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Learning to Trust: Trends in Generalized Social Trust in the Three Baltic Countries from 1990 to 2018¹

Mai Beilmann, Laur Lilleoja, and Anu Realo

Abstract

Generalized social trust (social trust) is often seen as the glue that holds a society together and fosters cooperation among individuals. There is a growing amount of empirical evidence that social trust is conducive to many positive societal and individual outcomes, including democracy. In this paper, we examine the change in social trust levels in the three Baltic countries—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—from 1991 to 2018 using data from the World Values Survey, European Values Survey, and the European Social Survey. Our findings show that change trajectories in social trust have not followed the same path in all three Baltic countries. A steady rise in the levels of social trust in Estonia and Lithuania during the last decades is rather unprecedented from an international comparative perspective,

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whereas, in Latvia, where levels of social trust have been historically lower than in the other two Baltic countries, social trust has been surprisingly stable since 2008. Our results offer partial support for the hypothesis that a trustworthy state and good governance play some role in generating social trust.

Key words: generalized social trust, institutional trust, perceived corruption, social inequality, Baltic countries, European Social Survey, World Values Survey

1 Introduction

Generalized social trust (social trust), that is, the willingness to trust others, even total strangers, without the expectation that they will immediately reciprocate that trust or favor, is often seen as the glue that holds a society together and fosters cooperation among individuals. There is a growing amount of empirical evidence that social trust is related to many positive societal and individual outcomes, such as economic growth and good economic performance (LaPorta et al., 1997, Neira et al., 2010; Uslaner, 2002; Whiteley, 2000), reduced crime levels (Akcomak & ter Weel, 2011; Whiteley, 2000), higher levels of political trust (Beilmann & Lilleoja, 2017), better governance and an effective state (LaPorta et al., 1997, Uslaner, 2002; Whiteley 2000; Zmerli & Newton, 2008), more civic participation (LaPorta et al., 1997; Putnam, 2000), better health (von dem Knesebeck et al., 2005), and higher levels of happiness and wellbeing (Inglehart, 1999; Putnam, 2000). As a result, social trust, which is often considered one of the key elements of social capital, is extremely important for the smooth functioning of democratic societies. Even though it is still disputed whether social trust is the cause or the outcome of these desirable social conditions, it appears to be an important factor for the success of a new democracy. This paper aims to analyze the trends in the levels of social trust in the three Baltic countries—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—from the beginning of 1990s until the present day. The Baltic countries serve as an example of how levels of social trust can dramatically change in just a few decades alongside rapid social, economic, and political changes.

2 Sources of Social Trust

Despite extensive research, there is no consensus among scholars about the origins of social trust. Several authors have argued that prevailing values in a society are the outcome of its current political and social situation, as well as of the country's historical, cultural, and religious background (e.g., Inglehart, 1997; Schwartz, 1999). Analogously, it has been claimed that differences in social trust levels across countries may be driven by their cultural and historical differences (Bjørnskov, 2007; Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 1993; Uslaner, 2002). A nation's post-communist heritage, in particular, has been found to be a major hazard for the development and sustainability of social trust. Indeed, trust levels vary considerably between European countries (Beilmann, Kööts-Ausmees & Realo, 2018; Beilmann & Lilleoja, 2015; Neller, 2008; Newton, 2004), with people in the former Eastern Bloc countries being generally less trusting than people in Western, and most notably, Northern parts of Europe (Bjørnskov, 2007).

From a theoretical perspective, there are two contrasting ways of explaining the level (and/or absence) of social trust. Social trust can be seen either as an individual trait or as an attribute of the social environment. Authors like Uslaner (2017) and Yamagishi and Yamagishi (1994) emphasize that a certain level of optimism toward the trustworthiness of others is an essential part of social trust. For them, social trust is more like an individual trait: some people just trust other people more than others because they have a trusting personality or because they were brought up that way. Another possibility is to conceptualize trust not as a characteristic of individuals, but rather as a feature of the social environment. Authors such as Putnam (2000), Whiteley (2000), Delhey and Newton (2005; Newton, 2004), and Ostrom and Ahn (2009) see social trust primarily as a social norm that people can learn from their social environment over their life course. This stance is somewhat different from Uslaner's (2000, 2002) view, according to which our tendency to trust or distrust other people is learned at an early age and does not change much in our adulthood. Uslaner's view is supported by several large-scale empirical studies that have shown that social trust levels are fairly stable over time and can be thus considered as a cultural feature of a society (Bjørnskov,

2006; Volken, 2002). The latter perspective, however, does not help to explain major fluctuations in the levels of social trust in several Eastern European countries in the nearly three decades following the fall of Soviet rule. Therefore, we take a particular interest in theories which claim that social trust is primarily a norm learned from the social environment and that the surrounding social context can have a profound effect on how much people trust others around them.

A country's political and institutional setting, such as trustworthy state institutions (e.g., the police force and the legal system) and good governance, seem to be important factors in producing high levels of social trust among a country's citizens (Neller, 2008; Newton, 2004; Rothstein, 2005; Rothstein & Stolle, 2003; Stolle, 2003). Following the definition of Delhey and Newton (2005), that social trust is the belief that others will not deliberately cheat or harm us as long as they can avoid doing so, social trust can be seen as a social norm that people learn from their environment. When people see that state officials treat people equally and are not involved in corrupt activities, a highly visible example that it is reasonable to expect honesty and trustworthiness even from people whom one does not know very well is offered (Rothstein, 2005). Corrupt state institutions, on the other hand, are often considered one of the main causes of low levels of social trust, because their activities give a very strong signal that one can trust other people only very selectively (Rothstein, 2005; Uslaner, 2002). Newton (2004) even suggested that individual responses to standard trust questions are evaluations of the society in which they live, whereas Beugelsdijk (2006) argued that measures of trust are simply surrogate measures of the quality of a country's institutions, as countries with strong institutions have high levels of trust. Uslaner (2017), on the contrary, expressed very clearly that better government most definitely does not lead to greater social trust and that social trust is not based upon personal experience. According to Uslaner (2017), social trust "leads to greater institutional quality rather than stemming from structural foundations" (p. 61), and that it would be more fruitful to look at the individual characteristics of people when searching for the sources of social trust.

Indeed, there is evidence that, at the individual level, social trust is influenced by a wide range of socioeconomic and contextual factors, such as education (Hooghe et al., 2012; Neller, 2008; Putnam,

2000 & 2002; Uslaner, 2017), race (Uslaner, 2017), and religion (Neller, 2008; Uslaner, 2017), among several others. However, it has been recently demonstrated that the relationship between education and social trust, for example, is in fact mediated by state efficacy. Using survey data from three continents, Güemes and Herreros (2019) exemplified the importance of state efficacy in generating social trust by demonstrating that, in countries with high levels of state efficacy, it is the most educated (and intelligent) people who are most trusting, whereas, in countries with low state efficacy, highly educated people are the least trustful. Intuitively, this makes perfect sense, as it would be equally harmful and ignorant to place trust in others in countries with low levels of social trust (Whiteley, 2000). Therefore, it is very difficult to create social trust in places where it does not exist. These views give little hope for any rapid increase in social trust, but nevertheless suggest that there is a tiny possibility that, in societies where state institutions go through radical reforms toward more trustworthy and transparent functioning and less corruption, the citizens of these societies will eventually become more trusting towards generalized others.

