

TRUST AS A PILLAR OF SOCIAL COHESION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: DYNAMICS AND INTERCONNECTIONS

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Abstract: This article addresses the complex interlink between the levels of social cohesiveness and trust in the Republic of Moldova, underlining that both aspects are significant in determining the country's democratic development. The research describes the trust dynamics by elaborating a profound review of the literature, using secondary data analysis and quantitative research provided by the Institute of Legal, Political, and Sociological Research. Based on sociodemographic information and comparative analysis from other countries, it assesses the degree of trust among people and institutions, especially in the context of pandemic problems. The paper discusses the controversial state-building initiatives of the Republic of Moldova, the oligarchs' strong position, pervasive corruption, and state capture in a position to deprive institutional trust. Unfair competition poses serious barriers to the electoral democratic framework. It does, nonetheless, point to areas of hope, which include media and political plurality, active civil society, and developments around specific reform areas. Equally important is the commitment of the Republic of Moldova to European values, with the European Union holding the key leverage in terms of democratic transformation. While trust is a crucial ingredient in elaborating social cohesion and resilience in the Republic of Moldova, the article argues that democratic improvements will require constant EU incentives.

Keywords: social trust, social cohesion, social capital, institutions, electoral democracy

Résumé : Cet article examine l'interconnexion complexe entre les niveaux de cohésion sociale et de confiance en République de Moldavie, en soulignant que ces deux aspects jouent un rôle déterminant dans le développement démocratique du pays. La recherche analyse les dynamiques de confiance en s'appuyant sur une analyse des données secondaires et un examen approfondi de la littérature, en référence à des recherches quantitatives fournies par l'Institut de Recherche Juridique, Politique et Sociologique. En se basant sur des informations sociodémographiques et une analyse comparative avec d'autres pays, l'étude évalue le degré de confiance entre les individus et envers les institutions, en particulier dans le contexte des problématiques liées à la pandémie. Une discussion est faite sur les initiatives controversées de building de l'État dans la République de Moldavie, la position dominante des oligarques, la corruption généralisée et la capture de l'État qui

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compromettent la confiance institutionnelle. La concurrence déloyale constitue également un sérieux obstacle au cadre démocratique électoral. However, the article does raise sources of hope-the pluralistic media and political landscape, an active civil society, and advances made in some areas of reform. It also insists on the commitment of the Republic of Moldova to European values, with the European Union holding one of the keys in the transformation towards a democratic regime. Enfin, bien que la confiance soit un ingrédient clé pour renforcer la cohésion sociale et la résilience en République de Moldavie, l'article soutient que les améliorations démocratiques nécessiteront des incitations constantes de la part de l'Union européenne.

Mots-clés : confiance sociale, cohésion sociale, capital social, institutions, démocratie électorale

Abstract: Acest articol abordează legătura complexă dintre nivelurile de coeziune socială și încredere în Republica Moldova, ambele aspecte fiind semnificative în determinarea dezvoltării democratice a țării. Cercetarea descrie dinamica încrederii prin revizuirea literaturii de specialitate, utilizarea analizei secundare a datelor, precum și a datelor cercetărilor cantitative furnizate de Institutul de Cercetări Juridice, Politice și Sociologice. Pe baza informațiilor sociodemografice și a analizei comparative din alte țări, studiul nostru evaluează gradul de încredere între oameni și instituții, mai ales în contextul problemelor pandemice. În articol punem în discuție inițiativele controversate de construire a statului în Republica Moldovenească, poziția dominantă a oligarhilor, a corupției generalizate și a capturării statului cu rezultatul compromiterii încrederii instituționale. Concurența neloyală reprezintă bariere serioase în calea cadrului democratic electoral. Cu toate acestea, ea indică domenii de speranță, care includ mass-media și pluralitatea politică, societatea civilă activă și evoluțiile în jurul unor domenii specifice de reformă. La fel de important este angajamentul Republicii Moldova față de valorile europene, Uniunea Europeană deținând pârghia cheie în ceea ce privește transformarea democratică. În timp ce încrederea este un ingredient crucial în elaborarea coeziunii sociale și a rezistenței în Republica Moldova, articolul susține că îmbunătățirile democratice vor necesita stimulente constante din partea UE.

