



Risk analysis of threats of identity, belonging, cohesion and democratic processes

IPHS-BAS

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We-ID deliverable D 5.5

July 2026



**Funded by
the European Union**



Risk analysis of threats of identity, belonging, cohesion and democratic processes

D5.5 (WP5)

EU-Programme

HORIZON.2.2 - Culture, creativity and inclusive society Main Programme

HORIZON.2.2.1 - Democracy and Governance

Topic

HORIZON-CL2-2024-DEMOCRACY-01-04 - The interrelation between social, cultural and political identities, as well as the sense of belonging, and democracies

Grant agreement ID: 101177925, DOI [10.3030/101177925](https://doi.org/10.3030/101177925)

Dissemination Level	Public (PU)
Work Package	WP5 (IPHS-BAS)
Milestone	
Deliverables No	D5.5
Version	V1.0
Submission Date	19.8.2026
Due Date	31.8.2026

Suggested citation:

Hristova, Antoaneta; Bakalova, Diana; Tsvetanova, Tsvetelina; Nacheva, Ilina; Dolmova, Valentina (2026). Risk analysis of threats of identity, belonging, cohesion and democratic processes. We-ID Deliverables. University of Göttingen.
Available at: www.uni-goettingen.de/We-ID

We-ID Identities - Migration - Democracy is a three-year project (2025-2028) that analyses the transformation of individual and collective identities, social cohesion and democracy in the midst of migration, demographic change and current crises in Europe. The consortium includes eight partners: Georg August University of Göttingen, the University of St Andrews in Scotland, the Bocconi University, the Institute for the Study of Population and Human Studies (Bulgaria), the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (Croatia), Max Planck Society (Population Europe), the Council of the Baltic Sea States, and The Civics Innovation Hub.

Website: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/We-ID>

The We-ID project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the grant agreement No. 101177925.

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1. Control Sheet

Version History			
Version	Date	Modified by	Summary of Changes
V1.0	31.08.2026		Initial Version

2. List of Participants

Participant No.	Participant Organisation Name	Country
1 (Coordinator)	University of Goettingen (UGOE)	Germany
2	Bocconi University (UB)	Italy
3	University of St. Andrews (USTAN)	Great Britain
4	Institute for Population and Human Studies (IPHS)	Bulgaria
5	Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (IPI)	Croatia
6	Max Planck Society (MPG)/Population Europe	Germany
7	Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)	IGO, Sweden
8	THE CIVICS Innovation Hub (CIVICS)	Germany

3. Objectives

The European Union's promise of prosperity and security is based on the principle of "unity in diversity" and the guarantee of fundamental freedoms, rights and democratic participation of its citizens. The vast majority of EU citizens share these values. At the same time, democracies are in crisis. Populist parties are fuelling fears and spreading the narrative that migration leads to a loss of identity. There is no doubt that migration always raises the question of identity and belonging. How do we organize integration and participation in such a way that cohesion is created despite diverse identities? The project "Identities - Migration - Democracy" (We-ID) is therefore concerned with the transformation of individual and collective identities, social and territorial cohesion and democracy under the conditions of demographic change, particularly with regard to migration and growing population diversity. We-ID follows an innovative research path by a) analysing the impact of migration on identities, belonging, cohesion and democracy, taking into account both the impact on host communities and the changes in the identities of migrants and their descendants, and b) elaborating the interrelationship between identities, cohesion, resilience and democracy. In addition to quantitative data analysis, we will use qualitative methods at the local level (e.g., pilot study in a border region, content analysis, case studies) to look for factors that strengthen resilient democratic communities. By consistently pursuing a transdisciplinary approach within our Policy, Advocacy and Research Lab (We-PARL) throughout the project, we will create a platform for mutual learning between different stakeholders from the European to the local level, while at the same time contributing to evidence-based and thoroughly discussed policy recommendations. In addition, based on our findings, we will develop materials such as toolboxes that can be used by practitioners and local actors (We-SCOUTS).

In detail, We-ID pursues the following objectives:

- Objective 1:** Revise and evaluate the relevant conceptual issues concerning identities, belonging and cohesion, and establish their relationship with resilience and democracy, with a particular emphasis on migration.
- Objective 2:** Map trends and patterns of identities, belonging and cohesion together with their drivers, including geographic differences, gender, age and education, as well as immigrant status and employment.
- Objective 3:** Investigate how the social identities and political participation of immigrants and their descendants differ across European countries, what factors influence identity and participation of immigrants, and what assumptions can be made for the future.
- Objective 4:** Extending objectives 2 and 3 through a regional pilot study in a Bulgarian border region. To analyse, how migration flows affect both the migrant communities themselves and their identities, and the communities exposed to new and large-scale immigration.
- Objective 5:** Development of an inclusive concept for resilient democratic communities (ReDeCos), through the identification (five case studies) of local factors that hinder or strengthen belonging.
- Objective 6:** In addition, development of a Civic Competences Toolbox (CCT) for local actors (We-SCOUTS) equipped with civic skills and competences to support local communities, moderate conflicts and controversies and create spaces for participation.