Another important socioeconomic factor that has been found to affect social trust levels is social and economic (in)equality (Bjørnskov, 2007; Jordahl, 2009; Neller, 2008; Newton, 2004; Stolle, 2003; Uslaner, 2002, 2017). Uslaner (2017), for example, claims that “at the societal level, trust depends most strongly on the level of economic equality in a society. When there are high levels of inequality, the rich and the poor do not see each other as part of the same moral community” (p. 61). Yet, the mechanism of the relationship between inequality and social trust is contested and unclear, with some authors even suggesting that the relationship between inequality and social trust might only hold for countries with very high levels of income inequality (Steijn & Lancee, 2011).

3 The Aims of the Current Study

In this chapter, we will examine trends in social trust levels in the three Baltic countries—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—over a period of nearly thirty years, that is, since 1991, when they regained their

independence, until 2018, when the three Baltic countries celebrated the hundred year anniversary of their first declarations of independence. We will also provide some possible explanations for the changes in social trust levels in these three countries.

As the Baltic countries have gone through major social, economic, and political transitions in the last three decades, it seems plausible that explanations for changes in social trust should be primarily sought at the societal level. Therefore, our analyses will focus on examining the effects of a trustworthy state and good governance, low corruption, and social and economic equality on changes in social trust levels in the three Baltic countries. We expect to see an effect for those societal indicators on the levels of social trust. For instance, the levels of social trust and economic inequality should go hand in hand with social trust declining in the Baltic countries, as socioeconomic inequality rapidly increased after the countries regained their independence in 1991.

4 Method

4.1 Data

We were not able to find any trustworthy longitudinal studies with the *same participants being followed* continuously over a period of 30 years for all three Baltic countries. For this reason, we combined data from different cross-national and repeated cross-sectional survey programs, such as the World Values Survey (WVS), the European Values Survey (EVS), and the European Social Survey (ESS), that have measured social trust in representative samples of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian inhabitants from 1990 to 2018.

More specifically, this paper draws upon six waves of WVS and EVS (1990, 1996, 1999, 2008, 2011, and 2018) and eight waves of ESS (2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018). Estonia and Lithuania have taken part in all rounds of ESS since 2004 and 2008, respectively, whereas Latvia has participated in four rounds (i.e., in 2006, 2008, 2014, and 2018) but the data for the 2014 round were never published. Therefore, for Latvia, we can only use the ESS data from 2006, 2008 and 2018. There are similar problems in WVS/EVS datasets: whereas Estonia has participated in six data collection waves since 1990, Lithuania has taken part in five and Latvia only four rounds of data collection. An overview of all studies and samples used in the analyses is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Studies and Samples used in the Analyses

Study	Year	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
<i>ESS</i>	<i>2004</i>	1,989	n/a	n/a
	<i>2006</i>	1,517	1,960	n/a
	<i>2008</i>	1,661	1,980	2,002
	<i>2010</i>	1,793	n/a	1,677
	<i>2012</i>	2,380	n/a	2,109
	<i>2014</i>	2,051	n/a	2,250
	<i>2016</i>	2,019	n/a	2,122
	<i>2018</i>	1,905	918	1,835
<i>WVS/EVS</i>	<i>1990</i>	1,008	903	1,000
	<i>1996</i>	1,021	1,200	1,009
	<i>1999</i>	1,005	1,013	1,018
	<i>2008</i>	1,518	1,506	1,499
	<i>2011</i>	1,533	n/a	n/a
	<i>2018</i>	1,308	n/a	1,488

Note. ESS = European Social Survey; WVS = World Values Survey; EVS = European Values Survey.

Besides social trust, which is the main interest of this study, WVS/EVS and ESS datasets also allow us to measure the levels of institutional trust across the three Baltic states from 1990–2018.

In order to analyze how country-level changes have affected levels of social trust, we combine individual-level survey data with several relevant country-level indexes (i.e., Transparency International Perceived Corruption Index, GINI index, and Human Development Index), as described below.

4.2 Measures

4.2.1 Individual-level Indices

Social trust. Both WVS and EVS contain a dichotomous question “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?” (1=“Most people can be trusted”, 2=“Need to be very careful”). In ESS, social trust is measured with a similar question “Would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” but the answers are given on an 11-point Likert-

type scale, ranging from 0=“You can't be too careful” to 10=“Most people can be trusted”.

To make social trust variables across the different datasets comparable, the social trust variable in ESS was recoded into a binary format similar to WVS/EVS, so that 1 (values 6 to 10) represents respondents who would argue that “most people can be trusted” and 2 (values 0 to 5 and “don't knows”)² those respondents who would rather say that one “can't be too careful” in dealing with people or who choose the answer “don't know” (Table 2). In our analyses, we use the proportion of respondents who either answered that “most people can be trusted” (as in WVS/EVS data) or who gave a score of 6 to 10 in ESS data.

² Based on analyses for similar scales, the middle category (5) in 11-point scales tends to work also as “don't know” and, therefore, when comparing only positive responses, bias should be small (Zuelli & Scholz, 2016).

Table 2: Scale Transformations of Social Trust Measures

Study	<i>Need to be careful or don't know (2)</i>								<i>Most people can be trusted (1)</i>			
ESS	DK	0 You can't be too careful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Most people can be trusted
WVS/EVS	DK	2 Need to be very careful						1 Most people can be trusted				

Note. ESS = European Social Survey; WVS = World Values Survey; EVS = European Values Survey; DK = respondents who answered “Don’t know”

It is clear that, due to differences in the measurement of social trust and sampling methods, social trust values across the two different datasets (i.e., WVS/EVS vs. ESS) cannot be considered 100% equivalent. However, when comparing *the trends* in social trust values in Estonia during the study period 1990 to 2018, we can see a very similar pattern of responses across the two surveys over time (Figure 1). Overall, the percentage of respondents who would argue that “most people can be trusted” shows a clear increase across the study period in both surveys, yet the proportion of respondents indicating that they would trust other people seems to systematically differ between the surveys, with levels of social trust being higher in the ESS data than in the WVS/EVS data. Therefore, we acknowledge that the social trust levels in our datasets are not directly comparable, but we can assume that the relationships within each of these datasets are comparable.

