



**Measurement and
description of cross-national
patterns and trends in
identities, cohesion and
resilience.**

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Measurement and Description of cross-national Patterns and Trends in Identities, Cohesion and Resilience (WP3)

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We-ID Identities - Migration - Democracy is a three-year project (2025-2028) that analyses the transformation of individual and collective identities, social cohesion and democracy in the midst of migration, demographic change and current crises in Europe. The consortium includes eight partners: Georg August University of Göttingen, the University of St Andrews in Scotland, the Bocconi University, the Institute for the Study of Population and Human Studies (Bulgaria), the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (Croatia), Max Planck Society (Population Europe), the Council of the Baltic Sea States, and The Civics Innovation Hub.

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1. Control Sheet

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Version	Date	Modified by	Summary of Changes
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2. List of Participants

Participant No.	Participant Organisation Name	Country
1 (Coordinator)	University of Goettingen (UGOE)	Germany
2	Bocconi University (UB)	Italy
3	University of St. Andrews (USTAN)	Great Britain
4	Institute for Population and Human Studies (IPHS)	Bulgaria
5	Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (IPI)	Croatia
6	Max Planck Society (MPG)/Population Europe	Germany
7	Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)	IGO, Sweden
8	THE CIVICS Innovation Hub (CIVICS)	Germany

3. Objectives

The European Union's promise of prosperity and security is based on the principle of "unity in diversity" and the guarantee of fundamental freedoms, rights and democratic participation of its citizens. The vast majority of EU citizens share these values. At the same time, democracies are in crisis. Populist parties are fuelling fears and spreading the narrative that migration leads to a loss of identity. There is no doubt that migration always raises the question of identity and belonging. How do we organize integration and participation in such a way that cohesion is created despite diverse identities? The project "Identities - Migration - Democracy" (We-ID) is therefore concerned with the transformation of individual and collective identities, social and territorial cohesion and democracy under the conditions of demographic change, particularly with regard to migration and growing population diversity. We-ID follows an innovative research path by a) analysing the impact of migration on identities, belonging, cohesion and democracy, taking into account both the impact on host communities and the changes in the identities of migrants and their descendants, and b) elaborating the interrelationship between identities, cohesion, resilience and democracy. In addition to quantitative data analysis, we will use qualitative methods at the local level (e.g. pilot study in a border region, content analysis, case studies) to look for factors that strengthen resilient democratic communities. By consistently pursuing a transdisciplinary approach within our Policy, Advocacy and

Research Lab (We-PARL) throughout the project, we will create a platform for mutual learning between different stakeholders from the European to the local level, while at the same time contributing to evidence-based and thoroughly discussed policy recommendations. In addition, based on our findings, we will develop materials such as toolboxes that can be used by practitioners and local actors (We-SCOUTS).

In detail, We-ID pursues the following objectives:

- Objective 1:** Revise and evaluate the relevant conceptual issues concerning identities, belonging and cohesion, and establish their relationship with resilience and democracy, with a particular emphasis on migration.
- Objective 2:** Map trends and patterns of identities, belonging and cohesion together with their drivers, including geographic differences, gender, age and education, as well as immigrant status and employment.
- Objective 3:** Investigate how the social identities and political participation of immigrants and their descendants differ across European countries, what factors influence identity and participation of immigrants, and what assumptions can be made for the future.
- Objective 4:** Extending objectives 2 and 3 through a regional pilot study in a Bulgarian border region. To analyse, how migration flows affect both the migrant communities themselves and their identities, and the communities exposed to new and large-scale immigration.
- Objective 5:** Development of an inclusive concept for resilient democratic communities (ReDeCos), through the identification (five case studies) of local factors that hinder or strengthen belonging.
- Objective 6:** In addition, development of a Civic Competences Toolbox (CCT) for local actors (We-SCOUTS) equipped with civic skills and competences to support local communities, moderate conflicts and controversies and create spaces for participation.
- Objective 7:** Establish the We-PARL - Policy, Advocacy and Research Lab - transdisciplinary platform, the tool which supports all thematic research areas foreseen in the project.
- Objective 8:** To disseminate We-ID findings, drawing on the outcomes and findings from the We-PARL, communicating them to a broader audience.
- Objective 9:** The project will identify factors at both national and local level that hinder social and political participation and at the same time develop policy recommendations on how to achieve equality and mitigate discrimination against women, LGBTIQ+ and ethnic minorities.

4. Purpose of the Deliverable

This deliverable provides a descriptive analysis of social cohesion in Europe, focusing on interpersonal (social) trust and institutional trust as key dimensions of cohesion. Using data from the European Social Survey (ESS), the report documents levels, dispersion, and temporal trends in trust across European regions defined at the NUTS1 level. By moving beyond national averages, the analysis highlights substantial subnational variation in trust and reveals how regional trust environments differ within countries.

The results show strong and persistent spatial patterns in both social and institutional trust. Northern European regions consistently exhibit high levels of trust, while lower levels are concentrated in Southern and Eastern Europe. These cross-regional differences are remarkably stable over time. At the same time, within-country heterogeneity is substantial in several countries, particularly in Southern and parts of Central and Eastern Europe, underscoring the limitations of national-level indicators for assessing social cohesion.

A key distinction emerges between the temporal dynamics of social and institutional trust. Social trust is highly stable across regions and over time, exhibiting only gradual change. Institutional trust, by contrast, displays greater volatility and is more sensitive to historical and political developments, with visible declines during periods of economic and political stress followed by partial recoveries. Despite this volatility, institutional trust also shows medium- to long-run persistence, with regions tending to maintain their relative positions over time.

Keywords: Trust; Cohesion; Identity; Resilience; European Social Survey

5. Introduction

Over the past two decades, social cohesion has become a central concern for European policymakers. Rising economic inequality, demographic change, increased mobility and migration, and growing political polarisation have all raised questions about the capacity of European societies to remain cohesive while undergoing rapid transformation. Trust—both interpersonal trust among citizens and trust in institutions—has long been recognised as a key pillar of social cohesion, underpinning cooperation, compliance with rules, and the legitimacy of public authority.

While the We-ID project explicitly focuses on social cohesion, identity, and resilience, this deliverable adopts trust as a unifying analytical lens through which these dimensions can be jointly examined. Trust occupies a central position at the intersection of cohesion, resilience, and identity. As a core component of social cohesion, interpersonal trust reflects the extent to which individuals expect cooperation and reciprocity from others, while institutional trust captures confidence in the fairness, competence, and legitimacy of public authority. At the same time, a large body of research shows that trust is closely linked to societal resilience: societies and regions characterised by higher levels of trust are better able to absorb shocks, sustain cooperation under stress, and maintain compliance and solidarity during periods of crisis, such as economic downturns, pandemics, or rapid demographic change. In this sense, trust functions as both a resource that buffers societies against disruption and an outcome shaped by how institutions and communities respond to adversity.

While the We-ID project explicitly focuses on social cohesion, identity, and resilience, this deliverable adopts trust as a unifying analytical lens through which these dimensions can be jointly examined. Trust occupies a central position at the intersection of cohesion, resilience, and identity. As a core component of social cohesion, interpersonal trust reflects the extent to which individuals expect cooperation and reciprocity from others, while institutional trust captures confidence in the fairness, competence, and legitimacy of public authority. At the same time, a large body of research shows that trust is closely linked to societal resilience: societies and regions characterised by higher levels of trust are better able to absorb shocks, sustain cooperation under stress, and maintain compliance and solidarity during periods of crisis, such as economic downturns, pandemics, or rapid demographic change. In this sense, trust functions as both a resource that buffers societies against disruption and an outcome shaped by how institutions and communities respond to adversity.

Trust is also intrinsically connected to identity. Trust relations are not formed in a social vacuum; they are embedded in shared norms, collective narratives, and perceptions of belonging. Levels of trust reflect how individuals locate themselves within a broader social and political community - who is perceived as part of the in-group, which institutions are seen as representing “us,” and whether social change is experienced as inclusive or threatening. Regional variation in trust can therefore be interpreted as variation in how collective identities are constructed and sustained across space. By capturing expectations about others and evaluations of institutions, trust provides an empirically tractable indicator that speaks simultaneously to cohesion (the capacity to cooperate), resilience (the capacity to endure and recover from shocks), and identity (the sense of shared membership and legitimacy). For these reasons, focusing on interpersonal and institutional trust offers a coherent and policy-relevant entry point for mapping the three core dimensions of the We-ID framework in a unified descriptive analysis.

Existing research shows that levels of trust vary substantially across European countries. Northern and some Western European societies tend to report high and stable levels of interpersonal and institutional trust, while

lower levels are more common in Southern and Eastern Europe. At the same time, much of this literature relies on national averages, which risk obscuring important subnational differences. In practice, trust is not distributed evenly within countries. Regions within the same national context may exhibit markedly different levels of cohesion, reflecting historical trajectories, economic structures, demographic composition, and institutional performance.

