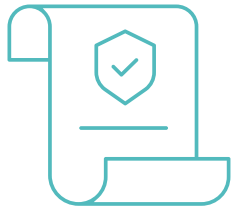




COronavirus Vulnerabilities and INFOrmation  
dynamics Research and Modelling

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**The impact  
of COVID-19 on  
marginalized groups  
in Greece**

Policy Brief: 6  
October 2023

# Authors

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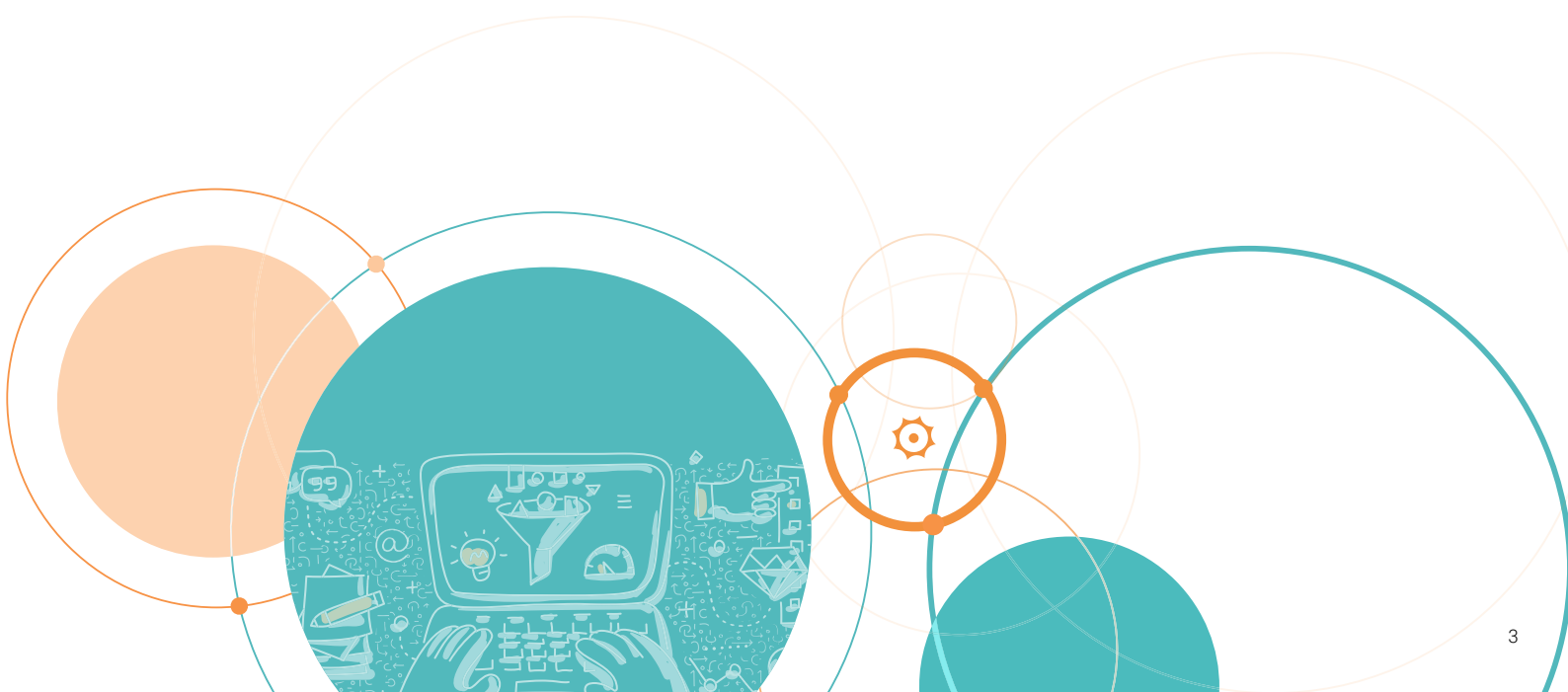
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## Executive Summary

The COVINFORM project examines the multiple socio-economic, legal, cultural dynamics within the contemporary social contexts in European target states, the ways governance systems and resource units responded in areas of interaction and which outcomes were generated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary role in this sequence of interactions and events has besides the aforementioned variables, vulnerability and vulnerable groups that would be impacted more severely by negative consequences of the pandemic.

