

Social Cohesion and Food Security

Using the Moldova 2022 Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index to inform how the United Nations World Food Programme's activities can sustain social cohesion.

December 2023



Introduction

This research aims to use data from the Moldova SCORE 2022 survey to strengthen the United Nations World Food Programme's (WFP) **evidence basis in Moldova**, informing how WFP's activities can **sustain social cohesion** between refugees and the host community, and whether WFP's food security interventions can potentially **contribute to social stability** in general. This research is particularly prescient given the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to WFP in 2020 "for its efforts to combat hunger, for its **contribution to bettering conditions for peace** in conflict-affected areas and for acting as a driving force in efforts to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict"ⁱ. The research subsequently set out to **identify linkages between food security and social cohesion in Moldova** by answering two overarching research questions:

1. How does food security influence horizontal social cohesion, particularly regarding attitudes towards refugees from Ukraine?
2. How is access to resources linked to social stability and vertical cohesion?

About the Moldova SCORE 2022

The 2022 iteration of the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index¹ in Moldova² was implemented in 2022 – 2023 by the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD)³ in partnership with USAID/OTI. In 2022, the SCORE in Moldova was accompanied by a parallel study in the Transnistrian region, implemented by the United Nations in Moldova. The SCORE in Moldova was first implemented in 2017 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in partnership with SeeD.

About WFP in Moldova

WFP has been present in Moldova since March 2022. According to WFP Moldova's Transitional Interim Country Strategic Plan (T-ICSP 2022-2024)⁴, WFP is providing life-saving assistance to crisis-affected populations to address their immediate food and essential needs. WFP also supports the Government of Moldova to enhance the shock-responsiveness of the national social protection system, address structural issues, and meet the essential needs of refugee, host community and vulnerable Moldovan households, ultimately ensuring social cohesion between the local population and refugees. To ensure responsible exit from Moldova, WFP will continue its presence for another 2 years from March 2024 under Interim Country Strategic Plan (2024-2026).

Authors

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¹ About the [SCORE methodology](#)

² [SCORE in Moldova data](#)

³ [About SeeD](#)

⁴ WFP, September 2022. [Republic of Moldova transitional interim country strategic plan \(2022-2023\)](#). [Budget revision](#).

Methodology

The Moldova 2022 SCORE was a quantitative, face-to-face survey, based on nationally representative data for the general population, collected using random sampling.

Data for SCORE Moldova 2022 was collected by Magenta Consulting between 11 August and 29 November 2022, with a total representative national sample of 1,991 adult respondents in the Republic of Moldova⁵.

Additional representative booster samples were collected in Balti municipality (N=110), UTA Găgăuzia (N=116) and respondents aged 18 to 35 (N=119), bringing the total sample to 2,336. Data was weighted to ensure representativeness, where necessary.

Data for the Transnistrian region was collected by Sigma Expert, and quality control was conducted by Magenta Consulting between 3rd December and 27th December 2022, with a total representative sample of 825 adult respondents⁶.

The SCORE contained two questions making up the Food Security indicator:

1. **Are you able to meet your own and your dependents' nutritional needs?** *Response scale: "Not at all", "Not really", "Yes, to some extent", "Yes, very much".*
2. **How would you estimate the amount of your income?** *Relevant response option: "We lack money even for food".*

⁵ ±2.2% error margin at a 95% confidence interval. Multistage randomisation was applied, taking into account groups of districts, households and respondents.

⁶ ±3.4% error margin. Multistage randomisation was applied, taking into account groups of districts, households and respondents.

How does food security influence horizontal social cohesion, particularly regarding attitudes towards refugees from Ukraine?

These findings agree with estimates from UNDP in Moldova, which postulate that the share of the population living in poverty would lie between 21% and 32% by the end of 2022ⁱⁱ, alongside the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which reports that moderate or severe food insecurity was prevalent in 23.5% of the population in 2021, compared to 27.2% in 2019 and 19.3% in 2015ⁱⁱⁱ.

Target groups who are particularly at risk of low food security include women (42% cannot meet household nutritional needs, 24% say they lack money even for food; compared to 32% and 13% of men, respectively; Figure 1), particularly **women who are over the age of 65, women survivors of domestic abuse, and women living in the North region** (Table 1).

This agrees with findings from the National Bureau of Statistics, according to which in 2019 54% of the poor were women^{iv}. At risk groups also include **rural citizens, persons over the age of 65 and persons with disabilities, citizens with only primary level education and those who are unemployed, as well as single-person households and households with five or more children** (Table 1). These target groups overlap with **those identified as vulnerable by WFP and UNDP in Moldova**, where women-headed households, families with three or more children, persons with disabilities, and the elderly are expected to be rendered even more at risk should inflation continue to rise^v. Furthermore, the National Bureau of Statistics also report that rural citizens, households with 3 or more children, and individuals over the age of 60 were most at risk of poverty in 2022^{vi}.

At national level, almost four in ten (38%) respondents say that their household is unable to meet nutritional needs and 19% report that they lack money even for food (Figure 1).

According to the SCORE, **food insecurity was higher in the North**, where 53% of respondents said they cannot meet household nutritional needs and 30% said they cannot afford food. Food insecurity is also **relatively higher in Găgăuzia**, where 61% said they cannot meet household nutritional needs (**Figure 1**). It is

noteworthy that in Găgăuzia, the proportion who report lacking money even for food is not as high as other parts of the country, indicating that the nutritional value of food products that are available merits further investigation.

Food insecurity is also prevalent in certain raions, in which over one quarter of respondents reported both being unable to meet household nutritional needs and lacking money even for food (**Figure 2**). These are Briceni, Dondușeni, Drochia, Fălești, Glodeni, Soroca and Șoldănești in the North region, and

Cimișlia in the South. Rîbnița in the Transnistrian region also has a slightly higher proportion of respondents (35%) who report that they cannot meet their household nutritional needs, compared to other raions in the Transnistrian region (between 20% and 30%), although it does not differ on the proportion who are able to afford food.

Reasons for higher reported food security in the Transnistrian region (**Figure 1**) may arise due to the high inflation rates in the rest of Moldova^{vii} at the time of surveying, while consumer goods and food prices were relatively low in the Transnistrian region. Data from the SCORE in Moldova validates these findings, where all forms of perceived disruption due to the war in Ukraine were lower in the Transnistrian region than other parts of the country^{viii}.

Table 1: Proportion of respondents who say they are “not at all” or “not really” able to meet household nutritional needs (left) and who say that their household lacks money even for food (right). Nationally representative full sample N = 1,991.

	Not able to meet household nutritional needs	Lack money even for food
<i>Respondents Under 35</i>	30%	7%
<i>Respondents Aged 36 to 44</i>	31%	9%
<i>Respondents Aged 45 to 64</i>	38%	21%
<i>Respondents Over 65</i>	47%	32%
<i>Men Under 35</i>	25%	5%
<i>Women Under 35</i>	35%	9%
<i>Men 36 to 44</i>	22%	6%
<i>Women 36 to 44</i>	41%	12%
<i>Men 45 to 64</i>	34%	18%
<i>Women 45 to 64</i>	42%	25%
<i>Men Over 65</i>	44%	20%
<i>Women Over 65</i>	49%	41%
<i>Rural</i>	39%	22%
<i>Urban</i>	35%	15%
<i>Persons without Disabilities</i>	36%	18%
<i>Persons with Disabilities</i>	56%	37%
<i>Primary Education</i>	55%	45%
<i>Secondary Education</i>	40%	19%
<i>Tertiary Education</i>	24%	7%
<i>Unemployed</i>	46%	26%
<i>Employed</i>	26%	9%
<i>Single Person Household</i>	48%	35%
<i>Household with Two or More People</i>	35%	15%
<i>Household with Less Than Five children</i>	38%	19%
<i>Household with Five or More Children</i>	50%	29%
<i>Women without Experience of Domestic Abuse</i>	37%	18%
<i>Women Survivors of Domestic Abuse</i>	47%	28%