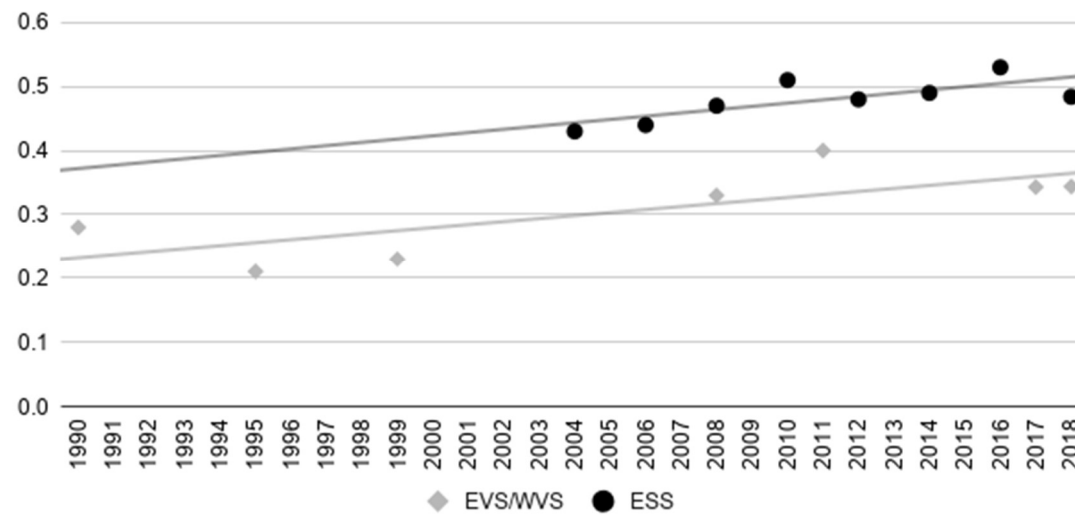


Figure 1: The percentage of people in Estonia who would argue that most people can be trusted based on year and survey. ESS = European Social Survey; WVS = World Values Survey; EVS = European Values Survey.

Institutional trust. In WVS and EVS, the question measuring trust towards different institutions is formulated in the following way: “I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?” (1=“A great deal”, 2=“Quite a lot”, 3=“Not very much”, 4=“None at all”). The institutions that were included in the analyses were the following: a) the church, b) the press, c) the police, d) parliament, e) the government, f) the justice system, and g) political parties.

In ESS, the question for institutional trust is formulated in the same way as for social trust: “Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0–10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust.” In the current study, we were interested in levels of trust in the following institutions: a) parliament, b) the legal system, c) the police, d) politicians, and e) political parties.

A similar procedure as for social trust was applied when comparing the level of trust in different institutions across different studies (i.e., ESS and WVS/EVS). As indicated in Table 3, the variables in ESS and WVS/EVS were recoded into a binary format similar to the social trust indicator, so that 1 (values 6 to 10 in ESS; values 1 and 2 in WVS/EVS) represents respondents who would argue that they trust or have confidence in different institutions and 2 (values 0 to 5 and “don’t know” in ESS; values 3, 4, and “don’t know” in WVS/EVS) those respondents who do not trust or have confidence in different institutions or “don’t know.”

Table 3: Scale Transformations of Institutional Trust Measures

Study	<i>Do not trust or don't know (2)</i>							<i>Trust (1)</i>					
ESS	DK	0 No trust at all	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 Complete trust	
WVS/EVS	DK	4 None at all	3 Not very much				2 Quite a lot				1 A great deal		

Note. ESS = European Social Survey; WVS = World Values Survey; EVS = European Values Survey; DK = respondents who answered “Don’t know”

4.3 Country-level Indices

In our analyses, we combine individual-level survey data with several relevant country-level indices (i.e., Transparency International Perceived Corruption Index, GINI index, and Human Development Index) in order to examine how country-level changes in corruption, social inequality, and human development may have affected levels of social trust over the study period.

Transparency International Perceived Corruption Index (CPI) is an aggregate indicator that ranks countries in terms of the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians. It is a composite index drawing on corruption-related data from a variety of independent and reputable institutions that ranges from 0 (“Highly corrupt”) to 1 (“Very clean”). CPI data for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been available since 1998 and are provided by Transparency International³.

GINI index is a measure of the income inequality or wealth inequality within a country. The index ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 representing perfect equality and 1 representing total inequality. The GINI index values for the three countries for the study period were taken from ESS Multilevel Data⁴.

Human Development Index (HDI) is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: 1) a long and healthy life, 2) being knowledgeable, and 3) having a decent standard of living⁵. HDI is the geometric mean of normalized indices for each of the three dimensions, with a maximum value of 1 indicating higher human development. HDI values for the study period were taken from ESS Multilevel Data⁶.

5 Analyses

We first examine whether and how levels of social trust have changed in the three Baltic countries during the period 1990 to 2018. In the second part of our study, we have a closer look at trends in social trust over time, along with trends in institutional trust across the last three

³ <https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/overview>

⁴ <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/multilevel/>

⁵ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>

⁶ <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/multilevel/>

decades in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The third set of analyses focuses on the relationships between social trust and various indices of societal development (e.g., social inequality, human development, etc.) with particular attention on the associations between social trust and the levels of perceived corruption from 1990 to 2018.

6 Results

6.1 Changes in Social Trust Levels in the Three Baltic Countries in 1990–2018

Compared to Western democracies, levels of social trust were rather low in the Baltic countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union and during the reorganization of political and social systems in mid 1990s. However, Estonia and Lithuania were able to recover from this post-totalitarian trauma quite well, as indicated by a considerable increase in the levels of social trust from the beginning of the new millennium (Figure 2). Nevertheless, it seems that the increase in social trust may have come to a halt in recent years, with levels of social trust dropping back to where they were around 2010. In Latvia, the levels of social trust have been historically lower than in the other two Baltic countries, and surprisingly stable since 2008.

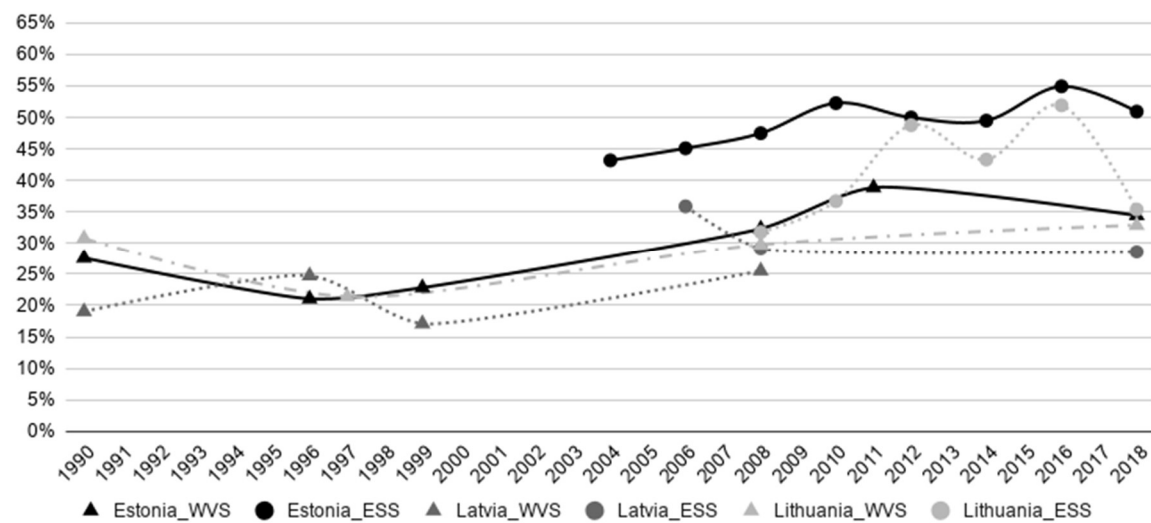


Figure 2: The percentage of people in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1990–2018 who would argue that most people can be trusted (Data: ESS, WVS/EVS)

The growth in the level of social trust has been biggest and fastest in Estonia, where, according to WVS/EVS data, the proportion of people “who trust other people” nearly doubled between 1996 and 2011. According to ESS data from 2018 (see Figure 3), the proportion of Estonians (51%) who tend to trust other people is 8% higher than the European average of 43%, which ranks them 7th among 27 European countries, right after Ireland and ahead of Germany. Due to a sharp decline in their social trust levels between 2016 and 2018, Lithuanians (35.4%) have now fallen into the lower half of the European ranking, whereas levels of social trust in Latvia (28.6%), as already mentioned, were not only lower compared to its neighbor states of Estonia and Lithuania, but also well below the European average of 43% in 2018.

