

Article

Urban–Rural Asymmetries in Social Resilience: The Role of Territorialized Institutional Trust in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

Social resilience has become a central concept in urban and sustainability research, yet its institutional and spatial determinants remain insufficiently specified in contexts marked by persistent urban–rural asymmetries. The objective of this article is to explain how spatial differences in institutional trust shape divergent resilience trajectories across territories in Central and Eastern Europe. This study develops a conceptual, mechanism-based framework and employs a qualitative comparative illustration based on institutional indicators of trust, service accessibility, and governance effectiveness. The analysis shows that territorialized institutional trust—structured by institutional presence, procedural consistency, and institutional legibility—systematically conditions access to resources, stabilizes expectations, and shapes adaptive behavior, with dense and predictable institutional environments supporting longer-term resilience while thin and uneven ones entrench short-term coping. The findings suggest that social resilience should be understood as an institutional outcome shaped by the spatial organization of governance rather than as a territorially neutral attribute of communities. The broader significance of the study lies in providing a territorially sensitive and institutionally grounded framework for urban sustainability and resilience planning, highlighting how built environment and governance arrangements jointly structure the adaptive capacities of urban and rural territories.

Keywords: institutional trust; social resilience; territorial governance; built environment; urban–rural disparities; sustainability

1. Introduction

In recent years, resilience has become a central analytical and normative concept in urban studies, sustainability research, and policy-oriented debates. Originally developed in ecological and systems-oriented frameworks, the concept has progressively migrated toward social and urban contexts. In the literature, resilience refers to the capacity of communities, cities, or territories to absorb shocks, adapt to crises, and maintain core functions over time. These capacities are shaped by governance arrangements embedded in the built environment [1,2]. Despite its widespread adoption, social and community resilience often remains analytically underspecified, particularly regarding the institutional conditions that enable or constrain adaptive capacities across territories.

A dominant strand of the literature treats resilience as an emergent property of communities, emphasizing social capital, networks, and informal coping mechanisms [3–5]. While these approaches have significantly advanced our understanding of social adaptation, they frequently abstract resilience from its territorial and institutional embedding. Spatial inequalities are therefore often treated as mere background context rather than as



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constitutive elements of resilience [6]. This is particularly problematic in regions marked by strong territorial asymmetries and uneven state capacity [7].

This article argues that social resilience cannot be adequately understood without accounting for the territorial distribution of institutional capacity and institutional trust. Resilience is not merely a social or cultural attribute of communities; it is also an institutional outcome shaped by access to public services, administrative predictability, and the effective presence of the state. From a neo-institutionalist perspective, institutions structure expectations, reduce uncertainty, and enable coordinated action, thereby directly influencing the capacity of individuals and communities to respond to crises [8–10].

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) offers a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. Post-socialist transformations have produced deeply uneven institutional landscapes, marked by strong urban concentration of administrative capacity and persistent rural peripheralization [11,12]. These disparities reflect not only economic inequalities but also differentiated exposure to functioning public institutions, with significant implications for social resilience in moments of systemic stress.

Building on this observation, the article proposes the concept of territorialized institutional trust to capture how spatially uneven governance environments shape adaptive capacity. Territorialized institutional trust is defined as a territorially embedded, interaction-based perception of institutional reliability that emerges from repeated encounters with public authorities whose presence, procedural consistency, and legibility vary across space. Rather than treating urban–rural differences in trust as cultural or attitudinal deficits, the argument situates them in differentiated institutional configurations and their materialization in the built environment.

Institutional trust is often understood as confidence in the fairness, effectiveness, and reliability of public institutions, but it is still commonly treated as a nationally aggregated attitude that is insufficiently sensitive to territorial variation [13–16]. This paper reconceptualizes institutional trust as territorially embedded, shaped by everyday interactions with institutions whose presence, accessibility, and performance vary systematically across space. Urban–rural asymmetries in trust are thus interpreted not as cultural deficits, but as outcomes of differentiated institutional environments.

Unlike quality of government or state capacity indicators, which capture institutional resources and performance, territorialized institutional trust focuses on how institutional environments are experienced, interpreted, and anticipated across space.

The analysis makes three contributions to resilience and sustainability debates. First, it reconceptualizes institutional trust as a territorially embedded mechanism rather than a uniform national attribute, linking it explicitly to spatially uneven governance structures. Second, it develops a mechanism-based framework centered on institutional presence, procedural consistency, and institutional legibility, showing how these dimensions condition adaptive capacities in urban and rural settings. Third, it positions Central and Eastern Europe as a critical context for examining these dynamics and outlines a research agenda for operationalizing territorialized institutional trust through institutional and built-environment indicators.

2. Conceptual Framework and Analytical Approach

This article employs a conceptual analytical approach, developing and systematizing a theoretical framework rather than testing empirical hypotheses. Conceptual articles of this type serve a distinctive purpose in the literature: they introduce new analytical categories [17,18], specify the mechanisms through which these categories operate, and establish their explanatory relevance for empirical and applied research [19]. The literature selection follows a purposive and theory-driven approach. Sources were chosen based

on their relevance to three intersecting strands of research: institutional theory, social resilience, and territorial governance. Priority was given to contributions that explicitly address institutional performance, trust formation, and spatial inequalities, particularly in the context of post-socialist and multi-level governance systems. This approach does not aim at exhaustive coverage but at identifying a coherent conceptual gap across these studies. The framework developed here—territorialized institutional trust—is not proposed as a substitute for empirical investigation but as a prerequisite for it, providing a theoretically grounded vocabulary for identifying, measuring, and comparing territorial variation in institutional trust and its resilience effects.

The analytical procedure follows three steps. First, the article reviews and synthesizes existing studies on institutional theory, social resilience, and territorial governance to identify a recurrent gap: the tendency to treat institutional trust as a nationally aggregated and spatially undifferentiated variable. Second, it constructs the concept of territorialized institutional trust through mechanism-based theorizing [20], specifying three analytically distinct but interrelated dimensions—institutional presence, procedural consistency, and institutional legibility—and articulating how each conditions adaptive capacity. Third, the framework is applied to the Central and Eastern European context to assess its explanatory plausibility and policy relevance, using available comparative indicators as illustrative evidence rather than formal empirical tests.

The framework explicitly distinguishes between conceptual generalization and empirical inference. While the former operates through mechanism specification, the latter is deliberately limited in this article to illustrative evidence, in order to avoid overstating causal claims in the absence of spatially disaggregated data.

Figure 1 illustrates the analytical structure of the framework, linking literature synthesis, conceptual development, and empirical illustration.