Objective 7: Establish the We-PARL - Policy, Advocacy and Research Lab - transdisciplinary platform, the tool which supports all thematic research areas foreseen in the project.

Objective 8: To disseminate We-ID findings, drawing on the outcomes and findings from the We-PARL, communicating them to a broader audience.

Objective 9: The project will identify factors at both national and local level that hinder social and political participation and at the same time develop policy recommendations on how to achieve equality and mitigate discrimination against women, LGBTIQ+ and ethnic minorities.

4. Executive summary

This report translates interviews with migrants and local residents in front-line areas with increased migration-related pressure into a public-facing risk analysis.

It identifies how threats to identity, belonging, social cohesion and democratic processes arise, compound and can be mitigated in migration-affected localities in Bulgaria.

- **Evidence base**

Semi-structured interview data: migrants from Ukraine (MUK), migrants from the Middle East (MME), local residents from North-East Bulgaria (LNEBG) and local residents from South Bulgaria (LSBG).

- **Public reporting safeguards**

No names or identifying details are reproduced. Interview evidence is reported as synthesized patterns and short, non-identifying examples. Risk levels are qualitative and indicative, not statistical prevalence estimates.

- **Reading note**

The report uses the term "risk" to mean a condition or process that may weaken identity security/integrity, belonging, cohesion or democratic processes and trust if it persists, combines with other pressures or is not addressed. The analysis deliberately separates risk from blame: risks may emerge from institutional gaps, uncertainty, poor communication, past trauma, spatial segregation, economic pressures or everyday encounters that harden social boundaries.

The interview data shows that the main democratic and cohesion risks in migration-affected localities do not arise from migration alone. They arise when forced displacement, economic insecurity, weak institutional communication and limited bridging contact make everyday life less legible and less fair for both migrants and local residents. The risk is systemic: identity, belonging, cohesion, resilience and democratic trust repeatedly shape one another.

For migrants, the central risk is a recognition gap. People work to rebuild ordinary lives through language learning, work, care for children, professional re-legitimation, voluntary action and navigation of housing, health care and administrative systems. Belonging strengthens when these efforts become visible and accepted by neighbors, employers, schools and institutions. It weakens when people remain in a permanent "guest" position, are reduced to origin or religion, or cannot make themselves heard in basic services.

For local residents, the central risk is a normalization (stabilization) gap. Many respondents want calm, predictable rules, safety, fair treatment and manageable coexistence. Local support and tolerance are present, but they are often conditional on order, work, rule-following and low disruption. Where

institutions appear absent, opaque or unequal, local residents may translate uncertainty into resentment or suspicion, even when they do not reject migrants as individuals.

The strongest cross-cutting risks are language and service access barriers; weak bridging contact between migrants and locals; conditional belonging; perceived unfairness in resources and rights; gendered and local security anxieties; and democratic audibility deficits, meaning the feeling that complaints, needs and participation do not travel into responsive institutions. These risks reinforce one another. Language barriers can lead to avoidance; avoidance reduces contact; low contact makes stereotypes more durable; stereotypes make belonging conditional; conditional belonging lowers trust and participation.

The strongest protective factors are also visible in the data: schools and children as bridges; work and professional roles; neighbourhood familiarity; mixed volunteering; reliable local mediators; language support; responsive complaint pathways; transparent public communication; and practical, non-symbolic encounters where people do something together. A layered response is therefore recommended: stabilize everyday access first, create bridging cohesion second, and connect both to democratic audibility and institutional accountability.

Headline risk judgement:

The overall risk cannot be interpreted as a uniform or immediate crisis. It is rather a cumulative risk: if weak bridges, institutional opacity and perceived unfairness persist, current patterns of silent tolerance can turn into social distance, resentment and lower democratic trust. If practical contact, language support and responsive institutions are strengthened, the same localities can move toward durable cohesion and democratic resilience.

Table 1: Key Findings and Their Implications for Risk Analysis

Key message	Implication for risk analysis
Belonging is the key early-warning outcome.	When belonging is weak, resilience stays costly, identity becomes defensive or provisional, and cohesion contracts into small circles.
Recognition and normalization are the two sides of the same system.	Migrants seek recognition as legitimate participants; locals seek predictable, fair and orderly coexistence.
Democracy is experienced in everyday encounters.	Respondents talk about dignity, complaint, fairness, rule of law, responsiveness and audibility more than abstract procedures.
Bonding networks protect but can also contain.	Family, co-national and online groups are essential, but without bridges they can produce parallel worlds.
Risk reduction must be practical.	The strongest interventions are language support, service navigation, school/work bridges, mixed local activities and transparent institutional communication.

