

# **ANALELE UNIVERSITĂȚII DIN ORADEA**



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# ANALELE UNIVERSITĂȚII DIN ORADEA

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**Address of the editorial office:**

**University of Oradea**

**International Relations and European Studies Department**

Str. Universității, nr. 1, 410087 Oradea, România

Tel/ Fax (004) 0259 408167. E-mail: [analerise.oradea@gmail.com](mailto:analerise.oradea@gmail.com)

<http://www.analerise.igri.ro>

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## PUBLIC POLICIES, GOVERNANCE, DEVELOPMENT AND INCLUSION. EDITORIAL AND INTRODUCTORY STUDY

*Mircea BRIE\**

**Abstract.** *This paper is an introductory and editorial approach to an issue of a journal published under the aegis of the EuroINCLUS Research Center within the Department of International Relations and European Studies, University of Oradea. The aim of this editorial project is to contribute to national and international academic debates in international relations and European studies, by publishing theoretical and empirical analyzes with a vast array of topics, but prioritizing articles on current debates and interdisciplinary analyses.*

*The collection of articles in this volume brings together the papers selected through the peer review process to be included in issue XVIII of the journal the Annals of University of Oradea, Series International Relations and European Studies. In addition to this editorial and introductory study, the volume includes 17 theoretical and applied papers on specific fields. In addition to these, 3 book reviews are added. The articles have been grouped thematically into three sections: 1. International Relations and Governance; 2. Identity, Education and Inclusivity; 3. Public Policies. Development and Socio-Economic Realities.*

**Keywords:** *international relation, public policies, governance, development, identity, inclusion*

This paper is an introductory and editorial approach to an issue of a journal published under the aegis of the EuroINCLUS Research Center within the Department of International Relations and European Studies, University of Oradea. The aim of this editorial project is to contribute to national and international academic debates in international relations and European studies, by publishing theoretical and empirical analyzes with a vast array of topics, but prioritizing articles on current debates and interdisciplinary analyses.

The collection of articles in this volume brings together the papers selected through the peer review process to be included in issue XVIII of the journal the Annals of University of Oradea, Series International Relations and European Studies. In addition to this editorial and introductory study, the volume includes 17 theoretical and analytical papers on specific fields. In addition to these, 3 book reviews are added. The articles have been grouped thematically into three sections: 1. *International Relations and Governance*; 2. *Identity, Education and Inclusivity*; 3. *Public Policies. Development and Socio-Economic Realities*.

**1. International Relations and Governance** – is the first section containing 5 papers on various topics in the field of international relations and governance at various levels. These are both theoretical approaches and analytical research.

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\* Mircea Brie, PhD Professor at the University of Oradea, Department of International Relations and European Studies. E-mail: [mbrie@uoradea.ro](mailto:mbrie@uoradea.ro)

First paper, which is published in French, *L'initiative « Une Ceinture, Une Route » comme mécanisme de renforcement de la coopération multilatérale*, is signed by Svetlana Cebotari and Violeta Cotilevici, both from the State University of Moldova, Faculty of International Relations, Political and Administrative Sciences, Department of International Relations (Republic of Moldova). Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—often characterized as the "New Silk Road"—represents a monumental shift in global infrastructure development. Frequently compared in scale and ambition to the Marshall Plan, the BRI has evolved over the past decade into the most significant geopolitical and economic undertaking of the modern era, reshaping the landscape of transregional connectivity (Cebotari and Cotilevici, 2026). The article, provides a comprehensive examination of the structural frameworks through which the BRI facilitates international synergy. The research highlights several key pillars of the initiative:

- **Transregional Connectivity and Infrastructure:** By analyzing data on maritime and terrestrial logistics, the study demonstrates how BRI projects catalyze economic integration and diversify global trade routes.
- **Policy Harmonization and Investment:** The initiative serves as a vehicle for aligning national regulatory frameworks, thereby fostering an environment conducive to large-scale foreign direct investment and institutional partnerships.
- **Global Governance and Diplomacy:** Beyond physical assets, the BRI acts as a platform for intensified dialogue between sovereign states at disparate levels of development, potentially altering the traditional norms of global governance.
- **Multilateralism and Interdependence:** The research posits that the initiative functions as a catalyst for a sophisticated framework of economic interdependence. However, it also acknowledges critical challenges, such as: transparency and Sustainability

This research utilizes analysis and synthesis as its fundamental analytical tools to provide a structured investigation into the BRI's strategic aims and institutional architecture. The application of this method allows for a nuanced understanding of how the initiative reshapes multilateral cooperation across political and economic spheres. Critically, the study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, synthesizing insights from realism, institutional neoliberalism, and constructivism to capture the complexity of the Chinese-led project.