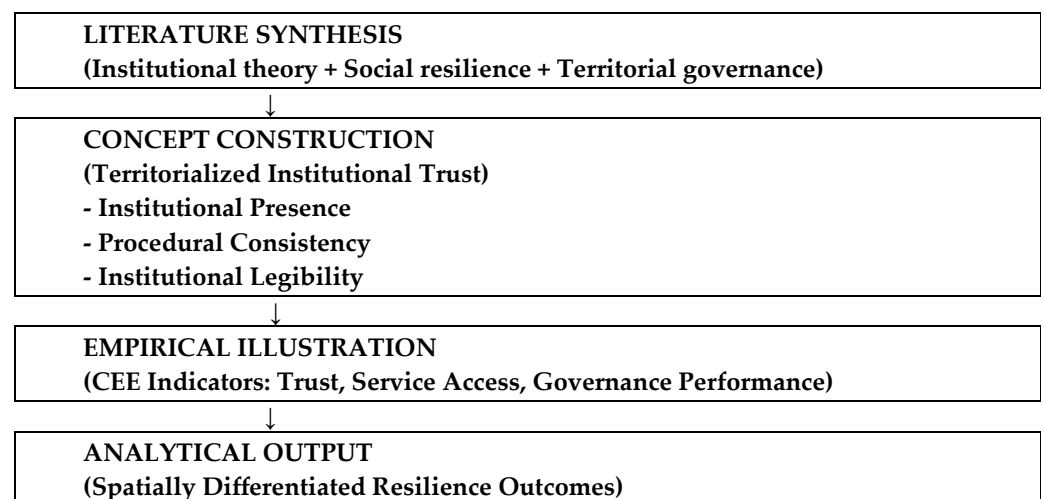


Figure 1. Analytical structure of the conceptual framework.

The figure illustrates the analytical sequence linking theoretical synthesis, conceptual development, and empirical illustration in the construction of the territorialized institutional trust framework.

The focus on Central and Eastern Europe is analytically motivated rather than case-specific. The region combines pronounced territorial disparities, uneven administrative capacity, and multi-scalar governance arrangements, making it particularly suitable for observing how institutional trust becomes spatially differentiated. At the same time, the framework is not limited to this context but is expected to apply to other governance systems characterized by similar territorial asymmetries.

The focus on the built environment as a mediating variable is both analytical and normative [21]. Analytically, built environment indicators—including the spatial density of public facilities, housing quality indices, and proximity to administrative services—offer observable proxies for the otherwise difficult-to-measure dimensions of institutional presence and legibility. Normatively, the built environment is a domain in which urban planners, architects, and spatial policy designers can intervene directly, making the framework actionable for sustainability governance. By situating institutional trust within the material and spatial fabric of governance, this article aims to bridge the gap between the social science literature on resilience and the applied concerns of urban design and planning research.

The framework proposed here generates testable expectations at the level of mechanisms rather than at the level of individual predictions. These expectations can be formulated as a set of falsifiable hypotheses linking territorialized institutional trust to observable institutional and spatial indicators.

First, subnational units characterized by higher institutional presence—measured through service density, accessibility, and continuity—are expected to exhibit higher levels of institutional trust, controlling for socioeconomic variables. For example, in many peripheral rural municipalities in Central and Eastern Europe, the closure or consolidation of local administrative offices and health centers has increased travel times and reduced routine contact with public authorities, reinforcing perceptions of institutional distance and weakening trust.

Second, territories with higher procedural consistency—reflected in predictable administrative outcomes and reduced variance in decision-making—are expected to display greater engagement in long-term adaptive behavior, such as participation in renovation programs or planning processes. A common illustration is provided by uneven enforcement of building regulations or social assistance eligibility across neighboring municipalities, where similar cases receive different outcomes, fueling perceptions of arbitrariness and discouraging engagement with formal procedures.

Third, higher levels of institutional legibility—captured through transparency, clarity of governance structures, and citizen comprehension—are expected to be associated with higher voluntary compliance and coordinated responses during crises. In spatial terms, this can be observed where citizens must navigate fragmented service locations, overlapping jurisdictions, or poorly signposted administrative facilities, making it difficult to know which authority is responsible for specific decisions and how to access support.

Fourth, territories combining these dimensions into higher levels of territorialized institutional trust are expected to exhibit more robust resilience trajectories, including faster recovery from systemic shocks.

These hypotheses are intended to guide future empirical research and can be falsified if territorial variation in trust is found to be independent of institutional configurations or more strongly explained by non-institutional factors.

3. Institutions, Trust, and Resilience: A Theoretical Framework

Institutional analyses emphasize the role of formal and informal rules in structuring social interaction, reducing uncertainty, and enabling coordinated action [8,22,23]. Particularly under conditions of systemic risk, institutions stabilize expectations and provide the procedural continuity necessary for collective responses. Where institutional arrangements are coherent and consistently enforced, they facilitate compliance and long-term planning. Conversely, fragmented or unevenly applied institutional frameworks increase uncertainty and constrain adaptive capacity.

Within this perspective, institutional trust reflects confidence in the functioning, accessibility, and fairness of public institutions. In this article, institutional trust is defined as

a territorially embedded, interaction-based perception of the reliability, accessibility, and predictability of public institutions, emerging from repeated encounters with administrative systems and public services. Rather than being a generalized attitudinal disposition, institutional trust is treated here as an interaction-based outcome that conditions how institutional action is interpreted and anticipated [24].

In this framework, institutional capacity and institutional trust are not parallel variables but elements of a causal sequence. Institutional capacity shapes the conditions under which individuals and communities interact with public institutions, while institutional trust reflects how these interactions are experienced and interpreted. In turn, territorially differentiated institutional trust mediates the relationship between institutional configurations and adaptive behavior, influencing resilience outcomes across space.

It is important to distinguish institutional trust from state capacity. State capacity refers to the administrative, fiscal, and regulatory resources available to public authorities, whereas institutional trust reflects how these capacities are perceived and anticipated by citizens. High capacity does not necessarily generate trust when institutional action is experienced as inconsistent or opaque. Conversely, even limited institutional capacity may sustain trust when procedures are predictable and interactions are stable.

This distinction is critical for understanding resilience. Adaptive capacity depends not only on the formal availability of resources, but also on the ability of individuals and communities to anticipate institutional responses. Where institutional behavior is predictable, actors can coordinate and invest in long-term adaptation. Where institutional action is perceived as uncertain or uneven, adaptive strategies tend to shift toward short-term coping and individualized responses.

