

Research Article

LEGAL CULTURE, INSTITUTIONAL TRUST, AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN POST-SOCIALIST LEGAL SYSTEMS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF KAZAKHSTAN AND EASTERN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

Background: In contemporary post-socialist legal systems, including Kazakhstan and several Eastern European states, the sustainability of civic participation depends not only on the formal existence of rights and procedures, but also on the broader socio-legal environment in which these rights operate. Of particular importance are legal consciousness, legal culture, legal literacy, institutional trust, and the quality of the rule-of-law environment. These factors shape whether citizens perceive law as a legitimate, intelligible, and effective framework for action, and whether formal channels of participation are used as meaningful instruments of engagement rather than as merely symbolic mechanisms. Although each of these dimensions has been addressed in the literature, their interaction remains insufficiently examined in comparative research on Kazakhstan and Eastern Europe. The article therefore analyses civic participation not as an isolated democratic outcome, but as a product of interrelated legal, institutional, and cultural conditions.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.33327/AJEE-18-9.3-a0001998>

Date of submission: 21 Apr 2026

Date of acceptance: 18 Jun 2026

Online First Publication: 23 Jul 2026

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Method: The study employs a mixed comparative legal design that combines doctrinal legal analysis, directed content analysis of official documents from 2020 to 2025, index-based modelling, and correlation-regression testing. The comparative sample includes Kazakhstan, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Hungary. To ensure analytical consistency, the study constructs and applies the Legal Consciousness Index, Legal Literacy Index, Institutional Trust Index, Civic Participation Index, Legal Nihilism Index, and Rule of Law Environment Index, as well as the composite Civic-Legal Participation Index. This framework is used as a structured comparative tool rather than as a causal explanatory model; it helps organise documentary evidence and compare the formal and operational dimensions of civic-legal embeddedness across the selected post-socialist legal systems.

Results and Conclusions: The findings suggest that legal consciousness and institutional trust are most consistently associated with civic participation in the comparative sample, whereas legal literacy appears to be a necessary but insufficient condition when considered in isolation. The study identifies several distinct models of civic-legal embeddedness across the selected countries, ranging from balanced and institutionally reinforced participation to compensatory and structurally imbalanced forms. Kazakhstan demonstrates meaningful growth potential due to its comparatively developed legal and procedural accessibility, yet further progress depends on stronger institutional trust and reduced legal nihilism. The article proposes a comparative legal model for analysing civic participation by examining the interaction among legal culture, institutional trust, and procedural accessibility. It concludes that stable civic participation requires more than formal legal modernisation: it depends on the extent to which law is experienced as fair, predictable, and socially credible. These findings may support policies aimed at strengthening legal education, improving legal enforcement, and deepening state-citizen interaction in Kazakhstan.

1 INTRODUCTION

In contemporary legal systems, legality depends not only on the quality of norms and institutions but also on whether law is perceived as legitimate, intelligible, and practically meaningful. Legal consciousness and legal culture, therefore, mediate the relationship between legal norms, public institutions, and social action. They influence citizens' readiness to use legal mechanisms, seek remedies, participate in public life, and perceive the state as a framework for fair and predictable interaction rather than solely as a coercive authority.¹

1 Darkhan Bakirov et al., 'Legal Culture and Legal Consciousness in Kazakhstan: An Analysis of the Annual Reports of the Ombudsman for Human Rights and Legal Acts' (2025) 8(3) *Access to Justice in Eastern Europe* 278, doi:10.33327/AJEE-18-8.3-a000105; Pablo Carvacho, 'Access to Justice in Prisons or the Limitations of Prison Defense' (2023) 79(5) *Crime, Law and Social Change* 531, doi:10.1007/s10611-023-10082-1; Mihaela Serban, 'Law and liberation: Legal consciousness and legal mobilization in post-communist Europe' in Steven A Boucher, Corey S Shdaimah, and Michael W Yarbrough (eds), *Research Handbook on Law, Movements and Social Change* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2023) 102, doi:10.2139/ssrn.4244978.

The relevance of this issue became especially visible in 2020–2025. In post-socialist states, debates on the rule of law increasingly moved beyond courts and anti-corruption measures toward legal trust, civic participation, and legal literacy. For Kazakhstan, this shift is particularly significant, since official reforms promoting the rule of law, legal education, and access to justice still coexist with weaknesses in accountability, access to law, and enforcement. This reveals a persistent gap between formal regulation and citizens' lived legal experience.²

The post-socialist and Eastern European context gives this problem a clear comparative dimension. These states share related historical and legal transformations, yet differ in institutional quality, public trust, and forms of civic engagement. European Commission materials confirm continuing differences in justice quality, anti-corruption mechanisms, checks and balances, and civic participation, which makes comparative analysis methodologically justified.³

The problem is further intensified by the broader crisis of institutional trust. OECD findings show that trust depends on openness in decision-making, evidence-based governance, institutional integrity, and perceptions of fairness. These factors are closely connected with legal consciousness: when citizens do not view law as effective and equally applicable, their participation in institutional forms of public life becomes less stable.⁴

Contemporary scholarship no longer reduces legal culture to knowledge of statutes or abstract respect for law. Legal consciousness is understood as the way individuals interpret law, relate it to their interests, and decide whether legal action is meaningful. It functions as an active link between the legal order and social practice. Research on post-communist Europe shows that legal culture becomes evident in legal mobilisation, everyday recourse to law, and perceptions of legal accessibility.⁵

Against this background, the central problem of the study is that comparative legal scholarship still fails to explain how legal consciousness shapes civic participation in post-socialist societies. This gap is especially relevant for Kazakhstan, which is rarely examined alongside Eastern European states within a shared comparative framework. The divide between doctrinal legal analysis and socio-legal interpretation, therefore, remains unresolved.

2 Bakirov et al (n 1); World Justice Project, *Rule of Law Index 2024* (WJP 2025) <<https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global/2024>> accessed 10 April 2026.

3 European Commission, *2024 Rule of Law Report* (EC 2024) <https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/annual-rule-law-cycle/2024-rule-law-report_en> accessed 10 April 2026; Agnieszka Kubal, 'Judicial Relational Legal Consciousness: Authoritarian Backsliding as a Catalyst of Change' (2024) 51(s1) *Journal of Law and Society* S45, doi:10.1111/jols.12497.

4 OECD, *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment* (OECD Publishing 2024) doi:10.1787/9a20554b-en.

5 Kubal (n 3); Şerban (n 1).

The aim of this study is to determine how legal consciousness and legal culture influence civic participation in Kazakhstan and Eastern European countries and to identify institutional and educational mechanisms that can strengthen this relationship in contemporary legal policy.

H1. A higher level of legal consciousness and legal culture increases the likelihood of stable civic participation in institutional and legal forms. This assumption is based on the view that legal knowledge, trust in procedures, and confidence in institutional effectiveness strengthen citizens' readiness to use legal channels and participate in public life through normatively structured forms.⁶

H2. Differences in civic participation between Kazakhstan and Eastern European countries are shaped not only by formal legal norms but also by the quality of enforcement, institutional accountability, and public trust. Normative modernisation does not strengthen legal culture unless it is supported by predictable legal practice and a credible public experience of justice.⁷

H3. Strengthening legal education, legal literacy, and civic-legal learning helps reduce legal nihilism and reinforce civil society. This hypothesis rests on the view that legal culture develops not only through institutional reform, but also through long-term socialisation, public legal communication, and access to legal information.⁸

The scientific novelty of the study lies in treating legal consciousness not as an abstract category of legal theory, but as an applied indicator of citizens' institutional embeddedness within the legal order. Unlike studies that are limited to general descriptions of legal culture or to isolated aspects of legal education, this article combines comparative legal analysis, socio-legal interpretation, and an institutional approach. It shows that civic participation does not arise automatically from formal rights and freedoms, but depends on the interaction of legal intelligibility, trust in institutions, and real procedural accessibility. This perspective links the theoretical discussion of legal culture with practical implications for legal policy and enforcement.

The article's contribution is primarily conceptual and comparative. The index-based component is used to operationalise the main socio-legal dimensions and to make the cross-country comparison more transparent. It should not be read as a stand-alone econometric explanation of civic participation or as evidence of strict causal effects. Rather, the indices provide a structured analytical lens through which differences between Kazakhstan and the selected Eastern European countries can be interpreted.

6 OECD (n 4); Şerban (n 1).

7 European Commission (n 3); World Justice Project (n 2).

8 Bakirov and others (n 1); Council of Europe, *Shaping Europe's Democratic Future: Building a European Space for Citizenship Education* (CoE 2024) <<https://rm.coe.int/policy-brief-06-10/1680b6694b>> accessed 10 April 2026.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on legal culture, institutional trust, and civic participation can be organised around three interconnected research directions. The first concerns legal culture and legal consciousness as conditions under which law becomes socially meaningful rather than merely formally valid. In this view, law influences civic behaviour only when citizens recognise it as understandable, legitimate, and practically usable.⁹ Earlier studies on legal culture in Kazakhstan emphasise the role of legal awareness, respect for law, and civic responsibility in strengthening the legal order and limiting corrupt or informal practices.¹⁰ More recent research builds on this argument by linking legal culture to access to rights-protection mechanisms and to everyday legal experience.¹¹ In the broader post-socialist context, legal consciousness is also treated as a dynamic form of legal mobilisation: citizens turn to law when they perceive legal procedures as accessible and capable of producing meaningful outcomes.¹²

The second direction focuses on the rule of law, institutional quality, and legal backsliding. Studies of Central and Eastern Europe show that formal constitutional guarantees do not automatically secure the practical authority of law. The weakening of judicial independence, anti-corruption mechanisms, checks and balances, and civic space may reduce the credibility of legal institutions even where legal procedures remain formally available.¹³ This

- 9 Yonathan A Arbel, 'The Readability of Contracts: Big Data Analysis' (2024) 21(4) *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies* 927, doi:10.1111/jels.12400.
- 10 Arman Serikovich Akhmetov, Victor Nikolaevich Zhamuldinov and Oleg Evgenievich Komarov, 'Legal Culture and its Role in Civil Society Formation' (2018) 9(5) *Journal of Advanced Research in Law and Economics* 1534, doi:10.14505//jarle.v9.5(35).03; Arman Serikovich Akhmetov, Victor Nikolaevich Zhamuldinov, and Oleg Evgenievich Komarov, 'Corruption as a Social Phenomenon: Problems and Prospects for Combating Corruption' (2018) 9(5) *Journal of Advanced Research in Law and Economics* 1539, doi:10.14505//jarle.v9.5(35).04; Arman Serikovich Akhmetov, Victor Nikolaevich Zhamuldinov, and Oleg Evgenievich Komarov, 'Current Issues Of Legal culture formation' (2018) 9(7) *Journal of Advanced Research in Law and Economics* 2218, doi:10.14505//jarle.v9.7(37).02.
- 11 Bakirov et al. (n 1).
- 12 Kubal (n 3); Şerban (n 1).
- 13 Petra Bárd, 'The Rule of Law and Academic Freedom or the Lack of it in Hungary' (2020) 19(1) *European Political Science* 87, doi:10.1057/s41304-018-0171-x; Julinda Beqiraj and Lucy Moxham, 'Reconciling the Theory and the Practice of the Rule of Law in the European Union: Measuring the Rule of Law' (2022) 14 *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 139, doi:10.1007/s40803-022-00171-z; Lukasz Bojarski, 'Civil Society Organisations for and with the Courts and Judges – Struggle for the Rule of Law and Judicial Independence: The Case of Poland 1976–2020' (2021) 22(7) *German Law Journal* 1344, doi:10.1017/glj.2021.72; Olga Ceran, 'The Democratic Justification of Academic Freedom in EU Law: Article 13 of the EU Charter, the Rule of Law Toolbox, and the Scope for EU Action' (2025) 21(2) *European Constitutional Law Review* 300, doi:10.1017/S1574019625000136; Barbara Grabowska-Moroz et al., 'Reconciling Theory and Practice of the Rule of Law in the European Union' (2022) 14(2-3) *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 101, doi:10.1007/s40803-022-00183-9; Hans Petter Graver and Petra Gyöngyi, 'Hidden Rule of Law Discontinuities: A Theoretical Framework for Studying Rule of Law Backsliding' (2024) 20(2) *International Journal of Law in Context* 117,

literature is important for the present study because it demonstrates that legal culture cannot be separated from the institutional environment in which citizens encounter law. At the same time, much of this scholarship remains concentrated on courts, supranational mechanisms, and constitutional standards, while the link between institutional quality and everyday civic participation is less fully examined.

