Concept for the New In-Depth Model on Identity, Belonging, Cohesion, and Democracy

IPHS-BAS

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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	24.04.2026		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. Executive Summary

What this report does

- **An integrative conceptual model of democracy, identity, cohesion, belonging, and resilience - based on inductively derived categories from semi-structured interviews with immigrants and locals in migration-affected localities in an EU borderline country: the case of Bulgaria**
- Explains the main findings from interviews with migrants and locals in migration-affected localities in a borderline country (Bulgaria)
- Shows in an integrative conceptual model how the five constructs work together rather than as separate topics
- Highlights both shared patterns and differences between migrants and local residents
- Offers practical lessons for communities, institutions, and civic actors.

Core claim. The five constructs (democracy, identity, cohesion, belonging, and resilience) do not operate as parallel variables. In the interview corpus, identity and resilience form the main adaptive engine; cohesion is the relational infrastructure through which adaptation becomes socially viable; democracy is the institutional-normative condition that validates or blocks human dignity and rights, audibility, accountability, and order; and belonging is the integrative outcome through which a person or group becomes stably and recognizably 'here/at home'.

Main contribution. Belonging is not merely an emotion or a final attitude. In these data, belonging is the socially and institutionally recognized form of successful stabilization. People build it by converting safety, coping, language, roles, family routines, work, children, everyday contact, and institutional encounters into repeated, legitimate presence in place.

Most important comparative distinction. For migrants, the system is organized primarily around *recognition*: whether one can convert survival and adaptation into accepted presence. For locals, the system is organized primarily around *normalization*: whether coexistence becomes orderly, predictable, and manageable in everyday life.

4. Methodology: An Abductive Model Building Approach

The model presented in this report was built using an *abductive approach*. Inductively generated categories with operational definitions and interview for the five constructs (democracy, identity, cohesion, belonging, and resilience) across four interview groups (N=40; Middle East migrants - N=10; Ukrainian migrants - N=10; locals in North-East Bulgaria - N=10; locals in Southern Bulgaria - N=10) were used as primary empirical material for the model building (see D5.2. Selection Case Studies, Content Analyses). Group interpretative analysis, cross-group and cross-construct links synthesis showed how the five constructs work together in real life circumstances of migration-affected localities. Then, the model was analysed against theory (see D5.3 Report on identities, belonging, cohesion and feeling of democracy) in order to assess fit, limits, and conceptual added value.

The abductive logic used here unfolded in four steps. First, the role of each inductively generated category was analytically interpreted: Was it describing a resource, a threat, a mechanism, a condition or an outcome? Second, the categories were compared across the four groups in order to identify recurring patterns, asymmetries and inversions. This was important because the same issue often appeared in different roles depending on the interviewee's social position. For example, cohesion appeared among migrants mainly as a resource for survival and orientation, while among locals it more often appeared as an assessment of whether coexistence felt viable, fair, and safe. In the same way, democracy was narrated by Middle East migrants through dignity and humane treatment, by Ukrainians through equality and accountability, and by locals through rule of law, audibility, and the workability of institutions.

Third, the interpretation focused on whether the five constructs behaved as parallel themes or as parts of a larger system. Both cross-group synthesis and the links between the five constructs showed repeated clustering: identity linked densely with resilience; cohesion linked with belonging through everyday contact and boundary-making; democracy linked with cohesion and belonging through fairness, order, and access; and belonging repeatedly appeared as the point at which safety, contact, routine, and recognition were either consolidated or blocked. This is the point at which the provisional model was drafted.

In the fourth step, the emerging model was placed in dialogue with the theoretical framework (see D5.1. Mind map of existing models on identity, belonging, cohesion and democracy. and D5.2 Selection Case Studies, Content Analyses). This return to theory did not serve to overwrite the data-driven structure. Rather, it served three specific purposes: 1. to identify which existing theories captured substantial parts of the interview material; 2. to specify where those theories only partially fit, and 3. to make visible what the interview corpus adds beyond them. In other words, the model remains empirically led but theoretically positioned. Theoretical concepts were used as interpretive comparators, not as a coding frame imposed in advance. Therefore, this report should be read as a source-grounded abductive model that is theoretically positioned, analytically reasoned and suitable for further refinement.

5. The Integrative Model at a Glance

The figure below summarizes the proposed model.

