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Delineating the Transformative Power of Social Phenomena - Report on EU Parliamentary debates

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The objective of the D3.4 report is to explore the democratic narrative around the [three] socio-economic transformations: a) the COVID-19 pandemic; b) migration & refugee waves (from the Ukraine, Syria, and other points of origin); c) digitalization of work. Deliverable 3.4 addresses the three phenomena as case studies of recent/ongoing crises of global impact and is based on an analysis of parliamentary debates conducted in the European Parliament (EP).

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Project summary

TRUEDEM is a 3-year multinational research project funded by the Horizon program of the European Commission with several core objectives. TRUEDEM aims to design and implement a complex research effort to collect comprehensive evidence on the perceptions of trust and judgments of trustworthiness in a range of European states. The project will create a robust and comprehensive knowledge base on long-term dynamics and predictors of trust in political institutions of representative democracy (parties, executives, parliaments, judiciary etc.) in the EU. TRUEDEM will examine the role of new patterns of electoral behaviour, impact of socioeconomic transformations, the erosion of old and emergence of new political cleavages for the inclusiveness, representativity and legitimacy in European democracies, and political trust. TRUEDEM will identify strategies to address the demands and needs of citizens expressed via both electoral and non-electoral forms of political participation as means to enhance active engagement and inclusion and thus booster inclusive and responsive decision-making and governance in Europe. TRUEDEM will distinguish clusters of values that can hinder or foster pro-democratic values and attitudes and thus contribute to the barriers and opportunities to re-invigorating and enhancing representative democratic systems. Finally, TRUEDEM will develop a comprehensive and transparent toolbox of policy interventions including recommendations, toolkits and methodologies for enhancing trust in political institutions, boosting transparency inclusiveness of representative systems. TRUEDEM is coordinated in Austria with partners in Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, and Ukraine. The three-year program runs from January 2023 to December 2025.

Annotation of the Deliverable (D3.4)

This document is a part of work package WP3. Role of socioeconomic transformations in reshaping European democracies, led by UoP-GR and Sokratis Koniordos. The objective of the D3.4 is to explore the democratic narrative around the [three] socio-economic transformations: a) the COVID-19 pandemic; b) migration & refugee waves (from the Ukraine, Syria, and other points of origin); c) digitalization of work. Deliverable 3.4 addresses the three phenomena as case studies of recent/ongoing crises of global impact and is based on an analysis of parliamentary debates conducted in the European Parliament (EP).

The report is structured as follows: in the 1st chapter is presented the methodology followed for the collection and analysis of the European Parliament Debates. In the following three chapters, we present the analysis of the debates on the issues under study. The final chapter summarizes the findings, and, in the ANNEXES, we provide details of the parliamentary debates that were analyzed and the political groups in the EP.

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Introduction

This report provides an in-depth analysis of debates in the European Parliament (EP) concerning three salient issues that the EU faced in recent years. These are the immigration issue and particularly so the increased refugee waves of the period 2014-2016, the COVID-19 pandemic and, the measures taken to manage the pandemic's consequences, and the digitalization of work. The report analyses how Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have addressed the challenges of immigration, Covid-19, and digitalization of work. One of TRUEDEM's main themes is political trust. Therefore, this report focuses on the thematic role of trust in debates in plenary sessions of the EP and, and the reactions from various European Parliament party groups. The analysis is based on fifteen key texts, namely minutes of EP debates and reports from 2014-2019 and 2019-2024.

1 Methodology

The primary data for this study consists of transcripts of parliamentary debates, available at the website of the EP (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/minutes.html>) As already noted, the data used in this report, specifically consists of debates related to migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the digitalization of work. These transcripts were collected from official EP debates among Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who belong to different party groups. The time frame for the collected data spans from 2016 to 2023, covering key legislative sessions and debates (see ANNEX).

Parliamentary proceedings in the EU parliament are uniquely difficult to analyse, since each MP speaks in her/his national language. As a result, the text of the proceedings consists of several different languages that need to be translated in order to conduct the analysis. So far, there are very few research projects that have embarked on translating EU parliamentary proceedings for a specific timeframe¹, but EU is also preparing an AI tool for instant translation of all parliamentary proceedings that has not been fully developed yet. For that reason, we have chosen specific parliamentary proceedings for each of the chosen subjects of our research, and we translated them using the Office 365 translation tool and checked it with DeepL app.

For the analysis of the texts, we utilized MAXQDA software. MAXQDA is designed to handle and analyze qualitative data efficiently, making it suitable for examining large volumes of text, identifying patterns, and drawing meaningful conclusions. Its features allow for systematic coding, categorization, and visualization of data, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of parliamentary debates.

The social research technique employed for this study is qualitative content analysis. This technique involves systematically coding and categorizing a selected text to identify patterns, themes, and key issues within the data. The steps followed in this analysis are detailed below:

- Familiarization with the Data: – The transcripts were read thoroughly to gain an initial understanding of the content and context of the debates. This step involved identifying preliminary themes and recurring issues related to the migration issue, the COVID-19 pandemic and the digitalization of work.

¹ See for example the Europarl Parallel Corpus <https://www.statmt.org/europarl/> which contains translated proceedings from 1996 till 2011 and the Plenary debates of the European Parliament as Linked Open Data from 1999 to 2017 <https://linkedpolitics.project.cwi.nl/linkedpolitics/web/html/home.html>

- **Developing a Coding Scheme:** – Based on the initial familiarization, a coding scheme was developed. This scheme included predefined categories relevant to the research questions. The coding scheme was designed to be flexible, allowing for the emergence of new categories during the analysis process.
- **Coding the Data:** – The transcripts were imported into MAXQDA. Each segment of text related to the predefined categories was coded accordingly. The coding process involved marking relevant passages and assigning them to the corresponding codes in the coding scheme. In cases where new themes emerged, additional codes were created, and previously coded text was revisited to ensure comprehensive coverage.
- **Validity and Reliability:** – To ensure validity and reliability in our analysis, multiple TRUEDEM researchers reviewed the coding scheme and the coded data. Discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved through consensus.

Given that the data consists of publicly available parliamentary transcripts, there were no significant ethical concerns related to data privacy. However, the researchers ensured that the analysis was conducted objectively and that the interpretations were grounded in the data to avoid any bias. The report acknowledges certain limitations, such as the potential for subjective bias in qualitative analysis and the reliance on available transcripts, which may not capture all nuances of the debates.

In multiple visits to the platform of the EP minutes, the research team has run into and identified major EP debates on immigration, Covid-19, and digitalization of work. The relevant criteria that the TRUEDEM research used to select major EP debates differed by topic and were the following: regarding immigration, which is a recurring phenomenon, the research team took care to include debates in the plenum of the EP from five different years in 2016-2024, including a recent debate that took place on 10 April 2024. The research team primarily focused on debates about the so-called Mediterranean routes of immigration that affect Italy, Greece, Malta, and Spain, i.e., EU Member-States that were first called-upon to manage immigration in the period under study.

In other words, the proceedings regarding migration span several years (2016-2024), allowing for an analysis of the evolution of EU migration policy discourse, reflecting shifts in political priorities and public sentiment. Additionally, the selected texts cover various dimensions of the migration issue, including the management of external borders, the establishment of common procedures for international protection, and the EU's engagement with international frameworks like the UN Global Compact. This diversity enables a nuanced exploration of how trust is constructed and challenged in discussions of cooperation between EU member states, the relationship between the EU and third countries, and the trustworthiness of the EU's own mechanisms for handling migration. As such, these texts are valuable for dissecting the role of trust in shaping policy decisions, public perceptions, and international collaborations related to migration.

Regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, the research team selected out four debates that took place in the first six-month long period after the pandemic struck EU Member-States (March – November 2020) because in that time-period national governments and EU authorities rushed to take the relevant measures. The research team added a fifth debate that took place at the end of 2022, i.e., the period in which the pandemic was petering out.

Concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, the documents included in our sample span key phases, from the initial response in early 2020 to the discussions on sustained preparedness and future strategies in 2022, providing a broad temporal scope. Each text addresses distinct but interrelated aspects of

the EU's handling of the pandemic, including the impact of COVID-19 measures on democracy, fundamental rights, and the rule of law, as well as public health strategies and coordinated actions across member states. This variety allows for a detailed analysis of how trust is constructed and questioned in relation to government transparency, the balance between public health and civil liberties, and the effectiveness of EU-wide cooperation.

The research team selected EP debates on the digitalization of work, focusing on the most important pieces of legislation and the digital future of Europe, including discussions on Artificial Intelligence (AI). Debates on these topics that took place in three different years (2020, 2021 and 2022) were included in the sample of parliamentary debates. More specifically, the documents cover key legislative and policy debates related to the Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act, and the broader implications of digital transformation for European society and economy. By covering crucial issues such as the regulation of online platforms, the use of artificial intelligence (AI), and the protection of workers' rights in the gig economy, these texts allow for a comprehensive examination of how trust is constructed and contested in the context of rapid digital change. This diversity allows for a nuanced analysis of trust in regulatory frameworks, the responsibilities of digital platforms, and the role of the EU in protecting the interests of consumers and workers. The inclusion of debates on civil liability, intellectual property rights, and the ethical aspects of AI in our sample of EP debates further underscores the importance of trust in the governance of digital technologies and their impact on society.

Thus, while it is possible that another team of researchers may have selected a different set of parliamentary debates, the most important debates on the three socio-economic transformations of interest to the TRUEDEM project have not escaped us. For the period 2016-2024 this report has fished out very relevant EP debates that are helpful to register.

