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RESEARCH

A Micro-level Perspective on Migration Intentions: Institutional Trust Matters

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Abstract
This paper examines institutional trust as a micro-level behavioural channel associated with migration intentions under uncertainty. Building on institutional economics and behavioural decision-making, it develops a stylised formal framework in which trust in domestic institutions stabilises expectations and increases the perceived value of remaining in the country of origin, thereby lowering the relative attractiveness of migration. The empirical analysis uses individual-level data from the Eurobarometer 70.1 survey covering 27 European Union member states and estimates weighted logistic regression models with country fixed effects. Migration intentions are modelled as a function of alternative measures of institutional trust alongside a comprehensive set of sociodemographic, labour-market, and behavioural controls. Robustness is assessed using functional-form tests, calibration and precision–recall diagnostics, and sensitivity analysis for omitted-variable bias. Across specifications, higher institutional trust is consistently associated with a lower probability of reporting an intention to migrate, with substantively meaningful estimated magnitudes over empirically relevant variation in trust. While the analysis does not claim causal identification, the findings are consistent with the proposed behavioural mechanism linking perceived institutional reliability to individual migration-related expectations. The results highlight institutional trust as a relevant non-economic correlate of migration intentions and suggest that policies strengthening the predictability and credibility of public institutions may be associated with migration intentions by stabilising citizens' expectations.

Keywords International migration · Institutions · Institutional trust · Migration intentions · Individual decision-making

Introduction

International migration remains a central empirical puzzle in the social sciences. Persistent cross-country differences in income levels, labour-market opportunities, and living standards would, under standard neoclassical assumptions, imply substantially higher mobility than is observed in practice. Yet actual migration flows remain modest relative to these predicted incentives, suggesting that economic differentials alone provide an incomplete account of individual migration behaviour (Clemens 2011; Massey et al. 1993).

Recent research has increasingly turned to institutional factors as potential explanations for this gap, documenting systematic associations between governance quality, legal environments, and migration outcomes (Baudassé et al. 2018; Guzi and Mikula 2021; Arif 2019). While this literature has substantially improved our understanding of macro-level patterns, it typically relies on aggregate indicators and country-level data, offering limited insight into how institutional environments shape individual expectations and behavioural intentions. As a result, the micro-level mechanisms linking institutions to migration decisions remain insufficiently specified.

This paper addresses this gap by focusing on institutional trust as a subjective channel through which individuals evaluate the predictability and reliability of domestic institutional arrangements. Rather than treating institutions solely as objective country characteristics, the analysis examines how individual perceptions of institutional quality influence migration intentions. The central hypothesis is that higher institutional trust is associated with a lower propensity to express an intention to migrate, as greater trust in domestic institutions reduces perceived uncertainty and weakens the

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perceived benefits of migration. The paper does not claim causal identification in a strict econometric sense; instead, it develops a theoretically grounded behavioural interpretation and evaluates its empirical consistency using individual-level data.

The empirical analysis draws on micro-level survey data from the Eurobarometer 70.1 wave and estimates weighted logistic regression models with country fixed effects. Migration intentions are modelled as a function of alternative measures of institutional trust alongside a comprehensive set of sociodemographic, human-capital, labour-market, and behavioural controls. A series of robustness and sensitivity analyses — including functional-form tests, alternative operationalisations of trust, and omitted-variable sensitivity assessments — are employed to assess the stability of the main association.

Building on the growing body of micro-level survey-based evidence on institutional perceptions and migration intentions, this paper contributes to the literature in three respects. First, it advances a micro-level perspective on the institutions–migration nexus by conceptualising institutional trust as a behavioural channel through which institutional environments may be reflected in individual expectations under uncertainty, rather than treating institutional quality solely as an aggregate country characteristic. Second, it provides a transparent formalisation of this mechanism and links it directly to a reduced-form empirical specification, thereby clarifying the interpretation of trust effects in observational micro-data. Third, the analysis subjects the main association to a broad set of robustness and sensitivity diagnostics, strengthening confidence in the substantive relevance — though not the causal interpretation — of the estimated relationship.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. After the introduction, the next part reviews the relevant literature and identifies the remaining conceptual gaps. The paper then develops the theoretical framework and presents the stylised formal model used to motivate the empirical specification. This is followed by the data and methodology section. The subsequent part reports the empirical results, after which the implications and limitations of the findings are discussed. The paper concludes with a brief conclusion.

Literature review

Early migration research was predominantly shaped by neoclassical economic approaches, emphasising wage differentials, labour-market conditions, and the transferability of human capital as primary drivers of mobility. While Massey et al.'s (1993) influential synthesis acknowledged an alternative strand labelled "institutional theory", this perspective referred mainly to the role of organisations and intermediaries — including private, non-profit, and informal actors — in facilitating and sustaining migration flows, rather than to the institutional-economics tradition associated with North (1990) and related scholarship. Additionally, other contributions have highlighted the role of welfare institutions, public services, and social protection systems in shaping migration incentives (Dustmann and Okatenko 2014; Kureková 2013; Palmer and Pytlikova 2015), but these strands remain conceptually distinct from institutional-economic interpretations of governance quality and rule structures.

More recently, a growing body of research has explicitly incorporated institutional quality into the analysis of migration outcomes. Baudassé et al. (2018) document a gradual shift toward institutional explanations, noting that both economic and political institutions have been linked to cross-country differences in migration rates and directions. Empirical studies show that weak institutional environments in countries of origin tend to generate stronger emigration pressures (Bergh et al. 2015; Li et al. 2023), and that institutional quality is also related to emigrant self-selection (Nejad and Young 2016), while stronger institutional settings may either attract migrants (Bertocchi and Strozzi 2008; Akça and Çelik 2024) or moderate outward mobility and brain drain (Chen et al. 2024; Guzi and Mikula 2021; Nifo and Vecchione 2014). Institutional conditions have also been shown to shape refugee movements (Tétényi et al. 2019). Together, these findings support the view that institutional arrangements constitute an important contextual dimension of migration dynamics beyond purely economic incentives.

