission presented in this section is based on the literature, reports, and the data collected from other stakeholders.

According to the Commission, “our first priority is the health of our citizens” (European Commission 2023a). Indeed, it is clear that the European Commission had prioritised the saving of citizens’ lives in response to the rapidly evolving COVID-19 crisis. In the meantime, the crisis has profoundly affected

the global, European and Member State economies; thus, protecting businesses and jobs and workers has also become the Commission's priority. Here, there have been innovations that are worth mentioning. First, as its earliest response, the Commission increased the flexibility of EU state aid rules by adopting a State Aid Temporary Framework and by immediately activating the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) (European Commission 2020a). This was the first time that the clause was used. It allows Member States to “resort to an increase in public debt in order to finance themselves, without necessarily incurring the risk of being subject to the corrective arm of EU economic surveillance, namely the Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP)” (Rainone and Pochet 2022: 8). Second, the SURE instrument provided EUR 100 billion of financial assistance in the form of loans to the Member States. It was the first financial assistance programme that did not require the beneficiaries to commit to structural reform in exchange for assistance (Rainone and Pochet 2022). Third, the adoption of the NextGenerationEU recovery plan occurred through “a creative and flexible reading of the European Union's public finance rules” and existing instruments and governance mechanisms (Rainone and Pochet 2022: 31).

Notwithstanding these innovations, the respondents in our study realised that it was impossible for the Commission and national governments to simultaneously save lives and the economy and strike an equitable balance between protecting businesses and jobs. Moreover, representatives from trade unions emphasised that the economic support and recovery packages provided by the EU and Member State level authorities, especially during the first year of the pandemic, failed to “*hit the nail on its head*” and that there had been geographical differences in the implementation of policies, rules and practices, particularly in protecting non-standard platform workers and the self-employed. These groups were often not included in the economic support and recovery packages. An important solution highlighted by trade unions was the use of research data to identify vulnerable groups and the kinds of vulnerabilities they faced.

The role of the European Parliament

The European Parliament represents the interests of the people in EU law-making, promotes democracy and safeguards human rights. To tackle the pandemic, a Special Committee on the COVID-19 (COVI Committee) pandemic within the European Parliament was established. The role of the Committee is to investigate the ways in which the European Union has responded to the pandemic, look for lessons learned and produce recommendations for future action. In addition to these tasks, one respondent from the European Parliament pointed to the three initiatives concerning society and welfare strategy,

including acknowledging that social and health sectors were under-resourced, considering platform work a new type of essential work, and debating better surveillance and legislation regarding work and the labour market. Furthermore, this MEP reflected that “*we did not do that much*” at a concrete level for immigrants, continuing that “*we should make a kind of protective plan in a time of crisis for different categories of work*”. Another important initiative is the mental health strategy under preparation by the Parliament.

The role of trade unions

During the course of the pandemic, EU-level trade unions continued their pre-COVID ‘business as usual’ approach. For instance, they represented their members by negotiating collective bargaining agreements and monitoring the implementation of those agreements. More specifically, during the pandemic, trade unions were vocal about the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on employment, worker well-being, and the cost of living by ‘pushing’ for actions to protect vulnerable groups in the labour market. One trade union representative added that “*we’ve [the trade union] been [not only] very active towards the EU institutions, but also towards the employers, calling for compensation . . . [and] calling for governments to take actions, actions to cushion the effects of the crisis.*”

The role of employer organizations

Employers are obliged to conduct a risk assessment and use all necessary means to protect their workers from certain dangers. However, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that employers in many sectors failed to ensure the occupational safety and health of their workers. Case studies from Members State conducted by the research team of the DEFEN-CE project, illustrated the uneven protection and variations in measures used by employers. Like other parts of the world, Europe experienced a shortage of respiratory protective equipment (RPE), which caused exposure to COVID-19 in groups of essential healthcare workers, especially those on the frontline. In addition, one respondent from a trade union highlighted those types of work, such as jobs in the meatpacking industry, where workers were at a high risk of infection because employers refused to follow social distancing guidelines and provided them with inadequate protective equipment. In addition, the issue of telework, which had received very little attention before the COVID-19 outbreak, turned out to cause a poor work-life balance, worsen gender inequalities at home, and increase psychosocial risks for workers.

