



**MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK**



Social Cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

**KEY TRENDS BASED ON SCORE BiH 2025
WITH COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS FROM SCORE BiH 2020**

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Executive Summary

The 2025 Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index in Bosnia and Herzegovina provides evidence-based assessment of **how social cohesion is experienced across the country and how key elements have evolved since 2020**.¹ The analysis examines five core elements of social cohesion: **Intergroup Harmony, Inclusive Belonging, Sense of Progress, Support for Bosnia and Herzegovina Institutions, and Constructive Citizenship**. These are identified as core elements that are internal to the meta concept of social cohesion in Bosnia Herzegovina, rather than its drivers, **due to their strong theoretical grounding in social cohesion literature and contextual relevance for Bosnia and Herzegovina informed by participatory stakeholder consultations**.

To ensure the robustness and representativeness of the findings, data were collected from approximately 3,800² respondents primarily in November-December 2025³, via face-to-face Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). Using a stratified sampling approach designed to capture variation across key demographic and geographic groups, survey covered all 16 regional-territorial units of the country. The margin of error on the full sample level was <2%, for Federal Bosnia Herzegovina and Republika Srpska was <3% each, and for Brčko District, it was <9%.

A central and encouraging finding is that Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2025 does not present the image of a “collapsed social fabric” often portrayed in anecdotal external and internal narratives. The data shows moderate cohesion, above-average intergroup harmony and strong community cooperation at the local level. Inclusive civic identity and identification with Bosnia and Herzegovina remain strong enough to serve as an enabling platform. In other words, the data suggests a pattern of **cautious coexistence**, where every day intergroup relations are largely functional and stable, and where important foundations for inclusive sense of belonging are stronger than widely assumed, highlighting a society more resilient than often portrayed

At the same time, the report identifies a second, equally important reality: **pessimism about the country’s direction remains widespread**, shaped by concerns about political instability, economic uncertainty, and regional dynamics. This produces a defining feature of the current context: **a gap between relatively positive local experiences and negative system-level perceptions**. This gap is not merely a perception issue; it can shape behaviour, reduce civic engagement, and amplify vulnerability to divisive narratives.

This existing coexistence – future pessimism gap matters for policy and programming. If citizens’ daily interactions and community life remain more resilient than the public narrative suggests, then programming can build on these strengths. However, if pessimism and expectations of instability

¹ It should be noted that the 2020 time comparison should be interpreted carefully, as it coincided with the COVID-19 period, which may represent an unusually low baseline.

² The total sample is approximately, 3,800, including 660 respondents from 10 booster localities, identified based on programmatic priorities. These boosters included 100-140 respondents each, from Velika Kladusa, Jajce, Odzak, Stolac, Mostar, Prnjavor, Dobo, Teslic, Srebrenica, Brčko District. The nationally representative sample of 3,170 is weighted based on entity and ethnicity.

³ Fieldwork was conducted between November 2025 and February 2026, but majority of the data was collected in November-December.

remain high, these perceptions can undermine trust, discourage civic participation, and create room for divisive narratives to prevail. The key challenge, therefore, is not only to invest in reconciliation, and to **protect what already works in everyday coexistence, but also to expand structured civic participation spaces and to communicate success stories** to help address societal pessimism and anxiety about the future that can erode social cohesion over time.

Taken together, SCORE 2025 Bosnia and Herzegovina findings indicate modest but positive improvements across multiple dimensions of social cohesion since 2020⁴ coupled with a society with a solid, underutilised foundation for stronger social cohesion. The task ahead is to protect everyday resilience, address prevalent societal pessimism, and convert local cooperation into broader civic participation and institutional trust.

Intergroup Harmony with Outgroups

What this dimension captures: Intergroup Harmony with Outgroups measures the overall quality of relations between the country's main ethnic communities, specifically Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. It combines four components: **Positive feelings, Intergroup trust, Social distance, and Social anxiety** towards outgroups. As a composite dimension, it includes both emotional expressions of harmony as well as relational to effectively capture whether relations between groups are peaceful and functional in everyday life, and whether they are deepening into trust and emotional closeness.

Key findings: Intergroup Harmony in 2025 is above average across the country (6.3/10⁵), with relatively minimal differences between constituent entities. This suggests that, for most citizens, daily coexistence across ethnic lines is generally functional, but not necessarily emotionally close. **Social distance is low** (2.9/10), meaning that most people report openness to work and form friendships with the members of their outgroups. Yet, reservations remain stronger around intermarriage. **Social anxiety is also low** (1.9/10) across the whole country, indicating limited day-to-day fear in the presence of other ethnic groups. **Positive feelings** (5.4/10) are slightly above average but are often described as “lukewarm” and neutral rather than positive and warm. At the same time, the report points to a major constraint: **Intergroup trust remains below average** (4.2/10), indicating that coexistence often has a “thin” quality. Citizens may live and work alongside one another without high levels of confidence in the intentions of other groups. When it comes to Intergroup Harmony, the main takeaway is that **intergroup relations are not collapsing**, but the country remains characterised by limited trust and uneven emotional warmth, which requires sustained trust-building approaches rather than **assumptions that coexistence automatically equals reconciliation**.