5. Evidence base, method and interpretation of risk

The report is based on both inductive and abductive thematic analyses of 40 semi-structured interviews across four groups: migrants from the Middle East (MME, n=10), migrants from Ukraine (MUK, n=10), local residents in North-East Bulgaria (LNEBG, n=10) and local residents in South Bulgaria (LSBG, n=10). The purpose is to translate the patterns present in the interview data into a public risk analysis in 5 risk domains: identity, belonging, social cohesion, democratic trust and resilience, with threat perception as a cross-cutting factor. The report identifies how the domains operate as a system rather than as separate topics through a public-risk lens: what conditions could escalate into mistrust, exclusion, fragmentation, low participation or institutional delegitimation, and what conditions reduce those risks?

Risk interpretation

The risk ratings in the figures and tables are qualitative judgements. They combine: recurrence of themes across interviews; severity of potential consequences; cross-group convergence; and whether the theme affects more than one domain. For example, language barriers are high-risk not only because they appear often, but because they affect service access, employment, dignity, everyday conflict avoidance, bridging cohesion and the ability to complain or participate.

What counts as a threat?

Threats are understood broadly. They include direct safety fears, ontological and economic insecurity, cultural or identity threat, geopolitical anxiety, institutional distrust, administrative uncertainty, stigma, unequal treatment, lack of voice, and the sense that rules are not predictable and reliable. In the interview material, these threats are rarely isolated. A person may describe language difficulties as a practical problem, but the same difficulty also affects dignity, confidence, social contact and trust in institutions. A local resident may describe a security concern, but it may also express weak institutional communication or lack of predictable control.

6. Analytical framework: the stabilization-recognition loop

The integrative model used for this report treats identity, resilience, cohesion, democracy and belonging as a dynamic system. The system is activated by threat, uncertainty or rupture. Identity gives people an interpretive frame: who am I, what must I protect, what kind of future is possible? Resilience is the work of adapting and keeping life livable. Cohesion is the relational infrastructure through which that work either travels or gets blocked. Democracy is the institutional and normative condition that makes effort feel fair, audible and legitimate. Belonging is the outcome: the point at which a person or group is not merely present, but recognized as legitimately here.

This framework matters for risk analysis because it shows why an isolated intervention may fail. Language courses can help, but if institutions do not respond, voice remains weak. Employment can help, but if local narratives continue to treat migrants as temporary or suspect, belonging remains conditional. Local order can help, but if order is felt as exclusion or unequal control, democratic legitimacy can weaken. The system therefore needs interventions that combine practical access, meaningful contact and fair institutions.



Figure 1. Stabilization-recognition loop

Source: “An integrative conceptual model of democracy, identity, cohesion, belonging, and resilience” used for the public risk analysis

N.B. Risk rises when the loop stalls: adaptation remains costly, cohesion narrows, and democratic trust erodes.

Risk falls when everyday routines, recognition and institutional responsiveness reinforce each other.

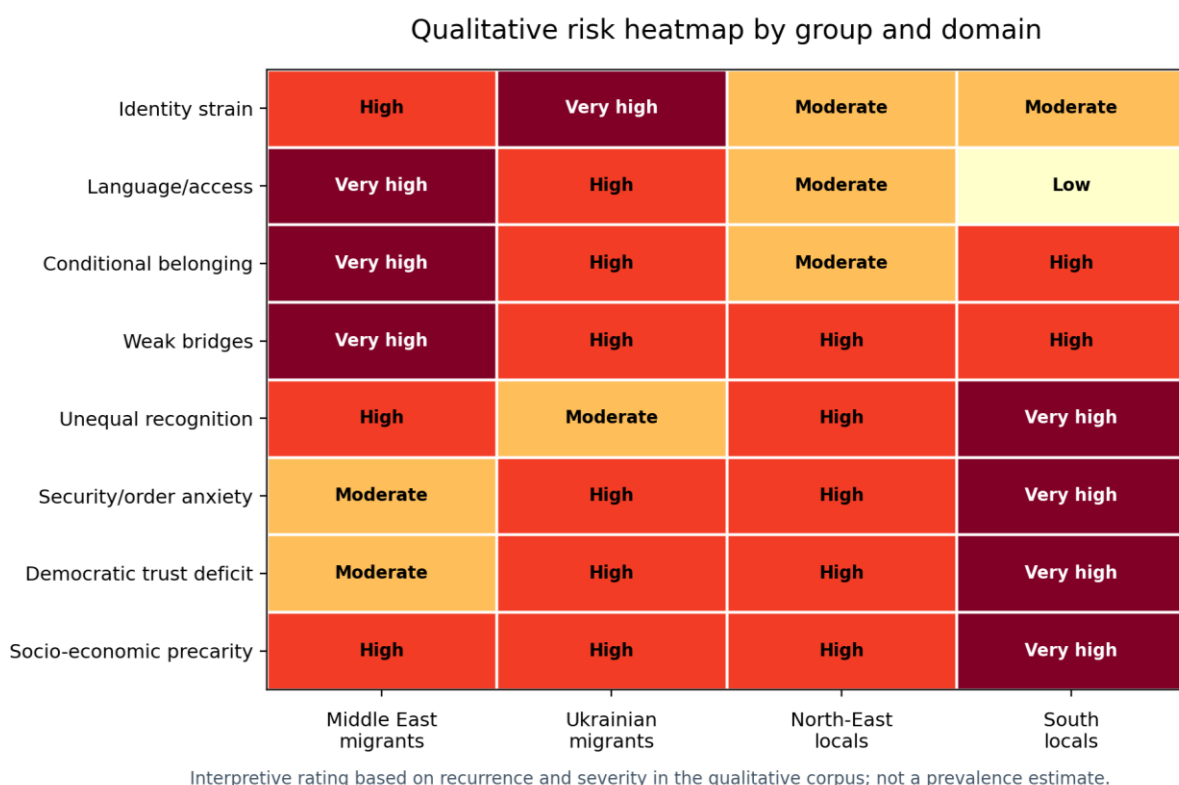
Table 2: Analytical Domains, Their System Roles and Risk Implications

