Rethinking Social Cohesion in EU Accession Countries: Lessons from Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood

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Funded by the European Union

Executive Summary

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The present Policy Report analyses the nature and dynamics of social cohesion in the candidate countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) and Western Balkans (Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) and identifies to what extent the EU accession process has impacted it. As there have been no systematic, comparative or in-depth studies of social cohesion conducted covering these countries, our knowledge of its regional peculiarities is rather scarce. Addressing this gap, the Report presents the first attempt of conducting an in-depth comparative analysis of the nature and dynamic of social cohesion in the candidate countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) and Western Balkans (WB), specifically in the context of the EU accession process. Social cohesion is understood as a complex concept that encompasses aspects of socio-economic equality (e.g., access to finances, education and health), belonging and tolerance, social participation and people-to-people relations, as well as political participation and institutional trust. Based on the desk research and expert interviews, this research provides the possibility of developing empirically informed recommendations regarding the improvement of the EU enlargement policy, specifically with regards to various aspects of social cohesion. The findings demonstrate that, despite notable progress in recent years, candidate countries in the WB and the EN regions still lag behind EU levels in several key aspects of social cohesion. It shows that societies in these countries are characterised by uneven levels of social, political, and economic participation, which lead to the disruption of social fabric, hindering the development of genuinely cohesive societies. Importantly, much of these challenges stem from internal factors such as governance models, historical legacies, and social structures, but they are also propelled by malign foreign interference, which aim to weaken the unity and resolve of societies. While some of the best practices aimed at strengthening social cohesion in candidate countries have been identified, the challenges revealed through the research underscore the need for comprehensive, multi-layered initiatives from both the EU and national governments. Strengthening social cohesion is essential not only for the candidate countries at their current stage but also for ensuring that EU accession proceeds smoothly as they advance on their membership paths. To achieve meaningful results, the EU should mainstream social cohesion within its policy frameworks and allocate resources to strengthening all its dimensions throughout the accession process.

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About InvigoratEU

InvigoratEU is a Horizon Europe-funded project, coordinated by the EU-Chair at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) together with the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin. The project, with a duration of 3 years from January 2024 until December 2026, examines how the EU can structure its future relations with its Eastern neighbours and the countries of the Western Balkans. The consortium has received around three million euros for this endeavour.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18390585

Funded by the European Union

About the project: www.invigorat.eu

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1 Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine in 2022 marked the start of restructuring the geopolitical architecture of the Eurasian continent, substantially affecting the EU accession process in the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) countries, as well as in the Western Balkans (WB). In response to the new threats emerged as a result of this process, re-evaluation of the EU enlargement policy became a matter of an immediate necessity. Increasing the relevance of the geopolitical dimension for the enlargement process, the war underscored that the latter is no longer merely a mechanism of economic and institutional convergence but also a question of security and resilience. Therefore, resilience – defined as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (European External Action Service, 2016, p. 23; Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier 2019, p. 234; Brandt & Tekin 2024) – has become a critical concept on the agenda of both "modernisation logic" as well as the "geopolitical logic" of the EU enlargement process. In the first case, resilience is fostered through democratic governance, institutional stability and social cohesion, whereas, in the second case, it is ensured by enhancing states' capacity to resist external pressures and hybrid threats, thereby contributing to security and strategic stability.

As the urgency of war and the threats stemming from the new geopolitical reality led to an unprecedented speed of granting the three EN countries (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) candidate status, as well as to the revitalisation of the accession process of the WB states, the question of social cohesion in these countries has become particularly pressing. A cohesive society demonstrates the capacity "to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimizing disparities, avoiding marginalisation" (Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2019, p. 234) and representing stable institutions. Thus, cohesiveness is an essential prerequisite of a resilient society.

It is in this context that the present Policy Report (Report) aims at developing recommendations by addressing the following question: what measures should the EU take to strengthen social cohesion in the candidate countries of the EN and WB? In order to inform the answer to this question empirically, the report analyses the nature and dynamics of social cohesion in the candidate countries of these two regions and identifies to what extent the EU accession process has impacted it. For that matter, the Report first lays the conceptual foundation for the notion of social cohesion, which remains highly contested in academic and policy debates. There is no clear consensus in the literature regarding its precise definition, conceptual boundaries, or the appropriate methods for its measurement. Scholars approach social cohesion from diverse disciplinary perspectives – ranging from sociology and political science to economics – emphasizing different dimensions such as equality, trust, solidarity, inclusion and shared values. As a result, the concept has evolved into a multidimensional and context-dependent construct, reflecting the complexity of social relations and normative ideals it seeks to capture.

Beyond conceptual clarity, general knowledge on social cohesion is also bounded geographically. The research on the subject matter is dominated by the studies conducted in and addressing western democracies, mostly the EU countries and Canada (e.g., Bertelsmann 2013, Dragolov, Ignacz, Lorenz, *et.al* 2016). Some of the other studies have looked at the patterns of social cohesion in Asian countries (e.g., Chan 2006, Chan 2014, Kamri, Hamid, Syuhada, *et.al* 2021) and even collected the data that made comparison of social cohesion between western

and Asian worlds (Bertelsmann, 2017). However, our knowledge of the peculiarities of social cohesion in the regions of EN and WB are rather scarce. With some rare exceptions of certain isolated case-studies (e.g., Dimitrovska 2022 on North Macedonia, Minich, Dugli-Hustings and Zurabashvili 2024 on Ukraine, Dragalin, Novosolova and Zurabashvili 2024 on Moldova), there have been no systematic, comparative or in-depth studies conducted, which would cover the two regions. Addressing this gap, the Report presents the first attempt of conducting an in-depth comparative analysis of the nature and dynamic of social cohesion in the candidate countries of EN and WB, specifically in the context of the EU accession process. As a result, this research provides the possibility of developing empirically informed recommendations regarding the improvement of the EU enlargement policy, specifically with regards to the aspects of social cohesion.

The main line of argumentation in this report departs from the way the EU approaches the concept of social cohesion. On the one hand, the concept is embedded in the foundational documents of the European Union. It is mentioned as one of the Union's objectives in key agreements such as the Single European Act of 1986, the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992, the Treaty of Amsterdam of 1997, the Treaty of Nice of 2001, and the Treaty of Lisbon of 2007. It is also reflected in the EU's long-term budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework, and is routinely referenced in strategic and operational documents. On the other hand, no concerted effort has yet been made to comprehensively define and operationalise the concept. As a result, it tends to be understood primarily in terms of economic equality and inclusion. The latest manifestation of this is that in the reports of the 2025 Enlargement Package, social cohesion is defined rather narrowly by four economic indicators: average nominal monthly wages and salaries, the index of real wages and salaries, the Gini coefficient, and the poverty gap. As the complexity of social cohesion goes far beyond the economic domain, we challenge this approach by proposing to address the concept from a broader perspective. We argue that including other constituent dimensions in the analysis leads to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges to social cohesion in the candidate countries and of the gaps the EU should address to strengthen it.

Thus, we conceive of social cohesion as a complex concept that, beyond economic equality, encompasses aspects of social equality (e.g., access to education and health), belonging and tolerance, social participation and people-to-people relations, as well as political participation and institutional trust. Findings from our research show that in the candidate countries of the EN and the WB, it is precisely the social and political dimensions of cohesion where challenges to the social fabric emerge. More specifically, by identifying local peculiarities of social participation and people-to-people relations, the findings reveal that the mechanisms through which societies in these countries are held together differ from those of European societies. Furthermore, given the geopolitical in-betweenness of these countries, external threats and their instrumentalisation by local political elites constitute major sources of political polarisation, which in turn endangers societal cohesiveness. The study is based on the triangulation of two methods and respective research stages: First, the desk research was conducted, implying the collection and analysis of the secondary quantitative data on various dimensions of social cohesion in six candidate countries: Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in EN and Serbia, North Macedonia and Montenegro in WB. Second, with the goal of corroborating the desk research findings and delving deeper into the qualitative aspects of social cohesion in the candidate countries, expert interviews were conducted, focusing on the four countries: Georgia and Moldova in EN and Serbia and North Macedonia in WB. The expert interview stage of the research

included two components – expert scoring and in-depth narratives. The empirical part of the Report is structured in two blocks along these two stages of the research, leading to the final chapter, which presents the policy recommendations derived from the research findings. However, before moving to the empirical part, first, a brief review of relevant literature is presented, leading to the establishment of the conceptual framework and then, the methods used for the analysis are explained in detail.

2 Research Design

This chapter lays the conceptual and methodological foundation of the empirical research on the nature and dynamic of social cohesion in the EU candidate countries and the impact of the EU accession process on it. First, the challenges related to the conceptual clarity are discussed and our approach to conceptualisation and operationalization are presented. Further, each method used for collecting and analysing the data is detailed.

Conceptual Framework

Social cohesion, a critical aspect of the well-being of societies, has become a key point of academic and policy research due to its profound implications on social integration, economic growth, inclusion, and the overall quality of life. Broadly understood as the "glue" that holds the society together, social cohesion encompasses a wide variety of elements, ranging from trust, social networks, and social capital to feelings of intergroup harmony, solidarity, and inclusive identity. Although approaches to studying social cohesion have varied across time and countries, scholars have converged on its positive impact on the stability and functioning of societies, resulting in a growing body of works aimed at understanding its complexities, including the factors that contribute to it. This sub-chapter explores the multifaceted nature of social cohesion research, drawing on key conceptual frameworks and empirical studies. The primary objective of this review is to define the concept and lay foundation for further empirical analysis.

Earlier works on social cohesion can be traced to sociologists Émile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies, who analysed the transition from traditional to industrial modes of social organisation. Puzzled by the shift from relatively simple to relatively complex societies in the 19th century, the authors sought to understand how social bonds were evolving with the emergence of new economic models of operation. In his seminal work of 1893, titled 'The Division of Labour in Society', Durkheim identified two types of social systems: "mechanical solidarity," which stands on shared values, beliefs, and similar life experiences and is characteristic to pre-modern societies, and "organic solidarity," which emerges in more complex societies where individuals are interdependent due to their specialised roles and functions. In other words, while "mechanical solidarity" rests on likeness and affinity, "organic solidarity" is based on acquired complementarity between different actors engaged in different activities (Durkheim 1893; XVI). Tönnies, on the other hand, argued in his book of 1887 'Community and Society' that true solidarity could exist only if social differences were minimal, as was the case in small, close-knit pre-industrial village communities, where social bonds were stronger due to shared norms and

direct, personal interactions. Tönnies believed that gradual loss of these traditional modes of interactions led to weaker social bonds and less solidarity.

Although social cohesion has long been a concern of sociology and other adjacent disciplines, it re-emerged in academic research with renewed vigour only in the 1990s (Moustakas 2023), driven largely by the popular perception that Western societies were under threat of social breakdown due to growing economic crises, inequality, immigration, and globalisation (Jenson 1998; Putnam 2000; Schmeets and te Riele 2014; Delhey and Dragolov 2015). In parallel, social cohesion as an area of public policy research has gained increasing attention within national governments, international organisations, and intergovernmental institutions, including the European Union and the Council of Europe (Dimeglio et al. 2012). A major focus of these studies has been on defining cohesion, with multiple definitions proposed over time. For Judith Maxwell, for instance, social cohesion referred to "shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and … a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, … and that they are members of the same community" (1996). In a much similar vein, the Canadian Government defined social cohesion as "the ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity" (Berger-Schmitt 2000). The Council of Europe added more nuance to these definitions, describing social cohesion both as "society's ability to secure the long-term well-being of all its members, including equitable access to available resources," and "respect for human dignity with due regard for diversity, personal and collective autonomy and responsible participation" (2005). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) took a similar line, saying a cohesive society works towards "the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility" (2011).

Although the notion of social cohesion has been embedded in the Maastricht Treaty (1992), alongside economic and territorial cohesion, as one of the objectives to be promoted by the European Union, there has been no single, EU-wide definition of the concept (Kech and Krause 2006). Nevertheless, because the EU institutions primarily view their cohesion policy as a tool for addressing disparities in economic development, particularly across its regions, it is reasonable to state that the EU too defines social cohesion primarily in terms of economic equality and inclusion.

Others favour more minimalist approaches, effectively excluding economic parameters from their conceptualisations. For instance, for Chan et al., social cohesion is simply about interactions and bonds among members of society, "characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging, and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations" (Chan et al. 2006). Green and Janmaat further refine the concept, stating that "social cohesion refers to the property by which whole societies, and the individuals within them, are bound together through the action of specific attitudes, behaviours, rules, and institutions which rely on consensus rather than pure coercion" (Green and Janmaat 2011). Dimeglio et al. offer a similar definition, describing social cohesion as "a set of norms, values, aptitudes, and behaviours that are necessary for the existence of solid and durable relations and cooperation within a society" (2012). Bertelsmann Stiftung also adopts a similar approach, defining social cohesion "as the extent of social togetherness in a territorially defined geo-political entity" (2013). "A cohesive society can be characterised by reliable

social relations, a positive emotional connectedness of its members to the entity and a pronounced focus on the common good," states their report (ibid).

One more important aspect of social cohesion research is the ongoing debate on factors affecting it. Importantly, this is linked to the belief that social cohesion is being gradually weakened by the effects of modernisation and globalisation. While this assumption has been questioned and, to some degree, refuted in the academic discourse, particularly for Western industrial nations, the ongoing discussion remains marked by concerns about decreasing social cohesion and the resulting social and political instability (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018). Hence, the interest of scholars and policymakers is to understand both what drives social cohesion and what effects social cohesion has on other aspects of life. Several lessons can be learned from these debates. First, prior research supports the contention that inequality negatively affects social cohesion (Bartelsmann Stiftung 2013; Bartelsmann Stiftung 2018). Studies also affirm that technological progress and education have positive impacts on social cohesion (Moustakas 2023). Works on the impact of ethnic diversity show mixed results, however. While studies like Putnam's (2007) suggest that ethnic diversity can erode social capital by decreasing trust both within and between racial groups, other authors challenge these conclusions (Gesthuizen et al. 2009). Similarly, shared values are found to have both negative and positive effects (Moustakas 2023). Importantly, although most studies have focused on understanding social cohesion and its dynamics within European societies, little attention has been given to examining the impact of European Union accession on social cohesion in member states and candidate countries.

Our definition of social cohesion derives from the InvigoratEU Analytical Glossary, according to which social cohesion refers to the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimising disparities, avoiding marginalisation and representing stable institutions (Brandt & Tekin, 2024). With the definitional variations described above, multiple operationalisations of the concept emerged. One of the most prominent early frameworks was developed by Chan, To, and Chan, who proposed eight dimensions for measuring social cohesion. These dimensions were grouped into subjective and objective components, reflecting the perceptual and behavioural manifestations of an individual's place and role in society. The subjective component includes general trust among fellow citizens, willingness to cooperate and help others, trust in public figures, and confidence in institutions. The objective component, on the other hand, encompasses social participation, volunteerism and donations, the presence or absence of major intergroup alliances and cleavages, and political participation (Chan et al., 2006).

Another seminal contribution to the academic literature is that of Jane Jenson, who, building on her earlier research, identified three key dimensions that capture the essence of social cohesion in contemporary societies (2010). These are: social cohesion as inclusion (encompassing access to resources such as finances, economic activity, education, health, and technology), social cohesion as ethnic and cultural homogeneity (relating to factors such as ethnic fractionalisation, bilingualism or multilingualism, and the proportion of the foreign-born population), and social cohesion as participation (including trust, electoral participation, involvement in voluntary associations, and charitable giving).

These two frameworks reflect the definitional divergences within the study of social cohesion. The approach proposed by Chan et al. aligns with a narrower interpretation of the concept, emphasising factors such as interpersonal trust, cooperation, and participation. In contrast,

Jenson's framework adopts a broader perspective, encompassing not only social aspects of cohesion but also socio-economic factors, including disparities in access to resources and the challenges associated with ethnic and cultural diversity. Taken together, however, these frameworks provide a more comprehensive understanding of social cohesion, one that integrates both the interpersonal and structural aspects contributing to a cohesive society and thus serves as a more robust analytical tool for the purposes of this research.

It is, therefore, that the present research uses a merger of the two frameworks. Specifically, it incorporates two dimensions from Jenson's model, *social cohesion as inclusion* and *social cohesion as participation and belonging*, alongside the *subjective dimension* proposed by Chan et al. Accordingly, the study examines the following components to capture levels of social cohesion: access to economic resources, access to finances, access to technology, access to health, access to education, political/electoral participation, belonging, participation in voluntary associations, charitable giving, trust among fellow citizens, willingness to cooperate and help others, trust in public figures, and confidence in institutions. It is important to note that the three objective components identified by Chan et al. – social participation, volunteerism/donations, and political participation – are subsumed or integrated under Jenson's participation and belonging dimension, as they closely resemble and, in some instances, overlap with it. Furthermore, the analysis deliberately excludes the *ethnic and cultural homogeneity* component from the definition of social cohesion, as it lacks relevance from a policy perspective. Unlike other components, where interventions can enhance or reduce specific aspects of social cohesion, such as trust or participation, the ethnic composition of a society is neither a feasible nor a desirable target of policy intervention. Including this dimension, therefore, would not contribute to actionable policy recommendations. Therefore, the aspect of ethnicity will be taken into account in terms of potential disparities across ethnic groups rather than the composition of a society.

Additionally, for ease of operationalisation and further analysis, the selected components were consolidated into five larger dimensions. Access to economic activity, finances, and technology were clustered under **Access to economic and technological resources**. The two other inclusion components – **Access to education** and **Access to healthcare** – remain as separate dimensions. Belonging, participation in voluntary associations, charitable giving, willingness to cooperate and help others, and trust among fellow citizens were grouped under **Social participation, belonging, and people-to-people relations**. Finally, political participation, including electoral participation, along with trust in public figures and confidence in institutions, formed the fifth dimension, **Political participation and institutional trust**.

Combined, these five dimensions provide a balanced framework that integrates structural, behavioural, and perceptual aspects, as well as horizontal (people-to-people) and vertical (people-to-state) elements of social cohesion. Access to economic and technological resources reflects the degree to which wealth and opportunities are equitably distributed, an essential factor, as inclusive environments tend to foster stronger social connections. Social participation, belonging, and people-to-people relations capture the extent to which individuals are linked to one another and actively engage in their communities, reflecting mutual trust, understanding, and solidarity at interpersonal level. Finally, political participation and institutional trust measure the degree of citizens' involvement in decision-making and confidence in institutions and leaders, indicating the strength of the relationship between society and the state.

Methodological Framework

Based on the operationalisation of social cohesion, empirical research proceeded along two stages. The first stage, which involved desk research, implying the quantitative analysis of the secondary data, examined how each candidate country (Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Ukraine, and Serbia) performs on the indicators corresponding to the five dimensions. The set of indicators was primarily drawn from Chan et al. (2006) and Jenson (2010), but where indicator data was unavailable for the candidate countries, alternative indicators were used (see the full list in the Annex 1). A total of 28 indicators were used to capture the levels of social cohesion in the candidate countries. Where possible, the collected data was disaggregated by geographic areas and demographic groups to allow for a more nuanced understanding of within country variations. Country figures were also compared with those from earlier years, typically a decade prior, allowing for an assessment of the impact of the EU integration process on the candidate states. The year of signing the Association Agreement (AA) by the country was taken as a major point of reference for this matter. For contextual purposes, corresponding averages for EU member states were also used as a point of reference.

The second stage of the analysis, which comprised of expert interviews, delved deeper into four cases: Georgia and Moldova in the EN and Serbia and North Macedonia in the WB. While the primary goal was to cover both regions in the qualitative part of the analysis, the selection of specific cases within each region was guided primarily by data availability. The expert interviews had two components: scoring and in-depth narratives with national experts, aimed at assessing each country's standing across the same set of dimensions of social cohesion. For that matter, interviews in each country were conducted according to the following thematic clusters: *Access to education*; *Access to economic and technological resources*; *Access to healthcare*; *Social participation, belonging, and people-to-people relations*; *Political participation and institutional trust*. For each of the cluster, respondents were selected based on their area of expertise, including representatives from academia, government, and civil society organisations based in the country concerned. For each thematic cluster, up to three national experts were interviewed per country. Priority was given to in-person interviews, although online and hybrid formats were also used when necessary. With certain exclusions (mostly, in North Macedonia), expert interviews – including both scoring and in-depth components – were conducted in groups to ensure that scoring decisions were based on detailed discussions, ensuring the reliability of final scores. For each of the thematic clusters, separate questionnaires have been developed. Each of these questionnaires consisted of four indicators, with the exception of *Access to economic and technological resources*, which included five of them (see the full list in the Annex 2). Experts were first asked to share their thoughts on the indicator in question. For instance, an economics expert or group of economics experts was asked to provide a general assessment of income equality in the country, with a particular focus on disparities across geographical areas and demographic groups. After the discussion, experts were given time to translate their views into numerical form using a scoring card.

To the date, there exist no systematic data on social cohesion that would allow for a comparative analysis of the candidate countries. Expert scoring, which was conducted based on the same scoring system across the four countries aimed at addressing this gap. The scoring system was designed in the following way: the assessment was conducted on a scale from 0 to

10, where 0 represented the poorest outcome and 10 represented the best outcome for that specific indicator. To promote consistency in interpretation, the 10-point scale was divided into five equal parts, each accompanied by a brief statement describing the corresponding score range. Experts were asked to provide their assessment either as a whole number or a decimal value. Discussion and scoring were conducted sequentially, indicator by indicator. In the second part of the expert interview and scoring session, experts were asked to discuss the impact of the EU integration process on the same set of indicators. Similar to the previous exercise, they were then asked to translate their views into quantitative terms using a five-point scale (see the sample questionnaire in the annex), assessing whether the approximation process had worsened, improved, or had no effect on the situation related to each indicator. Expert scores were analysed using the method of Social Network Analysis (SNA) – specifically, its centrality measure – as this allowed to map a comparative picture of the relation between the social cohesion dimensions and the countries under study.

The added value of complementing the quantitative analysis with expert interviews and scoring was multi-layered: it allowed for the corroboration and enrichment of earlier findings; it provided an opportunity for a more systematic comparison of social cohesion and the influence of the EU integration process on it across the countries under study; delving deeper into the nuances, it also helped identify local peculiarities of cohesion and reveal factors challenging it in current geopolitical setting. Overall, it enabled the development of actionable policy recommendations, designed for EU agencies and institutions.

In the desk research, country performance was first assessed at the indicator level by classifying each country as performing relatively high, moderate, or low on each parameter. These classifications were then tallied to identify consistent patterns of strong or weak performance within each dimension. The resulting counts informed a qualitative summary of each country's overall standing within a dimension. It should be noted that this approach does not generate a strict numerical ranking of social cohesion; rather, it provides a general comparative sequence based on observed patterns of performance across indicators and dimensions. While this approach provided a structured and transparent overview of country performance, it also had inherent limitations: indicators based on official data do not always capture contextual nuances, recent developments, current sentiment, or qualitative aspects of governance, social dynamics, individual well-being, and institutional functioning. To complement these gaps, the second method – expert scoring – was used, allowing national experts to provide informed assessments that reflect on-the-ground realities and interpretive insights not fully captured through official statistics alone.

3 Desk Research – An Overview of the Secondary Data on Social Cohesion Dimensions in the Candidate Countries

This chapter evaluates the performance of the six candidate countries across 28 indicators grouped into five dimensions: access to education; access to economic and technological resources; access to healthcare; social participation, belonging, and people-to-people relations; and political participation and institutional trust. Where possible, data was disaggregated by geographic areas and demographic groups to provide a more nuanced understanding of within-country variation. Country results were also compared with figures from earlier

periods – typically a decade earlier – to assess the impact of the EU integration process on the candidate countries. For context, average values for EU member states were also included as a benchmark.

Access to Education

Education plays a key role in social cohesion. It strengthens the social fabric of nations by promoting shared values, mutual understanding, and equal opportunities, enabling the citizens to participate meaningfully in their community. Similarly, in the context of EN and WB, in countries like Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine, access to education is central to the strength of social unity and connectedness. And although each country has undergone significant socio-economic transformations in the aftermath of the collapse of the Socialist bloc, they still face a complex range of challenges in terms of ensuring full access to education (Akhvlediani et. al. 2025).

This chapter examines the state of the education system in the six candidate countries from the two regions. Specifically, it zooms in on the availability of educational institutions, measuring it across four inter-related indicators – the number of schools per 1,000 pupils aged 6 to 18, the percentage of out-of-school children[1], the percentage of out-of-school youth, and the gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education. Additionally, to capture the quality dimension, it includes data on learning achievement in reading. Where possible, the chapter highlights regional and socio-economic disparities and compares the latest available country-level data with corresponding figures from earlier years. To provide more context, it also includes comparisons with data from the European Union, and where the EU averages data is missing – from two high-performing education systems in the EU, Estonia and Finland.

The number of schools per 1,000 pupils aged 6 to 18 – an indicator measuring availability of primary and secondary schools – shows that schools are widely available in all six countries. In Georgia, for instance, the school-to-pupil ratio stands at 3.62 in 2023/24, with Moldova reporting a similar figure of 3.59 schools per 1,000 pupils in 2023/24. In Ukraine, the corresponding figure stands at 3.25 in the reporting year, down from 3.67 in 2019/20[2]. Notably, the school-to-pupil ratio in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, are consistent with ratios observed in Estonia and Finland (3.29 and 3.64, respectively). The figures, however, are visibly higher in Serbia and North Macedonia, with the former reaching 5.08 and the latter 4.35 schools per 1,000 pupils. It is also worth noting, that Montenegro registered a relatively lower figure for school-to-child ratio, 2.22 in 2023/24, which is likely due to a combination of demographic and geographic characteristics of the country; with highly urbanised population (World Population Review 2025) and a relatively small territory, schools tend to be more concentrated in large cities rather than dispersed across the country.

[1] Ratios are calculated from school pupils aged 6 to 18, and not the overall age cohort falling from 6 to 18.
[2] The reduction can be attributed to significant population outflows following the Russian invasion, as well as the fact that many schools are now on the Russian-occupied areas.

Table 1. Number of Schools per 1,000 Pupils aged 6 to 18

Country	Year	Schools (#)	School population	schools per 1000 pupil (#)	Year	Schools (#)	School population	schools per 1000 pupil (#)
Serbia	2023 /24	3,711	730,474	**5.08**	2013/ 14	3,929	827,218	**4.74**
North Mac- edonia	2023 /24	1,086	249,402	**4.35**	2017/ 18	1,118	263,906	**4.23**
Georgia	2023 /24	2,296	633,593	**3.62**	2013/ 14	2,328	546,679	**4.25**
Moldova	2023 /24	1,201	334,404	**3.59**	2017/ 18	1,243	335,621	**3.70**
Ukraine	2023 /24	12,701	3,906,174	**3.25**	2019/ 20	15,194	4,138,466	**3.67**
Montenegro	2023 /24	230	96,396	**2.22**	2019/ 20	221	99,391	**2.38**

Sources: National Statistics Office of Georgia [Geostat], n.d.; Ministry of Education and Research of Estonia, n.d.; Statistics Finland, 2022; Statistical Office of Montenegro [MONSTAT], n.d.; Statistical Office of Montenegro [MONSTAT], n.d.; Eurydice, n.d.; TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Centre, 2019; National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, n.d.; State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, n.d.; Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2016, 2024; State Statistics Service of Ukraine, n.d.)