Much of this evidence relies on aggregate country-level indicators and macro-level migration outcomes, which are informative about cross-country patterns but offer limited leverage for analysing individual decision-making processes. At the same time, a growing body of recent research has employed individual-level survey data to examine how subjective perceptions of governance quality, political environments, and institutional performance relate to migration aspirations. Micro-level studies document that perceived corruption, political dissatisfaction, and evaluations of institutional effectiveness are systematically associated with migration intentions across diverse regional contexts (Crisan et al. 2019; Dennison 2022; Etling et al. 2020; Helbling and Morgenstern 2023).

While these contributions convincingly demonstrate that individual evaluations of political and institutional environments matter for migration-related preferences, they typically remain primarily empirical and politically oriented, and rarely embed these perceptions in an explicit institutional-economic framework that conceptualises institutions

as rule systems shaping incentives, uncertainty, and planning horizons. As a result, the behavioural mechanisms through which perceived institutional reliability translates into expectations, risk perceptions, and long-term planning under uncertainty are not always explicitly articulated. The present study complements this literature by grounding institutional trust in a bounded-rationality framework and by explicitly formalising how perceived institutional predictability is reflected in individual migration intentions at the micro level.

In parallel, a separate line of research has emphasised the role of trust in institutions for the effective functioning of social and political systems more broadly (Efendic et al. 2011). Within the migration field, existing studies have primarily examined institutional trust among immigrants and host populations. Quaranta (2025) analyses trust in democratic institutions among immigrants, while Salamońska et al. (2021) link institutional trust to political participation. Other contributions focus on how trust shapes attitudes toward immigrants and migration policy among native populations (Bartasevičius 2024; Grežo et al. 2024; Halapuu et al. 2014), or how media trust conditions responses to migration-related information (Agovino et al. 2022). By contrast, the role of institutional trust among potential migrants in countries of origin has received comparatively limited attention. Vento (2021) examines the evolution of political trust among migrants after departure, while Aliyev and Gasimov (2023) analyse the association between institutional trust and migration intentions primarily through subjective wellbeing and income perceptions.

Taken together, existing studies point to a growing recognition of institutions and institutional trust as relevant factors in migration processes, while highlighting the diversity of approaches and remaining open questions regarding how subjective evaluations of domestic institutional arrangements shape individuals' expectations, perceived risks, and migration-related plans.

Building on this literature, the present study focuses on institutional trust as a subjective channel through which individuals interpret and evaluate the predictability and reliability of domestic institutional environments. Rather than claiming novelty in the use of micro-level data per se, the contribution lies in articulating a theoretically grounded behavioural interpretation, rooted in institutional economics and bounded rationality, that clarifies how individual perceptions of institutional reliability are reflected in migration intentions under uncertainty. By combining this conceptual framework with individual-level survey evidence and a broad set of robustness checks, the analysis complements existing empirical studies and helps sharpen the interpretation of the trust–migration-intentions relationship without claiming causal identification or mediation.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, international migration is understood as long-term, voluntary cross-border mobility involving settlement for more than one year. Following Sjaastad (1962), migration is interpreted as an individual investment decision in human capital. This investment entails direct and indirect costs — including information acquisition, relocation, administrative procedures, and social adjustment — while expected returns may take the form of higher wages, improved living standards, or access to welfare and public services abroad. Individuals evaluate these costs and benefits when forming intentions about whether to remain in their country of residence or to migrate.

In contrast to the neoclassical microeconomic theory of migration, which assumes fully rational decision-makers maximizing expected utility under complete information (DaVanzo 1981; Massey et al. 1993), the present framework adopts the perspective of bounded rationality (Simon 1997). Individuals face fundamental uncertainty about future outcomes (Knight 1921) and operate under cognitive and informational constraints. As a result, migration intentions are formed under imperfect knowledge and subjective expectations rather than precise optimization.

Within this perspective, institutions play a central role in shaping how individuals interpret and manage uncertainty. Following North (1990), institutions are understood as the formal and informal rules of the game that structure incentives and stabilize expectations in social and economic interaction. Formal institutions include codified and enforceable rules such as laws, contracts, and regulatory frameworks, while informal institutions consist of norms, conventions, and shared expectations. By providing relatively stable rules and enforcement mechanisms, institutions contribute to the predictability of future interactions and outcomes, thereby reducing uncertainty for individual actors.

Importantly, institutions can perform this uncertainty-reducing function only to the extent that individuals perceive them as reliable, stable, and effectively enforced (North 1990). Institutional effects therefore operate not solely through objective rule structures but also through subjective evaluations of how those rules function in practice. This brings institutional trust to the centre of the analytical framework.

Institutional trust refers to an individual's confidence, based on accumulated experience and social learning, that institutions are capable of performing their designated roles in a predictable and impartial manner (Győrffy 2017). In the case of formal institutions, the state and its legal system are particularly salient, as they possess enforcement authority and monopoly over coercion. A baseline disposition of scepticism toward state power is

therefore not uncommon (Hardin 1999), especially where enforcement is perceived as selective or arbitrary. Trust emerges when institutional practices are experienced as consistent, impartial, and rule-bound, including the equal application of laws and the credible protection of property and contractual rights.

These characteristics closely resemble the features that Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) associate with inclusive institutional arrangements, which provide broad access to economic and social opportunities through predictable rules and enforceable rights. While the inclusive–extractive distinction is primarily used to analyse long-run development patterns at the macro level, its core intuition can be heuristically extended to individual-level reasoning: institutional environments that are perceived as predictable and impartial may facilitate more stable expectations about future prospects, whereas environments perceived as arbitrary or unreliable are likely to be associated with higher subjective uncertainty. This analogy is used solely for interpretive purposes and does not imply a direct mapping between macro-level institutional regimes and individual perceptions or behavioural responses. In this sense, institutional quality may matter not only through formal constraints but also through how individuals interpret and experience institutional performance. The present framework does not seek to explain institutional change or development trajectories; rather, it draws on this intuition to motivate the role of perceived institutional reliability in shaping individual expectations.

