



# Report on Identities, Belonging, Cohesion and Feeling of Democracy

**IPHS-BAS**

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# Report on Identities, Belonging, Cohesion and Feeling of Democracy

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

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## 1. Control Sheet

Version History			
Version	Date	Modified by	Summary of Changes
V 1.0	27.02.2026		Initial Version

## 2. List of Participants

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

### 3. Objectives

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

In detail, We-ID pursues the following objectives:

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

- Objective 6:** In addition, development of a Civic Competences Toolbox (CCT) for local actors (We-SCOUTS) equipped with civic skills and competences to support local communities, moderate conflicts and controversies and create spaces for participation.
- Objective 7:** Establish the We-PARL - Policy, Advocacy and Research Lab - transdisciplinary platform, the tool which supports all thematic research areas foreseen in the project.
- Objective 8:** To disseminate We-ID findings, drawing on the outcomes and findings from the We-PARL, communicating them to a broader audience.
- Objective 9:** The project will identify factors at both national and local level that hinder social and political participation and at the same time develop policy recommendations on how to achieve equality and mitigate discrimination against women, LGBTIQ+ and ethnic minorities.

## 4. Executive Summary

Deliverable D5.3 presents the consolidated findings of the qualitative study conducted under WP5 on identity, belonging, social cohesion and democratic trust in a front-line EU Member State.

The study is based on 40 semi-structured interviews conducted with:

- Migrants residing in Bulgaria (including individuals displaced by the wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East),
- Residents of border regions experiencing higher levels of migration pressure.

The research explored how individuals perceive identity, belonging and democratic institutions within a rapidly changing socio-demographic environment.

The findings reveal several important structural patterns:

- Democratic trust is closely associated with perceived institutional responsiveness and fairness in migration governance. Identity is dynamic and context-dependent, influenced by perceived geopolitical and economic pressures.
- Feelings of belonging are strongly linked to safety, connection to local language, opportunities for children and everyday interactions, rather than formal legal status alone.
- Social cohesion is shaped by local-level contact and trust-building mechanisms.
- Perceived threat — whether economic, cultural or geopolitical — plays a central role in shaping attitudes across all groups.

The study confirms that identity dynamics, cohesion and democratic trust are deeply interconnected. It also highlights differences between migrants and local residents, particularly in how belonging and institutional trust are experienced.

Based on these findings, WP5 refines its integrated conceptual model and provides evidence-based recommendations to support democratic resilience and social cohesion in front-line EU contexts. The results contribute to strengthening migration governance, social integration strategies and early detection of social fragmentation risks within the European Union.

The report aims to:

- Describe how displaced people and local residents in Bulgaria experience and talk about democracy, identity, belonging, social cohesion, and resilience in everyday life.
- Identify key factors that support or undermine inclusion and stability, such as access to information and services, language and orientation, social networks, and institutional treatment.
- Compare perspectives across displaced groups (Ukraine, Middle East region) and local contexts (hosting larger influx of migrant waves) to highlight shared patterns and key differences.
- Translate qualitative insights into practical, non-stigmatizing messages that can inform institutions and partners working on reception, integration, and community support, including in higher education contexts.

## 5. Background and Rationale

### 5.1 Front-line Country Context

Bulgaria is situated on a major route at the EU’s external border and has experienced successive waves of displacement linked to war and instability in neighbouring regions, as well as the large-scale displacement from Ukraine. These dynamics place sustained pressure on local services and communities, particularly in specific receiving areas such as border regions, larger cities, and coastal destinations. In this context, everyday experiences of institutional access, safety, social relations, and integration pathways become central to how both displaced people and local residents understand stability, belonging, and social life. Bulgaria is a particularly relevant case because it concentrates multiple “front-line” dynamics:

- EU external border context: Bulgaria is an EU external border country, including a key border with Turkey, shaping reception pressures and public debates about security and movement.
- Displacement since 2022: Bulgaria has been affected by displacement related to the war in Ukraine, with large numbers seeking temporary protection.
- Long-term demographic decline: These dynamics unfold against sustained ageing and depopulation trends that interact with migration and influence perceptions of fairness and belonging.

Demographically, Bulgaria’s population was 6,437,360 as of 31 December 2024, reflecting continuing depopulation pressures. In relation to displacement from Ukraine, UNICEF reporting for January–December 2024 notes 203,122 people registered for temporary protection in Bulgaria, and indicates that many displaced people maintained valid registrations during the period.

### 5.2 Strategic EU Relevance

Understanding how democracy, identity, belonging, cohesion, and resilience are lived in front-line contexts is strategically relevant for the EU because these dynamics shape social stability, integration outcomes, trust in institutions, and community readiness during crises. Evidence from local and displaced perspectives helps identify what supports effective inclusion—such as accessible information, fair and predictable procedures, language and orientation support, and cooperation between institutions and NGOs. These insights can inform EU-level approaches to reception and integration, strengthen the social dimension of crisis response, and support policies that protect rights while sustaining cohesion in host communities.

## 6. Overview of Research Approach

### 6.1 Study design and Participant Groups

To address the deliverable’s aim—understanding how democracy, identity, belonging, cohesion, and resilience are narrated and practiced in contexts of displacement and receiving communities—the study used a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol and field approach were developed by the IPHS–BAS team specifically for the project, grounded in the WP5 theoretical framework and adapted to the Bulgarian context.

Interviews were conducted with three participant groups:

- Ukrainian migrants (n = 10)
- Migrants from the Middle East (n = 10)
- Local residents (n = 20), split between:
  - a) coastal regions (North-East Bulgaria) with a higher presence of Ukrainian migrants; and
  - b) a South Bulgarian region near the Bulgarian– near Turkish border with a higher presence of migrants from the Middle East.

This sampling logic enables comparison between displaced and host-community perspectives, as well as between local contexts shaped by different migration profiles and recent dynamics.

#### **Sampling and participant selection** (migrant interviews)

Migrant participants were recruited through purposive sampling aligned with WP5 objectives and the focus on forced migration. The sampling strategy was designed to capture not only immediate arrival experiences but also settlement and longer-term integration dynamics relevant to identity, belonging, cohesion and democratic trust. Inclusion criteria included:

- Age: 18 years or older.
- Forced migration profile: participants with a forced displacement background (e.g., war/conflict-related displacement, asylum-related mobility, or comparable forced circumstances).
- Current residence: residing in Bulgaria at the time of interview (including locations with higher migrant presence/front-line dynamics).
- Minimum exposure to the host context: to ensure that interviews reflect experiences beyond the initial arrival phase, participants were selected so that at least one member of the participant’s family unit had been living in Bulgaria for a minimum of two years. This criterion supports analysis of medium-term processes such as institutional contact, language learning, schooling/child-related integration, labour market access, and the stabilisation (or erosion) of belonging and cohesion over time.

To strengthen analytical robustness and support cross-group comparison (Objective 5.4), recruitment aimed for variation across:

- gender and age groups;
- family status (including participants with and without children);
- education and employment situation;
- type of settlement/locality (e.g., border/front-line/high-migration areas).

#### **Ethical safeguards**

All participants provided informed consent. Recruitment and interview procedures were designed to minimise risk and ensure confidentiality, particularly given the vulnerability associated with forced displacement trajectories.

Participation was voluntary. Recruitment was supported by the national refugee agency and NGOs working with migrant communities. Outreach to these stakeholders began in autumn 2025, enabling field access, trust-building, and recruitment that was sensitive to participants’ circumstances and safeguarding needs.

## 6.2 Data Collection and Processing

Many participants did not have sufficient proficiency in Bulgarian or English; therefore, interviews were conducted with the support of professional translators. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed. Due to GDPR requirements and language constraints, transcription and translation required additional safeguards. The team used GDPR-compliant tools, combined with substantial manual transcription and translation from Ukrainian and Arabic into English to ensure both accuracy and confidentiality.

## 6.3 Data Analysis

The analysis follows a qualitative content/thematic approach aligned with WP5 concepts and the study objectives. We used QDA Miner and WordStat to code the interview material across shared thematic dimensions—democracy, identity, belonging, social cohesion, and resilience—and to compare patterns across groups and regions. Where appropriate, coded themes were also descriptively quantified (e.g., prevalence across interviews) to support a transparent synthesis without reducing the qualitative meaning of narratives.

## 6.4 Data Protection and Storage

All data were pseudonymised. Audio files, transcripts, and translated materials are stored on a restricted-access institutional server and an encrypted external storage device. Access is limited to authorised project researchers only, in line with GDPR and Horizon Europe requirements, reflecting the sensitive nature of migration-related narratives.

## 6.5 Coding Approach

For the coding and analysis of the 40 translated interview transcripts, the team combined an inductive (data-driven) thematic approach with audited, rule-bounded coding supported by QDA software. Coding was organised around five parent domains: Democracy (DEM), Identity (IDN), Belonging (BEL), Social Cohesion (COH), and Resilience (RES). Group-specific codebooks were developed based on the four respondent sub-samples:

- Migrants from the Middle East (MME)
- Migrants from Ukraine (MUK)
- Locals from South Bulgaria (LSBG)
- Locals from North-East Bulgaria (LNEBG)

# 7. Key Findings

This section contains anonymized qualitative summary based on interview narratives.

