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Understanding Contextual Variations in the Trust–Well-Being Nexus: An Examination of Social Mechanisms in Austria and Hungary

This study analyzes ESS Wave 11 data using PLS-SEM to assess how generalized trust shapes subjective well-being in Austria and Hungary through two mediators: social life (social contacts, participation) and solidarity/helpfulness (value-based prosocial orientations). In Austria, trust significantly predicts both mediators, which transmit its positive effects on well-being. In Hungary, trust relates only to social life, while solidarity shows no connection. Overall, results reveal strong context-specific differences in the trust–well-being relationship.
Keywords: social capital, PLS-SEM, cross-country comparison
JEL-code: I31, Z13

https://doi.org/10.32976/stratfuz.2025.38

Introduction

This comparative study investigates the mechanisms through which generalized trust shapes subjective well-being and welfare, with a particular focus on how these relationships unfold differently in Austria and Hungary. While trust is widely recognized as a foundational element of social capital, its influence on individual well-being is neither uniform nor universal. Instead, it is embedded within distinctive socio-cultural environments that shape how trust is formed, expressed, and translated into social outcomes. By examining two countries that differ markedly in their levels of interpersonal trust and social capital structures, the study provides a unique opportunity to explore the contextual nature of the trust–well-being nexus.

The analysis centers on two key mediating mechanisms: social life and solidarity & helpfulness. These dimensions capture how individuals interact within their social networks and how they engage in prosocial behaviors −both of which may serve as pathways linking trust to well-being. Previous research has shown that trust is associated with greater social participation and a stronger sense of community, which in turn support higher well-being; however, the strength and structure of these pathways vary considerably across societies (Glatz & Eder, 2019). By scrutinizing these mediators, the present study seeks to determine whether trust improves well-being primarily by fostering social connectedness and prosocial orientations, or whether it exerts its influence independently of these mechanisms.

To address these questions, the study employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using data from Wave 11 of the European Social Survey, allowing for a rigorous assessment of both mediating and moderating relationships. This methodological approach is particularly well-suited to cross-country comparative analyses, as it can accommodate cultural variability in how latent constructs such as trust and well-being are expressed. It also allows for simultaneous estimation of direct, indirect, and interaction effects, providing a more holistic understanding of their interplay.

The research is grounded in a growing body of literature that highlights the multidimensional structure of trust and its complex associations with subjective well-being. Trust has been shown to correlate with life satisfaction, happiness, and perceived quality of life, both through direct effects and through its role in enabling social engagement and reciprocity (Glatz & Schwerdtfeger, 2022). Institutional mechanisms—such as consumer protection and market regulation—also play a critical role in maintaining the conditions that support interpersonal trust (Berg, 2022). Yet the pathways linking trust to well-being are far from straightforward. Empirical work increasingly emphasizes the importance of mediational processes, in which trust facilitates social interactions

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that in turn enhance well-being (Adedeji et al., 2023). These insights motivate the present study's focus on disentangling the relative contributions of social life and solidarity-oriented behaviors within different societal contexts.

At the same time, national differences in historical legacies, institutional quality, and patterns of digital development may moderate the way trust functions within social systems (Karabchuk & Shomotova, 2021). Austria's comparatively high-trust environment and robust civic culture contrast sharply with Hungary's more fragmented social capital landscape, making these countries ideal cases for examining how context shapes the trust–well-being relationship. Understanding these cross-national differences is crucial, as the salience and functioning of trust −and its capacity to foster well-being −may vary markedly across European societies (Glatz & Eder, 2019).

Beyond its comparative contribution, this study also broadens the conceptualization of social capital by incorporating a wider array of relational and prosocial factors. By doing so, it responds to recent calls for more nuanced analyses that move beyond generalized trust alone and consider how different forms of social connection contribute to well-being (Gómez-Balcácer et al., 2022). The resulting model provides a richer understanding of how trust interacts with social dynamics to influence subjective well-being, offering theoretical insights and practical implications for strengthening social cohesion and enhancing societal welfare.

Hypotheses development

A substantial body of research demonstrates that various dimensions of trust −particularly social and institutional trust − are positively associated with subjective well-being across diverse populations (Glatz & Schwerdtfeger, 2022; Glatz & Eder, 2019). This association is often explained by the idea that trust facilitates social participation, strengthens interpersonal connections, and expands individuals' social resources, all of which enhance well-being (Adedeji et al., 2023). Engaging in civic activities, volunteering, and community interactions rooted in trust has been shown to function as a key source of emotional support and relational satisfaction, thereby improving subjective well-being (Adedeji et al., 2023). Conversely, low levels of generalized trust tend to reduce social engagement and increase social isolation, ultimately contributing to diminished well-being (Growiec & Growiec, 2013).