Institutional trust affects individual behaviour through its influence on perceived uncertainty and planning horizons. Győrffy (2013) argues that reliable institutions support long-term planning by stabilizing expectations and facilitating rule compliance, whereas unreliable institutions encourage short-termism and adaptive rule circumvention. When actors trust that rules will be enforced predictably and impartially, they are more likely to invest in long-term projects and to anchor their life strategies within the existing institutional environment. Conversely, when institutional trust is low, future outcomes become more uncertain and long-term planning becomes less attractive.

Migration intentions can be interpreted within this logic. Migration is inherently a long-term and high-commitment decision involving substantial irreversible costs and delayed returns. Individuals who perceive domestic institutions as reliable and predictable may expect that future opportunities can be pursued within their home institutional environment, making migration a less attractive strategy for managing uncertainty. By contrast, individuals who perceive domestic institutions as unreliable may attach higher subjective risk to remaining and may evaluate migration more favourably as an alternative life strategy. Importantly, this mechanism operates through subjective perceptions and expectations rather than through objective institutional indicators alone.

This framework therefore conceptualises institutional trust as a behavioural transmission channel that shapes subjective expectations, without implying direct causal identification of this channel in the empirical analysis. The argument does not imply deterministic or causal identification in a strict econometric sense. Instead, it articulates a theoretically grounded behavioural logic through which perceived institutional reliability is reflected in how individuals evaluate future opportunities, risks, and planning horizons when forming migration intentions under bounded rationality.

The formal model presented in the following section translates this behavioural logic into a stylised decision framework, which serves to derive empirically testable implications. These implications are subsequently examined using individual-level survey data on migration intentions and institutional trust.

Model

This section provides a stylised formalisation of the behavioural logic outlined in the theoretical framework. The purpose of the model is not structural estimation or causal identification, but to provide a transparent mapping between the conceptual argument and the reduced-form empirical specification used in the analysis.

We consider an individual k residing in country i, who forms an intention either to remain in the country of residence or to migrate abroad. Migration is understood as a long-term, voluntary cross-border move involving substantial and partly irreversible costs, consistent with the human-capital approach to migration (DaVanzo 1981; Sjaastad 1962). Individuals evaluate expected benefits and costs under uncertainty and imperfect information.

Let the expected utility associated with remaining in the country of residence (U_i^k) be given by expression (1):

$$U_i^k = Y_i^k + G_i^k \tag{1}$$

where Y_i^k denotes labour income and G_i^k represents the expected net value of public services and transfers, broadly interpreted to include cash and in-kind benefits as well as tax burdens. These components reflect subjectively perceived lifetime expectations rather than precisely discounted present values, consistent with bounded rationality (Simon 1997).

Expected income and public services depend on observable individual characteristics d_k(such as education, age, labour-market status), contextual labour-market conditions

in the country of residence LM_i, and the individual's level of institutional trust IN_i^k:

$$Y_i^k = Y(\boldsymbol{d_k}, LM_i, IN_i^k) \tag{2}$$

$$G_i^k = G(\boldsymbol{d_k}, IN_i^k) \tag{3}$$

Institutional trust enters both components because individuals who perceive domestic institutions as predictable and reliably enforced attach greater confidence to their future income prospects and the stability of public service provision. Formally, we assume $\frac{\partial Y}{\partial IN_i^k} > 0$, and $\frac{\partial G}{\partial IN_i^k} > 0$. This reflects the idea that trust reduces subjective uncertainty surrounding future outcomes rather than mechanically increasing objective income or transfers.

Substituting (2) and (3) into (1) yields expression (4):

$$U_i^k = Y(\boldsymbol{d_k}, LM_i, IN_i^k) + G(\boldsymbol{d_k}, IN_i^k) \tag{4}$$

Let the expected utility associated with migration be given by expression (5):

$$U_m^k = Y_m^k + G_m^k - C_m^k \tag{5}$$

where Y_m^k and G_m^k denote expected income and public services abroad, and C_m^k captures one-off mobility costs such as relocation, information acquisition, administrative barriers, and social adjustment. In line with the behavioural interpretation of institutional trust, individuals may hold expectations about institutional conditions in potential destination countries. However, such destination-specific institutional perceptions are not observed at the individual–destination level in the available data and cannot be modelled explicitly in a dyadic framework. This abstraction reflects data availability constraints; the empirical design tests the origin-side association rather than a full destination-choice model. This abstraction does not imply that institutional conditions in destination countries are irrelevant for migration decisions; rather, it reflects the fact that destination-specific institutional expectations cannot be observed at the individual–destination level in the available data and therefore lie outside the empirical scope of the analysis.

Expected migration utility may depend on observable characteristics d_k and general beliefs about opportunities abroad, but these factors are not modelled explicitly, as the empirical analysis focuses on the relative attractiveness of remaining versus migrating rather than on destination choice.

Individual k forms a migration intention when the perceived net benefit of migration is positive as can be seen in expression (6):

$$NU^k = U_m^k - U_i^k > 0 \tag{6}$$

Substituting from (4) and (5), this condition can be written as presented in expression (7):

$$Y_m^k + G_m^k - C_m^k > Y(d_k, LM_i, IN_i^k) + G(d_k, IN_i^{\mathrm{k}}) \tag{7}$$

Let $migr_k \in \{0,1\}$ denote whether the individual expresses an intention to migrate. The probability of migration intention is therefore presented in expression (8):

$$\Pr\left(migr_k = 1\right) = \Pr\left(NU^{\mathrm{k}} > 0\right). \tag{8}$$

Institutional trust affects this probability through its impact on the perceived attractiveness of remaining in the country of residence. Higher institutional trust increases the subjective reliability of expected domestic outcomes, raising U_i^k and thereby reducing the likelihood that the net benefit of migration becomes positive. Formally, this implication can be expressed as the (9) sign restriction.

$$\frac{\partial \Pr(\mathrm{migr_k} = 1)}{\partial \mathrm{IN}_i^k} < 0 \tag{9}$$

The model provides a stylised formal representation of the behavioural argument, treating institutional trust as a subjective channel affecting how expectations are formed under bounded rationality. It does not imply structural estimation of income or public service functions, nor does it model destination choice or institutional change. Instead, it provides a transparent mapping between the theoretical argument and the reduced-form empirical specification used in the analysis.