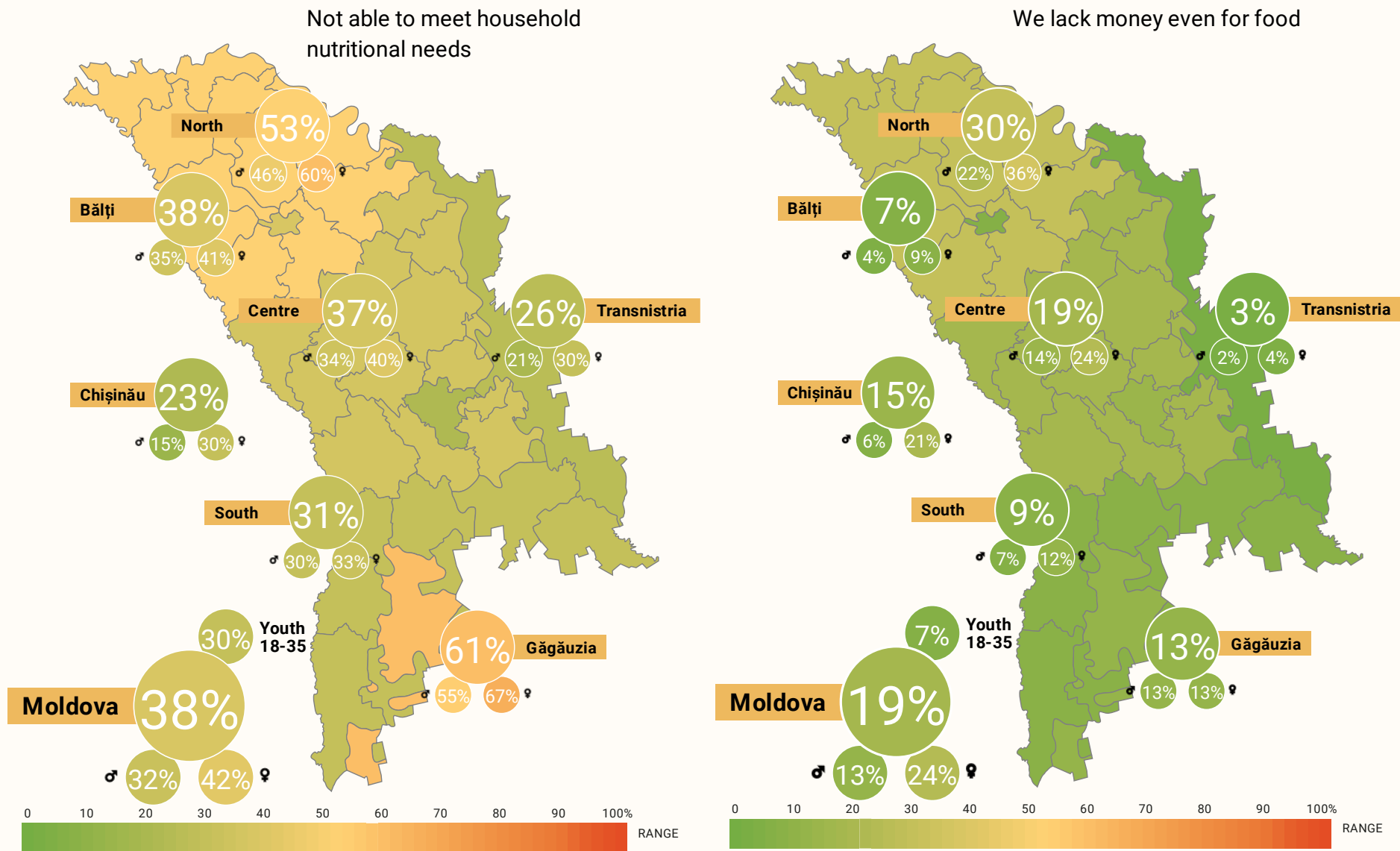


Figure 1: Proportion of respondents who say they are “not at all” or “not really” able to meet household nutritional needs (left) and who say that their household lacks money even for food (right).

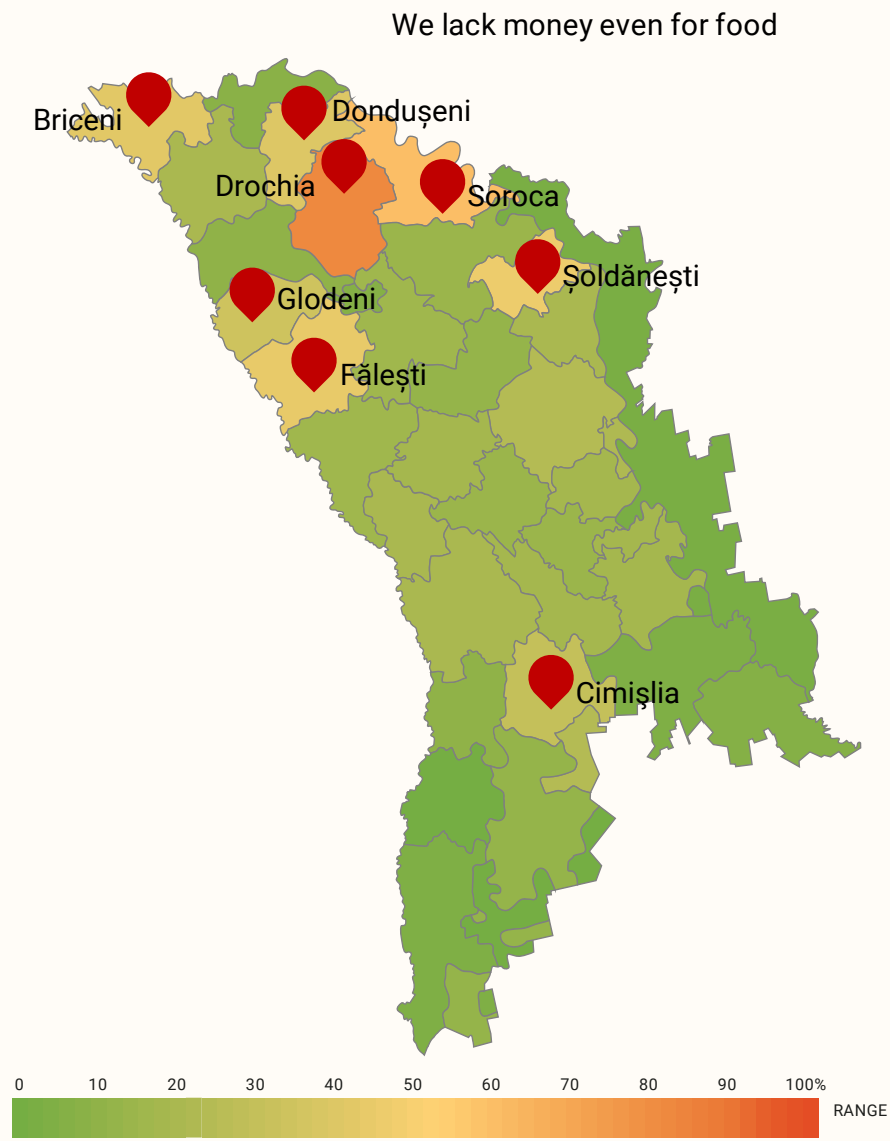
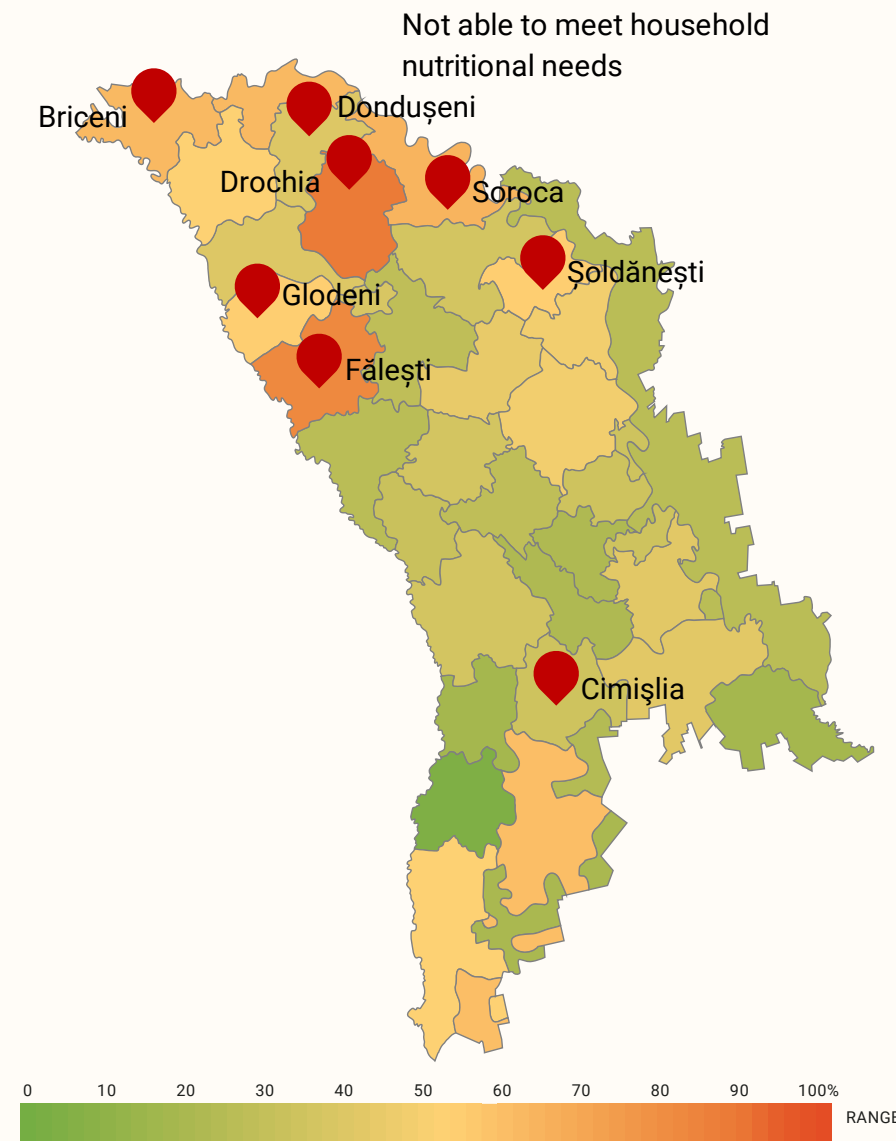