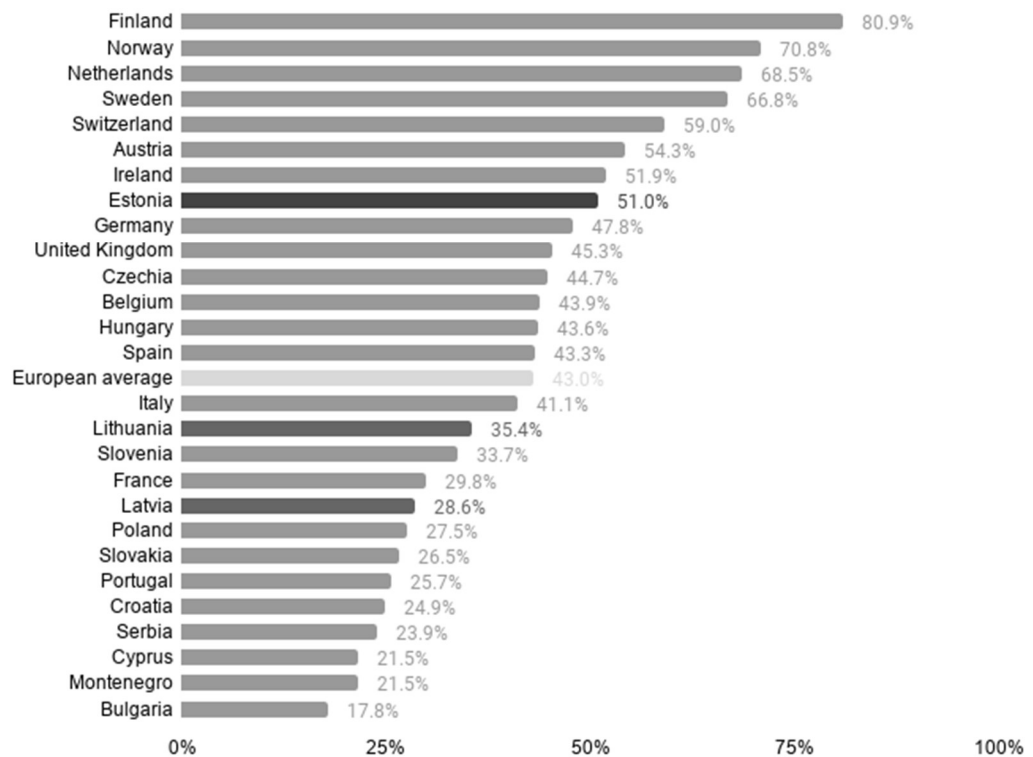


Figure 3: Generalized social trust in European countries in 2018. The percentage of respondents who gave scores of 6 to 10 to the question “Would you say that most

people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?", ranging from 0="You can't be too careful" to 10="Most people can be trusted." (Data: ESS 2018).

The growth in social trust in Estonia and Lithuania in the period 1996 to 2018 is rather remarkable, not only among European countries, but over the entire world. WVS/EVS data reveal that, in the period 1996 to 2018, the increase in social trust levels in Estonia and Lithuania was one of the greatest (13.0% and 10.4%, respectively) among the 46 countries which participated in the survey in both years (Figure 4).

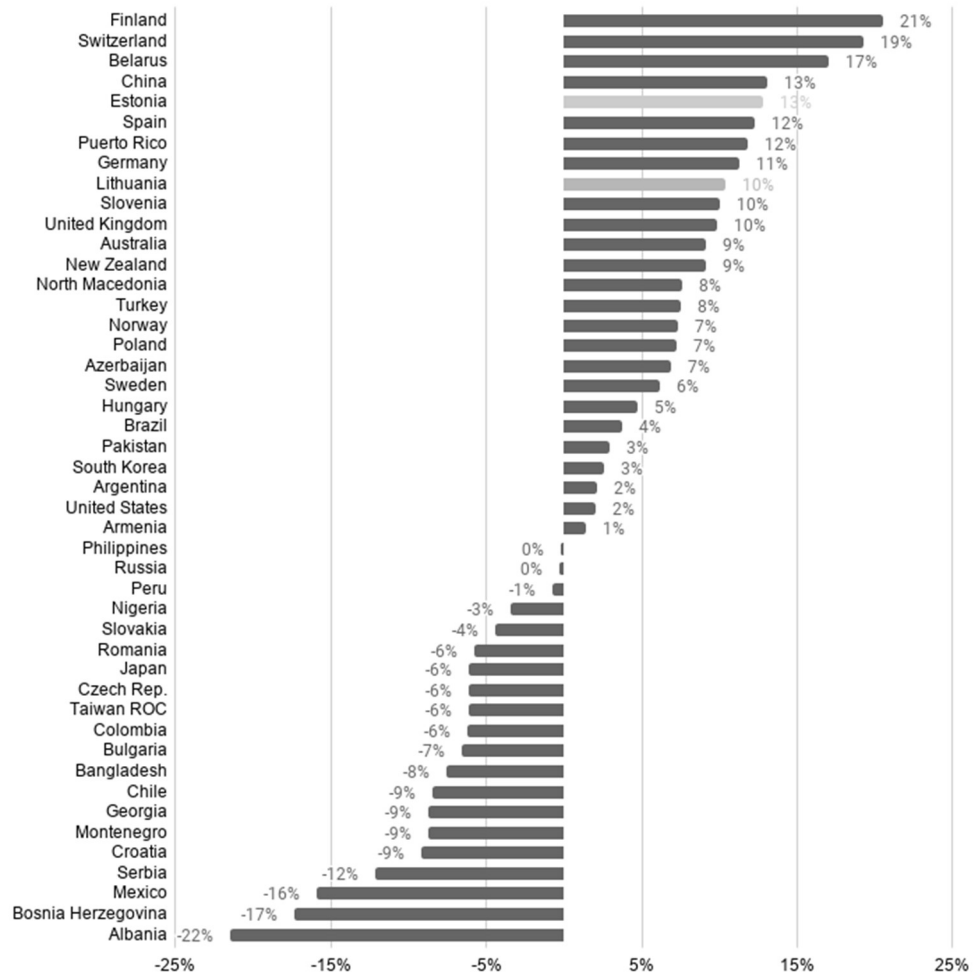


Figure 4: Changes in the levels of generalized social trust in 46 countries in 1996–2018 (Data: WVS/EVS). Key: Scale shows how many percentage points the levels of generalized social trust have increased (the positive side of the scale) or decreased (the negative side of the scale) over the study period. Only the countries that participated in WVS/EVS survey rounds both in 1996 and 2018 are included in the analysis.