The empirical models therefore estimate the association between institutional trust and migration intentions conditional on observable individual characteristics and country fixed effects, consistent with the sign restriction in (9). The purpose of the formalisation is to clarify the logic of the hypothesised relationship rather than to claim causal identification in a strict econometric sense.

Data and Methodology

The empirical analysis draws on micro-level survey data from the Eurobarometer 70.1 wave conducted in October–November 2008 (European Commission 2012). The survey provides nationally representative samples of approximately 1,000 respondents per country across the 27 European Union member states, with harmonised questionnaires and sampling procedures. In the Eurobarometer sampling design, Germany is split into former East and West regions

and Northern Ireland is sampled separately from Great Britain; accordingly, the number of country clusters in the estimations is 29. The dataset contains detailed information on respondents' sociodemographic characteristics, labour-market status, attitudes toward political and legal institutions, and migration-related intentions.

Survey calibration weights supplied by the Eurobarometer are applied throughout the analysis to restore population representativeness within countries. All empirical models include country fixed effects in order to absorb time-invariant national characteristics and institutional contexts that are common to all respondents within a country in the survey year.

Because reliable micro-level data linking pre-migration characteristics to realised international mobility for representative origin populations remain scarce, the analysis relies on stated migration intentions rather than observed migration behaviour. While intentions do not mechanically translate into realised moves, prior research documents a meaningful empirical relationship between intentions and subsequent migration outcomes, making intention data a standard proxy in micro-level migration research (Bauer and Zimmermann 1995; Castro-Martín and Cortina 2015; Zaiceva and Zimmermann 2008).

The dependent variable is a binary indicator of migration intention constructed from a two-step survey item. Respondents were first asked: "Do you intend to move at all in the next five years?" (yes/no), and those answering affirmatively were subsequently asked whether they intended to move "to another country within the EU" or "to a country outside the EU". Individuals reporting an intention to move abroad in either category are coded as potential migrants ($migr = 1$), while all other respondents are coded as non-migrants ($migr = 0$). The wording of the question captures relatively strong migration intentions, resulting in a low event rate in the sample: approximately 5.1% of respondents report a positive migration intention (the unweighted mean is 4.2% in Appendix 2. Table 2; the difference reflects the application of calibration weights). This feature motivates the use of complementary model diagnostics for rare outcomes, reported in the Results and in the Appendices.

The central explanatory variables capture individual-level institutional trust. Respondents report whether they "tend to trust" or "tend not to trust" several institutional and political entities, including the legal and justice system, parliament, government, political parties, and regional or local public authorities. Two alternative operationalisations are employed. First, $Trust\_law$ is a binary indicator equal to one if the respondent reports trust in the legal and justice system and zero otherwise. This measure is treated as the primary proxy for trust in formal rule enforcement and legal reliability, consistent with the conceptual focus on institutions as rule-based systems. Second, $Trust\_general$ is constructed as the unweighted average of binary trust indicators across all listed entities, rescaled to range between 0 and 1. This composite index captures broader confidence in the functioning of domestic political and institutional arrangements. Because the index is formed as an average of binary items, it takes discrete support points at 0.0, 0.2, 0.4, 0.6, 0.8, and 1.0. The distributional properties of this index are reported in Appendix 1.

In addition, the variable $Institution\_informal$ captures whether the respondent identifies difficulties in adapting to a different culture as one of the main barriers to moving to another EU member state. This variable is interpreted as a proxy for perceived cultural and normative adaptation costs associated with informal institutional environments, rather than as a measure of institutional trust or confidence in informal institutions. It is included to reflect the broader "institutions matter" perspective by capturing non-formal institutional constraints on mobility, not to operationalise informal institutional quality or trust.

The empirical specification includes a comprehensive set of control variables capturing standard micro-level determinants of migration and closely aligned with the benchmark analysis of Zaiceva and Zimmermann (2008), facilitating comparability with earlier findings. These controls capture prior international exposure ($Foreign\ Experience$), access to information and communication technologies ($Internet$), foreign-language competences ($Language$), and housing ownership ($Real\ Estate$). Sociodemographic characteristics include age, gender, household composition (marital status dummies and number of children), educational attainment measured by the age of completion of full-time education, labour-market status dummies, and settlement type ($Village$, $Small\ town$, urban reference category). The variable Satisfied captures respondents' self-reported satisfaction with the life they lead, measured on a four-point scale and included as a general subjective control. Marital status, labour-market status, and settlement type enter the model as sets of dummy variables, with married, employed white-collar, and large urban residence serving as reference categories. Unless otherwise noted, binary indicators are coded as one if the condition applies and zero otherwise.

Sample size varies across specifications due to item nonresponse in the institutional trust measures. The $Trust\_general$ index is constructed from multiple trust items; therefore, respondents with missing values on any component are excluded under listwise deletion. As a result, the $Trust\_general$ specification is estimated on a

smaller sample (N=20,556) than the $Trust\_law$ specification based on trust in the legal system (N=22,909). The difference (2,353 observations) is entirely attributable to missingness in the trust items, as verified by comparing estimation samples across specifications. Re-estimating the $Trust\_law$ specification on the common complete-case sample yields substantively unchanged results (see Appendix 4). Descriptive statistics for all variables and detailed information on survey wording, coding, and operationalisation are reported in Appendix 2 (Table 2 and Table 3).

Migration intentions are modelled using weighted logistic regression with country fixed effects. The probability that individual k in country i reports a migration intention is specified as a function of institutional trust measures and the vector of control variables described above. Standard errors are clustered at the country level to account for within-country correlation in unobserved factors. Average marginal effects are reported to facilitate substantive interpretation of estimated associations.

Two main specifications are estimated, alternately including $Trust\_law$ and $Trust\_general$ as the focal explanatory variable. The empirical analysis is explicitly reduced-form and does not seek causal identification; instead, it evaluates whether the observed associations are consistent with the behavioural mechanism derived in the theoretical framework.