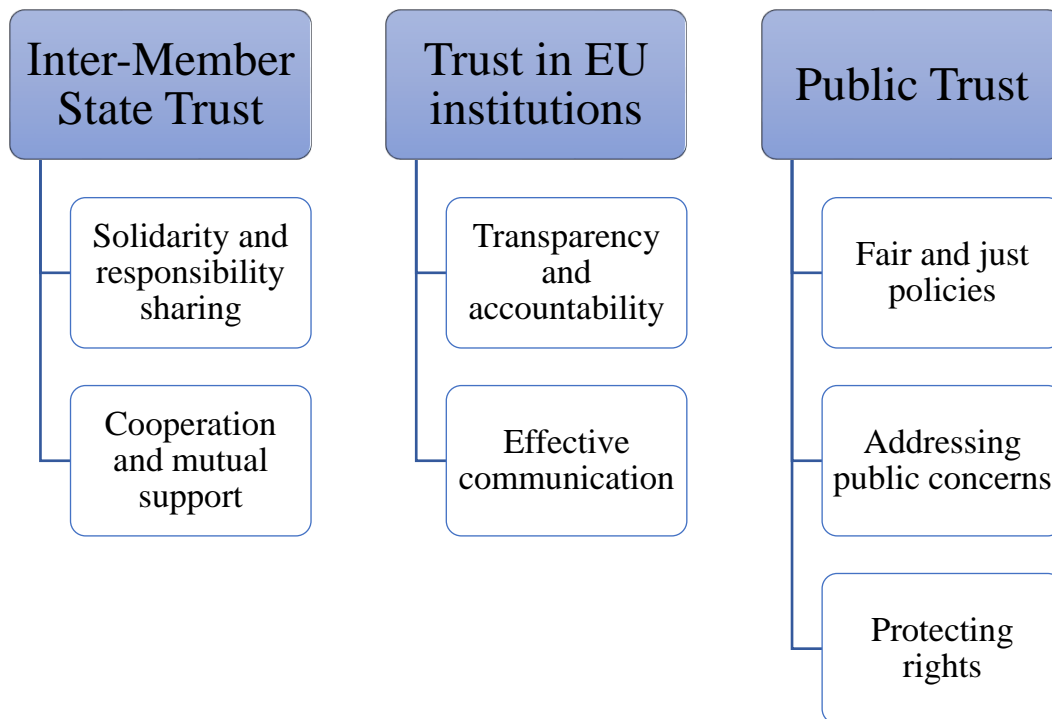
It is also important to clarify that EU parliamentary debates include speeches by members of other EU institutions, such as the European Commission, who usually introduce or argue in favour of the policy proposals that MEPs are asked to vote on or discuss. As many members of the Commission come from the EU's ruling parties, and in order to maintain a balanced representation of the political groups to which MEPs belong, we have excluded all other speakers from our analysis and only included speeches by MEPs. With regard to the political groups represented in the EP, we have included all of them in the analysis, but we have decided to exclude the group of Non-attached Members (NI), which includes MEPs mostly from far-right parties that are already represented in the ECR and ID groups. They should be included in a future and more detailed analysis.

Moreover, we followed a two-step analysis of the data. In order to trace discussions referring to trust, we searched for explicit expressions of trust in the debates. We run a keyword analysis in which we searched for the word trust and its synonyms. All these quotes were in-vivo coded. The second step included in-vivo coding of the remaining text with implicit expressions of trust and trustworthiness. Our goal was to discern between different forms and actors of trust, based on the method designed by Trenz and Zschache (2022). Our final analysis explores the ideological components of trust and how the European party groups and Member-States are positioned around trust.

The explicit expressions of (dis)trust by MEPs are divided into three basic forms of trust: (i) diagnostic observations,² (ii) appeals to the need for trust³ and (iii) criteria of trustworthiness⁴. The basic actors of trust, attributors and receivers, are four and can play both of these roles: the citizens of EU, the member-states, EU institutions, and third, i.e., non-EU, countries. Depending on the issue of discussion we trace other actors as well. Health experts, big companies are also found more often as receivers of (dis)trust.

The final coding scheme is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Coding Scheme



2 Immigration and Trust

This strand of research aims to delve into dimensions of political trust with regard to EP debates on immigration. The research summarized below focuses on trust in governmental capacity to manage immigration (namely, the capacity of EU organs and national governments of EU Member States to do so); trust in the rest of political institutions (public administrations, local governments, and legislatures) to manage the inflows of immigrants and refugees; and trust in international cooperation on immigration issues.

2.1 Immigration and the refugee crisis in Europe

The EU has experienced a significant migration and refugee crisis over the past decade (Geddes, Hadj-Abdou, and Brumat 2020; Carr 2012). This crisis has been driven by a combination of factors, including conflict, economic instability, and environmental changes in various regions, particularly

² Refers to statements of facts regarding trust e.g. “citizens do not trust governments and politicians”.

³ Refers to statements that call for trust e.g. “if we want people to trust the EU we should show solidarity”.

⁴ Refers to statements assign characteristics of trustworthiness e.g. “we must be transparent and sincere”.

in the Middle East and Africa, as documented in the appendices 1 and 2 of TRUEDEM deliverable D 3.2.

Increased migration flows became particularly noticeable during the peak period of 2015-2016, when over 1 million refugees and migrants arrived in the EU, primarily from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were 1,015,078 arrivals in 2015. However, post-2016, the number of arrivals decreased significantly due to various policy measures. In 2020, there were approximately 95,000 arrivals, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Syria has been the primary driver of this crisis, with millions fleeing the civil war. Between 2011 and 2020, around 6.6 million Syrians sought refuge outside their country. Continued instability and violence in Afghanistan and Iraq also contributed to substantial numbers of migrants from these two countries. Different routes were used by these migrants, with the Eastern Mediterranean route being predominantly used by migrants from the Middle East entering the EU through Turkey and Greece. The Central Mediterranean route, primarily used by sub-Saharan Africans, involved very dangerous sea crossings from Libya to Italy. Another significant pathway was the Western Balkan route, used by those traveling from Greece through the Balkans to reach Northern Europe.

Policy responses to the crisis have been varied. The EU-Turkey Agreement of 2016 aimed to stem the flow of migrants via the Eastern Mediterranean route. Under this agreement, Turkey agreed to take back all migrants and refugees crossing to the Greek islands in exchange for financial aid, visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, and resettlement of Syrian refugees directly from Turkey to the EU. This agreement, although not fully implemented, significantly reduced the number of arrivals via the Eastern Mediterranean route, although it faced very harsh criticism regarding human rights concerns (International Rescue Committee 2023).

Another response was the strengthening of border controls by national governments and EU organs. Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, benefited from increased budget and operational capacity to manage and secure external borders. The hotspot approach was established in frontline states like Greece and Italy for the identification, registration, and fingerprinting of migrants. Relocation and resettlement schemes were also introduced. An EU-wide relocation scheme aimed to redistribute asylum seekers from Greece and Italy to other member states, relieving pressure on these two frontline states. By 2017, about 34,000 people were relocated out of an initial target of 160,000. Resettlement efforts involved the direct resettlement of vulnerable refugees from non-EU countries to EU member states, with over 50,000 refugees resettled between 2015 and 2019.

Legal and policy frameworks such as the Dublin Regulation and the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) were also pivotal. The Dublin Regulation, which determines the member state responsible for processing an asylum seeker's application, was exposed as having significant weaknesses during the crisis, leading to calls for reform. The CEAS efforts aimed to harmonize asylum policies across the EU, proposing reforms that include a fairer distribution mechanism and more efficient asylum procedures.

Humanitarian aid and development assistance have been critical in addressing the crisis. The EU allocated substantial funds for humanitarian aid in conflict regions and for supporting refugees in neighbouring countries. For instance, the EU provided €6 billion in assistance to Turkey under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (European Commission 2023a).

Despite these efforts, challenges and criticisms persist. In the EP and elsewhere, human rights concerns have been raised regarding policies such as the aforementioned EU-Turkey agreement and increased border controls, which are seen as compromising the safety of migrants. There has been significant tension among EU Member States regarding the fair distribution of asylum seekers, with some countries resisting mandatory quotas. Additionally, the successful integration of migrants and refugees into host societies remains a challenge. Among the unresolved issues are employment, social inclusion, and cultural integration of migrants and refugees.

The migration and refugee crisis in the EU has prompted a complex and multifaceted response, blending humanitarian assistance with stricter border controls and legal reforms. While the number of arrivals has decreased since the peak of the crisis (i.e., since 2015-2016), ongoing conflicts, economic instability, and climate change continue to pose challenges. Moving forward, the EU must balance security concerns with its humanitarian obligations and strive for greater solidarity and cooperation among its Member States to effectively manage migration and support those in need.

2.2 Trust and Immigration in EU Parliament Debates

Trust is a critical theme in the discourse of EP on immigration, influencing cooperation and policy implementation. However, it is framed as a necessity in order to establish better policies or to gain citizens' approval. It is, also, important to note that parliamentary debates do not evolve explicitly around trust, but we are looking for the discourse that entails trust, explicit or implicit.

Some of the observations of (dis)trust, that MEPs convey to their colleagues and to EU authorities, rely on impressions that MEPs have about how European citizens react to various policies or what is their general attitude towards politicians. Appeals to win over citizens' trust are also very common in parliamentary debates. Usually, the appeals are part of the critique of MEPs to EU policies or are used as an argument in order to convince EU authorities for the need of further policy measures.

Moreover, in terms of the criteria of trustworthiness, these mainly concern transparency and sincerity in policymaking and in EU regulation. MEPs usually condemn the EU policymakers for not revealing all aspects of EU policy planning and call for more control of the implementation of regulation measures.

The basic actors of trust in the immigration issue, are four and can play both of these roles: the citizens of EU, the member-states, EU institutions, and third, i.e., non-EU, countries. Citizens are the main target of MEPs and usually they have the role of the attributor of trust in EU, in governments, in policies etc. Member-states can be both attributors and receivers of trust; MEPs expect trust between all member-states and from them to the EU institutions. Third countries are important actors in the debates about EU regulation because the implementation of the regulation also depends upon third countries. So it is important for the EU institutions to build trust relationships with third countries.

2.2.1 Inter-Member State Trust and Trust in Third Countries

Trust between member-states was a central theme in many speeches of the MEPs either as an observation for its lack of it or as an appeal in order to tackle the migration issue. The MEPs observe that distrust among member-states is rising, and some countries use improper and abusive means while they attempt to manage the inflow of migrants and refugees.

“We’ve witnessed in recent years the total collapse of trust between the Member States. We’ve seen pushbacks and violence at the external borders, inhumane reception conditions and asylum seekers sleeping on the streets of the richest countries on this planet” (Sophia in ‘t Veld, Renew, Netherlands- Democrats 66, 2024)⁵

It also comes as an appeal, as a precondition for the implementation of the law from all member-states in order to work better and protect human rights and show solidarity.

“This law erodes the rights and safeguards of asylum seekers and risks dangerous deportations. It allows for undermining the common standards, which is exactly the opposite of what we need. We need to foster a common policy based on mutual trust. So, we are far from fixing the asylum system. Let us indeed take responsibility to finally get it right” (Tineke Strik, Greens/European Free Alliance, Netherlands-GreenLeft, 2024)

The need for solidarity among EU Member States was a central theme. Trust between countries is essential for effective collaboration on migration policies. Discussions often emphasized the importance of equitable burden-sharing, where all Member States contribute fairly to managing migration and supporting refugees. The principle of solidarity (Pornschnegler 2021) was seen as crucial for maintaining unity and ensuring that no single country bears a disproportionate share of the migration burden. Moreover, cooperation and mutual support among Member States were highlighted as necessary for addressing migration challenges. Trust was to be fostered through collaborative efforts, joint operations, and sharing best practices. The importance of maintaining a united front and working together to implement comprehensive migration policies was frequently underscored.

“Europe must be a force for peace and stability in neighbouring regions. The countries receiving the largest migratory flows need support and there must be a fair sharing of responsibility” (Beatriz Becerra Basterrechea, ALDE, Spain-Union, Progress and Democracy, 2016)

Despite the urge for solidarity and collaboration from many of the MEPs, there were also MEPs from Central-European countries, like Poland, Czechia, Austria and Hungary, who were opposed to a common migration pact, like the UN Global Migration Act.