The share of out-of-school children[3] – an indicator measuring participation in primary education – paints a moderately positive picture. In 2023, Montenegro and Moldova reported a near-complete absence of out-of-school children, with figures standing at 0.22% and 0.58%, respectively. In contrast, the situation in Serbia and North Macedonia was less favourable, with latest figures standing at 3.75% and 3.79%, respectively. Similarly, Georgia recorded a rate of 4.81% in 2023. The picture is more concerning in Ukraine, where the latest available data from 2021 shows an out-of-school rate of 15.87%. Looking at trends over time, most countries show little to no change. However, Moldova stands out for its notable improvement, while Ukraine has seen a gradual worsening, likely influenced by the ongoing invasion of the Russian Federation. Additionally, the corresponding figure for Europe as a whole was 1.2% in 2023, meaning that only two out of the six countries (Montenegro and Moldova) reported comparable results.

Table 2. The Share (%) of Out-of-School Children in Primary and Upper Secondary Education

	Primary education				Secondary education			
Country	2023	2021	2017	2012	2023	2021	2017	2012
Montenegro	0.22		0.12	0.87	13.31		14.46	
Moldova	0.58		0.64	8.1	13.87		23.14	34.33
Serbia		3.75	1.03	3.65		14.22	11.13	11.03
North Macedonia	3.79		2.91	2.31	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Georgia	4.81		2.03	2.85	1.49		1.66	3.65
Ukraine		15.87	16.46	10.24		21.68	8.91	3.38

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

[3] Percentage of children of primary school age who are not in school.

The share of out-of-school youth[4] – an indicator measuring participation in secondary education – presents a more diverse situation across the five countries[5]. Ukraine reported the highest rate at 21.68% in 2021, followed by Serbia with 14.22% in the same year. Moldova and Montenegro show similar results in 2023, 13.87% and 13.31%, respectively. In contrast, Georgia recorded the lowest figure, with just 1.49% in 2023, significantly lower than the European average of 5.7%. As with out-of-school children, the only notable changes over time are observed in Moldova and Ukraine. In Moldova, the rate declined from 34.33% in 2012 to 13.87% in 2023, while in Ukraine, it increased sharply, from 3.38% in 2012 to 21.68% in 2021.

To complement the findings, we also refer to the data on out-of-school youth by The World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE)[6]. Analysis of the latest available data reveals that the out-of-school rate is strongly influenced by socio-economic factors. The highest rates are found consistently among the poorest segments in all countries, with Moldova showing the largest gap with the national average. Large disparities are also observed in Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Georgia. Rural-urban divides are also visible in most countries, though these gaps tend to be less pronounced than those related to income.

Next, the chapter examines the issue of access to tertiary education, which is another key component of well-functioning educational systems. More specifically, we look at **Gross enrolment ratio** of the UNESCO Institute of Statistics. This indicator measures the total participation in tertiary education[7] – regardless of age – as a percentage of the population in the official university age group (typically 18-24 years)[8].

In 2022, the ratio stood at 79.33% in Georgia, 72.03% in Serbia, 68.06% in Moldova, 57.43% in Montenegro, and 53.16% in North Macedonia. The most recent available data for Ukraine, from 2021, shows a ratio of 75.91%. Notably, the corresponding average from that year for the European Union stood at 79.69%, meaning that only Georgia and Ukraine are in line with the overall EU levels in terms of university enrolment rates. It is also worth noting that over the past decade, countries like Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, and Serbia have experienced significant increases in tertiary education enrolment, with the most pronounced rise observed in

[4] Percentage of youth of upper secondary school age who are not in school.
[5] Data for North Macedonia is not available from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS). However, according to the World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) database (see the following endnote for more information), the out-of-school youth rate in North Macedonia stood at 12% in 2019. Due to differences in data collection methodologies between WIDE and UIS, comparisons should be interpreted with caution.
[6] Although both datasets are hosted on UNESCO-affiliated websites, they rely on different sources of information. WIDE draws primarily from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), while the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) compiles data from various sources, including national governments, Eurostat, and others. Due to the availability of more recent data, our analysis primarily relies on the UIS data.
[7] According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, tertiary education includes short-cycle tertiary education programs, Bachelor's or equivalent degree programs, and Master's or equivalent degree program. Short-cycle tertiary education, on its part, includes (higher) technical education, community college education, technician or advanced vocational training, associate degree, etc. For details, see the International Standard Classification of Education by UNESCO.
[8] The rate is calculated by dividing the total number of students enrolled in tertiary education institutions by the population of the official age group for that level, then multiplying by 100 to convey it as a percentage. The official age group can differ by countries, depending on the length of tertiary education, but it typically falls between the 18-22, 18-23, or 18-24 ranges.

Georgia[9], which climbed to the top of the list a decade after being one of the two worst-performing countries. The increase was also sizable in the case of Moldova.

Table 3. Gross Enrolment Ratio in Tertiary Education (%)

Country	2022	2013
Georgia	79.33	40.59
Ukraine	75.91 (2021)	81.53
Serbia	72.03	56.70
Moldova	68.06	41.28
Montenegro	57.43	60.43
North Macedonia	53.16	38.95
European Union	79.69	67.52

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

To measure the quality of primary and secondary education, we refer to the **Learning achievement in reading at the end of lower secondary** indicator[10], based on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). The data shows uneven outcomes across countries. In 2018, 91% of pupils in Ukraine passed it successfully, followed by Serbia with 87% pass rate in 2022. In Moldova the overall average was 80% in 2022, while in Montenegro, the figure stood at 77% in the same year. Notably, North Macedonia and Georgia recorded significantly lower results; in 2022, the average for Georgia was 66%, while for North Macedonia, the rate was 60%. For comparison, the corresponding figures in 2022 were 97% in Estonia and 92% in Finland, meaning that only Ukraine and Serbia are close to the performance levels observed in the two countries.

From a temporal perspective, comparisons with previous data points reveal a relatively stable picture across both the candidate countries and reference cases of Estonia and Finland. Of the five countries with available historical data (excluding Ukraine, for which data is missing), four show consistent results over time. The only exception is Georgia, where the rate declined notably, from 74% in 2015 to 66% in 2022.

Further analysis of the data through geographic and demographic lenses reveals two notable findings. First, across all candidate countries (except Ukraine), students who do not speak the language of the exam at home perform significantly or notably worse than their peers[11]. The performance gap between students who do and do not speak the exam language at home is largest in Georgia (23 percentage points), followed by North Macedonia (20 percentage points) and Serbia (17 percentage points). Second, students from the poorest socio-economic backgrounds show substantially lower achievement rates. The gap is widest in North Macedonia (17 percentage points), followed by Moldova (15 points) and Georgia (14 points). Results

[9] The increase is due to a decline in the number of university-age students (18-22) and a corresponding rise in both international and master's-level students.
[10] Percentage of pupils of lower secondary school age taking part in the assessment and passing four levels of increasing difficulty.
[11] The percentage of students who speak a different language at home compared to the one in which they sat their PISA assessment. Tests are usually administered in the language of instruction used in each participating country. For instance, according to OECD, in PISA 2022 in Moldova, 82% of students took the test in Romanian, while the rest took it in Russian. In Georgia, 93% of students took the test in Georgian, 5% in Azeri, while the rest took it in Russian.

are generally lower in rural areas, with the gap reaching 28 percentage points in North Macedonia.

For comparison, income-based disparities are much less pronounced in Estonia (94% among the poorest vs. 97% national average) and Finland (86% among the poorest vs. 92% national average), with urban-rural differences being virtually non-existent in both countries. However, disparities become more evident when language is taken into account. In Estonia, the pass rate among students who do not speak the language of the exam at home is 92%, five percentage points below the national average. In Finland, the gap is wider, with a 16-point difference (76% vs. 92%). Still, both countries outperform those in the WB and EN in terms of equity in learning achievement.

Table 4. Learning Achievement in Reading (End of Lower Secondary)

Country	Year	Percent	Groups/areas with lower rates[12]	Year	Percent
Ukraine	2018	91	80% among the poorest; 81% in rural areas 87% among males.	N/A	
Serbia	2022	87	70% among those who do not speak the exam language at home; 78% among the poorest; 83% among males.	2012	88
Moldova	2022	80	65% among the poorest; 70% in rural areas; 74% among males; 75% among those who do not speak the exam language at home; 76% among the poor.	2015	79
Montenegro	2022	77	63% among those who do not speak the exam language at home; 64% among the poorest; 70% among males.	2012	82
Georgia	2022	66	43% among those who do not speak the exam language at home; 52% among the poorest; 54% in rural areas; 57% among males; 59% among the poor	2015	74
North Macedonia	2022	60	32% in rural areas; 40% among those who do not speak the exam language at home; 43% among the poorest; 53% among males	2015	57

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Taken together, the figures suggest that access to primary education is near-universal across the six countries (except Ukraine), while access to secondary education remains uneven and more problematic. Disparities in the latter are most pronounced among the poorest and rural populations, as well as for specific ethnic minority groups. Additionally, although the data indicates that tertiary enrolment is stable or are improving, it still lags behind the EU average, with only Georgia and Ukraine showing commensurate results. The data also suggests that there are significant differences in learning outcomes across income levels and settlement types, as well as language backgrounds. Moreover, among the six countries, only Ukraine and Serbia come close to the learning levels observed in well-performing EU education systems. At the same time, there has been a notable degree of consistency over time in most countries.

When we look at country performance across the education-related indicators, Serbia and Ukraine emerge as the strongest performers. **Serbia** combines a high number of schools per 1,000 pupils, moderate shares of out-of-school children and youth, strong gross enrolment ratios in tertiary education, and high learning achievement in reading. Likewise, **Ukraine**

[12] Only differences of three percentage points or less from the national average are shown. Data applies to latest years (2018 for Ukraine and 2022 for the rest of the countries).

maintains good school-to-pupil ratio, high tertiary enrolment, and the highest learning achievement results, though its shares of out-of-school children and youth have worsened due to the ongoing invasion. Georgia and Moldova show solid but mixed performance. **Georgia** matches EU levels in availability of schools and reports the lowest share of out-of-school youth, as well as fast-rising tertiary enrolment, although its learning achievement figure and share of out-of-school children remain weaker. **Moldova** performs well in the share of out-of-school children, shows major long-term improvement in the share of out-of-school youth, and continues to increase tertiary enrolment, with mid-level learning achievement results. The two remaining candidate countries – Montenegro and North Macedonia – show relatively weaker performance. **Montenegro** has an excellent share of out-of-school children but the lowest school-to-pupil ratio, along with moderate out-of-school youth, tertiary enrolment, and learning achievement figures; **North Macedonia**, despite its high school-to-pupil ratio, faces high shares of out-of-school children and youth and the lowest learning achievement, placing it among the weakest in terms of access to education.

Access to Economic and Technological Resources

Access to Economic Resources

Economic conditions play important role in achieving social cohesion. They shape how people live together: steady jobs, predictable incomes, and rising living standards make it easier to trust institutions, cooperate across groups, and feel that the rules are fair. However, when poverty is high and inequality is sharp, discontent grows and divides regions, generations, and genders. The EU candidate countries (Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine) have different economic profiles and historical predispositions that till this day determine their economic outcomes. Therefore, assessing these conditions helps show how far they support or strain social cohesion and whether the EU accession process is helping to close gaps.

To read this picture, this subsection uses a focused set of indicators: Gini Index, poverty rate, unemployment rate, and the share of informal employment. Each indicator is shown at two points in time: 2013 as a common baseline and the latest available year. For context, EU averages are included to show whether countries' outcomes are moving toward or away from EU levels.

Gini Index is a standard indicator to describe how unequally income is shared in a society. It ranges from 0% (everyone has the same income) to 100% (one person has all the income). Lower values mean a more even distribution. Across the six EU candidate countries, inequality generally eased between the 2013 baseline and the latest available year. Within the group, Georgia currently has the highest Gini index at 35.7% in 2024. Ukraine, on the other hand, recorded the lowest level of inequality at 25.6% in 2020, only slightly higher than its 2013 value of 24.6%. However, the full-scale war since 2022 has likely worsened inequality, meaning this figure probably understates current conditions. The WB trio started with higher inequality but achieved the strongest improvements. The Gini Index fell by 5.6 percentage points (pp) in both North Macedonia and Montenegro, and by 4.7 pp in Serbia. Changes were smaller among the EN countries: Georgia's index declined by 2.9 pp, and Moldova's by 2.8 pp, with the latter remaining below the EU average throughout the period. Overall, the gap with the EU average

narrowed, but Georgia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia still record higher inequality than the EU level.

Table 5. Gini Index

Country	Year	Gini Index (%)	Year	Gini Index (%)
Georgia	2013	38.6	2024	35.7
Montenegro	2013	38.5	2020	32.9
Serbia	2013	38.0	2021	33.3
North Macedonia	2013	37.0	2020	31.4
Moldova	2013	28.5	2021	25.7
Ukraine	2013	24.6	2020	25.6
EU Average	2013	30.6	2024	29.4

Sources: World Health Organization (WHO) and Eurostat

Poverty Rate, another indicator of access to economic resources, is tracked here in two ways: share of population at risk of relative poverty after transfers (threshold at 50% of equivilised median income)[13], and extreme absolute poverty (the share living on less than $3 a day (2021 PPP))[14]. Since 2013, relative poverty rates have fallen in nearly all EU candidate countries, though to different degrees. As of the latest available data, Ukraine and North Macedonia record the highest relative poverty rates, at 23.4% and 22.2% respectively. Moldova and Montenegro follow closely, at 20.7% and 20.3%, respectively. Within the group, Georgia and Serbia show the lowest relative poverty rates (19.8% and 19.7%, respectively), however, they are well above the EU average at about 16.2% in 2024. As for the progress over the analysed period, Montenegro and Serbia show the greatest improvement, reducing relative poverty rate by 5.9 pp and 4.9 pp, respectively. North Macedonia, Georgia, and Ukraine show more moderate progress, while Moldova stands out as the only country where relative poverty increased, rising by 1.9 pp between 2013 and 2023. Notably, since Ukraine's most recent data precede the full-scale war, the conflict has likely reversed some of these gains that is not yet reflected in official statistics[15].

Table 6. Proportion of People at Risk of Poverty in the EU Candidate Countries (Relative)

Country	Year	% of people at risk of poverty	Year	% of people at risk of poverty
Ukraine	2013	24.8	2021	23.4
North Macedonia	2013	24.2	2023	22.2
Moldova	2013	18.8	2023	20.7
Montenegro	2013	25.2	2022	20.3
Georgia	2013	21.5	2023	19.8
Serbia	2013	24.5	2024	19.7
EU Average	2013	16.8	2024	16.2

Source: Eurostat

[13] Figures are based on equivalised disposable income after taxes and transfers, adjusted for household size and composition using the OECD equivalence scale.

[14] In 2025, the World Bank revised its international poverty lines to 2021 purchasing power parity (PPP) values, increasing the extreme poverty line from $2.15 to $3.00 per day. (source: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2025/06/05/june-2025-update-to-global-poverty-lines?utm)

[15] In 2022, the State Statistics Service of Ukraine suspended the Household Budget Survey due to martial law.

When looking at the extreme absolute poverty of less than $3 a day (2021 PPP), all six EU candidate countries have seen major progress over the past decade. In 2013, several still had notable shares of people living in extreme poverty – especially Georgia (14.9%), Serbia (7.8%), and North Macedonia (7.4%). According to the latest available data, these numbers had fallen sharply, with countries reporting rates between 0% (Moldova in 2022 and Ukraine in 2020) and 5.2% (Georgia in 2023). The EU average is not available for this indicator, but for context, the highest rates in the EU in 2023 were in Lithuania (1.1%) and Bulgaria (1.0%). That suggests that most candidate countries still lag behind EU members, even though progress has been significant.

Overall, the data shows that EU candidate countries have made notable progress in reducing poverty, though challenges remain. Extreme absolute poverty has almost disappeared across the region, reflecting improvements in basic welfare. However, relative poverty rates remain high, with around one in five people in these countries still at risk of poverty.

Unemployment rate is another key measure of access to economic activity in EU candidate countries. In this report, the data also includes the NEET rate (young people not in employment, education, or training) to capture youth outcomes. According to the latest available data, unemployment is highest in Montenegro (14.1%) and North Macedonia (13.9%), while lowest in Moldova (1.4 %). Since 2013, the largest declines were recorded in North Macedonia (by 15.1 pp) and Serbia (by 14.8 pp), followed by Georgia (by 7.9 pp) and Montenegro (by 5.5 pp). Moldova was already low and fell slightly (by 0.5 pp). Meanwhile, in Ukraine unemployment increased from a low rate of 7.2% to 9.8% in 2021, likely increasing further in the following years due to war-time disruptions. Overall, a clear micro-regional pattern emerges. The WB started with high unemployment and are on the way toward the EU average (5.9% in 2024), while the EN countries show a mixed picture: unemployment in Georgia improved, in Moldova it remained very low, and Ukraine diverged upward due to war-related challenges. Regarding the NEET unemployment of youth, latest levels are highest in Georgia (24.9%), followed by Montenegro (20.1%) and North Macedonia (19.1%). Serbia (12.4%) and Moldova (13.3%) are close to the EU level (12.5%), and Ukraine is mid-range (16.5%). Changes since 2013 are broadly favourable. Youth unemployment decreased the most in Serbia (-7.4 pp), followed by Georgia (-6.1 pp), North Macedonia (-5.8 pp), and Moldova (-5.3 pp). However, Montenegro is the exception where youth unemployment increased over the analysed period (+2.2 pp).

Table 7. Unemployment Rate in the EU Candidate Countries

Country	Type	Year	Unemployment Rate (%)	Year	Unemployment Rate (%)
Montenegro	Total	2013	19.6	2024	14.1
	NEET	2013	17.9	2022	20.1
North Macedonia	Total	2013	29.0	2024	13.9
	NEET	2013	24.9	2023	19.1
Georgia	Total	2013	19.4	2024	11.5
	NEET	2013	31.0	2020	24.9
Ukraine	Total	2013	7.2	2021	9.8
	NEET	2014	20.0	2017	16.5
Serbia	Total	2013	22.2	2024	7.4
	NEET	2013	19.8	2023	12.4
Moldova	Total	2013	1.9	2024	1.4
	NEET	2013	18.6	2023	13.3
European Union	Total	2013	11.6	2024	5.9
	NEET	2013	17.5	2024	12.5

Source: World Health Organization (WHO) and Eurostat

An additional aspect of employment that strongly influences social cohesion is **informal employment**[16]. This indicator measures the share of workers who are employed without formal contracts or social security coverage, meaning that their jobs are not regulated or protected by labour laws. A large informal sector limits access to social protection and contributes to inequality. Informal employment[17] remains widespread across the region but with clear differences. Georgia has the highest share at 55.6% (as of 2020). Moldova also shows a high level at 52.2% (2024), down from 57.1% in 2013[18]. In the WB, rates are significantly lower and declining: Serbia reduced informality from 23% to 18% in 2013–2024, and North Macedonia achieved the largest improvement, halving its rate from 22.6% to 11.1% over the same period. As for gender differences, men and women work informally at similar rates in Georgia and Moldova, while in North Macedonia women are less likely, and in Serbia slightly more likely, to be informally employed. For comparison, the EU rate was just 3.4% in 2024, making informality one of the largest gaps to close on the path to convergence.

To sum up, the analysis of the above indicators shows some clear patterns. Overall, the three WB candidates have moved closer to the EU pattern on employment and inequality. Within the group, Montenegro still faces the most pressure in the labour market and youth outcomes, despite recent easing in poverty and inequality. North Macedonia shows steady gains on employment and informality that have not yet translated into lower relative poverty. Serbia is closest to the EU on employment, yet the income inequality and relative poverty remain higher than the EU.

In the EN trio, Moldova stands closer to the EU on overall inequality and unemployment, but faces stubborn relative poverty pressures. Georgia has improved on several fronts, yet it remains weak on income inequality, job informality, and youth outcomes. Ukraine entered the

[16] By the definition of International Labour Organisation (ILO), informal employment refers to jobs that are not covered by formal labour regulations or social protection systems. It includes people who work in unregistered or small-scale businesses, those producing goods for their own household use (such as subsistence farmers), unpaid family workers, and employees without formal contracts or benefits, whether they work in formal or informal enterprises or as domestic workers.

[17] The indicator is not available for Montenegro and Ukraine. Source: Ilostat

[18] Earlier data is not available for Georgia.

period with low inequality and very little extreme poverty, but the war has almost certainly worsened the labour market and poverty outcomes.

Put simply, our analysis shows that absolute poverty has nearly disappeared across the six, but relative poverty and labour market outcomes continue to mark a gap with the EU.

Access to Technological Resources

Access to digital technology has become a central factor in shaping social cohesion. In the digital era, reliable internet connections, affordable devices, and the ability to use digital tools effectively are prerequisites for meaningful participation in education, employment, public services, and civic life. When access to technology is widespread and equitable, it can help reduce barriers between groups, connect remote communities, and promote inclusion across lines of geography, income, and ethnicity. But when access is uneven, it reinforces existing divides and leaves disadvantaged groups at risk of deeper exclusion.

Households with Internet access at home – This indicator measures the share of households with an internet connection at home. Across the six countries, household access rose sharply between 2013 and the most recent year available. In the EN group, starting points were lower but the catch-up has been fast. Georgia moved from 34.5% in 2013 to 89.0% in 2023, the sharpest climb in the sample and the highest coverage of households as of the latest available data. Internet access in Ukraine rose from 40.0% to 84.2% by 2023, and in Moldova it improved from 46.0% to 74.1% by 2024. In the WB, access was higher from the start. Over the analysed period, Serbia advanced from 55.8% to 88.8% of households with internet access at home. Montenegro and North Macedonia also converged toward the same range, from 55.8% to 84.5% (2013–2024) and from 65.1% to 83.8% (2013–2023), respectively. Notably, all six countries stand below the EU average for the indicator; however, the common pattern is convergence over time.

Regarding the rural-urban gap in the access to internet, countries have reached significant progress over the analysed period. As of the latest available data, the largest gap is observable in Moldova (15.6 pp in 2024), while smallest in North Macedonia (2.9 pp in 2018). Notably, over the analysed period, rural-urban gap in access to internet decreased the most in Georgia.

Table 8. Percentage of Households with Internet Access at Home

Country	Level	Year	Households with Internet Access (%)	Year	% of Households with Internet Access(%)
Georgia	Total	2013	34.5	2023	89.0
	Urban	2013	59.30	2023	93.10
	Rural	2013	9.7	2023	83.4
Moldova	Total	2013	46.0	2024	74.1
	Urban	2014	57.1	2024	83.0
	Rural	2014	31.4	2024	67.4
Montenegro	Total	2013	55.8	2024	84.5
	Urban	2015	75.2	2024	87.6
	Rural	2015	52.7	2024	78.2
North Macedonia	Total	2013	65.1	2023	83.8
	Urban	-	-	2018	80.8
	Rural	-	-	2018	77.1
Serbia	Total	2013	55.8	2024	88.8
	Urban	2016	72.5	2024	91.1
	Rural	2016	51.8	2024	84.2
Ukraine	Total	2013	40.0	2023	84.2
	Urban	2013	57.9	2021	87.4
	Rural	2013	28.4	2021	72.8
European Union	Total	2013	77.2	2024	94.2

Source: International Telecommunication Union

When we look at country performance across the economic and technological indicators, Serbia and Moldova emerge as the strongest performers. **Serbia** performs well across most dimensions, combining one of the lowest relative poverty rates, low informal employment, moderate unemployment, a mid-range Gini Index, and high household internet access. **Moldova** reports a low Gini Index, the lowest unemployment rate, and zero absolute poverty, yet it still struggles with relative poverty, informal employment, and limited internet access. They are followed by Georgia and Montenegro. **Montenegro** shows moderate results in terms of Gini Index, low absolute poverty, improved internet access, but high relative poverty and unemployment. **Georgia** shows one of the lowest relative poverty rates and the highest internet access in the group. However, it faces challenges related to high informal employment and absolute poverty, alongside the highest Gini Index. At the lower end are North Macedonia and Ukraine. **North Macedonia** shows high relative poverty, high unemployment, a moderate Gini Index, and slightly lower internet access, despite achieving reductions in informal employment and having nearly eliminated absolute poverty. **Ukraine** reports the lowest Gini Index and no reported absolute poverty, but faces high relative poverty, unemployment and informality, as well as only moderate internet access.

Access to Healthcare

Access to quality healthcare is another key pillar of social cohesion. Limited access reinforces social divides, leaving poorer or disadvantaged populations more vulnerable and deepening disparities between regions and generations. This subsection examines several indicators that capture the accessibility and performance of healthcare systems in selected EU candidate countries. These include life expectancy, crude death rate, birth rates, infant mortality rate, out-of-pocket expenditures, and the availability of medical personnel and infrastructure,

measured through the number of physicians and hospital beds per population. Together, these indicators help assess how well countries ensure basic conditions for health that support social cohesion, and how far they align with the EU.

Life expectancy at birth is one of the most direct measures of population well-being and access to healthcare. Among the six, North Macedonia recorded the highest life expectancy in 2023 at 77.6 years, followed closely by Serbia (76.2) and Montenegro (75.3). Notably, EN countries are lower on the list. Across the EU candidate countries, life expectancy at birth increased modestly between 2013 and 2023. Despite improvements, all six countries remain below the EU average of 81.4 years, with the gap ranging from about 4 years in North Macedonia to over 10 years in Moldova.

While overall life expectancy improved, **healthy life expectancy** (the expected number of years lived in good health) shows a more mixed picture. The latest available data for 2021 reveal declines compared to 2013 in all countries, largely reflecting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health systems and population. Although these figures may not fully reflect the current situation, they remain an important benchmark. They show how vulnerable different countries were to a large-scale health crisis. In this sense, the 2021 data serves as a useful proxy for resilience. The data suggests that the drop was particularly pronounced in North Macedonia (-2.3 years) and Serbia (-2 years), while least noticeable in Ukraine (-0.7 years). In contrast, the EU average did not fall below the 2023 level in 2021, showing that candidate countries were less able to withstand the pandemic's impact and to maintain population's health.

