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INSTITUTIONAL TRUST AND PERCEIVED SENSE OF SECURITY – A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS⁴⁴

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Abstract

Governments and public institutions play a fundamental role in supporting an inclusive society. The concept of the welfare state refers to the level of economic and social welfare and security provided to citizens by the state and its institutions. Prevalence of corruption, exposure to violence, competitiveness of the economy, economic growth rate, perceived levels of risk such as unemployment and financial and economic instability, government success in reducing economic inequalities, are shaping citizen's trust in governments and institutions. Citizens who are satisfied with their financial situation have more confidence in the state and have a sense of a higher standard of living. They also have a favorable perception of the state and democracy, enabling them to play an active role in policy-making and the realization of security and economic goals. The paper will present the results of empirical research through a questionnaire related to the survey of attitudes to the extent to which residents in Serbia feel safe, how much the state protects their interests, and provides them with economic security and poverty protection. The research also includes the question of how much citizens trust institutions: police, judiciary, and parliament. Survey included respondents from Serbia, Hungary and Croatia and the correlation analysis indicated the existence of a statistically significant correlation between institutional trust and the perceived feeling of security. This relationship indicates that a higher level of institutional trust leads to a higher perception of security.

Keywords: *security perception, institutional trust, economic security, government, quality of life*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indicators of quality of life and societal well-being are the economic and physical security of the population, in addition to material living conditions, employment possibility and labor participation of people aged 15 and over, educational attainment, health status,

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good work-life balance and social interactions, quality of democratic institutions and rule of law, environmental protection, life satisfaction (Galonja & Šunderić, 2017). Perception of vulnerability and feeling insecurity can significantly affect individuals' behavior and quality of life. Security is the ability of individuals, households, or communities to sustainably meet their fundamental needs, physiological, socioeconomic, spiritual, technological, informational and moral ideals, necessary for society's vital activity and prosperity (Tamošiūnienė & Munteanu, 2015). The citizens' security is reflected primarily in a certain future and the possibilities of planning. Insecurity of any kind introduces fear and worry that can harm the overall quality of life and social well-being. Economic security refers to the current financial situation but also to the individual expectations on how that situation may develop in the future positively or negatively. Therefore, economic security has a deep psychological dimension based on future planning and facing economic shocks, unlike poverty and material deprivation, which are focused only on the present moment. Physical insecurity refers to an individual's exposure to dangerous situations that directly threaten their physical safety, such as crimes, accidents, or natural disasters (European Commission, 2015).

The paper will analyze economic security aspects followed by labor market transitions, inability of the individuals and households to face unexpected expenses and obligation that has not received payment by its due date, as well as population financial satisfaction, job satisfaction, overall life satisfaction, and satisfaction with personal relationship. The results of the research on the relationship between the perception of citizens' security and their trust in the institutions (police, judiciary, and parliament) will also be presented by the example of Croatia, Hungary, and Serbia and the correlation between the two observed variables will be determined. Trust in key public institutions is a very important economic, sociological and political issue that significantly determines the functioning of a society and the well-being of citizens. Institutional attributes associated with the achieved level of trust are competence, integrity, relevance, delegation, transparency, efficiency, performance, and accuracy (Kavanagh et al., 2020). Since citizens are vulnerable to the actions and decisions of institutions, there is a need for research design that examines the nature of the relationship between institutional trust and the perception of security.

2. ECONOMIC SECURITY CONCEPT

One of the indicators of economic security and dealing with economic risks is the ability of the household to face unexpected expenses. Unexpected costs could include financial expenses for surgery, burial, replacement of consumer durable goods that should be paid from their funds without seeking financial assistance from others and without borrowing from the bank (Figure 1). Almost a third of the EU population was unable to pay for unexpected expenses in 2020. North Macedonia, Greece, and Croatia have the biggest problem dealing with unplanned financial expenditures from the observed countries in the region. In the last ten years, this indicator declined for 10-25 percentage points on average in all observed countries (EUROSTAT, 2020).