“I would like to express pride to the Austrian Federal Government. I would like to say thank you to Sebastian Kurz thank you to Heinz-Christian Strache who as Vice-Chancellor was certainly the driving force behind the Austrian rejection. I would like to say thank you to Viktor Orbán I would like to say thank you to Poland Croatia the Czech Republic and since yesterday also to the Bulgarians who are leaving. I hope that Denmark will also choose the path of exit here... I know that this will not become a primary legal component, but it will be encroached on national decision-making sovereignty via customary international law. It will very well interfere with national decision-making sovereignty via decisions of the highest courts” (Harald Vilimsky, Identity and Democracy, Austria- Freedom Party of Austria, 2018).

⁵ The details of the speaker from whom the quote in the text comes from are presented in the following way: Name, Political Group in the EP that are affiliated with, Country they come from, National Political Party that supported them and the year their speech was held in texts under study.

2.2.2 Trust in EU Institutions and Trustworthiness

Trust in EU institutions is built on transparency and accountability. Participants in EU debates often called for EU institutions to provide clear, accurate information about migration policies and their implications. Ensuring that these institutions are transparent in their decision-making processes and accountable for their actions was seen as vital for maintaining credibility and public trust. Sophia in 't Veld, makes an observation regarding the deals the EU has signed with third countries questioning their transparency, an element that erodes, thus highlighting transparency and sincerity as components of trustworthiness.

“That is why the European Commission needs to be tough and enforce the law that we’re going to vote today. The European Commission will have to do a lot more to convince us that it will actually enforce the new pact, because in recent years it allowed human rights violations to happen and it didn’t lift a finger; I’m sorry to say. Dirty deals with Tunisia, colleagues, cannot be considered a confidence-building measure either, for that matter” (Sophia in 't Veld, Renew, Netherlands-Democrats 66, 2024).

Effective communication from EU institutions was another key theme in relevant EP debates. There was a strong emphasis on the need for these institutions to communicate the benefits and challenges of migration policies to the public. By providing reliable information and addressing misconceptions, EU institutions can build trust and foster a better understanding of migration issues among European citizens. The reliability of EU institutions in managing migration is also crucial for building trust. Consistent and predictable actions from these institutions help to reassure member states and the public that migration is being managed effectively. Participants in EP debates stressed the importance of EU institutions demonstrating their capability to handle migration challenges through coordinated and well-implemented policies.

“Mr President the European Parliament – and I want to mirror what the Commissioner said – voted for the global compact and supports it as strongly as the Commission is supporting it. Because we didn’t just come up with this compact. We had meetings with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) the Holy See the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and with national parliaments. Huge amounts of work and resources went into this” (Claude Moraes, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, UK-Labour, 2018).

2.2.3 Public Trust

Public trust in migration policies hinges on their perceived fairness and justice. The need for policies that are seen as fair and just by the public was a recurring theme in EP debates. This included ensuring that migration policies protect the rights of migrants and refugees, while also addressing the legitimate concerns of host communities. The appeals for citizens’ trust are also very common in parliamentary debates. Usually, the appeals are part of the critique of MEPs to EU policies or are used as an argument in order to convince for the need of further policy measures.

“If we really want to regain the trust of our citizens, we must be successful in solving the migration crisis, and to do this we have to proceed step by step. This step-by-step approach entails, for example, trying to fix these problems one after another. I see the upcoming file at Parliament on our border agency and more secure European external

borders as a contribution to this holistic approach. This is because we cannot survive with our current values and Schengen system of open internal borders without fixing our external borders. Let us do it step by step and we will also succeed with the migration crisis” (Artis Pabriks, EPP, Latvia-Unity, 2016).

Addressing public concerns about migration is essential for building trust. Participants in EP debates often highlighted the importance of engaging with the public, listening to their concerns, and providing reassurances about the management of migration. By addressing fears and misconceptions, policymakers can build a more trusting relationship with the public.

“Today's migration crisis is not a crisis of numbers, but a crisis of confidence. When refugees came knocking on the door of Italy, Greece, Germany and Sweden, people did not feel that it is better to be in the EU than outside it – quite the contrary. No progress report, return agreement or disembarkation centre to solve that. If it were up to the European Parliament, the Commissioner would come here today and say that it will never happen again. That there is a plan ready to ensure that a village with 1000 inhabitants will never again have to take care of 400 unaccompanied children alone, because 26 other member states will be ready. Then European values today would be as tangible as the actions of Salvini and Orbán” (Kathleen Van Brempt, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats-MEP from Belgium, 2019).

Protecting the human rights of migrants and refugees is a fundamental aspect of building public trust. Participants in EP debates frequently emphasized the need to uphold human rights standards in all migration policies. Demonstrating a commitment to human rights helps to build trust among the public and ensures that migration policies are aligned with European values. Examples of relevant positions follow. Kinga Gál voiced concerns about the potential negative impact of the Global Compact on national interests, reflecting the challenge of balancing public trust with international commitments.

If we read the UN Global Compact for Migration carefully it becomes clear that it does not reflect Europe's interests it is not addressed to Europe. The document portrays migration as a positive phenomenon conflates illegal economic migration with the issue of real refugees and legal migration and presents illegal migration as a fundamental right. The adoption of this package would therefore have irreversible consequences due to legal interpretation and the development of habits which are contrary to the interests of the European people. (Kinga Gál, Non-attached member, Hungary, 2018).

2.3 Convergence divergence among EU Member States on the Immigration Issue

A clear pattern emerges when comparing the attitudes of Central, Southern, and Western European countries towards immigration and international agreements, such as the UN Global Compact for Migration. These differences reflect deeper regional concerns and priorities, influenced by historical, cultural, and political contexts.

Central European countries, particularly Hungary, Poland, and Austria, often exhibit strong resistance to international frameworks that they perceive as undermining national sovereignty. These countries tend to view immigration, especially from non-European regions, as a threat to their cultural identity and social cohesion. For example, Hungarian representatives argue that the Global Compact for Migration "does not reflect Europe's interests" and "portrays migration as a positive phenomenon," conflating illegal migration with legitimate refugee status, which they see as dangerous for Europe. Austria's withdrawal from the Global Compact is similarly rooted in concerns over national sovereignty, with Austrian leaders emphasizing the need to protect their borders and cultural identity from what they perceive as an influx of uncontrolled migration. However, this is an opinion mostly expressed by far-right wing MEPs that come from the abovementioned countries and the governing parties.

“Mr President ladies and gentlemen after Belgium signed the Marrakesh Political Declaration in May of this year with Minister of the Interior Jambon and State Secretary for Migration Francken in the lead Belgium is now threatening to travel to Marrakesh again. This time to sign this Global Compact for Migration. This text is as disastrous as the Geneva Convention. International agreements conventions and treaties all have one characteristic in common they are the product of unworldly diplomats and politicians. They are written over the heads of the people and the consequences are forced on them behind the backs of the people. For this reason migration is only in exceptional cases an issue where free nations are allowed to relinquish their powers. Under active pressure from my party the Vlaams Belang Belgium's decision was postponed. Here too I call on the Belgian Government not to sign this United Nations migration pact” (Gerolf Annemans, ID, Belgium-Vlaams Belang, 2018).

“Mr President the UN Global Compact for Safe Orderly and Regular Migration is a draft international agreement that must be fought against at all costs. If it were to simply call on States to respect the human rights of migrants it could be accepted but it goes far beyond that. It is a text that gives in to a mad immigrationist. It states in paragraph 10) that migration is an integral part of globalisation and concludes from this in paragraph 11) that it must and I quote 'facilitate'. In reality it wants to create legal migration channels based on the presupposition expressly taken up by the European Parliament's resolution of 18 April 2018 that migration is necessarily beneficial for the host countries. For my part I believe on the contrary that mass migration is a scourge that destabilizes the host countries and I congratulate the courageous States that have decided to reject this disastrous global pact. Congratulations to the United States Hungary Austria Czechia Croatia Poland and Bulgaria!” (Gilles Lebreton, ID, France-National Rally, 2018).

Southern European countries, such as Italy and Spain, are more directly impacted by migration due to their geographical location as entry points into Europe. These countries often call for greater European solidarity and support in managing the influx of migrants. For instance, Italian MEPs stress the need for a "global strategy" to address the root causes of migration and argue that countries under the most pressure cannot be left alone. Spain, which supports the Global Compact, views it as essential for creating a framework for safe, orderly, and regular migration, reflecting its commitment to multilateralism and shared responsibility.

Western European countries, particularly Germany and France, generally support international agreements on migration, viewing them as necessary for managing global migration challenges in a coordinated manner. These countries often emphasize the importance of multilateralism and the protection of human rights. For example, German MEPs argue that migration is a global phenomenon that requires "global solutions," and they express regret over the withdrawal of some EU Member States from the Global Compact. France, similarly, supports the Compact as part of a broader commitment to upholding international cooperation and managing migration in a way that respects both the rights of migrants and the interests of host countries.

2.4 Positions of European Party Groups on the Immigration Issue

The issue of immigration elicited varied reactions from different European party groups, reflecting their ideological positions and policy priorities. Since immigration is a controversial issue there are two very different points of view regarding its tackling. The center-left wing and liberal political groups (S&D, RENEW/ALDE, Greens/EFA, The Left) are in favour of solidarity and protection of human right of migrants and refugees. The far-right political groups (ID, ECR) are opposed to any migration pact that facilitates the entrance of migrants and proposes regulatory frameworks of highly protected national borders and deportations. The EPP stands in the middle of these positions, acknowledging the need for solidarity, cooperation and mutual support but also argues in favor of more protected borders and cooperation with third countries like Turkey and Libya in order to ensure the resettlement of migrants. Furthermore, the MEPs emphasize the political aspect and dynamics of the European Parliament and consider that the party composition of the EP can be a diminishing factor for the decision making.

A more detailed presentation of positions of party groups, accompanied by concrete statements of MEPs, follows.

European People's Party (EPP)

The EPP generally supported a balanced approach to migration, combining security measures with humanitarian assistance. They emphasized the importance of strengthening the borders, advocating for stronger border controls to manage migration flows and prevent illegal entry.

Most of us understand that if we have a common external border, we also need more common migration policy. The EPP Group will support the migration pact. We think that it is crucial that we start to take back control from the smugglers, because we need to decide who will actually enter the European Union. (Tomas Tobé, EPP, Sweden-Moderate Party, 2024)

They also advocate in favour of international cooperation, with safe third countries that they consider safe, like Turkey and Libya. Working with countries of origin and transit to address the root causes of migration and improve regional stability.

Europe must be able to protect its external borders both on land and at sea, rather than managing situations imposed by smugglers. This is what our constituents expect of us, first and foremost across Europe. We must take help to those in trouble, not bring the problem to Europe. It is there that we must strengthen the population retention power of the third countries concerned. (Kinga Gál, EPP, Hungary-Fidesz, 2019).

