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**DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL TRUST  
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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**Purpose and scope of the deliverable:**

The objective of D1.5 *Dynamics of Political Trust in the European Union* is to analyze the mid- and long-term dynamics as well as national and regional trends of political trust at the national and European level, using the data collected in D1.3 (*Long-term trends of political trust dynamics (1980-2023)*) and the data collected in D8.1 (*2025 TRUEDEM Online Survey*). The report (D1.5) will become the foundation of the robust and comprehensive knowledge base on long-term developments in trust in political institutions of representative democracy (parties, executives, parliaments, judiciary etc.) – that will be complemented with the findings of other WPs.

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## Introduction

### Project summary

TRUEDEM is a 3-year multinational research project funded by the Horizon program of the European Commission with several core objectives. TRUEDEM aims to design and implement a complex research effort to collect comprehensive evidence on the perceptions of trust and judgments of trustworthiness in a range of European states. The project will create a robust and comprehensive knowledge base on long-term dynamics and predictors of trust in political institutions of representative democracy (parties, executives, parliaments, judiciary etc.) in the EU. TRUEDEM will examine the role of new patterns of electoral behavior, impact of socioeconomic transformations, the erosion of old and emergence of new political cleavages for the inclusiveness, representativity and legitimacy in European democracies, and political trust. TRUEDEM will identify strategies to address the demands and needs of citizens expressed via both electoral and non-electoral forms of political participation as means to enhance active engagement and inclusion and thus booster inclusive and responsive decision-making and governance in Europe. TRUEDEM will distinguish clusters of values that can hinder or foster pro-democratic values and attitudes and thus contribute to the barriers and opportunities to re-invigorating and enhancing representative democratic systems. Finally, TRUEDEM will develop a comprehensive and transparent toolbox of policy interventions including recommendations, toolkits and methodologies for enhancing trust in political institutions, boosting transparency inclusiveness of representative systems. TRUEDEM is coordinated in Austria with partners in Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, and Ukraine. The three-year program runs from January 2023 to December 2025.

### Annotation of the Deliverable (D01.5)

This document is part of Work Package 01 – Quantitative indicators and long-term trends of political trust, led by Claudiu Tufiş, UOB-RO. The first deliverable of WP01, D01.1 *Literature review and research paper on measuring trust* was submitted in July 2023 and provided an up-to-date survey of literature and a comprehensive overview of the existing approaches in the social sciences to measuring trust and trustworthiness, including interpersonal and institutional forms of trust (Norris, 2023).

This second deliverable in the work package, D01.2 *Methodological paper on trust data harmonization* (Tufiş, Ghica, and Radu, 2023a), was submitted in October 2023 and offered a detailed analysis of the existing measures of trust identified in the trust literature published between 1980 and 2023. The final section of the report focused on the issue of harmonizing trust data and proposed a harmonization scheme that was used in the TRUEDEM project to prepare D01.3 *Long-term trends of political trust dynamics (1980-2023)*, which was submitted in December 2023 (Tufiş, Ghica, and Radu, 2023b).

This deliverable D1.5 *Dynamics of Political Trust in the European Union* presents the mid- and long-term dynamics, as well as national and regional trends, of political trust at the national and European level, using the data collected in D1.3 *Long-term trends of political trust dynamics (1980-2023)* and in D8.1 *2025 TRUEDEM Online Survey* (Haerpfer, Norris, and Kizilova, 2025). The report (D1.5) will become the foundation of the robust and comprehensive knowledge base on long-term developments in trust in political institutions of representative democracy (parties, executives, parliaments, judiciary etc.) – that will be complemented with the findings of other WPs.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Why study institutional trust?

Institutional trust is generally recognized as a necessary condition for effective democratic governance. When citizens trust their institutions, they are more likely to accept political decisions, to comply with legislation, to cooperate with authorities, and to support various policies even when they might require significant costs. From this perspective, trust reduces transaction costs in governance and allows institutions more autonomy and flexibility (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Rothstein and Stolle, 2008). At the other end, medium- and long-term low trust undermines institutional legitimacy, weakens policy compliance, and paves the way for anti-system political actors and populist mobilization (Hetherington, 2005; Norris, 2011).

The existing empirical research shows that institutional trust is related to perceptions of performance, procedural fairness, and integrity in the activities of public institutions. Citizens are more likely to trust institutions they perceive as effective, impartial, and free from corruption (van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2017; Tyler, 2006). High institutional trust is associated with greater tax compliance, higher acceptance of redistributive policies, and stronger willingness to follow public health and security regulations (Levi, 1998; Hetherington & Husser, 2012). Distrust, on the other hand, is associated with political disengagement, protest voting, and declining satisfaction with democracy (Dalton, 2004; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018).

Ever since Easton's work we also know that institutional trust plays an important role in sustaining democratic legitimacy: trust in institutions contributes to diffuse support for the political regime, enabling democratic systems to withstand some periods of poor performance (Easton, 1975; Norris, 1999). Where and when trust erodes persistently, democratic stability is likely to suffer, making political systems more vulnerable to polarization and democratic backsliding (Foa and Mounk, 2016; Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017).

Studying institutional trust has become increasingly important in contemporary Europe. Following the eager optimism caused by a misidentified end of history that characterized the 1990s, since the 2000s the world has been increasingly confronted with repeated systemic challenges that give the impression that we have moved away from a world of individual crises, we have rapidly gone through a poly-crisis world and have now fully arrived into the world of the perma-crisis. This development was probably quite surprising for Europeans: instead of enjoying the victory of democracy marked by the fall of the Iron Curtain, Europe experienced, in quick succession, a global financial crisis, an Eurozone crisis, rising inequality and labor market insecurity, contentious immigration debates, the COVID-19 pandemic, renewed geopolitical threats following Russia's war on Ukraine and, most recently, the threat of a not very friendly divorce from the United States. Each of these crises has tested institutional capacity and responsiveness, raising questions about the capacity and ability of European political systems to retain sufficient public trust to govern effectively in conditions of increased uncertainty and contestation (Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014; Foster and Frieden, 2017; Bol, Giani, Blais, and Loewen, 2021).

It should be clear, from this perspective, that understanding institutional trust is not only an issue of academic interest, but also necessary in order to maintain democratic governance. Mapping how trust has evolved over time, how it differs across countries, and how it is structured within societies, the goals of this report, provides important information for evaluating democratic resilience in present time Europe.

Europe offers the perfect context for studying institutional trust. Within a relatively compact region, most European countries share democratic commitments, significant economic interdependence, and extensive supranational governance through the European Union. At the same time, they also display substantial diversity with respect to state capacity, welfare regime structure, administrative traditions, corruption control, and historical legacies of democratization. This combination of shared overarching structures and heterogeneous national contexts is what makes Europe a natural laboratory for examining how institutional trust forms, evolves, and responds to shocks.

Just to expand a bit on the previous idea:

- Europe contains both some of the world's longest-established democracies and some of the newest democracies, post-communist regimes that underwent rapid institutional transformation after 1989. This allows us to analyze trust formation under conditions of stable institutional continuity as well as in contexts of regime rebuilding and democratic consolidation (Mishler and Rose, 2001; Pop-Elecheș and Tucker, 2017).
- European countries also differ substantially in governance quality and corruption control, factors that have been shown to influence institutional trust (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008; Charron and Lapuente, 2018).
- European welfare states range from the universalistic Nordic models to the fragmented Southern European systems and the post-socialist hybrid arrangements in Central and Eastern Europe, offering further variation in how citizens experience public institutions (Ferrera, 1996; Kumlin and Rothstein, 2010).
- Europe is also the only region in the world where the multi-level governance structure created by the European Union means that citizens have to simultaneously evaluate trust in local, national, and supranational institutions. This allows studying topics such as the distribution of trust across governance levels, the effects of responsibility attribution on institutional evaluations, or the interaction effects between national and EU-level legitimacy (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016; Hooghe and Marks, 2009).
- Europe has experienced multiple shared crises, including financial instability, sovereign debt emergencies, migration pressures, pandemic governance, external security threats, and the possible reorganization of international alliances. These events provide natural experiments for observing how institutional trust responds under stress, and how countries with different institutional designs and political cultures converge or diverge in their trust trajectories (van Erkel and van der Meer, 2016; Esaiasson et al., 2020; Kritzinger et al., 2021).
- Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, Europe benefits from survey infrastructures that allow us to study trust across most if not all European countries over a period of time that is almost half a century long. The European Social Survey, the Eurobarometer, the European Values Study, the World Values Survey, the International Social Survey Programme, as well as other smaller scale research programs provide repeated, comparable measurements of institutional trust across countries and decades. This data richness (which is matched only by the case of the United States) enables systematic longitudinal and cross-national analyses that go far beyond single-country case studies or short-term snapshots.

All these characteristics make the region a perfect laboratory for advancing comparative understanding of institutional trust. The work the different partners have done in the TRUEDEM project is a perfect example of how we focused on understanding institutional trust. This report,

specifically, integrated 46 years of harmonized survey data with a new 2025 cross-sectional survey to provide a comprehensive and dynamic mapping of trust in European institutions.

## 1.2 Main questions

In the preceding section we have shown how existing research has provided important insights into the determinants of trust, documented cross-national differences, and analyzed specific crisis episodes (we expand on this in the next chapter of the report). At the same time, major gaps remain in our understanding of how trust has evolved over longer historical periods, how national trust patterns compare dynamically, how institutional trust is structured today, and how it varies across social groups. In this report, we address these gaps through four main questions.

### 1.2.1 How has trust evolved since 1980?

How have levels of institutional trust in Europe changed over the past 46 years? Multiple studies have examined trust trends over shorter periods (most commonly since the early 2000s, using ESS data, or over specific periods using the Eurobarometer) yet studies of long-term trust trajectories across European countries and institutions from 1980 to the present time are sparse.

There are two reasons we consider this question to be relevant now. First, European countries have undergone profound structural transformations since 1980 (already mentioned in the previous section of the report). Understanding if these transformations have produced long-term erosion, resilience, or divergence in institutional trust is essential for evaluating democratic stability in the region. Second, contemporary debates on democratic backsliding, populism, and political polarization often assume widespread trust decline, without sufficient empirical evidence to sustain the assumption. Providing a systematic analysis of long-term trajectories of trust in Europe fills a key empirical gap and offers a necessary baseline for assessing current democratic conditions.

### 1.2.2 Do countries follow distinct trust trajectories?

The second main question examines whether European countries follow distinct patterns in how institutional trust evolves over time. Different typologies of European political systems assume that institutional characteristics define stable regime families. However, current empirical trust studies suggest that countries within the same group may experience different trust dynamics in response to crises, corruption scandals, governance reforms, or democratic backsliding.

This question moves the focus of the analysis beyond static classifications and asks whether dynamic “trust regimes” can be identified empirically. If countries do cluster into groups with similar long-term trust trajectories, then it is likely that trust dynamics reflect deeper structural or institutional commonalities. If trajectories diverge even within regime families, then it is more likely that trust is shaped by country-specific developments and contingent political events. Identifying dynamic trust-based country groupings has the potential to provide new evidence for understanding how institutional trust evolves across different democratic contexts.

### 1.2.3 What are the current dimensions of trust?

How is institutional trust structured in contemporary Europe? Trust is a complex phenomenon. Citizens may differentiate between political institutions (governments, parliaments), implementing institutions (courts, police), and supranational bodies (EU institutions and international organizations). Previous studies suggest that trust items often cluster into latent dimensions, but evidence remains mixed on whether these structures are consistent across countries and regions or vary with institutional context and political experience (Brunkert, Puranen, Turska-Kawa, and Welzel, 2024; Tufiş, 2012).

This question is relevant today because European governance increasingly operates across multiple levels. Citizens simultaneously evaluate trust in local, national, and supranational institutions, and the legitimacy of European integration depends in part on whether trust in EU institutions forms a distinct attitudinal dimension or is embedded within broader national trust structures. Identifying current trust dimensions therefore provides insight into how Europeans conceptualize authority and responsibility in multi-level governance systems, and whether patterns differ across regions and national contexts.

### **1.3 The structure of the report**

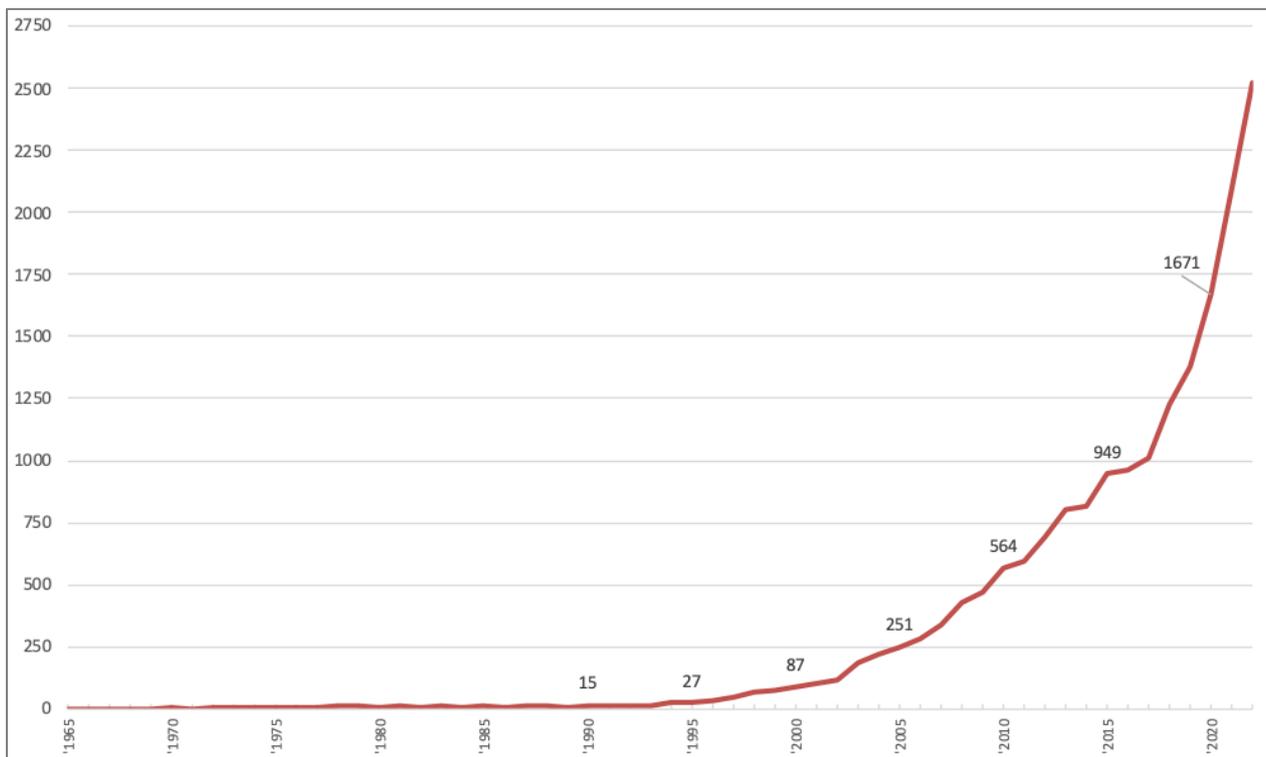
Together, these questions structure the empirical analyses presented in the report. Long-run trend estimation addresses the first question; trajectory clustering addresses the second; polychoric factor analysis of the 2025 survey addresses the third. This design allows us to connect long-term historical developments with contemporary trust structures and social divides, providing a comprehensive assessment of institutional trust in Europe.

The report is organized into several chapters. Chapter 1 has introduced the motivation for studying institutional trust, presented Europe as a comparative setting for analyzing trust variation, and formulated the research questions guiding the analysis. Chapter 2 reviews existing theoretical and empirical research on institutional trust in Europe. It summarizes the main theoretical approaches, documents key empirical findings on long-run trends and post-communist trajectories and identifies the principal knowledge gaps that the present report seeks to address. Chapter 3 describes the data sources and analytical methods used in the study. It introduces the harmonized long-term trend dataset covering the period 1980–2025, the 2025 cross-sectional survey, the regional classification employed in the analyses, and the statistical techniques used to estimate trends, identify country trajectories and clusters, uncover latent trust dimensions, and examine socio-demographic group differences. Chapter 4 presents the long-term trend analyses. It documents European-wide patterns in institutional trust since 1980 and compares regional trajectories. Chapter 5 identifies clusters of countries with similar trust dynamics. Chapter 6 focuses on contemporary trust structures using the 2025 cross-sectional survey. It analyzes the dimensional structure of institutional trust across Europe, regions, and countries. Chapter 7 concludes the report.

## 2 Existing Research

Before proceeding on with our report, we stop for a while to discuss what the current literature has to tell us about the topic of institutional trust. Research on institutional trust has increased significantly since the 2000s (see Figure 1), both for reasons that have to do with the increased demand for academic publications, and for reasons that have to do with an increased interest in the topic (for a detailed discussion of this trend, see Tufiş, Ghica, and Radu, 2023a).

*Figure 1 Articles containing “trust” in metadata, Scopus or Web of Science, 1965-2022*



Source: authors' compilation from data collected from Scopus and Web of Science

### 2.1 Theories of institutional trust

The existing institutional trust literature can be summarized as belonging to one of three partially overlapping perspectives. The first (from an economic/rational perspective) interprets trust as based on the evaluation of institutional performance. The second (from a social/cultural perspective) understands trust as linked to cultural orientations and social capital, which define generalized expectations about others and about institutions. The third (from a political perspective) sees trust as linked to broader questions of political legitimacy, distinguishing between support for incumbents, institutions, and the political regime as a whole.

It should be mentioned that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, as in practice, most studies understand trust as an outcome of both short-/medium-term evaluations and longer-term predispositions, operating within institutional contexts that influence how citizens attribute responsibility. What differs across these perspectives is their main focus, the time horizon of change they expect, and the mechanisms through which trust is built and eroded.

### 2.1.1 Performance-based

Many studies of institutional trust define it as a judgment about how well institutions work. From this perspective, trust is not a fixed attitude but a reasoned evaluation. Citizens observe how institutions perform, evaluate whether procedures are fair, and update their trust accordingly. When institutions offer public services effectively, manage crises competently, and act impartially, trust tends to increase. When institutions appear inefficient, corrupt, or unresponsive, trust tends to erode. The appeal of this perspective comes from the fact that the evaluations are based on citizens' direct, everyday interactions with the institutions that are being evaluated. This mechanism leads to developing trust when people's experiences confirm their expectations or developing distrust when the expectations are not confirmed.

Comparative analyses of European countries show that trust is shaped by both performance outcomes (i.e. economic conditions and policy effectiveness) and procedural evaluations (i.e. fairness, transparency, and lack of corruption). Citizens distinguish between these two components and treat them as separate, so that both independently predict trust in political institutions (van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). From this perspective, trust is more than simple satisfaction; it is determined by citizens judging institutions against normative standards of good governance.

In this framework, trust matters because it functions as a political heuristic or cognitive shortcut. When citizens trust institutions, they are more willing to accept policies with uncertain outcomes, to comply with regulations, and to grant authorities discretion in managing public affairs. When people expect institutions to act competently and in good faith, there is a reduced need for constant monitoring and contestation (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Declining trust, in turn, generates skeptical citizens, who resist policy initiatives even when they might align with their interests (Hetherington, 2005).

At the same time, performance-based explanations of trust recognize that performance signals do not operate in a vacuum. Citizens must be able to properly attribute responsibility for outcomes, and they must receive information about institutional behavior through media and political discourse. Where responsibility attribution is more difficult (e.g. in coalition governments or in multi-level governance systems), citizens also have a more difficult time in basing trust on performance and in rewarding the relevant political actors with it. This is particularly relevant in the European context, where national and EU institutions share authority, so that trust may shift across governance levels rather than simply rising or falling in parallel.

This is the main perspective for short-/medium-term changes in institutional trust. It explains why trust declines during economic crises, corruption scandals, or policy failures, and also why it may recover when governance improves. It has a more difficult time, however, in explaining why some societies exhibit higher trust over long periods even when they experience similar shocks. Cultural and social-capital perspectives are better suited at explaining such cases.

### 2.1.2 Cultural/social capital

Studies that belong to this perspective start from the assumption that trust is a general orientation toward others and toward collective life. If this assumption is true, then societies differ in their trust cultures, which are shaped by historical experience, social norms, and patterns of interpersonal cooperation. Institutional trust is understood as an extension of these deeper social predispositions.

Putnam's research on social capital is exemplary for this perspective. In *Making Democracy Work*, Putnam argued that dense networks of civic association and norms of reciprocity foster cooperative behavior and effective governance, which in turn sustain trust in public institutions (Putnam, 1993).

Where people are accustomed to cooperating, volunteering, and participating in community life, trusting institutions becomes a natural extension of trusting others. Uslaner also contributed to this perspective, by arguing that most people hold a stable belief about whether others can be trusted. He characterizes this as a moral outlook, learned early in life and relatively resistant to short-term political events (Uslaner, 2002). From his perspective, institutional trust reflects whether citizens believe that public officials are likely to act in good faith rather than exploit their power.

As the field developed, some authors argued that the causality should be inverted: it is not trusting citizens that create good institutions; it is impartial and fair institutions that can create trustful citizens. Rothstein and Stolle argue that when public institutions treat citizens fairly and predictably, individuals infer that others are also likely to follow rules, leading to higher generalized trust (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008). In the end, researchers have come to a more nuanced conclusion. Social and cultural predispositions matter, especially in explaining why countries differ in baseline trust levels over long periods. At the same time, these predispositions themselves are shaped by institutional experiences. Trust is therefore neither fully inherited nor fully situational: it is the product of long-run institutional histories interacting with contemporary performance.

This perspective is particularly relevant for Europe, a region that includes not only Nordic countries, with long histories of impartial administration and low corruption, with high social and institutional trust, but also post-communist countries, with historically coercive and unaccountable state institutions, and with divergent trajectories of trust as institutional reforms took hold. Such patterns cannot be explained by performance or culture alone; they reflect their interaction.

### **2.1.3 Political legitimacy**

The third perspective interprets institutional trust within broader debates about political legitimacy. Institutional trust is more than an evaluation of current performance or a reflection of social predispositions; it is interpreted as a belief that institutions have the right to govern. Trust signals that citizens accept political authority as appropriate and are willing to comply even when they don't necessarily agree with specific decisions. This perspective is based on Easton's (1975) distinction between specific support (approval of incumbents and current authorities) and diffuse support (attachment to institutions and the political regime). Institutional trust belongs primarily to the domain of diffuse support, allowing political systems to endure periods of dissatisfaction with governments without sliding into regime rejection.

Starting from Easton's distinction, Norris's work on critical citizens shows that modern citizens have become more demanding and skeptical of political elites while still supporting democratic principles (Norris, 1999; Norris, 2011). Declining trust in political institutions does not automatically imply democratic breakdown, as it may reflect rising expectations and increased scrutiny, changing the evaluation frame. Yet long periods of sustained low trust, especially when combined with widespread perceptions of unfairness or corruption, can weaken the foundations of democratic stability.

This perspective is helpful in understanding multi-level governance in Europe, as citizens may have different levels of trust for local/national/supranational institutions. Conflicts between different levels of authority, strategic institutional scape-goating, unclear responsibility, or perceptions of distant decision-making can generate legitimacy challenges for EU institutions. Understanding institutional trust in Europe requires analyzing not only performance but also how citizens interpret the appropriateness of authority across governance layers. The legitimacy approach is a bridge between micro-level trust attitudes and macro-level democratic resilience, explaining why trust is politically consequential.

As it should be clear from the discussion in this section, no single perspective can fully explain trust dynamics, as institutional trust is created from the interaction of inherited social predispositions, accumulated institutional experiences, and real-time evaluations of governance. This approach informs the analytical strategy of the present report, which combines long-term trend analysis, trajectory-based comparisons, and contemporary group-difference analyses in an attempt to capture as much as possible from the three layers of trust formation.

## 2.2 Empirical findings on trust in Europe

Empirical research on institutional trust in Europe has expanded quickly over the past two decades, supported by two especially important infrastructures: the European Social Survey (ESS) and the Eurobarometer. Together with other research projects, these infrastructures have enabled researchers to track trust in core political institutions (parliaments, parties, politicians, governments) and in EU-level institutions (European Parliament, European Commission, the EU as a whole), and to link changes in trust to macroeconomic conditions, governance performance, and major political crises.

While some European countries exhibit stable differences in baseline trust levels, within-country trust is far from static. It responds to political performance, institutional reforms, and crisis events. Trust in Europe is best understood not as a uniform continental trend but as a set of diverging national and regional trajectories shaped by shared shocks and distinct institutional histories.

One of the most robust findings is that citizens distinguish clearly between different types of institutions. Representative political bodies such as parties, parliaments, and politicians tend to attract lower and more volatile trust than implementing institutions such as courts, police, or public administrations. This pattern appears across most European countries, reflecting the fact that representative institutions are closely associated with political conflict, broken promises, and responsibility for unpopular policies, whereas implementing institutions are more often evaluated in terms of procedural fairness and competence. This institutional differentiation has important implications for democratic legitimacy: dissatisfaction with political actors does not automatically translate into rejection of the state or the democratic regime, but persistent distrust in representative institutions can weaken the quality of representation and open space for anti-establishment appeals (Dalton, 2004; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018; Valgarðsson et al., 2025).

At the same time, Europe is characterized by significant cross-national variation. Northern European countries have consistently ranked among the highest-trust societies, combining high trust in political institutions with strong generalized social trust. Western European countries typically show moderate but relatively stable trust levels. Southern European countries usually have lower and more volatile trust, reflecting fragmented party systems, weaker administrative traditions, and recurring political crises. Lastly, Central and Eastern European countries entered the post-1989 period with different levels of institutional trust, shaped by experiences of authoritarian rule and state socialism, and have continued on diverging paths. In some cases, trust improved as democratic institutions consolidated and governance improved, while in others trust has stagnated or declined in connection with corruption scandals, democratic backsliding, or economic insecurity (Mishler and Rose, 2001; Pop-Elecheș and Tucker, 2017; Rothstein and Stolle, 2008).

These regional regularities are doubled by strong national specificity. Countries exposed to similar external shocks have often responded differently, a development best observed during the global financial crisis. In several Southern European countries, trust in national political institutions crashed during austerity, while recovery has been slow and not always complete. In contrast, some

Northern and Western European countries experienced only moderate and short-lived trust declines. Central and Eastern European countries displayed mixed responses, depending on institutional resilience, corruption control, and political stability. These patterns support the broader conclusion that trust reacts to crisis-driven performance signals, but that the magnitude and persistence of these reactions depend on pre-existing institutional credibility and governance quality (Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014; Foster and Frieden, 2017; van Erkel and van der Meer, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic, a different type of crisis, produced a different dynamic. In many European countries, trust in governments and public authorities increased at the onset of the crisis, a rally around the flag effect in the face of external threat and uncertainty. But this has been only an uneven, short-lived effect, as trust returned to pre-crisis levels once emergency measures became politicized and fatigue set in. This episode confirmed the insight that institutional trust is sensitive not only to objective performance outcomes but also to perceptions of fairness, transparency, and accountability in crisis management (Bol et al., 2021; Esaiasson et al., 2020; Kritzinger et al., 2021).

Another important empirical finding reflects the complex relationship between national and supra-national trust in Europe. Citizens do not react uniformly across all governance levels. Trust in EU institutions sometimes moves in parallel with trust in national institutions during periods of economic or political stress, but it can also diverge, when responsibility for outcomes is attributed differently. During the Eurozone crisis, for instance, trust in EU institutions declined sharply in countries where European actors were perceived as imposing unpopular austerity measures, while in some Central and Eastern European countries EU institutions retained higher trust than domestic ones, reflecting perceptions of the EU as a guarantor of governance standards. These findings highlight that institutional trust in Europe is structured by a multi-level political order and cannot be reduced to purely national dynamics (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Sericchio et al., 2013).

Finally, empirical research has also offered evidence that trust is socially distributed. Lower trust in political institutions is usually associated with lower education, lower income, economic insecurity, and peripheral territorial locations, though the magnitude of these divides varies across countries. These differences in trust have become quite important in recent years, as political mobilization by populist and anti-establishment actors has often drawn support from groups expressing strong distrust in political institutions. The evidence suggests that social stratification of trust is a central feature of European politics (Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018; Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017).

Summing up, institutional trust in Europe is neither in uniform decline nor permanently fixed. It is anchored in long-term institutional histories, influenced by crisis-driven performance evaluations, differentiated across types and levels of institutions, and unequally distributed across social groups. These findings underline the importance of combining short-term snapshots and static regime typologies with integrated analyses that trace national trust trajectories over time, identify dynamic country clusters, and link long-run patterns with contemporary trust structures.

## 2.3 Knowledge gaps

Despite the richness of existing research, two significant gaps remain in the comparative study of institutional trust in Europe. These gaps concern, first, the lack of harmonized long-run trend synthesis, and second, the absence of dynamic country-regime classifications based on trust trajectories. The existing research suffers from the quasi-absence of comprehensive, harmonized analyses of long-term trajectories of trust across European countries and institutions (Valgarðsson et al, 2025 represents one well timed exception). Most empirical studies rely on single survey programs or on limited time windows defined by specific research questions. While these studies have produced valuable insights into particular periods and institutional objects, they do not provide an integrated view of trust dynamics across multiple decades, multiple countries, and multiple institutions. Most existing research often provides fragmented evidence, making it difficult to distinguish between short-term fluctuations and long-term structural shifts in institutional trust.

The data that we use in this report, the TRUEDEM long-term trend dataset, directly addresses this gap by harmonizing trust indicators from all major European survey infrastructures from 1980 to 2025. By integrating EVS, WVS, ESS, ISSP, Eurobarometer, and regional barometer series into a single country-year panel, the dataset enables systematic long-run analysis of institutional trust across countries and institutions. The analyses presented in this report therefore move beyond period-specific studies and offer a continuous 46-year mapping of European trajectories of trust. This provides the empirical foundation for properly assessing trust in Europe.

A second major gap concerns the lack of dynamic classifications of European countries based on trust trajectories. Existing typologies of European political systems are typically constructed from institutional or economic characteristics. Although these typologies are theoretically grounded and widely used, they are static, assuming that countries belong to fixed regime families, and do not incorporate how public attitudes toward institutions evolve over time.

Empirical trust research has shown that similar countries can follow different trust trajectories, particularly in response to crises, governance reforms, corruption scandals, or democratic backsliding. Despite this empirical observation, existing comparative studies rarely attempt to classify countries based on observed trust trajectories, rather than on pre-defined institutional categories. As a result, we lack a systematic understanding of whether European countries form distinct trust regimes characterized by similar long-term patterns of institutional trust.

We address this gap by applying trajectory-based clustering methods to long-term country time series of institutional trust. Instead of assuming regime types a priori, we identify groups of countries whose trust levels have evolved in similar ways over the past four decades. This approach allows us to examine whether conventional regional or institutional typologies align with empirically observed trust regimes, or whether new, substantively meaningful groupings emerge. In doing so, we provide a dynamic country classification grounded in observed trust behavior, rather than in static institutional attributes alone.

Overall, through our analytic approach we address the gaps we identified, placing this report at the intersection of performance-based, cultural, and legitimacy-based studies, while adding a new dynamic comparative perspective that has so far been missing from the European trust literature. In the next chapter we describe a harmonized longitudinal dataset covering four decades of trust measurements and a new 2025 cross-sectional survey, along with an analytical strategy designed to capture both long-term trajectories and contemporary trust structures. Subsequent chapters use these to document European, regional, and national trends; to identify clusters of countries with similar trust dynamics; and to examine the dimensions of trust in 2025.

### 3 Data and Methods

This chapter describes the data sources and analytical procedures we used in the report. The empirical strategy combines a longitudinal perspective, capturing changes in institutional trust in European countries from 1980 to 2025, with a cross-sectional perspective, providing detailed information on trust structures and social divides in 2025. Bringing together these two data components allows us to examine both long-term dynamics and contemporary patterns of institutional trust, and to link historical trajectories with current attitudinal structures.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first two sections we describe the two datasets, including their coverage, harmonization procedures, and key methodological choices in data preparation. We explain, then, the regional classification we used and its theoretical justification. The next section outlines our analytical strategy, detailing the statistical techniques we applied in trend estimation, clustering, dimensional analysis, and group comparisons. The chapter concludes with a brief note on software tools and implementation.

#### 3.1 Long-term trend dataset (1980–2023)

The analysis of long-term dynamics of institutional trust in Europe is based primarily on the *Long-Term Trends of Political Trust Dynamics* dataset developed within the TRUEDEM project (Tufiş, Ghica, Radu, 2023b). The dataset was designed to provide harmonized longitudinal indicators of trust in political and social institutions across European countries from 1980 to 2023, with the goal of allowing systematic analyses of changes in institutional trust over extended time periods and across national contexts.

The dataset combines information from the main international comparative survey programs that have repeatedly measured institutional trust in European countries over the past four decades (European Values Study (EVS), World Values Survey (WVS), European Social Survey (ESS), International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), Eurobarometer (Standard, Special, Flash, CEEB, and CCEB series), New Europe Barometer (NEB), Central and Eastern European Barometer (CEEb), Applicant and Candidate Countries Eurobarometer (CCEB)). The original dataset included data up to 2023, the year it was published (see Figure 2). For the purposes of this report, we have extended the temporal coverage up to 2025, using the available Eurobarometer surveys and the 2025 cross-sectional online survey collected in the TRUEDEM project.

Figure 2 shows a map of Europe indicating the number of years for which trust measurements are available in each country. This highlights both the broad geographical scope of the dataset and the uneven historical depth of coverage across countries. In its current version, the dataset offers harmonized data for more than 90 indicators of political and social trust in European countries from 1980 to 2025.

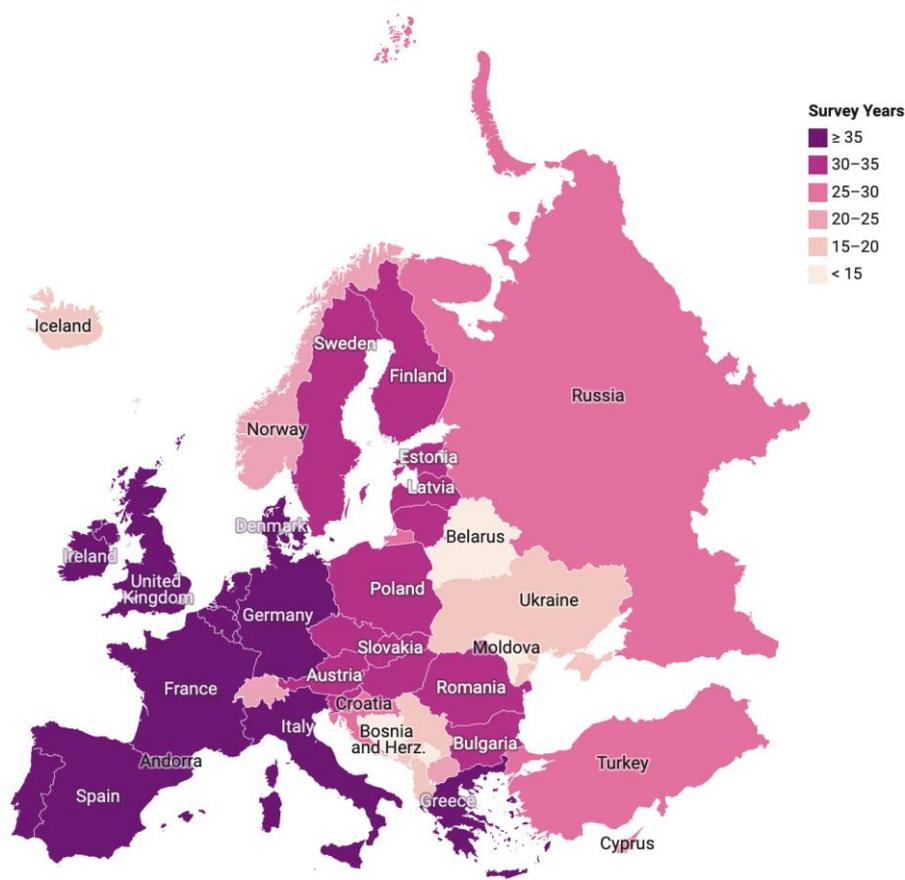
For this report we have kept in analysis only the countries that had sufficient data for the measures of political trust we are analyzing in the report. Thus, the report analyzes trust data for the following 30 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Ukraine.

We are using for our analyses the 2-point scale harmonized indicators of trust available in the long-term trend dataset, focusing on the percentage of respondents expressing trust in each institution.

This yields continuous country–year indicators ranging from 0 to 100 percent, enabling direct comparison across surveys, countries, and years.

For several countries and years, more than one survey measured trust in the same institution. This occurs when different survey programs field comparable questions in the same calendar year or when repeated waves of a survey take place within a short interval. To ensure that each country–year contributes only one observation per institution, all harmonized trust measures observed within the same country and year are averaged to produce a single annual data point. This approach prevents over-representation of countries or years with dense survey coverage and reduces idiosyncratic survey noise arising from sampling variation or minor wording differences. This aggregation procedure is standard, and it is used in other longitudinal cross-survey harmonization projects, including the OECD Trust Database (OECD, 2017), Varieties of Democracy (Coppedge et al., 2020), or the Global State of Democracy Indices (Tufiş and Hudson, 2025). Averaging multiple observations assumes that surveys fielded within the same year capture the same underlying population attitude. Minor residual inconsistencies in question wording or fieldwork timing may remain. In addition, averaging may smooth short-term shocks in trust linked to rapidly unfolding political events. Given the report’s focus on long-term dynamics over four decades, this loss of high-frequency variation is considered acceptable.

*Figure 2 Coverage in the Long-Term Trends of Political Trust Dynamics dataset*



Map source: Tufiş, Ghica, Radu, 2023b.

Survey fieldwork does not occur in every country in every year. To allow visualization of continuous trajectories and implementation of time-series clustering algorithms, we decided to apply linear interpolation between adjacent observed years to estimate missing annual values. This method does not modify the original observed data points; it just provides estimated values for those years without direct survey measurements, based on the assumption that the changes from one year to the next are linear. We use interpolated data only for trend visualization and trajectory analysis. Linear interpolation of missing data to construct continuous national time series is standard practice in major comparative projects (see, for instance, Coppedge et al., 2020, or Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, 2010).

### **3.2 2025 cross-sectional survey**

To complement the long-term trend analysis, we also use in the report data from the 2025 TRUEDEM Online Survey (Haerpfer, Norris, and Kizilova, 2025). This survey provides a cross-sectional snapshot of institutional trust, social trust, and political attitudes across European countries in 2025. The survey was implemented online, administered to nationally-representative adult samples in 24 European Union countries (we have excluded the three member countries with population under one million: Cyprus, Luxembourg, and Malta) using a common methodology and coordinated fieldwork procedures. For more details, see Haerpfer, Norris, and Kizilova (2025).

The 2025 survey covers 24 European Union member countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. The survey was conducted online, with questionnaires administered in national languages. The dataset includes post-stratification weights to adjust for minor deviations from population distributions.

The questionnaire includes an extensive battery of trust questions. We include in our analyses in this report only indicators of trust in political institutions at the local, regional, national, or supra-national level. More specifically, we use indicators of trust in the government, the regional government, the parliament, political parties, justice, the head of state, the head of government, elections, the army, the church, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council, and the United Nations.

In addition to trust indicators, the survey also includes measures of perceived institutional performance, media use, political participation, democratic preferences, populist attitudes, and socio-demographic characteristics. We use some of these variables in later sections in the report to examine social divides in trust.

### **3.3 Regional classification**

While the data we use are collected at country level (long-term trends) or within countries (2025 cross-sectional survey), we are not going to restrict our analyses only at country level; we are also analyzing the trends and patterns of trust at the level of the whole European Union, as well as the level of several European regions. Comparative research on political institutions and public attitudes has shown that European countries are not independent observations. They belong to broader historical and institutional families, defined by shared state traditions, welfare regimes, patterns of economic development, and experiences of democratization.

We decided to group the countries we analyze into four regions: Northern Europe, Western Europe, Southern Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe. We will use this classification consistently in all sections of the report, in an attempt to uncover if countries with similar institutional contexts also display similar levels, trajectories, and structures of institutional trust. Grouping countries into regions provides a useful intermediate level of comparison between all-European averages and national case studies. It should be noted that our grouping of the countries in these regions does not imply the regions are perfectly homogenous. The groupings we have selected are widely used typologies in comparative political science, that identify persistent similarities across European countries. Analyses at the regional level will complement country-level analyses.

The four-region classification we use is based on typical classifications used in comparative research. Northern European countries (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden in this report) are commonly treated as a distinct cluster characterized by high state capacity, universalistic welfare regimes, low corruption, and high levels of social and institutional trust, characteristics that are linked to stable democratic performance and high confidence in public institutions (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008; Kumlin and Rothstein, 2010).

Western European countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Switzerland in this report) share long-established democratic institutions, mature welfare states, and relatively high administrative capacity. They typically display moderate to high levels of trust in institutions and relatively stable long-term trajectories, making them a coherent reference group in comparative analyses (Norris, 2012).

Southern European countries (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain in this report) are frequently identified as a separate cluster in welfare regime theory and studies of political legitimacy. These countries combine later democratic consolidation with more fragmented state institutions and historically lower interpersonal and institutional trust. Previous studies show they experienced sharper declines in institutional trust during economic and political crises, followed by partial recoveries (Armingeon and Baccaro, 2012; Foster and Frieden, 2017).

Finally, Central and Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine in this report) share the experience of post-communist democratic transition. The collapse of state socialism produced initially low trust in political institutions, followed by divergent rebuilding trajectories shaped by economic reforms, EU accession, and varying degrees of democratic consolidation. Numerous studies document distinctive trust patterns in post-communist Europe by comparison to older democracies (Mishler and Rose, 2001; Pop-Elecheș and Tucker, 2017).

### **3.4 Analytical strategy**

In order to simplify the presentation of our analyses in the rest of the report, we have decided to describe in more detail in this section the analyses that we ran. We structured our analyses around six complementary components: LOESS trend estimation for long-run visualization, regional aggregation, country trajectory profiles, trajectory clustering, polychoric factor analysis of trust dimensions in 2025, and group-difference models using both descriptive and adjusted comparisons.

For the long-term analyses, trust is measured as the percentage of respondents expressing trust in an institution (0–100). Annual series are constructed from harmonized survey measures, averaged within years when multiple observations exist, and linearly interpolated for missing years to support continuous trend visualization and trajectory methods. For the 2025 survey, trust items are

measured on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (low trust) to 4 (high trust). We treated these variables as ordinal variables for the dimensional analysis and as quasi-continuous measures for descriptive and adjusted group comparisons.

**Trend estimation.** To summarize trust trajectories, we use LOESS smoothing (locally estimated scatterplot smoothing) to estimate non-linear trends over time. LOESS fits local regressions within moving neighborhoods of the time axis and then stitches these local fits into a smooth curve. This approach is well suited to survey-based time series because it can capture gradual shifts, turning points, and longer cycles without imposing a fixed functional form (Cleveland, 1978). We use LOESS trends for visual interpretation rather than causal inference. The smoothing parameter is held constant within each figure type to ensure comparability across countries and regions. Where data density is limited (early years in most cases), we take a cautious approach in interpreting the curves, using them mostly to indicate broad directional patterns.

**Regional aggregation.** To complement country-level trends, we also estimate trajectories at the level of four regions: Northern Europe, Western Europe, Southern Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe. The main goals of the regional analyses are to simplify the interpretation when comparing many countries over long periods and to tests if countries with similar institutional and historical setups show similar trust dynamics. We compute the regional and European trends as the mean of country-year trust values within each corresponding region. Since regional averages can conceal divergence within regions, we always interpret them together with country trajectories and by comparison to trends in other regions.

**Country trajectories.** We also present country trajectories to document national patterns and to identify deviations from regional or European averages, using one or more of the following displays: (1) observed-and-interpolated country series (country lines) to show long-run movement; (2) country small-multiples (one panel per country, consistent axes) to facilitate systematic comparison; (3) country deviations from regional means to highlight divergence and convergence. When interpreting the country trajectories, we keep in mind that volatility may be caused by sparse data in some cases, so we tend to focus on what we consider to be robust patterns. The country trajectories also provide the empirical basis for the clustering approach we discuss next.

**Trajectory clustering.** To identify groups of countries with similar trust dynamics over time, we use trajectory clustering using the country-level time series as input data. Our goal is to identify possible empirically grounded “trust regimes”, i.e. groups of countries that show similar long-term patterns in levels and/or changes of trust. We compute this via hierarchical clustering, using a trajectory distance measure based on similarity of entire time series (shape and co-movement) and a Ward-type linkage rule that tends to produce compact clusters (Kaufman and Rousseeuw, 1990).

In clustering, we opted to emphasize the shape of the trajectory (similar rises and declines regardless of level) rather than the level (low / average / high trust), the reasoning behind being that the shape contains more information than the level and that we can add information on the level at any moment in our interpretation based on the country trajectories. Thus, we standardized the trajectories prior to clustering. Given that we have 30 countries in our analysis, we explored 5-clusters solutions and assessed their interpretability using cluster-average trajectories and country membership stability. Readers that are less familiar with clustering should keep in mind that clustering is an exploratory type of analysis, as clusters are not “true” categories but rather analytical tools. We do use the results of the clustering analyses as a structured summary of patterns rather than a definitive classification.

**Polychoric factor analysis.** The 2025 cross-sectional survey contains multiple trust items measured on ordinal response scales. In order to identify latent dimensions of institutional trust, we use polychoric factor analysis. Polychoric correlations estimate the association between ordinal variables under the assumption that each observed item reflects a discretized version of a continuous latent response. This is the recommended approach when items have a small number of ordered categories (such as our data, measured using a 4-point Likert scale), because Pearson correlations can underestimate associations if used on ordinal measures with skewed distributions (Olsson, 1979; Holgado-Tello et al., 2010).

We use the polychoric correlation matrices as input data then we run exploratory factor analyses (EFA) to identify the number and meaning of trust dimensions. We extract the factors based on eigenvalues (using the value of 1 as threshold) and we use an oblique rotation (oblimin), because we have the dimensions of institutional trust to be correlated. We run these analyses for Europe overall, each region, and each country, to assess the stability and comparability of trust structures.

In interpreting the factorial solutions, we focus on loading patterns, factor correlations, and the conceptual coherence of institution groupings. We treat the differences we identify across regions and countries as substantive results, not as statistical noise.

### 3.5 A word on software

We conducted all our analyses using R (version 4.5.0). For longitudinal data processing, interpolation, and LOESS smoothing we used standard data manipulation and visualization packages (*dplyr*, *tidyr*, and *ggplot2*). For time-series restructuring and panel construction we used *tidyr* and *zoo* for interpolation of missing years. For trajectory clustering we used hierarchical clustering routines from base R, supported by cluster-validation tools from *factoextra* (<https://doi.org/10.32614/CRAN.package.factoextra>). For polychoric correlations and exploratory factor analyses for ordinal trust items we used the *psych* (<https://doi.org/10.32614/CRAN.package.psych>) package, which provides established routines for polychoric correlation estimation and factor extraction appropriate for Likert-type variables. Oblique factor rotations were implemented using built-in rotation procedures within the same framework.

## 4 Trajectories of trust

In analyzing long-term trajectories of institutional trust, we start from the observation that citizens do not relate to all institutions in the same way. Institutions differ in the level at which they operate, the functions they perform, and the kinds of legitimacy they draw upon. Comparative studies on political attitudes consistently show that people form different evaluative judgments toward different institutions, rather than expressing a single undifferentiated orientation toward all institutions. Grouping institutions into specific categories will allow readers an easier interpretation of trajectories of trust and a better understanding of the institutions that are driving legitimacy dynamics in a broader sense.

We have decided to structure our analysis on a classification that reflects three underlying distinctions emphasized in the trust literature:

- level of governance (supranational, national, local institutions)
- institutional function (representative, implementing, informational institutions)
- symbolic or identity-based authority.

Each of these distinctions is widely used in research on political support and legitimacy, even if specific terminologies might differ a bit (Weatherford, 1992; Scharpf, 1999; Papadopoulos, 2010). Based on the selected classification, we analyze here trust in 20 institutions, grouped in five different categories which we briefly describe below.

**Supranational institutions.** Supranational institutions (the European Union, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the United Nations, and NATO) exercise authority beyond the nation-state. Trust in these bodies depends on perceptions of international cooperation, problem-solving capacity, and shared sovereignty, but also on concerns about distance, democratic accountability, and complexity.

Previous studies of European governance emphasized that citizens evaluate supranational institutions differently from the national ones, as responsibility for outcomes is often diffuse and political contestation is mediated through domestic actors (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000; Hix and Høyland, 2011). Moreover, trust in supranational institutions can follow trajectories that diverge from national trust, particularly when international organizations become directly associated with controversial policy interventions or security commitments (Anderson, 1998; Hartevelde, van der Meer, and Vries, 2013). Treating supranational institutions as a distinct category reflects the unique legitimacy challenges of authority beyond the nation-state.

**National/representative institutions** (the government, the parliament, political parties, and politicians) form the institutional core of representative democracy. These are the primary objects of electoral accountability and political competition, and the main channel through which citizens experience democratic responsiveness.

Previous studies show that the representative institutions are especially vulnerable to distrust, because they embody political conflict, partisan rivalry, and unmet expectations (Pharr and Putnam, 2000). Trust in these institutions is closely linked to perceptions of political efficacy, representation quality, and integrity of political elites. Their trajectories provide a direct indicator of how citizens evaluate the functioning of democratic representation over time.

**Local/implementing institutions** (the courts, the police, local government, public administration) operate as the interface between citizens and the state. Usually, citizens evaluate them in terms of fairness, professionalism, and service delivery, rather than in ideological terms.

Previous studies have shown that perceptions of impartial treatment and predictable enforcement are key determinants of trust in such institutions (Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence, 2003; Tyler and Jackson, 2014). Comparative governance studies also show that trust in administrative and judicial institutions is associated with perceived corruption control and bureaucratic quality (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, 2010; Dahlström, Lapuente, and Teorell, 2012). Grouping these institutions together captures a dimension of trust centered on state capacity and procedural justice, not on partisan politics.

**Mass media/informational institutions** (the written press, radio, tv, the internet, social networks) play a distinct role in modern democracies by shaping political information, framing institutional performance, and mediating public accountability. These institutions have the potential to influence how citizens form judgments about all other institutions.

Research on media credibility shows that trust in news organizations follows its own dynamics, being influenced by technological changes, partisan polarization, and concerns about misinformation (Tsfati, Strömbäck, and Fawzi, 2025; Fletcher and Park, 2017). Traditional broadcast and print media typically have different trust trajectories than online and social media platforms, reflecting contrasting perceptions of professionalism and reliability and also different audiences. Treating media as a separate institutional category allows us to uncover how trust in information intermediaries is linked to trust in political authority.

**Symbolic institutions** (the church, the army) derive their legitimacy not necessarily from governance performance but rather from their symbolic links to national identity and moral order. In European societies, the church and the armed forces are the relevant examples. They often stand outside routine political contestation and are associated with tradition, collective memory, and the protection of the national community. Previous studies have shown that symbolic institutions can maintain distinct trust profiles even when trust in political institutions fluctuates dramatically (Bruce, 2011; Accorsi and Krebs, 2024). At the same time, changes in the functioning of these institutions (secularization, professionalization of armed forces, and changing civil–military norms) have gradually changed their legitimacy. Their trajectories of trust offer insight into deeper cultural and identity-based transformations rather than short-term political performance.

In the rest of the chapter, we will discuss the trajectories of trust for each of the 20 institutions, grouped in the five categories we have already described. In order to not crowd the text with multiple figures, we will present the discussion first and then we will present trust trajectories for Europe as a whole, for the four European regions (Northern Europe, Western Europe, Southern Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe), and at country level grouped at the end of the section.

Given the large number of institutions analyzed in the report, for each of the five groups of institutions we discuss in more detail one institution which we consider representative for the group. For the remaining institutions in the group we offer only a brief discussion, going in more details only if the trajectory of trust requires it.

We believe that in this way we can reach a balance offering informative interpretations of the evolution of trust without drowning the reader with minute details which do not fit the purpose of our report. Readers interested in particular combinations of institutions and countries which we do not discuss in detail can use the figures in the chapter to gain more information.

## 4.1 Supra-national institutions

The European-level trajectory of trust in the European Union (Figure 4) reveals a pattern of medium-term fluctuation, not one of monotonic decline or steady growth. Beginning in the early 1990s, slightly more than 50% of the Europeans had trust in the EU. From this initial point, trust declines gradually during the 1990s, reaching a local minimum during the mid-to-late 1990s. This period coincides with the post-Maastricht phase of integration, when EU authority expanded, leading to an increase in public debates on democratic accountability and economic convergence. While a graph cannot prove causality, the timing is consistent with the interpretation of growing public ambivalence toward EU governance during this phase.