Note on confidentiality: The quotations below are anonymized. Any interview identifiers and technical coding notes have been removed.

## 7.1 Democracy (DEM)

Qualitative research in the field of democracy aims to highlight the similarities and differences between the groups studied in their understanding of the phenomenon. We take G.L. Munck and J. Verkuilen's (2002) definition of the term democracy as a starting point. It includes two levels - attributes and components of attributes. The attributes are: 1. Presence of competition and 2.

Participation. The presence of competition in turn includes the components - 1. The right to form political parties and 2. The freedom of the media. Participation includes the components - 1. The right to vote, 2. Fairness of the electoral process, 3. Parties' access to public funding (i.e. degree of conflation) and 4. Voting rights (i.e., degree of redundancy).

### Brief interpretation for the Migrants Middle East (MME) group:

The data from qualitative research outline most salient: Freedom of action, Human treatment institutions and Rights and grievances. Tone is more negative. The two most negative in content are Low political literacy and Doubt/libel.

MME surveyed "see" democracy through everyday, bodily markers of dignity and agency: can you act; are you treated "like a human"; does it make sense to file a complaint; do you learn how the political system works. The peripheral but highly negative layer is the narrative of a disconnect between talk and actual inclusion/relationship ('democratic in words...') - a typical 'breaking down' of democratic meaning through experiences of racism/exclusion.

### Brief interpretation for the Migrants Ukraine (MUK) group:

All 7 extracted subthemes are key. Democracy is quite "developed" thematically. What is distinctive about the data: Three dominant sub-themes - Middle class as a barometer, Equality without 'castes' and Access and accountability of power. The overall tone is less "descriptive" and more evaluative.

Ukrainians define democracy not only as procedures, but as a social contract, measurable by (1) equality and lack of untouchables, (2) working accountability/access to institutions, (3) "normal" social structure (middle class). Thus democracy becomes a pragmatic indicator of "European normality" (not just a value). At the same time, a moral axis "corruption ↔ justice" is visible, plus a migrant status-specific constraint: the "guest position"/fatigue to evaluate the host society.

### Brief interpretation for the Locals North-East Bulgaria (LNEBG) group / local perspectives around the Ukrainian influx:

Seven of the 8 sub-themes are core/key and 1 is peripheral (oligarchy/"cliques"). Democracy is seen as a strong institutional/procedural framework: real citizen participation, rule of law, gap between 'in theory' and practice, protest as a channel, external pressure/EU, transparency and information

What is distinctive about the data: Most "heavy" on mentions/prevalence: Rule of Law, Democracy in theory, Voter apathy. Overall tone is mostly neutral, with some pos/neg. Democracy is articulated more descriptively ("how it is set up/how it (doesn't) work") than affectively.

This group generally conceives of democracy as a system of rules and access to decisions, but experienced as "not working" or "partial", which logically breeds apathy and shifts "participation" to more realistic/low-threshold channels (e.g. protest). A "democracy = pressure/interests" line is also evident in the quotes, linking the legitimacy of democratic procedures to a sense of external/backstage governance.

### Brief interpretation for the Locals South Bulgaria (LSBG) group/ local perspectives around the MME corridor:

All 8 sub-themes are key (a highly consolidated 'narrative' of democracy).

What is distinctive in the data: Europe: standard and dictate and Laws not for everyone are the most clearly visible themes tied to democracy. They are followed by Rulers without accountability and Is the voice heard. The overall tone is again strongly neutral, but with a negative rather than positive (net score negative).

The interviewed Bulgarians from South Bulgaria experience democracy mostly through deficits of equality and order: laws "do not apply to all", access goes through "connections/protections", and civic audibility is low. Added to this is a strong external frame of reference - Europe as both standard and 'dictate' - which directly links democracy to geopolitics/belonging. The "democracy = anarchy" narrative is very indicative of a breakdown in the normative sense of pluralism (many opinions → chaos), and the presence of the "strong government is better" sub-theme marks a partial withdrawal from the democratic ideal.

### Cross-group synthesis

Common axes (common "skeleton" of democracy)

1. Equality before rules/institutions
  - LSBG: "laws not for all" + "connections/protections"
  - LNEBG: "rule of law"
  - MUK: "equality without castes"
  - MME: "rights and grievances" + "human treatment"
2. Audibility/access/accountability (democracy as citizen ↔ power relationship)
  - LSBG: "is the voice heard" (you can say, but it rarely has an effect)
  - MUK: "access and accountability of power"
  - MME: institutions as a place where dignity is "checked"
3. Legitimacy/meaning of democracy (when democracy "becomes meaningless")
  - LSBG: "democracy = anarchy" and even "strong government" as a preferred alternative
  - LNEBG: "democracy in theory" + voter apathy
  - MUK: "guest position" and fatigue with political issues
  - MME: "hypocrisy" (democratic label without real equality/inclusion)

The clearest differences

- Local Bulgarian groups (LSBG /LNEBG) talk democracy mostly as a deficit of working institutions (very neutral-descriptive talk; democracy is a "broken mechanism").
- Ukrainians (MUK) hold the most normative and "socio-economic" reading: democracy = equality + accountability + middle class.

- Syrians (MME) 'ground' it in micro-practices of agency/dignity, with greater sensitivity to exclusion/double standards.

### Democracy links with identity, cohesion, belonging and resilience

#### Democracy ↔ Identity

- MUK: in TOP\_RELATIONS, democratic assessments (equality/accountability/middle class) co-occur strongly with identity frames such as "Europe through an external view" and professional role/recognition (democracy becomes part of "who I am" as a citizen/European).
- LSBG /LNEBG : identity is kept as a separate frame from "governance models" (in the codebook this is even methodologically marked: e.g. "moderation outside communities" does not include specific governance models - they go into democracy). Interpretive: political polarisation/governance is an external 'pressure' on identity, but analytically kept separate.

#### Democracy ↔ Cohesion

- Cohesion "breaks" through distrust, but the codebook draws an important line: interpersonal closure is cohesion, and distrust of institutions/politics is coded to democracy.
- MUK: the most striking link is that mutual aid co-occurs with the democratic ideal of equality (community practices are experienced as 'democratic' in the sense of equivalence between people).
- LSBG: democracy co-occurs with cohesion fairly strongly at the level of topic (DEM-COH), which is logical in a "no order/no audibility" narrative → people shut down/tensions rise.

#### Democracy ↔ Resilience

- Here the relationship is most pragmatic: when democracy is experienced as systems working/not working, resilience is activated as "how do we get along anyway". In LNEBG, the top links include Rule of Law ↔ Tools and Systems (i.e. the need for order/rules "translates" into creating practical systems).
- The Resilience codebook also keeps a boundary: assessments of democracy/elections are not resilience, but hope/plans may include "political optimism" while "only discontent without perspective" remains in democracy.
- MME: democracy is about resilience through learning/orientation (rules, institutions, complaints, learning) - democratic inclusion is part of coping.

#### Democracy ↔ Belonging

- Belonging is 'tuned' to where democracy seems more real: in LSBG and LNEBG, Europe/EU is strongly present as an external standard or pressure, which is directly visible in the co-occurrence Bulgaria vs Europe ↔ Europe: standard and dictate.
- In the affiliation codebook itself, it is clearly noted that "EU as power/dictate" is treated as democracy (rather than as affiliation) - interpretively, this indicates that "Europe" is experienced both as identity/affiliation and as a political regime of governance.

- MUK /MME: 'guest/refugee' status regulates readiness for political evaluation and perceived voice (in the UK it is explicitly articulated as 'guest position'/tiredness).

## 7.2 Identity (IDN)

### Brief interpretation for the Migrants Middle East (MME) group:

In MME narratives, parenthood and breadwinning sit at the core of identity, alongside layered identities of origin and forced displacement. Religion often becomes publicly visible, and a future-oriented “citizen” identity frames settlement as a long-term project. Some accounts also describe a personal “restart” after migration and an identity grounded in fairness, equality, and freedom.

#### **Parenthood as identity core**

Parenthood is narrated as a core of identity: “who I am” is described through protecting, stabilizing, and raising children – often with a positive stance and strong future orientation toward children’s well-being (e.g. “...my wish, my hope is to come to Bulgaria, the children to grow up, to study, to become...”; “My children – to study, to learn, and to succeed in Bulgaria.”).

#### **Worker/breadwinner identity**

Self-description as a “worker/breadwinner” provides dignity and recognition. Providing for the family/household is presented as a central part of identity and a practical way to regain stability after displacement (e.g. “For me, work is very important in order to succeed as a person.”; “If I don’t work, I’m dead.”).

#### **Ethnic/national self and the “refugee” label**

Ethnic/national self-identification (e.g., “Syrian/Arab”) and the “refugee” label often coexist. One expresses belonging and origin; the other marks coercion, vulnerability, and the uncertainty of being seen as temporary (e.g. “I am still Syrian.”; “Of course, I applied for asylum and settled here.”).