The third direction addresses institutional trust, legal literacy, and participation. Trust is increasingly understood not as a general attitude toward the state, but as a multidimensional relationship shaped by predictability, impartiality, accountability, and procedural fairness.¹⁴ Legal literacy and access to justice also matter because citizens cannot use legal channels if they do not understand their rights or lack procedural support. However, legal knowledge alone is insufficient. It produces sustained civic participation only when supported by credible institutions and procedures that citizens experience as fair and effective. This is especially relevant for post-socialist systems, where formal legal modernisation may coexist with distrust, legal scepticism, or reliance on informal strategies.

Recent work on digital civics and algorithmic governance adds a further dimension to this debate. Digital state platforms, online petitions, e-justice tools, and algorithmic decision-making increasingly mediate the relationship between citizens and legal institutions.¹⁵ These developments expand access to legal and administrative procedures, but they also raise questions of transparency, accountability, and digital inequality. For

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- doi:10.1017/S1744552324000077; Carlos J Moreiro González, 'Implementing the Rule of Law in the European Union: How Long Trapped in Penelope's Spinning Wheel from Article 2 of the TEU?' (2024) 25 *Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies* 161, doi:10.1017/cel.2023.17; Pieter-Augustin Van Mallegheem, 'Legalism and the European Union's Rule of Law Crisis' (2024) 3(1) *European Law Open* 50, doi:10.1017/elo.2024.5.
- 14 Kee Hoon Chung and Hyeok Yong Kwon, 'Trust, Institutional Quality, and the Protection of Property Rights: A Cross-Regional Study of East Asia and Western Countries' (2024) 105(2) *Social Science Quarterly* 267, doi:10.1111/ssqu.13340; Louisa Estadieu et al, 'Institutional Trust in Crisis? Conceptual and Methodological Challenges in Measuring Institutional Trust' (2025) 19(6) *Sociology Compass* e70073, doi:10.1111/soc4.70073; Andrea FM Martinangeli et al, 'Institutional Quality Causes Generalized Trust: Experimental Evidence on Trusting under the Shadow of Doubt' (2024) 68(3) *American Journal of Political Science* 972, doi:10.1111/ajps.12780; Koen Verhoest et al, 'How Trust Matters for the Performance and Legitimacy of Regulatory Regimes: The Differential Impact of Watchful Trust and Good-Faith Trust' (2025) 19(1) *Regulation & Governance* 3, doi:10.1111/rego.12596.
- 15 Frida Elek-BenMoshe and Sheizaf Rafaeli, 'Readability of Online Government Information about Welfare Rights and Benefits: The Israeli Case' (2025) 24(2) *Universal Access in the Information Society* 1659, doi:10.1007/s10209-024-01167-2; M Taha Kasim et al, 'Can a Legal Literacy Campaign Build Citizen Trust? A Randomized Controlled Trial in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan' (2025) 53(2) *Oxford Development Studies* 159, doi:10.1080/13600818.2025.2487708; Antonios Kouroutakis, 'Rule of Law in the AI Era: Addressing Accountability, and the Digital Divide' (2024) 4 *Discover Artificial Intelligence* 115, doi:10.1007/s44163-024-00191-8; Federico Tomasello, 'Digital Civics and Algorithmic Citizenship in a Global Scenario' (2023) 36(2) *Philosophy & Technology* 39, doi:10.1007/s13347-023-00638-3.

Kazakhstan, where public services and channels of appeal have become increasingly digitalised, this dimension is particularly relevant.

Overall, the literature confirms that legal culture, institutional trust, legal literacy, and civic participation are closely connected, but they are often studied separately. Rule-of-law scholarship tends to privilege macro-institutional analysis, while studies of legal literacy and civic education often focus on applied mechanisms without integrating them into a broader theory of civic-legal embeddedness. Comparative research that places Kazakhstan and Eastern European countries within one analytical framework remains limited. The present study addresses this gap by examining how legal consciousness, legal literacy, institutional trust, legal nihilism, and the rule-of-law environment jointly shape civic participation in post-socialist legal systems.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Analytical Logic

The study employs a mixed comparative legal design to examine how legal consciousness, legal culture, legal literacy, institutional trust, and the rule-of-law environment are associated with civic participation. The design combines doctrinal legal analysis, directed content analysis of official documents, index-based modelling, and statistical testing. This combination was selected because the research problem cannot be addressed through formal legal analysis alone: the study requires both interpretation of legal and institutional materials and a comparable measurement of socio-legal patterns across countries.

The quantitative component has an interpretive and comparative function. It is intended to systematise documentary evidence, identify relative differences between countries, and support hypothesis-oriented interpretation. Given the limited number of country cases and the aggregated character of the data, the index-based and statistical procedures are not designed to establish causal effects in a strict econometric sense.

3.2. Comparative Scope and Empirical Base

The comparative sample includes Kazakhstan, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Hungary. These countries share a post-socialist legal legacy but differ in institutional development, civic space, public trust, and the practical operation of legal procedures. Kazakhstan is treated as the central case, while the Eastern European cases provide the comparative framework. The period of analysis covers 2020–2025.

The empirical base comprises three groups of sources: national legal and policy documents, international and supranational assessment materials, and scholarly publications on legal culture, institutional trust, legal literacy, civic participation, and the rule of law. In the

qualitative part of the study, the unit of analysis is a document or report. In the quantitative part, the unit of observation is the country-year.

3.3. Research Procedure

The research was conducted in five stages. First, the literature was reviewed to identify the key dimensions linking legal culture and civic participation. Second, doctrinal legal analysis was used to examine the formal legal and institutional context of each country. Third, directed content analysis was applied to official documents using a predefined coding matrix. Fourth, the coded values were transformed into sub-indices and a composite index. Fifth, the relationships between the indices were tested through Spearman's rank correlation and regression modelling.

3.4. Variables and Measurement

The study uses six sub-indices and one composite indicator. The Legal Consciousness Index (LCI) captures the extent to which documents reflect legal subjectivity, procedural justice, and orientation toward law as a legitimate means of action. The Legal Literacy Index (LLI) measures legal education, accessibility of legal information, and procedural navigation. The Institutional Trust Index (ITI) reflects accountability, impartiality, predictability, and responsiveness. The Civic Participation Index (CPI) measures legally structured participation, including consultation, complaint, appeal, and mediation-related mechanisms. The Legal Nihilism Index (LNI) captures distrust in legal mechanisms, orientation toward extra-legal strategies, and weak procedural motivation. The Rule of Law Environment Index (RLEI) reflects the external institutional context, including judicial guarantees, checks and balances, and access to rights protection. The Composite Civic-Legal Participation Index (CLPI) integrates these dimensions into a single comparative measure.

All indicators were coded on a three-point scale:

- 0 – the feature is absent or expressed only declaratively;
- 1 – the feature is present partially;
- 2 – the feature is clearly expressed and supported both normatively and procedurally.

This format was chosen because it allows comparison of heterogeneous documents without introducing artificial precision while supporting the reproducibility of the results. To improve reliability, the coding matrix was first tested on a pilot sub-corpus, after which the main coding procedure was carried out (Table 1).

Table 1. Operational structure of variables and analytical procedures¹⁶

Component	Analytical meaning	Measurement and function in the study
LCI — Legal Consciousness Index	Reflects legal subjectivity, procedural justice, and orientation toward lawful recourse.	Positive index used to assess how legal consciousness is associated with civic participation.
LLI — Legal Literacy Index	Captures legal education, accessibility of legal information, procedural navigation, and legal aid.	Positive index used to evaluate whether legal literacy supports participation and reduces legal nihilism.
ITI — Institutional Trust Index	Measures accountability, impartiality, responsiveness, predictability, and institutional openness.	Positive index used to determine the trust-based capacity of the legal environment.
CPI — Civic Participation Index	Reflects consultation, complaint and appeal channels, mediation, and other structured forms of participation.	Dependent variable in the main regression model and the key outcome indicator of civic participation.
LNI — Legal Nihilism Index	Captures distrust in law, orientation toward extra-legal strategies, and weak procedural motivation.	Negative index used to assess constraints on civic-legal embeddedness.
RLEI — Rule of Law Environment Index	Reflects judicial guarantees, checks, and balances, anti-corruption capacity, and access to rights protection.	External contextual indicator used to compare the broader legal environment across countries.
CLPI — Composite Civic-Legal Participation Index	Integrates LCI, LLI, ITI, CPI, RLEI, and the reverse value of LNI.	Composite indicator used to compare the overall level of civic-legal embeddedness.
GAP coefficient	Compares internal legal preparedness with actual civic participation.	Diagnostic coefficient used to identify balanced, under-realised, or compensatory participation patterns.

¹⁶ Source: Compiled by the authors.

Component	Analytical meaning	Measurement and function in the study
Spearman's rank correlation	Measures associations between the main indices.	Used to test H1 and H3 because the data combine ordinal and normalised values.
Regression model	Examines how CPI is associated with LCI, ITI, RLEI, and LNI within the aggregated comparative dataset.	Exploratory procedure used to support the comparative interpretation of H2, not to establish causal effects.

Note. All document-based indicators were coded on a three-point scale and then normalised to a 0–1 scale. Positive indicators increase the level of civic-legal embeddedness, while LNI is treated as a negative component.

3.5. Hypothesis Testing Strategy

The hypotheses were tested through correlation and regression procedures. H1 was tested by examining the relationship between LCI and CPI. H2 was tested using a regression model with CPI as the dependent variable and LCI, ITI, RLEI, and LNI as predictors. H3 was tested through the relationship between LLI and LNI, using both Spearman's rank correlation and an additional regression model with LNI as the dependent variable. Spearman's rank correlation was selected because the dataset combines ordinal and normalised indicators and is of moderate size.