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)

The S&D group focused on the humanitarian aspects of migration and emphasized the protection of migrant rights. Their key priorities included humanitarian aid and solidarity, integration policies and multilateralism. They trust in a collective European response that respects human rights and European values and distrust nationalistic and xenophobic policies, which they believe undermine the EU's ability to manage migration humanely.

Saving lives becomes a top priority, as does the development of mechanisms for the distribution of beneficiaries of international protection in all the Member States of the European Union. The time has come for the Member States to assume their responsibilities and fulfil their obligations in relation to the relocation measures that this House strongly supports... We insist on the need for a binding and mandatory mechanism for the resettlement of a substantial number of asylum seekers directly from third-country refugee camps to the Member States, the so-called 'humanitarian corridors', without neglecting the strengthening of similar forms of solidarity, such as humanitarian admission and humanitarian visas. We call for specific measures for minors, starting with the right to legal assistance, health care, education, guardianship, and above all non-detention due to their condition. (Cécile Kashetu Kyenge, S&D, Italy- Democratic Party, 2016).

Renew Europe (Renew) / ALDE

Renew Europe/ALDE supported innovative and coordinated EU-wide responses to migration. Their approach included solidarity, security, international cooperation and legal pathways for immigrants. They express distrust towards both extreme left and right narratives that either push for open borders or complete isolationism.

"We cannot, unfortunately, legislate away a far-right majority because even if you reject the package, that majority will still be there and it may actually be bigger in the next term. And are you going to entrust the next Parliament with the elaboration of our asylum policies? Well, not me, colleagues, not me" (Sophia in 't Veld, Renew, Netherlands- Democrats 66, 2024).

The Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)

The Greens/EFA group focused on human rights and environmental factors driving migration. They express distrust towards the EU's current direction, which they feel compromises on human rights in favor of stricter controls.

Madam President, the anti-European far right is gaining ground throughout the European Union... And this explains, at least in part, the fact that we have been talking about the reform of the Dublin system for years and that we are talking for years about the reform of the asylum and migration system, and the Member States are unable to agree, demonstrating an alarming lack of solidarity, of willingness to share responsibilities and to cede sovereignty. that this is what the European Union is all about. (Jordi Solé, Greens/EFA, Spain- Republican Left of Catalonia, 2019).

European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)

The ECR group stressed national sovereignty and security in managing migration. Their stance was characterized by arguments for stricter control in the European borders, prevention of the illegal migration in order to protect national sovereignty. They express distrust towards European integration on migration, arguing that such policies threaten national sovereignty and security.

“In fact, you have sent a love letter to human traffickers to push as many people as possible into the sea, because it is known that they will be accepted without any criteria anyway. What will be the results? First of all, you will stuff money with smugglers, a lot of people will drown, you will cause problems for Europe, you will take money from countries like Poland, and you will not solve any problem. Any. So it's time for a radical change in the next elections. Don't vote for the centre-left, vote for traditional Europe. We will revoke these documents and the Green Deal” (Patryk Jaki, ECR, Poland-Sovereign Poland, 2024).

Identity and Democracy (ID)

The ID group generally adopted a restrictive stance on migration, emphasizing security concerns and opposing large-scale migration. They frame distrust towards the EU's migration policies, seeing them as a threat to national identity and security. They advocate for strict national control over immigration, fearing that mass migration could destabilize European societies.

“Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, we are being inundated by millions of undesirable asylum seekers. Our people have more than enough of that. But what does the European Union do? Quite the opposite. With the EU Pact on Migration, it wants to be able to oblige us to take in even more asylum seekers. It also wants to import 4.5 million non-European foreigners a year. The EU Migration Compact is not at all about defending our borders against that asylum invasion. It is about the deliberate and organised replacement of the European population, the colonisation of Europe, the suicide of our unique European civilisation. Our borders must be closed. By definition, asylum must be granted in their own region, because our people do not want more, but rather less migration. This EU migration pact is pure madness, and the people will pay the price for it” (Tom Vandendriessche, ID, Belgium- Vlaams Belang, 2024).

The Left (GUE/NGL)

The GUE/NGL's framing of trust and distrust regarding the immigration issue is rooted in their commitment to fundamental rights, humanitarian values, and opposition to policies they view as restrictive or inhumane. They often frame their trust in the protection of human rights and international solidarity, while expressing strong distrust towards policies that they believe undermine these principles.

"It is a disgrace for the Presidency and the Council to tell us that the problem is secondary flows, and that solidarity is not the sharing of desperate people. What is solidarity, Madam President-in-Office? Should money be given to build camps? Secondary flows will exist as long as the door is closed and we do not stop wars. It is very bad to hear the phrase "illegal refugees and migrants". People cannot be "illegal." War is illegal and the arms trade is illegal, and we do not even discuss that"
(Konstantina Kuneva, GUE/NGL, Greece-Syriza, 2019).

2.5 Conclusion on the EP Discourse on Immigration

The EU Parliament's discourse on migration is multifaceted, addressing policy, humanitarian, and socio-economic dimensions. Trust is a pivotal theme, influencing inter-member state cooperation, institutional credibility, and public acceptance of migration policies. Reactions from party groups varied widely, reflecting their ideological differences and policy priorities. As shown above, the left and the far right in the EP take diametrically opposed positions in EP debates on immigration, while parties of the centre and the centre-right adopt a middle-of-the-way, if not a fence-sitting stance.

In general, in the EP debates, the issue of (dis)trust is used as an acknowledgement tool that keeps reminding that citizens distrust EU regulation. So, they appeal for a better trust-building mechanism that entails not only better regulation but also better implementation. Another dysfunctionality in the EU is the reciprocity of distrust. Member States do not trust the EU measures, so they refuse to implement them. Meanwhile, EU authorities distrust Member States' willingness to comply with EU measures. As a result, there are inequalities in regulating immigration. The identification of the dysfunctions in EU law-making that contribute to the decline in trust also gives rise to the trustworthiness criteria. The EU will be trustworthy as long as it can better legislate in the interests of all its citizens, but also for the protection of human rights.

3 COVID-19 Pandemic and Trust

The primary aim of this section of Deliverable 3.4 is to explore how political trust is related to public health measures, vaccine distribution, economic interventions, and cross-border cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic. This section of the report investigates the diverse ways in which trust is articulated in the context of the challenges of the pandemic that the European Union (EU) faced in 2020-2022. Based on research on Minutes of EP plenary sessions, the research seeks to examine aspects trust in health policy measures, health experts, and vaccines, and the trust shown among EU Member States in collaboratively managing the crisis.

3.1 The COVID-19 pandemic in the EU

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019 and spread in 2020 and the years that followed, has had an unprecedented impact on the European Union (EU), testing its health systems, economies, and social structures. The rapid spread of the virus across Member States led to significant public health challenges, economic downturns, and societal disruptions. Governments were compelled to implement stringent measures such as lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing to curb the spread of the virus, which in turn triggered debates on the balance between public health and individual freedoms (Schwab and Malleret 2020, Kahn 2021).

The EU's response to the pandemic has been multifaceted, involving coordinated actions to manage the health crisis, mitigate economic impacts, and support recovery efforts (European Commission 2023b). Key initiatives included the establishment of the European Recovery Fund, joint procurement of medical supplies and vaccines, and the reinforcement of health cooperation mechanisms. However, the pandemic also exposed gaps in preparedness and disparities in healthcare capacities among Member States, prompting calls for a more integrated and resilient European Health Union (European Commission 2024).

Trust emerged as a critical factor in the EU's pandemic response, influencing public compliance with health measures and the acceptance of vaccines. Misinformation and disinformation posed significant challenges, undermining public confidence in scientific advice and government actions. The European Parliament (EP), representing diverse political groups, played a crucial role in debating and shaping the EU's strategies to address these issues, ensuring that responses were aligned with democratic values and fundamental rights.

As the EU navigated the ongoing challenges of the pandemic and prepared for future health crises, the discussions within the EP highlighted the importance of solidarity, cooperation, and innovation in building a robust and equitable public health framework for all its citizens

3.2 Trust and COVID-19 in the EP Debates

Trust has been a central theme in EP debates, particularly regarding public confidence in scientific advice, vaccines, and government measures. MEPs have recognized the critical role of trust in ensuring compliance with health guidelines and the successful rollout of vaccination programs. In several debates, trust is explicitly mentioned, particularly in the context of the relationship between citizens and institutions. For instance, debates emphasize the need for citizens to trust public health measures, vaccination campaigns, and the EU's response to the pandemic. Trust is directly tied to the effectiveness of these measures—without public trust, the implementation and success of health policies are perceived as being at risk.

Distrust, while not always mentioned explicitly, is frequently implied through concerns about misinformation, the perceived inefficacy of responses, and the fear of authoritarianism. Distrust is suggested in debates over the sufficiency of measures taken by the EU and national governments. For example, concerns about whether the EU or national governments acted quickly and effectively enough, or whether they overstepped in restricting freedoms, implicitly reference a lack of trust in EU and national actors.

Several speeches and interventions by MEPs during the debates serve as direct appeals for trust. These appeals often aim to bolster public confidence in the actions of the EU, national governments, and health authorities. For example, members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have called for trust in the scientific community, in the safety and efficacy of vaccines, and in the EU's coordinated response to the pandemic. These appeals are sometimes coupled with reassurances, emphasizing transparency, adherence to democratic principles, and the proportionality of measures to address public concerns about government overreach or misuse of state power.

"We have an opportunity and an obligation to better coordinate and strengthen our health systems in the face of future threats" (Dolors Montserrat, EPP, Spain-People's Party, July 2020).

There are also observations made by MEPs regarding the current state of trust or distrust within the EU. For instance, there is acknowledgment that the EU's initial response to the pandemic may have eroded trust due to perceived delays or inadequacies. Conversely, successful coordination efforts, such as those in vaccine procurement, are cited as ways in which trust is being rebuilt. Observations are also made regarding the consequences of distrust, such as the spread of disinformation, which further complicates the EU's efforts to manage the pandemic effectively.

"The crisis has also had an impact on democracy, electoral processes and freedom of expression. The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed been accompanied by an unprecedented flood of false or inaccurate information that can create confusion and distrust, undermine an effective public health response and have a negative impact on democratic institutions" (Didier Reynders, Renew, Belgium-Reformists Movement, November 2020).

Mr President, Commissioner, ladies and gentlemen, part of the population of the European Union and the French overseas territories has distinguished itself by its hostility to vaccination. Even today, some of our fellow citizens have not received their first dose, by choice. The COVID-19 pandemic that we are experiencing is therefore not only a health issue, it is a mistrust of our health institutions. Thus, the issue of disinformation, which is particularly prevalent on social networks, has led to dramatic situations. It is therefore time to take the right measure of this problem, with the implementation of a truly effective European awareness campaign. (Max Oville, Renew, France-Democratic Movement, 2022).

Trustworthiness is discussed in terms of transparency, effectiveness, and adherence to democratic values. For example, the debates in EP emphasize that the EU's actions need to be transparent and based on scientific evidence to maintain and build public trust. Additionally, there is a recurring theme that any emergency measures must respect fundamental rights and the rule of law, as this adherence to democratic principles is a key criterion for trustworthiness.