The conclusions of the two authors, while the BRI offers unprecedented prospects for global growth, its success as a multilateral mechanism depends on a coordinated, high-standard approach among international stakeholders to address its inherent complexities. More than a decade since its 2013 inception, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has transcended its initial role as a logistical project to become a dynamic, multi-dimensional framework for global cooperation. By integrating economic, technological, and institutional components, the BRI is actively restructuring global trade flows and establishing novel platforms for diplomatic dialogue among diverse sovereign actors. The research identifies that while the initiative effectively drives cross-border investment and regional integration, its ultimate efficacy is contingent upon three critical variables: 1. The robustness of the institutional frameworks governing project implementation; 2. The clarity and accountability of financial and legal processes; 3. The capacity of participating states to align BRI projects with their internal development goals. Despite its potential as a catalyst for multilateralism, the initiative faces significant

headwinds regarding financial risk management, environmental sustainability, and the maintenance of geopolitical equilibrium (Cebotari and Cotilevici, 2026).

The second paper, *Hegemony at an Inflection Point: U.S. and The Crisis of the International System*, is signed by Adrian – Ionuț Bogdan, PhD Candidate at Babeș-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca (Romania). The contemporary international order is increasingly characterized by a convergence of overlapping crises that challenge the institutional resilience of global governance and the adaptability of U.S. strategic leadership. By utilizing the conceptual frameworks of the "Perfect Storm", the "Crises' Decade", and the "Permacrisis" (Bogdan, 2026), this research provides a nuanced interpretation of current global turbulence, capturing the intricate interplay between immediate shocks, cyclical disruptions, and deep-seated systemic fragility. The study adopts a qualitative methodological approach, synthesizing case-based analyses of contemporary conflicts, primary policy documents, and extant scholarly literature. This multifaceted analysis aims to evaluate the strategic posture of the Trump second Administration within a landscape defined by: 1. Systemic Revisionism: Challenges to the established norms of the liberal international order; 2. Geoeconomic Rivalry: The intensification of economic competition as a tool of statecraft; 3. Democratic Uncertainty: The implications of internal and external pressures on democratic stability.

The author has analyzed throughout this work, beyond the simple diagnosis of the vulnerabilities inherent in the liberal order, to delineate potential strategic trajectories for US power, offering a critical assessment of how American leadership could navigate an era of unprecedented global volatility. „The Trump administration's embrace of transactional bilateral/minilateral underscores the fragility of traditional alliance systems, even as the United States retains unparalleled military, technological, and financial assets. The key issue is no longer whether the U.S. can remain powerful, but whether it can sustain legitimacy and cohesion as the anchor of global stability. The decline in trust, both at home and abroad, risks hollowing out the very basis of hegemonic endurance” (Bogdan, 2026).

The third paper is signed by Laurențiu Petrila, Felix-Angel Popescu and Ana Maria Coatu: *Analysis of Local Governance in Romania*. The authors propose an analysis of the electoral promises formulated in the 2012 campaign that reveals a remarkable convergence towards several dominant themes that reflect both the structural deficiencies of regional development in Romania and the politicians' perception of the electorate's expectations. „The result was, almost invariably, the transition of these commitments to the register of promises without consequences, with a high reputational cost and with the side effect of disturbing the rational prioritization of budgets. Beyond individual failures and cases of corruption, the analysis reveals deep systemic problems. that transcend political affiliation or regional specifics” (Petrila; Popescu and Coatu, 2026). The conceptualization of local governance (see Șoproni, 2025), through references to analyses that include multilevel governance, and the analysis of electoral promises vs. public policies led to several results of this research, both at a theoretical and practical level.

