



POLÁNYI CENTRE PUBLICATIONS

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**UNTANGLING THE CONSTITUTIVE ELEMENTS OF SOCIETAL  
TRUST AND SOLIDARITY IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC**

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**CENTRAL EUROPE AND SCANDINAVIA**

*II.2020/WP01*

iASK WORKING PAPERS  
**2020**

## About the Author

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# Abstract

What does it mean to have trust in one's country? Trust in those who lead the government, trust in the way society is ordered and organized, and trust in the people of the country can all influence how individuals perceive the country in which they live. This study examines the different facets of societal trust (the complex network of state, political, national and social trust) in four European countries – Norway, Sweden, Slovakia and the Czech Republic – and connects these with how people understand their society to be organized. Perceptions of sameness/difference, equality/inequality and the nation are examined in relation to levels of trust. The results presented from these four countries offer a more nuanced picture of what it means to have trust in government and institutions and what it means to have trust in those who inhabit one's country, especially in a time of crisis. The main data sources are identical surveys in four languages.

# Introduction

This study sets out to examine trust and distrust in connection with perceived levels of social inequality and societal diversity and how these relate to the prevalence of nationalism (nation-thinking) in two sets of European countries: Norway and Sweden with their reportedly high levels of accumulated social trust, and Slovakia and Czechia with their reportedly low levels of accumulated social trust. It is important to stress that this study looks at the individuals' perceptions of social inequality and societal diversity, not at measures of inequality like GINI coefficients or measures of diversity like demographic records or censuses. In addition to gathering data through online surveys, further qualitative research is conducted on how the concepts inequality and diversity are framed in the relevant countries. This study is part of a broader research project that will run over the course of two years. While the next stage of research involves a second round of surveys and discourse analysis of major media outlets in the abovementioned countries to contextualize the survey results, the first stage mainly focuses on the results from the first round of surveys in May and June of 2020. This working paper will focus primarily on the results from the first round of surveys, the framework for this study, and the individual contexts of the four countries included.

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed the world and research plans are certainly not immune. The outbreak severely altered the scope and timetable of this research plan and it partially altered the questions in focus. More than anything, it forced a refocusing of the questions asked in the survey. The reframed questions ask respondents about their trust and attachment to various groups and institutions in the context of the pandemic. These questions about social trust and political trust have perhaps become more salient during the pandemic. While the data gathered from the first survey captures respondents' feelings at the outset of the pandemic, the second survey will capture the ways in which trust has been strained or perhaps in some instances strengthened by the crisis situation. By examining these different facets of societal trust, we should be able to get a nuanced picture of the internal highs and lows when it comes to social and political trust in the four countries.

As framed, this research attempts to accomplish a number of tasks. First, it seeks to examine some of the constitutive elements of societal trust in the four countries in question. Categorizing countries simply as high trust or low trust countries does not tell the whole story. In order to counter broad generalizations regarding social trust in Scandinavia and Central Europe, this analysis shows the internal highs and lows of societal trust, giving a more nuanced picture of who and what receives the trust of respondents. Trust in government might be low, but trust in strangers can be high. The inverse is also possible. However, even these estimations do not tell the whole story as these feelings of trust for groups and institutions may also be highly contextual. It is my hope that this study can help clarify what societal trust looks like in these four countries. In addition to a focus on society as a whole, the survey asks respondents to differentiate between various levels of societal organization: respondents evaluate their levels of trust and attachments along various geographic divisions such as local lines, regional lines, national lines and beyond. Second, the research delves into people's perceptions of equality/inequality and diversity/homogeneity in their home countries. These perceptions are then analyzed in connection with respondents' reliance on the national frame. Lastly, I seek to situate all of this in the context of the 2020 pandemic situation.

As mentioned, two pairs of countries are examined here: Slovakia – Czechia and Sweden – Norway. The former exhibit low trust on a European level and the latter exhibit high trust on a European level. The countries have similar population sizes and comparative populations. Both pairs include one country with about 5.5 million inhabitants (Slovakia, Norway) and both pairs include one country with a bit over 10 million inhabitants (Czechia, Sweden). There is a general perception that Norway and Sweden exhibit high levels of equality and that Czechia and Slovakia exhibit higher levels of inequality, although this is somewhat tampered by the decades under communism that flattened the inequality curve to a large degree. Despite this, there is a general perception of low levels of equality. In addition, both pairs were single countries in relatively recent history, each with a dominant partner and a lesser partner. They exhibit similar dynamics of othering (big brother, little brother relationships) with Czechia and Sweden considered more cosmopolitan, and Norway and Slovakia more provincial/parochial. These relationships make each of the paired countries their most significant comparative other.

## Topic in focus

Societal diversity can break down the trust which is sought after in a stable democracy (Putnam 2007). Social inequality, especially in the form of income inequality, can also accelerate distrust within society (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) and it has been hinted that this connection may be more robust in the case of European states (Delhey and Dragolov, 2013). Diversity and inequality disrupt the perceived values of equality among the members of a given society. If a society's cohesiveness is built upon equality or the promise of equality, perceptions of largescale difference among the population can stress the system if there are no salient cross-cutting identities to mitigate the stress. Separately, and in concert with one another, these factors shape the potential relationships between the peoples of a nation-state by influencing who can be considered within the discursively constructed "us". Examining these societal influences on trust are of immense importance, especially in the midst of a crisis when social solidarity and governmental trust are certainly put to the test.

While significant research has been done on the relationships between trust and equality and trust and diversity, no studies have taken this research further to determine what role these relationships play in the everyday salience of nationalism. By the term nationalism, I refer to "a way of talking, writing, and thinking about the basic units of culture, politics, and belonging that helps to constitute nations as real and powerful dimensions of social life." (Calhoun, 2007) Furthermore, I focus on the ways that nationhood is enacted in the speech, actions, choices and consumption patterns of everyday individuals (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). Everyday nationhood, which echoes the call from Michael Billig to notice the unconscious and banal uses of the nation in speech and symbols (Billig, 1995), helps to describe the discursive and practical possibilities for using the nation as a salient form of difference-making. An additional important dimension of the research plan of everyday nationhood, is that it locates the transmission and growth of the national frame not within the discourse of ruling elites, but in the practical language and behaviors of everyday individuals. In this study, the behaviors of everyday individuals are present in the form

respondents' choices and their reliance on the national frame. Several questions in the survey focus exactly on those types of everyday discourses and understandings.

This study builds upon the established relationship between inequality and distrust, as well as the relationship between diversity and distrust, to see how distrust around these two axes correlates with the prevalence and salience of nationalism. Essentially, I seek to better understand the strength of nation-thinking in relation to perceived levels of inequality and alterity within specific societies. Important to note is that the project focuses on perceptions of inequality and diversity within individual societies and not on actual measurements of inequality or diversity. To help give a more complete picture, I incorporate survey questions that measure perceived levels of trust within society, when it comes to local, regional and national institutions. I anticipate that the levels of institutional trust within society will have some sort of correlation with the prevalence of nation-thinking. Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) point to distrust in ruling elites as a prerequisite for the growth in nationalist claims which can accompany populism. This does not mean that distrust in democratic institutions necessarily precedes, accompanies or follows growing nationalism, but rather distrust in those who hold office in these public institutions has a correlation to growing nationalism. In order to better understand the relationship between societal trust and trust in institutions, as well as to control for this significant variable, institutional perceptions will be included in this survey on trust and nation-thinking.

Analyzing trust or distrust is of paramount importance to assessing national cohesiveness and therefore national security. One Eurobarometer survey of Europeans' attitudes towards security (Special Eurobarometer 464b, 2017) looks at Europeans' feeling of safety and security in the home community, in their country and in the EU, but it focuses on external threats and internal criminal threats. It does not consider the level of distrust within a society as a significant threat. Another Eurobarometer survey from 2017, *Designing Europe's Future* (461), takes trust in institutions as a major subtopic of inquiry. Roughly following the results of this inquiry, I have chosen two countries that exhibit a pattern of trust in national governments and institutions and two countries that exhibit a pattern of distrust in national institutions and governments. The two countries with

comparatively high levels of trust included here are Sweden and Norway. The two countries with comparatively low levels of trust included here are Slovakia and Czechia.

The Eurobarometer surveys suggest that those in an economically precarious position are less trustful of national governments than those who are economically stable. Additionally, generally speaking, those with lower levels of education are more distrustful than those who have attained higher levels of education. But how does this affect the level of nationalism within a society? Research suggests that European nationalist movements often find most recruits in the lower or working classes. However, in Scandinavia, nationalist movements more often recruit from the middle classes. Economic marginalization alone does not explain this relationship. Therefore, looking towards perceptions of fairness, equality and diversity in connection with trust can give us a more detailed look at these domestic processes that strengthen national salience.

## Methodology

This overall project utilizes a mix of methods in its data collection: online surveys including qualitative and quantitative data and discourse analysis of major media outlets. In this paper I will focus mainly on the survey data, but I will also include some qualitative material to help give context to the results of the survey. As mentioned, the surveys garner both quantitative and qualitative data: they include questions where respondents give a numerical response based on a 11-point scale, as well as questions with user-generated text-based responses. These text-based responses allow respondents to define, in essence, their understanding of the concepts that feature most heavily in the survey, thereby demonstrating the ways in which the respondents understand, reproduce, challenge or even redefine the dominant understandings of trustworthiness, equality/inequality and homogeneity/diversity. Content analysis of media reports provides additional context and added definition to the concepts in focus. Further analysis of content from media outlets in each of the four countries – during stage two of the research project – will examine representations of inequality, diversity and nation during the time in which the online



surveys were active. This will help to determine not only the dominant discourse surrounding these topics at a particular moment in time, but it will help to map the discursive possibilities when using and understanding these concepts. All of this is done to give a more nuanced understanding of what it means to have trust in one's own society.