Building on these findings, this study examines the mediating roles of *social life* and *solidarity & helpfulness* in the trust–well-being relationship. This approach provides a more nuanced perspective than earlier research that treated social participation as a single, aggregated construct (Adedeji et al., 2023). Importantly, we investigate whether these mediational pathways differ across national contexts, focusing on the contrast between Austria's relatively stable, cohesive social structure and Hungary's more transitional and fragmented social environment (Grajczjár et al., 2019). Such contextual differences are critical, as historical legacies and institutional frameworks contribute to cross-country variation in how social capital is formed and how trust translates into well-being outcomes (Growiec & Growiec, 2013; Glatz & Schwerdtfeger, 2022).

Prior comparative research reveals that while generalized trust predicts both social life and solidarity in Austria, its influence on solidarity appears markedly weaker or absent in Hungary (Glatz & Bodi-Fernandez, 2020; Glatz & Eder, 2019). At the same time, social life and solidarity play a significantly stronger role in shaping subjective well-being in Hungary, suggesting that close interpersonal relationships are more central to well-being there than generalized trust itself (Grajczjár et al., 2019). These findings point toward a more fragmented social capital structure in Hungary, where well-being depends more heavily on strong ties and personal networks, in contrast to Austria, where trust, solidarity, and social participation reinforce one another within a more integrated system (Glatz & Bodi-Fernandez, 2020).

This divergence underscores the context-sensitive nature of trust and highlights the need to explore cultural, institutional, and socio-economic factors that may condition how trust influences well-being. Cross-national differences in economic development, historical trajectories, and

cultural norms – such as Hungary's stronger emphasis on financial security – may shape the formation and expression of trust and its effects on social capital (Venczel, 2024). Broader multi-level evidence further indicates that both individual-level expectations of others and national-level trust climates jointly influence voluntary membership, collective action, and social participation (Sánchez-García et al., 2025), reinforcing the complexity of trust as a determinant of well-being. Moreover, international studies show that the relationship between trust and well-being is shaped by cultural and institutional contexts, suggesting that the underlying mechanisms are not universal but contingent on societal characteristics (Calvo et al., 2012; Chen et al., 2024).

Taken together, these insights suggest that the pathways linking generalized trust to subjective well-being likely involve both mediation – via social life and solidarity – and moderation, where trust strengthens or conditions the effects of social connections on well-being. Accordingly, the study formulates hypotheses examining the direct, indirect, and moderating relationships among these constructs.

The conceptual model (Figure 1) of the study proposes that *Generalized Trust* influences individuals' *Subjective Well-being and Welfare* through several interconnected pathways. First, the model includes direct effects, suggesting that higher trust not only enhances well-being directly but also promotes stronger social life (social participation) and increased solidarity and helpfulness, both of which independently contribute to well-being. In addition, the model incorporates indirect (mediated) pathways: trust is expected to improve well-being indirectly by fostering richer social interactions and encouraging prosocial orientations, thereby channeling its effects through social life and solidarity. Finally, the framework acknowledges moderating effects, whereby the impact of social life and solidarity on well-being depends on the level of generalized trust. In this way, trust not only initiates but also strengthens the positive influence of social connectedness and prosocial behaviors on subjective well-being. Together, these direct, indirect, and moderating relationships form a comprehensive structure that explains the multifaceted role of trust in shaping individual welfare.