#### **Religious identity & visibility in public**

Religion and the visibility of religion (including wearing a hijab) emerge as points of tension. Identity becomes more “visible” in public and therefore more exposed to comments, gazes, and potential stigmatization (e.g. “As for the hijab, for me it is normal.”; “For example, someone who makes them hear bad words, like ‘Look at her hijab’ or ‘Don’t wear a hijab,’ etc.”)

#### **Future “citizen” identity**

A future “citizen” identity is narrated as a project and an ideal self: striving to become “part of this country”, not only to live in Bulgaria. This future orientation is also tied to everyday practicalities of settlement (e.g. “I think about the future - about becoming a citizen of Bulgaria.”; “When I become Bulgarian, I will be able to take out a loan.”).

#### **Identity through values of equality and freedom**

Identity is also expressed through values of fairness, equality, and low racism, and through recognition of women’s freedom and non-imposition in everyday relations (e.g. “Women here are very free.”; “They don’t impose anything.”).

### **Identity transformation/“restart” after migration**

Some narratives frame identity as a personal “restart,” described in a positive light as rebuilding life and experiencing more freedom after migration. Across subthemes, identities are narrated less as “celebration of the self” and more as mechanisms for reordering life after rupture (e.g. “We started a new life, from the beginning.”; “Now I feel as if I have been reborn.”).

Links with other themes

The strongest link for MME identity narratives is with resilience: “parent” and “breadwinner” are both identities and coping strategies (family as a resource, work as a support, and hope for a future without war) that help regain control.

With belonging, identity links run through the “future citizen” project and children as a bridge to connect the self to “here” (Bulgaria), alongside acceptance/help from locals and transnational threads between “here” and “there” (place of origin and other countries).

Democracy is less directly tied to identity than other themes in MME narratives. Respondents speak more about safety/order and practical settlement than abstract civic ideals, though rights, fairness, and equality can still matter as reference points.

With cohesion, links run more through internal networks and practical help than through abstract notions of “community.”

#### Brief interpretation for the Migrants Ukraine (MUK) group:

In MUK narratives, identity is strongly reflexive and positional – often thought through Europe, professional recognition, and debates over nationality and language. Alongside these, parent/protector roles, mobility, and patriotism (as loyalty) are recurring identity anchors, with values of respect/love and occasional humor serving as coping frames.

### **Professional role and recognition**

A central identity task is restoring “who I am” through professional qualifications, diplomas, language learning, and recognition of skills. Professional identity becomes a way to regain continuity and agency in a new environment (e.g. “If we are talking about office work – no. Because I need the language... I’m starting a Bulgarian language course.”; “Nobody hires me at 70. You need certificates, language, and then you can try.”).

### **Europe through an “external” gaze**

Europe is perceived both as a framework of rules and protection and as a space where MUK feel “from the outside” and must prove themselves. This produces a positional identity: living inside Europe while not always feeling fully “of” it (e.g. “In Bulgaria I feel in Europe, but also like a person ‘from the outside’ who must prove themselves.”; “Europe is an idea, but in reality there are many different standards by country.”).

### **Nationality versus language**

Language becomes a moral and political line (e.g., claims that speaking Ukrainian defines who counts), but it is also tied to biography and everyday life. Identity is negotiated through tensions between

nationality and language use (including being Ukrainian while speaking Russian) and debates over who counts as a “real” member of the nation (e.g. “I am Ukrainian by nationality, but I speak Russian. Is that patriotic or not?”; “They told me I have to speak Ukrainian... I can speak both Ukrainian and Russian.”).

### **Parental/protector identity**

Parenthood is narrated as an identity of care and protection – especially managing uncertainty around school, doctors, routines, and above all safety. Children become a reason to endure and to rebuild daily life (e.g. “It is important that the child is calm, not to hear sirens.”; “It is safe for the child – that was the main thing.”).

### **Nomadic identity/mobility**

Many narratives include life “in suitcases” and readiness to move again depending on work, safety, and uncertainty about settlement. Mobility becomes an identity stance as well as a practical survival strategy (e.g. “We thought about Spain, Croatia, Bulgaria... then Germany... constant moving.”; “We set off across the border... to Romania... then Bulgaria.”).

### **Patriotism as loyalty**

Patriotism is often narrated as loyalty and responsibility toward people and homeland, without equating the state with the government. It can combine inner connection, practical help, and moral distinction between the country and its leadership (e.g. “To love the state does not mean to love the government. These are different things.”; “I help our people. For me that is loyalty – to not abandon [them].”).

### **Identity through values: respect and love**

Values of respect and love appear as a moral compass for survival and relationships. This framing universalizes dignity (“a person is a person”) and emphasizes how to relate ethically across differences (e.g. “Honestly, for me it doesn’t matter whether a person is Bulgarian, European, or from somewhere else. A person is a person.”; “I think everything should be done through love.”).

### **“Survivor” identity & humor**

In some narratives, humor becomes a coping strategy that helps meaning-making despite difficulty – holding together tears and laughter in the same story (e.g. “Actually I laugh. I laugh a little to myself and feel compassion for those people.”; “And I will cry over the book, with tears and with laughter...”).

Overall, MUK identities are strongly reflexive and positional: “who am I” is thought through Europe, nationality and language, professional role and recognition, parental responsibility, and mobility. These identities constantly translate themselves between contexts.

### **Links with other themes**

In MUK identity narratives, there is a dense link with resilience: parenthood, values, and inner strength become coping strategies, including when dealing with bureaucracy, health-related issues, and losses.

With democracy, the link is strong and particularly visible through Europe -expectations for equality, accountability, and standards, alongside disappointments or ambivalence when these are not met.

With belonging, identity is anchored through children, language, and social chains/support that make “here” (Bulgaria) more real without erasing “there” (Ukraine).

With cohesion, the link runs through diaspora mutual aid and tensions in community channels (including online), where community can both support and exhaust people’s resources.

### Brief interpretation for the Locals North-East Bulgaria (LNEBG) group/ local perspectives around the Ukrainian influx:

In LNEBG narratives, identity is articulated in a more civic and competence-based register - through education, standards, rules, and activity. Professional circles function as a key social environment. Patriotism is often framed as everyday civic action, and tolerance is negotiated through boundaries. European identity appears mainly as values and rules; critical pride and non-xenophobic national attachment are present but less central.

#### **Identity through literacy and hierarchies**

Identity is often articulated through competence, education, and a sense of social ladder, alongside critique of a lack of civic culture. This identity layer is frequently voiced in a tense or ambivalent register and is used to evaluate society or “how things should be” (e.g. “The higher people are people with education...”; “The lack of knowledge, of interest... their worldview closes more and more.”).

#### **Identity through professional environment as a circle**

Identity is also expressed through belonging to professional communities and networks – work as an environment that structures social ties, shared norms, and even friendships (e.g. “Through the professional society that surrounds me, this is my environment.”; “Has also turned into my circle of friends...”).

#### **Patriotism as action**

Patriotism is narrated as everyday civic practice – voting, filing reports/signals, and sustained effort for change – rather than symbolism. It is tied to responsibility for the future, including children (e.g. “An ordinary Bulgarian citizen who pays taxes... I vote...”; “To try somehow for this to change... for... the future and the children.”).

#### **Identity boundaries and tolerance**

Openness to others is often paired with clear limits - expectations of order, reciprocity, and acceptable public behavior. Tolerance can be framed as conditional and negotiated in everyday encounters (e.g. “On the road - no, I can’t tolerate it...”; “It annoys me... to hear much more Ukrainian speech than Bulgarian.”).

#### **European as values**

European identity is framed primarily as cultural-value belonging – ideas, history, and rules/standards – rather than only as material living standard (e.g. “It means to follow the rules and laws of Europe.”; “Europe is the greatest intellectual community...”).

### **Self-definition through roles**

Identity is also articulated through social roles (family member, parent, worker/professional, “ordinary citizen”) and everyday responsibilities that give meaning and direction (e.g. “I consider myself a realized, average Bulgarian... my niche as a specialist...”; “An ordinary Bulgarian citizen who pays taxes... I vote...”).

### **Critical Bulgarian pride**

Pride in Bulgaria is often expressed in a critical mode – love for the country can coexist with dissatisfaction toward governance and public life (e.g. “Bulgaria is a little paradise... not thanks to the government...”; “I can’t say that I’m a proud Bulgarian woman...”).

### **Nationalism without xenophobia**

Some narratives distinguish national attachment from xenophobia, emphasizing empathy or non-aggression toward people in need – even when disapproval or distance is present (e.g. “The struggle to explain... that these are people in need.”; “Even though I don’t approve... I don’t get into conflicts with them.”).

In summary, self-definition in LNEBG is more civic and competence-based. Identity is articulated mostly through roles, rules, cultural standards, and activity; less through community comforts and more through a normative horizon.

### **Links with other themes**

In LNEBG narratives, there is a clear linkage of identity with democracy and resilience. “Patriotism as action” and “European as values” make democracy part of “who I am” (civic role/standard). Both tie to rules/laws and to tools for coping; coping often runs through these tools/systems and perspective, not only emotional support.