Trends since 2020: Intergroup Harmony has improved modestly since 2020 across the country and in both entities, namely Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. This suggests that everyday relations have not become more tainted with societal tensions, contrary to what

⁴ The most recent previous wave of the SCORE survey in Bosnia and Herzegovina was conducted in 2020, achieving a total sample of 3,637 respondents.

⁵ Throughout this report, indicators are mostly presented on a 0–10 scale. In most cases, higher values indicate stronger presence of a positive phenomenon (for example, inclusive civic identity or community cooperation). For some intergroup indicators, such as social anxiety and social distance, lower values reflect better outcomes (less threat perception and less distance). Some indicators that are related to change or sense of progress however, are presented on a -10 to +10 scale, where -10 indicates prevalent and strong worsening, 0 indicates no change, and +10 indicates prevalent and strong improvement.

stereotypical perceptions may often imply. However, the report also indicates that not all areas moved in the same direction. In Brčko District BiH, changes appear weaker or moving in the opposite direction on several Intergroup Harmony indicators, suggesting that some local contexts may require closer attention.

Implications: Programmes should move beyond one-off “contact” activities or ‘inter-ethnic’ framing and focus on approaches that deepen trust through sustained cooperation, joint initiatives, and practical problem-solving across communities. Perspective taking and social tolerance programming through common interests (e.g. occupational partnerships) can be effective in moving co-existence to more resilient and emotional reconciliation.

Inclusive Belonging

What this dimension captures: Inclusive Belonging measures the extent to which individuals perceive and endorse a shared sense of belonging to Bosnia and Herzegovina that can include all residents, beyond ethnic divisions. It brings together two indicators: **Inclusive Civic Identity** (belief in shared culture, common values, and an overarching identity shared across ethnic groups) and **Self-identification as a Citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina** (degree of civic identification with the state).

Key findings: Inclusive Belonging is one of the strongest and most stable dimensions of social cohesion. Inclusive Civic Identity is moderately high (6.6/10), and many respondents agree that there are unifying factors and a shared way of life across ethnic groups. Identification with the state is also high overall (7.8/10), although differences persist across entities and groups. This is one of the most important insights offered by the SCORE 2025 findings. Even in a country with institutional complexity and intense political contestation, **many citizens continue to express an inclusive sense of belonging**. This suggests that civic identity is a real social resource that can support long-term resilience and inclusive development, provided that it is protected from polarising political discourses.

Trends since 2020: Inclusive civic identity and belonging appears broadly stable over time, with some minimal variation across entities. Stability is meaningful in this context: it indicates that **inclusive belonging has not eroded even amid political tensions and pessimistic discourse**.

Implications: Policies and programmes can build on inclusive belonging through civic education, inclusive narratives, and initiatives that strengthen a shared civic space. At the same time, where identification with the state is uneven, approaches should focus on practical, citizen-facing improvements and inclusive participation mechanisms that increase shared lived experiences of the state as responsive and fair.

Sense of Progress and Expectations of the Future

What this dimension captures: Sense of Progress reflects whether people believe the country has moved forward over the past five years and whether they anticipate stability or instability ahead. It is included as a social cohesion dimension because perceptions of shared progress and stability can strengthen a sense of common future and reduce the appeal of divisive narratives.

Key findings: Sense of Progress is the weakest dimension of social cohesion in 2025. **Many citizens perceive deterioration in key sociopolitical areas**, including trust among people, stability in the Balkans, and hate speech and divisive narratives. Perceptions of progress on everyday life conditions are more mixed, but overall quality of life is still often evaluated negatively. These perceptions sit alongside high expectations of instability: many respondents expect political tensions and economic hardship, and a large proportion agree that disagreements between political leaders can destabilise the country. One of the most important interpretive insights in the report is that **these pessimistic perceptions do not fully translate into everyday intergroup behaviour**. When asked about their personal and local interactions, respondents report more stable intergroup relations, low social distance, and relatively low social anxiety. This reinforces the “gap” described earlier: **pessimism is often directed outward toward the political system and broader society, rather than inward toward day-to-day community interactions**.

Implications: Widespread pessimism and anxiety about the future can become self-reinforcing and decapacitating if it reduces civic participation, increases vulnerabilities to manipulative or divisive narratives, or discourages investment in collective solutions. As such, if not addressed, vicious cycles can form, shaping and hardening negative system-level perceptions. Programming should therefore combine communication approaches that highlight positive news, capturing success stories with collective community-level action that make tangible progress more visible and credible to citizens. Efforts should also promote responsible communication by public figures and institutions and counteract inflammatory rhetoric or divisive public discourse, reinforcing trust and constructive engagement.