This deliverable contributes to the *We-ID* project by providing a detailed descriptive analysis of social cohesion across Europe, focusing on both cross-country differences and variation within countries. Using data from the European Social Survey (ESS), we examine interpersonal trust and institutional trust over time and across European regions defined at the NUTS1 level. This regional perspective allows us to identify countries characterised by relatively homogeneous trust environments and to contrast them with countries where trust is more unevenly distributed across regions.

A central motivation for this analysis is the recognition that cohesion-related challenges increasingly operate at the subnational level. Migration, economic restructuring, and demographic change are spatially concentrated processes. National averages may therefore mask the fact that exposure to social change, including immigration, differs sharply across regions within the same country. Understanding the regional distribution of trust is thus a necessary step toward assessing how social cohesion interacts with migration exposure and other structural pressures.

The analysis presented here is deliberately descriptive. At this stage of the *We-ID* project, the focus is on mapping patterns, dispersion, and trends in trust across European regions rather than on establishing causal relationships. This provides a baseline against which future work will build. In subsequent deliverables, this descriptive framework will be extended by incorporating additional dimensions of cohesion, including resilience and identity, and by explicitly linking regional trust patterns to measures of immigration exposure and other contextual factors.

5.1 Policy Context

Social cohesion and trust are closely linked to the effectiveness of public policy. High levels of interpersonal trust facilitate cooperation among citizens, while institutional trust supports compliance with laws, acceptance of reforms, and confidence in democratic governance. Conversely, uneven or declining trust can undermine policy implementation and amplify social divisions, particularly in contexts marked by rapid social change.

At the European level, cohesion is a recurring theme in policy debates, from regional development and integration strategies to discussions about democratic legitimacy and social resilience. The increasing territorial concentration of migration and economic activity has heightened the relevance of regional perspectives, as cohesion challenges often emerge locally even when policy responses are designed nationally. A better understanding of within-country variation in trust is therefore essential for designing policies that are sensitive to regional contexts and capable of strengthening cohesion where it is most fragile.

5.2 Structure of the Report and methodological Note

This report uses data from the European Social Survey to document levels, dispersion, and trends in interpersonal and institutional trust across European countries and regions. The unit of analysis is the NUTS1 region, which allows us to capture meaningful subnational variation while maintaining comparability across countries.

The report is structured as follows. Chapter 1 introduces the concepts of interpersonal trust and institutional trust and describes how they are measured in the ESS. Chapter 2 presents a cross-sectional overview of trust levels across Europe, highlighting both between-country differences and within-country

dispersion at the regional level. Chapter 3 examines changes over time, comparing patterns across ESS rounds to assess the stability or evolution of trust across regions. Chapter 4 brings these strands together by identifying countries with relatively homogeneous trust distributions and contrasting them with countries characterised by greater internal dispersion, thereby setting the stage for subsequent analyses linking cohesion to regional exposure to immigration and other structural factors.

6. Trust as a Dimension of social Cohesion

Trust is widely recognised as a central component of social cohesion. It facilitates cooperation among individuals, supports collective action, and underpins the legitimacy and effectiveness of institutions. In societies characterised by high levels of trust, individuals are more willing to engage with others, comply with rules, and accept collective decisions, even in the absence of direct monitoring or enforcement. For this reason, trust is frequently used in comparative research as a key indicator of cohesion at both the societal and institutional levels.

Scholars commonly distinguish between generalised and particularised trust (Yamagishi, 2011; Schilke et al., 2021). Generalised trust refers to the trust an individual places in others in general, independent of the specific characteristics of the trustee or the situation (Cook et al., 2005). This form of trust is of particular interest because it tends to be relatively stable over time within individuals, while exhibiting substantial variation across countries and regions. A large body of research has linked generalised trust to broader societal outcomes, including economic performance, social cooperation, and political stability (Tabellini, 2008, 2010). Generalised trust has also been shown to correlate with lower risk perception and higher optimism, suggesting that it shapes how individuals evaluate uncertainty and future prospects (Siegrist et al., 2005).

The concept of generalised trust is closely related to social capital, which refers to the resources individuals and groups can access through social networks, shared norms, and reciprocal relationships. Social capital was first conceptualised by Bourdieu (1985) as the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to durable networks of mutual recognition. Subsequent definitions have emphasised the role of trust, norms, and networks in facilitating cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam et al., 1993). Empirical measures of social capital often incorporate indicators of trust (Paxton, 1999; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000; Putnam, 2000), and higher levels of social capital have been associated with greater civic and political participation, as well as more effective institutional functioning (Krishna, 2002; Larsen et al., 2004; Son and Lin, 2008).

In contrast to generalised trust, particularised trust is directed toward specific actors or institutions and relates to specific domains of action (Schilke et al., 2021). Trust in government, the legal system, the police, or political institutions are examples of particularised trust. While generalised trust often correlates with institutional trust, the two are conceptually distinct. Institutional trust is typically more volatile and more responsive to perceived institutional performance, policy decisions, and political developments (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008). As a result, changes in institutional trust can signal shifts in how citizens evaluate the functioning and legitimacy of public authority.

Closely related to institutional trust is the concept of discontent, which captures dissatisfaction with political institutions, governance, or leadership. The literature on political trust distinguishes between cultural perspectives, which view trust as a relatively stable disposition formed early in life, and institutional perspectives, which emphasise the role of political and economic performance in shaping trust and discontent (Mishler and Rose, 2001). From an institutional perspective, poor performance, perceived unfairness, or ineffective governance can erode trust and increase discontent, even among individuals who are otherwise socially integrated (Przeworski et al., 1996; Diamond, 1999). Micro-level institutional theories further stress that

trust is shaped by individuals' subjective evaluations of how institutions perform and respond to societal challenges (Williams, 1985; Mishler and Rose, 2001).

Taken together, generalised trust and institutional trust capture complementary dimensions of social cohesion. Generalised trust reflects the quality of social relations and the extent to which individuals expect cooperation from others, while institutional trust reflects confidence in formal systems of governance and authority. Examining both dimensions, and their variation across regions and over time, provides a nuanced understanding of cohesion that goes beyond national averages and allows for the identification of territorially uneven patterns within countries.

7. Measuring social and institutional Trust

This deliverable draws on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), which provides harmonised, high-quality measures of attitudes and values across European countries. Trust is a core component of the ESS and has been measured consistently across survey rounds, allowing for both cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses.

7.1 Interpersonal (social) Trust

Interpersonal trust, also referred to as social or generalised trust, is measured in the ESS using three standard items that captures respondents' general expectations about the trustworthiness of others. The questions are worded as follows:

- "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? Please tell me on a score of 0 to 10, where 0 means you can't be too careful and 10 means that most people can be trusted."
- "Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?"

"Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?" Responses are recorded on an eleven-point scale from 0 to 10. The first item is widely used in comparative research and is usually referred to as generalised trust. It has been shown to correlate with social capital, cooperation, and civic engagement. We add two items that also capture a broad orientation toward others rather than trust in specific individuals or groups and calculate the mean score across these three items to obtain an index for social trust.

In the analyses presented in this report, interpersonal trust is treated as a continuous variable. Regional averages at the NUTS1 level are computed using ESS survey weights to ensure representativeness within countries. This allows us to examine both national levels of social trust and variation across regions within the same country.

7.2 Institutional Trust

Institutional trust is measured in the ESS through a battery of questions asking respondents to indicate how much they trust a range of public institutions. The standard wording is:

"Please tell me on a score of 0–10 how much you personally trust each of the following institutions."

Institutions included in this analysis are:

- the national parliament,
- the legal system,
- the police,
- politicians,
- the European Parliament, and
- the United Nations

Responses are given on a scale from 0 (“No trust at all”) to 10 (“Complete trust”). Consistent with existing literature, we construct an index of institutional trust by, again, averaging responses across these six items. The resulting index captures respondents’ overall confidence in core political and legal institutions and exhibits high internal consistency across ESS rounds and countries.

As with interpersonal trust, institutional trust is analysed at both the national and regional (NUTS1) levels. Regional means are computed using survey weights, enabling an assessment of within-country dispersion and cross-regional differences in trust toward institutions.

7.3 Regional Aggregation and Comparability

The ESS is designed to be representative at the national level. To analyse subnational variation, individual responses are aggregated to the NUTS1 level based on respondents’ region of residence. While regional sample sizes vary, the NUTS1 classification provides a balance between spatial detail and statistical reliability and is widely used in comparative regional research.

By combining repeated ESS rounds with regional aggregation, this report is able to document both spatial patterns and temporal trends in social and institutional trust across Europe. The focus on dispersion within countries complements standard national-level analyses and provides a more nuanced picture of cohesion in contexts characterised by regional heterogeneity.