Unlike approaches centered on quality of government or state capacity, which focus primarily on institutional performance or resource endowment, the framework proposed here captures how institutional environments are experienced across territories. Institutional trust operates as a mediating mechanism between institutional configurations and adaptive behavior, shaping resilience outcomes in spatially differentiated governance contexts.

Territorialized institutional trust should be distinguished from adjacent concepts such as state capacity, governance quality, and social capital. While state capacity refers to the administrative and regulatory resources available to public authorities, and governance quality captures the effectiveness and impartiality of institutional performance, territorialized institutional trust focuses on how these institutional environments are experienced, interpreted, and anticipated across space. In contrast to social capital, which refers to networks of reciprocity and cooperation among individuals and groups, the concept captures a relational and spatially embedded perception of institutional reliability generated through repeated interaction with public authorities. Its analytical focus is therefore not on institutional resources or social ties as such, but on the territorially differentiated experiential mechanism linking institutional configurations to adaptive behavior and resilience outcomes.

4. Conceptualizing Territorialized Institutional Trust

Territorialized institutional trust refers to spatially differentiated patterns of trust that emerge from unequal institutional environments. It is produced through repeated interactions with public institutions whose presence, accessibility, and performance vary systematically across territories. Rather than a generalized attitude, institutional trust is conceptualized here as an interaction-based outcome conditioned by territorially embedded institutional configurations.

The concept therefore does not duplicate existing governance indicators; it identifies the territorially differentiated experiential mechanism through which institutional environments shape adaptive capacity. The relationship between territorialized institu-

tional trust and social resilience can be analytically unpacked through a set of mechanisms, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Mechanisms Linking Territorialized Institutional Trust and Social Resilience.

Mechanism	Definition	Effect on Institutional Trust	Resilience Implication
Institutional Presence	Density, continuity, and accessibility of public institutions within a given territory, including effective service availability and administrative reach.	Dense, routinized contact between citizens and public authorities stabilizes expectations of reliability. Episodic or fragmented presence erodes confidence in institutional availability.	Structured access to resources and coordination mechanisms during crises. Thin presence forces reliance on informal coping strategies, increasing vulnerability to systemic shocks.
Procedural Consistency	Stable and predictable application of institutional rules and decision-making criteria across territories, independent of local discretion.	Predictable procedures allow actors to form stable expectations. Territorial variation or opaque decision-making erodes trust even absent overt conflict.	Enables long-term adaptive investments and coordinated responses. Inconsistency generates uncertainty, discouraging durable resilience strategies in favor of short-term coping.
Institutional Legibility	Visibility, transparency, and interpretability of institutional action: the extent to which citizens understand how decisions are made and what outcomes to expect.	Legible institutions reinforce trust through cognitive alignment between expectations and outcomes. Opaque or complex governance weakens credibility even when performance is adequate.	Facilitates voluntary compliance and collective coordination during crises. Illegible action shifts compliance toward coercive enforcement, fragmenting adaptive responses.

Note: The table summarizes analytically distinct mechanisms. Institutional dimensions are not mutually exclusive and may interact differently across territorial contexts.

Territorialized institutional trust can be analytically unpacked through three interrelated mechanisms: institutional presence, procedural consistency, and institutional legibility. While analytically distinct, these mechanisms jointly shape how institutional environments condition adaptive capacity across territories.

Operationalization and Measurement Strategies

While the framework is conceptual, its analytical components can be operationalized through a combination of spatial, administrative, and perceptual indicators. Institutional presence may be measured through the density and accessibility of public services, including the number of administrative facilities per capita, average travel time to service

points, or continuity of service provision. Procedural consistency can be approximated through indicators of administrative predictability, such as variance in decision outcomes, audit data, or citizen-reported consistency of institutional responses. Institutional legibility may be captured through measures of transparency, clarity of administrative procedures, and citizen comprehension of governance processes, including survey-based indicators of perceived accessibility and interpretability of institutional action.

These dimensions can be combined into composite indices at the subnational level [25], allowing for comparative analysis of territorialized institutional trust across regions. While existing datasets—such as the European Quality of Government Index or administrative service delivery indicators—provide partial proxies, further data development is required to fully capture the interaction between institutional configurations and territorially embedded trust. This operationalization strategy reinforces the conceptual distinction between institutional performance and institutional experience by linking observable indicators to territorially differentiated interaction patterns.

Territorial institutional environments, structured by institutional presence, procedural consistency, and institutional legibility, shape institutional trust, which conditions adaptive behavior and resilience outcomes. The built environment acts as a material interface influencing institutional accessibility, proximity, and legibility across space.

Institutional presence refers to the density, continuity, and accessibility of public institutions within a given territory, encompassing the effective availability of public services and sustained interaction with public authorities. Territories characterized by dense institutional presence offer frequent and routinized points of contact between citizens and public authorities, facilitating the formation of stable expectations regarding institutional behavior. In contrast, territorially marginalized areas often experience institutional presence as episodic or fragmented, with limited-service availability and weak administrative reach [26]. These conditions undermine trust not because institutions are absent in a formal sense, but because their presence lacks continuity and predictability.

From a resilience perspective, institutional presence shapes adaptive capacity by structuring access to resources and coordination mechanisms during periods of stress. Where institutional presence is dense, crisis response can build on established administrative routines and inter-institutional linkages. Where presence is thin or intermittent, adaptive responses tend to rely on informal arrangements or individualized coping strategies, increasing vulnerability to prolonged or systemic shocks. For example, access to healthcare facilities or local administrative offices in rural areas often requires significantly longer travel times, reducing the frequency and continuity of institutional interaction. Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual model linking territorialized institutional trust to social resilience outcomes.

Procedural consistency captures the degree to which institutional rules and practices are applied in a stable and predictable manner across territories. When similar situations are handled differently across territories, or when institutional decisions appear discretionary or opaque, trust is eroded even in the absence of overt conflict or corruption.

Procedural consistency is particularly important for resilience because it conditions expectation formation. Adaptive behavior presupposes the ability to anticipate institutional responses to future contingencies. In territorially differentiated governance environments, inconsistent procedures generate uncertainty regarding eligibility, enforcement, and continuity of support. This uncertainty discourages long-term adaptive investments and favors short-term coping strategies. Conversely, where procedural consistency is maintained across space, institutional trust stabilizes expectations and enables coordinated adaptation, even under conditions of uncertainty. This can be observed, for instance, in variations in permit approval processes or access to social benefits across regions.