"I believe that the time has come, so that, if we have a committee that deals with COVID, it has a full mandate, that it can ask itself and ask itself what happened in Wuhan in order to make the European Commission itself more transparent, because there is no way that we find out that the European Commission had financed the Wuhan



center only thanks to Assange's Wikileaks. There is no way that we cannot see contracts except with many cancelled parts. To our questions, von der Leyen replies that she has nothing to say about SMS to the Pfizer CEO, when in fact the European Ombudsman and the Court of Auditors have strongly criticised and censured the European Commission. We are a Parliament, we represent the citizens, we demand answers and transparency” (Marco Campomenosi, ID, Italy- Lega Nord, 2022).

“A pandemic such as this impacts disproportionately and differentially on women, on gender issues, on minorities and immigrants and those on the margins of society. Women and girls are disproportionately at risk during this pandemic as, during lockdowns, they can be exposed to abusers for long periods of time with no availability of social or institutional support. The risk of child sexual exploitation has, sadly, further increased as have the opportunities for online harassment and disinformation. Undoubtedly, this crisis has brought about the best in many countries, including here in the EU. We’ve seen good leadership, but strongman politics and authoritarianism can take hold. Further restrictive measures must always be accompanied by proper information, education and widespread consultation. Democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, are at the core of our societies. They cannot and should not be jeopardised by this pandemic” (Frances Fitzgerald, EPP, Ireland- Fine Gael, November 2020).

Conversely, trustworthiness is challenged by actions perceived as inconsistent or overly authoritarian. Instances where state emergency powers were extended without sufficient oversight, or where there were failures in communication and coordination, are seen as eroding trust. The debates frequently highlight that trust can only be maintained if institutions demonstrate that they are acting in the public's best interest and are subject to checks and balances.

"The implementation of a public health strategy a posteriori more than 6 months after the epidemic is proof that Europe has failed in its missions" (Joëlle Mélin, ID, France-National Rally, July 2020).

Moreover, in the parliamentary debates on COVID-19 within the European Parliament, the concepts of trust and distrust are woven into discussions that define distinct roles for those who attribute trust and those who receive it. These roles reflect the complex dynamics of governance and public expectations within the European Union. Attributors of trust in these debates primarily include EU citizens, national governments, and MEPs.

Citizens are expected to have trust in the decisions and actions of their governments, the EU institutions, and public health authorities, believing that these bodies will act in their best interest during the pandemic. National governments, in turn, are also attributors of trust as they rely on EU institutions for guidance, support, and coordination, particularly in critical areas like vaccine procurement and public health policy. MEPs, as representatives of the people, express trust or distrust in various actors within the European framework, positioning themselves as intermediaries who channel the concerns and hopes of their constituents.

On the other hand, receivers of trust are those entities in whom trust is placed. EU institutions, such as the European Commission and the European Medicines Agency, are primary receivers of trust.

They are expected to provide effective leadership, ensure transparency, and coordinate efforts across Member States to manage the pandemic. National governments also receive trust from their citizens, who expect governments to implement effective health measures and protect public interests. Additionally, public health authorities are trusted to deliver accurate information, develop and distribute vaccines, and manage the overall pandemic response.

Interestingly, some actors in the debates in EP function as both attributors and receivers of trust, reflecting the interdependent nature of governance within the EU. National governments, for instance, are not only receivers of trust from their citizens but also act as attributors of trust towards EU institutions, depending on them for resources, guidance, and support. The European Parliament itself occupies a dual role: it is trusted by citizens to safeguard democracy and fundamental rights during the crisis, while it simultaneously trusts the European Commission and other EU bodies to act in the collective interest of the Union.

Ultimately, the success of the EU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic hinges on this layered and reciprocal trust between institutions and the public. The debates within the European Parliament reveal that trust is not merely a static concept but a dynamic and multifaceted relationship that must be actively maintained and nurtured across different levels of governance and society.

3.2.1 Inter-Member State Trust

During the debates, the importance of solidarity among member states was frequently highlighted. MEPs stressed that the pandemic required a united front where all countries shared responsibilities, particularly in managing the health crisis and ensuring equitable access to resources.

“We want a Europe for health with a health approach in all policies with more funding in the European budget and with the EMA and ECDC with more competences and with decision-making and coordination capacities for an effective response across Europe” (Dolors Montserrat, EPP, Spain-People’s Party, July 2020).

Cooperation was another key theme, particularly in the context of joint procurement of medical supplies and vaccines. Several MEPs noted that without mutual support, the EU would struggle to manage the pandemic effectively.

“I’m also concerned that there are Member States where hospitals are totally outdated and there are others where hospitals have five-star rooms” (Nicolae Ștefănuță, Renew, Romania- Save Romania Union, July 2020).

3.2.2 Trust in EU Institutions

Transparency and accountability were critical in building and maintaining trust in EU institutions during the crisis. MEPs called for clear, transparent communication from EU bodies to ensure that all actions were understood and trusted by member states and citizens.

“The implementation of a public health strategy a posteriori more than 6 months after the epidemic is proof that Europe has failed in its missions” (Joëlle Mélin, ID, France-National Rally, July 2020).

Effective communication was emphasized as vital for maintaining trust in EU institutions. MEPs argued that clear, consistent messaging was necessary to ensure public compliance with health measures and to prevent misinformation.

“Disinformation can kill. And we in Europe must defend ourselves together in the face of the growing infodemic. Our citizens have the right to honest and truthful information from their governments” (Vladimír Bilčík, EPP, Slovakia-Democrats, November 2020).

3.2.3 Public Trust

Public trust addresses how EU policies and actions impact public perceptions, focusing on the fairness and justice of policies, addressing public concerns, and protecting rights. The fairness of EU policies, particularly in their impact on different populations and member states, was a recurring theme. MEPs stressed that policies must be perceived as just to maintain public trust.

“The exceptional nature of the pandemic must lead national governments now more than ever to strengthen and protect our fundamental rights and the balance of powers” (Dolors Montserrat, EPP, Spain-People’s Party, July 2020).

Addressing the concerns of citizens, particularly regarding health and economic security, was seen as essential. MEPs called for policies that directly respond to the anxieties and needs of the public. Protecting the rights of citizens during the pandemic was a critical aspect of maintaining public trust. MEPs discussed the balance between implementing necessary health measures and ensuring that fundamental rights were not unduly compromised.

“The way forward cannot be to suspend, prohibit, or prevent activities or events nor to restrict the exercise of rights, freedoms, and guarantees” (Sandra Pereira, GUE/NGL, Portugal- Portuguese Communist Party, November 2020).

3.3 Convergence and Divergence among EU Member-States on the COVID-19 Pandemic Issue

MEPs from countries like Germany and France generally exhibit a higher level of trust in the European Union’s capacity to coordinate and lead the public health response. They often advocate for greater EU involvement and harmonization of health policies, reflecting confidence in the EU’s ability to strengthen member states’ health systems.

István Ujhelyi, while coming from Hungary, a country with weaker healthcare infrastructure, still aligns with this view, advocating for a European Health Union as a means to equalize access to healthcare across the EU:

“Can our European Union be happy if many times access to health depends on where people were born? Can our Europe be united and healthy in the future if health care is not a strategic sector for us?” (István Ujhelyi, S&D, Hungary- Hungarian Socialist Party, July 2020).

These statements reflect a trust in the EU's potential to lead and improve healthcare outcomes, especially from representatives of member states that traditionally see themselves as leaders within the EU.

In contrast, MEPs from East and South European countries often express skepticism or distrust towards the EU's strategies. They raise concerns about the feasibility of the proposed measures, particularly given the existing disparities in healthcare infrastructure and economic capacity.

Daniela Rondinelli voiced concerns about the ambitious nature of the EU's health strategy, indicating a distrust in its practicality given the economic constraints faced by many member states:

“This European strategy is acceptable but at the same time I believe that it is too ambitious and unrealistic because in order to implement it, it takes an unsustainable spending capacity for most European and non-European countries” (Daniela Rondinelli, NI, Italy- Five Star Movement, July 2020).

Similarly, Joëlle Mélin criticized the EU's delayed response, which she views as evidence of the Union's failure to act promptly and effectively. Her comments suggest distrust in the EU's crisis management capabilities:

“The implementation of a public health strategy a posteriori more than 6 months after the epidemic is proof that Europe has failed in its missions... this stubbornness in maintaining the free movement of people carriers of the virus by land sea or air is responsible for the current hecatomb” (Joëlle Mélin, ID, France-National Rally, July 2020).

The debates also reveal a divergence in priorities between North and South European countries. MEPs from Northern countries, which generally have more robust healthcare systems, focus on long-term strategies and structural reforms. In contrast, MEPs from Southern Europe, where economies are more strained, emphasize the immediate need for support and the suspension of austerity measures.

Nicolae Ștefănuță pointed out the stark differences in healthcare quality across the EU, underscoring the need for more immediate action:

“I'm also concerned that there are Member States where hospitals – as Mr Ujhelyi said – are totally outdated and there are others where hospitals have five-star rooms” (Nicolae Ștefănuță, Renew, Romania- Save Romania Union, July 2020).

Edina Tóth highlights the initial failures of the EU, advocating for stronger state involvement, which hints at a preference for national rather than supranational control in crisis situations:

“There has been a lot of criticism of the European Union in recent months and indeed we have to say that in the initial period the Union was not able to act effectively enough and help protect itself against the coronavirus” (Edina Tóth, EPP, Hungary- Christian Democrats, July 2020).

East European representatives often emphasize the need for solidarity and equal treatment within the EU, reflecting concerns that without strong EU leadership, disparities between Member States could worsen.

Vladimír Bilčík discussed the vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic, particularly in smaller and less wealthy member states:

“The pandemic shows how vulnerable we are. In addition to the virus that invades our bodies, a virus has massively spread in recent months that attacks and destroys the verified information, facts, and scientific knowledge we rely so heavily on to find the right policy decisions” (Vladimír Bilčík, EPP, Slovakia- Democrats, November 2020).

The debates within the European Parliament reveal significant disparities in trust towards the EU's ability to manage the COVID-19 crisis. The disparities are largely shaped by the differing healthcare capacities and economic situations of Member States. While countries with stronger health systems express greater trust and call for enhanced EU coordination, those with weaker systems and more strained economies exhibit skepticism and concern about the feasibility and fairness of the EU's strategies. This divergence in reactions underscores the challenges the EU faces in creating a unified response that meets the diverse needs of its Member States, highlighting the necessity of building trust through equitable and effective policy implementation.

3.4 Positions of European Party Groups on the COVID-19 Pandemic Issue

Regarding policy responses to the pandemic, the reactions and proposals from various political groups within the European Parliament illustrate a wide range of approaches to handling the pandemic and preparing for future crises.