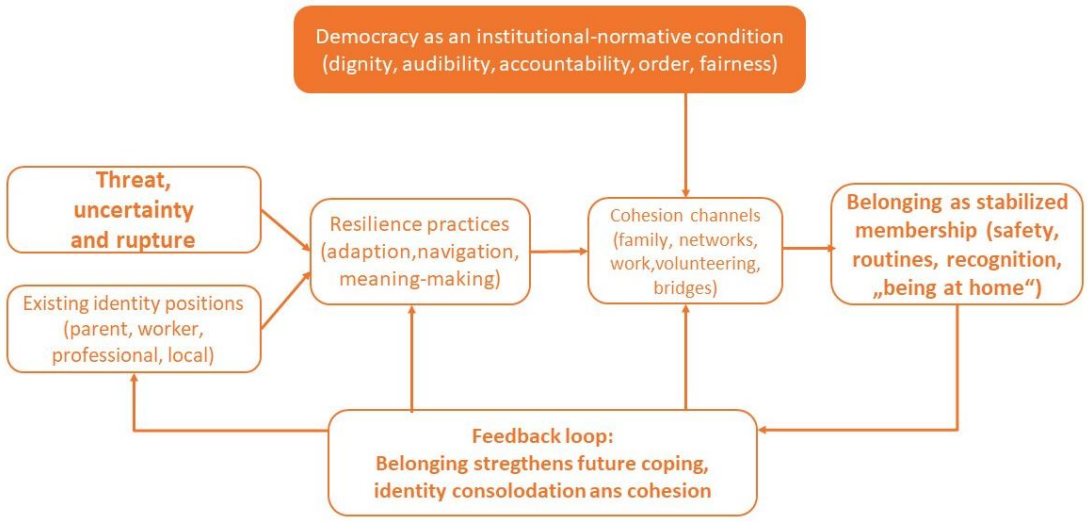

Figure 1. An integrative model of the five constructs as an adaptive-relational-institutional system

6. Structural Role of each Construct in the Model

Construct	Primary role	Typical function in migrant groups	Typical function in local groups
Identity	Interpretive and motivational core	Role-based selfhood under displacement: parent, provider, professional, language learner, future citizen, etc.	Role-, place-, and norm-based selfhood: family member, local resident, civic actor, competent citizen, etc.
Resilience	Adaptive process	Safety, navigation, family support, work, meaning, bureaucracy management, future orientation	Normalization, order restoration, reporting, systems, volunteering, institutional control, scenario-thinking
Cohesion	Relational infrastructure	Bonding networks and practical support that enable orientation and survival	Threshold of coexistence: cooperation, suspicion, tolerance, mixing, fear management, local climate
Democracy	Institutional-normative condition	Experienced through dignity, humane treatment, rights, fairness, access, and accountability	Experienced through rule of law, audibility, equality before rules, trust in working institutions, and order
Belonging	Integrative outcome and feedback loop	Stabilized presence through safety, language, children, contacts, routines and recognition	Stable attachment through place, everyday rhythm, family, calm and the manageability of coexistence

7. Core Mechanism: The Stabilization-Recognition Loop

7.1. Trigger Condition

The common system does not begin with abstract values. It begins with disruption. The five constructs are “activated” when ordinary life becomes unstable, uncertain or difficult to manage. For migrants, this instability is often immediate and biographical: war, forced movement, deportation risk, loss, separation, insecurity and the practical demands of rebuilding life in a new country (Bulgaria). For locals, the trigger is more often social and contextual: the arrival of newcomers, fear during earlier migration waves, the perception of disorder, weak institutional control, low social cooperation or a sense that rules no longer work predictably.

In this sense, the model is activated by different forms of threat (mostly to economic and physical security), but not by threat alone. It is also activated by a breakdown in legibility. People in all four groups ask, in different words, whether life is understandable, manageable, and morally navigable. Middle East migrants speak of fleeing war and seeking calm; Ukrainian migrants describe living through uncertainty, bereavement, and bureaucratic complexity; North-East Bulgarian locals emphasize crisis organization under conditions where 'no one knows anything' and systems have to be built quickly; Southern Bulgarian locals talk about fear, normalization after migrant waves and the need for control, reporting, and restored routine. The trigger condition is therefore best understood as a perceived rupture in security, predictability or social order.

7.2. Identity Activation

Once the system is activated, identity does not function as a static label; it operates as an interpretive and motivational frame. The interviewees do not simply say who they are; they use identity positions to decide what matters, what must be protected, and what kind of action is possible. In the migrant groups, the most recurrent identity positions are parent/protector, worker or professional, national subject and person trying to reconstruct a future. In the local groups, identity is more often grounded in family, locality, professional or civic role, competence and standards of normality.

