

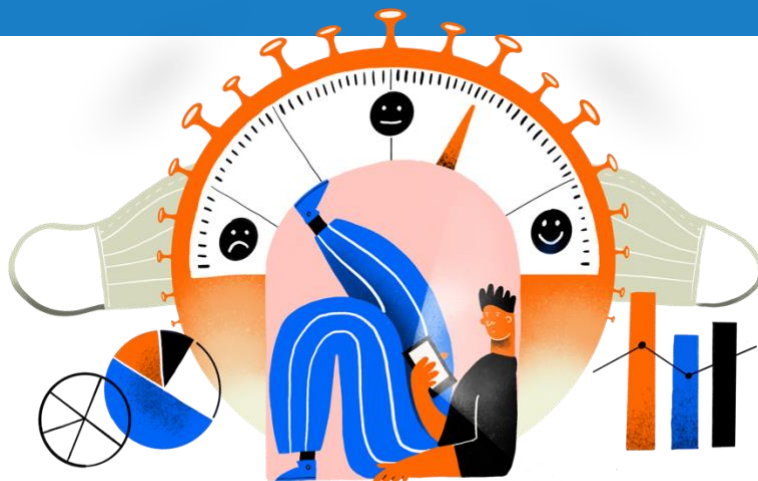
REPORT 21

At our limits end and yet persevering

The Motivation Barometer

Authors (in alphabetical order): Olivier Klein, Olivier Luminet, Sofie Morbée, Mathias Schmitz, Omer Van den Bergh, Pascaline Van Oost, Maarten Vansteenkiste, Joachim Waterschoot, Vincent Yzerbyt

Reference: Motivation Barometer (January 29, 2021). At our limits and yet persevering. Ghent, Belgium.



2021 began promisingly: we overcame the Christmas and New Year period well, numbers remained stable, there was hope for further decline, and freedom was promised with the rollout of the vaccination strategy. But the prolonged effort was beginning to weigh heavily. We have been locked in our bubbles for several months and the prospects for rapid improvement are limited. Not surprisingly, our motivation drops, we feel curtailed, and resignation increases. Fear and uncertainty about how the situation will evolve are at a peak and there is a need more than ever for a clear strategy on how we will handle the situation in the coming weeks. The latest results from the Motivation Barometer (total N = 7345, average 53 years, 18 - 86 years, 64% women) on motivation and well-being do not seem very optimistic.

Take home message

- Voluntary motivation decreases, while feelings of discouragement and 'must'-ivation increase.
- Fear and uncertainty about the situation are rising, while we feel increasingly lifeless. We are in danger of losing some of the population as a result.
- Our risk awareness has not increased, indicating an underestimation of the fragile nature of the situation.
- In particular, wearing face masks is well established, but we have a hard time adhering to the social restrictions and we adhere less than in the past two months.
- Meeting more hug-buddies is not associated with more relatedness or better well-being, but rather indicates a lack of energy to persevere.
- We formulate concrete recommendations for policy and the public.

Question 1: How does our motivation and mental health evolve?

In Figures 1 - 7 we provide an overview of some of the key issues we have been measuring since the beginning of the crisis (March 19, 2020). The comparison with the findings of the latest wave is worrying:

- During this second lockdown, motivation continuously fluctuated between 50% and 65% motivational support (see Figure 1, orange zone). However, in mid-January, a drop in motivational support occurred to 41% during the week of January 25.
- At the same time, the population's sense of discouragement and 'must'-ivation increased (Figure 2). We feel curtailed, as evidenced by the strong frustration of our psychological need for autonomy (Figure 3).
- We are also struggling mentally. Our life satisfaction and vitality are at their lowest since measurements began, while anxious worry peaks higher than ever (Figure 4). Figure 5 shows that this anxiety stems primarily from the uncertainty about how the situation will evolve in the near future. Surprisingly, the concern of being infected and the awareness that we are in a risky situation has not increased (Figure 6), which previously served as a source of voluntary motivation.