Model performance and robustness are assessed using multiple complementary diagnostics, including ROC and precision–recall measures, calibration and Brier-score statistics, functional-form tests, and sensitivity analysis for omitted-variable bias. These diagnostics are computed in-sample and are reported as descriptive measures of model discrimination and calibration rather than as out-of-sample forecasting performance. Detailed results are reported in the Results section and Appendices.

Results

We begin by examining the association between institutional trust and migration intentions using weighted logistic regression models with country fixed effects and standard errors clustered at the country level. All models are estimated using calibration weights to restore population representativeness.

Table 1 reports average marginal effects for two alternative measures of institutional trust. Column (1) employs $Trust\_law$, a binary indicator of trust in the legal and institutional system, while column (2) uses $Trust\_general$, a composite index capturing average trust in several political and institutional actors.

Consistent with the theoretical expectations, higher institutional trust is associated with a lower predicted probability of reporting an intention to migrate, holding all covariates constant. A one-unit increase in $Trust\_law$ is associated with an approximately 1.6% point decrease in the predicted probability of migration intention ($AME = -0.0156$, $p < 0.001$), while a one-unit increase in $Trust\_general$ corresponds to a reduction of approximately 2.9% points ($AME = -0.0285$, $p < 0.001$). Relative to a weighted baseline prevalence of approximately 5.1% in the estimation sample, this implies a substantively large effect for a full-range change in the trust index. At the same time, the distribution of $Trust\_general$ is concentrated in the mid-range of the scale; a one standard deviation increase ($SD \approx 0.37$) corresponds to an estimated reduction in migration intention

Table 1 Determinants of Migration Intention: Average Marginal Effects

	(1)		(2)	
	AME	SE	AME	SE
Trust_law	−0.01565***	0.00317		
Trust_general			−0.02850***	0.00443
Institution_informal	−0.01554***	0.00419	−0.01597***	0.00447
Foreign Experience	0.06528***	0.00576	0.06532***	0.00539
Internet	0.01154***	0.00384	0.01270***	0.00414
Language	0.01526***	0.00378	0.01603***	0.00453
Real Estate	−0.00055	0.00394	−0.00157	0.00404
Living with a Partner	0.01641**	0.00773	0.01664**	0.00827
Single	0.02476***	0.00572	0.02352***	0.00608
Divorced	0.02707***	0.00570	0.02694***	0.00509
Widowed	0.00968	0.01386	0.01134	0.01403
Children	−0.00346	0.00263	−0.00270	0.00271
Male	0.01057***	0.00295	0.01136***	0.00334
Age	−0.00203***	0.00024	−0.00199***	0.00022
Village	−0.02053***	0.00608	−0.02416***	0.00615
Small Town	−0.00863**	0.00414	−0.01035**	0.00457
Education	0.00145***	0.00032	0.00120***	0.00034
Self-Employed	0.02623***	0.00551	0.02596***	0.00638
Employed_blue-collar	0.00825*	0.00432	0.00574	0.00532
Unemployed	0.01992***	0.00681	0.02153***	0.00651
Retired	−0.00998*	0.00596	−0.00933	0.00762
Student	0.03366***	0.00521	0.03401***	0.00529
Satisfied	−0.01110***	0.00259	−0.01053***	0.00275
N	22,909		20,556	
Pseudo R-squared	0.235		0.234	
Country fixed effects	Yes		Yes	
Weights	Calibration weights (W1)		Calibration weights (W1)	
SE clustered at country level	Yes (clustered by country)		Yes (clustered by country)	

Source: author's calculations based on European Commission (2012)

of about 1.1% points, while an interquartile-range shift (from the 25th percentile at 0.0 to the 75th percentile at 0.8, reflecting the discrete construction of the index as an average of binary trust items) implies a decrease of approximately 2.3% points. For reference, the empirical distribution of the $Trust\_general$ index is documented in Appendix 1. These magnitudes indicate that the association remains substantively meaningful even when interpreted over empirically relevant variation in institutional trust. Perceived difficulty in adapting to a different informal institutional environment, interpreted as a cultural and normative adaptation barrier rather than as institutional trust, is also negatively associated with migration intention.

The control variables largely behave in line with established findings in the migration literature. Prior international exposure, internet use, and the absence of perceived language barriers are positively associated with migration intention, as are indicators of labour-market detachment and student status. Age is negatively associated with migration intention, and men exhibit a higher propensity to report migration intentions than women, ceteris paribus. Residence in rural areas and smaller settlements is associated with lower predicted migration propensities relative to urban reference categories.

Although the pseudo-R^2 values reported in Table 1 are modest, they are typical for logistic regression models of individual binary outcomes. Threshold-independent diagnostics indicate satisfactory discrimination: the area under the receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve is approximately 0.86 in both core specifications, suggesting that the models distinguish reasonably well between individuals with and without reported migration intentions. Given the low event rate of migration intentions, we additionally assess performance using precision–recall diagnostics and calibration measures. The precision–recall area under the curve (PR-AUC) is approximately 0.22, substantially exceeding the baseline prevalence of migration intentions (5.1%), indicating non-trivial discrimination in a rare-event setting. Calibration and Brier-score diagnostics reported in Appendix 3 indicate good agreement between predicted and observed probabilities across the risk distribution. These diagnostics are descriptive and should not be interpreted as evidence of out-of-sample predictive performance.