European People's Party (EPP)

The European People's Party has been vocal about the need for stringent adherence to democratic principles and the rule of law during the pandemic. Emphasized the need for strong, unified action led by EU institutions to manage the crisis effectively. This group highlighted the importance of trust in the EU's capacity to lead and implement necessary health measures, while also acknowledging the challenges faced by member states.

Despite overall trust, the EPP also voiced concerns and criticisms regarding the initial handling of the pandemic by the EU, acknowledging shortcomings and areas needing improvement.

“There has been a lot of criticism of the European Union in recent months and, indeed, we have to say that in the initial period the Union was not able to act effectively enough and help protect itself against the coronavirus... what is needed is not a uniform European minimum health service proposed by the left, but maximum health protection for citizens of the Union” (Edina Tóth, EPP, Hungary-Christian Democrats, July 2020).

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)

The S&D group has focused on social equity and protecting the most vulnerable. They trust EU that will implement policies that ensure equal access to healthcare and social support systems across member states. However, the S&D also expressed distrust regarding persistent economic inequalities and the adequacy of the EU's response in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations.

“There are the usual suspects – that's what I'll call them – who exploit the situation to restrict fundamental rights far too unduly... we have to look at particularly vulnerable groups. We know that domestic violence against women and children has increased. We know that minorities have been further restricted, in some cases made scapegoats”
(Katarina Barley, S&D, Germany-SPD, November 2020).

Renew Europe (Renew)

Renew Europe has pushed for a coordinated European approach and expressed trust in the EU's ability to adapt policies swiftly and manage the crisis effectively. They supported collaborative efforts and the pooling of resources to accelerate solutions like vaccine development and economic recovery plans. However, they also expressed distrust concerning bureaucratic inefficiencies and delays that hampered timely responses, calling for more agile and responsive mechanisms.

We will not be better off if we do not recognise that at the beginning of this crisis, the retreat into the choice of certain Member States and the initial impotence of the Commission left a bitter taste in the mouths of European citizens... second, the economy... Let's hit hard with a massive recovery plan, as Ursula von der Leyen said, with a new Marshall Plan, with the perspective of digital and t (Dacian Cioloş, Renew, Romania- Party of Liberty, Unity and Solidarity, April 2020).

Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)

The Greens/EFA group placed trust in the EU's potential to implement sustainable, environmentally friendly, and socially inclusive policies as part of the pandemic response and recovery. At the same time, they expressed distrust regarding the influence of large corporations and the potential sidelining of environmental and social considerations in favour of economic interests.

The first risk is that once again, it is the most vulnerable who pay for a crisis in which they have no responsibility... The second risk is that, in the name of the health emergency, our democracies will find themselves permanently weakened, mistreated as in Poland, or even suspended indefinitely, as in Hungary... The third risk is that the pandemic will provide the ideal alibi for all those who have built their fortunes on the limitless exploitation of our planet to put a stop to attempts – even belated, even insufficiently ambitious – to bring our societies back into harmony with the nature of which we are a part and on which we depend. Climate change, the collapse of biodiversity, the depletion of resources have not been stopped by the coronavirus. (Philippe Lamberts, Greens/EFA, Belgium- Confederate Ecologists for the Organisation of Original Struggle, April 2020).

European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)

The ECR group has stressed the importance of pragmatic responses and protecting national interests. They place trust in national sovereignty and advocate for pragmatic, limited EU interventions that respect the autonomy of member states. They distrust the EU's centralization, bureaucracy, and perceived inefficiency and believe that excessive central control can hinder effective and timely responses to crises.

“The answer, however, is not to centralise everything in the hands of the European Commission... Politicians who are not elected by absolutely no one can make decisions for the whole of Europe” (Andrey Slabakov, ECR, Bulgaria- VMRO – Bulgarian National Movement, 2022).

Identity and Democracy (ID)

The ID group places trust in national governments and sovereignty, advocating for decisions to be made at the national level rather than by centralized EU bodies. They argue that the EU's centralized approach undermines national sovereignty and fails to account for the unique circumstances of individual member states.

“The future with you is 'pandemic' and 'vaccine'. You repeat it seven times, "vaccine", "vaccine", "vaccine", "vaccine", "vaccine", "vaccine"... and "vaccination". I had prepared a technical speech based on your annexes, but given that you never answer questions, I am going to speak for our fellow citizens, many of whom criticise the action of this deaf and authoritarian Commission, which spends its time punishing Member States that go out of bounds” (Virginie Joron, ID, France-National Rally, 2022).

The Left (GUE/NGL)

The GUE/NGL group has called for a significant overhaul of health policies, advocating public ownership of health services and treatments. They advocate for policies that ensure universal access to healthcare, reject privatization, and prioritize the public good over corporate interests. They, also, distrust towards neoliberal policies and the influence of corporations, particularly in the context of public health and social welfare.

“The overwhelm of our healthcare services does not come out of nowhere. 63 times between 2011 and 2018, the European Commission recommended that Member States reduce their health spending. Liberal governments did not ask for a better pretext, moreover, to justify the destruction of our hospitals. This should have been recognized in order to draw political lessons” (Manon Aubry, GUE/NGL, France- La France Insoumise, April 2020).

3.5 Conclusion on Discourses on Covid-19 in the EP

Debates in the EP reflected a diverse range of perspectives on managing the COVID-19 pandemic and future health crises. While there was a convergence of views towards the need for greater coordination and robust health systems, approaches varied significantly across political groups. Groups on the left supported the further enhancement of public health care systems and the reduction of inequalities in access to health care, while groups on the centre and the right advocated the enhancement of policy coordination across EU Member States and the need to streamline policy implementation. All groups were sensitive to infringement of democratic freedoms in the process of implementing emergency and restrictive policy measures. Trust in science and public health measures remains a critical factor, with MEPs emphasizing the need to combat misinformation and ensure transparency in government actions. As the EU moves forward, these debates will continue to shape its public health strategy and response to future pandemics.

4 Digitalization of Work

The digitalization (or digitization) of work is a multifaceted issue impacting various aspects of the economy, society, and individual livelihoods within the European Union (EU). MEPs actively addressed relevant changes, owed to digitalization, through legislative debates and policy-making. The European Parliament's debates on the digitalization of work reveal a nuanced understanding of both the opportunities and challenges that this transformation presents to the European labour market. The digitalization of work, driven by the rapid expansion of digital platforms and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in various sectors, is recognized as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it offers unprecedented flexibility and the potential for new economic models that could enhance productivity and create new jobs. On the other hand, it raises significant concerns about the erosion of traditional labour rights and the emergence of new forms of worker exploitation.

One of the critical issues highlighted in the parliamentary debates is the need for a robust legal framework to govern the digital labour market. This includes the regulation of platform work, where workers often find themselves in precarious positions with limited social protections. MEPs have pointed out that many platform workers are classified as self-employed, which exempts employers from providing benefits such as health insurance, pensions, and unemployment protection. This classification leads to a growing segment of the workforce being vulnerable to exploitation and economic instability.

The debates also focus on the role of AI and algorithmic management in the workplace. While AI can optimize operations and increase efficiency, MEPs have expressed concerns about its potential to undermine workers' autonomy and subject them to unfair treatment. For instance, algorithms that manage and evaluate workers can be opaque and unaccountable, leading to decisions that might be biased or discriminatory. The lack of transparency in how these algorithms function makes it difficult for workers to challenge unfair practices. To address this, there is a strong call for legislation that ensures transparency and accountability in the use of AI, particularly in decisions that affect workers' rights and livelihoods.

Moreover, the Parliament advocates for a human-centred approach to digitalization, emphasizing that technological advancements should not come at the expense of workers' dignity and rights. There is a push for policies that balance innovation with social protection, ensuring that digitalization leads to inclusive growth rather than deepening inequalities. This includes proposals

for continuous learning and upskilling programs that prepare workers for the digital economy, as well as the modernization of social security systems to cover new forms of employment.

4.1 Trust and Digitalization of Work in EU

The parliamentary debates within the European Parliament, especially those concerning digital technologies and artificial intelligence, frequently address issues of trust and distrust. These discussions can be categorized into several thematic areas, including explicit appeals for trust, observations of trust or distrust, and references to criteria of trustworthiness.

In several instances, trust is directly invoked as a necessary component for the successful implementation and adoption of new technologies. For example, in discussions on artificial intelligence, MEPs emphasize that trust is not a luxury but a necessity. This appeal for trust is linked to the requirement for transparent rules and clear regulations that protect consumers and businesses from biased or discriminatory practices in machine learning processes. Similarly, the need to build an "ecosystem of trust" is highlighted, where transparency, responsibility, and accountability are key to ensuring that citizens feel secure in the digital environment.

"What are the fundamentals? That humans are in control; that transparency, responsibility, accountability, is what we want to work with; that you should know your customer; that you should be able to identify yourself to create the trust that people know who they are dealing with and you know that you are in control of the data that you create." (Margrethe Vestager, Renew, Denmark-Social Liberal Party, September 2021).

Distrust is often observed in the context of the manipulation of information and the potential for abuse by large digital platforms. For instance, there is concern about the role of opaque algorithms in spreading disinformation, manipulating voters, and undermining public trust in democratic institutions. This distrust is linked to the broader issue of how digital services are structured, leading to a lack of confidence in both the technology and the entities that control it.

"But where does the current structure lead? A structure of opaque algorithms that determine how the world is shown to us based on our personal data, which is sold to whoever is willing to give the most money to them. When disinformation spreads much faster than anything verified, and when algorithms know exactly who is most susceptible to conspiracy theories. This structure leads to easy manipulation of voters, to the organized spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, the sale of illegal, harmful products, hate speech, even incitement to violence and, unfortunately, often actually leads to violence." (Irena Joveva, Renew, Slovenia-List of Marjan Šarec, May 2021).

Trustworthiness is discussed in terms of compliance with ethical standards, transparency, and the protection of fundamental rights. For instance, the deployment of artificial intelligence is only seen as trustworthy if it respects human autonomy, prevents harm, and ensures fairness and explainability. Furthermore, transparency is repeatedly mentioned as a crucial criterion for building

trust, particularly in ensuring that consumers are aware when they are interacting with AI systems and that they have control over their personal data.

"We create user trust with transparency rules. Everyone should know when they are dealing with AI, for example on the phone. And we are also investing one billion euros a year in artificial intelligence from Digital Europe and Horizon Europe, in order to hopefully trigger up to 20 billion euros of additional investment annually from private individuals and member states." (Margrethe Vestager, Renew, Denmark-Social Liberal Party, September 2021).

Furthermore, in the European Parliament debates surrounding digital legislation, trust and distrust are central themes, with various actors assuming roles as both receivers and attributors of trust. The primary receivers of trust in these discussions are digital platforms and companies, which are seen as needing public trust to function effectively and maintain their user bases. These platforms are expected to handle data responsibly and moderate content in a way that instils confidence among users.

Additionally, governments and regulatory bodies, including the European Union and national governments, are receivers of trust as they are tasked with enforcing digital regulations. Public trust in these institutions is crucial for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the laws they implement. Consumers and citizens, although less explicitly mentioned, also emerge as receivers of trust. Their sense of security and protection in the digital space, especially when interacting with emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, hinges on the trust they place in both institutions and platforms.