The longitudinal analysis of county council leadership within the 2012–2016 cycle provides a critical diagnostic of local governance dynamics in post-communist democracies. The research distills three foundational lessons that redefine the intersection of political commitment and administrative efficacy: 1. The Paradigm of Institutional Competence: The study posits that political mandates must be articulated through a vocabulary of operational feasibility. Commitments are only viable when framed as

specific objectives within the legal and budgetary jurisdiction of the county council—complete with fiscal annexes, strict timelines, and quantifiable performance indicators. This distinguishes between deliverable administrative outputs and broader advocacy goals. 2. Integrity as a Metric of Operational Efficiency: Moving beyond moral considerations, the research treats integrity as a structural determinant of performance. By implementing systemic prevention policies—including procurement transparency, rigorous internal controls, and robust whistleblower protection—integrity is repositioned as a mechanism to minimize institutional friction and maximize resource optimization. 3. The Imperative of Professionalization: The analysis underscores that the professionalization of public administration must be a continuous strategic investment rather than a transient project. Establishing a viable career path in public project management is presented as a prerequisite for institutional resilience. Without such human capital development, the persistent skills deficit risks transforming administrative inertia into a systemic failure of the democratic mandate. In conclusion, these three pillars—operational clarity, institutional integrity, and professional continuity—form the essential framework for elevating subnational governance from "habitual failure" to sustainable public service delivery (Petrila; Popescu and Coatu, 2026).

The fourth paper, *Ethical Governance in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Challenges and Opportunities for the Western Balkans*, is signed by Marco Marsili, from University of Venice (Italy), Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage. In this paper, the author examines the ethical and political implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in governance, focusing on the Western Balkans in the broader context of European integration and democratic transformation (Marsili, 2026). A deep debate and analysis of AI is of paramount importance across all disciplines, and particularly through its implications for the social sciences and humanities (they also pose significant risks of surveillance, algorithmic bias, and reduced accountability, especially in regions facing fragile democratic institutions, ethnic diversity, and complex security challenges). „AI technologies increasingly shape decision-making, policy implementation, and public discourse, offering opportunities for efficiency, transparency, and citizen participation” (Marsili, 2026). Drawing upon political philosophy, ethical theory, and contemporary debates in digital governance, this study develops a robust normative framework for the ethical adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI), grounded in democratic values and fundamental human rights. By utilizing empirical references to governance practices in the Western Balkans, complemented by comparative perspectives from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the research identifies both regional vulnerabilities and strategic pathways for responsible technological integration. The paper posits that cross-border cooperation, civil society engagement, and policy alignment with European Union standards are indispensable prerequisites for establishing ethical AI governance. By critically addressing both systemic risks and transformative opportunities, this research contributes to the broader scholarly discourse on democratization, security management, and the role of emerging technologies in reconfiguring the future of public governance. The governance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the Western Balkans represents a critical intersection of technological disruption, democratic fragility, and geostrategic rivalry. While countries like Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina pursue modernization, their efforts are complicated by institutional weaknesses and risks of state capture. The study proposed by Marco Marsili contends that AI regulation is not merely a technical endeavor but a profound political challenge; it serves as a battleground between European normative standards and alternative authoritarian models. To

ensure democratic consolidation, the region must transcend simple policy compliance, prioritizing institutional resilience, civil society engagement, and the embedding of fundamental rights within AI architectures. In conclusion, AI will either act as a catalyst for emancipation or a mechanism for systemic control.

The last paper of this section, *Theoretical and Conceptual Approaches to the Phenomenon of New Regionalism*, is signed by Svetlana Cebotari and Selena Stejaru, both from the State University of Moldova, Faculty of International Relations, Political and Administrative Sciences, Department of International Relations (Republic of Moldova). It is a theoretical and conceptual analysis research on the subject of regionalization. New regionalism transcends formal economic integration, emerging as a multidimensional paradigm involving state and non-state actors. Driven by globalization and a "bottom-up" orientation, it reconfigures regions as strategic, interconnected entities. This alternative governance framework adapts to local contexts while navigating the complexities of a multipolar, interdependent international order (Cebotari and Stejaru, 2026; Brie; Islam and Polgár, 2022).

**2. Identity, Education and Inclusivity** - is the second section of the journal issue, containing 5 papers on various topics in the field of identity and different types of integration/inclusion (educational, intercultural, linguistic or socio-economic).