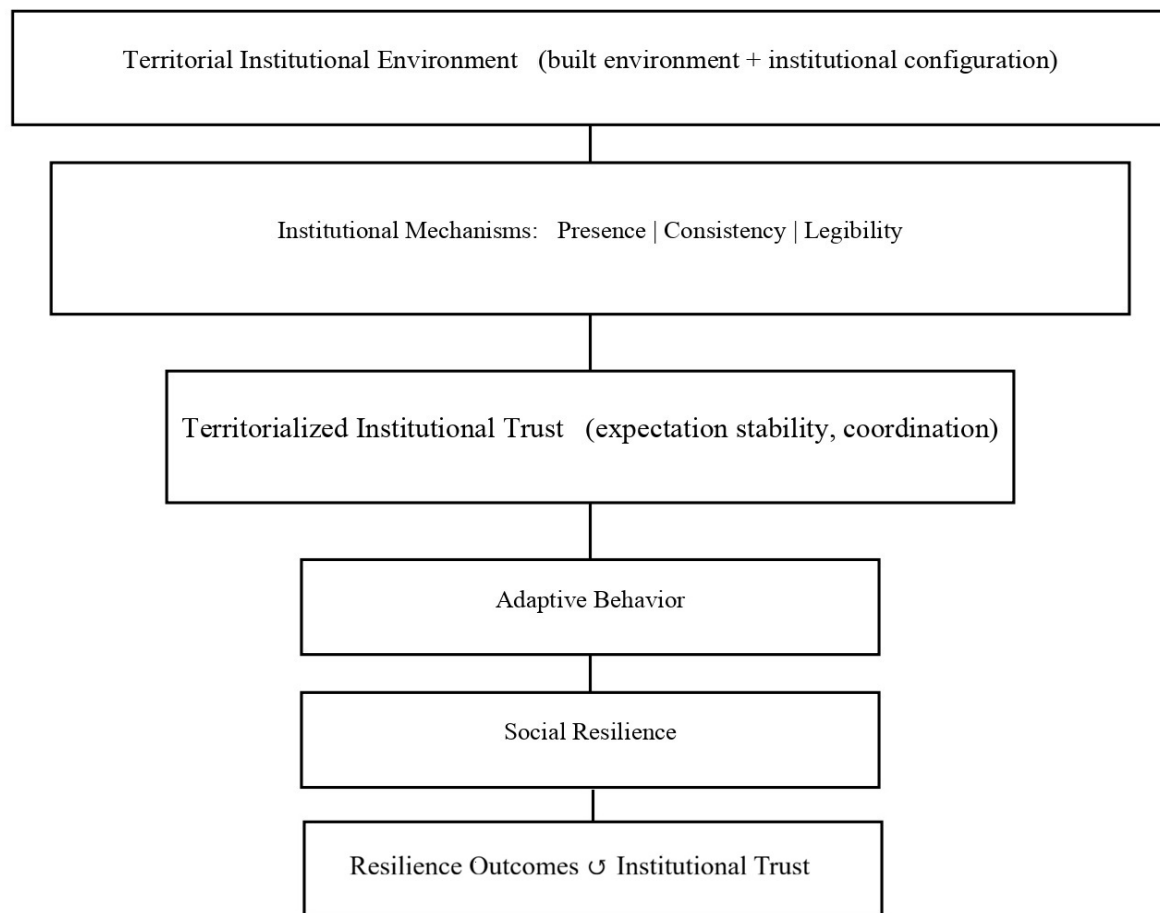


Figure 2. Conceptual model of territorialized institutional trust and social resilience.

Institutional legibility refers to the visibility, transparency, and interpretability of institutional action [27]. Legibility concerns the extent to which citizens can understand how decisions are made, who is responsible for them, and how institutional processes relate to concrete outcomes. Complex administrative structures, fragmented governance arrangements, or opaque decision-making processes may obscure institutional action, weakening trust even when performance is objectively adequate.

Legibility plays a central role in linking institutional trust to resilience outcomes. During periods of crisis, institutional decisions often require rapid compliance and collective coordination. Where institutional action is legible, compliance is facilitated through cognitive alignment between expectations and outcomes. Where institutional action is opaque or poorly communicated, compliance becomes fragile and may depend on coercive enforcement rather than voluntary cooperation. Territorial variation in institutional legibility thus translates into differentiated resilience trajectories, with significant implications for sustainability-oriented governance. In spatial terms, fragmented service locations or unclear administrative jurisdictions may reduce citizens' ability to navigate institutional systems effectively.

Taken together, these mechanisms illustrate how territorialized institutional trust operates as a mediating variable between governance structures and adaptive outcomes. Institutional presence ensures access and continuity, procedural consistency stabilizes expectations, and institutional legibility facilitates coordination and compliance. Variations along these dimensions produce distinct institutional environments that shape not only levels of trust, but also the temporal and behavioral orientation of adaptive strategies.

Importantly, these mechanisms highlight why resilience cannot be adequately captured by aggregate indicators of institutional quality or governance performance. Territorialized institutional trust is produced through localized interactions with institutions embedded in specific spatial configurations. As a result, similar governance reforms or resilience policies may yield divergent outcomes depending on how they interact with territorially differentiated institutional environments.

Territorialized institutional trust does not imply that trust deficits are culturally embedded or normatively fixed. Rather, it treats trust as contingent, relational, and potentially reversible through changes in institutional configuration. This distinction is crucial for avoiding culturalist explanations of urban–rural divides, which tend to naturalize territorial inequalities and obscure their institutional origins [28].

5. Central and Eastern Europe as a Critical Institutional Context

Central and Eastern Europe represents a particularly instructive context for analyzing territorialized institutional trust and its implications for social resilience. Rather than constituting an exceptional or anomalous case, the region illustrates in a concentrated form dynamics that are increasingly visible across Europe: uneven state capacity, spatial concentration of governance resources, and territorially differentiated institutional performance.

Post-socialist transformations profoundly reshaped institutional architectures across the region. The rapid dismantling of centralized administrative systems was accompanied by decentralization reforms that often outpaced the development of local administrative capacity [11,29]. Comparative welfare state research has shown that these transformations did not converge toward a single institutional model but instead produced hybrid configurations combining Bismarckian, universalistic, and market-based elements, with social protection functions increasingly displaced toward households and informal networks [30,31]. While these reforms strengthened urban governance in metropolitan areas, they also produced fragmented and uneven institutional landscapes, particularly in rural and peripheral regions. As a result, territorial disparities in institutional presence became a structural feature rather than a transitional anomaly.

Urban areas in Central and Eastern Europe tend to concentrate administrative expertise, regulatory agencies, healthcare infrastructure, and educational institutions. This concentration generates dense institutional environments in which interactions with public authorities are frequent, routinized, and relatively predictable. In contrast, rural and semi-peripheral areas often experience institutional thinning, characterized by reduced service availability, limited administrative reach, and episodic state intervention. These patterns do not merely reflect demographic or economic decline; they actively shape citizens' expectations regarding institutional reliability and responsiveness.