The case study of KEMEA, as part of the research activities conducted during the COVINFORM project, sheds light on the challenges and hurdles that marginalized groups faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the ways the social interaction, perception, communication and trust by and towards minority groups. It is an undeniable fact that the negative consequences of COVID-19 have influenced socio-interpersonal relationships, communication, trust and perception among societal groups. During all of these cases, minority groups were most affected by the consequences of COVID-19 and relevant policies to address the pandemic. Were these policies effective and efficient? What was their impact on minority groups and what could be improved? The impact that COVID-19, the implementation of policies such as lockdowns, abrupt ceasing of employment activities and movement containment of marginalized groups, has been thoroughly researched during the COVINFORM project, nevertheless additional and tailored research is recommended for the distinct sub-categories of “minority groups” (i.e. Roma, migrants, homeless citizens, elderly etc.). This policy brief aims to unravel the challenges posed by policies relating to how minority groups in Greece

interacted with Law Enforcement Agents. Based on KEMEA’s case study, this brief will elaborate further on the effect that policies and the COVID-19 pandemic had on minority groups’ perception, socio-interpersonal relationships, communication and trust, particularly with LEAs, as the target group that ensured the implementation of the rules and regulations. The following main findings were identified:

In relation to public *Perception*, minority groups suggest that decision makers and the media should be held accountable for the management of the pandemic, while have experienced labour exploitation and fear an even worse form of post-pandemic labour exploitation. Regarding *Social interaction and compliance*, minority groups sympathize with LEAs, nevertheless condemn isolated events of overzealousness, indicate skepticism, ignorance and lack of education as contributing factors to cases of non-compliance. Moreover, target groups suggest there is a lack of social representation of minorities and may lead to marginalization. *Communication* should not be a monotonous top-down process but interactive while crisis communication should not be based in fear. Findings indicate that COVID-19 had a catalyst role in *Trust*. Minority groups’ trust LEAs but suggest a lack of trust towards politicians due to lack of engagement. Concluding, this brief will examine the effectiveness and efficiency rate of policies in relation to minority groups and conduct a critique according to findings that stem from expert interviews and generate subsequent recommendations for policy and decision makers.

## Introduction

Within the context of the COVINFORM project, among the established primary objectives was to conduct in-depth research for the purpose of identifying and examining with the utmost scrutiny of how COVID-19 has influenced the socio-political, economic, legal, and cultural framework of the target contemporary societies, the subsequent consequences of the implemented mitigation policies, responses while simultaneously attempting to strategically decipher the methods and means of societal interaction between the relevant actors and the governance systems.

The impact on minority groups during the COVID-19 pandemic has been multidimensional, since even prior to the crisis, members of these groups are marginalized, in many cases overlooked by society with multiple vulnerabilities influencing their daily lives.

This policy brief is of particular importance and relevance to decision makers, policy experts, law enforcement agents, scholars, and the general public, as it thoroughly examines the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent policies, had on the daily lives of vulnerable groups in Greece. This brief presents a unique opportunity, encouraging academics to conduct additional research in this specific topic, simultaneously highlighting the main challenges that marginalized groups face during an unprecedented crisis, therefore allowing decision makers and policy experts to document the main findings and recommendations. This brief, allows policy experts and decision makers to examine the primary challenges, analyze the main findings and take into consideration of the recommendations presented by incorporating them to the national response mechanisms and shaping a more encompassing, contemporary EU strategy on crisis response. Based on the main findings that stem from qualitative interviews, stakeholders also be able to increase the national crisis management effectiveness and efficiency rate, as they will gain a more insight in the communities' most vulnerable groups during a long-term widespread pandemic.