In terms of how employer organizations engaged in social dialogue, our respondents highlighted the many sectoral differences. One respondent from a European federation organisation representing

domestic employers reported that their organisation had arranged an event at an EU institution in order to lobby for long-term care and the well-being of children, with an attempt to include good examples of home care in the recommendations. Employers in some sectors were found to be actively engaged in social dialogue; for example, UNI Europa and the EFCI (European Cleaning and Facility Services Industry) released a joint statement on necessary measures to protect the industrial cleaning and facility services sector and its workers during the COVID-19 crisis (UNI-Europa, 2020a). Furthermore, UNI Europa and CoESS issued a joint declaration on the protection of workers in the COVID-19 pandemic (UNI-Europa, 2020b). In addition, the role of employer organisations varied between different countries. One respondent stated that the role of their member organisation in France was to strengthen, through social dialogue, access to personal equipment and vaccines for care workers and ensure that domestic workers who were not allowed to go to work got paid, and this was “thanks to the collective agreement in the sector”.

The role of non-governmental organisations

One of the key roles of non-governmental organisations is to represent vulnerable groups in decision-making processes. Their involvement in policymaking is part of ‘civil dialogue’ rather than social dialogue, but the EU-level non-governmental organisations in this study had continued their high-level advocacy work aimed at policy-making bodies during the pandemic: “*We have tried to influence all of that, bring in the perspective of the different vulnerable groups to influence the responses that the EU has put in place*”, remarked one respondent from a non-government organisation. Nevertheless, the respondent raised concerns that even though NGOs had attempted to engage with emergency policies such as the RRF, while the social partners were able to participate at the earlier stage, NGOs were involved in such policies much later and in some cases seemed to be given “*very little space*”.

The role of knowledge organisations/research institutes

Knowledge organisations/research institutes were not directly involved in social dialogue, but during the pandemic, they prioritised their research to focus on health, employment, workers and their vulnerabilities. The results of their work are publications (reports, edited books, special series of journal articles, and articles), training provided to stakeholders, support for relevant stakeholder projects and

programmes, and conferences and meetings. These publications and activities influenced the policy agenda in a way that helped the European Commission, and the social partners, including employers and trade unions, protect vulnerable groups.

4. Conclusion and lessons learned

This study set out to answer three main questions at the EU level:

- 1) What public policy and social dialogue measures targeting vulnerable groups were implemented for employment and social protection during the COVID-19 pandemic 2020–2022?
- 2) How and to what extent did social dialogue play a role in the implementation of the social and employment rights of selected vulnerable groups in the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022?
- 3) What lessons and opportunities does the COVID-19 pandemic provide for strengthening social dialogue at the EU level?

Based on desk research and 11 interviews, we identified a diverse set of EU-level policies: most notably the EPSR, SURE instrument, RRF and Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages. Most of these initiatives were top-down measures to manage unforeseen situations arising from the pandemic. In terms of the implementation of these measures at a national level, other studies show considerable cross-national variations. Furthermore, SURE, in particular, was considered an innovation regarding the magnitude of the European Commission’s social policy response.

An essential question for the DEFEN-CE project was the identification of specific ‘vulnerable groups’ during the COVID-19 crisis. We identified a large set of vulnerable groups based on the interviews we conducted. COVID-19 was seen to worsen the vulnerabilities of ‘classic’ disadvantaged groups – central also to the European Commission’s definition of vulnerability as related to poverty and social exclusion. Nevertheless, the lessons from COVID-19 also highlighted the link between vulnerability and a broader set of social, economic and health risks. COVID-19 had exerted an intersectional effect, impacting particular groups of workers as well as various sectors of employment more profoundly than others.