Importantly, the persistence of these asymmetries cannot be explained solely through economic indicators or cultural attitudes. Comparative research has shown that institutional trust in the region varies significantly within countries and closely follows patterns of institutional access and governance performance [14,32,33]. The dependent capitalism model that characterizes much of the region has structurally decoupled economic growth from social protection, reinforcing the displacement of institutional functions toward informal arrangements and transnational strategies [34]. International migration, in particular, has emerged not merely as an economic response to income differentials but as an institutionally embedded strategy through which individuals access more predictable governance environments and social protection systems [35]. Data on institutional trust from the Standard Eurobarometer [36] confirm marked differences between ECE member states and the EU average, as well as significant within-country variation that national-level aggregates obscure. Similarly, Eurostat EU-SILC data reveal persistent urban–rural asymmetries in

poverty risk and access to services across the region [37], while Worldwide Governance Indicators document a sustained gap in government effectiveness and rule of law between CEE and Western European states [38]. This territorial variation challenges interpretations that attribute trust deficits to post-socialist legacies understood as stable cultural traits. Instead, it points to ongoing institutional differentiation as a key driver of trust formation.

Central and Eastern Europe thus provides a critical empirical setting for examining how institutional trust becomes territorially embedded. The region's governance systems combine formal convergence with European administrative norms and persistent informal practices shaped by uneven enforcement and selective state presence. This combination produces localized institutional experiences that are internally coherent yet territorially unequal, reinforcing differentiated patterns of trust and mistrust across space.

From the perspective of social resilience, these institutional configurations have significant consequences. Communities embedded in dense institutional environments benefit from coordinated governance responses, clearer lines of authority, and more effective crisis management. Conversely, territorially marginalized communities face higher exposure to systemic shocks due to weak institutional mediation, even when social cohesion at the local level remains relatively strong. Resilience, in this sense, reflects the cumulative effects of institutional availability rather than inherent community attributes.

Analyzing Central and Eastern Europe through the lens of territorialized institutional trust therefore allows for a reframing of regional disparities. Instead of treating urban–rural divides as symptoms of delayed modernization or cultural lag, this approach highlights the role of spatially uneven governance in producing differentiated resilience outcomes. In doing so, it situates the region not at the margins of European debates on resilience and sustainability, but at their analytical core.

Post-socialist institutional trajectories have compressed phases of administrative reform, decentralization, and Europeanization, exposing tensions between formal institutional convergence and uneven territorial implementation. This compression effect helps explain why territorialized institutional trust emerges as a salient analytical category in the region. Formal institutional frameworks often display high degrees of legal alignment and organizational complexity, while everyday institutional experiences vary markedly across space.

Viewing the region through this lens also helps avoid exceptionalist interpretations. Territorialized institutional trust does not derive from culturally specific attitudes or post-socialist legacies understood as fixed constraints. Rather, it reflects ongoing interactions between institutional design and spatial configuration. The persistence of territorial disparities in trust points to the cumulative effects of governance arrangements that privilege certain territories over others, reinforcing differentiated resilience trajectories over time.

By situating Central and Eastern Europe within a broader comparative perspective, this section reinforces the article's central argument. Territorialized institutional trust is not a region-specific phenomenon, but a general mechanism through which governance structures shape resilience across space.

Empirical patterns observed across Central and Eastern Europe provide preliminary support for this framework. Urban areas typically benefit from dense institutional environments characterized by proximity to administrative services, healthcare infrastructure, and educational facilities, which facilitate repeated and predictable interactions with public institutions. By contrast, rural and peripheral areas often experience institutional thinning, reflected in longer distances to essential services, reduced administrative presence, and discontinuous service provision. In Romania, for instance, significant urban–rural gaps persist in access to healthcare, public services, and administrative capacity, which correlate with differentiated levels of institutional trust and varying reliance on informal

coping mechanisms. These patterns suggest that institutional trust is not uniformly distributed but spatially conditioned by the material and organizational configuration of governance infrastructures.

Table 2 presents a set of illustrative indicators that do not aim to test the framework empirically, but to demonstrate its empirical plausibility by mapping observable territorial asymmetries onto the mechanisms identified above. While these indicators do not constitute a formal empirical test of the framework—which remains conceptual in scope—they serve to ground the theoretical arguments in observable patterns and to demonstrate the analytical leverage of the territorialized institutional trust approach. National-level indicators in Table 2 are used for illustrative purposes and do not claim to capture the full extent of subnational variation in territorialized institutional trust.

Table 2. Territorial asymmetries in institutional trust and service access: selected CEE indicators.

Indicator/Country	Romania	Poland	Hungary	Czech Rep.
Trust in national govt. (%) [36]	23	35	28	44
Rural poverty risk rate (%) [37]	38.5	19.4	21.7	12.3
Govt. effectiveness score (WGI) [38]	+0.11	+0.74	+0.31	+1.12
Urban–rural gap: unmet medical need (pp) [37]	+9.2	+4.1	+5.8	+2.3
Life satisfaction urban vs. rural (0–10) [39]	6.4/5.9	7.1/6.8	6.7/6.3	7.3/7.0

Note: Trust in national government = percentage of respondents who tend to trust (Eurobarometer 102, Autumn 2024 [36]). Rural poverty risk rate = percentage of rural population at risk of poverty or social exclusion (EU-SILC 2022 [37]). Government effectiveness = World Governance Indicators score, scale −2.5 to +2.5 (2023 [38]). Urban–rural gap in unmet medical need = percentage point difference between urban and rural respondents reporting unmet need (EU-SILC [37]). Life satisfaction = mean score on 0–10 scale, urban/rural (Eurofound 2024 [39]). pp = percentage points.

Across the four CEE countries, urban residents systematically report higher life satisfaction scores than rural residents, mirroring broader EU patterns documented by Eurofound [39].

These national-level indicators are used strictly as aggregated reflections of underlying subnational variation and do not constitute empirical tests of the proposed mechanisms. Their function is illustrative, aimed at demonstrating the empirical plausibility of territorially differentiated institutional trust rather than providing direct measurement of its spatial dynamics. Although the indicators are presented at the national level, they reflect aggregated outcomes of underlying territorial disparities, particularly urban–rural asymmetries, which are well documented in the regional context.