Cuvinte cheie: încredere socială, coeziune socială, capital social, instituții, democrație electorală

1. Introduction

The understanding of social cohesion is pivotal for the proper working of society. It refers to the level of unity, confidence or collaboration among its members, where social institutions are key to the development and protection of this quality. The Republic of Moldova, like any other society, is endowed with certain challenges and opportunities for social cohesion. To this effect, the level of confidence in social institutions is very important in the promotion of the stability and sustainable development of the nation. After the Declaration of Independence, the Republic of Moldova has been through a long and complex transition period which has severely impacted the people's confidence in the institutions. The ongoing processes of democratization, socio and economic reform and social change have created a more or less unstable climate for the population. As a result, aspects such as corruption, inefficiency, political interference, and low

transparency have undermined trust in institutions, including the government, judiciary, political parties, and the media.

The social stability of the Republic of Moldova is highly dependent on the trust that its citizens have in its state institutions. In a society where the majority of citizens have confidence in its strategic institutions, there is a higher level of cooperation, unity, and order. The more people believe that institutions are just and fair, the more secure and endorsed they feel about these institutions. Therefore, confidence in institutions is a prerequisite for business development, social integration, and participation in civic life. Trust in social institutions in the Republic of Moldova has been falling in recent years, but there is a need to find reasons that affect such trust. Change in understanding and functioning of social institutions involves continuous efforts and well-conceived communication strategies. The concepts of accountability and transparency must be entrenched in the institutions to win back public trust and enhance cohesion.

The present article will investigate the dynamics of trust in the social institutions in the Republic of Moldova, the factors which account for the level of such trust and recommend measures that can be utilized in the promotion of social trust. After reviewing the literature and seeking relevant illustrative examples from different settings, we shall offer possible solutions and guidance on dealing with the current limits and encouraging trust in social institutions in the Republic of Moldova. Our goal is to highlight the role of social institutions in fostering social trust and cohesion in the context of the Republic of Moldova and to help shape a theoretical and practical framework that instils trust and encourages social engagement. In our case, we hope to assist in the course of building and consolidating trust towards a sound institution that undergirds the structural integrity of the Republic of Moldova in a transitioning era.

Individual and social levels of trust have always been appreciated by the society. Trust between people is basic for smoother togetherness, enhancing democracy, and the quicker development of state institutions. Trust in others permits participation in cooperation and increases the bond that exists in society. Given the significance set on social trust, an increasing number of studies try to determine its constituents and how it is formed. A significant dispute around this question does exist, but researchers mostly contend that this is how building trust operates – in most cases specific to location. Factors that may be available as crucial for the emergence of social trust in one country may not matter in the context of another country. The present study aims to investigate the defining factors of social trust in the unique political, economic, and social settings of the Republic of Moldova. The case of the Republic of Moldova stands out for several, no less important aspects. First, Moldova was the other in the group of post-Soviet economies and belonged to the Soviet Union for a long period where collectivism and egalitarianism were widely accepted. Such an experience usually results in congruency in social trust. Secondly, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country embarked on the path of transitioning to democracy and a market economy. Since these processes gained intensity in the last two decades, the

Republic of Moldova provides a valuable case for studying how new political and economic governance approaches may influence social trust levels.

2. Theoretical framework

If we consider the concept of trust in social institutions, it is a vital part of social cohesion and stability in a society. It is a definition and theory that have been developed with time by many sociologists. According to Anthony Giddens, „trust viewed as increase in certainty within social relationships, based on past experiences and expectations regarding the future behavior of others” (Giddens, 1990). On the other hand, Niklas Luhmann conceptualizes trust as the creation and acceptance of risk through reducing communication complexity (Luhmann, 1979).

Sociological studies have pointed out several factors that influence trust in social institutions. Among the leading theories is the social capital theory of Robert Putnam, which stresses that it is social relationships and networks that form the basis for trusting social institutions. The theory argues that civic participation, social interaction, and a sense of community belonging are key ingredients for building institutional trust (Putnam, 2000). Karen S. Cook delves into trust within a broader social framework, exploring the underlying processes and mechanisms that sustain trust and examining its implications for cooperation and social interaction. Cook synthesizes various theoretical perspectives on trust, highlighting its importance in organizations, communities, and interpersonal relationships. Her work provides a comprehensive understanding of trust’s multifaceted nature and the factors that influence it (Cook, 2005). Nan Lin researches social capital and its contribution to the development of trust and social relations. Lin develops a theory that stresses the importance of social networks and strong ties for developing trust and social cohesion. Through his research and examples, he manages to show how social capital enables cooperation, resource exchange, and mutual support, thus creating an environment that is friendly for trust and positive social interactions (Lin 2001).