Domain	Role in the system	Risk meaning in this report
Identity	Interpretive and motivational core	Threat: identity hardening, loss of status, marginalization, "us/them" narratives. Protection: complex, civic and role-based identities.
Belonging	Recognized stabilization	Threat: conditional belonging, permanent guest status, stigmatized presence. Protection: stable routines, local recognition, school/work/neighborhood inclusion.
Cohesion	Relational infrastructure	Threat: closed networks, silent tolerance, low bridging contact. Protection: everyday cooperation, mixed activities, trust-building channels.
Democracy	Fairness, voice, accountability and order	Threat: low audibility, unequal rules, corruption narratives, complaint futility. Protection: responsive institutions and transparent communication.
Resilience	Adaptive capacity and recovery	Threat: costly individual coping, burnout, crisis-only systems. Protection: distributed support through family, NGOs, volunteers, services and institutions.

7. Overall risk landscape

The risk landscape is best understood as medium-high and unevenly distributed. Some risks are concentrated among migrants, especially language barriers, institutional navigation, status insecurity and stigmatized difference. Other risks are concentrated among locals, especially perceptions of disorder, institutional unfairness and democratic frustration. The most important risks, however, are relational: they emerge in the space between groups, services and institutions.

The qualitative heatmap below summarizes this interpretation. It should be read as an analytical aid, not as a statistical measurement. It reflects how strongly each risk appears in the available qualitative material and how damaging it could be if left unaddressed.



*Figure 2. Qualitative risk heatmap by group and domain
(Ratings are interpretive and indicative, not population estimates).*

Source: Authors' own elaboration for the report, generated using Canva.

Main risk clusters

Access and voice risks: Language barriers, documentation, housing, health care, service navigation and complaint mechanisms. These risks affect migrants most directly but also shape locals perceptions of whether the system is competent and fair.

Recognition and stigma risks: Visible difference, religion, origin, refugee status, nationality-language tensions and unequal policy attention. These risks can make belonging conditional and can lead to defensive and narcissistic identities.

Cohesion and contact risks: Bonding networks are strong but bridges are weaker. Migrants often rely on family, co-national and online networks; locals often judge coexistence through whether there is order, work and low disruption.

Security and order risks: In South Bulgaria especially, migrant centre boundaries, memories of earlier disorder, gendered safety concerns and group fights can remain powerful even when the current situation is calmer.

Democratic trust risks: Across groups, democracy is evaluated through rule of law, fairness, dignity, audibility, accountability, freedom of speech, corruption and whether institutions respond in practice.

Future uncertainty risks: Many migrants live with open futures tied to war, family separation, work, legal status and return possibilities. Locals also connect future risk to demographic decline, labor needs, local development and geopolitical insecurity.

The project has been designed to improve the understanding of the long-term drivers and patterns of identity, belonging and cohesion and how they relate to resilience and democracy, with a particular focus on the impact of migration. The goal is to

- revise and evaluate the relevant conceptual issues, and establish their relationship with resilience and democracy, with a particular emphasis on migration;
- map trends and patterns of identities, belonging and cohesion together with their drivers, including geographic differences, gender, age and education, as well as immigrant status and employment;
- investigate how the social identities and political participation of immigrants and their descendants differ across European countries, what factors influence identity and participation of immigrants, and what assumptions can be made for the future.

How to read the risk clusters

The clusters are not separate boxes. They compound. A language barrier may begin as an access problem, become a dignity problem during a health or housing encounter, and then become a democratic problem if the person cannot complain or obtain a response. A local safety concern may begin with a public-space incident, become a cohesion problem through avoidance, and then become a democratic problem if people believe authorities are absent or selective. The risk register therefore treats each risk as a pathway rather than as a single event.

The analysis also avoids ranking groups as "risky" or "safe". The risk object is the relationship between threat, institutions and everyday contact. Migrants can be vulnerable to recognition and access risks, while locals can be vulnerable to disorder, unfairness and audibility risks. Both sides matter for cohesion because democratic trust depends on whether people can see rules as fair and usable in ordinary life.