The data presented in Table 2 illustrate several patterns consistent with the territorialized institutional trust framework. Romania displays the lowest trust in national government among the four countries (23%), the highest rural poverty risk (38.5%), the largest urban–rural gap in unmet medical need (+9.2 percentage points), and the lowest government effectiveness score (+0.11)—a configuration that reflects the compounded effects of institutional thinning and territorial marginalization identified in the framework. The Czech Republic, by contrast, exhibits substantially higher trust (44%), lower rural poverty risk (12.3%), a smaller urban–rural service gap (+2.3 pp), and the highest governance effectiveness score (+1.12), consistent with a denser and more territorially even institutional environment. Poland and Hungary occupy intermediate positions, with inter-

nal variation reflecting distinct trajectories of decentralization, welfare state restructuring, and administrative capacity development. Taken together, these patterns support the argument that territorial disparities in institutional trust are not merely attitudinal but are systematically associated with observable differences in governance performance and service accessibility—the structural conditions through which territorialized institutional trust is produced and reproduced.

The empirical illustration remains limited by the use of aggregate and secondary indicators, which do not allow for direct measurement of the proposed mechanisms at the subnational level. This limitation reinforces the need for future research based on spatially disaggregated data and mixed-method designs capable of capturing the interaction between institutional configurations and lived experience.

While the Central and Eastern European context provides a particularly visible configuration of territorialized institutional asymmetries, the framework is not limited to this regional setting. Its applicability is conditioned by specific institutional and spatial characteristics. In particular, the framework is most relevant in governance systems characterized by uneven territorial distribution of administrative capacity, multi-level governance arrangements, and significant disparities in access to public services.

By contrast, in highly centralized and territorially homogeneous systems—where institutional presence, procedural consistency, and administrative legibility are relatively uniform across space—the explanatory leverage of territorialized institutional trust is expected to be more limited. Under such conditions, variations in trust may be driven more strongly by national-level factors or cultural dynamics than by territorially differentiated institutional experience. The framework thus operates as a mid-range theoretical model, linking institutional configurations to spatially differentiated trust formation under conditions of governance asymmetry.

6. Territorialized Institutional Trust and Social Resilience

Social resilience is commonly defined as the capacity of individuals and communities to cope with, adapt to, and recover from external shocks. In much of the existing literature, this capacity is attributed to social cohesion, informal networks, and community-level resources [3,4]. While these factors undoubtedly matter, they do not operate in an institutional vacuum. This section argues that institutional trust, when territorially differentiated, plays a mediating role between structural conditions and resilience outcomes.

A key implication of the territorialized institutional trust framework is the need to distinguish analytically between short-term coping and long-term resilience. While both responses may emerge in the face of external shocks, they rely on different institutional conditions and produce divergent outcomes over time. Coping strategies tend to be reactive, improvised, and oriented toward immediate survival, whereas resilience presupposes the capacity to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to disturbances in a manner that preserves core functions. Institutional trust plays a decisive role in determining which of these trajectories predominates across territories.

In contexts characterized by territorially concentrated institutional trust, short-term coping mechanisms are more likely to be integrated into longer-term adaptive strategies. Trust in institutional mediation enables individuals and communities to rely on formal support mechanisms, to coordinate responses with public authorities, and to accept temporary constraints in exchange for predictable future outcomes. This dynamic stabilizes expectations and extends the temporal horizon of adaptation, allowing resilience to emerge as a cumulative institutional outcome rather than as a sequence of improvised responses.

By contrast, in territorially marginalized contexts where institutional trust is weak or uneven, coping strategies often substitute for resilience rather than contributing to it.

Informal networks, family-based support, and localized solidarity may compensate for institutional gaps in the short term, but they rarely provide the coordination capacity or resource mobilization required for sustained adaptation [40]. Research on post-communist welfare regimes has documented how social risks are systematically displaced toward households and informal networks when public institutions lack the capacity or reach to provide consistent protection [41]. In such configurations, informal institutions function not as transitional residues but as stable substitutes for absent or unreliable formal arrangements [15]. Over time, reliance on such mechanisms may entrench vulnerability by limiting access to institutional resources and reinforcing patterns of institutional disengagement.

This distinction is particularly relevant when considering the role of social capital in resilience processes. High levels of bonding social capital are frequently associated with strong local coping capacity, yet their contribution to long-term resilience is contingent on institutional embedding. In the absence of institutional trust, bonding social capital may foster insularity, reduce engagement with formal governance structures, and limit exposure to external sources of support [42]. Conversely, where institutional trust is present, social capital can enhance resilience by facilitating collective action within institutional frameworks rather than outside them.

Territorialized institutional trust also shapes resilience through its effects on risk perception and behavioral compliance. Trust in institutions influences how risks are interpreted, how policy signals are received, and how collective measures are evaluated. In territorially differentiated governance environments, identical risks may elicit divergent behavioral responses depending on prior institutional experiences. Where institutional action is perceived as credible and predictable, compliance with collective measures becomes a rational adaptive strategy. Where institutional action is perceived as inconsistent or opaque, risk management shifts toward individualized strategies that may undermine collective resilience.

These dynamics become especially salient in the context of sustainability transitions, which often involve distributive trade-offs, behavioral adjustments, and temporal asymmetries between costs and benefits. Territorial variation in institutional trust therefore translates directly into differentiated capacities to sustain such transitions. In high-trust institutional environments, transitional costs are more likely to be interpreted as legitimate and temporary. In low-trust environments, similar costs may be perceived as arbitrary or unfair, triggering resistance and undermining policy effectiveness.

One key mechanism linking trust to resilience is institutional mediation. In contexts characterized by dense institutional presence, public authorities act as intermediaries between social needs and available resources, translating policy instruments into locally accessible forms of support. Trust in these institutions enables timely uptake of assistance, compliance with emergency measures, and coordination across sectors. In territorially marginalized contexts, weak institutional mediation results in fragmented responses, delayed intervention, and uneven access to protection mechanisms, amplifying vulnerability during systemic shocks.

A second mechanism concerns expectation stability and behavioral predictability. Resilience depends not only on available resources, but also on the capacity of actors to anticipate institutional responses. Where institutional behavior is predictable, individuals and communities can plan adaptive strategies with greater confidence. Territorialized deficits in institutional trust disrupt this process by generating uncertainty about eligibility, enforcement, or continuity of support.

A third mechanism relates to institutional learning and feedback. Trust facilitates reciprocal communication between institutions and communities, enabling feedback loops that support policy adjustment and institutional learning. In territorially concentrated

institutional environments, repeated interactions foster mutual adaptation and incremental improvement in governance responses. In contrast, territorially fragmented trust weakens feedback mechanisms, limiting institutional learning and entrenching maladaptive governance patterns.