8. Social Trust

8.1 Spatial Patterns and temporal Stability of social Trust

Figure 1 provides a cross-sectional overview of social trust across European regions at the beginning of the observation period, using data from ESS Round 1 (2002). A pronounced spatial gradient is immediately visible. Social trust is highest in the Nordic countries, where nearly all regions fall in the upper part of the distribution, and relatively high levels are also observed in parts of Western Europe. In contrast, substantially lower levels of social trust characterise Southern and Eastern Europe, with several regions displaying average trust scores in the lower range of the scale. Importantly, the figure also highlights meaningful within-country variation, particularly in larger and more heterogeneous countries such as Italy, Spain, and Germany. Grey areas in the map indicate regions for which no ESS data are available in this round.

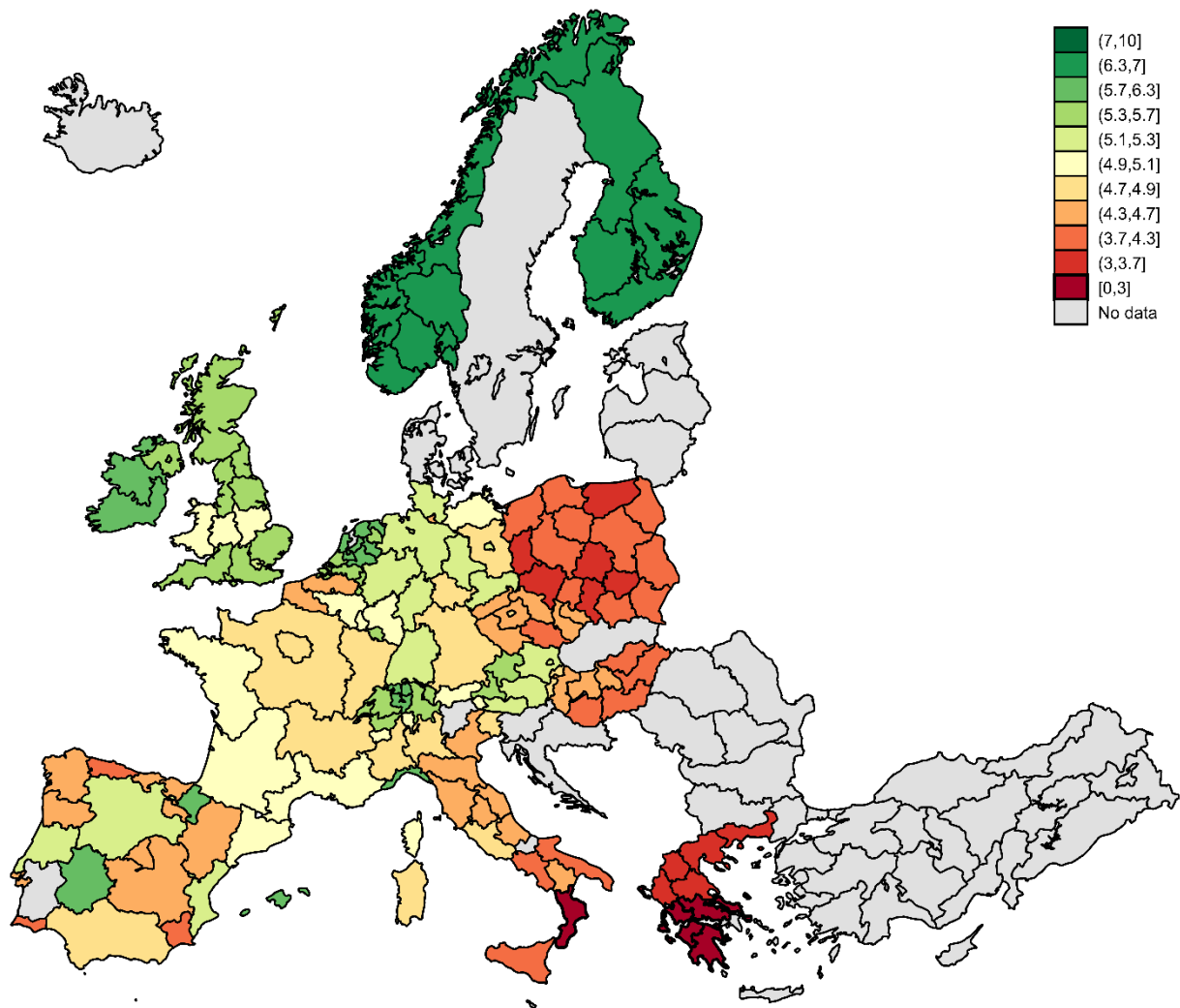


Figure 1: Social Trust across Regions – ESS Round 1 in 2002

Figure 2 shows the corresponding regional distribution of social trust a decade later, using ESS Round 6 (2012). The broad spatial structure observed in Figure 1 remains largely intact. Nordic regions continue to exhibit consistently high levels of trust, while many regions in Southern and Eastern Europe remain clustered at lower levels. Although some regions experience modest shifts relative to 2002, these changes are generally limited in magnitude. The persistence of the North–South and West–East gradients suggests that social trust is deeply rooted in long-standing social, institutional, and historical factors rather than being highly responsive to short-term shocks.

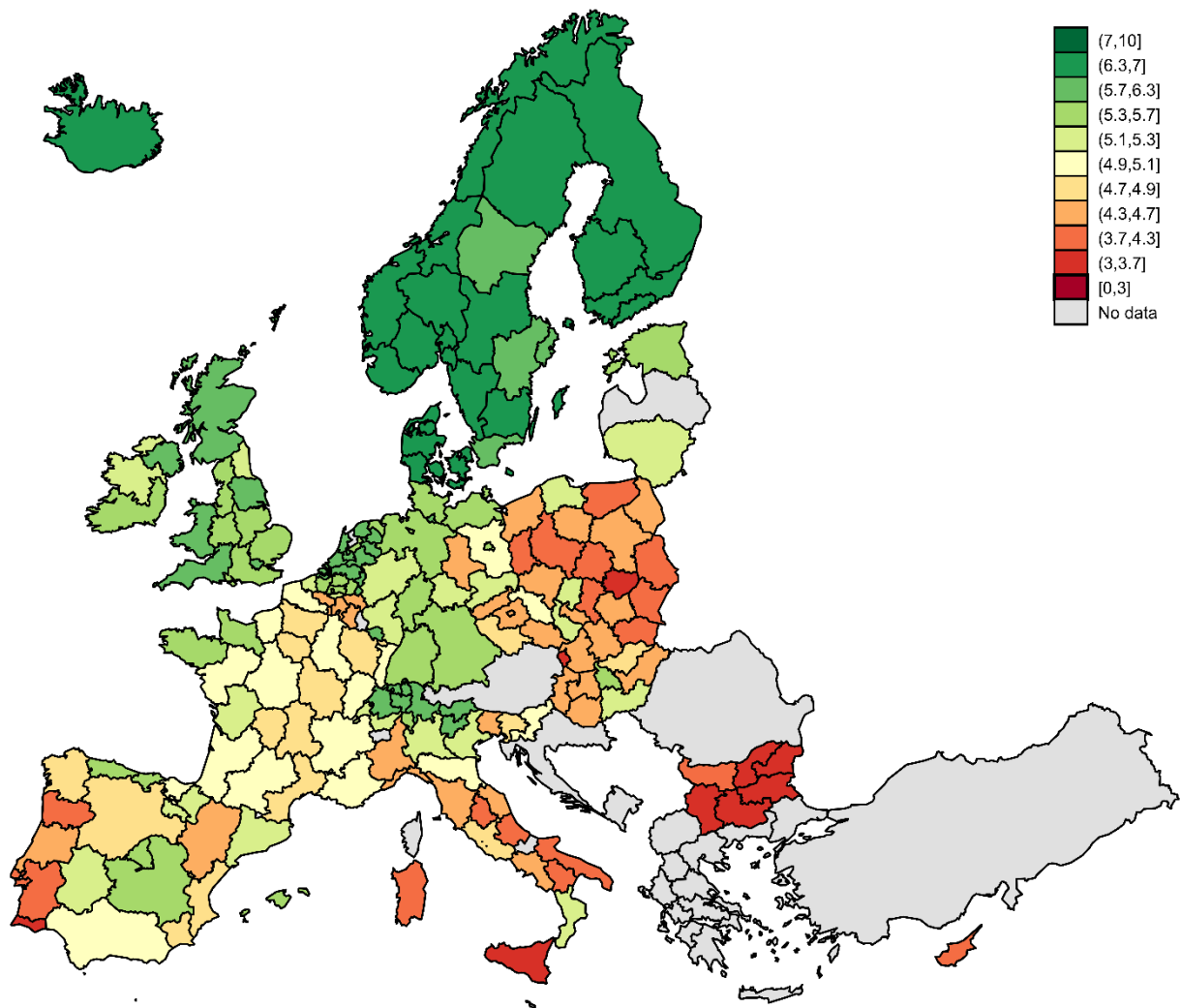


Figure 2: Social Trust across Regions – ESS Round 6 in 2012

Figure 3 extends the analysis to the most recent data, ESS Round 11 (2023). Once again, the overall pattern is strikingly stable. High-trust regions in Northern Europe remain at the top of the distribution, while lower-trust continues to be concentrated in Southern and Eastern Europe. Some regions exhibit incremental increases or decreases over time, but there is little evidence of systematic convergence or divergence across broad areas of Europe. The continued presence of within-country heterogeneity—visible, for example, in Italy, Spain, and parts of Central and Eastern Europe—underscores that national averages conceal substantial regional differences in social trust. As in previous figures, grey shading denotes regions without available data.