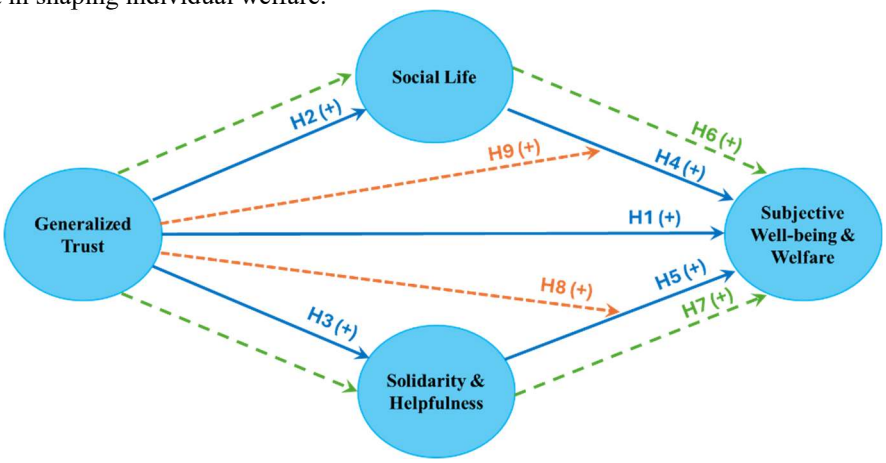

Figure 1. Conceptual model
Source: author's edition

The study formulates *nine hypotheses* to capture the direct, indirect, and moderating relationships between Generalized Trust, Social Life, Solidarity & Helpfulness, and Subjective Well-being & Welfare:

Direct Effects

H1 (+): Generalized Trust positively influences Subjective Well-being & Welfare.
H2 (+): Generalized Trust positively influences Social Life.
H3 (+): Generalized Trust positively influences Solidarity & Helpfulness.
H4 (+): Social Life positively influences Subjective Well-being & Welfare.

H5 (+): Solidarity & Helpfulness positively influence Subjective Well-being & Welfare.

Indirect (Mediated) Effects

H6 (+): Generalized Trust increases Subjective Well-being & Welfare indirectly through Social Life.

H7 (+): Generalized Trust increases Subjective Well-being & Welfare indirectly through Solidarity & Helpfulness.

These hypotheses propose that social engagement and prosocial tendencies act as mediators through which trust enhances well-being.

Moderating Effects

H8 (+): Generalized Trust moderates the effect of Solidarity & Helpfulness on Subjective Well-being & Welfare, strengthening this relationship at higher trust levels.

H9 (+): Generalized Trust moderates the effect of Social Life on Subjective Well-being & Welfare, such that the positive effect of social life on well-being is stronger when trust is higher.

Study design

This study employs a comparative cross-sectional research design to examine how generalized trust influences subjective well-being and welfare in Austria and Hungary, and how these relationships are shaped by social life and solidarity & helpfulness. The analysis is based on data from Wave 11 of the European Social Survey (ESS 2022–2023), a high-quality, representative survey that provides harmonized indicators across European countries. The use of two countries with contrasting trust cultures enables a systematic assessment of contextual differences in the trust–well-being nexus.

Sample

Two nationally representative subsamples from the ESS were used: Austria (AT): n = 2,226; Hungary (HU): n = 2,005. Listwise deletion was applied to handle missing data. These sample sizes exceed common requirements for structural equation modeling and provide sufficient statistical power for multi-group comparisons.

Measures

The structural model included four latent constructs: Generalized Trust, Social Life, Solidarity & Helpfulness, and Subjective Well-being & Welfare. The Subjective Well-being & Welfare construct was measured by four items, whereas the remaining three constructs were each measured by three items (Table 1). All items were measured on different scales. For items marked with (R), reverse coding was applied during the analysis. Thus, for every item, higher values consistently indicate a higher level of agreement or more positive perceptions.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Items Representing the Research Dimensions (n_{AT}=2,226, n_{HU}=2,005)

Dimension	Item code	Item description	Scale	AT Mean (SD)	HU Mean (SD)
Generalized Trust	ppltrst	Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful	0–10	5.91 (2.15)	4.50 (2.57)
	pplfair	Most people try to take advantage of you, or try to be fair	0–10	6.39 (2.02)	5.10 (2.21)
	pplhlp	Most of the time people helpful or mostly looking out for themselves	0–10	6.17 (2.06)	4.71 (2.36)

Social Life	sclmeet	How often socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues	1–7	4.89 (1.22)	3.46 (1.51)
	inprdsc	How many people with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters	0–6	2.97 (1.18)	2.48 (1.20)
	sclact	Take part in social activities compared to others of same age	1–5	2.81 (0.87)	2.54 (0.87)
Solidarity & Helpfulness	iphlppla (R)	Important to help people and care for others' well-being	1–6	5.02 (0.87)	4.55 (1.04)
	iplylfra (R)	Important to be loyal to friends and devote to people close	1–6	5.47 (0.71)	4.93 (0.98)
	ipudrsta (R)	Important to understand different people	1–6	4.91 (0.97)	4.45 (1.03)
Subjective Well-being & Welfare	happy	How happy are you	0–10	7.80 (1.60)	7.12 (1.99)
	health (R)	Subjective general health	1–5	3.94 (0.87)	3.81 (0.94)
	hincfel (R)	Feeling about the household's income nowadays	1–4	3.16 (0.71)	2.81 (0.68)
	stflife	How satisfied with life as a whole	0–10	7.83 (1.61)	6.59 (2.20)