From the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, trust increases, peaking around the mid-2000s. This upward movement aligns with a period of economic expansion across most EU member states and the optimism surrounding the Eastern enlargement. This was followed, however, by a pronounced decline starting in the late 2000s and continuing into the early 2010s, with the lowest point around 2013–2014. This decline corresponds closely to the global financial crisis and the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis.

From the mid-2010s onward, trust in the EU gradually recovers, with a noticeable upward trend continuing through the mid-2020s. By the end of the series, EU-level trust has returned to, and slightly surpassed, the early 1990s levels. This recovery suggests that the crisis-induced loss of trust in the EU was not permanent, and that EU institutional legitimacy was resilient on long term.

Two general conclusions emerge from Figure 4. First, trust in the EU is responsive to macro-political and macro-economic events, showing clear downturns during periods of systemic stress. Second, despite volatility, there is no evidence of long-term secular erosion of trust in the EU across the whole time series; instead, the trajectory can be described as cycles of decline and recovery.

Disaggregating the European trajectory into trajectories across the four regional clusters (Figure 5) reveals distinct regional dynamics. Country trajectories (Figure 6) confirm that regional patterns are not artifacts of averaging: they do reflect coherent country-level movements, although in some cases we can identify significant national deviations.

Northern European countries show the highest increase in trust levels. Starting from the lowest level of trust in the EU among the four regions, trust declines in the 1990s, increases after 2000, and shows a limited decline during the Eurozone crisis years. From the mid-2010s on, trust increases, reaching its highest level by the end of the time series. The relative stability and high levels of trust in the EU are consistent with these countries' strong administrative capacity, high-quality governance, and long-standing legitimacy of public institutions. It should be noted that the region acted as a buffer against an even deeper decline during the 2005–2014 period at the European level.

The trajectory of trust in Western European countries is mostly similar to the European average: trust declines in the 1990s, recovers in the early 2000s, falls significantly during the Eurozone crisis, and rebounds gradually after 2015. By 2025, trust levels return to their 1990s starting point. This pattern suggests that Western Europe experienced the crisis as a temporary but substantial confidence shock, followed by a recovery that restored the initial legitimacy levels. Among the nine Western European countries included in analysis, two stand out with respect to the trajectory of trust in the European Union. France is the only country in the group which shows a declining pattern over the whole period of time. Austria shows an opposing trend, with trust in the EU significantly increasing over the same time period. All other countries conform to varying degrees to the general pattern of the region.

The trajectory in Southern Europe is quite different. Trust remains moderate through the 1990s and early 2000s, then it shows the largest decline across the European regions from 2008 to its lowest point around 2013–2014. After 2015 trust begins to recover, and by 2025 it returns close to its pre-crisis level. The Southern European pattern reflects a highly crisis-sensitive trust regime, with large changes but also recovery. The response shown by the trajectory should not surprise, given that Southern European countries have had a significant exposure to austerity, financial instability, and politicized EU intervention during the sovereign debt crisis. Most Southern European countries show sharp V-shaped drops during the Eurozone crisis period. Cyprus, Greece, and Italy display especially steep declines, none of the three countries recovering completely. Spain and Malta indicate different patterns but by 2025 they manage to show levels of trust in the EU similar to the ones recorded at the beginning of the 1990s. Portugal is the only country in the region which has significantly more trust in the EU in 2025 by comparison to the 1990s. These differences reflect national variation in crisis severity and political instability but remain within a shared regional pattern.

Central and Eastern European countries show a distinct pattern characterized by the smallest variations over time among the four regions. This suggests a moderate-trust, moderately volatile regime, shaped by both EU accession optimism and later governance and corruption challenges within some countries. This region is more heterogeneous than the others, in part because it includes the largest number of countries (12). Most countries show rising levels of trust after EU accession, followed by moderate crisis drops and recoveries. Some countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Poland) managed to recover the lost trust, while others (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia) still show a deficit of trust in 2025 by comparison to accession levels. Ukraine's trajectory remains distinct, reflecting its unique geopolitical and institutional characteristics in the group.

Summing up, across all countries, three common features stand out: (1) No country shows monotonic long-run decline in EU trust. The countries that come closer to this model are Denmark, Finland, Austria, and France, but even in these countries there are still minor ups and downs. (2) Crisis periods produce synchronized downturns, but the recovery speed differs across countries. (3) Post-2015 recovery is widespread, indicating restoration of EU legitimacy. It is interesting to note in this context that we do not see strong changes in trust in the EU around the pandemic years.

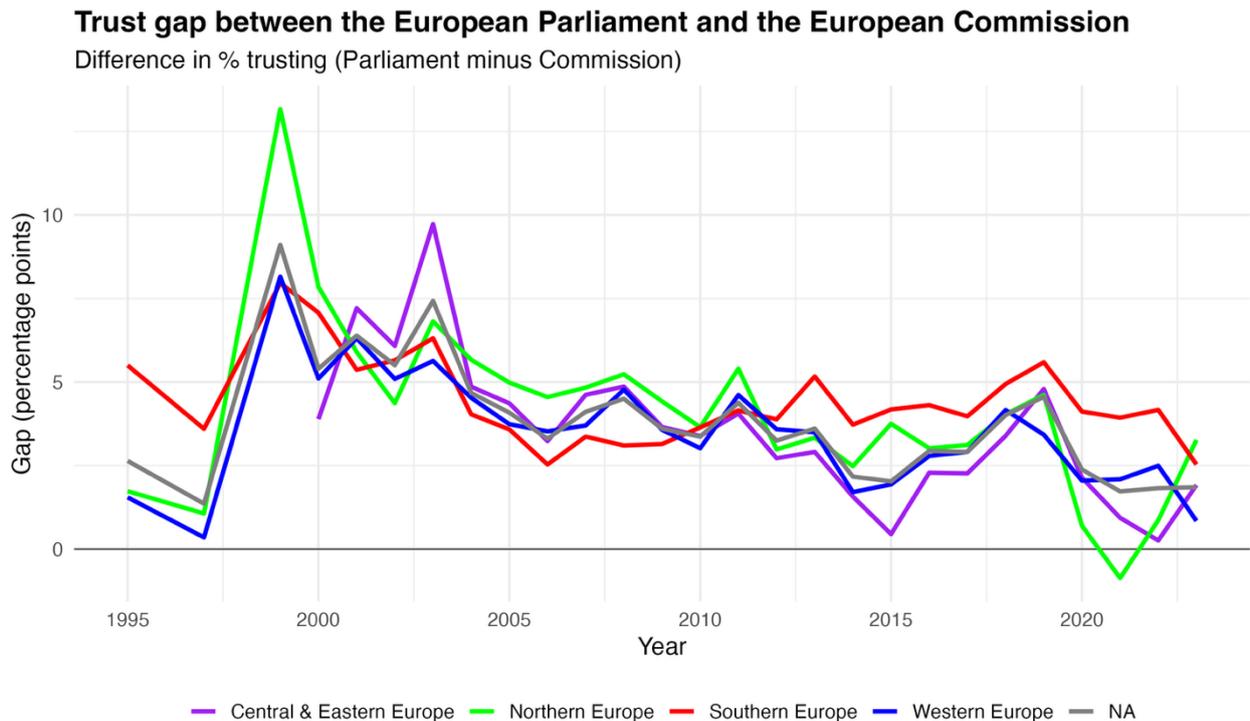
The data presented in the three charts suggest that trust in the EU responds to key events: major systemic shocks generate temporary declines, but trust tends to recover once the shocks disappear. The speed and shape of the recovery seem to be influenced by national institutional contexts. The four regions seem to be indicative of different regimes of trust in the EU: Northern Europe is high trust and stable, Southern Europe is characterized by high volatility, Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe are moderate trust, but with more stability in the first case and more volatility in the second.

There are two more EU institutions included in the data we analyze: trust in the European Parliament (Figure 7 - Figure 9) and trust in the European Commission (Figure 10 - Figure 12). Since they are all part of the same institutional setup and keeping in mind that it is very likely that most people do not have a very detailed knowledge of the European Union institutions, we are not going to discuss these results in too much detail.

In terms of systematic differences, the most important one is that trust in the European Parliament tends to be slightly higher than trust in the European Commission for most of the period of time we analyze (see Figure 3). This suggests that people reward with more trust the role of the European Parliament as the only directly elected EU institution. It is interesting to note in this context that starting with 2013 the largest gap is recorded in Southern Europe. This pattern reflects the distinct

institutional roles played during the crisis period. The Commission became closely associated with fiscal surveillance, bailout negotiations, and enforcement of austerity measures, while the Parliament remained largely removed from direct crisis management.

Figure 3 Trust gap between the EU Parliament and the EU Commission



Trust in the European Commission is not only slightly lower, it also shows greater volatility, particularly during crisis years. The sharper decline of trust in the EU Commission during the Eurozone crisis reflects its central role in fiscal surveillance, bailout conditionality, and technocratic intervention. These functions made it more directly associated with controversial crisis management decisions, producing a deeper temporary legitimacy shock.

Taking together the three institutions, the data show they experienced parallel downturns during periods of crisis and recoveries afterward, with more favorable evaluations for the European Parliament as a representative body, and more reputational costs for the European Commission, as an executive body.

In addition to EU institutions, we also analyze trust two other supranational institutions, the United Nations – UN (Figure 13 - Figure 15) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – NATO (Figure 16 - Figure 18).

The Europe-wide LOESS trend for trust in NATO displays a different structure from trust in the European Union, indicating a steady upward trajectory across the entire period. From an average of less than 40% in the early 1990s, NATO trust rises almost continuously, exceeding 50% by the early 2020s and continuing its increase. There is no pronounced post-financial-crisis collapse, suggesting that NATO legitimacy in Europe has been less sensitive to economic performance shocks and more anchored in perceived security guarantees and geopolitical developments. This should be interpreted with care, however, as trust in NATO has not been measured every year and sometime interpolations might hide existing but unmeasured variations in the missing years.

Trust in the United Nations has a similar pattern to trust in the EU. Summarized, it looks like a  $\pm 5\%$  variation around the 50% mark for the most part of the period we analyze. The UN appears as a symbolic supranational institution, whose legitimacy fluctuates slightly but without the strong crisis sensitivity visible in trust in the EU.

In terms of regional trajectories, Northern Europe shows the steepest increase in NATO trust, reaching very high levels by the 2020s. This reflects both long-standing Atlanticist orientations and heightened security concerns in the post-2014 period. EU trust in this region also rises in the long run, but less sharply. UN trust remains high and stable. Thus, Northern Europe exhibits a security-driven trust escalation, distinguishing NATO from other supranational bodies.

Western Europe displays moderate but consistent increases in NATO trust after 2005. Trust in the UN looks quite stable over time, with minor variations around the 50% mark. These trajectories indicate that Western European publics differentiate between economic-political integration (EU) and defense integration (NATO), with NATO gaining renewed legitimacy after geopolitical shocks.

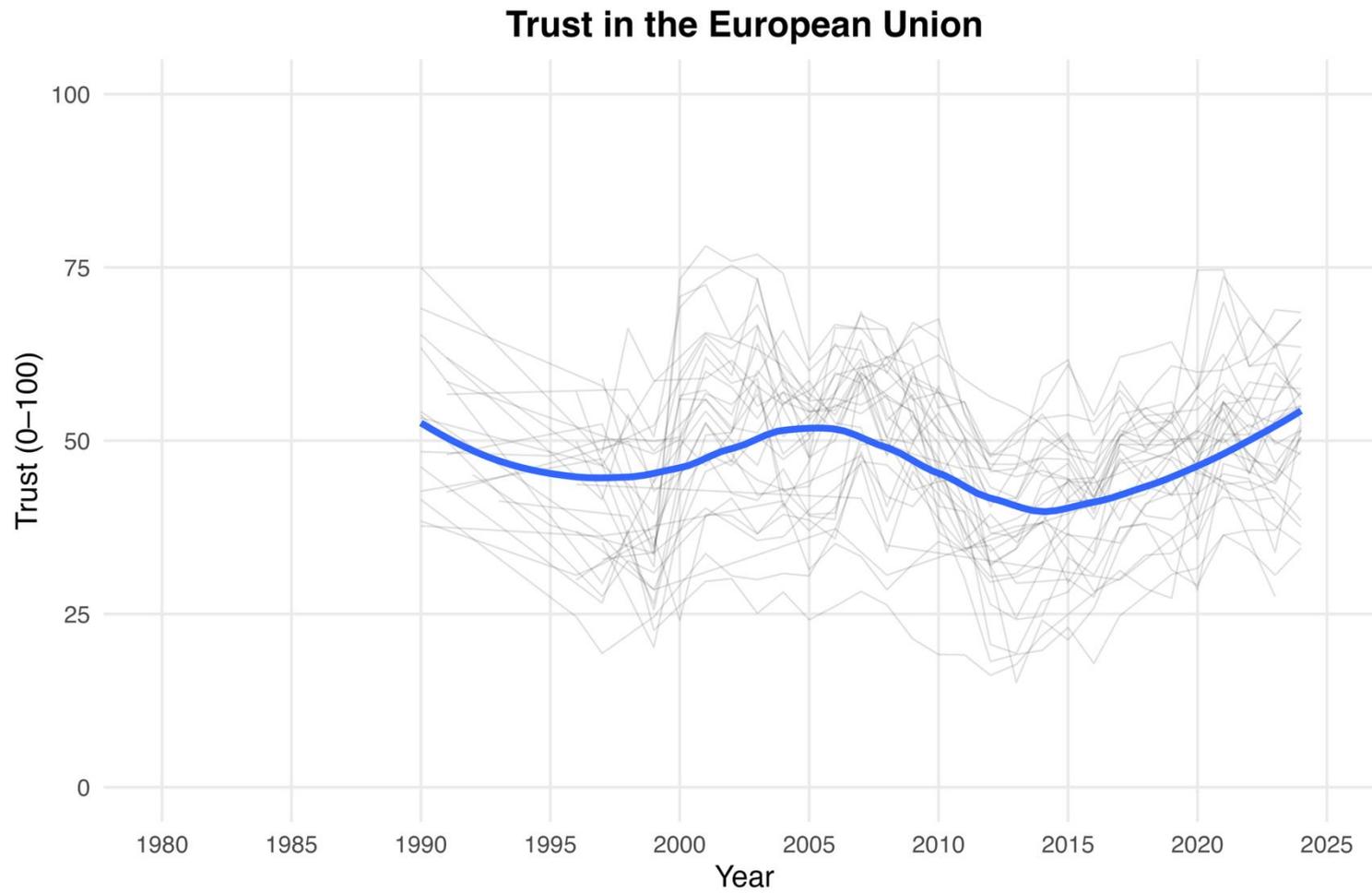
Southern Europe shows stable but low trust in NATO (around 35%-40%). This contrasts with EU trust, which displays strong crisis-driven volatility in Southern Europe (notably the post-2008 collapse and post-2015 recovery). Trust in the UN follows a similar crisis-sensitive pattern. Thus, Southern Europe appears to maintain stable skepticism toward NATO, while evaluations of EU and UN are responding to the economic context.

Central and Eastern Europe shows an increase of trust in NATO from low initial levels in the 1990s to almost 50% around 2005, continuing to slowly rise after 2014. UN trust remains moderate and stable. This indicates that in CEE countries NATO has acquired exceptionally strong legitimacy, consistent with its role in post-communist security realignment.

The differences discussed here suggest citizens have a functional perspective on supranational institutions: the EU is evaluated partly as an economic and political governance actor, NATO is evaluated primarily as a security guarantor, while the UN is evaluated as a symbolic international order institution. This confirms that European publics do not evaluate supranational institutions as a single undifferentiated category; instead, trust trajectories reflect the functional domain of each institution.

As an additional conclusion, it seems security institutions have gained legitimacy across Europe, especially in the post-2014 geopolitical environment. All these results suggest that future research could differentiate, if needed, between governance, security, and symbolic global institutions.

*Figure 4 Trajectories of trust in the European Union – Europe*



*Figure 5 Trajectories of trust in the European Union – European regions*

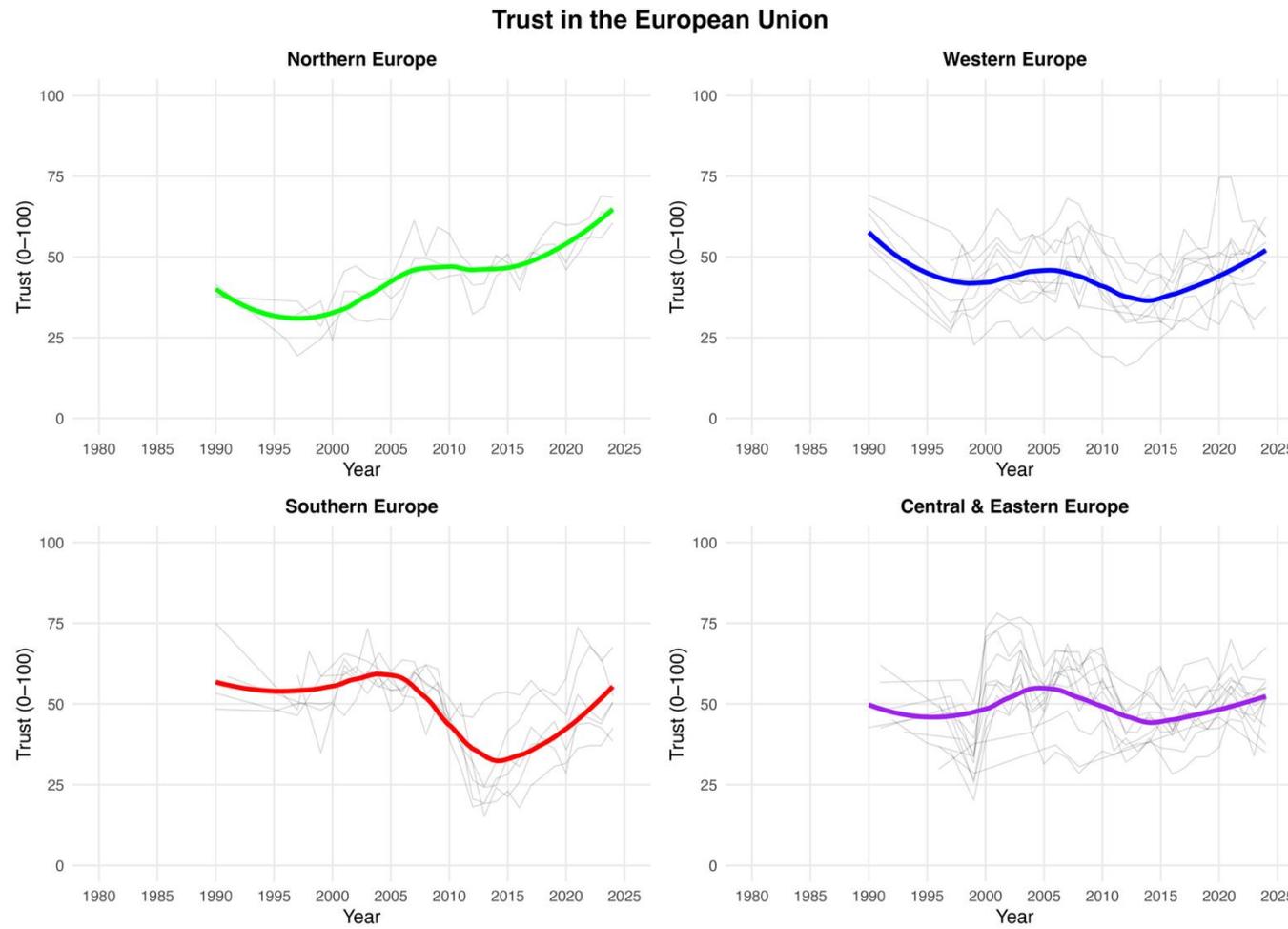
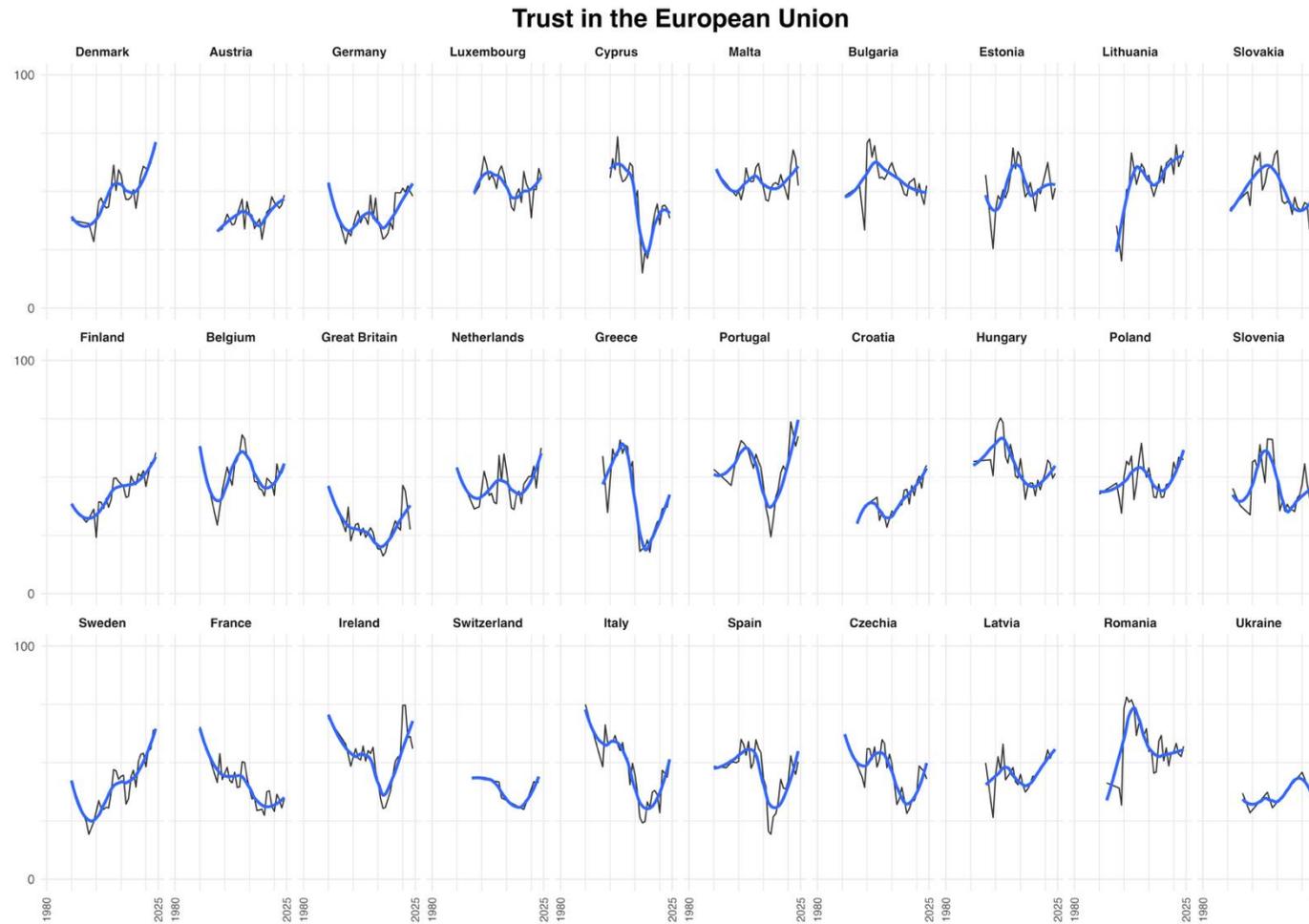




Figure 6 Trajectories of trust in the European Union – Countries



*Figure 7 Trajectories of trust in the European Parliament - Europe*

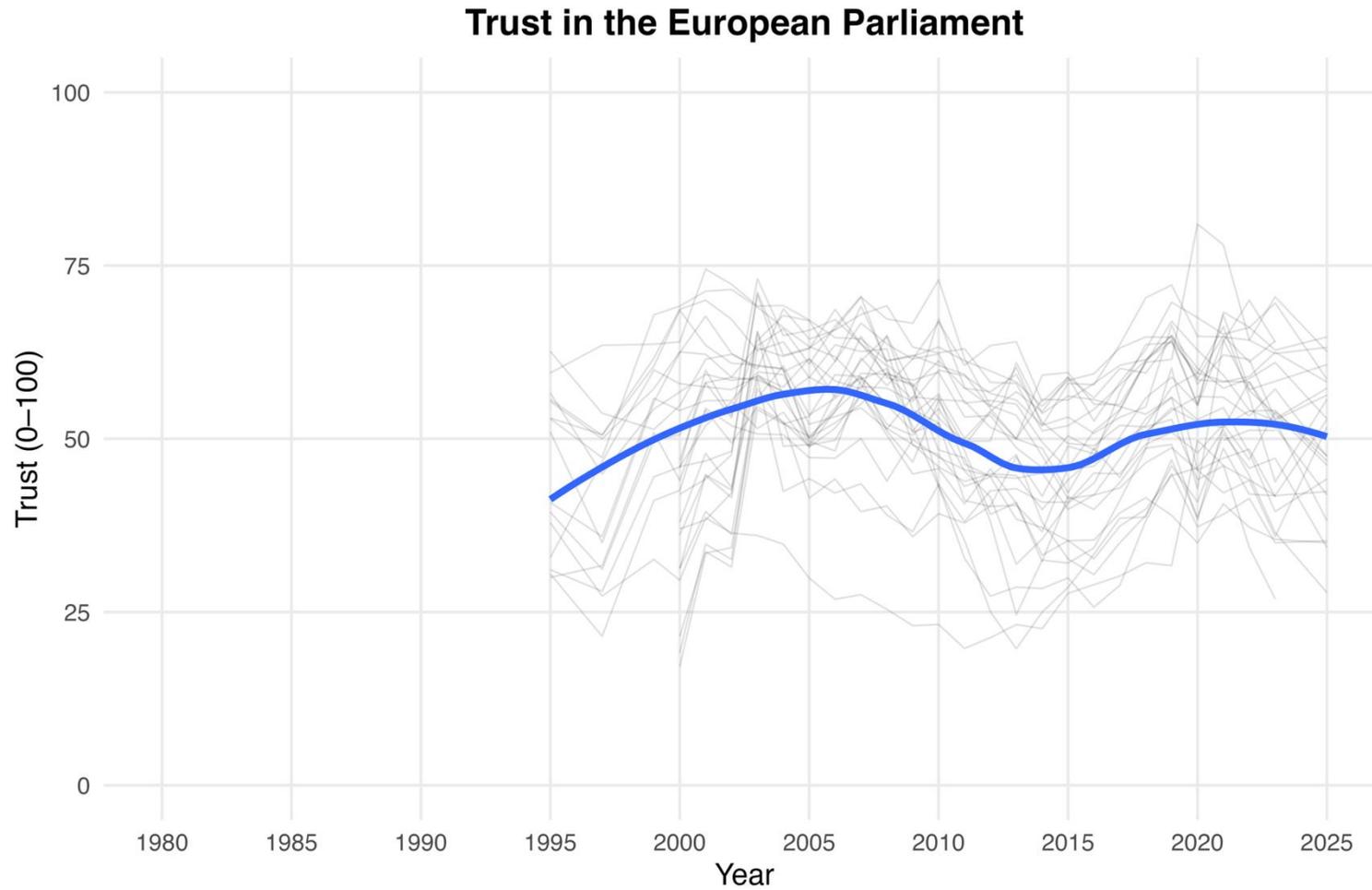
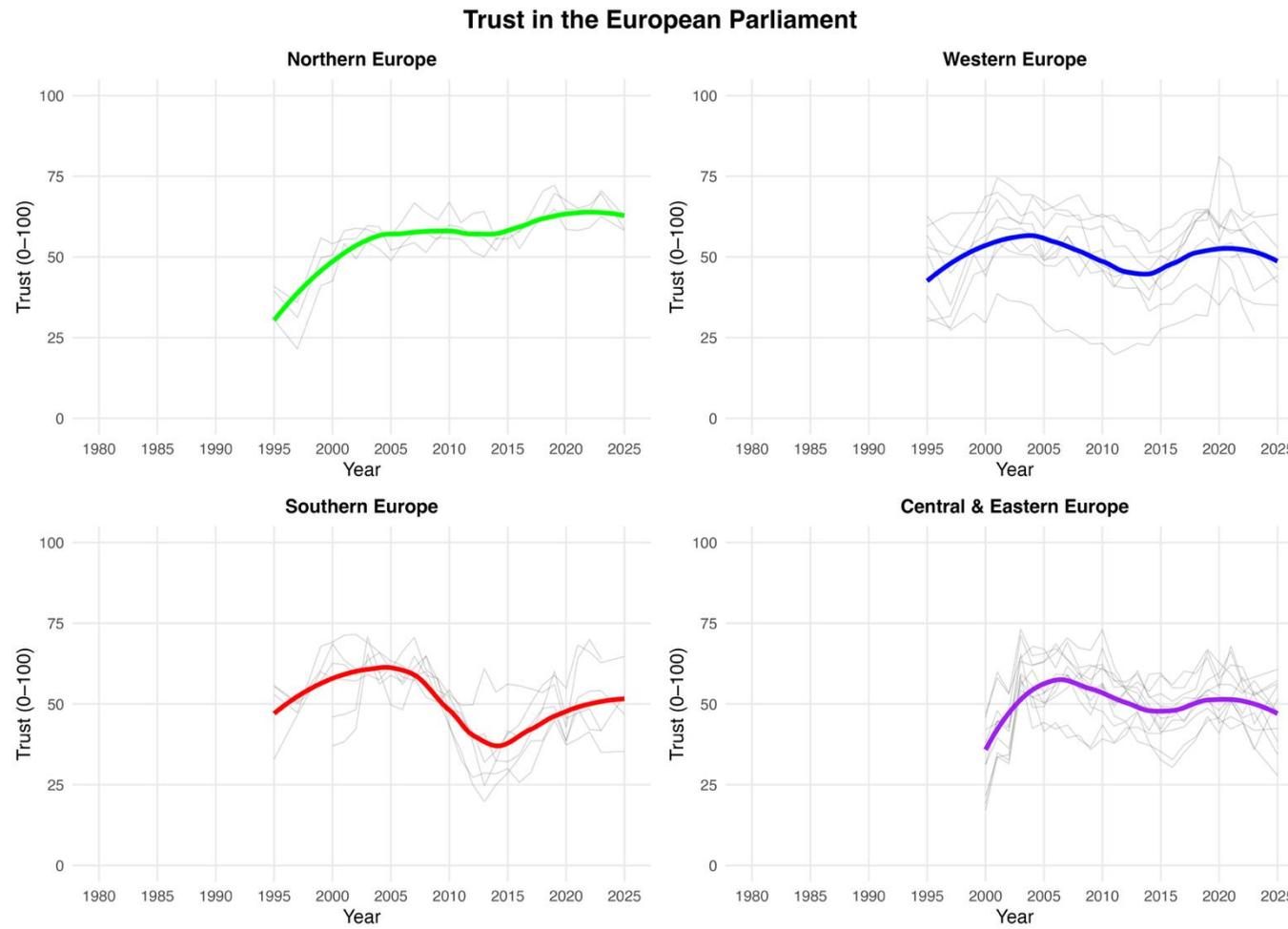
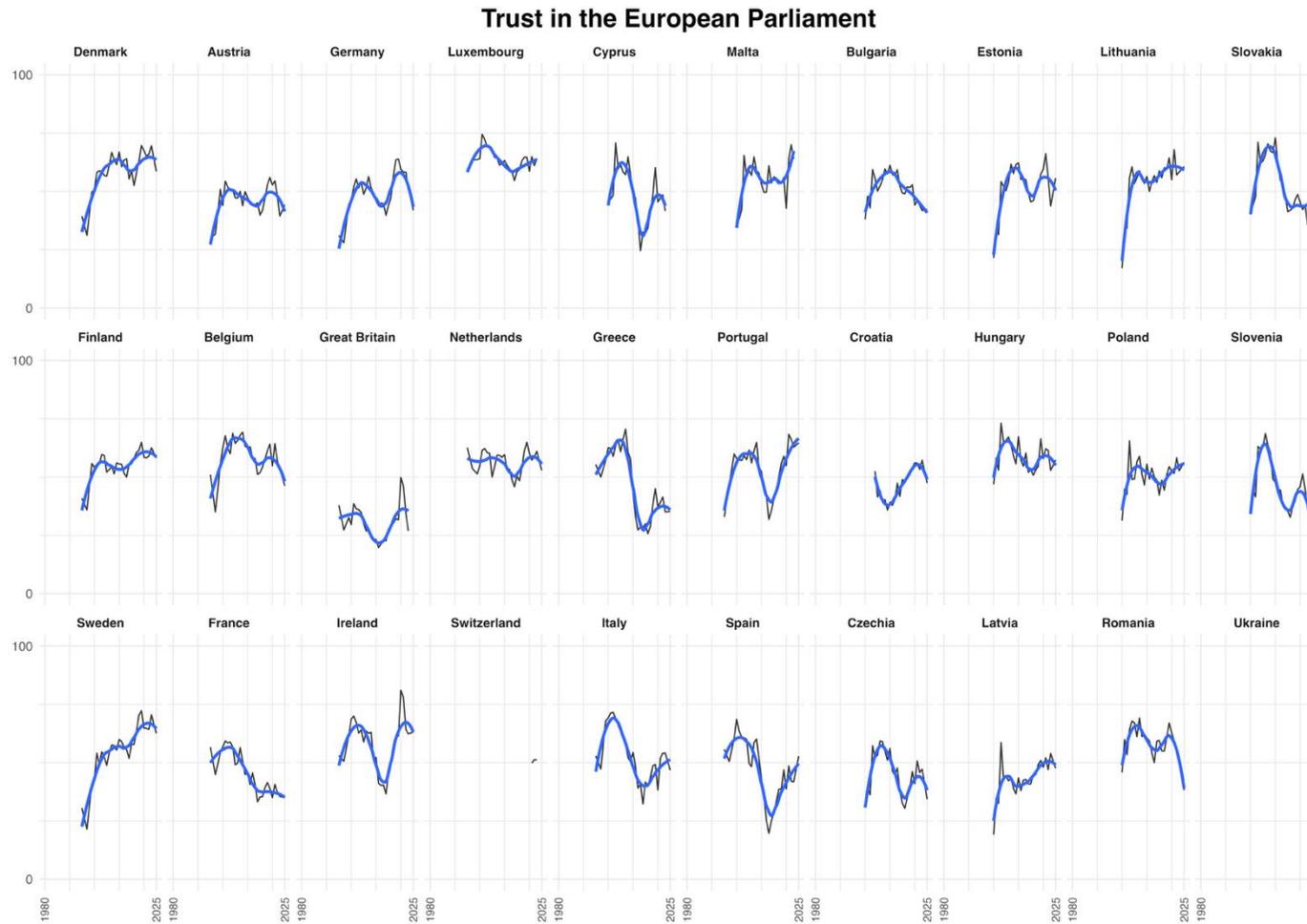


Figure 8 Trajectories of trust in the European Parliament – European regions



*Figure 9 Trajectories of trust in the European Parliament – Countries*



*Figure 10 Trajectories of trust in the European Commission – Europe*

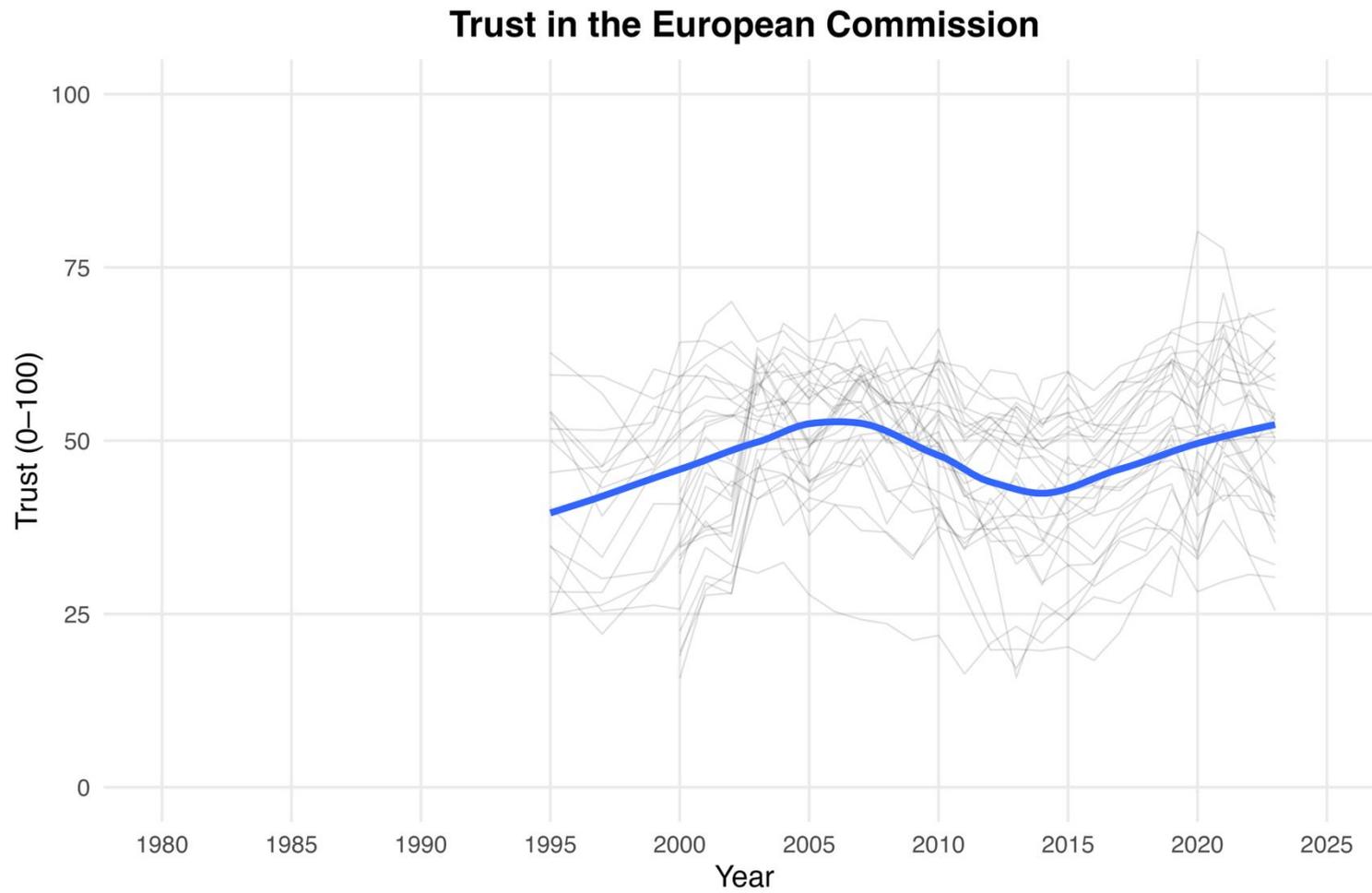


Figure 11 Trajectories of trust in the European Commission – European regions

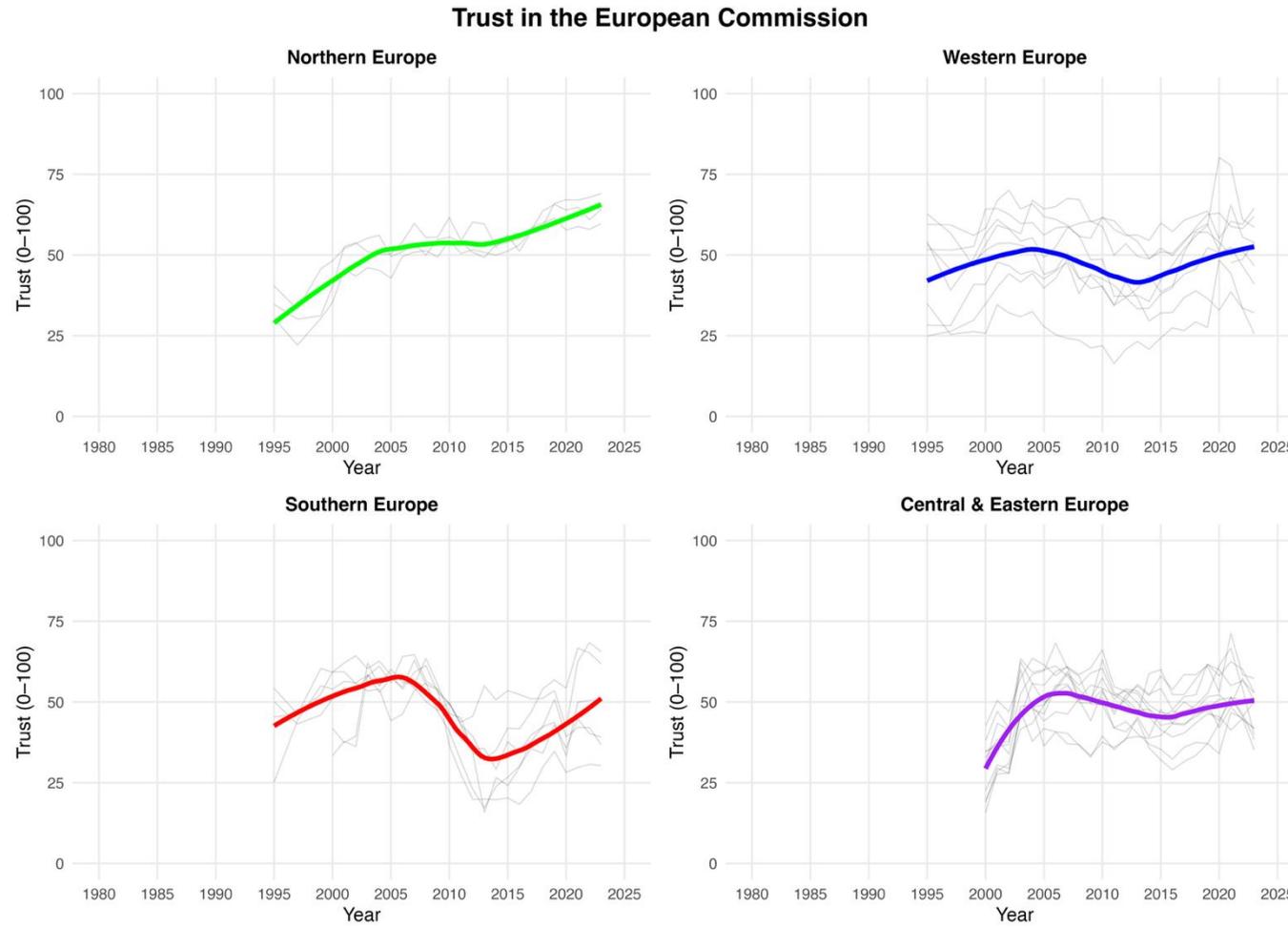
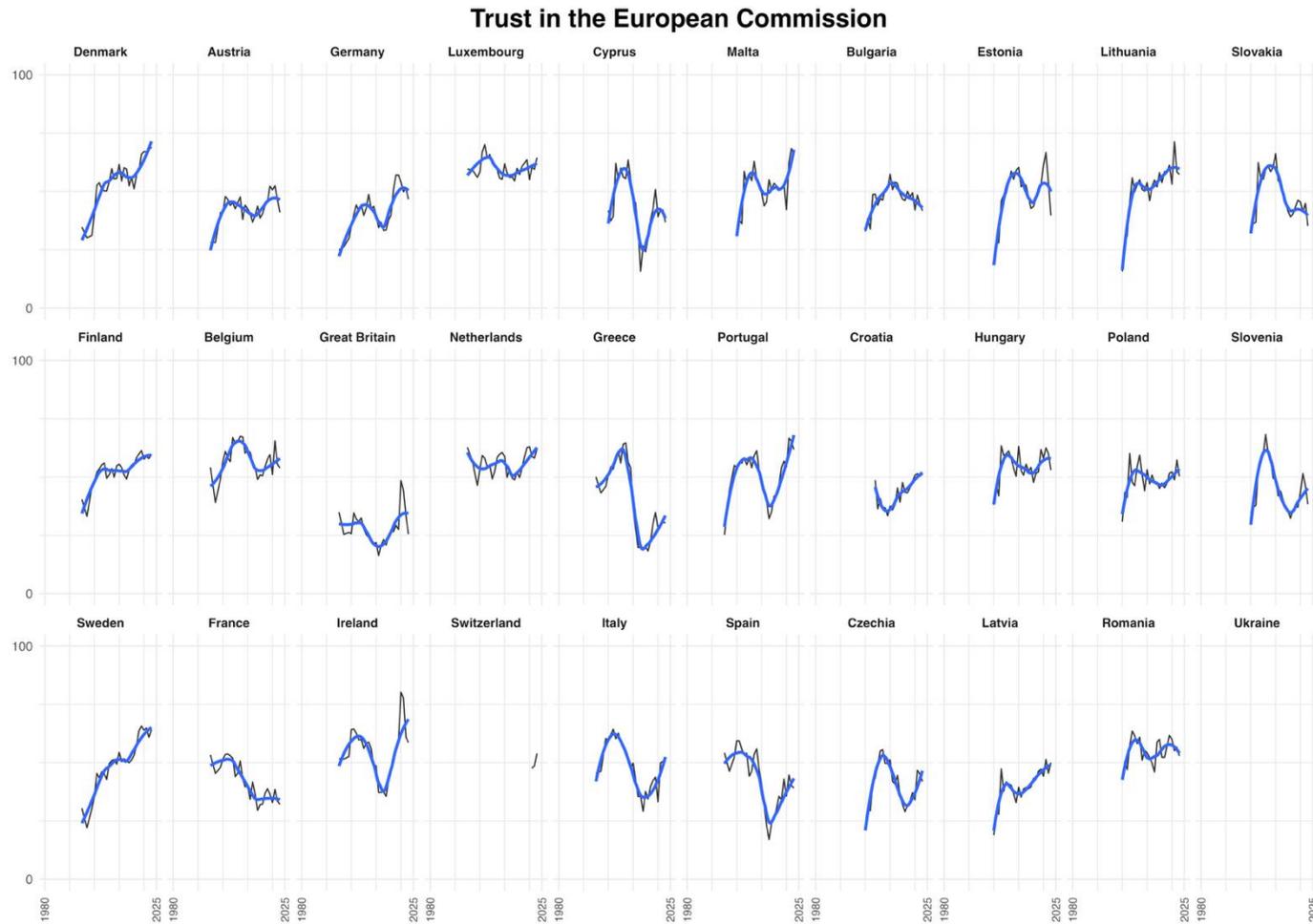


Figure 12 Trajectories of trust in the European Commission – Countries



*Figure 13 Trajectories of trust in the United Nations - Europe*

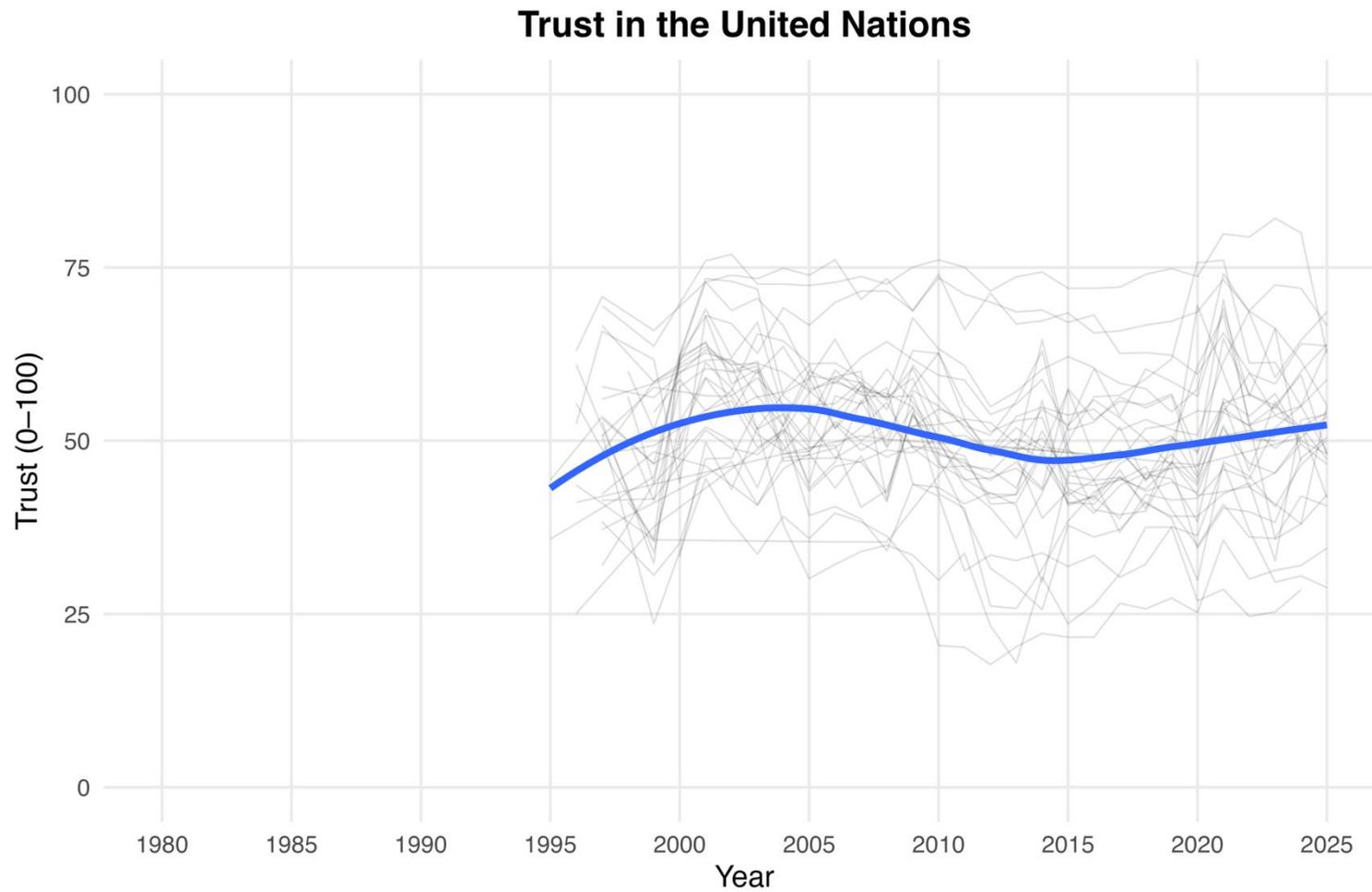


Figure 14 Trajectories of trust in the United Nations – European regions

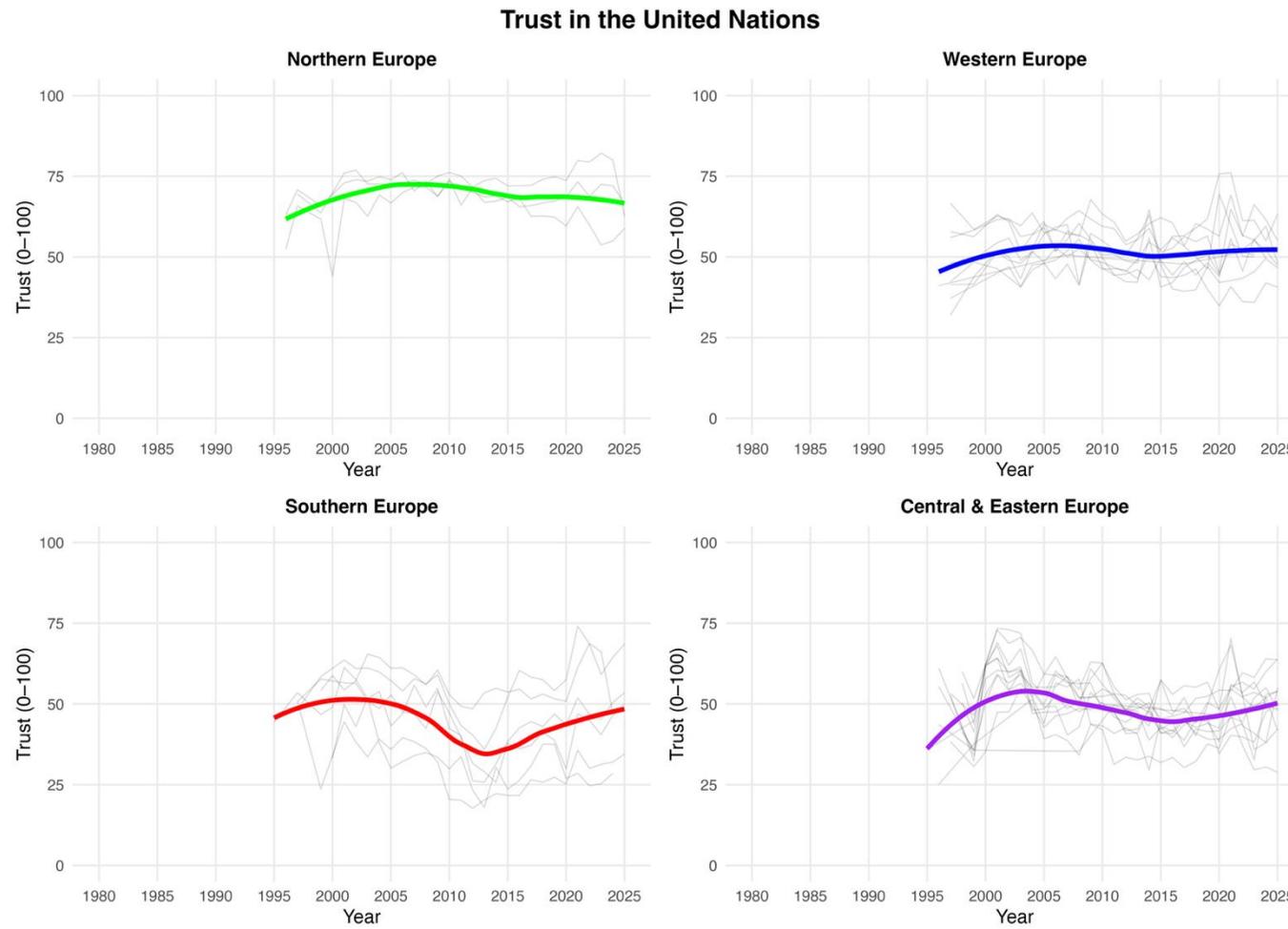
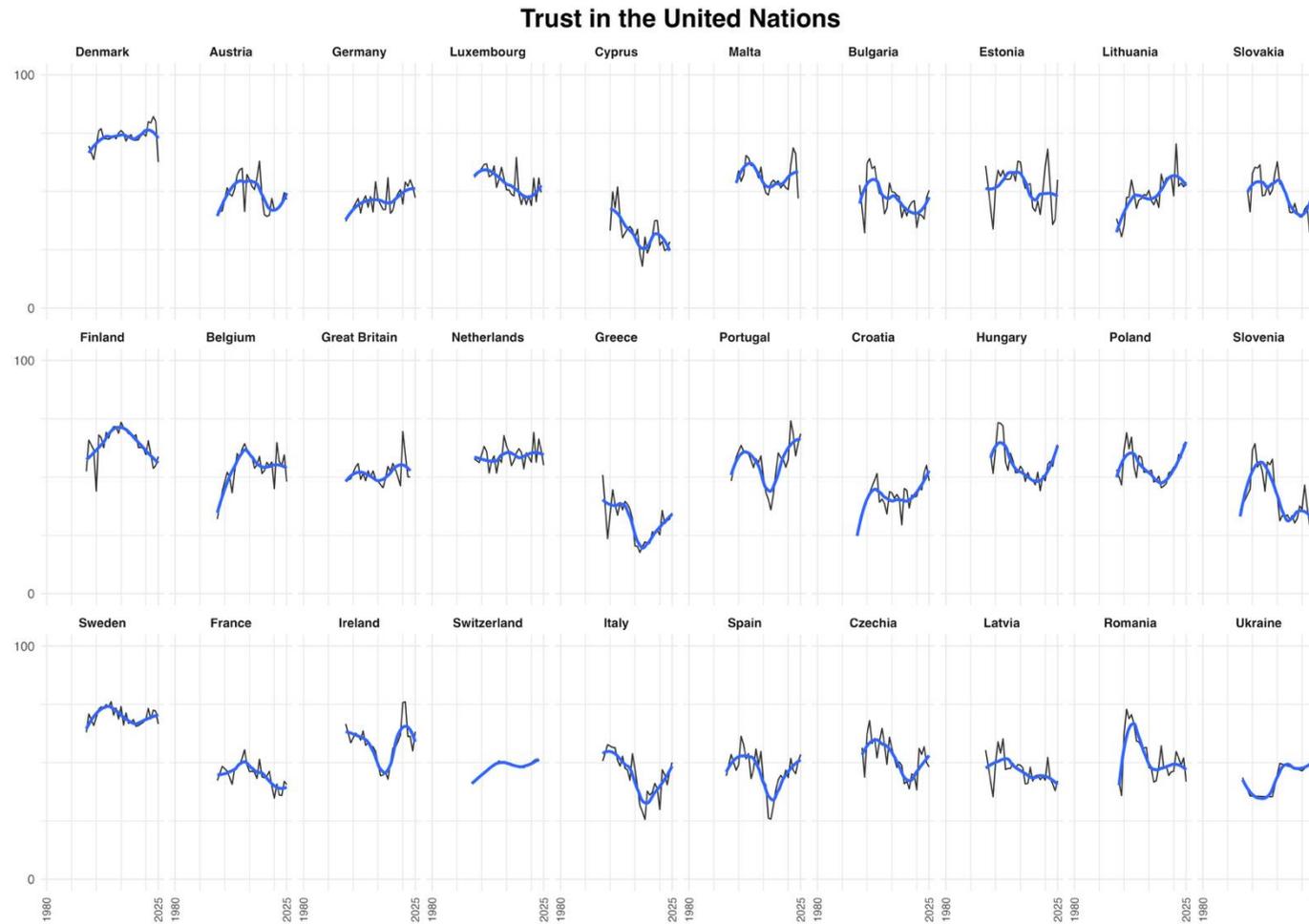