Identities in the interview corpus are practically framed. Middle East migrants organize identity around parenthood, provision, religion, origin, refugeehood and the project of becoming part of Bulgaria. Ukrainian migrants organize it around professional recognition, language and nationality, parenthood, patriotism, mobility, and a distinctly external gaze toward Europe. Locals in North-East Bulgaria define themselves more through roles, competence, patriotism as action, and European values, while locals in Southern Bulgaria anchor identity more strongly in family, locality, modest patriotism, coexistence and ordinary life. These identity positions do not sit beside action; they orient it.

7.3. Resilience Work

Resilience then appears as the active work of keeping life livable. The inductive categories of the construct and the cross-group synthesis repeatedly show that resilience is not treated as a fixed personality trait. It is narrated as movement, adaptation, improvisation, discipline, support-seeking, organization, rule-learning, and future orientation. Among Middle East migrants, resilience begins with physical survival and then stabilizes through family, networks, work, faith and the hope of a future without war. Among Ukrainians, it combines inner strength with practical navigation of healthcare, documents, language learning and grief. Among locals, resilience is less often inward and more often

collective: organizing arrivals of migrants, creating systems, filing reports, relying on institutional control, volunteering or normalizing life after a period of tension.

The data driven categories and cross-group comparisons clearly show that resilience is socially distributed. Middle East respondents describe support through neighbors, friends, and organizations; Ukrainian respondents describe both internal discipline and an 'external prosthesis' of volunteers, NGOs, and administrative navigation; North-East Bulgarian respondents describe tools, systems, scenario planning, and integration as a stabilizing mechanism; Southern Bulgarian respondents describe family support, economic survival, local reporting channels and the gradual return of rhythm after earlier fear. Resilience therefore works in this model as a process of adaptation that is simultaneously personal, relational, organizational, and institutional.

7.4. Cohesion Channels

For adaptation to become sustainable, it must move through some form of relational channel. This is where cohesion enters the model. The inductive categories of the construct and the cross-group comparisons show very clearly that cohesion is not distributed evenly across social positions. Migrants tend to narrate cohesion as practical mutual aid, family support, internal community solidarity, digital help and selected bridges to locals. Locals tend to narrate cohesion as the general climate of coexistence: whether neighbors help, whether groups mix, whether fear and resentment are high and whether common action is possible.

The distinction is crucial. Among Middle East migrants, cohesion often takes the form of a relatively tight social capsule - kinship, Syrian interconnectedness, online group, and only partial mixed ties with Bulgarians, with language barriers sharply limiting broader contact. Among Ukrainians, cohesion is stronger and more differentiated: internal mutual aid, neighborhood solidarity, professional bridges and joint volunteering coexist with closure, fear and conflict in online groups. Among locals in North-East Bulgaria, cohesion appears through a deficit of local warmth but also through crisis logistics, mixed teams and silent tolerance. Among locals in Southern Bulgaria cohesion oscillates between neighborly mutual aid and routine diversity on one side, and fear, cultural clashes, protest solidarity and social hierarchy on the other. In the model, cohesion is the set of channels through which everyday social life either carries or blocks adaptive efforts.

7.5. Democratic Conditioning

The same relational processes are shaped by whether institutions feel fair, accessible, and recognizable. Democracy in the interview data is not limited to elections or constitutional form. It is experienced through whether rules apply equally, whether one can complain, whether institutions respond, whether there is transparency, whether one is treated 'like a human', whether power is accountable and whether participation appears meaningful rather than futile. In that sense, democracy conditions the convertibility of effort into legitimate presence.

The differences across groups are visible. Middle East migrants speak about democracy through freedom of action, rights, complaints, political education, equality and above all humane treatment by institutions. Ukrainian migrants define democracy through equality without castes, accountability, audibility, corruption versus justice, freedom of speech and the existence of a normal middle-class society. North-East Bulgarian locals focus on rule of law, difficult participation, transparency, external pressure, protest, and the gap between democracy in theory and in practice. Southern Bulgarian locals emphasize laws that do not apply to all, connections and protections, unaccountable rulers, rigged

elections, weak civic audibility and even the idea that democracy has turned into anarchy. This layer matters because it shapes whether people read the environment as workable, illegible, humiliating or open.

