

# **HUMAN SECURITY AND TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

## **A POTENTIAL FOR DEEPENING REGIONAL COOPERATION**

*By Umut Ergezer, Deputy Secretary General of RCC*

Institutional trust reflects the individuals' confidence that the institutional system works properly, including all its components, formal rules, organisations and enforcement mechanisms (World Bank, 2002). Trust in institutions is thus fundamental to societal functioning and governance. Trusted institutions facilitate individuals to receive services and goods helping them to put the capacity sets into functioning. Each individual, through well-functioning institutions benefiting from the capacities they have equitable access to; will be an agency for the development of their community and nations. (Sen, 1984, 1997, 1999, 2000; Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Rawls, 1993).

Be it generalised (in unknown individuals) or particularised trust (trust in particular individuals and institutions), trust is the backbone of social cohesion, facilitating cooperation between citizens and the state. People feel much safer in an environment where they have higher trust in people and institutions. Low interpersonal (generalised) trust spills over to low trust in many government institutions and governments themselves, creating conditions under which people may feel less secure (UNDP, 2022). Low level of trust in public institutions affects perception of security, equality, inclusion and is also found to be associated with substituting reliance on diverse informal practices, both positive and negative, as informal networking, informal economy, undeclared jobs and even corruption. Several studies reveal that those informal institutions such as family networks, kinships or other types of communal networks or institutions may substitute wherever formal institutions could not enjoy a sufficient level of trust from their citizens. We are able to conclude that eroded trust in state institutions, which is a reflection of ineffectiveness of formal institutions, is conducive to informality (Gordy and Efendic, 2019). In most cases, both formal and informal institutions coexist with each other where the main challenge is to get efficient interaction, primarily to be complementary not substitutive (De Soto, 1989). Hence, both trust in people and trust in institutions work as intermediary mechanism, ultimately affecting the feeling of security.

People-centric security could be holistically conceptualised as human security. The initial margins of the concept were drawn by the UNDP Human Development Report in 1994. After that, the concept of human security has been widely discussed and many different interpretations appeared from interventionist to less coercive and cooperative tones. For this paper, I will use the definition of human security as the vital core of all human lives which needs to be protected from critical pervasive threats, in a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfilment (Alkire, 2003, p2). I will not dwell into discussing what core can be considered as vital, and how that vital, whatever it be, can be protected from what types of threats. That discussion continues among human security experts and development economists. Our paper will utilise human security as a normative concept and refer to it when we use the term "people's feelings of security".

Human security is by definition a multidimensional concept and emphasizes the protection of individuals' rights, and having a life free from fear, indignity, and want (UNDP HDR, 1994, 2022) (UN, 2016). The South East Europe (SEE) 2030 Strategy adopted by the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) in 2021 prioritises enhancing human security and resilience in the SEE region, and Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Secretariat is mandated to facilitate its implementation.

## Feelings of security

There is a significant global trend in declining people's feelings of security. Particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, only less than a quarter of the population recorded in developed economies feel secure (UNDP, 2022).

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX GROUP	Secure	Moderately insecure	Very insecure
LOW AND MEDIUM HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX	8%	29%	64%
HIGH HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX	14%	31%	55%
VERY HIGH HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX	23%	40%	37%