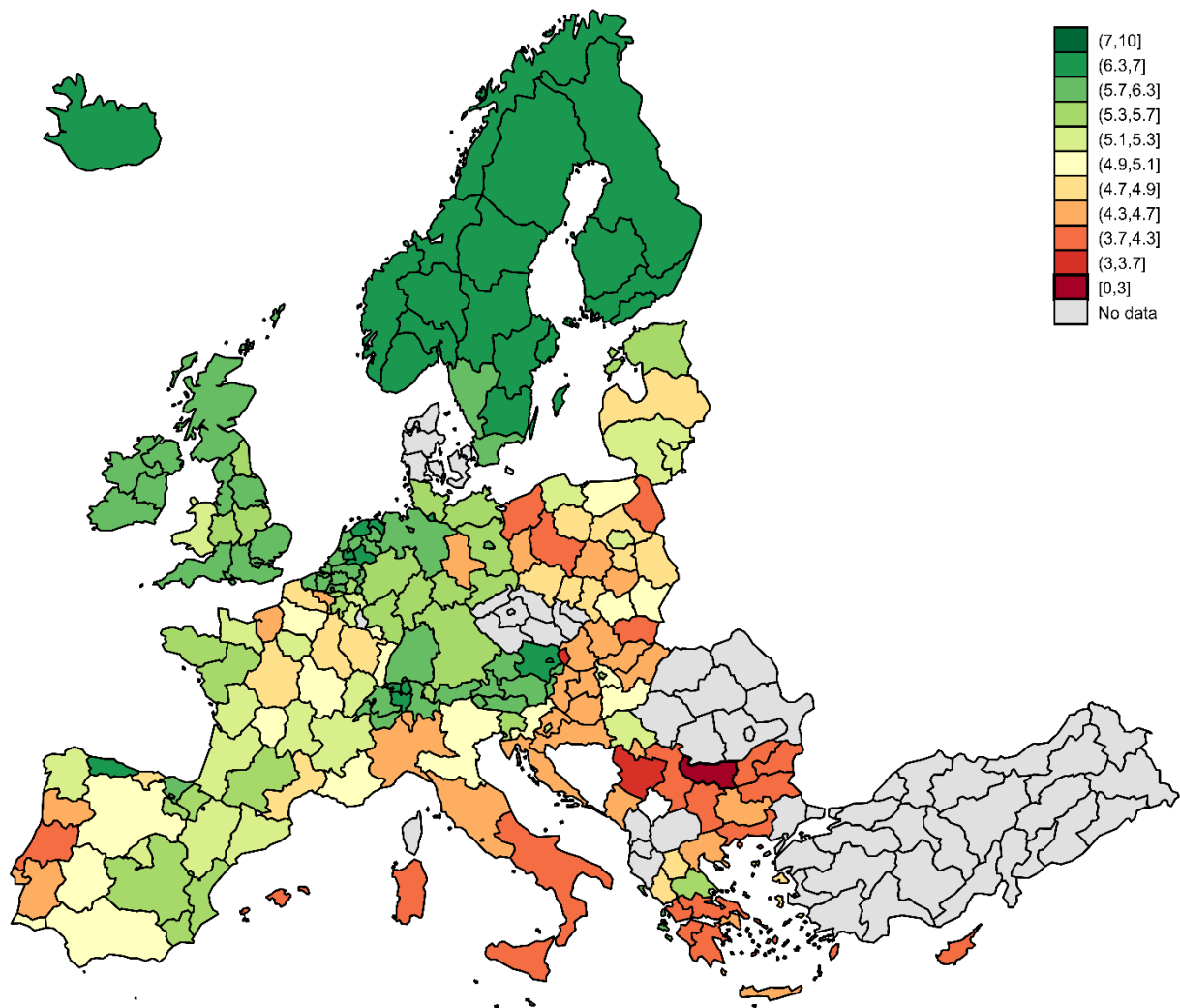


Figure 3: Social Trust across Regions – ESS Round 11 in 2023

While Figures 1–3 emphasises spatial patterns at specific points in time, Figure 4 focuses explicitly on temporal dynamics by plotting regional social trust trajectories across all ESS rounds. The figure confirms that social trust is relatively stable over time, particularly in high-trust countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands, where regional trajectories are tightly clustered and show only gradual change. Countries with lower average trust, including Italy and Poland, display greater dispersion across regions, but even here temporal fluctuations are modest rather than abrupt. Overall, Figure 4 reinforces the view that social trust evolves slowly and exhibits a high degree of persistence, with changes over time tending to be incremental rather than transformative.

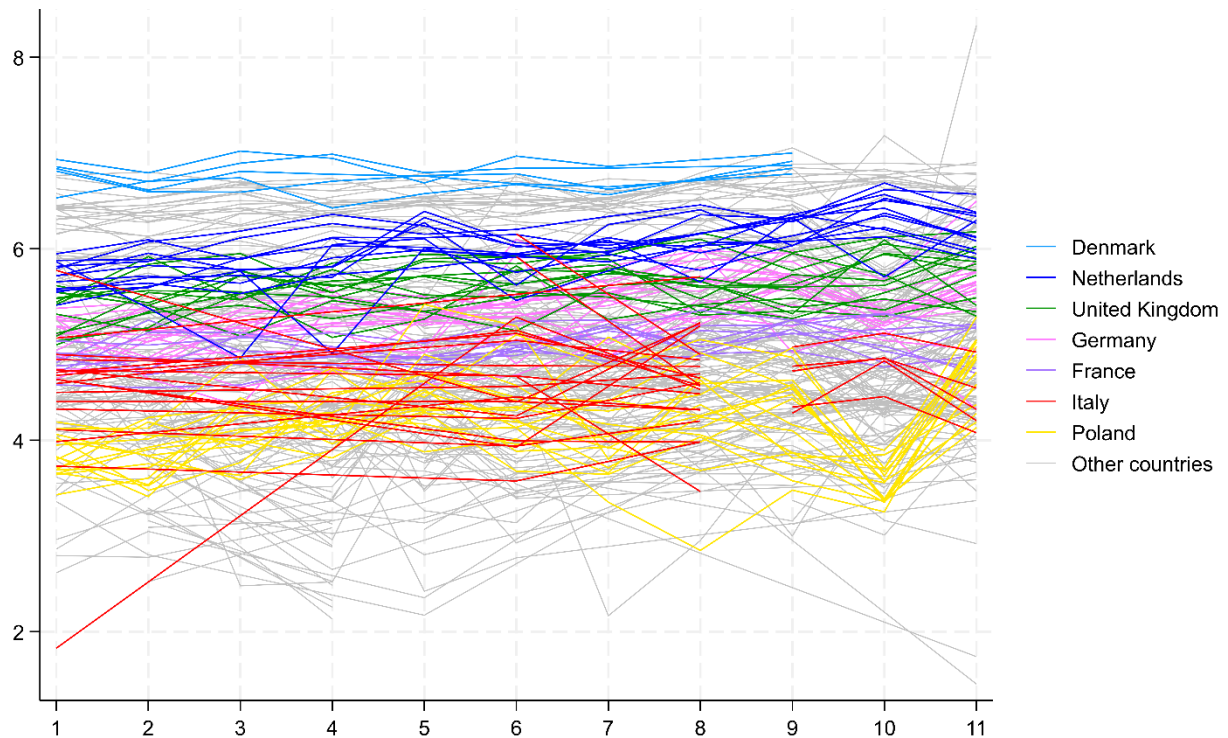


Figure 4: Social Trust across Regions in ALL Countries

Taken together, Figures 1–4 document three key features of social trust in Europe: strong and persistent cross-regional differences, meaningful within-country variation, and a high degree of temporal stability. These descriptive patterns provide an important baseline for subsequent analyses in the We-ID project, particularly those linking regional trust environments to differential exposure to migration and other structural pressures.