Figure 15 Trajectories of trust in the United Nations – Countries



*Figure 16 Trajectories of trust in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – Europe*

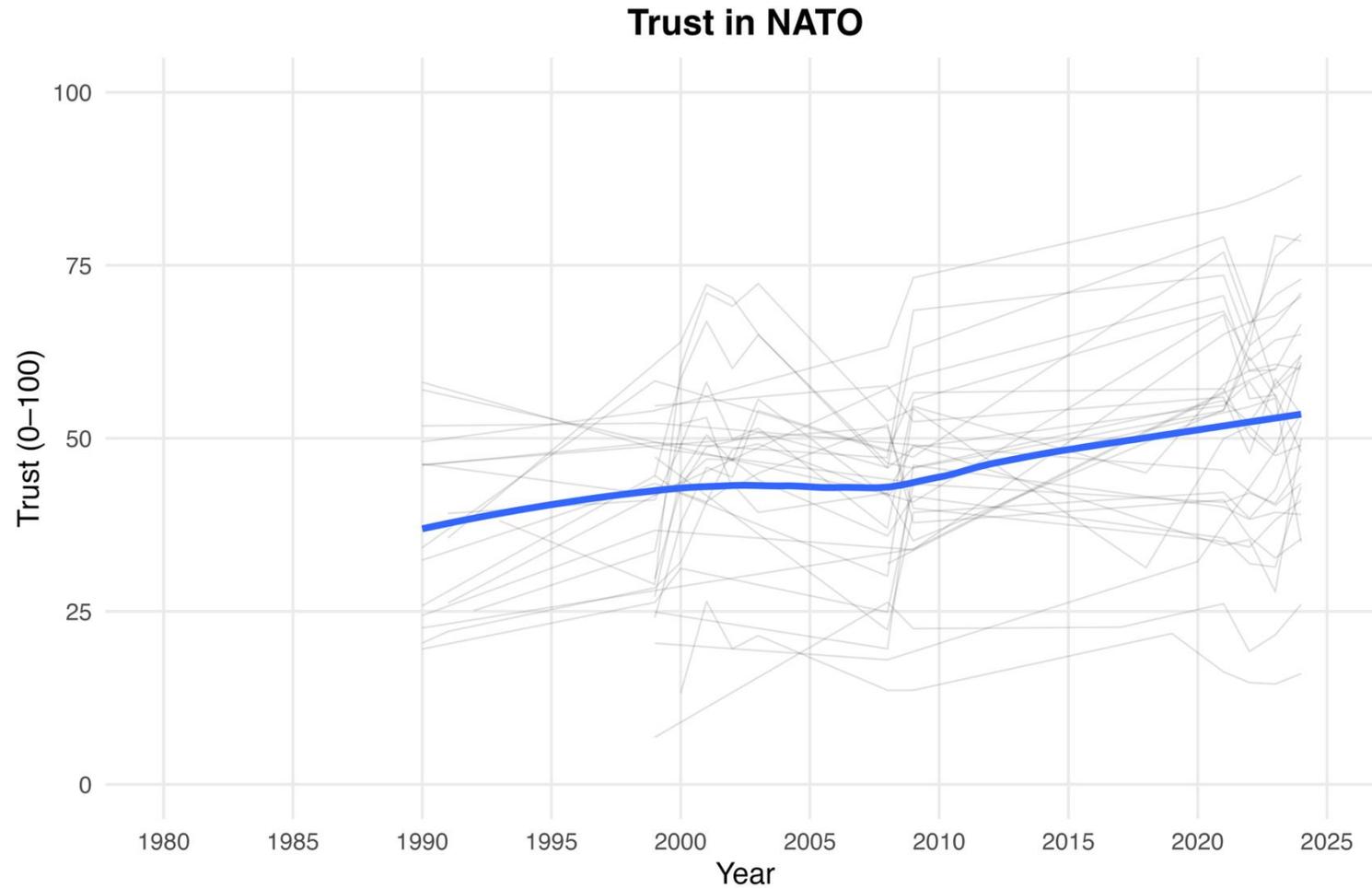


Figure 17 Trajectories of trust in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – European regions

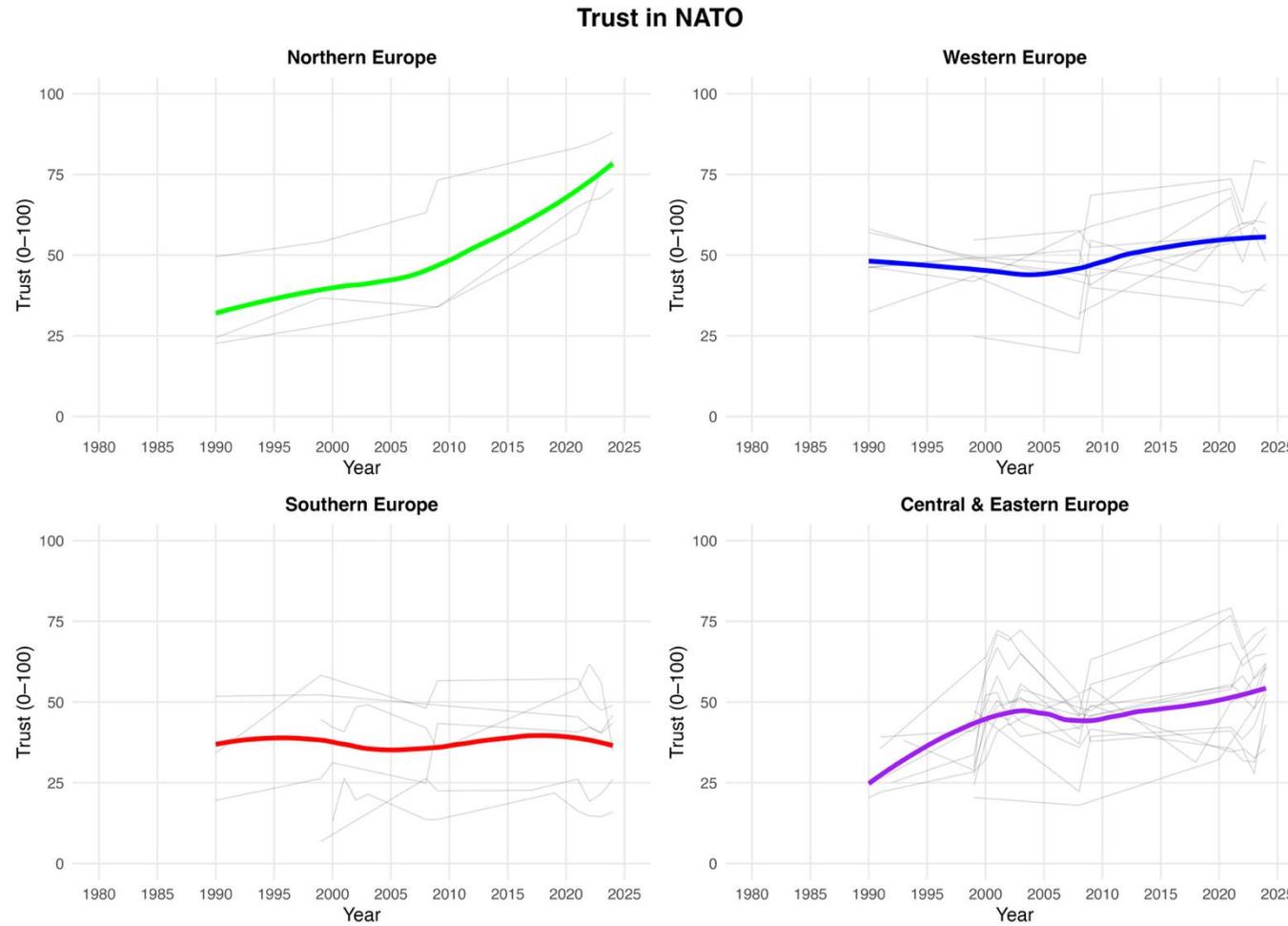
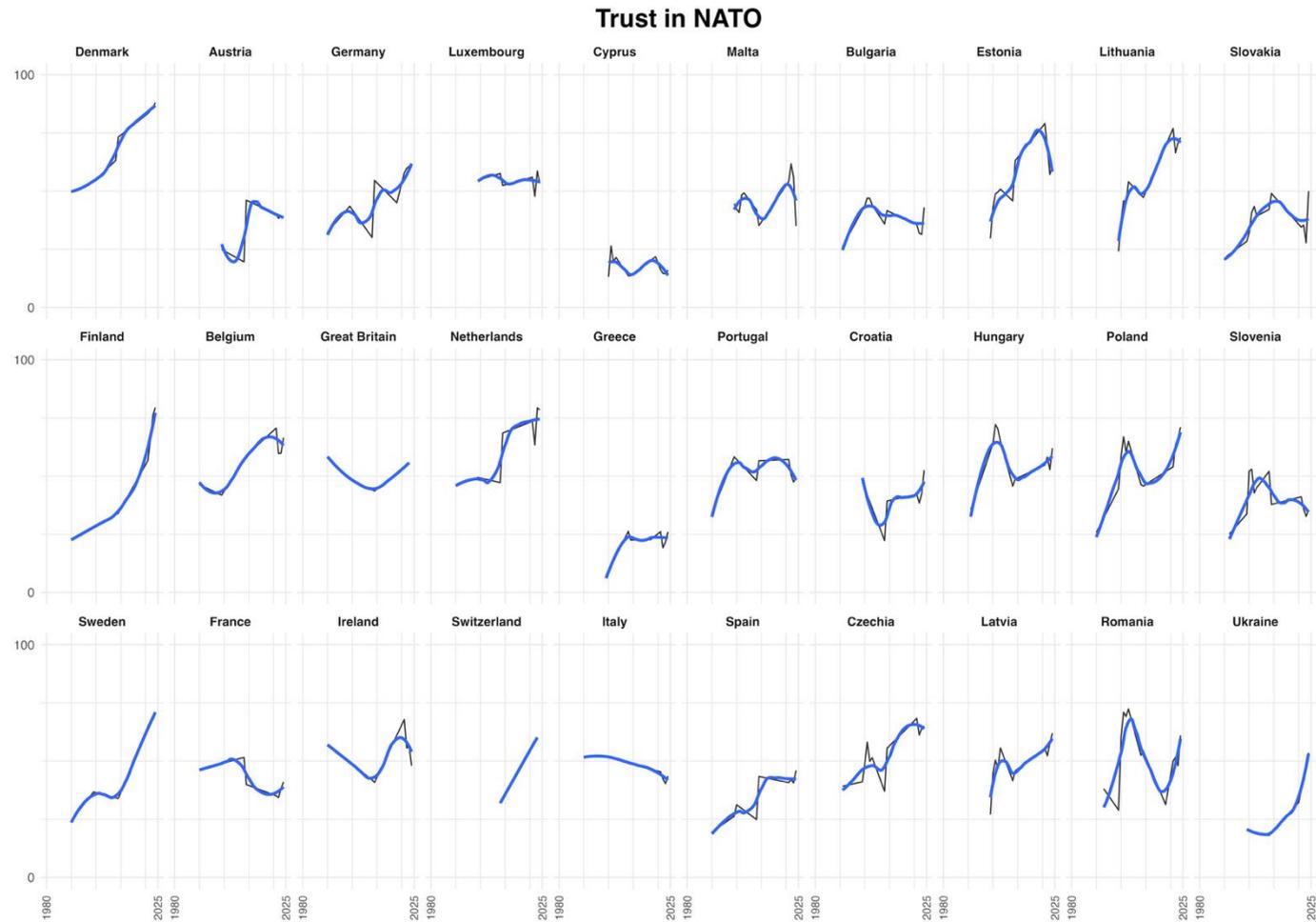


Figure 18 Trajectories of trust in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – Countries



## 4.2 National / representative institutions

We have grouped in this category trust in the government (Figure 19 - Figure 21), trust in the parliament (Figure 22 - Figure 24), trust in political parties (Figure 25 - Figure 27), and trust in politicians (Figure 28 - Figure 30). Just as in the previous section, we will focus our analysis on trust in the parliament, as the key representative institution in a democratic setting, and the government, as the key executive institution, and we will discuss the other national institutions in less detail and only where relevant.

At the aggregate European level, both trust in parliaments and trust in governments display non-linear long-term trajectories. Trust in parliaments (Figure 22) shows a slow and sustained decline from the early 1980s through the late 2000s, reaching its lowest levels around 2010–2013, followed by a moderate recovery in the late 2010s and early 2020s. This pattern suggests a prolonged erosion of confidence in representative institutions over nearly three decades, interrupted only by a partial rebound after the acute phase of the financial and sovereign debt crises subsided. Importantly, the recovery remains incomplete, and average trust in parliaments in the mid-2020s does not fully return to early-1980s levels. It should also be noted that the country lines on the graph suggest increased variability across countries post-2000, indicating that regional differences may be significant.

Trust in governments (Figure 19) shows a more volatile trajectory, with clearer cyclical movements. From the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, trust in governments increases across Europe, reflecting the relative political and economic stability of the period. From the early 2000s onward, trust declines, with the lowest level around 2010–2013. A partial recovery follows after 2015, but without a full return to pre-crisis levels.

Based on these two charts, it seems that trust in governments is more responsive to short-term events, while trust in parliaments reflects slower-moving structural trends. The trajectories of trust in parliament (Figure 23) and the government (Figure 20) at regional level offer additional information.

Northern European countries record the highest, relatively stable, trust in both parliaments and governments. Parliamentary trust rises through the 1990s and early 2000s and declines only mildly thereafter, remaining well above the European average. Government trust in Northern Europe also remains high and stable, with limited crisis-induced volatility. This pattern reflects the long-established high-trust equilibrium of Nordic governance systems.

Western Europe, as a region, displays moderate but stable trust in both institutions. Parliamentary trust remains largely flat over four decades, with only minor cyclical fluctuations. Trust in governments shows slightly more volatility, but overall, the trajectory is quite flat. Western European democracies thus appear to maintain a stable baseline of institutional legitimacy, despite increasing party system fragmentation and political volatility.

Looking at country-level trajectories (Figure 24 and Figure 21) we see quite a lot of variation: France and the Netherlands show overall declining trust in both institutions, indicating increased dissatisfaction of their with these institutions. Most countries show quite a lot of variation in trust for the two institutions, with trust declining and recovering at different moments and with different rates. In a way, this variability was to be expected, given that the aggregate trend was rather flat: trust in the parliament and the government responds primarily to contextual, national events, which, when aggregated across countries, tend to even out and result in a more or less aggregate curve. By contrast to France and the Netherlands, Switzerland stands out as a country in which trust in

national institutions (especially the government) has increased dramatically over the time period included in the analysis.

Southern Europe suggests cyclical vulnerability. Trust in both parliaments and governments rises until the early 2000s, collapses sharply during the financial and sovereign debt crises, and recovers only partially thereafter. The depth and duration of the Southern European trust collapse indicate a systemic legitimacy shock affecting both institutions simultaneously. Of course, given the severity of the crisis in these countries, the reaction of the population is proof that the evaluation-based interpretation of trust has strong empirical support in the countries grouped in this category. Some of the declines recorded in the region during the global economic crisis have been quite severe: trust in the parliament declined by 50 percentage points (ppt) in Cyprus, by 40 ppt in Greece and Spain, by 30 ppt in Portugal. Similar declines have been observed for trust in the government as well.

Central and Eastern Europe displays a clear transitional trajectory. Parliamentary trust starts high in the early 1990s, declines steeply through the late 1990s and early 2000s, stabilizes at relatively low levels, and shows modest recovery in the late 2010s. Government trust follows a similar but more volatile pattern, suggesting more variation among countries. This reflects the post-communist disenchantment phase, combined with the pains of the economic transition early in the period and then with continuing institutional consolidation and periodic political instability.

Looking at the country-level trajectories, most countries in CEE show a “U” curve defined by a steep decline during the 1990s and a very slow recovery over the last decade or so. Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, of Poland are examples for this pattern, especially with respect to trust in the parliament. Other countries (Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, for instance) were less successful in increasing their citizens’ trust in the parliament and the government.

Overall, the differences discussed here suggest that national political events, governance quality, party system restructuring, and corruption scandals have strong effects on trust trajectories. The data also show that global crises have the potential and actually do influence most European countries around the same moment in time. Comparing the two institutions discussed so far, it seems trust in governments is more event-driven, while trust in parliaments reflects longer structural trends. Lastly, while the grouping is not perfect and there is heterogeneity within the groups, the regions do show specific patterns of trust.

The incomplete recovery of parliamentary trust after 2015 in most countries may indicate that the crisis period produced a recalibration of citizen expectations toward political representation. It may also indicate we are faced with the consequences of more and more people expecting a sort of “instant democracy” (Kuo, 1999).

Taken together, the trajectories of trust in parliaments and governments reveal that European democratic legitimacy has been resilient but unevenly strained. The financial and sovereign debt crises mark the principal turning point of contemporary institutional trust, but long-run structural differences across regions persist. Trust in the key institutions of the political system has experienced a prolonged erosion followed by partial restoration. The timing of the decline aligns with the perma-crisis in Europe: post-communist institutional transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, increasing party system volatility in Western Europe, enhanced by the financial and sovereign debt crises, followed by the pandemic and Russia’s war on Ukraine. All of these have something to do with how people evaluate institutions and might also explain why the recovery has not been complete.

In addition to parliaments and governments, we have also included in this category trust in political parties (Figure 25 - Figure 27) and trust in politicians (Figure 28 - Figure 30). While parliaments and governments represent the institutional core of democratic authority, political parties and individual politicians constitute the most direct interface between citizens and political elites. Political parties and politicians are especially vulnerable to perceptions of self-interest, corruption, and broken promises, so trust in these institutions should be lower than in the ones we have previously discussed.

As mentioned above, we do not discuss trust in political parties and politicians in as much detail, we focus only on the most important conclusions that are supported by the data. As expected, trust in political parties and politicians is significantly lower than trust in the parliament and the government. In both cases we see a slight decline until the first half of the 2010s, followed by a slight increase since then.

The regional specificities identified so far are valid here, as well, with the highest levels of trust recorded for Northern European countries, with Western Europe in a medium position, with a significant decline of trust during the global crisis in Southern European countries and with a rather skeptical outlook with respect to political parties and politicians in Central and Eastern European countries.

It is interesting to note in this context that although over the last decades we have seen across Europe how political competition has become increasingly leader-centered, this focus on specific politicians has not translated into more trust in politicians as a group, suggesting the increased role of “exceptionalism” in partisan politics in Europe. It seems like politics becomes less about political parties and institutions and more about Beppe Grillo, Nigel Farage, Geert Wilders, Viktor Orban, Marine Le Pen, Karol Nawrocki or Giorgia Meloni.

Summing up, as we move from institutions to actors trust levels decline and volatility increases: parliaments show long-term structural trends and moderate recovery, governments show stronger cyclical sensitivity to shocks, political parties show deeper crisis-driven declines and some late recovery, while politicians exhibit the lowest baseline trust and the slowest recovery. Institutional democracy in Europe may have recovered and remains broadly legitimate, but trust in political intermediaries and elites seems weakened and its recovery remains uneven.

*Figure 19 Trajectories of trust in the Government – Europe*

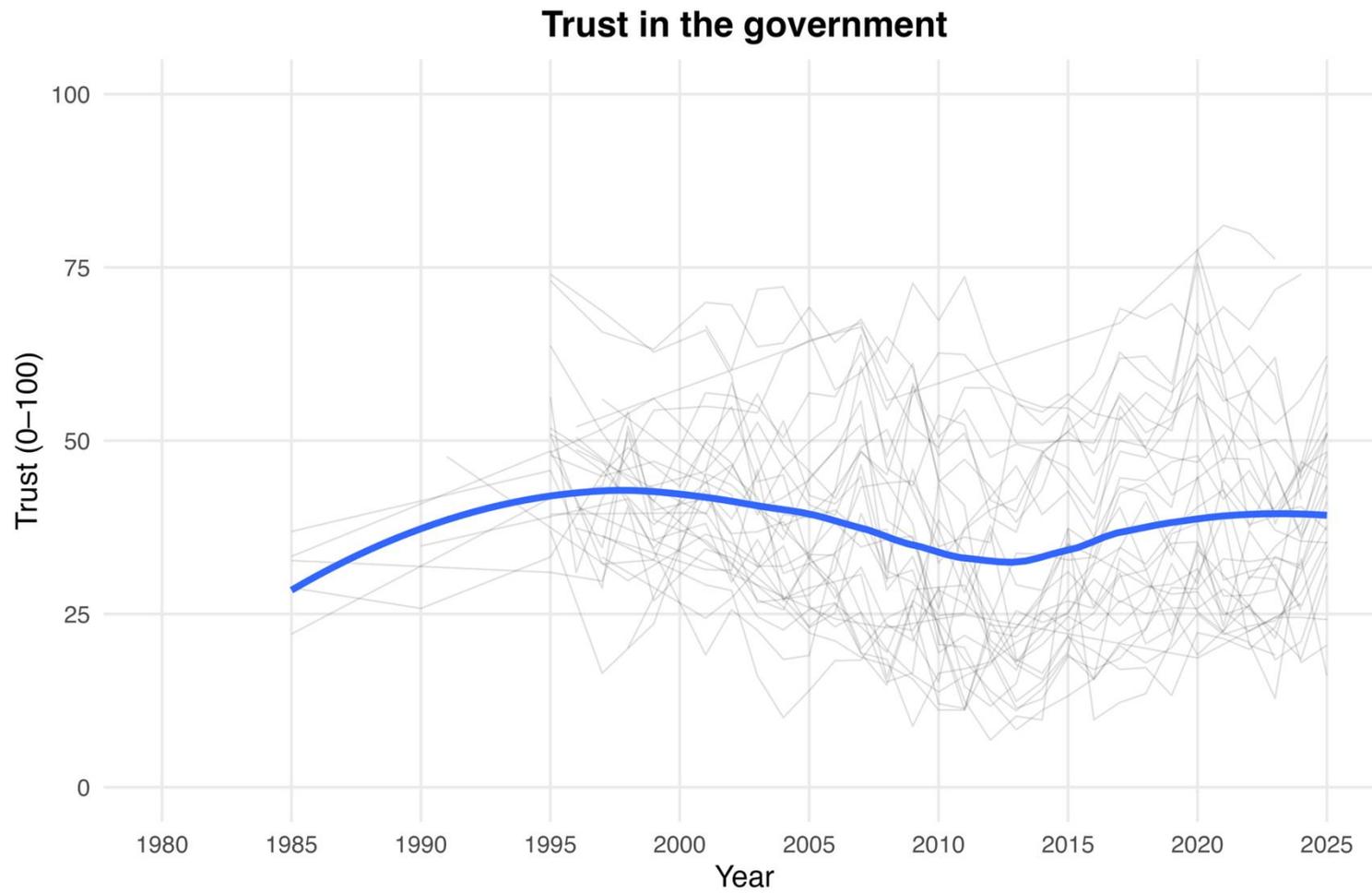
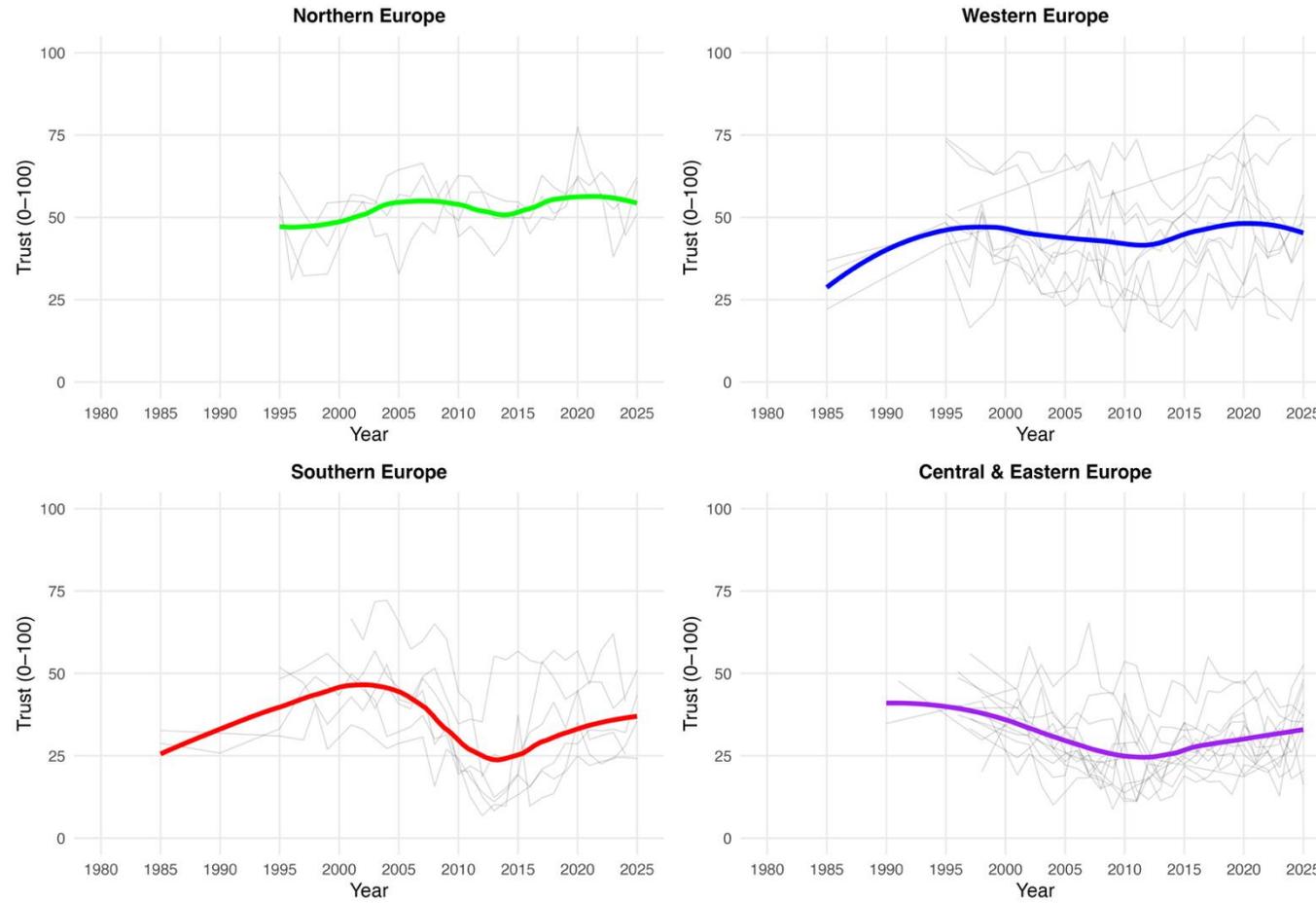
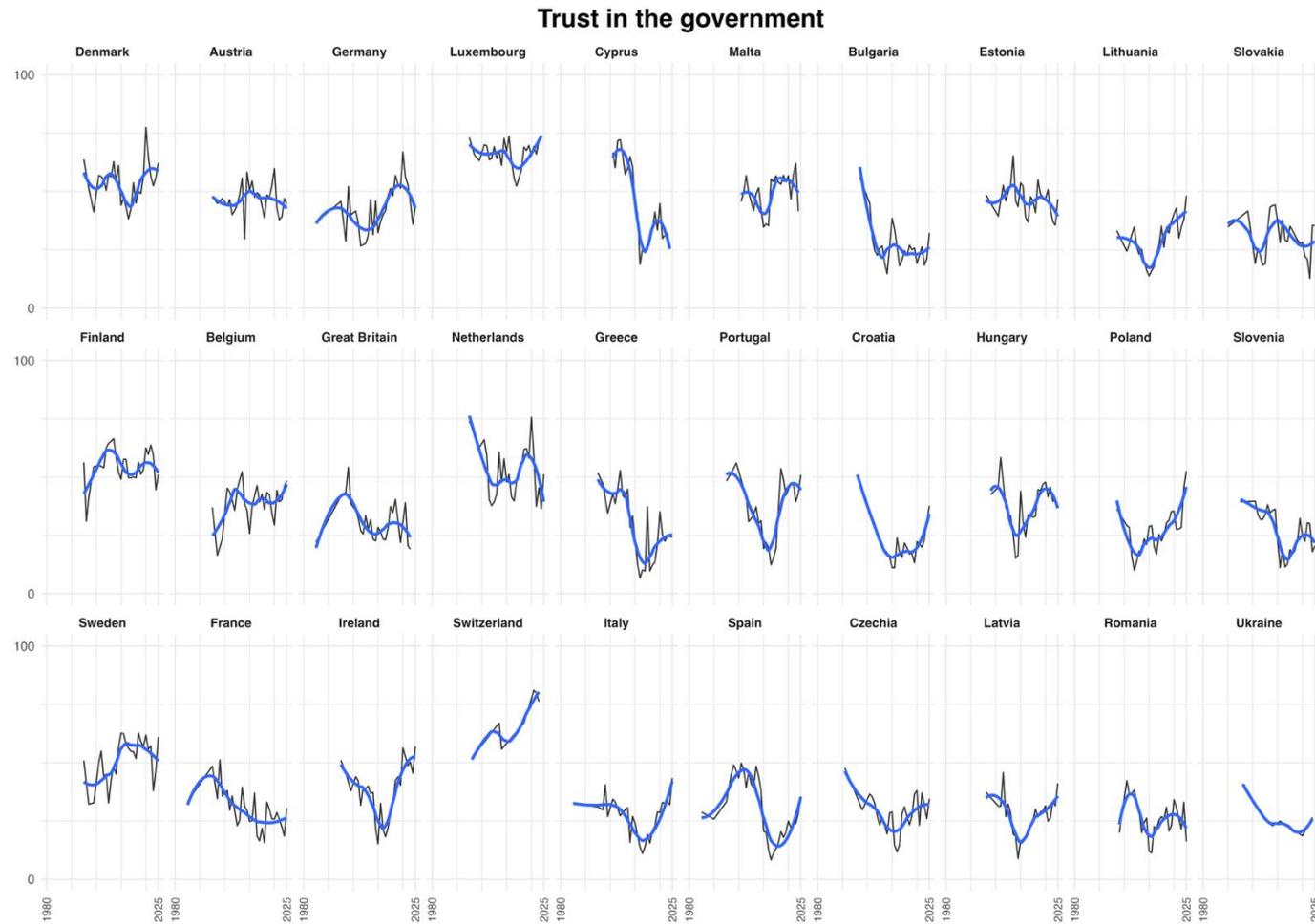


Figure 20 Trajectories of trust in the Government – European regions

**Trust in the government**



*Figure 21 Trajectories of trust in the Government – Countries*



*Figure 22 Trajectories of trust in the Parliament – Europe*

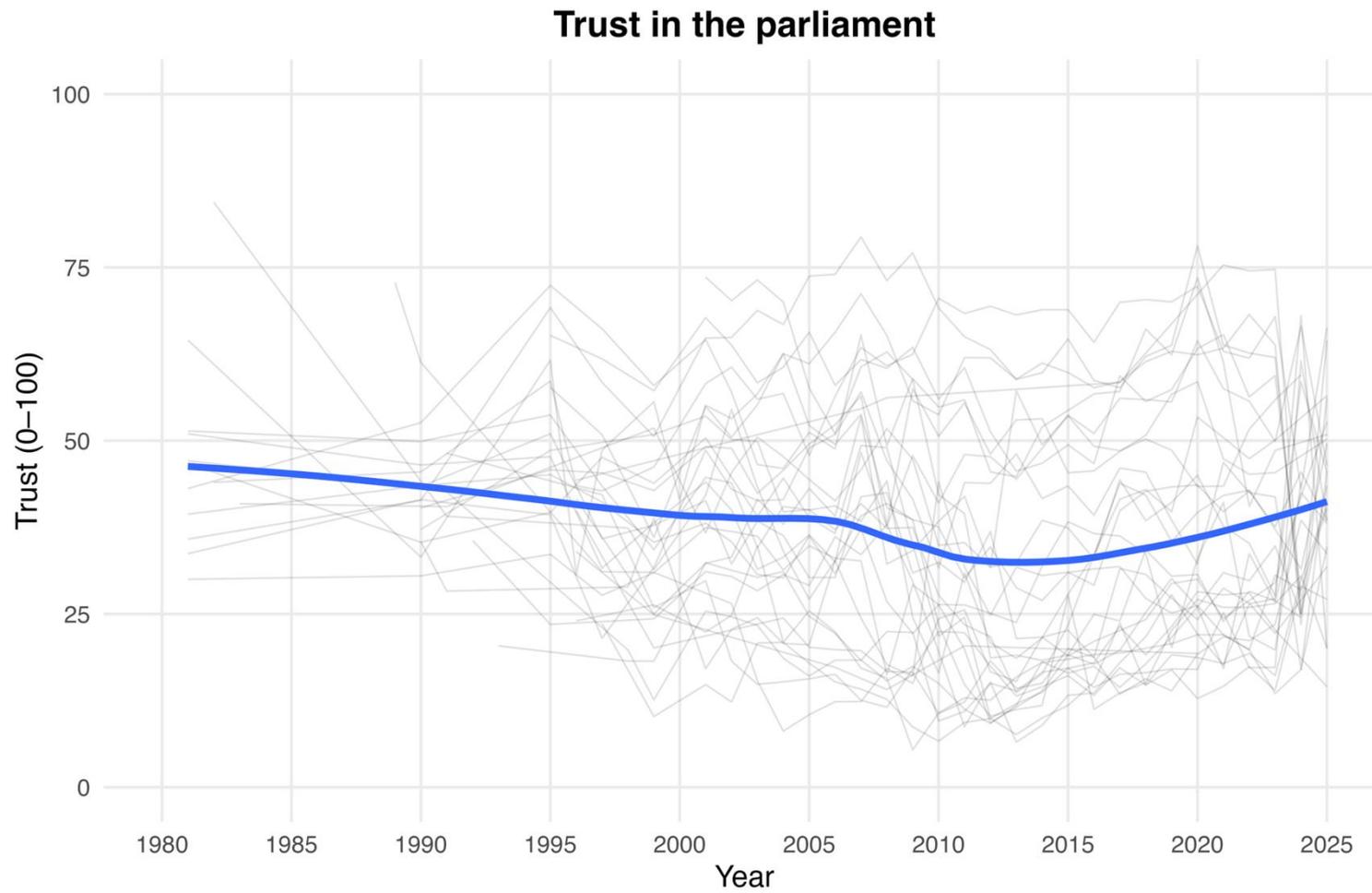


Figure 23 Trajectories of trust in the Parliament – European regions

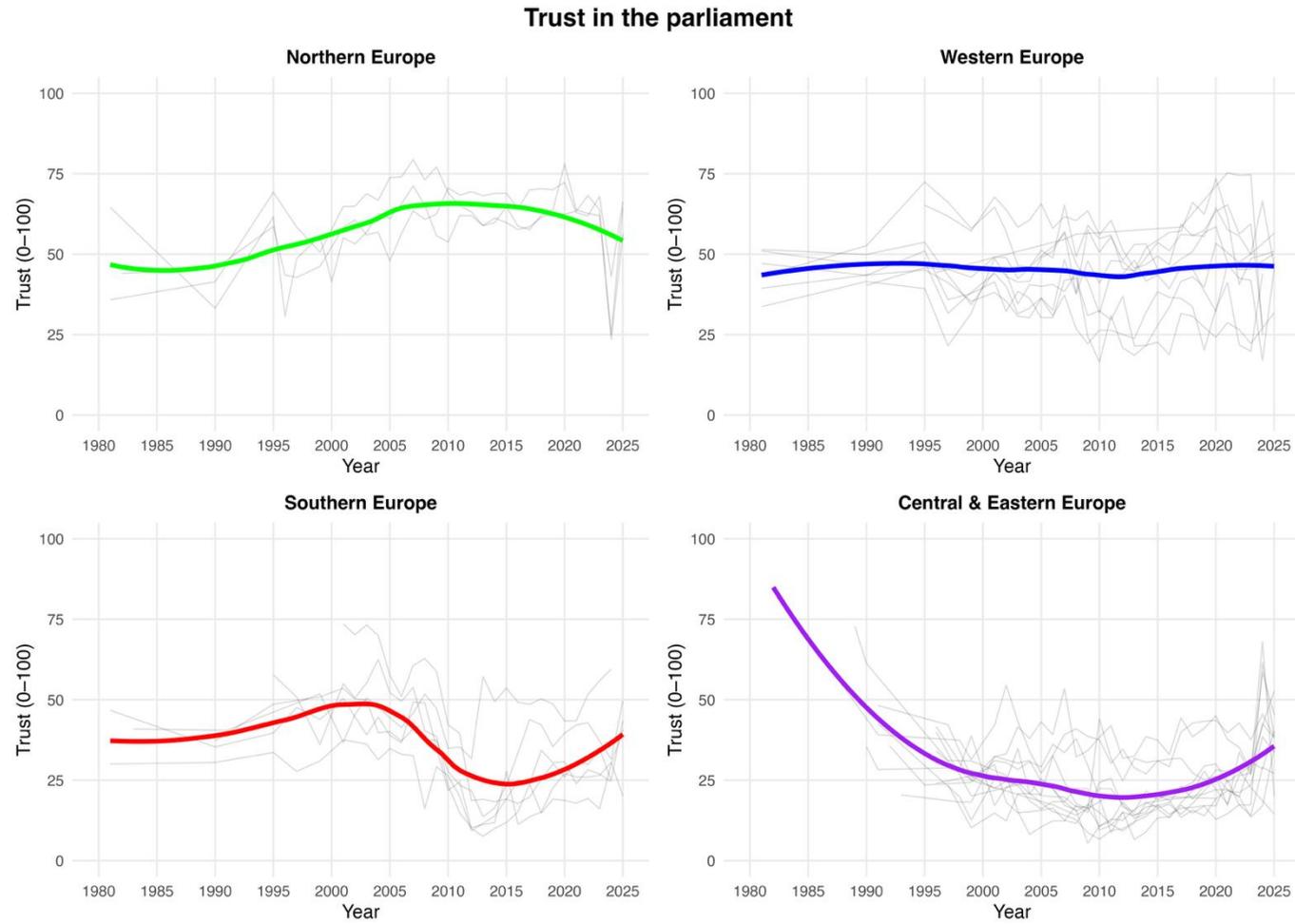
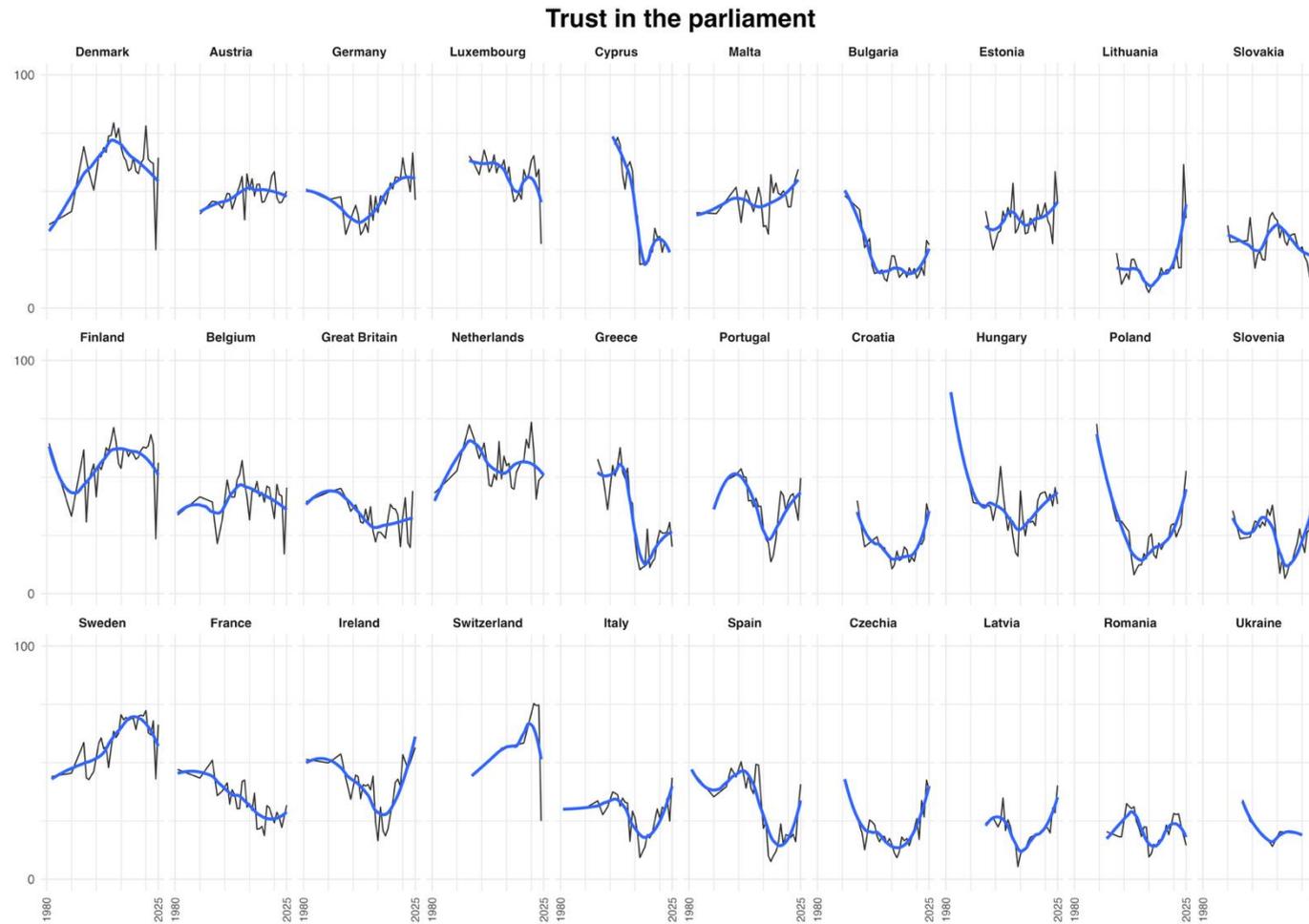


Figure 24 Trajectories of trust in the Parliament – Countries



*Figure 25 Trajectories of trust in political parties – Europe*

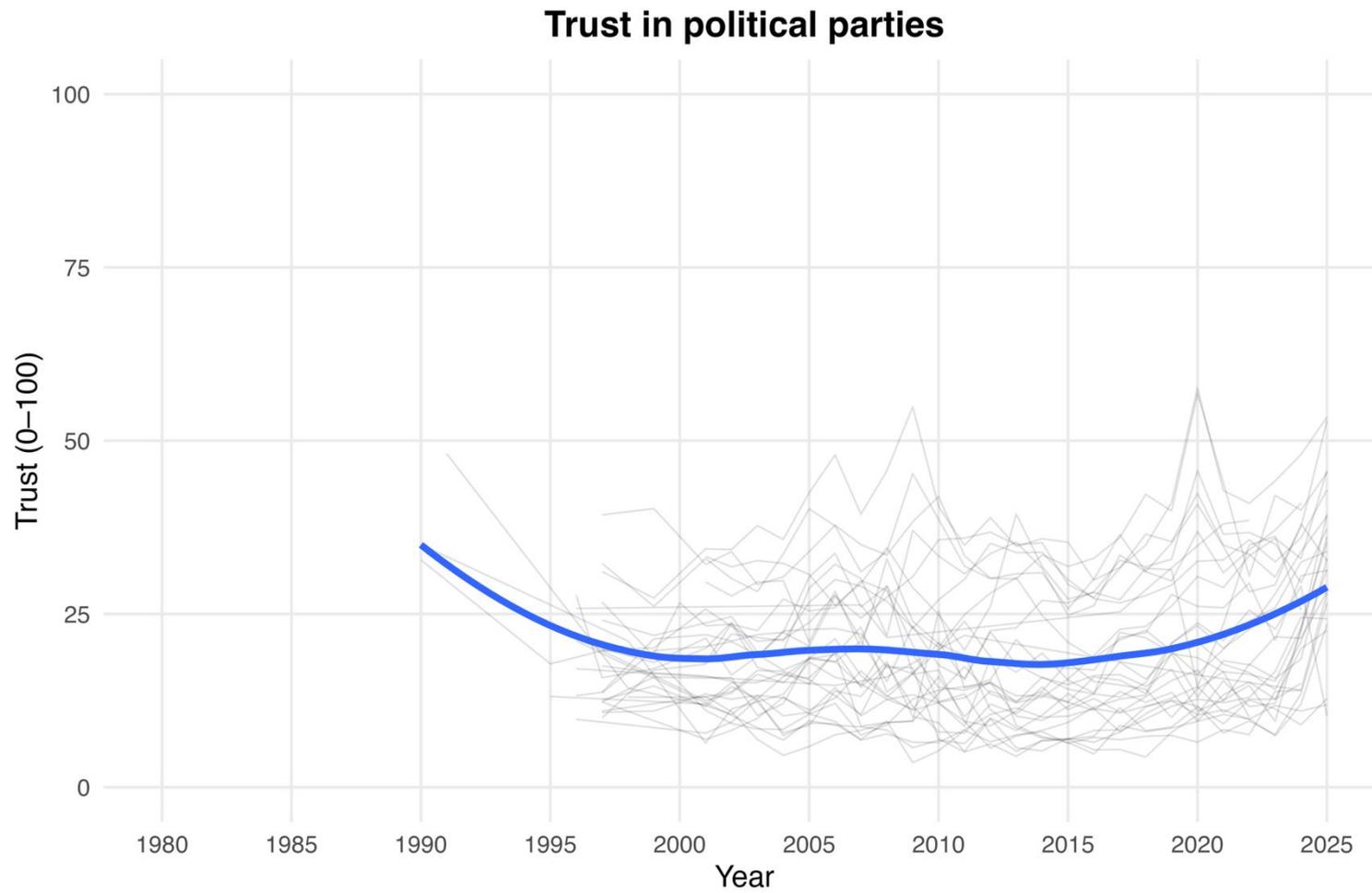


Figure 26 Trajectories of trust in political parties – European regions

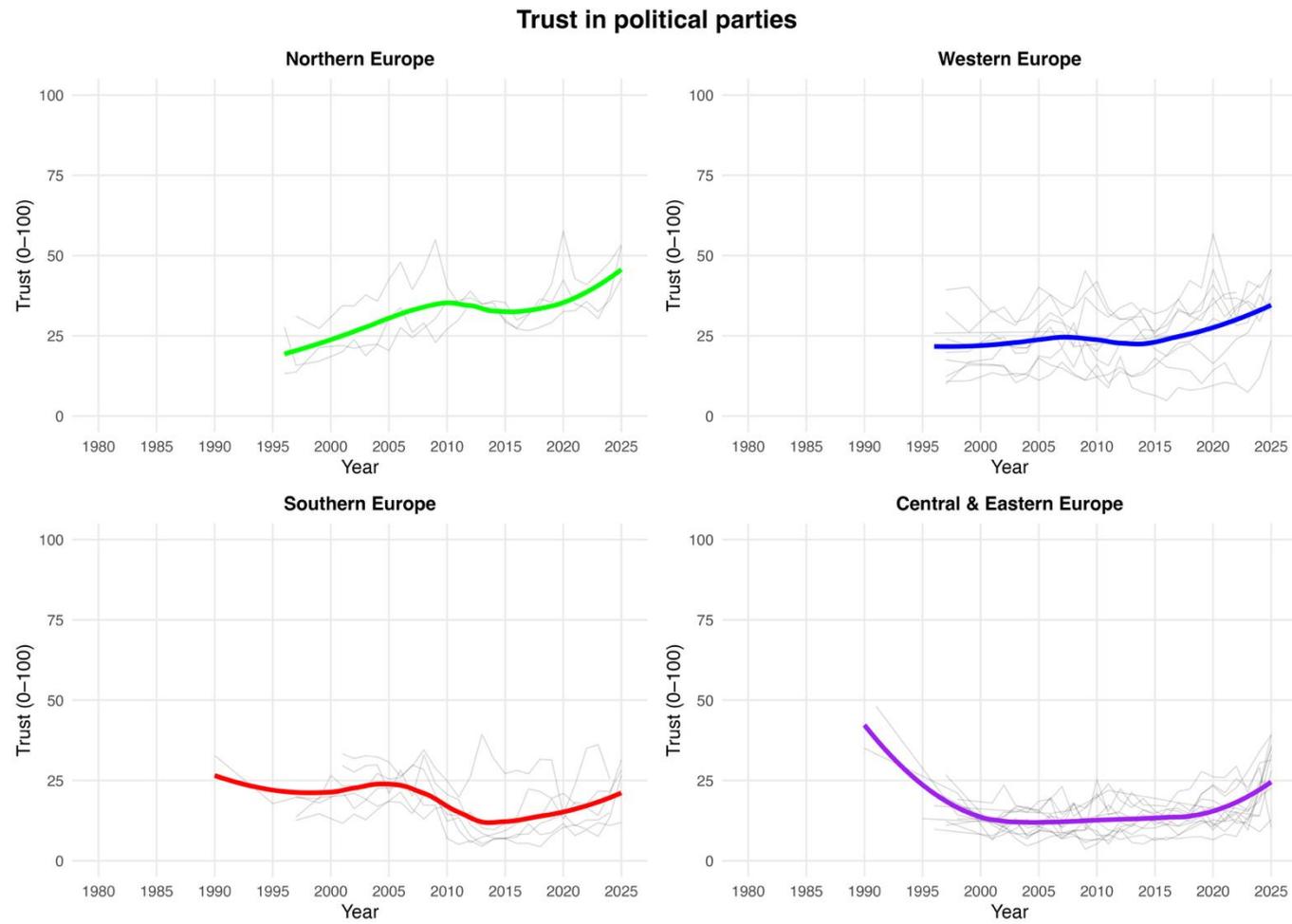
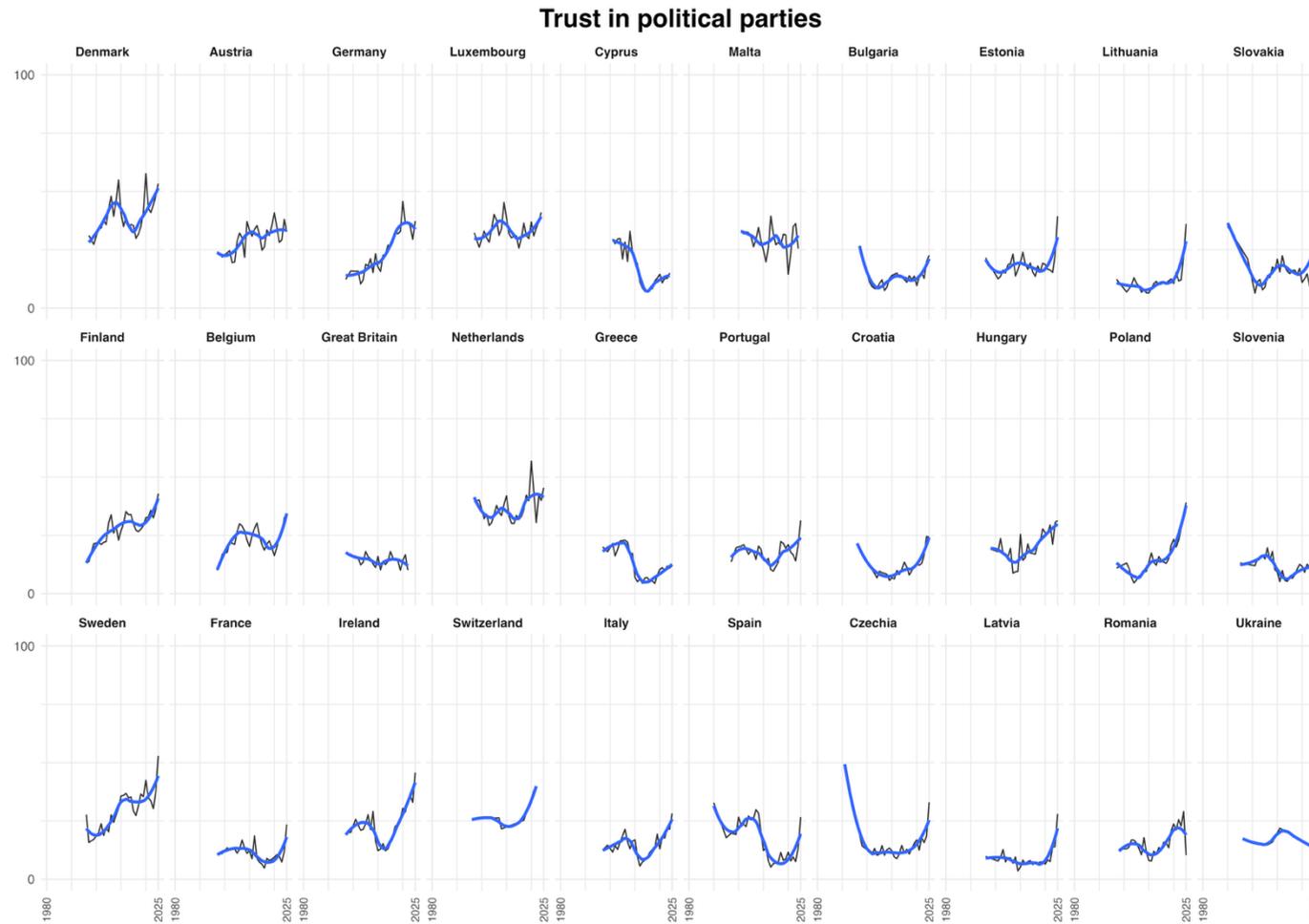