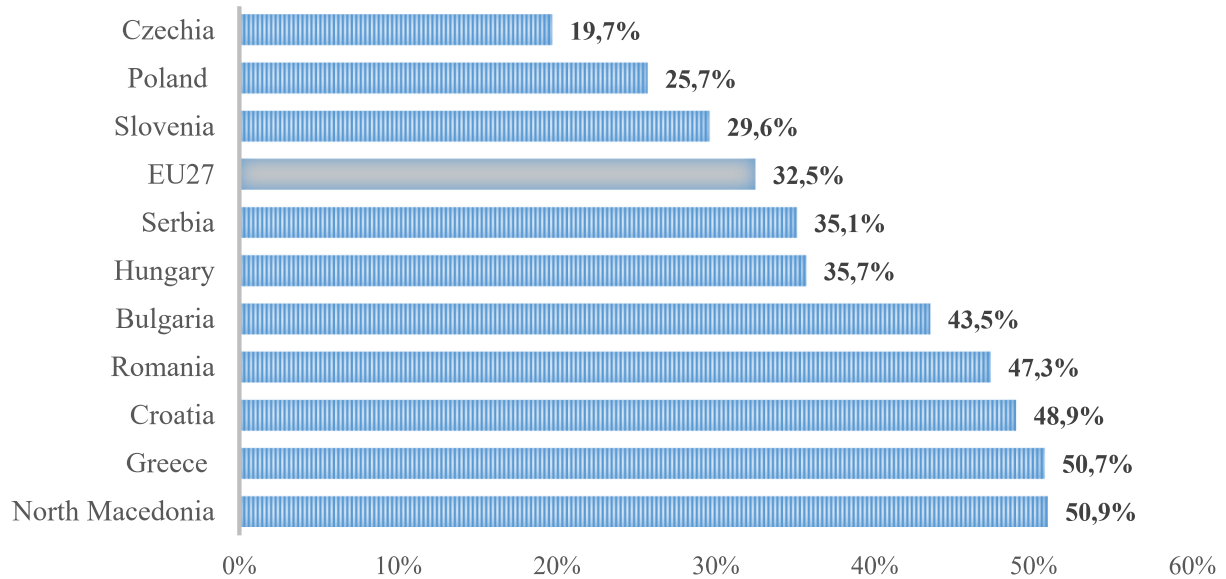


Figure 1. Inability to face unexpected expenses, by country, 2020 (% of population)

Source: EUROSTAT,

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_mdes04/default/table?lang=en

Figure 2 shows that among the observed countries, Slovenia and Romania recorded the highest perceived levels of financial, job, life, and personal relationship satisfaction, with scores corresponding to the EU average. Also, the obtained result is in accordance with the low share of people in arrears (less than 15%). However, what attracts attention is the data from Figure 1, which deviates from the previous results, showing that about half of the Romanian population is not prepared for unplanned financial costs.

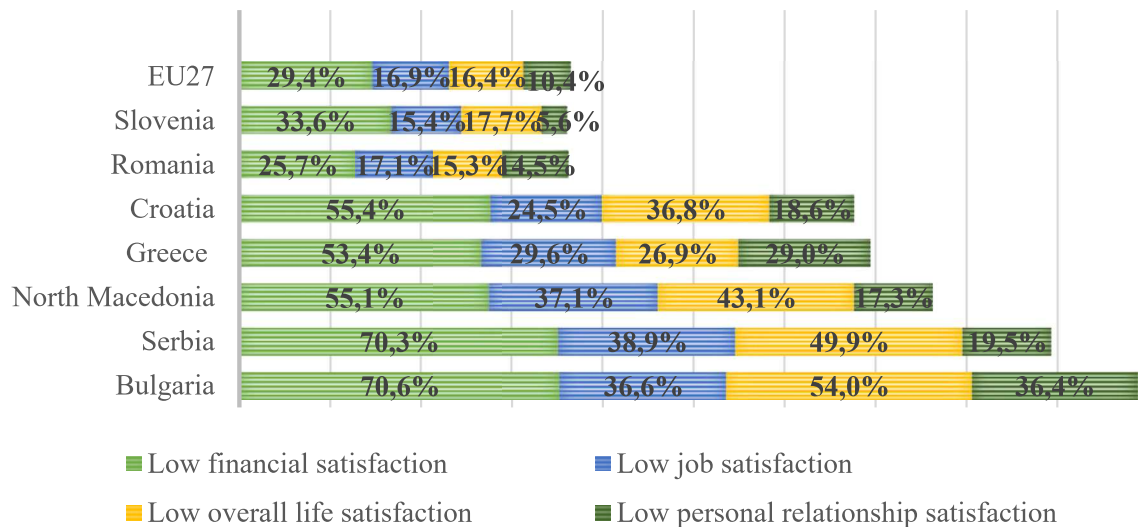


Figure 2. Percentage of the population rating their satisfaction as low, 2018.