Risk register

Table 3: Key Social Cohesion Risks, Affected Groups and Early-Warning Signs

Code	Risk	How it appears	Most affected	Level	Early-warning signs
R1	Recognition gap	Migrants rebuild life but remain treated as provisional, invisible or less deserving.	Middle East migrants, Ukrainian migrants	High	Visible stigma, service refusals, repeated "guest" narratives, low participation.
R2	Language and institutional access barrier	Language limits work, health care, conflict resolution, complaint and self-protection.	Migrants, service providers	Very high	Missed appointments, reliance on informal translators, avoidance of officials.
R3	Conditional belonging	Acceptance depends on work, rule-following, family status, "good	All groups	High	Belonging framed as deserved only

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		migrant" norms or low visibility.			under strict compliance.
R4	Closed-network cohesion	Strong bonding support protects but reduces bridging contact with locals.	Migrants, locals indirectly	High	Parallel social lives, online-only help, rare mixed activities.
R5	Perceived unequal recognition	Groups compare access to housing, aid, work, protection or public sympathy.	Middle East migrants, locals	Medium-high	Narratives of favoritism, resentment, competition and institutional opacity.
R6	Security and order anxiety	Past incidents or spatial concentration shape perceptions of risk even when current conditions improve.	South locals, migrants in migrant centres	High	Avoidance of public spaces, protest readiness, gendered fear, rumors.
R7	Democratic audibility deficit	People feel they cannot be heard or that institutions do not respond fairly.	All groups	High	Complaint futility, cynicism, low trust in elections/rules, protest without resolution.
R8	Institutional fragmentation	Local systems rely on volunteers and ad hoc organization without durable coordination.	Local institutions, NGOs, residents	Medium-high	Crisis fatigue, duplication, unclear referrals, gaps between state and municipality.
R9	Provisional lives and future suspension	War, return uncertainty and legal/economic insecurity prevent ordinary future planning.	Migrants from Ukraine and Middle East	High	Long-term waiting, family separation, inability to invest in local ties.
R10	Polarizing narratives	Fear, geopolitics, online conflict and identity simplification can harden group boundaries.	All groups	Medium-high	Us/them framing, misinformation, ethnicization of practical problems.

8. Group-specific risk profiles

The four interview groups share a common system but enter it from different positions. The following profiles describe the dominant pathway for each group, the main risks and the most important protective factors. They should be read comparatively: the same issue can be a resource in one group and a risk signal in another. For example, strong internal cohesion among migrants is a survival resource, but if it remains unbridged it can also signal social containment. Local desire for control can stabilize coexistence, but if it turns into selective enforcement it can undermine democratic trust.

Migrants from the Middle East

Dominant pathway: flight to safety -> collective stabilization -> conditional emplacement.

The strongest protective theme is safety. Bulgaria is often described as a place of calm, family future and relative security after war, destruction or displacement. Parenthood, work, religion, origin and the wish to become part of Bulgaria organize identity. Resilience is strongly relational: family, Syrian or

Arabic-speaking ties, neighbors, organizations, faith, work and digital groups help people navigate the first stages of settlement.

The main risk is conditional recognition. Respondents seek ordinary dignity: to work, raise children, learn, communicate, complain when necessary and be treated humanely. Language barriers strongly limit broader contact, making Google Translate, informal mediators and community networks essential. Visible difference and religious or cultural markers can make belonging vulnerable to stigma. A specific risk also emerges around perceived unequal attention: some Middle East respondents compare support available to Ukrainians with support available to Arabs or Syrians and interpret differences as unfair recognition rather than only resource scarcity.

Risk implication: Middle East migrants may appear stable because family and co-national networks are strong. Yet this stability can become a social capsule if language, employment, civic contact and institutional access do not expand. The result is not immediate conflict, but parallel belonging: safe enough to remain, not recognized enough to fully participate.

Migrants from Ukraine

Dominant pathway: uncertainty and loss -> disciplined adaptation -> rooting through language, children, social chains and professional re-legitimation.

The Ukrainian interviews show high identity reflexivity. Respondents often compare Bulgaria, Ukraine and wider Europe; they negotiate nationality, language, professional identity, parenthood and the possibility of return. Many describe Bulgaria through safety, familiar landscapes, the sea, schools, volunteering and social chains. Children, language learning and work are major bridges toward belonging. At the same time, their lives remain shaped by war, bereavement, family separation, continuing news from Ukraine and the uncertainty of return.

The main risks are the guest position and service vulnerability. Some respondents feel at home in daily routines but still do not feel fully secure in conflict situations, health care, housing or institutions because language and status limit their ability to defend themselves or complain. Mutual aid is strong, but Ukrainian online spaces can also become closed or conflictual. The risk is a prolonged provisional life: people invest in Bulgaria, yet their belonging remains fragile because they are still read as temporary, foreign or dependent.

Risk implication: the Ukrainian case shows how fast humanitarian welcome can become a longer-term integration challenge. Without durable language, work, housing and institutional pathways, resilience remains disciplined but costly. The democratic risk is not rejection alone; it is the feeling that effort does not convert into stable recognition.