Table 9. Life Expectancy

Country	Life expectancy at birth		Healthy life expectancy	
	2013	2023	2013	2021
Georgia	73.0	74.5	63.9	62.5
Moldova	70.3	71.2	62.8	61.2
Montenegro	75.4	75.3	66.9	65.1
North Macedonia	76.5	77.6	66.0	63.7
Serbia	75.2	76.2	65.9	63.9
Ukraine	71.5	73.4	62.3	61.6
European Union	80.5	81.4	61.0	63.6

Source: World Health Organization (WHO) and Eurostat

Birth and death rates illustrate long-term demographic and health dynamics in the EU candidate countries. Between 2013 and 2023, birth rates declined notably across all six of the selected EU candidate countries, however, the trend is more pronounced in the EN group. The steepest falls were observed in Ukraine (5.5 less births per 1,000 people, likely due to the war-related factors), Georgia (3.6 births less) and Moldova (3 births less). In contrast, birth rates in the WB remained relatively stable, though on decreasing trajectory. This dynamic coincides with that of the EU, indicating that low fertility has become a shared continental challenge.

Over the same period of 2013-2023, death rates rose slightly in most countries, reflecting aging population and the pandemic's short-term impact on mortality. As of 2023, death rate is the highest in Serbia, Moldova and Ukraine, while lowest in Montenegro, which is the only country within the group with lower death rate than in the EU. On the other hand, **infant mortality rates** show clear improvement. All six countries reduced infant deaths, with North

Macedonia and Montenegro now lower than the EU average. However, though improved, the EN trio still record relatively higher infant mortality rates, especially in Moldova (13.5 deaths per 1,000 live births).

Table 10. Crude Birth and Death, and Infant Mortality Rates in the EU Candidate Countries

Country	Birth rate, crude (per 1,000 people)		Death rate, crude (per 1,000 people)		Mortality rate, infant (per 1,000 live births)	
	2013	2023	2013	2023	2013	2023
Georgia	15.1	11.5	12.3	11.8	9.6	8.0
Moldova	13.8	10.8	12.6	13.6	14.6	13.5
North Macedonia	11.2	9.2	9.3	11.0	9.4	2.8
Montenegro	12.0	11.2	9.5	10.1	4.2	2.1
Serbia	9.2	9.2	14.0	14.7	5.9	4.5
Ukraine	11.2	5.6	14.0	13.1	9.9	7.8
European Union	9.7	8.2	10.0	10.8	3.7	3.3

Source: World Health Organization (WHO) and Eurostat

The availability of medical personnel and infrastructure is a central measure of healthcare capacity. As of 2020, **the number of physicians** per 1,000 people ranged widely among EU candidate countries. Georgia recorded the highest level (5.2), above the EU average (4.1). Montenegro and Serbia had fewer doctors, both at 2.7 physicians per 1,000. Despite overall improvement since 2013, there are persistent disparities in access to medical professionals, especially between urban and rural areas.

When looking at **the number of hospital beds** per 1,000 people, the picture is mixed. Between 2013 and 2020, Georgia and Serbia increased their capacities, while Moldova, North Macedonia, and Ukraine experienced decreases, which is more aligned with the overall EU trend.

Table 11. Number of Physicians and Hospital Beds in the EU Candidate Countries

Country	Physicians (per 1,000 people)		Hospital beds (per 1,000 people)	
	2013	2020	2013	2020
Georgia	4.8	5.2	3.1	4.9
Moldova	3.0	4.1	6.1	5.6
North Macedonia	2.8	3.0	4.4	4.2
Montenegro	2.1	2.7	3.8	3.8
Serbia	2.9	2.7	5.2	5.4
Ukraine	3.5	-	8.8	6.3
European Union	3.5	4.1	5.6	5.3

Source: World Health Organization (WHO) and Eurostat

Although these data predate the pandemic, where we would normally expect some increase in these figures, particularly in hospital capacity, they still offer a useful reference point for understanding the baseline resilience of health systems entering 2020s. The differences in medical capacity mirror broader inequalities in preparedness noted in recent research, which finds that in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (despite sizable external assistance from the EU) low baseline funding, weak governance, and poor coordination limited the effectiveness of system upgrades (Lebanidze 2025). Hospitals often face outdated infrastructure and staff shortages, especially outside major cities. This shows that healthcare access depends not only

on capacity but also on institutional resilience and equity – factors that, when weak, deepen social divides during crises.

Out-of-pocket expenditure, or the share of healthcare costs paid directly by households, offers another lens on healthcare accessibility in the EU candidate countries. Over the analysed period, the share of direct household expenditure declined in most cases, though at different paces. Georgia, which had by far the highest share at the beginning of the period, achieved the strongest improvement, reducing out-of-pocket payments from 69.1% to 40.4% of total health expenditure. Moldova and North Macedonia also recorded meaningful declines, while Serbia saw only a slight reduction. Montenegro diverged from this trend, with private spending rising from 33.7% to 40.2%. Meanwhile, as of latest available year, Ukraine records the highest out-of-pocket share among the group, at 45.3%. In comparison, the EU average stands far lower, at 14.9% in 2023, reflecting stronger public coverage. Overall, the data show that while progress has been made in reducing financial pressure on households, the burden of out-of-pocket spending remains much higher in the candidate countries.

Table 12. Out-of-Pocket Expenditure (% of Current Health Expenditure)

Country	Year	Out-of-pocket expenditure	Year	Out-of-pocket expenditure
Georgia	2013	69.1	2022	40.4
Moldova	2013	42.6	2022	31.7
Montenegro	2013	33.7	2022	40.2
North Macedonia	2013	42.1	2022	36.7
Serbia	2013	37.9	2022	36.5
Ukraine	2013	48.2	2021	45.3
European Union	2014	16.2	2023	14.9

Source: World Health Organization (WHO) and Eurostat

Overall, access to healthcare in EU candidate countries has improved over the past decade, though notable gaps with the EU remain. Life expectancy and infant mortality have shown steady improvements, reflecting gradual convergence toward EU standards. The number of physicians has increased, while trends in hospital bed availability are more mixed. Differences in healthcare capacity and preparedness continue to affect how countries respond to health challenges. In some cases, availability is not the main issue as several countries even exceed EU averages. However, the quality and effectiveness of healthcare remain major concerns. Affordability is another critical challenge: out-of-pocket spending remains far higher than in the EU, limiting equal access to care and exposing vulnerable groups to financial strain. This became evident during the pandemic, when health outcomes were more easily disrupted in the EU candidate countries, showing persistent gaps in system performance and resilience. The data also highlights clear regional divides, with Western Balkan countries generally performing better than Eastern neighbourhood countries across core indicators of health and well-being, as well as system capacity.

When we look at country performance across the healthcare indicators, North Macedonia and Serbia emerge as the strongest performers. **North Macedonia** reports the highest figure of life expectancy at birth and one of the lowest infant mortality rates, while also showing moderate birth and death rates. **Serbia** follows with similarly high life expectancy, relatively low infant mortality, balanced birth and death rates, solid hospital bed availability, and moderate out-of-pocket expenditures. Montenegro and Georgia show mixed performance. **Montenegro** records relatively high life expectancy, the lowest death rate, and very low infant mortality, but has comparatively fewer physicians per 1,000 people and a high share of out-of-pocket

spending. **Georgia** stands out for having the highest density of physicians and increased bed capacity, yet the country records lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality, and sizable out-of-pocket expenditures. Ukraine and Moldova appear as the weaker performers. **Ukraine** faces high death rates, the highest out-of-pocket expenditure, and low hospital bed availability, while **Moldova** shows the lowest life expectancy, the highest infant mortality rate, high death rates, and lower hospital capacity.

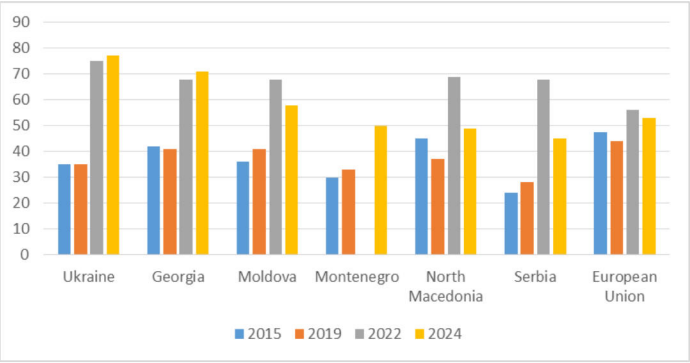
Social Participation, Belonging and People-to-People Relations

Social participation

Social participation is another constitutive element of cohesion. Contributing to a common cause – whether by helping others financially, time-wise or in other ways – reflects one's individual generosity, as well as a sense of responsibility towards others. It also indicates the strength of people-to-people ties within society. Social participation can take different forms, but for the purposes of this study, we examine it on three levels: the extent to which individuals help strangers, the extent of donations to charities, and the extent of time volunteered. Specifically, we draw on the World Giving Index by the Charities Aid Foundation (CAT), which tracks global trends across these indicators[19]. Combined, they provide a holistic framework for assessing the level of social participation in contemporary societies.

The CAF data shows that, of the three indicators, helping strangers is the most common form of participation for the six candidate countries. Moreover, all six countries – North Macedonia, Ukraine, Montenegro, Georgia, Serbia, and Moldova – have experienced an increase since 2015, with their average rising from 35.5% in 2015 to 58% in 2024, surpassing the EU average of 53% in the same year. Ukraine experienced the largest spike, with an increase of 42 percentage points from 35% in 2015 to 77% in 2024, which can be attributed to the social solidarity triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Sizable increases have also been recorded in Georgia (29 percentage points), Moldova (22 points), Serbia (21 points), and Montenegro (20 points). The increase has been more modest in North Macedonia (4 percentage points).

Figure 1. Percentage of Adults reporting to have helped a Stranger

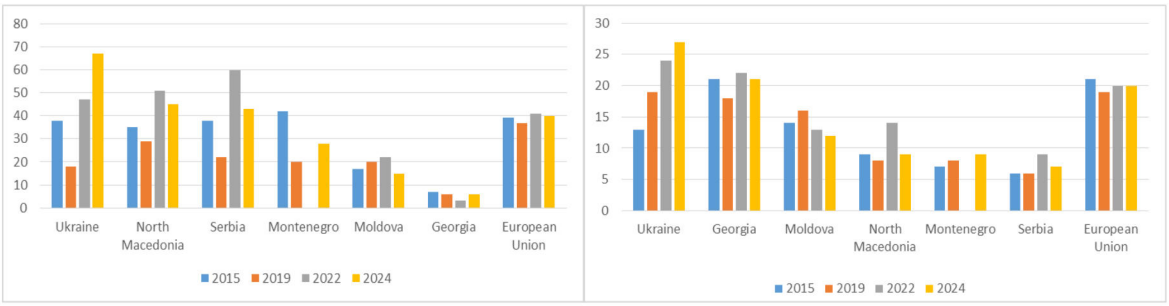


Source: Charities Aid Foundation

[19] The results are based on data from the Gallup World Poll. The surveys ask respondents whether, in the past month, they have: Helped a stranger or someone they didn't know who needed help; Donated money to charity; Volunteered time to an organisation.

Donating money to charities is the second most practiced form of participation. Notably, the cross-regional average for 2024, 34%, is minimally lower than the corresponding figure for the EU, 40%. However, trends vary significantly across the six countries. Some states, such as Ukraine, North Macedonia, and Serbia, show improvements over time – Ukraine rising from 38% in 2015 to 67% in 2024, North Macedonia from 35% to 45%, and Serbia from 38% to 43%. In contrast, Georgia and Moldova continue to report consistently lower levels of donations. Georgia's figures fluctuated between 3% and 7% throughout the reporting period, while Moldova's rate declined from 17% in 2015 to 15% in 2024. Montenegro stands out as the only country to have seen a substantial decline, with donation rates falling from 42% in 2015 to 28% in 2024.

Figure 2. Percentage of Adults reporting to have donated Money to Charities (Left) and to have volunteered their Time (Right)



Source: Charities Aid Foundation

Volunteering is the weakest of the three forms of social participation, according to CAF data. It has also shown minimal change over time. Across the six candidate countries, Ukraine stands out with the highest figure of 27% in 2024, up from 13% in 2015. Georgia maintained relatively stable participation rates, fluctuating between 18% and 22%. In contrast, countries like Moldova, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia showed persistently lower levels of volunteering, with 2024 figures ranging from just 7% to 12%. Notably, Serbia recorded the lowest figure in 2024, 7%, with only minimal changes across the two time points. Compared to the EU average of 20% in 2024, the six countries lag behind, with an average of 14%.

Overall, over the past decade, social participation has seen an increase across the six countries, but the pace and pattern of growth differs significantly across the three forms. Helping strangers has seen the most substantial and consistent rise, with trends in charitable donations remaining mixed and volunteering – persistently low. Additionally, compared to the EU, the candidate countries now outperform in terms of helping strangers, but continue to lag behind in both charitable donations and volunteering. Ukraine shows consistently high levels across all indicators, while Georgia and Moldova report moderate to high results in helping strangers and volunteering, but consistently underperform in donations. North Macedonia and Serbia demonstrate moderate engagement overall, with improvements in helping strangers and donations but limited progress in volunteering. Montenegro, meanwhile, shows relatively low results across all three indicators, with a particularly sharp decline in charitable giving.

Belonging and people-to-people relations

To capture additional dynamics of social cohesion, we also examine levels of people-to-people trust and tolerance. This includes data on generalised trust with fellow citizens and trust in various layers such as family, neighbours and others, as well as on the acceptance of different

groups as neighbours. Additionally, to complement these findings, we also assess the sense of belonging, measured by levels of national pride.

The data on generalised trust in candidate countries, drawn from the World Values Survey, shows notable variations across geography and over time. Georgia shows consistently low levels of trust, declining from 17.6%[20] in 2009 to just 9% in 2018. Similarly, Montenegro saw a drop from 32.9% in 2001 to 21.7% in 2019. Serbia also reported low and fluctuating trust levels, from 18.3% in 2001 to 16.3% in 2018. In contrast, Ukraine recorded a moderate increase, rising from 24.5% in 2006 to 28.4% in 2020. Meanwhile, North Macedonia has consistently had some of the lowest levels, with 13.1% in 2001 and 15.1% in 2018. The cross-regional average for the countries listed in the 2018–2020 period stands at 18.6% (the figure excludes Moldova, as it was not included in the latest WVS/EVS dataset), which is significantly below the EU average of 35.4%. These figures suggest that trust in fellow citizens remains a substantial challenge across the two regions, with most countries continuing to fall well below the broader European standard.

Table 13. Generalised Trust (% of Respondents reporting to have Trust to Fellow Citizens)

Country	2001	2002	2006	2009	2011	2014	2018	2019	2020
Georgia				17.6		8.8	9		
Montenegro	32.9							21.7	
Serbia	18.3		13.6				16.3		
Ukraine			24.5		23.1				28.4
North Macedonia	13.1							15.1	
Moldova		14.1	17.6						

Source: World Values Survey, European Values Study

To complement the findings with more recent data on generalised trust, we draw on the European Social Survey (ESS), which includes the latest entries for Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia[21]. The ESS data shows that the share of people who trusted fellow citizens in 2023 was 31.1% in Serbia and 29.2% in Montenegro, both notably lower than the EU average in the same year, 41.97% (ESS 2023)[22]. Importantly, in the previous round of ESS in 2018, when the two countries were included, the figures were 23.9% for Serbia and 21.4% for Montenegro, also below the then EU average, 43.1% (ESS 2018)[23]. Additionally, in the closest available survey year for North Macedonia, in 2020, the figure stood at 24.8%, which falls below EU averages in 2018 and 2023 (ESS 2020).

[20] Percentage of respondents who answered *'Most people can be trusted'* to the question: *'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you need to be very careful when dealing with people?'*
[21] The ESS uses an 11-point scale, where 0 indicates *"You can't be too careful"* and 10 indicates *"Most people can be trusted."* To ensure comparability with the WVS/EVS data, which uses a binary response format, we applied a cut-off at 6. Accordingly, the percentages reported in this paragraph refer to the proportion of respondents who selected values from 6 to 10 on the trust scale.
[22] Average share of respondents selecting values between 6 and 10 on the trust scale, across the 21 EU member states included in the 2023 European Social Survey.
[23] Average share of respondents selecting values between 6 and 10 on the trust scale, across the 24 EU member states included in the 2018 European Social Survey.

For Moldova, which does not feature in the latest round of the WVS/EVS survey, we rely on the Study on Equality Perceptions and Attitudes in the Republic of Moldova, a survey commissioned by UNDP in 2024. The study shows that the share of respondents who agree that 'Most people can be trusted' stands at mere 5%, making Moldova the worst performer in terms of social trust among the candidate countries.

Next, we examine the level of trust across different layers of society, family, neighbours, acquaintances, strangers, and people of another nationality or another religion. In the 2018-2020 period, when the latest WVS/EVS data was collected (the data excludes Moldova), trust in family remained relatively high in the five candidate countries and was broadly aligned with the EU average. Trust in neighbours also showed relative parity with EU levels, though Serbia lagged notably behind at 64.9%[24], compared to the EU average of 77%. However, the gap widened as questions moved further from an individual's immediate social circle. For example, the difference between the EU and five countries in trust toward people personally known to the respondent was nearly 10 percentage points. This gap increased substantially when it comes to strangers, where the difference reached 16.5 percentage points. Additionally, among the candidate countries, Georgia reported the lowest trust in strangers (13.2%), while Montenegro was closest to the EU average (35.2%).

Table 14. % of Respondents reporting to trust various Social Circles (2018-2020)

Country	Family	Neighbours	People you know personally	People you meet for the first time	People of another nationality	People of another religion
Georgia	98.7	80.7	78.6	13.2	44.8	38.4
Montenegro	98.3	81.6	78	35.2	43.2	45.9
Serbia	98.2	64.9	78.8	23.4	38.2	38.2
Ukraine	96.2	75.4	77.6	22.9	40.9	36.6
North Macedonia	98.1	76.8	82.2	27	47	46.3
EU average	97.3	77	88.3	39	56.1	55.4
Candidates av.	97.8	74.7	78.7	22.5	42	39.5
Moldova	94	60	69	10	-	-

Source: World Values Survey, European Values Study, SeeD (Moldova)

Notably, similar disparities are observed in attitudes toward people of a different nationality or religion, with the countries trailing the EU by around 15 percentage points. Trust in people of another nationality averages 42% across the five countries versus 56.1% in the EU, while for those of another religion, the figures are 39.5% in candidate countries versus 55.4% in the EU. Trust in people of another nationality was lowest in Serbia (38.2%), while trust in people of another religion was lowest in Ukraine (36.6%). These patterns suggest that, while trust in close relationships is strong and consistent, generalised and out-group trust remains significantly weaker, pointing to challenges in social tolerance and integration. It is also worth noting that Montenegro and North Macedonia emerge as relatively strong performers in terms of horizontal trust, often matching or approaching EU averages, particularly in trust toward family, neighbours, acquaintances, and even, to some extent, strangers. This suggests a comparatively

[24] Percentage of respondents who answered *'completely'* and *'somewhat'* to the question: *'could you tell me for each whether you trust people from this group completely, somewhat, not very much or not at all?'*

higher degree of openness within these two societies, at least in the context of mutual confidence.

To fill in the missing data for Moldova, we rely on the survey by the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD) that shows that in 2024 Moldova aligned with the EU and other candidate countries in terms of trust in family (94%)[25]. However, it lagged behind when it came to confidence in one's neighbourhood (60%), people known personally (69%), and strangers (10%). Additionally, the 2024 SEPA survey in Moldova found that ethnic and religious differences contribute to higher levels of distrust.

Next, we examine the level of acceptance of certain groups as neighbours, which serves as a measure of social tolerance. Once again, we rely on data from the Joint WVS/EVS survey, which includes responses from five of the six countries (excluding Moldova). The results show that drug addicts are the least tolerated group, with the share of people unwilling to have them as neighbours ranging from 68%[26] in Georgia to 88.2% in Montenegro. The second least accepted group is homosexuals, with Montenegro again emerging as the least tolerant country, where 68.9% of respondents are unwilling to have homosexuals as neighbours. The most tolerant in this regard is Ukraine, at 46.2%, while the remaining countries fall between 51% and 63%. A similar pattern is observed for immigrants/foreign workers. Montenegro records the highest rejection rate at 55.1%, followed by Serbia and North Macedonia with 35.2% and 29.3%, respectively. Ukraine is again the most tolerant, with just 23.4% of respondents expressing rejection of immigrants. The picture is slightly different for people of other races; here, Georgia is the top rejecting country, with 32.6% not wishing them as neighbours, while Montenegro is the least intolerant, with 20.8%.

Table 15. Social Tolerance (% of Respondents not Wishing these Groups as Neighbours)

Country	Drug addicts			Homosexuals			Immigrants/ foreign workers			People of different race		
	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020
Georgia	68			61.7			30.3			32.6		
Montenegro		88.2			68.9			55.1			20.8	
Serbia	79.9			51.7			35.2			21.1		
Ukraine			71.2			46.2			23.4			23.4
North Macedonia		81.8			63.3			29.3			25	

Source: World Values Survey, European Values Study

When compared to EU averages, several important findings emerge. While the rejection rate of drug addicts as neighbours is nearly identical between the five candidate countries (75.7%) and the EU average (75.1%), stark differences appear for other groups. The average rejection

[25] This data was collected and analysed by SeeD within the project titled Social Tensions Monitoring Mechanism (STMM) for Moldova: Theoretical Framework and Measurement Tool Empirical Pilot Wave, with the support of the 'Multidimensional Response to Emerging Human Security Challenges in Moldova' programme, funded by the Government of Japan and implemented in partnership with UNDP. For more on STMM, see: https://scoref-orpeace.org/en/moldova/stmm/2024/1/map?row=tn-2-0
Percentage of respondents who answered *'to a great extent'* and *'to a very great extent'* to the question: *Now I want to ask you how much you trust different types of people. How much do you trust the people in that category?'*
[26] Percentage of respondents who answered *'drug addicts'* to the question: *' On this list are various groups of people. Could you please mention any that you would not like to have as neighbours?'*

rate for homosexuals stands at 55.4% in the candidate countries, more than double the EU average of 21.7% in the same period. Similar gaps are observed for immigrants and foreign workers (32% vs. 21.2%), as well as for people of a different race (24.8% vs. 12.5%), which underscores broader challenges of inclusion in the five candidate countries.

The corresponding data for Moldova, drawn from SeeD's 2024 survey, shows that the country remains broadly in line with the rest of the countries in terms of rejection levels toward the four groups. Despite some improvements between 2017 and 2022, drug users continue to face the highest level of rejection, with 70%[27] of respondents in 2022 indicating they would prefer this group to leave their community. This is followed by the LGBTQI+ population, with a rejection rate of 69%. Negative attitudes toward immigrants and people of other races are considerably lower, standing at 23% and 21% in 2022. They have also seen notable decreases over time.

Table 16. Social Tolerance in Moldova (%)

Year	Drug users	LGBTQI+	Immigrants	People of different race
2017	89	86	40	44
2022	70	69	23	21

Source: SeeD (Moldova)

Finally, the data on national pride indicates that there is a generally strong or increasing sense of belonging in most countries. Georgia consistently reports very high levels of national pride, reaching 97%[28] in 2009 and remaining above 93% in subsequent years. Montenegro shows a sharp increase, from 41.6% in 2001 to 86.7% in 2018. Serbia and Ukraine also exhibit steady upward trajectories, with the former rising to 80.6% in 2018 and the latter to 76.4% in 2020. In contrast, North Macedonia experienced a decline, with national pride falling from 78.2% in 2001 to 70% in 2019. Moldova, while not included in recent rounds, recorded relatively modest levels in earlier years, ranging from 61.8% in 2002 to 65.9% in 2006. On average, national pride across the five candidate countries stands at 81.7%, nearly identical to the EU average, 81.2%.

Table 17. Pride in Nationality (%)

Country	2001	2002	2006	2009	2011	2014	2018	2019	2020
Georgia				97		96.1	93.6		
Montenegro	41.6							86.7	
Serbia	68.2		74.5				80.6		
Ukraine			69.5		66.6				76.4
North Macedonia	78.2							70	
Moldova		61.8	65.9						

Source: World Values Survey, European Values Study

[27] Percentage of respondents who answered *'I would prefer if they leave our community'* to the question: *'On this list there are various groups of people. Could you please mention for each whether you would accept to interact with them personally, accept them to be in the community but without you having communication, or prefer that they leave the community altogether?'*

[28] Percentage of respondents who answered *'very proud'* and *'quite proud'* to the question: *'How proud are you to be of nationality of this country?'*

Overall, the survey data on people-to-people relations highlights several challenges. Trust among fellow citizens remains significantly lower than the average of the European Union, with most countries struggling to build strong generalised trust beyond immediate circles such as family or neighbours. While countries like Montenegro and North Macedonia show relatively higher levels of people-to-people trust, Moldova and Georgia rank lowest across multiple trust dimensions. Social tolerance remains problematic as well, particularly in acceptance of marginalised groups such as drug users, LGBTQI+ individuals, immigrants, and people of different races, where rejection rates in the candidate countries remain higher than the corresponding EU averages. Despite these limitations, however, a strong and growing sense of national pride suggests that belonging to the national community remains an important element of social unity in the area.

When we look at country performance across the indicators falling in the dimension of social participation, belonging, and people-to-people relations, Ukraine and Montenegro emerge as the strongest performers. **Ukraine** combines very high levels of helping strangers, charitable donations, and volunteering, reflecting a strong sense of solidarity in times of crises, also demonstrating comparatively higher degree of tolerance towards minority groups. **Montenegro**, while showing moderate social participation and a decline in charitable giving, exhibits relatively higher trust within families, neighbours, and acquaintances, alongside moderate confidence in strangers, and a sharp rise in national pride. The country, however, continues to demonstrate low tolerance towards certain minority groups. Georgia and Moldova take a middle position. **Georgia** exhibits high national pride and strong trust within families, while helping strangers and volunteering are moderate. Moreover, charitable donations remain very low, and acceptance of immigrants and people of other races is limited. **Moldova** shows some improvements in trust within close social circles, but continues to struggle with very low generalised trust and limited confidence in strangers, as well as moderate social participation levels and persistent intolerance toward minority groups. Serbia and North Macedonia are at the lower end. **Serbia** exhibits very low volunteering, modest levels of donations and helping strangers, fluctuating trust in both close and wider social circles, and higher levels of rejection toward immigrants and LGBTQI+ individuals. National pride is moderate in Serbia. **North Macedonia** shows moderate figures in social participation and trust, yet generalised trust remains low, tolerance towards minority groups is limited, and national pride is on decline, indicating persistent gaps in social cohesion.

Political Participation and Institutional Trust

Political participation

Political participation is a vital component for cohesive societies. Higher engagement in political activities empowers individuals, encourages collective action, and strengthens community bonds. It also provides avenues for expressing and resolving political and social grievances. This section examines the level of political participation in the six candidate countries. It specifically looks at two dimensions – election participation and participation in other forms of political action, such as demonstrations, petitions, and strikes. To assess the gender inclusion aspect, the analysis also considers the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments. Where relevant information is available, it also includes comparisons of latest available data with figures from previous years. Additionally, corresponding averages from member states of the European Union are included to provide more contextual information.