Figure 2: Raions in which more than 25% of respondents are both unable to meet household nutritional needs and whose household lacks money even for food. Note: Smallest sample 13 cases; largest 495. Representative only to group of rayon level

Horizontal social cohesion between the host community and refugees from Ukraine was assessed using the indicator Positive Attitudes towards Ukrainian Refugees (Figure 3). A linear regression was then used to assess the impact of food security on positive attitudes.

Positive Attitudes towards Ukrainian Refugees combines the SCORE indicators which measure Trust, Positive Feelings and Social Tolerance towards refugees from Ukraine, alongside support for policies which help them. **Moldovan citizens attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees are more positive than negative**, although scores are **slightly lower in the North and in Bălți** (Figure 3). There are no other demographic differences (including urban rural differences) in attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees, although respondents with higher levels of education generally report higher levels of Positive Attitudes.

Citizens generally trust Ukrainian refugees, with 53% reporting that they trust them somewhat, and 11% trusting them fully (Figure 4). Most citizens have no specific feelings towards refugees (67%), with 12% reporting warm and positive feelings towards them (Figure 5).

Although 42% of citizens say that they would accept to interact with Ukrainian refugees personally, 43% would accept them in the community but personally avoid communication, and a minority of 14% would prefer if they left their community (Figure 6). An overwhelming majority (83%) of respondents believe that Moldova should continue to support refugees from Ukraine, with **42% strongly and 41% somewhat agreeing that Moldova should provide refugees with the housing and support they need** (Figure 7).

These findings indicate that citizens demonstrate a preference for fulfilling social obligations and support at a policy level, rather than engaging at a personal level with refugees from Ukraine. This may suggest that challenges may arise regarding the integration of refugees into local communities due to moderate levels of trust and warmth.

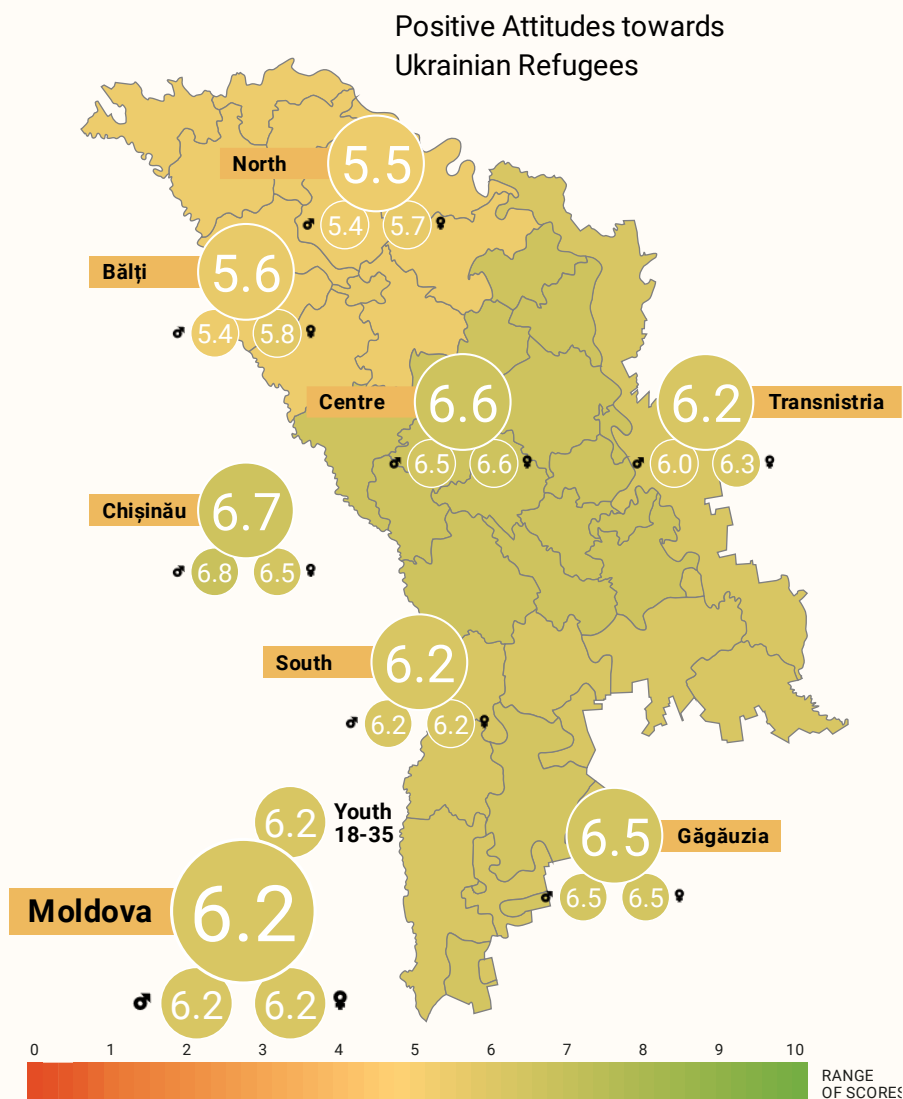


Figure 3: Mean scores of Positive Attitudes towards Ukrainian Refugees on a scale from 0 to 10. A score of 0 indicates complete absence of a phenomenon, and a score of 10 indicates its full presence.

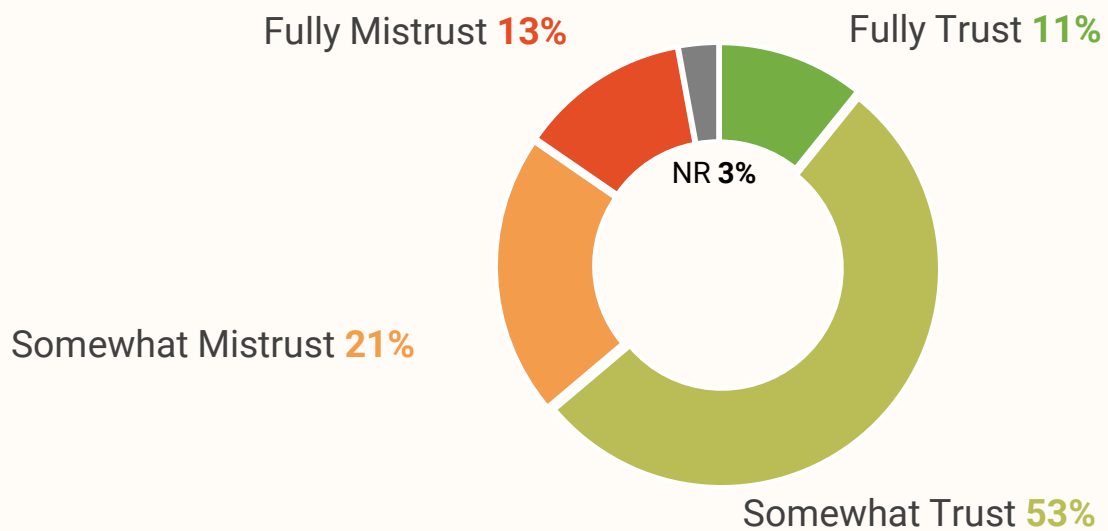


Figure 4: Proportion of responses for Trust towards Refugees from Ukraine.