Diego Gambetta explores the nature of trust and its construction or erosion within cooperative relationships. He examines the psychological and social mechanisms underpinning trust and social cooperation. Gambetta’s theoretical analyses and case studies shed light on factors affecting trust development and its restoration or deterioration, discussing aspects like reciprocity, moral hazard, and relational structures (Gambetta, 1988). Bo Rothstein addresses the problems and dilemmas of trust and social cooperation in contemporary societies. The work investigates the impact of „social traps” on trust and social solidarity. According to Rothstein, defective social structures and coordination problems may undermine trust and create self-reinforcing vicious circles in damaging behavior. Efficient institutions and public policies will counteract these situations and nurture institutional trust (Rothstein, 2005). Pamela Paxton discusses the loss of social capital in the United States and its consequences regarding trust and social cohesion. With the analysis of different measures and empirical data, she reveals

the sources of trust and civic engagement decline and ways for the restoration of social capital in the U.S. (Paxton, 1999).

Marc Hooghe and Dietlind Stolle present a comparative view of social capital and civil society. Their compilation brings together contributions on the role institutions and collective actions play in generating social capital across diverse social and cultural environments. They consider how institutions and civil society shape trust and social cooperation, hence offering useful insights into different practices and outcomes across countries (Hooghe et al., 2003). David L. Feldman and Karen Stenner examine the relationship between threat perception and political authoritarianism. The two authors discuss how specific social and political situations can enhance the desire of individuals for authoritarian regimes while undermining confidence in democratic organizations. Their study gives a psychological and political view of trust and stability within institutions (Feldman et al., 1997).

The evolution of trust in social institutions provides a multilayered and interesting topic, put into a comparative perspective in Western and Eastern European societies. Generally speaking, Western societies have a long tradition of institutional trust rooted in democratic values, the rule of law, and good governance. Traditionally, institutions like governments, systems of justice, police, and the media enjoyed high trust from the public. Still, recent decades have seen a decline attributed to economic crises, demographic shifts, political polarization, and problems with institutional transparency.

In Eastern Europe, in contrast, deep political and economic transitions swept across the region with the end of the Soviet Union. For this latter area of the world, trust in social institutions was influenced by experiences such as the dismantling of old structures, corruption, political instability, and economic adversities. With democratic consolidation and European integration, however, institutional trust started to improve in countries like Poland and the Czech Republic. In Moldova, the post-independence transition was also painful. Permeated with corruption and ineffective governance, it was plagued by political instability, while persistent economic problems neither came to nor went away. This has resulted in low levels of trust in institutions such as government, judiciary, and police. Ethnic and geopolitical factors contribute even more to societal polarization and erosion of interethnic trust. Comparing Western Europe with Eastern Europe and Moldova reveals differences in institutional trust conditioned by history, politics, and culture.

3. Research methodology

Secondary data analysis is performed in the given study by resorting to quantitative data of multiple waves of the POB, conducted by the Institute of Public Policy. Precisely, data for four waves were analysed: June 2021 (n1=1161), November 2022 (n2=1132), August 2023 (n3=1215), and October 2024 (n4=1100 respondents). The repeated cross-sectional design of the POB allows the examination of longitudinal trends and dynamics in public attitudes in the Republic

of Moldova. The weights were applied to be representative of the adult population of the country and accounted for basic demographic variables: age, gender, type of residence, and geographic region. In analysing this trend, the theoretical framework is based on trust theories, which conceptualize social trust as being related to two different sources: cultural predispositions and contextual conditions. Dispositional factors stem from cultural norms and values and are thus relatively stable and less sensitive to short-term fluctuations. Conversely, contextual factors, shaped by the political, economic, and social environment, are more dynamic and may change rapidly. This dual-framework approach thus enables to capture of the structural and situational dimensions of the formation of social trust in Moldova.