The key questions presented in this brief are the following:

- 1. How has COVID-19 impacted the daily lives of vulnerable groups?**
- 2. How COVID-19 impacted the trust, societal interaction, perception and communication within the social context between Marginalized groups and law enforcement agents?**
- 3. What are the mismatches or inconsistencies between crisis management policies, implementation of regulations and their impact on vulnerable groups?**

It is known that governmental mechanisms have interpreted vulnerability with a different approach during the various pandemic phases, thus particularly during the first phase, many vulnerable citizens would not receive adequate support or protection by the governmental response mechanism. As the pandemic progressed, systemic governmental weaknesses became more apparent. The main overarching research question, which has generated the three aforementioned questions is: What are the main key findings and lessons learned that can be drawn from the lived experiences of minority groups in Greece during COVID-19?

# The impact of COVID-19 on minority Groups in Greece: Perceptions, Social interaction – compliance, communication and trust

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The COVINFORM project examines the multidimensional impact and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. During and within the context of the project, consortium partners identified thematic areas of particular interest and conducted research as part of their case studies. The Center for Security Studies (KEMEA) conducted in depth examination and research of how Policing has been conducted during the pandemic and in particular emphasized in the impact that coronavirus has on law enforcement agents and marginalized groups, in relation to public social interaction, measure compliance, communication, perception and trust. Relevant data was acquired via qualitative research. The research sample consisted of five law enforcement agents and five minority group members and/or representatives who provided valuable insight by answering open-ended questions. The five LEAs are officers who have multiple years of experience and active engagement with minority groups such as ethnic minorities (i.e. the Roma community), refugees and asylum seekers in the Athens and Thessaloniki. Several interviewees have been also employed as mediators – negotiators. Regarding minority groups, this policy brief examines the interviews of Roma community members and a representative of a refugee camp in Greece, who expressed the opinion of multiple refugees and asylum seekers, thus overcoming language barriers. The four (4) distinct sections examined perception, social interaction - compliance, communication and trust. Specifically:

**Section 1:** Main research question: What is the interviewees personal perception of COVID-19 and how it has impacted on their daily life and professional environment?

**Section 2:** Main research question: What is the perceived impact of implemented COVID-19 measures on minorities - vulnerable groups?

**Section 3:** Main research question: How communication and vaccination campaigns against COVID-19 where perceived by vulnerable groups and minorities? How have these responses have affected people's measure and vaccination compliance?

**Section 4:** Main research question: How COVID-19 management have affected people's trust towards authorities?

An important caveat is also established in this policy brief, as this report only focuses on minority groups which is one of the primary target groups in the case study.

## ***Perception: Minority groups believe that decision makers and the media should be held accountable while fear labour exploitation***

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The main finding indicates that movement restriction policies (i.e. curfew), had an immensely negative psychological impact on daily lives and well-being of minority groups. Indoor confinement and the lack of social interactions have increased the feeling of loneliness and demanded a swift change of on-site to digital, remote interaction and discourse with colleagues, friends and family. This change also had a negative impact on minority group financial status, since business opportunities and employment was restricted by COVID-19 policies. Minority group interviewees, particularly Roma community members, report that COVID-19 and relevant policies influenced the quality of life and people's attitude – behavior negatively, which were expressed via acts of violence, particularly in forms of domestic abuse and anger, frustration and disobedience to healthcare protocols such as wearing a mask in public means of transportation, contributing to widespread insecurity and lack of communication.

Another key finding suggest that minority groups firmly believe that decision makers and the media should be held accountable regarding the mishandling of the pandemic due to politicization of COVID-19, particularly by politicians who intended to reinforce their political narrative thus increasing their personal political gains, as well as the way information was conveyed by the media.