Source: EUROSTAT, <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

One of the indicators of economic security is the labor market transition and the share of the population that changed status from being unemployed in 2019 to being employed in 2020. This share in Romania is only 11% of the population, while in advanced transition countries it is two to almost three times higher: Hungary 28%, Slovenia and the Czech Republic 26%, Poland 23%. Croatia is also a country with conflicting results. Namely, about half of the population has a problem dealing with unexpected financial expenses and half of the population perceive the degree of satisfaction with financial status as low, but the share of the population in arrears is lower than 15% (Figure 3). On the other hand, the share of the population that changed their labor market status and become employed during 2020 is 22%. From the selected transitional countries that are subjects of the analysis, the Czech Republic and Poland have the lowest share of residents with outstanding liabilities (3% and 5.5% respectively). Also, they record the smallest share of the population that would not be able to overcome future unexpected financial expenditures (19.7% and 25.7% respectively).

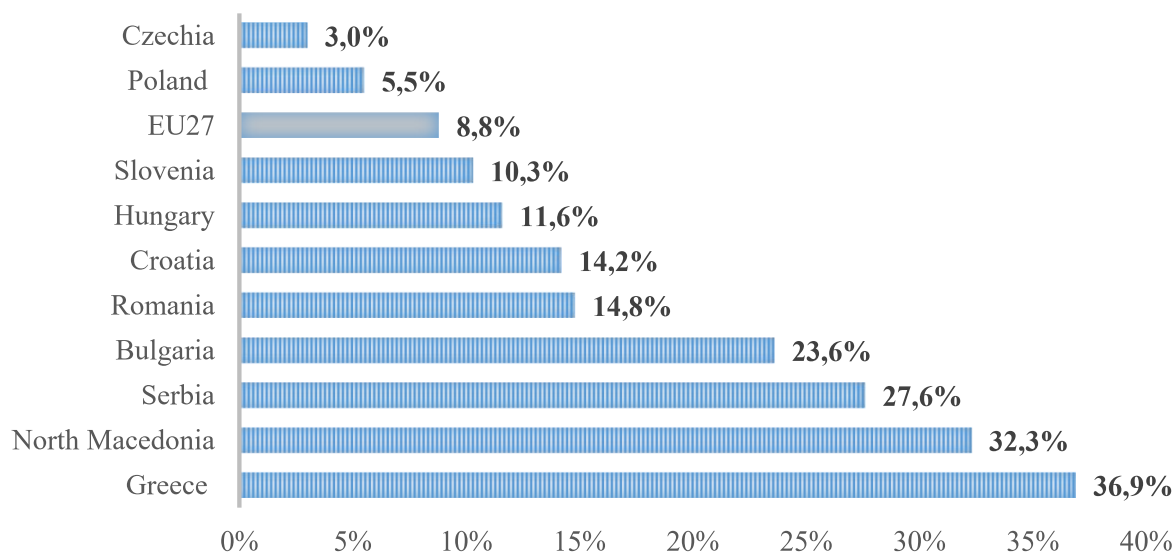


Figure 3. Percent of population in arrears (mortgage or rent, utility bills or hire purchase), 2020.

Source: EUROSTAT

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_mdcs05\\$DV_422/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_mdcs05$DV_422/default/table?lang=en)

Bulgaria, Serbia, and North Macedonia are the countries with the highest proportion of people with low financial satisfaction. About one-third of the population of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Greece is in arrears, while dealing with the future unexpected expenditures most affect the citizens of Greece, North Macedonia, and Croatia (around a half of the population).