Electoral participation, measured by the average **voter turnout across all national elections** (presidential and parliamentary) starting from the 2000s, presents a relatively consistent picture across the candidate countries. Ukraine (64.46%) and Montenegro (63.89%) report the highest levels of electoral participation over the 25-year period. They are followed by Moldova (56.53%), Georgia (55.72%), North Macedonia (55.28), and Serbia (54.27%). The corresponding figure for the EU[29] stands at 64.13%, meaning that only Ukraine and Montenegro come close to the EU average, while the rest tend to fall behind this benchmark. When we look at only the 2020s, however, some shifts can be observed. Here, Montenegro tops the list with 66.51%, followed by Georgia, which has seen a notable rise, with the figure reaching 58.36%. Serbia saw a modest increase to 56.15%, while both North Macedonia and Moldova registered decreases, dropping to 51.21% and 50.13%, respectively[30]. For comparison, the EU countries reported an average turnout of 58.52% in national elections in the 2020s, placing it above most candidate countries.

Table 18. Election Participation Statistics (%)

Country	Average voter turnout (total)	Average voter turnout in 2020s	Average voter turnout in 2010s	Average voter turnout in 2000s
Ukraine	64.46	N/A	58.76	72.07
Montenegro	63.89	66.51	67.85	60.13
Moldova	56.53	50.13	54.96	60.52
Georgia	55.72	58.36	47.69	63.57
North Macedonia	55.28	51.21	56.55	56.52
Serbia	54.27	56.15	54.28	53.59
European Union	64.13	58.52	N/A	N/A

Source: ElectionGuide, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)

Closer examination of country-level data reveals that voter turnout in Ukraine was consistently high throughout the 2000s, often exceeding 65%, especially in presidential elections. However, since 2010, turnout has gradually declined for both institutions, with a more noticeable drop in parliamentary elections. In Moldova, turnout has also declined across both presidential and parliamentary elections, falling from an average of 60.52% in the 2000s to 54.96% in the 2010s and 50.13% in the 2020s. North Macedonia has followed a similar downward trend, though with a slightly different trajectory: here, presidential elections have seen a more pronounced decline than parliamentary ones. Conversely, Montenegro has maintained relatively high and stable levels of participation across both presidential and parliamentary elections, with most cycles since the early 2000s recording voter turnout rates above 65%. Georgia, on the other hand, experienced visible fluctuations over time, with the highest average participation rate of 63.57% recorded in the 2000s, followed by a decline to 47.69% in the 2010s, and a notable rebound to 58.36% in the 2020s. Interestingly, when participation figures for Georgia are grouped by parliamentary and presidential elections, there are no clear differences in the patterns of voter turnout over time. Lastly, Serbia, which has the lowest overall turnout among the six countries, displays a relatively consistent pattern across the three periods, both in terms of time and type of election.

[29] The figure represents an average of all parliamentary and presidential elections held across EU member states since the year 2000. For countries that joined the EU after 2003, only elections held from the date of their accession onward are included. The United Kingdom is included in the dataset up until its exit from the EU in 2020.
[30] Data for Ukraine in the 2020s is unavailable, as the country has not held elections due to the Russian invasion.

As for the other forms of political action, the data on **participation in lawful manifestations** – collected from the WVS/EVS surveys – indicates that protest engagement has remained moderate across the six countries. Moldova and North Macedonia show comparatively higher engagement, while Ukraine, Montenegro, Georgia, and Serbia register more modest levels in 2018–2020. They also show divergent trajectories when historical data is considered. Most countries, including Georgia, Serbia, Ukraine, and Montenegro, exhibit a gradual decline over time, while Moldova shows a notable increase, reaching the highest reported rate of 24% in 2020[31]. North Macedonia stands out for its stability, with the figures remaining consistent over time.

Table 19. Participation in Non-Electoral Forms of Political Action (Lawful Manifestations %)

Country	2001	2002	2006	2009	2011	2014	2018	2019	2020
Georgia				20.1		21.2	12.2		
Montenegro	16.6							10	
Serbia	22.6		20.6				11.8		
Ukraine			15.8		13.6				6.6
North Macedonia	16.5							16.8	
Moldova		15.8	18.2					24	

Source: World Values Survey, European Values Study[32], IRI (Moldova 2019)[33]

Overall, the findings indicate a general weakening of protest participation across the countries. Moreover, when compared to the corresponding EU average of 18.6%[34], the average participation rate of the candidate countries between 2018 and 2020 – just 10.7%[35] – shows a visible gap, highlighting that the candidate countries lag behind their EU counterparts in terms of protest engagement. Nevertheless, these findings should be treated with caution, as the most recent data is not available[36].

[31] The 2019 data for Moldova is based on a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI 2019). Although the question used is similar, comparisons with the other data entries should be interpreted with caution.
[32] The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered *"Have done"* to the following question: *"Now I'd like you to look at this card. I'm going to read out some different forms of political action that people can take, and I'd like you to tell me, for each one, whether you have actually done any of these things, whether you might do it or would never, under any circumstances, do it. Attending lawful/peaceful demonstrations."*
[32] The table shows the percentage of respondents who indicated "*Participated in a protest*" to the following question: *"Have you engaged in any of the following activities?"*
[33] The table shows the percentage of respondents who indicated "*Participated in a protest*" to the following question: *"Have you engaged in any of the following activities?"*
[34] The figure represents an average across 24 EU countries from 2017 to 2022, based on WVS/EVS results (World Values Survey, European Values Study). Four EU member states (Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta) are not accounted for in the figure, as no surveys were administered there.
[35] The figure represents an average across five candidate countries from 2018 to 2020, based on WVS/EVS results. Moldova is intentionally excluded, as its 2019 data comes from a different source and is not fully comparable with the WVS/EVS results.
[36] More recent data from the European Values Survey, which is not comparable with WVS/EVS data, but can be used to validate general trends, suggests a narrowing gap in yearly protest participation between the three Western Balkan countries and the EU. In 2023, the average rate of participation in protests (as measured by frequency of positive responses to the following question: *During the last 12 months, have you taken part in a lawful public demonstration?*) across 22 EU member states was 7.68%, which was lower than the rates observed in Montenegro (8.5%) and Serbia (11.1%). Back in 2018, the EU average for 24 countries stood at 7.44% – slightly above Serbia's

The data on **participation in petition-signing** paints a more positive picture across the countries. In Georgia, petition-signing more than doubled in a decade, rising from 7.5% in 2009 to 19.7% in 2018. Montenegro also saw a significant increase, from 20.4% in 2001 to 40.5% in 2019. In Ukraine, engagement grew steadily as well, from 6.6% in 2006 to 12.7% in 2020. In contrast, Moldova[37] and Serbia showed relatively stable levels of participation over time, with North Macedonia experiencing a modest decline from 24.7% in 2001 to 20% in 2020.

Table 20. Participation in Non-Electoral Forms of Political Action (Signing Petitions %)

Country	2001	2002	2006	2009	2011	2014	2018	2019	2020
Georgia				7.5		9.5	19.7		
Montenegro	20.4							40.5	
Serbia	27.3		28.4				26		
Ukraine			6.6		8.8				12.7
North Macedonia	24.7							20	
Moldova		15.2	10.3					13	

Source: World Values Survey, European Values Study[38], IRI (Moldova 2019)[39]

Overall, the data suggests growing or stable use of petition-signing as a form of political participation, indicating that more formal, institutional forms of engagement are slowly gaining popularity in the candidate countries. Despite this, however, take-up of petition-signing still falls far short of the EU average of 41.9%[40], with only Montenegro and Serbia showing commensurate levels in 2018-2019[41].

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rate (6.4%) and slightly below Montenegro's (7.8%). The closest available data for North Macedonia, from 2020, shows a participation rate of 8.8%, also exceeding the more recent EU average.

To allow for comparisons with the Eastern Neighbourhood countries, we also consider similar data for Georgia and Moldova (for Ukraine, no recent data is available for this indicator). For Moldova, we draw on 2024 data from the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development, which reports a protest participation rate of 14% over the past 12 months. In Georgia, data from the International Republican Institute for the same year places the figure slightly lower, at 6%, which is roughly in line with the figures from the Western Balkans.

[37] The 2019 data for Moldova is based on a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute. Although the question used is similar, comparisons with the other data entries should be interpreted with caution.

[38] The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered *"Have done"* to the following question: *"Now I'd like you to look at this card. I'm going to read out some different forms of political action that people can take, and I'd like you to tell me, for each one, whether you have actually done any of these things, whether you might do it or would never, under any circumstances, do it. Signing a petition."*

[39] The table shows the percentage of respondents who indicated "*Signed a petition*" to the following question: *"Have you engaged in any of the following activities?"*

[40] The figure represents an average across 24 EU countries from 2017 to 2022, based on World Values Survey results. Four EU member states (Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta) are not accounted for in the figure, as no surveys were administered there.

[41] As with the protests indicator, a comparison with similar (though not identical) data from recent years, drawn from the European Values Survey, shows that petition signing has become more prevalent in the Western Balkans. In Montenegro, the share of positive responses to the question *"During the last 12 months, have you signed a petition?"* rose from 19.4% in 2018 to 21.9% in 2023. In Serbia, it increased from 19.6% to 23.4% over the same period. These figures are relatively higher than the average for EU countries, which stood at 18.1% in 2023, down from 23.7% in 2018. Notably, however, the corresponding figure for North Macedonia was significantly lower in 2020, at just 7.3%. Moreover, similar (though not fully comparable) data from countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood indicate that petition signing remains relatively low. In Georgia, only 4% of respondents reported having signed a petition in the past year, according to the 2024 Caucasus Barometer, a decline from 8% in 2019, but identical to 4% in 2013. The closest available data for Moldova, collected by the Public Policy Institute and based on a question about participation in the past five years, show that 10.5% of respondents had signed a petition in 2018, up slightly from 9.8% in 2015.

Participation in unofficial strikes remains comparatively lower than in other forms of political action. At the same time, most countries are in line with the EU average of 7.1%, with only Ukraine showing a significantly lower figure of 2.3%. The countries show a mostly stable trend over time, with modest increases observed in Montenegro (from 3.4% in 2001 to 5.2% in 2019), Serbia (6.8% in 2001 to 7.7% in 2019), and North Macedonia (4.5% in 2001 to 6.7% in 2019). In contrast, Ukraine saw a slight decline, dropping from 3.8% in 2011 to 2.3% in 2020. Georgia remained unchanged at 4.3% between 2014 and 2018, while no recent data is available for Moldova, which had a relatively high rate of 10.8% in 2002.

Table 21. Participation in Non-Electoral Forms of Political Action (Unofficial Strikes %)

Country	2001	2002	2011	2014	2018	2019	2020
Georgia				4.3	4.3		
Montenegro	3.4					5.2	
Serbia	6.8				7.7		
Ukraine			3.8				2.3
North Macedonia	4.5					6.7	
Moldova		10.8					

Source: World Values Survey, European Values Study[42]

According to the WVS/EVS data, participation rates across all three forms of political action (manifestations, petitions, strikes) are slightly lower than average among women, rural residents, low-income groups, and youth. Notable exceptions include North Macedonia, where individuals aged 16 to 29 report higher levels of participation in protests and petition-signing, and where lower-income respondents show relatively greater involvement in strikes. In Montenegro, both youth and women demonstrate above-average figures in petition-signing, while in Ukraine, low-income individuals participate in demonstrations more frequently than the national average.

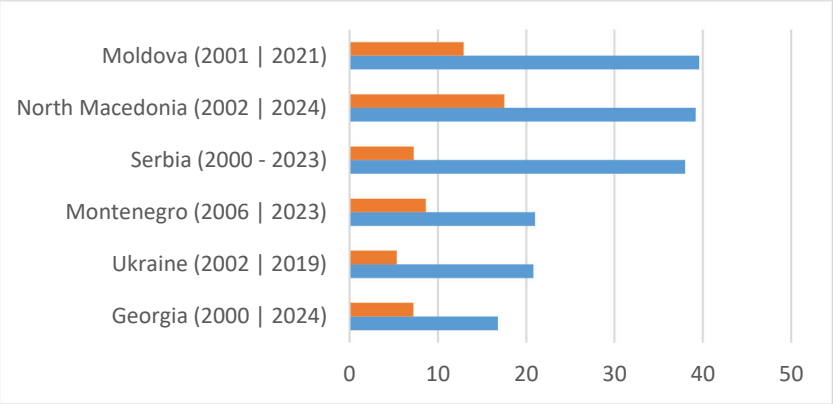
To illustrate the gender aspect of participation, we also look at the share of women in national *parliaments*. Data from latest elections, shows varying levels of representation in national legislatures across the regions. Moldova tops the list with 39.6% of females in its parliament, followed closely by North Macedonia with 39.2% and Serbia with 38%. The figures for Montenegro and Ukraine stand at 21% and 20.8%, respectively, while Georgia has a relatively modest representation rate of 16.8%. This brings the average across all six countries to 29.2% (32.73% for WB and 25.73% for EN), only slightly lower than the corresponding figure for EU member states in 2024, which stands at 30.93%.

When historical data is considered, several observations can be made. The most pronounced changes are in Serbia and Moldova, with increases of 30.75 and 26.7 percentage points, respectively. These are followed by North Macedonia with an increase of 21.7 points, and Ukraine with 15.47 points. Montenegro and Georgia recorded the smallest increases, at 15.47 and 9.57

[42] The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered *"Have done"* to the following question: *"Now I'd like you to look at this card. I'm going to read out some different forms of political action that people can take, and I'd like you to tell me, for each one, whether you have actually done any of these things, whether you might do it or would never, under any circumstances, do it. Joining unofficial strikes."*

percentage points, respectively. Importantly, much of the recorded increase can be attributed to the introduction of mandatory gender quotas[43]. For instance, Moldova, which implemented a 40% gender quota in 2016, saw women's parliamentary representation rise from 20.79% in 2014 to 39.6% in 2021. Similarly, Montenegro, which introduced quotas in 2011, experienced an increase from 11.11% in 2009 to 23.46% in 2016.

Figure 3. The Share of Women in National Parliaments[44]



Source: Our World in Data, Global Change Data Lab

Overall, political participation in the candidate countries shows mixed patterns, with notable differences both between countries and across forms of engagement. Electoral participation has remained relatively stable over time, with countries like Ukraine and Montenegro recording turnout rates that approach or exceed the EU average. However, most other countries continue to fall below this benchmark. Still, there are encouraging signs, such as Georgia's recent rebound in election turnouts and consistently steady participation levels in Serbia. When it comes to gender representation in national parliaments, all six countries have made progress in recent years, gradually bringing the cross-regional average closer to the EU level. Nonetheless, countries like Montenegro, Ukraine, and Georgia remain below both the candidate and EU averages, highlighting the need for more proactive affirmative measures. Meanwhile, participation in non-electoral forms of political action remains moderate. Petition-signing is generally more common than participation in protests or strikes, suggesting a preference for less confrontational and more institutionalised forms of engagement. Still, all three forms of non-electoral participation remain below EU averages in most cases. Notable differences are also evident between the countries of the WB and those of the EN: the former generally exhibit higher levels of participation, at times matching or even exceeding EU levels, while the latter tend to lag behind. Additionally, the absence of more recent data from Ukraine – due to the ongoing full-scale invasion by Russia – makes it impossible to draw definitive conclusions about the current state of participation in the country.

Finally, when demographic and geographic factors are taken into account, political participation figures reveal visible inequalities. While engagement in demonstrations, petitions, and boycotts is generally satisfactory, the data disaggregation reveals uneven participation across

[43] Gender quotas have been in place in Serbia and North Macedonia since the early 2000s, initially requiring 30% representation, and later increasing to 40%. Ukraine and Georgia have no gender quotas.
[44] Data by earliest and latest parliamentary elections in the XXI century.

age groups, income levels, gender, and urban-rural divides, pointing at the necessity of more fundamental changes in the political systems.

Institutional trust

Trust in public figures and institutions is another key element of social cohesion. Confidence in these actors reflects the quality of vertical, citizen-state relationships, and signals how connected the citizenry is with those at the helm of the country. To assess the current state of institutional trust, this section draws on relevant indicators from the WVS/EVS dataset, specifically those related to Parliament, Government, Political Parties, and the Justice System/Courts. These indicators enable temporal, cross-country, and EU-level comparisons, but to complement the findings with more recent in-country dynamics, the section also examines latest nationwide surveys that provide deeper insights into citizens' trust in public institutions.

Trust in Parliament was low across the region by the end of 2010s[45], according to the WVS/EVS datasets, with trends varying by country and over time. Georgia showed a moderately increasing trajectory, with confidence towards the legislature rising from 22.7% in 2009 to 29.8% in 2018. In Montenegro, trust levels remained relatively stable, increasing slightly from 30.8% in 2001 to 33.2% in 2020. Serbia and Ukraine exhibited persistently low and slightly declining levels of confidence, both at 18.1% in most recent surveys. A notable shift was observed in North Macedonia, where levels of confidence towards the Parliament rose from 6.8% in 2001 to 31.7% in 2020. Moldova[46], on the other hand, saw a decline from the 2000s, with some fluctuation in the 2010s. When compared to the then-EU average of 29.9%, only Georgia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia recorded confidence levels that were commensurate with or exceeding this figure.

Table 22. Trust in Parliament (%)

Country	2001	2002	2006	2009	2011	2014	2018	2019	2020
Georgia				22.7		29.3	29.8		
Montenegro	30.8							33.2	
Serbia	20.9		19.9				18.1		
Ukraine			17.5		20.4				18.1
North Macedonia	6.8							31.7	
Moldova		33.5	27.6	41.3	19.8	24.2	20.7	23.6	17.1

Source: World Values Survey, European Values Study[47], Institute for Public Policy (Moldova 2009-2024)[48]

Trust in government was higher than trust in Parliament across most countries, but like the former, in-country and cross-country variation was notable. Georgia and Montenegro topped the list again, followed by Serbia, North Macedonia, Moldova and Ukraine. In Georgia, trust increased from 30.5% in 2009 to 37.4% in 2018. Montenegro also showed stable and relatively

[45] The latest available data from the World Values Survey.
[46] The data for Moldova is based on a survey conducted by the Institute for Public Policy. Although the question used is similar, comparisons with the other data entries should be interpreted with caution.
[47] The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered *"A great deal"* and *"Quite a lot"* to the following question: *"I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all? (name of institution)."*
[48] The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered *"A great deal of trust"* and *"Somewhat trust"* to the following question: *"How much do you trust the following institutions? [name of institution]."*

high trust, rising from 31.8% in 2001 to 36.1% in 2020. Serbia maintained moderate levels, fluctuating around the mid-to-high twenties, with 27% trust in 2018. Ukraine's trust level has declined, dropping from 23.6% in 2006 to 16.8% in 2020, while that of Moldova decreased from 36.3% in 2002 to 23.2% in 2020[49]. In contrast, North Macedonia experienced notable growth, starting from 10.7% in 2001 and ending with 25.7% in 2019. It is also worth noting that, the gap between the average trust levels of all candidate countries and the average of 24 EU countries in 2017-2022 was relatively narrow, with a cross-regional average of 27.2% compared to the EU's 29.9%.

Table 23. Trust in Government (%)

Country	2001	2002	2006	2009	2011	2014	2018	2019	2020
Georgia				30.5		32.5	37.4		
Montenegro	31.8							36.1	
Serbia	28.3		24.8				27		
Ukraine			23.6		25.4				16.8
North Macedonia	10.7							25.7	
Moldova		36.3	32.4	34.1	22.9	27.5	26	27.8	23.2

Source: World Values Survey, European Values Study[50], Institute for Public Policy (Moldova 2009-2024)[51]

Trust in political parties was lower than in government or parliament, but most states were close to the EU average of 16.1%. Montenegro reported the highest levels of trust, rising from 23.9% in 2001 to 28.9% in 2020. Moldova[52] showed a volatile trend, ending at 21.3% in 2020. Georgia and North Macedonia also showed upward trajectories, both surpassing the EU average in most recent data. Serbia continued to report consistently low trust, hovering around 12%–13%. Ukraine's trend was mixed, with a temporary rise to 22% in 2011 before declining to 14.9% in 2020.

[49] The data for Moldova is based on a survey conducted by the Institute for Public Policy. Although the question used is similar, comparisons with the other data entries should be interpreted with caution.
[50] The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered *"A great deal"* and *"Quite a lot"* to the following question: *"I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all? (name of institution)."*
[51] The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered *"A great deal of trust"* and *"Somewhat trust"* to the following question: *"How much do you trust the following institutions? [name of institution]."*
[52] The data for Moldova is based on a survey conducted by the Institute for Public Policy. Although the question used is similar, comparisons with the other data entries should be interpreted with caution.

Table 24. Trust in Political Parties (%)

Country	2001	2002	2006	2009	2011	2014	2018	2019	2020
Georgia				16.1		20.2	20.3		
Montenegro	23.9							28.9	
Serbia	13.1		12.5				12.5		
Ukraine			15.1		22				14.9
North Macedonia	9.3							20.6	
Moldova		23.2	20.5	16.4	17.4	18.7	13.3	20.1	21.3

Source: World Values Survey, European Values Study[53], Institute for Public Policy (Moldova 2009-2024)[54]

On its part, **Trust in the justice system/courts** surpasses that of other institutions but remains significantly below the EU average of 52.9% for the same period[55]. Among the six countries, Georgia leads with 38.8% trust in the justice system/courts in 2018, followed by Montenegro (34.6%), North Macedonia (33.8%), and Serbia (28.7%). In contrast, Ukraine and Moldova[56] recorded the lowest levels, both declining from 29.3% in 2006 to 18.9% and 19% respectively in 2020.

Table 25. Trust in Justice System/Courts (%)

Country	2006	2009	2011	2014	2018	2019	2020
Georgia		22.2		33.1	38.8		
Montenegro						34.6	
Serbia	27.6				28.7		
Ukraine	29.3		25.2				18.9
North Macedonia						33.8	
Moldova	29.3	27.7	23.3	21.6	20.5	16	19

Source: World Values Survey, European Values Study[57], Institute for Public Policy (Moldova 2009-2024)[58]

Taken together, WVS/EVS data from the late 2010s suggest that governments and the justice system in the WB and EN tended to be more trusted than parliaments and political parties. At the time, Montenegro and Georgia stood out with relatively high levels of public confidence across institutions. In contrast, Ukraine consistently reported the lowest trust levels for all institutions. Moldova and Serbia also showed relatively low confidence, while North Macedonia recorded moderate to high levels of trust in most cases. Additionally, when compared to EU

[53] The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered *"A great deal"* and *"Quite a lot"* to the following question: *"I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all? (name of institution)."*

[54] The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered *"A great deal of trust"* and *"Somewhat trust"* to the following question: *"How much do you trust the following institutions? [name of institution]."*

[55] The cross-regional average for Georgia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Ukraine, and Serbia was 29.3% according WVS.

[56] The data for Moldova is based on a survey conducted by the Institute for Public Policy. Although the question used is similar, comparisons with the other data entries should be interpreted with caution.

[57] The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered *"A great deal"* and *"Quite a lot"* to the following question: *"I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all? (name of institution)."*

[58] The table shows the percentage of respondents who answered *"A great deal of trust"* and *"Somewhat trust"* to the following question: *"How much do you trust the following institutions? [name of institution]."*

averages, most countries fell below, with the largest gap observed in relation to the justice system/courts.

To corroborate the WVS/EVS findings with more recent data, we also draw on surveys conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI). Specifically, we analyse three waves of IRI's Western Balkans Regional Poll from 2020, 2022, and 2024, alongside comparable opinion surveys carried out individually in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia during the same years. In addition to the four institutions analysed we also examine trust in the media and the presidency[59], which were not included in the WVS/EVS dataset.

According to the Western Balkans Regional Poll, in 2024, Montenegro ranked highest for four out of six institutions in the three countries (for president, prime minister, parliament, political parties), replicating its strong performance observed in the WVS/EVS datasets. The presidency and the prime minister's office emerged as the most trusted bodies, with confidence levels of 62% and 58%, respectively. Despite this strong confidence in the executive, trust in other institutions remained relatively low. Parliament followed with a trust rating of 47%. The media showed a trust level of 44%, while the judiciary received 38%. Political parties were the least trusted, with only 33% of respondents expressing confidence. These results align with broader WVS/EVS trends, with executive institutions consistently receiving higher ratings than representative bodies.

In the same year, trust in the presidency remained highest among the measured institutions in Serbia, at 58%, followed by the courts (52%) and the prime minister (50%). Notably, the judiciary is the only institution where Serbia outperforms other WB countries. Parliament and media received more moderate levels of trust in the country, at 43% and 44% respectively, while political parties remained the least trusted institution, with just 28% expressing confidence. The Serbian data also indicates a general increase in confidence across all institutions from 2020 to 2024, with the courts seeing the sharpest rise from 39% to 52%.

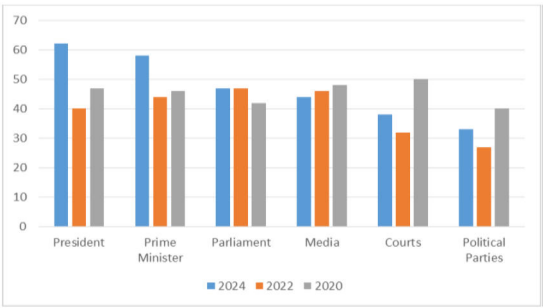
On the contrary, in 2024, North Macedonia ranked lowest among the three countries in five of the six measured institutions, with the sole exception being the media, where it recorded the highest level of public trust at 62%. Trust in the presidency stood at 30%, followed closely by political parties (29%), the prime minister (24%), parliament (23%), and the courts (17%). Additionally, compared to previous years, the media saw a sharp rise in public trust since 2020, while most other institutions experienced decline. Overall, the data shows a significant deficit of trust in most institutions in North Macedonia, marking a notable shift from earlier findings

[59] In Ukraine, only presidency, prime minister and parliament are included. Data on the rest of the institutions is not available.
The figures for the three Western Balkan countries represent the combined share of respondents who expressed *"a great deal"* or *"somewhat"* trust, in response to the question: *"To what extent do you trust or distrust each of the following institutions?"* By contrast, the data for Moldova (all three years) and Georgia's 2023 dataset is based on the categories *"Very positive"* and *"Somewhat positive"*, from the question: *"What is your opinion of each of the following institutions?"*. In Georgia's 2022 and 2020 surveys, the scale referred to *"Very favourable"* and *"Somewhat favourable"*. For Ukraine, all three data points reflect public approval rather than trust, based on responses to *"Do you approve or disapprove of the activities of..."*, with categories *"Strongly approve"* and *"Somewhat approve."* While approval and trust are conceptually distinct, with approval typically referring to assessment of performance, and trust to perceptions of credibility or legitimacy, they often track closely in public opinion data. Hence, for the purposes of this research, use of these data is justifiable. Nevertheless, caution is warranted at all times when comparing figures, as differences in wording and response scales can significantly influence results and should be taken into account when interpreting cross-national comparisons.