Source: Author's own calculations using data from ESS Round 11 (2022–2023)

Austrian respondents consistently reported more positive perceptions across all examined dimensions than Hungarian respondents. Levels of generalized trust were notably higher in Austria, with mean scores on all trust items exceeding those in Hungary. Social life indicators showed a similar pattern: Austrians met others more frequently, had slightly more people to discuss personal matters with, and participated in social activities more actively. In the Solidarity & Helpfulness dimension, Austrians expressed stronger agreement with helping others, loyalty, and understanding different people. Subjective well-being indicators were also higher in Austria, where respondents reported greater happiness, slightly better perceived health, higher satisfaction with household income, and significantly greater overall life satisfaction compared to Hungarian respondents.

Measurement Model

To assess the measurement quality of the latent constructs, a reflective measurement model was estimated separately for Austria and Hungary. Indicator reliability was evaluated through outer loadings. The majority of items loaded satisfactorily on their respective constructs, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Appendix, Table 5). However, one item (*hincfel (R)*, measuring perceived household income) showed a weaker loading in the Austrian model (0.563), falling below the commonly accepted 0.60 cutoff. Although loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 may be retained if they contribute to the construct's content validity and if composite reliability and AVE remain acceptable, this result suggests that the income-feeling item explains less variance in the latent construct of Subjective Well-being & Welfare in Austria.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed via Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). Cronbach's alpha values approached or exceeded the 0.70 benchmark for most constructs, though Social Life (AT: 0.632) and Solidarity & Helpfulness (AT: 0.613) fell slightly below this threshold. Given that Cronbach's alpha is sensitive to the number of items and assumes tau-equivalence, lower values are not unusual for constructs composed of only three indicators. Composite reliability values, which are more robust under congeneric measurement and widely recommended in PLS-SEM, showed acceptable reliability across all constructs in both countries (all CR $\geq$ 0.79).

Convergent validity was assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with all constructs in both models meeting the recommended threshold of 0.50. This indicates that each latent variable explains more than half of the variance in its indicators. Overall, despite minor deviations in individual loadings and alpha values, the constructs demonstrate adequate indicator reliability, internal consistency, and convergent validity in both country samples.

The discriminant validity assessment using the HTMT criterion demonstrates acceptable construct distinctiveness in both Austria (AT) and Hungary (HU), as all values fall well below the commonly recommended threshold of 0.85 (Table 2). In Austria, the highest HTMT value is observed between Subjective Well-being & Welfare and Generalized Trust (0.413), while in Hungary the strongest association is between Subjective Well-being & Welfare and Social Life (0.527). In both countries, the weakest relationships appear between Solidarity & Helpfulness and Generalized Trust (AT: 0.162; HU: 0.064), indicating good differentiation between these constructs. Although Hungary shows generally higher HTMT values −particularly between well-being and social life −the results remain within acceptable limits, supporting adequate discriminant validity across all construct pairs in both samples.

Table 2. Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) Ratios Assessing Discriminant Validity Across Constructs

Constructs	AT	HU
Social Life <-> Generalized Trust	0.248	0.230
Solidarity &Helpfulness <-> Generalized Trust	0.162	0.064
Solidarity &Helpfulness <-> Social Life	0.274	0.170
Subjective Well-being &Welfare <-> Generalized Trust	0.413	0.299
Subjective Well-being &Welfare <-> Social Life	0.384	0.527
Subjective Well-being &Welfare <-> Solidarity &Helpfulness	0.200	0.365

Source: Author's own calculations using data from ESS Round 11 (2022–2023)

Structural Model

The structural model was evaluated to assess the direct effects of generalized trust on subjective well-being and welfare, as well as its indirect effects operating through two mediators −social life and solidarity & helpfulness. In addition, the model examined the moderating role of generalized trust on the relationships between social activity, solidarity, and subjective well-being.