While respondents are given an opportunity to essentially define how they understand some of the major concepts featured in this survey, they have not been given the opportunity to define the social groupings that they find most salient. They are asked to respond about the trust they hold towards named social groupings or the attachment they feel towards them. This of course influences the individuals surveyed. In an ideal scenario, the respondents would be asked to produce the groupings and geographic divisions that get asked about in the survey, thereby demonstrating which groups are actually salient for the respondents and giving a mental map of the way they perceive their social world. These responses could then be automatically inserted into the subsequent questions. However, for comparative purposes, this survey requires some unity among the responses, so asking respondents to define the terms of the survey was not feasible at this point in time.

While this report details the framework and results of the survey campaign completed in 2020, there is a temporal dimension to the overall project: two surveys over time, one at the early acute stage of the crisis (2020) and one approximately one year into the crisis (2021). As of now, only the first survey has been launched and completed. Despite using the term crisis to designate this period, in the surveys, I refer to the "current situation" instead of the coronavirus crisis. Individuals surveyed can then interpret the current situation as they may. One, it allows to use the same set of questions at different times, as perhaps, by the second running of the survey, the situation will no longer be perceived as a "crisis" in the same way it was previously. Two, some respondents may experience the situation as a health crisis, for others it may be perceived as primarily an economic crisis, a social crisis, a mental health crisis, a political crisis, all of the above or some of the above. This allows respondents to interpret for themselves what is the most salient aspect of the crisis.

## *The Survey*

The survey is 33 questions in length. Twenty-nine of the questions use an 11-point linear numeric scale (0 – 10) with a number of the questions grouped in multiple rating matrices, three questions collect user-generated text-based responses of up to one sentence in length, and one question uses a modified 7-point Likert scale. In addition, I have asked respondents to provide some additional information about themselves at the conclusion of the survey, information like their preferred news sources and political parties supported.

Each individual survey collects a large amount of data and the process of completing the surveys for respondents took an average of 15 to 20 minutes. The length of the survey appeared to be a detractor for some would-be respondents, as there were several incomplete, non-submitted surveys for each country. Crafting a shorter survey could have netted a larger sample size and upon rerunning this survey in the early spring of 2021, the survey length will be reduced in order to entice more complete, submitted surveys.

This survey was shared primarily on Facebook so as to collect a greater age range than might be met through other social media platforms. It was shared by institutional Facebook groups in three out of the four countries. Interestingly, I received pushback from two public research institutions in Sweden who initially agreed to share the survey on their feed, but then declined. The feedback I received was that asking people to evaluate the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis (which is only one part of the survey) might be seen as too political for a public institution. This is itself quite telling and while this also represents data, it is not the data I set out to mine. Because of this situation, the survey was shared only by individual Facebook users in Sweden and not on Facebook group pages or institutional feeds. This resulted in a markedly low return rate for the surveys. I have shared some of those results here, but due to the small number of respondents from Sweden, the data from these surveys should be interpreted as illustrative and not authoritative.

The questions in the survey are suited specifically to the four countries in focus. Since each country survey needed to contain the exact same questions, there were influencing factors concerning what could be asked about and what made little sense to ask about. For

example, in the case of Norway, I wanted to ask about individuals' perceptions of the NAV office, which is a one-stop shop for welfare and social services. While there are welfare offices in each country, there is no direct analogue in the other three countries, so these questions were removed from the final version of the survey. On the other hand, I could ask about hospitals, as all four countries have a state health care system that is in charge of operating/regulating the hospitals. This may seem self-evident, but not long ago, hospitals in Norway were administered by county governments. However, now that they are part of the state system, the survey can reliably ask about perceptions/expectations when it comes to hospitals and this question holds the same meaning in all four countries.

## Some theoretical considerations

This study was inspired by a couple different strains of thought. First, on the surface, there seems to be a strong relationship between economic crisis and the growth of nationalist claims. It has long been considered common knowledge that economic crises were major prerequisites for the explosions of nationalist claims. However, in the past few decades, social researchers have been attempting to show that while economic crises certainly exacerbate the level of nationalist claims, the root causes often lie elsewhere. In addition, nationalist movements usually predate the economic crises pointed to as primary drivers. This socio-cultural turn in the analysis of nationalism remains an incredibly important contribution in the analysis of how political nationalism develops and grows in strength. Yet, economic roots as prime instigators should not be completely disregarded or underestimated. In part, this study attempts to correct for the amount of focus directed away from economic causes of growing nationalist claims; not by focusing on actual economic conditions, but by shifting the gaze towards people's perceptions of equality and fairness in their societies. In other words, the economic situation itself might not be the spark that ignites flaming nationalism claims, but rather individuals' attitudes and understandings of the economic situation and their perceptions of how it affects them. The

proposal of this modest shift means to reconcile these approaches by taking inspiration from strains of thought.

With this in mind, there is an interesting question to consider: if economic crisis is indeed a significant driver of nationalist claims, COVID-19 should exacerbate conflicts that are framed as national (and further nationalist claims). In this survey, that might be evidenced by a higher level of trust for co-nationals or a higher salience of the national frame. If, on the other hand, it's more about perceived inequality in society, perhaps COVID-19 won't produce an immediate effect on nationalist claims, as the majority of spheres within society were shut down over the short term and the economic effects were more widespread. In other words, maybe another driver is more significant, whether it be social or political; or perhaps, disruption itself is a major instigating factor, regardless of the type of disruption.

### *Accessing trust*

First, we must ask what produces trust? Is it transparency, efficiency, fairness, efficacy? Is trust earned primarily through evidence of trustworthiness or is it simply faith? Trust is about expectations, so in other words, it is about the future. Individuals expect honesty, fairness, reciprocity and good intentions from groups, institutions and often strangers. Why would people do such a thing, as it seems to be a rather dangerous proposition? The simple answer to that is that trust is a shorthand: one based on an oversimplification of a complex web of variables. It allows people to make decisions without an overabundance of time and energy spent in the act of decision-making. Trust (and distrust) helps individuals to function.

So, where do individuals place their trust, if it is not placed or practiced with international organizations and supranational governments, as often seems to be the case? While the nation-state seems poised to collect the surplus, it is important not to forget about the local and the regional. Can these levels of social organization be the key to repairing trust beyond and above the nation-state?

Trust is the most significant and repeated concept in the survey campaign. I ask about trust in three different ways: one, by directly asking about the levels of trust a respondent feels toward certain groups; two, by asking about what groups an individual feels they can count on; and three, by asking about the degree of respondents' personal connection to various groups, as trust is closely related to the attachments an individual may feel. These three pathways toward measuring trust reflect different ways of conceptualizing what trust means. Trust is abstract, so including these different conceptualization helps us to get a better overall picture of trust.

Perhaps more importantly, trust is not only abstract, but highly contextual. This requires an examination of the “when” of trust, or rather, how trust is contextual or conditional. One may say, “I trust my brother if I get into a physical confrontation, but I don’t trust him with my stock portfolio.” Instead of determining if individuals trust, for example, the government in general; I set out to determine in what contexts individuals may trust the government, i.e. trust to maintain order and deliver essential services, but not to direct the public life of citizens. This understanding of trust relates closely to questions regarding the dividing line between public and private. In democratic societies, we could also conceptualize the right-left political spectrum as a sliding scale for how many spheres of influence in which we trust the state to operate. Of course, there is a notable exception when it comes to political issues conceived as religious or moral issues.

In the survey, I asked individual directly about trust in ethnic co-nationals; however, I also gave respondents the space to reframe the distinctions of otherness and solidarity in their countries. In addition, in survey questions, I have distinguished between ethnic co-nationals and citizens. I have not asked directly about non-citizen residents. In this particular survey, it was more important to look at the phenomenon that Putnam describes as “hunkering down”; in other words, not necessarily who people do not trust, but simply if they do trust or not. Ideally, I want to capture the level of trust felt across different groups of people within society and not against specific groups.

National attachments and supranational attachments do not have a zero-sum relationship. Contrary to messages from many politicians, it doesn’t have to be an either or situation, connection to the nation-state or connection to Europe. Research from Castano (2004) and

Duchesne and Frogner (2008), looking at local, regional, national and supranational identity, demonstrates that high- or low-level attachments to one level does not preclude high- or low-level attachments to another level. However, it hints at two things: (1) since many European political conflicts are currently constructed around an axis that pits national against supranational, there can be large impediments to establishing high levels of attachment to both levels at the same time, and (2) in general, adjacent levels can often feature complications like competition over who has decision-making competencies (i.e. independence movements, as an extreme example). High local and high national attachments, high regional and high supranational attachments; these types of formulations can be easier to maintain than adjacent levels like high national and high supranational attachments. In these relationships, we see examples of nesting identities, conflicting identities, “concordant” identities (Deutsch 2006: 166), as well as others.