Source: UNDP, Human Security Report 2022

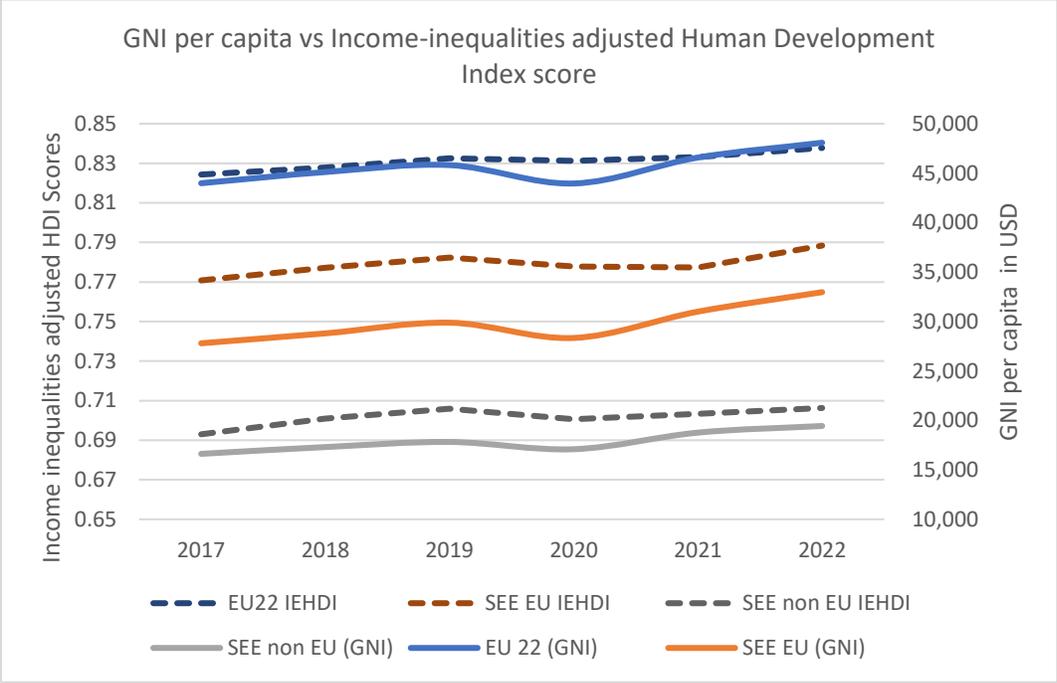
This trend happens to appear throughout the globe indifferently, particularly after the pandemic. However, there is a pattern suggesting that lower level of human development, if observed through Human Development Index, is associated with higher level of insecurity (table above). Two years after the UNDP's report, we observed similar outcomes in the Western Balkans. On a positive note, 51.8% of Western Balkan citizens consider their economies a secure place to live in (sum of those who mostly and completely agree with this statement). On the other hand, if the below data are binarized in a way to measure the ones who consider their economies a secure place and others, we observe that the remaining part of the population (i.e. others) is not negligible (47%). This finding is in line with the previous edition of SecuriMeter (2023) which observed that at least 4 out of 10 adults in the Western Balkans do not consider their economies a secure place to live in.

QUESTION: DO YOU AGREE THAT YOUR (ECONOMY) IS A SECURE PLACE TO LIVE IN?	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
I COMPLETELY DISAGREE	261	5.1
I MOSTLY DISAGREE	921	17.9
I NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	1,233	24.0
I MOSTLY AGREE	2,057	40.0
I COMPLETELY AGREE	610	11.8
DON'T KNOW / REFUSE TO ANSWER	59	1.1
<b>N=5,141</b>		
<b>SOURCE: RCC SECURIMETER 2024</b>		

One of the main factors behind the global pattern of insecurity is retarded recovery in human development conditions.

A comparison is made in the below graphs between EU 22, South East Europe (SEE) EU Member States, and SEE non-EU economies by visualising the longitudinal performance of each group in Gross National Income per capita, and Inequality-adjusted HDI scores. The below visual aims to provide a quick snapshot of how each sub-regional group (i.e. EU 22, SEE EU, and SEE non-EU) has delivered before or after the pandemic, and of the current state of play regarding convergence between each of them by income per capita but also by human development scores adjusted for inequalities.

The graph below illustrates a distinct parallelism in income/GNI per capita development trends across each sub-regional group, underscoring their economic and trade connectivity. However, this convergence pattern does not extend to the Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI). The subject indicator reveals that the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 are significantly more severe in non-EU economies in the SEE than in the EU, with a markedly slower pace of post-pandemic recovery in the SEE region.