The overall model fit was assessed using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), Squared Euclidean Distance (d_ULS), and Geodesic Distance (d_G), following the recommendations for PLS-SEM evaluation. For both Austria and Hungary, the SRMR values of the saturated model (AT = 0.080; HU = 0.081) and the estimated model (AT = 0.084; HU = 0.083) fall below the commonly accepted cut-off of 0.08–0.85, indicating an acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Henseler et al., 2015). The d_ULS and d_G values for both countries remain within acceptable bounds, as model fit is supported when the discrepancy values of the estimated model do not significantly exceed those of the saturated model (Henseler et al., 2016). Taken together, the results indicate that the measurement models for Austria and Hungary demonstrate adequate global fit according to established PLS-SEM criteria.

Table 3. Model Fit Indices for Austria and Hungary (SRMR, d_ULS, d_G)

	SRMR		d_ULS		d_G	
Model	AT	HU	AT	HU	AT	HU
Saturated model	0.080	0.081	0.586	0.599	0.161	0.166
Estimated model	0.084	0.083	0.650	0.627	0.166	0.167

Source: Author's own calculations using data from ESS Round 11 (2022–2023)

Results and Discussion

The structural model estimation for the Hungarian sample indicates that generalized trust exerts a significant positive direct effect on subjective well-being and welfare (β = 0.219, p < 0.001), supplemented by a small but significant indirect effect via social life (β = 0.040, p < 0.001), resulting in a total effect of β = 0.259. In contrast, the indirect pathway through solidarity is negligible and statistically non-significant (β = –0.001, p = 0.920), indicating that solidarity does not mediate the relationship between trust and well-being in the Hungarian model. Generalized trust also shows a significant positive effect on social life (β = 0.158, p < 0.001), whereas its direct effect on solidarity & helpfulness is not significant (β = –0.002, p = 0.920). Social life and solidarity & helpfulness both have significant and positive effects on subjective well-being (β = 0.262, p <0.001; β = 0.265, p <0.001), confirming their role as key psychosocial pathways linking trust to welfare outcomes.

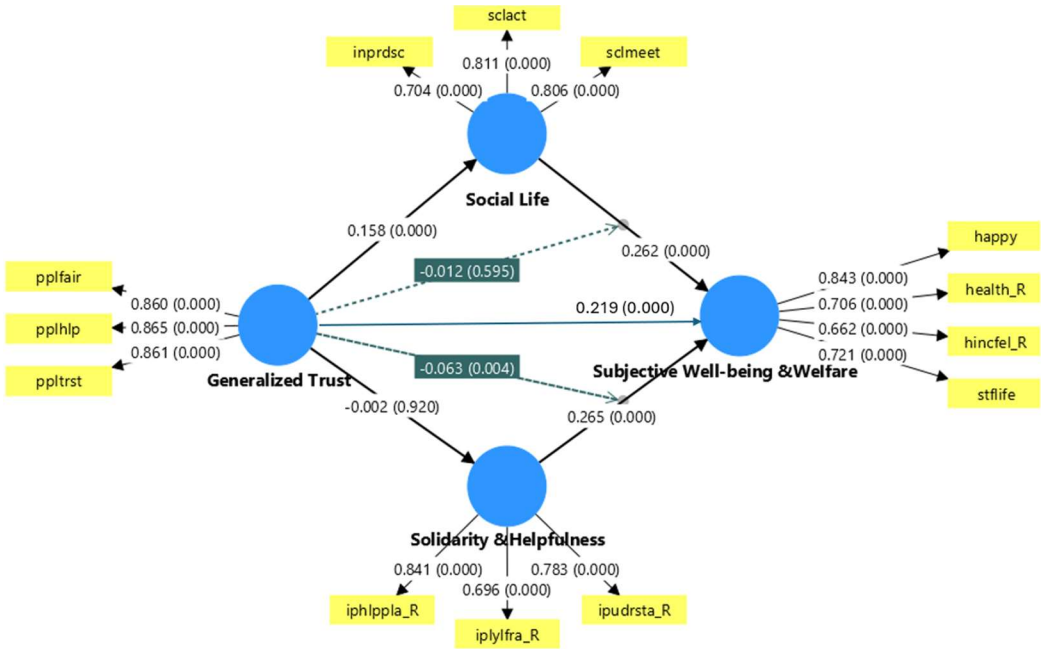

Figure 2. Estimated Structural Path Coefficients and Measurement Loadings for the Hungarian Model

Source: Author's own calculations using data from ESS Round 11 (2022–2023)