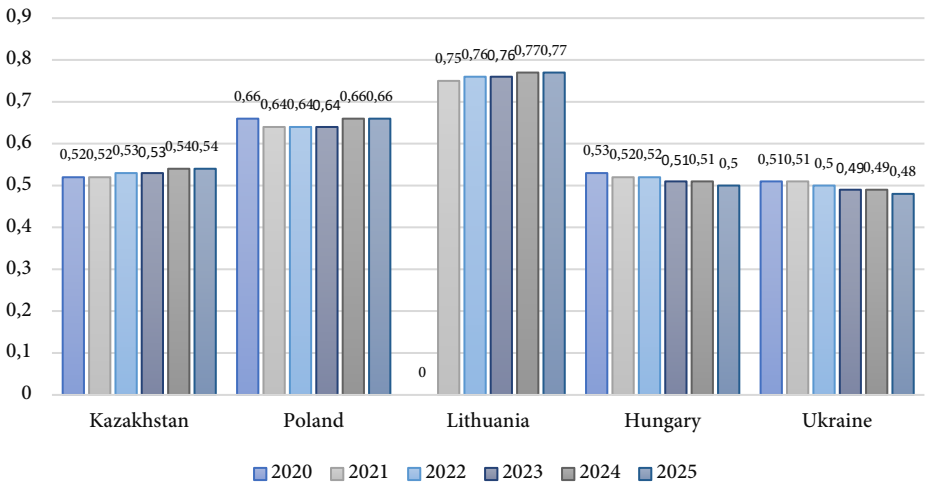
3.6. Methodological Limitations

The study has several limitations typical of comparative legal research. The documents differ across countries, legal languages, and institutional contexts, which may affect the comparability of some indicators. These limitations were mitigated through a unified coding matrix, comparable source categories, value normalisation, and triangulation among doctrinal analysis, document coding, index construction, and statistical testing. The methodology, therefore, does not claim to measure legal culture exhaustively. Its purpose is to provide a consistent comparative framework for identifying how legal consciousness, institutional trust, legal literacy, and legal nihilism shape civic participation across post-socialist legal systems.

4 RESULTS - COMPARATIVE PATTERNS AND EMPIRICAL OUTCOMES OF CIVIC-LEGAL EMBEDDEDNESS

The initial institutional background indicates that the legal environments of Kazakhstan, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Hungary developed unevenly in 2020–2025. Despite their shared post-socialist legal legacy, these countries differ in rule-of-law dynamics, institutional resilience, procedural quality, and anti-corruption capacity. For comparative consistency, the study uses the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index as the baseline indicator, as it uses a uniform scale and allows cross-country changes to be tracked over time.

The index is suitable for this analysis because it covers not only the judiciary, but also constraints on government powers, corruption control, open government, fundamental rights, regulatory enforcement, and civil and criminal justice. It therefore provides a coherent basis for assessing how the broader legal environment shapes legal consciousness, legal literacy, institutional trust, and civic participation (Figure 1).



Note. Values range from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating a stronger rule-of-law environment. Lithuania was not included in the WJP 2020 edition. Values marked ~ for 2023 were reconstructed from the official 2024 data and the annual percentage change.

Figure 1. Dynamics of the overall rule-of-law indicator (WJP Rule of Law Index) in Kazakhstan and Eastern European countries, 2020–2025¹⁷

17 Source: Compiled by the authors from the WJP Rule of Law Index (2020, 2021, 2022, 2024, 2025) and related official materials.

The comparison reveals distinct trajectories. Lithuania maintains the strongest and most stable rule-of-law environment, while Poland shows partial recovery after an earlier decline. Kazakhstan records a gradual but limited improvement, mainly in procedural and enforcement stability. Hungary demonstrates persistent deterioration, whereas Ukraine's decline should be interpreted in the context of wartime pressure and incomplete institutional recovery. The following table, therefore, compares the direction and scale of change across the selected countries (Table 2).

Table 2. Change in the overall rule of law indicator during the study period¹⁸

Country	Baseline year	Final year	Change, p.p.	Change, %
Kazakhstan	0.52 (2020)	0.54 (2025)	+0.02	+3.8%
Poland	0.66 (2020)	0.66 (2025)	0.00	0.0%
Lithuania	0.75 (2021)	0.77 (2025)	+0.02	+2.7%
Hungary	0.53 (2020)	0.50 (2025)	-0.03	-5.7%
Ukraine	0.51 (2020)	0.48 (2025)	-0.03	-5.9%

Note. For Lithuania, the calculation covers 2021–2025, as the country was not included in the WJP 2020 edition. The percentage change was calculated from the baseline and final values.

Table 2 clarifies the comparative dynamics and shows that aggregate rule-of-law scores do not fully explain the institutional meaning of change. Ukraine and Hungary demonstrate the most pronounced decline, but the nature of this decline differs: Ukraine's score decreased from 0.51 to 0.48 under severe wartime pressure and incomplete judicial recovery, while Hungary's decline from 0.53 to 0.50 reflects more persistent systemic rule-of-law weaknesses, including corruption-related concerns and structural institutional deficits. Kazakhstan and Lithuania show moderate improvement, although at different levels. Kazakhstan increased from 0.52 to 0.54, indicating partial progress mainly in order-related and selected procedural dimensions, while constraints on power and guarantees of fundamental rights remain weaker. Lithuania improved from 0.75 to 0.77 and retained the strongest legal environment in the group, with continued emphasis on institutional quality and anti-corruption mechanisms. Poland returned to 0.66 from 0.64 after an earlier decline, suggesting partial institutional recovery, although the European Commission still notes the absence of an updated national anti-corruption strategy.

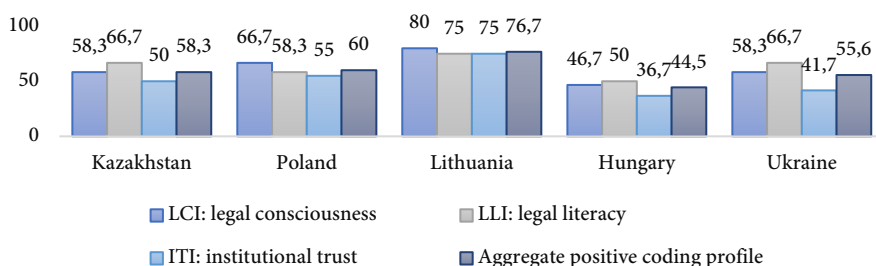
The comparison confirms that similar quantitative scores may conceal different institutional conditions. Kazakhstan, Hungary, and Ukraine fall within partly comparable numerical ranges, but their legal environments differ in substance. Kazakhstan reflects uneven but observable institutional strengthening; Hungary demonstrates more entrenched structural weaknesses; and Ukraine combines declining rule-of-law indicators with wartime pressure and incomplete institutional recovery.

¹⁸ Source: Compiled by the authors from official WJP materials.

At the next stage, these institutional differences were translated into measurable indicators through directed content analysis of official documents from 2020 to 2025. The analysis focused on three dimensions: LCI for legal consciousness, LLI for legal literacy and access to legal information, and ITI for institutional trust. Each dimension was coded using a predefined matrix and normalised on a 0–1 scale to ensure a standardised document-based comparison.

The document corpus used to calculate LCI, LLI, and ITI included sixty official and internationally recognised documents for 2020 to 2025, with 480 coding units in total. Each country was represented by twelve documents and ninety-six coding units, ensuring symmetry in the comparison. The corpus included annual human rights reports, Ombudsperson reports, Rule of Law country chapters, judicial governance materials, legal aid documents, mediation-related materials, public service reports, OECD governance materials, UN country reports, and stakeholder submissions. For Kazakhstan, the analysis relied on annual human rights materials, the 2024 Ombudsperson's report, the 2024 Annual Report of the State Corporation for Public Services, and the OECD Public Governance Scan of Kazakhstan. For Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, and Ukraine, the corpus was compiled from the European Commission Rule of Law country chapters, national judicial and legal aid materials, mediation documents, UN materials, and recognised institutional reports. One coding unit was defined as a distinct semantic fragment assigned to one of the nine indicators used in the study. The full list of documents included in the corpus is provided in Appendix A.

At the first analytical stage, the focus was placed not on the final indices themselves, but on the distribution of positive codes across the three thematic blocks. This made it possible to identify which elements of legal culture and legal accessibility were consistently present in institutional documents and which appeared only fragmentarily (Figure 2).

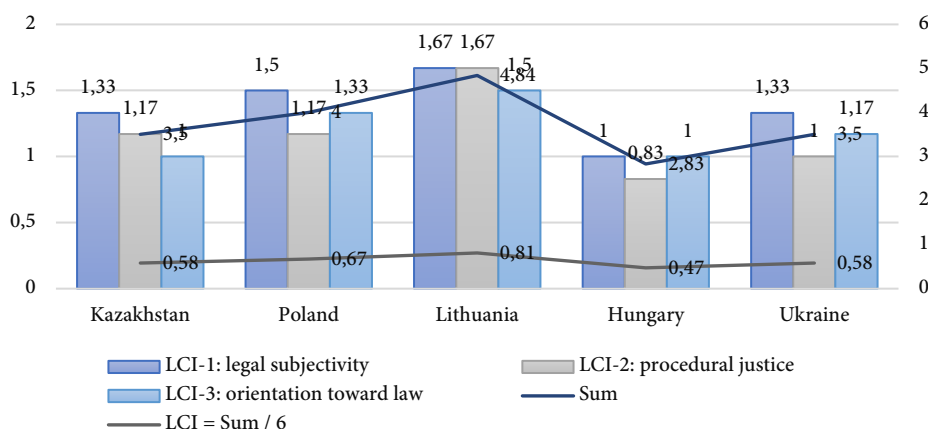


Note. The values show the share of positively coded features within each block. A feature was treated as positive if it received a score of 2 or if recurring level-1 features were consistently confirmed over several years.

Figure 2. Distribution of positive codes across the LCI, LLI, and ITI blocks in the 2020 to 2025 corpus, % of the maximum possible number of codes¹⁹

19 Source: Authors' calculations based on the directed content analysis of official documents for 2020 to 2025.

The initial coding results reveal clear cross-country differences. Lithuania shows the strongest profile across all three dimensions, while Hungary records the weakest results, especially in institutional trust. Poland demonstrates a stronger legal consciousness profile than legal literacy, whereas Kazakhstan and Ukraine show similar LCI and LLI values but differ in ITI. To refine this comparison, the next stage calculates the components of the Legal Consciousness Index: legal subjectivity, procedural justice, and orientation toward lawful recourse (Figure 3).



Note. Calculation formula:

$$LCI_{it} = \frac{LCI1_{it} + LCI2_{it} + LCI3_{it}}{3 \times 2}, \quad (1)$$

where 2 is the maximum possible score for each indicator.

Figure 3. Components of the Legal Consciousness Index (LCI) by country, average scores for 2020 to 2025 on a 0–2 scale²⁰

Lithuania records the highest LCI value (0.81), followed by Poland (0.67). Kazakhstan and Ukraine show equal scores (0.58), with Kazakhstan reflecting greater procedural stability, whereas Ukraine's profile is shaped by rights-protection discourse under crisis conditions. Hungary has the lowest LCI value (0.47), indicating a weaker basis for stable legal consciousness. Overall, higher LCI values reflect not only references to rights, but also the consistent presentation of law as a fair and usable procedural framework.

The next stage examines the Legal Literacy Index, which covers legal education, accessibility of legal information, procedural navigation, and legal aid mechanisms (Figure 4).

²⁰ Source: Authors' calculations based on the coding of documents from 2020 to 2025.