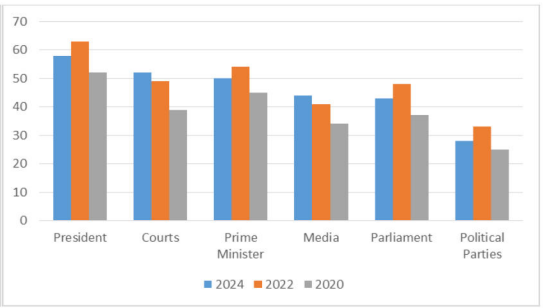
from the WVS/EVS data, in which the country emerged as a moderate to high performer in institutional trust.

Figure 4. Trust in Public Institutions in the Western Balkans

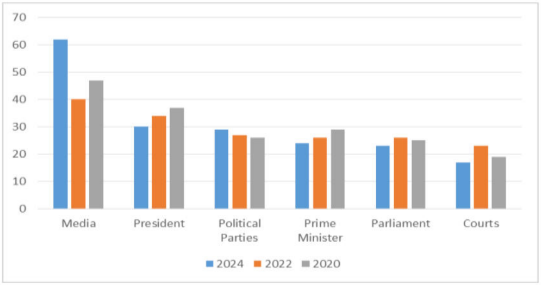
Montenegro



Serbia



North Macedonia



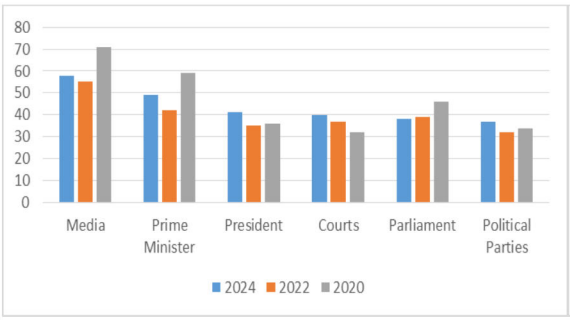
Source: International Republican Institute, Western Balkans Regional Polls 2020, 2022 and 2024

Next, we look at IRI surveys in three EN countries. Trust in major public institutions in Georgia was moderate to high in 2023, repeating its strong performance observed in the WVS/EVS dataset from late 2010s. The media enjoyed the highest level of confidence at 58%, followed by the Prime Minister at 49%. Trust in the President and the judiciary was slightly lower, at 41% and 40%, respectively, while Parliament and political parties received the least support, at 38% and 37%, respectively. Despite reports of declining confidence in authorities, in 2023, Georgia's levels of institutional trust remained relatively stronger in the regional context. Trust in institutions in Moldova remained generally low. The media held the highest level of trust at 40%, followed by the President at 38% and the Prime Minister at 35%. Trust in the Parliament stood at 32%, while political parties and courts ranked lowest, at 27% and 21%, respectively. These figures placed Moldova at or near the bottom among the candidate countries across most institutional categories, highlighting persistent discontent or disconnect with key public institutions. Notably, this is consistent with findings from the late 2010s, where Moldovan institutions emerged as some of the weakest performers. The latest data in the case of Ukraine also comes from 2024 and shows a sharp divide: The President enjoys the highest level of confidence among the candidate countries at 69%, while the Prime Minister and Parliament receive some of the lowest support, at 35% and 21% respectively. Notably, confidence surged significantly for all institutions following the Russian invasion but has since declined, with trust in the Parliament and Prime Minister returning toward pre-war levels. Importantly, recent Ukrainian data aligns broadly with findings from the WVS/EVS dataset, which identified the

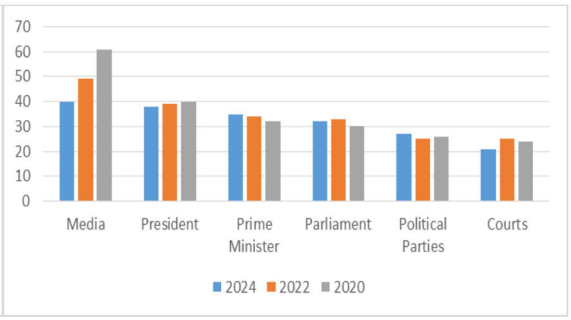
government and parliament as among the least trusted institutions across the candidate countries.

Figure 5. Trust in Public Institutions in the Eastern Neighbourhood

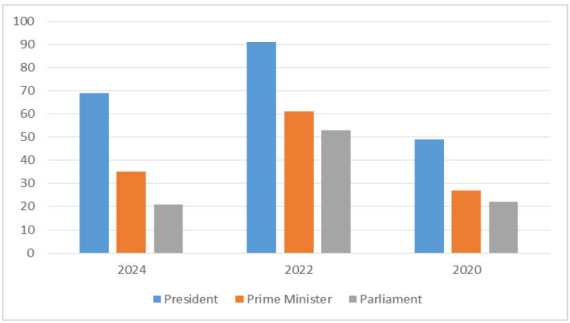
Georgia



Moldova



Ukraine



Source: International Republican Institute, Public Opinion Surveys

Overall, the six candidate countries tend to exhibit moderate levels of trust in public institutions. Presidents and prime ministers often enjoy relatively higher levels of confidence, while parliaments, political parties, and courts rank consistently among the least trusted. Combined, these patterns suggest that the candidate countries lean toward personalised politics, where trust is placed in individual leaders rather than in formal institutions. At the same time, trust in the media remains stable, indicating a willingness among citizens to rely on non-state institutions as sources of information and accountability. The data also shows that trust levels are gradually becoming comparatively higher and more stable in the WB in recent years, a shift from the more even cross-regional distribution observed in earlier waves of the WVS/EVS surveys.

When we look at country performance across the indicators of political participation and institutional trust, Montenegro and Ukraine emerge as relatively strong performers. **Montenegro** reports the highest voter turnout in recent elections, shows notable engagement in petition-signing, and demonstrates comparatively high degree of trust in government, the presidency, and other institutions. It, however, has modest female representation in parliament. **Ukraine** exhibits strong electoral participation and steady growth in formal political engagement, alongside a significant, although uneven, increase in confidence in the presidency and other public institutions following the Russian invasion. Female representation in parliament remains modest. Georgia and Serbia take a middle position. **Georgia** shows improving voter turnout,

growing petition-signing, moderate protest and strike participation, and relatively high degree of trust in executive institutions, though confidence in parliament and political parties remains lower. Moreover, female representation in parliament is the lowest. **Serbia** demonstrates steady electoral participation, limited engagement in strikes, and rising confidence in the courts and executive offices, while trust in parliament and political parties remains comparatively low. Women hold a sizable share of parliamentary seats. Although the countries lead in gender representation, Moldova and North Macedonia are at the lower end in terms of overall record. **Moldova** shows declining voter turnout, and consistently low trust across most public institutions. **North Macedonia** shows similar patterns, with modest political participation and weak institutional trust, particularly in the presidency, parliament, and judiciary, despite a relatively high level of confidence in the media.

Summary

In this chapter, we analysed the dynamics of social cohesion across six candidate countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) and Western Balkans (WB) – Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine – focusing on five key dimensions: **Access to education, Access to healthcare, Access to economic and technological resources; Political participation and institutional trust; Social participation, belonging and trust**. The preceding sections showed that the candidate countries have undergone significant socio-economic and political changes over the past decade, reflected in notable improvements across most dimensions of social cohesion.

Serbia and Ukraine emerge as the comparatively strongest performers. **Serbia** leads in access to education and access to economic resources, also performing strongly in access to healthcare; however, the country shows weaker outcomes in the social and political dimensions. **Ukraine**, by contrast, performs exceptionally well in the social and political dimensions, as well as in access to education, but faces challenges in access to healthcare and economic resources. **Montenegro** presents a mixed picture, combining strong performance in the social and political dimensions with weaker results in access to education, economic resources, and healthcare. **Georgia** follows, performing moderately across most domains, though it lags notably in access to healthcare. **Moldova** comes next. It takes moderate-to-lower positions across most dimensions, showing particularly weak performance in access to healthcare. **North Macedonia** ranks lowest, with the weakest results in the social and political dimensions, as well as in access to education and economic resources, although it stands out as a comparatively strong performer in healthcare.

Several overarching conclusions can be drawn from the analysis. **Access to education** is generally satisfactory, with broad availability of educational institutions. However, significant disparities persist in the quality of education, particularly affecting poorer populations, rural residents, and minority language groups. **Access to economic resources** is moderate. Most countries have seen gradual declines in inequality, unemployment, and poverty, yet high informality, low labour force participation, persistent gender gaps, and war-related disruptions, especially in Ukraine, continue to affect the well-being of citizens, as well as convergence with EU standards. Rural-urban divides and youth unemployment also remain pressing. **Access to healthcare** has improved as well, as reflected in rising life expectancy, declining infant mortality rates, and increases in the number of medical personnel. Nevertheless, despite visible progress and growing convergence, the candidate countries continue to lag behind the EU

average across most healthcare indicators. Taken together, our research shows that basic measures of socio-economic equality – a core element of social cohesion – are improving but are not equally distributed. And while these gradual improvements provide a solid foundation for building more cohesive societies, it must be further reinforced to ensure the sustained advancement toward the levels observed in the EU and the overall quality of the social fabric.

Political participation shows signs of upward movement. While electoral participation has remained relatively high and stable over time, gender representation in national legislature has seen notable progress. Importantly, both of these indicators place the six countries mostly on par with the corresponding EU averages, indicating gradual alignment with European benchmarks of participation. However, our research also suggests that engagement in non-electoral forms of political action, such as demonstrations, boycotts, and strikes, remains moderate and below the EU average. Among these, petition-signing is more common than protests or strikes, which suggests that there is a preference for less confrontational forms of engagement. Important observations also emerge in the area of **institutional trust**. Overall, candidate countries tend to exhibit lower levels of confidence in public institutions compared to the EU average. A distinctive feature of the WB and EN is relatively higher degree of trust in executive institutions. As a rule, presidents and prime ministers enjoy significantly more public confidence, while parliaments and political parties consistently rank among the least trusted institutions. This pattern points to a tendency toward personalised politics, where trust is vested in individual leaders rather than the institutional frameworks they represent. Such dynamics, combined with consistently low confidence in the judiciary, pose a challenge for social cohesion, as it distances citizens from the realm of decision-making and legal process. Without political parties and courts acting as intermediaries and arbiters, the relationship between citizens and the state becomes weakened, making it harder for people to have their voices heard or their grievances addressed.

The data also indicates a cross-regional shift in institutional trust: in recent years, confidence in institutions has become comparatively higher and more stable in the WB, marking a departure from the more evenly distributed levels of trust across both regions in earlier periods. There is also a regional divide in terms of political participation: WB countries tend to exhibit higher levels of engagement in demonstrations, strikes and boycotts compared to their counterparts in the East. However, across all countries, participation rates in all three forms of political action are consistently lower among women, rural residents, low-income groups, and youth.

People-to-people relations present a mixed picture. Horizontal trust, or trust among citizens, illustrates this complexity best: while trust in family members and neighbours is relatively high and comparable to EU levels, it drops sharply when it comes to strangers or individuals from different ethnic or religious backgrounds. This pattern reflects a tendency toward particularistic and group-based trust, which can have both positive and negative implications for the overall health of the social fabric. Higher trust within immediate social circles (family, friends, and neighbours), as well as within their in-groups, is undoubtedly positive for social bonds, as these relationships create a sense of community and provide vital support, be it emotional or otherwise. However, lower trust beyond these close-knit groups can weaken individuals' connection to society at large, thereby undermining the very foundations of social cohesion at the national level. Interestingly, the low generalised trust observed in the candidate countries contrasts with the fact that many of these societies exhibit a strong sense of national pride, that is, a high degree of belonging to their countries. Several explanations could account for this.

Individuals may feel a deep attachment to the nation-state, even in the absence of broad societal trust. In other words, there may be a strong sense of identification with the homeland, without a corresponding sense of identification with fellow citizens as part of a collective whole. Alternatively, this could reflect a more symbolic form of national belonging, one that does not necessarily translate into attitudes and actions in everyday life. In any case, this interplay between national pride and low horizontal trust warrants further investigation, which goes beyond the scope of this chapter.

Challenges also persist in the area of social tolerance. Societies across the candidate countries continue to exhibit high levels of suspicion toward certain groups, particularly drug users and homosexuals. Notably, while intolerance toward the former is broadly in line with EU levels, intolerance toward homosexuals is significantly higher, around 2.5 times greater than in the EU. Intolerance toward immigrants and people of different race is somewhat lower but still remains above the EU average. Such attitudes act as social barriers, pushing people apart rather than bringing them together, and pose a significant obstacle to building cohesive societies.

When it comes to **social participation**, the overall levels are satisfactory. Notably, acts such as helping strangers, donating money to charity, and volunteering time to an organisation increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, while Ukraine witnessed a further surge following the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. As a result, in 2024, the candidate countries outpace the EU average in helping strangers. This indicates that there is a strong sense of informal, altruistic support. However, participation in charitable donations and volunteering for organisations remains lower, both compared to helping strangers and relative to corresponding EU levels. This suggests that while individual acts of kindness are common, sustained engagement through formal, organisational channels is less developed. Combining this finding with the previous observations on political participation and institutional trust, it can be argued that civic behaviour in these countries tends to be more spontaneous and informal rather than embedded within structured forms of engagement. This dynamic may limit the potential for collective action and the strengthening of broader social networks necessary for deeper social cohesion.

In sum, our research shows that despite notable progress, the candidate countries still lag behind EU levels of social cohesion. They continue to grapple with uneven socio-economic conditions and persistent divides across demographic and geographic lines. Political engagement seems to be respectable, with relatively regular voter turnout and participation in various forms of political action. Additionally, most societies exhibit distrust toward public institutions, but they maintain a relatively higher degree of confidence in executive institutions. Links with political parties and deliberative institutions remain weak, meaning that there is limited institutional mediation between the public and personal spheres. At the same time, these societies enjoy tight social connections and a high degree of trust within close-knit communities. They also demonstrate willingness to help strangers, but structured social participation remains low. This combination of socio-economic fragmentation, personalised politics, particularistic trust, and relative civic passivity alongside altruistic behaviour presents a distinct model of social cohesion, one that is shaped by the post-socialist transition, economic downturn, and institutional fragility.

4 Experts' Assessment of Social Cohesion in the EU Candidate Countries

The second part of the report aims at corroborating the findings from the quantitative research presented in the first part and delving deeper into analysing the nature and dynamics of social cohesion dimensions in the following four candidate countries – Georgia and Moldova representing the EN and Serbia and North Macedonia representing the WB. For that matter, we triangulate the quantitative research findings with the expert interviews conducted in each of these countries. As described in the methods section, the goal of the interviews is two-fold: (a) to assess the state of the five dimensions of social cohesion and the effect of EU accession process on them through expert scoring and by that to ensure the possibility of comparative analysis of the four candidate countries and (b) to obtain in-depth narratives by the experts and, therefore, better understand the peculiarities underlying the patterns of social cohesion in these countries.

The next section maps a big picture and reveals general trends of how experts in the four countries score the state of social cohesion dimensions and the impact of the accession process on them.

Mapping the Big Picture: Comparing Social Cohesion and the Impact of the EU Accession Process on it in Four Candidate Countries

Following the operationalisation of social cohesion in this study, we map the dimensions of economic inequality, access to education, access to healthcare, political aspect and social aspect of cohesion based on the expert scorings in the four candidate countries. To do so, we rely on the centrality measure of SNA. Figure 6 depicts the distribution of the four candidate countries based on the expert assessment of social cohesion in each of them. The proximity of each country to the centre represents its prevalence – the closer a country is to the centre, the higher the overall social cohesion has been assessed by the experts in it. Colour of the arrows connecting countries with the dimensions represents the strength of this dimension in a given country – the darker it is the higher is the experts' score of that dimension in the respective country. Figure 7 should be read in exactly the same way with the difference that it focuses on the centrality of the dimensions of social cohesion rather than the countries. Here, the closer a dimension is to the centre the higher its level has been assessed by the experts in all the four countries cumulatively.

Figure 6 reveals that, in general, there are no drastic differences among the candidate countries according to the experts' assessment of social cohesion in them. However, certain distinctions can still be observed. The cumulative analysis of the expert assessments of the five dimensions of cohesion in each country reveals that Moldova stands out with a slightly higher score than the other three candidate countries, followed by Serbia, which displays a rather closer proximity to the centre as well. While North Macedonia and Georgia are spatially also closely distributed to each other, pointing to the similar levels of social cohesion in them, the latter seems to be performing worst among the countries under study. On the one hand, experts' assessment of how countries compare with each other based on the strength of social cohesion in them differs from what we have observed through the findings of the desk research at the level of specific indicators. On the other hand, this divergence is not unexpected but rather analytically valuable. The desk research-based indicators capture measurable outcomes and structural conditions, whereas expert scoring reflects lived experience, contextual

knowledge, and perceptions of how systems function. Because these approaches draw on different sources, time horizons, and forms of evidence, variations in their findings are natural and help identify gaps between statistical performance and on-the-ground reality. These divergences offer useful insights into areas where quantitative indicators and expert assessments highlight different dimensions of country performance. The two approaches complement each other in that they reveal a more comprehensive picture of the nature of social cohesion in a given country. For example, the desk research has shown high numbers of electoral participation in almost all countries under study. However, the in-depth interviews analysed below uncovered the problems underlying these high numbers of voter turnout, pointing to a rather limited substantial participation. Similarly, according to the desk research, access to primary education is almost universal across all the countries but in-depth interviews revealed that physical access to schools does not translate into quality education.

Conversely, experts' assessment of the dimensions of social cohesion map a more similar picture to the findings of the desk research. From the very first inspection of the Figure 7, it becomes clear that experts assess access to healthcare and education as the dimensions of social cohesion that perform best in the countries under study. Whereas, economic equality and the political aspect – comprising of the indicators of political trust and participation – seem to be on the margins of the graph pointing to the relative weakness of these dimensions. Social aspect of the cohesion – defined by the indicators of social participation and horizontal trust – is assessed as the most problematic aspect of social cohesion in the candidate countries.

Figure 6. Distribution of the Four Candidate Countries according to the State of Social Cohesion Dimensions in each of them. Measure: Out-Degree Centrality.

One set of nodes represents countries, and another represents dimensions of social cohesion. Arrows linking the two represent the strength of a dimension in a country. The darker the arrow, the stronger the dimension is in a given country. the closer a country is to the centre, the higher the overall social cohesion has been assessed by the experts in it

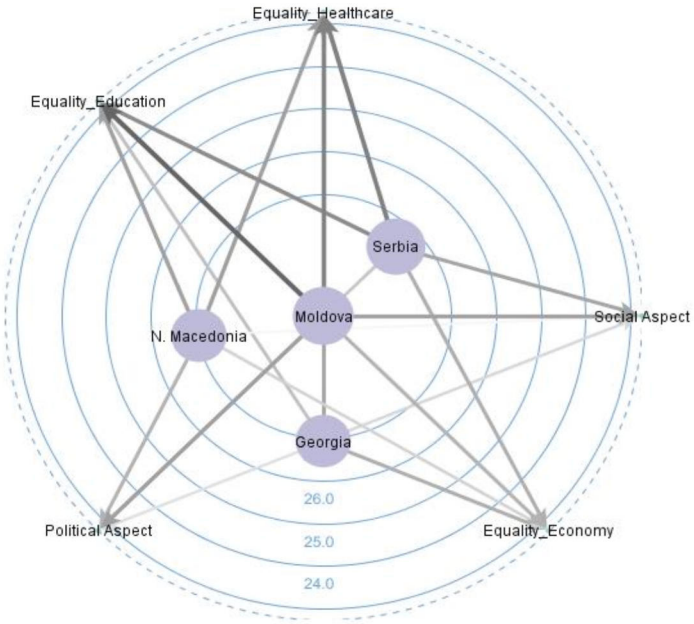
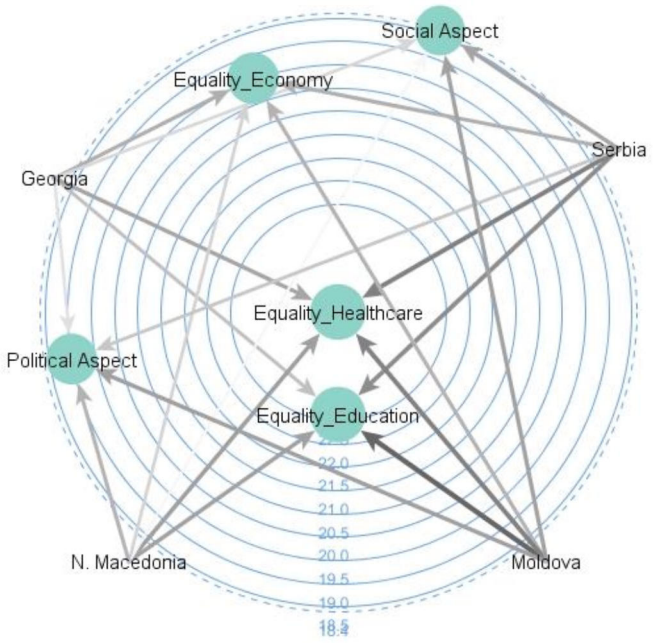


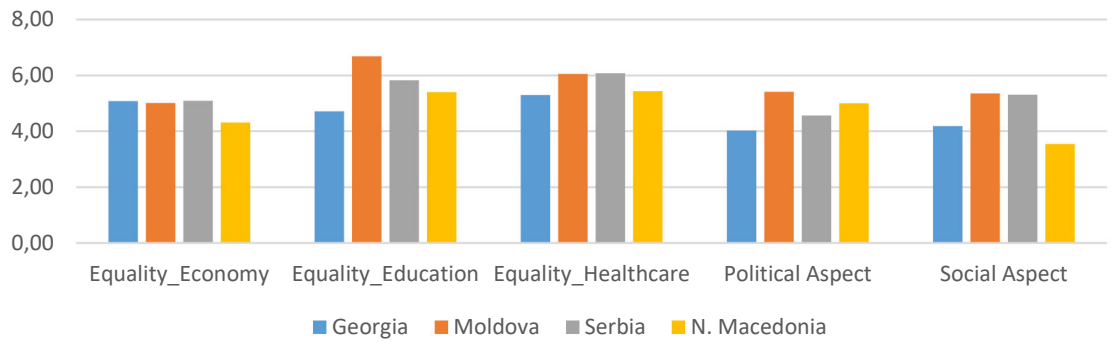
Figure 7. Distribution of the Social Cohesion Dimensions in the 4 Candidate Countries. Measure: In-Degree Centrality.

This Figure follows the same rules as the Figure 6 but shifts the focus from the countries to the dimensions. The closer a dimension is to the centre, the higher its level has been assessed by the experts in the four countries cumulatively.



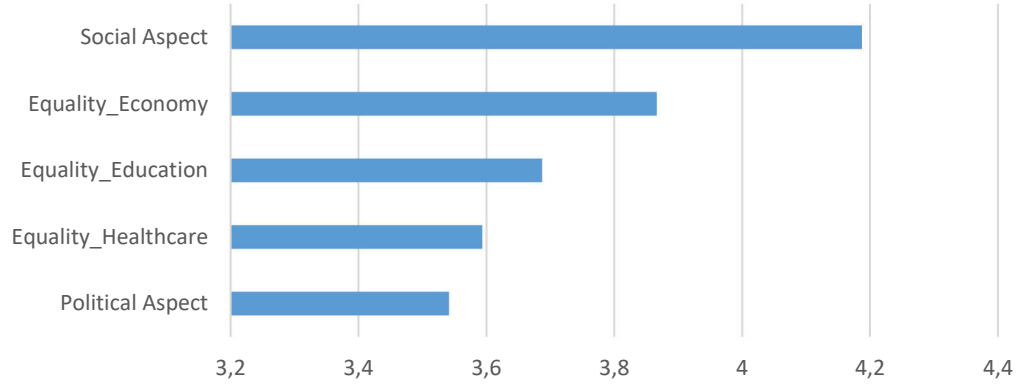
It should be stressed that, in general, the level of social cohesion in the candidate countries is assessed as rather low by the experts. This is particularly well-visible in Figure 8, which presents the expert scoring of each dimension of social cohesion according to the countries under study. As shown by this Figure, the highest score of 6.68 has been prescribed to the dimension of equality of education in Moldova. Whereas, most of the other dimensions are scored below 6, the average assessment of all the dimensions in all the countries being 5.1. Considering that the scoring scale ranged from 0 (the poorest outcome) to 10 (the best outcome), even the best performing dimension is, in fact, assessed rather poorly. Hence, it is not surprising that the in-depth narratives of the interviews in all the thematic clusters, including the ones that are assessed relatively better than others, are dominated by experts underscoring problems and challenges.

Figure 8. Expert Assessment of Social Cohesion Dimensions according to the 4 Accession Countries.



A similar pattern emerges in the experts' assessments of how the EU accession process influences various dimensions of social cohesion in the candidate countries. In this part of the study, experts within each thematic cluster were asked to evaluate the impact of accession using a categorical scale that captured both positive and negative effects. The scale ranged from "significantly worsened" (1) to "significantly improved" (5), with intermediate options – "slightly worsened" (2), "neither worsened nor improved" (3), and "slightly improved" (4) – allowing for more nuanced responses. Figure 9 presents the cumulative analysis of these assessments across all countries included in the study, whereas Figure 10 disaggregates the results by individual country.

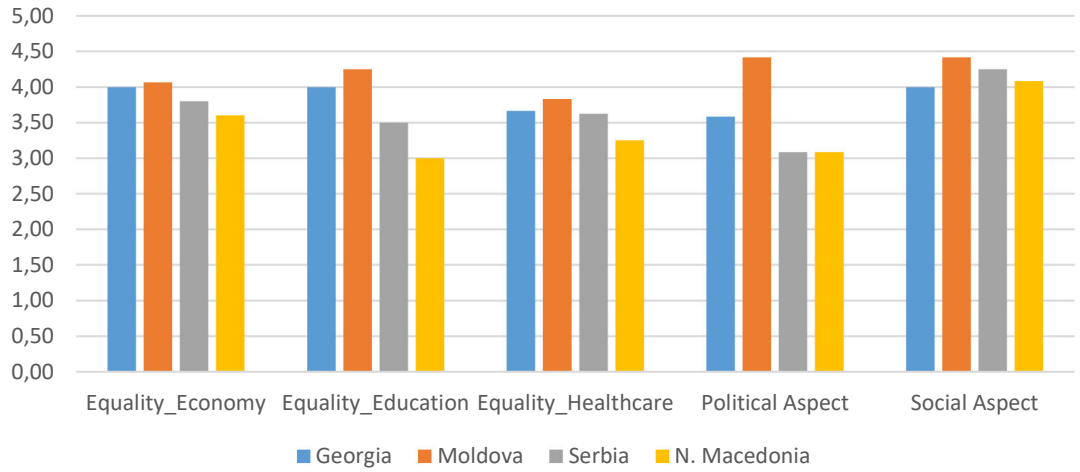
Figure 9. Experts' Assessment of how much EU Accession Process has impacted the Social Cohesion Dimensions in the Four Candidate Countries cumulatively. Scale from 1 (Significantly Worsened) to 5 (Significantly Improved).