The key attributors of trust in these debates are the European Union and national governments, which play a significant role in fostering trust through the creation and enforcement of legislation. By implementing clear and transparent regulations, these bodies aim to build trust among the public and within the digital market. Legislators and policymakers within the European Parliament act as attributors of trust by advocating for robust legal frameworks that safeguard citizens' rights and promote fair practices within the digital economy. Digital platforms and companies, while receivers of trust, also serve as attributors when they adhere to legal requirements and promote transparency in their operations. This dual role is crucial for sustaining the mutual relationship of trust between platforms and users.

Some actors, particularly digital platforms and governments, function simultaneously as both receivers and attributors of trust. Digital platforms, for instance, not only receive trust from users and regulators but also attribute trust by implementing and enforcing policies that protect user data and ensure fair content moderation. Similarly, national governments and EU authorities are both receivers of trust from citizens and businesses and attributors of trust through their regulatory and enforcement actions. Their dual role is pivotal in maintaining a balanced digital environment that users can trust.

The debates in the European Parliament highlight the complex interplay of trust in the digital sphere, where multiple actors are engaged in a continuous exchange of trust. This dynamic underscores the importance of transparent, accountable, and ethical practices by both regulators and digital platforms to foster and maintain public trust. The success of digital transformation initiatives across Europe is seen as heavily dependent on the effectiveness of these efforts.

4.1.1 Inter-Member State Trust

The European Parliament debates reflect a strong emphasis on fostering trust between member states, recognizing it as a cornerstone for the effective functioning of the European Union. This trust is primarily built through solidarity and responsibility sharing, where member states are expected to support each other in times of crisis and to contribute equitably to the collective efforts of the Union. This is particularly evident in discussions surrounding the digital transformation, where the sharing of best practices and resources is seen as essential to ensure that all member states can equally benefit from technological advancements.

In addition to solidarity, cooperation and mutual support between member states are highlighted as crucial components of this trust. The debates often stress the need for member states to work together in implementing EU policies, particularly those related to digitalization and cybersecurity. By pooling resources and knowledge, member states can better protect their citizens and enhance the overall resilience of the Union against external threats, such as cyber-attacks or economic disruptions caused by rapid technological change.

"Artificial intelligence must push us to overcome the weaknesses of our market fragmentation, unjustified barriers, insufficient integration; on the other, it must encourage us to develop a new industrial autonomy. For new technologies and innovation to be adopted, they need investment and trust. To be trustworthy, they must first and foremost comply with fundamental rights and reflect our European values."
(Brando Benifei, S&D, Italy-Democratic Party, September 2021).

4.1.2 Trust in EU Institutions

Trust in EU institutions is another critical theme in the parliamentary debates. The effectiveness and legitimacy of the EU's digital policies are closely linked to the level of trust that both member states and the public place in these institutions. Transparency and accountability are frequently cited as key factors in building and maintaining this trust. MEPs argue that for the EU to lead the digital transformation effectively, its institutions must operate transparently, ensuring that all decisions and actions are clear and open to scrutiny. This is particularly important in the context of regulating digital platforms and AI, where there is a significant concern about the potential for abuse and the need for robust oversight mechanisms.

Moreover, effective communication from EU institutions is essential in fostering trust. The debates suggest that clear and consistent messaging from the EU is necessary to ensure that all stakeholders, including member states, businesses, and citizens, understand and support the Union's digital policies. This communication is not just about informing but also about engaging with the public and member states to address their concerns and incorporate their feedback into policy development. By doing so, the EU can strengthen its role as a trusted leader in the digital age.

"Trust in these systems, supporting technological innovation without creating unnecessary bureaucracy for the business fabric that intends to innovate. I believe that this is what we must all work towards" (Alex Agius Saliba, S&D, Malta-Labour Party, September 2021).

4.1.3 Public Trust

Public trust in the EU's digital transformation efforts is critical for the successful implementation of new technologies and policies. The debates highlight the need for fair and just policies that protect the rights and interests of all citizens. This includes ensuring that digital services and AI systems are used in a way that is equitable and does not perpetuate existing inequalities or create new forms of discrimination. MEPs stress that the public must feel confident that the digital economy will benefit everyone, not just a privileged few.

"I would like to thank you for your comments. We are witnessing a global competition for leadership in digital technologies. Therefore, it is necessary to take coordinated, horizontal action that will boost the safe development of trustworthy AI that helps humans in Europe" (Joanna Kopcińska, ECR, Poland-Law and Justice, May 2021).

Addressing public concerns is also a central theme in building public trust. The parliamentary debates recognize that the public is increasingly concerned about issues such as data privacy, online security, and the potential misuse of AI. EU institutions are called upon to proactively address these concerns through clear regulations and protections that reassure citizens that their rights will be safeguarded in the digital world.

Finally, protecting rights is seen as a fundamental aspect of maintaining public trust. The debates emphasize that the EU must ensure that all digital policies and technologies respect fundamental rights, such as privacy, freedom of expression, and non-discrimination. By upholding these rights, the EU can create a digital environment that is not only innovative and competitive but also trustworthy and aligned with the core values of the Union.

"I believe that it is possible, provided that we respect a certain number of fundamental principles, that we are able to set limits and set a framework. There are at least two points on which I think we can go further. The first is facial recognition. I share the doubts that have been expressed by the many human rights organisations, which have warned of the use of video surveillance driven by artificial intelligence, which will limit the possibilities of anonymous movement in a totally disproportionate way and which constitutes an unbearable intrusion into private life with, in addition, risks, because AI is unable to avoid misidentification based on gender, age, or ethnicity. This is a real problem, and we need a European moratorium on video surveillance or, in any case, on facial recognition" (Emmanuel Maurel, GUE/NGL, France- Republican and Socialist Left, October 2020).

4.2 Convergence and Divergence among EU Member-States on the Digitalization of Work Issue

The alignment of member states on digitalization issues generally follows broader economic and political patterns. Wealthier Western and Northern European countries are often at the forefront of advocating for robust regulatory frameworks that protect workers and ensure fair competition. These countries generally advocate for robust regulatory frameworks to ensure that digitalization aligns with strong social protections and worker rights. They are supportive of EU-wide regulations like the Digital Services Act and are typically in favour of stringent data protection measures, as seen in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Southern European countries typically support these regulations but may place a greater emphasis on addressing economic disparities and protecting vulnerable workers. Eastern European countries, while supportive of digitalization as a growth strategy, may push back against perceived EU overreach and advocate for greater national autonomy in implementing digital policies. Eastern European countries may have mixed positions on digitalization. While they generally support digital transformation as a means to boost economic growth, there is sometimes reluctance to fully embrace stringent EU-wide regulations, particularly those perceived as limiting national sovereignty.

4.3 Positions of European Party Groups on the Digitalization of Work Issue

Different party groups within the EP have varied perspectives on the digitalization of work, reflecting their broader political ideologies and priorities.

European People's Party (EPP)

The EPP focused on enhancing digital infrastructure and skills development. The party group's MEPs argued for significant investments in digital infrastructure to improve internet accessibility and affordability. Additionally, MEPs of that party group emphasized the importance of digital skills for small businesses and the overall economy. When it comes to distrust, the EPP expresses concern about the potential for economic disruption and the misuse of digital platforms. They emphasize the need for strong EU oversight to prevent the exploitation of digital markets by non-European companies, particularly in the context of artificial intelligence and data sovereignty. This reflects the EPP's broader focus on maintaining economic stability and protecting European industries from unfair competition.

“The important thing now, however, is that this e-commerce directive is updated, for example, clarifying the liability regime for content management and providing tools to deal with the growing volume of illegal goods” (Pilar Castillo Vera, EPP, Spain-Partido Popular, October 2020).

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)

MEPs of S&D highlighted the need for inclusive digitalization that addresses social inequalities. They stressed the importance of ensuring that digital transformation benefits all citizens, particularly those in rural and remote areas. They also supported stronger digital rights and the protection of workers in the gig economy. Distrust, for S&D, arises from concerns about social inequality and the potential for digital technologies to exacerbate existing disparities. They express skepticism about the unchecked power of digital platforms and algorithms, particularly in terms of their potential to discriminate against marginalized groups or to undermine labour rights.

“Madam President, Commissioner, in our day, as in history, socialists defend the rights of workers, especially those who are most unprotected. There is now an army of people who work through digital platforms and who, in their overwhelming majority, are not entitled to a pension, nor to sick leave, working an average of 60 hours a week. This lack of protection and precariousness appear camouflaged as independent work, when we all know that the relationship is one of dependence, often extreme. The only fair way

to resolve this situation is to determine the existence of a subordinate employment relationship with the platform and to prove that this is not the case. If, as some people want, we create an intermediate category of protection, we will be paving the way for minimal protection and the degradation of labour protection. In the name of the dignity of the world of work and an economy that works for people, we have the right to fight for the rights of these workers” (Manuel Piza, S&D, Portugal-Socialist Party, September 2021).

Renew Europe (Renew)

Representatives of Renew Europe emphasized the need for a citizen-centric approach to digitalization. They called for programmes that would educate citizens on digital tools and ensure that digitalization makes lives easier. They also stressed the importance of maintaining a European approach to ensure equal opportunities for all. They frame trust in digital transformation through a focus on innovation, consumer protection, and the balance between regulation and freedom. distrust centers on the potential abuse of power by digital platforms and the risks of over-regulation stifling innovation. They argue that while regulation is necessary to protect consumers and ensure fairness, it must be carefully calibrated to avoid hindering the development of new technologies and businesses. Renew thus seeks a balance between promoting innovation and safeguarding public trust.

“We need regulations that enable innovation and also have answers to issues such as hate on the Internet, geo-blocking or the supremacy of Google, Amazon, Facebook and Co. And for artificial intelligence, for example, we still lack any guidelines and regulations at all. Something has to happen at last, and one thing is clear the future is not waiting for us” (Claudia Gamon, Renew, Austria- NEOS – The New Austria, May 2021).

The Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)

The Greens/EFA group frames trust through a sustainability and ethical governance lens. For the Greens, trust in digital transformation is contingent upon ensuring that technologies are developed and used in ways that are environmentally sustainable, ethically sound, and socially responsible.

“Mr President, the big tech created a strongly centralised digital environment because they want to exercise full control over our digital lives. But my political group has always been fighting to give power back to people over the technology they use. This means challenging the centralised digital ecosystem. This means ensuring that messaging services can interoperate, so that people are able to move to privacy-friendly alternatives, to switch between applications, to refuse intrusive surveillance advertising. Because our fundamental rights can prevail over the commercial interests of the big tech as long as the digital ecosystem relies on covert tracking of individuals or when legal content is removed by error from filters” (Marcel Kolaja, Greens/EFA, Czechia- PIRÁTI, 2022).