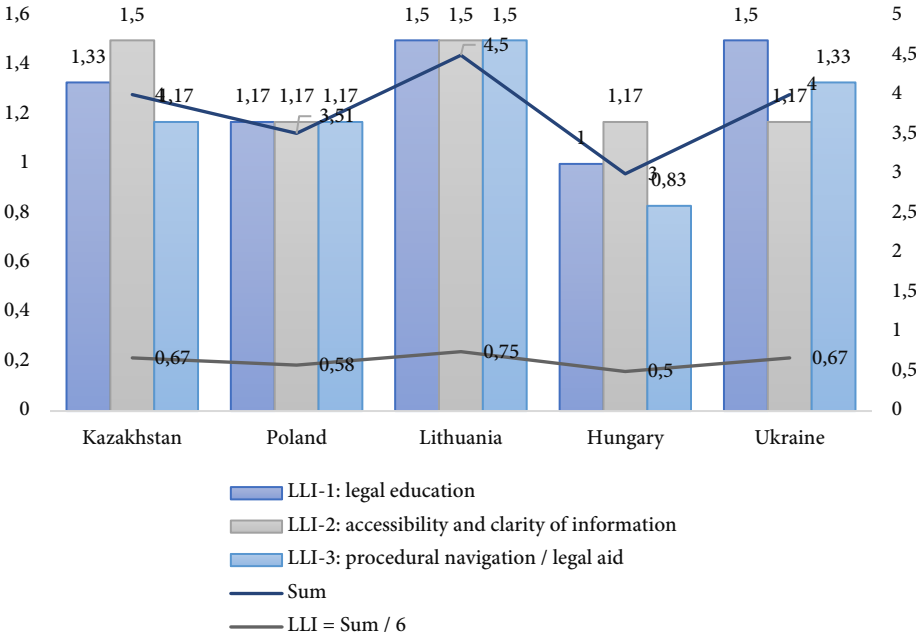


Figure 4. Components of the Legal Literacy Index (LLI) by country, average scores for 2020 to 2025 on a 0-2 scale²¹

The LLI results show a different pattern. Lithuania records the highest value (0.75), reflecting the strongest integration of legal aid, mediation, and accessible legal information. Kazakhstan and Ukraine have equal scores (0.67), but Kazakhstan’s result is linked mainly to digital public services and procedural access, whereas Ukraine’s reflects broad legal aid under wartime conditions. Poland and Hungary remain weaker in this dimension. Overall, legal literacy is understood here as a combination of legal knowledge, procedural navigation, and access to assistance.

The third stage calculates the Institutional Trust Index, covering accountability, openness, procedural impartiality, independence, responsiveness, and predictability (Figure 5).

21 Source: Authors’ calculations based on the coding of official documents and materials related to legal aid, public services, and procedural access.

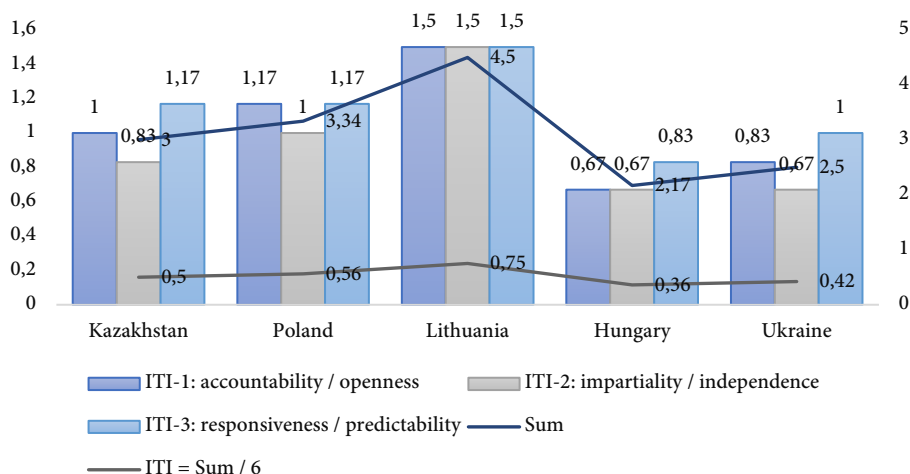


Figure 5. Components of the Institutional Trust Index (ITI) by country, average scores for 2020–2025 on a 0–2 scale²²

The ITI results most clearly differentiate the countries. Lithuania shows the strongest and most balanced trust profile, while Poland (0.56) and Kazakhstan (0.50) demonstrate moderate but incomplete levels of institutionally conveyed trust. Ukraine (0.42) and Hungary (0.36) record weaker results, shaped respectively by wartime pressure and deeper structural deficits. Overall, ITI is the most sensitive indicator, as it captures whether the legal environment is supported by procedural credibility and trust-generating capacity. The next step combines LCI, LLI, and ITI to assess the overall internal legal profile of each country (Table 4).

Table 4. Summary values of LCI, LLI, and ITI by country, average for 2020 to 2025²³

Country	LCI	LLI	ITI	Mean of the three indices	Rank by internal legal profile
Lithuania	0.81	0.75	0.75	0.77	1
Poland	0.67	0.58	0.56	0.60	2
Kazakhstan	0.58	0.67	0.50	0.58	3

²² Source: Authors' calculations based on the coding of country chapters, ombudsperson reports, and official materials on justice governance.

²³ Source: Compiled by the authors.

Country	LCI	LLI	ITI	Mean of the three indices	Rank by internal legal profile
Ukraine	0.58	0.67	0.42	0.56	4
Hungary	0.47	0.50	0.36	0.44	5

Note. The mean of the three indices was calculated as:

$$Profile_{it} = \frac{LCI_{it} + LLI_{it} + ITI_{it}}{3}, \quad (1)$$

The summary results indicate that Lithuania has the most balanced internal legal profile, while Hungary shows the weakest configuration. Poland ranks above Kazakhstan and Ukraine, although institutional trust remains its main limitation. Kazakhstan and Ukraine have similar average values but differ structurally: Kazakhstan shows a stronger ITI profile, whereas Ukraine relies more on legal aid and support mechanisms. These results confirm that the legal environment is shaped by the interaction of legal consciousness, legal literacy, and institutional trust. The next stage, therefore, examines the dynamics of LCI, LLI, and ITI over time (Table 5).

Table 5. Changes in LCI, LLI, and ITI in 2020 and 2025²⁴

Country	LCI 2020	LCI 2025	ΔLCI	LLI 2020	LLI 2025	ΔLLI	ITI 2020	ITI 2025	ΔITI
Kazakhstan	0.50	0.62	+0.12	0.58	0.75	+0.17	0.42	0.54	+0.12
Poland	0.58	0.71	+0.13	0.54	0.63	+0.09	0.46	0.58	+0.12
Lithuania*	0.76 (2021)	0.83	+0.07	0.71 (2021)	0.79	+0.08	0.71 (2021)	0.79	+0.08
Hungary	0.50	0.42	-0.08	0.54	0.46	-0.08	0.42	0.33	-0.09
Ukraine	0.54	0.58	+0.04	0.58	0.71	+0.13	0.46	0.38	-0.08

Note. For Lithuania, the starting point is 2021 because of the structure of the available comparable corpus.

Δ shows the change between the first and the last available point of the period.

The dynamic analysis shows uneven change across the indices. Kazakhstan records the strongest growth in LLI, reflecting the expansion of digital and service-based access to legal services. Poland improves across all three indices, while Lithuania grows moderately from an already high baseline. Ukraine strengthens LCI and LLI but declines in ITI, indicating

²⁴ Source: Authors' calculations based on the stage-by-stage annual coding of the 2020 to 2025 corpus.

that legal support may expand without a corresponding increase in trust. Hungary shows deterioration across all three dimensions, especially in institutional trust. These results confirm that higher legal literacy or legal consciousness does not automatically produce stronger institutional trust. The next step illustrates the calculation procedure using Kazakhstan as an example.

For LCI:

$$LCI_{KZ} = \frac{1.33 + 1.17 + 1.00}{6} = 0.58$$

For LLI:

$$LLI_{KZ} = \frac{1.33 + 1.50 + 1.17}{6} = 0.67$$

For ITI:

$$ITI_{KZ} = \frac{1.00 + 0.83 + 1.17}{6} = 0.50$$

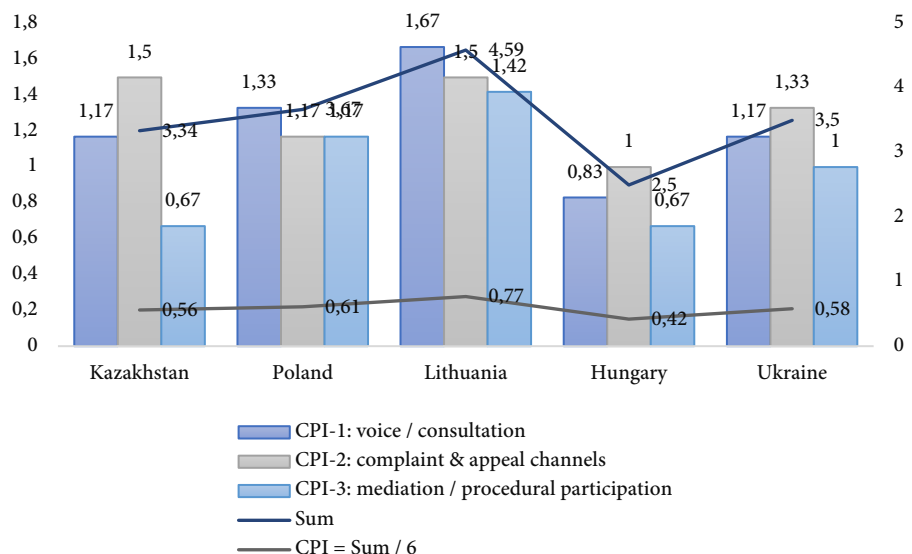
The consolidated internal profile is then calculated as follows:

$$Profile_{KZ} = \frac{0.58 + 0.67 + 0.50}{3} = 0.58$$

The Kazakhstan case shows that legal literacy is the strongest component, while institutional trust remains the main constraint. This means that legal and service accessibility are developing faster than public confidence in institutional impartiality and predictability.

To capture this imbalance, the study uses CPI, which measures structured civic participation, and LNI, which reflects distrust in the law and an orientation toward extra-legal strategies. Together, these indicators show whether legal infrastructure is converted into legitimate civic engagement.

Official markers for 2024–2025 reveal different participation patterns. Kazakhstan relies mainly on Epetition.kz, Citizens' Reception Centres, and video-based public services; Poland on public consultation and NGO support; Lithuania on court use, digital justice, and mediation; Ukraine on legal aid, the Ombudsperson network, and rights-based complaints; and Hungary remains constrained by limited civic space. Accordingly, CPI is measured through three components: voice and consultation, complaint and appeal channels, and mediation or other procedurally structured participation (Figure 6).