Regarding moderation, generalized trust exhibits a weak but statistically significant negative moderating effect on the relationship between solidarity & helpfulness and subjective well-being (β = –0.063, p = 0.004). Although modest in magnitude, this interaction suggests that higher levels of generalized trust slightly weaken the positive influence of solidarity and helpfulness on subjective well-being. One plausible interpretation is that in contexts where generalized trust is high, individuals may rely less on close personal networks for emotional or instrumental support;

consequently, the added well-being benefit of solidarity-related behaviors becomes somewhat less pronounced. In contrast, when generalized trust is lower, solidarity and helping behaviors may play a more critical compensatory role in sustaining well-being. Overall, the model supports a primarily direct and mediated influence of generalized trust on well-being, while revealing a subtle nuance in how trust shapes the function of social support mechanisms.

The findings for the Austrian sample provide clear evidence that generalized trust plays a central role in shaping subjective well-being and welfare, both directly and indirectly. First, generalized trust exerted moderate positive effects on both social life (β = 0.182, p <0.001) and solidarity & helpfulness (β = 0.119, p <0.001), suggesting that individuals with higher interpersonal trust tend to participate more actively in social relationships and express stronger prosocial orientations. These two constructs, in turn, were also significant predictors of subjective well-being and welfare, although their magnitudes differed: social life showed a substantial positive effect (β = 0.199, p <0.001), while solidarity & helpfulness showed a weaker but still significant effect (β = 0.067, p = 0.002). Importantly, generalized trust also demonstrated a strong direct association with subjective well-being and welfare (β = 0.269, p <0.001), indicating that trust shapes well-being not only through social mechanisms but also independently − likely reflecting psychological security, optimism, and lower perceived social threat.

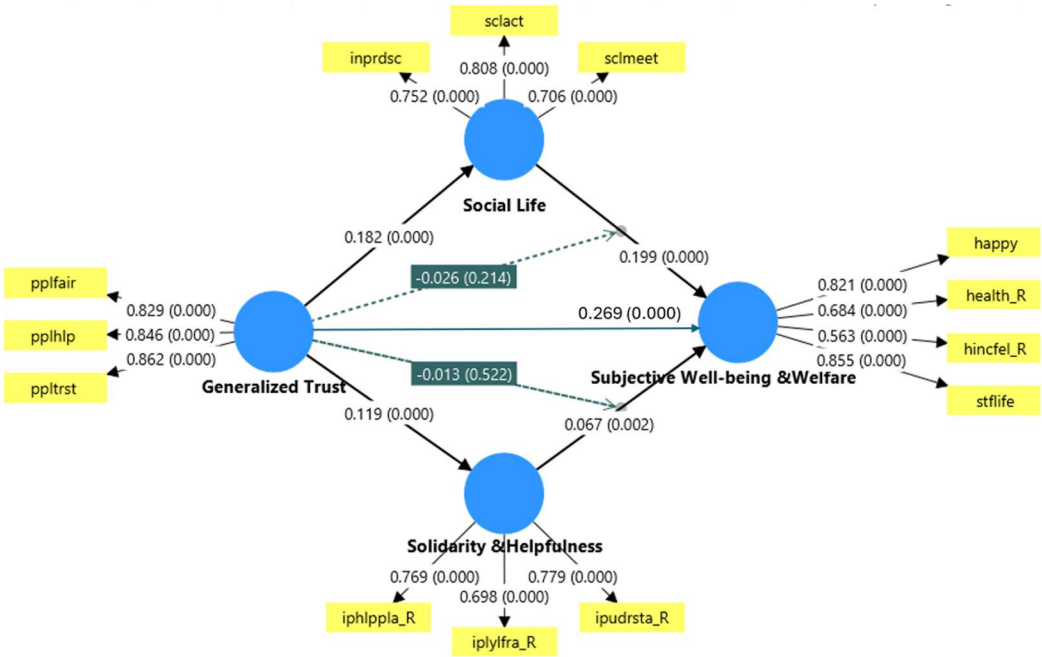

Figure 3. Estimated Structural Path Coefficients and Measurement Loadings for the Austrian Model

Source: Author's own calculations using data from ESS Round 11 (2022–2023)

Furthermore, the Austrian model revealed significant indirect pathways, reinforcing the importance of social mechanisms: trust predicted well-being indirectly via social life (β = 0.036, p < 0.001) and, to a lesser extent, via solidarity & helpfulness (β = 0.008, p = 0.004). These indirect effects accumulated to a notable total indirect effect (β = 0.044, p <0.001), and when combined with the direct effect resulted in a strong total effect of trust on well-being (β = 0.313, p <0.001). In contrast, the hypothesized moderation effects − trust × social life and trust × solidarity − were not supported, suggesting that trust enhances well-being primarily through additive (direct and indirect) pathways rather than by amplifying or buffering the effects of social interactions.