These results indicate that the population is struggling. For the first time in this crisis, we see a fragile combination of decreased voluntary motivation, increased discouragement and anxious worry, and low risk awareness. Because we have never had it so difficult mentally as today, we are in danger of losing some people. While this is a relative finding, it may be hopeful that motivation has not yet fallen to its lowest point (August). At that time, motivational support stood at a low of 23%.

Several elements may explain this increasing resignation:

1. There is a lot of confusion and ambiguity: how worrisome is the situation really? How will the government handle the situation if it evolves for better or for worse? At the same time, there is sometimes threatening and fear-inducing communication. All of this creates unease.
2. The optimism about vaccinations has given way to the sobering truth that the vaccine course will undoubtedly be bumpy and unpredictable. Hope gives way to disillusionment.
3. The stabilizing figures and the emerging UK variant make it clear that bringing the curve further down to the stated goal of 800 infections and 75 hospitalizations is not easy. This raises doubts about whether we can achieve our collective goals.

4. There is a lack of socially connecting actions to support everyone and not lose anyone in pursuit of these goals.

Question 2: Will we keep this up?

Our behavior is and will remain the key factor in this crisis. Three things can be deduced from Figure 7:

1. The average figures indicate that there are still more individuals who claim to follow the measures than those who say they disregard them.
2. The ranking in adhering to the measures is particularly telling: wearing a face mask appears to be a habit, but we have a much harder time to limit ourselves to the maximum number of social contacts. Of all the measures, this is the most unnatural behavior. We have a need for psychological relatedness. It is therefore not surprising that the number of hug-buddies at different times exceeds the permitted number on average. Yet it should be noted that there is very much variation around this: some are stricter on themselves than what is allowed (i.e., zero hug-buddies), others ignore the measure completely. Contrary to what is sometimes suspected, young adults (18 - 35 years) do not have more hug-buddies than the older age groups.
3. Third, there is a noticeable evolution in following the measures. In the months of October and November we followed the measures faithfully, with falling infection rates as a positive result. After the announcement at the end of November that the holidays would be celebrated in a limited circle, increased discouragement caused us to follow the measures less faithfully. Although together we were able to avoid an increase in the January numbers, the decline in adherence continued over the past week.

Question 3: Do people with more hug-buddies than allowed feel better?

The question is whether those who violate social constraints feel better about themselves and, for example, experience a greater sense of relatedness. This is not the case! In particular, they report more autonomy frustration, less vitality, and more anxious and depressive symptoms. Those who have more hug-buddies than allowed do not have the energy to constantly adhere to the measures, while for others it is a sign of resistance to the autonomy-restricting policy.

What can we do specifically?

Voices are being raised today to introduce even stricter measures. The question is whether the population can still cope with these and whether there is still sufficient support for them. New measures could further increase autonomy frustration and undermine our mental health. At the same time, they could also offer greater security if motivational communication is provided, tailored to the population and emphasizes the benefits in light of the risks we face today. This has paid off in the past and may pay off again in the future. What can motivate the population to be more adherent to the current measures? We formulate 4 recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Continually demonstrate the importance of our behavior in a didactic and visual way and provide a plan.

- Make a direct connection between people's efforts and concrete results and visualize them as "what-if" scenarios. Refer concretely to periods when we successfully adhered to measures (e.g., first month of lockdown and during Christmas and New Year, compliance was higher) and managed to get the situation under control faster. This is how trust can grow.
- Do not chase the crisis situation, but teach the population to think ahead. Although it is unclear how the situation will evolve, a wait-and-see attitude provokes annoyance and uncertainty. Provide a clear plan and be transparent about the different scenarios that will be followed depending on the circumstances (conditional "what-if" scenarios).
 - Where are we at this moment in the crisis?
 - What is our strategy in case of a positive evolution (sequence of easing) or negative evolution (plan B)?
 - Emphasize (i.e., show) the effectiveness of these measures.
 - What would happen if we all consistently complied?
 - What would happen if we relax the measures
 - Communicate weekly at a set time about this plan.
- Avoid alarmist messages without clear plans. They increase fear and uncertainty (calls to not panic create anxiety in many people). Instead, make it visual what it means that a variant is 60% more contagious, so that people better understand the concrete impact. Honest and transparent communication with clear "what-if" plans are highly valued by the public.
- Avoid (implicit) guilt-inducing messages. This works resentment and misunderstanding and is emotionally exhausting at a time when the population is already low on energy.