Note. Calculation formula:

$$CPI_{it} = \frac{CPI1_{it} + CPI2_{it} + CPI3_{it}}{3 \cdot 2}, \quad (2)$$

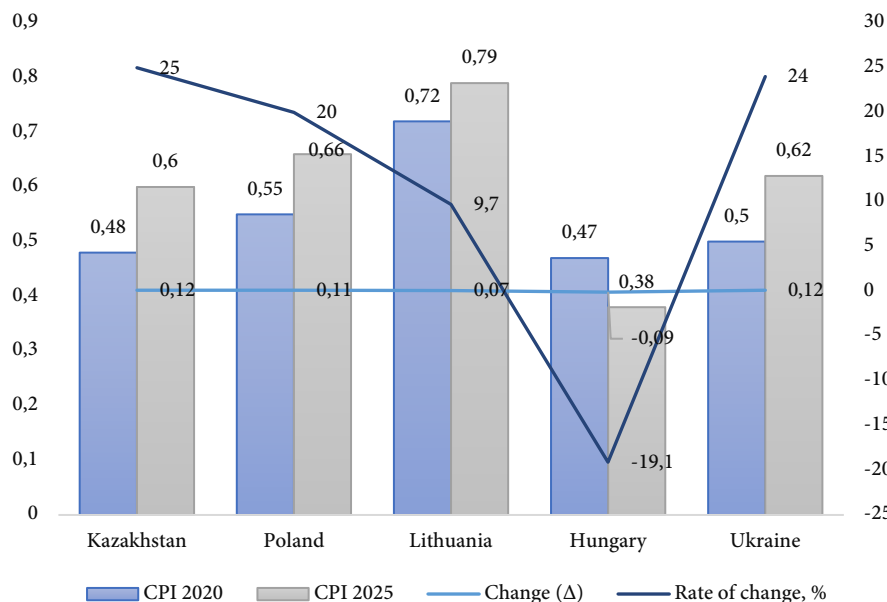
where 2 is the maximum score for each component.

Figure 6. Components of the Civic Participation Index (CPI) by country, average values for 2020 to 2025 on a 0–2 scale²⁵

Lithuania records the highest CPI value (0.77), confirming the strongest institutional basis for civic participation. Poland follows with 0.61, reflecting the recovery of consultation-based mechanisms. Ukraine (0.58) and Kazakhstan (0.56) show close results, although Ukraine relies mainly on legal aid and rights-based claims, while Kazakhstan's participation is driven by service-based and complaint channels. Hungary has the lowest CPI value (0.42), indicating weak enabling conditions for civic engagement.

These results show that civic participation depends less on formal declarations than on functioning procedures. CPI was therefore also calculated for the beginning and end of the period to assess its dynamics (Figure 7).

25 Source: Authors' calculations based on the directed content analysis of official documents and materials for 2020 to 2025.



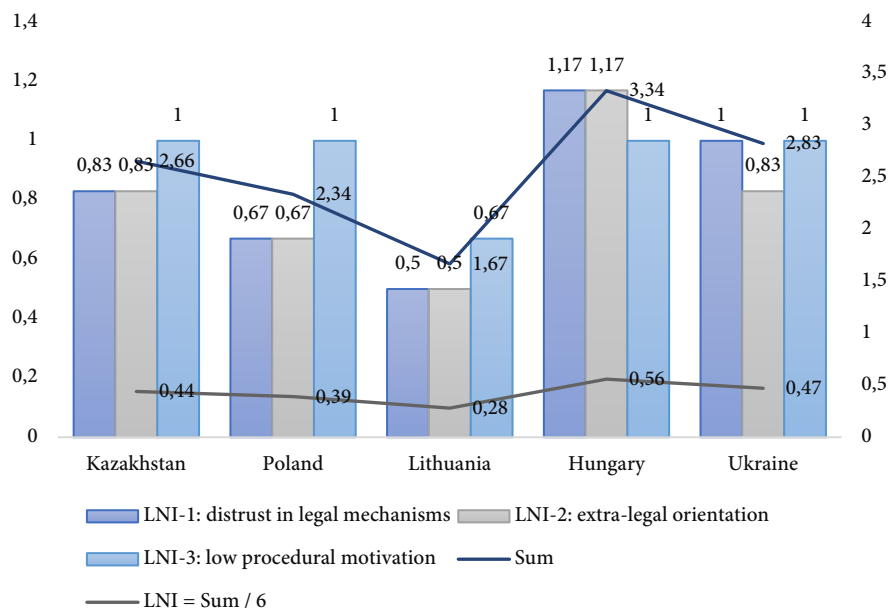
Note. The rate of change was calculated as the ratio of the difference between 2025 and 2020 to the 2020 value.

Figure 7. Dynamics of the Civic Participation Index (CPI), 2020 and 2025²⁶

Kazakhstan and Ukraine show the highest relative growth in CPI. In Kazakhstan, this reflects the expansion of formal appeal channels and service-based participation infrastructure, whereas in Ukraine, it indicates a stronger reliance on legal protection mechanisms amid systemic pressure. Poland also demonstrates positive dynamics, driven by improved consultation procedures and a more favourable civil society framework. Lithuania remains high with limited growth from a strong baseline, whereas Hungary is the only case with negative dynamics.

These results show that CPI growth may have different meanings: in stable contexts, it reflects deeper participation procedures; in crisis conditions, it may indicate increased dependence on formal rights-protection channels. This distinction is especially relevant for Ukraine. The next step calculates the Legal Nihilism Index (LNI), which encompasses distrust in the law, an orientation toward extra-legal strategies, and weak procedural motivation (Figure 8).

²⁶ Source: Authors' calculations based on the annual coding of the 2020 to 2025 document corpus.



Note. Calculation formula:

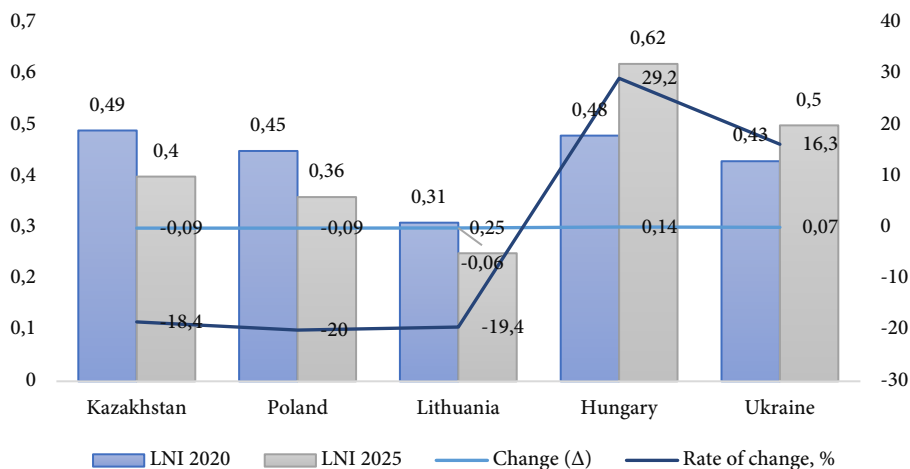
$$LNI_{it} = \frac{LNI1_{it} + LNI2_{it} + LNI3_{it}}{3 \times 2}, \quad (3)$$

The higher the value, the more strongly legal nihilism is expressed.

Figure 8. Components of the Legal Nihilism Index (LNI) by country, average values for 2020 to 2025 on a 0–2 scale²⁷

Lithuania records the lowest LNI value (0.28), consistent with its strong LCI, LLI, and ITI profile. Poland shows a moderate level (0.39), while Kazakhstan and Ukraine differ despite similar CPI values: Ukraine has a higher LNI, indicating that legal participation may coexist with incomplete trust. Hungary records the highest LNI (0.56), reflecting weak civic space and erosion of a trust-based legal environment. These findings confirm that high civic participation does not necessarily imply low legal nihilism. CPI and LNI should therefore be analysed together, and LNI dynamics were calculated for the beginning and end of the period (Figure 9).

²⁷ Source: Authors' calculations based on the directed content analysis of documents for 2020 to 2025.



Note. A negative Δ value indicates a decline in legal nihilism, while a positive value indicates its growth.

Figure 9. Dynamics of the Legal Nihilism Index (LNI), 2020 and 2025²⁸

Hungary shows the most unfavourable LNI dynamics, indicating stronger alienation from the formal legal order. Ukraine also records an increase in LNI despite CPI growth, which confirms that greater use of legal channels does not necessarily reflect stronger trust in law. By contrast, Kazakhstan, Poland, and Lithuania show declining LNI values. This suggests that legal nihilism decreases where participation is supported by clearer procedures and a more credible institutional environment.

For the final comparison, the Civic-Legal Balance Coefficient (CPB) was calculated:

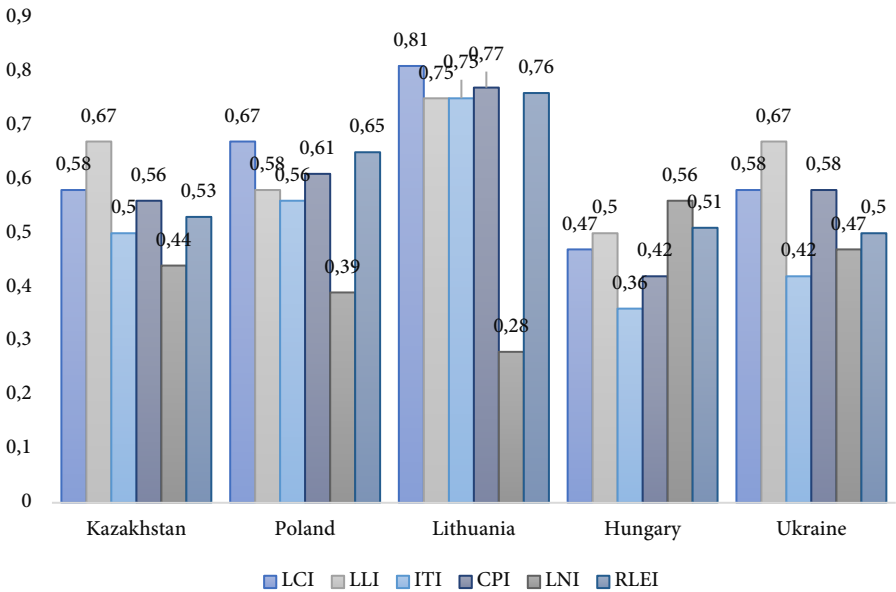
$$CPB_{it} = CPI_{it} - LNI_{it}, \quad (4)$$

A higher CPB value indicates that civic participation prevails over legal nihilism, whereas a negative value indicates that alienation from the law is stronger than the readiness to act within formal legal frameworks.

The CPB results show that Lithuania has the strongest civic-legal balance, with CPI exceeding LNI by 0.49. Poland also demonstrates a stable positive balance (0.22), indicating that the recovery of participation procedures is accompanied by lower legal scepticism. A higher CPB value indicates that civic participation prevails over legal nihilism, whereas a negative value indicates that alienation from the law is stronger than the readiness to act within formal legal frameworks. Hungary is the only country with a negative CPB value (-0.14), meaning that legal nihilism exceeds institutional participation.

²⁸ Source: Authors' calculations based on the annual coding of the 2020 to 2025 document corpus.

These results confirm that civic participation becomes sustainable only when formal channels are supported by trust in law as a fair and effective mechanism. The study therefore proceeds to the Composite Civic-Legal Participation Index (CLPI), which integrates LCI, LLI, ITI, CPI, LNI, and RLEI into a single comparative measure (Figure 10).



Note. LCI, LLI, ITI, CPI, and LNI were derived from the authors directed content analysis of documents from 2020 to 2025. RLEI was constructed from internationally comparable rule-of-law data and qualitative country interpretations.

