

Mobilization around Inequalities: Navigating Deservingness, State Capacity, and Political Actors in Eastern Europe (RISE)

Inequality is one of the most salient issues of all time, but not all forms of inequality matter equally in politics. This project investigates how people in Eastern Europe perceive and respond to different types of inequality—whether economic, ethnic, gender-based, or related to sexual orientation—and why some of these issues become politicized while others remain in the background.

Across the region, citizens widely acknowledge inequality as a serious problem. At the same time, many express hesitation about universal redistribution schemes, doubting whether the state has the capacity or integrity to administer them fairly. This paradox—recognizing the problem of inequality, yet remaining skeptical of state-led solutions—stands at the center of our research. We argue that who is seen as deserving state support, trust in state capacity, and experiences with corruption shape how concerns about inequality are translated into specific policy preferences.

The project focuses on five countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. It pursues four main research questions. On the demand side, we ask which forms of inequality matter most to citizens; how this shapes their political attitudes and policy preferences; and how perceptions of state capacity influence support for redistributive policies. On the supply side, we explore how political actors—parties and social movements—respond to these demands, and why their strategies sometimes align with citizens' preferences and sometimes not.

To address these questions, we use a combination of methods. Focus groups with citizens will uncover how ordinary people understand inequality and what drives their trust or distrust in state interventions. Large-scale surveys and survey experiments will assess how different scenarios of inequality and state action influence support for redistribution. Finally, interviews with political actors will help explain their choices in emphasizing some dimensions of inequality over others.

By combining a citizen-centered and actor-centered perspective, this project will shed light on why inequalities matter politically in some cases but not others. The results will inform both academic debates and public policy strategies, offering evidence-based insights to foster social cohesion and more effective responses to inequality in Eastern Europe.