Lastly regarding trust, in my approach to the creating this survey, I wanted to add further nuance to the idea of societal trust. First, I separate societal trust in political and social trust. Next, I divide political trust into two separate spheres: governmental and institutional. I divide social trust into two overlapping spheres: generalized social trust (i.e. trust in strangers) and national trust (i.e. trust in your national community). In other words, at both the political level and the general social level, I ask respondents to evaluate both a *what* and a *who*. Governmental trust refers to those elected officials who are currently in power in a given country – a *who*. Institutional trust refers to the established state agencies and bureaucracies that are a bit less dynamic in nature – a *what*. Similarly, generalized social trust refers to individuals or strangers in society – a *who* – while national trust refers to a community of individuals – a *what*.

I would have liked to look at processes of othering as well; however, in this survey it was not possible to also get an accurate picture regarding trust and resident “foreigners”. There were multiple reasons for this: 1) members of both ethnicized majorities and minorities might take this survey, so things are framed in terms of the respondent’s nation (not necessarily the majority group) and citizens more broadly 2) the hierarchy of ethnic others in a country cannot be captured in a few short questions 3) I seek to examine if ethnic co-nationals are trusted and national salience is higher in situations where diversity and

inequality are perceived as high, not necessarily who is the object of distrust, which is a common concomitant process 4) this survey cannot capture who is “in” and who is “out”, in other words, who are understood as foreigners/others and who are not 5) a purely qualitative approach or a quantitative approach where individuals themselves provide the relevant groups and then answer set questions about them would be better suited for finding these types of answers.

### *The Respondents*

The number of respondents for these online surveys was unfortunately rather small, though the amount of data generated was still rather large. The surveys were posted online in the end of May 2020 and were open for one month, which yielded just over 30 respondents each for Slovakia, Czechia and Norway. For Sweden, there were even fewer.

The survey does not collect any personal information about the respondents other than from four voluntary questions at the end of the survey. These questions ask how old the respondents are, where they get their news, what party they voted for in the last election and if they participate in any membership organizations. Respondents range in age from 18 years-old to 77 years-old, with the majority of respondents in their 30s, 40s and 50s. In all four countries, political views and worldviews are strongly linked to the choice of media consumed and the surveys yielded a good distribution of preferred news sources.

For the question on political parties, I gave respondents the possibility to choose from the parties currently represented in parliament in each of the respective countries (or to choose “none of the above” or “I did not vote”). This means that crossing electoral thresholds formed the basis for inclusion in this survey. The electoral threshold for Norway is 4% of the vote nationally, in order to be eligible for bonus or levelling seats in the parliament. For Sweden, the threshold is 4% nationally or 12% in any electoral constituency. In Czechia, the threshold is 5% for single parties, 10% for two-party coalitions or 15% for three-party coalitions. In Slovakia, the threshold is 5% for single parties and 7% for coalition groupings. However, in the case of Slovakia, respondents were given more

choices. Elections occurred more recently in Slovakia than in the other countries and the political constellation changed a great deal, due to scandals. Many parties received significant numbers of votes but did not quite cross the threshold, including a number of well-established political parties. Therefore, I included all parties that received above 1% of the vote.

The survey also asked individuals about whether or not they are involved in any volunteer or membership organizations. Putnam (2007) talks about social capital in terms of networks – joining things – so the degree to which individuals engage with their communities is highly relevant in interpreting respondents' other answers on the survey.

## **Forms of political trust: governmental trust and institutional trust**

First, I will share the survey responses that pertain to trust: trust ratings for groups and institutions, ratings of reliance on various groups and institutions and feelings of attachment to various social groupings. Following that, I will explore trust ratings specifically in the context of the pandemic. Second, I will share survey results that pertain to respondents' understandings of the societies in which they live: perceptions of diversity/homogeneity, equality/inequality and fairness. Third, the degree to which the nation and the national frame is salient for respondents will be added to the picture. Lastly, these results will be analyzed in connection with one another.

### *Governmental trust*

When asked if respondents trust the current government in each respective country, the general level of governmental trust varied greatly. In Norway, nearly 70% of respondents stated that they either fully or partially trust the government and a very low percentage of respondents stated that they did not trust the government: 6.2% saying that they do not



trust the government and 15.6% saying that they usually trust the government but not this particular government. In Slovakia, the majority of respondents were more lukewarm in their response. Over 60% of respondents stated that they either trusted the government very little or only somewhat. A significant number of respondents gave a conditional response: around 14% stated that they usually do not trust the government but they trust the current government and around 17% stated that they usually trust the government but they do not trust the current government. In Czechia, the responses were divided across the trust spectrum with a higher percentage demonstrating low levels of trust in the government: 56% stated that they either did not trust the government or they trusted them very little. In Sweden, all of the few respondents espoused high levels of trust for the government.

In general, the survey responses seem to indicate a rather high level of governmental trust in Norway. This is especially interesting given the fact that the government in power at the time of this survey was a rightwing government and only 13% of the respondents stated that they voted for one of the parties in the ruling coalition during the previous election. These results emphasize the high level of governmental trust in the country. However, when asked if they trust the current government to properly handle the coronavirus situation, respondents returned a trust score average of 6.45 out of 10 ( $\sigma$  2.39). The corresponding result for Slovakia was a trust score average of 5.07 ( $\sigma$  2.35), while the trust score average for Czechia was even lower at 4.58 ( $\sigma$  3.10). While not statistically relevant due to the low number of responses, the average trust score for Sweden was 6.75 ( $\sigma$  2.17). In general, the results for governmental trust in each of the four countries aligns with the expected results: rather high levels of governmental trust in the Scandinavian countries and markedly lower levels of governmental trust in the Central European countries. However, examining governmental trust alone does not give complete picture of political trust in a country.

### *Institutional trust*

The surveys do not only capture governmental trust; they also capture institutional trust. In one question that asks if state institutions can be trusted to deliver important services, the Norwegian respondents return a trust score much higher than that given to the government, 7.45 ( $\sigma$  2.15). Respondents in Slovakia also returned a much higher institutional trust score than governmental trust score, 6.45 ( $\sigma$  2.25). Respondents in Czechia returned, comparatively speaking, an even higher institutional trust score, 6.53 ( $\sigma$  2.86), considering the governmental trust score was even lower than in Slovakia. Respondents in Sweden all gave high trust scores to institutions in the country.

Institutional trust appears to be quite high in all four countries in question. In Sweden and Norway, over 75% of respondents gave scores of 7 or higher when asked how much they trust state institutions to deliver essential services. The majority of respondents from Slovakia and Czechia gave scores of 7 or higher as well, though there were a significant number of low scores as well. These numbers reflecting institutional trust tell an important story. High institutional trust in Scandinavia is not unexpected, but it is underreported in Central Europe. Despite the fact that Slovakia and Czechia exhibit low levels of governmental trust and relatively low levels of generalized social trust, there are nevertheless stores of accumulated trust in society, and state institutions are the recipients of this trust.

**Table 1** – International and Supranational Institutional Trust: Do what extent to you trust the following institutions? (0 – low trust, 10 – high trust)

	European Union – mean [standard deviation]	World Health Org. – mean [standard deviation]	United Nations – mean [standard deviation]
Norway	5.20 [σ 2.75]	6.45 [σ 3.37]	6.24 [σ 3.21]
Slovakia	6.52 [σ 2.25]	5.83 [σ 2.35]	5.75 [σ 2.49]
Czechia	4.24 [σ 3.17]	4.15 [σ 2.75]	4.52 [σ 3.05]
Sweden	*5.50 [σ 1.80]	*7.25 [σ 2.49]	*6.50 [σ 2.06]

\*not statistically relevant due to low number of responses

I also asked about trust in institutions outside of the state, one supranational (the European Union) and two international (the World Health Organization and the United Nations). Respondents from Slovakia were the only group to report a high level of trust to the EU, with nearly 60% of responses at 7 or higher. In the case of the Czech Republic, 50% of the respondents gave the EU a score of 3 or lower. The average scores from Czech Republic, Sweden and Norway were all between 5 and 6, but the high standard deviations show that there was a high level of disagreement about the answers to these questions. Slovakia was the only country from which the average response was above 6. It should be noted that Norway is the only country that is not a member of the European Union.

Respondents from Slovakia and the Czech Republic exhibited even lower levels of trust for the World Health Organization, markedly lower in the Slovakia and only somewhat lower in Czechia. Unsurprisingly, the WHO scored much higher in Norway than did the European Union.

Czechia’s average score for trust given to the UN was just above 4, due to 18% of the respondents giving a zero score to the UN. For Slovakia, the average score was nearly 6 out of 10. The majority of scores from Norway were above 7; however, 15% of the respondents

gave a zero score to trust in the UN. The limited data from Sweden shows a similar trend. Overall, the responses show a clear pattern of huge divisions within society regarding the perception of supranational and international institutions. In other words, these institutions received a number of very high and very low scores (evidenced by the high standard deviations), demonstrating that there is a significant amount of polarization in these countries when it comes to questions of international organizations. In none of the countries measured did any domestic institutions receive such low scores or such dramatic splits in the scores given. Only when it comes to the trustworthiness of politicians did respondents also give some zeros as well. Predominantly, domestic institutions, received 1) generally higher scores than international institutions and 2) generally more clustered scores with fewer large splits in the scores given. So, regardless of respondents' perceptions of international institutions, they gave relatively similar scores for domestic institutions. Therefore, institutional trust seems to be high in each of the four countries in question. This does not necessarily mean that all state institutions are evaluated equally. Respondents were asked only to give their perception of state institutions in general, not specific institutions.