All participants suggested that their working environment, daily activities and perception

radically changed due to COVID-19 and the relevant policies. Participants became more cautious and enforced personal hygiene habits, abiding to healthcare protocols which were recommended and implemented by the governmental mechanism. They suggest the swift to remote work was challenging, albeit necessary. In addition, another key finding suggests that minority groups strongly criticize how employers take advantage of systemic gray areas and legislative weaknesses of the labor law, which fails to protect employees who work on a remote basis. Employers frequently infringe employee rights by reducing the wage of remote working employees, increase their workload and do not respect the set work hours which, according to participants, can significantly reduce their productivity and lead to a cascading phenomenon of employee rights violation, even after the pandemic.

Concluding, minority participants appear divided in relation to when and if the pandemic will cease. For some participants the pandemic has ended, while some others suggest that COVID-19 will continue to co-exist but the mortality intensity will be reduced as more effective vaccines will be invented, while citizens ought to comprehend their role and responsibilities in relation to the pandemic and behave accordingly.

## **Social Interaction – Compliance: *Minority groups sympathise with LEAs, nevertheless condemn isolated events, indicate skepticism, ignorance and lack of education as contributing factors to non-compliance***

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Regarding social interaction and compliance, a key finding indicates that minority groups criticize the pandemic management mechanism, decision makers for failing to address the intensified weaknesses of vulnerable populations and mitigating the consequences of COVID-19.

Minority group interactions with LEAs in specific, have not been influenced while they sympathize with the LEAs' role, which can be contradicting, nevertheless, in isolated incidents LEAs demonstrated overzealousness and intrusiveness in relation to questioning citizens. These events suggest mismanagement, particularly in the event that took place in Nea Smyrni square, which drew negative attention and generated public outrage. Minority respondents suggest that LEAs have not changed their approach towards minority groups and have not abused their power, which was increased during COVID-19 phases.

In relation to compliance, key findings suggest that minority groups abided by the pandemic policies, healthcare protocols and measures with the exception of cases in which reduced income posed a threat of survival, illiteracy, lack of resources and ignorance.

Moreover, according to key findings, minority group members are in favor of vaccinations, with the exception of a participant who is opposed to the obligatory nature of vaccinations. Participants indicate that general skepticism in minority communities stem from ignorance, lack of education which hinders critical thinking, susceptibility to disinformation in relation to vaccines, and lack of necessary financial

resources which guarantee survival. In refugee and migrant communities, the fear of not being entitled to financial benefits or educational courses encouraged reluctant members of the aforementioned group to be vaccinated, even if some would not abide by measures such as wearing a mask properly.

Dissecting the timeline of COVID-19, it becomes apparent that non-compliance to measures were experienced and can be identified during two important phases: the second curfew which was during October – November 2020 and the announcement of the mandatory vaccination. Key findings indicate that minority group members were frustrated since curfews had proven to have catastrophic financial consequences and would struggle to ensure income for their survival, whereas respondents indicate that the mandatory nature of the vaccination process enraged minority members due to the infringement of individual liberties. These interrelated events amplified the fear of minority members generating increased rates of non-compliance.

Concluding, key findings suggest that the most difficult measure to abide to was social isolation (curfews) while citizens began expressing their frustration and demonstrated higher degree of non-compliance during the second curfew. At the first phase, according to respondents, key findings indicate that minority groups demonstrated high rate of compliance mostly due to widespread fear of COVID-19.



## ***Social Interaction – Compliance: Minority groups sympathise with LEAs, nevertheless condemn isolated events, indicate skepticism, ignorance and lack of education as contributing factors to non-compliance***

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## ***Communication: Lack of social Representation may lead to marginalisation, communication should not be a monotonous top-down process but interactive, crisis communication should not be based in fear***

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Key findings suggest that several minority groups have not been able to express their concerns due to a lack of representation, particularly in the Roma community on the socio-political stage. Interviewees indicate that many members of the Roma community are not aware of their rights and obligations towards the society, in combination with the lack of proper education and ignorance, which causes inaction. Moreover, minority group members also believe that they will not be heard by governmental representatives due to a lack of interest and interaction between the governmental mechanism and citizens, particularly in minority groups, while any attempts to voice concerns in some cases were met with indifference or anger.