First paper, *The German Minority and the Romanian Diaspora in Romanian-German Cultural Diplomacy*, is signed by Natalia Andone, PhD student, Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of European Studies, Cluj-Napoca (Romania). „This article examines the role of the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany in shaping Romanian–German cultural diplomacy” (Andone, 2026). This study integrates the German minority and Romanian diaspora into a unified framework of societal cultural diplomacy, emphasizing non-state actors in bilateral dialogue. Utilizing qualitative discourse and documentary analysis, the research explores how transnational cultural capital and collective memory are mobilized. Findings reveal a functional complementarity: the German minority leverages institutional continuity and heritage, while the Romanian diaspora utilizes mobility and associative structures. The article proposes the concept of “community soft power” to explain how societal symbolic influence sustains long-term diplomatic stability (see more cases Jusufi, 2025; Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025). The article argues that the sustenance and intensification of the cultural nexus between Romania and Germany are not solely contingent upon political or economic continuity, but increasingly rely on the capacity of minority and diaspora communities to serve as credible intermediaries. By navigating the intersections of disparate national spaces, these actors enhance the social legitimacy, stability, and long-term viability of bilateral relations. In conclusion, this underscores the pivotal role of societal cultural diplomacy within a contemporary European landscape defined by heightened mobility, pluralism, and systemic interconnection (Andone, 2026).

The next paper, *Europeanization in Segregated Schools? Third Parties' Efforts to Build a Trans-Ethnic Educational Space in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, is signed by Georgiana-Diana Horobeanu and Miruna Butnaru-Troncotă, both from National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest (Romania). „This article addresses that gap by examining reconciliation from a bottom-up perspective, by examining third-party efforts to build trans-ethnic educational spaces in post-conflict societies” (Horobeanu and Butnaru-Troncotă, 2026). The conceptualization refers to Europeanization, participatory approach, peacebuilding, reconciliation, ethnic segregation

in schools, development of public policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina (see more concepts for Western Balkan area Mahmutović, 2026; Tanasijević; Škorić, and Popovski, 2025; Brie; Islam, and Polgar, 2023; Brie; Islam, and Polgar, 2021; Brie and Solcan, 2025). This research employs a qualitative case study design, utilizing a triangulation of data sources including European Commission progress reports (2018–2024), Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) allocations, and NGO-led project documentation. The methodology examines the nexus between EU-driven structural support and local agency, evaluating whether participatory frameworks can catalyze sustainable institutional change within a historically segregated educational landscape. The findings indicate that while macro-level national reforms remain characterized by political inertia, micro-level initiatives have facilitated quantifiable improvements in interethnic cooperation, with select institutions successfully integrating inclusive pedagogical models into their core curricula. These results underscore the potential of participatory educational paradigms to circumvent stalled state-level transitions. Furthermore, they illustrate how bottom-up approaches can foster a trans-ethnic social fabric, yielding both localized dividends and viable strategic pathways for Bosnia and Herzegovina's European integration (Horobeanu and Butnaru-Troncotă, 2026).

Main conclusion is Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU integration is hindered by persistent educational segregation and macro-level reforms, reflecting an ambivalent process of Europeanization. While structural, top-down changes remain stalled, bottom-up participatory initiatives—such as those implemented by local NGOs—demonstrate potential to foster interethnic trust and generate meaningful, localized reconciliation. The study concludes that embedding these inclusive, micro-level practices is essential to transforming education and advancing social cohesion. To achieve systemic change, the analysis highlights the need for EU efforts to prioritize scaling these grassroots initiatives.

The third paper is signed by Simona Camelia Fer and focuses on *The Evolution of Political Language in the Digital Age. Linguistic Tendencies and Implications for the Legitimacy of Power*, „examines the evolution of political discourse in digital environments, focusing on the strategies through which political actors articulate power relations and legitimacy” (Fer, 2026). Integrating critical discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics, this research examines four dimensions of digital political communication: lexical polarization, pronominal identity formation, metaphorical strategies, and moral binaries. The findings reveal that digital platforms do more than accelerate messaging; they actively amplify ideological polarization and emotional engagement through iterative cycles that consolidate group cohesion while marginalizing dissent. By synthesizing classical and contemporary scholarship, the study underscores the transformative interplay between language, technology, and political power. Fundamentally, it demonstrates that online discourse is a dynamic, influential force capable of profoundly reshaping public opinion and political identities in the digital age (Fer, 2026). For a broader approach to the role of language in the legitimacy process, please see: Brie (2023); Brie and Goreainov (2026); Solcan and Burea (2026); Cebotari and Guțu (2025); Villányi (2026).