On the basis of these findings, two important conclusions can be drawn. First, the levels of social trust (especially when using ESS data) vary greatly across the three Baltic countries, with Estonia hav-

ing consistently higher levels of social trust than Lithuania and, especially, Latvia. Second, while levels of social trust steadily increased in Estonia and Lithuania from 1996 to 2016, the levels of social trust in Latvia are roughly at the same level in 2018 as they were in mid-1990s.

6.2 Social Trust and Trust in Institutions

The different patterns and rates of change in social trust levels in the three Baltic countries raise the obvious issue of how to explain these differences. As a trustworthy state and good governance have been found to be positively associated with social trust, it is worthwhile mapping out the trends in institutional trust in the Baltic countries alongside levels of social trust from the beginning of the 1990s. Our assumption is that trustworthiness, as well as trust in state institutions, has gone through major changes since the three countries regained their independence in 1991, and these changes may contribute to changes in social trust levels, as trust and satisfaction with state institutions tend to increase levels of social trust.

Looking at the trends in social and institutional trust levels in Estonia using the WVS/EVS data, it is evident that the steady rise in social trust from 1999 is paralleled by a rapid increase in trust in non-political state institutions, such as the police and the legal system (Figure 5). Similar growth in trust in political institutions (e.g., parliament, political parties, the government) or other major societal institutions (e.g., the press, the church) has not occurred—trust in these institutions peaked in 2011 and has steadily decreased since, reaching roughly the same level in 2018 as ten years earlier (i.e., in 2008).

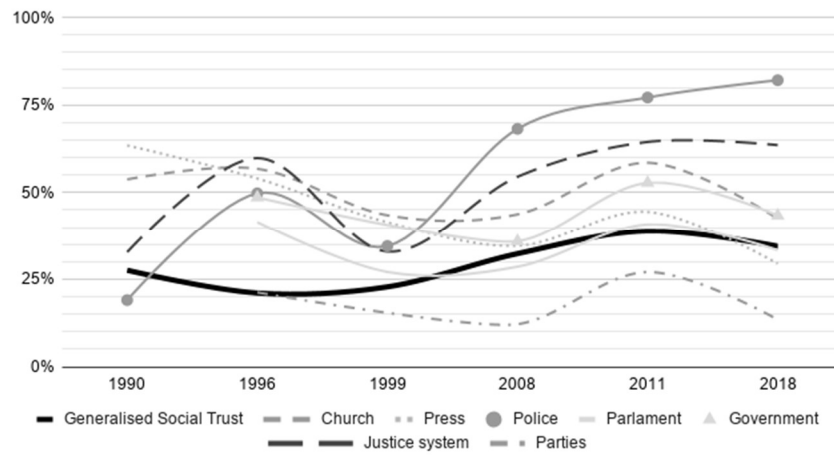


Figure 5: Percentage of people in Estonia in 1990–2018 who believe that other people can be trusted (social trust) and who trust the following institutions: the church, the press, the police, parliament, the government, the justice system, and political parties. (Data: WVS/EVS).

In ESS data (Figure 6), a somewhat similar pattern of rising levels of social trust and trust in non-political state institutions (e.g., police and legal system) appears. While trust in political state institutions (e.g., the government) is not as high as trust in non-political institutions, it has increased compared to the 2000s.

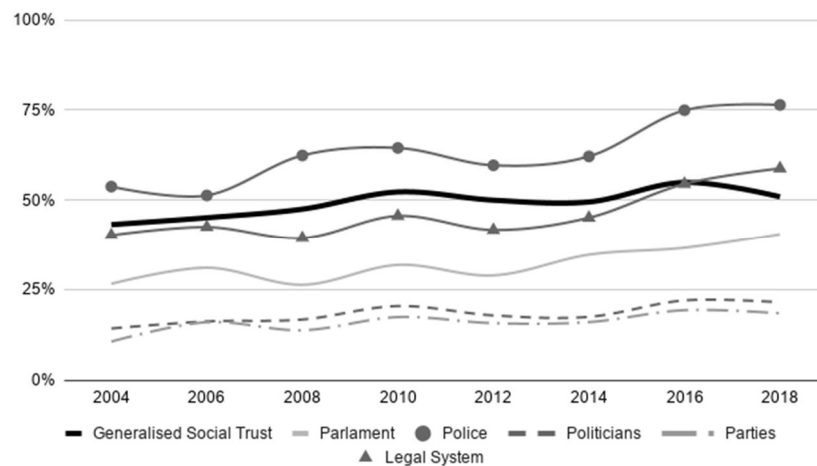


Figure 6: Percentage of people in Estonia in 2004–2018 who believe that other people can be trusted (social trust) or who trust the following institutions: parliament, the police, politicians, and political parties. (Data: ESS).

In order to further analyze the relationships between the levels of social trust and trust in different institutions across time, we examined the profile correlations of trust levels in the Estonian and Lithuanian data. Table 4 describes the intraclass correlations between the levels of social trust and institutional trust across time, calculated as a Spearman correlation. As can be seen in Table 4, in Estonia, social trust was positively and significantly correlated with trust in the police in WVS/EVS data, and with confidence in the police, the justice system, the parliament, politicians, and political parties in ESS data. In Lithuania, social trust was positively and significantly correlated only with confidence in the justice system in WVS/EVS data. Latvia was excluded from this analysis due to the small number of data points.

Table 4: Intraclass Correlations (Spearman's Rho) between the Levels of Social Trust and Institutional Trust across the Period of Study

Study		The Church	The Press	The Police	Parliament	The Government	The Justice System	Politicians	Parties
Estonia	WVS 1990–2018 (n=6)	0.03	-0.43	0.71*	0	0.40	0.60		0.40
	ESS 2004–2018 (n=8)			0.83**	0.69*		0.76*	0.95**	0.76*
Lithuania	WVS 1990–2018 (n=4)	0.40	-0.40	0.80			1**		
	ESS 2008–2018 (n=5)			0.60	0.71		0.48	0.71	0.71

Note. WVS/EVS = World Values Survey and European Values Survey; ESS = European Social Survey.

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Therefore, the Estonian data seem to provide some support for the claim that social trust goes hand in hand with trust in non-political state institutions. As the legal system and the police force have gone through major changes and reforms since the turbid nineties, the systems have become more trustworthy in the eyes of citizens. At the same time, we can see a steady rise in social trust, although it is not as fast as the increase in trust in the police and the legal system. The trend lines of social trust and non-political state institutions diverge from 2016, when trust in the police and legal system stay steady, while social trust is in decline along with trust in some political state institutions, the press, and the church. If the growth in trust in non-political state institutions and the decline in social trust continue in the coming years, this trend would contradict our assumption about the relationship between social trust and trust in non-political state institutions. However, it should be made quite clear that we cannot claim any causality based on those trends.