With belonging, identity links are more selective - more through roots/family decisions and less through everyday togetherness. Roots/family/place matter, but do not dominate as strongly as in LSBG.

With cohesion, identity links are comparatively weaker: identity is not narrated mainly as “we as a community,” but as “me and my standards/roles” (for example, as a civic/professional role).

### Brief interpretation for the Locals South Bulgaria (LSBG) group/ local perspectives around the MME corridor:

In LSBG narratives, identity centers on family and kin, and on local/town image. Patriotism is typically “modest” and non-showy, while Bulgarian-ness is described as a hoped-for path of development and normality. Religious tolerance is narrated as everyday coexistence, and an ambivalent Eastern European self-perception appears through West/East comparisons. Occupational identity is present but less central; a non-aligned, moderate stance toward formal communities appears as respondent-specific.

### **Family and kin**

Family and kin are described as the most stable center of identity, including practical roles (parent/partner), lineage memory, and loved ones. This identity layer is usually voiced in a positive tone and functions as a baseline for how everyday life is evaluated (e.g. “My closest circle... friends, relatives, family.”; “They are well so that we are well and calm. As parents.”).

### **Local identity**

Local identity (e.g., Harmanli) works as a label of “who we are here” – a small-town rhythm, changes in the environment, and sometimes external stigma linked to migration routes (e.g. “When they say I’m from Harmanli they ask - there, with the migrants, how do you get along?”; “Annual gatherings of the whole town... fairs... something that brings the community of our town together.”).

### **“Modest” patriotism (without showiness)**

Patriotism is often expressed as quiet loyalty without heroization or showiness – attachment to Bulgaria through everyday choosing-to-stay and emotional belonging (e.g. “I feel fondness for Bulgaria. I stand by Bulgaria. But feats like that... - no.”; “It’s hard here, but I prefer it here.”).

### **Bulgarian-ness in progress**

Bulgarian-ness is narrated as desired development and normality – livelihood, care for people, and hope that things will go on the right path – alongside critique of hollow symbols. This layer is often future-oriented as an ideal self-image for the town and country (e.g. “The best thing is for people to have a livelihood... for there to be care for people.”; “We want... to be Europeans. We want... to live better, but somehow we can’t manage...”).

### **Religious tolerance**

Religious tolerance appears as everyday, “domestic” ethics of coexistence, expressed through a principle of not judging people by religion or nationality and through normalized contact (e.g. “I... don’t judge people either by religion... or by nationality.”; “I communicate with Muslims... I have no problem at all.”).

### **Eastern European self-perception**

A more ambivalent layer frames identity as “European, but peripheral/behind others”, often through comparisons between Western and Eastern Europe (including Bulgaria) and reflections on rules, standards, and living conditions (e.g. “In Europe... strict rules... and with us there is always a loophole.”; “Only they (Western European countries) have a higher living standard.”).

### **Occupation and profession as self**

Occupational identity appears as a self-description tied to ownership, status, and the social circles that work creates, though it is less central than family and local identity (e.g. “The office is mine.”; “I’m... a broker...”).

**Non-aligned but moderate identity**

A respondent-specific narrative articulates distance from formal communities or “clubs”, expressing skepticism toward collective causes while maintaining everyday networks of family and friends (e.g. “For which community would you sacrifice yourself? For which?”; “No. There is no other such group.”).

Overall, identities in LSBG encompass mostly family (support) and local/town image. Talking about “us” is rarely through abstract ideologies; more often through kin, place, ordinary life, normality, and coexistence.

**Links with other themes**

In LSBG narratives, identity links most densely with cohesion and belonging: family identity often becomes the filter through which social tension/fear is experienced, especially around vulnerable groups. This increases sensitivity to (in)security and fear, especially regarding women/children. Both local identity and family identity structure who is “one of us”, what is normal, and how coexistence works. Local identity also connects to talk about getting used to ethnic groups and how everyday life “normalizes” differences.

With resilience, the link runs mostly through family, which can be both a resource and a point of anxiety. Coping often occurs through maintaining a normal local rhythm.

With democracy, the link is weaker. While democracy is often an evaluation of the system (state/rules), identity in this group is more local and family-based.

Cross-group synthesis

Identity (“who I am”) is anchored differently across groups, even though there are common layers of identity:

**Family/parenthood as a universal identity anchor**

- For migrants from the Middle East (MME) and migrants from Ukraine (MUK), family/parenthood is in the core of the self as parent/protector.
- For locals from South Bulgaria around the “MME corridor” (LSBG), family is the “quiet” base through which security and social tensions are understood.
- For locals from North-East Bulgaria around the “Ukrainian influx” (LNEBG), it is articulated as one of many social roles – everyday responsibilities that give meaning and direction.
- Work/profession as survival, dignity and legitimacy
- For MME, this identity layer is articulated mostly as a worker/breadwinner striving to survive and gain respect.
- For MUK, it is often narrated as professional recognition (diplomas, language, access to labor).
- For LNEBG, it is mostly expressed as social identity shaped by professional circles through shared values, interests, and norms.
- For LSBG, it is less prominent as an identity layer in interviews.

**Europe (EU) as a different type of identity resource**

- For MUK, Europe is mostly an “outside” position, including fear, hope, and/or standards.
- For LNEBG, Europe is mostly values, culture, and/or rules.

- For LSBG, Europe is often framed through Eastern European (incl. Bulgarian) peripherality.
- For MME, Europe is a weaker identity core; stronger is the “settlement/citizenship” project.

Identity “visibility” and labels

- Only for MME, the salience and visibility of religion (hijab) and the “refugee” label direct identity tensions.
- For MUK, the tension is more through language/attributions and the need to prove oneself.

Overall, locals (both LNEBG and LSBG) describe identity primarily as place-and-history (and secondarily as “European”). Migrants (both MME and MUK) describe identity primarily as future reconstruction (children, work, safety), with belonging conditional on stability and opportunity.

Identity links with cohesion, belonging, democracy and resilience

- The most stable axis is identity–resilience (especially among displaced groups MME and MUK). Identity layers (parent, breadwinner, professional) are both “self” and coping to “stay afloat”.
- The second axis is identity–belonging, where home is constructed through children, language, work, and local/social chains.
- The identity–democracy link becomes central where Europe (EU) and/or rules serve as a personal compass (mostly for MUK and LNEBG).
- The identity–cohesion link is most visible when security and coexistence are lived through family roles and local everyday life (especially for LSBG).

### 7.3 Belonging (BEL)

Exploring the belonging construct, from a psychological perspective and in the context of migration processes, is a cornerstone for understanding the key drivers of successful integration of people into new environments. Belonging has undoubtedly broad definitions that encompass 1/ the perception of being an integral part of a group, place, or system (Allen, 2021; Malone, Pillow & Osman, 2012), as well as 2/ the experience of deep connection with people, places, and values, which carries a sense of emotional safety and “being at home” (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The qualitative results from the WE-ID in-depth study, on both migrants and members of a hosting EU borderline country (Bulgaria), reveal fundamental needs, expectations, and perceptions that not only inform us but help us highlight both common foundations and group-specific differences in how people construct the feeling of being 'at home' in migration settings.

Brief interpretation for the Migrants Middle East (MME) and Migrants Ukraine (MUK) groups (shared pillars):

The most salient shared themes are Safety as home, Language as key/prerequisite, Social networks and community spaces and Children as anchor/bridge.

Across both groups, belonging begins with physical safety, which is equated with calmness, normality, and the possibility to plan long-term. Language functions simultaneously as access and boundary: it opens work, services, and friendships, yet its absence creates distance and insecurity. Social networks—whether community-based spaces (mosques, parks, neighbourhoods) or organised groups and centres—operate as practical pathways into everyday belonging. Children stabilise belonging by

transforming it from a personal feeling into a future-oriented commitment; however, this anchoring effect is stronger among Ukrainians, while for MME it often remains a bridge shaped by transnational ties and experiences of stigma.

Overall, migrant belonging is structured around safety, access, social embedding, and intergenerational continuity, but its stability varies depending on prior migration experiences, language proximity, and exposure to exclusion.

### Brief interpretation for the Migrants Middle East (MME) group:

The most salient themes are Transnational connection, Community places, Language barrier, and Neighborhood/visiting, followed by Home through security, Reception and assistance, and Looks/tension.

MME belonging is structurally layered: everyday safety and routine places create a workable sense of 'here', while strong cross-border family ties keep belonging distributed between 'here' and 'there'. Language barriers and visible differences (such as looks/comments/stigma) can interrupt inclusion even when physical safety is present. Children operate as an important bridge to long-term integration, but with ambivalence linked to uncertainty and social acceptance.

### Brief interpretation for the Migrants Ukraine (MUK) group:

The most central themes are Language as a key, Social chain of contacts, Home = safety, Sea as home, Children as family anchor, Material rooting, and Rejection/barriers.

MUK belonging appears as a process rather than a fixed status: first stabilization and safety, then social wiring through networks and neighbours, then investment in language, children, and material rootedness. The group shows a strong future orientation and practical integration logic, but belonging remains conditional where service barriers, rejection, or war-related anxiety persist.