7.6. Belonging as Outcome

In the proposed model, belonging is not the starting point. It is the outcome of a successful conversion process. People begin to belong when safety, routine, coping, and contact acquire a recognizable social form: a child in school, a stable home, repeated interactions with neighbors, language competence, work, familiar places, calm and some degree of recognition from others and institutions. Belonging is therefore more than attachment. It is a stabilized, repeated, and socially legible presence.

The data driven categories of “belonging” and the cross-group comparisons demonstrate that this process looks different across groups. For Middle East migrants, belonging is layered and divided: calm in Bulgaria, neighborhood relations, community places, help from Bulgarians, and children as a bridge coexist with transnational attachment, stigma, visible difference and strong language barriers. For Ukrainians, belonging is a process of rooting through safety, the place (sea as familiarity), language learning, children's integration, material stability and social chains. But it also remains vulnerable to rejection in housing, healthcare and everyday interaction. For locals in North-East Bulgaria, belonging is more self-understood and rooted in homecoming, roots, social contacts and family. For locals in Southern Bulgaria it rests more on small-town rhythm, close circles, peace of mind and the ongoing distinction between migrants as transit users and migrants who truly integrate through work. Belonging is thus the point at which adaptive work either becomes durable or remains fragile.

7.7. Feedback

The model also contains a genuine feedback loop. Once belonging increases, the character of the whole system changes. Resilience becomes less emergency-oriented and more practical; identity becomes less dominated by rupture and more organized around ordinary roles and future projects; and cohesion can expand from a narrow circle toward broader bridging ties. In other words, belonging is not only an outcome. It also changes the conditions of future adaptation.

The reverse is equally important. When belonging remains weak, resilience stays costly and crisis-driven. Then identity remains defensive, dominant or provisional, and cohesion contracts toward small circles, silent tolerance or outright mistrust. This is visible, for example, when language barriers keep Middle East migrants socially contained, when Ukrainians remain in a 'guest' position while trying to root, when North-East locals manage coexistence through logistics more than warmth, or when Southern locals describe calm and local pride alongside camp boundaries, transit imaginaries and conditional acceptance. The feedback loop therefore explains why the five constructs should not be interpreted as separate themes. They keep reshaping one another over time.

8. Group-Specific Pathways within the Common Model

Shared patterns across all four groups

- Safety is the base layer of belonging. For migrants it often means peace, quiet and protection from war. For locals it often means order, predictability and manageable public life.
- Family remains central almost everywhere, but it plays different roles: anchor, bridge, filter of fear, or source of decision-making.
- Language is not just a tool. It is also a symbol of effort, recognition and distance. It can open doors, but it can also mark visible otherness.
- Work is important not only economically but morally. It gives dignity, legitimacy and a sense that someone is participating rather than remaining on the margins.
- Children often make settlement more real. School, routine, friendships and future plans are some of the strongest bridges into lasting belonging.

8.1. Middle East Migrants (MME)

The dominant pathway is flight to safety - collective stabilization - conditional emplacement.

Identity is strongly organized around parenthood, work, origin, religion and a future-citizen horizon. Resilience is staged: first survival, then stabilization, then work, endurance, and future-making. Cohesion is strongest inside family and migrant-community ties, including online infrastructures. Democracy matters mainly as dignity in interaction, humane treatment, rights and complaints rather than as abstract civic ideology. Belonging is built through safety, neighborhood ties, community places and children's future. But it remains fragile because of language barriers, transnational attachments and visible stigma.

8.2. Ukrainian Migrants (MUK)

The dominant pathway is uncertainty and loss - disciplined adaptation - rooting through language, children, social chains and professional re-legitimation.

Identity is highly reflexive and positional, anchored in Europe-as-benchmark, professional role, nationality-language tension, parenthood and mobility. Resilience combines inner strength with intense practical navigation of documents, housing, health care and organizational support. Cohesion is both a resource and a strain: mutual aid is strong, but participants say online conflicts and closure also appear. Democracy is richly elaborated through equality, accountability, middle-class normality, justice and access to power. Belonging is therefore a process of gradual rooting, but it remains vulnerable to rejection, service barriers and the continuing 'guest' position.

8.3. Locals in North-East Bulgaria (LNEBG)

The dominant pathway for them is roots + civic/competence identity - crisis organization - managed coexistence.