Figure 10. Summary values of the sub-indices by country, average for 2020–2025²⁹

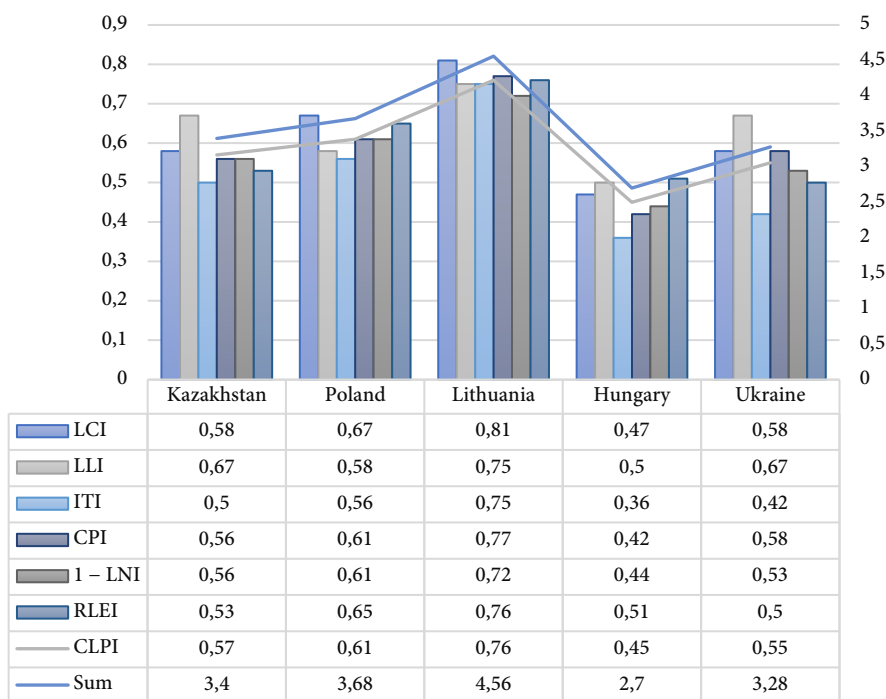
The table shows that the legal environment is distributed unevenly across the cases. Lithuania is the only country in which all positive sub-indices remain high while LNI stays low. Poland presents a more moderate but still coherent profile. Kazakhstan and Ukraine are similar in LCI and LLI, yet differ more clearly in ITI and RLEI, which points to different institutional foundations of legal activity. Hungary shows the weakest configuration, combining low trust and participation with the highest level of legal nihilism. These results indicate that neither legal literacy nor legal consciousness alone is sufficient. What matters is the coherence of all components, especially the relationship

29 Source: Authors' calculations based on the figures, tables, and WJP Rule of Law Index data.

among institutional trust, the rule-of-law environment, and participation. In the next stage, the composite indicator CLPI was calculated:

$$CLPI_{it} = \frac{LCI_{it} + LLI_{it} + ITI_{it} + CPI_{it} + (1 - LNI_{it}) + RLEI_{it}}{6}, \quad (5)$$

This formula reflects the general logic of the study. Five indicators are included in the index in positive form because they strengthen civic-legal embeddedness. LNI is included through the expression (1 - LNI) because legal nihilism operates in the opposite direction. The higher it is, the lower the final CLPI value (Figure 11).



Note. 1 - LNI reflects the reverse transformation of the negative indicator of legal nihilism into a positive contribution to the final index.

Figure 11. Calculation of the composite Civic-Legal Participation Index (CLPI)³⁰

The composite index integrates the separate indicators into a single model of civic-legal embeddedness. Lithuania has the highest CLPI value (0.76), representing a high and structurally balanced model. Poland ranks second (0.61), indicating a moderately high

³⁰ Source: Authors' calculations based on the data presented in the tables and figures.

restorative model. Kazakhstan records 0.57, indicating a medium service-procedural pattern in which legal literacy and appeal channels support participation, while institutional trust remains moderate. Ukraine has a close value (0.55), but its model is mobilisational-compensatory, as participation is driven mainly by demand for legal protection under weaker trust conditions. Hungary records the lowest CLPI value (0.45), showing a structurally imbalanced model marked by weak trust and high legal nihilism.

These results confirm that civic-legal embeddedness depends on the interaction of legal accessibility, institutional trust, and functioning participation channels. Similar CLPI values may therefore reflect different institutional mechanisms. To clarify this difference, the study uses the GAP coefficient: a positive value means that legal preparedness exceeds actual participation, while a negative value indicates that participation outpaces its legal and trust-based foundation, often under compensatory or crisis-driven conditions (Table 7).

Table 7. Coefficient of the gap between legal preparedness and civic participation (GAP)³¹

Country	Mean (LCI + LLI + ITI) / 3	CPI	GAP	Interpretation
Kazakhstan	0.58	0.56	0.02	Almost balanced relationship
Poland	0.60	0.61	-0.01	Participation slightly exceeds internal preparedness
Lithuania	0.77	0.77	0.00	Almost complete correspondence
Hungary	0.44	0.42	0.02	Low overall level with a small gap
Ukraine	0.56	0.58	-0.02	Participation exceeds the trust-legal framework

Note. A positive value means that legal preparedness is somewhat higher than actual participation; a negative value means that participation is outpacing its legal and trust-based foundation.

The GAP results show that similar CLPI levels may reflect different institutional mechanisms. Lithuania has an almost zero GAP, indicating consistency between legal preparedness and actual participation. Poland and Ukraine both record negative values, but Poland reflects restored participation procedures, whereas Ukraine indicates crisis-driven legal mobilisation. Kazakhstan has a near-zero positive GAP, suggesting that its legal and service-based foundation is close to being converted into stronger participation, although trust remains limited. Hungary's small positive gap reflects the low level of both legal preparedness and participation.

31 Source: Authors' calculations based on the data presented in the tables and figures.

Overall, the GAP coefficient distinguishes balanced models from compensatory ones.

The Balance indicator confirms the same pattern more compactly. Lithuania shows the strongest positive balance, with a mean of positive factors of 0.77, LNI of 0.28, and Balance of 0.49. Poland also has stable positive balances of 0.61, 0.39, and 0.22, respectively. Kazakhstan occupies an intermediate position, with a mean positive value of 0.57, LNI of 0.44, and Balance of 0.13. Ukraine shows a weaker positive balance, with 0.55, 0.47, and 0.08. Hungary is the only case with a negative value: the mean of positive factors is 0.45, LNI is 0.56, and Balance equals -0.11. This means that legal nihilism outweighs the positive capacity of the legal environment only in Hungary.

These results show that stable civic participation depends on whether institutional resources are strong enough to offset legal scepticism. Where this margin is narrow, participation remains vulnerable and may become reactive. The next step, therefore, presents the full calculation for Kazakhstan.

$$CLPI_{KZ} = \frac{0.58 + 0.67 + 0.50 + 0.56 + (1 - 0.44) + 0.53}{6}$$

$$CLPI_{KZ} = \frac{0.58 + 0.67 + 0.50 + 0.56 + 0.56 + 0.53}{6} = \frac{3.40}{6} = 0.57$$

Gap coefficient:

$$GAP_{KZ} = \frac{0.58 + 0.67 + 0.50}{3} - 0.56 = \frac{1.75}{3} - 0.56 = 0.58 - 0.56 = 0.02$$

Balance of positive and negative factors:

$$Balance_{KZ} = \frac{0.58 + 0.67 + 0.50 + 0.56 + 0.53}{5} - 0.44$$

$$Balance_{KZ} = \frac{2.84}{5} - 0.44 = 0.57 - 0.44 = 0.13$$

The calculation shows that Kazakhstan has a medium but not fully stable civic-legal profile. Its strengths are legal literacy, expanded channels of appeal, and a moderately positive rule-of-law trajectory, while institutional trust remains the main constraint on stronger civic participation.

After constructing the sub-indices and CLPI, the study proceeded to hypothesis testing. Spearman's rank correlation was used to assess relationships between the indices, while an exploratory regression model treated CPI as the dependent variable and LCI, ITI, RLEI,

and LNI as predictors. The purpose was to identify stable empirical associations within the comparative legal framework rather than to develop a complex causal model.

The correlation results confirm the internal coherence of the index model. Civic participation is most strongly associated with legal consciousness (LCI-CPI: $r_s = 0.975$) and institutional trust (ITI-CPI: $r_s = 0.900$). The rule-of-law environment also supports participation (RLEI-CPI: $r_s = 0.700$), while legal literacy has a positive but weaker association with CPI (LLI-CPI: $r_s = 0.667$).

The negative correlations clarify the constraining role of legal nihilism. LNI is strongly and negatively associated with civic participation (LNI-CPI: $r_s = -0.900$). Legal literacy is moderately associated with lower nihilism (LLI-LNI: $r_s = -0.667$), while institutional trust shows the strongest anti-nihilistic relationship (ITI-LNI: $r_s = -1.000$). RLEI also has a very strong negative association with LNI ($r_s = -0.900$).

Overall, civic participation appears to be associated with a cluster of interrelated factors, among which legal consciousness and institutional trust show the most consistent relationships in the comparative sample (Table 9).

**Table 9. Testing Hypothesis H1:
the relationship between legal consciousness and civic participation³²**

Indicator	Value
r_s (LCI-CPI)	0.975
Direction of association	Positive
Strength of association	Very strong
Decision on H1	Confirmed

Note. The interpretation of strength follows the conventional scale used for rank correlation.

The result indicates an almost linear relationship between LCI and CPI across the countries under study. This supports the central assumption of the article: law becomes a basis of civic participation not merely when it exists formally, but when it is perceived as legitimate and practically usable. The fact that this relationship is stronger than that between LLI and CPI is especially important. Legal literacy matters, but it is not sufficient on its own. What matters more is a deeper orientation toward law as a fair and meaningful social mechanism.

H1 is empirically supported within the limits of the comparative dataset. The stronger the expression of legal consciousness and legal subjectivity, the higher the probability of stable

³² Source: Authors' calculations.

institutional participation. In this sense, civic participation should be understood as a practical manifestation of legal culture.

The second hypothesis addressed a broader question: whether differences in civic participation are shaped not only by formal legal norms but also by the quality of the institutional environment, particularly institutional trust, the rule-of-law environment, and legal nihilism. To test this, the following model was applied:

$$CPI = \beta_0 + \beta_1 LCI + \beta_2 ITI + \beta_3 RLEI - \beta_4 LNI + \varepsilon, \quad (8)$$

Because all indices had already been normalised, the model coefficients allow comparison of the relative direction and strength of the associations between variables (Table 10).

Table 10. Results of the author-developed regression model for CPI³³

Predictor	Coefficient β	Direction of effect	Interpretation
Constant	-0.960	–	Technical model parameter
LCI	2.064	Positive	Legal consciousness makes the strongest positive contribution to variation in CPI
ITI	0.539	Positive	Growth in institutional trust strengthens participation
RLEI	-0.899*	Formally negative	The coefficient should be interpreted cautiously because of interdependence among predictors
LNI	1.205*	Formally positive	The sign is distorted by high multicollinearity; substantively, LNI acts negatively, as confirmed by the correlations
R ²	1.000	–	Full explanation within a small, aggregated sample

Note. The model was estimated on aggregated cross-country values and has an exploratory character. Because of the small sample size and high interdependence among predictors, individual coefficients should be interpreted alongside the correlation matrix rather than as strict causal effects. Formally, unexpected coefficient signs are attributed to multicollinearity.

The regression model was estimated on aggregated cross-country values and is exploratory. Because the sample is small and the predictors are strongly interrelated, individual coefficients should be interpreted together with the correlation results. The unexpected

³³ Source: Author's calculations.

signs for RLEI and LNI reflect multicollinearity: stronger LCI usually coincides with higher ITI and RLEI and lower LNI. Substantively, CPI is most strongly linked to LCI, followed by ITI, while LNI remains a constraining factor.