These four dimensions collectively illustrate how digital political discourse is strategically engineered to modulate both cognition and affect. The interplay between lexical selection, identity construction, metaphorical framing, and moral reductionism creates a discursive environment that is both dynamic and emotionally charged. In the digital era, political language does not merely reflect social realities but



actively constructs them, reshaping the negotiation of power and collective identities. By condensing multifaceted realities into binary oppositions, digital messaging enhances accessibility while simultaneously eroding sophisticated deliberation and fueling polarization. The participatory architecture of social media amplifies these dynamics; users do not merely consume content but actively reinforce ideological alignment and emotional investment through iterative engagement. Consequently, this study demonstrates that digital discourse is a constitutive force that legitimizes power relations. Mastering these discursive strategies is therefore essential for understanding the contemporary mechanisms of political legitimacy and the intensification of affective polarization in online spaces (Fer, 2026).

The next paper in this section is *Social Inclusion and European Rural Development Policy: The Case of Non-Agricultural Tourism Activities in Rural Bihor County*, proposed by Claudiu Gabriel Bonaciu and Mircea Brie. Romanian rural territories contend with structural vulnerabilities arising from geographic isolation and restricted economic dynamics, which impede sustainable employment. Consequently, private sector resilience and inter-actor synergy are pivotal for social inclusion, with job creation serving as the primary benchmark for cohesion policy efficacy. By financing non-agricultural sectors—such as tourism, crafts, and services—this mechanism sought to mitigate over-reliance on the primary sector, addressing labor outflow and demographic aging. However, the effectiveness of these instruments has been historically hampered by fragmented planning and the absence of a cohesive long-term vision. Despite the alignment of non-agricultural development with market demands, suboptimal implementation has exacerbated social inclusion disparities, risking the transformation of isolated investments into interventions lacking systemic sustainability. This study analyzes the contribution of non-agricultural activities to labor market dynamics and their spillover effects on the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, specifically within the tourism sector. The units of analysis comprise the communes of Aușeu, Vadu Crișului, Șuncuiș, and Bratca (Bihor County), situated within the Crișul Repede Gorge protected/natural area. The methodology integrates multi-level data, synthesizing European and national statistics with specialized scholarly literature. „The creation of employment opportunities in non-agricultural sectors is a fundamental pillar for the resilience and structural transformation of rural areas, offering a strategic alternative to traditional farms. This economic diversification helps strengthen financial stability and social inclusion, directly contributing to poverty alleviation and the modernization of local communities” (Bonaciu and Brie, 2026).

The last paper in this section is *The Role of Border Management in the Process of Migration Management at the EU's South Eastern Borders*, proposed by István Polgár from University of Oradea. This research is very important and high topicality, addressing critical dimensions of public policy, governance, and the strategic management of diversity. Furthermore, it examines the integration and protection of individuals within the migratory process. The phenomenon of migration transcends traditional geographical, economic, and legal frameworks. Examining this issue through a specialized lens reveals significant ambiguities and uncertainties concerning the role of sovereign states and the institutional efficacy of migration management systems. The Southeastern border regions of the European Union, along with their adjacent territories, constitute a geopolitical epicenter for migratory flows. Specifically, the Western Balkan route serves as a primary transit corridor for thousands of migrants and refugees seeking entry into EU Member States. Effective border governance and migration management

within the EU and its neighborhood represent critical socio-economic investments, fostering societal cohesion, resilience, and long-term prosperity. Furthermore, this is a multifaceted societal process wherein responsibility is distributed across a broad spectrum of stakeholders rather than a single entity (Polgár, 2026).

This study provides a comprehensive inventory of general trends and evolutions over the past decade, focusing on the shifting perceptions of borders within the Southeast European space. Additionally, it examines how migration management processes have influenced transnational institution-building. The research seeks to highlight the insufficient interaction between the border authorities of neighboring states at various operational levels along the European Union's Southeastern frontiers (see more Polgár and Brie, 2023; Polgár and Brie, 2024; Polgár and Brie, 2025)

**3. Public Policies. Development and Socio-Economic Realities** – is the third section which includes 7 papers. Among the main concepts with which we operationalize the analysis of the papers included in this section, we mention: disparities in regional development, risk management, Green Industrial Policy, polycentric development, knowledge and technology transfer and tourism development.