Identity is articulated through literacy, professional milieu, civic action, bounded tolerance and values-oriented Europeanness. Resilience is less psychological self-description and more collective crisis management: they speak about tools, systems, scenarios, mixed logistics and practical organization.

Cohesion is not narrated as warmth but as a social climate of cooperation/non-cooperation, suspicion between groups and individuals and also as tension management. Democracy is strongly procedural and institutional: rule of law, participation, transparency, protest and the gap between theory and practice. Belonging is stable and largely pre-given, rooted in homeland and social contacts. What changes is not locals' own belonging, but their judgment of whether the locality remains manageable and fair.

8.4. Locals in Southern Bulgaria (LSBG)

The dominant pathway is family and local rhythm - fear memory and order concerns - normalization through control, reporting, work and practical coexistence.

Identity is anchored in family, town-based locality, modest patriotism, religious tolerance and a sense of Eastern European peripherality. Resilience is temporal and practical: life was once frightening, now it is calmer; order is restored through institutional control, civic reporting, volunteering and livelihood strategies. Cohesion combines neighborly mutual aid and acceptance of diversity with fear, cultural-clash narratives, protest solidarity and status-based boundary-making. Democracy is experienced mainly through deficits: laws not for all, captured power, rigged elections, low audibility and even anarchy-like disorder. Belonging is highly local. But it is also constantly interpreted through “the camp” boundary, transit imaginaries and the expectation that integration must be demonstrated through work and rule-following.

9. Theoretical Positioning of the Model

9.1. Belonging

The belonging framework integrated by Allen and colleagues (Allen et al., 2021) suggests a useful starting point because it defines belonging through involvement in a social environment and through feelings of acceptance, commonality, and being at home. That basic idea fits the interview material well. Across all four groups, belonging is clearly more than legal status or residence. It is experienced through whether people feel safe, whether they have recognizable places and routines, whether others respond to them as legitimate participants in social life and whether ordinary life begins to feel stable rather than provisional.

The fit is only partial, however, because the data make belonging much more processual and conditional than the source framework initially suggests. In these interviews, people do not simply report belonging or not belonging. They move toward or away from it through specific pathways. For Middle East migrants, belonging grows through calm, neighborhood ties, community places, reception from Bulgarians and children's futures. It is often interrupted by visible stigma, transnational attachment and language barriers. For Ukrainians, belonging develops through safety, language, children's integration, social chains and material rooting, but remains vulnerable to rejection and institutional barriers. For locals, belonging is more settled and place-based, but it is also recalibrated by migration, local change and distinctions between transit and integration of migrants. The data therefore add a stronger temporal claim: belonging is built through stabilization and recognition rather than simply felt once and for all.

9.2. Resilience

The resilience framework suggested by Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker (2000) is especially applicable to the interview material because it explicitly distinguishes resilience resources, resilience processes, and resilience outcomes. This distinction fits the corpus closely and helps avoid a common analytical mistake. The interviewees do not treat resilience as a fixed personal characteristic. They describe resources such as family, work, networks, volunteers, faith, nature, language courses, systems and institutional control. They describe processes such as fleeing, navigating, organizing, reporting, integrating, enduring, and making meaning; and they describe outcomes such as greater calm, restored routine, survival and future orientation. The idea of resilience as a dynamic process rather than a trait also fits strongly, particularly the process-oriented perspective (Masten, 2018; Southwick et al., 2014).

The fit is still selective. Hardiness, flexibility, appraisal, and sensemaking all illuminate parts of the interview data, but none of them alone captures the full empirical range. Appraisal theory helps explain how threat and coping potential are interpreted (Folkman et al., 1986), especially in the migrant narratives of war, uncertainty and institutional obstacles. Psychological flexibility is useful where respondents hold mixed positions without collapsing them into rigid binaries (Hayes et al., 2011; Hayes et al., 2012), as in narratives that criticize and support local society at the same time. Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) is particularly helpful for the local groups, who actively narrate how crisis, fear, procedures and coexistence become understandable and manageable.

9.3. Identity

Identity frameworks fit the corpus best when they emphasize threatened motives, layered identities, and contextual reconfiguration rather than stable identity types. Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986) and related motive-based approaches, such as Motivated Identity Construction Theory (see Vignoles et al., 2006), are particularly useful because the interview material repeatedly revolves around the needs (motives) of continuity, self-efficacy, meaning, belonging, distinctiveness, and coherence under conditions of migration and local change. This is especially visible among migrants, whose identities are narrated through parenthood, work, language, profession, patriotism, religion, mobility, and future citizenship. It is also visible among locals, especially in North-East Bulgaria, where identity is organized through competence, professional circles, patriotism as action, and European values.