In relation to information acquisition, according to respondents, younger populations tend to use the internet more than rely solely on the TV while older populations within their communities focus mostly on the TV and to a lesser extent on the internet, mostly due to technological barriers such as lack of necessary skills to navigate online. Minority group members consider discussion TV panels and the news to be one-sided and do not encourage open dialogue while the information from the scientific community is misinterpreted by decision makers and tailored to fit their narrative, which is presented to the general public. Key findings suggest that minority members tend to refrain from cross-checking and verifying the validity of sources and may even use the home pages of popular social media as their main source of information without using critical thinking to examine their findings.

Another finding suggests that minority group members consider communication campaigns from authorities to be insufficient and ineffective, since they were too generic, not targeted to specific sub-sections of the social structure such as minority groups and very limited. Authorities were non-responsive to real time interaction requests and some representatives were unsure which information to convey upon requests.

In relation to crisis communication that influenced compliance, key findings suggest the measures were rather difficult to abide by, and significantly harder to follow as time progressed, particularly lockdowns, due to the ambiguity that was created and the rapid change of measures and differentiated scientist and decision makers' views. The lack of a Pan-European approach towards COVID-19 intensified this confusion. In Greece, minority groups suggest that fear was the prime element in crisis communication which is not the best option, suggesting the need for a common framework for authorities on how to implement measures and an added emphasis on the scientific community, which could also involve embassies to provide support by informing their nationals who reside or temporarily stay in each country.

In relation to vaccinations, key findings suggest that measure compliance rate was influenced by the holistic enforcement of fines and widespread fear as most citizens were vaccinated due to fear of losing their employment.

## **Trust: COVID-19 had a catalyst role in Trust, Minority groups' trust LEAs but suggest a lack of trust towards politicians due to lack of engagement**

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Key findings indicate that minority groups were treated equally, which could in certain cases be problematic, due to the unique characteristics of each group. For instance, regarding migrant and refugee groups, the language barrier and lack of assistance from embassies, would certainly hinder the living conditions of refugees and migrants during the first phases, who were actively assisted by employees and NGO representatives who also filled that communication gap on a daily basis. Moreover, according to some minority group members' views, citizens of higher socio-financial status enjoyed liberties in contrast to average and low income citizens as well as minority groups who are considered to be more vulnerable, underlining that most citizens have lost their trust towards local, regional and national authorities in Europe. The supporting argument is that if a society is unable to accommodate the needs of vulnerable people such as homeless individuals among other, whereas the COVID-19 pandemic created a falsified image of LEAs as the "enemy" who on the one hand actively work to protect citizens and their rights and on the other the implemented measures would restrict citizen liberties. During the first wave, most respondents suggest that their perceptions towards healthcare experts and LEAs did not change and continue to trust them, with the exception of a respondent who has a negative opinion towards LEAs.

Another key finding indicates that during lockdowns and particularly during the second lockdown, people changed their approach towards LEAs due to widespread frustration and

how information was conveyed, leading to citizens trust less the authorities and the media. Moreover, during this period, minority groups do not consider themselves to be as much protected by the police as they should have been, due to the high rate of frequent and daily criminal activities in comparison to how many anti-riot police personnel (MAT) would participate in a protest, which can generate mistrust towards the objectives and priorities of LEAs.

Key findings indicate that most minority group consider COVID-19 pandemic had a catalyst role in relation to a reduction in trust towards the authorities. In specific, trust was influenced due to the ignorance, lack of clarity in measure and practices that were implemented. Trust can be influenced upon major events such as the economic crisis. Participants suggest that active steps need to be taken in order to increase trust, such as adopting a welfare, care and assistance model, targeting the lower socio-economical groups and providing information on relevant measures and practices in a clear manner. In specific according to participants, minority groups such as the Roma community, trust towards LEAs has not been influenced, however trust politicians even less. Concluding, one participant suggested that trust is influenced according to the engagement, support and accommodation of needs also the degree that decision makers pay attention to vulnerable groups, instead of solely on an individual event that may influence them.