Figure 27 Trajectories of trust in political parties – Countries



*Figure 28 Trajectories of trust in politicians – Europe*

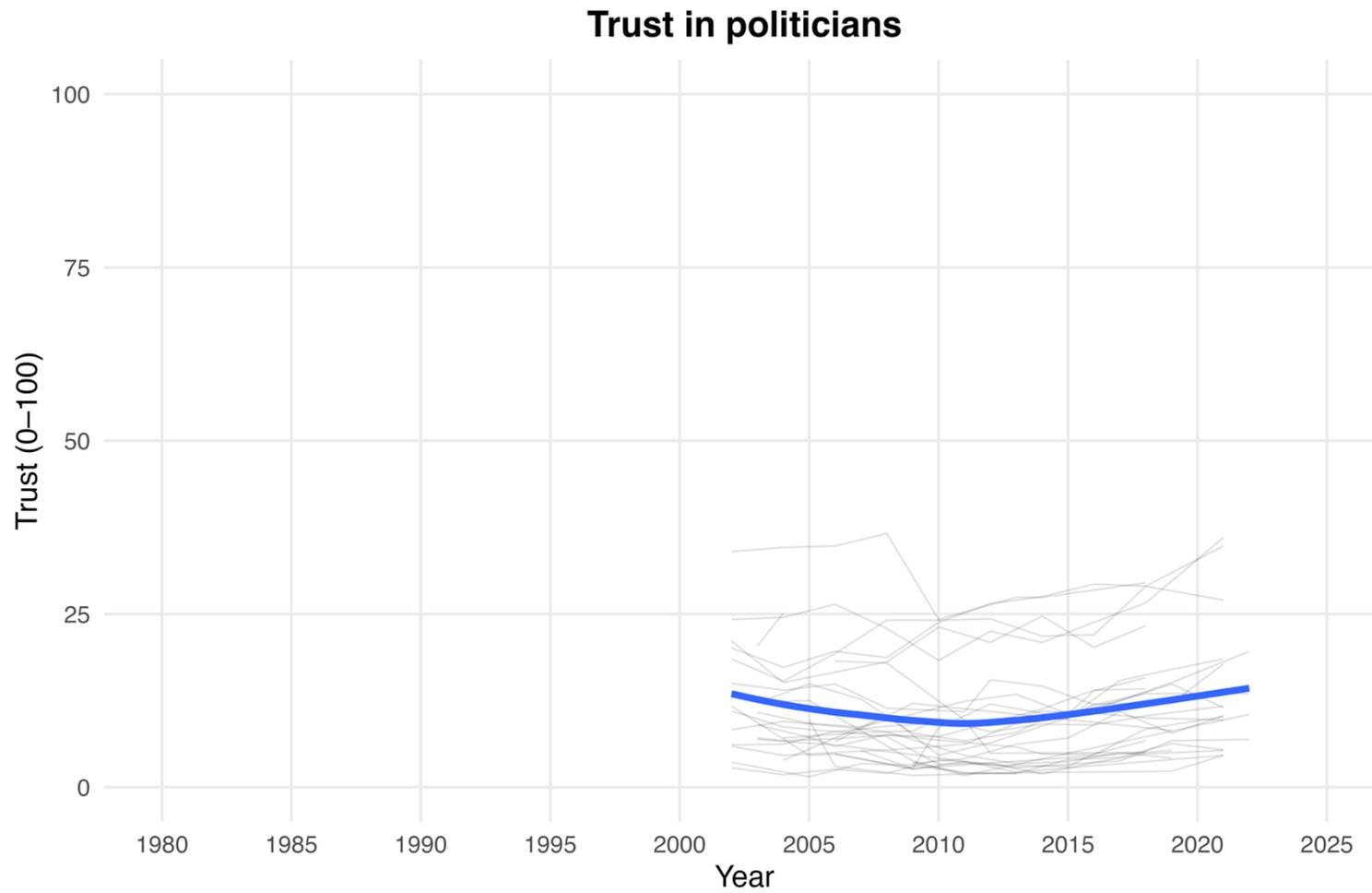


Figure 29 Trajectories of trust in politicians – European regions

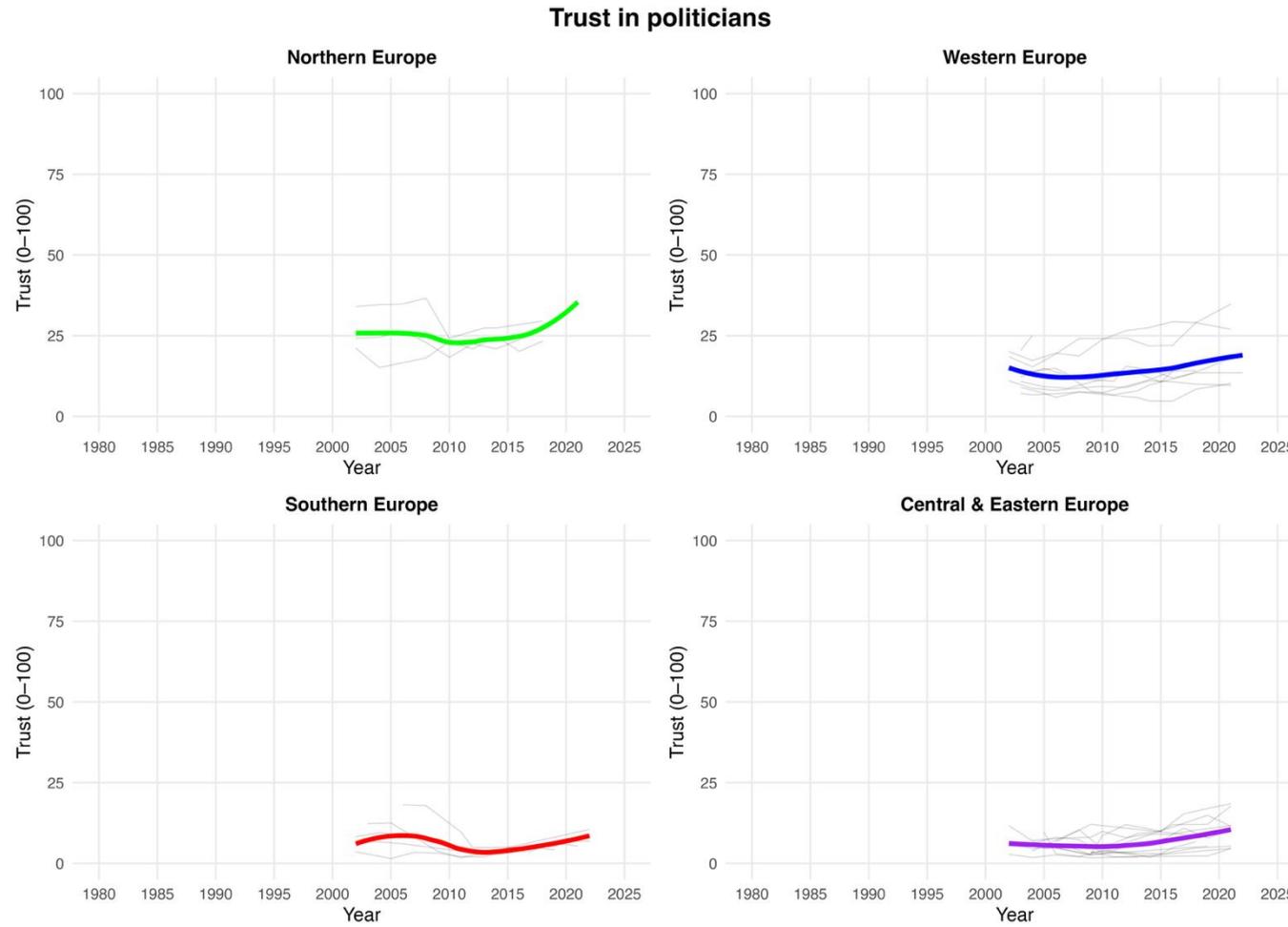
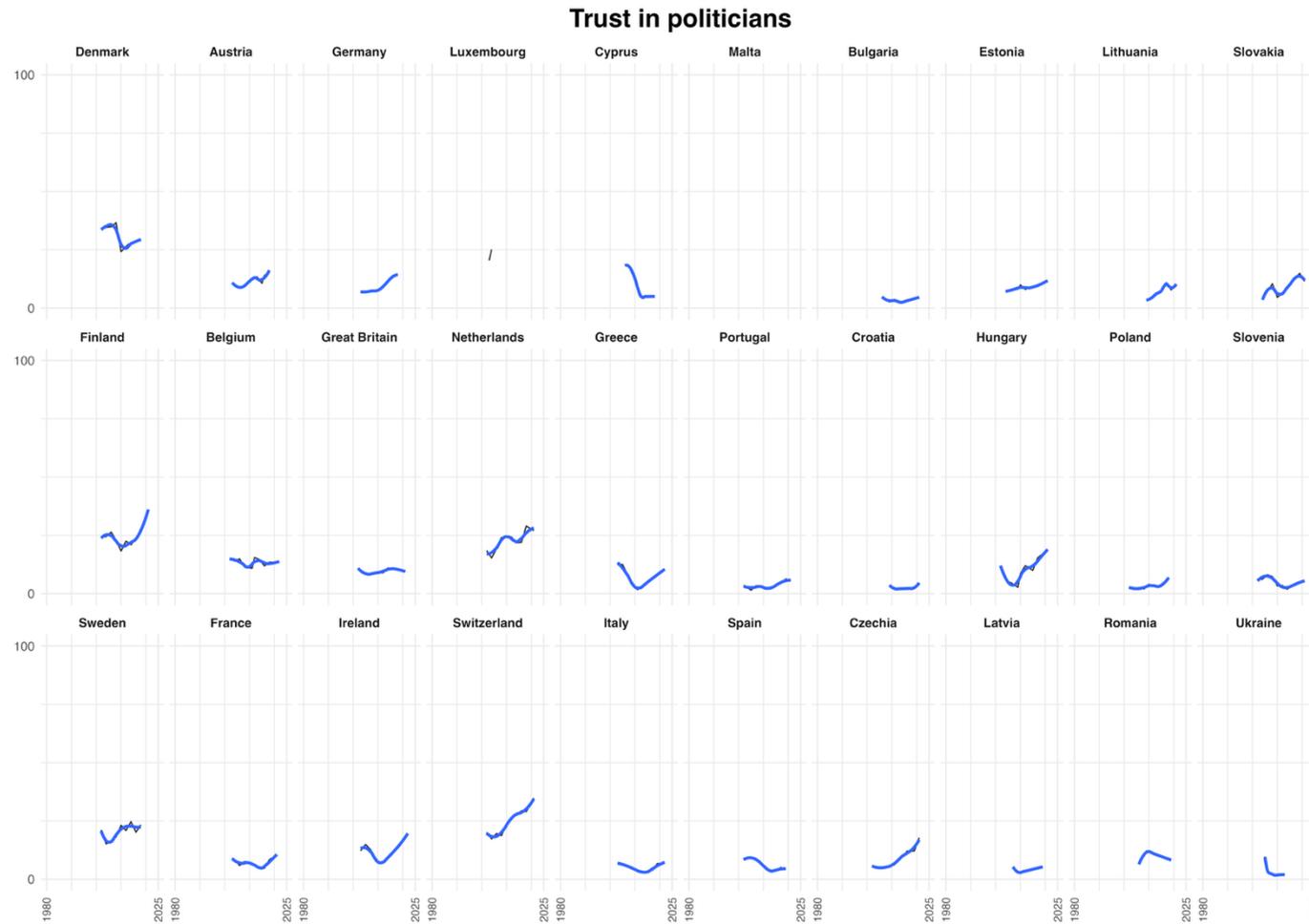




Figure 30 Trajectories of trust in politicians – Countries



### 4.3 Local / implementing institutions

Local (or implementing) institutions (the courts, the police, local government, and public administration) have a distinct position in the architecture of political trust. Unlike the representative institutions in the previous section, which are directly involved in partisan competition and policy design, the local institutions execute, interpret, and enforce decisions. From this perspective, trust in these institutions should depend primarily on people's perceptions of competence, impartiality, and procedural fairness. Both performance-based and legitimacy-based theories of institutional trust suggest that implementing institutions should have more stable and higher levels of trust than political institutions. We discuss in detail trust in courts and the police, institutions that are highly visible and known, and we complement the discussion, if needed, with details related to trust in the local government and the public administration.

Across Europe as a whole, trust in courts (Figure 31 - Figure 33) and trust in the police (Figure 34 - Figure 36) display a similar, long-term U-shaped pattern. Trust in these institutions declined gradually from relatively high levels in the early 1980s into the late-1990s, then it began a slow recovery period, recovering most of the lost trust by 2025. In terms of levels, trust in police is slightly higher than trust in the courts. This long-term pattern contrasts with the flatter or declining trajectories observed for national political institutions. While trust in parliament and government showed crisis-related downturns, trust in courts and the police shows greater long-term resilience. This supports theoretical expectations that judicial institutions are partially insulated from short-term political dissatisfaction.

At regional level, there are only two observable differences between trust in these two institutions. First, in terms of levels, trust in the police is always higher than trust in the courts in all regions. Second, the trajectories are similar in all regions with the exception of Central and Eastern Europe. In this region, trust in the courts has a U-shaped form, similar to the one observed for trust in the parliament or in the political parties: starting from high levels, trust in the courts declines dramatically until the mid 2000s then starts a slow recovery, reaching the 50% mark by 2025. In all other regions (and also in Central and Eastern Europe in the case of the police) the trajectories of trust could be approximated quite well using linear equations with small positive slopes, regional differences being related to the level of trust, not to its trajectory.

Central and Eastern Europe presents a post-transition pattern: very high trust in courts and police immediately after 1989, followed by dramatic declines during the 1990s as corruption, politicization, and weak rule-of-law enforcement became visible. Since the mid-2000s, trust gradually recovers, especially in police and local government, though courts remain still contested to some extent. This finding is consistent with literature on uneven rule-of-law consolidation (Popova 2012; Mendelski 2015).

Country-level trajectories show similar developments in Northern and Western Europe, and more diverging trends in the other two regions. Cyprus and Greece are the only two countries in which trust in the courts has declined over the period of time we analyzed (in Cyprus trust in police also declined). In some Central and Eastern European countries (Poland and Romania are the most visible cases) the courts are a more contentious institution than the police, as indicated by trajectories of trust with high variability. This should not surprise those who follow politics in these countries, as the courts have been constantly in the middle of power fights, with politicians (especially those in power) attempting to limit the independence of the courts and to control them as much as possible.

In the case of the police, trust trajectories confirm that police trust has improved in almost all European countries since 2000. Even in countries with stagnating or declining trust in political

institutions, trust in police still rises. The most impressive improvements can be observed in the Baltic states or in Czechia, countries which recorded a difference of about 50 percentage points in trust in the police across the period of time we included in our analysis.

Trust in public administration (Figure 40 - Figure 42) has an intermediate position between courts and police. European mean levels improve slowly over time, passing the 50% mark by 2025. Both the European and the regional trajectories are quite similar to the ones observed in the case of trust in the courts and the police, with differences only in terms of level of trust. The only additional observation that jumps from the charts is that by 2025 there seems to be more variation among countries than it was recorded in the beginning of the 2000s. Northern countries show only a pattern of a large increase in trust over time; Western countries show an average level of increase over time. Southern countries show either stagnation, or minor increases in trust over time. Lastly, Central and Eastern European are more heterogenous, with multiple patterns for the trajectories of trust.

Lastly, trust in the local government (Figure 37 - Figure 39) is placed somewhere in the middle: trust here is higher than in national political institutions but generally lower than in courts and police. Moreover, by comparison to the other institutions in this category, the trajectory of trust in the local government is more cyclical, reflecting most likely local governance reforms, decentralization processes, and crisis-induced austerity.

The aggregate trends we have observed here align with comparative governance studies showing that trust in implementing institutions is rooted in state capacity and administrative quality rather than partisan satisfaction (Holmberg, Rothstein, and Nasiritousi 2009; Dahlström, Lapuente, and Teorell 2012). Overall, across all regions, courts are the most trusted institution of the group, reflecting the symbolic authority of legal neutrality, even where actual judicial independence is contested. Police trust is slightly lower, but it shows a similar trajectory, shaped by visibility and everyday contact. Public administration trust sits lower still, indicating sensitivity to perceptions of bureaucratic corruption and inefficiency. Lastly, local government trust remains comparatively stable, likely because citizens evaluate it through direct service encounters rather than national political narratives.

One last observation, before moving on to the next section: the gradual convergence of Central and Eastern European trust levels (in this group of institutions) toward the Western European levels may be interpreted as evidence of the impact of EU governance conditionality, administrative capacity-building, and rule-of-law monitoring. The slow recovery of trust in courts suggests that judicial independence reforms have been slower or contested (again, countries such as Hungary, Poland, or Romania give plenty of evidence this way). This confirms recent research findings showing that EU integration strengthens administrative professionalism faster than judicial autonomy (Börzel and Sedelmeier 2018).

*Figure 31 Trajectories of trust in the courts – Europe*

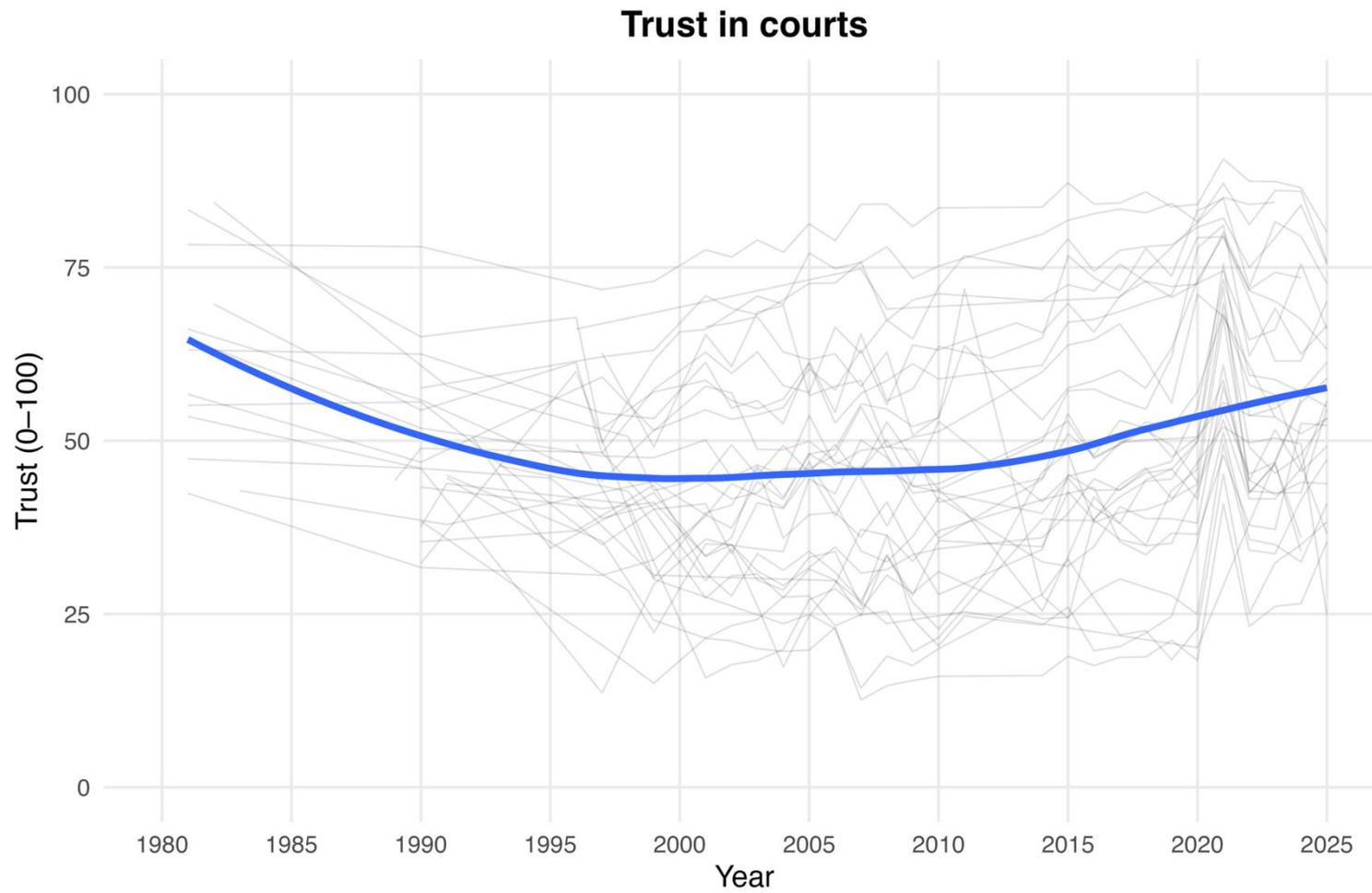


Figure 32 Trajectories of trust in the courts – European regions

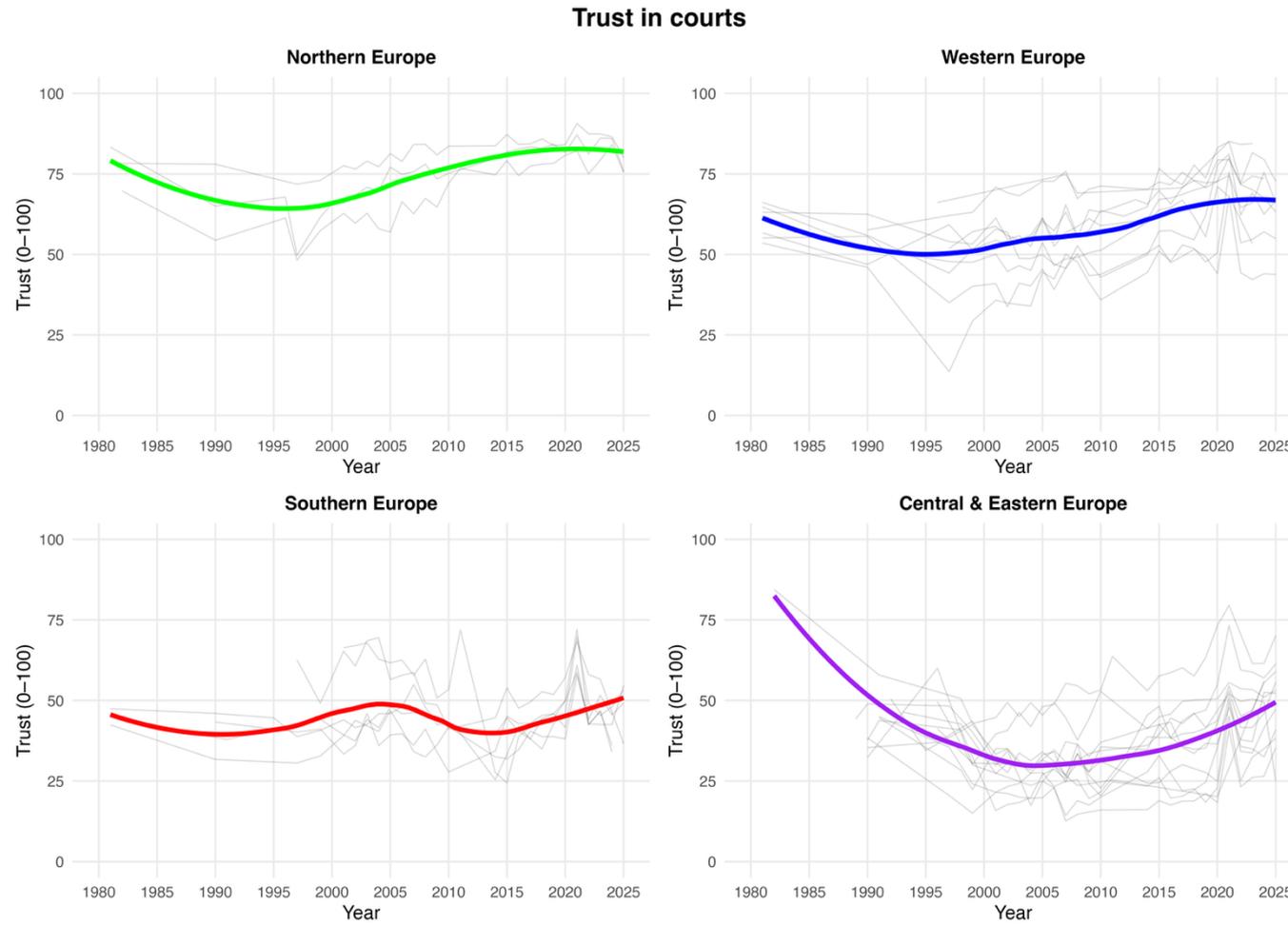
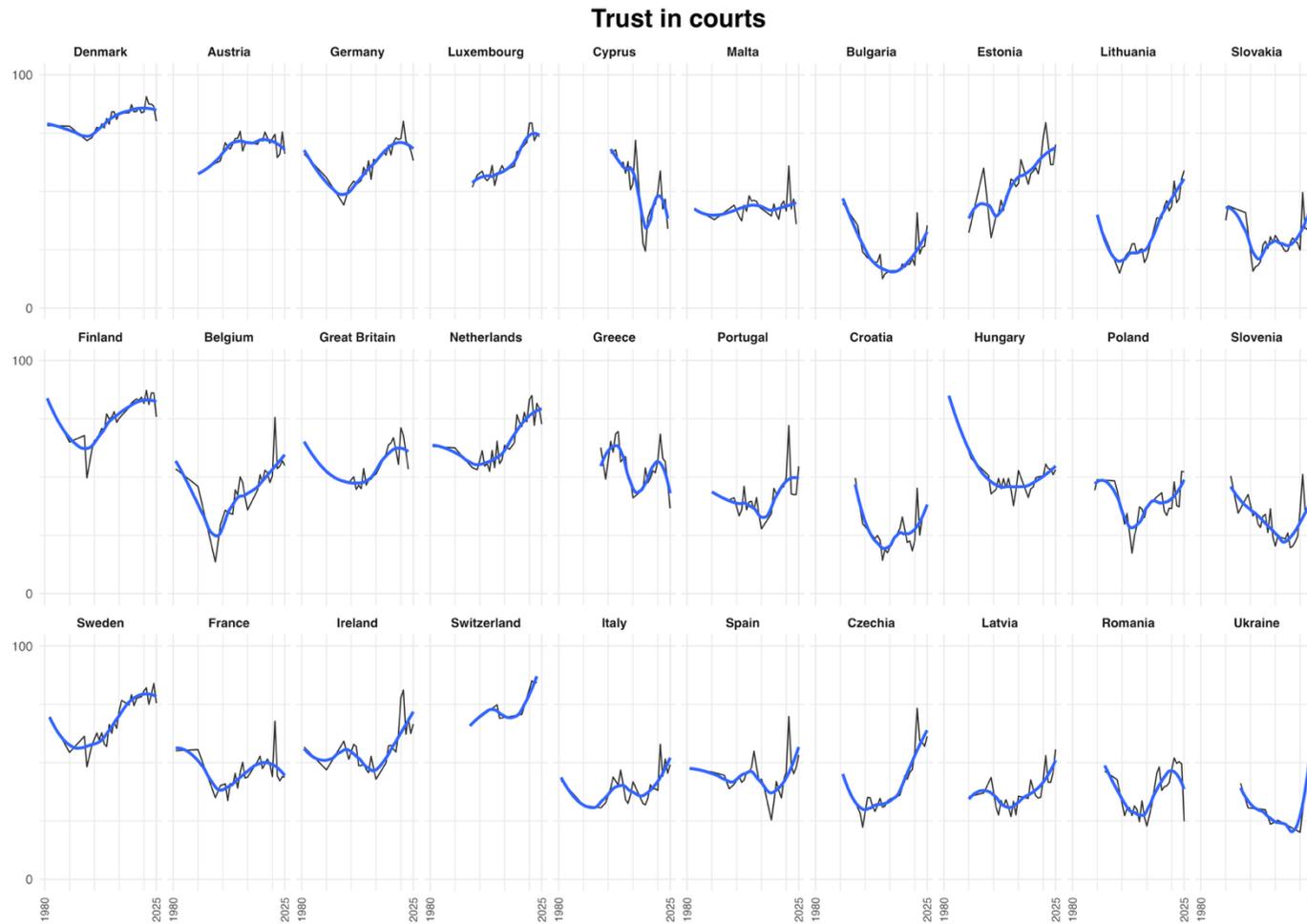
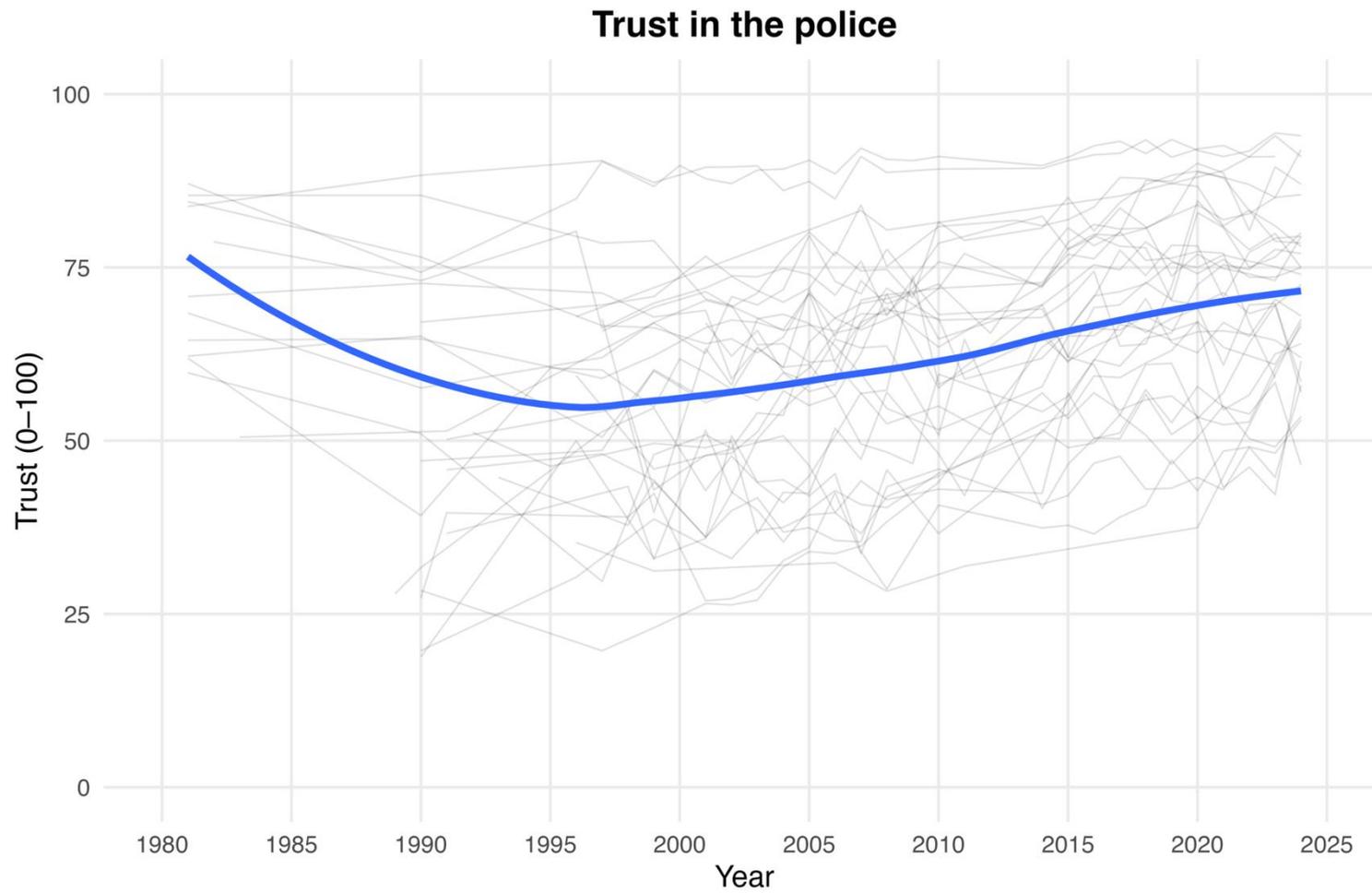


Figure 33 Trajectories of trust in the courts – Countries



*Figure 34 Trajectories of trust in the police – Europe*



*Figure 35 Trajectories of trust in the police – European regions*

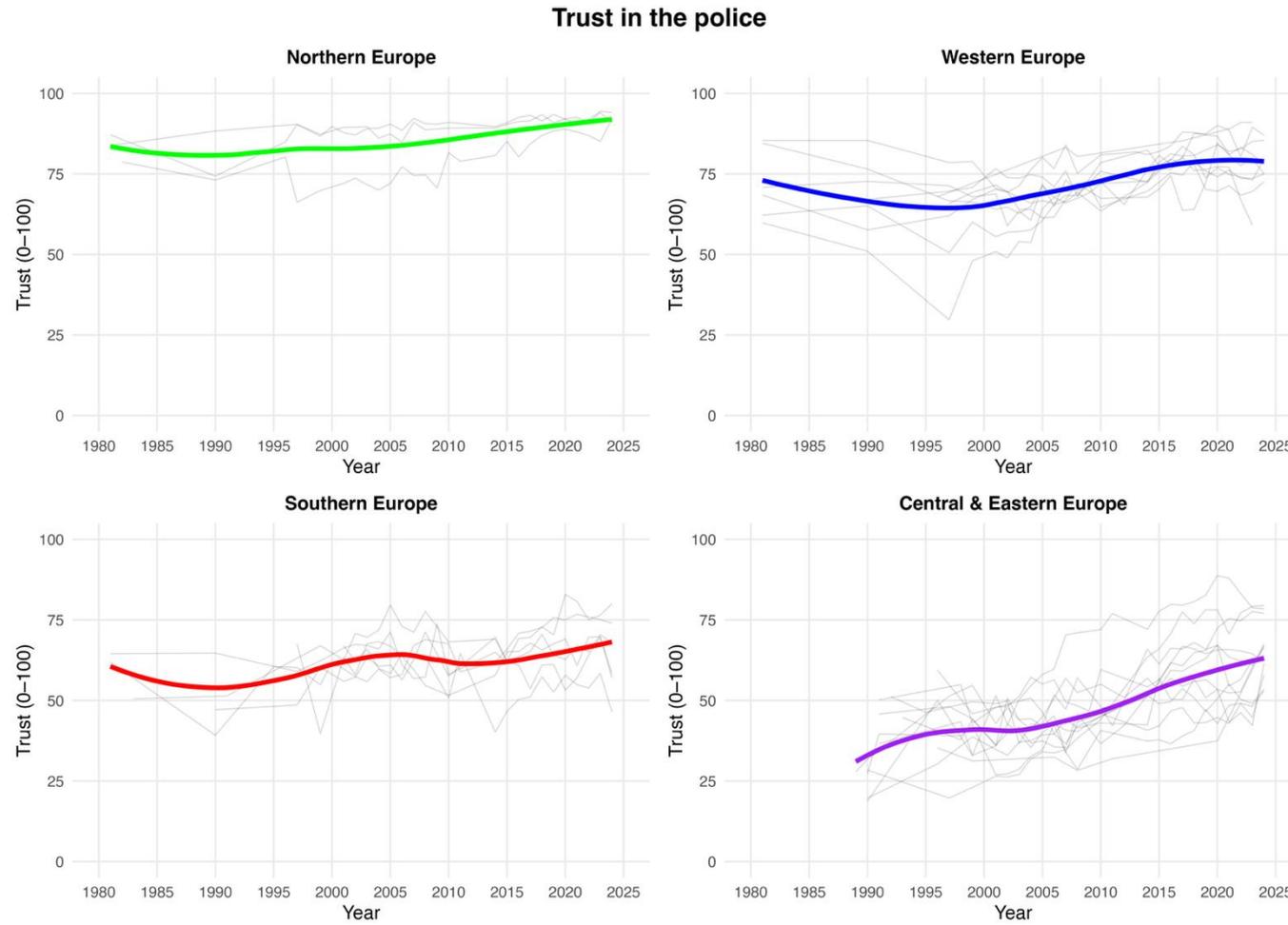
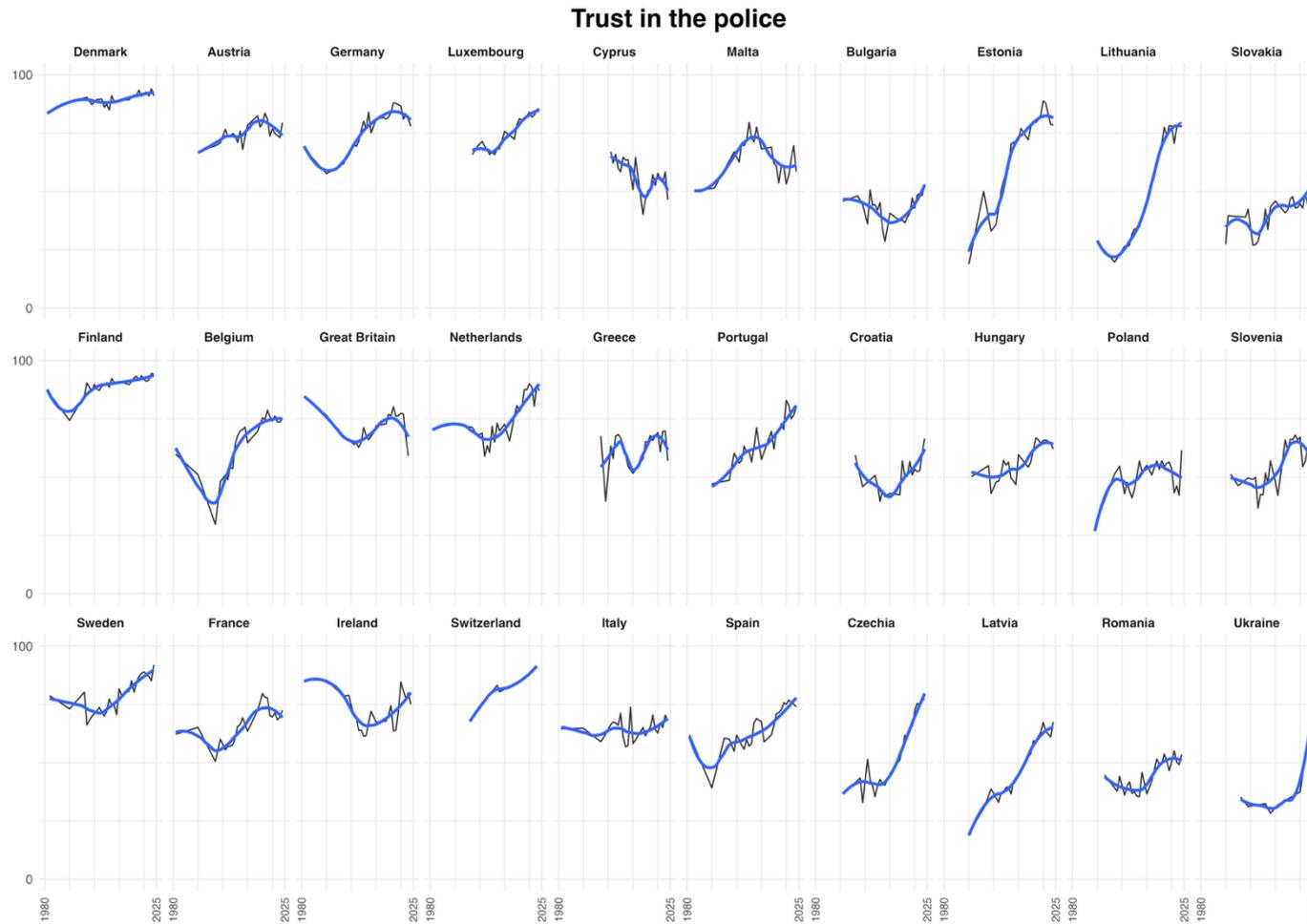


Figure 36 Trajectories of trust in the police – Countries



*Figure 37 Trajectories of trust in the local government – Europe*

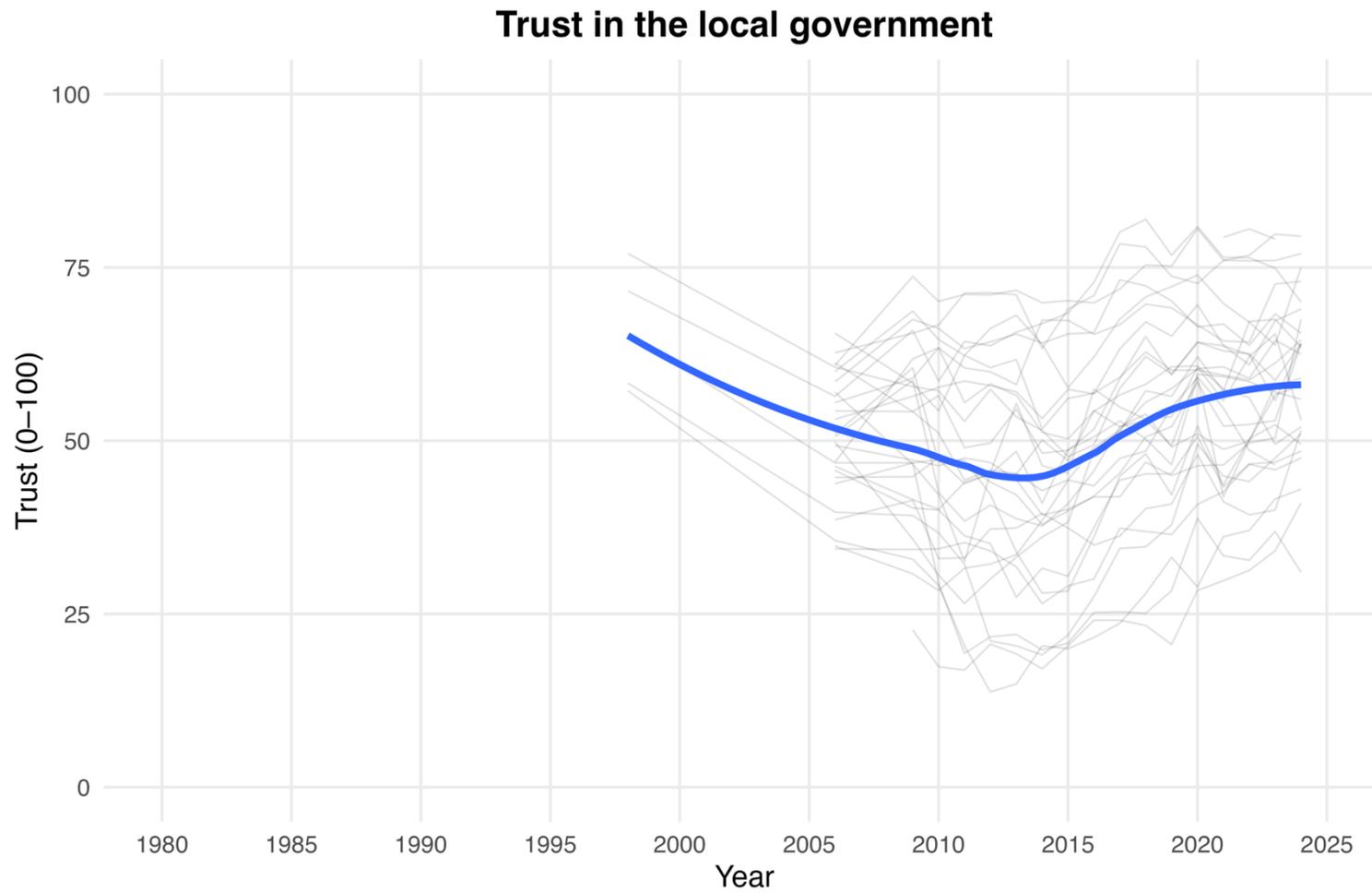


Figure 38 Trajectories of trust in the local government – European regions

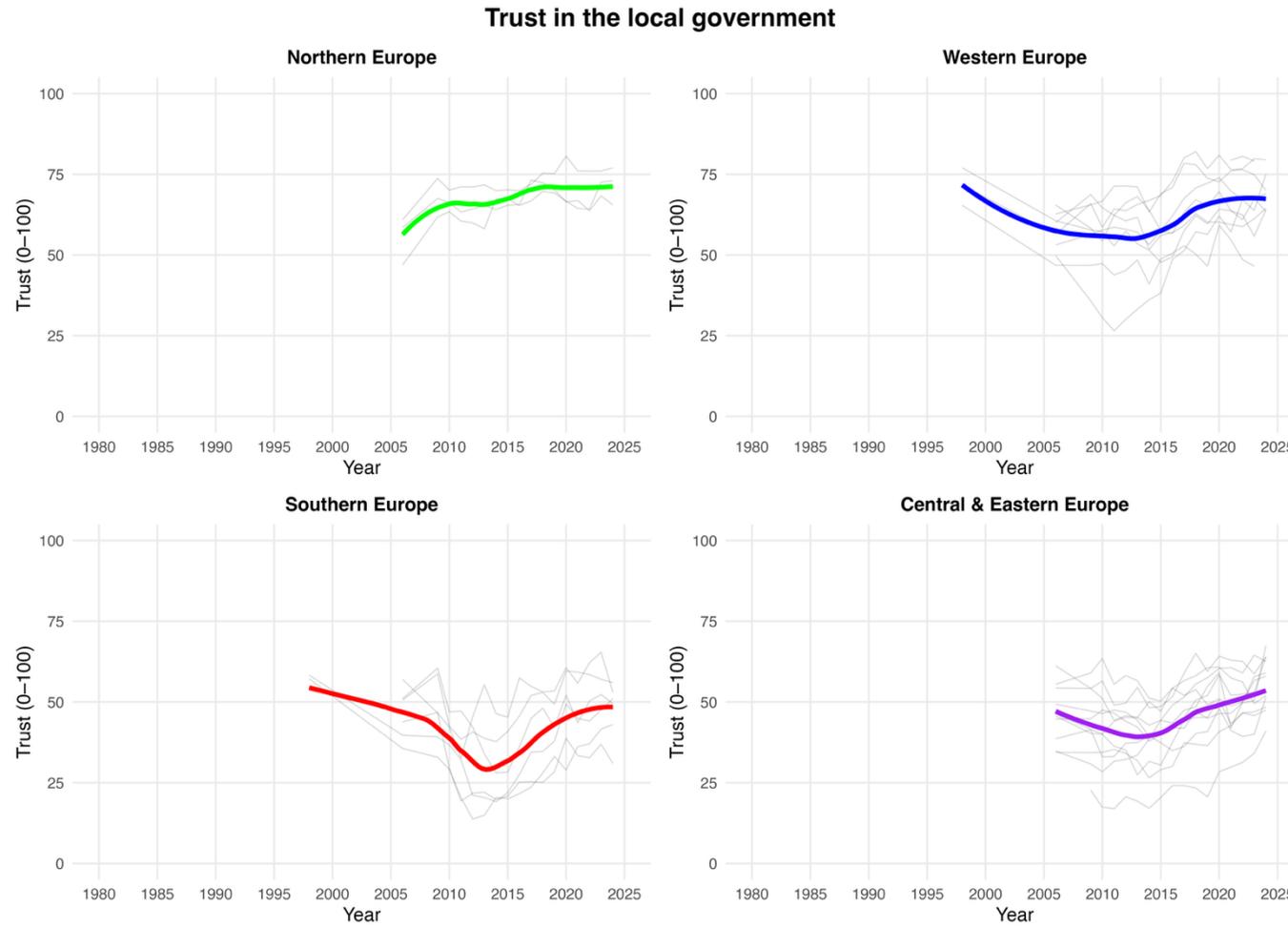
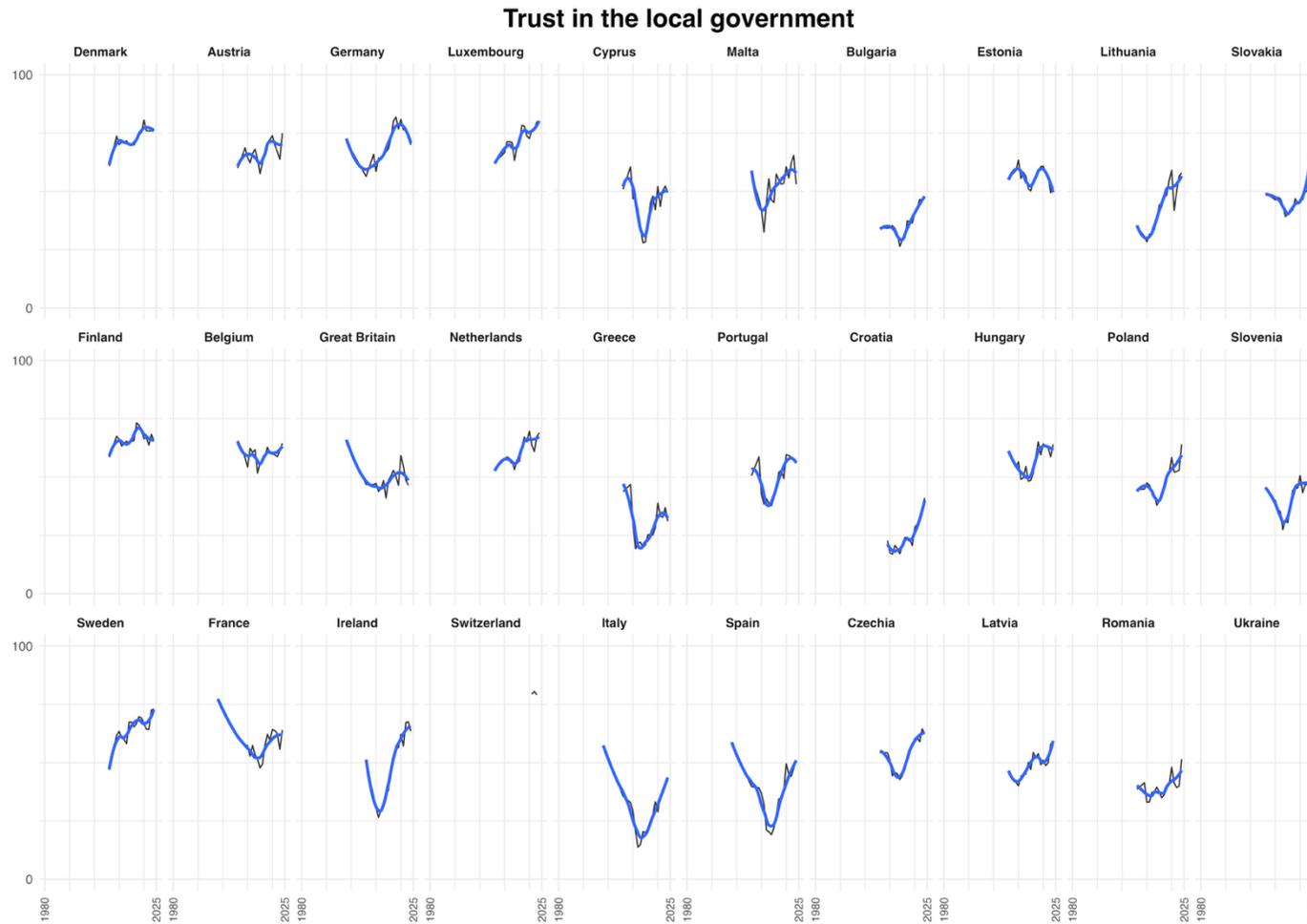