We refine this analysis further by including primary data from a probability-based survey carried out by the Center for Sociology and Social Psychology within the Institute of Legal, Political, and Sociological Research. This survey was carried out from November 15 to December 20, 2021, and it involved multi-stage random sampling in 87 localities situated on the right bank of the Dniester River. The sample size of 1,698 respondents ensures statistical reliability, with a margin of error of $\pm 2.8\%$ at a 95% confidence level. Stratification variables included urban-rural residence, gender, age, educational attainment, and regional distribution to ensure a representative snapshot of the Moldovan adult population. Triangulation of these sources of data enables a far-reaching analysis of the interaction between macro-structural forcing factors, such as political and economic systems, and micro-level predispositions, such as individual attitudes and cultural values. The integration of secondary and primary data allows this study to present a comprehensive inquiry into the determinants of social trust in Moldova and bring to light the persistent impact of cultural dispositions hand in hand with the mouldability of trust under changing contextual conditions.

4. Study results

The dynamics of institutional trust in the Republic of Moldova between June 2021 and October 2024 are impressive, reflecting that period's socio-political and economic contexts. During this period, Moldova passed from a socialist government to a pro-European administration, passed through the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, faced war consequences in Ukraine, and had an energy crisis deepening. Each of these factors influenced public perceptions of institutional performance and legitimacy. Data from four waves of the Public Opinion Barometer reflects the cumulative trust levels („very much” and „somewhat trust”) in key institutions and provides an insight into how the Republic of Moldova's society responds to structural and contextual pressures.

Table 1. Evolution of the Republic of Moldova population's trust in institutions in 2021-2024

Institution	Distribution of cumulative responses „A lot of trust” and „Some trust”			
	June 2021	November 2022	August 2023	October 2024
Government	18,5%	28,0%	28,4%	23,7%
Parliament	15,1%	24,3%	26,7%	20,5%
President	47,0%	34,1%	35,8%	35,3%
Justice	18,5%	17,7%	22,5%	15,2%
Army	42,0%	26,9%	32,6%	30,1%
Church	72,6%	62,5%	58,0%	63,4%
City Hall	55,3%	55,6%	55,4%	55,1%
Political parties	18,5%	16,5%	17,3%	9,4%
Mass media	44,8%	43,3%	41,0%	30,9%

Source: Institute of Public Policies, Public Opinion Barometer, June 2021, November 2022, August 2023, October 2024; n1=1161 r, n2=1132 r, n3=1215 r. n4=1100

In June 2021, the socialist government remained in office, while the country was still dealing with the exceptional medical situation created by the pandemic. Trust in the government stood at a low level of 18.5%, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with pandemic management and governance shortcomings. By November 2022, however, this had surged to 28.0% as the newly elected pro-European PAS government took strides toward dealing with the refugee crisis from the war in Ukraine. This dropped to 23.7% by October 2024, indicating that long-drawn crises energy shortage- and the failure of the government to meet governance expectations gradually eroded public optimism initially bestowed upon it.

Public trust in the Parliament follows a similar pattern. As early as June 2021, 15.1% of respondents trusted it because of dissatisfaction with the political establishment under the socialist regime. The pro-European government's pledges of reform consequently brought a gradual rise in the record of trust, culminating in the peak value of 26.7% in August 2023. However, by October 2024, it had fallen to 20.5%, reflecting overall public disappointment with legislative inactivity and the general polarization of the pre-election landscape. The decline underlines that structural reforms, usually slow and contentious, did not satisfy the expectations of the public in due time.

Trust in the President followed a different pattern. During the pandemic in June 2021, trust was at an unusually high 47%, reflecting trust in the presidency as an unifying figure during a time of national crisis. While governance challenges mounted, it decreased to 34.1% by November 2022 and stabilized at about 35% through 2023 and 2024. Thus, the modest levels of trust in this period are indicative that even though the presidency still retained symbolic authority, its capacity to influence public confidence was weakened amidst the persistence of systemic challenges.

The trust in the judiciary varied within the range of 15.2% to 22.5% in this period. In this context, these numbers underline the scepticism about how well judicial reforms have been carried out and to what extent the system is independent. The results improved somewhat in 2023, probably because of increased political rhetoric on anti-corruption measures, but decreased again to 15.2% in 2024.