### Brief interpretation for the Locals North-East Bulgaria (LNEBG) group / local perspectives around the Ukrainian influx:

The dominant orientation is Roots and homeland, with support from Belonging through contacts and Family as anchor.

For this group, belonging is mostly experienced as continuity and inherited attachment to place rather than as a construct that must be built. It is stable, routine-based, and socially embedded in existing circles. European belonging is present more as a pragmatic standard (order, institutions, quality of life) than as an emotional identity. Tension emerges mainly when visible otherness increases in everyday public spaces.

### Brief interpretation for the Locals South Bulgaria (LSBG) group/ local perspectives around the MME corridor:

The strongest themes are Integration through work, Spatial boundary of the camp, Close circle belonging, Bulgaria vs Europe, and Calmness of place, with Migration as transit and Nostalgia/return.

LSBG belonging is highly local and context-sensitive: people describe strong attachment to town routine, predictability, and close circles, while simultaneously structuring belonging through a town-

camp distinction. Legitimacy of newcomers is often evaluated through work participation, language, and perceived permanence, which makes belonging both strong and conditional.

### Cross-group synthesis

Common axes (common 'skeleton' of belonging)

1. Safety and everyday predictability as a base for belonging
  - MME: Home through security and calmness in the host context
  - MUK: Home = safety, with fear/trauma still present
  - LNEBG: belonging as a stable continuity of a familiar place
  - LSBG: calmness and local rhythm as core anchoring mechanisms
2. Social embeddedness as a mechanism (ties, circles, bridges)
  - MME/MUK: Belonging grows through neighbourhood, community hubs, support networks
  - LNEBG/LSBG: Belonging is maintained through family, close circles, and routine contacts
  - Across groups: bridging ties expand belonging; encapsulated ties narrow it
3. Language and recognition as thresholds of inclusion
  - MUK/MME: language is both a bridge (access/work/friendships) and a boundary
  - Locals: linguistic visibility can activate perceptions of distance and separation
4. Time horizon and permanence
  - Migrants: belonging is gradually built through decisions, investments, and future planning
  - Locals: belonging is assumed and becomes explicit mostly under change pressure
5. Place as a symbolic and practical anchor
  - MUK: sea geography and housing rootedness support emotional settlement
  - LSBG: camp proximity structures social boundary-making
  - LNEBG: roots/homeland frame place as identity continuity
  - MME: belonging is place-based but transnationally distributed

The clearest differences

- MME: strongest transnational layering; belonging split between host-country safety and cross-border identity/family ties.
- MUK: most process-driven integration trajectory (language + children + networks + material rootedness) with high practical agency.
- LNEBG: most continuity-based belonging model, relatively less negotiated and more identity-rooted.

- LSBG: most context-conditioned belonging model, shaped by town-camp proximity, labour legitimacy, and perceived temporality.

### Belonging links with democracy, identity, cohesion and resilience

#### Belonging ↔ Identity

- For migrants, identity is dynamic and role-based (parent, worker, language learner, protector), and belonging is negotiated through these roles over time.
- For MME, transnational identity keeps belonging multi-sited (here/there). For MUK, identity reconfiguration is tied to children, safety, and future settlement.
- For locals, identity is more territorially stable; belonging protects continuity and becomes salient when social landscape changes.

#### Belonging ↔ Cohesion

- Cohesion is the main social channel through which belonging becomes visible in everyday life (neighbours, groups, volunteering, reciprocal support).
- Internal cohesion can stabilize belonging but may remain parallel and inward-facing if bridges with other groups are weak.
- Belonging expands where contact is mixed and routine; it contracts where circles remain separate and interaction is low-trust.

#### Belonging ↔ Resilience

- In migrant groups, resilience resources (family, language learning, work orientation, social networks, material stabilization) enable belonging formation.
- In local groups, belonging to familiar micro-contexts supports resilience under institutional dissatisfaction or rapid social change.
- Across groups, resilience and belonging form a feedback loop: coping practices build belonging, and growing belonging improves adaptive capacity.

#### Belonging ↔ Democracy

- Belonging is strongly affected by how institutions are experienced in everyday encounters (access to services, fairness, dignity, audibility).
- For migrants, refusals and unequal treatment weaken belonging; fair procedures and respectful interaction strengthen it.
- For locals, democratic dissatisfaction can narrow belonging to family/local circles, while 'Europe' often functions as both governance benchmark and belonging frame.

#### Overall synthesis

Belonging in the four-group model is an integrative construct at the intersection of identity, cohesion, resilience, and democracy. It strengthens when people experience safety, social bridges, fair

institutional access, and realistic pathways to participation. It weakens when recognition is conditional, networks remain parallel, and inclusion is perceived as unstable. In this sense, belonging is neither purely emotional nor purely structural: it is a lived process that translates social conditions into everyday attachment to place and future.

#### 7.4 Social Cohesion (COH)

Social cohesion is essential for sustaining stable and resilient societies, as it relies on interpersonal trust, social support, strong relationships, civic engagement and legitimate institutions. It contributes to both systematic and ontological security by helping individuals and groups adapt their identities and maintain resilient social structures. Cohesion, however, can have a dual effect: while it may foster integration, strong in-group bonds can also hinder it, particularly in interactions between migrants and local communities. Qualitative research using inductive thematic analysis seeks to identify subthemes and peripheral aspects of social cohesion, enriching understanding of its meanings and everyday manifestations. This approach reveals how cohesion is experienced, constructed and maintained within real social contexts and highlights similarities and differences across group narratives. As a next step, the emerging subthemes can be compared with Bottoni's (Bottoni, 2018) theoretical model, which distinguishes micro, meso and macro levels and subjective and objective dimensions. Finally, connections between cohesion and related concepts such as belonging, identity, resilience and democracy can be explored through quantitative indicators in text corpora.

##### Brief interpretation for the Migrants Middle East (MME) group:

In the group of migrants from the Middle East, social cohesion is present mostly as a characteristic of the kinship and family circle and as an internal interconnectedness within the migrant communities themselves (respect between people, greetings to strangers of the same nationality, feeling that "there is no division"). In addition, respondents describe online migrant groups as an effective resource for mutual support. Parallel to these themes are two "borders": limited mixing (which is attributed exclusively to the language barrier) and partial connections with local people (friendships/blended families).

##### **Cohesion in Family and kinship circle**

Cohesion is often limited to family and relatives. Narratives describe meetings "at home", connected to small circle of trust ( e.g. *"They gather only in the family and relatives who are here, with others"; "There is not a single family that left without taking their children"; "That's why I brought my relative back to try to get him to work with me. I told him that the country here is better... I'm looking forward to meet him"; "I hope that my family will come so that we can be together and achieve psychological stability, stability as a family"*)

##### **Interconnectedness in migrant communities**

Descriptions of cohesion between Syrians/migrants communities: respect, greetings, "no division" (e.g. *"This means that there is interconnectedness, that is, among the Syrians here, among themselves"; "Syrians communicate, respect each other a lot, and greet each other" -; "Syrians help those they know well"*)

### **Community hierarchy/ Eldership**

Cohesion through hierarchy/experience: “earlier arrivals” guide newcomers for documents, orientation in institutions etc. (e.g. *“Those who came earlier, in the past, they know, they will tell us”; “For example, they will guide us”*)

### **Cohesion in cybercommunities/ Online groups as a resources:**

Cohesion via online groups in WhatsApp/Facebook etc.: job search, “where to find” questions (e.g. *“Through Facebook, they post ads for work that we need to do, and so on.”*)

### **Relations with local people:**

Cohesion between groups, which includes friendships, mutual assistance with Bulgarians and mixed families (e.g. *“I have Bulgarian friends, a neighbor”; “My husband is Bulgarian”; “And there are Arabs who have married Bulgarian women”*)

### **Barriers and limitations to communication:**

Low cohesion between communities due to language/misunderstanding and lack of contact: “we don’t know many people”(e.g. *“To be honest, I don't have many Bulgarian friends because I don't speak the language yet”; “No, we can't communicate with Bulgarians because they don't know Arabic, and we don't know Bulgarian”*)

### **Division in society:**

Perception of division (e.g. “supporters/opponents”), visible through social media or observations ( e.g. *“I feel that there is a division”; “There are supporters and opponents”; “No, no, that means there is no division at all”*)

### **Poverty and inequality:**

Cohesion is thought through socio-economic faults (poverty, financial difficulties) ( e.g. *“Bulgaria is a poor country”; “And they live in containers, right?”*)

For Middle Eastern migrants cohesion is a “social capsule” built on strong internal trust, especially within families and close communities. Digital groups help them navigate work and institutions, while contact with locals remains limited. Language barriers restrict wider networking, and perceptions of societal division, poverty and inequality shape their broader understanding of social cohesion as both relational and structural.

### **Brief interpretation for the Migrants Ukraine (MUK) group:**

In this group, the topic of cohesion is very clearly structured around internal mutual aid and neighborly solidarity, but it is also connected with tensions in (online) groups. In addition, there is a strong line of intergroup bridges through joint volunteering and professional contacts. Language differences at school stand out as a barrier, and a factor for fear /closure.