Overall, the Austrian results indicate that trust functions as a foundational social and psychological resource, promoting social engagement and prosocial orientations, which in turn

elevate subjective well-being. The lack of moderating effects implies that trust does not change the *strength* of the benefits derived from social life or solidarity, but rather consistently contributes to well-being both on its own and through its influence on social relationships. This aligns with broader sociological and psychological research emphasizing trust as a cornerstone of social cohesion and individual flourishing.

Comparing Austria and Hungary, the structural models point to a broadly similar but not identical social mechanism. In both countries, generalized trust is positively related to subjective well-being and welfare, and in both cases part of this association is mediated by more active social life and prosocial orientations. However, the overall impact of trust is somewhat stronger in Austria (total effect $\beta = 0.313$) than in Hungary (total effect $\beta = 0.259$), and the Austrian model shows a clearer pathway from trust to solidarity and helpfulness, which is absent in Hungary where the direct path from trust to solidarity is essentially zero and non-significant. Moreover, while the Hungarian model revealed a small but significant negative moderation of the solidarity–well-being link by trust, no such moderation is present in Austria. This contrast suggests that in Austria generalized trust, social participation and solidarity form a more coherent "virtuous circle," whereas in Hungary the benefits of solidarity for well-being are somewhat more contingent and can even be slightly dampened in high-trust contexts. Together with the descriptive evidence that Austrians report higher average trust, social engagement and well-being than Hungarians, the comparative results support the interpretation that generalized trust is more deeply embedded in the social fabric in Austria, while in Hungary its role is still more fragile and context-dependent.

Conclusions

Across both national samples, the structural models consistently showed that generalized trust positively predicts social life, solidarity & helpfulness, and subjective well-being, although the strength of these effects differs between Austria and Hungary. Both models support the central hypothesis that generalized trust enhances subjective well-being (Table 4), but the underlying mechanisms differ. Austria shows stronger mediating pathways and no moderation, while Hungary shows weaker mediation, no indirect pathway through solidarity, and a small suppressing moderation effect. These differences indicate that although trust is an important social resource in both countries, its role is more structurally embedded and consistently beneficial in Austria, whereas in Hungary, trust interacts more subtly with social behaviors and may be shaped by a more fragile or polarized social context.

Table 4. Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results for Hungary and Austria

Hypothesized Relationship	Hungary (HU) β (p) – Decision	Austria (AT) β (p) – Decision
H1: Generalized Trust → Subjective Well-being & Welfare (direct)	0.219 ($p < 0.001$) **Supported**	0.269 ($p < 0.001$) **Supported**
H2: Generalized Trust → Social Life	0.158 ($p < 0.001$) **Supported**	0.182 ($p < 0.001$) **Supported**
H3: Generalized Trust → Solidarity & Helpfulness	–0.002 ($p = 0.920$) **Not supported**	0.119 ($p < 0.001$) **Supported**
H4: Social Life → Subjective Well-being & Welfare	0.262 ($p < 0.001$) **Supported**	0.199 ($p < 0.001$) **Supported**
H5: Solidarity & Helpfulness → Subjective Well-being & Welfare	0.265 ($p < 0.001$) **Supported**	0.067 ($p = 0.002$) **Supported**
H6: Trust → Social Life → Well-being	0.040 ($p < 0.001$) **Supported**	0.036 ($p < 0.001$) **Supported**
H7: Trust → Solidarity → Well-being	-0.001 ($p = 0.920$) **Supported**	0.008 ($p = 0.004$) **Supported**

Hypothesized Relationship	Hungary (HU) β (p) – Decision	Austria (AT) β (p) – Decision
H8: Trust × Solidarity → Subjective Well-being & Welfare (moderation)	–0.063 (p = 0.004) **Supported** (weak negative moderation)	–0.013 (p = 0.522) **Not supported**
H9: Trust × Social Life → Subjective Well-being & Welfare (moderation)	–0.012 (p = 0.595) **Not supported**	–0.026 (p = 0.214) **Not supported**

