

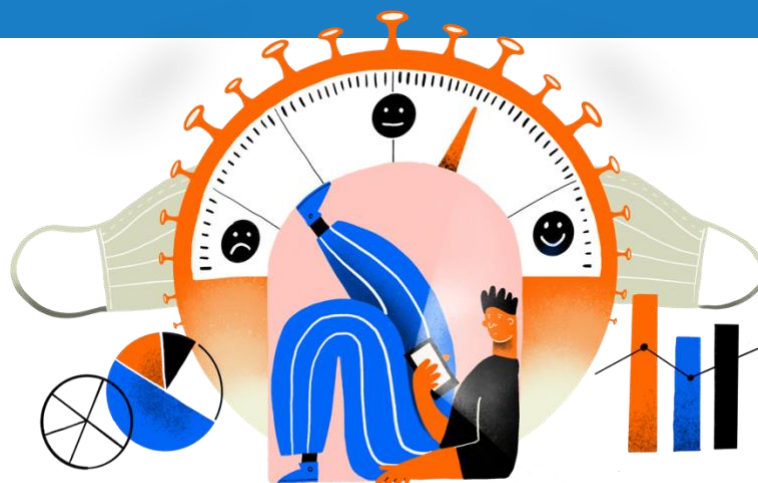
# REPORT 16

## Taking a closer look at some assumptions about behavior and motivation

### The Motivation Barometer

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Reference: Motivation Barometer (October 27, 2020). Taking a closer look at some assumptions about behavior and motivation. Ghent, Belgium.



*On Sunday, October 25, 2020, Prime Minister Jan Jambon felt that the Flemish situation was not yet under attack, and thus stricter measures were not yet necessary. He chose to wait and see how the situation evolved in order to intervene only if necessary. One of the arguments was his concern for the mental health and well-being of the population. However, is it true that our mental health suffers more from stricter measures than from the uncertainties within a wait-and-see attitude, even if many alarming signals arise? The data from the Motivation Barometer of Ghent University indicate that we cannot let the motivational momentum for action pass us by. We learned this from the reactions to the latest decisions of the National Security Council under the Wilmès government. After all, strict measures do not by definition undermine our motivation and well-being, quite the contrary. In exchange for certainty and a clear plan of action, the population is prepared to face the situation and accept risk-reducing measures. In this way, our well-being is protected in the longer term. In this report, we discuss some of the implicit assumptions about behavior and well-being that policymakers sometimes make and compare them to empirical findings.*

## Assumption 1: Strict measures demotivate the population

Of course, stricter measures challenge our motivation and well-being if they have to be maintained for a long time. Even cyclists cannot go over their limits for too long on a climb, but they can do it for a shorter time. So, the question is under what conditions stricter measures are acceptable and maintainable and what their effect is on well-being in the shorter term.

The latest results from the Motivational Barometer show that since October 16, Flemish respondents consider the chance of themselves and especially others becoming (seriously) infected to be more realistic (see Figure 1). This risk perception comes to a new height in this crisis. Because risk perception feeds our voluntary motivation, this is therefore a key moment for proposals that could reduce risk. Although stricter measures may be very tough, the population is willing to accept and follow them if they are tailored to the severity of the pandemic and offer prospects for improvement. Rather than labeling new measures as ‘entanglements’, we can describe them as ‘risk-reducing interventions’. In this way, their added value and necessity become immediately clear. Such motivational framing can in itself have a motivational effect.

Since the new federal government team took office, respondents' voluntary motivation has stabilized around 50% (Figure 2). This is remarkable because our personal and public freedom has been increasingly restricted in recent weeks. Equally remarkable was that since the last press conference of the former Wilmès government (on September 23), our motivation had dropped sharply after communication of measures that were perceived as relaxations (i.e., hugging became an individual rather than a family right). However, at that time, risk perception was high (see Figure 1) and it was thus a good time to introduce measures that would reduce risk. The Wilmès government, however, lacked the motivational momentum and instead opted for relaxations because it thought that more lax measures would be better adhered. Unfortunately, motivational apathy and despondency rather occurred due to the lack of momentum, causing respondents to adhere to the measures less rather than more. Thus, the idea that rationalizations and relaxations in the measures would lead to better adherence to measures proved false (Figure 3).

**Conclusion 1:** Do not assume that strict measures necessarily undercut motivation. The population is willing to adhere to stricter measures in exchange for security and perspective.

Figure 1. Evolution in risk perception through the crisis.