Even though the increase in social trust since 1990s has been more modest in Lithuania, there are similar trends of increasing trust in the police and the legal system (Figures 7). In the case of Lithuania, trust in the police started to increase rapidly from 1996, while trust in the legal system started to increase in the second half of the 2000s. Compared to Estonians, Lithuanians put much more trust in the church and press: until 2010, the press was considered more trustworthy than the police in Lithuania, and the church remained the most trusted institution at the end of study period. As social trust was positively and significantly correlated with trust in the justice system in Lithuania (Table 4), this lends some support to our earlier conclusion that trust in non-political state institutions (at least partly) contributes to growth in social trust.

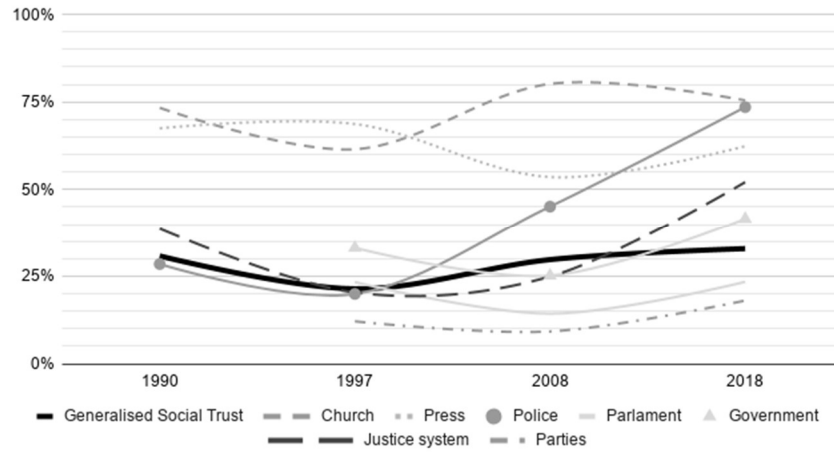


Figure 7: Percentage of people in Lithuania in 1990–2018 who believe that other people can be trusted (social trust) or who trust the following institutions: the church, the press, the police, parliament, the government, the justice system, and political parties. (Data: WVS/EVS).

The ESS data provide some further insight into the trends in social and institutional trust in Lithuania from 2008 to 2018 (Figure 8). Broadly speaking, the profiles of social trust as well as of institutional trust in the parliament, politicians, and political parties follow very similar trends across the study period. First, there is a steady increase in the levels of social and institutional trust in the parliament, politicians, and political parties from 2008 to 2016, followed by a decline between 2016 and 2018. Only trust in the police has consistently increased throughout the whole observed period. However, these trends do not offer much evidence to support our assumption of a link between social trust and trust in institutions, as the levels of social trust and trust in different institutions across time are not significantly correlated in the Lithuanian ESS data (Table 4).

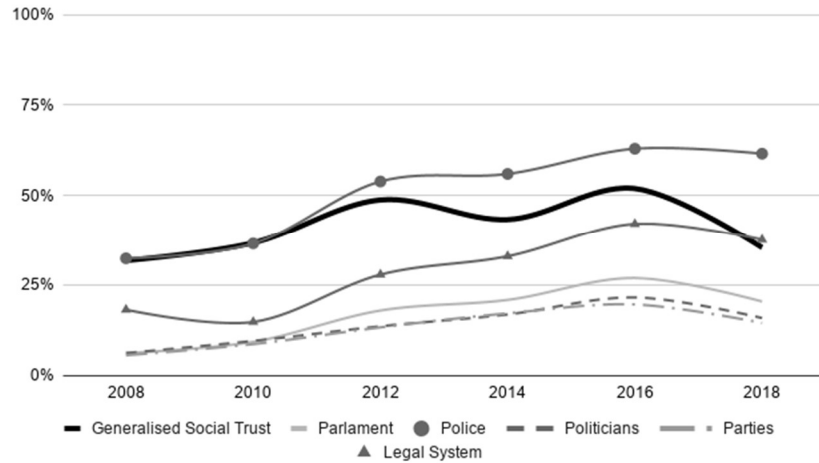


Figure 8: Percentage of people in Lithuania in 2008–2018 who believe that other people can be trusted (social trust) or who trust the following institutions: parliament, the police, the legal system, politicians, and political parties. (Data: ESS).

In Latvia, social trust, as well as trust in different political and non-political institutions, tends to be lower than in their northern and southern neighbor countries. However, there are some similarities with Lithuania in the general trust trend lines. In both countries, the church is the institution with the highest trust scores throughout the study period, followed by trust in the press throughout the nineties and first half of 2000s. From the middle of 2000s, trust in the police became higher than trust in the press. At the same time, the percentage of people who believe that other people can be trusted has stayed at around 20% to 25% throughout the study period. Therefore, Latvian trends in social and institutional trust do not lend any support to our assumption that trust in non-political state institutions leads (at least partly) to growth in social trust.

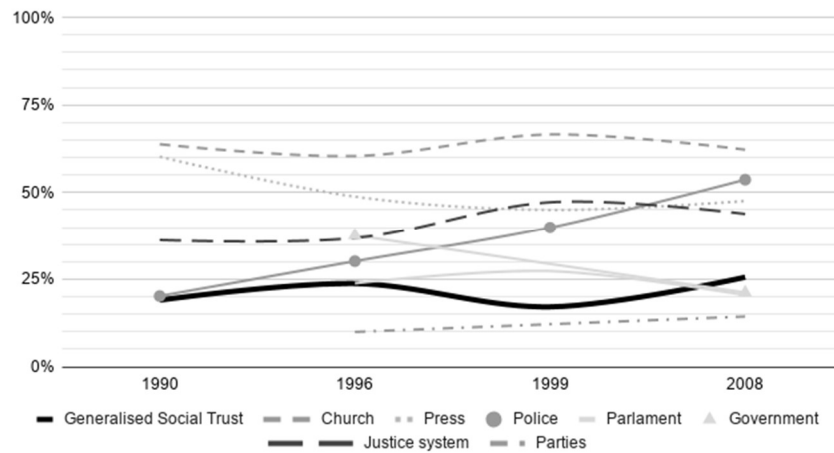


Figure 9. Percentage of people in Latvia in 1990–2008 who believe that other people can be trusted (social trust) or who trust the following institutions: the church, the press, police, parliament, the government, the justice system, and political parties. (Data: WVS/EVS).

6.3 Social Trust and Societal Development

Our final analyses focus on examining changes in the level of social trust in the context of wider societal indicators, such as levels of corruption, human development, and social inequality across the study period.