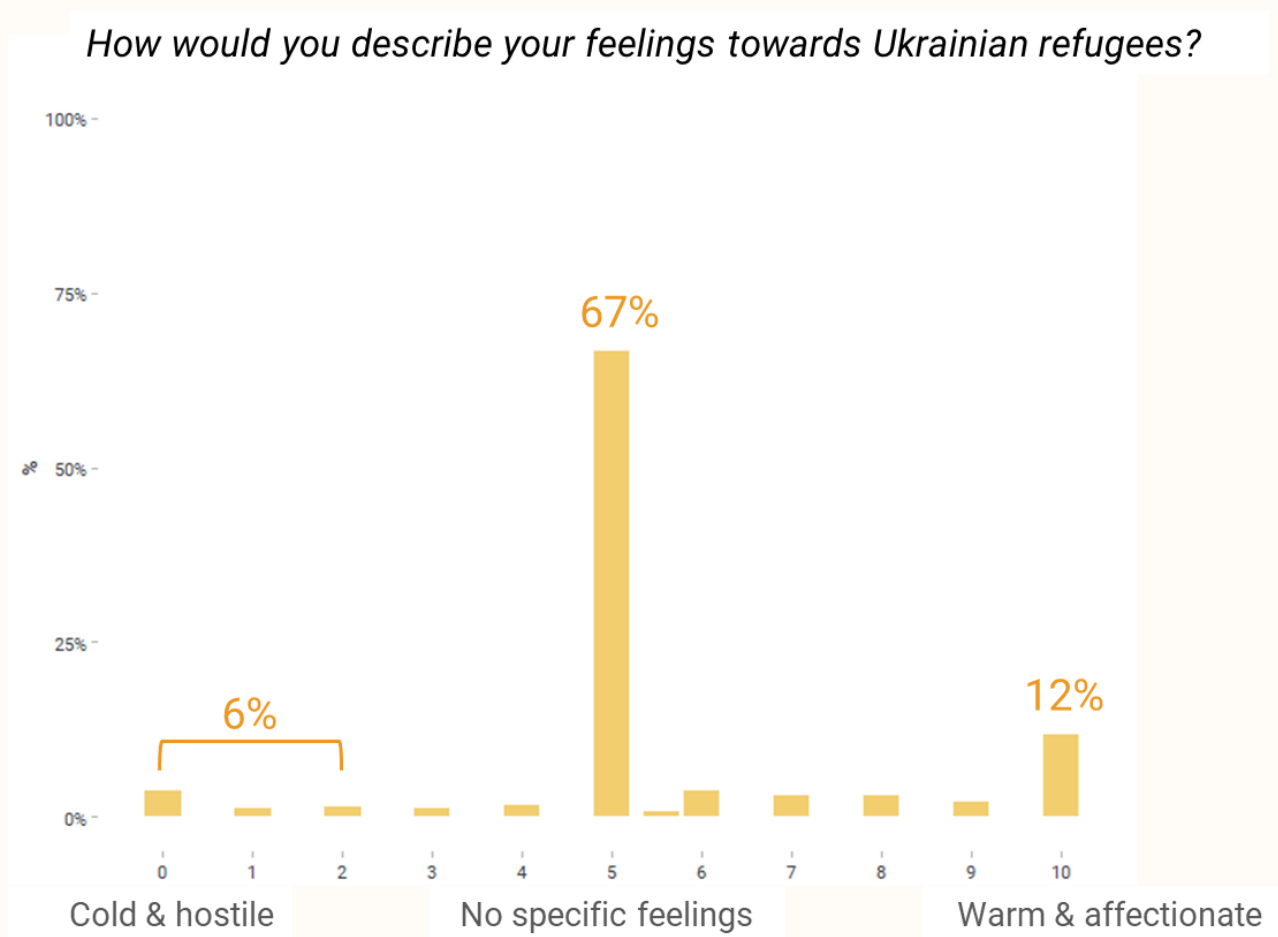


Figure 5: Proportion of responses for Positive Feelings towards Refugees from Ukraine

How do you feel about Ukrainian refugees?

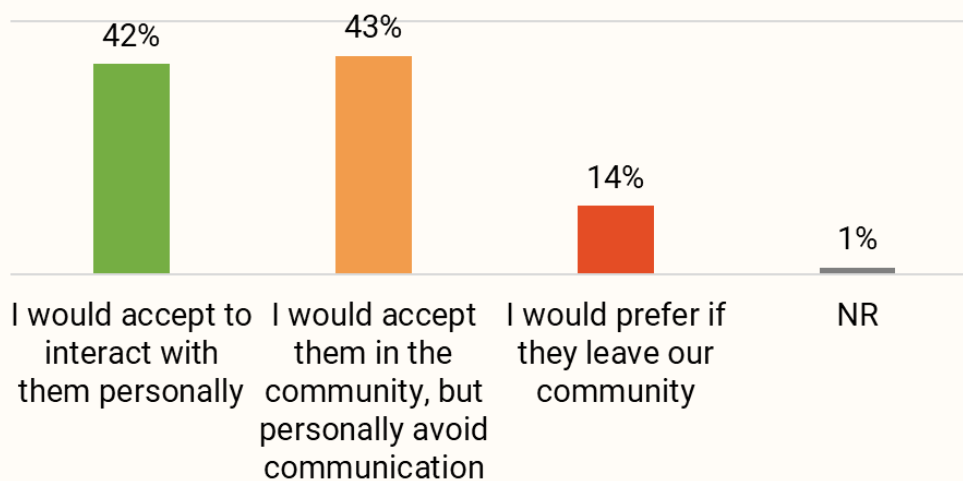


Figure 6: Proportion of responses for Social Tolerance towards Refugees from Ukraine

To what extent do you agree?

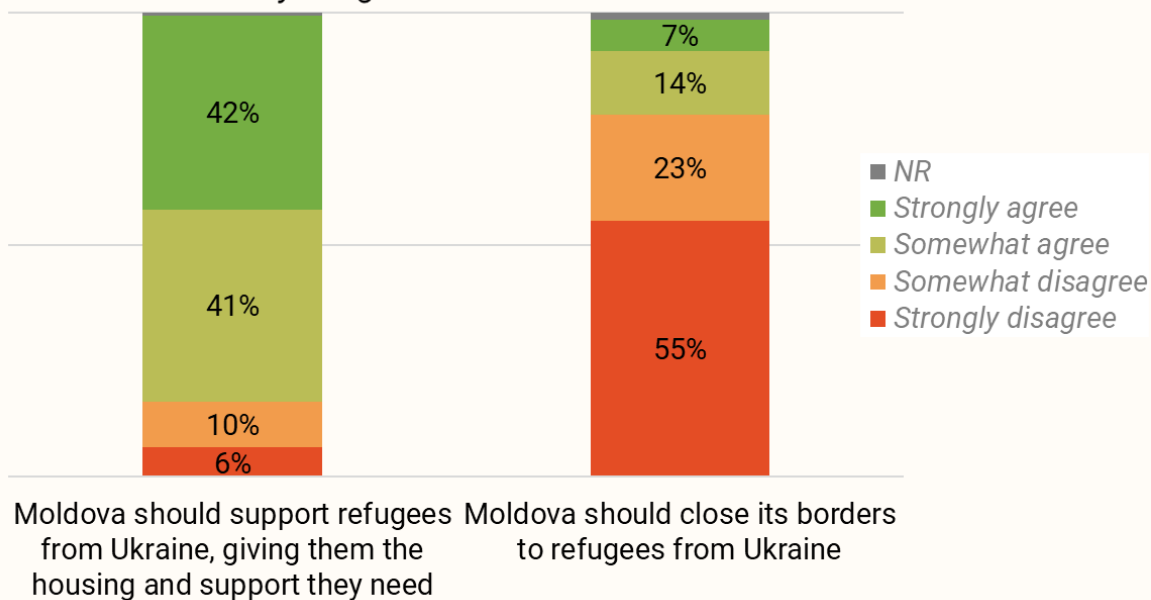


Figure 7: Proportion of responses for Support for Policies Helping Ukrainian Refugees.