By conceptualizing resilience as an outcome mediated by territorially differentiated institutional trust, this approach shifts analytical attention from community attributes to governance configurations. It also provides a basis for explaining why formally similar policy interventions produce divergent resilience outcomes across space. Institutional trust, when unevenly distributed, acts as a multiplier of resilience in some territories and as a constraint in others.

Finally, the framework highlights the cumulative nature of resilience as an institutional outcome. Territorialized institutional trust is both a precondition for and a product of effective crisis management. Successful institutional responses reinforce trust, while repeated failures or inconsistencies erode it. Over time, these feedback loops generate path-dependent resilience trajectories that are difficult to reverse through isolated policy interventions.

The framework developed here does not exclude alternative structural explanations of institutional trust, such as those based on economic inequality, demographic change, or political polarization. These factors are likely to influence trust formation, particularly in contexts marked by persistent socioeconomic disparities or political instability. However, the present approach suggests that their effects are mediated through territorially differentiated institutional environments. Economic inequality, for instance, may affect trust not only directly, but also indirectly by shaping access to public services and exposure to institutional performance across space. Similarly, political polarization may erode trust where institutional action is perceived as inconsistent or opaque, reinforcing territorially uneven patterns of institutional experience.

By focusing on institutional presence, procedural consistency, and legibility, the framework does not seek to replace structural explanations, but to specify the mechanisms through which they are translated into territorially differentiated patterns of trust and resilience.

7. Implications for Urban Sustainability and Governance

The built environment is analytically integrated into the framework through its role in shaping institutional presence, procedural consistency, and institutional legibility across space.

The concept of territorialized institutional trust suggests several implications for urban sustainability and governance debates. Much of the contemporary sustainability agenda assumes that resilience-enhancing policies can be designed and implemented in a territorially neutral manner, relying on standardized instruments and place-blind interventions. This section argues that such approaches systematically underestimate the role of territorially differentiated institutional capacity in shaping sustainability outcomes, and outlines four domains in which this underestimation has practical consequences.

First, institutional accessibility as a sustainability resource. Urban sustainability is often associated with infrastructural density, economic diversification, and innovation capacity [43]. While these factors are undeniably relevant, they are insufficient to explain why similar sustainability policies generate divergent outcomes across territories. The framework developed in this article suggests that institutional accessibility, predictability, and trust constitute critical sustainability resources in their own right. Where institutional trust is territorially concentrated, sustainability initiatives benefit from higher compliance, more effective coordination, and greater adaptive flexibility. Where trust is territorially depleted, even well-designed policies encounter implementation barriers and limited local uptake, reducing their overall effectiveness irrespective of technical quality. For instance, sustainability-oriented renovation programmes anchored in clearly identified one-stop

administrative offices, co-located with other public services in accessible urban or rural centers, tend to achieve higher uptake than schemes dispersed across multiple agencies and locations.

Second, the limits of formal decentralization. From a governance perspective, territorialized institutional trust highlights the limits of formal decentralization when it is not matched by effective institutional presence. Decentralization reforms that transfer responsibilities without ensuring administrative capacity risk deepening territorial disparities in trust and resilience. In such contexts, local governance structures may exist formally, yet lack the institutional density required to mediate between policy objectives and local needs. This dynamic is particularly visible in rural and semi-peripheral areas, where sustainability policies are often perceived as externally imposed rather than locally embedded. Effective decentralization must therefore be accompanied by deliberate investments in local institutional capacity, procedural continuity, and administrative legibility.

Third, the design of participatory governance mechanisms. The framework challenges participatory models of sustainability governance that implicitly assume uniform institutional baselines. Participation mechanisms presuppose trust in institutional procedures and expectations of responsiveness. Where territorialized trust deficits persist, participatory processes may reinforce exclusion rather than empowerment, systematically favoring actors already embedded in dense institutional environments. Addressing these asymmetries requires not only inclusive design principles, but deliberate investment in institutional legibility and accessibility at the territorial level—ensuring that formal participation mechanisms translate into substantive engagement across spatially differentiated communities.

Fourth, spatial equity in sustainability transitions. Territorialized institutional trust reframes the relationship between urban sustainability and social equity. Sustainability transitions are frequently associated with distributional tensions, particularly when environmental or infrastructural adjustments impose short-term costs in exchange for long-term benefits. In contexts characterized by uneven institutional trust, such costs are more likely to be interpreted as arbitrary or unfair, undermining long-term support for sustainability objectives and triggering resistance that formal policy instruments are poorly equipped to address. Conversely, where institutions are perceived as predictable and responsive, redistributive trade-offs become more politically and socially manageable, expanding the feasible space for ambitious sustainability strategies.

The built environment plays a distinctive role within this framework. Urban infrastructure, public spaces, and service networks are not merely physical assets; they are institutional interfaces through which citizens encounter and interpret governance [44]. The spatial distribution of built environment quality thus shapes institutional legibility and proximity, reinforcing or disrupting trust formation [45]. Sustainability investments that prioritize institutional visibility—through accessible public facilities, legible service delivery, and visible administrative presence in peripheral areas—may generate trust dividends that extend beyond their immediate functional purpose.

The physical configuration of public buildings and administrative facilities constitutes a particularly salient dimension of this interface [46]. The location, accessibility, and architectural legibility of public institutions—courthouses, municipal offices, health centers, schools—signal the effective presence of the state and condition the frequency and quality of citizen–institution interaction. Research on community health and resilience in disadvantaged settings shows that collective efficacy and local support networks can buffer the impacts of structural vulnerabilities, but only up to a point. In territorially marginalized areas, the physical withdrawal of public buildings, whether through consolidation reforms, fiscal austerity, or spatial rationalization, produces not only functional deficits but symbolic ones: the absence of a visible institutional footprint communicates state disengagement and

erodes the expectation of reliable institutional response. Conversely, deliberate investment in accessible and well-maintained public facilities in peripheral territories operates as a material trust signal, reinforcing perceptions of institutional commitment and procedural continuity [47,48]. This dynamic is consistent with research in environmental psychology and urban design suggesting that the physical quality and spatial proximity of civic infrastructure shape citizens' cognitive representations of governance and their willingness to engage with formal institutional processes [49].