Source: UNDP <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/documentation-and-downloads>

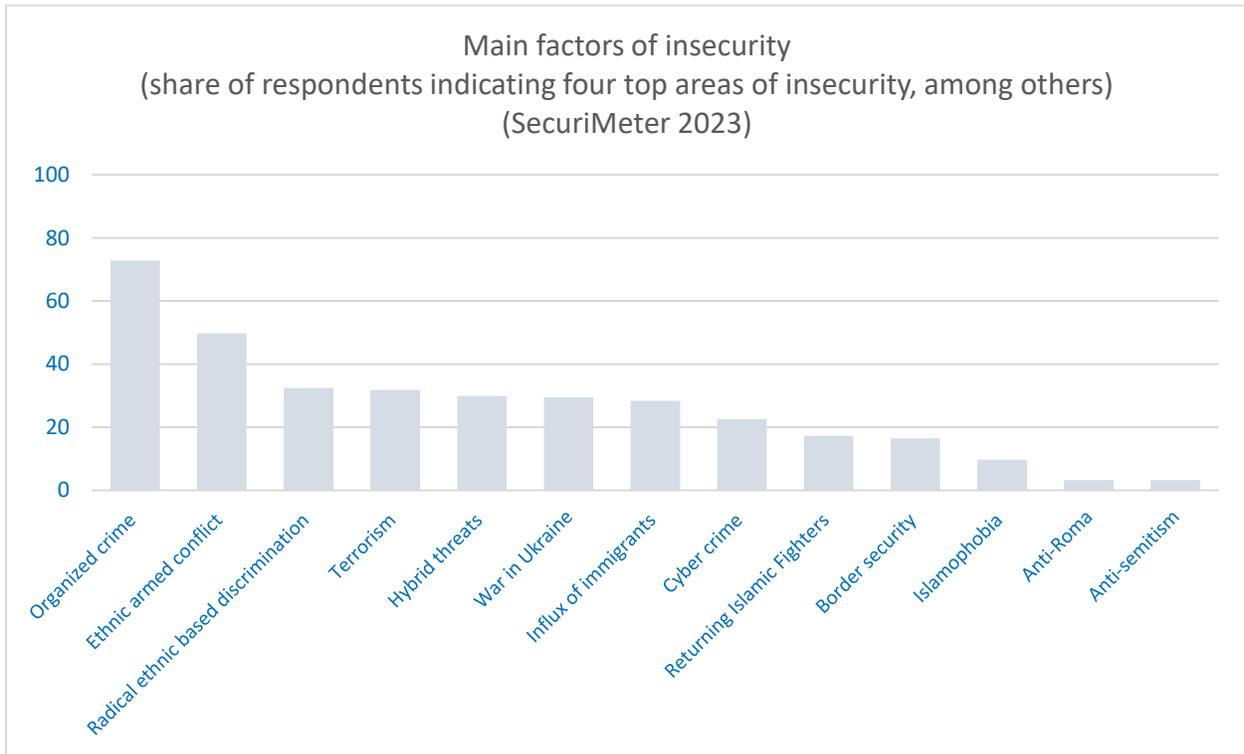
While overall economic growth at the macro level may signal broad progress, it does not capture income distribution across demographic groups. Even after simple visual inspection of this graph, it is quite obvious that socioeconomic convergence remains particularly challenging between the SEE non-EU economies and the EU groups (i.e. EU 22 and SEE EU), suggesting that convergence in equitable/inclusive economic growth will take considerably longer time.

A similar trend can also be verified through Eurostat data. According to the European data on social protection, the total expenditure on social protection benefits in the EU amounted to 26.9% of GDP. If we look into the granular distribution of social assistance, almost half of the total expenditure of social protection benefits of EUR 4.3 trillion was spent on the old age and survivors function, and 30% was spent on sickness and health care. Another eye-catching aspect of the EU’s social protection data is that the most expanded social protection expenditures were related to housing and social exclusion, followed by family and children protection during the period between 2012 and 2022. The Eurostat data on social protection is available only for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia in the Western Balkans. Accordingly, social protection expenditures share in GDP for these four economies were below 20% compared to the EU’s average share of 26.9%<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> [File:Expenditure on social protection benefits \(% relative to GDP, 2012 and 2022\).png - Statistics Explained.](#)

The second possible reason behind declining human security is the increased number of traditional and non-traditional security threats. In addition to “direct threats” stemming from traditional security related threats (such as the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the wars in Middle East), there is a substantial number of significant indirect threats which can be assessed by people as risking the stability and sustainability of their lives.