Local residents in North-East Bulgaria

Dominant pathway: roots and civic/competence identity -> crisis organization -> managed coexistence.

North-East local respondents often speak from a position of stable place-belonging and practical competence. The arrival of Ukrainian refugees activated volunteer systems, hotel accommodation, donations, professional roles and local crisis organization. This region shows important protective resources: civic action, scenario thinking, organizational capacity, mixed logistics and contacts through services, schools, hotels and volunteering.

The main risks are institutional fatigue and managed distance. Respondents describe practical help, but also gaps between initial state response, local authority involvement and the continuing coordination

burden placed on volunteers and ad hoc networks. Some local narratives point to limited tolerance, confusion between Russian-speaking groups, geopolitical ambivalence and the difficulty of changing attitudes among people with no direct contact with migrants. Belonging for locals is not threatened in the same way as for migrants; rather, locals evaluate whether the locality remains fair, workable and socially manageable.

Risk implication: North-East Bulgaria has a strong crisis-management potential, but the model can become over-dependent on civic energy. If institutional coordination is weak, local solidarity may turn into fatigue, and coexistence may remain logistical rather than warm or relational.

Local residents in South Bulgaria

Dominant pathway: family and local rhythm -> fear memory and order concerns -> normalization through control, reporting, work and practical coexistence.

South Bulgarian respondents often describe their local identity through family, small-town rhythm, coexistence with diversity and practical life near a reception/migrant centre environment. The material contains both acceptance and anxiety. Some respondents note families, children and modest behavior among migrants, and some emphasize that the town is open as long as there are no incidents. Others recall periods of more intense insecurity, public-space avoidance, fights, protests and gendered discomfort around groups of men in parks or shops.

The main risks are spatial boundary-making, fear memory and democratic frustration. The migrant centre boundary structures belonging: migrants are often seen as transit users or temporary presences rather than future locals. Integration is expected to be demonstrated through work, respect for rules and low disruption. Democratic risk is high because local residents also describe laws that do not apply equally, captured power, weak audibility, rigged elections or anarchy-like disorder. Migration-related insecurity can therefore connect with a broader story of state weakness.

Risk implication: South Bulgaria is not simply anti-migrant. It is a context where order, safety, labor, migrant centre management and democratic distrust are tightly connected. Risk reduction must address public space, transparent local communication and fair institutional response, not only attitudes.

9. Cross-cutting risk mechanisms

The group profiles point to seven mechanisms through which risks become systemic. These mechanisms are important because they show where interventions should enter the loop. They also explain why seemingly small everyday frictions can acquire democratic consequences.

Language as a security and dignity issue

Language is not only a communication tool. It is a condition of self-protection, service access, work, complaint and everyday confidence. Migrants who understand partially but cannot speak confidently may avoid conflict, leave unfair situations unresolved or depend on informal translators. This reduces both belonging and democratic audibility.

Institutions as converters of effort into recognition

Institutions convert adaptation into legitimate presence when they provide clear information, fair access, respectful treatment and responsive complaint channels. When institutions are

opaque or inconsistent, migrants experience humiliation or futility and locals experience disorder or unfairness.

Bonding without bridging

Family, co-national and online networks reduce immediate vulnerability. But when broader bridges are weak, those networks can become containers. Locals then have few opportunities to see migrants as workers, parents, neighbors or civic participants, and migrants have few opportunities to practice language and local norms in low-risk settings.

Conditional belonging

Across the interview corpus, belonging is often conditional. Migrants are more accepted when they work, have children, are quiet, follow rules, look familiar or remain temporary. Conditional belonging can stabilize coexistence in the short term but signals that full membership is uncertain and revocable.

Perceived unfairness and comparison

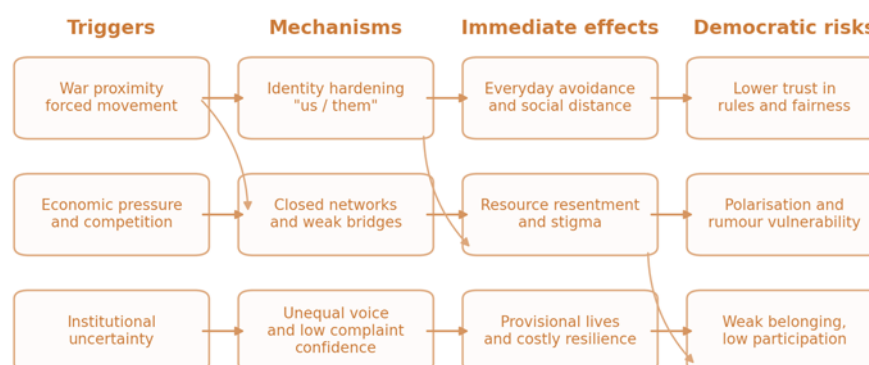
Unclear criteria for aid, housing, work access or legal treatment create comparison. Comparisons occur between migrants and locals, and also between migrant groups. Where criteria are not transparent, resource scarcity becomes a recognition conflict.