We conducted several robustness checks to assess the sensitivity of the main association between institutional trust and migration intentions. Functional-form tests reveal no evidence of nonlinearity in the relationship between $Trust\_general$ and migration intentions: including a quadratic term yields a statistically insignificant nonlinear component ($\chi^2(1) = 0.27,\ p = 0.606$). Treating $Trust\_general$ as a categorical measure based on its empirical support points leads to substantively similar conclusions. To address potential concerns related to inference with a limited number of country clusters, we additionally implement wild cluster bootstrap tests. The main coefficients remain statistically significant under this procedure, supporting the stability of the results. In addition, sensitivity analysis using the Cinelli–Hazlett framework suggests a moderate degree of robustness to omitted-variable bias: an unobserved confounder would need to account for a non-trivial share of the residual variance in both the treatment and the outcome to fully explain away the estimated association, indicating that only relatively strong unobserved confounders could plausibly overturn the main conclusion. The sensitivity analysis is implemented using a linear probability analogue of the preferred specification and should therefore be interpreted as heuristic rather than as a causal bound. Detailed results of these robustness checks are reported in Appendix 4.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide consistent evidence that individual-level institutional trust is systematically associated with migration intentions. Across alternative operationalisations of institutional trust, higher levels of trust are linked to a lower propensity to report an intention to migrate, even after controlling for a broad set of sociodemographic characteristics, human-capital proxies, labour-market status, and behavioural indicators. This pattern supports the theoretical expectation that institutions shape individual decision-making not only through formal constraints but also through subjective perceptions that influence how individuals evaluate uncertainty and future prospects.

By operationalising institutional quality at the level of individual trust rather than relying on aggregate country-level indicators, the analysis sheds light on a plausible micro-level behavioural channel through which institutional environments may be reflected in migration-related behaviour. Individuals who perceive domestic institutions as predictable and reliable appear less inclined to consider migration as a strategy for managing perceived risk and uncertainty, in line with institutional theories emphasising the role of institutions in structuring expectations and reducing uncertainty (North 1990). This micro-level perspective complements macro-oriented institutional approaches and helps clarify how institutional effects may be reflected in individual decision-making.

In this respect, the results directly address concerns raised by Baudassé et al. (2018) regarding the limited micro-level evidence on how institutional conditions translate into individual migration-related behaviour. Rather than inferring behavioural responses from aggregate correlations, the present analysis shows that institutional trust is a meaningful individual-level correlate of migration intentions, reinforcing the analytical value of subjective institutional perceptions in migration research.

These findings are consistent with a growing body of micro-level, survey-based research showing that individuals' subjective evaluations of political and institutional environments are systematically associated with migration intentions. Prior studies document positive associations between perceived corruption, political dissatisfaction, or weak institutional performance and emigration intentions across diverse contexts (Crisan et al. 2019; Dennison 2022; Etling et al. 2020; Helbling and Morgenstern 2023), while related work links institutional trust to migration intentions through subjective wellbeing and income perceptions (Aliyev and Gasimov 2023). The present results align with this evidence by confirming that institutional perceptions at the individual level are substantively related to migration intentions. The contribution lies primarily in interpretation: rather than treating institutional evaluations as political attitudes or general dissatisfaction, the analysis conceptualises institutional trust as a behavioural and institutional channel shaping expectations about predictability, uncertainty, and long-term prospects under bounded rationality. The findings may also be read through Hirschman's (1970) Exit–Voice–Loyalty framework, with migration intentions corresponding to exit and institutional trust capturing one aspect of how individuals assess the reliability of their domestic institutional environment, even though voice cannot be observed in the available data. More broadly, the findings complement existing micro-level studies by embedding survey-based evidence in an explicit institutional-economic framework, without claiming causal identification or mediation.

The stability of the estimated effects across multiple robustness checks further strengthens the substantive interpretation. Taken together, these robustness checks reduce concerns that the main association is driven by functional-form misspecification or artefacts of extreme values. Importantly, institutional trust captures subjective evaluations rather than objective institutional performance, implying that the estimated association reflects perceived – not necessarily actual – institutional quality.

Sensitivity analysis based on the framework proposed by Cinelli and Hazlett (2020) indicates a moderate degree of robustness to omitted-variable bias. While unobserved confounding cannot be ruled out in observational data, the estimated association would require a confounder with non-trivial explanatory power in both the treatment and the outcome to fully explain away the observed effect. This reinforces confidence in the substantive relevance of institutional trust in explaining variation in migration intentions, while maintaining appropriate caution regarding causal interpretation. One further limitation is that destination-specific institutional expectations cannot be directly observed in the data and are therefore not modelled explicitly. This constrains the analysis to origin-side perceptions and prevents a fully dyadic interpretation of migration intentions. Future research using dyadic or panel data could examine how perceived institutional conditions in potential destination countries interact with origin-side institutional trust in shaping migration intentions.

Conclusion

This paper examined the relationship between institutional trust and migration intentions using individual-level survey data and weighted logistic regression models with country fixed effects. By operationalising institutional quality through subjective trust measures rather than aggregate institutional indicators, the analysis contributes to a more fine-grained understanding of how institutional environments are reflected in individual migration-related expectations and decision-making.

The empirical results consistently indicate that higher institutional trust is associated with a lower probability of reporting an intention to migrate, even after controlling for a broad set of socioeconomic and behavioural factors. The stability of this association across alternative specifications and robustness checks suggests that institutional perceptions constitute a substantively meaningful correlate of migration intentions at the micro level. In this sense, the findings complement macro-oriented institutional accounts by clarifying one plausible behavioural channel through which these contexts may influence individual mobility considerations.

From a policy perspective, the results indicate that responses to outward migration and potential human-capital loss cannot rely exclusively on economic convergence or labour-market interventions. Policies that

strengthen the predictability, impartiality, and credibility of public institutions may also be associated with changes in migration-related expectations indirectly by reinforcing citizens' trust in domestic governance arrangements. Given the observational design of the study, these policy implications should be interpreted as suggestive rather than prescriptive. While institutional reforms are inherently long-term and context-dependent, their potential behavioural implications deserve attention in migration-related policy debates.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies on cross-sectional data and self-reported migration intentions rather than observed migration behaviour, which constrains causal inference and external validity. Second, although extensive controls and sensitivity analyses were employed, unobserved confounding cannot be fully ruled out. Third, the institutional trust measures capture perceptions rather than objective institutional performance, which may introduce measurement error or reflect broader attitudinal dispositions. A further limitation is that destination-specific institutional expectations cannot be directly observed in the available data and therefore remain outside the scope of the empirical analysis.