Finally, what lessons can we draw from the research? To what extent was the pandemic seen to affect traditional social dialogue and its aims, particularly working conditions and the precariousness of work, as well as non-traditional dialogue, such as reconciling work and family? According to the European Commission social dialogue is at the centre of European social governance:

Social dialogue is a cornerstone of the European social model. One of the EU's key objectives is to improve living and working conditions. Social dialogue and collective bargaining are fundamental ways of doing this, contributing to higher productivity while also ensuring social fairness, a quality working environment and democracy at work. A strong social Europe requires strong social partners. Social dialogue is therefore one of the key principles of the European Pillar for Social Rights. (Commission 2023a)

The recent and unfolding crisis also necessitates active social dialogue. The world has witnessed rapid changes triggered by climate change, digitalisation, and unexpected crises such as COVID-19, and the Russia-Ukraine crisis. Social dialogue is crucial to the design and implementation of policies to address these changes. The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the European labour market have revealed, to some degree, the diverse vulnerable conditions that different groups of workers have faced. The efforts of the social partners (through social dialogue), and the roles of NGOs and research institutes in influencing policy design and implementation at the EU and Member State levels have been highlighted in this study.

Based on our interview data, a few areas of interest emerged that demonstrate the importance of the role of social dialogue in defending vulnerable groups in the post-COVID labour market.

Working conditions: The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder of the necessity of social dialogue and the need to address unsolved issues relating to working conditions.

The interview findings indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted various aspects of society, including traditional social dialogue and its aims, particularly when it comes to working conditions. It has served as a stark reminder of the importance of social dialogue in identifying, addressing and resolving issues that affect workers' well-being. The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in existing working conditions and highlighted the need for comprehensive discussions and negotiations between employers, employees, and relevant stakeholders. Lockdown measures, social

distancing guidelines, and economic slowdowns have resulted in widespread job losses, reduced working hours, and increased uncertainty for many workers. As a result, workers have faced challenges such as reduced income, job insecurity, and deteriorating working conditions, as well as inadequate access to social protection.

Precariousness of work: links to the vulnerabilities of workers, not only EU citizens but migrants from outside the EU, such as seasonal workers.

Our interview findings suggest that the precariousness of work was a significant issue during the COVID-19 pandemic. One common challenge faced by individuals who became unemployed due to the crisis was the difficulty in finding alternative employment opportunities. This was especially problematic for those with multiple employers or working contracts, such as those workers employed by households and service providers simultaneously. The process of recovering from the crisis and returning to pre-pandemic conditions took a considerable amount of time, as it was only by 2022 that the situation began to stabilise.

During the pandemic, there was a growing recognition of the need to provide protection for precarious workers. However, the measures implemented fell short of addressing their specific needs. While some solutions were introduced for self-employed workers, those engaged in the most precarious forms of employment, such as gig workers and those with multiple employers, were left with only the basic safety net established for society as a whole. The pandemic also revealed the vulnerabilities faced by specific groups of workers, such as seasonal workers and those with zero-hour or on-call contracts. These workers were often excluded from support programmes, exposing the flaws in existing regulations. It became apparent that regulations governing such work needed to be strengthened and enforced, thereby recognising the value of these workers and their contributions to the economy.

In terms of changes observed around the precariousness of work, **the pandemic revealed the limitations of some recently adopted measures.** Even directives that were introduced in 2019 appeared outdated when confronted with the changes brought about by the pandemic. Instruments such as the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive and the Work-Life Balance Directive, which were designed to address contemporary labour market challenges, were found lacking in the face of remote work and the rise of platform work.

Trade unions played a crucial role in raising awareness and advocating for the rights of vulnerable workers.

Trade unions highlighted issues faced by workers in various sectors, such as slaughterhouse operatives, food carriers, cleaners, and office workers transitioning to remote work with longer working hours. The pandemic underscored the need for union representation and stronger social partners to collectively advocate for the rights of different workers, ensuring that they are not pushed into poverty or excluded from support measures.

The pandemic also affected other areas of social dialogue that are not traditionally associated with labour rights. For example, increased attention was paid to occupational health assistance.