8.3 Within-Country heterogeneity in social Trust

Figure 5 provides a more detailed view of social trust dynamics by plotting regional trajectories separately for each country across all ESS rounds. (NUTS-2 regions are colored dark blue, while NUTS-1 regions for country-waves for which only NUTS-1 regions are available are colored in light blue.) This figure highlights substantial cross-country differences not only in average levels of social trust, but also in the degree of within-country heterogeneity and temporal stability.

Countries in Northern Europe, such as Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, are characterized by consistently high levels of social trust combined with very limited regional dispersion. Regional trajectories within these countries are tightly clustered and display only modest fluctuations over time. This pattern suggests a relatively homogeneous trust environment, where regional contexts differ little in terms of generalised trust and where changes occur slowly and uniformly.

A similar, though slightly more heterogeneous, pattern is observed in countries such as the Netherlands and Switzerland. While average trust levels remain high, there is somewhat greater dispersion across regions, particularly in earlier ESS rounds. Nevertheless, regional trajectories remain broadly parallel, indicating that differences across regions persist over time rather than reflecting divergent trends.

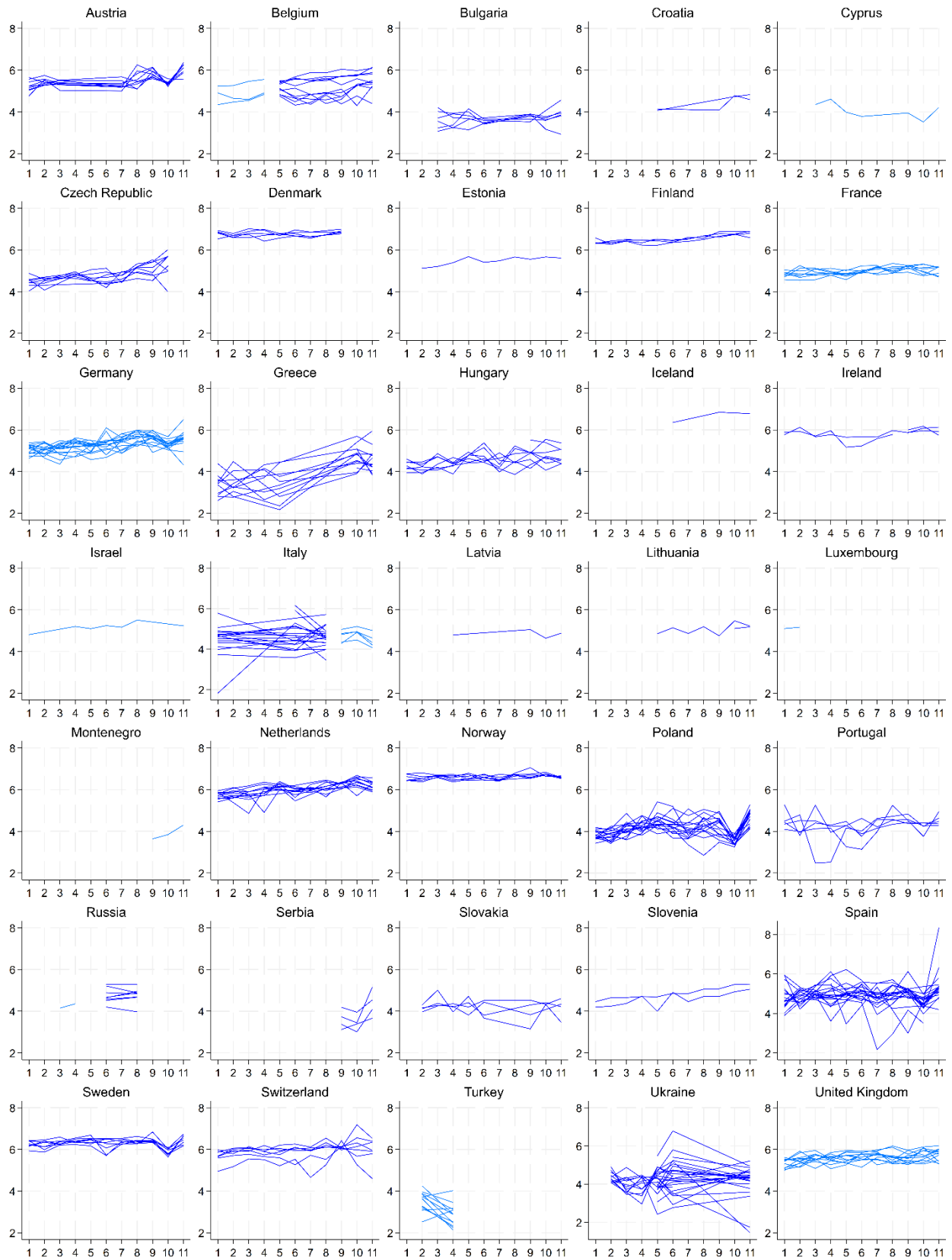


Figure 5: Social Trust across Regions separately by Country

In contrast, several Western and Southern European countries exhibit lower average levels of social trust and markedly greater regional variation. Italy and Spain, in particular, display substantial dispersion across regions, with trajectories that differ both in level and, to a limited extent, in slope. While overall trust remains relatively stable over time, the persistent gap between higher- and lower-trust regions points to long-standing territorial differences rather than transitory fluctuations. France occupies an intermediate position, with moderate trust levels and comparatively limited regional dispersion, but little evidence of strong upward or downward trends.

Central and Eastern European countries generally show lower average trust levels alongside pronounced regional heterogeneity. Countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia exhibit wide spreads in regional trust, especially in the earlier rounds, although some convergence appears over time as regional trajectories become more tightly clustered. Nonetheless, average trust remains substantially below that observed in Northern Europe, and changes over time are gradual rather than abrupt.

Finally, countries with shorter or more fragmented time series—often due to intermittent ESS participation—tend to display greater apparent volatility. In these cases, fluctuations should be interpreted cautiously, as they may partly reflect sampling variation rather than genuine shifts in underlying trust levels.

Overall, Figure 5 reinforces three central findings. First, social trust differs systematically across countries, with persistent high-trust and low-trust clusters. Second, within-country regional heterogeneity varies substantially, being lowest in Nordic countries and highest in Southern and parts of Eastern Europe. Third, despite this heterogeneity, social trust remains highly stable over time within regions, underscoring its role as a slowly evolving component of social cohesion rather than a rapidly shifting response to short-term events.

9. Institutional Trust

9.1 Spatial Patterns and temporal Dynamics of institutional Trust

Figure 6 presents the regional distribution of institutional trust across Europe using data from ESS Round 1 (2002). As with social trust, clear cross-national and cross-regional differences are evident. Institutional trust is highest in the Nordic countries, where most regions fall in the upper part of the distribution, reflecting strong confidence in political and legal institutions. Relatively high levels are also observed in parts of Western Europe. In contrast, Southern and Eastern European regions tend to exhibit substantially lower levels of institutional trust. Compared with social trust, within-country variation appears more pronounced in several cases, suggesting that confidence in institutions is more unevenly distributed across regions. Grey areas indicate regions for which no data are available.