Those non-traditional security threats are directly related to the human security conditions of individuals. The majority of Western Balkan people feel insecure due to organised crime. However, when people are asked to select the top four reasons for insecurity, ethnic-based tension remains a significant factor of insecurity among other security issues. This includes both potential ethnic armed conflict and ethnic-based discrimination, which are also factors affecting emigration intentions in the region.



Source: RCC SecuriMeter 2023

### *Understanding Trust in Institutions*

Trust in institutions frames the overall confidence that individuals and communities place in formal institutions such as their governments, civil service, law enforcement agencies like the police force, or judiciary. The main pillars the trust of citizens and communities in their institutions is built upon are competence (Mayer et. al., 1995; Acemoglu, 2005), integrity (Tyler, 2006), transparency (Grimmelikhuijsen et. al. 2013; Acemoglu et. al., 2005), fairness and justice (Rawls, 1999), reliability and predictability (Kasperson et. al. 1992), legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Acemoglu et.al., 2012), and responsiveness (Bouckaert et.al. 2003).

The perceptions of institutions’ legitimacy, accountability, and responsiveness significantly influence citizens’ trust in their institutions. Therefore, those pillars are associated as indicators to measure the effectiveness of governance in a given formal entity, and fairness, transparency and competence of institutions. Effective, capable and competent institutions are successful in delivering societal needs and

are accountable in a transparent way for their failures. Adversely, low trust is covaried with people's disengagement, scepticism, and conflict, undermining or questioning the legitimacy of the social contract between citizens and their polity. Put it simply, the low trust in institutions can be a signal of ineffective institutions as judged by those who live with them.

### *The Interaction between Trust in Institutions and Human Security*

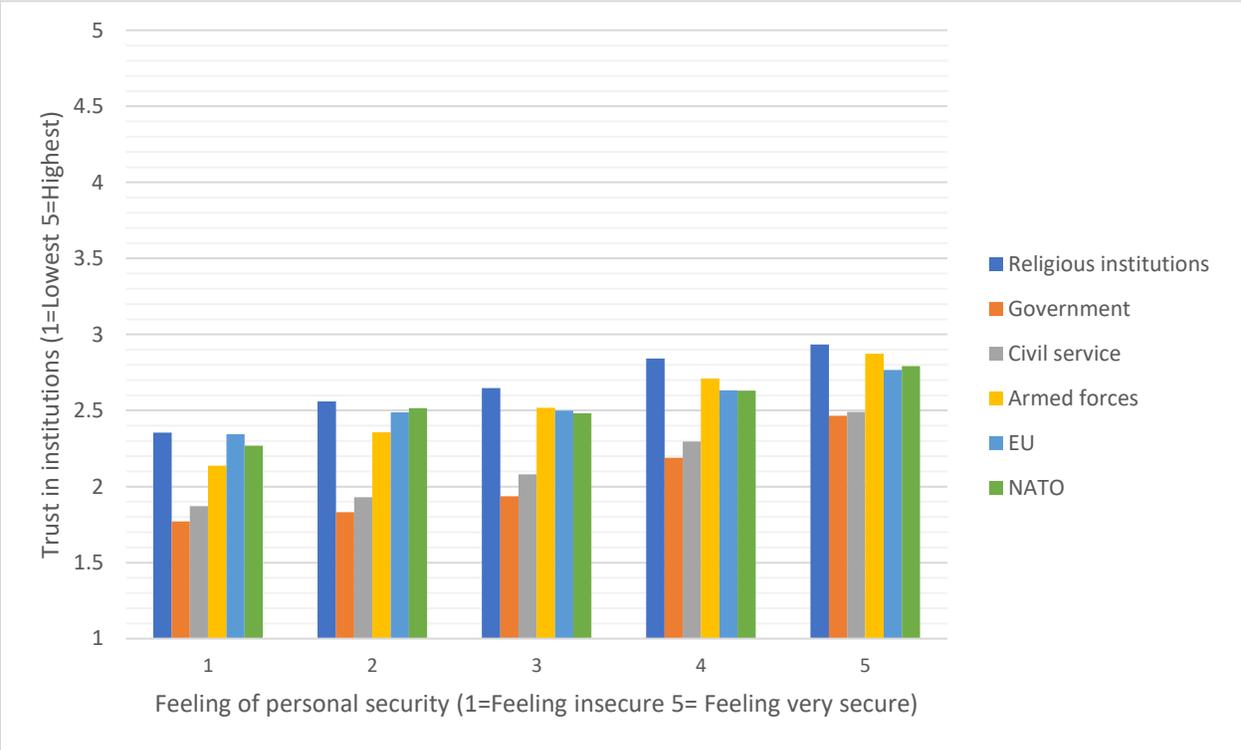
The interaction between trust in institutions and human security is likely to be bidirectional and dynamic. All three pillars of the human security concept (i.e. freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom from indignity) empirically might interact with people's perceptions of their public institutions. It is commonsensical as the states are still the main providers of security to their citizens. The margins of that security service go beyond military-centric national security and territory protection; however, without excluding the former, all the states are now expected to provide inclusive welfare services for their citizens to help them counter non-traditional security threats. The majority of those non-traditional security threats are transboundary and go beyond the established capacities of states. Therefore, international and regional cooperation between states plays a critical role in providing a cooperative human security perspective which is different from the coercive and interventionist interpretation that appeared in the post-Cold War period.