## **Forms of Social trust: Generalized social trust & national trust**

The surveys also looked at generalized social trust, i.e. trust in strangers. I added a national component as well, asking both about other people living in the country and other people who shared the same national identity/ethnicity. In all four countries in question, the level of trust exhibited by the respondents is roughly the same for stranger co-residents and stranger co-nationals (a more detailed presentation of these results will follow later in the paper). This was not a huge surprise as both of these conceptualizations can be construed to represent the national "us", especially in the case of Norway and Sweden. Also, in three of the four countries, asking questions that reference national identity or ask about national preference can be a bit awkward. Despite that, it was important to plant this

nationally framed differentiation early in the survey, as many of the later questions try to determine what in-group holds the most salience for the respondents and what are the limits of the trust given to relevant in-groups. In Norway and Sweden, asking about ethnicity/national identity and preferences could be perceived as awkward. This is further complicated by the fact that there exist markedly different understandings within these countries regarding who is considered to be a member of the nation and who is kept out of the national community. Interpreting national identity as ethnicity has a strong history in all four countries in question, but the past decades have seen challenges to that dominant understanding in Scandinavia. There are significant segments of the population in both Sweden and Norway that interpret national identity in terms of citizenship and culture, as opposed to ethnicity or race. Ethnicity and race are still key components of national identity in these countries, but they are not often made explicit. In the Czech Republic, questions regarding national identity are also considered to be a bit awkward, but for a different reason. Due to a variety of historical circumstances, there today exists a relatively low level of attachment to national identity throughout the Czech Republic. As a multi-ethnic state, national differentiation has become engrained in the social and political life of Slovakia, so these questions would not be considered as awkward among survey respondents. Some of these interpretations were echoed by some colleagues who edited the language on the surveys or offered feedback on the questions. Colleagues in Sweden and Czechia responded that they thought respondents might be uncomfortable with (or at very least unaccustomed to) answering questions that took ethnicity into consideration and made it explicit.

### *Reliance as trust*

In order to gain a fuller picture of respondents' trust, the survey asks them not only to declare their trust in a variety of groups and institutions, but to rate the degree to which they feel they can rely on various groups. I include this additional dimension of trust for a variety of reasons. First, trust as a concept may not be easily defined and different respondents will likely have slightly differing understandings of what it means to trust;

therefore, I wanted to include differing dimensions of what trust might mean. Second, trust, especially in its verb form, translates differently in the four languages used for the survey. In Czech and Slovak, the translation of the verb “to trust” has a meaning of believing in or having faith in a person or thing. In Norwegian, the translation of trust is mostly devoid of these religious undertones. In Swedish, the translation of trust can also be used to talk about confidence in. These linguistic differences, even when subtle, can have an effect on how trust is conceptualized; therefore, the more ways to access respondents’ levels of trust, the more detailed the picture that emerges.

**Table 2 – Reliance as Trust: To what extent to you feel that you can rely upon the following groups and institutions? (0 – not at all, 10 – completely)**

	Neighbors mean [SD]	Local government mean [SD]	State government mean [SD]	Co-nationals mean [SD]	Others regardless of nationality/ethnicity - mean [SD]
Norway	7.15 [σ 1.80]	6.81 [σ 2.20]	6.15 [σ 2.67]	6.87 [σ 1.81]	6.52 [σ 1.78]
Slovakia	6.93 [σ 2.42]	5.93 [σ 1.92]	4.62 [σ 2.11]	5.57 [σ 1.80]	5.90 [σ 1.73]
Czechia	5.79 [σ 2.95]	5.23 [σ 2.41]	3.81 [σ 2.61]	5.31 [σ 2.24]	5.24 [σ 2.16]
Sweden	*8.25 [σ 1.48]	*7.25 [σ 0.83]	*8.00 [σ 0.71]	*7.50 [σ 0.50]	*7.33 [σ 0.47]

\*not statistically relevant

Table 2 shows the degree to which respondents feel they can rely upon certain groups and institutions. While the data from Sweden is not statistically relevant, the general picture shows very high reliance on neighbors and quite high reliance on government and people. On the whole, the data is marked by generally high levels of confidence that people can rely on others in society in the Scandinavian countries. For all four countries, respondents give the highest reliability rating to their neighbors. Also of relevance is the low degree to which people feel they can rely on the state government, especially in the cases of Slovakia

and Czechia. In contrast, the surveys from Norway, Slovakia and Czechia rated the reliability of local government significantly higher than that of state government.

The low standard deviations (under  $\sigma 2.00$ ) found among the responses from Norway indicate a great deal of consensus when it comes to trusting neighbors, co-nationals and others regardless of nationality or ethnicity. The low standard deviations found among the response from Slovakia indicate a great deal of consensus when it comes to trusting local government, co-nationals and others regardless of nationality or ethnicity. The higher standard deviations among the responses from the Czech Republic indicate a greater degree of volatility or disagreement regarding the degree upon which these groups and institutions can be relied.

The surveys from Slovakia show one other extremely interesting trend: that co-nationals receive a lower reliability score (5.57) than others in society regardless of their ethnicity or nationality (5.90). The low standard deviations demonstrate that there is a rather strong degree of consensus around these estimations. This trend matches the results from another section of the survey that will be presented in Table 8. One possible explanation for this can be connected to the way in which Slovak society is ordered. It is the only country of the four that can be labeled a multi-ethnic state. Certainly, Sweden and Norway can be described as multicultural in nature primarily, though not completely, due to relatively recent immigration. In Slovakia, ethnicity is part of political life and part of many people's social lives, depending on where they live in the country. Ethnicity as a fundamental building block of society, therefore, becomes a part of the dominant discourse. Perhaps because it is perceived as an everyday reality, nationality has taken on a more neutral connotation. In the other countries in question, the topic of ethnicity is often shied away from in polite conversation, yet feelings of ethnic superiority (or skepticism towards other ethnicized groups) is quite widespread throughout the general population. This seems to match with the slightly lower reliability scores for 'others regardless of ethnicity or nationality' that we see in Norway and Czechia (as well as in the limited data from Sweden). It is not my assertion that more publicly present discourse on nationality and ethnicity brings higher estimations of ethnic "others". There are a number of episodes in Slovak social and political life over the past decade or so which have served to partially

delegitimize nationalist parties and movements in the country. Survey respondents can also be reacting to this de-legitimization of the national frame. Also, due to the small sample size, these numbers cannot be seen a representative of the country as a whole; however, they do show a number of the possible interpretations of government and society that exist in the country.

*Attachments as trust*

In addition to asking respondents to declare the level of trust they give to different groups and institutions, the survey asks them to evaluate how attached they feel to a variety of social groupings. Inspired by Nira Yuval-Davis’ work, where she looks at feelings of safety, belonging and attachment as constitutive elements of identity while the negotiations, declarations, contestations, etc. form the pathways for doing identity work, in other words, the politics of identity (Yuval-Davis 2006). In this survey, I ask respondents to do identity work in order to express their feelings of safety, belonging and attachment to social groupings, which I read as fundamentally connected to the set of expectations which make up trust.

**Table 3 – Attachments as trust: To what degree do you feel connected to the following? (0 – not at all, 10 – very much)**

	Local community		Religious/worldview community		Country		Europe	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Norway	6.27	σ 2.15	3.5	σ 3.13	7.85	σ 1.74	6.69	σ 2.04
Slovakia	5.31	σ 1.86	4.35	σ 2.73	6.62	σ 2.37	6.97	σ 1.93
Czechia	5.97	σ 2.52	4.9	σ 3.85	6.61	σ 2.09	6.12	σ 2.25
Sweden	*8.25	*σ 1.30	*0.00	*σ 0.00	*7.00	*σ 2.12	*5.25	*σ 2.17

\*not statistically relevant



Especially of interest from Table 3 are the responses that show individuals' connections or feelings of attachment to their local communities and their countries. The high levels of attachment declared for one's country will be discussed more in a subsequent section. While respondents professed higher levels of trust in local government than state governments, they expressed greater connection to their country than to their local community. This would suggest that greater opportunity exists to create connections with the country in which one lives, likely due to the dominance of the national frame and the hegemony of the nation-state. This implies the likelihood of a more robust emotional connection to country than local community. Also relevant is the degree to which respondents declared a connection to Europe; although European connections did not typically score as high as attachments to country, they generally scored higher than attachments to local community. The exception to this is the data from Slovakia, where attachment to Europe was higher than attachment to one's country. The lower average attachment to country among scores from Slovakia corresponds to the responses from other sections of the survey in which respondents typically rate institutions inside Slovakia more poorly than those outside of the country.