Figure 39 Trajectories of trust in the local government – Countries



*Figure 40 Trajectories of trust in the public administration – Europe*

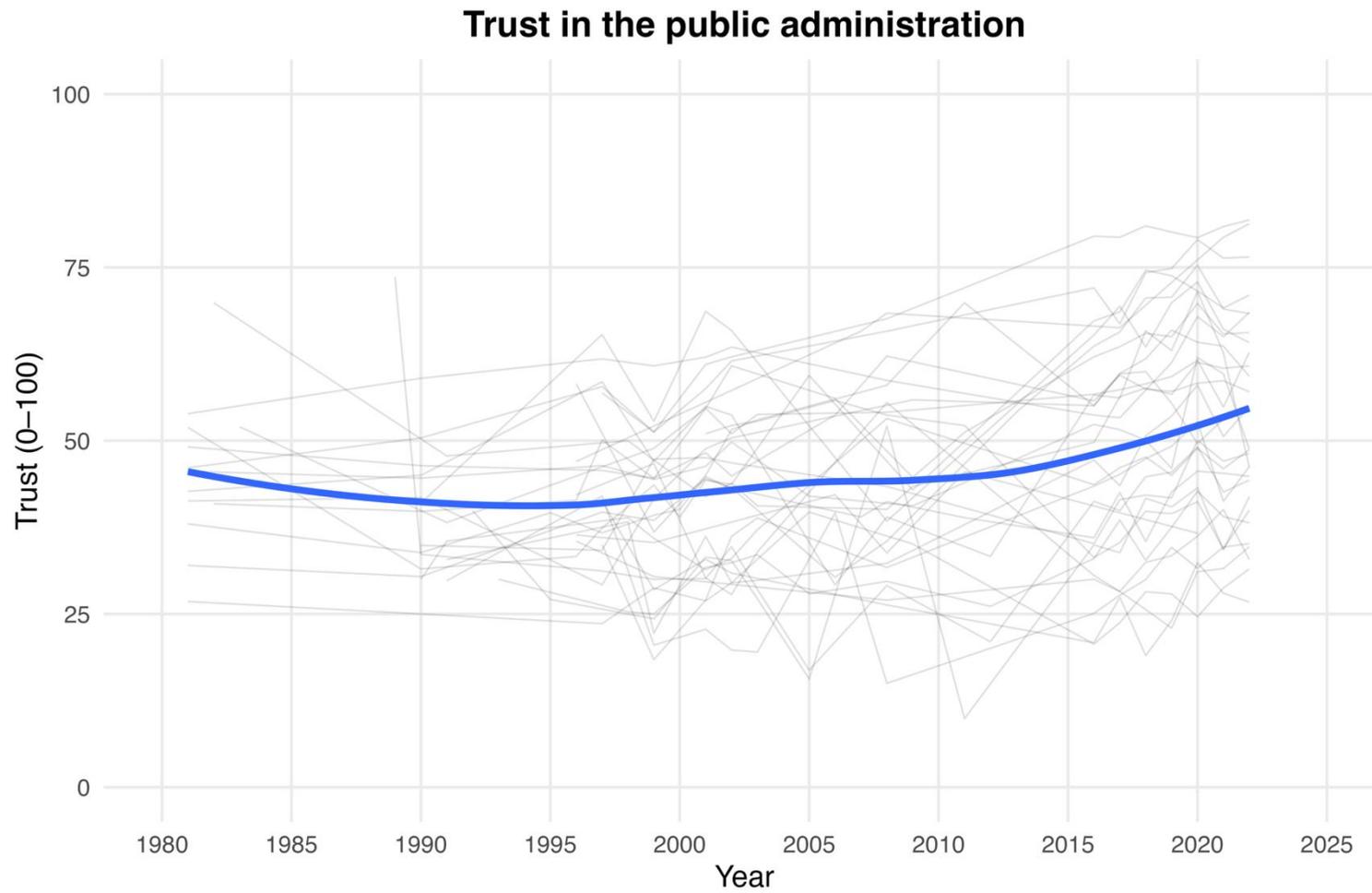


Figure 41 Trajectories of trust in the public administration – European regions

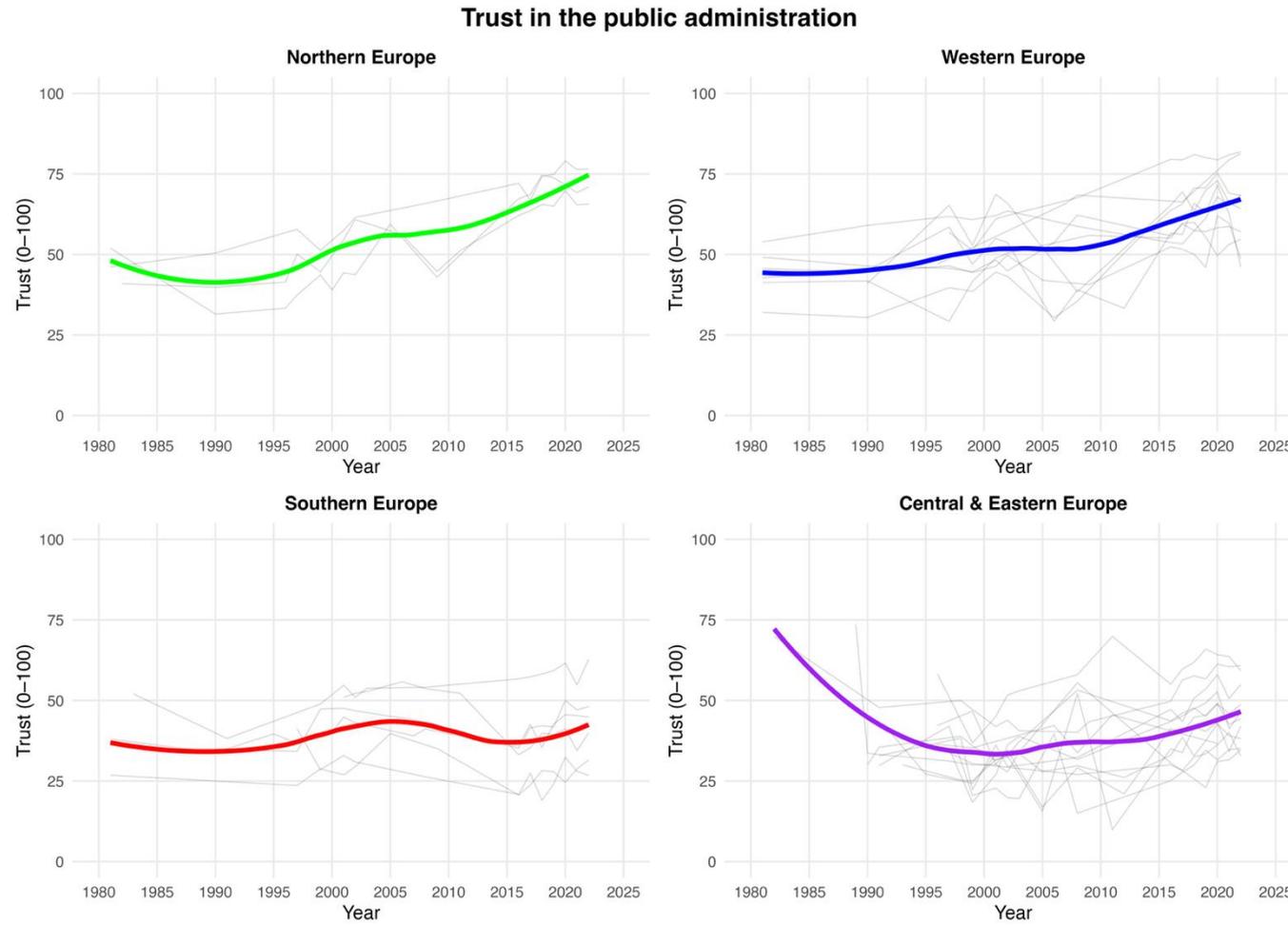
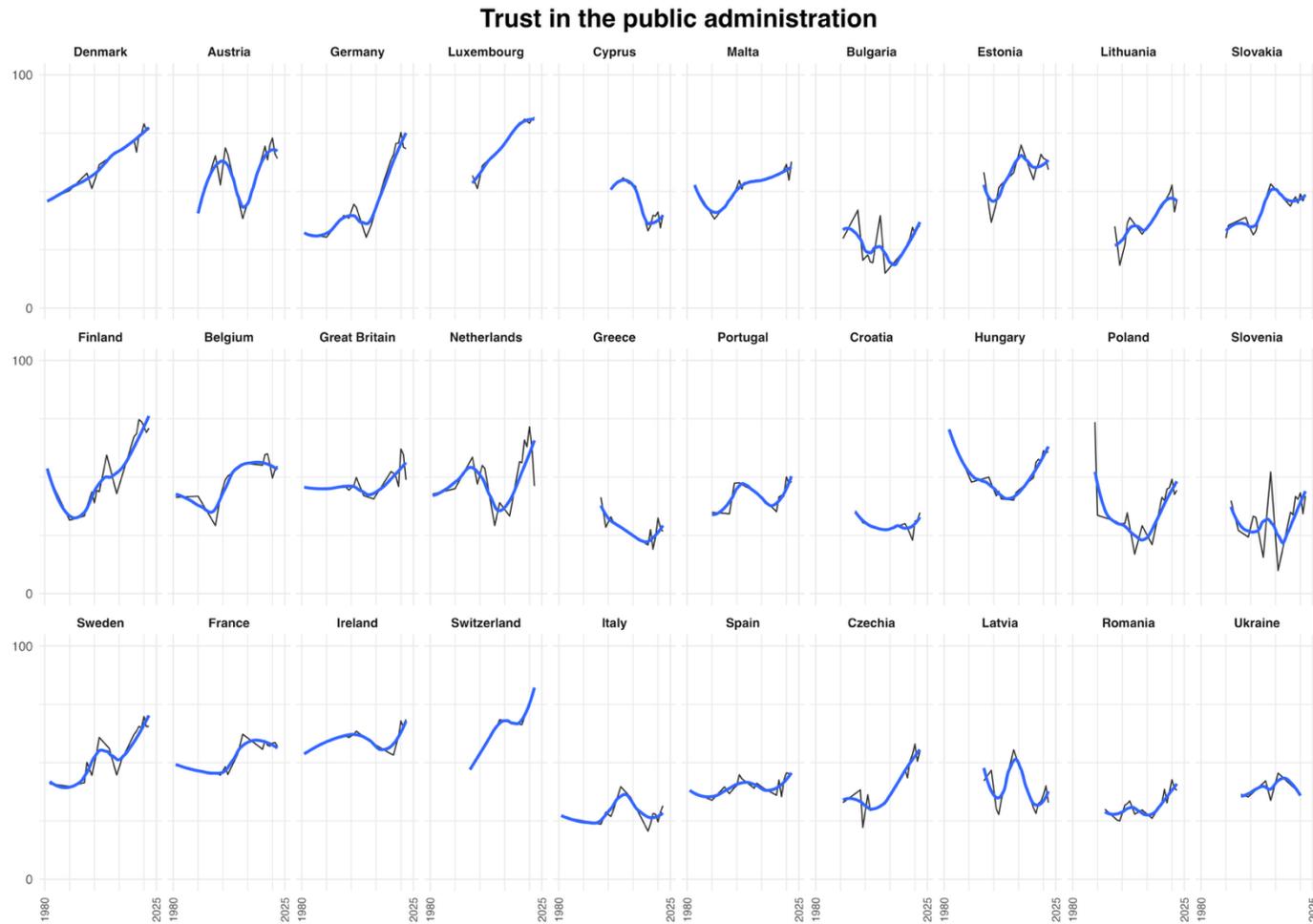


Figure 42 Trajectories of trust in the public administration – Countries



#### 4.4 Mass media / informational institutions

Mass media institutions (the written press, radio, TV, the internet, social networks) occupy a distinct position in the architecture of institutional trust, functioning both as information providers and as intermediaries between citizens and the political system in all its forms. As a result, trust in media reflects not necessarily evaluations of journalistic professionalism, but rather perceptions of political fairness, social cohesion, and informational integrity. The last two decades have been challenging for traditional media given the digital disruption and partisan polarization in the field. Examining long-term trust trajectories in both traditional and new mass media institutions allows us to understand how European societies have adapted to these changes. We will focus most of our discussion on trust in the traditional media, reflecting perhaps the age of the author of this report, and we will refer at the trajectories of trust in the other institutions included in the group only as needed. For those interested in seeing first the data and then reading the report, trajectories of trust in the written press are presented in Figure 43 - Figure 45. Trust in radio is presented in Figure 46 - Figure 48, and trust in the TV is presented in Figure 49 - Figure 51. We have also included trust in the internet (Figure 51 - Figure 53) and trust in social networks (Figure 55 - Figure 57).

At the European level, trust in traditional media shows a pattern of relative stability combined with gradual reconfiguration. Radio remains the most trusted traditional medium throughout the period, closely followed by TV and, at some distance, the written press. Although the written press displays lower baseline levels, it also shows some moderate long-term improvement from the 1990s into the early 2000s, followed by stabilization. By comparison, trust in radio and the TV, although at higher levels, has shown a small decline since a maximum recorded during the 2000-2005 period. These trajectories confirm previous studies showing that broadcast media historically benefited from stronger professional norms, public-service regulation, and relatively high barriers to entry, all of which supported credibility (Norris 2000; Hallin and Mancini 2004). The written press, by contrast, was more exposed to market pressures and partisan traditions, leading to slightly lower trust. It should be noted in this context that despite widespread narratives of a crisis of trust in the media, traditional media in Europe have kept substantial legitimacy by comparison to political institutions (Fletcher and Park 2017).

At the regional level, Northern Europe shows the highest trust in all three media forms. Radio and television trust, already at high levels at the beginning of the time series, slightly increase over time, while trust in the written press more than doubles over the time period we analyze. Western Europe shows moderately high trust in television and radio, but lower trust in the written press. After an increase during the late 1990s and early 2000s, trust levels flatten. Southern Europe displays the lowest and most variable trust across traditional media. The trajectories observed in Southern European countries confirm research documenting politicized media ownership and clientelistic information environments (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002; Vaccari and Valeriani 2021). Central and Eastern Europe shows a different pattern: high initial trust in the early 1990s, reflecting optimism toward newly liberalized media, followed by small declines, especially the written press. These trajectories confirm observations of previous authors who have pointed out evidence of media capture, declining press freedom, and political instrumentalization of broadcasting in post-communist states (Bajomi-Lázár 2014). The regional differences mirror broader regime-level differences in media system institutionalization (Hallin & Mancini 2004).

Surprisingly, traditional broadcast media, especially radio and TV, remain resilient trust anchors in Europe. Trust in the written press is structurally lower and more sensitive to political and economic shocks. Newspaper trust trajectories thus function as an early-warning indicator of broader informational stress. It is important to note the divide between Northern and Western European countries

on the one hand and Southern and Central and Eastern European countries on the other: countries in the first group have increased trust in the traditional media, while countries in the second group have an inverse evolution, showing a decline in trust over time. This might have important consequences given that countries in these regions are also more exposed to democratic backsliding. Anecdotic evidence from multiple post-communist countries suggests that weakening independent journalism and rising government control reinforce each other in a vicious circle that is dangerous to democracy (Humprecht et al. 2020; Hanitzsch et al. 2018).

The figures for trust in the internet (Figure 52 - Figure 54) and social networks (Figure 55 - Figure 57) show a consistent empirical pattern across Europe. First, trust in digital media is significantly lower than trust in traditional media. This ordering is visible in all regional panels. Second, regional differences are present but sometimes different from the patterns identified for other institutions. Northern Europe, for instance, shows more trust in digital media platforms than the other regions, but the level of trust is rather modest. Central and Eastern Europe exhibits the lowest average trust in both categories, with substantial cross-national dispersion in the country panels. Third, it should be noted here that the period of time covering trust in social networks is significantly smaller than for any other institution, reflecting the recency of digital media. In this case it is possible that we do not have sufficient data to capture long-term trajectories of trust. Overall, the visual evidence suggests that digital information channels have not achieved yet the institutionalized trust status of traditional media. At the same time, we know from national studies that digital media is widely adopted as an information source by the younger generations, to the detriment of the traditional media. This suggests the existence of age-related media consumption patterns that may not be visible in the data that we have.

From a theoretical perspective, mass media institutions occupy a second-order trust position, citizens trusting them not precisely because they provide information enabling judgments about other institutions (Giddens 1990; Kohring and Matthes 2007). When trust in media declines, this affects citizens' ability to form assessments of institutional performance, potentially amplifying polarization and reducing institutional trust across the board (Tsfati & Cappella 2005). Traditional media historically fulfilled this gatekeeping role and trust in these institutions was linked to perceptions of journalistic independence and factual reliability (Strömbäck et al. 2020).

The new era of digital platforms and social networks transformed the media environment by replacing editorial gatekeeping with algorithmic curation and user-generated content. This democratized access to information, but it also blurred distinctions between verified news, opinion, and misinformation (van Dijck et al. 2018). This might be an explanation for the comparatively lower trust levels observed for social networks across all European regions: trust in digital media reflects not only evaluations of specific platforms but also broader concerns about information disorder, privacy, and manipulation in the online environment. These concerns have intensified in the aftermath of electoral interference scandals, pandemic misinformation, and algorithmic amplification controversies.

The empirical trends suggest that while citizens rely more and more on digital platforms for information, they do not trust them too much. This creates a tension, as information consumption moves to media that are less trusted. It remains a question for the future to uncover how this evolution affects coherent trust formation across political and administrative institutions. So far, the evidence points to a negative effect.

*Figure 43 Trajectories of trust in the written press – Europe*

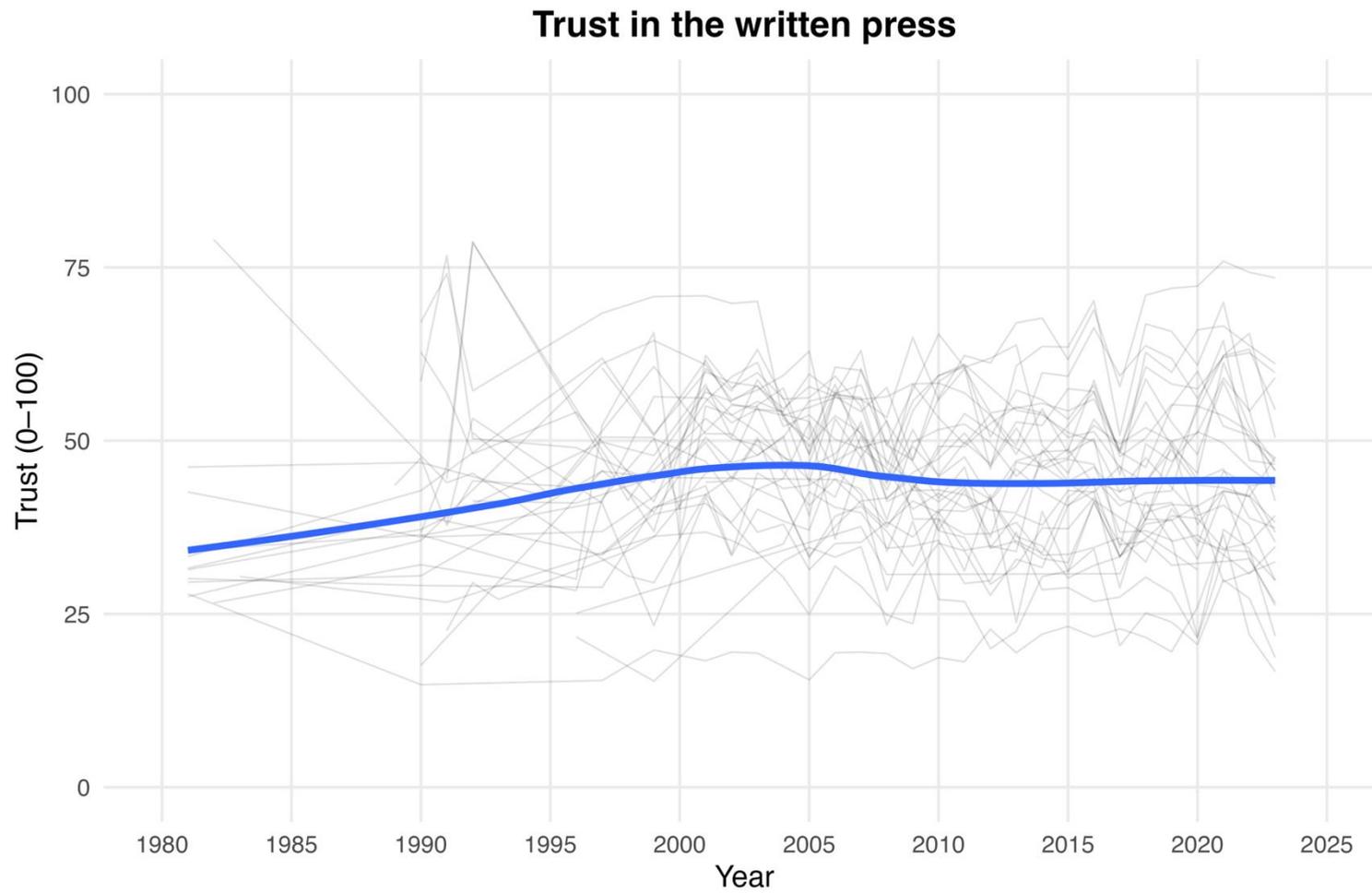


Figure 44 Trajectories of trust in the written press – European regions

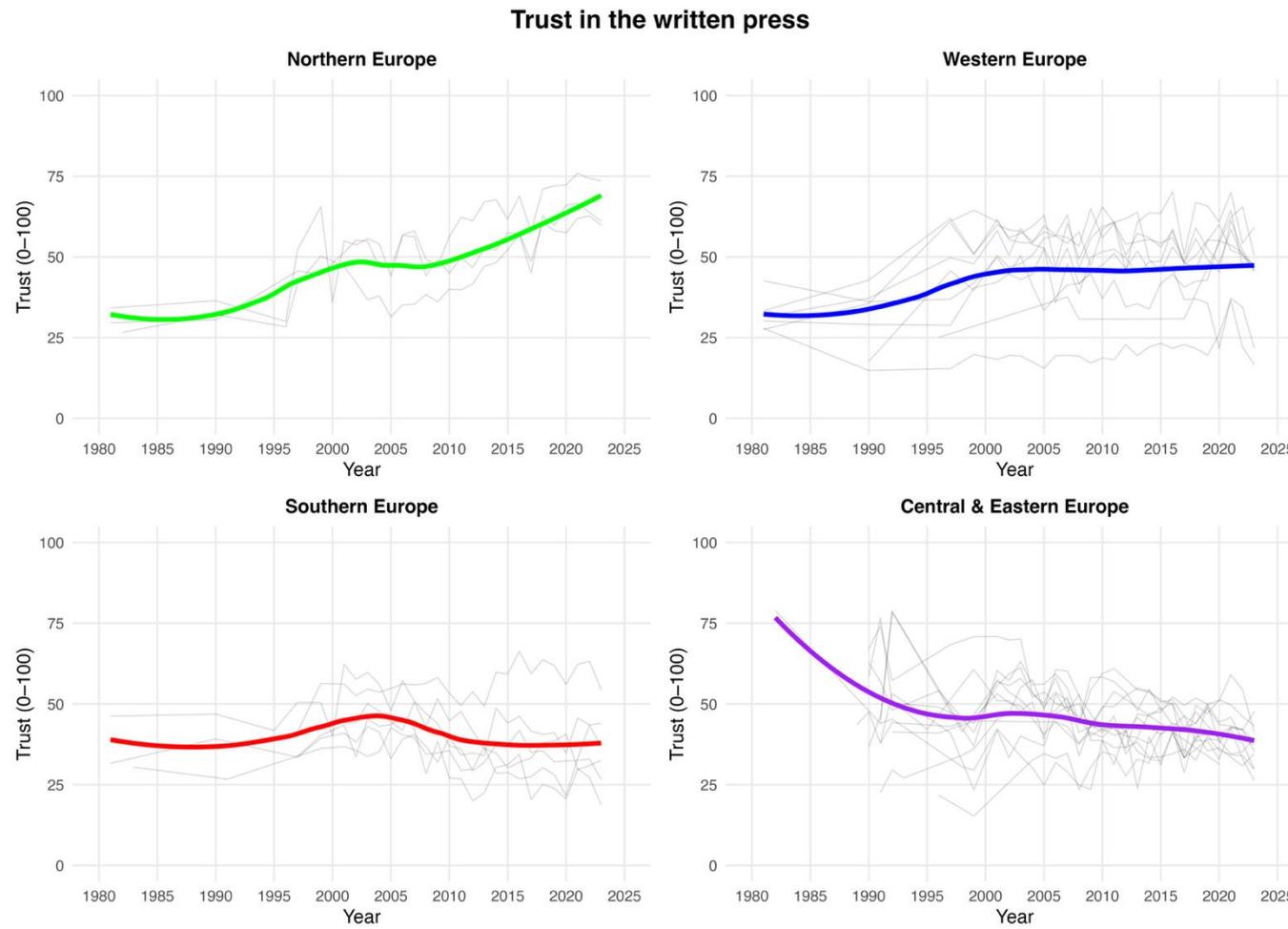
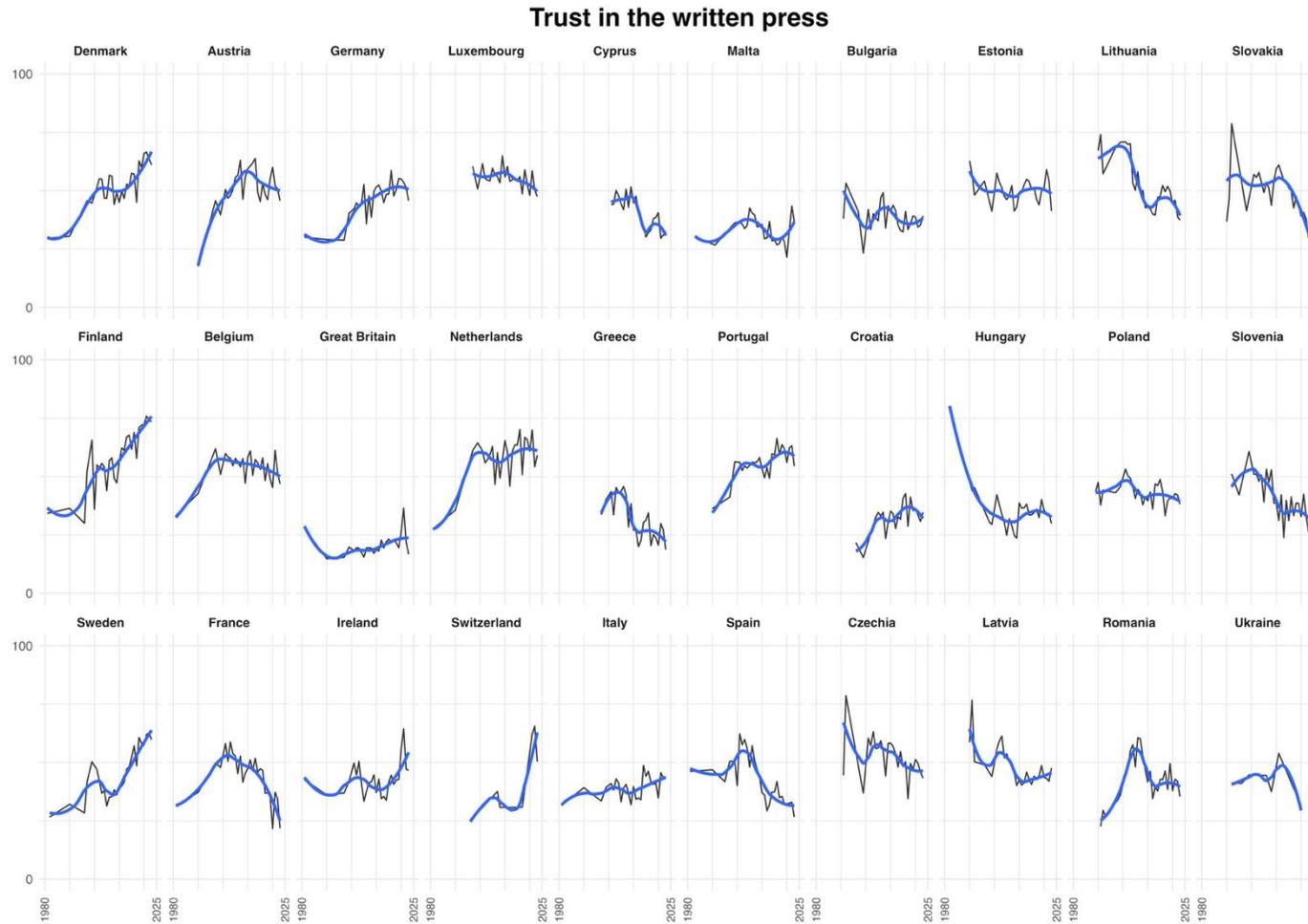




Figure 45 Trajectories of trust in the written press – Countries



*Figure 46 Trajectories of trust in radio – Europe*

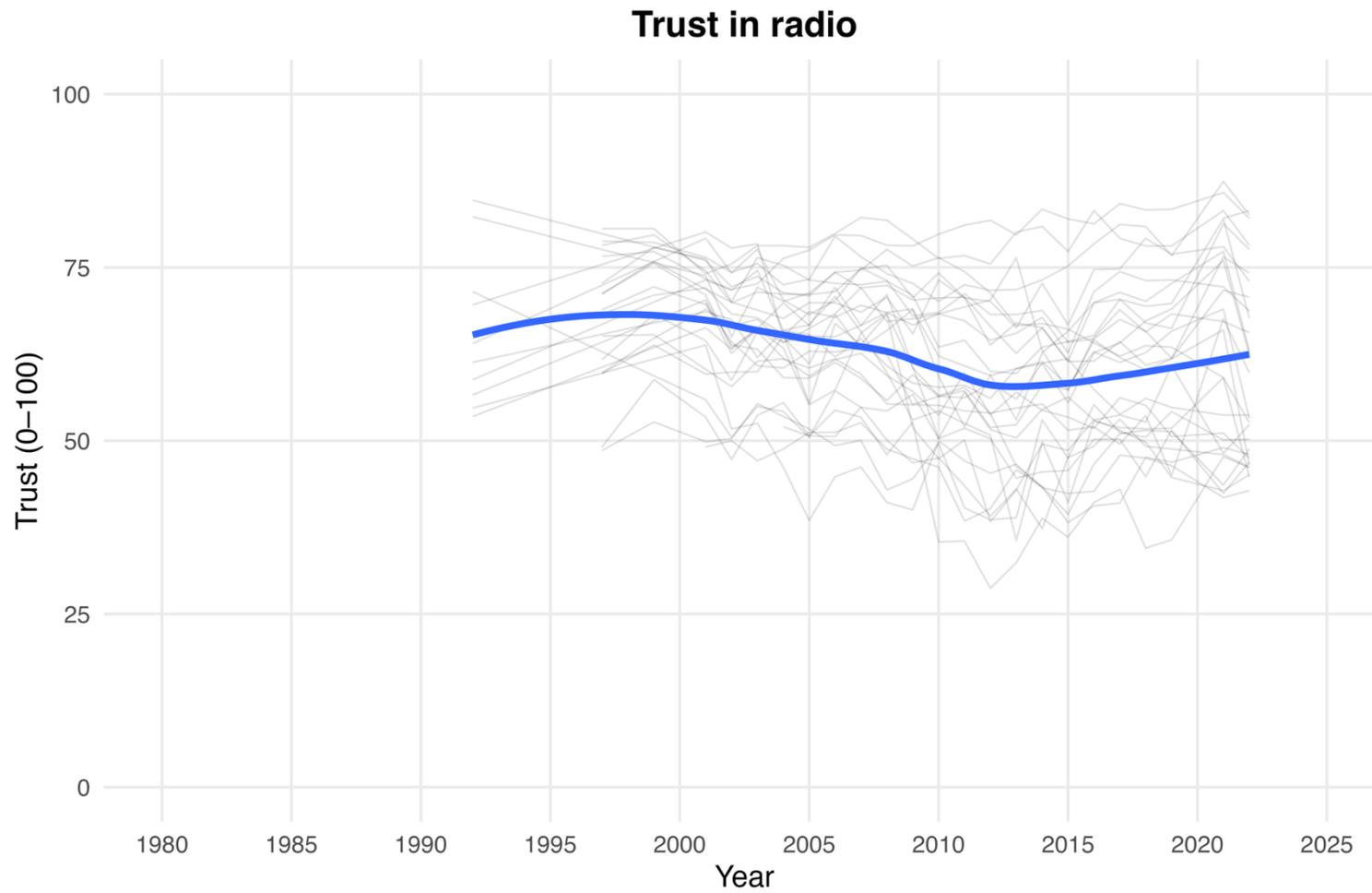


Figure 47 Trajectories of trust in radio – European regions

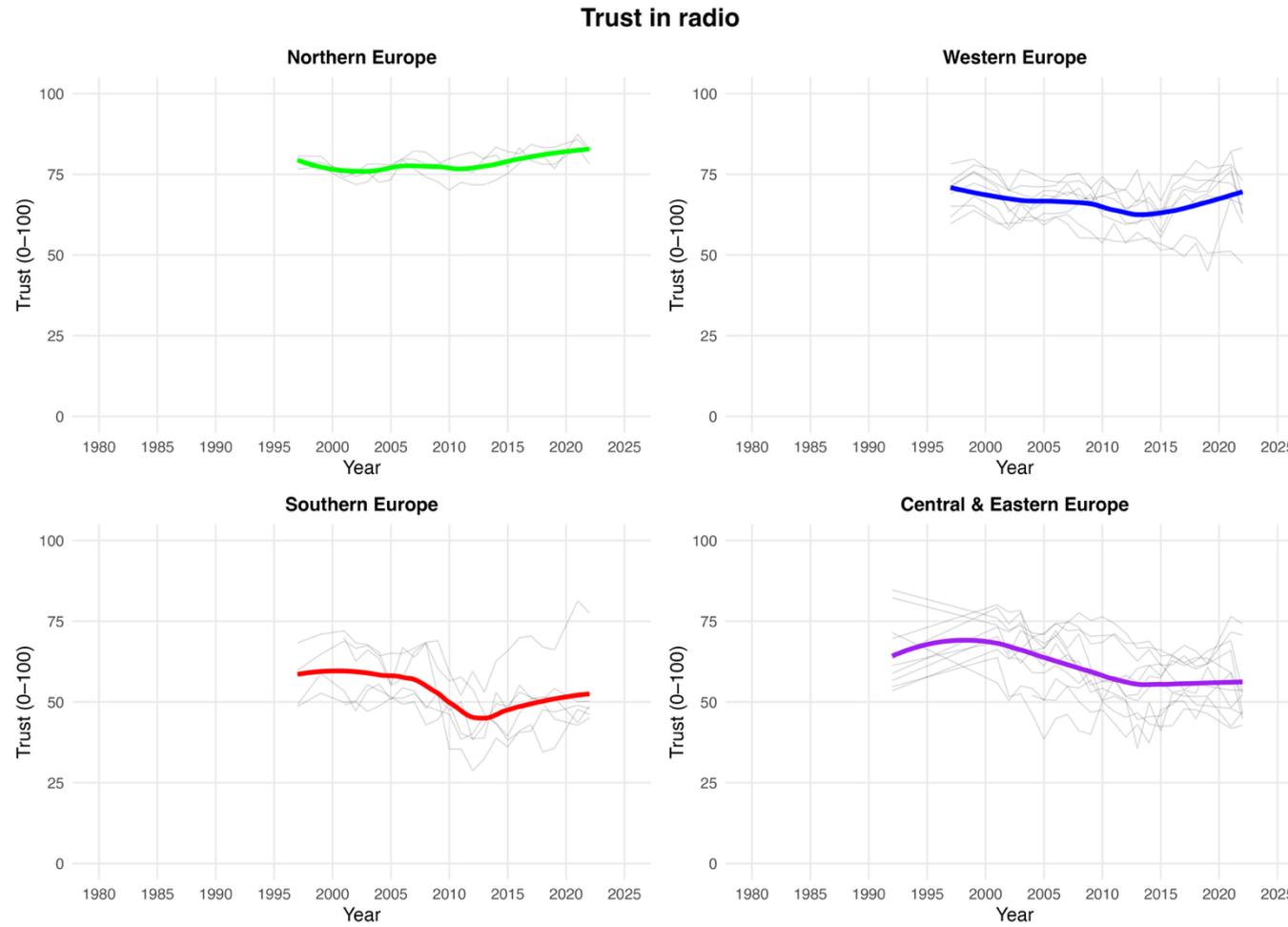




Figure 48 Trajectories of trust in radio – Countries



*Figure 49 Trajectories of trust in TV – Europe*

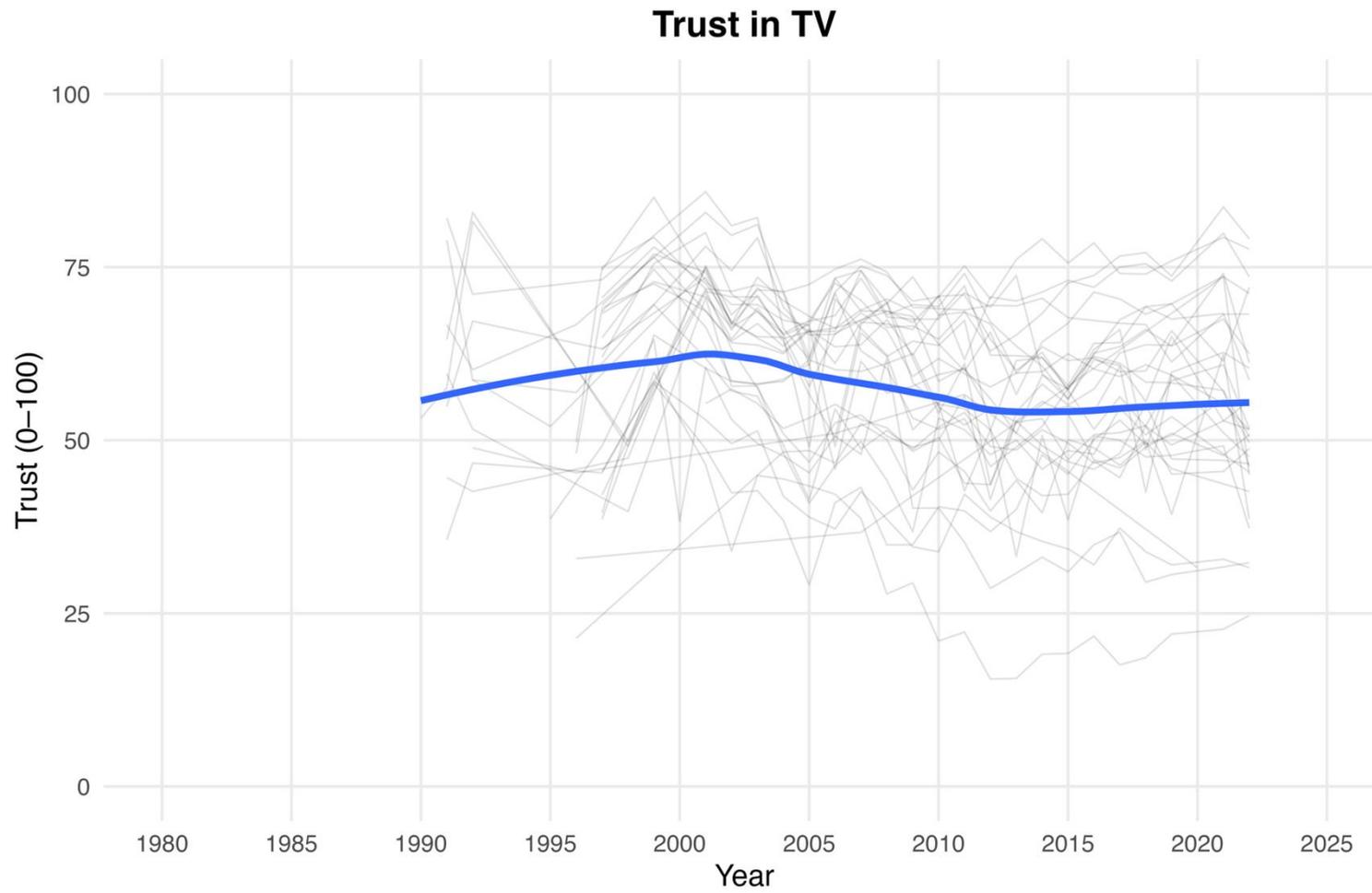


Figure 50 Trajectories of trust in TV – European regions

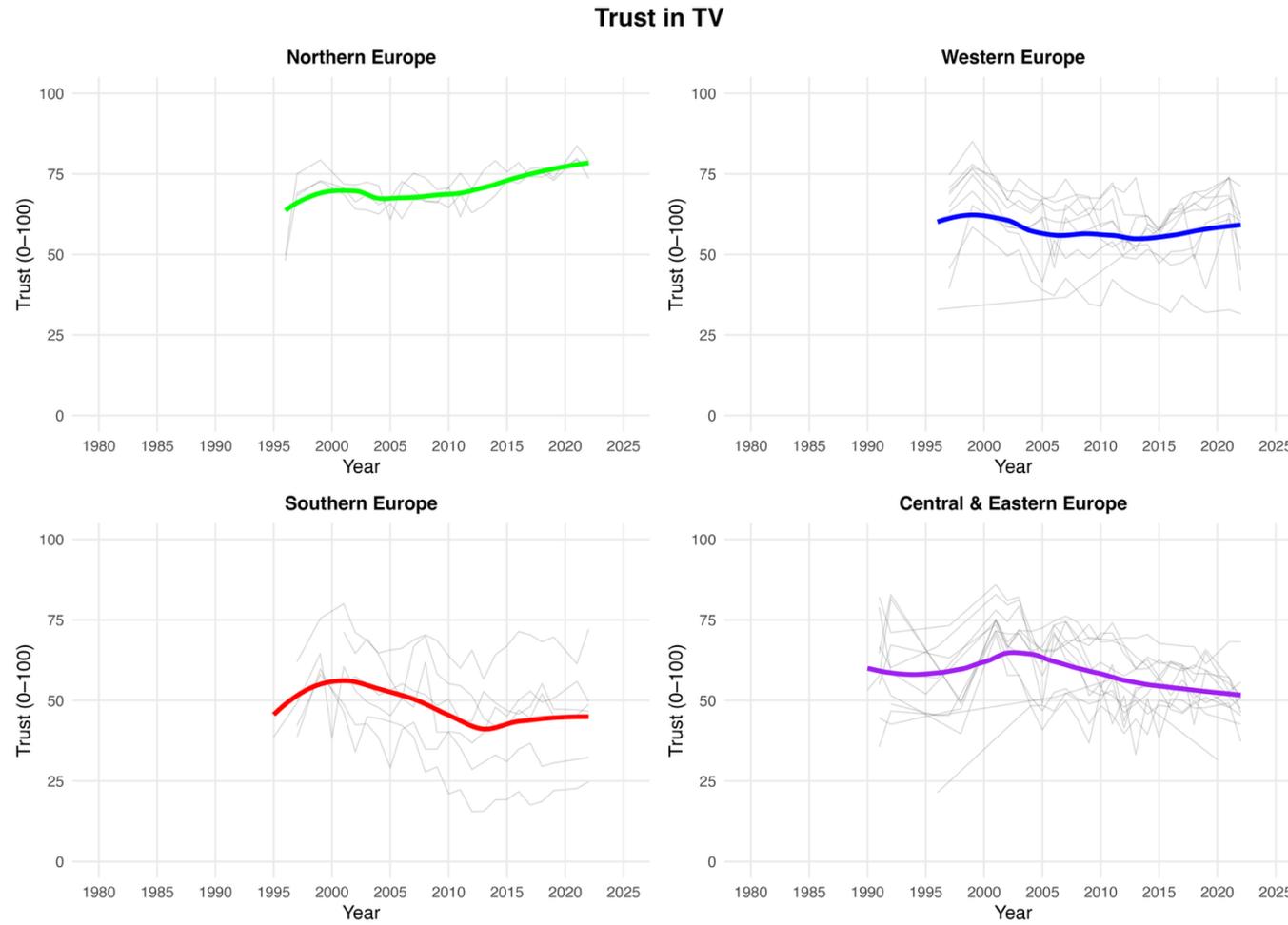
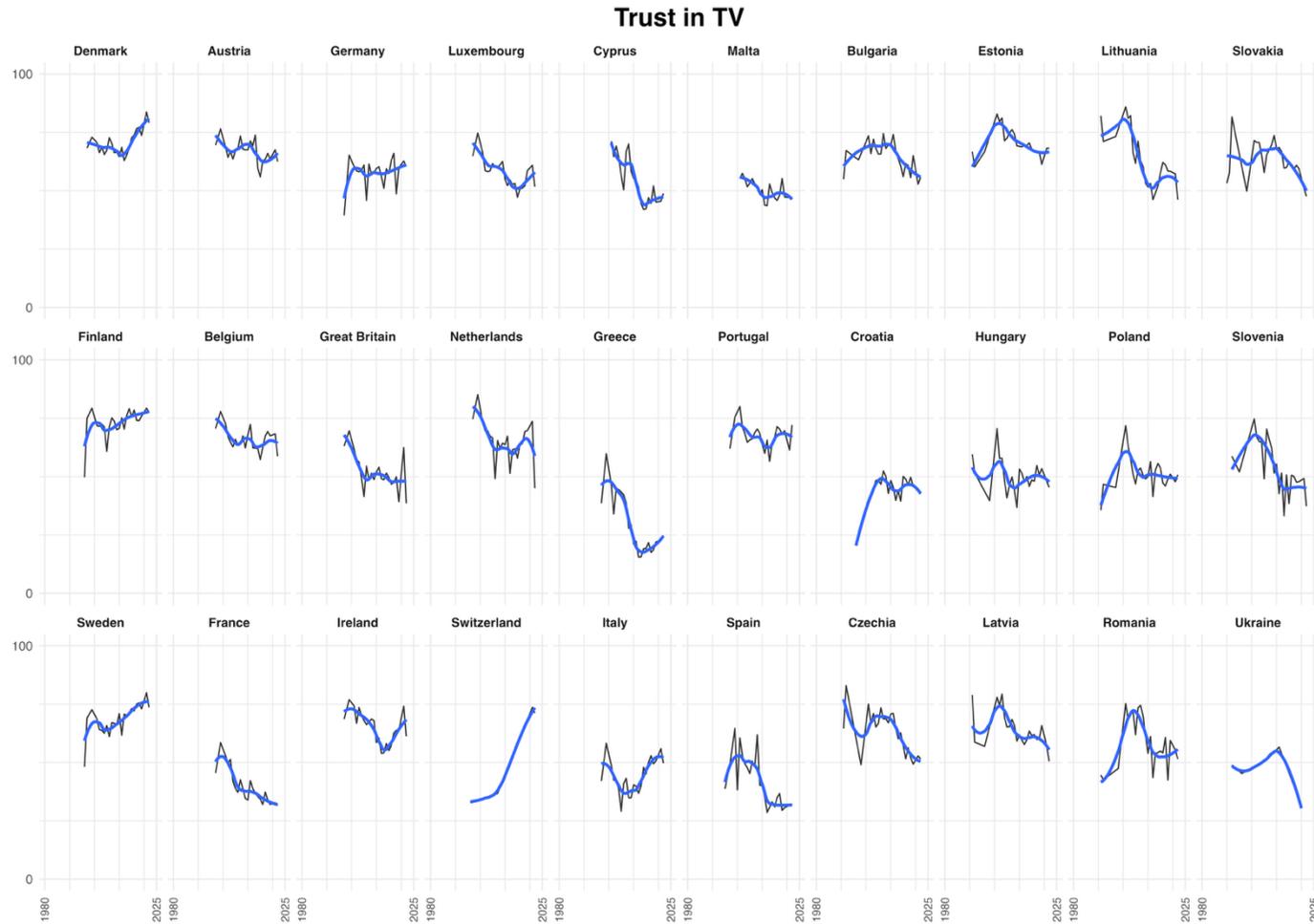
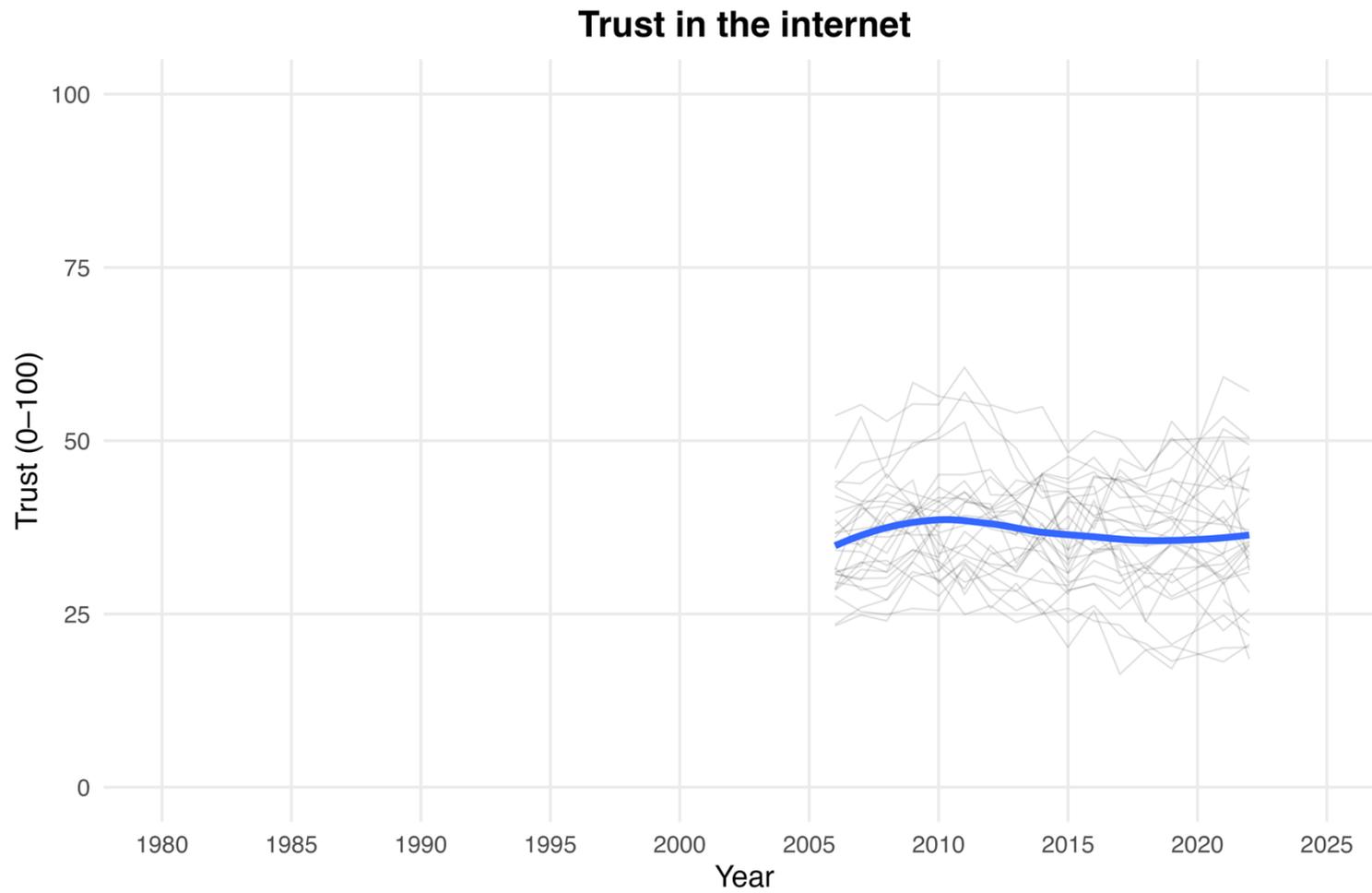