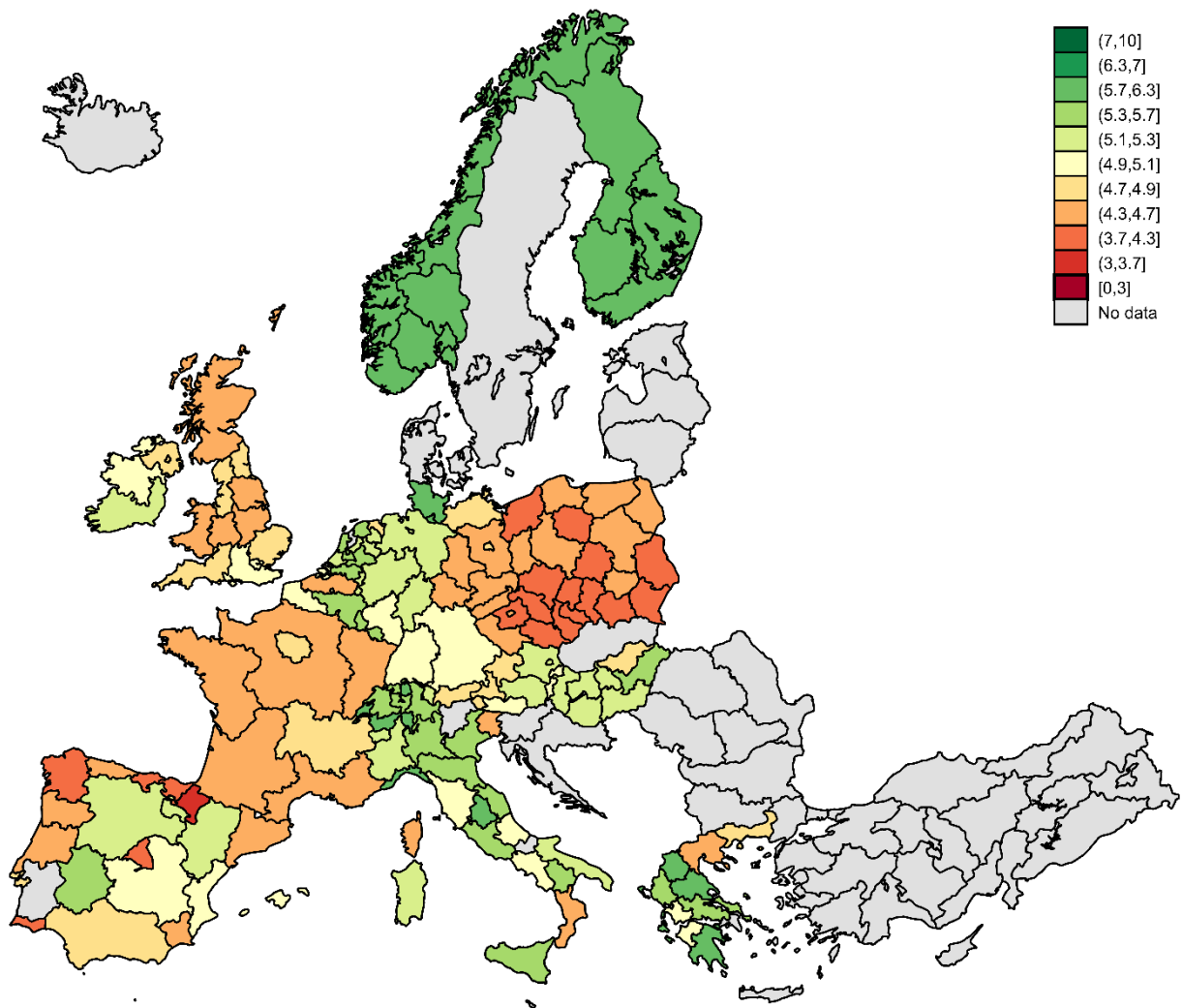


Figure 6: Institutional Trust across Regions – ESS Round 1 in 2002

Figure 7 shows the corresponding distribution a decade later, based on ESS Round 6 (2012). While the broad spatial pattern remains recognisable, institutional trust displays more visible changes over time than social trust. In several countries, particularly in Southern Europe, average levels of institutional trust decline relative to 2002, consistent with the timing of the global financial crisis and subsequent sovereign debt crises. At the same time, Nordic countries continue to display high and relatively stable levels of institutional trust across regions, reinforcing the contrast between institutional environments across Europe.

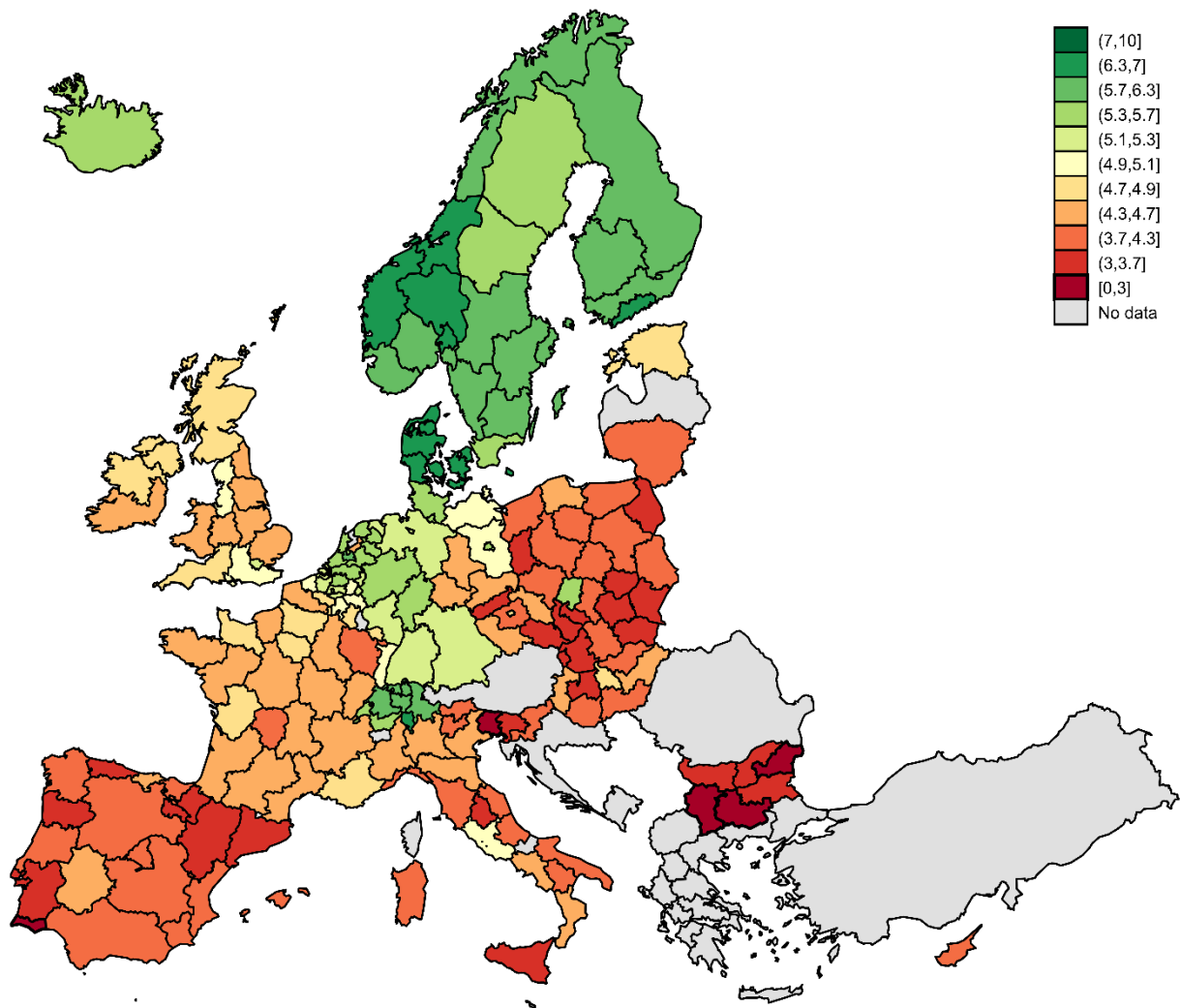


Figure 7: Institutional Trust across Regions – ESS Round 6 in 2012

Figure 8 extends the analysis to ESS Round 11 (2023). By this point, some recovery in institutional trust is observable in parts of Europe, although levels remain below those seen in the early 2000s in several countries. Cross-regional disparities persist, especially in Southern and Eastern Europe, where some regions display consistently low trust in institutions. Compared with Figures 6 and 7, the 2023 map suggests partial stabilisation rather than a full convergence across regions or countries. As in earlier figures, grey shading denotes missing data.