I will not spend much time analyzing the responses that show respondents' attachment to religious (or worldview) communities, but a couple of points are noteworthy. First, the standard deviations shown in Table 3 (above) indicate a wide range of scores. While responses from Czechia and Norway followed a pattern of mostly low scores and a few high scores, responses from Slovakia were more-or-less evenly distributed along the linear scale. Norway and Czechia are highly secularized countries with rather low levels of declared religiosity, so it makes sense that the majority of respondents would give low attachment scores when it comes to religious communities. Strong religiosity is much more widespread in Slovakia and the Catholic Church is rather active in the public life of the country, which can explain the presence of low, moderate and high attachment scores. Also noteworthy is the degree to which respondents chose to give a score to this question. For Czechia, 41.2% of respondents answered "I don't know." The number was even higher for Norway with 45.5% of respondents answering "I don't know." In the case of Slovakia, 20.7% answered in the same way. Half of the respondents from Sweden also chose this response.

## Social trust in the pandemic

One set of questions in the survey directly relates to the COVID situation. I ask respondents' perceptions of to what degree people can be trusted to follow guidelines and act in solidarity with others. Specifically, I ask respondents to rate the degree to which they could trust people in their neighborhood and the degree to which they could trust people living in neighboring countries, though I did not specify which countries. This is the only time in the survey when respondents are asked about groups living outside of their country of residence. Partially influenced by anthropologist Marianne Gullestad, I focus on neighborhood as opposed to asking about one's entire country. Gullestad finds that the way that individuals perceive their country can be highly influenced by the ways in which they experience their neighborhood (2006). This does not necessarily mean that individuals view the country in which they live as their neighborhood writ large, although that is sometimes the case. However, individuals often imagine their country based upon how they interpret their neighborhood. So, for the purposes of these survey questions, the neighborhood was an important focus.

In Norway, respondents gave a 6.82 average out of 10 when asked if their neighbors could be trusted to follow guidelines and a 7.34 average when asked if they could rely on their neighbors to help one another if necessary. Respondents in Norway gave an average 6.52 when asked if people in neighboring countries could be trusted to follow guidelines and a 6.64 average when asked if people in neighboring countries would also help one another if necessary (see table below for complete list of average scores). As expected, the evaluation of imagined people outside of Norway brought a lower trust rating.

**Table 4** – *Following Guidelines and Helping Others: To what extent do you trust people in your neighborhood/neighboring country to follow directives and guidelines/help others if necessary? (0 – low trust, 10 – high trust)*

	Following guidelines – neighborhood (avg.)	Following guidelines – neighboring countries (avg.)	Helping one another – neighborhood (avg.)	Helping one another – neighboring countries (avg.)
Norway	6.82	6.52	7.34	6.64
Slovakia	7.21	6.24	7.17	6.10
Czechia	6.50	5.35	7.55	5.47
Sweden	*6.75	*7.25	*7.00	*6.75

\*not statistically relevant

One important thing to note is that, in general, respondents seem give higher scores when talking about giving help than when evaluating whether or not people will follow government guidelines and directives. The respondents from Slovakia provide an interesting exception to this: they gave a slightly higher average trust rating to their neighbors in regard to following guidelines (7.21) than to helping one another (7.17). This same exception appears in their evaluation of people living in neighboring countries. This evaluation of neighbors seems to correspond with the prevalent self-perception of people in Slovakia as obedient. Obedience and agreeability are prominent self-assigned national stereotypes in the country (Graf & Hrebícková, 2011), and the fact that following guidelines receives a slightly higher score than offering assistance (and a comparatively high score in general) seems to support the prevalence of this self-understanding. This national stereotype, however, does not necessarily support the ratings given to individuals in neighboring countries, where rule-following receives higher trust scores than helping others. I offer five possible explanations here. One, the set of questions regarding people in neighboring countries comes directly after the set of questions about neighbors. The repetition of similar sets of questions could cause an unconscious bias among some respondents that would influence them to follow roughly the same pattern as in the previous questions, albeit at a lower trust rating. Two, obedience is featured in the

stereotypes of many Central European countries, though perhaps not as prominent as in Slovakia. This could influence the thinking of respondents. Three, for some respondents, this could be a nod to Central European solidarity, where the similarities of the Vysegrad countries are often painted to overshadow the differences, especially in the current European political climate. Four, the phenomenon mentioned by Gullestad, where individuals' perceptions of their nation are colored by the perception of their neighborhood could be influential. In concert with a perception of neighboring countries as similar, this could account for the trend. Five, the neighboring country or countries imagined by the respondents could simply be perceived as more obedient than helpful.

When it comes to the numbers from respondents in the Czech Republic, national stereotypes can also play a significant role. Czech self-stereotypes often reference high levels of individualism and cautiousness. I do not claim that these self-perceptions are responsible for the numbers presented from this survey, but rather that they can help offer a reading of these responses. Respondents from Czechia exhibit a large difference between perceptions of neighbors' obedience versus willingness to help when necessary. Individualism and cautiousness, taken in tandem, can be represented by skepticism. One reading of the numbers that show respondents' expectations that neighbors will follow guidelines (6.50) could be informed by a healthy dose of cautiousness or skepticism, while respondents' expectations that neighbors would help if necessary (7.55) could reflect a lower level of cautiousness. The phrase "if necessary" in the question about helping others likely influences respondents to drop a bit of their skepticism. In other words, counting on one's neighbors to help in case of an emergency is a distinctly different scenario than counting on one's neighbors to do all the little things that the government is asking them to do. There is much greater immediacy when it comes to the former. These questions also ask respondents to distinguish between neighbors complying with the government and neighbors helping concrete people, their neighbors. If the national self-stereotype of individualism is influential to respondents, it would be likely for them to give a lower score of trust for neighbors following along with guidelines issued by the government, as the respondents themselves might feel a bit of skepticism to dictates from the government. Respondents from the Czech Republic exhibited extremely low trust scores when it comes

to the degree to which they feel that they can rely on the state government (see earlier section on Reliance).

In Norway, the fact that helping others scores higher than following guidelines seems to match with commonly held perceptions of Norwegian society, especially in regard to the concept of *dugnad*. “*Dugnad* refers to unpaid, collective, cooperative work where every member of a community is expected to participate regardless of their social position (Eriksen 2020).” It is a ubiquitous concept in the Norwegian context, one that has been weaved into the national character. *Dugnad* can take many forms from fixing up a community garden to the collective rebuilding effort after World War II. This idea of voluntarily helping others is engrained into the national consciousness so much so that it can hardly be called voluntary; it is expected. It is hardly surprising, then, that the expectations that neighbors will help one another are so high.

The trust ratings given for those in neighboring countries, from the respondents in both Slovakia and Czechia, are significantly lower than the ratings given to one’s neighbors. For respondents from Norway, the dip in trust for people in neighboring countries is not nearly as severe. This seems to match with other survey data, especially with the survey responses about connections and attachments.

The measurements for Sweden were not statistically relevant, but showed a moderately high level of trust for both neighbors and those living in neighboring countries, roughly similar to that of Norway. These results are more-or-less in line with what would be expected. In both Sweden and Norway, there exist general perceptions of solidarity being highly valued in society, though there are certainly significant challenges to this perception as well. Also, Sweden and Norway are each other’s most relevant other, along with Denmark, so it’s likely that many respondents are imagining the other country. The responses to this set of survey questions highlight two important factors of social trust: that the term trust contains within it different meanings and that trust, however conceptualized, is contextual (in other words, exemplifying the *when* of trust).

# Sameness and difference

This survey focuses not only on trust in terms of declarations of trust and levels of attachment, but on respondents’ perceptions of the society in which they live: how fair it is, how equal or unequal it is, and how homogenous or diverse it is. I contend that people’s perceptions of inequality and diversity are far bigger drivers than actual inequality and actual diversity in making the national frame more salient. I will later compare the overall scores from each country with the GINI coefficients and demographic information to see which connection is stronger (perceptions or metrics). Especially when it comes to equality/inequality and sameness/difference, respondents are asked to evaluate the place where they live in a variety of geographic contexts: neighborhood, municipality, region and country.

**Table 5** – How similar do you feel people are in the following geographic areas? (0 – very different, 10 – extremely similar)

	In your country – mean [SD]	In your region – mean [SD]	In your town – mean [SD]	In your neighborhood – mean [SD]
Norway	6.18 [σ 1.99]	6.31 [σ 1.80]	6.19 [σ2.10]	6.35 [σ2.13]
Slovakia	6.07 [σ 2.10]	6.41 [σ 2.19]	6.41 [σ2.44]	6.5 [σ2.39]
Czechia	6.35 [σ 2.25]	6.37 [σ 2.09]	6.26 [σ2.33]	6.41 [σ2.51]
Sweden	*6.75 [σ 0.43]	*8.50 [σ 1.50]	*7.00 [σ 2.12]	*8.75 [σ 1.30]

\*not statistically relevant

## Homogeneity and diversity

The average responses concerning homogeneity and diversity do not tell a very detailed picture. Even the question regarding sameness and difference is not very precise. This was, in fact, by design. The questions that ask for user-generated text-based responses, at the end of the survey, are meant to get respondents to essentially define what types of

similarity or difference they perceive in the social world of their countries. I did not want to ask respondents specifically about religious, ethnic, cultural, linguistic or other types of diversity. Instead, I want them to produce what they see as the salient cleavages in society. In addition, these responses become much more useful when the answers of individual surveys are examined in connection with one another to determine the relationship between a single respondent's trust scores and the understandings of the society in which they live. This analysis will be completed in stage two of the research program.