3. INSTITUTIONAL TRUST AND SECURITY PERCEPTION - A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

3.1. Literature review

Political trust represents confidence in institutions such as the legislature, the judiciary, the executive apparatus such as bureaucracy and the police, regional or international organizations, etc. Institutional trust reflects confidence in outcomes - the institutions' ability to provide citizens with quality services, effectively meets their needs and requirements, and successfully manage social, economic, and political risks, uncertainties, and opportunities (Bauer and Freitag, 2017). Discussion of trust in public institutions across political science, psychology, and sociology indicates that it is based on both objective considerations - institutional competence, integrity, efficiency, capacity to deliver the service, and subjective factors - institutions protect the interests of citizens sharing common values. Misplaced trust will damage the citizen's interests and the citizen as a service-user will face uncertainty (Taylor-Gooby, 2008). "In a more unstable society, institutional trust rests on a continuing quest for grounds on which trust might be based, leading to a more engaged and 'dialogic' democracy" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Also, institutional trust has been seen as "a democratic good in and of itself as well as an important gauge of a democracy's political health" (Dalton, 2004).

Prevalence of corruption, exposure to violence, the state of the economy and economic growth rate, perceived levels of risk such as unemployment and financial and economic instability, government success in reducing economic inequalities are shaping citizen's trust in governments and institutions (Kettl, 2017; Kroknes et al., 2016). In the literature, institutional trust is most often associated with a sense of security among citizens, the level of education of the population, the level of corruption, and citizens' willingness to obey the law and the regulations. Study confirms that in corrupt societies education is negatively correlated with institutional trust, while is positively correlated with institutional trust in pure societies. Further, the corrosive effect of corruption on trust in institutions worsens as education improves (Hakhverdian and Mayn, 2012). Also, crime victimization in the short term reduces trust in public security institutions while undermining trust in institutions in charge of upholding criminal sanctions in the long run (Cozzubo et al., 2021). Another result confirmed by research is that a low level of institutional trust could undermine the effectiveness of government action and its ability to enforce laws, since individuals with a low level of trust in institutions are much more likely to engage in illegal activities, especially those related to the tax system (Marien and Hooghe, 2011).

What must be emphasized is that citizens' trust in government is diminishing, judging by the latest results of the perception survey. Only 43% of the global population trusts the government and believes that the government "is doing what is right". If the research area is limited to OECD countries, the share of residents with political trust is even lower and amounts to 38% (Kumagai and Iorio, 2020). The decline of trust in government is due to changes in the values and expectations of citizens (Dalton, 2004). The results of the empirical research, which examines the existence of a statistically significant relationship between the trust of the citizens of Serbia, Croatia, and Hungary in the institutions and their perceived sense of security, will be presented below.

3.2. Descriptive Statistics

In order to investigate the relationship between security perception and institutional trust, we rely on data from the ninth-wave European Social Survey. The European Social Survey (ESS) is a biennial cross-national survey run by the ESS European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ESS ERIC). Data was collected from 2018 to 2020 through face-to-face interviews in 27 European countries. The following data is weighted by the *pspwght* (post-stratified design weight) variable. In our study, we observed Serbia, Croatia, and Hungary. Sample size per country is: (n= 2043), (n= 1810), (n= 1661), respectively. We began our interpretation of the results by presenting the descriptive statistics.