### **Ukrainian Mutual Aid/Interconnectedness in Migrant Communities**

Intra-group cohesion: helping “without unnecessary questions” and willingness to help a stranger (e.g. *“...In the hotels... Ukrainians helped each other — some with translation, some with documents” ;*

*"...The group for Ukrainians by the sea is very active... people respond quickly" ; "...When you are in a community, you don't feel alone."*)

### **Conflicts in Online Groups**

Cohesion is undermined by quarrels/tensions in online groups (Viber, Telegram etc.) and reluctance to participate (e.g. *"... We have groups in Viber, in Telegram and I see how people fight with each other there. And I don't like that" ; "...Such conflicts... there are... somebody is not satisfied with someone" ; "...Online groups sometimes help, sometimes create tension"*)

### **Fear and Community Closure/Encapsulation**

Some people maintain cohesion through “closure” and encapsulation: fear of locals/consequences and staying in their own community (e.g. in hotels) (e.g. *"...There are people who are afraid of everything... and close themselves off" ; "...At first we didn't say 'hello' to our neighbors... we were closed off" ; "...Fear makes a person withdraw from communication"*)

### **Neighborhood Solidarity**

Cohesion is seen in daily local mutual assistance (neighbors, neighborhood), which makes difficulties “lighter” (e.g. *"...And here, all our neighbors come and bring food." ; "Of course, they help... it's nice when there are many people who are the same"*)

### **Language Differences in School**

Cohesion/tension around language: high share of Ukrainian children changes overall communication in class and this creates limitations/concerns (e.g. *"...The language balance at school is difficult — children learn in Bulgarian, but at home it is a different language" ; "...School is the place where language either includes you or excludes you" ; "...When a child does not understand the language, he first closes himself off."*)

### **Professional Bridges**

Connections between groups are built through work/services (e.g. repair crews, medical/humanitarian projects) (e.g. *"...Through work you meet people, it's a bridge" ; "...Colleagues and the professional environment help you feel like a part of something" ; "...Some people here are looking for Ukrainians for work because they are disciplined"*)

### **Joint Volunteering**

Intergroup cohesion: Ukrainians and Bulgarians act together in disasters/crisis (cleaning, collecting clothes) (e.g. *"...I participate in volunteer trips for doctors... I translate..." ; "...Coordinator of a humanitarian medical project... volunteer doctors... hotels with refugees" ; "...Volunteers and NGOs were key in the first weeks"*)

The refugee group from Ukraine shows a profile with high cohesion, but not without friction and conflicts (including intra-community). As main trends we can summarize:

- Bonding (intra-group): strong practical mutual assistance (“we help without unnecessary questions”), which compensates for uncertainty.

- Bridging (inter-group): volunteering and professional communities are the main “contact zones” in which cohesion manifests itself both in behavior and in feeling.
- Erosion/ambivalence: fear and closure on the one hand are related to the traumatic background that the ongoing war creates; on the other hand, the presence of conflicts in online groups undermines trust and participation; the school language balance is a “point of tension” where inclusion/exclusion are experienced most acutely.

### Brief interpretation for the Locals North-East Bulgaria (LNEBG) group / local perspectives around the Ukrainian influx:

In this group, the theme of cohesion is refracted primarily through the feeling of a *deficit of local cohesion* (low neighborly responsiveness; “non-cooperative” culture), plus *tension/suspicion* towards newcomers and at the same time “*silent*” *tolerance/refraining from conflict*.

#### **Disinterested neighbors/ lack of neighborly solidarity**

Cohesion at the local level is described as low: lack of responsiveness, “old town spirit” and common actions ( e.g. *"There is no such thing as in the past, as it was... you need something and you start calling this one - "neighbor, I'm out of salt", you call the other one, "give me three potatoes". That thing is no longer there" ; "But there is no [cohesion] in relation to Bulgarians either. No, this is not a matter of bad attitude towards Ukrainians, especially here, for our neighborhood. It's just some kind of... that old city spirit and that essentiality is gone"*)

#### **Ukrainian mutual aid/ Interconnectedness in migrant communities**

Cohesion is observed as strong internal mutual aid in the Ukrainian community/diaspora (especially at the beginning of the war) ( e.g. *"...they are very mutual, they are very mutually supportive. And they are one big family" ; "...we include Ukrainian volunteers... in all citywide celebrations..." ; "...she also helped there, took care of the children"*)

#### **Tension and suspicion**

Cohesion is strained by perceptions of injustice (rents, “luxury,” privileges) that breed suspicion of newcomers ( e.g. *"...the Ukrainian is a poor tourist... and... the dislike for Ukrainians" ; "...rumor has it that the European Union has changed... that must annoy a lot of people" ; "...it annoys me... Ukrainian speech... It annoys me, I don't like it" )*

#### **Silent tolerance/ Conflict avoidance**

Often there is no open conflict: people “accept”, avoid confrontation, but there may be isolated incidents ( e.g. *"...most people accept them, they don't confront them" ; "...I try to suppress this feeling..."*)

#### **Teamwork at the workplace (peripheral topic)**

Cohesion is discussed as “team spirit”, mutual support and respect in a professional environment; erosion is observed ( e.g. *"...professionally... it has also become part of my circle of friends..." ; "...we gather people, we hold sessions, we train them..."*)

**Bridges through mixing**

Cohesion between groups is purposefully built by “mixing” Bulgarians and Ukrainians in volunteering and city-wide initiatives ( e.g. *“...our mission is... to mix groups... to a few Ukrainians, we attach a few Bulgarians...”*)

**Common logistics as a connection**

Cohesion also manifests itself as coordination between different actors (volunteers, hotels, police, fire department) in a common infrastructure for assistance ( e.g. *“...registered... were given... food... water... and were accommodated...”*; *“...they gathered... people in the field... distributed... on lists... (via) Facebook groups...”*)

**Non-cooperative culture**

Lack of cooperation is thought of as a broader Bulgarian characteristic that undermines community cohesion ( e.g. *“...we write, we write... Nothing is taken into account...”* ; *“Nobody knows anything. There is no plan”*)

In the group of respondents from Northern and Eastern Bulgaria, social cohesion is not perceived so much in the sense of “community warmth”, but rather a social climate of (un)cooperation and tension management. Everyday neighborhood and community cohesion is experienced as weak. The tension, arising mainly through social comparison (perception that the other group is unfairly enjoying privileges, receiving benefits, etc.) is the key mechanism for the erosion of intergroup cohesion.

**Brief interpretation for the Locals South Bulgaria (LSBG) group/ local perspectives around the MME corridor:**

In this group social cohesion is clearly defined by neighborly mutual assistance/routine adaptation to ethnic diversity and evident manifestations of fear and insecurity, cultural clashes regarding norms, as well as a division on the socio-economic axis (money/status).

**Neighborly Mutual Aid**

Cohesion as practical mutual assistance between neighbors/acquaintances (including between ethnicities), “we helped each other” (e.g. *“...the neighbors are united”* ; *“...many times they have helped us - me, my family. Yes, we have helped each other”* ; *“...we go and donate to the camp. We just give things to them like that...”* )

**Closure and Mistrust (Peripheral Topic)**

Descriptions of low trust and social “closure”: people distance themselves from each other/from the community (e.g. *“...If we were united, the whole country would be in a very good condition”* ; *“...in these days... [united] is a very strong word...”* ; *“...here people are more concerned with themselves being well... if they can screw the other one...”*)

**Acceptance of Ethnic Diversity**

Normalization of ethnic diversity as a factor for peaceful coexistence (Bulgarian Turks, Roma, Bulgarians) in the region; getting used to migrants from other ethnicities (e.g. *“...over the years we*

*have gotten used to each other"; "...mixed marriages... with Syrians and Bulgarians..."; "...in the first years, yes. Now... we're probably used to it..."*)

### **Group Cohesion of Migrants**

Perception that migrants are strongly cohesive (clans/tribes, group reactions), but also have internal conflicts (e.g. *"...they were quite strongly united... towards this own goal... towards destruction"* ; *"...they constantly walk in groups... Sunnis, Shiites... and they hate each other..."* ; *"They always walk in groups of two, three, they never walk alone..."*)

### **Fear and Vulnerable Groups**

Cohesion is undermined by fear and insecurity (especially for women/mothers/children) during migration waves (e.g. *"The main concern was fear... mothers with children, girls, women"* ; *"Fear. Fear"* ; *"...not to create unrest, such as these rapes, stabbings, thefts"*)

### **Cultural Clash of Norms**

Tension/distance from different public norms and behaviors (hygiene, prayers, gestures); assessment of "not normal" (e.g. *"...they entered the river and started bathing with their clothes on..."* ; *"...decides that he needs to go to the toilet ... wherever... This is normal. For them"* ; *"...they don't respect women that much... and they don't make way for women..."*)

### **Protest Solidarity**

Temporary cohesion around a common issue through protests, initiative committees and civil pressure (e.g. *"...we went on a lot of strikes, we protested a lot... and things were getting better..."* ; *"There were protests"* ; *"...the strikes that were in the city itself against them..."*)

### **Social Hierarchy / Money**

Understanding of "superior/inferior" groups mainly through wealth and class distance (e.g. *"...again it depends on who you are, what kind of person you are..."* ; *"They are above the law. While an ordinary person, the state will crush him..."*)

In this group, cohesion appears in everyday practical cooperation but is shaped by a lingering "memory of tension" from past conflicts within and between communities. Routine coexistence provides a soft buffer, yet a dominant discourse of fear—especially among vulnerable groups—keeps cohesion limited to conditional tolerance.