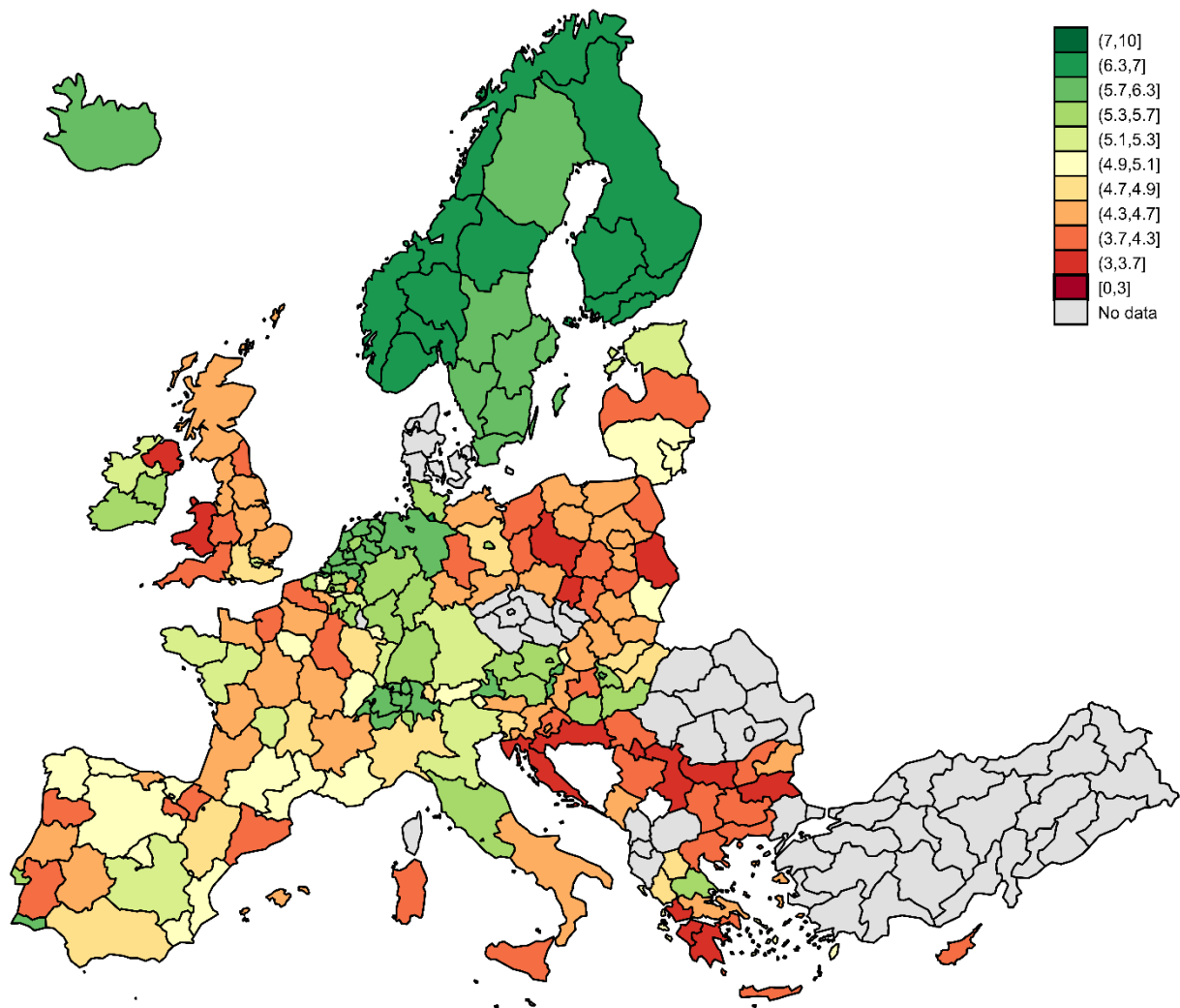


Figure 8: Institutional Trust across Regions – ESS Round 11 in 2023

While Figures 6–8 emphasise spatial patterns at specific points in time, Figure 9 illustrates regional trajectories of institutional trust across all ESS rounds. In contrast to social trust, institutional trust exhibits noticeably greater temporal volatility. Several countries show marked declines during the late 2000s and early 2010s, followed by modest recoveries in subsequent years. This pattern is particularly visible in Southern European countries, where regional trajectories diverge more strongly than in Northern Europe. In high-trust countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands, trajectories remain relatively flat and tightly clustered, indicating both high levels and strong resilience of institutional trust.

Taken together, Figures 6–9 highlight three key features of institutional trust in Europe. First, institutional trust displays strong and persistent cross-country differences, broadly aligned with those observed for social trust. Second, within-country regional heterogeneity is more pronounced for institutional trust, reflecting uneven evaluations of institutional performance across regions. Third, institutional trust is more sensitive to historical and political developments over time, exhibiting greater volatility than social trust while nonetheless retaining a degree of long-run persistence. These patterns underscore the importance of distinguishing between social and institutional trust when assessing the dynamics of social cohesion across European regions.

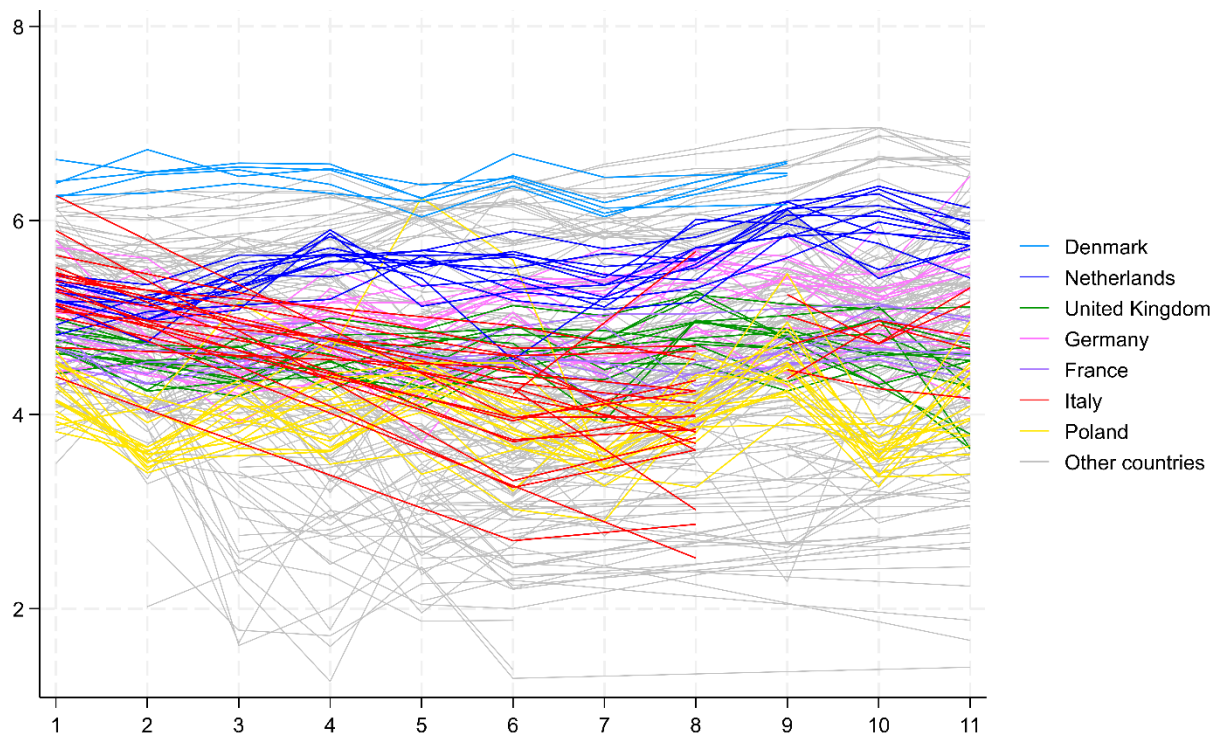


Figure 9: Institutional Trust across Regions ALL Countries

9.2 Within-country Dynamics of institutional Trust

Figure 10 presents regional trajectories of institutional trust separately for each country across all ESS rounds. Compared with social trust, institutional trust exhibits markedly greater temporal variation and stronger cross-country differences, reflecting its closer connection to political performance, economic conditions, and institutional legitimacy.

Nordic countries—including Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland—stand out for their consistently high levels of institutional trust combined with limited regional dispersion. Regional trajectories in these countries are tightly clustered and largely flat over time, indicating both strong baseline confidence in institutions and a high degree of resilience to economic and political shocks. Even during periods associated with broader European turbulence, declines in institutional trust are modest and short-lived.

Countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Germany also display relatively high institutional trust, but with somewhat greater regional heterogeneity and more visible temporal fluctuations. In these cases, declines during the late 2000s and early 2010s are apparent, followed by partial recoveries in later rounds. Nevertheless, regional trajectories remain broadly parallel, suggesting that shocks tend to affect regions within countries in a similar manner rather than generating lasting regional divergence.

In contrast, Southern European countries exhibit substantially lower average levels of institutional trust and considerably greater volatility over time. Italy, Spain, and Greece show pronounced declines in institutional trust during the period surrounding the global financial crisis and subsequent sovereign debt crises. While some recovery is observable in more recent ESS rounds, institutional trust remains persistently low in several regions. Moreover, within-country dispersion is pronounced, indicating that confidence in institutions varies markedly across regions and that these differences are enduring rather than transitory.