H2 is therefore supported by the comparative results, although the exploratory character of the regression model requires cautious interpretation. Civic participation depends not only on formal legal procedures but also on institutional trust, the rule-of-law environment, and the reduction of legal nihilism. Legal consciousness remains the strongest explanatory factor when supported by reliable institutions.

H3 was then tested by examining the relationship between LLI and LNI to determine whether stronger legal literacy and civic-legal education are associated with lower levels of legal nihilism (Table 11).

Table 11. Testing Hypothesis H3: the relationship between legal literacy and legal nihilism³⁴

Indicator	Value
r_s (LLI–LNI)	-0.667
Direction of association	Negative
Strength of association	Moderately strong
Decision on H3	Confirmed
Note. A negative value indicates that, as legal literacy increases, the level of legal nihilism declines.	

This relationship is weaker than LCI–CPI and ITI–LNI, which is analytically important. It indicates that legal literacy reduces legal nihilism, but its effect is limited without institutional trust and procedural justice. Where information channels and service infrastructure are developed but trust remains weak, nihilism declines more slowly.

H3 is supported in a qualified sense: legal literacy is associated with lower levels of legal nihilism, but this relationship becomes more meaningful when interpreted alongside institutional trust and procedural fairness. Legal literacy helps reduce legal nihilism, but its effect is stronger within a broader institutional environment characterised by trust, fairness, and procedural reliability. The results of hypothesis testing are summarised in Table 12.

34 Source: Authors' calculations.

Table 12. Summary results of testing Hypotheses H1–H3³⁵

Hypothesis	Tested relationship	Empirical result	Status
H1	A higher level of legal consciousness is associated with more pronounced civic participation	$r_s = 0.975$ between LCI and CPI	Confirmed
H2	Civic participation is determined not only by norms, but also by the quality of the institutional environment	The largest contribution to CPI comes from LCI and ITI; RLEI and LNI are also significant within the overall model	Confirmed
H3	Stronger legal literacy reduces legal nihilism	$r_s = -0.667$ between LLI and LNI	Confirmed

Note. Confirmation of the hypotheses indicates empirical consistency between the findings and the proposed assumptions. It does not imply absolute causal exhaustiveness of the model.

The consolidated assessment provides comparative support for all three hypotheses, although the strength of the observed relationships varies across the dimensions tested. H1 receives the strongest confirmation, as legal consciousness shows the clearest relationship with civic participation. H2 is also confirmed, although its effect depends on the broader institutional configuration. H3 is supported in a qualified form: legal literacy reduces legal nihilism but cannot replace institutional trust and procedural fairness.

These findings confirm the central argument of the study: civic participation is shaped by the combined effect of legal consciousness, legal literacy, institutional trust, and the quality of the rule-of-law environment.

Kazakhstan requires separate interpretation as the central case of the study and as an intermediate model. Its profile is transitional: the country demonstrates visible institutional and service-based improvements, but formal legal channels are expanding faster than trust in law as an impartial and effective mechanism.

Kazakhstan's external profile confirms its intermediate but positive position. In the WJP Rule of Law Index, the country ranked 65th out of 142 states in 2024 and 66th out of 143 in 2025, while retaining fifth place among fifteen countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Procedural accessibility also expanded in 2024 through 137 Citizens' Reception Centres, eighty video-based public services, and the launch of Epetition.kz. The OECD Public Governance Scan of Kazakhstan further indicates that public administration reforms continue but require stronger coordination and governance quality.

³⁵ Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of the results presented in the tables and figures.

The Kazakhstani case is neither stagnant nor crisis-driven. Externally, it shows moderate rule-of-law improvement, while procedurally it demonstrates broader access to appeal channels and public services. However, this progress remains uneven: digital and service-based accessibility is developing faster than trust-based and rights-oriented interaction with law.

Kazakhstan, therefore, represents a medium service-procedural model of civic-legal embeddedness. Its internal profile includes LCI = 0.58, indicating moderately expressed legal consciousness; LLI = 0.67, the strongest component, reflecting developed legal literacy and procedural accessibility; ITI = 0.50, showing that institutional trust remains the main constraint; CPI = 0.56, indicating participation above the mid-level; LNI = 0.44, meaning that legal nihilism remains visible; RLEI = 0.53, reflecting a moderately favourable external legal environment; and CLPI = 0.57, placing Kazakhstan within the medium type of civic-legal embeddedness.

These values show that Kazakhstan does not lack formal legal channels. Its central challenge is converting procedural access into stable, legitimate, and trust-supported participation. Further progress depends on strengthening institutional credibility, procedural fairness, and rights-protective guarantees. To clarify this specificity, Kazakhstan is compared below with Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Hungary (Table 14).

Table 14. Kazakhstan in comparative positioning across the key indices³⁶

Indicator	Kazakhstan	Lithuania	Poland	Ukraine	Hungary	Kazakhstan's position
LCI	0.58	0.81	0.67	0.58	0.47	Lower than Lithuania and Poland, equal to Ukraine, higher than Hungary
LLI	0.67	0.75	0.58	0.67	0.50	Equal to Ukraine, higher than Poland and Hungary, lower than Lithuania
ITI	0.50	0.75	0.56	0.42	0.36	Lower than Lithuania and Poland, higher than Ukraine and Hungary
CPI	0.56	0.77	0.61	0.58	0.42	Intermediate position: participation is lower than in Poland and Lithuania, but higher than in Hungary

³⁶ Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of the study calculations.

Indicator	Kazakhstan	Lithuania	Poland	Ukraine	Hungary	Kazakhstan's position
LNI	0.44	0.28	0.39	0.47	0.56	Lower than Ukraine and Hungary, but higher than Poland and Lithuania
CLPI	0.57	0.76	0.61	0.55	0.45	Third place in the sample

Note. Higher values of LCI, LLI, ITI, CPI, and CLPI indicate a stronger profile. For LNI, the interpretation is reversed.

Kazakhstan occupies an intermediate and internally uneven position. Its main strength is legal literacy and procedural accessibility: LLI reaches 0.67, exceeding Poland and clearly surpassing Hungary. However, Kazakhstan remains weaker than Lithuania and Poland in legal consciousness and, especially, in institutional trust: LCI is 0.58, while ITI is 0.50. This means that expanded access to legal and public service channels has not yet been fully converted into a stable trust-based model of civic participation.

The diagnostic coefficients confirm this transitional profile. GAP equals 0.02, showing that legal preparedness only slightly exceeds actual participation. Balance equals 0.13, indicating that positive institutional resources still outweigh legal nihilism, although the margin remains limited. Thus, Kazakhstan's main challenge is not the absence of formal legal mechanisms, but their incomplete conversion into public engagement and civic-legal confidence.

In comparative terms, Kazakhstan represents a medium, transitional, service-procedural model of civic-legal embeddedness. Its development is supported by relatively strong LLI, a growing CPI, and a moderate CLPI, but is constrained by weaker ITI and a still-visible LNI. Further progress will depend on whether existing channels of appeal, digital access, and public services are perceived by citizens as fair, predictable, and rights-protective.

Lithuania represents a balanced high-level model in which all major indices are coherent and no substantial internal imbalance is observed. Poland reflects a restorative model, marked by stronger participation and declining legal nihilism, although institutional trust remains less stable. Kazakhstan demonstrates a service-procedural transitional model: its strengths are relatively high LLI and expanding channels of recourse, while the main constraint is moderate ITI and incomplete trust-based conversion. Ukraine represents a mobilisational-compensatory model, where legal mobilisation and legal aid sustain participation under crisis pressure, but participation outpaces the trust base. Hungary shows a structurally imbalanced model, with high LNI, weak civic space, and the most vulnerable overall profile.

The comparative analysis shows that cross-country differences are shaped by the interaction of legal culture, institutional trust, legal literacy, and civic participation rather than by a single variable. The most stable models emerge where these dimensions develop coherently.

To outline the practical implications of the findings, the study uses a baseline scenario for CLPI dynamics in 2026–2030. The scenario is illustrative rather than deterministic and is based on the observed relationship between LCI, ITI, LLI, RLEI, CPI, and LNI.

For practical interpretation, three scenarios were introduced. The baseline scenario assumes the continuation of current reform and institutional tendencies without abrupt acceleration. The moderately optimistic scenario assumes gradual strengthening of the trust dimension and procedural justice. The inertial scenario assumes the preservation of the formal legal framework without meaningful improvement in trust or in the broader civic environment. For the purposes of the main article, the baseline scenario is the most appropriate, since it remains the most analytically neutral (Table 16).

Table 16. Forecast of the composite CLPI index for 2026 to 2030³⁷

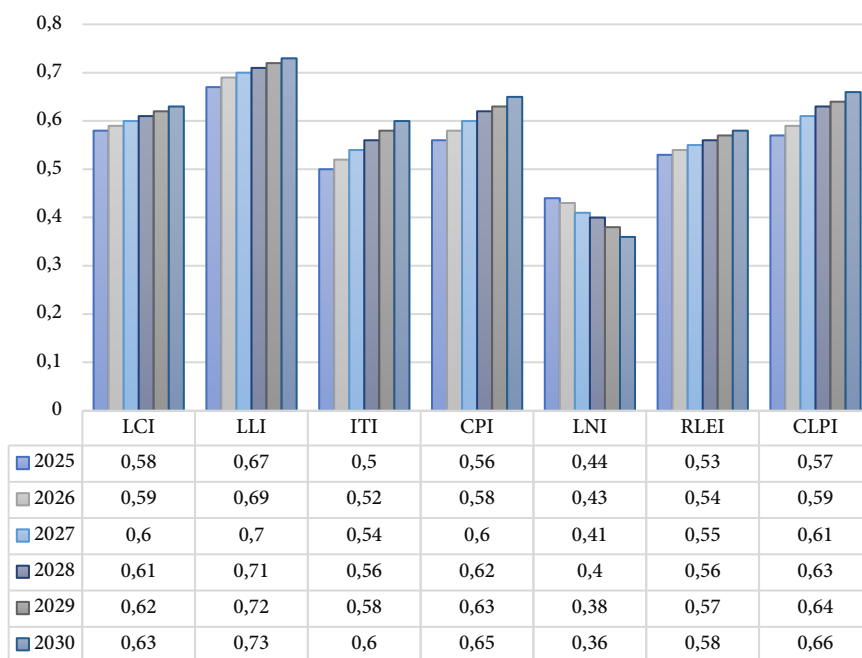
Country	CLPI 2025 (base)	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	Expected trajectory
Kazakhstan	0.57	0.59	0.61	0.63	0.64	0.66	Gradual growth driven by legal literacy and stronger trust
Poland	0.61	0.63	0.65	0.66	0.68	0.69	Moderate restorative growth
Lithuania	0.76	0.77	0.78	0.79	0.80	0.81	Growth from a high base, with saturation effects
Hungary	0.45	0.45	0.46	0.47	0.48	0.49	Slow recovery, conditional on lower LNI
Ukraine	0.55	0.56	0.58	0.60	0.61	0.63	Growth conditional on institutional stabilisation and a stronger trust base

Note. The forecast was produced by the authors based on the baseline scenario, the initial CLPI values, and the identified directions of influence associated with LCI, ITI, LLI, RLEI, and LNI. The values are model-based rather than deterministic.