### Cross-group synthesis

The common axes along which the groups "construct" the concept of cohesion can be summarized as follows:

#### 1. Bonding vs Bridging

- MUK and MME speak naturally about bonding (intra-group mutual aid and family networks) as the first line of cohesion.
- LNEBG and LSBG more often think of cohesion through the local social climate and "local-newcomer" relations (bridges, tolerance, tensions, fear).

## 2. Cohesion as practice (volunteering/logistics/protest)

- In MUK, the most positive mechanism is joint volunteering and professional bridges.
- In LNEBG, “mixing” and “common logistics” are cohesion that is produced through organizational frameworks (especially crisis ones).
- In LSBG, protest solidarity is an important but ambiguous resource: it strongly unites, but in these cases the high cohesion is the result of the perception of outgroup conflict/threat.

## 3. Barriers and catalysts: language, norms, fear as a dominant emotion

- Language: in MME, limited mixing is directly related to the language barrier; in MUK, language is experienced as a factor in maintaining or destroying “balance”, as well as a source of potential tension in the school microenvironment.
- Norms/cultural clashes: key factor for attitudes in LSBG (hygiene/public behavior as a marker of intergroup distance).
- Fear as a dominant emotion: a central eroding force in LSBG and MUK (leading to closure/avoidance), while in LNEBG, erosion more often goes through social comparison and a sense of injustice.

### Summary and conclusions:

In the text corpora of interviews with migrants (MUK and MME), cohesion functions mainly as a resource for survival and orientation (networks, mutual aid, family, online infrastructure).

In interviews with representatives of the local population (LNEBG and LSBG), cohesion often appears as an assessment of the quality of communication and coexistence of people in the settlement/society. Important topics here are, for example, whether there is cooperation, trust, justice, security. Cohesion here is more of a threshold for accepting “others”.

### Cohesion links with democracy, identity, belonging and resilience

The synthesis of the entire text corpus of interviews outlines four common mechanisms linking social cohesion to other concepts:

#### 1) **Cohesion ↔ Resilience:** the “social infrastructure” of coping

- In migrant groups (MUK and MME), cohesion is a direct resource for survival (information, translation, work, system navigation).
- In local groups (LNEBG and LSBG), cohesion is most visibly activated in times of tension/crisis: protests, volunteering, logistics, preparedness.

#### 2) **Cohesion ↔ Belonging:** belonging is made “in contact”

- Where there are functioning everyday connections (neighborhood, chains of acquaintances, community places), belonging grows.
- Where there are boundaries (language barrier, camps/encapsulation, stigma, fear), both weaken and shrink towards a “small circle”.

#### 3) **Cohesion ↔ Identity:** boundaries of “we” and bridges of “roles”

- The strongest “universal” bridges are work/professional role and children/parenthood (appearing as connecting nodes in more than one group).
- The most common faults occur in relation to: language; visible differences - behaviors, clothing, symbols, etc. (which are perceived as indicators of differences in cultural norms and religious affiliation) and hierarchization - most often through markers such as money, status, educational qualifications.

4) **Cohesion ↔ Democracy:** the political environment strongly influences through trust and the sense of justice

- In groups with representatives of the local population (LNEBG and LSBG) democracy is often an “explanation” for low cohesion, with the logic often following the scheme: injustice → distrust → disunity.
- Among respondents from Ukraine (MUK), democratic values are more reduced to a daily assessment of equality and inclusion (which respectively supports or hinders participation and activism).
- Among migrants from the Middle East (MME), the political language is weaker; democracy is more experienced as a freedom/human relationship, with an indirect impact on cohesion.

### 7.5 Resilience (RES)

Resilience is widely understood in the social sciences as positive adaptation - the ability to maintain or regain wellbeing despite adversity. It is often described as a process of adjusting to difficult experiences through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility.

This report explores how resilience is understood and practiced across four participant groups: displaced people from the Middle East, displaced Ukrainians, Bulgarians in coastal regions, and Bulgarians in a region hosting migrants from the Middle East. Using an inductive thematic analysis of interview narratives, it identifies the everyday “building blocks” people rely on to cope and adapt - such as seeking safety, navigating institutions, work and self-reliance, family and community support, integration through language and shared norms, and future-oriented hope.

Rather than treating resilience as a fixed personal trait, the report presents it as a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by the type of adversity people face, the resources available to them (networks, NGOs, institutions, civic action), and the strategies they use to restore predictability and meaning in daily life. It also briefly highlights how resilience practices relate to identity, belonging, cohesion, and experiences with institutions.

#### Brief interpretation for the Migrants Middle East (MME) group:

For participants displaced from the Middle East, resilience is described first as survival through movement: leaving home because of war and danger, often to protect children and family. Migration is narrated not as a choice for opportunity, but as a deliberate strategy to reduce risk and stay alive.

After reaching physical safety, resilience becomes collective and practical, sustained by close relationships and everyday guidance. Family is the core anchor, shaping decisions and future hopes around keeping the household together and securing children’s wellbeing. Social networks - neighbors, friends, and community contacts - help people orient themselves, translate, and

understand where to go and what to do. Resilience is also tied to self-reliance through work, which restores routine, dignity, and a sense of control, even under difficult conditions.

Alongside these practical strategies, many accounts emphasize faith and religious meaning as an emotional buffer that supports patience and hope without replacing action. Language learning is viewed as an important investment for integration, but participation in courses is uneven due to time, work, and access constraints. Looking ahead, the desired future is most often framed as a life without war—peace and normality rather than individual ambition. Finally, some narratives highlight additional vulnerability where resilience means starting over again after administrative pressures or forced relocations. Overall, resilience in this group is best understood as a socially supported process: flight to safety, stabilization through family and networks, rebuilding through work, and endurance through faith and hope.

#### Brief interpretation for the Migrants Ukraine (MUK) group:

For Ukrainian migrants, resilience is described as inner strength put into practice through everyday discipline and active adaptation - a way of “pulling yourself together” and continuing despite war-related fear, grief, and uncertainty (“don’t cry, get up”; “I will manage”; “I don’t know how long...”). Many narratives use meaning-making and positive reframing as a coping resource (“positive energy,” “magnet,” balancing the material with the spiritual), alongside self-care through nature and sport (walks, mountains/forest, “to breathe,” training, healthy routines) to regulate stress and restore a sense of control.

Resilience is also highly practical and competence-based: people describe learning how life “works” in Bulgaria by navigating documents and administration, registering addresses, finding a GP, and securing referrals - turning repeated attempts and confusion into workable pathways. Family care is a major stabilizer (“I respond through love”; the child as “the strongest support”; caring for relatives after losses), while NGOs and volunteers function as an essential bridge to services and social support (guidance, information, meeting spaces, and material help). Many participants emphasize proactive integration - “you have to keep moving” - through language learning, courses/certificates, recognition of qualifications, and independently finding housing and work, often tied to a dignity-based refusal of passive dependence (“no one should give [things]”). Overall, the interviews present resilience not as the absence of hardship, but as the capacity to keep acting, orienting, and caring “despite it all,” combining inner discipline with networks and institutional navigation.

#### Brief interpretation for the Locals North-East Bulgaria (LNEBG) group / local perspectives around the Ukrainian influx:

This group describes resilience as something built in real time, at the point where a sudden crisis meets limited coordination. People remember the earliest moments as a vacuum “there were no rules”—and then narrate how order was created quickly through self-organization: setting up a center from scratch, inventing registration routines, opening hotels, and preparing facilities so arrivals could be accommodated and guided. In this sense, resilience is not only emotional endurance; it is the ability to improvise workable practices when institutions are missing, overwhelmed, or slow.

A second layer of resilience is the creation of tools and systems that turn chaos into something manageable. Interviewees describe building a “first registration system” even without strong state support, collecting key information about health and needs, tracking free places, and organizing

distribution. The emphasis is administrative and logistical: resilience is the effort to systematize information and movement, so that people flows become predictable and resources can be allocated fairly.

Around these crisis practices, support networks function as a practical scaffold. Diaspora contacts, friends, neighbors, and local initiatives take in newcomers, guide them, and connect them to information and services - often through concrete actions like food and clothing support. These accounts frame coping as orientation through people, rather than as abstract opinions about legal status or generalized stereotypes.

At the same time, resilience is narrated as a balance between action and strain. Interviewees speak about psychological vulnerability- frayed nerves, heightened sensitivity, fear during family reunions after long separation, and uncertainty for children close to conflict- showing that coping does not erase fear or trauma. Another strand is readiness and scenarios: families respond to uncertainty with small preparedness strategies, such as quickly issuing passports or planning what to do “if we have to leave,” and then gradually calming after the initial shock.