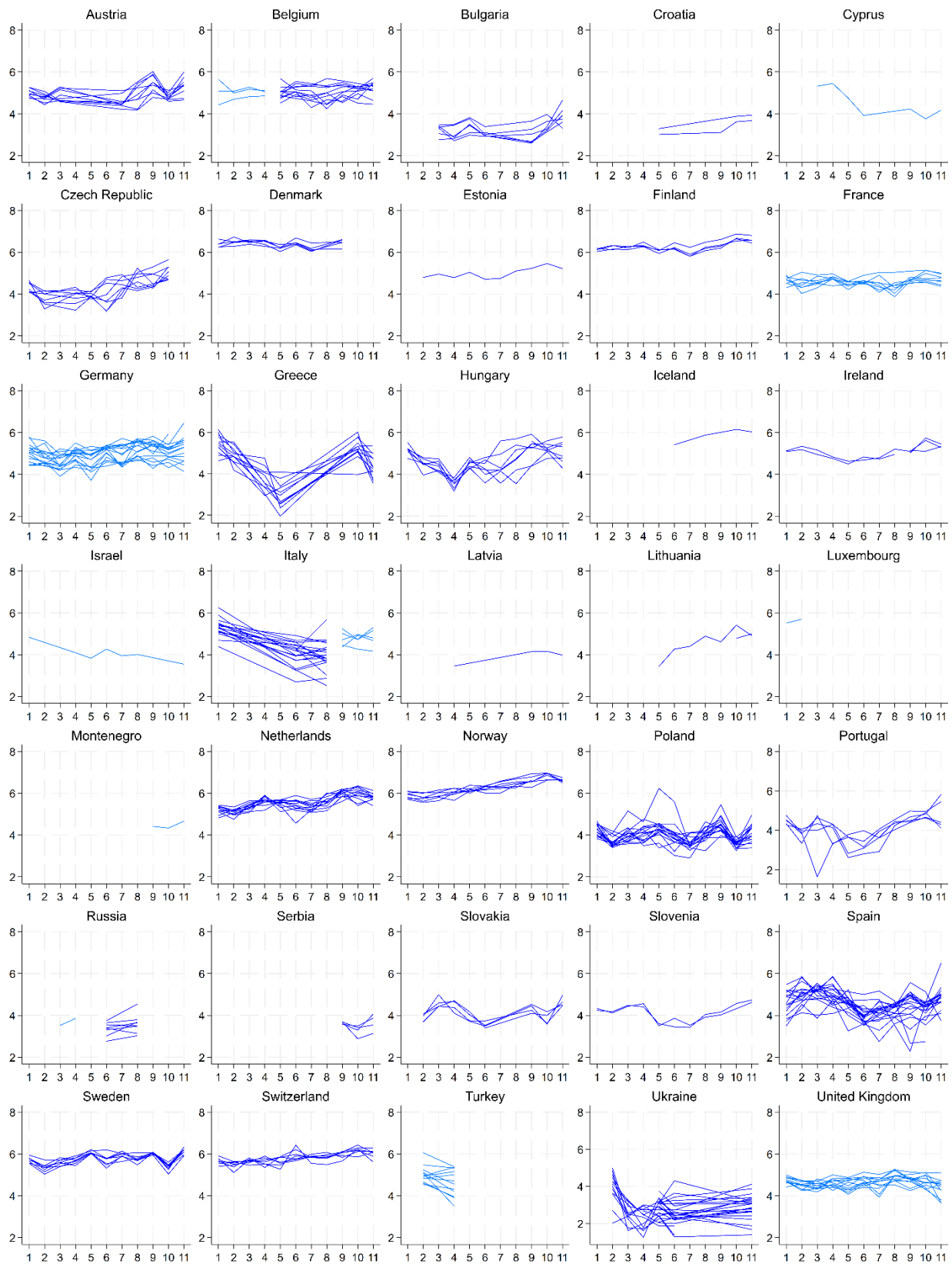


Figure 10: Institutional Trust across Regions separately by Country

Central and Eastern European countries are characterised by a combination of low average institutional trust and substantial regional heterogeneity. Countries such as Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic display wide spreads in regional trust levels, particularly in earlier ESS rounds. Over time, some convergence across regions is visible, but overall levels remain well below those observed in Western and Northern Europe. Temporal trajectories in these countries often exhibit sharp fluctuations, underscoring the sensitivity of institutional trust to political developments and governance challenges.

Finally, countries with shorter or more irregular ESS participation tend to display greater apparent volatility in institutional trust trajectories. In these cases, changes over time should be interpreted cautiously, as part of the observed variation may reflect sampling uncertainty rather than genuine shifts in institutional confidence.

Overall, Figure 10 highlights three central features of institutional trust dynamics. First, institutional trust varies systematically across countries, with persistent high-trust and low-trust clusters. Second, within-country regional heterogeneity is substantial, particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe, pointing to territorially uneven evaluations of institutional performance. Third, institutional trust is more volatile than social trust, responding more visibly to political and economic shocks, while still exhibiting medium- to long-run persistence. These patterns reinforce the importance of analysing institutional trust separately from social trust when assessing regional social cohesion in Europe.

10. Discussion and Extensions

This deliverable set out to provide a descriptive mapping of social and institutional trust across European regions, with a particular emphasis on subnational variation and temporal dynamics. By combining repeated waves of the European Social Survey with regional aggregation at the NUTS1 level, the analysis documents how trust is distributed across space and how it evolves over time. The figures presented in the preceding sections highlight several robust and interrelated patterns that are central to understanding social cohesion in contemporary Europe.

A first key finding concerns the persistence of strong spatial gradients in both social and institutional trust. Across all ESS rounds, Northern European regions consistently exhibit high levels of trust, while Southern and Eastern European regions tend to display substantially lower levels. This pattern is visible for both interpersonal trust and trust in institutions and remains remarkably stable over the two decades covered by the data. While modest changes over time can be observed in specific regions, there is little evidence of large-scale convergence across Europe. These findings are consistent with a large body of research emphasising the long-run persistence of trust and its deep roots in historical, cultural, and institutional contexts.

At the same time, the regional perspective adopted in this report reveals that national averages often mask substantial within-country heterogeneity. In several countries—most notably Italy, Spain, and parts of Central and Eastern Europe—regions differ markedly in their levels of both social and institutional trust. These differences are persistent across ESS rounds, suggesting that they reflect enduring territorial divides rather than short-lived shocks. In contrast, Nordic countries display not only high average trust but also very limited regional dispersion, indicating relatively homogeneous trust environments. This contrast between homogeneous and heterogeneous countries is a central descriptive insight of the analysis and underscores the importance of moving beyond national-level indicators when assessing social cohesion.

A second major finding relates to the differing temporal dynamics of social and institutional trust. Social trust is characterised by a high degree of stability over time. Regional trajectories are generally flat, with changes occurring slowly and incrementally. Even in periods marked by major economic or political upheaval, such

as the global financial crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic, social trust exhibits limited short-term volatility. This stability reinforces the interpretation of social trust as a deeply embedded orientation toward others that evolves gradually and is relatively insulated from short-term events.

Institutional trust, by contrast, displays greater temporal variation and sensitivity to historical developments. Several countries experience pronounced declines in institutional trust during the late 2000s and early 2010s, followed by partial recoveries in subsequent years. These patterns are particularly visible in Southern Europe, where regional trajectories diverge more strongly than in Northern Europe. Nevertheless, even institutional trust exhibits a degree of long-run persistence: regions with relatively high or low trust tend to maintain their relative positions over time, despite temporary fluctuations. The contrast between the stability of social trust and the volatility of institutional trust highlights the importance of distinguishing between these two dimensions of cohesion.

Taken together, these findings point to a layered understanding of social cohesion in Europe. On the one hand, trust is highly persistent and territorially structured, reflecting long-standing differences across regions and countries. On the other hand, institutional trust is responsive to political and economic conditions, introducing an element of dynamism into the cohesion landscape. Importantly, this dynamism does not erase underlying spatial inequalities; instead, it often amplifies existing regional differences during periods of stress.

The descriptive patterns documented in this deliverable provide a crucial baseline for the broader We-ID project. In particular, they create a foundation for analysing how trust interacts with exposure to migration and other forms of social change. Migration is not evenly distributed across space: arrivals tend to be concentrated in specific regions, often those that are economically dynamic or demographically growing. The coexistence of stable trust environments in some regions and more fragile, heterogeneous trust landscapes in others raises important questions about how migration exposure may interact with pre-existing levels of cohesion.

Future extensions of this work will build on the present descriptive analysis in several directions. A first extension will explicitly link regional trust patterns to measures of migration exposure, including both asylum-related inflows and other forms of mobility. By combining the regional trust indicators developed here with harmonised measures of migration, subsequent analyses can examine whether regions with different trust profiles respond differently to demographic change. Particular attention will be paid to whether migration exposure is associated with changes in institutional trust, which appears more responsive to contextual shocks, rather than social trust, which is more stable.

A second extension will broaden the conceptual scope of cohesion by incorporating additional dimensions such as resilience and identity. Trust captures an important but partial aspect of cohesion. Resilience relates to the capacity of societies and regions to absorb shocks without experiencing lasting deterioration in social relations or institutional legitimacy. Identity, in turn, shapes how individuals perceive in-groups and out-groups and may condition responses to diversity and migration. Integrating these dimensions with the trust measures developed here will allow for a more comprehensive assessment of cohesion dynamics across regions.

A third avenue for future work concerns the temporal dimension of change. While this deliverable documents long-run trends across ESS rounds, further analyses will explore whether specific periods—such as the financial crisis, the pandemic, or the war in Ukraine—are associated with identifiable shifts in trust trajectories once other factors are taken into account. This will help distinguish between short-term shocks and longer-term structural change.

In sum, this deliverable demonstrates that social and institutional trust in Europe are characterised by strong persistence, meaningful regional heterogeneity, and distinct temporal dynamics. By providing a detailed descriptive mapping of these patterns, the analysis lays the groundwork for subsequent stages of the We-ID

project, which will move beyond description to examine how trust, migration exposure, resilience, and identity jointly shape social cohesion across European regions.

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