Support for Bosnia and Herzegovina Institutions

What this dimension captures: Support for Bosnia and Herzegovina Institutions combines (a) **Trust in BiH state-level institutions** and (b) **Perceived legitimacy of Bosnia and Herzegovina** (acceptance of the state, its institutions, and its boundaries). As such, the dimension is made up of two types of indicators both essential for a healthy social contract: the trust indicator is not normative, meaning 100% trust is not necessarily desirable, and the legitimacy indicator, which is normative. This dimension is sensitive and volatile in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s context given the complex multi-layered governance structure, but it is central for understanding long-term vertical cohesion.

Key findings: Support for BiH Institutions is slightly above average and shows improvement since 2020. Perceived legitimacy of Bosnia and Herzegovina is relatively high and stable (6.9/10), with a large share of citizens accepting the state and its boundaries as legitimate. Trust in BiH state-level institutions remains moderate (4.3/10) and lower than trust in local institutions, but it shows a meaningful improvement relative to 2020. A key interpretive point is that **legitimacy does not automatically translate into trust in Bosnia and Herzegovina**. Many citizens may accept the state as legitimate while still expressing mistrust and cynicism towards its institutions. Strengthening institutional trust often requires improving the lived experience of governance and investing in governance coherence across all institutional levels. Erosion of trust in institutions is a global phenomenon observed across many countries including Europe, and it is often linked to skepticism

about serving the public good. It is more than just an ‘emotive mood’, it points to a bigger pattern about lack of participatory and evidence-based decision making, which leads to reduced confidence that decisions are fair, representative and open to influence.⁶

Implications: Strategies should focus on improving drivers of trust rather than trust itself because trust is an outcome of decision making and service delivery performance rather than process of change. Recognising that this report is diagnostic and thus does not investigate drivers of social cohesion dimensions, implications can be enriched with global literature and good practice lessons. These assert that building confidence in institutional decision making as competent and fair institutions that can effectively tackle complex policy issues while balancing interests of the current and future generations require policies and mechanisms that promote meaningful civic engagement (e.g. civic assemblies) as the key to boosting “skills for democracy” and enhancing trust in government.

Constructive Citizenship

What this dimension captures: Constructive Citizenship measures whether people have the knowledge, motivation, and community environment to participate constructively in public life. It combines three indicators: **Civic Awareness** (knowledge of institutions, processes, and avenues for participation), **Civic Duty/Responsibility** (sense of responsibility and belief in one’s ability to influence change), and **Community Cooperation** (mutual support and collective problem-solving in local communities).

Key findings: The report points to “**untapped civic potential**” rather than “civic apathy”, which is encouraging and emerges as an asset. Many citizens show readiness to contribute and cooperate locally, but this is not yet fully transformed into formal participation and sustained engagement in public life. Constructive Citizenship is moderate and improving.

Community Cooperation is relatively high (6.7/10), indicating strong local social capital and mobilisation on the local level. **Civic Duty/Responsibility has increased** from 4.9 in 2020 to 5.8 in 2025, suggesting a growing willingness and sense of responsibility among citizens to contribute to positive change. However, **Civic Awareness remains comparatively low** (4.5/10). This is a practical barrier: willingness and local solidarity cannot be leveraged into constructive civic engagement or meaningful participation in decision-making if people do not feel informed about how to engage, do not understand how governance works, or if structured civic engagement mechanisms are absent.

Implications: Programming can deliver high returns by investing in civic awareness and structured civic participation pathways. These include civic education for different age groups beyond young people, practical mechanisms for citizen input (e.g. civic assemblies or participatory budgeting at municipal and/or school level), and support for locally rooted, grassroots citizen organizing, such as membership-based initiatives, neighbourhood groups, and parent or community councils, that can connect community cooperation to municipal and state-level decision-making. These can

⁶ OECD (2024), OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions; *World Values Survey Wave 7, 2022*

leverage the untapped civic potential to nurture a stronger and more resilient social cohesion from bottom up.

Summary of Actionable Recommendations

The report suggests that there is a credible foundation for **bolder transformative policy and programming** beyond crisis-based or resilience-focused efforts. Considering not only the weaknesses but also the strengths, the main entry points to address social cohesion challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina should prioritise programming that can convert civic potential and inclusive belonging into constructive civic participation and transformative action:

- The main entry point is **deepening trust both between groups through reconciliation and sustained cooperation, and in institutions through meaningful civic participation mechanisms.**
- Going beyond dialogue or contact, and centring social tolerance and perspective taking at the centre of reconciliation without overemphasising ethnic identities, through joint community-based enterprises, collaborative livelihood initiatives and community problem-solving can turn neutral coexistence into stronger trust.
- For improving confidence in institutions, the practical opportunity is to translate willingness to engage and civic responsibility into sustained engagement and constructive public life through structured civic participation mechanisms, civic learning and awareness, and community-driven initiatives.