The impact of food security on social cohesion with refugees from Ukraine was investigated using a predictive statistical analysis, which reveals the drivers of Positive Attitudes towards Ukrainian Refugees (**Figure 8**).

Although the perceived disruption due to influx of refugees decreases positive attitudes towards them, it was found that **the actual estimated proportion of refugees in the raion does not impact attitudes towards them⁷ neither does the capacity of refugee accommodation centres in the raion⁸**. In addition, the perceived disruption due to influx of refugees was inversely linked to the actual proportion of refugees as estimated by UNHCR⁹. These findings indicate a need for **awareness-raising and educational interventions, combatting negative stereotypes and misinformation about refugees**, which could cause tensions towards them.

Taken together, these findings imply that increasing food security and environmental security are expected to have a positive impact on attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees. However, the main drivers of these attitudes stem from support or opposition to certain polarising, false narratives, alongside attitudes about the necessity of equal rights for all. Subsequently, while the focus on food and economic assistance should continue, there is also a need for efforts which combat misinformation and which promote aspect of cohesive and inclusive citizenship.

Food Security drives Positive Attitudes towards Ukrainian Refugees, demonstrating that it has a positive impact on social cohesion (Figure 8). Nevertheless, Food Security was not the strongest predictor. Environmental Security – the extent to which people can **access water, uninterrupted electricity, and affordable heating** – **also increases Positive Attitudes** towards Ukrainian Refugees. **Political Security** is also a driver, as are civic attitudes and behaviours – namely, **Community Coherence and Cooperation, Willingness to Participate in Civic Initiatives, and Belief in Human Rights**. Expectations of Economic Instability also increase positive attitudes, indicating that those who are worried about economic instability are more ready to help Ukrainian refugees in Moldova. In contrast, perceiving a **disruption due to the influx of refugees reduces positive attitudes towards them**, as **does supporting false Russian narratives about the war in Ukraine¹**. Service provision is not associated with attitudes towards refugees from Ukraine.

⁷ Based on the results of a multilevel fixed effects (with random intercepts) model, the [UNHCR projected distribution of Ukrainian refugees per raion in Moldova from July 2022](#) was a non-significant raion-level predictor. N = 1,991 for individual and N = 35 for raion.

⁸ Based on the results of a multilevel fixed effects model, [the capacity level of all refugee accommodation centres per raion in August 2022](#) was a non-significant raion-level predictor. N = 1,991 for individual and N = 35 for raion.

⁹ Based on raion-level correlation analysis, $p < 0.05$, $N = 35$, $r = -0.485$.

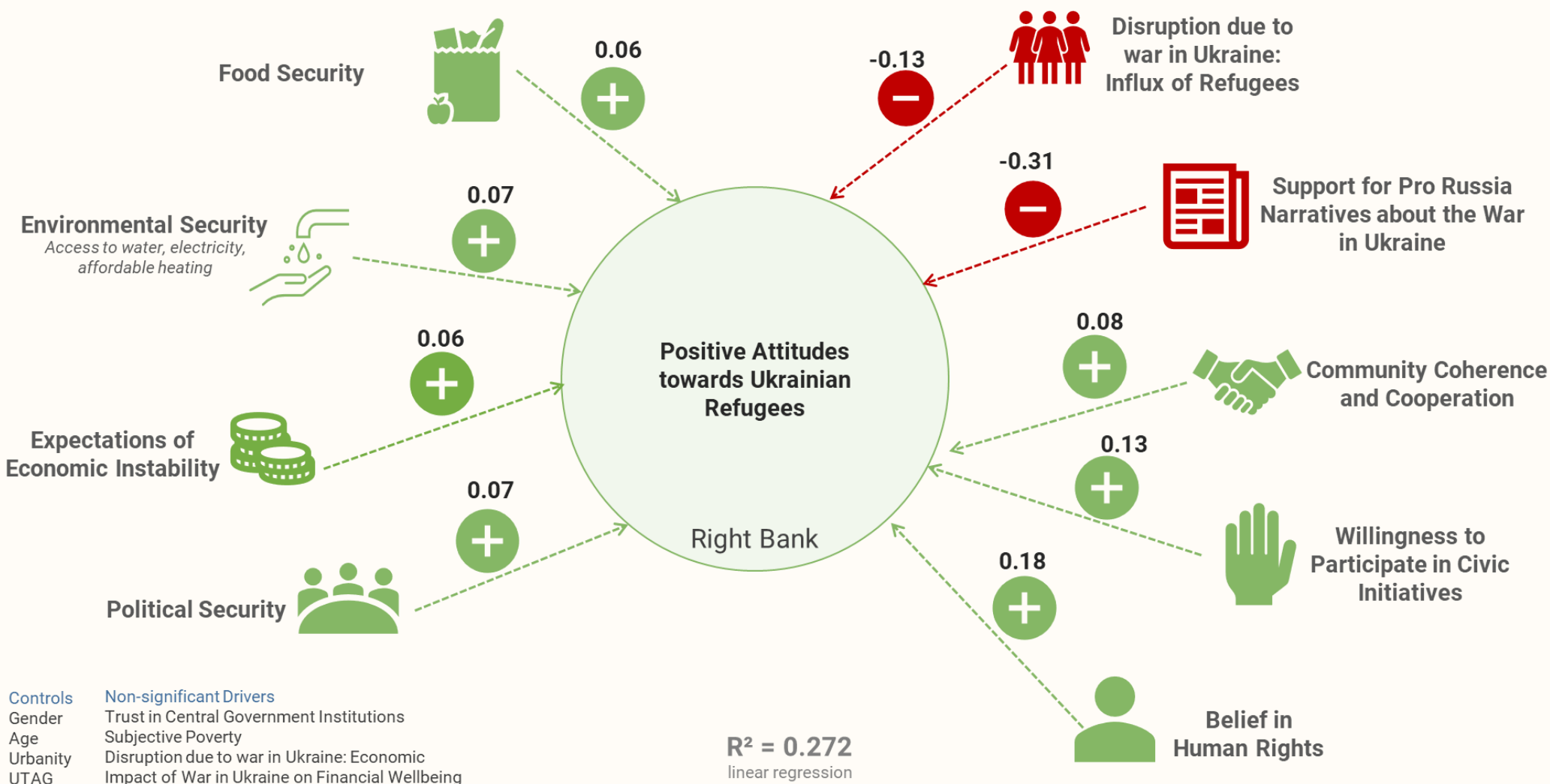


Figure 8: Results of linear regression to identify the drivers of Positive Attitudes towards Ukrainian Refugees. $N = 1,991$, $p < 0.05$, standardised beta weights shown. Standardised beta weights indicate that for every increase of a driver (e.g., Food Security) by a unit of 1, we would predict an increase in the outcome (Positive Attitudes towards Ukrainian Refugees) by a unit of 0.06. Standardised beta weights below 0.1 are considered relatively small effects.

How is access to resources linked to social stability and vertical cohesion?

Vertical cohesion is assessed using Trust in Central Government Institutions and Political Violence tendencies. It is noteworthy that central institutions are not overwhelmingly trusted, with the majority (over 50%) of citizens reporting mistrust in these institutions to some extent (**Figure 9**). **Trust in Central Government Institutions is slightly lower in the North and in Găgăuzia (Figure 11)** and for **respondents with lower household income**. **Political Violence tendencies are low across the country**, with slightly higher scores in Chişinău, North and South regions, and in the Transnistrian Region.