Other institutions also presented some interesting dynamics of trust. For example, trust in the army, an institution traditionally enjoying a high level of trust, fell from 42% in June 2021 to 26.9% in November 2022, when public attention began to shift toward domestic emergencies like the arrival of Ukrainian refugees. Trust partially recovered to 30.1% by October 2024 but remained below pre-crisis levels, reflecting a general shift in public attention to domestic issues. Similarly, trust in the church went from 72.6% in 2021, down to a low of 58.0% in 2023, before recovering to 63.4% in 2024. Such fluctuation may be indicative both of secularization tendencies and of the variable role of the church in attempting to answer societal concerns in times of political and social instability.

In contrast, trust in mayoral offices stood at about 55% throughout the period, with very little variation. This is probably because of their direct connection with the day-to-day life of citizens and their perceived insulation from national political crises. Meanwhile, the level of trust in political parties and mass media went down, with political parties suffering a sharp decline from 18.5% back in June 2021 to just 9.4% in October 2024. This indicates increasing alienation of the public from party politics, which is fostered by perceptions of polarization and ineffectiveness. In a similar vein, the level of trust in the mass media decreased from 44.8% in 2021 to 30.9% in 2024, reflecting much scepticism after perceived biases and the role the media has played in polarizing society. In all, the dynamics of institutional trust during this period reflect a complex interplay between cultural predispositions and contextual factors. On one hand, trust in institutions such as the church and local authorities reflects relatively stable cultural expectations. On the other hand, trust in dynamic institutions of government, Parliament, and political parties varies based on immediate political and economic conditions. The public's response to various crises in Moldova underlines that responding not only to the immediate challenges but also to structural and systemic issues is fundamental for the long-term prospect of building trust. The dynamics of public opinion regarding the direction of Moldova's development between June 2021 and October 2024 reflect the significant socio-political and economic challenges the country faced during this period. The distribution of responses—whether the country was perceived as being on the right track, the wrong track, or respondents were uncertain—shows how shifting contexts influenced public sentiment.

Table 2. Evolution of respondents' opinions on the country's development direction

Period	The direction is correct	The direction is wrong	I don't know/ I don't answer
June 2021	29,6%	63,9%	6,5%
November 2022	24,3%	65,8%	9,9%
August 2023	32,0%	57,8%	10,3%
October 2024	39,2%	46,7%	14,1%

Source: Institute of Public Policies, Public Opinion Barometer, June 2021, November 2022, August 2023, October 2024; n1=1161 r, n2=1132 r, n3=1215 r. n4=1100

In June 2021, in the last months of the socialist government, 29.6% of the respondents believed the country was going in the right direction, while 63.9% considered the direction wrong. That period truly coincided with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that had then put severe tests on the government's management of healthcare and economic challenges. Generally, public dissatisfaction might have been heightened by limited vaccine rollouts, strained medical infrastructure, and economic stagnation. The high level of negative assessments speaks to a lack of trust in the ability of the socialist leadership to manage these crises effectively.

In November 2022, once the pro-European government of PAS had taken power, only 24.3% felt the country was going in the right direction, and 65.8% felt it was taking the wrong direction. This represents a drop and may indicate that the initial optimism of the public, following the elections in July 2021, dissipated. The COVID-19 pandemic by then was no longer a number one concern, while Moldova was heavily affected by the war in Ukraine. It had to provide significant aid to the Ukrainian refugees, secure the border, and manage the geopolitical tensions brought on by the conflict. While needed, these may have deflected attention away from domestic reforms and economic recovery, feeding the general public discontent. The emerging energy crisis was starting to bite household budgets, too, and dampen optimism even more.

In August 2023, the proportion of respondents who perceived the country as being in the right direction went up to 32.0%, while those who saw it as headed in the wrong direction went down to 57.8%. This uptick suggests that some of the work of the government, like addressing the energy crisis and ensuring macroeconomic stability, was finally beginning to strike a chord with the public. However, the remaining effects of inflation, high energy costs, and slow reform processes likely cooled popular euphoria. The rise in the number of respondents not voicing a clear opinion, to 10.3%, might suggest that people have grown more ambivalent or simply tired of political and economic developments.