As illustrated in Figure 9, the social aspect of cohesion emerges as the dimension, which experts think has been most positively affected by the EU accession process and the only one reaching the threshold of "slightly improved." The remaining dimensions fall within the range between this category and "neither worsened nor improved." Figure 10 further demonstrates that, with only minor variations, these assessments remain largely consistent across the countries examined. Taken together, the findings suggest that experts in the candidate countries generally acknowledge modest positive developments, particularly concerning the social aspect of cohesion and economic equality. Importantly, none of the dimensions is considered to

have deteriorated, even slightly, while the political aspect is identified as the least positively affected among them.

Figure 10. Experts' Assessment of how much EU Accession Process has impacted the Social Cohesion Dimensions in each Candidate Country



A closer look at the narrative component of the interviews in each thematic cluster helps identify the reasoning behind the scoring decisions and provides insights into the nature of specific dimensions of social cohesion in these countries. Therefore, the analysis of the qualitative part of the interviews is structured the following way: the next section presents the in-depth analysis of the dimensions, which have been assessed as performing relatively well compared to others; the following one delves deeper into the dimension which has been assessed as the weakest and aims at identifying the factors that contribute to this weakness; and, the last section of this chapter zooms into the aspect of social cohesion that experts think has been least impacted by the EU accession process and seeks to reveal the peculiarities behind this assessment.

Socio-Economic Equality – What Challenges the Relatively Well-Performing Dimensions of Social Cohesion?

Socio-economic equality – such as access to healthcare, access to education and economic equality – have been assessed as relatively well performing set of dimensions of social cohesion in the candidate countries under study. Delving deeper into each aspect of socio-economic equality through the analysis of in-depth interviews enables a more nuanced, country-specific understanding of these dimensions. Such qualitative exploration allows us to move beyond the quantitative assessments and to identify the underlying challenges and contextual particularities that shape these outcomes. This approach also makes it possible to examine whether the candidate countries converge or diverge in their experiences and trajectories, as well as to discern the common patterns and cross-cutting themes that emerge across different national contexts.

Access to healthcare

While access to healthcare is assessed as the best performing one among the five dimensions, experts across all target countries still describe a rather mixed picture of a progress and significant persisting problems. This general trend corroborates the findings from the quantitative research, which has revealed inconsistent patterns articulated in improvements in certain areas of medical sector, on the one hand, and stagnation or deterioration, on the other hand. For example, we observed that the candidate countries have shown steady improvements in life expectancy and infant mortality over time, with clear convergence toward EU standards and that countries' medical capacity is improving in terms of physicians, but bed availability shows mixed trends. Experts' assessments of the access to health, which according to the Figure 8, is rather similar across all the countries, provide us with a more nuanced picture that goes beyond mere numbers and articulate a couple of common threads that are apparent across all the target countries.

First, while experts point to the improvement in terms of the physical access to medical services, they stress that the latter does not ensure equal access to high-quality medical care. Experts in Georgia, for example, raise concern that the quality control system is highly ineffective, leading to problems related to patient safety, unnecessary expenditures both for the state and the private sector, simultaneously harming the primary healthcare. Stressing the problem of quality control, one of the Georgian experts explains that "when a patient is prescribed seven medicines, out of which three are of the same function, this is an unnecessary expenditure". In Serbia, experts flag serious concerns about staff shortages, ageing personnel, and limited availability of modern medical equipment outside urban centres. Interviews reveal that the outflow of medical personnel, especially nurses and mid-level staff, toward Western European countries such as Germany, has created noticeable shortages, particularly in smaller communities. However, despite these gaps, they also acknowledge improvements in digitalisation of services, simplification of appointment scheduling, and expanded access to e-health records, which – they contend – have made navigation of the system easier for many patients in recent years. It should be mentioned here that the problem of brain drain of medical personnel to the EU has also been mentioned by the experts in North Macedonia. Whereas, this issue has been completely absent from the narratives of the experts in Moldova and Georgia. What exacerbates the problem of access to quality medical care is the public/private divide in the healthcare system, which seems to be a particularly vivid in the WB region. Experts from Serbia point to the fact that within the scope of services that are officially covered by the public health system, long waiting times for diagnostic procedures, specialist appointments, and certain interventions remain a widespread problem. As a result, many patients who can afford it increasingly turn to private healthcare providers. This has contributed to the emergence of a de facto dual system – one that is overloaded but formally universal, and another that is accessible, faster, but available only to those with sufficient financial means.

Second, while in certain candidate countries different types of disparities are mentioned in terms of access to health, experts in all of these countries talk about the prevalence of urban/rural and centre/periphery divides. Experts in Georgia and Moldova, continuously mention the problem of access and quality of medical care in villages, linking this to high rates of poverty in these areas and stressing the issues such as lack of primary care, shortage of doctors and other medical personnel, as well as unavailability of diagnostic facilities. A very similar picture is drawn by the experts in North Macedonia, who in addition to the above-mentioned

problems point to the problem of availability of pharmacies and delivery of medicines in rural areas. Similarly, in Serbia, while rural areas are formally covered by at least one major health centre, many of them lack basic ambulatory services, and connectivity to central institutions is often poor. The combination of geographic distance, inadequate transportation, and under-investment in local facilities leaves rural populations significantly more vulnerable in terms of both preventive and acute care. It should be mentioned, though, that according to one of the experts in Moldova, territorial concentration of healthcare facilities might be even beneficial for the quality of care. But, what creates a real problem is the unavailability of proper transportation means to these facilities. Beyond territorial disparities, Georgian experts highlight the ethnic aspect of inequality caused by language barriers, as well as unequal access to health faced by sexual minorities caused by social stigma. While ethnic aspect is also mentioned by an expert in North Macedonia, stressing the unequal access for local Roma population, the respondent thinks that main disparities still lie across socio-economic groups – "it is rather about who can pay", says the respondent. In most of the cases, experts acknowledge that universal/public insurance has reduced these disparities by ensuring higher levels of affordability. However, they also point to the fact that there is a plenty of room for improvement in terms of the setup of this system.

Third, while experts across all the four countries have stressed the weakness of preventive medicine as a major problem, experts in Georgia and Moldova have emphasised this aspect particularly strongly. Experts in Georgia agree that vaccination process is working more or less effectively, however, other aspects of preventive medicine – in one of the experts' words – is almost "non-existent" as there is no will from the state to prioritise this issue. In turn, this increases inequalities in the access to health as peripheries and vulnerable groups are affected particularly strongly. Experts in Moldova report a similar pattern, but they also speak of increasing fears and ignorance towards vaccination amidst certain disinformation campaigns, highlighting the need for proactive communication and educational initiatives, which would facilitate a "change of culture" regarding preventive medicine in general. As for the WB countries, expert assessments tend to be more positive, pointing to the efforts the authorities put in vaccination process, as well as preventing certain diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular, and kidney diseases. However, experts in North Macedonia do point to the fact that preventive healthcare should go beyond the efforts of the Ministry of Healthcare and should involve other agencies, which deal with education, sports and raising awareness.

As Figure 9 demonstrates, the improvement of the access to healthcare as a result of the EU accession process has been assessed as slight, if at all present (between the points of "neither worsened, nor improved" and "slightly improved") and these assessments are rather similar across all the four countries (Figure 10). In this regard, experts have mentioned direct and indirect effects. Namely, on the one hand, all experts from all the four countries acknowledge that the EU has played a constructive and tangible role in strengthening the health sector. Through various programs and funds, investments have been directed toward health infrastructure upgrades, medical equipment purchases, and capacity-building for primary care services. EU support has also contributed to preventive health programs, such as early cancer screenings, anti-smoking campaigns, and sexual and reproductive health education. On the other hand, some of the experts – particularly from Georgia and North Macedonia – think that this impact has mostly happened indirectly, through other aspects of integration rather than through the efforts directly targeting the healthcare system. This refers, for example, to the general improvement of the legal framework resulting from the Association Agreement.

Access to education

Experts in the candidate countries have assessed access to education as a second most well-performing aspect of social cohesion among the five dimensions we look at. Despite this assessment, the interview narratives flag a complex picture, indicating that the current education systems – and, particularly, the extent to which they ensure quality education – are limited in their contribution towards building cohesive societies. Notably, the findings from expert interviews confirm the major trends identified through the quantitative research. According to the latter, education systems in the candidate countries manifest near-universal availability of physical infrastructure. However, the question of access to quality education reveals a more uneven picture with marked disparities among rural populations, low-income groups, and ethnic minorities. These inequalities highlight persistent socio-economic and regional divides that continue to limit equal access to education. Similarly, experts are unanimous that the physical access to primary and secondary education seems to be almost universal across the four countries under study and that higher education seems to be rather accessible for the majority of population. However, almost all of them stress that these formal access masks substantial problems related to economic and regional inequalities and to the quality of education at all levels. "Children are at school but they don't learn enough," as one of the experts sums it up. Similar to the question about healthcare, experts think that EU accession process only slightly has improved access to education in the candidate countries under study, some of them even questioning if there was any impact at all.

Two issues dominate in the expert narratives as major challenges to the equal access to quality education: (1) socio-economic and territorial disparities; and (2) the lack of capacity of teachers at primary and secondary level, as well as that of professors at tertiary level. In what follows, expert accounts are presented with regard to the each of these two issues.

It is challenging to pin point a specific layer of disparities limiting the equal access to quality education as these seem to be cross-cutting and feeding each other. Number one factor that is raised by all experts when discussing the subject matter is the urban-rural and centre-periphery divide. However, if there is one thing common across the assessments of all experts is the linkage between the two and socio-economic background. Hence, to explain this linkage better, we discuss these two factors in an interconnected way as well.

All experts acknowledge that access to quality education (all levels) is rather limited in rural areas as compared to urban ones, mountainous and remote villages affected particularly strongly. They also agree that this trend translates into observable territorial disparities in learning outcomes. As one of the experts from North Macedonia explains, "in rural areas, children come from poor families. So, this is what skews the rural-urban divide". Assessments of the experts from other countries are largely in line with this general statement. Experts in Georgia speak of "depressive" educational environment in rural areas that deprives both students and teachers of motivation to foster an engaging and productive learning process, strongly resonating what Moldovan experts say about "teaching staff crisis". Socio-economic conditions and teachers' professional capacities are named as factors contributing to this outcome. Experts from Georgia and Moldova report that in certain rural areas, due to the shortage of teachers of specific subjects, teachers of other subjects take the responsibility of teaching something that goes beyond their immediate competences.

This "depressiveness" of the education system in rural areas heightens disparities by affecting the student opportunities in terms of continuing their studies at a higher level. In Georgia, for example, according to the interviewed experts, the system favours those who can afford private tutoring (the so-called "repetitors") as part of preparation for tertiary education. Students from the capital consistently outperform those from rural and high-mountain regions. Universities outside the capital offer fewer opportunities for academic development, prompting students to migrate to Tbilisi. However, this requires covering not only tuition but also sharply rising living and transport costs in the capital, an issue largely overlooked by current state funding policies. As a result, many talented young people from poorer or remote areas are excluded from higher education, reinforcing a sense of systemic unfairness and limiting social mobility. Similar trend is observed by the experts in Serbia, who report that students from central areas are far more likely to enrol in academic-track schools, while those from peripheries often opt for vocational education simply because it is available nearby.

Beyond territorial and economic inequalities, experts – particularly, in Georgia and North Macedonia – stress divides in the access to education across ethnic lines, which cross-cut with gender disparities. Namely, experts in Georgia describe a complex chain of exclusion of ethnic minorities. It starts with language barrier and limited access to quality primary and secondary education in their respective regions and continues with students from ethnic minority communities being less prepared for higher education. This translates into low rates of graduation and high rates of leaving the education system, affecting their employment opportunities. Gender aspect is an additional layer of the problem. High rates of early marriages within ethnic minority communities decrease the probability of young girls attending universities. Similar issues are described by experts in North Macedonia highlighting language barrier as a major problem for ethnic minorities in terms of their access to education. The fact that children are expected to work from early age in certain ethnic communities in North Macedonia affects their chances of benefiting from education and improving academic performance. For example, the number of Roma students – especially, among the graduates – seems to be rather low. According to one of the experts, it was not until recent years that the first Roma earned a PhD degree from the University of Skopje. While certain state policies, as well as NGO projects, target ethnic minorities to improve their access to education in the country, experts think a lot more needs to be done in this regards.

It should be noted that optimisation of schools seems to be an issue of discussion in all four, countries as one of the proposed solutions to even the territorial disparities in the access to education. This solution implies closing small schools in rural areas and redistributing students to larger schools nearby. In North Macedonia, this process is already in the phase of active implementation. Expert assessment of this process is contradictory, though. Some of them (e.g., in Georgia and Moldova) see it as counterproductive, claiming that while from economic point of view this might be justified, it overlooks local social aspects and can deepen urban-rural misbalance and negatively affect local communities. "Rural schools and schools with special needs must be supported, not closed" – says one of them. While others (e.g. North Macedonia) see this as an instrument for improving the quality of primary and secondary education. However, in the countries where optimisation is already an ongoing practice, experts also mention that there is a plenty of room for improving transportation issues that is an essential factor the success of optimisation efforts.

The second recurrent feature in all the interviews, which also transcends territorial or other types of disparities, is the concern regarding the low capacity of teachers and professors, which in turn affects the quality of education at all levels. As experts explain, the problem manifests in the lack of their availability (in certain territories but also for certain subjects), qualification, competence and motivation. Experts in North Macedonia point to the ineffectiveness of pedagogical faculties in keeping up with novelties and pursuing changes that would ensure properly prepared teachers. Experts in all the countries report that teaching is a low-paid job leading to the lack of motivation of those who are already in this profession, as well as to the lack of interest in young people to pursue this profession at all. Low salaries also translate into work overload of teachers, affecting the quality of their contribution. Experts in Serbia and Georgia, for example, say that teachers in smaller schools frequently work across multiple institutions, particularly in subjects such as foreign languages and IT, which undermines pedagogical continuity and limits their engagement with individual student needs. The problem seems to persist at higher education level as well. Furthermore, as experts in Georgia describe, due to the lack of research resources, professors at higher education institutions struggle in terms their professional development and are rarely able to provide students with research-based teaching. Erasmus exchange programs for academic staff is named as the only opportunity for them to keep up with international academic standards in their respective fields. Systemic problems in higher education are reported in all four countries under study. Amongst others, this implies rigidity of academic pathways and the failure to implement Bologna Process-related reforms in practice; non-existence of mobility between faculties and degree cycles; underdeveloped interdisciplinary approaches, poor alignment with labour market needs, as well as opaque and ineffectively targeted funding mechanisms.

Taking all these aspects into account, access to education – and, the education system, in general – in the candidate countries seems to be limited in contributing to the building of cohesive societies. Explanations by Georgian experts help us understand how the low quality of education, disparities in the access to it, as well as how lack of competence of teachers can be linked to social cohesion:

Children do not feel as part of the school. They just feel the obligation of going there daily. Therefore, it is hard to imagine that in the future, the same children will be engaged in solving societal problems, which is the first step for them to find connection with other members of the same society. There are two major ways of how schools can teach this: first, it is the "content" that makes children think about their role in the society, for example through teaching history; and, second, these are the structures that inspire them to be engaged, for example through self-government, so that they experience solving their own problems themselves. What we observe is that this part of social life of schools is not only ineffective in fostering interest, but it also does not work as a coherent entity that is able to engage students in solving daily problems.

How do the experts assess the impact of the EU integration process on the access to education in the candidate countries then? As the Figure 9 demonstrates, on average expert assessment of this question falls somewhere between the categories of "neither worsen nor improved" (score: 3) and "slightly improved" (score: 4). The narratives also back this assessment by acknowledging the positive contribution of programs and projects supported by the EU but at the same time admitting that this process did not have substantial impact on improvement of the system, especially when it comes to the quality of education. It is notable that experts

slightly differ in their perceptions of this issue within but also across countries, which is reflected in the Figure 10 as well.

In general, experts across the countries under study acknowledge the positive effects of the integration process through the programs such as Erasmus+, university alliances, and alignment with EU frameworks as well as the various forms of academic mobility and internationalisation encouraged by these programs. Experts note that EU support has contributed to specific reform initiatives and institutional development, though they also underscore a spectrum of challenges concomitant to this process. Serbian experts report that while the country has been engaging in processes aimed at bringing its education system closer to European models, the extent of practical convergence remains limited, particularly in areas such as student mobility, recognition of degrees, and integration into wider European academic networks. Experts in other countries flag that the EU funding is usually ad hoc and short-term and lack the link to local specific needs (North Macedonia) and that copying the EU model mechanically can be counter-productive (Moldova). Focusing on the expanded exchange programs, experts in Georgia report mixed implications of this process. Namely, on the one hand, students who have participated in exchange programs are more likely to access similar opportunities again, widening existing gaps with those who have not. Yet, their experiences also yield positive effects as returning students often demonstrate greater critical thinking, communication skills, and civic engagement, inspiring peers through a "domino effect" that contributes to strengthening social cohesion. In addition, one aspect that is observed throughout the interviews and cross cuts across all four countries is the emphasis on the need of training teachers at primary and secondary level with long-term effects.

Last but not least, interview analysis revealed regional, but also cross-country differences in terms of how experts conceive the issue of brain drain while discussing the impact of accession process on the access to education. First, it is notable, that experts from WB do not mention brain drain as a factor in this regard, while those from the EN do so. Second, those who do bring up the issue of brain drain, i.e. experts in Georgia and Moldova, see its implications in a rather different manner. Namely, experts in Moldova see it as a demographic problem by default. Whereas, experts from Georgia voice the positive aspect of this process. According to one of them, as labour market in Georgia cannot accommodate the high levels of qualification of those who do their study abroad, very frequently, these highly qualified people are able to be employed abroad on good positions. In this situation, they are able to be more useful for the Georgian society with their activities from other countries.

Economic Equality

When assessing economic inequality, experts from Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, and Serbia present a complex picture that often contrasts the positive trends suggested by official statistics. While headline indicators such as Gini index, poverty rates, and unemployment figures have shown gradual improvement over the past decade, interviewed experts consistently note that this statistical progress masks persistent structural problems and the lived reality of economic vulnerability.

In Georgia, for instance, experts argue that the country's recent economic growth has failed to translate into a corresponding increase in new, high-value jobs or adequately higher average salaries. Similarly, in Serbia, despite improvements in income inequality and poverty metrics, economic insecurity remains widespread, preventing these gains from being reflected in

citizens' daily experience. In North Macedonia, for example, the sharp drop in unemployment is largely the result of large-scale departures, a trend described by one of the experts as "ruining the potential of the country to achieve long-term growth." Similarly, Moldovan experts point out that the high migration rate "partially masks the lack of well-paid jobs." The patterns behind these disconnected figures, especially emigration, job quality, informality, and inequality, come up repeatedly across interviews.

Firstly, this phenomenon shows the conflicting effects of emigration in these countries. While experts note that remittances from the diaspora in Moldova and Georgia provide a vital economic lifeline, supporting consumption and easing poverty, they do not alleviate the structural economic deficiencies. Instead, this reliance on external income creates a dual problem: it reduces the immediate pressure on governments to create quality jobs, and it strips the countries of their most skilled and dynamic workforce ("brain drain" phenomenon). The consensus is that large-scale brain drain undermines growth potential and partially masks the persistent lack of well-paid, high-value jobs at home.

Nevertheless, experts in all four countries acknowledge the progress when it comes to declining unemployment, however, they warn about the quality of the created jobs. In North Macedonia, for example, experts note that while Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has driven job creation, these positions are frequently concentrated in "low-skill, low-value-added" sectors, leading to a persistent mismatch between the qualified workforce and the available opportunities. This sentiment is reinforced by Serbian experts, where new jobs, despite their volume, are often characterised as "precarious," particularly outside the Belgrade region. Georgian experts note that government efforts to reduce unemployment frequently rely on non-sustainable public employment programs that fail to address the fundamental deficit in private sector job creation. The critique specifically refers to a large-scale state initiative that offers low-wage (approx. 100 EUR per month) public works jobs to recipients of social assistance. Experts argue this program significantly inflates employment statistics with what one called "completely artificial jobs." Furthermore, the reliance on seasonal and unprotected agricultural labour in rural areas of Moldova and Georgia, contributes significantly to this challenge of low-quality employment. Ultimately, the failure to create enough high-quality jobs is the fundamental barrier to economic inclusion and social progress in all four nations.

Low-quality employment in these countries is unevenly distributed and reflects what experts see as one of the key sources of inequality: the widening gap between urban and rural areas. Experts in all four countries describe a dynamic where economic activity is overwhelmingly concentrated in the capital cities, leaving the rest of the country lagging. In North Macedonia, according to experts, this is quantified by the "excessively high concentration of economic activities in the Skopje region," which alone generates 42% of the country's GDP. A similar pattern is evident in Moldova and Georgia, where experts note that average salaries in the capitals (Chișinău and Tbilisi, respectively) can be almost twice as high as in peripheral regions. In these countries, rural employment is largely confined to "unproductive" and seasonal agriculture. The consequence is greater internal migration, as one Georgian expert explained: "in the capital city there are more opportunities... This is one of the main reasons why we have a high rate of urbanisation."

This stark territorial divide, which has also been demonstrated by the quantitative research findings, is deepened by another structural problem that affects particularly peripheral regions: the vast informal economy. The shadow economy distorts labour market data, traps

many workers in insecure jobs without protection, and weakens the state's ability to fund public services. In Georgia, the size of the informal sector is described by one expert as "catastrophic" for a country of its level of economic development. The drivers cited by the experts are multifaceted, ranging from a lack of trust in institutions in Moldova to high costs of formalisation in North Macedonia. As one Macedonian expert noted, high social security contributions create a powerful disincentive to stay in the formal economy. This phenomenon is particularly acute in rural and western regions of North Macedonia, where experts directly link higher perceived unemployment to a greater prevalence of informal activity, a consequence of the "weaker impact" of state institutions there.

The consequences of these structural problems are most severe for specific demographic groups that face disproportionate levels of economic exclusion: youth, women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities. Aligning with the quantitative research findings, high youth unemployment is cited as a significant issue across all four countries, often compounded by a persistent skills mismatch where educational attainment fails to align with modern labour market demands. For women, the main challenges are significantly low participation in the workforce and persistent pay gaps, with Moldovan and Georgian experts noting the important differences in employment rates compared to men. People with disabilities also come up in the interviews as facing steep income and employment barriers. In Moldova, experts say persons with disabilities earn well below the national average and depend largely on disability pensions that are often lower than old-age pensions and even below the minimum consumption level, which raises the risk of social exclusion. Furthermore, another acute form of marginalisation is observed among ethnic minorities, notably the Roma community in North Macedonia and Serbia. Experts from Serbia emphasise that general progress in inequality metrics has failed to reach the most vulnerable, pointing to limited economic integration for the Roma population. Similarly, North Macedonian experts highlight the high poverty rates among the Roma, who face limited job opportunities and reliance on often insufficient social benefits.

Additionally, the expert analysis of access to technology (The Digital Divide) reveals an underlying vulnerability. While all countries have made progress in infrastructure, experts concur that a significant digital divide persists. This gap exists primarily between urban and rural areas and across generations. Furthermore, even where access exists, experts note a critical lag in the adoption and effective use of digital technologies by small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as in public administration, which hinders overall productivity and modernisation efforts essential for sustaining long-term economic growth.

Lastly, Figure 9 indicates that, compared to other dimensions, expert scores rank the EU integration impact on economic equality second, following the social aspect. Still, the scores do not support a confident claim of a large effect. Interviews universally characterise the impact as positive yet limited and mostly indirect. The primary positive contribution across all four countries is the facilitation of trade liberalisation through agreements such as the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and the AA. This has opened European markets, attracted some FDI, and provided an external anchor for institutional and legislative reforms. A Moldovan expert explicitly states that EU support has helped to "protect certain vulnerable groups" and drive institutional modernisation, while Georgian experts note the establishment of "opportunities and benefits."

However, the current transformative power of the EU integration process is perceived as constrained. Georgian experts noted that the "scale of the programs" is not large enough to

induce significant change, and that the effect has often been indirect, meaning the EU's role is less about direct intervention and more about creating a favourable economic environment that is conditional on the actions of domestic actors. A Georgian expert captured this precise dynamic, stating: "If the country's policy does not follow through, then it is difficult [to see results]." Another distinctive view came from a North Macedonian expert, from the country that recorded the lowest score for EU integration's impact on economic equality (see Figure 10). He argued that the prolonged delay in the formal accession process has hindered convergence with the EU, suggesting that the credibility and the speed of the accession path matter profoundly to economic outcomes.

Social Participation and Horizontal Trust: Understanding the Local Peculiarities of Social Cohesion in the Candidate Countries

Expert scoring has revealed social aspect of cohesion – defined as horizontal trust and social participation – to be an outstanding dimension in two ways: (1) It is assessed as the weakest link of social cohesion in the candidate countries and, and at the same time, (2) it is said to have been affected by the integration process most positively among all the dimensions (Figure 9 and Figure 10). In other words, a considerable effort and investment is being done to improve this aspect, but, nevertheless, the progress is significantly slow. This – one could say, contradictory – assessments call for a deeper analysis underlying the problem. To do so, similar to the previous sections, we first look at how expert assessments converge or diverge with the findings of the desk research. Further, we proceed with the detailed discussion of what experts have reported to be a peculiar form of social capital, suggesting a context-specific understanding of horizontal trust and social participation in the candidate countries under study. This finding from the expert interviews led to the necessity of differentiating between the forms of social capital, which was done through integrating the concepts of *bonding* and *bridging* by Robert Putnam (2000) in the analysis. Therefore, the analysis that follows was guided by this framework.

In general, expert interviews are in line with the findings of the quantitative research, according to which trust and social participation in the candidate countries remain predominantly particularistic and group-based, with high trust confined to family and close circles but low trust toward strangers and diverse groups, significantly diverging from the EU averages of the same indicators. Interviews also confirm the quantitative research findings, which show that while volunteering, and charitable giving have grown modestly over the past decade, they still lag behind EU levels, with only isolated improvements, specifically after Ukraine's post-2022 surge in civic engagement. Despite this alignment between the findings of the quantitative research and expert interviews, experts' qualitative insights have revealed that certain local peculiarities need to be taken into account while explaining these patterns. As one of the Georgian experts put it:

We take a scheme, which works well in a certain cultural environment, but cohesion is a completely different thing in our case… It is not an economic equality that holds our society together.