Recommendation 2: Invest in psychological support and social mobilization projects

- Be appreciative of the burden the citizens are carrying today. Recognize that much is being asked of people and that these are tough times. Invest in professional psychological support and publicize this offer.
- Free up budget for long-term social mobilization projects for organizations and in education. It is crucial that we support and care for each other today. These projects can be fun and playful in nature but can also focus on providing emotional support to each other.

Recommendation 3: Offer concrete prospects

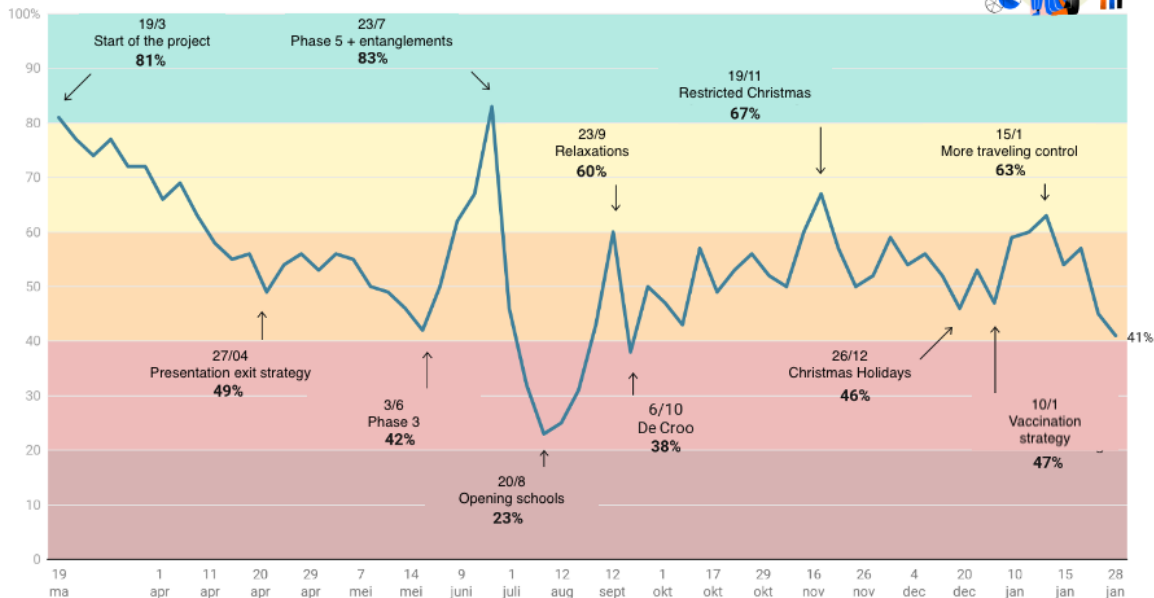
- Provide not only a long-term goal but also achievable intermediate goals (concrete targets) to motivate the population and clarify the behavioral pathway to get there. Provide a timeframe, recognizing the uncertain nature of these estimates. The hairdressers were given vague promises without a clear behavioral path to get there. Concrete, achievable intermediate goals that are visually demonstrably linked to our behavior provide hope and give the population a motivational boost.
- Emphasize that an increasing number of vaccinated people will reduce the pressure on the health care system. This will make it easier to reach the critical threshold of the control phase over time.

Recommendation 4:

- Show appreciation for the fact that people are trying to stick to the prescribed number of hug-buddies.
- Indicate that more hugging contacts do not necessarily guarantee more relatedness. Especially the quality of the interaction with others is important.