As the situation stabilizes, integration becomes a resource, not just an end goal. People describe mixing Ukrainians and Bulgarians, quick inclusion in school and community life, and support for learning Bulgarian—often portrayed as working well, especially for children. Finally, two quieter but meaningful supports run through the narratives: moral resilience, expressed through non-violence, charity, and “less conflict inside and around us,” and hope/perspective, expressed through confidence in Ukraine’s future and optimism that Bulgaria can improve after crises. Together, these themes portray resilience as coordinated problem-solving under pressure, supported by networks and values, while continuously shaped by uncertainty and emotional cost.

Brief interpretation for the Locals South Bulgaria (LSBG) group/ local perspectives around the MME corridor:

In this group, resilience is described as the ability to keep everyday life stable in a place shaped by two pressures at once: periods of migration-related tension and longer-term economic insecurity. Stability is narrated through what feels most reliable and workable, family support, quick problem-solving through local channels, and the regulating role of institutions when incidents occur. Many accounts also follow a time trajectory: an earlier period is remembered as “scary,” but the present is often described as more normal, with routines restored and fewer visible problems, even as worries about jobs, depopulation, and the future of small towns remain.

Resilience is grounded first in the family as the closest “infrastructure” of stability. People speak through family roles, caring for children, protecting the household, keeping life organized, and describe tense discussions where decisions about staying, moving, or adapting are filtered through the family perspective. The family is less a broad notion of community cohesion and more a dependable unit that absorbs pressure and keeps daily life functioning.

A second layer is normalization after waves, where resilience is experienced as a reduction of fear over time. Interviewees contrast “before” (high tension, uncertainty) with “now” (calmer routines, “no complaints”). These narratives emphasize change across time - how people re-adjust and life regains rhythm, rather than focusing on structural economic hardship or on a constant, unchanging sense of threat.

Within this storyline, institutional control is framed as a key mechanism for restoring order and security. Police, local administration, and rules appear as practical forces that “work with them,” explain expected behavior, and intervene after problems. The emphasis is on checks, sanctions, and local decisions that shape whether people feel safe, not on political critique or protest.

Alongside institutional order, resilience also appears as self-organization and reporting - small, pragmatic actions aimed at quick solutions. People describe filing complaints, using online reporting, and turning to the mayor, municipality, or local councilor as the first step when something happens. This is resilience as “finding a channel that works,” rather than mass mobilization, demonstrations, or charity as the main response.

Another strand is volunteering in disasters, where resilience becomes readiness for mutual aid in emergencies like fires and floods, and organized giving to those in need. Accounts include participating in extinguishing fires, donating clothes/food/toys through citizen initiatives, or planning to donate blood or volunteer with the Red Cross. This is framed as crisis-response solidarity and organized charity, distinct from everyday neighborly help or political activism.

At the same time, respondents describe resilience as economic survival in places with limited work and depopulation. Here coping is primarily a livelihood strategy - traveling for work, moving to larger cities, or going abroad to support the family, and reflects a hard calculation about how to maintain household stability. These accounts are about managing constraints and sustaining income, rather than expressing belonging (“home is here”) or framing migrants’ labor as the route to integration.

In relation to newcomers, resilience is also described as learning rules and integration - a practical idea of fitting in that reduces tension and supports a normal everyday life. Interviewees emphasize explaining norms, “showing the culture/mentality,” and supporting Bulgarian language learning or joining classes. The focus is on sustainability and functioning, not on culture shock narratives or purely administrative housing/transit arrangements.

Finally, hope and future plans operate as a longer-term resource. People express optimism that things can improve, imagine positive scenarios (returning people, new models), and describe intentions to get involved - politically, professionally, or through volunteering - at some point. This future orientation matters because it turns endurance into a horizon: resilience becomes not only “coping today,” but also maintaining a belief that life can become more predictable and worthwhile over time.

#### Cross-group synthesis

Across the four groups, resilience is built from shared “building blocks” but expressed in different ways. Hope and future orientation appear strongly in all groups. Integration (learning language and rules) is also universal, though locals frame it as helping newcomers “fit in” or as community stabilization, while displaced people describe it as personal agency or an investment for orientation. Social support is present everywhere, but it is structurally central for Middle East migrants (family/networks), strong and often NGO-supported for Ukrainians, and more institution- and community-action-based for locals (reporting channels, control, tools, systems).

The clearest differences are in how resilience is defined and enacted. For Middle East migrants it is most strongly about security and survival (flight to safety), and for Ukrainians it is living and rebuilding under uncertainty and loss. Local residents tend to describe resilience as restoring order,

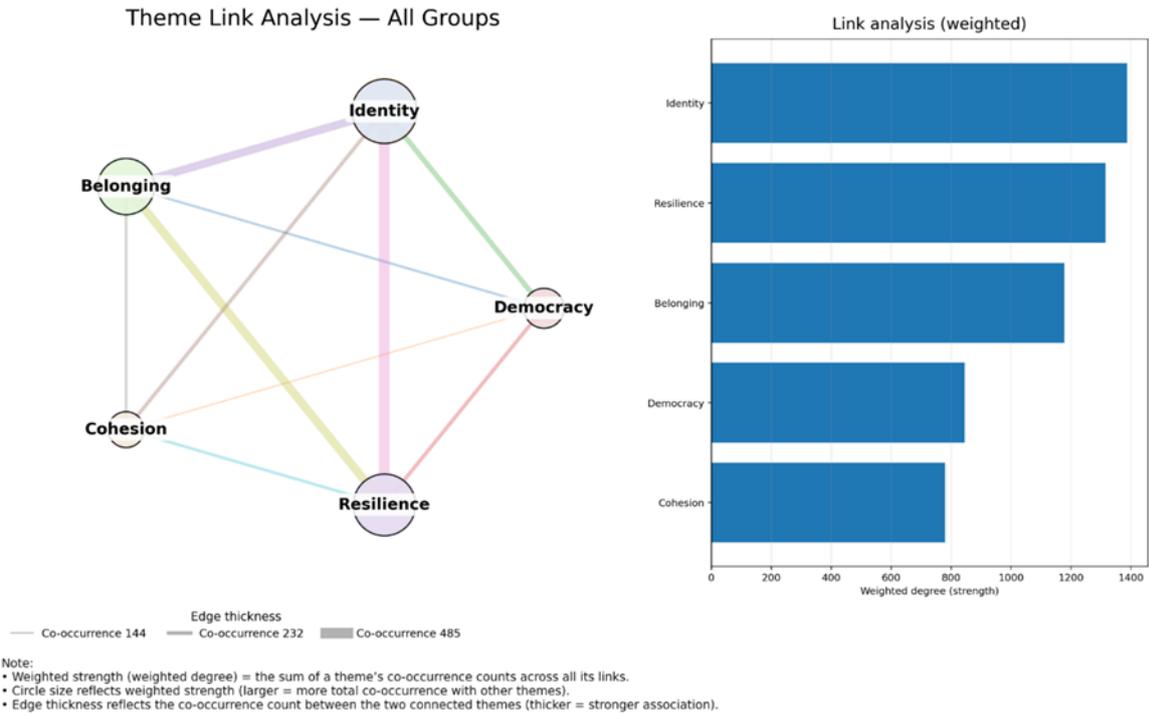
manageability, and normality, either through institutional control and civic practicality (regions hosting Middle East migrants) or through organizational capacity and systems thinking (coastal regions). Action models vary accordingly: locals emphasize reporting, volunteering, and building procedures; Ukrainians emphasize agency, integration, and navigating bureaucracy/healthcare; Middle East migrants emphasize networks, work, and faith/meaning.

### Resilience links with democracy, identity, cohesion and belonging

Resilience also connects differently to wider social themes. Identity supports resilience through roles (parent/provider/professional), values, and meaning, while displacement can reshape identity through adaptation. Belonging acts like an “infrastructure of calm” (safety, home, acceptance, contacts); when it is fragile, resilience becomes harder and more dependent on close networks. Democracy matters mainly through predictability, rights, and functioning institutions - experienced by locals as justice and accountability, and by displaced groups as fair treatment and access to services. Cohesion helps when there is mutual aid and bridging, but is easily disrupted by fear and hierarchies: it is strongest as a tested practice in local hosting contexts, more internal within migrant groups, and moderate among Ukrainians due to both mutual support and tensions.

## 8. Conclusion

Across all groups, the network structure is organised around an Identity–Resilience–Belonging triad (Graphic 1): identity is the most central theme, closely connected to resilience and belonging, and together they form the strongest pattern of co-occurrence in the qualitative material. This indicates that participants predominantly frame their experiences through identity anchors (e.g., family/professional roles), coping/adaptation resources, and the conditions of “home” and recognition. Cohesion appears more weakly connected to this nexus, with the lowest weighted degree and thinner links overall, implying that cohesion is more often articulated as a distinct judgement about coexistence (trust, fairness, security) rather than being integrated into identity–belonging narratives.



Graphic 1: Cross-Group Thematic Link Analysis

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