In the meantime, there are a few meaningful observations that can be gleaned from these scores. First, the standard deviations for the responses from Norway are rather low, at least lower than they are for Slovakia or Czechia. This signals a rather stable societal perception regarding the level of diversity in society, which might also signal a consensus around how individuals conceptualize diversity in Norway. In other words, there is a higher likelihood of respondents using the same categories to measure diversity. Second, the scores are rather similar across the board for all countries. In terms of demographic data concerning ethnicity, religiosity, religious affiliation, political affiliation and other characteristics, there exist a number of differences between how diverse or homogenous these countries can be conceived to be. In other words, no matter how one perceives similarity and difference, these countries do not exhibit similar patterns. Nevertheless, they return nearly identical scores. While I will not attempt to explain the similarity of these scores here, the analysis of respondents' text-based responses in stage two of the research can offer some hints as to why this phenomenon occurs.

### *Equality and Inequality*

According to *The Changing Wealth of Nations 2018: Building a Sustainable Future*, a book by the World Bank, which analyzes historical wealth of 141 countries, measuring economic health by GDP does not offer a complete or nuanced picture. Instead, the World Bank measures various types of natural capital, produced capital, human capital and infrastructure to get a clearer view of a country's wealth. According to this report, which offers a snapshot of wealth in 2014, both Norway and Sweden are placed in the top ten countries in the world in terms of wealth per capita, with Norway holding the first position

(and Sweden at number 8). In the Czech Republic, the household income per capita is lower than the OECD average, but at the same time, the unemployment rate and poverty rate are among the lowest in the OECD. In Slovakia, the household income per capita is also markedly lower than the OECD average, but the low poverty rate there nearly matches Czechia. So even in these countries with lower household incomes, the general picture of economic health is rather positive.

All four countries in question have among the lowest GINI coefficients in the world. Interestingly, none of the assessments of income equality are remarkably high, despite the four countries' very low GINI scores. In life satisfaction surveys (OECD Better Life Index), Norway is home to the highest life satisfaction rate in the OECD, while Sweden finds itself in the top third, Czech Republic sits around the OECD average and Slovakia comes in the bottom third. While this assessment does not necessarily match with respondents' perceptions of equality/inequality in their countries, it does follow the survey trend regarding the level to which a society is perceived as fair or not (see Table 6 below).

**Table 6** – How fairly do you think people in your country are treated? (0 – extremely unfairly, 10 – completely fairly) How equal do you feel your country is in terms of income equality? (0 – extreme inequality, 10 – broad equality)

	Treated fairly	Income equality
Norway	6.82 [σ 1.98]	5.73 [σ 2.15]
Slovakia	4.33 [σ 2.11]	3.46 [σ 1.95]
Czechia	5.52 [σ 2.23]	3.50 [σ 2.40]
Sweden	*7.50 [σ 0.50]	*6.00 [σ 3.50]

\*not statistically relevant

In the surveys conducted for this research, respondents in the Czech Republic and Slovakia assessed income inequality to be rather high in each respective country. In Norway (and Sweden, despite the small sample size), income inequality was assessed to be somewhat



low. Immediately, a contrast between actual and perceived income equality becomes visible. The fight for income equality is often considered to be one of the hallmarks of social democratic welfare states like Sweden and Norway. In addition, widespread income equality is often cited as one of the prerequisites for establishing these social democratic regimes in Scandinavia. Yet, the scores are only moderately high. This likely reflects actual lived reality in these countries, where inequality has been gradually rising over the past few decades, as opposed to the expectations from outside observers that paint a picture of more widespread income equality. In Slovakia and Czechia, respondents perceive a high degree of income inequality despite the fact that the countries both score very well on the GINI index. Of course, there are a number of factors and historical episodes that influence these perceptions regarding inequality. Regardless, the fact that this perception is so strong in both countries will become important later in the analysis.

When it comes to perceptions of fairness in society, the Scandinavian countries receive quite high evaluations and with a standard deviation under 2.00 for Norway, there appears to be rather strong consensus on this perception. The responses from Central Europe give a significantly lower score for fairness with respondents from Czechia assessing their country to be moderately fair and respondents from Slovakia assessing their country to be rather unfair. These scores correspond with assessments regarding the degree to which politicians and state governments can be trusted. Additionally, these lower fairness scores can play a role in the perceptions of income equality in the countries in question.

### *User-generated text-based responses*

When it comes to perceptions of equality/inequality and homogeneity/diversity, this survey collected a significant amount of user-generated text-based responses. Analyzing this body of text will be part of the research program in the coming year. In the survey, I asked respondents to shortly describe their country in terms of three different variables. The first question asks them to describe their country in terms of how equal or unequal they think it is. It is left up to the respondents to determine what type of equality or inequality is salient for them to comment upon. The second question asks them to describe

their country in terms of how diverse or homogenous they believe the people who live there to be. As in the first question, it is left to the respondents to decide how they will interpret diversity and homogeneity. The responses to the first two questions inform how the respondents in fact understand these concepts of equality/inequality and similarity/difference that appear throughout the rest of the survey. These answers will help to provide the context and set the boundaries for what these terms in fact mean. The third question asks them to describe how trustworthy they believe people in their country to be. As in the previous questions, there are no definitions or further prompts given. This question is designed to give respondents an opportunity to comment on who “the people” of the country are and in some cases they even reflect on how they understand “trust”.

#### *How Equality/Inequality and Homogeneity/Diversity Relate to the Constitutive Elements of Societal Trust*

One of the next steps in the analysis of this data will be to compare the way that individual responses on single surveys correspond to other individual responses on the same survey. This will be part of stage two of the study. Through this analysis, I hope to gain better insight into the way that respondents’ perceptions of equality/inequality and homogeneity/diversity correspond to the ways in which they respond to questions about societal trust. Here, in stage one of the study, I will look more broadly at the overall correlations between respondents’ perceptions of their society and their levels of political and social trust.

The data suggests a correlation between low levels of perceived income equality and low levels of perceived fairness, likely exacerbated by low levels of governmental trust. The low levels of perceived fairness undoubtedly have an effect on the perceptions of income equality. Remember, the Czech Republic and Slovakia exhibit high levels of income equality according to the GINI index, yet public perceptions of income equality are very different. Interestingly, there does not seem to be much of a connection between levels of institutional trust and perceptions of fairness in society.

In addition, moderately high levels of perceived similarity among the population of the countries seems to correlate with the moderately high levels of generalized social trust. I do not claim a causal link between these responses, only a correlation. As previously mentioned, respondents were not provided with any direction for interpreting similarity and difference. It was left up to them what factors (ethnic, cultural, political, linguistic, etc.) they use to determine the relative similarity or difference among the population of their countries.

It is also meaningful to look closer at the conceptualizations of sameness and difference themselves. Any discussion of equality/inequality and sameness/difference in the Scandinavian context would be remiss if it did not engage with the Norwegian concept of *likhet*, a term that means both equality and sameness. There is unfortunately not space to go into such a large discussion here, but an in-depth exploration of the conceptualization of sameness and equality versus difference and inequality will be the subject of additional article.

## **One Level Further: How does nationalism relate to these understanding of sameness and difference?**

### *Trust and the National Frame*

In this section, I will analyze the survey data especially in reference to questions which evoke the national frame. The two most relevant questions in that sense are the ones that ask respondents about the extent to which they trust other members of their own nation and the degree to which they feel they can rely upon members of their own nation. First, let us take a look at the trust scores given to residents of one's own country versus members of one's own nation (a formulation of generalized social trust and a formulation of national trust, respectively).

**Table 7** – To what extent do you trust the following groups: other residents of your country, other members of your nation, other members of your religious (worldview) community? (0 – low trust, 10 – high trust)

	Trust in residents – mean [SD]	Trust in co-nationals – mean [SD]	Trust in co-religionists – mean [SD]
Norway	7.40 [σ 1.46]	7.34 [σ 1.72]	7.05 [σ 2.19]
Slovakia	5.97 [σ 1.73]	5.36 [σ 1.93]	5.16 [σ 2.75]
Czechia	5.55 [σ 1.94]	5.58 [σ 1.95]	4.75 [σ 3.60]
Sweden	*6.50 [σ 0.87]	*6.33 [σ 0.95]	*6.00 [σ 1.00]

\*not statistically relevant

In Table 7, above, notice the nearly identical trust scores given for others residents of one’s country and other members of one’s nation. In other words, generalized social trust and national trust appear to be roughly the same in each country except for Slovakia, where fellow co-nationals (strangers that share a group identification with the respondent) garner a lower trust rating than fellow residents (strangers that share a home country). The standard deviations indicate a rather high amount of consensus on these trust assessments for each of the countries represented. This does not necessarily mean that the national frame is not salient for many of the respondents, though it could also mean that. All that can be reliably said is that respondents have evaluated them nearly identically.

Unfortunately, the 11-point numeric scale questions on the survey cannot accurately measure the salience of the nation or national frame, but it can offer some clues. In the questions that collect text-based responses, I hope to elicit responses that will reference the nation, or possibly reference other more salient social groupings, thereby giving additional information about the salience of the national frame. In looking for these clues, it is important to note that higher levels of national trust indicate higher entitativity, or the perception of the nation as really existing and not only abstract. The opposite cannot be

said to be true: higher entitativity of the nation does not necessarily mean higher levels of national trust.