Conversely, when trust in institutions is low, human security is likely to be compromised. Citizens may resort to informal or extrajudicial means of conflict resolution, leading to increased organised crime, violence and instability. Distrust can also result in social fragmentation, where communities feel disconnected from governmental processes, exacerbating vulnerabilities and insecurity, lowering their solidarity with others, distorting their belonging to civic multiethnic nation structures, and strengthening people's tendency to define more exclusionary ingroups which they perceive belonging to.

### *Institutional Trust in Western Balkans and people's satisfaction in their quality of life*

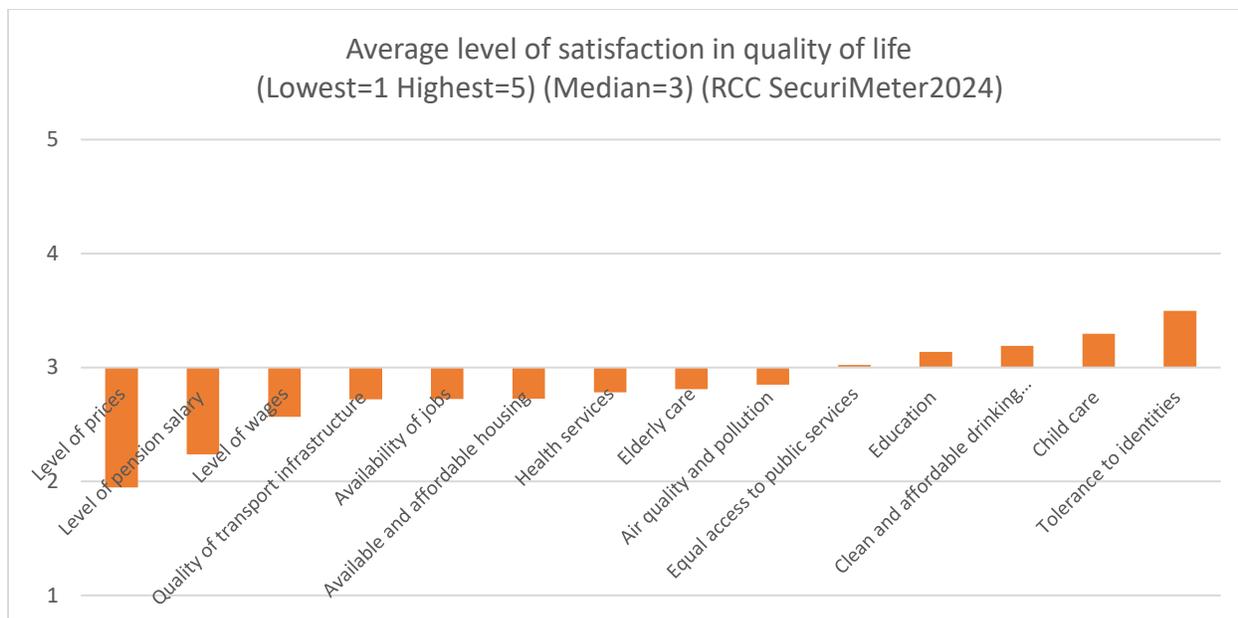
The latest SecuriMeter of Regional Cooperation Council reveals that the Western Balkans region is characterised as a low generalised trust society with low interpersonal trust in unknown individuals and shared values. 83% of the respondents in the Western Balkans stated that they do not have trust in others. Among all the social groups, which the people in the Western Balkans interact with, family members are the most trusted ones by far with 91.2%, suggesting that the trust is supported by strong ties in these economies. Whereas, only 39.4% of the people in our region trust people working in their administration, which does not look as a promising outcome.