Acculturation theory also helps, but only partly. It is useful insofar as the data clearly contain tensions around maintaining heritage versus adopting the host culture, and around mismatches between migrant and host expectations (Berry, 1997; Bourhis et al., 1997). However, the interviews do not reduce cleanly to four acculturation types. Middle East migrants combine strong origin identity, refugee identity, worker/provider roles, religious visibility, and future-citizen aspirations. Ukrainian migrants combine language tension, professional restoration, patriotism, Europe as an external frame, and mobile selfhood. The data therefore point less to static types than to layered and moving identity configurations.

Social Identity Complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) is more helpful here because it explains why some respondents can hold several identities in a relatively integrated way while others speak through narrower in-group (dominant) or boundary-heavy constructions. At the same time, identity fusion is also a cautionary possibility: where threat intensifies, strong in-group alignment supports solidarity

but also narrows tolerance to outgroups and raises the emotional stakes of intergroup life (Swann et al., 2009; Swann et al., 2012).

9.4. Cohesion

Bottoni's multilevel approach to cohesion is an especially useful framework because the interviews clearly operate across micro, meso and macro levels at once (Bottoni, 2018). At the micro level, the material is dense with interpersonal trust, support and network density: family circles, neighbor help, online groups, professional communities and small local circles. At the meso level, the interviews turn to participation, volunteering, mixing, protests, school inclusion and the acceptability of everyday coexistence. At the macro level, cohesion is linked to broader judgments about division in society, poverty, legitimacy and the functioning of institutions.

The stereotype content model and warmth-and-competence perspective (Lee & Fiske, 2006; Fiske et al., 2007) is also relevant because many local narratives evaluate migrants not simply by contact frequency but by implied intentions and capabilities. Fear, pity, irritation, respect and status judgment are all present in the interview material. Still, the data extend these models by showing that cohesion is position-dependent in function. For migrants, cohesion is often what makes survival and orientation possible: translation, guidance, kin support, digital networks and practical solidarity. For locals, cohesion is more often a measure of whether social life remains manageable: whether there is cooperation, whether tensions are controlled, whether norms can be shared, and whether the presence of newcomers can be absorbed without threatening local rhythm or social order. The data therefore add a functional asymmetry that some generic cohesion and social perception models do not fully capture.

9.5. Democracy

The democracy frameworks of Munck & Verkuilen (2002), Dahl (1971), and Beetham (1999) are valuable because they make visible the procedural and normative dimensions that recur in the interviews. Munck and Verkuilen's emphasis on conceptual structure, Dahl's stress on participation and opposition, and Beetham's focus on popular control and political equality all fit important parts of the corpus (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002; Dahl, 1971; Beetham, 1999). These perspectives are especially helpful for the local Bulgarian groups and for Ukrainians, who speak in detail about equality, audibility, rule of law, accountability, transparency, corruption, middle-class normality and whether institutions actually respond to citizens. Habermas (1996) is also relevant where democratic belonging is tied to civic standards, public reasoning, and Europe as a value horizon rather than merely a geopolitical frame.

The fit becomes weaker when the corpus turns to lived institutional dignity. Middle East migrants do not mainly define democracy through formal participation. They define it through freedom of action, the right to complain, the absence of coercion, and respectful treatment by the police or administration. Even Ukrainian migrants often judge democracy less by electoral procedure than by whether institutions are humane, accountable and socially normal. This is where the data go beyond procedural theory. Democracy appears here as an everyday test of whether one is heard, protected and treated as fully human. The inclusion of Klein’s framework (1975) is analytically useful at the margins rather than at the center: it helps explain why periods of fear, splitting, and 'us-versus-them' thinking may intensify under crisis, especially in local narratives shaped by insecurity, suspicion, and

threat perception. But the main empirical message is broader: democracy in this corpus is not only a regime form. It is an ordinary institutional experience of fairness, voice, dignity, and order.

10. Main Conceptual Contribution

Five main findings

- Belonging is built step by step. People do not simply "have" it; they create it through safety, routine, contact, language, and recognition.
- Identity and resilience are the strongest engine of adaptation, especially for displaced groups who must rebuild everyday life under uncertainty.
- Cohesion matters because it provides the social ties that either help people settle or keep them at a distance.
- Democracy matters in daily life through fairness, voice, dignity, order, and accountability – not only through elections or formal politics.
- Locals and migrants do not use these ideas in the same way. Migrants speak more through survival, rebuilding, and recognition; locals more often speak through order, coexistence, and manageability.