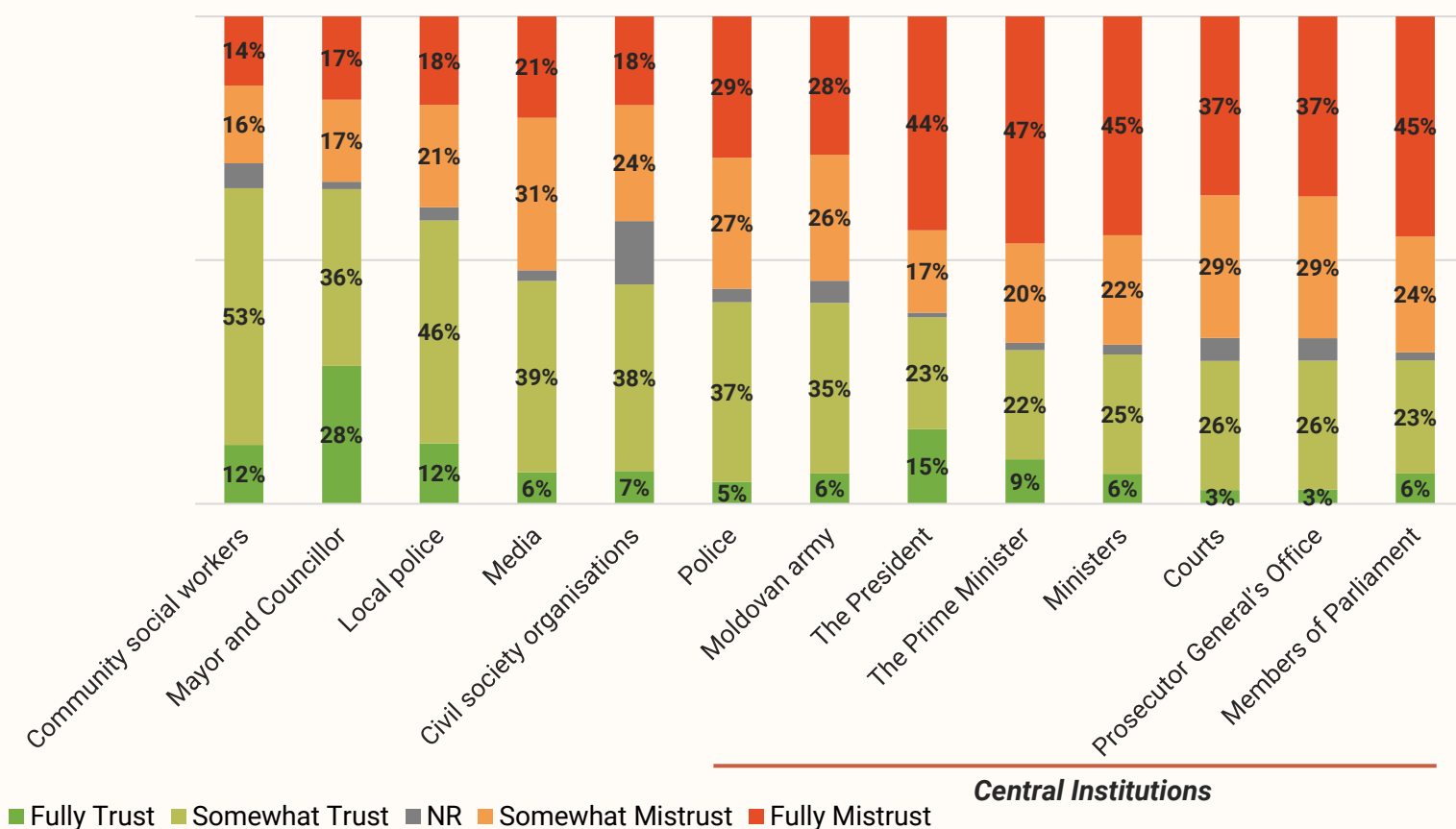


Figure 9: Proportion of respondents who trust different institutions in Moldova.

Access to resources is weakly linked to higher levels of trust in central institutions, indicating that increased access to resources could sustain vertical cohesion between citizens and the institutions that represent them. More specifically, **Economic Security, lower levels of Subjective Poverty and Expectations of Economic Instability, and better service provision** are all associated with higher levels of **Trust in Central Government Institutions**. In contrast, **Political Violence tendencies** are not associated with resource-related indicators, nor are they linked to higher in people who mistrust institutions. Other resource-related indicators, namely, perceived Economic Opportunities, Environmental Security, and the impact of the war in Ukraine on financial wellbeing were not correlated with Trust in Institutions.

	Openness towards Outgroups	Political Violence	Trust in All Institutions	Trust in Central Government Institutions
Economic Security			0.28	0.28
Provision of Services			0.23	
Food Security			-0.23	-0.20
Economic Opportunities				
Environmental Security				
Expectations of Economic Instability				-0.22
Subjective Poverty			-0.20	-0.19
Impact of War in Ukraine on Financial Wellbeing				
Disruption due to War in Ukraine...				
Disruption of Services				
Loss of Employment or Reduced Income				
Increase in Prices				
Increase in Cost of Fuel				
Reduced Availability of Basic Products				
Disruption of Imports and Exports				
Influx of Refugees				

Figure 10: Pearson correlation coefficients. $p < 0.05$, $N = 1,991$ representative sample on the right bank, controlled for urbanity, gender and age. Only correlations above $r = \pm 0.2$ are shown.