The analysis of the interviews across the four countries has revealed that this statement speaks to the realities of the other candidate countries as well and this is articulated in a couple of similar trends that are discussed below.

The most dominant pattern that cuts across all four countries is their similarity in the peculiar form of social capital, which significantly differs from how social capital works in European societies. In order to explain this difference better, we rely on the analytical framework proposed by Robert Putnam (2000), whereby social capital is defined as a "social organisation such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 2000, 19). Thus, social capital is manifested, amongst others, in the nature and level of social participation and horizontal trust. The author distinguishes between *bonding* and *bridging* forms of social capital. The former refers to more inward looking, exclusive types of networks. Whereas, the latter pertains to the networks that are more outward looking and that "bridge" people across multiple identities. As Putnam puts it: "bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves" (2000: 31). Experts in the candidate countries under study are unanimous in stressing that the main pillar of unity and connectedness in their respective societies are the personal *bonds* rather than *bridges* of formal structures such as, for example, non-governmental or political organisations and trade unions. Therefore, civic trust is based on the relationships of primary level. People trust the members of their family, friends, relatives, neighbours, acquaintances but have low trust in formal associations. This pattern is persistent in the interviews both in the EN as well as WB countries. However, experts from Georgia and Serbia have provided a more detailed account of explanations behind it. The analysis presented below reveals that these detailed accounts depict pictures that are similar to each other.

Experts from Georgia and Serbia provide similar explanations for the predominance of bonding over bridging social capital in their respective societies. In both contexts, social relations are strongly personalised, rooted in family ties, neighbourhoods, and close friendship networks, while formal civic engagement remains weak and institutionally fragile. As one Georgian expert notes, "we are a culture of personalised relationships [...] we might have some form of activism, but it is mostly done with a neighbour, a friend, a relative," reflecting a broader reluctance to participate in formal organisations due to low institutional trust. A comparable pattern is observed in Serbia, where interpersonal solidarity within small, homogeneous communities contrasts with low generalised trust and limited confidence in institutions or diverse social groups. In both countries, this orientation toward informal, trust-based relations can be explained by their shared authoritarian and communist legacies, which suppressed voluntary associations and civic participation. In Georgia, as experts describe, the civic sphere under Soviet rule was virtually absent, and NGOs that emerged after independence were often perceived as alien or elitist, fostering scepticism toward organised activism. Similarly, in Serbia, experts point to the legacy of hierarchical governance that keeps constraining participatory civic culture. Although Serbia has a large number of officially registered civil society organisations, most remain under-resourced, with limited membership and a focus on less contentious or low-conflict issues, such as environmental protection or professional associations.

In both settings, trust and participation are highly uneven – stronger within close-knit networks and weaker toward strangers or formal structures. Acts of help and charitable giving tend to occur on a personal basis rather than through institutional channels, as citizens remain reluctant to transfer resources to organisations they perceive as untrustworthy. This pattern reinforces the strength of bonding capital but leaves bridging forms of trust and cooperation underdeveloped. Nevertheless, experts point to some gradual improvement in both countries. In Georgia, new forms of activism, often linked to younger generations and exposure to European experiences through educational mobility, have begun to emerge, particularly around socially

sensitive or humanitarian causes.[60] Serbia, too, has seen a rise in spontaneous, non-formal movements, especially environmental and student-led protests, which mobilise citizens around concrete local issues. Yet, in both cases, these initiatives remain fragmented and episodic, rarely translating into sustained institutional participation. Overall, this dual reality, wherein strong interpersonal solidarity and local-level trust coexist with low institutional confidence and limited civic engagement creates fertile ground for patronalistic networks and informal practices, further hindering the development of inclusive, trust-based institutions. Experts stress the importance of identifying ways in which the strength of interpersonal relationships can be translated into institutional trust, amongst others by figuring out who the actors are who can be targeted for that matter.

Another layer of local peculiarity of social cohesion that has become vivid across all four candidate countries under study is what we have called a "*survival mode*". What we observe from all the interviews is that the moments when *survival* is at stake trigger particularly vivid practices of solidarity and social engagement that go beyond personal linkages and the *bonding* forms of social capital. Experts in Moldova repeatedly mention the solidarity and help Moldovan people have demonstrated towards the refugees from Ukraine that migrated as a result of Russia's invasion. "Not a single person was left homeless" – stresses one of them and argues that this experience has brought social cohesion in Moldova to a whole new level as it led to the increase in the numbers of charitable giving and volunteering. Initial impetus for the development of donation-based programs in Moldova was primarily linked to medical system and private cases of serious illnesses, especially in children, but the refugee crisis brought the new system to the fore. Experts assess the crisis-driven network of social solidarity in Georgia as historically strong. A good example of this, according to them, are the1990s, which despite being a decade of extreme poverty, when even a piece of bread was regarded as a luxury, has seen a notably limited incidences of hunger-related mortality. This was a result of what one expert calls "social empathy". However, he admits that it is existential problems that drive donations and charitable giving in the Georgian context. As he puts it: "solidarity is particularly important in times of hardship compared to the situations when existential issues are not at stake […] Why voluntarism is weaker than charitable giving? Because, voluntarism does not imply reducing harm. It is not related to existential issues. Whereas, charitable giving is a part of crisis management that sometimes can be related to human life, for example".

A very similar pattern of the *survival mode* is observed in the WB countries as well. For example, experts in North Macedonia directly link the sporadic instances of strong solidarity to "tragedies" such as earthquakes or fires and describe significant self-organisation as something that happens during emergency situations. Similar to other cases, generosity expressed about helping children with health issues are frequently mentioned here as well. Serbia also demonstrates a high level of public responsiveness in acute humanitarian contexts. Donations for medical treatment of children, disaster relief, or aid to vulnerable families often attract widespread support across all social strata. Citizens are generally willing to contribute directly, especially in cases where the state is perceived to have failed. However, the culture of giving remains highly ad hoc here as well, and typically lacks institutional channels. People tend to avoid donating to intermediary organisations – even those with proven expertise – preferring instead

[60] As the empirical research was mostly conducted in 2024 and the interviews were conducted early spring, 2025, the analysis covers the dynamics of the ongoing protests in Georgia in a rather limited way.

to support individual campaigns. This results in a paradox: high public solidarity in emergency situations coexists with a weak and unsustainable philanthropic infrastructure.

Given all these peculiarities, how do experts in the four candidate countries assess the impact of the EU accession process on the social dimension of cohesion? And, what is the story behind scoring this impact a bit higher than "*slightly improved*"? To put it in a nutshell, the assessment of this impact is rather similar to those presented with regards to other dimensions of cohesion, that is acknowledging certain positive effects but, at the same time, admitting that more could be done by pointing to the rooms for improvement. In this vein, experts across all the countries under study stress the importance of the EU funds that have been directed in support of civil society organisations, as well as that of the effort invested in building institutions as a result of democratic reforms. In their understanding, this process has also helped in terms of improving the level of tolerance towards certain groups of societies. At the same time, all experts inquired also warn against the increasing threat stemming from disinformation that aims at discrediting the EU and its intentions, by that harming the perceptions and attitudes towards EU in their respective societies. Furthermore, in most of the cases, experts do not see a direct linkage between the EU accession process and the dynamics of horizontal trust among citizens and point to the need of stronger effort in various forms of civic education in this direction. Despite these common threads revealed by the interviews, a brief overview of some of the cases ensures a nuanced picture for a better understanding of the peculiarities behind these general trends.

Experts note that indicators of social connectedness in Georgia began to attract attention only after the launch of the European integration process. One of the experts recalls that, during his studies, EU representatives frequently organised trainings, which many students and professors regarded with scepticism – as if "this foreign wave was coming from outside and depriving us of our Georgian identity." He explains that, prior to closer engagement with the EU, public consciousness was not merely non-liberal, but overtly anti-liberal – resistant to equality, and structured around rigid archetypes that defined behavioural norms and social hierarchies. According to him, this "ice" began to melt once the process of European integration advanced and the approximation of the legal framework followed. Another expert, however, offers a different interpretation. In his view, the EU's influence on the social dimension of cohesion in Georgia cannot be attributed to institutional mechanisms. If any impact has occurred, he argues, it stems from how many Georgians have come to perceive Europe – and Europeanness – as a desirable point of reference. For some, this represented a symbolic act of detachment from "being Asian," and, as he puts it, "due to the artistic nature of a Georgian, it felt more prestigious to play being European." However, referring to more recent developments, experts speak of a certain degree of scepticism towards the EU among Georgians, largely due to unfulfilled expectations of membership.

Experts in Moldova express positive expectations regarding the effect of EU integration process on social connectedness expressed in donations, charitable giving and voluntarism. According to their understanding, approximation to the EU will lead to the standardisation of legal and fiscal framework, more effective instruments of monitoring the governance and, hence, a greater trust in institutions. "A society with greater trust in institutions and clear rules is more likely to donate, to financially support charitable projects and believe that the money really goes to where it should" – says one of them. However, experts also point to the fact that the positive contribution of the EU integration process on the nature and levels of social

participation and horizontal trust might be conditioned by the growing challenges related to disinformation, which threatens the trust of Moldovans in EU itself. Myths, such as, for example, EU obliging Moldovans to sell agricultural land to foreigners, an immediate introduction of EURO or the legalisation of same-sex marriage fuel significant fears. In this context, experts think, that a positive impact of EU integration on social participation and trust in Moldova depends on the inclusion of citizens in the institutional dialogue and tangible transparency.

Serbian experts note that the role of EU integration in shaping social participation has been positive but uneven. In the early stages of the accession process, the EU played a catalytic role in fostering civic engagement through financial support, normative frameworks, and institutional incentives. Numerous CSOs were established and professionalised thanks to EU-funded programs, and values such as pluralism, inclusion, and active citizenship gained traction, particularly among younger urban populations. However, in recent years, the credibility and momentum of the EU have weakened, which in turn has diminished its transformative potential. Without clear progress or public enthusiasm, many of the earlier gains in civic infrastructure and participatory culture risk stagnation or even reversal in an increasingly polarised context. Horizontal trust appears to be less directly influenced by the EU integration process here. There is little evidence to suggest that the EU has meaningfully enhanced or undermined generalised social trust in Serbia. However, some indirect effects are plausible: for instance, reforms promoted under the accession framework have supported civic education and intercultural dialogue initiatives, which may contribute – albeit modestly – to trust-building in the long term. Still, experts think that the dominant forces shaping horizontal trust remain domestic, rooted in Serbia's socio-political divisions, media narratives, and historical legacies.

Similar to Serbia, experts in North Macedonia highlight the substantial presence of EU funding directed toward the development of civil society – primarily in what they describe as its "professionalised" form. These resources have enabled the establishment and relatively free operation of numerous CSOs. According to the experts, such initiatives have allowed the EU integration process to exert a positive influence on civic participation and engagement in voluntary associations. A beneficial impact is also noted in terms of the society's growing tolerance toward certain groups. One expert, in particular, underscores the pivotal role of the EU integration process in addressing the ethnic question in North Macedonia following the 2001 conflict. Yet, when it comes to assessing the process's effect on social trust, experts from North Macedonia share an observation consistent with their Georgian and Serbian counterparts: they perceive little to no significant impact in this regard.

Political Dimension of Social Cohesion and Geopolitics – What are we missing?

In this, last section of the interview analysis we delve deeper into the political aspect of social cohesion understood as various forms of political participation and the trust of citizens in political institutions. What calls for a deeper analysis of this aspect is its position of a notable underperformer among other dimensions of social cohesion in the candidate countries under study. Namely, according to the expert scoring, political aspect is the second weakest link of social cohesion and, at the same time, EU accession process has been assessed as the least impactful in terms of improvement in this direction. The analysis of the interview narratives has revealed the subtleties behind these assessments and provide better understanding of (1) where these countries converge or diverge in their patterns of political participation and

vertical trust and (2) why the positive impact of the EU accession process on these aspects has been so limited so far.

In general, expert assessments of political participation align with the findings of the quantitative research in that they confirm the high levels of electoral turnout. However, their in-depth narratives – which converge across all four candidate countries – reveal that the numbers reported by quantitative data do not, in fact, account for the substance of electoral participation. A couple of explanations have been provided for this discrepancy. First, experts in all four countries have mentioned the problem of electoral lists, which are inflated by the names/persons that are no longer able to vote either because they emigrated or passed away. As experts in Serbia and Georgia note, this artificially increases the total number of voters used in turnout calculations. Excluding these groups from the list would have increased effective participation. Second, experts in North Macedonia raise concern that the participation of emigrants in elections is rather limited. This flags a substantial fall-back for the general quality of political participation in the country, "where more than one third of the people are abroad". As one of the experts argues, the government deliberately does not ensure reducing the costs of voting for emigrants (e.g., traveling long distances to vote) because "they can neither intimidate, bribe, employ, nor scare them. […] Simply, they cannot manage or control them." Third, questioning the substantive presence of the freedom of choice, as well as the awareness about participation as a civic duty, experts stress that while voter turnout might look satisfactory on the surface, reasons behind this turnout might be telling a different story. For example, in Georgia, experts speak of a particularly problematic situation when it comes to the freedom of choice, especially in the regions. As they explain, strong clientalistic relationships and close informal ties between local authorities and citizens in the regions frequently deprive voters of anonymity. In villages, parties organise transportation of their "supporters" to make sure they voted. As everyone is able to recognise which party a car belongs to, it becomes easy for neighbours to identify which party a person votes for. It is not seldom that this creates problems in personal relationships, even among relatives, eventually increasing polarisation. Serbian experts report a similar pattern when describing how Serbia differs from many EU countries in the socio-economic structure of electoral participation. Citizens from lower-income groups, those without formal education and members of marginalised communities such as Roma are more likely to vote – frequently, as part of clientalistic and patronage-based mobilisation.

In terms of non-electoral forms of political participation, experts name demonstrations as most common. Although, these demonstrations seem to be mostly crisis-driven and spontaneous in all four countries. Participation in strikes is particularly rare, which experts attribute to the absence of coherent labour movements and a weak tradition of collective bargaining as a political tool. The latter is strongly related to what experts have described regarding the weakness of *bridging* social capital in these countries. Most labour-related protests tend to focus on narrowly defined economic or workplace issues rather than broader social demands. Despite these common trends, we observe differences across the countries in terms of the dynamics of demonstrations and protest participation – lower levels observed in Moldova and North Macedonia, while increasing trends are apparent in Georgia and Serbia.

Experts describe political culture in Moldova as "passive or disillusioned" and point to a very limited levels of political action beyond voting, which amongst others can be explained by the widespread belief that "any form of participation is useless". Similarly, in North Macedonia,

experts conceive the level of participation beyond voting being at its lowest, explaining this pattern with non-responsive institutions and the lack of feeling that they can change anything:

While, in the meantime, our government sold the electric distribution system as well as the electric procurement system. They sold telecommunications. And, there were no protests. Maybe, that's a legacy from the past, where protests were dangerous [...] maybe, it's a lack of interest, lack of self-awareness, lack of political responsiveness or that of taking responsibility. But, the fact is that the capacity of organizing protests here is the lowest [in the region].

In contrast, Serbia and Georgia have seen an outburst of protests in recent years. According to the experts, protest participation in Serbia has been driven by perceived electoral irregularities, environmental concerns related to large-scale infrastructure projects, and – more recently – demands for institutional accountability in response to acute tragedies. The most emblematic case in 2025 was the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station, which resulted in 16 fatalities. This event triggered widespread demonstrations, particularly among youth, who called for independent investigations and stronger institutional safeguards. These protests reflect a growing impatience with political complacency and perceived systemic negligence, and may mark a turning point in how younger generations engage with the political system. In the Georgian case, experts mostly refer to the protests sparked by the decision of the government to suspend the integration process with the EU in November, 2024 and the concomitant backsliding of democracy in the country. These demonstrations – ongoing for a year now – are characterised by the experts as diverse and peaceful. Their persistence under the circumstances of disproportional violence used by the government and the new repressive legislation along the total control of judiciary points to the fact that the intensity of these protests are "unprecedented". Experts think, this dynamic indicates that people in Georgia still keep hopes that peaceful protests can bring a change. Experts both in Serbia and Georgia emphasise that these recent protests have triggered a visible increase in youth engagement, which traditionally was very low in both countries.

These patterns of political participation are closely tied to the nature of citizen-to-state relations, which turns out to be a fundamentally problematic aspect of social cohesion in each of these countries. The weakness of vertical trust – also, referred by some experts as a "substantial public distrust"– is the dominant reason why political dimension of cohesion has been assessed with such a low score. While, in general, evidence from expert interviews supports the conclusions drawn from the quantitative research, according to which candidate countries tend to exhibit low trust in public institutions, compared to EU. Experts also confirm that the level of trust differs depending on the type of institution. In the quantitative research, these differences surfaced with regards to the pattern reflecting a tendency toward personalised politics, where faith is placed in individual leaders rather than institutions. Whereas, expert interviews provided a more nuanced accounts for how and why trust patterns differ across the type of institutions. A recurring tendency across all four countries is that trust is particularly low in relation to governing institutions, political parties and judiciary system due to the lack of responsiveness and the resulting "estrangement" between them and the citizens. Whereas, police, army and religious institutions seem to be trusted more. Although, experts in Georgia observe that recent developments related to the violent crackdown of demonstrations and the repressive actions towards protesters have caused a significant decline of trust in police. Experts in Georgia and Serbia – i.e., countries with higher intensity of demonstrations and protests – also point to the low public trust in opposition parties, which represents a major obstacle to

sustained civic engagement. Many citizens in these countries view opposition actors as lacking legitimacy or coherence, which undermines the effectiveness of their efforts to rally public support – even around widely shared grievances. Unlike the three other countries, in North Macedonia, vertical trust seems to be conditioned by ethnic cleavages between Macedonians and Albanians. As one expert explains, "ethnic Albanians would be inclined to trust the institutions run by Albanians" and the same is true for ethnic Macedonians. While they do not see ethnic divides to be deep *per se*, they do flag the persistent instrumentalisation of this issue by political parties for their own agendas, especially during electoral periods. Such patterns of politicisation of ethnicity create favourable conditions for deepening polarisation.

In three out of four countries, experts agree that trust in local governing institutions is comparatively higher than in central ones. The only exception in this regard is Serbia, where trust is even lower at the local level. Interviewees here consistently pointed to the perception of "captured" local governments, particularly in smaller municipalities where citizens feel powerless and politically marginalised. The public discourse – often shaped by the President's own criticism of local functionaries – reinforces a perception of widespread incompetence and corruption at municipal level. This contributes to what some respondents described as the "good tsar, bad boyars" effect, where the central figure (Vučić) is seen as correcting the failures of local elites, further diminishing institutional trust at the subnational level. In large urban centres such as Belgrade and Novi Sad, the legitimacy of local governments has been undermined by controversies such as so-called "phantom" electoral lists and questionable election outcomes. Conversely, in Georgia, Moldova and North Macedonia, experts assess trust at local level higher than at central level. At first glance, this seems to be logical given the proximity of governing institutions to citizens, the ease for the citizens to reach out these institutions, as well as the ease for the institutions to make every little progress visible to their citizens. However, while this logic seems to be working in North Macedonia, expert accounts in Georgia and Moldova reveal some nuances that make this pattern peculiar to these countries. Namely, this is tied to what has been discussed in the previous section regarding the strength of *bonding* social capital, which is particularly intense in rural areas and small communities and which, at times, is utilised by political actors for clientalistic and informal practices. In Georgia, experts point to the persistence of clan dominance and nepotism in local governance structures. In Moldova, they repeatedly stress the problem of transparency in local governance.

What helps political actors to utilise strong *bonding* social capital for clientalistic purposes – particularly successfully in rural areas – are the various layers of inequalities existing in the societies under study. Expert accounts in all four countries reveal that these disparities render certain groups vulnerable to political instrumentalisation, thereby substantially influencing both the dynamics, as well as the substance of their political participation and vertical trust. While on the surface, it seems that the dominant line of these disparities is territorial (urban/rural, centre /periphery), a broader picture shows that the latter is interwoven with other types of divides such as poverty, ethnicity and education. For example, experts in Georgia describe that ethnic minorities in rural areas are particularly vulnerable in this sense. Due to the language barriers, sometimes, they are not even aware of which political parties or individual candidates are running in the elections. Frequently, this results in the scenario when a person might not even physically go to the ballot but "lend" the ID card to a relative, an acquaintance or even a representative of the local governing institutions and let them voter for him/her – "this is rather a technical participation and not a substantial one". This discrepancy between the numbers and substance is also described by Georgian experts with regards to the

participation in demonstrations, pointing to the instances when people attend them not because they want to, but because they are obliged to do so by the authorities. Experts in the other three countries do not provide such a detailed description of everyday practices, but they do mention trends along the similar lines. As already mentioned above, in Serbia, vulnerable groups – particularly those with economic hardship, lack of formal education and ethnically marginalised – participate in elections more actively as part of patronage-based mobilisation. In North Macedonia, experts also point to stronger political participation in small communities "because party affiliation is stronger in smaller communities".

After discussing the peculiarities of political participation and vertical trust, as well as their similarities and differences, the final question to be addressed in this section is: what explains the experts' observation, according to which, out of the five dimensions of social cohesion, EU integration process has had the least positive impact on the political one (Figure 9)? This question becomes particularly pressing if we take into account the EU's effort for democracy promotion – specifically, targeting the issues of political participation and trust – in the candidate countries.

The analysis reveals a rather complex picture, wherein on the one hand, the integration process might be bringing certain improvements in terms of political participation and trust but, on the other hand, under the conditions of growing geopolitical tensions and its accompanying disinformation campaigns, it becomes the means of information manipulation aiming at increasing polarisation and by that endangering the already fragile social fabric of candidate countries. To disentangle these complexities empirically, we first overview the experts' accounts of a couple of counter-intuitive nuances regarding the effects of the integration process on participation and trust in Georgia and Serbia. And, further, we provide the analysis of expert narratives regarding the effects of the accession process on political dimension of cohesion through the mechanism of the geopolitics-disinformation-polarisation nexus.

Experts in Georgia provide mixed assessments of the transformative power of the EU accession process in relation to the political aspect of cohesion. On the one hand, they emphasise the positive impact of democratisation programs and projects in terms of increasing and qualitatively changing the citizens' expectations regarding democratic process. According to one of them, *"the population isn't being so easy on the government anymore in terms of forgiving it for electoral fraud or for violating the freedom of assembly. People rather demand the realisation of their rights. This was brought by the integration process"*. On the other hand, they question if it is indeed the expectations of democratic process or rather the idea of becoming a part of Europe that drives citizens. In this regard, experts recall that what triggered intense and continuous protests – shaking the political reality in Georgia to the date – was not the fundamentally rigged elections but the statement of suspending the European integration process that followed after a month. Thus, it was this detachment from the accession process that had a critical impact on reducing the trust in the government. Experts clarify that getting closer to the EU does not increase the trust in the government, but deviating from the European course does decrease it.

Another important nuance of how the integration process has impacted vertical trust in Georgia relates to the question of legitimacy. As experts explain, one can say that in Georgia, especially after 2003 and until 2022-23, EU has been a source of legitimacy for the authorities. Active compliance to the integration process was legitimising governments as this has been related to the will of the majority of the Georgian citizens to become a member of the

European Union. In this vein, the Georgian Dream government has also been benefitting from the implementation of EU-funded projects as well as from the opportunities that have emerged as a result of signing the AA, opening the visa free travel and obtaining the perspective of membership. Even under the circumstances of deteriorated relationships with the EU, prior to the parliamentary elections of 2024, the government has instrumentalised the EU flag in its election campaign to convey the idea that in response to the citizens' will, it still adheres to the European idea. As tensions between the government and the EU increase and the deviation from the European course becomes more and more vivid, experts think that the Georgian government faces the critical loss of trust of its citizens. Therefore, the EU accession process – and, more generally, the idea of European integration – plays an important role in how vertical trust is structured in Georgia.

In contrast, experts in Serbia argue that the EU's influence on political participation is rather limited. Although the EU consistently advocates for participatory governance, this is often channelled through formal mechanisms that are perceived as procedural and symbolic. Civil society consultations on public policy, typically conducted in response to EU requirements, are frequently described as tokenistic exercises with little impact on decision-making. Moreover, citizens rarely perceive the EU as a meaningful actor in domestic political life. Interviewees emphasise the widespread sense that the EU remains silent or disengaged in the face of protests and political crises in Serbia. Its public statements are often seen as vague and diplomatically cautious, primarily directed toward state institutions rather than citizens themselves. As a result, the EU has not played a significant role in catalysing or legitimising political participation on the ground. Nevertheless, the trajectory of EU integration has had a paradoxical effect on vertical trust. On the one hand, it did not significantly impact trust in local institutions – interviewees report that local governance remains deeply disconnected from the accession process. On the other hand, the credibility of central institutions may have been eroded by the perception that the EU tacitly supports the ruling elite, despite mounting democratic backsliding. This is particularly true among opposition-minded citizens who interpret Brussels' perceived pragmatism as an endorsement of status quo. Furthermore, repeated promises of accelerated EU accession made by central authorities – many of which remain unfulfilled – have created a sense of disillusionment, gradually undermining public trust in state institutions associated with the integration process.

Finally, in three out of the four candidate countries (Georgia, Moldova and Serbia), interviews reveal a common mechanism, through which the instrumentalisation of the EU accession process by foreign or and local information manipulation can negatively affect the political dimension of social cohesion in the candidate countries. While social cohesion literature discusses a couple of factors that can potentially affect its levels – for example, democratisation, economic integration, migration patterns – it never mentions geopolitics in relation to cohesion. Our analysis of social cohesion in the four EU candidate countries has revealed that the structure of geopolitical threats and the ways these threats affect political sphere domestically can fracture social unity. Experts in Serbia, Georgia and Moldova describe the following mechanism of how this process unfolds: geopolitical tensions resulting from Russia's invasion in Ukraine increase threats for the candidate countries, one of the manifestations of these threats being the intensified disinformation campaigns supported from outside, but also appropriated by certain local actors. These campaigns, which are largely based on invoking fears, foster political polarisation, which, in turn, shapes the political process – including the patterns of participation and trust – in these societies. As political polarisation and social

cohesion are two sides of the same coin, the reinforcement of the former often erodes the latter. Expert accounts in these three countries presented below describe the evidence of this mechanism at work, highlighting the country-specific angles, which reflect their respective historical experiences and cultural specificities.