Source: Author's own calculations and edition using data from ESS Round 11 (2022–2023)

The findings align with previous research indicating that the association between social trust and well-being can vary substantially across different societal structures (Guo et al., 2021). While some studies report a clear causal relationship between social trust and subjective well-being, others find the link to be less robust or even negligible, particularly when accounting for country-level characteristics or conducting extensive robustness checks (Glatz & Schwerdtfeger, 2022). It is important to note that the pathways connecting generalized trust and well-being are not universal; they can be significantly shaped by mediating factors such as perceived social fairness and trust in government, especially in societies undergoing socio-political transformation (Ma et al., 2024). These contextual differences are also reflected in broader patterns of regional and spatial development, where the sustainability of territorial decisions has been shown to influence social cohesion and long-term well-being outcomes (Kocziszky & Szendi, 2023).

Moreover, macroeconomic conditions and income inequality may further modify these associations, underscoring the importance of exercising caution when generalizing findings to other populations or contexts (Glatz & Eder, 2019; Inaba et al., 2015). Differences in historical trajectories and cultural norms related to collective action and individual responsibility can also influence how generalized trust translates into measurable societal outcomes. Replication studies in diverse populations are therefore essential for evaluating the generalizability of these results, as individual differences−such as personality traits or life circumstances −may simultaneously shape both general trust and subjective well-being (Adedeji et al., 2023).

The observed disparities between Austria and Hungary highlight that although generalized trust typically benefits societies by fostering civic engagement and economic development, its impact on individual well-being is highly dependent on the surrounding socio-cultural context (Ward et al., 2014; Glatz & Bodi-Fernandez, 2020). This underscores the importance of tailoring policies aimed at enhancing well-being through trust-building to the specific historical, political, and social dynamics of each nation (Jasielska et al., 2019). Future research should also employ longitudinal designs to establish clearer causal pathways between generalized trust, components of social capital, and subjective well-being, as cross-sectional data−while informative −limit causal inference (Adedeji et al., 2023). Such longitudinal analyses would enable a more nuanced understanding of how institutional and social trust evolve over time and how these shifts subsequently influence population-level well-being (Glatz & Schwerdtfeger, 2022). Additionally, examining differences in measurement specificity for generalized trust−such as comparing multi-item scales with single-item indicators−may uncover further complexities in its relationship with well-being across diverse cultural settings (Chan et al., 2017). Finally, investigating the mediating roles of perceived social fairness and trust in government remains essential, as these factors have been shown to significantly shape subjective well-being, particularly in contexts characterized by variability in governance quality (Ma et al., 2024; Dufhues et al., 2023; Glatz & Eder, 2019).

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Appendix

Table 5. Measurement Model Results: Outer Loadings, Internal Reliability, and Convergent Validity for Austria and Hungary

Dimension/Item	Item Code	Loadings AT (HU)	α AT (HU)	AVE AT (HU)	CR AT (HU)
Generalized Trust			0.801 (0.828)	0.715 (0.743)	0.883 (0.897)
Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful	ppltrst	0.862 (0.861)			
Most people try to take advantage of you, or try to be fair	pplfair	0.829 (0.860)			
Most of the time people helpful or mostly looking out for themselves	pplhlp	0.846 (0.865)			
Social Life			0.632 (0.665)	0.573 (0.601)	0.800 (0.818)
How often socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues	sclmeet	0.706 (0.806)			
How many people with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters	inprdsc	0.752 (0.704)			
Take part in social activities compared to others of same age	sclact	0.808 (0.811)			
Solidarity & Helpfulness			0.613 (0.671)	0.562 (0.602)	0.793 (0.818)
Important to help people and care for others' well-being	iphlppla (R)	0.769 (0.841)			
Important to be loyal to friends and devote to people close	iplylfra (R)	0.698 (0.696)			
Important to understand different people	ipudrsta (R)	0.779 (0.783)			
Subjective Well-being & Welfare			0.716 (0.716)	0.547 (0.542)	0.825 (0.824)
How happy are you	happy	0.821 (0.805)			
Subjective general health	health (R)	0.684 (0.706)			
Feeling about the household's income nowadays	hincfel (R)	0.563 (0.662)			
How satisfied with life as a whole	stflife	0.855 (0.721)			

Source: author's own calculations using data from ESS Round 11 (2022–2023)