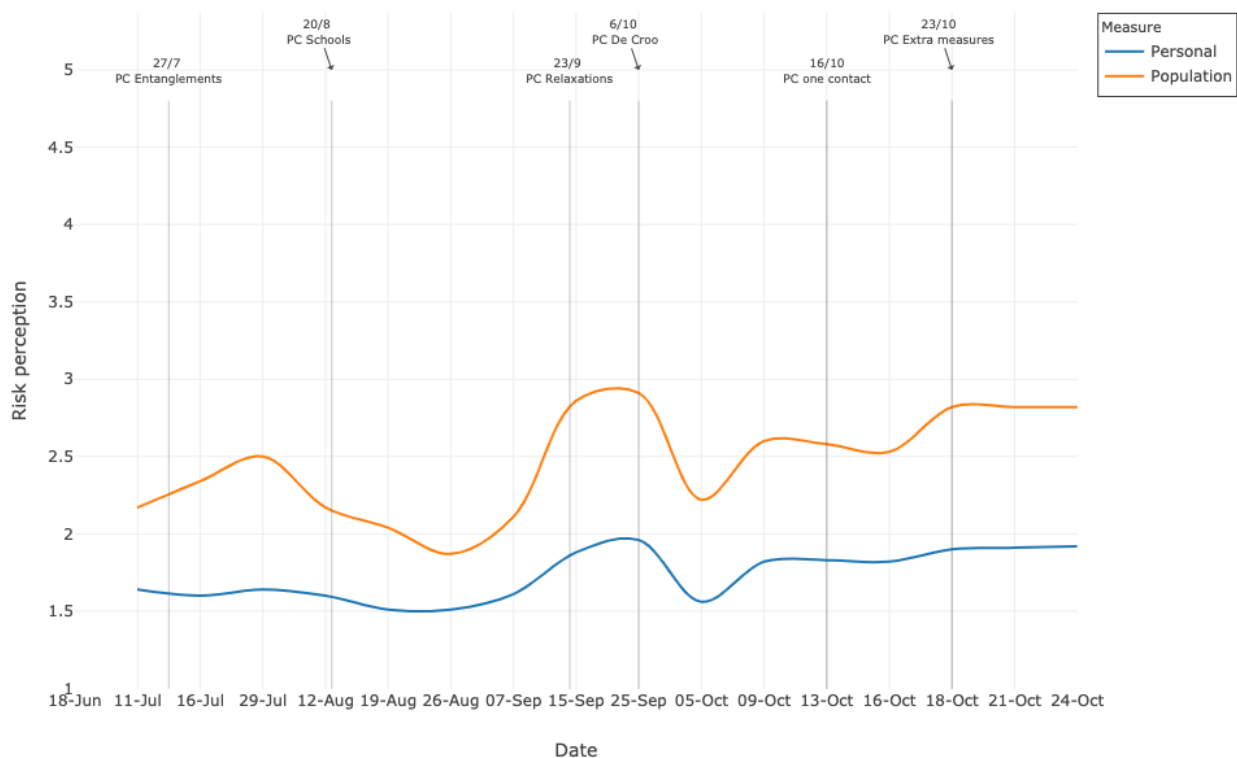


Figure 2. Evolution in different types of motivation through the crisis

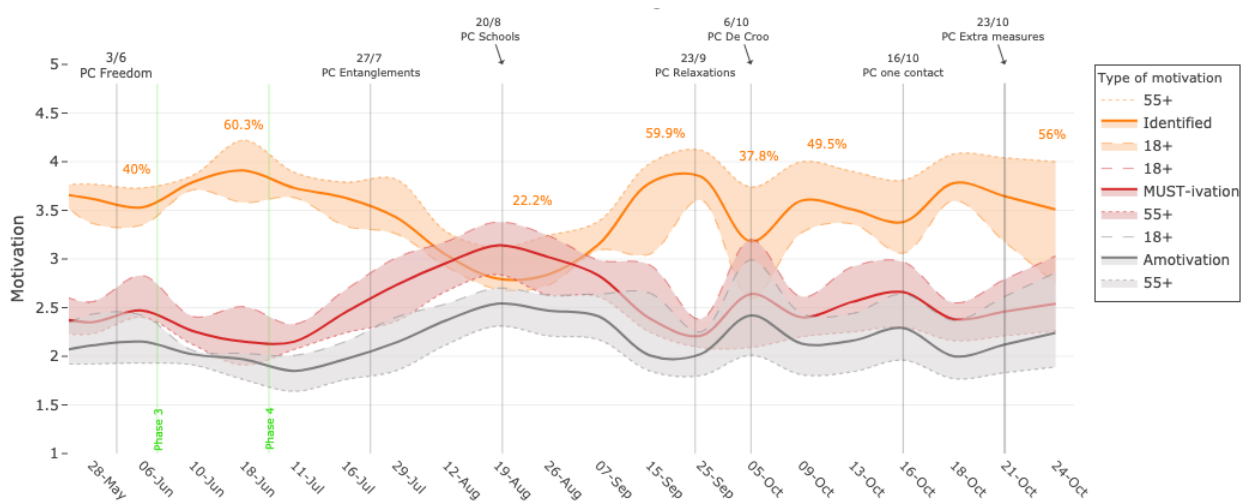
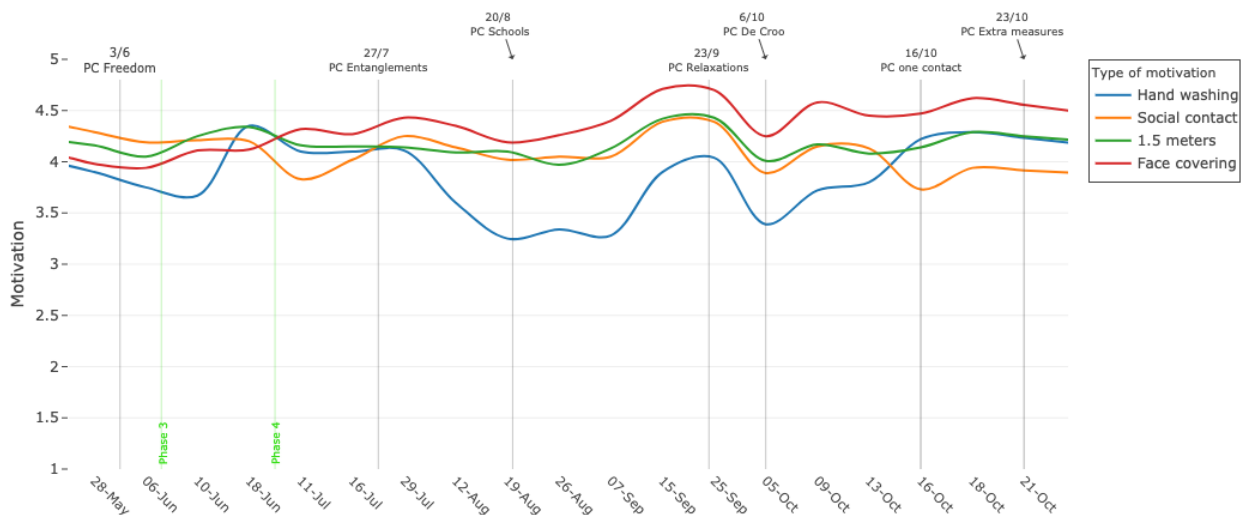


Figure 3. Evolution in the monitoring of measures



## Assumption 2: Impassively waiting to see how the numbers evolve brings peace of mind

Prime Minister De Croo and Minister-President Jambon rightly stressed that our mental health and well-being deserves all our attention today. Various psychological factors predict this well-being, including the degree to which we feel free and can make personal choices (autonomy), the degree to which we feel well attached to our loved ones and feel part of a group (relatedness/belongingness) but also the degree of experienced uncertainty. Figure 4 shows that our uncertainty peaks in several areas since the new

federal government team took office: Flemish respondents are concerned about their own health, that of their loved ones and about the current situation and expected evolution. These concerns take away at our well-being, as it is a major source of anxiety, disturbed sleep and depressive complaints.

At the moment it is therefore desirable to halt this growing uncertainty by introducing risk-reducing measures, even though these put pressure on our basic psychological needs for autonomy and relatedness. First and foremost, the population wants to know where it is heading and is prepared to leave other psychological needs partly and temporarily unfulfilled in order to do so. If with each set of stricter measures the concern remains if it will be sufficient to turn the tide, the population will have a hard time finding peace. Rather than impassively waiting, decisive action is - paradoxically - crucial to bring peace, even if it is freedom-restricting. In exchange for the hope and confidence that the policy being pursued will produce results, the population is prepared to face the situation in the short term. The emphasis is then best on psychological guidance and support that will keep things from getting too difficult. This can be done by including some rules of thumb in communication and policy:

- Communicate how effective "biting the bullet" is: what is the likely effect if we intervene and ask for the extra effort? And what is the effect if we don't?
- Communicate not only about the restrictions, but also about the opportunities that remain: what is still possible? In what ways can we still satisfy our needs for autonomy and relatedness?
- Communicate what intermediate goals we are aiming for during this extra effort and show by means of the barometer to what extent we are making progress. In this way, the population gains confidence to move to the next stage.
- Facilitate the sharing of good practices within the imposed constraints through a variety of media
- Encourage mutual solidarity among the population:
  - a. add a message of support (emotional, financial) to hardest hit people
  - b. have sufficient attention for the weak (lonely, singles, elderly, ...) through concrete proposals
  - c. Be attentive to people in specific situations (e.g. living under the same roof does not only apply to families, but can also relate to other forms of living together, cfr. students)