The proposed model reorders the five constructs (democracy, identity, cohesion, belonging, and resilience) into a system rather than treating them as separate analytical compartments. That reordering matters because the interview data do not describe five independent domains that happen to coexist. They describe a recurrent process in which people face uncertainty or disruption, interpret it through identity positions, respond through adaptive practices, move those practices through relational channels, and then meet either recognition or blockage from the wider social and institutional environment. What the model contributes, therefore, is a more adequate description of how these constructs actually 'travel' together in the interview narratives.

At the heart of the model lies one central proposition: belonging is the socially and institutionally recognized form of successful stabilization. This is the most important conceptual shift produced by the interview data synthesis. Belonging is not presented by respondents as a vague feeling of detachment from material life. It emerges when safety becomes routine, when coping becomes socially supported, when people are able to build a role and a place for themselves, and when others acknowledge that presence as legitimate. In this sense, belonging is the point at which adaptation becomes durable enough to feel real.

A second contribution is the distinction between recognition and normalization. Migrants mainly struggle for recognition: they seek to be treated fairly, heard, helped, translated, employed, respected, and not reduced to stigma or transit status. Local respondents, by contrast, often speak in the language of normalization: they want life to be calm again, rules to work, tensions to be manageable and coexistence to fit local rhythm. Although their aspirations differ, they meet within the same system. The model shows that migrants' search for recognition and locals' search for normalization intersect through cohesion, democracy, and belonging rather than through simple 'attitude toward migrants' measures.

A third contribution concerns the asymmetrical role of cohesion. Cohesion is often considered a desirable collective property of society. In the interview data, however, its role changes by position. For migrants, cohesion is mainly an enabling infrastructure: it provides translation, guidance, housing leads, work contacts, family support, online information, joint volunteering and practical solidarity. For locals, cohesion is more often evaluative and threshold-like: it indicates whether trust, cooperation, mutual restraint, mixing and public order still seem possible. The model therefore argues that cohesion should be analyzed not only by its level, but also by its social function.

A fourth contribution concerns democracy. In this corpus, democracy is not reducible to institutional design alone. It is lived through police encounters, bureaucratic procedures, transparency, local participation, the visibility of corruption, and judgments about whether rules apply to everyone. The data therefore widen the concept toward everyday 'institutional dignity'. This is particularly important for the migrant groups, who often locate democracy in very concrete experiences of treatment, rights, complaints, and fairness, but it is also visible among locals, who repeatedly connect democracy to order, audibility, and whether power can be influenced at all.

Why this Matters for Communities and Institutions

The findings suggest that integration and coexistence cannot be reduced to one policy lever. Housing matters, but so do schools, language access, work, neighborhood routines, public communication, and whether institutions are experienced as respectful and predictable. Small everyday experiences can have large effects because they accumulate. A polite clerk, a responsive school, a helpful neighbor, a clear process, or a local activity can help turn uncertainty into routine. The reverse is also true: repeated confusion, humiliation, suspicion, or isolation can keep people in a prolonged state of fragility.

The findings also show that it is not enough to ask whether communities are "for" or "against" migrants. Many local respondents described mixed (ambivalent) positions: sympathy and concern, willingness to help but also fear, acceptance but also social boundaries. Likewise, migrants often described gratitude and effort alongside loss, uncertainty or frustration. Public debate often simplifies these realities, but the interviews point instead to layered and sometimes contradictory experiences.

Practical Lessons in Brief

Area	Lessons learned
For local institutions	Respectful treatment is not a soft extra; it is one of the basic conditions for trust, coping, and belonging.
For schools	Children are major bridges into place. School routines, language support and everyday inclusion can have effects far beyond the classroom.
For municipalities and service providers	Clarity matters. Clear steps, good information and reachable staff reduce chaos and make both resilience and belonging more likely.
For community groups and NGOs	Bridges work best when they are regular, practical and repeated – not only symbolic.
For public communication	Language that turns people into threats, categories or rumors weakens cohesion. Language that explains, clarifies, and humanizes helps normalize coexistence.
For economic policy and local development	Work, housing stability, and the future of small towns matter deeply because they shape whether belonging feels possible for everyone.

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