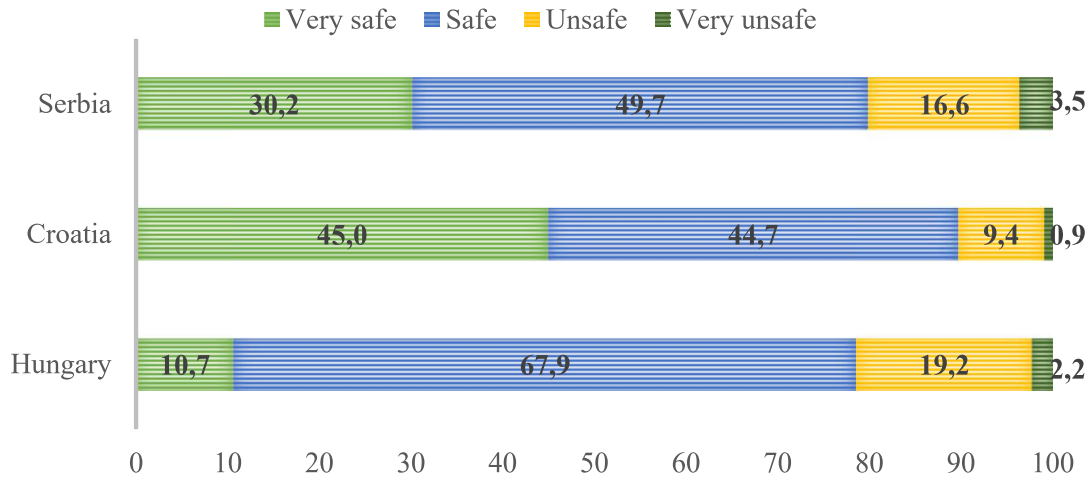


Figure 4. How safe do you feel while walking alone in the dark in your neighborhood? (%)

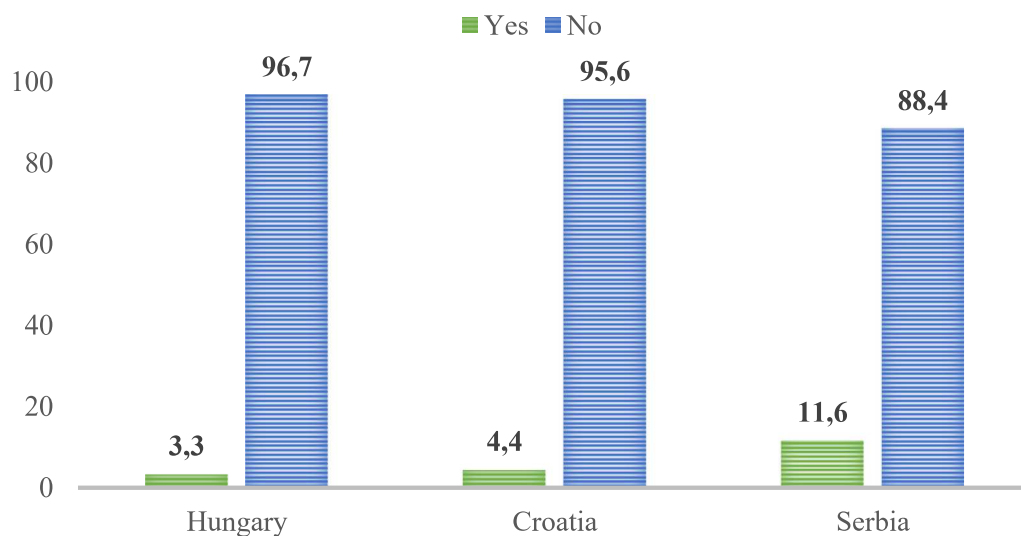


Figure 5. Have you or any member of your household been the victim of a burglary or physical assault in the last five years? (%)