By October 2024, in the eve of the presidential elections, public opinion happened to show a dramatic turn. The percentage of those who believed the country was taking the right direction reached its peak at 39.2%, while those who saw the direction as wrong significantly declined to 46.7%. There were a couple of

reasons for this change. First, the PAS government might have been more intense with communication on governance and reform successes in the run-up to the elections. Second, the polarized electoral environment clear division between pro-Western and pro-Eastern camps could have motivated incumbent government supporters to become more confident in their country's direction. But the increase in uncertain responses to 14.1% reflects the deep fragmentation of the electorate and points to the undecided voters' role in shaping the election outcome.

Table 3, on the perception of global development over time, gives great insight into how global events shape public opinion. Therefore, it compares responses between June 2021 and October 2024, reflecting great pessimism about the global trajectory and growing scepticism regarding the world's development.

Table 3. The evolution of opinions on the direction of development in the world

Period	The direction is correct	The direction is wrong	I don't know/ I don't answer
June 2021	37,8%	50,6%	11,5%
November 2022	18,7%	63,6%	17,7%
August 2023	24,4%	60,4%	14,4%
October 2024	21,3%	66,5%	12,2%

Source: Institute of Public Policies, Public Opinion Barometer, June 2021, November 2022, August 2023, October 2024; n1=1161 r, n2=1132 r, n3=1215 r, n4=1100

In June 2021, 37.8% of the respondents said the world was heading in the right direction, and 50.6% believed it was on the wrong track. During this time, there were several critical international developments: the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines provided a sense of hope that things would return to some sort of normalcy, yet the virus mutations took some of that hope away. It was expected that the high percentage of negative responses would be conditioned by global democratic erosion and the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. The relatively low percentage of respondents who were uncertain- 11.5%- implies a majority with quite firm opinions, possibly corresponding to increased awareness during the pandemic.

By November 2022, optimism had more than halved to 18.7%, while pessimism had increased fourfold to 63.6%. This faces the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which sent shockwaves not only into world security structures but also inflated economic and energy crises everywhere. Inflation reached alarming levels, thus eroding purchase power and building widespread economic uncertainty. The fading severity of the COVID-19 pandemic likely provided some relief, but it was overshadowed by ramping up tensions between major powers like the U.S. and China. These compounding crises explain the dramatic increase in negative perceptions, as well as the rise in uncertainty to 17.7%, reflecting the unpredictability of global developments during this period.

In August 2023, data revealed a slight recapture of optimism, as 24.4% perceive the global trajectory to be positive, while the majority-60.4%-are pessimistic. During this period, extreme weather events continue to unfold with

record-breaking global temperatures, raising the present threat of climate change. Furthermore, the revived violence in the Israel-Hamas War and meagre advances in Ukraine's counteroffensive against Russia further strained international stability. However, the slight improvement in optimism may be attributed to the world's gradual adaptation to these challenges and the international community's efforts to address pressing issues, such as climate change and humanitarian crises.

By October 2024, optimism was back down to 21.3%, and pessimism rose to its peak at 66.5%. The armed conflicts in Ukraine and between Israel and Hamas continued through this period. Mistrust deepened between the United States and China, increasing global tensions. In addition, lingering economic instability further crushed people's confidence. Still, against all these challenges, the reduction to 12.2% of uncertain responses shows that the people had clearer views on global issues, perhaps compelled by the unending media exposure to what was happening around the world. In the final analysis, the data reveals a stable trend of increasing disappointment with global developments with temporary recoveries. The events of this period serve only to illustrate how closely linked global progress is with large-scale crises, be it a pandemic, war, or economic instability.

Data in Table 4 reveal the extent to which respondents trust various sources of potential help. It starkly juxtaposes horizontal, or personal networks, against the vertical, or institutional, trust. The results show a deep imbalance, where confidence in the personal network (relatives, friends, neighbours, and colleagues) is far stronger than in institutional structures, such as the state and local government.

Table 4. Respondents' trust in the help received from institutions/individuals

To what extent do you think you could count on help from the following institutions/people?						
		I don't trust at all	I trust to a small extent	I trust to a large extent	Very much trust	I don't know/find it difficult to answer
Institution/ person	State	49,3%	43,1%	5,0%	1,2%	1,4%
	City hall	44,5%	44,5%	7,9%	1,1%	2,1%
	Relatives	7,1%	29,0%	44,2%	18,8%	0,9%
	Friends	15,9%	40,7%	32,8%	8,1%	2,5%
	Neighbors	36,9%	38,8%	17,1%	4,1%	3,1%
	Colleagues	32,7%	36,9%	23,1%	3,9%	3,4%

Source: Table elaborated by authors.