The same survey displays that religious institutions (60%), armed forces (55%), and police (54%) have much higher trust, compared to political and judiciary institutions. Particularly, the individuals who have higher trust in their political and civic institutions report also a higher level of personal security. The Western Balkan people's trust in EU and NATO as institutions is an outlier in this interaction. Even the ones of lower personal security feelings have higher trust in both institutions.



Source: RCC SecuriMeter 2024

Regarding areas of daily life and well-being, RCC’s SecuriMeter provides a comprehensive overview of those in which the citizens of Western Balkans are satisfied and the level of their satisfaction. Accordingly, people in Western Balkans are least satisfied with the level of prices. The level of pensions and wages are two interrelated areas of low satisfaction, and these three factors—prices, pensions, and wages—can be considered together. Among the areas with the above median level of satisfaction are education, access to clean and affordable drinking water, child care, and tolerance to identities.



### *Conclusion:*

This paper gives an overview of the level to which people in the Western Balkans feel secure in the economies where they live, and ways in which this could be interpreted in line with the increasing global trend of personal feelings of insecurities. Referring to the RCC's latest survey data, it also presents the factors that might be considered to influence people's security perceptions, and how they interact with people's trust in their institutions.

All Western Balkan economies have been undertaking significant reform efforts in the context of their EU accession process which support their institutional capacity building. They are also committed to reaching sustainable development goals in line with the Agenda 2030. However, increasing insecurity perceptions and weakened trust in institutions require particular attention and additional efforts. The EU integration process is of critical importance for promoting citizens' trust in their institutions. The EU and NATO, as external institutions, came up as two positive outliers in terms of trust that both created even among the citizens who have lower personal feelings of security. Additionally, the EU integration and accession to the EU institutions provide a perspective supporting Western Balkans institutions to promote their citizens' trust in all seven pillars.

Regional cooperation in this context plays an active and significant facilitating role. The nexus between security including non-traditional security threats crosscutting human security framework with overall trust in institutions requires a holistic approach. In this context, as an overarching objective, enhancing the resilience of the region to counter direct and indirect threats, not only predicting but preventing them through the support of regional cooperation in multidimensional policy frameworks, is a necessity and fully in line with the EU integration process of each Western Balkan economy. In this regard, the RCC's strategic initiative on Common Regional Market aims to promote connectivity and economic integration within the region, and with the EU. Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, and South East Europe 2030 Strategy based on the SDGs and Agenda 2030 provide a complementary toolkit for a resilient region. Still, several significant efforts are needed to deepen regional cooperation. Such deepening would be successful not only through the positive implementation track-record and commitment of RCC, but also, maybe more

importantly, via the support and commitment of the economies in the Western Balkans and South East Europe to the strategic objectives of regional cooperation.

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