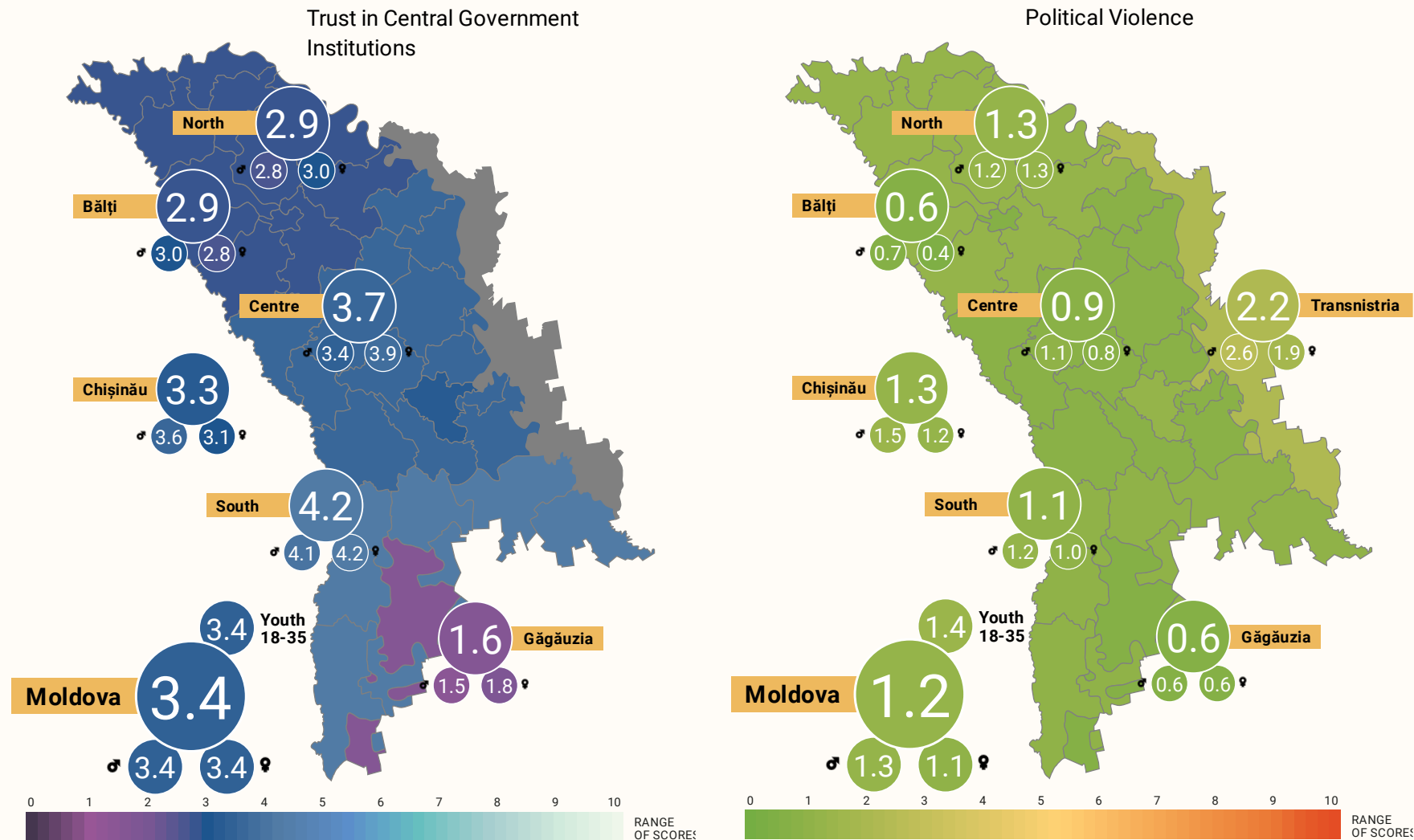


Figure 11: Mean scores on a scale from 0 to 10 on indicators of vertical cohesion. A score of 0 indicates complete absence of a phenomenon, and a score of 10 indicates its full presence. Political Violence is measured by the extent to which respondents would use any means, including violence, to improve conditions in their community; and whether respondents believe that violence is sometimes necessary to protect the integrity of the country.

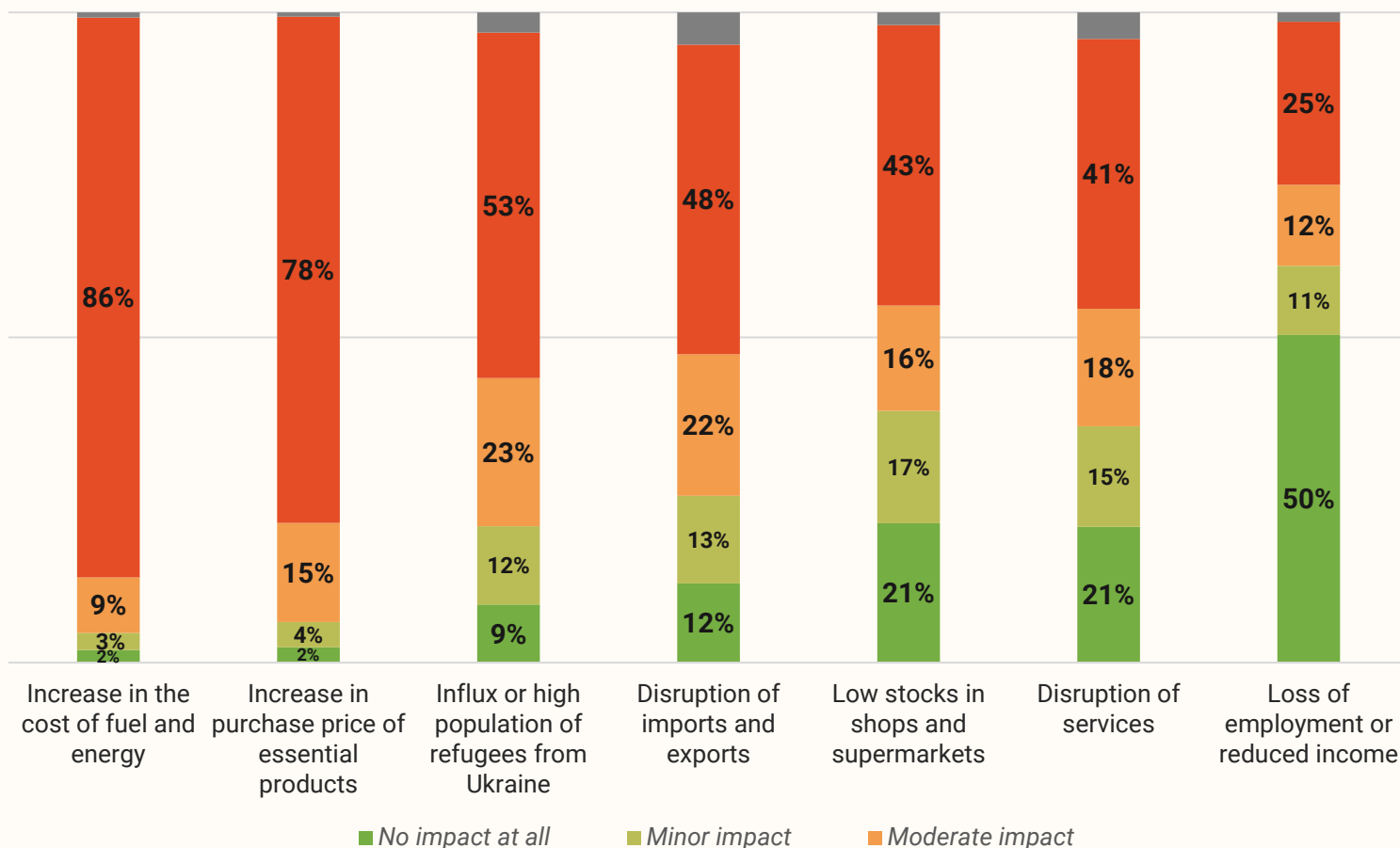


Figure 12: Proportion of responses to questions about disruption due to the war in Ukraine.

Citizens on the right bank reported a serious impact on the availability of resources following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. A staggering 86% of citizens said that there has been a serious impact on increased costs of fuel and energy, and 78% on the increased purchase price of essential products. Over half (53%) of respondents said that a high population of refugees has had a serious impact on them, and 48% that there has been a disruption of imports and exports. Although they did not inflict the most impact, 43% say that there has been a serious impact on stocks in shops, 41% that services have been disrupted, and one quarter (25%) that there has been a serious impact whereby they have lost their employment or faced reduced income (Figure 12). These findings agree with reports elsewhere, that Moldova has been left vulnerable to disruptions in the supply of food, energy and commodity imports, making it one of the countries most affected by the war in Ukraine^{ix}.

In the Transnistrian region, respondents reported lower levels of disruption due to the war in Ukraine. Just over one in three (37%) said there has been a serious impact on increased costs of fuel and energy, and 43% on the increased purchase price of essential products. Further, 18% report a serious impact due to the influx of refugees, 28% due to the disruption of imports and exports, 18% due to low stocks, 15% due to disruption of services, and 10% due to loss of employment or reduced income.

Social stability is measured using the indicator Openness towards Outgroups, which takes the minimum level of Trust and Positive Feelings towards any social or political group different to one's own. These groups include Ukrainian refugees, as well as several social and political groups reported as critical for social cohesion in Moldova, by diverse stakeholders during the participatory design of the Moldova 2022. Openness towards Outgroups is low, particularly in Găgăuzia and in the Transnistrian region.

Openness towards Outgroups was not associated with indicators which measure access to resources. This indicates that economic stress and resource competition do not lead to lower levels of Openness, or higher levels of tension, towards outgroups. **Similarly, previous findings by SeeD demonstrate that just Provision of Services played a role and only in Găgăuzia, where better services increased the level of Openness felt towards Romanian-speakers^x.**

Nevertheless, **Openness towards Ukrainian Refugees in Moldova is among the lowest-scoring indicators**, with a mean score of 5.5 out of 10, with only Romanian Unionists scoring lower (Figure 13, also see questions on Trust and Positive Feelings in Figure 5 and Figure 4).

Openness towards...	Mean score, 0 to 10
Romanian-Speaking Moldovans	7.0
Proponents of Moldovan Statehood	6.7
Russian Speaking Moldovans	6.6
Moldovan Diaspora	6.2
People Living in the Transnistrian Region	5.8
People who Support Closer Ties with the European Union	5.8
People from UTA Gagauzia	5.7
Bulgarians from Taraclia	5.7
People who Support Closer Ties with Russia	5.6
Ukrainian Refugees in Moldova	5.5
Romanian Unionists	5.2

Figure 13: Mean scores of Openness (Trust combined with Positive Feelings) towards specific groups.