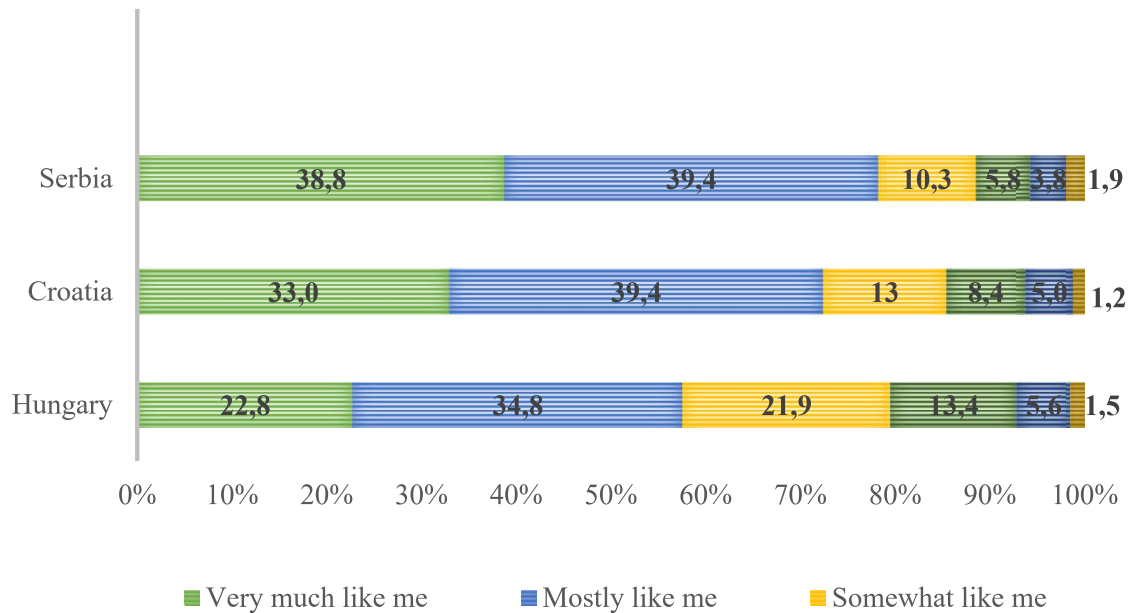


Figure 6. It is important for me to live in a safe environment. I avoid anything that could endanger my safety (%)

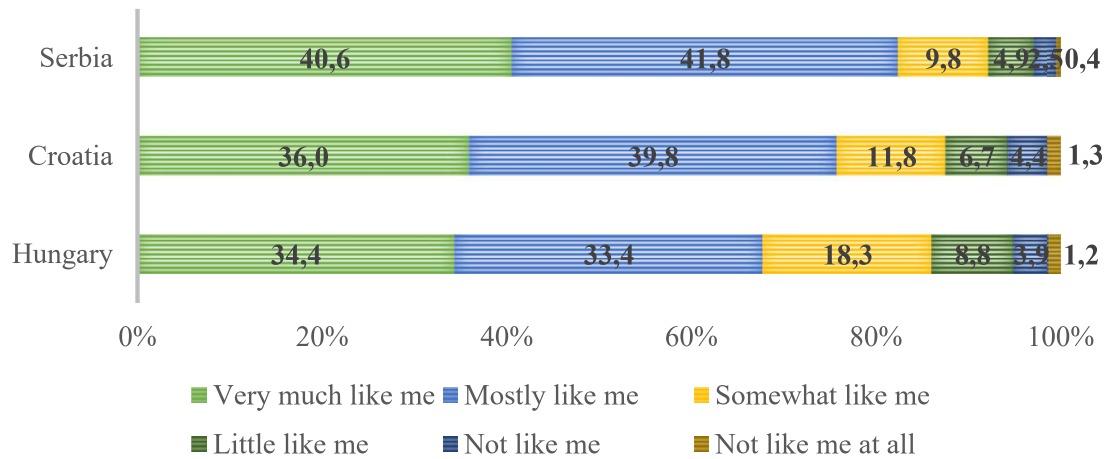


Figure 7. It is important that the government guarantees my safety from all threats. I want strong state that can protect its citizens (%)

The analysis of data from Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7, found that in all three observed countries a high proportion of respondents feel safe while walking around the neighborhood at night: Serbia (79.9%), Hungary (78.6%), and Croatia (89.7%). Also, the largest share of respondents in all three countries stated that they were not victims of burglary or physical attack in the last five years: Serbia (88.4%), Hungary (96.7%), and Croatia (95.6%). What all respondents in the observed countries have in common is that it is important to live in a safe environment, the government should guarantee citizens' security from all threats and only a strong state can protect its citizens.

3.3. Scale reliability analysis

The next step in the analysis is to measure the level of institutional trust in each of the observed countries. From the database of the European Social Survey, in order to measure the level of trust in institutions, the following question was analyzed: On a scale from 0 to 10, how much do you personally believe in each of these institutions: police, judiciary, and parliament?