Gendered and spatialized safety

Safety concerns are not abstract. They attach to parks, shops, migrant centre borders, streets, night-time movement and groups of men. Even when incidents decline, fear memory can structure routines and local interpretations for years.

Democratic audibility

The most important democratic risk is not only low electoral participation. It is the belief that ordinary people cannot be heard, that rules are unequal, or that power is unaccountable. Migration pressures can intensify this belief if authorities communicate poorly or leave local actors to improvise.



The main risk is not migration per se. It is the compounding of uncertainty, weak bridges, perceived unfairness and low institutional audibility.

Figure 3. How everyday uncertainty can become a democratic and cohesion risk.

Source: Authors' own elaboration for the report, generated using PowerPoint

10. Risk scenarios

The following scenarios are not predictions. They are plausible pathways derived from the risk mechanisms in the interview material. They can help clarify what to monitor and what to prevent.

Table 4: Risk scenarios and their consequences

Scenario	Main conditions	Expected risk consequence
Scenario A: recognized stabilization	Language, work, school and service access improve; institutions communicate transparently; mixed local activities become routine; migrants are seen as neighbors, workers and parents.	Belonging increases; cohesion expands beyond bonding networks; democratic trust stabilizes; local anxieties decline because coexistence becomes predictable.
Scenario B: silent parallelism	Basic safety remains, but migrants and locals continue to live in parallel circles; services are navigated informally; contact is polite but thin; locals tolerate rather than engage.	Risk remains medium-high. There is low open conflict, but weak bridging ties make rumors, resentment and political mobilization easier during shocks.
Scenario C: unequal recognition spiral	Aid, work, housing or rights are perceived as unfair across groups; institutions fail to explain criteria; economic pressure rises; online narratives intensify comparison.	Resource resentment grows; migrant groups compete for legitimacy; locals interpret inclusion as unfairness; democratic distrust increases.
Scenario D: security/order escalation	A visible incident occurs in a migrant centre-adjacent or public-space setting; weak official communication leaves rumor to fill the gap; past fear memories are reactivated.	Avoidance, protest, boundary hardening and demand for punitive control increase; migrants withdraw; institutions lose legitimacy if seen as absent or selective.
Scenario E: civic fatigue	Volunteers, NGOs and informal mediators continue to carry tasks without durable municipal/state coordination; crisis response remains ad hoc.	Support systems weaken; migrants lose navigation pathways; local helpers become resentful or exhausted; institutional distrust spreads.

11. Risk-reduction priorities and recommendations

A layered approach to handling risks is recommended. It begins with everyday stabilization because participation and bridging are unrealistic when housing, health care, language and safety remain fragile. It then builds institutional access, bridging cohesion and democratic resilience. The order matters: people cannot be expected to participate meaningfully if they cannot understand procedures, defend themselves in basic encounters or see institutions respond to complaints.

Risk-reduction architecture: from stabilization to democratic resilience



The layers are mutually reinforcing: without stabilization, participation is unrealistic; without voice and fairness, stabilization remains conditional.

Figure 4. Risk-reduction architecture from everyday stabilization to democratic resilience.

Source: Authors' own elaboration for the report, generated using PowerPoint

The following priority actions translate the identified social cohesion risks into practical measures that can be implemented by local authorities, service providers, civil society organisations and other relevant stakeholders. They focus on reducing barriers to access and participation, strengthening trust and interaction between groups, and improving the responsiveness and coordination of local institutions. Taken together, the measures aim to support more inclusive, resilient and sustainable forms of local integration and social cohesion.

Table 5: Priority Actions for Strengthening Social Cohesion and Local Integration

Priority	Recommended action	Risk reduction
1. Establish local integration navigation points	Create or strengthen visible, multilingual points that help with documents, health care, schools, housing, complaints and referrals. Include trained cultural mediators and clear signposting.	Reduces access barriers, informal dependency and service frustration; improves institutional legibility.
2. Treat language as infrastructure	Offer practical Bulgarian language pathways linked to health, work, school, tenancy and everyday conflict resolution. Include conversation formats with locals, not only classroom instruction.	Improves self-protection, employment and bridging; lowers avoidance and dependence on closed networks.
3. Create mixed practical activities	Support low-pressure activities where migrants and locals do something together: school events, repairs, sports, cooking, volunteering, neighborhood clean-ups, local fairs, parent groups, etc.	Turns contact into role recognition; reduces stereotypes; converts silent tolerance into relational cohesion.
4. Make criteria for aid and access transparent	Publicly explain eligibility, funding sources and limits for support to different groups. Communicate why provisions differ across legal statuses and funding streams.	Reduces comparison, rumors and resentment around unequal recognition.
5. Strengthen complaint and feedback loops	Create safe channels where migrants and locals can report problems and receive responses. Publish aggregated responses and resolution times without personal data.	Builds democratic audibility; prevents frustration from becoming distrust.