Respondents from Slovakia's somewhat pessimistic view of their own nation, as shown in the reliance scores as well as in Table 7 above indicates a possibly diminishing salience of the national frame in the country, a de-legitimization of the national frame or an increasingly negative evaluation of the nation as an important social group. Simultaneously, we see a higher than average trust rating for the EU and high levels of European attachment. High European entitativity does not necessarily mean low national entitativity, as it is not a zero-sum game between the levels of attachment; however, given current political divisions in Europe, there is often a negative correlation between the two attachments. Since the data from the Slovakia surveys also shows high levels of trust for neighbors, rather high levels of trust and attachments to the local, as well as rather high levels of trust given to strangers in neighboring countries, this supports the idea that, among the respondents from Slovakia, ideas about their own nation and the salience of nationality are being challenged in some way.

In looking at the countries with nearly identical resident and co-national trust scores, there are some other significant points to mention. Respondents typically gave higher trust scores than reliance scores to both co-nationals and residents without designated nationality or ethnicity (see also Table 2). This demonstrates that respondents likely interpret "trust" and "reliability" in different ways, despite the fact that relying on someone is one possible way to conceptualizing trust. This underlines the importance of asking about trust in multiple ways in order to capture respondents' diverse understandings of the concept. Also, like the trust scores in Table 7, reliance scores for co-nationals and others regardless of their nationality/ethnicity were nearly identical, except for the responses from Slovakia, where respondents gave lower reliance scores to their co-nationals.

One possible explanation for the typically flat scores for the categories 'residents' and 'co-nationals' can be found in societal norms regarding comfortableness or uncomfotableness of explicitly using the national frame. As mentioned earlier, colleagues from the Czech Republic and Sweden commented that they thought respondents in those countries might be uncomfortable with encountering explicit references to nationality/ethnicity, especially

when asked to give trust ratings. Though not quite as unusual in the Norwegian context (for a variety of historical reasons that I won't go into here), a significant amount of respondents there might also find such questions a bit awkward. Because of this uncomfortableness, respondents might not be willing to give drastically different answers for residents and co-nationals. It could also be that many respondents do not find those categories salient. In Slovakia, however, questions regarding nationality/ethnicity have been normalized to a certain degree. Since even before Slovak independence in 1993, national framing and national designations have been commonplace throughout society. Due to these engrained discourses and practices, taboos are largely absent from referencing ethnicity. This could be responsible for additional engagement with nationality-based questions.

**Table 8** – Question 1: To what extent do you trust that elected officials will prioritize the public over political or personal gain? (0 – low trust, 10 – high trust) Question 2: To what extent do you trust scientists, economists and prominent advisors in your country? (0 – low trust, 10 – high trust)

	Trust in elected officials – mean [SD]	Trust in scientists et al. – mean [SD]
Norway	5.40 [σ 3.05]	6.78 [σ 2.04]
Slovakia	4.31 [σ 2.31]	7.62 [σ 1.61]
Czechia	3.29 [σ 2.86]	7.15 [σ 2.18]
Sweden	*7.50 [σ 1.50]	*8.00 [σ 1.87]

\*not statistically relevant

The questions represented in Table 8 connect back to the ideas of populism and nationalism that are discussed briefly in the beginning of the paper. Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) point to distrust in the ruling elite as one of the major prerequisites for the growing nationalist claims which often accompany populism. The type of nationalism referred to in Albertazzi and McDonnell's work can be conceptualized as not just a salience of the

national frame, but an overemphasis on the national frame; something akin to Michael Billig's term "hot nationalism". The two questions presented here elicit responses that indicate the degree of danger that exists for populist movements to take hold in the countries in question. *High scores on both questions would indicate a low level of danger for the rise of populist movements in the countries. Low trust scores only for elected officials and not for scientists, economists and prominent advisors signals some danger for populist movements to grow among some segments of the population, but widespread conspiracy thinking does not seem to be present. Low trust scores on both questions would indicate widespread distrust of public elites and signal a high likelihood of widespread conspiracy thinking. In other words, this would demonstrate low political trust spilling into other spheres of public life.*

*When it comes to trust in elected officials, Norway, Slovakia and Czechia exhibit moderate trust, moderately low trust and low trust, respectively. Especially of relevance are the high standard deviations for the trust scores, specifically for Norway and Czechia. The standard deviations demonstrate a high degree of disagreement among respondents. Since the average trust scores for elected officials are not very high in general, this indicates that a significant number of respondents give extremely low trust scores to elected officials, most notably the over 30% of respondents from Czechia who give elected officials a trust score of zero or one. This trend supports the development or presence of populist movements within the countries among certain segments of the population, though not widespread; however, since the trust scores for scientists, economists and prominent advisors are quite high in all of the countries (and since institutional trust remains high in all these countries, as shown earlier), this does not indicate widespread conspiracy thinking in the four countries. The trust scores from Slovakia also demonstrate a great deal of strength in society and institutions, or perhaps more accurately the ability to bend and not completely break. After numerous political scandals throughout the 2010s, one could easily expect the trust scores for elected officials to be even lower than in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, the trust scores for elected officials are only moderately low and the trust scores for scientists, economists and advisors are very high (as is institutional trust), which signals a rather resilient democracy.*

### *Initial conclusions*

Here, I will point to a couple of my initial conclusions from the average trust, reliability and attachment scores. First, the high levels of attachment declared for one's country should be mentioned. This seems to be true across the board, regardless of the levels of political trust or social trust. Respondents also report generally high levels of attachment to Europe as well, except in the case of Czechia, where the assessments of attachment to country and Europe are nearly the same. Because of these strong attachments, we can reliably state that attachment to or identification with one's country – in other words national identity – is one of the most dominant identifications, despite the fact that the survey data does not demonstrate high degrees of national trust between individuals. We could reasonably assume that groups and institutions most closely connected with one's country have the potential to be the greatest aggregators of trust. However, we rarely see that possibility materialize. Only in international sporting events, like the Olympics or the World Cup, do we witness this type of phenomenon. If anything, this survey shows that our neighbors are often the greatest recipient of our trust, especially when respondents are thinking about who they trust most in the midst of a crisis.

Second, despite strong connections to one's country (and expectations that fellow countrymen follow rules better and are more willing to help others if necessary), on average, respondents did not give higher trust scores to their co-nationals. These ratings were generally the same, or worse in the case of Slovakia, than the trust scores for residents of their country regardless of nationality/ethnicity. However, when it comes to reliability, respondents on average gave their co-nationals a slightly higher rating, except in the case of Slovakia. This indicates that nationality/ethnicity plays some role in processes of differentiation and evaluation (in terms of trust) even when respondents say that they do not evaluate national groupings differently (by giving identical or nearly identical trust scores).

Third, local governments receive rather high reliability ratings, certainly higher than the reliability ratings received by state governments. Local government reliability rating is interesting for a few reasons. Results show that, generally speaking, neighbors score high;



however, local attachment is not that high, so it is not local patriotism that spurs these scores. Generally speaking, respondents assessed the people living in their neighborhood, town and region to share greater similarity than people living throughout the country. Perhaps perceptions of sameness account in some small way for greater faith in local government. It could simply be that the idea of local government is valued in each of the countries. In certainly is in Norway, where a strong case could be made for decentralization having a major impact on the high institutional and governmental trust. Episodes of centralization have created major backlashes in Norwegian society, like the recent consolidation of municipalities and counties throughout the country. It is especially unfortunate that there are not enough survey results from Sweden, a country which has seen largescale centralization processes. Taken together, results from these two countries could be very telling. However, regardless of what causes this phenomenon, could reinvigorating and empowering the local be the key to restoring trust in public spheres where it is in decline? Survey results indicate that there are significant amounts of accumulated trust in local government.

Fourth, as shown earlier, respondents in Slovakia and Czechia perceive a high degree of income inequality in their countries despite the fact that both countries score well on the GINI index. Inequality in society is often an influential feature in how people view strangers and should yield some significant effect on generalized social trust (i.e. trust in strangers). If actual inequality were the driver, it would be more likely to see higher generalized social trust because, according to GINI coefficients, income inequality is low in both Slovakia and Czechia. If perceived inequality were more influential, it would be more likely to see a dip in the level of generalized social trust, which seems to be the case in these survey results. While there are numerous other variables to consider, perceptions of inequality seem to be at least one of the significant influences on social trust, more so than objective inequality.

The scope of this study is rather large, despite the small sample size of surveys, so it is not possible to include everything in this working paper. There remains a significant amount of survey data that could not be reproduced here. Additionally, this research report accounts for only a portion of the analysis. Further analysis of the data already collected is scheduled

for stage two of the study. This will primarily entail analyzing the internal connections between responses on individual surveys that show the ways that national sentiment, views of society and trust relate to one another for individual respondents. In forthcoming publications, there will also be a more detailed presentation of some portions of the survey results and a larger focus on analyzing domestic media reports regarding state measures and public responses.