Figure 1

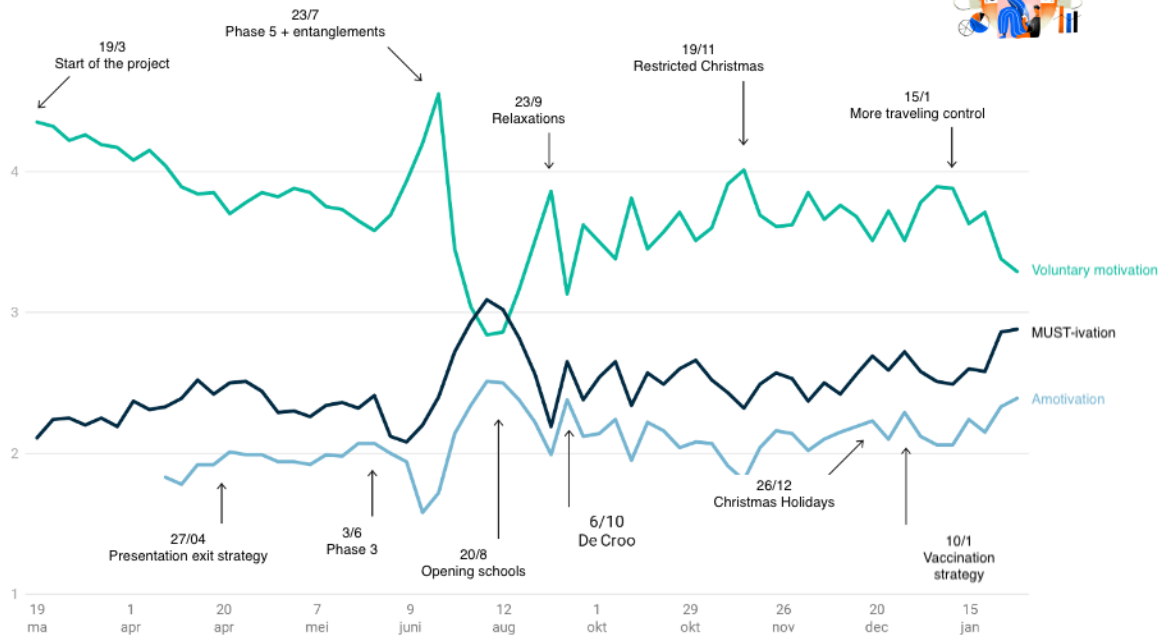
Evolution of percentage highly motivated people in the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium
The Motivation Barometer



N = 146 035
Source: Motivationbarometer

Figure 2

Evolution of motivation in the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium
The Motivation Barometer