## Summary of key findings



- **Perception:** Minority groups indicate that decision makers and the media should be held accountable while they have experienced labour exploitation and fear post-pandemic exploitation.
- **Social Interaction – Compliance:** Minority groups sympathize with LEAs, nevertheless condemn isolated events, indicate skepticism, ignorance and lack of education as contributing factors to non-compliance.
- **Communication:** Lack of social Representation may lead to marginalization, communication should not be a monotonous top-down process but interactive, crisis communication should not be based in fear.
- **Trust:** COVID-19 had a catalyst role in Trust, minority groups' trust LEAs but suggest lack of trust towards politicians due to lack of engagement.

# List of Policy Recommendations



**In this section, the main lessons learned and recommendations will be presented:**

## **Lessons Learned:**

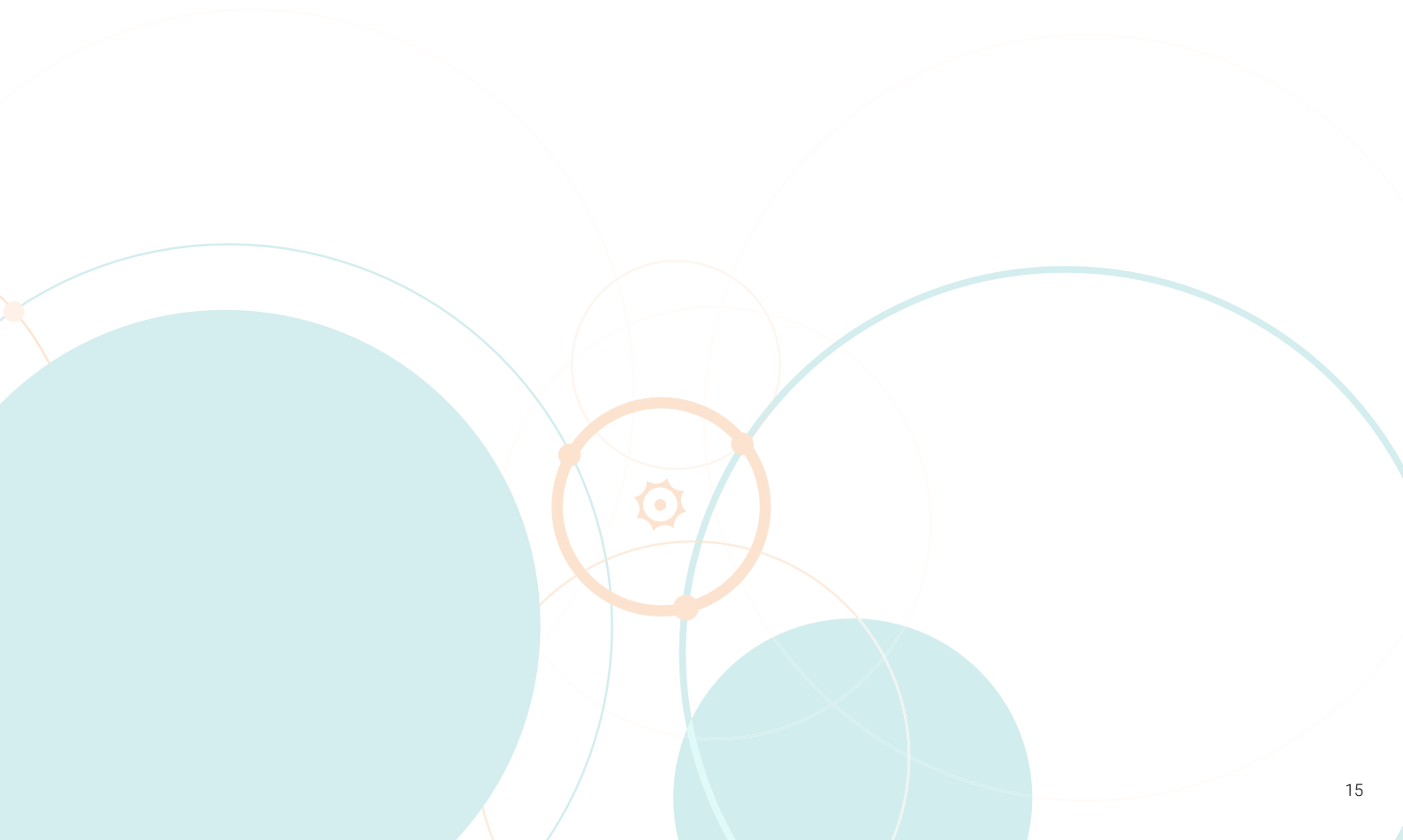
- Media and decision makers ought to be transparent, disregard the political cost while facing healthcare crises and adopt more human-centered approaches to combat pandemics. Decision makers should orientate the governmental responses with a post-pandemic perspective and financially assist businesses, vulnerable citizens and employees, reinforce the healthcare system, proceed with an open dialogue to identify lessons learned, mistakes and realistic improvement of responses for future crises as well as address the negative psychological impact that COVID-19 caused.
- Unregistered employment could increase the vulnerability of citizens due to not being entitled to financial benefits or labor exploitation of remote working basis employees.