In Serbia, experts emphasised that the issue of geopolitical orientation has been increasingly entangled with identity narratives and questions of belonging, which represent a major pillar for social cohesion. Public discourse is often saturated with emotionally charged debates over who "truly belongs" to the Serbian nation, who are considered allies, and whether EU membership is compatible with national identity. While national pride is widespread, the very meaning of "being Serbian" is contested – divided between visions aligned with European integration and civic values, and those rooted in traditionalism, Orthodox heritage, and alignment with Russia. These competing narratives not only reflect ideological divides, but also reinforce social distance: citizens with opposing worldviews are often seen not simply as different, but as morally inferior or culturally alien. In this way, geopolitical orientation becomes a marker of internal division, undermining the possibility of shared national belonging. Widespread presence of conspiratorial thinking, which thrives in Serbia's fragmented media environment and polarised political landscape adds to this picture. According to experts, such mindsets erode trust not only in institutions and elites, but also in fellow citizens perceived as ideologically, ethnically, or socially different.

A similar picture has been discussed by experts in Georgia. They start from the premise that 85% of the Georgian population supports the idea of becoming a EU member. However, as soon as one disaggregates this general idea into specific points of, for example, tolerance, secularism or other European liberal values, parameter of support will decrease. According to one of them, the idea of Europe and its values have been inspired by the political elites in Georgia and for the time being, it has not been possible for the society to fully internalise these ideas and values. *"What we observe now is the deconstruction of the idea of Europe" by the ruling party, which amidst the increasing tensions with the EU and growing normalisation of relationships with Russia, depicts EU as the threat to sovereignty".* This is followed by strengthening the narratives related to the double standards of the EU, linking the latter to the "global war party" and juxtaposing this to the ruling party's alleged support for peace. These narratives, amplified by the polarised media landscape, has affected a considerable number of citizens and invited a new *"stream"* in the society, which claims that *"conservative Europe is also Europe. Therefore, we support the idea of anti-liberal Europe".* Overall, this has further polarised the society along the lines that cut across geopolitics and ideology. Under these circumstances, the government's decision to suspend the European integration process fuelled the feeling of "going back to the Russian orbit" among the pro-European part of the society, which in turn led to the further estrangement between them and the government. It is through these mechanisms that instrumentalisation of the accession process has impacted the political dimension of social cohesion.

Experts in Moldova are particularly vocal in stressing the importance of "external influence campaigns" in undermining citizens' trust in central and local governing institutions and fostering polarisation of the society. While the number of those who support European integration is on the rise, there still remains a significant segment in the society that opposes this idea, "largely due to the influence of Russian propaganda" as 60% of information on international politics that citizens consume comes from Russian sources. Thus, public perceptions of the EU

integration process are influenced by disinformation that fuel fears regarding various issues such as losing sovereignty, facing negative economic consequences and obligation to sell land to foreigners, legalisation of same-sex marriage, etc. Experts argue that the benefits that the country has got from the European integration process through various programs are not sufficiently communicated among the public and that effective communication is an essential pillar to avoid further polarisation.

It is important to note that North Macedonia does not seem to be following the mechanism of geopolitics-disinformation-polarisation nexus described above. One of the explanations to this is the fact that according to the InvigoratEU External Threat Index, North Macedonia is the least impacted candidate country by the threats stemming from Russia (Todorovic, 2025). However, the EU integration process seems to have affected the level of political polarisation here as well, albeit through a different mechanism. Experts agree that the accession has been a driving force of the political process in the country for a long time, but after the three vetoes to the accession process of North Macedonia (by Greece, France and Bulgaria) and the unsuccessful process of opening the negotiations with the EU, the process has polarised the general public and the levels of Euroscepticism have increased significantly. The accession process has also polarised Macedonian society along ethnic lines, where Albanians have remained quite optimistic regarding the process of EU integration while ethnic Macedonians have shown predominant levels of disillusionment and resentment.

Summary

To sum up, this section complemented the quantitative part by analysing expert interviews from Georgia, Moldova, Serbia, and North Macedonia, which assess five dimensions of social cohesion – economic equality, access to education, access to healthcare, political and social aspects – and the impact of EU accession on them.

Although the overall levels of cohesion are assessed as relatively similar across countries, Moldova stands out with slightly higher scores, followed by Serbia, whereas Georgia performs worst. Despite these small variations, experts rate social cohesion as generally low, with average scores barely exceeding the midpoint of the 0–10 scale, even in the best-performing areas. A similar pattern emerges regarding the impact of EU accession, which experts assess as modest. No dimension is seen as having declined, yet none has undergone substantial progress either. Overall, the findings indicate limited transformative effects of EU integration on social cohesion, with only incremental gains observed in select areas.

Experts generally identify access to healthcare and education as the strongest-performing dimensions of social cohesion, followed by economic equality. While, political aspect of cohesion (defined as political participation and trust in institutions) as well as its social aspect (defined as social participation and horizontal trust) remain the weakest. Despite progress, healthcare systems in all four countries face disparities in quality and accessibility, especially between urban and rural areas. Brain drain, insufficient regulations and weak preventive medicine persist as cross-cutting challenges. The EU's impact on healthcare is perceived as supportive but indirect, mostly through infrastructural and legal improvements. Access to education is similarly mixed: physical access is broad, but disparities in quality are significant and linked to territorial, socio-economic, and ethnic divides. Teachers' low motivation, limited qualifications, and inadequate resources undermine learning outcomes, while reforms remain

fragmented. Education systems largely fail to foster social engagement or mobility, weakening their contribution to cohesion. Certain project-based initiatives such as Erasmus+ and related programs have had positive impact fostering better access to quality education but were insufficient to trigger systemic transformation. Economic equality is assessed as persistently weak despite modest statistical improvements. Experts highlight structural inequalities, including low-quality employment, rural-urban divides, informal economies, and the emigration of skilled labour. Vulnerable groups, such as youth, women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities, remain excluded from economic participation. While the EU accession process is credited with promoting trade liberalisation and institutional modernisation, its impact on inequality is limited and indirect, contingent upon domestic policy follow-through.

Experts emphasise that the social dimension of cohesion, defined in the study as horizontal trust and participation, is both the weakest and, paradoxically, the most positively affected by the accession process. Across all four countries, *bonding* social capital (family and personal ties) dominates over *bridging* capital (formal networks), resulting in low institutional trust and fragmented civic engagement. This pattern persists despite modest improvements among youth and cause-specific activism. Civic organisations often remain under-resourced, reactive, and vulnerable to pressures. Moments of crisis – such as wars, natural disasters, or humanitarian emergencies – trigger spontaneous solidarity, yet this "*survival mode*" reinforces ad hoc rather than institutionalised cooperation. The EU's influence is recognised in the support for civil society, tolerance-building, and democratic institution-building. However, experts warn that disinformation and limited civic education hinder sustained progress. Country-specific findings show nuanced patterns: in Georgia, EU integration reshaped social attitudes but also fuelled scepticism; in Moldova, the process enhanced institutional trust yet faced anti-EU propaganda; in Serbia and North Macedonia, EU funding has strengthened civil society but failed to foster deeper social trust.

The political aspect, which the study has defined as citizens' trust in political institutions and participation, is among the weakest dimensions of cohesion and the least influenced by the EU integration. Although electoral participation remains high, its substantive quality is undermined by clientelism, distorted electoral lists, and low civic awareness. Protest participation is largely crisis-driven, with Serbia and Georgia witnessing renewed mobilisation in response to democratic backsliding, while Moldova and North Macedonia remain more politically passive. Vertical trust is lowest toward political parties and central government, and somewhat higher at local levels. These patterns of political trust and participation seem to be often shaped by clientelistic and clan-based relations, which points to the fact that the misbalance between the *bonding* and *bridging* social capital affects cohesion not only in terms of its social dimension but in terms of its political dimension as well. Experts narratives revealed a common mechanism explaining the EU's limited impact on social cohesion in the candidate countries that are particularly strongly affected by the threats stemming from Russia. Namely, geopolitical tensions are said to be leading to the instrumentalisation of the EU accession process and fuelling fears through information manipulation, which, in turn, exacerbate polarisation and erodes cohesion. In Serbia, this mechanism manifests in competing identity narratives tied to the EU vs. Russia alignments, deepening internal divisions; in Georgia, anti-liberal rhetoric and disinformation have deconstructed the "idea of Europe"; in Moldova, Russian propaganda undermines trust and amplifies fear. North Macedonia's polarisation stems less from external threats and more from the accession fatigue that has fuelled Euroscepticism. Across all cases,

the EU's transformative power is constrained by local political dynamics, communication deficits, and the persistence of informal networks that mediate trust and participation.

5 Conclusions and General Recommendations

This report demonstrates that, despite notable progress in recent years, candidate countries in the WB and the EN regions still lag behind EU levels in several key aspects of social cohesion. It shows that societies in these countries are characterised by uneven levels of social, political, and economic participation, which lead to the disruption of social fabric, hindering the development of genuinely cohesive societies. Importantly, much of these challenges stem from internal factors such as governance models, historical legacies, and social structures, but they are also propelled by malign foreign interference, which aim to weaken the unity and resolve of societies.

The empirical research has confirmed that approaching the concept of social cohesion from a broader perspective instead of focusing only on economic equality and inclusion provides a better opportunity for uncovering the complex structures of societal connectedness. This broader analytical lens has made it possible to identify the social and political dimensions as the most fragile elements of cohesion, with the greatest potential to erode the social fabric in the candidate countries. More specifically, the analysis has revealed two patters that have been largely overlooked in previous discussions on social cohesion, particularly in the countries of the two regions under study. First, the mechanisms through which societies in these countries are held together differ qualitatively from those that are characteristic to most Western democratic states. Strong bonding capital, combined with very weak – at times almost non-existent – bridging capital, creates fertile ground for informal clientelistic practices. These practices significantly shape patterns of both social and political participation, as well as levels of horizontal and vertical trust. Second, geopolitical tensions, which intensified following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have heightened the sense of external threat across many of the candidate countries. The instrumentalisation of these threats by domestic and external political actors, particularly through anti-EU disinformation campaigns, has substantially increased political polarization, which, in turn, represents a direct counterforce to social cohesion. A nuanced understanding of these local specificities, alongside the factors endangering the social fabric, is essential for designing more effective policy strategies aimed at strengthening social cohesion in the candidate countries.

This also underscores the need for further research that goes beyond analysis of isolated indicators drawn from various datasets and sources. Findings of our research, which was the first attempt of exploring social cohesion in the EU candidate countries in a comparative manner – points to further necessity of examining social cohesion as an integrated concept and of developing unified and systematic data collection frameworks. This would enable rigorous cross-country comparisons within and across the regions under study. In addition, more in-depth qualitative research is required to capture the subtleties of local contexts and to illuminate how social connectedness is formed, sustained, and challenged within these societies. Together, such efforts would substantially enhance the evidence base needed to design policies capable of reinforcing societal resilience and robust social cohesion in the candidate countries.

Our research has also made it possible to identify the most effective practices within the EU accession process for strengthening social cohesion in the candidate countries. Drawing on

in-depth expert interviews, we discerned several measures that experts across all cases unanimously highlighted as having a positive impact on social cohesion. Three practices stood out most clearly: First, improvements to the legal framework resulting from the Association Agreements were widely acknowledged to have strengthened all five dimensions of social cohesion. Second, experts in all countries under study agreed that exchange programmes and mechanisms of academic collaboration (e.g., Erasmus+, Horizon Europe) have contributed to this process by facilitating knowledge transfer and increasing awareness of democratic norms and values. Third, the EU's efforts to support civil society in the candidate countries have helped cultivate the core tenets of pluralism, inclusion, social tolerance, and active citizenship. While these measures have undoubtedly had positive effects, the range of challenges identified through this research indicates that they remain insufficient to ensure the levels of social cohesion necessary to make societies in these countries fully resilient, including in the face of external threats. Addressing the challenge requires comprehensive, multi-layered initiatives from both the EU and national governments. Strengthening social cohesion is essential not only for the candidate countries at their current stage but also for ensuring that EU accession proceeds smoothly as they advance on their membership paths. To achieve meaningful results, the EU should mainstream social cohesion within its policy frameworks and allocate resources to strengthening all its dimensions throughout the accession process. Concrete ideas are outlined below, organised by the level of intervention.

Measures to be taken at the level of EU institutions

Our research shows that despite being considered as a Union-wide objective, no concerted effort has yet been made to define the concept of social cohesion. As a result, it tends to be understood primarily in terms of economic equality and inclusion, and is often used alongside regional and territorial cohesion. This conceptual vagueness is further compounded by the absence of a dedicated institution responsible for social cohesion at the EU level or for coordinating the many fragmented initiatives related to it. Taking this into account, the EU institutions should:

- adopt a unified, Union-wide definition of social cohesion to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency across policies, programs, and research initiatives, alongside existing or new, comparable indicators to measure and regularly monitor social cohesion across member and candidate states;
- fund further quantitative and qualitative research on social cohesion in candidate countries through its research and innovation programs, such as Horizon Europe and other relevant EU funding mechanisms; design research methodologies to ensure that findings are comparable across member and candidate states, while still allowing sufficient space to reflect country-specific particularities;
- establish a working group under the auspices of the European Commission, and in cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee, to improve coordination, foster dialogue, and share best practices among member states, candidate countries, and EU institutions;
- Engage with universities, civil society organisations, research centres, and think tanks specialising in social cohesion or its individual components to draw on their knowledge and expertise;
- mainstream social cohesion across its policies and programs by integrating it, or its individual components, into key EU frameworks relevant to the six countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood, such as NDICI-GE, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe, and others.

Measures by the EU in the candidate countries

Access to education

Our research demonstrates that access to education is generally satisfactory, with broad availability of educational institutions. However, significant disparities persist in the quality of teaching, particularly affecting poorer populations, rural residents, and minority language groups. The lack of qualified teachers and academic personnel, as well as insufficient alignment with labour market needs, remains a challenge too. Taking this into account, the EU institutions should:

- continue implementing and further strengthening education, training, and capacity-building initiatives in candidate countries, including ERASMUS+, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe, EU4Youth and other related programs;
- explore opportunity of covering schools (students, teachers, and staff) in its programs;
- continue investing in infrastructure upgrades and renovations of schools, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas.

Access to economic and technological resources

This research report also shows that access to economic resources remains moderate across the candidate countries. Most have experienced gradual improvement in equality, employment, and poverty alleviation, yet statistical progress hides persistent structural challenges. Inadequate salaries, weak job security, and high inflation remain widespread, preventing numerical gains from translating into visible improvements in citizens' daily lives. Additionally, migration continues to serve as an important economic lifeline through remittances, but it also fuels brain drain and weakens the incentive for comprehensive economic reforms. The informal economy remains extensive. In Ukraine, war-related disruptions further undermine economic activity. Those most affected by this uneven development are women, people with disabilities, and residents of peripheral regions, including rural areas, communities geographically distant from capital cities, and ethnic minority groups. Youth unemployment is high, exacerbated by significant skills mismatches. This is further compounded by the digital divide, affecting rural areas, as well as older generations. Taken together, these factors negatively impact citizens' well-being and hinder convergence with EU standards. Taking this into account, the EU institutions should:

- incorporate social cohesion into regional and bilateral mechanisms of cooperation (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, Reform and Growth Facility, Ukraine Facility, Neighbourhood Investment Platform, Eastern Partnership etc.), ensuring that they support the goal of achieving more cohesive societies;
- increase support for programs and initiatives aimed at reducing economic inequalities and promoting inclusive growth, including through continuing to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with affordable loans, particularly those owned and managed by women and located in underserved or economically disadvantaged areas;
- set quotas for young citizens from candidate countries to participate in apprenticeship and traineeship programs across selected economic sectors within the EU;
- continue and expand programs and initiatives (Digital Europe, EU4Digital, European Digital Innovation Hubs) aimed at reducing technological inequalities, including by improving access to digital infrastructure, enhancing skills training, and broadening the availability of services.

Access to healthcare

Access to healthcare has improved, as reflected in rising levels of life expectancy, declining infant mortality rates, and increases in the number of medical personnel. Nevertheless, all

candidate countries face challenges in terms of quality and availability of medical services, especially in rural areas. Taking this into account, the EU institutions should:

- encourage authorities to increase alignment of national health protection legislation with the EU *acquis*;
- expand access to EU4Health program for all candidate countries;
- support medical facilities with infrastructure upgrades and administration reforms, including through digitalisation of health services.

Social participation, belonging and people-to-people relations

Our research also highlights that across candidate countries, *bonding capital* (social relations based on family and personal ties) tends to dominate over *bridging capital* (social relations based on formal networks), which affects both interpersonal relations and the citizens' attitudes towards public affairs. This is most visible in the absence of institutionalised forms of participation. While social interactions often revolve around families and close-knit communities, formal organisations – those established around common causes and interests – often remain under-resourced and underdeveloped in the candidate countries. Challenges also persist in the area of social tolerance. Societies across the candidate countries continue to exhibit high levels of suspicion toward certain groups, particularly drug users, LGBTIQ persons, and ethnic minority communities. Such attitudes, often amplified by external actors, create social barriers that divide rather than unite, posing a significant obstacle to building cohesive societies. They also pave the way for undemocratic practices by constraining collective action and limiting the development of broader social networks necessary for stronger cohesion. Taking this into account, the EU institutions should:

- encourage broader civic participation through widening the programs such as the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Program (CERV), and the European Solidarity Corps;
- strengthen the capacities of the EU's Strategic Communication Task Forces to detect and counter disinformation, including by expanding their expertise and language capabilities related to the candidate countries;
- support local initiatives focusing on detecting and countering disinformation narratives about European integration, political participation, inclusion and acceptance of marginalised groups;
- support local initiatives promoting the inclusion and acceptance of marginalised groups, with a particular focus on LGBTIQ and ethnic minority communities;
- support local initiatives highlighting the importance of inclusive civic identities and, where possible, connect them to the broader European heritage of diversity, and solidarity.

Political participation and institutional trust

Our research shows that, while levels of electoral engagement appear somewhat stronger (although questions remain regarding the freedom of choice and the accuracy of turnout figures), distrust toward public institutions prevails. Expert interviews and survey results describe a strong sense of disconnect from representative and judicial bodies, while depicting relatively higher levels of trust in executive institutions. Participation in non-electoral forms of political engagement remains moderate. Some countries, particularly Serbia and Georgia, have experienced spikes in political activism, with surges of demonstrations in recent years. However, experts contend that these actions tend to be crisis-driven and spontaneous rather than sustained. As in other dimensions of social cohesion, political participation is lower among women, rural residents, low-income groups, and youth. Combined with the nature of social interactions that rely heavily on close-knit networks, these patterns pave the way for clientelist and patronage-based models of governance, which negatively affect the health and the integrity of social fabric. Taking this into account, the EU institutions should:

- re-assess the past initiatives in this direction, with a particular focus on what measures have been successful and what might have proved ineffective, or even counter effective;
- continue investing time and resources in democracy and rule of law reforms in the candidate countries, albeit with ensuring a stronger bottom-up approach by engaging citizens in the process;
- facilitate the development of accessible online and offline courses on basic political education for learners of all ages;
- increase the reach and the depth of the Young European Ambassadors' program;
- provide financial support to local initiatives aimed at empowering politically active groups and citizens, including through instruments such as the European Endowment for Democracy.

Measures to be taken in coordination with the candidate country governments

Our research demonstrates that, although candidate countries share similarities across a range of indicators, each country also has its own specific characteristics, highlighting the need for tailored, country-specific measures. It is also important that certain initiatives, particularly those that may be sensitive or vulnerable to exploitation by malign actors, retain strong local ownership. Taking this into account, the EU institutions should:

- provide technical assistance, training, and financial support to help candidate countries identify and monitor country-specific challenges related to social cohesion;
- encourage other local stakeholders, including those from academia, civil society organisations, and think tanks, to engage in research and analysis of country-specific factors of social cohesion;
- support the authorities and other local stakeholders to develop programs promoting volunteerism, tolerance, and civic-mindedness;
- assist the authorities in creating or improving regulatory frameworks for charitable donations.

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Appendix

Annex 1: List of Indicators used in the Quantitative Analysis Stage

The table below presents the specific indicators used in the quantitative analysis phase. It includes three columns: the first lists the dimension, the second lists indicators drawn from the original research frameworks of Chan et al. and Jenson, and the third specifies the indicators used in this study.

Dimensions	Indicators from original frameworks	Indicators used in this research
Access to education	- Literacy rate, adult total (percentage of people aged 15 and above); - Percentage of population over 15 who have not completed primary education; - Percentage of children of secondary school age enrolled in secondary education; - Percentage of population aged 18–24 in tertiary education.	- Number of schools per 1,000 pupil aged 6 to 18; - Percentage of out-of-school children; - Percentage of out-of-school youth; - Gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education; - Learning achievement in reading.
Access to economic and technological resources	Access to economic resources - Gini index; - Measures of income shares; - Poverty rate; - Unemployment rate; - Employment in informal economy. Access to technologies - Percentage of households with access to broadband internet.	Access to economic resources - Gini index; - Poverty rate; - Unemployment rate; - Employment in informal economy; Access to technologies - Percentage of households with internet access at home.
Access to healthcare	- Life expectancy at birth, in years; - Mortality rate, infant (per 1,000 live births); - Mortality rate, under-fives (per 1,000); - Births attended by skilled health staff (percentage of total).	- Life expectancy; - Crude death rate - Birth rate; - Infant mortality rate; - Out-of-pocket expenditures - Number of physicians (per 1,000 people); - Number of hospital beds (per 1,000 people).
Social participation, belonging and people-to-people relations	- Participation in voluntary associations;	- Percentage of adults reporting to have helped a stranger;

	- Charitable giving: percentage of population making donations; - Volunteerism: frequency of help provided free-of-charge to others; - General trust with fellow citizens; - Willingness to cooperate and help others; - Sense of belonging, including pride in one's country.	- Percentage of adults reporting to have donated money to charities; - Percentage of adults reporting to have volunteered their time; - General trust with fellow citizens; - Percentage of respondents reporting to trust various social circles (family, neighbours, strangers, etc.); - Social tolerance (percentage of respondents not wishing certain groups as neighbours); - Pride in nationality.
Political participation and institutional trust	- Electoral participation (voter turnout); - Political participation (frequency of expressing opinions on current affairs; participation in petitions, strikes, demonstrations, etc.); - Trust/confidence in public figures and major political and social institutions;	- Electoral participation (voter turnout); - Political participation (participation in petitions, strikes, demonstrations) - Trust/confidence in public figures and major political and social institutions; - Share of women in national parliaments.

Annex 2: List of Indicators used in the Expert Interview and Scoring Stage

Dimensions	Indicators
Access to education	Access to and availability of primary and secondary education Quality of primary and secondary education Access to and availability of higher education Quality of higher education
Access to economic and technological resources	Employment Income equality Employment in informal economy Absence of poverty Access to technologies
Access to healthcare	Physical accessibility of medical services Quality of medical services Affordability of medical services Preventive healthcare programs
Social participation and people-to-people relations	Participation in voluntary associations Donations and charitable giving

	Social trust (trust towards each other) Tolerance towards different groups
Political participation and institutional trust	Participation in elections (voting) Participation in other forms of political action Trust in central government institutions Trust in local government institutions

Annex 3: Sample Question from Expert Interviews and Scoring

Question #1: Employment

How would you assess the employment situation in the country? Are there significant disparities between the capital and the regions, rural and urban areas, or different demographic groups?

Considering your responses, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 represents the worst outcome and 10 represents the best outcome, how would you rate the employment situation? When assessing, please refer to the statements in the first column and the corresponding score ranges in the second column as your guide. Your precise score should be entered in the third column. Feel free to use decimal points if necessary.

Scorecard		
The employment situation is extremely positive. Employment opportunities are accessible to the vast majority of the population. Inequality in employment across various geographical areas* and groups** is minimal.	8.1–10.0	
The overall employment rate is moderately high. However, in some areas and groups, low levels of employment are observed.	6.1–8.0	
The overall employment rate is satisfactory. However, in some areas and groups, relatively lower levels of employment are observed.	4.1–6.0	
The overall employment rate is low. At the same time, noticeably lower levels of employment are observed in some areas and groups.	2.1–4.0	
The situation in terms of employment is critical. Employment opportunities are not accessible to the vast majority of the population. There is significant inequality in employment across different areas and groups.	0–2.0	

Please use this space for explanations_____

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*For the purposes of this study, "geographic differences" refer to variations between the capital and regions, as well as between urban and rural areas.

** For the purposes of this study, "Groups" encompass ethnic, religious, linguistic, and sexual minorities, as well as different age and gender groups.

Annex 4: Sample Questionnaire from Expert Interviews and Scoring (Impact of EU Integration)

Question #6: Impact of EU accession

In your opinion, what impact has the EU accession process had on the overall dynamics of economic inequality? If you believe the EU accession process has influenced economic inequality – either in general or in its specific aspects – could you share your thoughts on the concrete mechanisms through which it has had an effect (e.g., the AA/DCFTA, emigration, improvements in democracy, or geopolitical threats)?

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Considering all the above, how do you think the EU approximation process influenced the following: equality in employment, equality in income, informal employment situation, poverty situation, and equality in access to technologies? Please select the option that best describes your response from the left column and mark your answer with an "x" in the respective box.

	Employment equality	Income equality	Informal employment	Absence of poverty	Equality_access to technologies
Significantly worsened					
Slightly worsened					
Neither worsened nor improved					
Slightly improved					
Significantly improved					
Don't know					
Prefer not to answer					

Please use this space for explanations

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About InvigoratEU

InvigoratEU is a Horizon Europe-funded project, coordinated by the EU-Chair at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) together with the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin. The project, with a duration of 3 years from January 2024 until December 2026, examines how the EU can structure its future relations with its Eastern neighbours and the countries of the Western Balkans. The consortium has received around three million euros for this endeavour.

How can the EU invigorate its enlargement and neighbourhood policy to enhance Europe's resilience?

Our first goal is to investigate how to reform the EU's enlargement strategy in a new geopolitical phase, HOW TO RESPOND to other actors' geopolitical ambitions in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans, and HOW TO REBUILD the EU's foreign policy arsenal in view of a new era of military threats (triple "R" approach) combining the modernisation and geopolitical logics of EU enlargement, leading to new data – e.g. a public opinion survey in Ukraine, a set of scenarios, an external influence index (Russia, China, Turkey), and a social policy compliance and cohesion scoreboard.

Our second goal is to elaborate an evidence-based, forward-looking vision for the EU's political agenda and institutional frameworks for co-designing a multidimensional toolbox (i.e. two tailor-made toolkits), together with InvigoratEU's Expert Hub, Civil Society (CS) Network, Youth Labs, Workshops for Young Professionals and Policy Debates in a gaming set up, which will result in context-sensitive and actionable policy recommendations for European and national political stakeholders and (young) European citizens in particular.

Our third goal is to deploy a CDE (communication, dissemination and exploitation) strategy aiming at recommendations from Day 1 to maximize our scientific, policy and societal impact in invigorating the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies to enhance Europe's resilience. Ultimately, InvigoratEU is a deliberately large consortium respecting the diversity of Europe and political perspectives; 7 out of 18 are from Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the western Balkans (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia), complemented by our Civil Society Network of 9 representatives from all Western Balkan countries, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

InvigoratEU is funded by the European Union.