Future research could extend this approach in several directions. Longitudinal data would allow for stronger causal identification and the analysis of dynamic adjustments in trust and migration intentions. Linking individual-level trust measures with institutional reforms or policy shocks could further clarify causal pathways. In addition, comparative research across different regional and institutional contexts may help assess the generalisability of the findings and explore how institutional trust interacts with economic and political conditions in shaping migration behaviour and expectations.

Appendix 1. Distribution of the Trust_ general Index

The $Trust\_general$ index is constructed as the unweighted average of several institutional trust items and is bounded between 0 and 1, with discrete support points at 0.0, 0.2, 0.4, 0.6, 0.8, and 1.0. Higher values indicate higher overall trust in domestic institutions. As a consequence of this discrete construction, percentile-based dispersion measures such as the interquartile range may span relatively wide portions of the scale.

Using calibration weights, the weighted mean of the index is approximately 0.41. The unweighted standard deviation is about 0.37. The empirical distribution is moderately right-skewed, reflecting a substantial mass at higher trust values. The weighted interquartile range spans from 0.0 (25th percentile) to 0.8 (75th percentile), with a median of 0.4.

These distributional properties imply that a full one-unit change on the index corresponds to a shift from complete distrust across all components to complete trust in all components, which represents an extreme comparison. For this reason, marginal effects in the main text are also interpreted in terms of more empirically relevant changes, such as a one standard deviation increase and interquartile shifts.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics (Unweighted sample statistics; Eurobarometer 70.1)

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Migration intention	25,255	0.042	0.202	0	1
Trust_law	25,203	0.508	0.500	0	1
Trust_general	22,441	0.409	0.369	0	1
Institution_informal	26,618	0.202	0.402	0	1
Foreign Experience	26,145	0.064	0.245	0	1
Internet	26,618	0.533	0.499	0	1
Language	26,618	0.467	0.499	0	1
Real Estate	26,618	0.761	0.427	0	1
Living with a Partner	26,271	0.085	0.279	0	1
Single	26,271	0.183	0.387	0	1
Divorced	26,271	0.087	0.282	0	1
Widowed	26,271	0.110	0.313	0	1
Children	26,618	0.442	0.866	0	18
Male	26,618	0.450	0.498	0	1
Age	26,618	48.23	18.23	15	98
Village	26,565	0.360	0.480	0	1
Small Town	26,565	0.367	0.482	0	1
Education	26,151	18.57	5.11	0	75
Self-Employed	26,618	0.070	0.254	0	1
Employed_blue-collar	26,618	0.210	0.407	0	1
Unemployed	26,618	0.136	0.342	0	1
Retired	26,618	0.286	0.452	0	1
Student	26,618	0.079	0.269	0	1
Satisfied	26,490	2.896	0.781	1	4

Binary variables are coded as 1 if the condition applies and 0 otherwise. Marital status enters the regressions as a set of dummy variables with "Married" as the reference category. Settlement type is coded as $Village$, $Small\ Town$, and large urban residence (reference category). $Education$ is measured as the age at completion of full-time education. $Satisfied$is measured on a four-point scale (higher values indicate greater satisfaction). Descriptive statistics are unweighted; regression models apply calibration weights

Appendix 2. Variable Definitions and Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 Variable Definitions and Measurement

Variable	Definition (survey wording)	Coding/Scale	Interpretation
Migration intention	"Do you intend to move in the next five years?" Follow-up distinguishes moving within the EU or outside the EU.	Binary: 1 = intends to move abroad, 0 = otherwise	Proxy for strong migration intentions and potential future mobility.
Trust_law	"I would like to ask you how much trust you have in certain institutions… the legal system: tend to trust/tend not to trust."	Binary: 1 = tends to trust, 0 = tends not to trust	Proxy for subjective trust in formal rule enforcement and legal reliability.
Trust_general	Same trust battery as above (parliament, government, political parties, regional/local authorities); index constructed as the unweighted average of binary trust indicators.	Index ∈ {0, 0.2, 0.4, 0.6, 0.8, 1.0}	Captures broader subjective trust in domestic political and institutional arrangements.
Institution_informal	"If you wanted to move to another European Union country, what do you think would be the biggest difficulties you would face?" – response: "Adapting to a different culture".	Binary: 1 = selected, 0 = otherwise	Proxy for perceived informal-institutional (cultural and normative) adaptation barriers.
Foreign Experience	"Have you ever lived or worked abroad?"	Binary	Captures prior international exposure and accumulated migration-related experience.
Internet	"Which of the following do you have?" – response: "An Internet connection at home".	Binary: 1 = has home internet connection, 0 = otherwise	Proxy for access to digital infrastructure and information resources.
Language	"If you wanted to move to another European Union country, what do you think would be the biggest difficulties you would face?" – response: "Lack of language skills".	Binary: 1 = did not select lack of language skills; 0 = selected	Proxy for absence of perceived language-related mobility constraints.
Real Estate	"Which of the following do you have?" – responses: "A flat/a house which you are still paying for" or "A flat/a house which you have finished paying for".	Binary: 1 = owns residential property, 0 = otherwise	Captures housing ownership as a potential attachment or mobility constraint.
Living with a Partner/Single/Divorced/Widowed	Marital status categories.	Binary dummies (married as reference category)	Controls for household structure and social ties.
Children	"How many children under 10 live in your household?" + "How many children aged 10–14 live in your household?"	Numeric count	Measures family responsibilities and potential mobility constraints.
Male	Respondent gender.	Binary: 1 = male, 0 = female	Standard demographic control.
Age	Respondent age in years.	Continuous	Lifecycle factor in migration decision-making.
Village/Small Town	"Would you say you live in a rural area or village/small or medium-sized town/large town or city?"	Binary dummies (large town/city as reference)	Controls for settlement type and spatial context.
Education	"How old were you when you stopped full-time education?"	Continuous	Proxy for educational attainment and human capital.
Self-Employed/Employed_blue-collar/Unemployed/Retired/Student	Respondent occupation recoded from Eurobarometer occupational scale (v791).	Binary dummies (white-collar employment as reference)	Controls for labour-market position and economic attachment.
Satisfied	"On the whole, how satisfied or not are you with the life you lead?" (1 = not at all satisfied, 4 = very satisfied).	1–4 scale	Captures general subjective wellbeing and life evaluation.