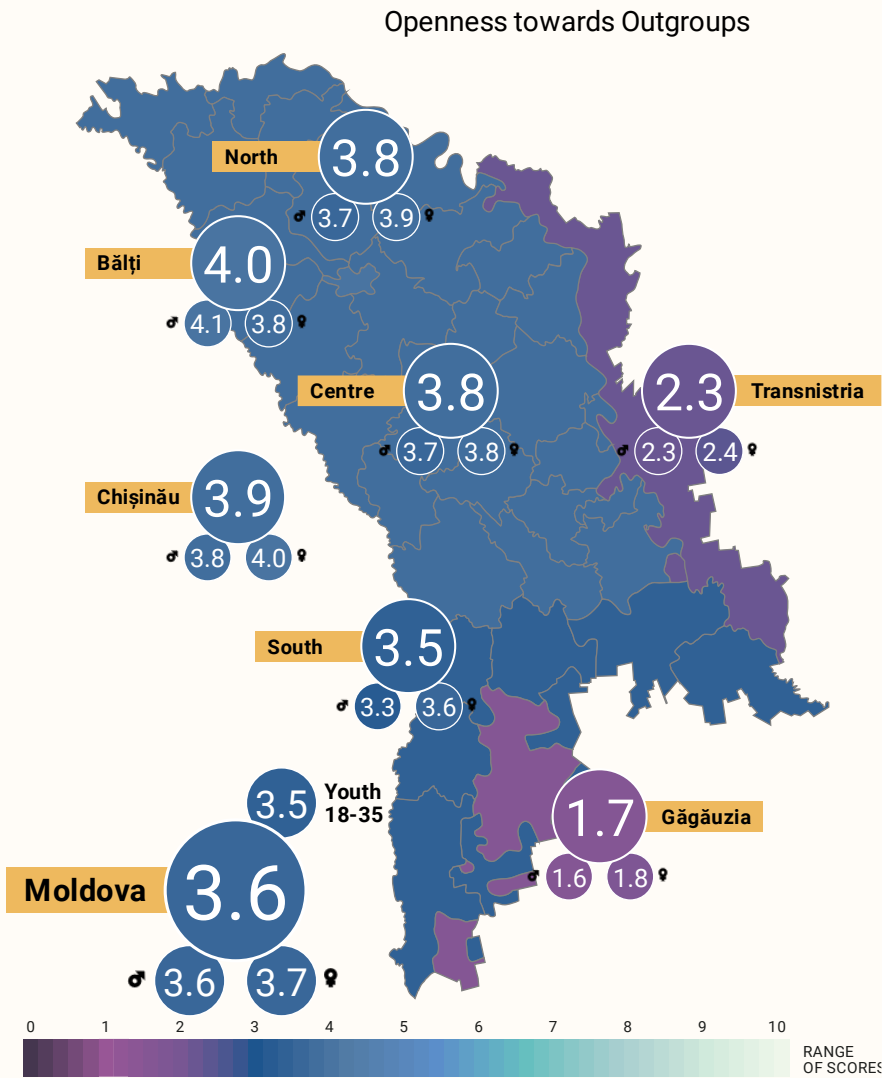


Figure 14: Openness towards Outgroups, mean scores.

Key Findings & Recommendations

How does food security influence horizontal social cohesion, particularly regarding attitudes towards refugees from Ukraine?

At national level, **38% of people report that their household cannot meet nutritional needs and 19% that they lack money even for food.** Food security is lower in the North, rural areas, for women, older people, and persons with disabilities. Food security is also lower for unemployed people, those with only primary education, single person households, and households with more than five children.

Attitudes towards refugees are more positive than negative, and people generally **trust refugees from Ukraine.** An overwhelming majority (83%) believe that **Moldova should continue to help refugees with housing and other forms of support.** While 42% would accept to interact with refugees personally, 43% would accept them in their community but personally avoid communication and a small minority of 14% would prefer that refugees left their community.

Food security increases positive attitudes towards refugees, demonstrating that it has a positive impact on social cohesion, although this impact is weaker than the effect of other variables. Further, the availability of clean drinking water, uninterrupted electricity and affordable heating are linked to positive attitudes towards refugees. **Civic behaviours and attitudes about the war in Ukraine also play a key on role,** with the latter being the dominant driver predicting attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees.

Opportunities for WFP programmes

Relevant for WFP T-ICSP Strategic Outcomes 1, 2 and 3

There is a demonstrable need for WFP's continued efforts to provide **targeted assistance to priority demographic groups and communities across both local and refugee populations,** including through cash and voucher transfers, and through technical assistance to enhance the shock-responsive social protection and food security systems of the Government, such as Ajutor Social and APRA.

In seeking to enhance social cohesion between host communities and refugees, there is evidence that **supports the integration of food security programmes into initiatives that also influence other drivers of positive attitudes towards refugees.** Building on WFP's existing activities, these may include combining community-based initiatives with food assistance interventions, such as community-led social canteens, community kitchens and working with local caterers.

Future data collection can be directed towards tracking changes in the food security and economic situation of both refugee and Moldovan households. This would uncover differences between the current

situation of long-term war, compared to 2022. Additionally, **smaller-scale quantitative and/or qualitative studies**, could be used **to confirm the effectiveness of WFP's activities in improving both food security and social cohesion**. These could track the outcomes of beneficiaries participating in WFP interventions, rather than the community at large, and could focus on food and economic security as the main targets of the intervention, as well as other knock-on effects such as horizontal and vertical social cohesion.

How is access to resources linked to social stability and vertical cohesion?

Vertical cohesion is moderate, and **central institutions are not overwhelmingly trusted**, with on average over half of respondents reporting some level of mistrust in these institutions. Positively, **Political Violence tendencies are low** across the country and **are not linked to higher levels of mistrust**.

Social stability and horizontal cohesion overall also **have room for improvement**, and Openness towards Ukrainian Refugees is among the lowest-scoring indicators. Respondents perceive a **serious impact of the war in Ukraine on their purchasing power**, although this **did not drive social instability** at the time of surveying.

Access to resources is linked to higher levels of trust in central institutions, indicating that **increased access to resources could sustain vertical cohesion between citizens and the institutions that represent them**. Improvements in services, financial assistance, and households' economic situation can have a positive impact on vertical cohesion.

Opportunities for WFP programmes

Relevant for WFP T-ICSP Strategic Outcomes 2 and 3

There is a need for continued efforts by WFP to **support government programmes** such as Ajutor Social and APRA, and to provide technical assistance to the **local social protection system**. As outlined in the WFP transitional interim country strategic plan (T-ICSP), these should include scaling up the capacity and reactivity of Ajutor Social, enhancing shock-responsiveness, coverage and adequacy of national social protection and food systems.

WFP can further continue to roll-out initiatives that integrate **financial services** and food aid distribution, as well as providing financial assistance for purchasing food and other essential products. While the former can pave the way for longer-term, sustainable financial support, the latter can provide emergency relief to mitigate any potential short-term increases in financial insecurity.

There is also evidence that supports **strengthening a wider range of services**, improving their provision, inclusiveness and sustainability, ultimately enhancing beneficiary-centred targeting and catalysing social cohesion and resilience.

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- ⁱ United Nations. [Nobel Peace Prize. 2020 – World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#).
- ⁱⁱ M Montoya-Aguirre, D Vasilescu, United Nations Development Programme 2022. [Moldova: Potential impacts of increased food and energy prices on poverty and vulnerability](#).
- ⁱⁱⁱ FAO 2021. [Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population \(%\)](#).
- ^{iv} WFP Moldova 2022. [Republic of Moldova transitional interim country strategic plan \(2022-2023\)](#).
- ^v M Montoya-Aguirre, D Vasilescu, United Nations Development Programme 2022. [Moldova: Potential impacts of increased food and energy prices on poverty and vulnerability](#); WFP Moldova 2022. [Republic of Moldova transitional interim country strategic plan \(2022-2023\)](#).
- ^{vi} National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2023. [Aspects of the standard of living of population of the Republic of Moldova \(Results of the Household Budget Survey\), 2023 Edition](#).
- ^{vii} National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2023. [Consumer price indices](#).
- ^{viii} SCORE Online Platform 2023. [Moldova General Population 2022 – Disruption due to War in Ukraine: Overall](#).
- ^{ix} WFP Moldova 2023. [Country Brief August 2023](#).
- ^x M Machlouzarides, I Dagli Hustings, A Guest, the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development 2022. [Strengthening the Bonds: Fostering Social Harmony in Moldova](#).