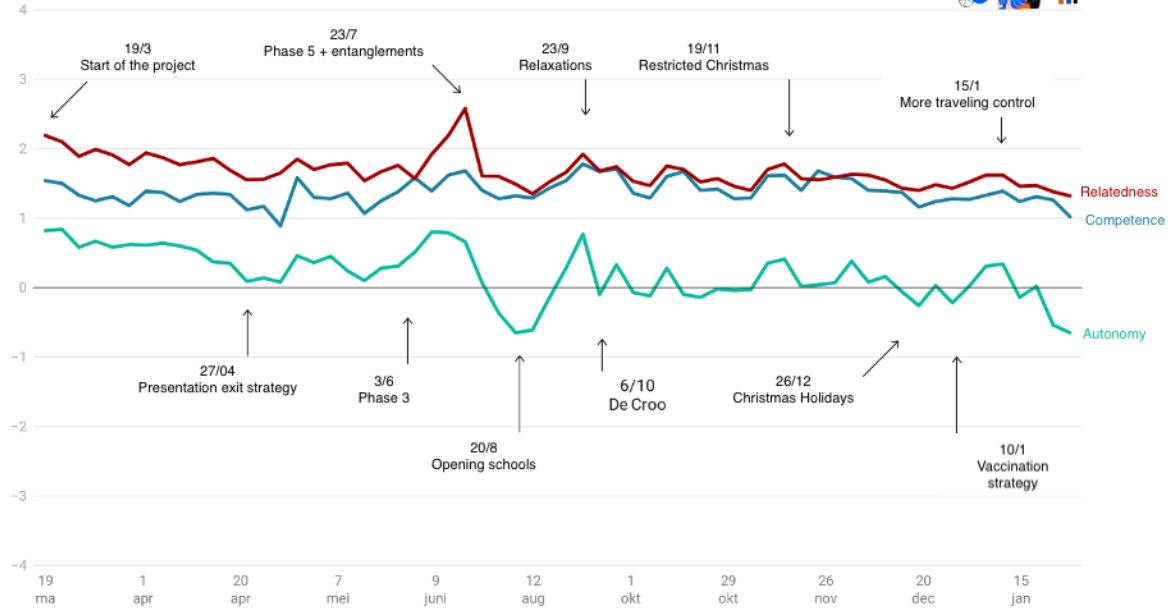


N = 146 035

Figure 3

Evolution of psychological needs in the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium

The Motivation Barometer

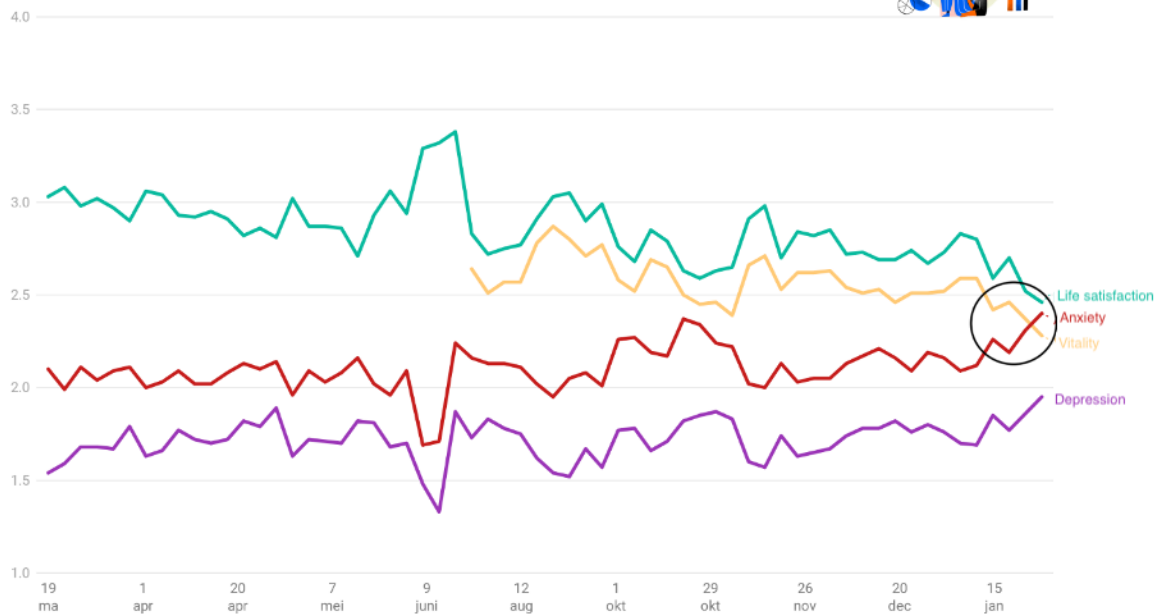


N = 146 035

Figure 4

Evolution of well-being indicators in the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium

The Motivation Barometer

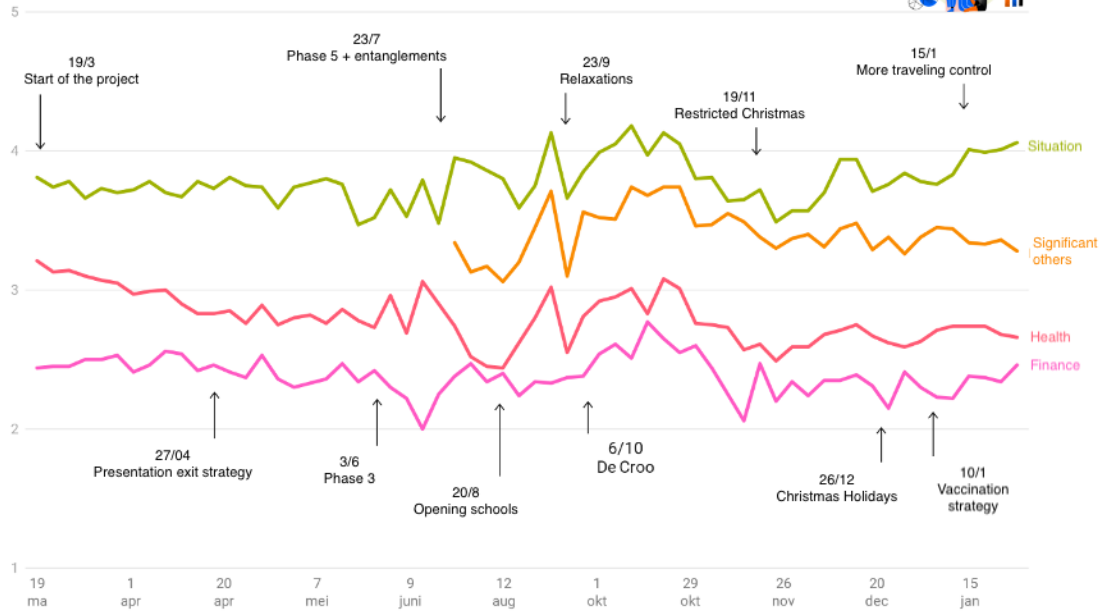


N = 146 035

Figure 5

Evolution of uncertainty in the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium

The Motivation Barometer

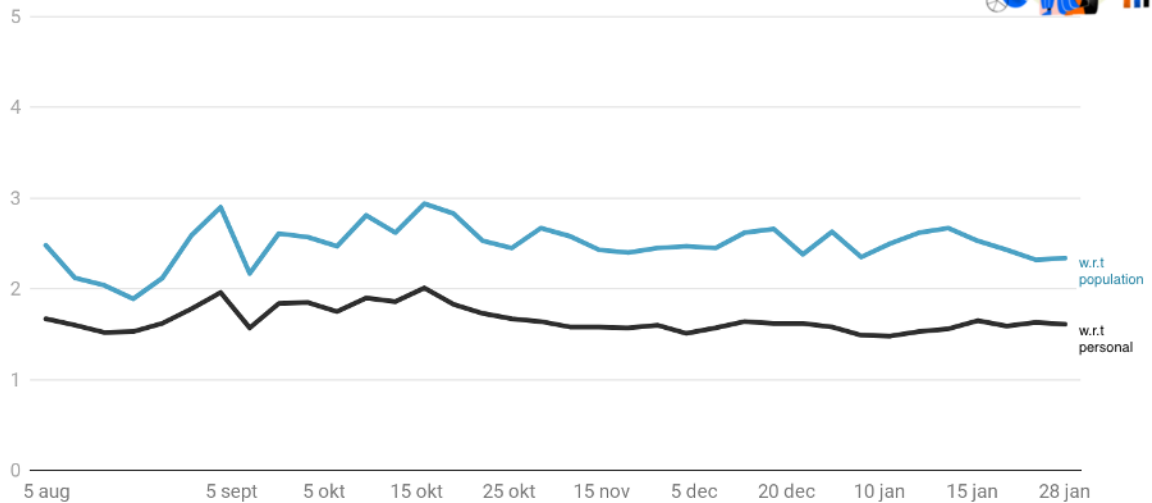


N = 146 035

Figure 6

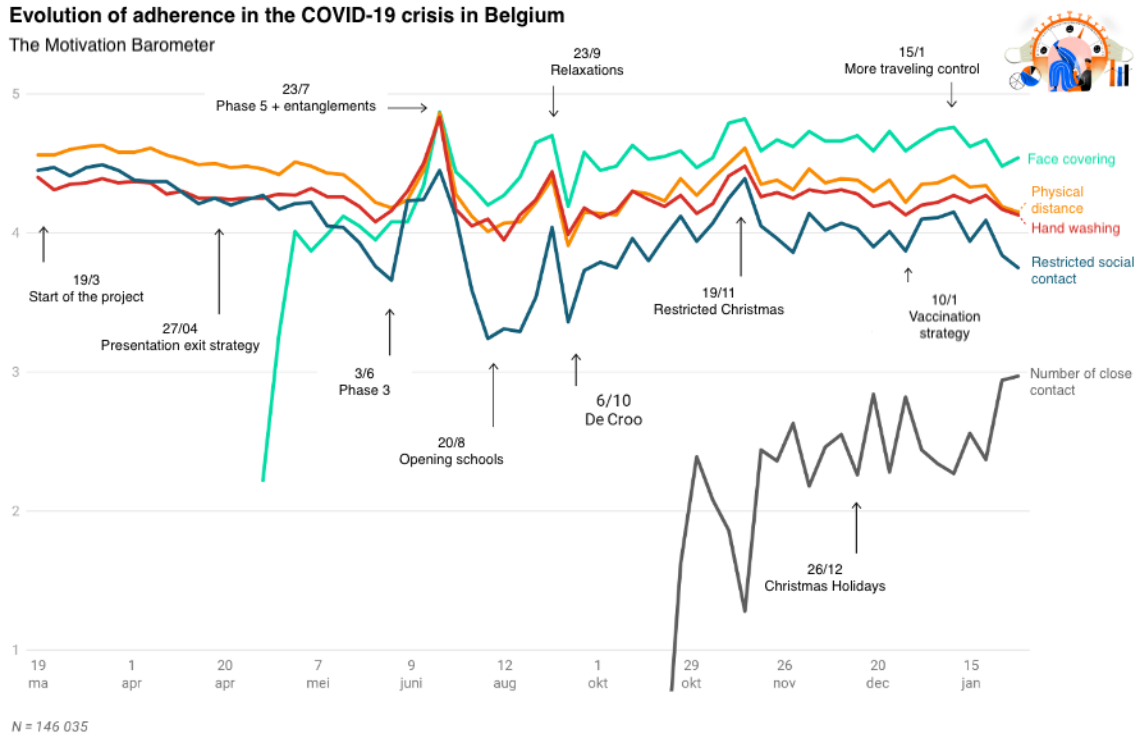
Evolution of risk perception in the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium

The Motivation Barometer



N = 146 035

Figure 7



CONTACT INFORMATION

- **Principal Investigator:**
Prof. Dr. Maarten Vansteenkiste (Maarten.Vansteenkiste@ugent.be)
- **Co-investigators:**
Prof. Dr. Omer Van den Bergh (Omer.Vandenbergh@kuleuven.be)
Prof. Dr. Olivier Klein (Olivier.Klein@ulb.be)
Prof. Dr. Olivier Luminet (Olivier.Luminet@uclouvain.be)
Prof. Dr. Vincent Yzerbyt (Vincent.Yzerbyt@uclouvain.be)
- **Conservation and dissemination questionnaire:**
Dra. Sofie Morbee (Sofie.Morbee@ugent.be)
Dra. Pascaline Van Oost (Pascaline.Vanoost@uclouvain.be)
- **Data and Analytics:**
Drs. Joachim Waterschoot (Joachim.Waterschoot@ugent.be)
Dr. Mathias Schmitz (Mathias.Schmitz@uclouvain.be)

www.motivationbarometer.com