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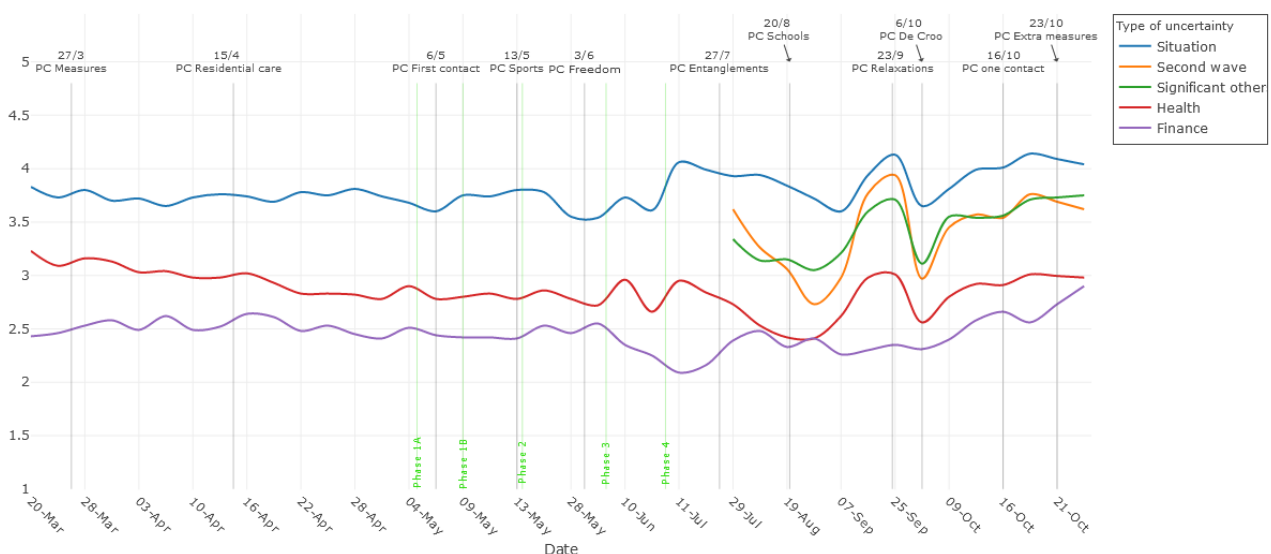
**Conclusion 2:** Do not assume that impassively waiting, as uncertainty increases, will bring peace of mind. The population is willing to face the situation in the short term if adequate psychological guidance and support is provided to safeguard well-being.

## Assumption 3: Clearly explaining what people need to do is enough to motivate them

It is naïve to assume that the population is automatically motivated to adhere to stricter measures. And if people do not comply with the measures, it is equally naïve to assume that explaining to them what to do and asking them to be more civic-minded or responsible will be enough to motivate them. To actively and sustainably engage people in an action plan, a number of motivational conditions must be met.

The much-discussed epidemiological barometer, which has been awaited for weeks, is an excellent tool for fulfilling these conditions. The barometer allows measures to be framed very well in a logical and coherent way, so that their "why" becomes clear. Measures are logically and insightfully linked to the risk phase of the pandemic, which guarantees their proportionality and predictability.

Figure 4. Evolution in different sources of uncertainty during crisis



For example, it would be clear that today we are deep into alarm phase 4, which meant it was already clear in advance, what stricter measures were needed to keep the situation under control. Now experts and care providers have to ring the alarm to indicate that the situation is getting out of hand. Therefore, the barometer allows us to come to a shared understanding of the seriousness of the situation without messages of fear. Furthermore, the barometer gives us a common goal. Preferably, it indicates the intermediate steps (i.e., slowing down the curve, stabilizing and reversing the curve) through which targets are reached on the way to our first main goal: evolving to alarm phase 3.

Other prerequisites are, of course, empathetic communication, through which policymakers authentically acknowledge the efforts of the population and of specific, affected target groups. The results of the Motivation Barometer show that the De Croo government gave excellent shape to this empathic element during its press conference. Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasize the unifying goals we are striving for as a society. In doing so, the government convincingly referred to core priorities that it wants to safeguard: keeping schools open, making businesses work, not overburdening the healthcare sector, and supporting mental health. It is important to make these more abstract goals concrete using specific examples. If you, as a citizen, realize that faithfully following the measure will ensure that your neighbor's fertility treatment is not interrupted or that your son can continue to play sports, then you are contributing to the well-being of others. Then adhering to the rules becomes a prosocial act. If these preconditions are met, then motivational support for difficult but necessary measures will grow.

**Conclusion 3:** Do not assume that clearly communicating what needs to be done is enough to motivate the population. The barometer along with motivating communication and initiatives are needed to get or keep everyone on board.

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