All variables are constructed from Eurobarometer 70.1 survey items. Binary indicators are coded as 1 if the condition applies and 0 otherwise unless stated. Full item wording and coding details are available from the original questionnaire

Appendix 3. Discrimination and Calibration Diagnostics

To complement the ROC-based assessment of model discrimination, we evaluate predictive performance using precision–recall diagnostics, which are more informative in settings with rare outcomes. In the present sample, the weighted prevalence of reported migration intentions is approximately 5.1 percent. All diagnostics are computed using fitted probabilities from the preferred specification (the $Trust\_general$ model reported in Table 1, column (2)). Calibration (Table 4) and the Brier score are computed using calibration weights where feasible. The PR-AUC is computed from the ranked fitted probabilities and is reported as a descriptive discrimination metric rather than as a population-level performance measure.

Using fitted probabilities from the preferred specification, we construct the precision–recall curve by ranking observations according to predicted risk and computing cumulative precision and recall across thresholds. The resulting area under the precision–recall curve (PR-AUC) is approximately 0.22, substantially exceeding the baseline prevalence of the outcome. This indicates that the model provides meaningful discrimination between individuals with and without reported migration intentions despite the low event rate.

While PR-AUC values are not directly comparable to ROC-AUC levels, a PR-AUC well above the unconditional event rate suggests that the model captures non-trivial predictive signal rather than random noise. Together with the ROC diagnostics reported in the main text, these results suggest that the model captures non-negligible discriminatory information, while remaining subject to the usual limitations of observational prediction in rare-event settings.

As an additional measure of probabilistic accuracy, we report the weighted Brier score. The weighted Brier score of the preferred specification is approximately 0.0368, compared to a baseline Brier of 0.0488 implied by the unconditional prevalence (). This corresponds to an absolute improvement of about 0.012 and a relative improvement of roughly 25 percent over the baseline. This indicates that the model provides meaningful gains in probabilistic accuracy despite the low event rate.

Table 4 Calibration of predicted probabilities by deciles of predicted risk

Decile	Mean predicted probability	Observed share
1	0.0020	0.0009
2	0.0044	0.0038
3	0.0078	0.0071
4	0.0124	0.0135
5	0.0180	0.0166
6	0.0260	0.0226
7	0.0389	0.0418
8	0.0630	0.0704
9	0.1110	0.1197
10	0.2500	0.2452

Predicted probabilities closely track observed outcome frequencies across risk deciles, indicating good calibration over the full distribution of predicted risk

Appendix 4: Robustness and Sensitivity Analyses

D1. Functional-form test for $Trust\_general$

To assess whether the relationship between institutional trust and migration intentions exhibits nonlinear patterns, we estimated an alternative specification including a quadratic term for the continuous $Trust\_general$ index. The coefficient on the squared term is statistically insignificant ($x^2\,(1) = 0.27,\ p = 0.606$), indicating no evidence of a nonlinear effect over the observed range of the variable. This result supports the adequacy of the linear specification adopted in the main analysis.

D2.Categorical specification of $Trust\_general$

As an additional robustness check, $Trust\_general$ was recoded into six ordered categories reflecting its empirical support points (0.0, 0.2, 0.4, 0.6, 0.8, 1.0). The model was re-estimated using these categories, and predicted probabilities of migration intention were computed using post-estimation margins. Predicted probabilities from the categorical specification are reported in Table 5.

Table 5 Predicted probabilities of migration intention by $Trust\_general$ category

Trust_general category	Predicted probability
0.0	0.066
0.2	0.050
0.4	0.051
0.6	0.051
0.8	0.038
1.0	0.036

The predicted probabilities display a broadly decreasing gradient as institutional trust increases. Although minor fluctuations appear in the mid-range categories, the overall pattern reinforces the substantive interpretation of the main results, namely that higher levels of institutional trust are associated with lower migration intentions.

D3. Sensitivity to omitted variable bias

To evaluate the robustness of the estimated association between institutional trust and migration intention to potential omitted confounding, we applied the sensitivity framework proposed by Cinelli and Hazlett (2020) to a linear probability analogue of the core specification. The analysis was implemented using the *sensemakr* procedure.

The robustness value indicates that an unobserved confounder would need to explain approximately 3.4% of the residual variance in both the treatment ($Trust\_general$) and the outcome to fully attenuate the estimated effect to zero. To render the estimate statistically indistinguishable from zero at the 5% significance level, a confounder explaining roughly 2.1% of the residual variance in both variables would be required. While these thresholds do not preclude the presence of unobserved confounding, they suggest that the main findings exhibit a moderate degree of robustness to omitted-variable bias.

D4. Small-cluster inference (wild cluster bootstrap)

Because standard errors are clustered at the country level and the number of clusters is limited, we assess robustness to small-cluster inference using wild cluster bootstrap (score bootstrap with Rademacher weights; 9,999 replications; clustering by country). In the Eurobarometer design, Germany is sampled separately for former East and West regions and Northern Ireland is sampled separately from Great Britain, yielding 29 clusters. The key trust coefficients remain statistically significant under this correction ($Trust\_law$: $p = 0.0003$; $Trust\_general$: $p < 0.001$), indicating that the core conclusions are not driven by conventional cluster-robust asymptotics.

D5. Common complete-case sample check

As an additional sample-composition check, the Trust_law specification was re-estimated on the common complete-case sample used for the Trust_general model. The coefficient on Trust_law changes only marginally, from -0.318 (SE = 0.079; N = 22,909) in the larger Trust_law sample to -0.326 (SE = 0.077; N = 20,556) in the common complete-case sample, with statistical significance unchanged ($p < 0.001$ in both cases). This indicates substantively unchanged results and suggests that differences in sample size across specifications are unlikely to drive the main findings.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate Not applicable.

Competing interests The author declares no competing interests.

Clinical Trial Number Not applicable.

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