Social partners across the EU began exploring ways to negotiate protective measures in the workplace, particularly in relation to occupational health. This shift in focus demonstrated the evolving nature of social dialogue in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Reconciling work and family: The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the importance of a work-life balance and the need for a new way of work: telework and platform work.

The participants in our study expressed notable concerns about the detrimental impact on workers' mental well-being caused by the COVID crisis, highlighting the urgent need to address the psychosocial risks arising from the pandemic. Additionally, the emergence of telework and the right to disconnect emerged as prominent issues that necessitated effective regulation. Furthermore, it was noted that although telework offered potential benefits in terms of facilitating a better work-life balance, it was crucial to establish comprehensive regulations due to the challenges associated with this mode of work. Participants noted that individuals engaged in telework tended to work longer hours, blurring the boundaries between their professional and personal lives. Moreover, it was emphasised that telework should not be seen as a substitute for sick leave or childcare.

Participants reported that the pandemic had foregrounded these issues, prompting a broader discussion on the role of telework in achieving a work-life balance. At the European level, ongoing negotiations between European social partners were reported, with the aim of developing an agreement on telework and the right to disconnect. This agreement, once translated into legislation, would represent a significant development after several years. The role of the social partners in addressing these issues was highlighted as pivotal in navigating the challenges and ensuring the well-being of workers. The

interviews also indicated that work-family reconciliation had long been a concern at the EU level, and the advent of telework during the pandemic had further intensified the discussions. However, it was noted that existing policies and initiatives already encompassed considerations for work-family reconciliation, including measures such as increasing care spaces and improving support conditions.

While the pandemic indirectly influenced the discourse on work-family reconciliation, the core aspects requiring attention remained consistent. This included the provision of sufficient external support for lone parents and the availability of adequate childcare options and vacation opportunities.

As for the future, new trends are emerging, some of which are related to the platform economy and work in the digital age, including, telework, the work-life balance and the role of gender.

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Appendices

Interviewed organisations and their identification of vulnerability

Name of organisation	Type of organisation	Identification
European Parliament	EU institution, a legislative body of the European Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - workers who cannot work remotely - nurses and healthcare workers - essential service workers such as firefighters - restaurant workers - immigrant workers, documented and undocumented, with living and/or working conditions such as workers in slaughterhouses. - taxi drivers and product delivery workers.
European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) (The representative who was interviewed answered interview questions in their personal capacity)	Research institute and training centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - medical profession - care workers - logistics and transport sector workers - platform-facilitated delivery workers - cleaners
European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)	Trade union confederation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - workers with non-standard form of employment - self-employed workers - workers of digital labour platforms - domestic worker – women are over-represented among domestic workers - workers with a migrant background
IndustriAll European Trade Union	Trade union federation representing industrial workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - women - young people - people with precarious form of employment
Uni Global Union – Europa (UNI Europa)	Trade union Federation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - home care workers - security guards - cleaners

		- overall, private sector workers performing essential work (who were often overlooked)
European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD)	Non-profit organization	- people in a disadvantaged position or under-represented in the labour market such as women, the elderly, low-skilled people, persons with disabilities. - LGBTQIA+ - people living in rural or remote areas, Roma people, other ethnic minorities and other people who are particularly at risk of exclusion or discrimination, and people with a migrant background.
Social Platform	Platform of European Social NGOs	- workers in the social service sector - people with disabilities - women - “racialised” communities - people with precarious form of employment such as people with zero-hour contract
European Federation for Family Employment & Homecare (EFFE - Homecare)	European federation organization representing domestic and care work employers	- care workers - domestic workers
experts*	researchers of a Not-for-profit research centre specialised in the social dimension of the European Union (EU).	- non-standard workers - self-employed workers - undocumented migrant workers - lone/single parents especially single mothers - ethnic minorities - women - people with disabilities - low-skilled workers - atypical workers - people in in-work poverty

*Three representatives from experts were interviewed. They are specialized in the different areas of the social dimension: governance, social dialogue, and social protection.



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