Accordingly, horizontal relationships have the highest level of trust, with relatives coming out as the most reliable source: 63% of the respondents (putting „great trust” and „very great trust” together) believe that they would be able to rely on their relatives if they needed some kind of help. Friends earn more trust than vertical institutions: 41%, colleagues 33%, and even neighbours 21%. This pattern reflects a strong reliance on informal social networks during times of need, likely because of proximity, ease of access, and perceived dependability.

By contrast, vertical trust is very low. Only 6% of the respondents have a high confidence in the state and 9% in the local city hall. The difference supports the idea of a critical gap in institutional support effectiveness and reliability. More than 90% in the case of both the state and local government declared either a lack of or only limited, trust in those entities, which would indeed signal systemic failure to meet citizen expectations for support. In all probability, low institutional trust reflects irritation with bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, and deficient social services, compounded by broader socio-political and economic challenges.

Preference for horizontal support networks points to a cultural and social dynamic where it is believed that relationships with people are far more immediate and reliable. In contexts of economic uncertainty, political instability, or a history of institutional shortcomings, individuals naturally turn to those closest to them for support. This happens all the more in societies whose core ways of managing adversity depend on bonds of family and community. This tells of the great disequilibrium in trust. The data suggests that the inability of the state to establish a strong and trustworthy support system results in continuing reliance on informal networks, which may exacerbate inequality even further. For example, people without strong personal ties might be particularly vulnerable since they lack social capital to draw upon in times of need. Furthermore, the low institutional trust hints at a possible erosion of civic engagement since citizens may feel either disengaged from or disillusioned with formal governance structures.

5. Discussions and conclusions

Trust dynamics in Moldova run the gamut of attitudes: from credulity, whereby individuals are not very critical of the credibility of their interlocutors, to paranoia, characterized by generalized suspicion. During the pandemic crisis, this dynamic became more marked and underlined how critical events were able to determine an impact on trust relationships inside society. In this respect, it is turning to be a core resource for social stability, especially in times of uncertainty. It is necessary to stimulate a culture of trust based on cooperation and social responsibility, which would assist in the reduction of global and local risks, enhancement of quality of life, and development of a connected and resilient society.

Social cohesion is one of the main drivers of economic development and continues to reflect the interplay between trust and collaboration among societal actors. High levels of social trust lower transaction costs, enhance the regulatory environment and reinforce the reliability of economic interactions. Conversely, a lack of social cohesion can act to constrain investment and development. The general trend of low institutional trust in Moldova is mostly driven by rampant corruption, insufficient delivery of public services, and concerns about the electoral process being unduly influenced. These perceptions are deeply entrenched and intermingled with the close connections between economic and political elites, thus giving rise to oligarchic tendencies and undermining the popular belief in democratic institutions.

Against these challenges, Moldova does show positive signs of democratic development: political pluralism is present, the media scene is decidedly competitive, and political reforms have been significant, which evidences resiliency within the democratic framework. Although civil society remains underdeveloped, it is capable of shaping reform agendas and promoting democratic values. Moreover, Moldova's European orientation has become a very important driving force for democratization, with the European Union wielding strong influence to encourage reforms and offset autocratic tendencies.

Future research should look further into the contextual factors shaping social trust across different nations or regional groups. These comparative analyses could thus be used to tease out the more subtle ways in which political, economic, and social conditions may influence processes of trust-building. Perhaps more importantly, this study underlines a positive interplay between social and political trust, even in societies with low baseline trust levels. This finding suggests that Moldova can be taken out of the vicious circle of distrust and underdevelopment, provided that collective resilience and cooperation are harnessed effectively. These international crises - the COVID-19 pandemic, energy shortages, and a regional military conflict - have come to exemplify the Republic of Moldova population's capacity for collective action and resilience. If it further consolidates democratic institutions, fights corruption, and builds social trust, the Republic of Moldova will be able, despite everything, to achieve more stability and prosperity, and strengthen its European aspirations.

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