Housing infrastructure and residential built environment quality further mediate territorialized institutional trust by shaping exposure to systemic risk and access to adaptive resources. In Central and Eastern Europe, post-socialist housing transitions produced spatially uneven residential landscapes: urban centers have experienced renewed investment and gentrification dynamics, while rural and semi-peripheral areas have accumulated housing deficits marked by aging stock, inadequate thermal insulation, and limited access to energy networks [50]. These material conditions are not institutionally neutral. Residents of thermally inefficient housing in low-capacity administrative areas face compounded vulnerability: they bear higher energy costs, are less able to comply with building renovation programs, and interact with institutional systems less capable of providing consistent support. The territorial concentration of housing precarity and institutional thinness reinforces each other, producing resilience deficits that neither infrastructure policy nor governance reform alone can adequately address. Integrating built environment indicators—housing quality indices, proximity to public facilities, infrastructure density—into subnational assessments of institutional trust and resilience capacity would therefore provide planners and policymakers with a more spatially precise diagnostic tool than aggregate governance metrics currently allow.

Urban design and spatial planning decisions also operate as mechanisms of institutional legibility. The organization of public space—including signage, wayfinding, the intelligibility of administrative boundaries, and the physical proximity of service delivery points—shapes whether citizens can navigate institutional systems effectively. Fragmented or opaque spatial organization of public services, a common feature of post-reform administrative landscapes in CEE, reduces institutional legibility and erodes trust even when service quality is objectively adequate. Planning frameworks that embed legibility principles—through co-location of services, clearly delimited administrative catchment areas, and multi-function public buildings designed for peripheral communities—can function as instruments of trust-building that simultaneously address infrastructural and institutional deficits. This suggests a productive convergence between sustainability-oriented urban design and the governance goals outlined in this framework: buildings and spaces designed for institutional visibility are also buildings and spaces designed for social resilience.

Policy implications emerging from this analysis do not point toward a single governance model, but toward a reorientation of sustainability strategies. Rather than prioritizing uniform policy instruments, governance frameworks should explicitly account for territorial variation in institutional trust and capacity. Strengthening institutional presence, ensuring procedural consistency, and enhancing the visibility of state action in territorially marginalized contexts are preconditions for resilient and sustainable urban development. At the level of policy design, this implies disaggregating sustainability targets by territory, embedding trust-building mechanisms into implementation frameworks, and evaluating policies not only in terms of environmental or economic efficiency, but also in terms of their capacity to stabilize institutional expectations across space.

In this sense, territorialized institutional trust functions as both an analytical lens and a normative benchmark for sustainability governance. Urban sustainability, viewed through this lens, becomes inseparable from the spatial organization of institutional trust

and governance capacity—a relationship that standard sustainability metrics are currently ill-equipped to capture.

8. Conclusions

Social resilience cannot be understood as a territorially neutral phenomenon. It is fundamentally shaped by spatially differentiated institutional trust. By introducing the concept of territorialized institutional trust, the paper argued that resilience is unevenly distributed across space and fundamentally conditioned by differentiated institutional presence, procedural consistency, and institutional legibility.

Drawing on an institutional perspective, the analysis reframed trust not as a generalized attitudinal disposition, but as a territorially embedded outcome of repeated interactions with public institutions. This shift allows urban–rural asymmetries in resilience to be interpreted as products of uneven governance environments rather than as cultural or behavioral deficits. In this sense, resilience emerges as an institutional capacity mediated through trust, predictability, and the spatial organization of governance.

The Central and Eastern European context illustrated how these mechanisms become particularly visible under conditions of compressed institutional change and recurrent systemic stress. Importantly, the analysis avoided exceptionalist interpretations by situating the region within broader patterns of territorially differentiated governance. Territorialized institutional trust was shown to operate as a general mechanism through which institutional arrangements shape adaptive capacity across space, with relevance extending beyond the specific regional context discussed in the article.

By linking territorialized institutional trust to social resilience, the paper contributes to urban sustainability debates in three main ways. First, it bridges institutional theory and spatial approaches to resilience, offering a framework capable of explaining why formally similar policies generate divergent outcomes across territories. Second, it challenges place-blind sustainability strategies by highlighting trust as a territorially distributed governance resource. Third, it repositions institutional accessibility, procedural consistency, and legibility as core components of resilient and sustainable urban development.

The analysis remains primarily conceptual, which also delineates its limits. While the framework specifies mechanisms through which institutional trust mediates resilience, it does not provide empirical measurement or causal testing. This limitation opens several concrete directions for future research.

Operationalization and measurement. A necessary next step is the development of subnational indicators capable of capturing territorial variation in institutional trust independently of national-level survey aggregates. Promising approaches include the use of administrative data on service delivery continuity, spatial analysis of institutional density (offices, healthcare, educational infrastructure), and micro-level survey instruments that link trust attitudes to concrete institutional interactions. Regional quality-of-government datasets, such as those produced by the Quality of Government Institute, could be extended to incorporate legibility and procedural consistency dimensions, providing a comparative empirical basis for the framework.

Comparative and longitudinal research. The territorialized institutional trust framework is well-suited to comparative research designs that examine resilience trajectories across urban–rural dyads within single countries or across governance systems with varying degrees of administrative centralization. Longitudinal research could track how targeted institutional capacity-building initiatives—such as one-stop administrative centers in peripheral areas, procedural standardization reforms, or enhanced transparency mechanisms—affect trust formation and adaptive behavior over time. Such studies would allow for causal identification of the mechanisms proposed in this article.

Intersection with sustainability transitions. Future research should examine more systematically how territorial variation in institutional trust conditions the social acceptance of sustainability policies. This includes the study of how communities in low-trust institutional environments respond to green infrastructure investments, climate adaptation mandates, or energy transition programs, and whether trust-building governance interventions can be sequenced alongside or prior to substantive policy measures to enhance their effectiveness.

Built environment and institutional interface. The role of the built environment as an institutional interface—shaping the visibility, accessibility, and interpretability of state action—merits dedicated investigation. Research on how urban design, spatial planning, and infrastructure provision shape citizens' everyday encounters with governance could enrich the framework and provide actionable guidance for sustainability-oriented planners and policymakers. Specifically, comparative studies could examine whether investments in accessible civic infrastructure—one-stop administrative centers, multi-service community buildings, or legibly designed public spaces—generate measurable gains in institutional trust at the subnational level, using before-and-after survey designs or difference-in-differences estimation across treated and control municipalities. If such investments fail to produce trust effects independent of service quality improvements, this suggests that the legibility mechanism operates primarily through functional rather than symbolic channels, requiring revision of the framework's architectural assumptions. The falsifiable expectations formulated in Section 2 provide a concrete methodological basis for such research designs.

Ultimately, the article argues that resilience cannot be reduced to community attributes or adaptive cultures alone. It is inseparable from the spatial organization of institutions and the trust they generate. Recognizing territorialized institutional trust as a central dimension of resilience is essential for designing sustainability strategies capable of addressing not only environmental and economic challenges, but also the institutional foundations upon which social resilience depends.

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