As it has been suggested that corruption has a negative effect on social trust levels, we also looked at the trends in perceived corruption in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the period 1998–2018. Indeed, in Estonia and Lithuania, CPI scores followed very similar general trends as social trust levels during the period under consideration, with the decrease in perceived corruption being accompanied by an increase in social trust (Figures 10 and 12). In Latvia, on the other hand, decreasing levels of corruption do not seem to lead to higher levels of social trust, as social trust levels remain surprisingly stable over the ten years from 2008 to 2018 (Figure 11). A possible explanation for this unexpected finding may be that, even though the levels of political corruption in Latvia, as measured by CPI, have dramatically decreased since 2011, there are other studies that indicate

that the average Latvian still believes that Latvia is one of the most corrupt countries in Europe (European Commission, 2017). Thus, if people in Latvia still feel that way, then Latvian social trust patterns fit our theoretical assumption that social trust levels are affected by perceived corruption rather well – it is not wise to become more trusting towards other people if you believe that you live in a highly corrupt country. However, there are no grounds for drawing any far-reaching conclusions from these results, as the levels of social trust and CPI across time are not significantly correlated in any of the three countries (Table 5).

Human Development Index may be a rather poor proxy for welfare state development, but it nevertheless provides at least some insight into the improving living standards in the Baltic countries since the early nineties. Figures 10, 11, and 12 demonstrate that the levels of HDI have been rising steadily in the Baltic countries from the mid-nineties. In Estonia and Lithuania, it has been followed by an increase in social trust (with the exception of a couple of recent years, which witness some decline in social trust levels), but, in Latvia, we cannot see any positive effect for increasing HDI on social trust. As can be seen in Table 5, levels of social trust are significantly correlated with HDI over time only in Estonia.

Table 5: Intraclass correlations (Spearman's Rho) between the Levels of Social Trust and Indicators of Societal Development across WVS/EVS (1990–2018) and ESS (2004–2018) Data Sets. Number of cases added in brackets.

Country	Study	GINI	HDI	CPI
Estonia	ESS	.17 (8)	.78* (8)	.48 (8)
	WVS	0.8 (4)	.77* (6)	.4 (4)
Latvia	ESS	-	-	-
	WVS	.22 (4)	.43 (4)	-
Lithuania	ESS	.43 (6)	.29 (6)	.59 (6)
	WVS	-.05 (4)	.71 (4)	0.8 (4)
<i>Average</i>		<i>0.32</i>	<i>0.59</i>	<i>0.57</i>

Note. WVS = World Values Survey; EVS = European Values Survey; ESS = European Social Survey. GINI = GINI index on a scale from 0 (total inequality) to 1 (maximal inequality); HDI = Human Development Index on a scale from 0 (least developed) to 1 (most highly developed); CPI = Transparency International Perceived Corruption Index score on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 1 (very clean); Trust: percentage of people who believe that most people can be trusted.

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

However, considering the potential link between social and economic inequality and social trust, it is probably more important to look at the trends in social trust together with the GINI index (Figures 10, 11, and 12). In Estonia, the increase in inequality (operationalized via the GINI index) was accompanied by falling levels of social trust in the early nineties (Figure 10). Since then, economic inequality in Estonia has remained rather stable. However, since the new millennium, the general trend is toward a modest decline in inequality. At the same time, social trust levels have increased since the late nineties. The increase in economic inequality was less sharp in Latvia after regaining independence (Figure 11). Levels of social trust, too, did not drop very rapidly. However, increasing economic inequality was accompanied by rising levels of social trust from 1999 to 2004. Since then, levels of both economic inequality and social trust have been rather stable. In Lithuania, the increase in inequality was not as rapid as in Estonia, but sharper than in Latvia (Figure 12). Increasing inequality was followed by decreasing levels of social trust. Since the early nineties, economic inequality has remained fairly stable in Lithuania, with minor ups and downs in the GINI index. However, social trust levels have been less stable, demonstrating a rather fluctuating trend line. Furthermore, intraclass correlations between the levels of social trust and GINI index across time do not allow us to attribute any changes in social trust to the changes in economic inequality (Table 5).

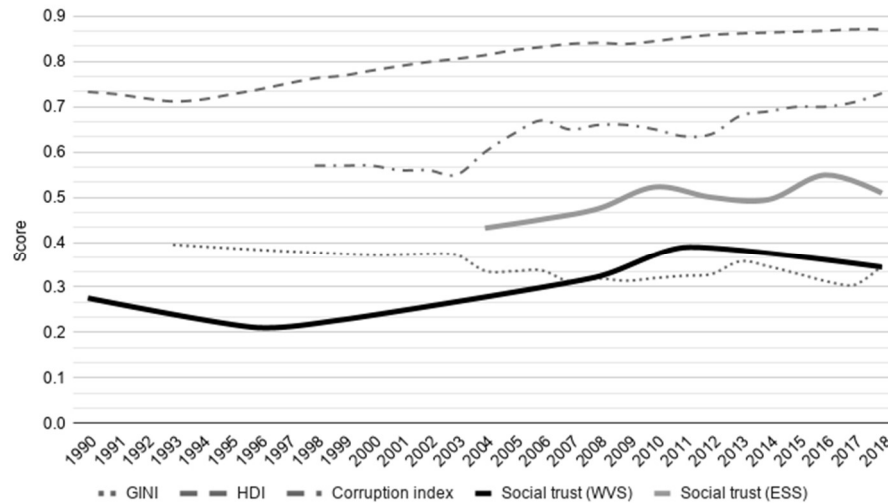


Figure 10: Changes in levels of social trust and the three indicators of societal development in Estonia in 1990–2018. GINI = GINI index on a scale from 0 (total inequality) to 1 (total inequality); HDI = Human Development Index on a scale from 0 (least developed) to 1 (most highly developed); Corruption Index = Transparency International Perceived Corruption Index score on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 1 (very clean); Social trust: percentage of people who believe that most people can be trusted (WVS/EVS).

In sum, our analyses did not provide support for the theoretical assumption that changes in levels of social trust may be triggered by changes in levels of corruption, human development, or social inequality. While HDI was positively correlated with levels of social trust in Estonia, correlations were non-significant in Latvia and Lithuania (Table 5). Furthermore, social trust levels seemed to have nothing to do with the levels of economic inequality and perceived corruption in the Baltic countries (Table 5).

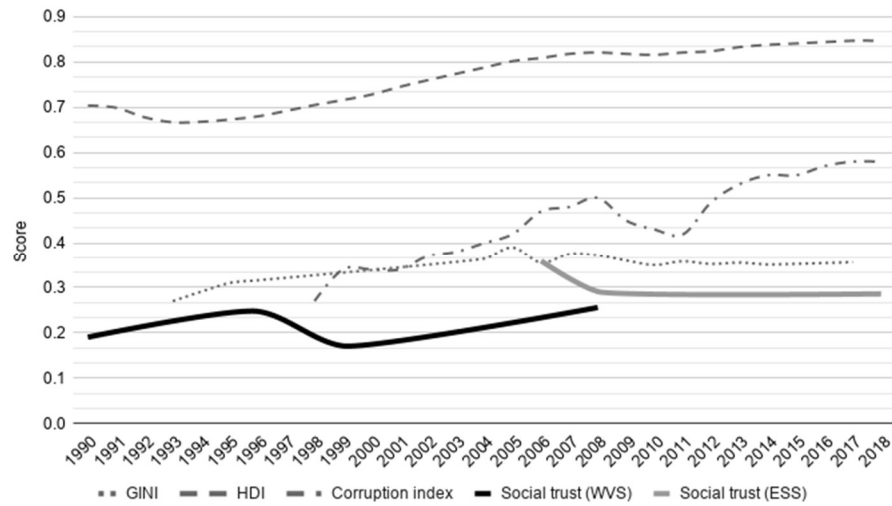


Figure 11: Changes in levels of social trust and the three indicators of societal development in Latvia in 1990–2018. GINI = GINI index on a scale from 0 (total inequality) to 1 (maximal inequality); HDI = Human Development Index on a scale from 0 (least developed) to 1 (most highly developed); Corruption Index = Transparency International Perceived Corruption Index score on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 1 (very clean); Trust: percentage of people who believe that most people can be trusted.