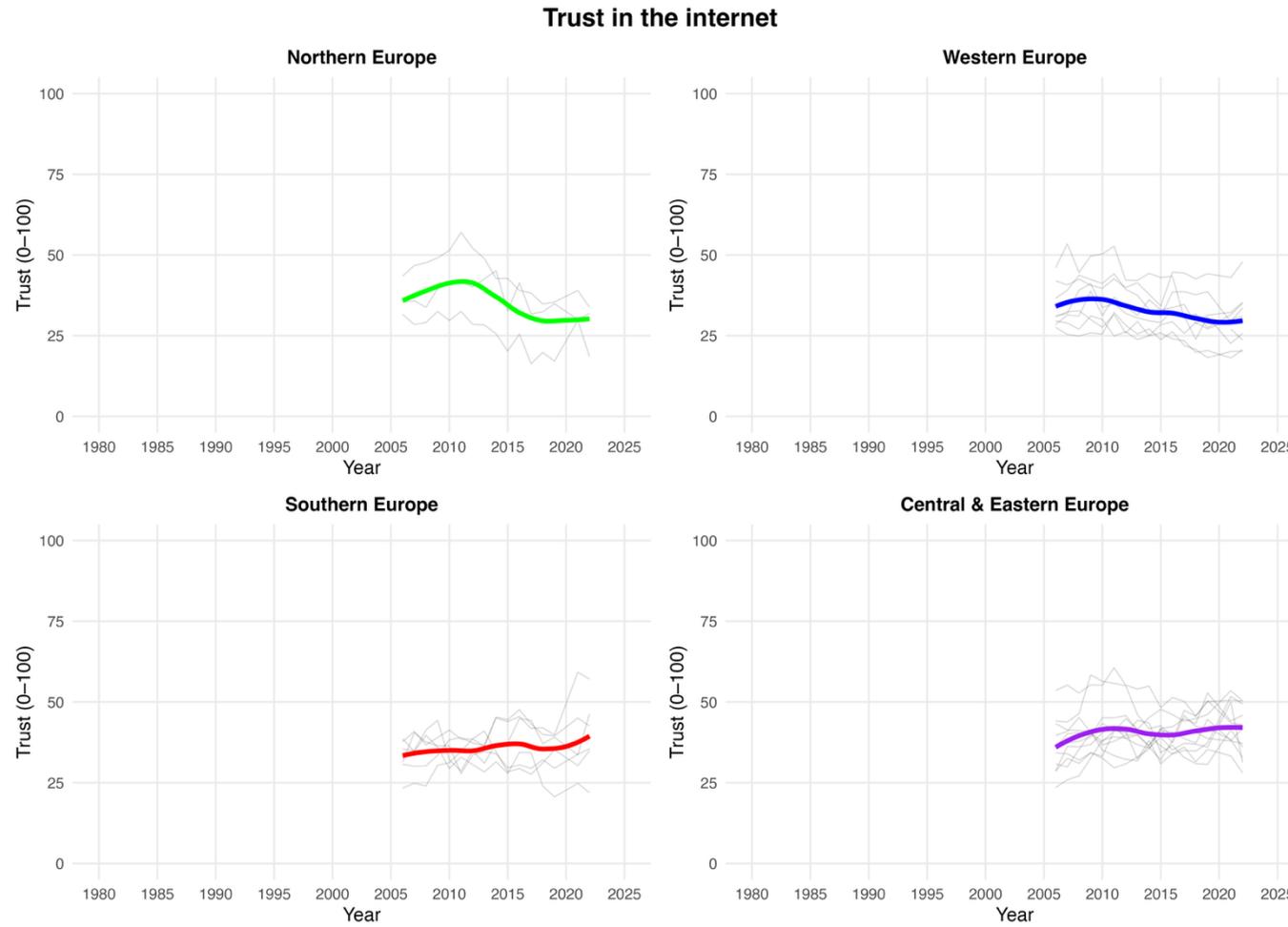
Figure 51 Trajectories of trust in TV – Countries



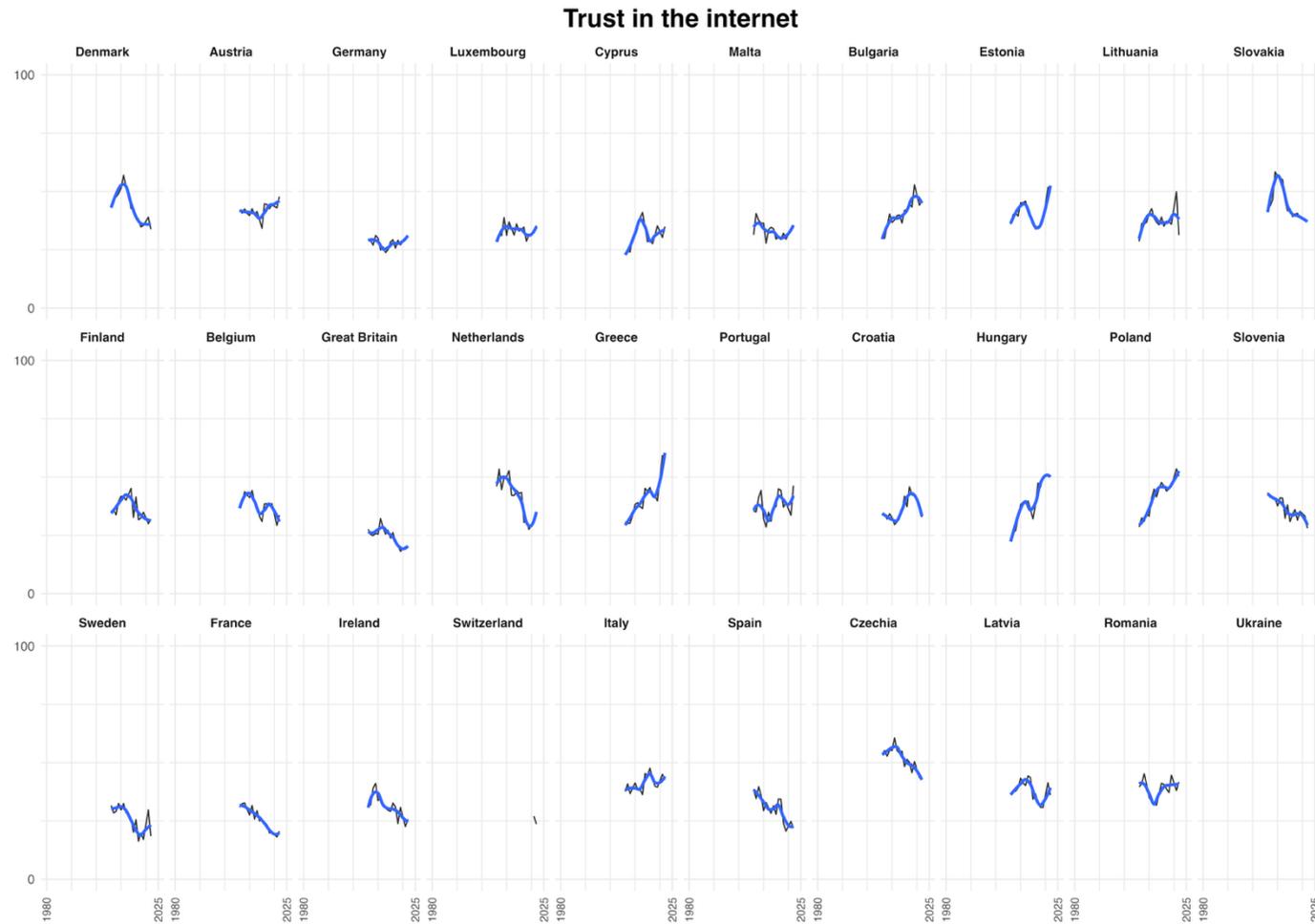
*Figure 52 Trajectories of trust in the internet – Europe*



*Figure 53 Trajectories of trust in the internet – European regions*



*Figure 54 Trajectories of trust in the internet – Countries*



*Figure 55 Trajectories of trust in social networks – Europe*

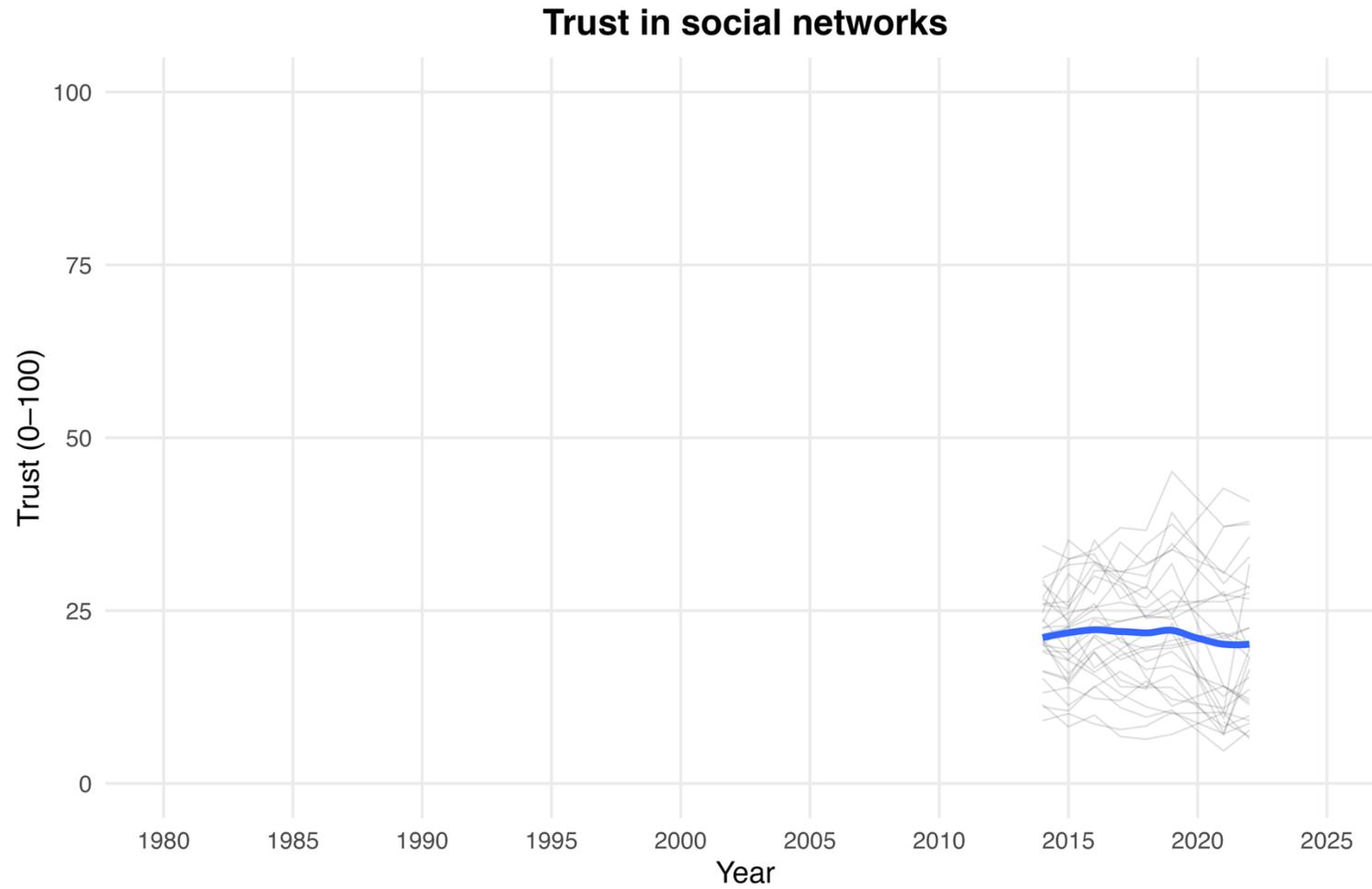
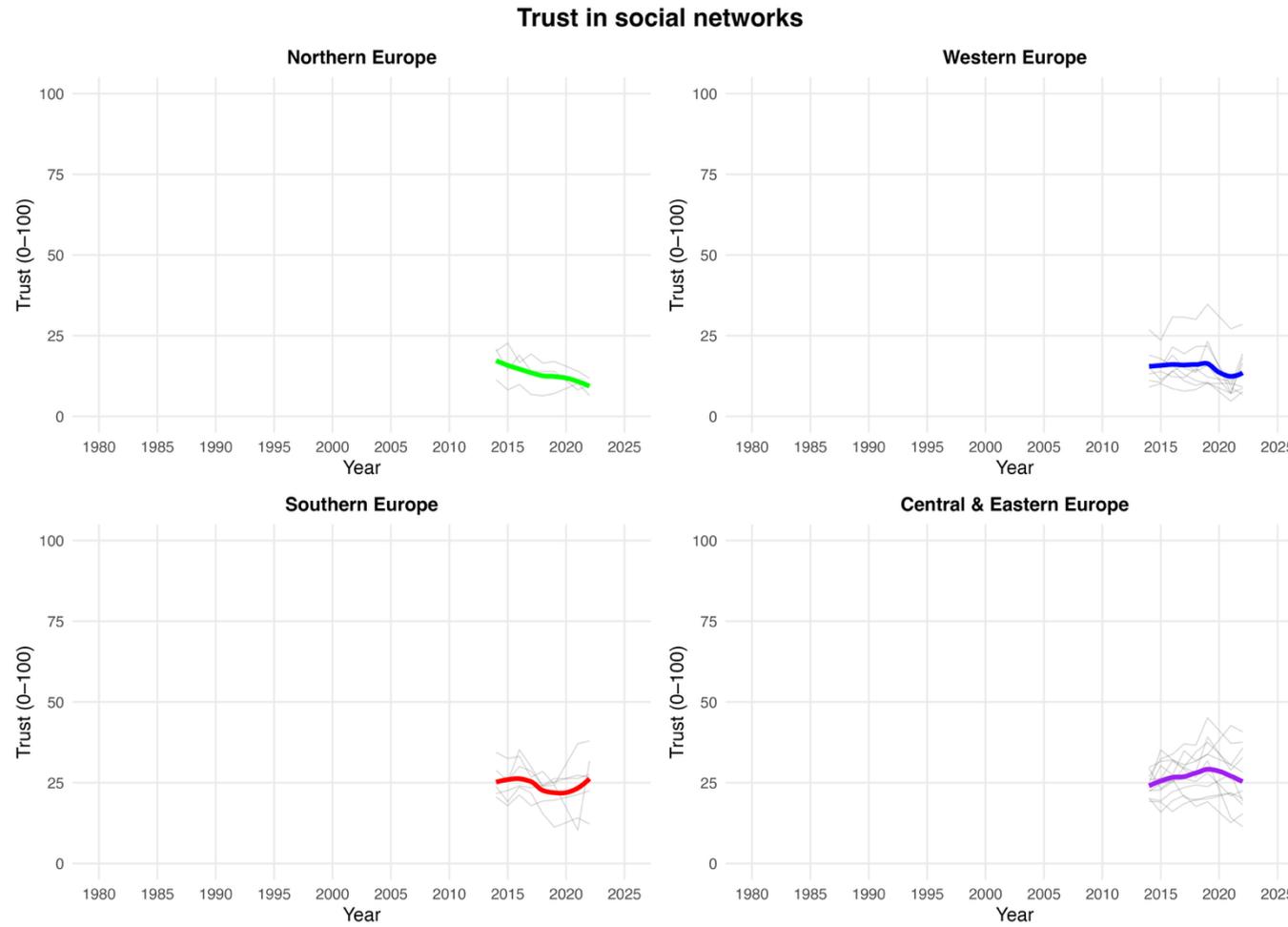
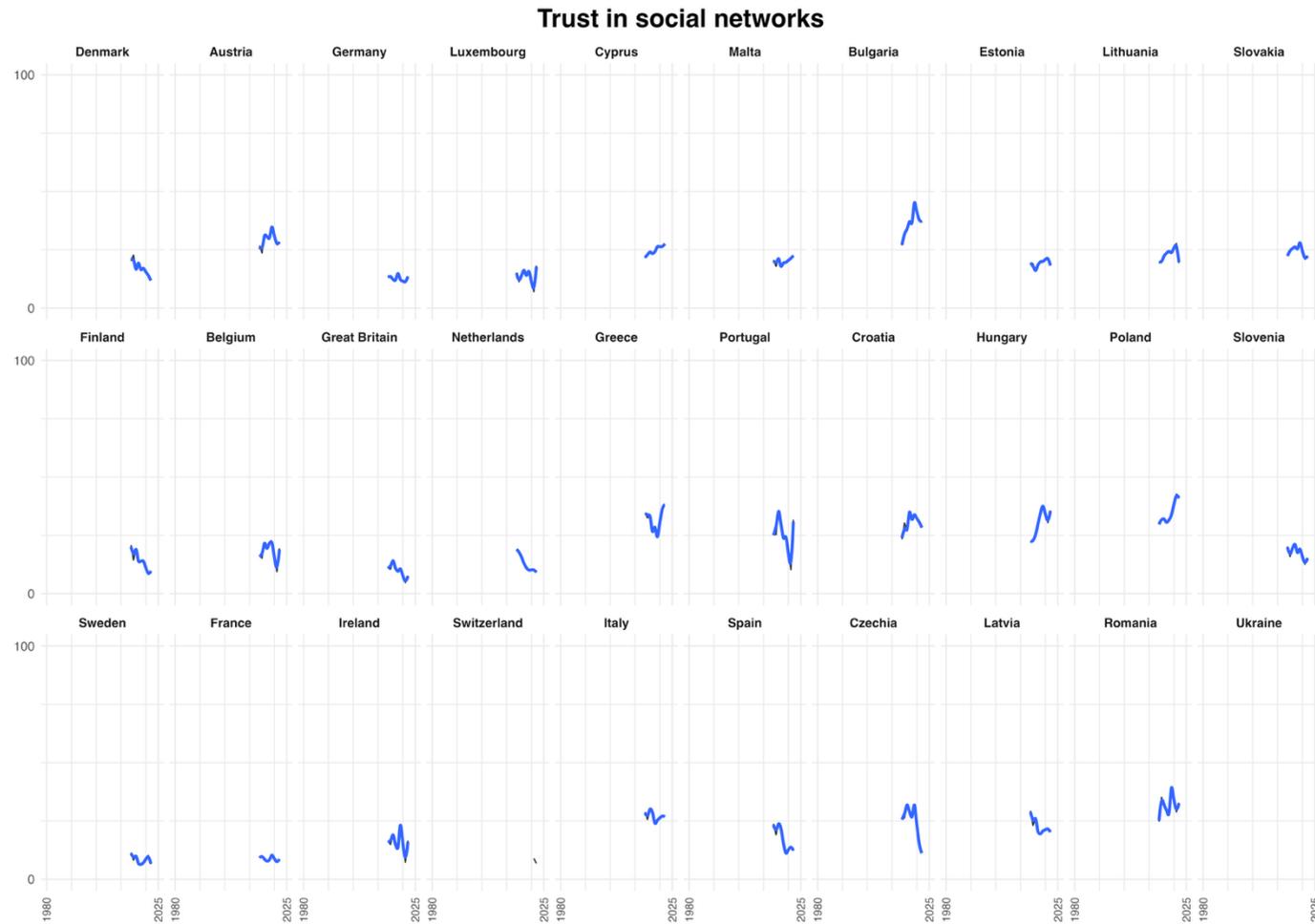


Figure 56 Trajectories of trust in social networks – European regions



*Figure 57 Trajectories of trust in social networks – Countries*



## 4.5 Symbolic institutions

Unlike political or administrative institutions, symbolic institutions are not primarily evaluated through their performance but rather through their role as keepers of collective identity, moral order, and national continuity. Churches anchor religious belonging and moral authority, while armed forces symbolize sovereignty, security, and the state's monopoly on legitimate force. Trust in these institutions reflects cultural legacies, secularization processes, and perceptions of external or internal threat rather than routine satisfaction with governance (Bruce 2011; Kaldor 2012). By examining trajectories of trust in these institutions, we can observe how identity-based trust compares to the more traditional variants of institutional trust.

Trust in churches (Figure 58 - Figure 60) shows a long-term pattern of slow decline, shaped primarily by secularization processes and historical religious traditions. In Northern Europe, where Protestant churches became embedded in highly secularized welfare states, trust levels are moderate but relatively stable over time. This reflects the coexistence of low-intensity, institutionalized religiosity with residual cultural respect for church institutions (Voas and Crockett 2005). Western Europe displays a clear downward trend from the 1980s onward, consistent with accelerating secularization, declining church attendance, and erosion of clerical authority. Over the last decade we can observe a slight recovery, probably as a consequence of the scandals involving the church being a thing of the past but also reflecting institutional reforms and generational replacement.

Southern Europe begins with comparatively high levels of trust in the church during the 1980s and 1990s, reflecting the importance of Catholicism in Spain, Italy, and Portugal. Post-2000, the trajectory declines significantly, suggesting rapid secularization and the politicization of church-state relations (Pollack and Rosta 2017). CEE countries show a different story. Trust in the church increased after 1989, as churches re-emerged as symbols of national and moral renewal after communist repression (Need and Evans 2001). From the 2000s onward the trend becomes one of slow decline, which coincides with institutional entanglement in party politics, revelations of collaboration with former regimes, and generational secularization (Ramet 2014).

Trust in the armed forces (Figure 61 - Figure 63) is characterized by a different trajectory. Armies are seen as protectors of collective security and national integrity, so one would expect trust in the armed forces to respond to external threat perceptions, alliance commitments, and professional performance (Levi and Stoker 2000; Hetherington and Husser 2012). The data show a significant increase in trust in the armed forces across the board. In Northern Europe this coincides with the restructuring of defense institutions post-Cold war and, more recently, with increased concern about Russia's offensive plans in the Baltic region. The increase in Western Europe is quite visible after the 2000s. Previous studies explain this by the growing visibility of armed forces in crisis management, disaster response, and counterterrorism (Eichenberg 2005). Southern Europe also shows an increasing pattern, interrupted during the financial crisis years but continuing after. Growth is also visible in Central and Eastern Europe, where the armed forces became symbols of regained sovereignty and national independence. The evolution of trust in the army is quite similar across the 30 countries we analyze, although countries such as Cyprus, Bulgaria, or Romania show divergent patterns from the rest.

The two institutions show diverging poles of symbolic institutional trust. Churches represent declining traditional authority via secularization and moral contestation, while armies represent renewed authority under conditions of external insecurity. Both draw on deep identity reservoirs, but their trust trajectories respond to distinct social mechanisms.

*Figure 58 Trajectories of trust in the church – Europe*

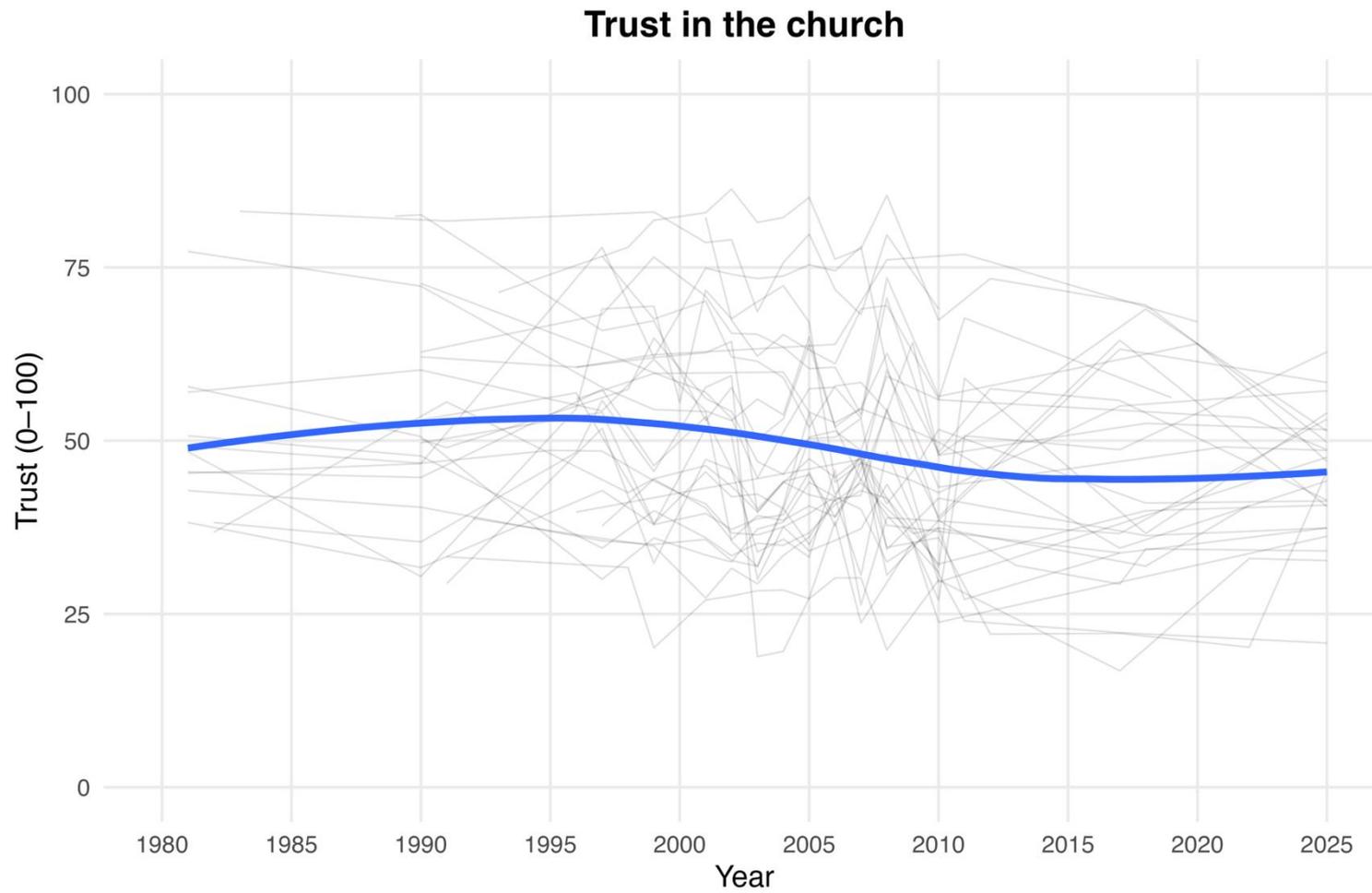


Figure 59 Trajectories of trust in the church – European regions

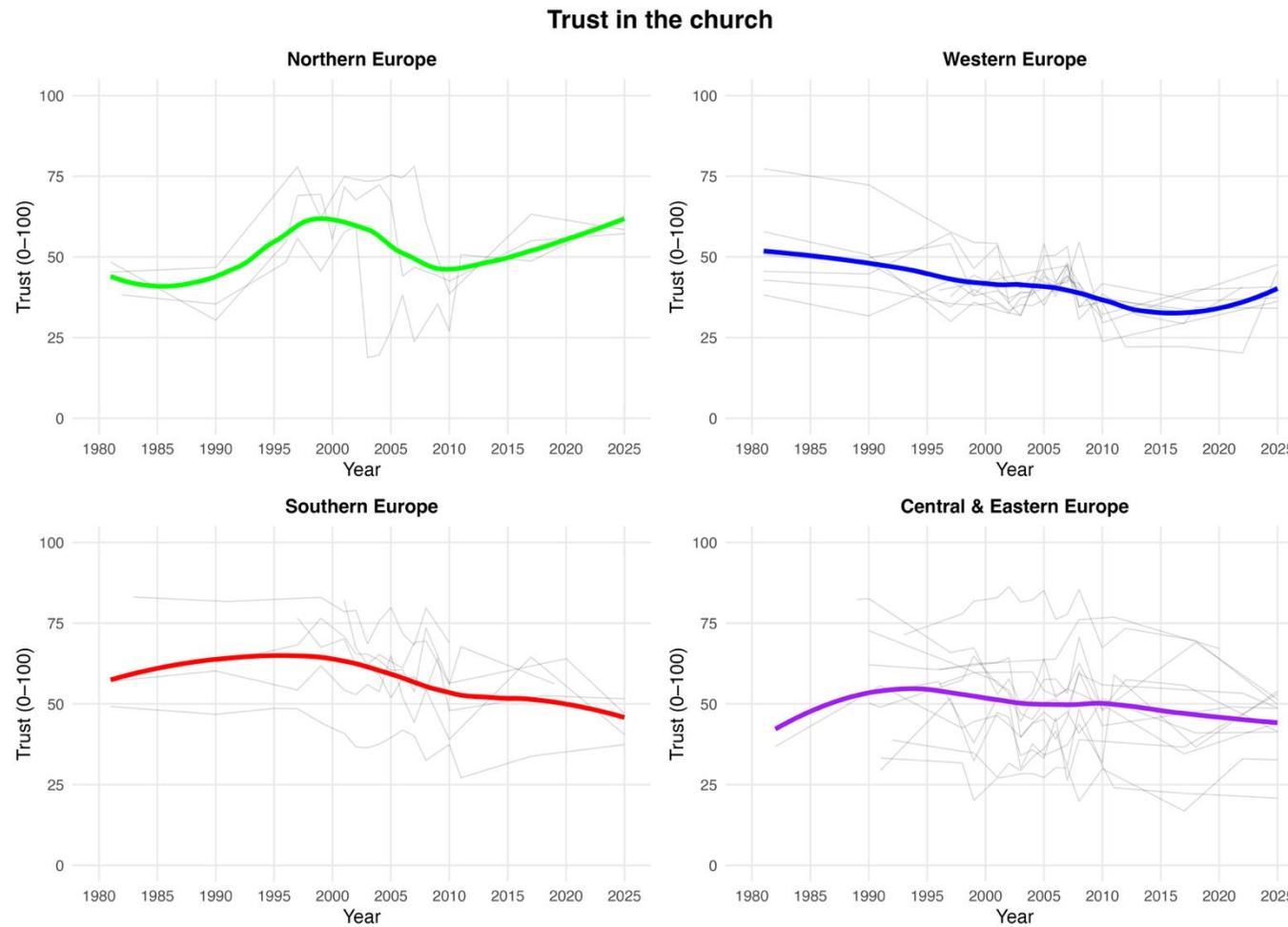
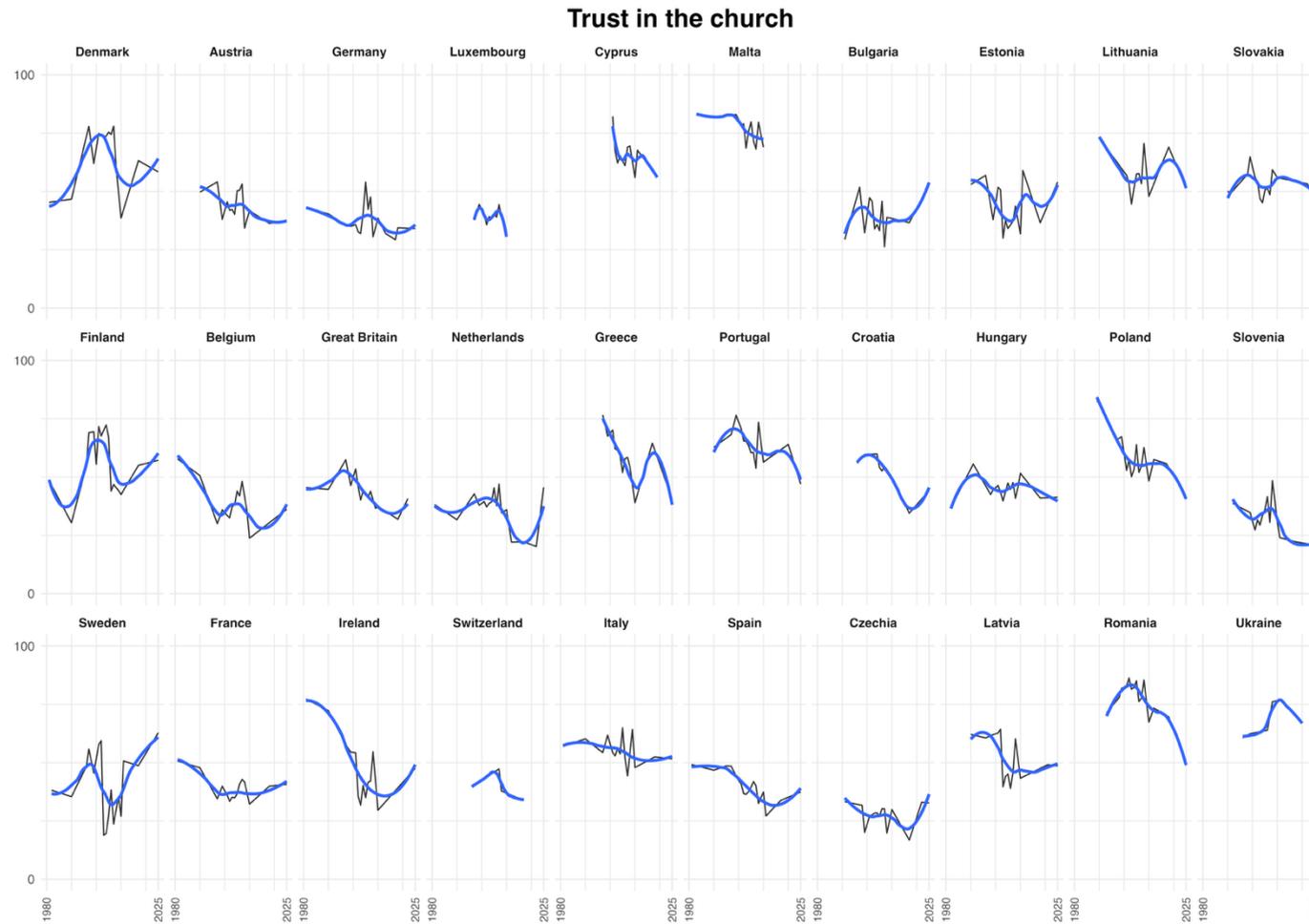


Figure 60 Trajectories of trust in the church – Countries



*Figure 61 Trajectories of trust in the army – Europe*

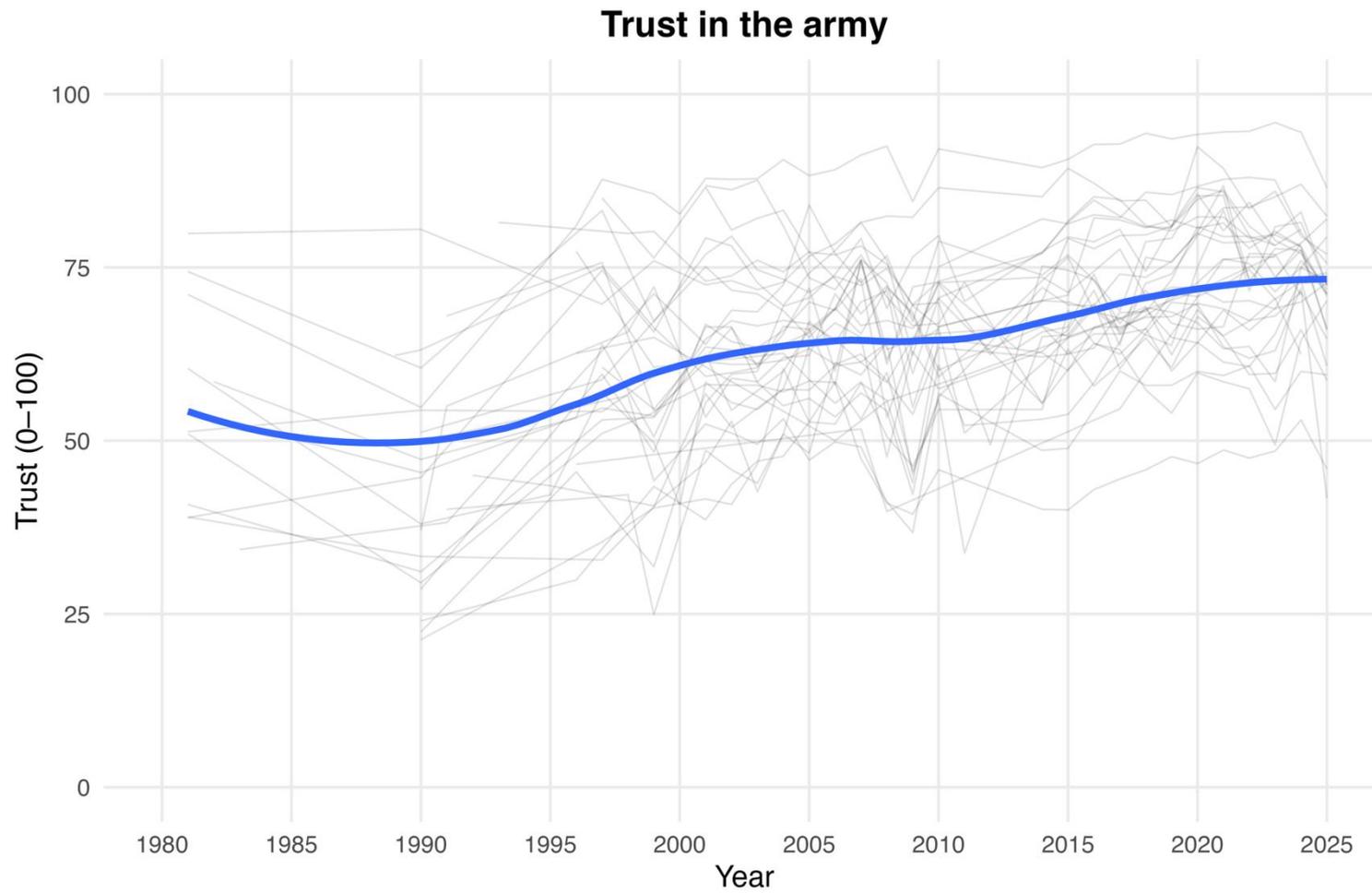


Figure 62 Trajectories of trust in the army – European regions

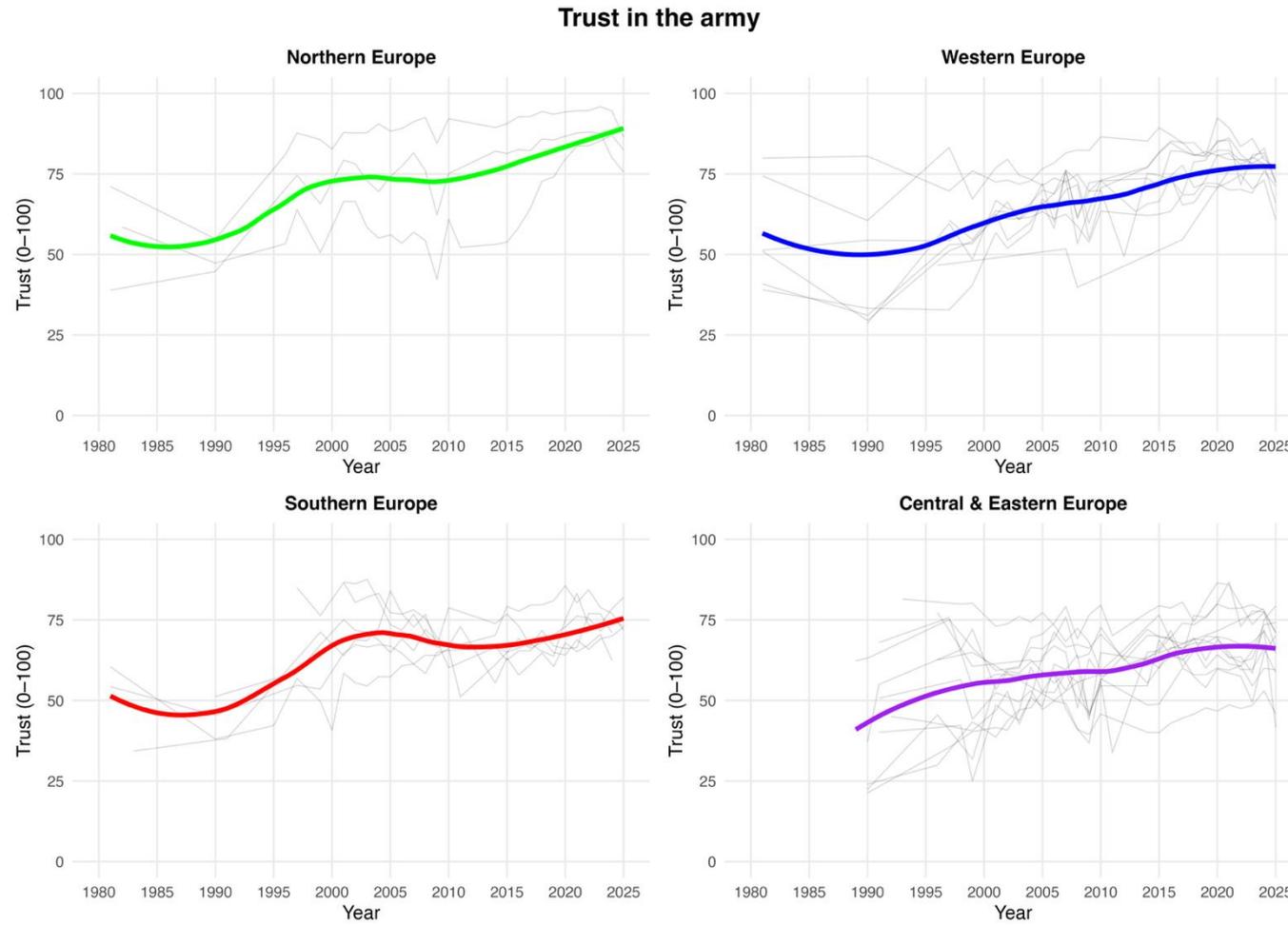
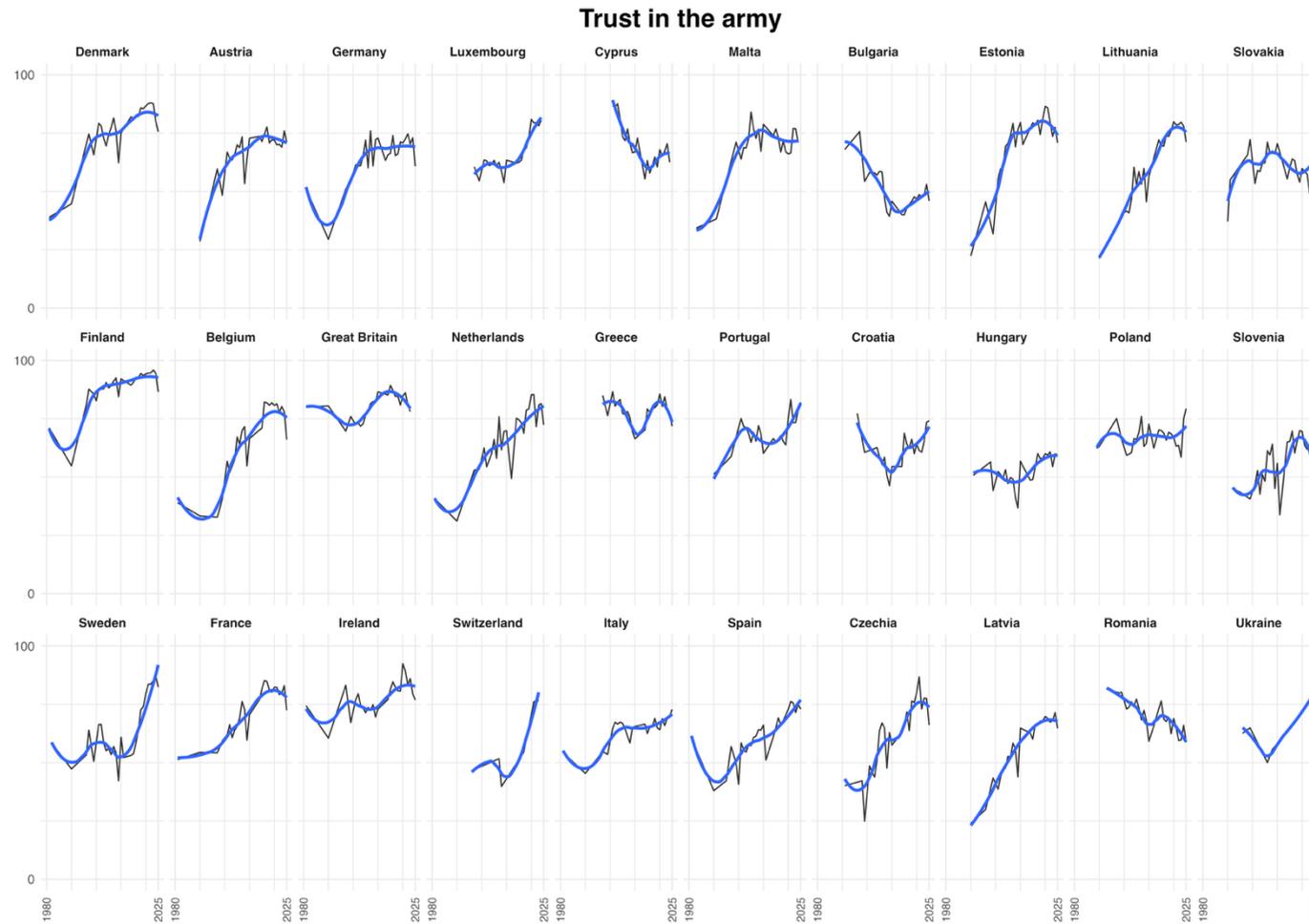


Figure 63 Trajectories of trust in the army – Countries



## 5 Regimes of trust

Analyzing data for trust in 20 institutions in 30 European countries over a period of 46 years means dealing with significant amounts of data. In the previous section we interpreted the trajectories of trust, but we still have a lot of information to process. In the remaining of the report, we try to simplify a bit both the data and our interpretation of the data. In this chapter we applied trajectory clustering to country-level time series of trust in the different institutions included in analysis, using k-means clustering and selecting a five-cluster solution to benefit both from clusters that are as homogenous as possible within, while maximizing the differences among them.

The same way we did in the previous chapter, we will focus on one key institution in each group of institutions we analyze and discuss in detail the clustering of the countries for that institution. We refer to the other institutions in the group only in passing and if needed, as additional examples or insights. The main goal of these cluster analyses is to uncover if there are groups of countries in which institutional trust has moved in a similar way over time. We try to uncover “regimes of trust” and describe them.

Before we present the results, a short note on why we need clusters instead of just using the European regions we have used in the report so far (Northern Europe, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Central and Eastern Europe): while these regions capture broad cultural and institutional commonalities, they assume temporal homogeneity within space. The clusters resulted from our analysis group countries by dynamic similarities and dissimilarities in trajectories of trust. Thus, instead of using the four-region typology which reflects structural background conditions, in this chapter we discuss the five-cluster solution which captures regimes of trust including a temporal dimension. This allows, hopefully, a better understanding of how institutional trust responds to shocks, reforms, and politicization over time.

### 5.1 Trust in supra-national institutions

In the group of the supra-national institutions we will first focus our analysis on trust in the European Union. The results of the cluster analysis are presented in the form of a map (Figure 64) and using the dendrogram (Figure 66). The average trajectories of trust among the five clusters we have identified are also presented (Figure 65).

#### 5.1.1 Trust in the European Union

**Cluster 1 – Institutional consolidators.** The first cluster includes Austria, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, and Poland. This group combines core EU member states (Germany, Netherlands, Austria) with post-2004 members (the Baltic countries and Poland). Despite different accession histories, their trajectories of trust converge toward a pattern of long-term institutional consolidation. They started from relatively high baseline trust (in the case of the post-communist countries we could talk about an initial optimism of joining the EU), then experienced a partial decline in trust during the period of economic crises, followed by renewed stabilization after institutional reforms and post-crisis recovery. This reflects what Hooghe and Marks (2005) call “postfunctional integration”: trust in the European Union varies with its perceived performance but stabilizes once institutional embedding becomes routine.

Trajectory pattern: Moderately high trust in the early 1990s, gradual decline through the mid-2000s, followed by recovery after 2013, reaching relatively high levels in the present.