Distrust for the Greens/EFA is closely tied to environmental and social justice concerns. They express significant skepticism about the ability of digital platforms and AI to operate fairly without strong ethical guidelines and regulatory oversight. The group is particularly concerned about the potential for AI to entrench existing social inequalities and contribute to environmental degradation if left unchecked. For them, building trust requires not only transparency and accountability but also a firm commitment to ethical and sustainable practices.

European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)

The ECR focused on the potential risks of digitalization, including privacy invasion and algorithmic discrimination. MEPs of ECR called for a balanced approach that would safeguard individual rights while promoting digital innovation. For ECR, trust is built on ensuring that digital platforms respect freedom of speech and do not succumb to political correctness or censorship. Distrust arises from concerns about overreach by both digital platforms and EU institutions. They are particularly wary of the potential for digital platforms to restrict freedom of expression and for EU regulations to encroach on national sovereignty and individual liberties. The ECR group calls for a more restrained approach to regulation, one that safeguards fundamental freedoms while ensuring that digital platforms do not abuse their power.

“The full potential of the digital revolution will only be possible if we properly and transparently define the opportunities and threats posed by the full automation of many areas of our lives. However, no technology is foolproof. A change in existing regulations in areas such as enforcement of liability for accidents and failures caused by AI-based systems is necessary. The process of pursuing claims and damages must be transparent, and the identification of the entity responsible for the payment of compensation must not be a problem” (Kosma Zlotowski, ECR, Poland-Law and Justice, October 2020).

The Left (GUE/NGL)

The Left MEPs criticized the digital economy for fostering precarious employment conditions and called for stronger labour protections and transparent algorithmic management. They argued for recognizing the employment status of platform workers to ensure they receive proper labour rights and benefits. They emphasize the importance of trust in institutions to ensure that digital technologies do not exacerbate social inequalities or erode workers' rights. The Left argues that trust can only be established if the digital economy is governed by rules that prioritize the well-being of all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. Distrust, for the Left, is deeply rooted in concerns about corporate power and exploitation. They are particularly critical of large digital platforms, which they see as monopolistic entities that exploit workers and violate privacy rights. The Left group calls for stringent regulations to curb the power of these corporations, protect workers in the gig economy, and ensure that AI is developed and deployed in ways that are fair and transparent. They also emphasize the need for public ownership and control over key digital infrastructures as a way to build and maintain trust.

“The attempt to create a digital constitution and to protect our online fundamental rights has largely failed. It really has. We’ve only chipped away at the immense power of online monopolies. We don’t have the right to opt out of targeted surveillance advertising. We don’t have the right not to use digital services anonymously. And there’s

no alternative to the toxic content algorithms that shape our online world and information and cause so much damage to people's mental health. So democratising the digital sphere is going to take collective action. We've got to hold the tech giants to account – their wielding of addictive, obsessive platforms, it's just not good enough. It's motivated by profit and not people's interests" (Clare Daly, The Left, Ireland-Independents 4 Change, 2022).

Identity and Democracy (ID)

The ID group's MEPs emphasized the need for practical and consumer-friendly digital policies. They highlighted the importance of trust in AI systems and stressed the necessity of human control over AI decision-making processes. They, also, consider AI as a means for strengthening the scarce resources of the state in the welfare scheme and thus limit the immigration flows. They frame trust in digital transformation in a more nationalist and protectionist context. For ID, trust is closely linked to the sovereignty of EU member states and the need to protect European citizens and businesses from the influence of non-European tech giants. Distrust for ID is often expressed in terms of cultural and political threats posed by digital platforms, particularly in how these platforms may undermine national values or be used to promote ideologies that conflict with the group's nationalist agenda.

Our trust here is rather in John Stuart Mill and his belief in the perspective of reason – not by decree or censorship, but through freedom of expression in the decentralized competition of ideas. And let's be honest digital transformation and artificial intelligence are the salvation when we are running out of natural intelligence due to fewer and fewer young Europeans. This is because artificial intelligence releases scarce human intelligence and is cheaper in terms of social policy than unqualified immigration. (Gunnar Beck, ID, Germany-AfD, October 2020).

4.4 Conclusion on EP Discourses on Digitalization of Work

The digitalization of work presents both opportunities and challenges for the EU. MEPs actively engaged in debates on policy-making to address these issues. They focused on ensuring fair working conditions, enhancing digital skills, and maintaining trust in digital technologies. The reactions from different EP party groups reflected a range of priorities, from infrastructure investment to safeguarding individual rights, highlighting the multifaceted nature of digital transformation of work in the EU.

5 General conclusion of Deliverable 3.4

This report examines the European Parliament's (EP) narratives around [three] socio-economic transformations: a) the COVID-19 pandemic; b) waves of immigration and refugees (from Ukraine, Syria and other sources); c) the digitalisation of work. It is based on the EP's minutes on these three issues, showing what the key issues were and how different political groups in the EP approached the three phenomena. It is a pilot study rather than a definitive statement on the narratives introduced in the EP, as it is based on a small sample of parliamentary debates held in the EP during an eventful period (2016-2024). The report highlights issues of political representation and

responsiveness that differ across issues, but on the basis of limited evidence, it does not claim to have measured the different levels of representation and responsiveness across issues.

Very briefly, on immigration, there were very different views. MEPs from the far-right political groups in the EP emphasised security issues, those from the left and the Greens emphasised human rights issues, while the rest, the EPP and the Socialists, offered a combination of the two positions (sometimes, but not always, such a combination involved securing the EU's borders to prevent further illegal immigration, while at the same time supporting a humanitarian approach towards immigrants and refugees who managed to get through and arrived on European soil).

With regard to the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, MEPs stressed, inter alia, that without reliable information and transparency, trust in government and health authorities would be less than desired. While MEPs differed on ideological grounds (reflecting the political group to which each MEP belonged), they agreed on the need to improve the preparedness and resilience of health systems in the EU.

With regard to the digitalisation of work, MEPs highlighted, among other things, the risks for workers affected by digitalisation and the importance of making digital technologies and their regulation trustworthy.

A comparative analysis of how trust is constructed and manifested in the contexts of COVID-19, immigration and digitalisation reveals different dynamics that are unique to each case. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, trust was largely centred on public health measures, the credibility of scientific advice and the effectiveness of government responses. Public compliance with health guidelines and vaccination campaigns depended heavily on trust in national and EU institutions.

In contrast, trust in immigration debates was more multifaceted, involving trust between Member States, trust in EU institutions to manage migration fairly, and public trust in the fairness and humanitarian nature of migration policies. Here, trust was often contested, reflecting different national priorities and values.

Finally, in the digitalisation of work, trust was primarily linked to the ethical use of technology, the transparency of algorithmic decision-making and the protection of workers' rights. In this case, trust dynamics were characterised by concerns about data privacy, algorithmic bias and the role of digital platforms in ensuring fair treatment.

By comparing these different contexts, it becomes clear that while trust is a central issue in all three areas, it is influenced by the specific challenges, actors and stakes involved in each scenario. This comparative approach highlights the complexity of trust in the European Union and the need for tailored strategies to build and maintain trust in different policy areas.

ANNEXES

ANNEX A List of European Parliament Debates analyzed (topic, date, place)

On immigration

1. The situation in the Mediterranean and the need for a holistic EU approach to migration, Tuesday, 12 April 2016 – Strasbourg, discussion on the report of Roberta Metsola and Kashetu Kyenge, on behalf of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, on the situation in the Mediterranean and the need for a comprehensive EU approach to immigration.
2. Managing migration along the Central Mediterranean Route (Wednesday, 1 February 2017 – Brussels), discussion on the statement by the Vice-President of the Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the management of migration via the Central Mediterranean route.
3. EU Member States' support for the UN Global compact for migration, Tuesday, 13 November 2018 – Strasbourg.
4. Reform of the EU asylum and migration policy in light of the continued humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and Africa, Tuesday, 15 January 2019 – Strasbourg
5. Screening of third country nationals at the external borders - European Criminal Records Information System - Third Country Nationals - Common procedure for international protection in the Union - Establishing a return border procedure, and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1148 - Asylum and migration management - Addressing situations of crisis and force majeure - Establishment of 'Eurodac' for the comparison of fingerprints for the effective application of Regulation (EU) No 604/2013, for identifying an illegally staying third-country national or stateless person and on requests for the comparison with Eurodac data by Member States' law enforcement authorities and Europol for law enforcement purposes (recast) - Union Resettlement Framework - Standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection - Standards for the reception of applicants for international protection, Wednesday, 10 April 2024 -Brussels

On COVID-19

1. EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, Thursday, 16 April 2020 - Brussels
2. The EU's public health strategy post-COVID-19, Wednesday, 8 July 2020 – Brussels
3. Oral question to the Commission on the impact of COVID-19 measures on democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, Thursday, 12 November 2020 – Brussels (1)
4. Oral question to the Commission on the impact of COVID-19 measures on democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, Thursday, 12 November 2020 – Brussels (2)
5. COVID-19 – Sustaining EU preparedness and response, looking ahead, Thursday, 6 October 2022 - Strasbourg

On Digitalization of Work

1. Digital Services Act. Improving the functioning of the Single Market - Digital Services Act adapting commercial and civil law rules for commercial entities operating online - Digital Services Act and fundamental rights issues posed - Framework of ethical aspects of artificial intelligence, robotics and related technologies - Civil liability regime for artificial intelligence - Intellectual property rights for the development of artificial intelligence technologies, Monday, 19 October 2020 - Brussels
2. Digital Services Act Improving the functioning of the Single Market - Digital Services Act adapting commercial and civil law rules for commercial entities operating online - Digital Services Act and fundamental rights issues posed - Framework of ethical aspects of artificial intelligence, robotics and related technologies - Civil liability regime for artificial intelligence - Intellectual property rights for the development of artificial intelligence technologies (continuation of debate), Monday, 19 October 2020 – Brussels
3. Digital future of Europe digital single market and use of AI for European consumers, Wednesday, 19 May 2021 - Brussels
4. Fair working conditions, rights and social protection for platform workers - New forms of employment linked to digital development, Monday, 13 September 2021 - Strasbourg
5. Digital Services Act I - Digital Markets Act - Monday, 4 July 2022 - Strasbourg

ANNEX B List of Political Groups in the European Parliament

Political groups in the European Parliament 2019-2024

- **EPP** - Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)
- **S&D** - Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament
- **Renew Europe** - Renew Europe Group
- **Greens/EFA** - Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance
- **ECR** - European Conservatives and Reformists Group
- **ID** - Identity and Democracy Group
- **The Left** - The Left group in the European Parliament - GUE/NGL
- **NI** - Non-attached Members

Political groups in the European Parliament 2014-2019

- **EPP** - Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)
- **S&D** - Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament
- **ECR** - European Conservatives and Reformists Group
- **ALDE** - Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
- **GUE/NGL** - Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left
- **Greens/EFA** - Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance
- **EFDD** - Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group
- **ENF** - Europe of Nations and Freedom Group
- **NI** - Non-attached Members

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