D5.5 Risk analysis of threats of identity, belonging, cohesion and democratic processes

6. Support schools and children as cohesion bridges	Invest in language support, intercultural school mediators/psychologists, enhance parent meetings, peer activities and teacher resources in mixed classrooms.	Children are one of the strongest bridges to belonging; schools prevent long-term segmentation.
7. Address gendered safety and public-space confidence	Map public spaces where women, youth or locals report discomfort. Combine lighting, mediation, outreach, codes of conduct, community presence and rapid communication after incidents.	Reduces fear memory and spatial boundary-making without stigmatizing whole groups.
8. Institutionalize volunteer coordination	Move from ad hoc crisis volunteering to formal coordination protocols between municipality, state actors, NGOs, schools, hotels/services and community representatives.	Protects civic energy from burnout and reduces institutional fragmentation.
9. Build work and professional recognition pathways	Connect migrants to legal work, skills recognition, apprenticeships, local employers and Bulgarian-language workplace support. Communicate labor needs openly to locals.	Transforms migrants from recipients or transit figures into contributors; reduces economic threat perceptions.
10. Monitor polarization narratives	Track local rumors, online conflicts, resource comparison and geopolitical framing. Respond with factual, calm, non-punitive public information.	Prevents practical problems from becoming identity conflict or democratic delegitimation.

Implementation recommendations

- Co-design measures with both migrants and local residents; otherwise recognition for one group may be experienced as exclusion by another.
- Avoid one-off awareness campaigns without practical follow-up. The sources indicate that durable change comes from repeated, legitimate presence in shared settings.
- Communicate limits honestly. Lack of resources is less damaging when criteria, responsibilities and timelines are clear.
- Do not treat bonding networks as a problem. They are survival infrastructure. The goal is to add bridges, not to weaken community support.
- Separate individual incidents from group blame while still responding quickly and visibly to safety concerns.

12. Monitoring indicators

The next phase of risk analysis can use a compact dashboard combining administrative data, qualitative monitoring and periodic surveys. The purpose is preventive - not only to detect conflict, but to detect weak belonging and weak audibility before conflict appears.

Table 6: Suggested Indicators for Monitoring Social Cohesion and Integration

Domain	Example indicators	Suggested source
Language and access	Share of migrants with access to Bulgarian courses; service encounters requiring informal translation; health/school/municipality referral completion rates.	Quarterly administrative and NGO reporting.
Belonging and recognition	Reported feeling of being treated with respect; ability to imagine a future locally; frequency of everyday contact with locals; reported discrimination or rejection in housing/services.	Short anonymous surveys and focus groups.

D5.5 Risk analysis of threats of identity, belonging, cohesion and democratic processes

Cohesion	Number and diversity of mixed activities; attendance by both migrants and locals; perceived neighborhood trust; online conflict frequency in local groups.	Event logs, community mediator reports, social listening with safeguards.
Democratic audibility	Use of complaint channels; response time; satisfaction with response; perceived equality before rules; participation in local consultations.	Municipal/NGO dashboard and periodic survey.
Security and order	Incident reports disaggregated by type, place and response; public-space avoidance; gendered safety perception; rumor spikes after incidents.	Police/municipal data plus qualitative checks.
Economic and work integration	Employment pathways, skills recognition cases, employer participation, perceived labor competition, wage exploitation reports.	Labor office, employer networks and NGOs.
Institutional coordination	Frequency of coordination meetings; unresolved referrals; volunteer workload; duplication of aid; clarity of roles between state, municipality and civil society.	Coordination minutes and partner self-assessment.

A single indicator should not automatically trigger alarm. Risk is more likely to rise when several indicators move together: for example, language access falls, complaints go unanswered, online rumors increase and public-space avoidance grows. Conversely, a locality can tolerate occasional incidents if response is rapid, fair, transparent and accompanied by bridging contact. The monitoring system should therefore look for clusters and trajectories rather than isolated events.

13. Data-related limitations

This report is an interpretive public synthesis of qualitative data analyses. It is not a representative survey of Bulgarian population, migrants or local residents. It does not estimate prevalence, predict conflict probabilities or evaluate specific institutions. Its value is diagnostic: it identifies risk mechanisms, early-warning signs and intervention points that can inform future quantitative measurement and policy design.

The report also uses a public communication standard. It minimizes direct quotations and personal detail because the interviews contain sensitive experiences of displacement, local fear, conflict, health, family separation and institutional encounters. The trade-off is that the report privileges patterns over individual stories.

14. Concluding statement

The core risk identified by the interview material is a failure of conversion: the failure to convert survival into stability, stability into recognized belonging, and recognized belonging into democratic trust. The core policy opportunity is the opposite conversion: make everyday access more reliable, make contact more practical, make rules more transparent, and make voice more responsive. When this happens, identity can remain plural and inclusive rather than defensive and exclusive, cohesion can become more than silent tolerance, and democracy can be experienced as a usable everyday reality.