Figure 64 Trust in the European Union – cluster groupings

**T\_EU – Trajectory clusters (k=5)**  
White = no data / no cluster assignment

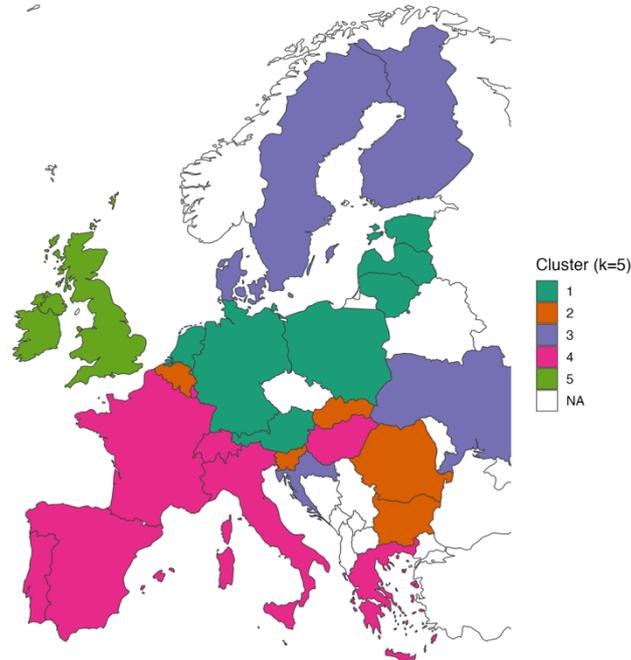


Figure 65 Trust in the European Union – cluster-based trends

**T\_EU – cluster mean trajectories (k=5)**

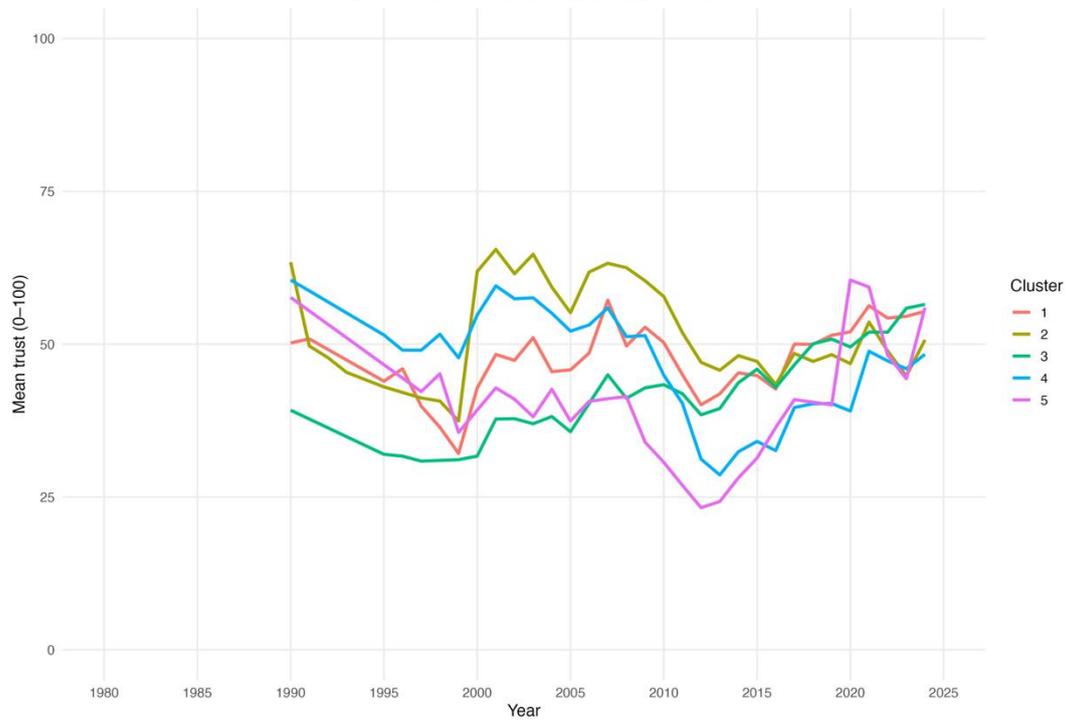
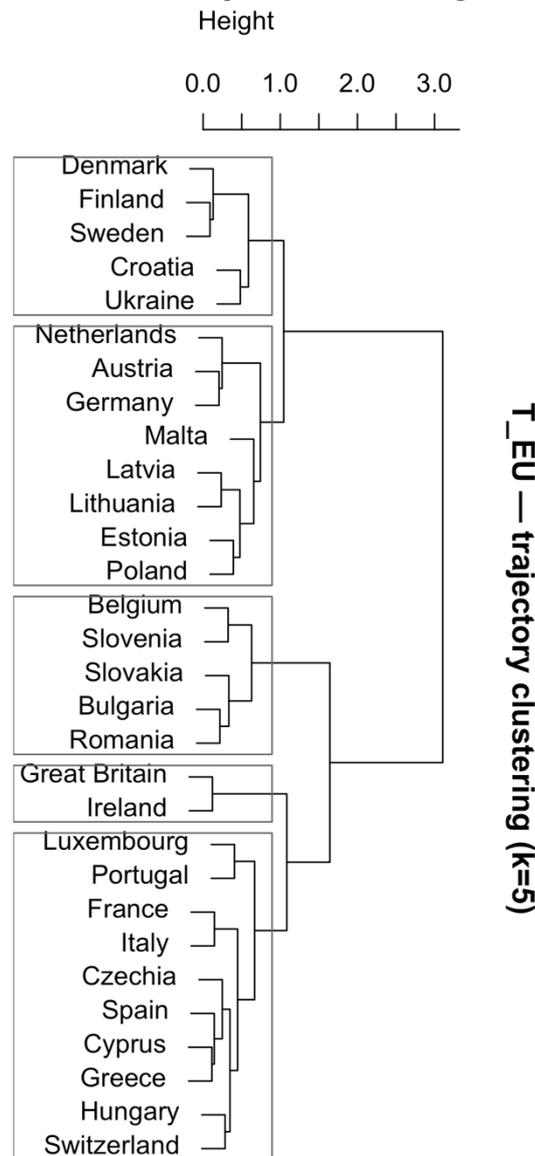


Figure 66 Trust in the European Union – dendrogram



**Cluster 2 – Late joiners, volatile trust.** The second cluster includes Belgium, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, smaller member states (most of whom joined the EU later) where EU trust appears to be influenced by domestic political volatility and corruption issues. The pronounced decline around the 2000s corresponds to pre-accession fatigue, governance scandals, and in some cases contested Europeanization reforms. Subsequent partial recovery reflects tangible economic gains from EU membership but persistent institutional fragility.

This pattern matches findings that EU trust in newer member states is strongly conditioned by domestic institutional performance rather than supranational identity alone (Karp and Bowler 2006; Tucker et al. 2002).

Trajectory pattern: Relatively high initial trust around accession or pre-accession years, sharp decline around the late 1990s and early 2000s, followed by uneven recovery.

**Cluster 3 – Stable high trust.** The third cluster includes Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Croatia, and Ukraine. The Nordic countries display consistently high trust and their trust in the EU most likely mirrors generalized institutional trust rather than transactional performance. Interestingly, Croatia and Ukraine belong to this cluster, both exhibiting strong pro-European sentiment tied to aspirational or security-driven motivations rather than economic calculus. This supports arguments that EU legitimacy can derive from geopolitical alignment, not only utilitarian cost-benefit evaluations (Bruter 2005; Risse 2010).

Trajectory pattern: High or rising EU trust since the 1990s, mild fluctuations, sustained upward trend after 2010.

**Cluster 4 – Crisis-affected trust.** The fourth cluster is composed of Cyprus, Czechia, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland. This is a large cluster that combines Southern European crisis-hit economies with some Continental states where EU trust became politicized during the constitutional treaty debates and later migration crises. The significant drop after 2008 is likely linked to economic hardship, austerity measures, and perceptions of externally imposed governance. The incomplete recovery suggests some long-term loss of trust in the EU. This trajectory corresponds to the “performance legitimacy shock” literature on EU support (Armingeon and Ceka 2014; Serricchio et al. 2013).

Trajectory pattern: Mid-level trust in the 1990s, sharp decline during the Eurozone crisis (2008–2013), followed by slow and incomplete recovery.

**Cluster 5 – Eurosceptics.** The last cluster is composed of only Great Britain and Ireland. The trajectory of trust anticipates and accompanies the Brexit process, reflecting long-term Eurosceptic mobilization. Ireland’s milder but parallel downturn reflects spillover politicization during EU treaty referenda. The post-2016 recovery might reflect re-legitimation among remaining pro-European constituencies after Brexit resolved institutional uncertainty. This pattern reflects the literature on “cue-taking and domestic contestation” in EU attitudes (De Vries 2018).

Trajectory pattern: High initial trust, sharp decline after 2000, partial rebound post-2016.

**Implications.** These trajectory clusters confirm that trust in the EU is neither uniformly declining nor uniformly stable. Instead, it follows distinct long-term paths shaped by institutional performance, domestic politics, and identity-based attachments.

### 5.1.2 Trust in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Given the geopolitical context at the time of writing this report, we have decided to also take a look at trust in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Figure 67 - Figure 69). The trajectory clustering of trust in NATO reveals a set of patterns that only partially overlap with the clusters of trust in the European Union. These differences suggest that NATO-related trust is structured around security concerns and geopolitical alignments rather than the socio-economic or integration-performance factors that dominated the trajectories of trust in EU.

**Cluster 1 – Institutional mainstream.** This cluster is composed of Greece, Belgium, Estonia, Croatia, Germany, Austria, Spain, Czechia, Denmark, and Netherlands. It includes countries where NATO trust is neither an outlier high nor structurally low, but rather at a middle–upper range over time. The membership mix is telling. It includes core West European NATO members (Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Spain), post-communist countries (Czechia, Estonia, Croatia) plus Greece and Austria. For countries in this cluster, NATO is a regular institution of the European security order: trusted, increasingly important after major shocks, but not experienced as a national cause.

Figure 67 Trust in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – cluster groupings

**T\_NATO – Trajectory clusters (k=5)**  
White = no data / no cluster assignment

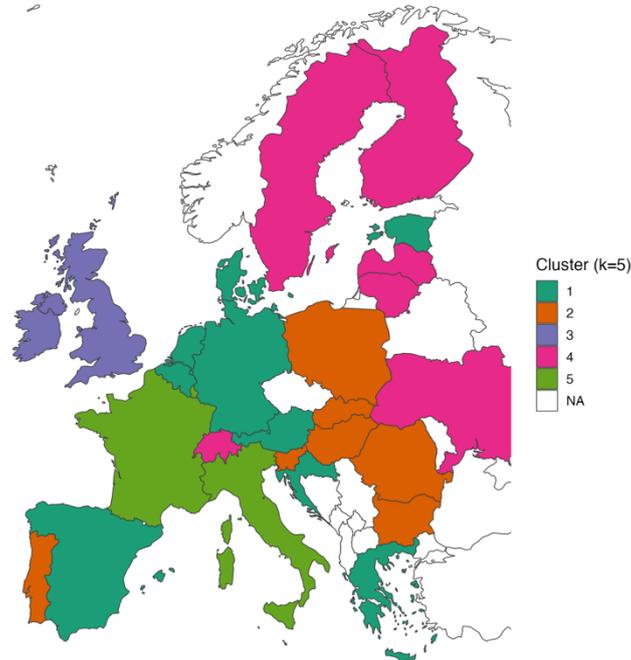


Figure 68 Trust in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – cluster-based trends

**T\_NATO – cluster mean trajectories (k=5)**

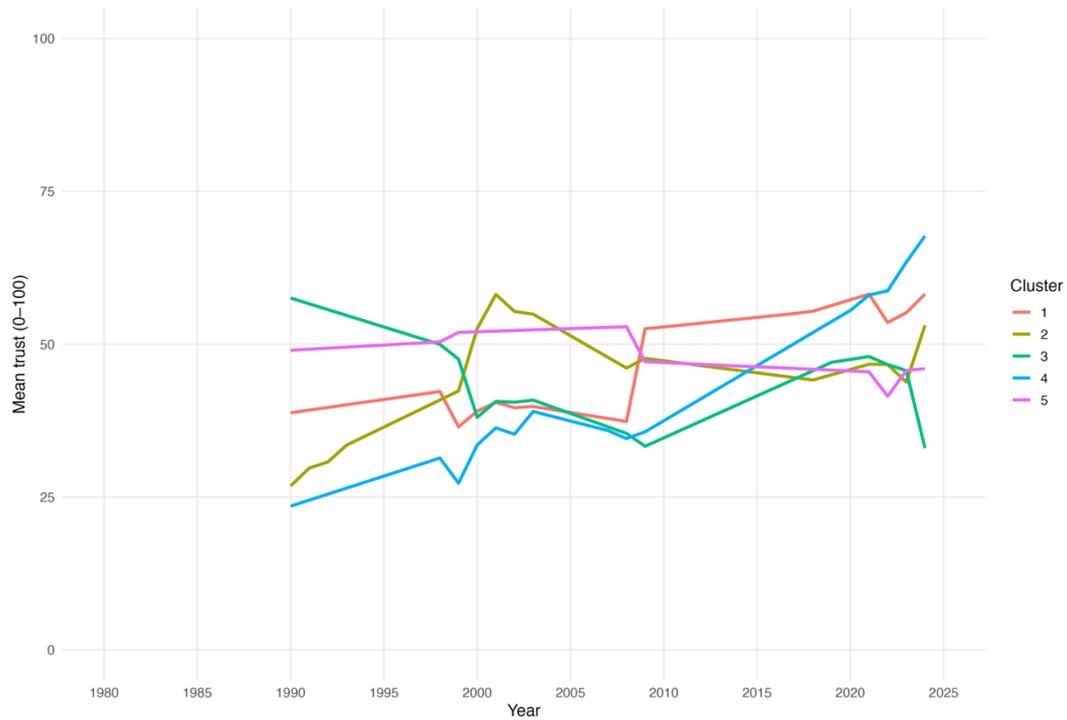
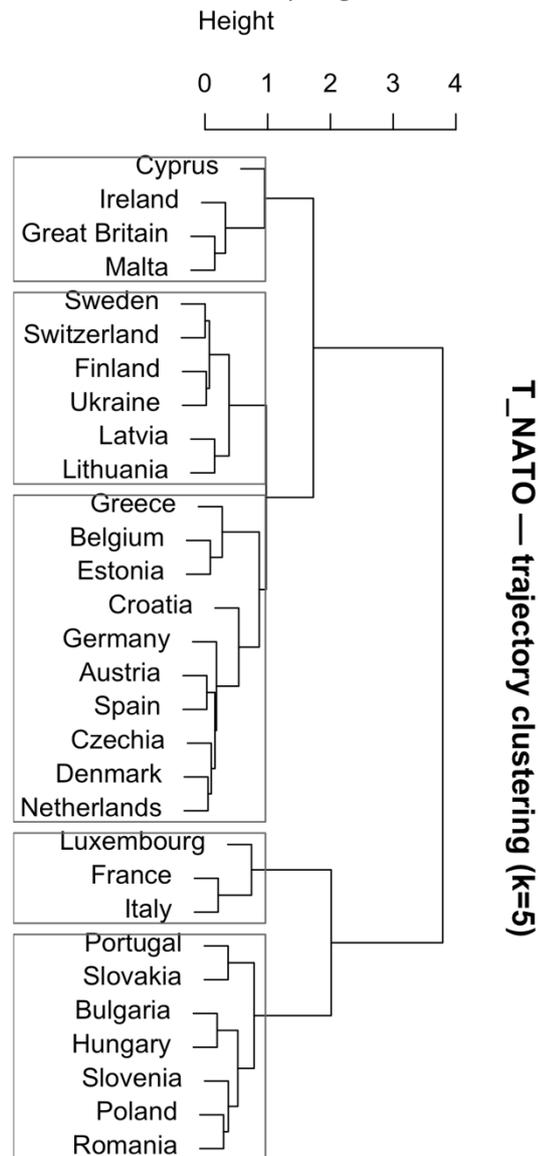


Figure 69 Trust in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – dendrogram



In Germany, Netherlands, Denmark, Spain, and Belgium, this interpretation fits the “embedded multilateralism” perspective: NATO is one pillar among others (EU, UN, OSCE) in a broader rules-based security architecture (Ruggie 1992; Hooghe & Marks 2005). In post-communist countries the institutional story is also supported by the legitimacy of “returning to the West” (Epstein 2008). Austria’s membership in this cluster, despite its neutrality, suggests that proximity to Western security structures can generate trust profiles that resemble those of member countries.

**Cluster 2 – Security-dependent members.** This cluster is composed of Central and Eastern European countries that joined NATO after 1999 (Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovenia, Poland, Romania) plus Portugal. For Poland and Romania, NATO is widely framed as the credible deterrent against Russian threats; for Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary, and Slovenia, the relationship is more politically contested but still shaped by dependence on collective defense. The membership implies an “instrumental reliance” logic: NATO trust is strongly linked to perceived external vulnerability

and the availability of alternatives (domestic defense capacity, EU defense credibility, bilateral guarantees). This aligns with scholarship on how post-communist security reorientation produced publics that often view NATO primarily through the lens of hard-security protection rather than identity attachment (Gheciu 2005). Portugal's membership in this cluster is harder to interpret. Overall, for countries in this cluster NATO is understood as insurance for when the regional security climate deteriorates.

**Cluster 3 – Non-aligned / peripheral publics.** The third cluster is composed of Cyprus, Ireland, Malta, and Great Britain. The first three countries are non-aligned in different ways, while Great Britain is a key NATO member but also a country with a public with a specific attitude profile toward supranational institutions. This cluster combines low public attachment to NATO, combined with relative stability across time. As non-members, these countries (except for Great Britain) evaluate military alliances cautiously, emphasizing autonomy (Devine 2011). In Great Britain NATO is a key element at the elite level, but the public is less attracted to this idea, consistent with work showing that British public orientations toward international institutions are frequently instrumental and sovereignty-oriented (Clements 2019).

**Cluster 4 – Neutral and under threat countries.** This cluster combines two different contexts: countries that are exposed to Russian threats (Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine) and neutral states whose security identity has been under stress (Finland, Sweden, and Switzerland). Two of the countries in this group decided to join NATO after Russia's attack on Ukraine: Finland joined in 2023, and Sweden joined in 2024. Both are examples of reactive alignment, redefining national security identity under acute threat. For the countries in the first group, NATO is the core deterrent underpinning national survival narratives. Switzerland's membership here is like Austria's membership in the second cluster: even in countries that have a history of neutrality, public trust in NATO can change in ways that resemble the "threat frontier" countries when the geopolitical context makes neutrality less relevant. When threat frames become dominant, attitudes toward protective institutions can shift rapidly (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998).

**Cluster 5 – Core members.** The fifth cluster includes Luxembourg, France, and Italy. For public opinion in these countries NATO is generally understood as a legitimate and enduring pillar of European security, with trust that remains relatively high. This cluster looks like consolidated legitimacy: trust is less about immediate threat response, as in cluster 4, and more about long-term acceptance of NATO as a normal, legitimate institution.

**Implications.** Trust in NATO seems to have different characteristics in different clusters: it is institutional in clusters 1 and 5 (it reflects orientations towards multilateralism and support for international institutions), instrumental in cluster 2, identity-based in cluster 3, and threat-determined in cluster 4.

## 5.2 Trust in national / representative institutions

We focus in this section on the parliament (Figure 70 - Figure 72), as the key representative institution at the national level, and on the government (Figure 73 - Figure 75), as the key executive institution at the national level.

### 5.2.1 Trust in the parliament

**Cluster 1 – Volatile trust.** This cluster includes four countries: Malta, Germany, Austria, and Estonia. These countries combine relatively high early parliamentary trust with steep declines in the

2000s, followed by uneven recoveries. This suggests that parliamentary legitimacy in these systems is tied to party system stability: when party systems fragment, trust erodes rapidly (Dalton 2004).

Figure 70 Trust in the parliament – cluster groupings

**T\_parliament – Trajectory clusters (k=5)**

White = no data / no cluster assignment

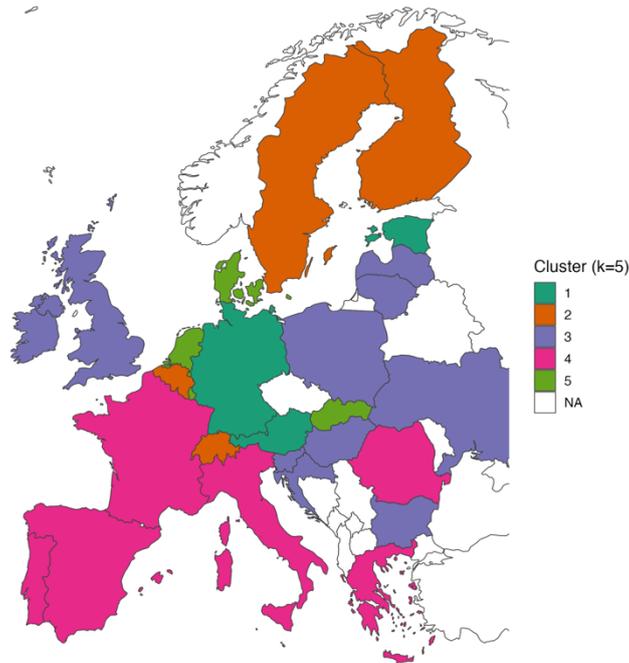


Figure 71 Trust in the parliament – cluster-based trends

**T\_parliament – cluster mean trajectories (k=5)**

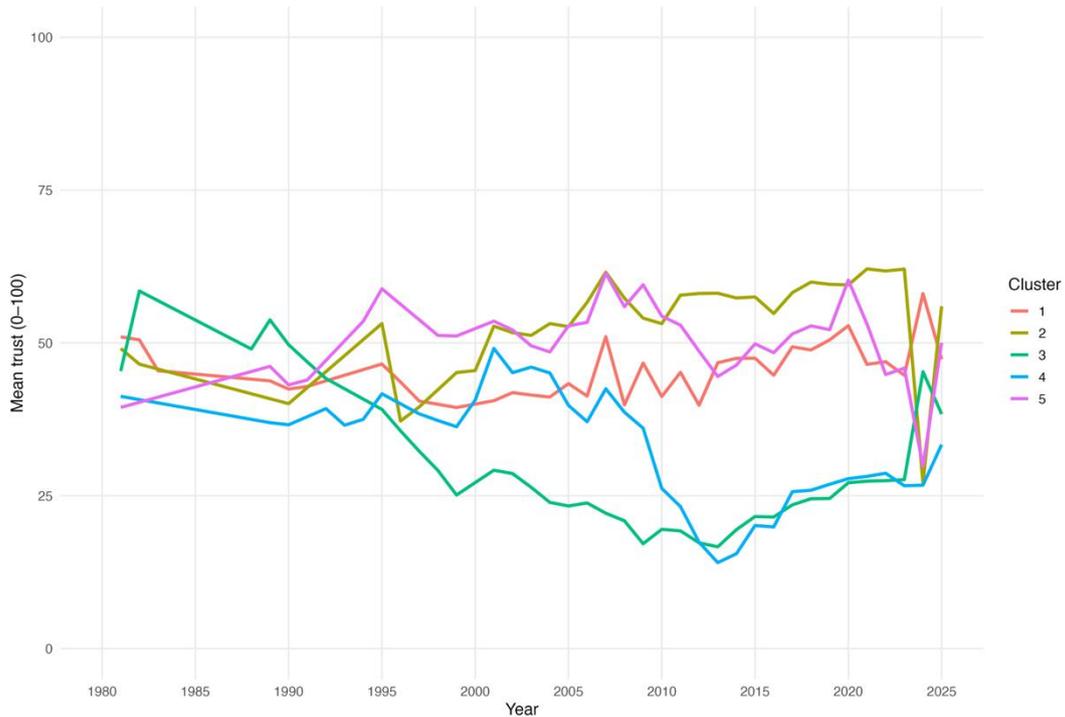
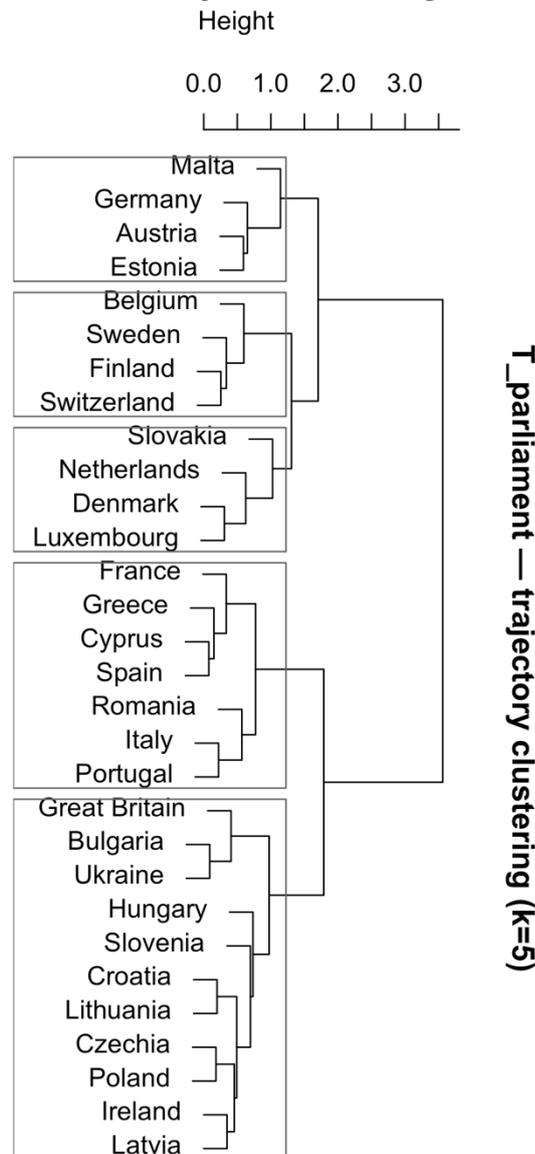


Figure 72 Trust in the parliament – dendrogram



**Cluster 2 – High and institutionalized trust.** The second cluster includes four countries: Belgium, Sweden, Finland, and Switzerland. These countries exhibit consistently high parliamentary trust, even when executive trust fluctuates. This reflects deeply rooted traditions of parliamentary sovereignty, proportional representation, and consensus-oriented political cultures (Lijphart 1999; Norris 2012). This cluster includes consensus democracies with proportional representation, strong committee systems, and long-standing traditions of parliamentary sovereignty. Citizens in these systems appear to view parliament as a legitimate arena of representation regardless of which parties govern.

**Cluster 3 – Low parliamentary trust.** The countries in this cluster are: Great Britain, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Lithuania, Czechia, Poland, Ireland, and Latvia. This cluster contains countries where parliamentary trust remains chronically low. Many are newer democracies or systems with adversarial party competition. Persistent perceptions of legislative inefficacy

and corruption drive sustained distrust (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017). Parliaments are perceived as adversarial, inefficient, or captured by elites. Weak party institutionalization, frequent coalition breakdowns, and corruption narratives reinforce chronic legislative distrust.

**Cluster 4 – Southern European volatility.** This cluster includes France, Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Romania, Italy, and Portugal. Parliamentary trust in Southern Europe and Romania exhibits steep collapse during the sovereign debt crisis, followed by strong rebounds. This mirrors protest-driven electoral volatility and re-legitimation through party system renewal (Kriesi and Pappas 2015). These trajectories reflect the destabilization of traditional party systems and the subsequent re-legitimation of representation through new parties and protest movements. Parliamentary trust here seems to track broader cycles of party system realignment rather than government performance.

**Cluster 5 – Moderate and stable trust.** This cluster is composed of Slovakia, Netherlands, Denmark, and Luxembourg. Countries here display steady mid-range trust in legislatures, paralleling moderate executive trust but with lower volatility. This suggests balanced institutional legitimacy where citizens differentiate less sharply between branches. These systems combine relatively disciplined party systems with effective legislative-executive balance. Parliamentary legitimacy is solid but not deeply institutionalized, making trust somewhat sensitive to political polarization or scandal.

**Implications.** Parliamentary trust tends to be more path-dependent and slower to recover once eroded, highlighting representative legitimacy, party system structure, and institutional memory as primary drivers of change.

### 5.2.2 Trust in the government

**Cluster 1 – Volatile trust.** The countries in this cluster are Slovakia, Austria, and Estonia. They show significant variation in executive trust over time. This pattern is consistent with performance-based legitimacy, where executive institutions remain strongly tied to economic and anti-corruption performance evaluations and, perhaps, strongly personalized around governing elites (Mishler and Rose 2001).

**Cluster 2 – High and consolidating trust.** This cluster includes Belgium, Finland, Sweden, Germany, and Switzerland. The cluster display consistently high trust in government with modest cyclical variation. These are long-established consensus democracies with strong welfare states and low corruption. Their trajectories reflect institutionalized political trust rooted in procedural fairness and administrative effectiveness (Rothstein and Stolle 2008; Norris 2011). Citizens appear to extend a stable reservoir of confidence to executive institutions, consistent with theories of institutionalized political trust where legitimacy rests on procedural fairness and reliable policy delivery.

**Cluster 3 – Crisis-exposed trust.** The countries in this group are: Great Britain, Netherlands, France, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Ukraine. These countries display pronounced trust declines during major political or economic shocks, followed by partial recoveries. The 2008 financial crisis, Brexit, and corruption scandals have all affected trust in the government. This cluster reflects contingent legitimacy, where trust is highly sensitive to macro-political disruptions and governments are held directly accountable for major national disruptions (Armingeon & Guthmann 2014).

Figure 73 Trust in the government – cluster groupings

**T\_government – Trajectory clusters (k=5)**

White = no data / no cluster assignment

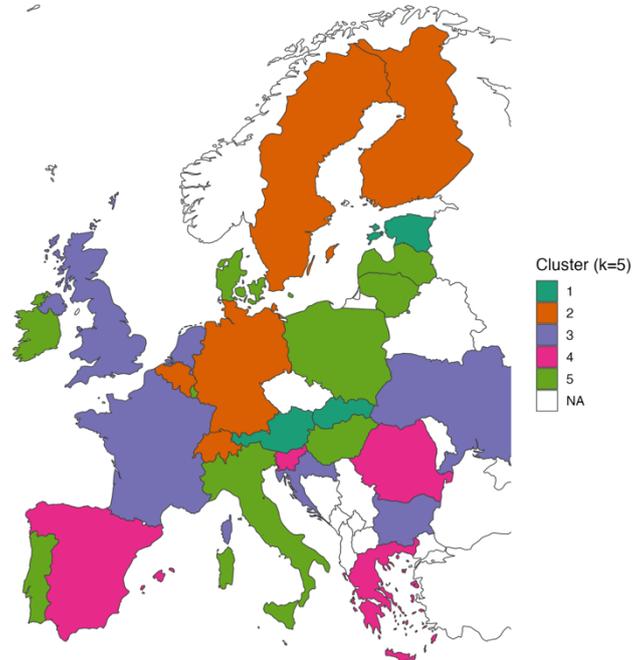


Figure 74 Trust in the government – cluster-based trends

**T\_government – cluster mean trajectories (k=5)**

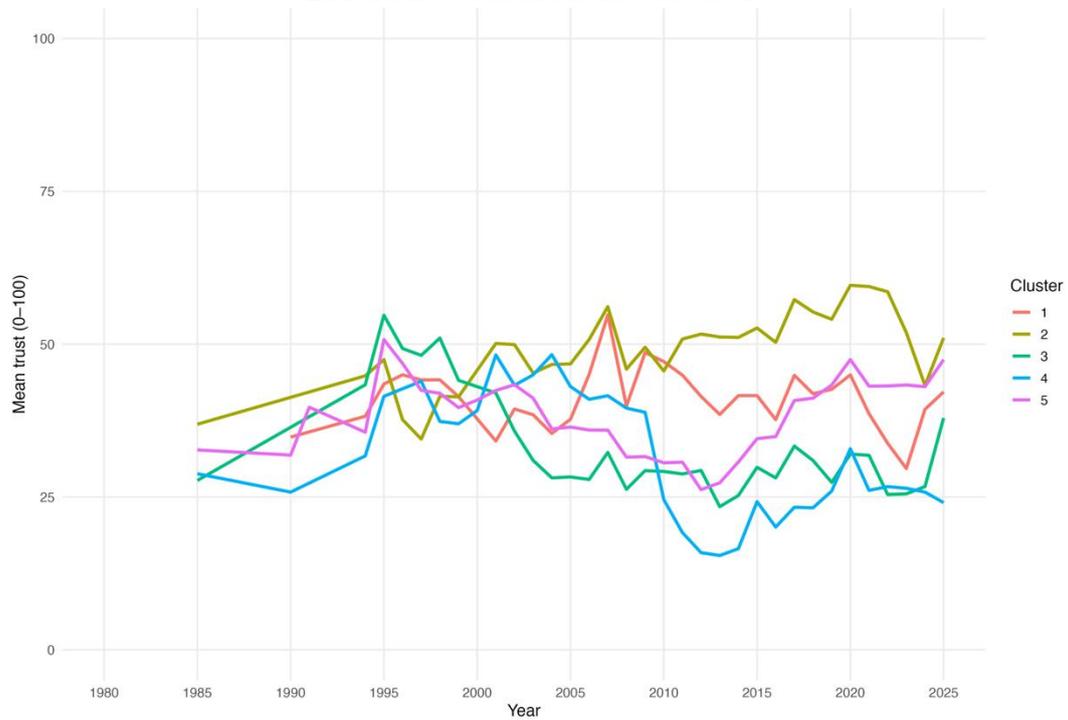
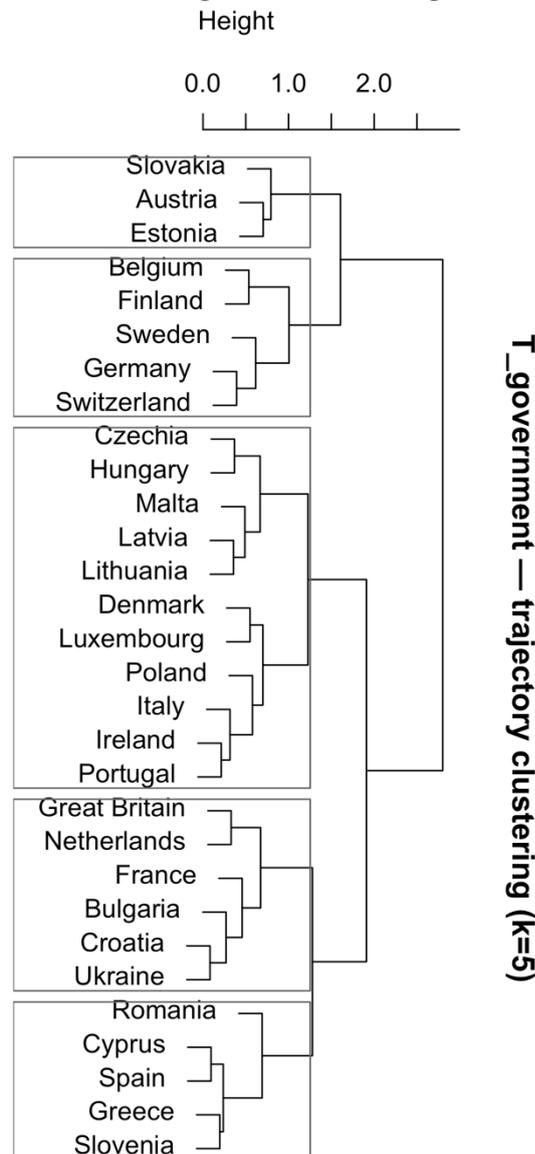


Figure 75 Trust in the government – dendrogram



**Cluster 4 – Low and slow recovering trust.** This cluster includes Romania, Cyprus, Spain, Greece, and Slovenia (Southern and post-communist democracies). Trust collapsed during austerity periods or systemic corruption crises but recovered after 2015, with low baseline levels. This suggests a delegative trust pattern and a protest-based political culture, where executives are blamed for systemic failures and rewarded only temporarily when new leadership emerges. (Pappas 2014).

**Cluster 5 – Moderate and stable trust.** This last cluster is composed of Czechia, Hungary, Malta, Latvia, Lithuania, Denmark, Luxembourg, Poland, Italy, Ireland, and Portugal. This is the largest and most heterogeneous cluster, characterized by mid-range trust levels with limited long-term trend movement. Executive trust here appears resilient but not strongly institutionalized. Countries include both Northern and Central European cases, suggesting that stable coalition governance and incremental policy responsiveness produce steady but unremarkable trust trajectories. This

suggests normalized democratic responsiveness, where citizens monitor government performance but do not fundamentally question regime legitimacy.

### 5.2.3 Summing up

Comparing clustering on trust in parliament and trust in government we can reach several tentative conclusions regarding the observed patterns. In terms of similarities, high-trust, institutionalized democracies cluster together in both cases. The same can be observed for Southern European and crisis-hit countries. Finally, post-communist states seem to combine in clusters characterized by volatility. In terms of differences, trust in the government seems to be easier to recover than trust in the parliament. Trust in the government often recovers after government turnover, while parliamentary trust remains depressed. This supports theories of clarity of responsibility, which argues that citizens reward or punish executives more easily than legislatures (Powell and Whitten 1993). By contrast, trust in the parliament seems to depend more on the institutional setup of the political system. Countries with consensus-style parliaments have higher levels of parliamentary trust, confirming the procedural legitimacy theory (Tyler 2006). In post-communist countries executives enjoy episodic increases in trust, tied to leadership change, while parliaments remain persistently distrusted. This reflects personalization of politics and weak party institutionalization (Kitschelt et al. 1999). Such patterns resonate with arguments on “leader democracy” and declining intermediary institutions (Mair 2013). Trust in the government remains more performance-driven and volatile, while trust in the parliament is more structurally embedded but harder to rebuild once eroded. The divergence between the two clusterings reflects the dual foundations of democratic legitimacy: responsiveness versus representation.

## 5.3 Trust in local / implementing institutions

Given the differences we discussed in section 4.3, we discuss here the results of the clustering for both trust in the courts and trust in the police as key local / implementing institutions.

### 5.3.1 Trust in the courts

**Cluster 1 – Trust consolidators.** The first cluster is a large one, including 14 countries from across Europe: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland. This cluster shows a comparatively high baseline of trust in the courts, followed by a gradual increase after the late-1990s. The trajectory is consistent with the idea that courts can earn trust through repeated experiences of predictable procedures, professionalized administration, and perceived impartiality, mechanisms at the core of procedural justice and institutional performance perspectives (Rothstein and Teorell 2008; Levi and Stoker 2000). It is important to notice here the presence of post-communist countries, which suggests that trust in the courts can converge towards high levels when institutional reforms are credible and corruption is seen as constrained.

**Cluster 2 – Long-term low trust.** This cluster includes Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine and shows consistent low levels of trust. Trust in justice declines until the early 2000s then stays at very low levels, with only a partial recovery over the last five years. This is a pattern predicted by the post-communist trust literature: where experiences with state institutions are filtered through politicization, corruption, uneven access, and unpredictability, courts become a focal point for distrust (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Seligson 2002). This cluster shows a chronic deficit in specific support, which is not easily offset by short-term improvements.

Figure 76 Trust in the courts – cluster groupings

**T\_justice – Trajectory clusters (k=5)**

White = no data / no cluster assignment

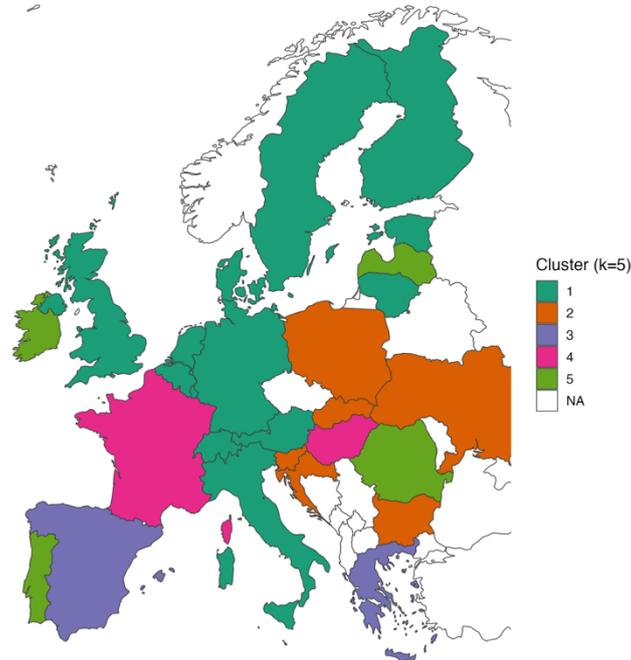


Figure 77 Trust in the courts – cluster-based trends

**T\_justice – cluster mean trajectories (k=5)**

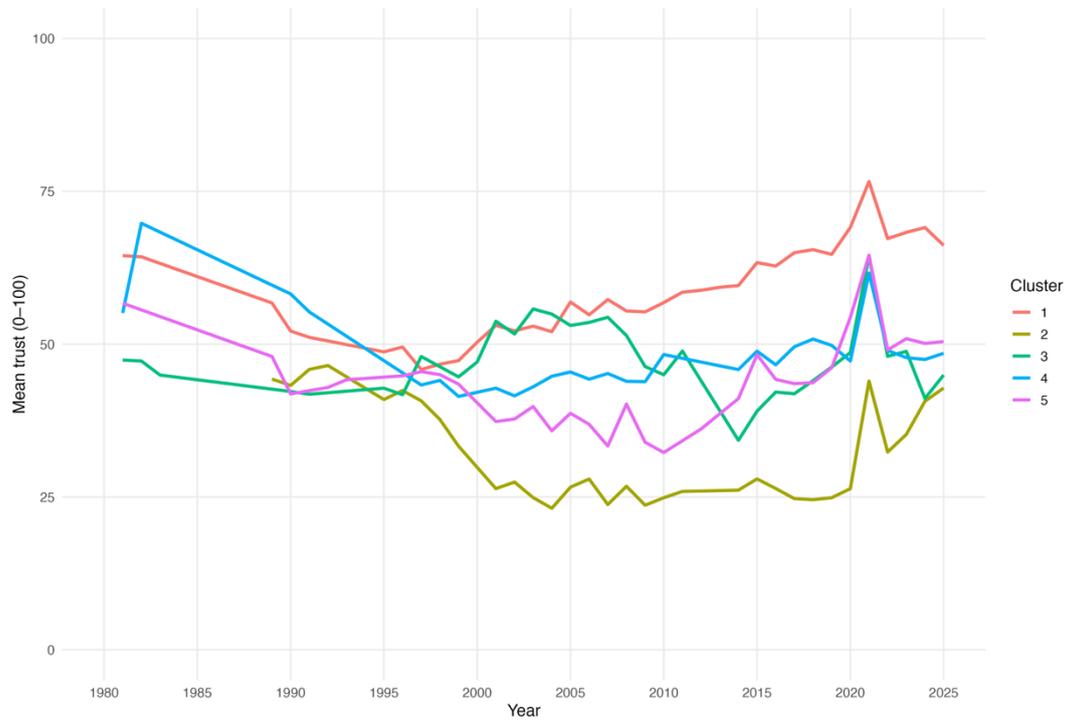
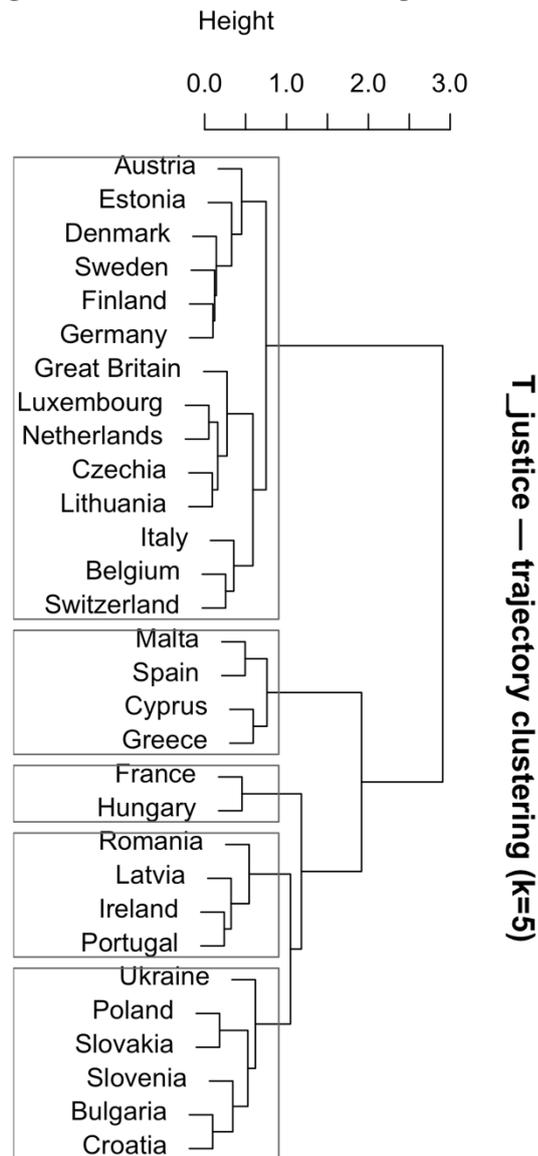


Figure 78 Trust in the courts – dendrogram



**Cluster 3 – Mediterranean.** This is a cluster composed of four countries: Cyprus, Greece, Malta, and Spain. The cluster is characterized by medium levels of trust, but it shows occasional significant variations. The timing and shape of these variations are consistent with the idea that trust in justice is sensitive to performance shocks (economic crisis, governance scandals, politicized reforms). Although the membership suggests a regional culture, it can also be interpreted as a cluster of vulnerability: trust can and does rise, but the increase does not get enough traction and is easier to knock off course.

**Cluster 4 – Residual cluster.** This is a small cluster including France and Hungary. It is closest to clusters 2 and 5. With only two countries, it is difficult to interpret it substantively, as it is most likely defined by a shared shape (levels and turning points). As mentioned, the trajectory is quite similar to the one observed for the next cluster, with the exception of the 2000s, when the two clusters moved in different directions.

**Cluster 5 – U-shaped trust.** This includes Ireland, Latvia, Portugal, and Romania. What brings these countries together is not obvious geography, but a shared pattern: erosion until 2010, followed by a recovery of trust. This resembles a trajectory where trust in justice is responding to performance: falling when austerity, corruption, or state capacity constraints become relevant, then recovering as governance stabilizes or as reforms increase perceived fairness. This is also consistent with the literature that treats “quality of government” and corruption control as central drivers of institutional trust (Rothstein and Teorell 2008; Linde 2012).

### 5.3.2 Trust in the police

**Cluster 1 – Long-term increase in trust.** This cluster includes Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland. Starting with the 1990s, this cluster shows an almost continuous increase in trust in the police. This is a typical pattern, expected when trust in the police is based on a combination of perceived effectiveness and procedural fairness. Fair treatment and neutrality are key elements of police legitimacy and compliance (Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Jackson et al. 2012). Like the case of trust in the courts, the presence of post-communist countries alongside older democracies shows that trust in the police can also converge upward. What is interesting to note in this context is that Poland was in a cluster of stable low trust in the courts, an element that suggests that trust in the police can improve even in contexts where the courts are contested.

**Cluster 2 – Low trust, small increase.** This cluster is composed of Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Italy, and Ukraine. This cluster is consistently, since the late 1990s, showing the lowest levels of trust in the police. Yet, it is an optimistic cluster, as the slow recovery of trust in the police suggests incremental gains in capacity and professionalization, although with continuing vulnerability to corruption scandals or politicized policing. This is consistent with performance-based interpretations of trust and with research showing that corruption perceptions and distributive fairness can decrease trust in street-level institutions (Levi and Stoker 2000; Anderson and Tverdova 2003).

**Cluster 3 – Inverted U shape.** This is a small cluster that includes only Cyprus and Malta. As such, it is quite difficult to interpret it in other terms than similar trajectories of trust. It is similar to cluster 1 until about 2005, then it takes a different path, being the only cluster that shows declining trust in police post-2005.

**Cluster 4 – Long-term increase at lower levels.** This is the largest cluster, including Czechia, Denmark, France, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Sweden. This cluster is quite similar in shape with cluster 1: decline during the 1980s, followed by a gradual increase. What makes it different from the first cluster is the fact that in cluster 1 recovery started from 1990, whereas in this cluster the trajectory shows first a plateau at comparatively low levels of trust until 2005, and only then a recovery, but at a lower level.

**Cluster 5 – Anglo pattern.** The last cluster includes only Great Britain and Ireland. In terms of pattern, it is quite similar to cluster 2, showing decline until about the mid-2000s then a small recovery of trust. What differs it from cluster 2 is the level: trust in police in this cluster is about 20% higher than in cluster 2.

### 5.3.3 Summing up

Trust in police tends to be higher and more stable than trust in courts in most European countries, and the clustering reflects that: the main differences are not between high trust versus low trust countries, but whether countries experience sharp discontinuities and how they react to those instances.

Figure 79 Trust in the police – cluster groupings

**T\_police – Trajectory clusters (k=5)**

White = no data / no cluster assignment

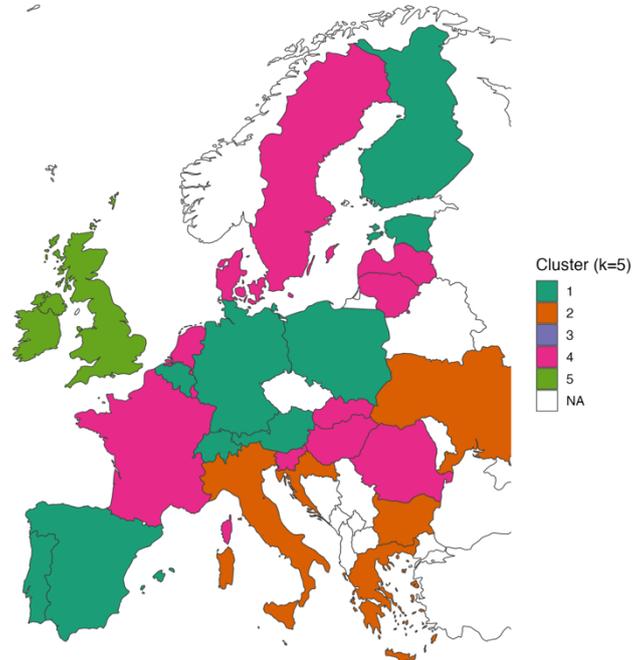


Figure 80 Trust in the police – cluster-based trends

**T\_police – cluster mean trajectories (k=5)**

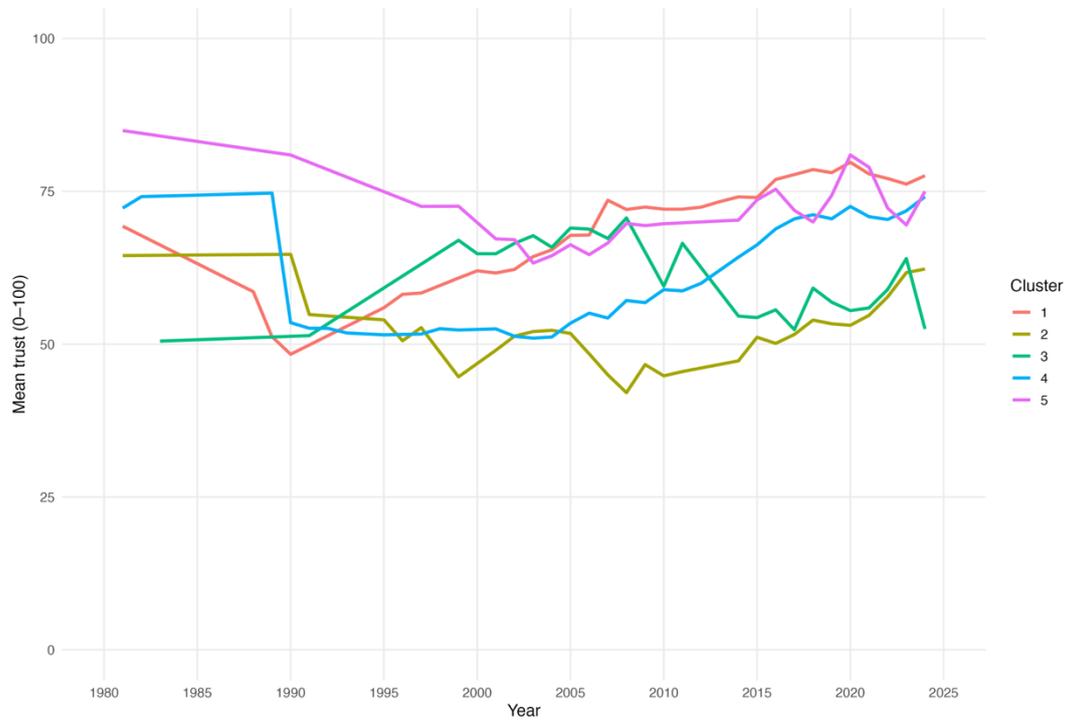
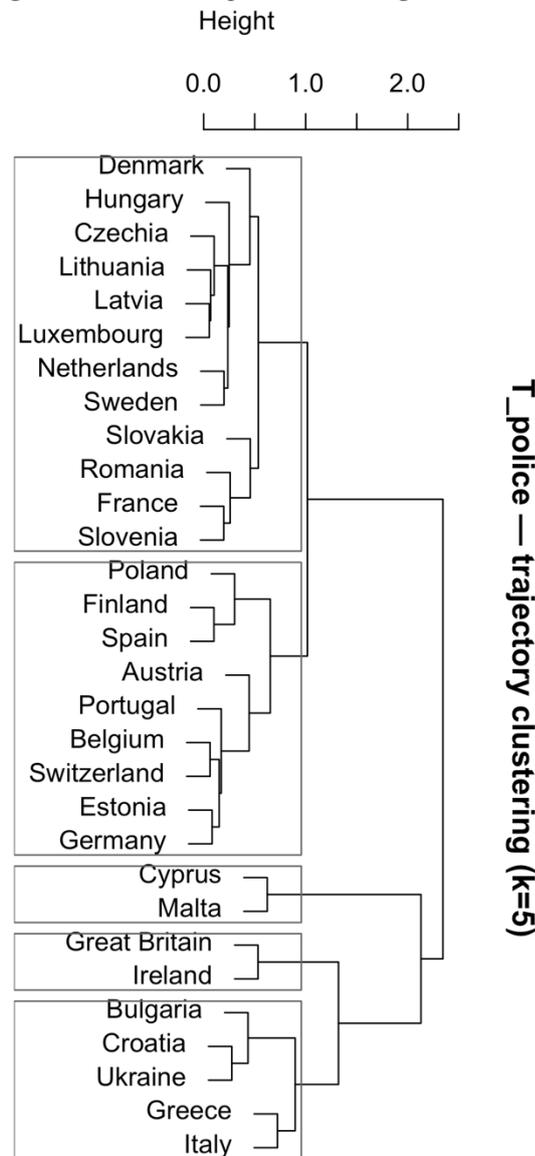


Figure 81 Trust in the police – dendrogram



In terms of similarities between the two institutions, quite a few countries characterized by long-term improvement in trust in justice also belong to relatively high and improving police clusters (e.g., Germany, Belgium, Austria, Finland, Estonia). This supports the broader quality-of-government argument: impartiality, low corruption, and predictable administration increase trust across institutions (Rothstein and Teorell 2008; Linde 2012).