- Facilitation of open dialogue between members of the society and decision makers, could be supported by municipality centers, schools, social media which could facilitate communication efforts such as awareness and information raising campaigns, in-person meetings with concerned citizens and formal method of documenting these concerns, empirical research utilizing questionnaires to minority groups and general public. These actions seem as feasible actions which would significantly engagement and communication between decision makers, general public and minority groups.
- In certain cases, it can be beneficial to have a more in-person approach to awareness raising campaigns even utilizing door-to-door campaigns, encourage the use of multi-polar, open dialogue discussion panels to examine a wide variety of topics and views as well as utilizing the re-direct method, which is a method that utilized targeted ads which can both inform social media end-users and more importantly, it can act as an effective method to actively combat disinformation.
- Minority group members consider that LEAs' in particular were simply doing their job despite the negative publicity some of their colleagues attracted in isolated incidents, nevertheless highlight that their approach to minority groups could be politer and more humane. Moreover, minority group respondents consider that it is crucial that LEAs acquire better education on social interactions and be provided with psychological support as they encounter several cases that would impact their mental health and well-being.
- Authorities and media should avoid labelling social groups (Such as the “youth” who are “irresponsible”) and instead should elaborate more on the usefulness and operating mechanisms of the vaccines as well as the potential side-effects in a clear and honest manner.
- Overall, the vaccination campaign was successful and the awareness raising campaigns contributed in increasing the vaccination rates due to explaining how beneficial a vaccine can be against COVID-19, nevertheless the pressure and widespread fear of being fined contributed in the increased vaccination rate.