## **A Coda: Representing cultural practice and self-perceptions in a time of crisis**

The research presented here was beset by a number of delays, first and most importantly by the arrival of the novel coronavirus itself. The original research plan looked at the same relationships between equality/inequality, homogeneity/diversity and nationalism; however, COVID drastically changed the survey questions as well as the timeline. One unexpected benefit of the delays that fell upon this project was that I got to experience the state responses from the four countries in question not only in the short term, but in the medium term as well, i.e. the resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall of 2020. Through viewing these short- and medium-term responses, one thing becomes incredibly interesting: the degree to which the state response to the pandemic situation is political or bureaucratic and how this relates to the level of popular trust in the state responses. At first, this might not appear to be an important factor, but I submit that the presentation of the state's response is extremely influential. The decision, whether explicit or implicit, to deliver a political or bureaucratic response can have an enormous effect on the medium- or long-term levels of trust given to a ruling government over their handling of the pandemic. Or perhaps more accurately, states that respond in a manner that corresponds with where large stores of political trust lay are less likely to meet large-scale public resistance to their measures in the medium and long term. Prior to the pandemic, all four states in question show rather high levels of institutional trust, though varying degrees of governmental trust. The two states who ended up with less political response to the pandemic, Slovakia and

Sweden, enjoy higher levels of popular support for their measures in the medium term. Norway and Czechia have faced some crises of trust in state measures, no doubt partially due to the high degree of politicization.

In the short term, Norway, Czechia and Slovakia were lauded by external observers for their responses to the pandemic, while Sweden was both praised and derided for their controversial response. Domestic audiences were supportive of and pleased with state responses in Norway and Sweden during the outset of the pandemic. Approval in Sweden remained relatively high more than six months into the pandemic despite pushback from some members of the medical community, while in Norway there have been a number of conflicts between state and municipal governments regarding how to handle the pandemic beginning around six months into the crisis. Domestic audiences in Slovakia and Czechia were also broadly supportive of state responses, despite the low level of support for the governments in power. Approval in Slovakia remained relatively high more than six months into the pandemic, despite some rather drastic measures taken in the end of October, while after six months in Czechia, trust has appeared to plummet in regard to the state's response to the pandemic.

At the outset of the outbreak, reports in each of the four countries stated that most people were observing the guidelines and measures enacted by each government, though it seems from media reports that some people in Sweden were not taking the situation as seriously as in the other countries. One explanation offered for this is that for many in the population, the state is viewed as a protector (the Swedish welfare state is often referred to as the "Swedish home") and since the state did not initiate a strong package of lockdown measures, many people felt that perhaps they were safer than they were. In other words, many people felt that the state would be there to protect them from harm if the harm were serious enough and since the state was not aggressive in stepping in (in a country where people are accustomed to a relatively interventionist state), this may have minimized the perception of potential harm. Despite this, many people in Sweden did take the coronavirus seriously and acted accordingly. On the whole, in the short term, people heeded the advice of the state in all four countries regardless of whether a political or bureaucratic response was applied. Possible reasons for this could be fear of infection, solidarity, care for others,

norms of good citizenship, obedience, social pressure, etc. However, in the medium term, as individuals lose their steadfastness and become “corona-tired”, the impetus for following guidelines may diminish. Without high levels of trust in those designing and delivering the guidelines, there may be resistance to prolonged, renewed or broadened state measures. Let us first look at each country individually before attempting to offer a comparison.

In Slovakia, the extremely low levels of pre-COVID government trust did not fully shake institutional trust, which remains moderately high, with some government sectors as exceptions. With low levels of government legitimacy and newly elected individuals holding the positions of president and prime minister, COVID measures stemming from a single leader or emanating from a single political party might not be tolerated for long by the general populace. The signals from the government were often seen as confusing, especially early on in the crisis, but the media, even tabloid media, stepped up to offer clear news of the domestic situation and concise summaries of the government’s measures. The media, an institution that holds a much higher level of trust in Slovakia especially after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018, played a dominant role in the dissemination of information. While the state response was neither overwhelming political or bureaucratic, the media as an institution became in many ways the *de facto* disseminator of rules and guidelines, which dampened the degree to which it was perceived as political. Reports suggest that COVID measures and guidelines were followed closely by the population of the country, in line with the popular self-perception of a nation of obedient citizens. After a remarkable job of limiting the spread of infection throughout the spring of 2020, infection rates began to rise as predicted in the fall. However, the government decided to launch one of the largest, most thorough and invasive strategies to combat the spreading virus in the end of October 2020. These measures caused some protests, but not widespread ones. In general, media reports suggest that trust in government measures remains relatively high more than 6 months into the pandemic, despite the fact that the country exhibits remarkably low governmental trust.

In Czech Republic, the low levels of pre-COVID government trust contrast greatly with the quite high levels of institutional trust. Public dissemination of the state’s COVID response

was filled with disagreement and fights between elected officials, which were acrimonious in nature. The state's response was filled with emotion and was highly political, especially after ruling coalition's crisis-inspired cooperation with the opposition Social democratic party quickly fell apart. After a highly successful effort to limit the spread of infection in the spring of 2020, Czechia saw one of the highest infection rates in Europe in the early fall. During the fall of 2020, political scandal involving the Minister of Health certainly contributed to a deteriorating trust for the government's response. Due to these factors, it is not surprising that media reports of governmental trust, in reference to the handling of the coronavirus, fall drastically six months into the pandemic. The appearance of a political, perhaps even overly political, response to the crisis at a time when government trust is extremely low does not seem to be conducive to retaining or increasing the levels of trust.

Norway and Sweden have responded in drastically different ways. Strangely, it has become a competition, drawing millions of spectators through the media. Frequently, even at the height of the causality numbers in the spring of 2020, observers were writing that they were "excited" to see who would be proven right and who wrong. Former State Epidemiologist of Sweden and WHO advisor, Johan Giesecke, says "We [Sweden] take into consideration scientific evidence. Norway and Denmark have a more political leadership that wants to show strength and enact measures" (Mogen 2020). Also in other media outlets, the Norwegian response to the crisis has been characterized as a political response. In contrast, I would characterize the Swedish response as a bureaucratic response. The individuals on the podium tell the story: in Sweden, state bureaucrats are primary communicators to the public, while in Norway, elected officials are the primary communicators.

In Norway, both pre-COVID government trust and institutional trust were high with the former being rather high and the latter being very high. Public dissemination of the state's COVID response was rather political in nature, despite the fact that at the outset of the pandemic, the government said that they were placing the Folkehelseinstitutt (Institute of Public Health) and the Directorate of Health in charge of the pandemic response. They very quickly took back control over the situation, relegating these two public institutions to advisory roles. The government oversaw a very successful effort to contain the spread of

infection during the spring of 2020, which lasted until infection rates began to rise significantly again in the fall. Apart from a bit of public backlash against a ban on visiting cabins and second homes in the late winter, public approval for government measures were very high. Government trust was further evidenced by the widespread downloading of a contact-tracing app launched by the government, with one quarter of the population downloading the app within a week (Eriksen 2020). As the situation developed over the summer and into the fall, the Norwegian government was criticized, especially from abroad, for its rapidly changing advice regarding travel guidelines and its frequent updates to rules and protocols. These were thought to be confusing and problematic. Upon the reemergence of community spreading in Norway, a number of conflicts between state and municipal officials arose regarding the measures to put in place in order to limit the infection rate. Also at this time, significant disagreements came to light between the Institute of Public Health, the Directorate of Health and the sitting government. While public protests against government COVID measures remained rare through the fall of 2020, the government was receiving significant pushback from public institutions and municipal governments.

Pre-COVID, Sweden was marked as a country with rather high institutional trust and moderate governmental trust. Despite a rather long history of high levels of governmental trust, the sitting government of 2020 led by the Social Democratic party did not enjoy such high levels of support. The Social Democrats are often credited with building the Swedish welfare state. While there is a good bit of truth to this, the development of the welfare state in Sweden has a far more complicated history than simply being born single-handedly by the Social Democratic party. Regardless, there is a popular narrative that the Social Democratic party built the welfare state (something that at the moment is evaluated positively), and because of that, they maintain a rather high level of accumulated trust, despite sinking public support for the party. The general perception, however, has been that this government has a weak hold on power, even prior to the pandemic. Perhaps because of these uncharacteristically low levels of support for the government, the state's COVID response has looked more institutional and bureaucratic than political. In Sweden, the response has been communicated primarily by the State Epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, who has become a symbol for the Swedish response itself. Tegnell has become

known around the world as the face of the Swedish response, one that has drawn both strong criticism and strong support. Unlike in Norway, bureaucrats like Tegnell take the podium far more often than elected officials. Domestic support for Sweden's response has been remarkably high through the first six months of the pandemic. Despite lower than normal trust in the government in Sweden, due to the coalition's weak hold on power, media reports suggest that trust in the state's response has been higher than normal. Some of this can likely be linked to Sweden's bureaucratic as opposed to political response.

There are, of course, many more details to share about the governmental and social response to the COVID crisis in these four countries. I have included only a few examples here to illustrate and provide context. Indeed, the state's response is only one part of the story when it comes to societal trust in the age of COVID-19. People's perceptions of the society in which they live are not governed wholly by the form and functioning of the state. There are a number of important factors that could be considered here, but since the focus here is on societal trust, it is important to include general patterns of public behavior and the narratives about "us" that are widely shared in these countries. I do not mean to state that the stories we tell about ourselves or the way we disseminate information are accurate predictors of public opinion and societal behavioral patterns in the case of a crisis. However, I maintain that these narratives structure the choices and possibilities available in such a situation. Much in the way that Pierre Bourdieu refers to dispositions, I see these narratives as systems that reproduce patterns which serve to limit or structure the set of available choices or possible responses.

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