In terms of dissimilarities, courts remain more sensitive to controversies, while police can recover trust through order and contact. Poland is a good example for this pattern. Generally, it looks like post-communist legacies are more relevant for trust in courts than for trust in the police.

Southern Europe, as a region, is more cohesive for justice than for police. Spain, Greece, Cyprus, and Malta cluster together for justice, but police trust splits: Spain and Portugal align with the improvers, while Italy and Greece belong to the lower baseline group. This suggests that different institutional domains react to different national reforms, scandal cycles, and governance reputations.

## 5.4 Trust in mass media / informational institutions

Across Europe, trust in the press displays more evidence of historically contingent paths (early transition shocks, later commercialization, the combined pressures of political polarization and the digital age).

**Cluster 1 – Moderate trust into small increase.** This cluster is the largest one, including Great Britain, Ireland, Switzerland, Austria, Romania, Croatia, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. This cluster begins at comparatively low levels of trust in the press and then shows constant long-term improvement, ending the period at moderate levels of trust. This shows a slow accumulation of trust, with short-lived fluctuations.

**Cluster 2 – High and stable trust.** This cluster includes Belgium, Netherlands, Malta, France, and Ukraine. This cluster is defined by sustained average trust over a long period of time, with only modest oscillations. Its main characteristic is resilience: once reaching the 50% zone, it does not change much.

**Cluster 3 – Transition shock then normalization.** This cluster is composed of Luxembourg, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Czechia, Slovakia. It shows a distinctive early-1990s jump in trust in the press, followed by a return toward average levels of trust. This is indicative of regime and media-system transformation: moments of rapid liberalization can briefly increase expectations about the press, but the subsequent realities of commercialization, ownership concentration, partisan capture, or disappointment can push trust back down. Over time, the trajectory looks like “normal politics” rather than a permanently exceptional trust profile.

**Cluster 4 – From high trust to contested.** A small cluster that includes Estonia and Hungary. This small cluster starts exceptionally high and then falls substantially, ending well below its initial levels. With only two members, it is difficult to interpret more, especially since early data are sparse. It is quite likely that the early data are not very high quality. Ignoring those early data points the trajectory of the countries in this cluster resemble the most the trajectories if countries in cluster 3.

**Cluster 5 – Gradual erosion.** This is the second largest cluster, with Poland, Latvia, Greece, Spain, Lithuania, and Slovenia. Cluster 5 begins around moderate levels but trends downward across the mid-2000s into the early 2010s, followed by only partial stabilization. The defining feature is cumulative distrust: not a single break, but an extended period in which credibility is slowly worn away. This is the cluster most compatible with the idea that structural changes (fragmentation of audiences, competitive pressure for sensational content, increased visibility of misinformation claims) reduce trust in mainstream media.

**Implications.** Clusters 1 and 5 look like slow-moving processes in opposite directions: gradual gain versus gradual erosion. Clusters 3 and 4, in contrast, are quite similar, being separated only by the moment of distinct historical breaks, suggesting that regime change and media liberalization can generate short-term trust gains that later disappear.

By the 2000s–2010s, several clusters reach similar mid-range values, but in different ways. Cluster 2’s stability reads as institutional resilience. Cluster 3’s mid-range looks like post-transition normalization. Cluster 1’s mid-range is reached only after long incremental gains. Cluster 5’s mid-range is the residue left after a long decline. When comparing the clustering of trust in the press to the clustering for other institutions, it should be kept in mind that the press is not a single, unified institution in the way that parliaments, governments, police, or the courts are.

Figure 82 Trust in the written press – cluster groupings

**T\_press – Trajectory clusters (k=5)**  
White = no data / no cluster assignment

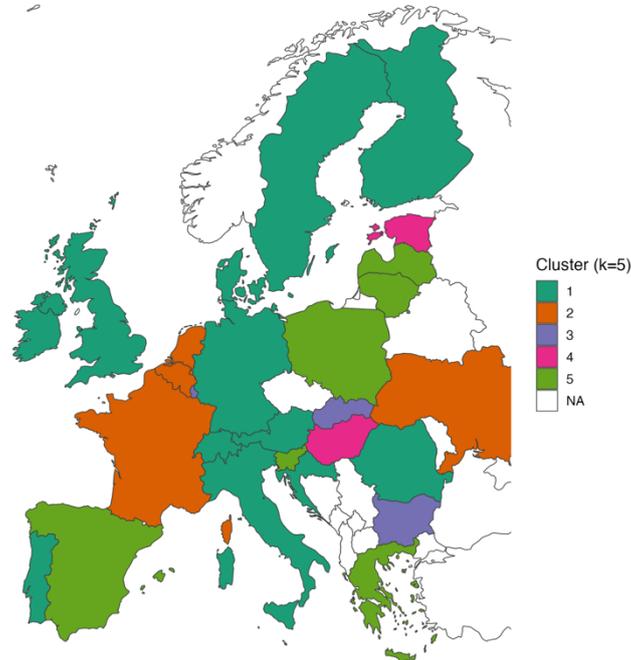


Figure 83 Trust in the written press – cluster-based trends

**T\_press – cluster mean trajectories (k=5)**

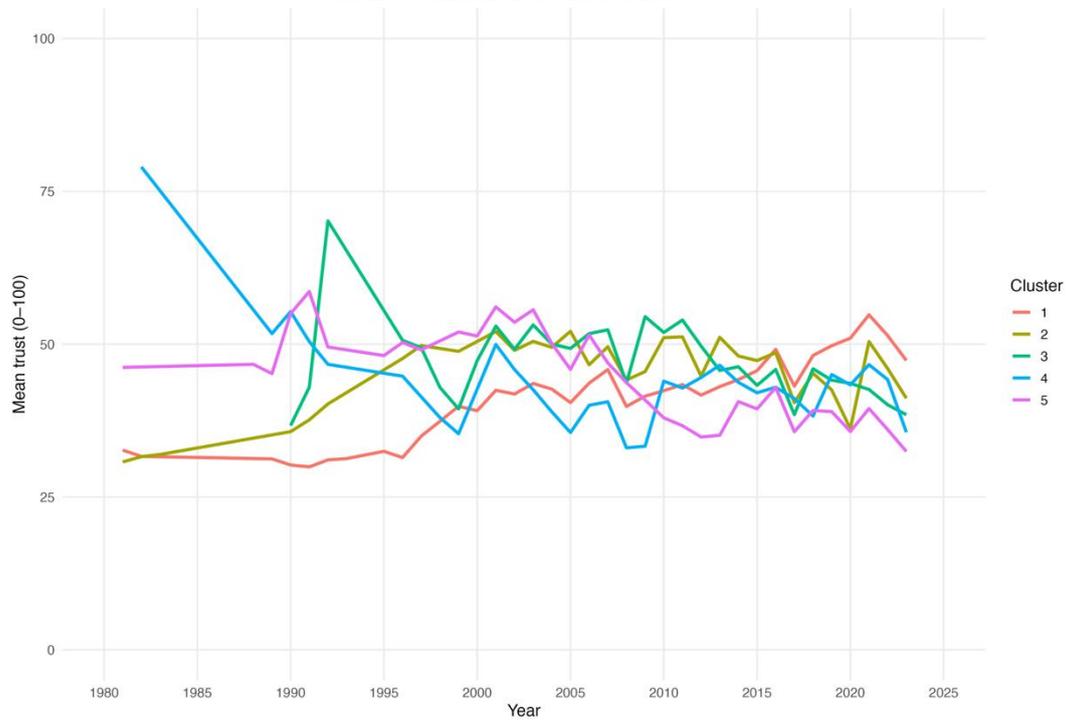
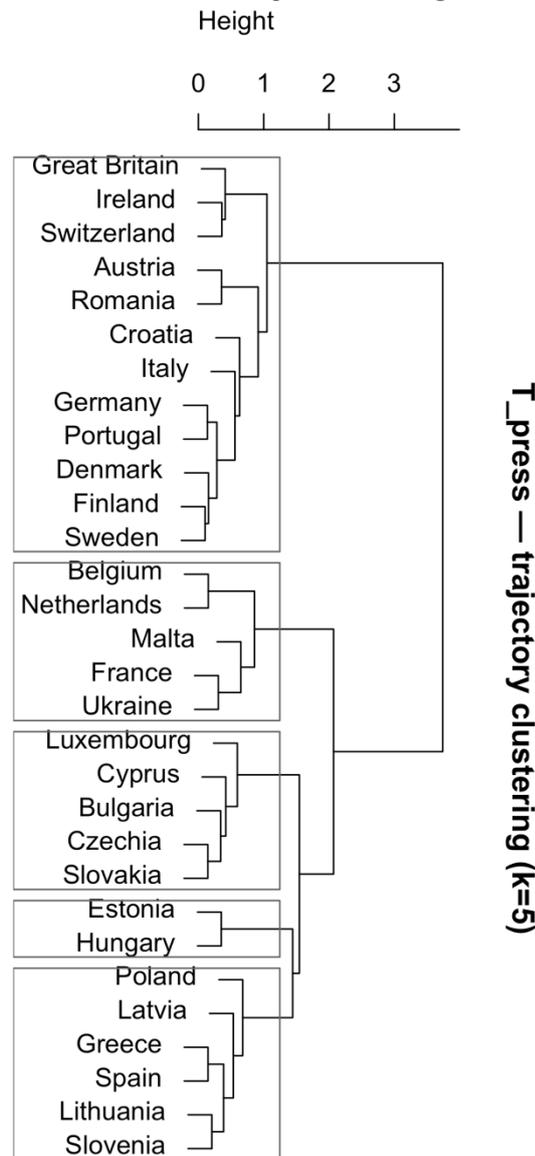


Figure 84 Trust in the written press – dendrogram



## 5.5 Trust in symbolic institutions

In this section we discuss the clusters of trajectories of trust for both symbolic institutions, the church (Figure 85 - Figure 87) and the army (Figure 88 - Figure 90).

### 5.5.1 Trust in the church

**Cluster 1 – Low trust in secularized societies.** This first cluster is composed of Estonia, Cyprus, Great Britain, Hungary, Poland, Czechia, Austria, and Germany. This cluster displays relatively low trust levels across the entire period, with some variations over time. These societies share either strong secularization trends (Czechia, Estonia, Great Britain, Germany) or historical politicization of religion leading to skepticism (Hungary, Poland, Austria). In Poland and Hungary, recent politicization of church–state alliances may even contribute to declining confidence among younger cohorts. Overall, this group reflects advanced secularization regimes, where churches still enjoy cultural visibility but only limited institutional credibility.

Figure 85 Trust in the church – cluster groupings

**T\_church – Trajectory clusters (k=5)**  
White = no data / no cluster assignment

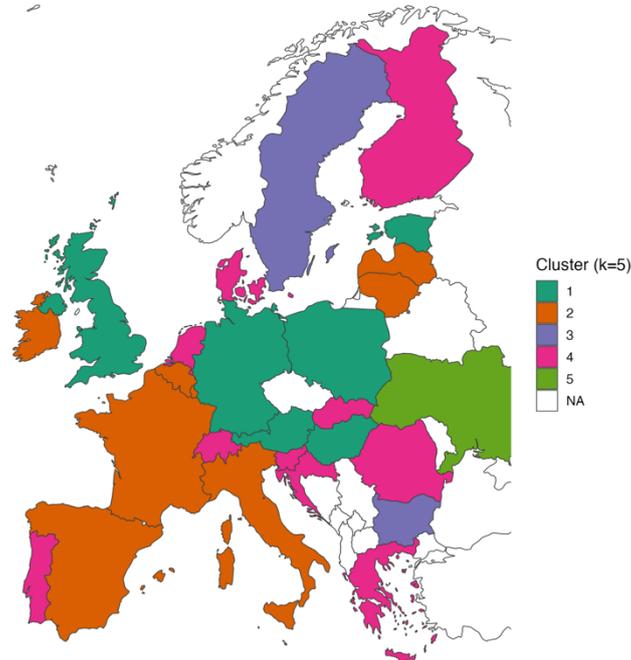


Figure 86 Trust in the church – cluster-based trends

**T\_church – cluster mean trajectories (k=5)**

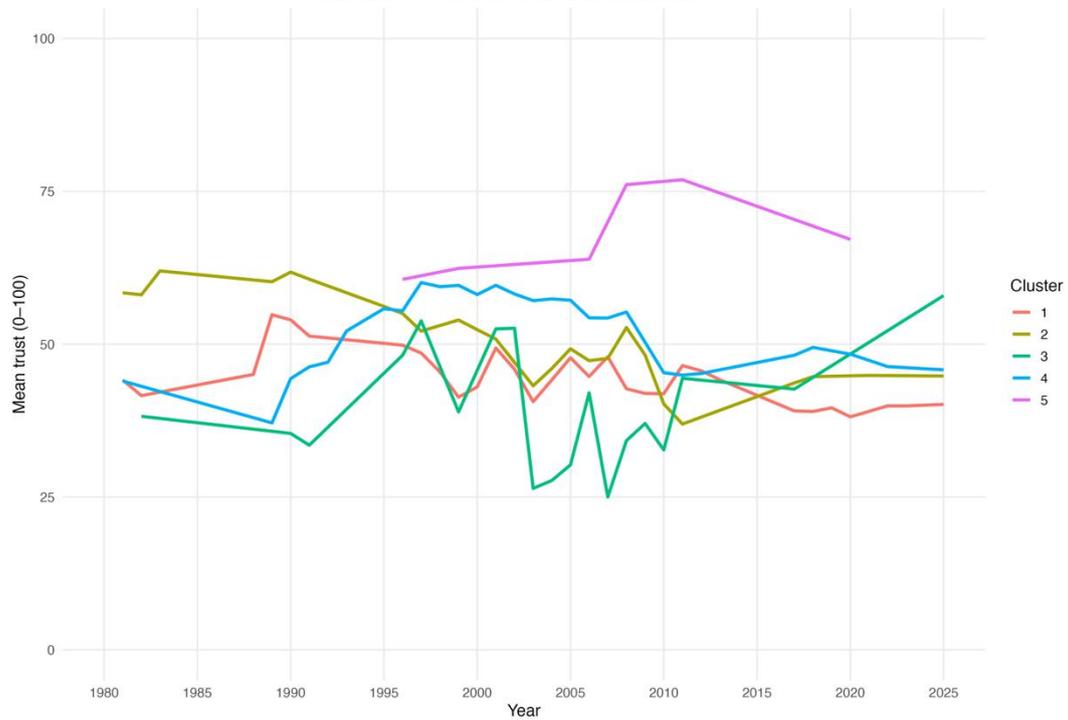
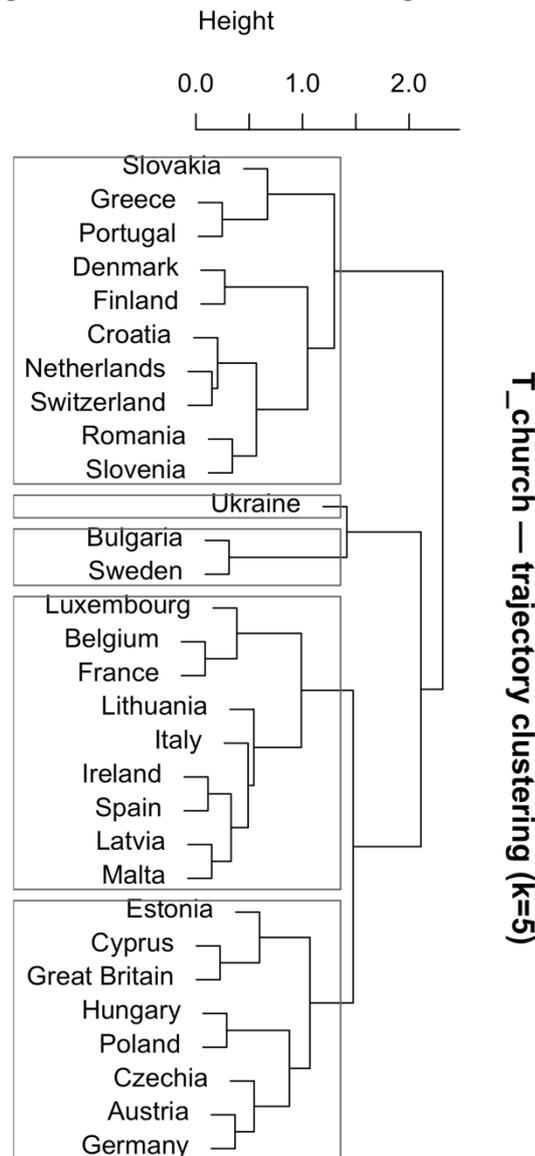


Figure 87 Trust in the church – dendrogram



**Cluster 2 – Declining trust in Catholic societies.** The countries belonging to this cluster are Luxembourg, Belgium, France, Lithuania, Italy, Ireland, Spain, Latvia, and Malta. Historically, these countries had a strong Catholic institutional presence, but the trajectory of this cluster shows gradual erosion of trust over time. The decline accelerates after the 1990s, coinciding with church scandals, modernization, and pluralization of belief then it stabilizes at comparatively low levels over the last 5-7 years. This cluster represents post-Catholic secularization, where traditional religious authority erodes but remains socially embedded (Voas and Chaves, 2016).

**Cluster 3 – Residual cluster.** This is a cluster composed of only two countries: Sweden and Bulgaria. As always, clusters with only two members are difficult to interpret substantively. The trajectories of trust in both countries show significant variations from the 1990s to the mid 2010s, followed by an increase in trust. The cluster is closest to the previous two clusters we have already discussed.

**Cluster 4 – Declining religious embeddedness.** The fourth cluster is composed of Slovakia, Greece, Portugal, Denmark, Finland, Croatia, Netherlands, Switzerland, Romania, and Slovenia. This cluster shows relatively high levels of trust through the 1990s and early 2000s, followed by gradual declines. Orthodox countries (Greece, Romania), Catholic countries (Slovakia, Croatia, Portugal), and Protestant Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Switzerland) all share historically strong linkages between the church and the state, with modern secularization slowly dissolving this relation. This is consistent with the “believing without belonging” pattern (Davie, 2007)

**Cluster 5 – Ukraine.** This is a single member cluster – Ukraine. It shows the highest levels of trust in the church, reflecting the role of this institution in national identity consolidation.

### 5.5.2 Trust in the armed forces

**Cluster 1 – Stable increasing trust.** This is the largest cluster and it includes Portugal, Denmark, Finland, Malta, Italy, Estonia, Austria, Germany, Great Britain, Slovenia, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechia, and Spain.

This cluster is characterized by increasing trust starting with the 1990s, reaching a plateau after 2020. These countries share professional armed forces embedded in democratic civil–military frameworks. Most of them are long-standing NATO members or are part of the Western security structures. The post-2014 rise aligns with renewed perceptions of external threat following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the subsequent re-securitization of European defense agendas. In the post-communist members (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechia, Slovenia), this pattern reflects increasing reliance on NATO security guarantees. Overall, this cluster represents consolidated regimes of trust in the army, where the armed forces are seen as competent, politically neutral, and necessary providers of external security (Cottey, Edmunds, and Forster 2002; Gibson and Caldeira 1996).

**Cluster 2 – Declining trust.** The countries included in this cluster are Romania, Bulgaria, and Cyprus. The trajectory begins at moderate levels in the early 1990s, but trust gradually erodes over the next three decades, ending at substantially lower levels by the 2020s. This is the only cluster where a long-term downward slope dominates the pattern, suggesting weakening of military legitimacy rather than consolidation.

**Cluster 3 – Volatile trust.** Two countries compose this cluster, Greece and Croatia. Their main characteristic is that of significant fluctuations rather than unidirectional change.

**Cluster 4 – Moderate, stable trust.** The countries included in this cluster are Hungary, Ireland, Ukraine, Sweden, Luxembourg, and Switzerland. The cluster shows moderate but relatively flat trust over time, with limited upward or downward movements over time. This pattern suggests a regime of persistent medium-level legitimacy without strong reinforcement or erosion.

**Cluster 5 – High level but slowly declining trust.** This cluster includes only Poland and Slovakia. Trust starts at high levels at the beginning of the period included in the analysis but tends to slowly decline over time.

### 5.5.3 Summing up

Overall, trust in the church shows weaker temporal coherence than trust in the army. While most army clusters show clear directional long-run trends, church clusters are more fragmented (they include a single-country cluster) and less synchronized across Europe. Countries with stable or rising trust in the army do not necessarily show a similar pattern for trust in the church. For instance, France and Italy belong to the high-and-rising army cluster but to a gently declining church cluster.

Figure 88 Trust in the army – cluster groupings

**T\_army – Trajectory clusters (k=5)**  
White = no data / no cluster assignment

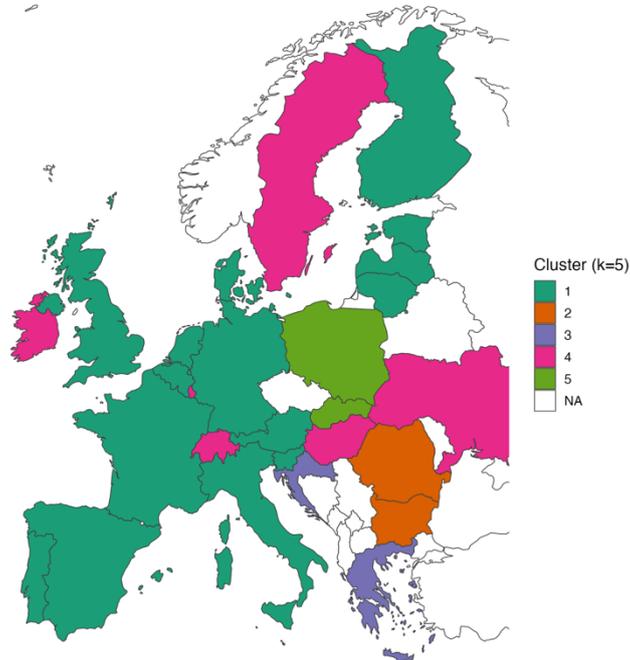


Figure 89 Trust in the army – cluster-based trends

**T\_army – cluster mean trajectories (k=5)**

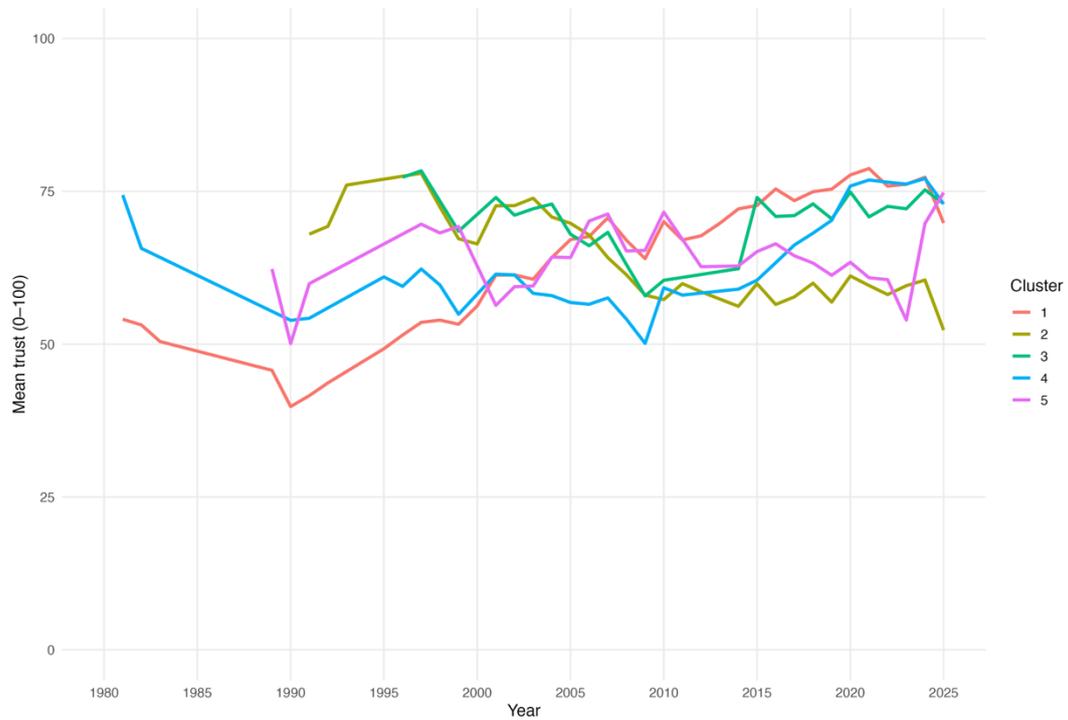
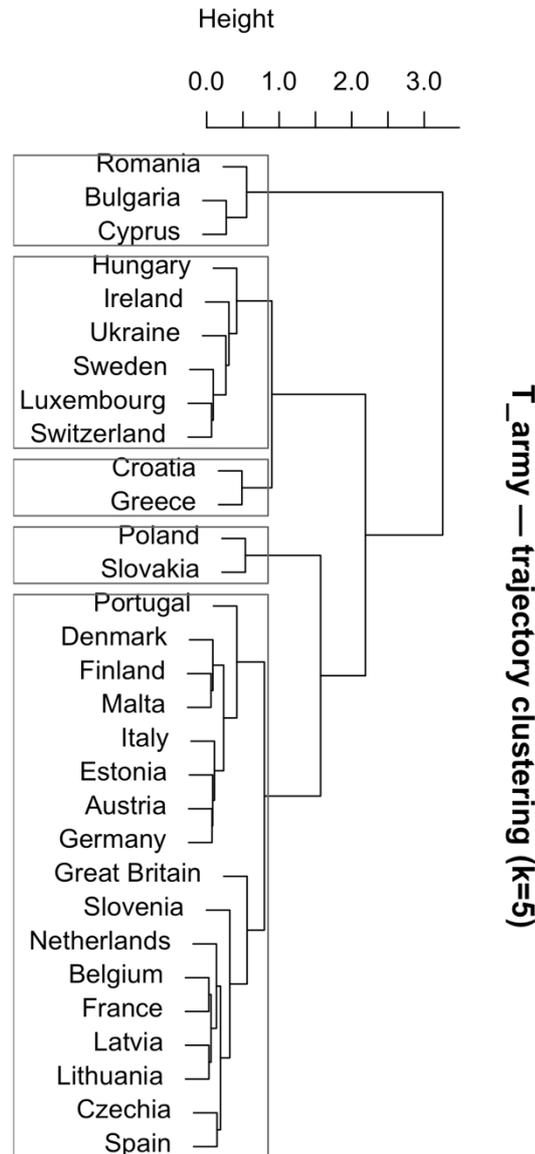


Figure 90 Trust in the army – dendrogram



Similarly, Romania and Bulgaria belong to the declining army cluster, but they fit into the stable church cluster, indicating divergent legitimacy dynamics between the two symbolic institutions.

The clustering shows that trust in the army is generally higher, more synchronized, and in many countries increasing, while trust in the church is lower, more fragmented, and often declining. The trajectory regimes do not map neatly onto classical regional typologies, confirming that dynamic institutional legitimacy regimes cut across conventional East–West or North–South divides.

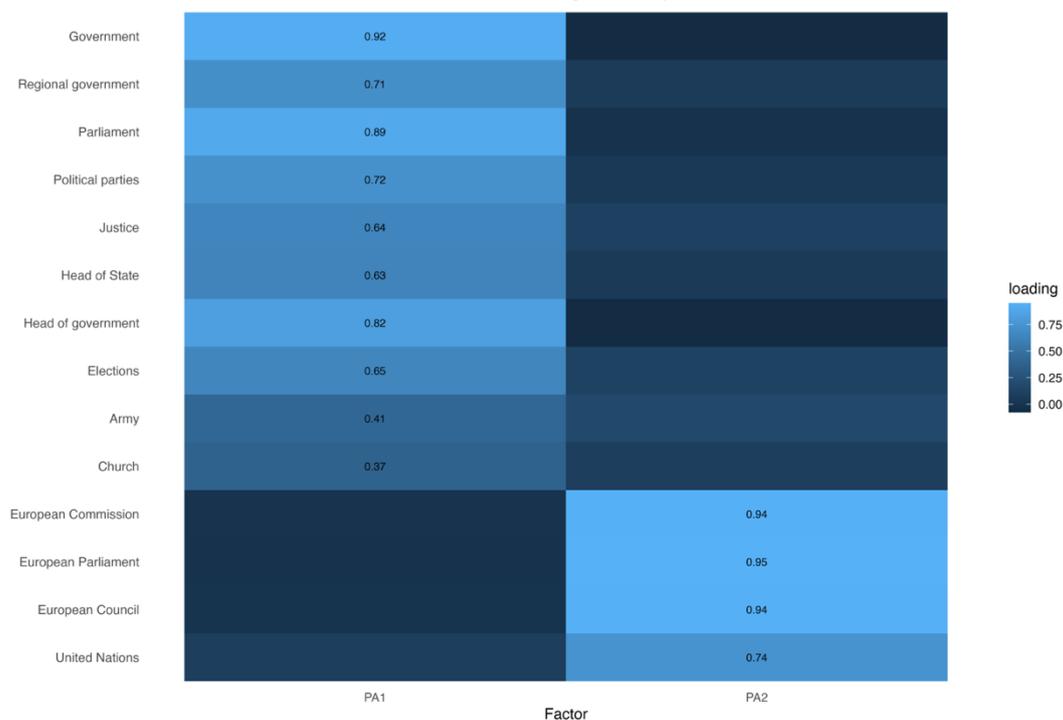
## 6 Mapping Trust Dimensions

In the previous chapters we have used the long-term trend dataset to analyze the evolution of trust since 1980 for the European countries and the institutions included in the analysis. As part of the TRUEDEM project, however, we also collected cross-sectional data concerning institutional trust in European countries in 2025. In this chapter, we analyze the data from this public opinion survey with the main goal of uncovering the dimensional structure of institutional trust in Europe and the four European regions we have used at the beginning of the report (Northern Europe, Western Europe, Southern Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe). To this end, we used polychoric factor analysis (more details about the technical aspects of the analysis are presented in section 3.4).

### 6.1 Trust dimensions in Europe

At the European level, the pattern matrix reads almost like a map of how citizens mentally sort institutions into domains (Figure 91). One dimension is clearly domestic and political, being defined by institutions that define representative government and day-to-day rulemaking: trust in the government loads very strongly (0.92), followed by trust in the parliament (0.89) and trust in the head of government (0.82). The same latent dimension also includes institutions of democratic contestation and accountability (political parties and elections), together with institutions representing state authority and legal order. Trust in the regional government also loads on this factor, suggesting that citizens interpret subnational authority as part of national politics.

Figure 91 Factor analysis of institutional trust – Europe – pattern loadings  
Pattern loadings – Europe



The two symbolic institutions, the church and the armed forces, are also linked to this dimension but with very low loadings (0.41 and 0.37, respectively). This suggests the symbolic institutions are not key definers of political trust. They are related institutions that share some variance with the domestic political package without defining it.

The second dimension is a factor that brings together trust in EU institutions and the UN. The European Commission (0.94), European Parliament (0.95), and European Council (0.94) all load at very high and strikingly similar levels, forming the “EU block”. The United Nations also loads strongly (0.74), aligned with this same supranational/international governance dimension. Empirically, this is a stable result: respondents are not treating EU institutions as three separate objects but as facets of one underlying evaluation of supranational governance.

The two factors are strongly correlated with each other (about 0.69). While Europeans distinguish between domestic political institutions and supranational governance, it is also true that people who are inclined to trust one domain are also generally inclined to trust the other. This combination of differentiation and high correlation indicates that citizens understand that different institutions have different roles while still responding to a common underlying disposition that affects many institutions at once.

## 6.2 European regions

### 6.2.1 Northern Europe

Northern Europe also fits the two-factor template observed at the European level, but with some differences regarding the most important institution defining the domestic political dimension (see Figure 92). The domestic factor remains anchored by government (0.89), parliament (0.84), and the head of government (0.82), then extends through parties (0.68), regional government (0.63), elections (0.61), justice (0.59), and head of state (0.55). One significant difference from the European solution is related to the symbolic institutions, which have weaker loadings on the domestic political factor. Statistically, they still belong to this factor, but, substantively, they have only a minor role in defining what “domestic institutional trust” means in Northern Europe. The supranational factor remains stable: the EU Commission (0.93), the European Parliament (0.94), the European Council (0.89), and the UN (0.74). The factors correlate strongly (about 0.71).

If we look at the country level, we see that only Sweden has a two-factor solution, while Denmark and Finland are better described by a three-factor solution. In the case of Denmark, the political and supranational factors are joined by the symbolic factor, defined by trust in the church and the army and that also includes other institutions with a strong symbolic component: the head of state (0.61) and the justice (0.49). Finland has a similar symbolic institutions factor, but here it includes the army, the justice, the head of state, and elections. Church does not load significantly on any of the three factors.

### 6.2.2 Western Europe

Western Europe is the clearest regional departure from the European solution, as the factor analysis extracts a single dominant factor with trust in all institutions loading on it (Figure 93). The domestic political institutions load strongly: government (0.85), regional government (0.79), parliament (0.85), political parties (0.77), justice (0.73), head of state (0.74), head of government (0.77), and elections (0.74). The international institutions also have strong loadings on this pattern: European Commission (0.85), European Parliament (0.86), European Council (0.86), and United Nations (0.77).

The symbolic institutions also join this same dimension: army (0.48) and church (0.49), somewhat weaker than the political and EU items but clearly not separate. These results suggest the existence of a general institutional trust dimension rather than a clean separation between domestic and supranational domains.



Figure 92 Factor analysis of institutional trust – Northern Europe – pattern loadings

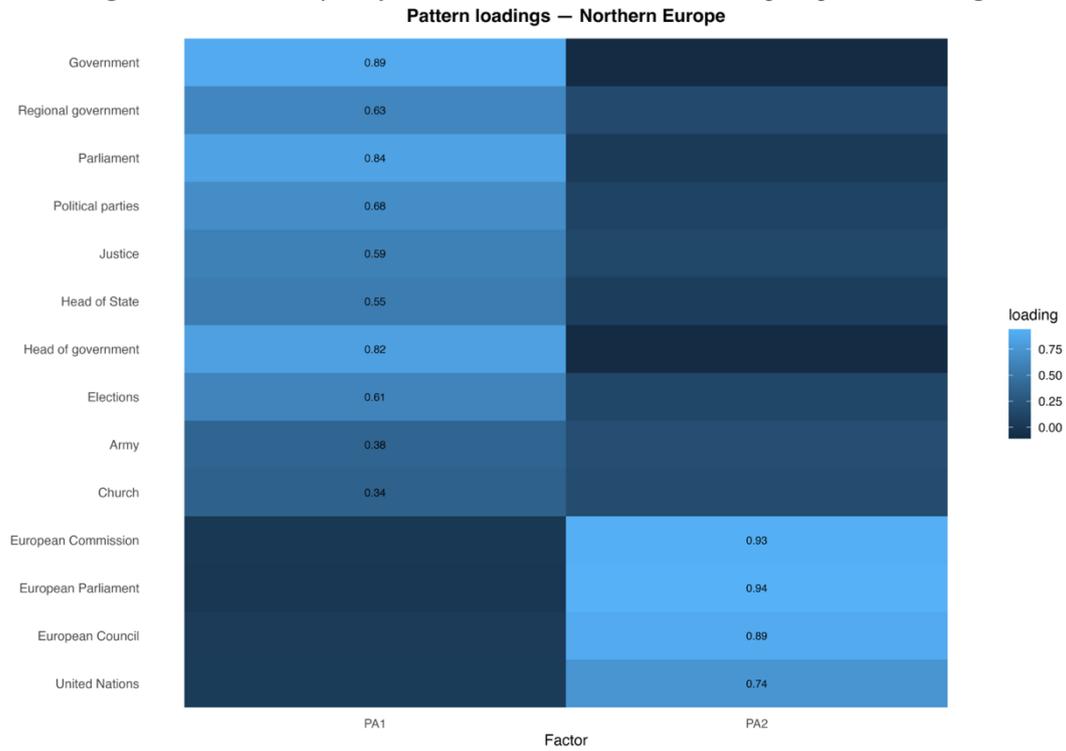
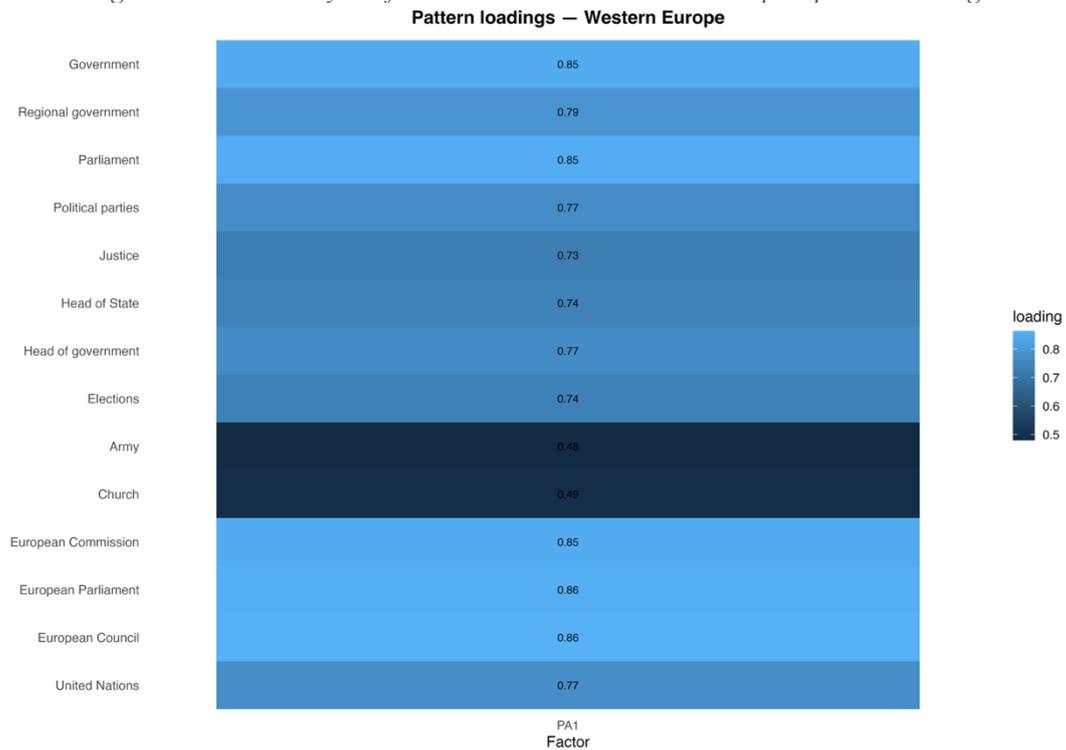


Figure 93 Factor analysis of institutional trust – Western Europe – pattern loadings

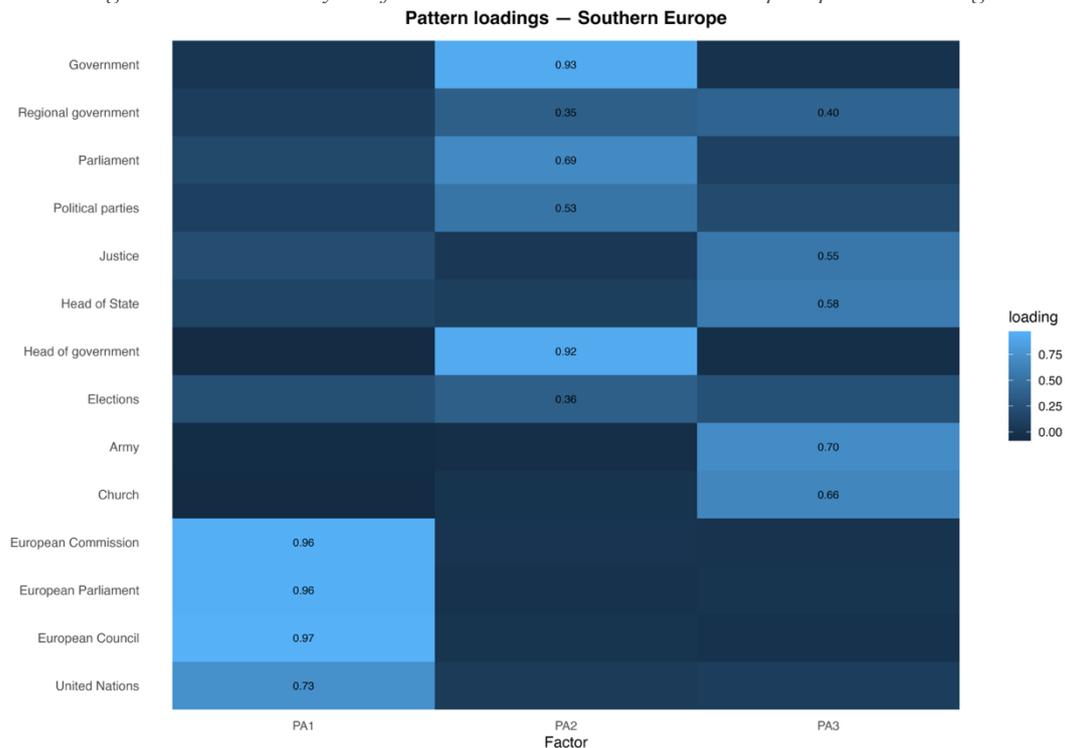


Looking at the countries from Western Europe, we see a little more variation, from countries with a single factor solution (Germany, the Netherlands) to countries with two-factor solutions (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland). In the latter countries the two factors are the domestic political one (with symbolic institutions loading on it as well) and the supranational one.

### 6.2.3 Southern Europe

Southern Europe provides the most internally differentiated structure. Here, the eigenvalue rule produces three oblique factors, with positive and moderate-to-strong (roughly 0.58–0.64) correlations, suggesting differentiation nested inside a broader common tendency.

Figure 94 Factor analysis of institutional trust – Southern Europe – pattern loadings



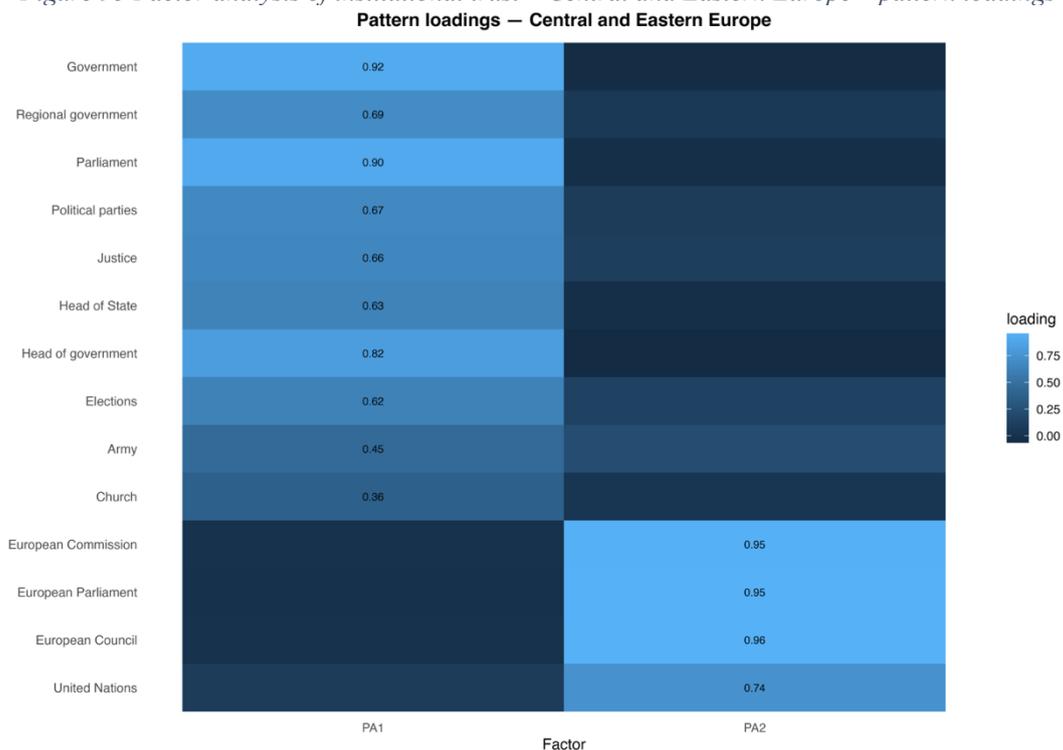
The first factor is the supranational/international governance dimension. EU institutions have very high loadings, 0.96 or above, and the UN aligns with them (0.73). The second factor corresponds to domestic politics, defined by trust in the government (0.93) and trust in the head of government (0.92). The parliament (0.69) and political parties (0.53) also belong to this factor with medium to strong loadings. This second factor is most defined by evaluations of the executive and the central government. The third factor brings together trust in army (0.70) and trust in church (0.66) alongside trust in the head of state (0.58), trust in justice (0.55) and, with a smaller loading, trust in the regional government. This is a coherent factor of trust in institutions often associated with authority, order, and supra-partisan guardianship. By comparison to the other European regions, in Southern Europe symbolic institutions help define an additional dimension of trust.

Comparing the solutions for the countries belonging to this group, Spain has a three-factor solution like the one observed for the whole region. Greece also has a three-factor solution, but the symbolic institutions are loading alone on the third factor. Finally, Italy and Portugal show only a two-factor solution. In Portugal the distinction between domestic and supranational institutions is very clear, while in Italy the supranational factor also include trust in justice and trust in the head of state.

### 6.2.4 Central and Eastern Europe

Central and Eastern Europe reproduces the Europe-wide architecture. The domestic political factor is anchored by government (0.92), parliament (0.90), and the head of government (0.82), and it extends to regional government (0.69), parties (0.67), justice (0.66), head of state (0.63), and elections (0.62). Here too, army (0.45) and church (0.36) are present but clearly secondary contributors. The supranational factor includes the European Commission (0.95), the European Parliament (0.95), and the European Council (0.96), together with trust in the UN (0.74). The factor correlation is quite high (about 0.70).

Figure 95 Factor analysis of institutional trust – Central and Eastern Europe – pattern loadings



At country level, with only two exceptions all the countries in the region have a two-factor solution. The exceptions are Bulgaria, which has a third factor that brings together the army, the church, and the head of state, all with modest loadings, and Estonia, where the third factor is composed of the army, the head of state, the justice, and election, with trust in church not loading on any of the three dimensions.

### 6.3 Conclusion

Across Europe, as well as in Northern Europe and in Central and Eastern Europe, the same two-factor architecture dominates: domestic political trust versus supranational/international trust, with a strong positive association between them. This repeating structure implies that governance level is a powerful organizing principle for trust, and that, despite differentiation, people still carry a general propensity that influences trust across domains simultaneously. This two-factor solution confirms arguments that European integration has created a second-order political authority, evaluated differently from domestic political institutions.

Western Europe differs by collapsing the two dimensions into one generalized institutional trust factor, looking like the region where institutional reputations (domestic and supranational) are statistically most fused: the EU, the national government, the courts, elections, and even the church and the army are all part of one broad evaluative package.

Southern Europe, in contrast, stands apart by multiplying domains: it not only separates domestic politics from supranational governance, but it further splits the domestic realm into a core political-executive dimension and a distinct cluster linking justice, head of state, church, and army. The resulting picture shows Southern Europe as the only region where symbolic institutions become structurally autonomous rather than peripheral.

It should also be noted that trust in the institutions of the European Union behaves like a remarkably stable measurement object. The Commission, the Parliament and the Council have similarly high loadings in all countries where they define a factor.

Finally, all two- or three-factor solutions show strong factor correlations. The factors are not independent; they move together substantially. This suggests that people do not draw clear distinctions between these factors. Rather, differentiation coexists with generalization.

Summing up, the results presented in this chapter suggest that Europeans tend to organize their evaluations around the governance level to which institutions belong (domestic versus supranational), while still retaining an underlying tendency to trust or distrust institutions in general. Differences across regions and countries are defined by how sharply the boundaries between factors are drawn and whether the symbolic institutions remain attached to the domestic political factor or migrate into a separate dimension.

## 7 What Have We Learned About Trust in Europe?

### 7.1 Long-term evolution

The long-term analyses covering 1980–2025 show that institutional trust in Europe does not follow a pattern of uniform secular decline as some feared. Trust levels display cyclical dynamics, characterized by medium-term downturns during crises and subsequent recoveries once crises are solved. This pattern is best visible in the case of trust in supranational institutions, where downturns coincide with the post-Maastricht period and with the global financial and Eurozone crises, followed by a gradual restoration of trust after 2015. Across countries, monotonic long-term erosions of trust are rare. Even where declines occur, they are usually followed by stabilization or recovery. The evidence offered in this report contradicts simplistic narratives of an irreversible loss of trust and instead suggests that European institutional trust is characterized by long term resilience.

### 7.2 Regional trajectories

Disaggregating European averages into four regional clusters reveals distinct regional trajectories of trust. Northern Europe combines comparatively high and stable trust levels with limited crisis-induced volatility. Western Europe mirrors the European average, experiencing significant crisis-related declines followed by restoration to pre-crisis levels. Southern Europe shows the highest sensitivity to systemic shocks, with steep trust collapses during the Eurozone crisis and substantial but incomplete recoveries afterward. Finally, Central and Eastern Europe displays more moderate fluctuations, reflecting post-accession optimism followed by differentiated national rebuilding trajectories. While national deviations exist, regional trajectories capture meaningful differences in how institutional trust responds to common European shocks under diverse historical and institutional contexts.

### 7.3 Trust regimes

Trajectory-based clustering adds a dynamic element to the previous patterns, by identifying empirically grounded “trust regimes” that group countries according to similarities in long-term trust dynamics rather than static institutional typologies. These regimes confirm that countries exposed to comparable external shocks can display divergent trust responses, shaped by domestic governance capacity, crisis exposure, and political developments. The clustering results thus complement regional classifications by introducing a temporal dimension, demonstrating that trust dynamics are structured not only by geography or regime type but also by shared historical trajectories of legitimacy shocks and recoveries.

### 7.4 Dimensional structure

The 2025 cross-sectional analysis reveals a stable latent architecture of institutional trust across Europe. At the European level, trust organizes primarily along two correlated dimensions: a domestic political dimension, anchored in representative and implementing institutions, and a supranational dimension, anchored in European Union and international institutions. This two-factor structure reproduces itself in Northern and Central-Eastern Europe, while Western Europe collapses both domains into a single generalized institutional trust factor and Southern Europe differentiates domestic political, supranational, and symbolic-institutional domains more sharply. Across

all regions, factors remain strongly correlated, indicating that differentiation between institutional domains coexists with an underlying general propensity to trust or distrust institutions. The results thus confirm that governance level is a fundamental organizing principle of contemporary European trust while also revealing regional variation in how symbolic and domestic authorities are integrated into broader trust structures.

## 7.5 Policy implications

The analyses presented in this report have several implications for European policy debates on democratic governance and institutional legitimacy. First, the long-term trajectories of institutional trust indicate that European democracies are not experiencing irreversible legitimacy erosion, but rather cyclical fluctuations shaped by systemic shocks and recovery phases. This suggests that policy responses to cases of decline in trust should focus less on alarmist narratives of democratic breakdown and more on strengthening institutional performance and crisis management capacity. Since trust downturns are closely associated with periods of economic and political stress, policies that enhance institutional responsiveness, transparency, and fairness during crises are likely to play an important role in preventing a temporary decline in trust from turning into a prolonged trust deficit.

Second, the regional and trajectory-based analyses demonstrate that trust responds differently across institutional and historical contexts. Northern and Western European countries display relatively stable trust regimes, while Southern and some of the Central and Eastern European countries show higher sensitivity to crises. This heterogeneity implies that one-size-fits-all strategies for strengthening trust at the European level are unlikely to be effective. Instead, interventions should be tailored to regional and national contexts, considering differences in administrative capacity, exposure to economic shocks, and historical experiences of institutional credibility.

Third, the dimensional structure of contemporary trust highlights the centrality of the level of governance in shaping institutional evaluations. Across Europe, domestic political institutions and supranational institutions form distinct but strongly correlated trust domains. This has direct implications for European Union governance: legitimacy at the EU level cannot be addressed independently of national institutional credibility, and vice versa. Policies aiming to strengthen trust in European institutions must therefore consider responsibility attribution across governance layers, communication clarity regarding institutional roles, and coordination between national and EU-level decision-making. The stability of the supranational trust factor indicates that EU institutional trust is a coherent evaluative object in citizens' perceptions, reinforcing the importance of transparent and accountable European-level governance.

Finally, the report's findings suggest that symbolic institutions such as the church and the armed forces play only a secondary role in defining contemporary political trust in most regions, except in Southern Europe, where symbolic and domestic political domains are more differentiated. This indicates that modern European legitimacy is primarily grounded in evaluations of representative and implementing institutions rather than in identity-based authorities. Policy strategies aimed at reinforcing democratic trust should prioritize improving the quality, integrity, and fairness of political and administrative institutions rather than relying on symbolic appeals or identity-based legitimacy. Effective policy action to sustain democratic legitimacy must focus on institutional performance, procedural fairness, transparent multi-level governance, and context-sensitive reform strategies rather than assuming uniform or irreversible trends in public confidence.

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