## Recommendations:

- It is recommended that actors who politicized and exploited the pandemic for personal gain, particularly by spreading falsified information should be held accountable. A post-pandemic perspective should be adopted to actively provide financial assistance for both vulnerable businesses, vulnerable citizens and employees, reinforcing the healthcare system, and facilitate open dialogue to identify lessons learned, mistakes and how to improve responses for future crises as well as address the negative psychological impact that COVID-19 caused.
- Governmental system mechanisms and relevant actors should develop protection mechanisms to address systemic gray areas and legislative weaknesses of the labor law, which fails to protect employees who work on a remote basis. It is important to protect employee's labor rights by abuses that involve reduction of the wages of remote working employees, increasing workload and disrespect of set work hours, which likely lead to reductions of productivity. Remote and on-site employee rights should be monitored by suitable governmental agencies to avoid a cascading phenomenon of employee rights violation, even after the pandemic.
- It is recommended that a well-structured, clear, feasible preparedness and response strategy and a post-pandemic action plan that takes into account weaknesses of marginalised groups in order to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic which were intensified pre-existing financial and social issues that posed a threat to their survival, is developed.
- During crises, LEAs can be considered societal role models, therefore LEAs should exercise caution in handling complex situations, particularly if the implemented measures are interpreted as contradictory to their role. LEAs ought to be cautious and not demonstrate overzealousness during the implementation of non-pharmaceutical interventions (i.e. social isolation) as it may cause public discontent and can easily result in mismanagement. LEAs should be professionally respectful towards citizens who may not be aware of specific limitations and restrictions due to lack of clarity.
- Decision makers and policy experts are recommended to take into consideration lessons learned from the pandemic, particularly in relation to the negative consequences and actively work in reinforcing identified systemic weaknesses. These include the provision of welfare and support to businesses and individuals within the general population and in marginalised groups who may disregard implemented measures in order to secure their income during the pandemic.
- Stakeholders and communication experts are recommended to take into account the importance of conducting communication activities (i.e. debates) based on open dialogue and opinion multi-polarity. The lack of multiple points of view on traditional media panels may have decreased their popularity among the general and minority populations.
- Communication campaigns should be clear and targeted, while also inclusive of specific socio-demographic groups, which may have been overlooked during COVID-19. Communication experts should employ a variety of means of communications during crises, whereas in relation to social media, could also employ the re-direct method which uses targeted ads which can both inform social media end-users and more importantly, it can act as an effective method to actively combat disinformation. In relation to vaccination,

experts should communicate the usefulness of the vaccine for both the general population and vulnerable populations (i.e. cancer patients), their function and potential side-effects in a clear and transparent manner.

- Decision makers should actively work on constructing a common framework between stakeholders such as authorities, scientific community, embassies and administrative agencies at all governance levels, with emphasis on how to effectively communicate and implement measures relevant to the crisis at hand. Embassies should have a pivotal role in assisting foreign nationals, migrants and refugees, particularly allowing them to overcome language barriers.
- Pre-existing lack of trust may negatively impact LEAs. Decision makers should take into consideration weaknesses of the civil protection responses, particularly in high criminal activity areas and reinforce citizen protection which will subsequently mend trust issues. Authorities should provide proper training and education, particularly to improve the social interaction skills of LEAs, as well as adequate wages that compensate the risks of their daily duties and responsibilities of deployed LEAs.
- It is important to facilitate open dialogue between the wider social structure and the minority communities on bridging the gaps and identifying courses of action that can be beneficial for minority communities, particularly in relation to their socio-economic and psychological wellbeing.
- Due to the financially challenging situation of Greece, decision makers are recommended to examine the erasure of the implemented fines which may cripple citizens and businesses.



# References

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## Webistes

<https://www.covinform.eu/>

## Deliverables

WP4 – D4.1 Baseline report: Governmental responses

WP4 – D4.2 Research design: Governmental responses

WP4 – D4.3 Analysis: Government responses to COVID-19 and impact assessment

WP4 – D4.4 Synthesis and lessons learnt on governmental responses and impacts

WP4 – D4.5 Baseline report: Governmental responses – updated M22

WP4 – D4.6 Research design: Governmental responses - update M26

WP4 – D4.7 Analysis: Government responses to COVID-19 and impact assessment - update M32

WP4 – D4.8 Synthesis and lessons learnt on governmental responses and impacts - update M33

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# The COVINFORM project

<b>Acronym</b>	COVINFORM
<b>Title</b>	Coronavirus Vulnerabilities and INFORMATION dynamics Research and Modelling
<b>Coordinator</b>	SYNYO GmbH
<b>Reference</b>	101016247
<b>Type</b>	Research and Innovation Action (RIA)
<b>Programme</b>	HORIZON 2020
<b>Topic</b>	SC1-PHE-CORONAVIRUS-2020-2C Behavioural, social and economic impacts of the outbreak response
<b>Start</b>	01 November 2020
<b>Duration</b>	36 months

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