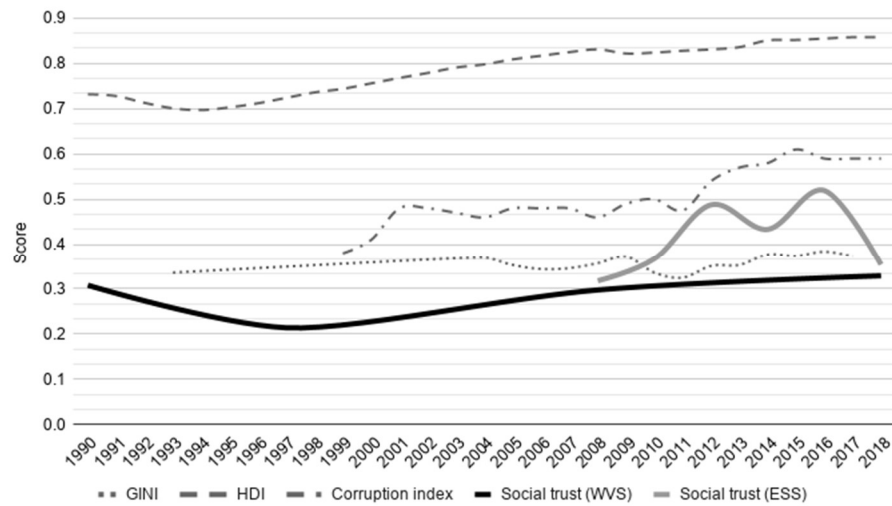


Figure 12: Changes in levels of social trust and the three indicators of societal development in Lithuania in 1990–2018. GINI = GINI index on a scale from 0 (total inequality) to 1 (maximal inequality); HDI = Human Development Index on a scale from 0 (least developed) to 1 (most highly developed); Corruption Index = Transparency International Perceived Corruption Index score on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 1 (very clean); Trust: percentage of people who believe that most people can be trusted.

7 Conclusion

Several large-scale studies have shown that generalized trust does not change much over time (Bjørnskov, 2006; Uslaner, 2017; Volken, 2002). However, this may only hold true for stable democracies and not for societies that have gone through major political, economic, or social transitions. The fast change in social trust levels in two of the Baltic countries—Estonia and Lithuania—during the last decades is rather unprecedented in international comparison, especially when considering that countries from the former Eastern bloc are generally believed to have less social trust than stable Western democracies (e.g., Bjørnskov, 2007; Neller, 2008; Newton, 2004). Even if the low levels of social trust in the Baltic countries in the early 1990s can be easily explained by the countries' Soviet past, it is a more difficult task to explain the fast growth of social trust in Estonia and Lithuania, but not in Latvia, from the end of 1990s until the middle of the last decade. Unlike its southern and northern neighbors, Latvia meets the general expectation for the former Eastern bloc country, with rather low social trust levels. Therefore, Latvia seems to fit the presumptions shared by several authors (e.g., Uslaner, 2000, 2002; Whiteley, 2000), that social trust is rather stable over time and extremely difficult to create in places where it does not exist. Rather rapid changes in social trust in the other two Baltic countries are much more difficult to explain and are at odds with the theoretical claims of relative stability in social trust levels over time. In this chapter, we tried to shed some light on the possible factors that may have helped Estonia and Lithuania recover from their post-totalitarian trauma and demonstrate levels of social trust comparable with established democracies.

Looking for possible explanations, we relied on theories that conceptualize trust as a feature of the social environment, suggesting

that individuals become more trusting by experiencing trustworthy behavior in their daily life (Delhey & Newton, 2005; Newton, 2004; Ostrom & Ahn, 2009; Putnam, 2000; Rothstein, 2005; Whiteley, 2000). According to these theories, social trust can be seen as a social norm that individuals learn from their social environment. Trustworthy state institutions (such as the police force and the legal system, in particular) and good governance, seem to be especially important factors for producing high levels of social trust among a country's citizens. When people see that state officials treat people equally and are not involved in corrupt activities, a highly visible example that it is reasonable to expect honesty and trustworthiness even from people whom one does not know very well is offered. Corrupt state institutions, on the other hand, are often considered one of the main causes for low levels of social trust, because people learn from these that they can trust people only very selectively. The results presented in this chapter partially support the hypothesis that a trustworthy state and good governance (as suggested by Newton, 2004; Rothstein, 2005; Rothstein & Stolle, 2003; Stolle, 2003) play some role in generating social trust. However, this only applies to Estonia and, to a considerably lesser extent, Lithuania. Furthermore, EVS/WVS and ESS data from the Baltic countries do not demonstrate any link between social trust and low corruption in state institutions (as suggested by Rothstein, 2005, & Uslaner, 2002).

We are, of course, fully aware that our analyses hardly let us make any claims about the direction of the causality between the changes in social trust and perception of state institutions. Nevertheless, our results do not offer support to Uslaner's (2017) claim that there is hardly any evidence that democratization after the fall of Communism has been followed by increasing levels of social trust and "where trust is low, institutional change does not seem to be the route to increase it" (p. 73). Estonia and Lithuania present a case where, despite increased socioeconomic inequalities, the process of democratization has been accompanied by a significant increase in social trust, and it seems plausible that, in this case, the increasing levels of social trust followed the institutional changes, rather than other way around. However, it may be too early to celebrate high social trust levels in Estonia and Lithuania given that the last couple of years have seen some decrease in those levels.

In sum, our analysis demonstrates that social trust levels have not followed identical patterns in the three Baltic countries, indicating that both their starting point after the collapse of Soviet Union as well as the social and political choices in the subsequent decades have been different and yielded different levels of social trust. The high levels of social trust in Estonia and (to a somewhat lesser extent in) Lithuania indicate that people living in those two Baltic countries have indeed learned that, in general, most people can be trusted. However, it seems that the experiences of Latvians have been remarkably different, as social trust levels have remained low throughout the three decades since regaining independence. Furthermore, it is yet to be seen whether the other two Baltic countries—Estonia and Lithuania—can maintain their high levels of social trust despite any economic and political changes, or if the slight decrease in social trust levels in recent years is the beginning of a downward trend.

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