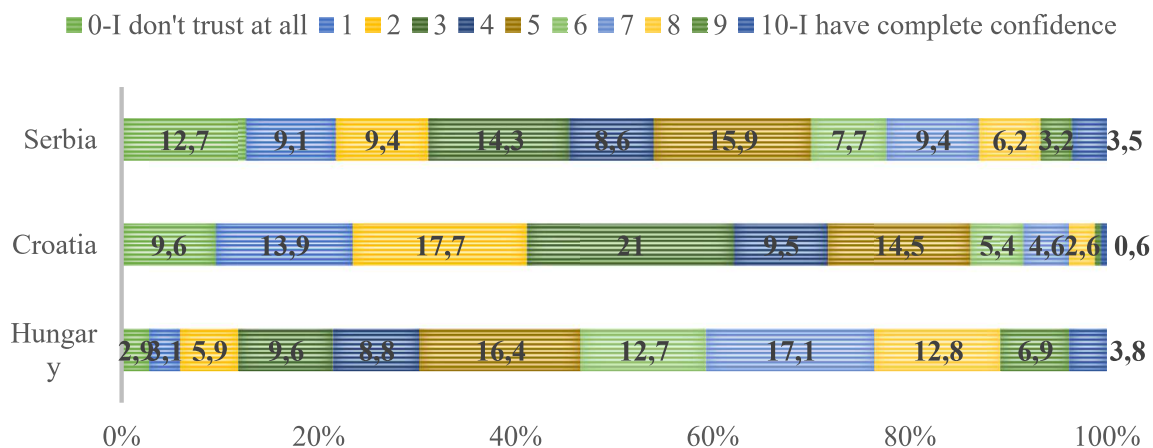


Figure 8. Distribution of institutional trust scale responses (%)

The statements are set so that lower grades show distrust and higher trust in institutions (0 means that you do not trust the institution at all, and 10 that you have complete confidence). Scale reliability analysis is used to determine whether the stated attitudes measure institutional trust. The following values of Cronbach Alpha have been recorded: Hungary (0.844), Croatia (0.710), and Serbia (0.823). The obtained results show that a reliable measuring instrument is represented in the case of all three observed countries. Figure 8. presents the distribution of responses on the scale of institutional trust in the case of all three countries.

3.4. Correlation analysis

Finally, the degree of quantitative agreement of the variation between institutional trust and the perceived feeling of security was examined. The results of the correlation analysis indicate the existence of a statistically significant relationship between two observed variables. However, the strength of the relationship tells how strong the relationship is, and only in the case of Serbia the correlation between two variables is considered to be weak (Table 1). This relationship indicates that a higher level of institutional trust leads to a higher perception of security. It should be noted that inverse relationship is represented only because in the case of the question of the perception of security, the answers are the opposite: 1 - very safe and 4 - very unsafe.

Table 1. Values of correlation analysis of variables of institutional trust and security perception

Country	Spearman's rho	Sig
Hungary	-,060	,014
Croatia	-,080	,001
Serbia	-,188	,000

The main methodological limitation is the incapability of observing other countries in the region (i.e., Macedonia and Montenegro did not participate in the ESS ninth wave). Additionally, in our study, only three institutions represent the institutional trust scale. Although trust in other institutions is part of institutional trust, we assume that they were not relevant for our study.

4. CONCLUSION

Issues of economic and physical security seem to be relevant today more than ever now. Europe and the world as a whole are faced first with a pandemic crisis and then with the war in Ukraine. Both crises directly affected citizens' sense of economic security as well as their perception of physical safety. Some countries entered into those turbulences better prepared than others. In this paper, we tried to detect perceptions of citizens related to economic and physical security in selected transitional countries in the before-crisis period that could be an indicator of their preparedness for turbulences. Our research revealed some inconsistencies in citizens' perceptions like in the case of Romania where citizens' satisfaction with the financial situation was at the EU average level, while Romanians' preparedness for unplanned financial costs was significantly lower with each second citizen admitting he or she is not prepared for unforeseen expenses. Since we are now faced with a rapid surge in prices, this discrepancy may indicate hidden risks because citizens overlooked (overestimated) some aspects of security, such as financial and job security. To test if the risk was undervalued, new research is needed that would cover the present period when rising costs put a significant burden on households in Europe.

In addition, the relationship between the trust of the citizens of Serbia, Croatia, and Hungary in the institutions and their perceived sense of security was tested as well. Our research confirmed the existence of a statistically significant relationship, which means that in countries where citizens' trust in the institutions is at a higher level, they feel safer. However, in future research, the application of partial correlation analysis is needed, which would help to better understand the relationship between institutional trust and the perception of security while other variables are kept under control. Furthermore, there is a need to define significant predictors of security perception by other types of analysis.

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