37 Source: Authors’ forecast based on the baseline scenario, initial CLPI values, and the identified directions of influence associated with LCI, ITI, LLI, RLEI, and LNI.

The forecast indicates the strongest five-year CLPI growth potential in Kazakhstan and Ukraine, although through different mechanisms. In Kazakhstan, this potential rests on an established service-procedural foundation, where stronger institutional trust could produce a significant multiplier effect. In Ukraine, growth depends more directly on broader institutional stabilisation. Poland is likely to continue its restorative trajectory, Lithuania to retain its leading position with moderate growth, and Hungary to improve more slowly due to persistent legal scepticism.

For Kazakhstan, the baseline values are CLPI = 0.57, LLI = 0.67, ITI = 0.50, and LNI = 0.44. Future progress, therefore, depends less on expanding basic infrastructure and more on increasing institutional trust and reducing legal nihilism. Under the baseline scenario, LLI is expected to grow by 0.01–0.02 annually, ITI by 0.02–0.03, while LNI is projected to decline by 0.01–0.02 annually (Figure 12).



Note. The forecast values were calculated by the authors under the baseline scenario, building on Kazakhstan's current service-procedural model and the results of the correlation and regression analyses.

Figure 12. Forecast dynamics of Kazakhstan's key indices, 2026–2030³⁸

38 Source: Authors' forecast based on the baseline scenario and the results of the correlation and regression analyses.

The model suggests that by 2030, Kazakhstan may reach CLPI ≈ 0.66 , moving from a medium transitional profile toward a more stable and moderately high model. This improvement would depend less on expanding procedures than on strengthening institutional trust (ITI) and reducing legal nihilism (LNI).

Kazakhstan's main reserve for growth, therefore, lies in converting its existing legal and service infrastructure into trust-supported participation. If service-procedural modernisation is accompanied by greater impartiality, accountability, and predictability, the country can substantially strengthen its civic-legal embeddedness over the next five years.

The broader conclusion is that legal culture becomes a real driver of civic participation only when supported by institutional trust, an intelligible legal environment, and low legal nihilism. For Kazakhstan, future progress depends not on multiplying channels of recourse but on increasing the trust-based and procedural credibility of law.

5 DISCUSSION

The findings show that legal culture should be understood not as an abstract value but as an institutional and behavioural mechanism that shapes civic participation. The comparison of Kazakhstan, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Hungary demonstrates that formal rights and procedures alone do not ensure stable inclusion in the legal sphere. What matters is whether law is perceived as legitimate, fair, intelligible, and practically effective. In this respect, legal consciousness emerges as the strongest predictor of participation, while institutional trust acts as a key condition that both supports participation and reduces legal nihilism. Legal literacy also contributes to this process, but its effect is more limited when it is not reinforced by trust and procedural credibility.

The country comparison reveals distinct models of civic-legal embeddedness. Lithuania shows the most balanced profile; Poland, a restorative one; Ukraine, a mobilisational-compensatory one; and Hungary, a structurally imbalanced one. Kazakhstan occupies an intermediate, service-procedural transitional position. Its main strength lies in expanding legal literacy, procedural accessibility, and channels of appeal. Its main limitation is the slower development of trust in institutions. This means that Kazakhstan's further progress depends less on creating additional formal procedures than on making existing ones more impartial, reliable, and socially credible.

6 CONCLUSION

The study shows that civic participation in post-socialist legal systems cannot be explained by the mere existence of rights and procedures. It is more accurately understood as the outcome of several interrelated conditions: legal consciousness, legal literacy, institutional trust, legal nihilism, and the quality of the rule-of-law environment. The comparative results do not establish strict causal relationships, but they indicate stable associations between these dimensions within the selected country sample.

The strongest and most consistent association was observed between legal consciousness and civic participation. Institutional trust also proved closely linked to participation and lower levels of legal nihilism. Legal literacy contributes to this process, but its effect is limited when citizens do not perceive institutions as impartial, predictable, and procedurally fair. This means that legal culture should not be reduced to knowledge of legal norms. It also includes legal subjectivity, procedural intelligibility, trust in institutions, readiness to use formal mechanisms, and reduced reliance on extra-legal strategies.

The comparison of Kazakhstan, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Hungary reveals several models of civic-legal embeddedness. Lithuania represents the most balanced configuration, where legal culture, institutional trust, and participation reinforce one another. Poland reflects a restorative model, in which participation mechanisms have strengthened, although the trust dimension remains less stable. Ukraine demonstrates a mobilisational-compensatory pattern, where formal legal channels remain important under crisis pressure. Hungary shows the clearest structural imbalance, combining weaker participation with higher levels of legal nihilism and lower levels of institutional trust.

Kazakhstan occupies an intermediate service-procedural position. Its main strength lies in legal literacy, procedural accessibility, and the expansion of recourse channels, while its main limitation remains the moderate level of institutional trust. The Kazakhstani case, therefore, suggests that further progress depends less on multiplying formal instruments of participation and more on converting existing legal infrastructure into fair, predictable, and trust-based mechanisms.

The practical implication is that transitional legal systems should not treat civic participation as a purely procedural outcome. Stronger results are more likely when legal education, accessible legal information, institutional accountability, procedural fairness, and effective feedback mechanisms develop together. For Kazakhstan, this means that the next stage of legal policy should focus on strengthening the credibility of existing channels of appeal, improving the predictability of enforcement, and deepening citizens' experience of law as an impartial and socially reliable framework.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Disclaimer: The authors declare that their opinions and views expressed in this manuscript are free from any impact of any organisations.

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EDITORS

Managing editor – Valentina Krivolapova. **English Editor** – Robert Reddin.

Ukrainian language Editor – Liliia Hartman.

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

Cite this article

Zhamuldinov V and Akhmetov A, 'Legal Culture, Institutional Trust, and Civic Participation in Post-Socialist Legal Systems: A Comparative Analysis of Kazakhstan and Eastern Europe' (2026) 9(3) Access to Justice in Eastern Europe 1-42 <<https://doi.org/10.33327/AJEE-18-9.3-a0001998>> Published Online 23 Jul 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33327/AJEE-18-9.3-a0001998>

Summary: 1. Introduction. – 2. Literature Review. – 3. Methodology. – 3.1. *Research Design and Analytical Logic*. – 3.2. *Comparative Scope and Empirical Base*. – 3.3. *Research Procedure*. – 3.4. *Variables and Measurement*. – 3.5. *Hypothesis Testing Strategy*. – 3.6. *Methodological Limitations*. – 4. Results - Comparative Patterns and Empirical Outcomes of Civic-Legal Embeddedness. – 5. Discussion. – 6. Conclusion.

Keywords: *legal culture; legal consciousness; civic participation; legal literacy; institutional trust; rule of law; legal nihilism; Kazakhstan; Eastern Europe; comparative legal analysis.*

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIAL

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available legal, policy, and analytical sources, including official national documents, international reports, and comparative rule-of-law materials cited in the article. The processed analytical materials are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Zenodo DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21453555>

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

DETAILS FOR PUBLICATION

Date of submission: 21 Apr 2026

Date of acceptance: 18 Jun 2026

Online First Publication: 23 Jul 2026

Publication: Aug 2026

Was the manuscript fast-tracked? - No

Number of reviewer reports submitted in the first round: 2 reports

Number of revision rounds: 2 rounds with minor revisions

Technical tools were used in the editorial process

Plagiarism checks - Turnitin from iThenticate

<https://www.turnitin.com/products/ithenticate/>

Scholastica for Peer Review

<https://scholasticahq.com/law-reviews>

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

We confirm that no artificial intelligence tools or services were used at any stage of the writing, translating, editing, or analysing content for this manuscript.

АНОТАЦІЯ УКРАЇНСЬКОЮ МОВОЮ

Дослідницька стаття

ПРАВОВА КУЛЬТУРА, ІНСТИТУЦІЙНА ДОВІРА ТА ГРОМАДЯНСЬКА УЧАСТЬ У ПОСТСОЦІАЛІСТИЧНИХ ПРАВОВИХ СИСТЕМАХ: ПОРІВНЯЛЬНИЙ АНАЛІЗ КАЗАХСТАНУ ТА СХІДНОЇ ЄВРОПИ

Віктор Жамулдінов та Арман Ахметов*

АНОТАЦІЯ

Вступ. У сучасних постсоціалістичних правових системах, зокрема Казахстану та кількох держав Східної Європи, стійкість громадянської участі залежить не лише від формального існування прав і процедур, але й від ширшого соціально-правового середовища, у якому ці права діють. Особливе значення мають правова свідомість, правова культура, правова грамотність, інституційна довіра та якість середовища верховенства права. Ці фактори формують те, чи сприймають громадяни право як легітимну, зрозумілу та ефективну нормативну основу для дій, і чи використовуються формальні канали участі як змістовні інструменти взаємодії, а не просто як символічні механізми. Хоча кожен із цих аспектів уже висвітлювався в науковій літературі, їхня взаємодія залишається недостатньо вивченою в межах порівняльних досліджень Казахстану та країн Східної Європи. Тому у статті було здійснено аналіз громадянської участі не як ізольованого демократичного результату, а як продукту взаємопов'язаних правових, інституційних та культурних умов.

Методи. У дослідженні використовується змішаний порівняльно-правовий дизайн, який поєднує доктринальний правовий аналіз, спрямований контент-аналіз офіційних документів за 2020-2025 роки, моделювання на основі індексів та кореляційно-регресійне тестування. Для забезпечення аналітичної послідовності дослідження розроблено та застосовано Індекс правосвідомості, Індекс правової грамотності, Індекс інституційної довіри, Індекс громадянської участі, Індекс правового нігілізму та Індекс стану середовища верховенства права, а також зведений Індекс громадянсько-правової участі. Ця система використовується як структурований інструмент порівняльного аналізу, а не як причинно-наслідкова пояснювальна модель; вона допомагає впорядкувати документальні

дані та порівняти формальні та операційні аспекти громадянсько-правової інтегрованості у вибраних постсоціалістичних правових системах.

Результати та висновки. Результати дослідження свідчать про те, що правова свідомість та інституційна довіра найбільш послідовно пов'язані з рівнем громадянської участі в досліджуваних країнах, тоді як правова грамотність видається необхідною, але недостатньою умовою, якщо розглядати її окремо. У дослідженні визначено кілька різних моделей громадянсько-правової інтегрованості у вибраних країнах: від збалансованої та інституційно підкріпленої участі до компенсаторних та структурно незбалансованих форм. Казахстан демонструє значний потенціал для подальшого розвитку завдяки своїй порівняно розвиненій правовій та процесуальній доступності, проте прогрес залежить від вищого рівня інституційної довіри та зменшення правового нігілізму. У статті пропонується порівняльно-правова модель для аналізу громадянської участі за допомогою вивчення взаємодії між правовою культурою, інституційною довірою та процедурною доступністю. Було зроблено висновок, що стійка громадянська участь вимагає більше, ніж просто формальної правової модернізації: вона залежить від того, наскільки право сприймається як справедливе, передбачуване та таке, що має суспільну довіру. Отримані результати можуть бути використані для формування державної політики, спрямованої на зміцнення правової освіти, підвищення ефективності правозастосування та поглиблення взаємодії між державою і громадянами в Казахстані.

Ключові слова: правова культура; правова свідомість; громадянська участь; правова грамотність; інституційна довіра; верховенство права; правовий нігілізм; Казахстан; Східна Європа; порівняльно-правовий аналіз.