The paper *Entrepreneurial Networks in Tochigi Prefecture During the Meiji Period: Unraveling Regional Development Disparities from Human Connections*, proposed by Yu Tsuchiya, Nobumichi Watahiki and Cristian Vlad, investigates whether the regionality of entrepreneurial networks is a characteristic unique to Niigata Prefecture. In addition, the relationship between the three types of centrality and their strengths and weaknesses in relation to economic development is examined. „While it was thought that the strength or weakness of centrality might affect regional development or decline, there were also regions like Tochigi Town where the number of companies increased but centrality weakened. From the current results, no relationship was found between the strength or weakness of centrality and economic development (Tsuchiya; Watahiki and Vlad, 2026).

The paper *Health Risk Management for the Safety of Festival Tourism*, signed by Tamás Suszter, investigates the law enforcement dimensions of festival tourism safety. A multi-methodological approach was employed, including a review of Hungarian and international literature and legal frameworks. Findings indicate that health safety is a cornerstone of festival security; inadequate provision correlates with declining regional attractiveness. Subjective safety is significantly dictated by the visibility and efficiency of medical services. The study advances the conceptual framework of 'cooperative safety,' synthesizing statutory regulatory requirements with organizational objectives and the operational roles of private providers. The research concludes that the adoption of health protocols surpassing mandatory standards transcends mere regulatory compliance; rather, it constitutes a fundamental strategic imperative. Such proactive measures are essential for ensuring institutional resilience and safeguarding the long-term interests of all stakeholders involved (Suszter, 2026).

A very interesting recerach is proposed by Ehlimana Spahić, Anisa Gradašćević and Mirza Pojskić on the topic of *Transforming the Brain Drain into Transfer of Knowledge and Technology to Strengthen the Healthcare System of Bosnia and Herzegovina*. This article examines the interdependency between Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) complex political architecture and its healthcare governance, with a primary focus on the structural challenges of human capital management. Central to the analysis is the phenomenon of medical brain drain, evaluated through its long-term

implications for the stability, accessibility, and quality of national health services. Conversely, the study identifies the medical diaspora as a pivotal agent for knowledge exchange and technology transfer. The research employs a qualitative methodology, integrating institutional analysis, an extensive literature review, and a targeted case study of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Doctors Association in Germany (BHÄG). The narrative transitions from a systemic deconstruction of BiH's fragmented political-administrative framework to an evaluation of the healthcare system's inherent vulnerabilities. By analyzing diaspora-driven initiatives, the authors demonstrate how migration—while detrimental to domestic staffing—can be leveraged to facilitate clinical mentorship and professional collaboration. Finally, the article synthesizes institutional critiques with empirical examples of diaspora engagement, offering a comprehensive understanding of how structural stagnation intersects with international mobility. The findings conclude with strategic policy recommendations aimed at transforming brain drain into brain gain through formalized transnational cooperation and systemic healthcare reform (Spahić; Gradašević and Pojskić, 2026). „In this publication, the following are highlighted as key strengths of the health system: increased transparency among health care providers and targeted anti-corruption efforts” (Spahić; Gradašević and Pojskić, 2026).

The next paper, *The Future of Green Industrial Policy: An Overview of Policy Communication*, is signed by Luciana-Mirela Butișcă and Cristina-Matilda Vănoagă. The authors argue that Green Industrial Policy has emerged as a cornerstone of contemporary governance, aligning industrial competitiveness with climate neutrality. This paper examines the evolution of European Union institutional discourse between 2021 and 2025, specifically analyzing the Updated Industrial Strategy, the Green Deal Industrial Plan, and the Clean Industrial Deal. Employing qualitative documentary and discourse analysis, the study investigates shifts in narratives, revealing how EU discourse serves as a strategic instrument to recalibrate political legitimacy amid intensifying geoeconomic and geopolitical constraints. „The research aimed to identify how the EU is redefining industrial policy in a context marked by the tension between climate ambition and economic and geopolitical constraints” (Butișcă and Vănoagă, 2026).

The paper *Comparative Analysis of Industrial Agglomerations in the Chūbu Region during the Meiji Period. A Quantitative Examination through Network and Statistical Analyses*, proposed by Masamichi Takagi, Nobumichi Watahiki, Luiza Gatan and Cristian Vlad, investigates the developmental disparities between Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City—both regional industrial centres and clusters that prospered during the Meiji period—by comparing the structural and statistical characteristics of their entrepreneurial networks. During the Meiji period, Japan experienced a surge in manufacturing productivity fueled by railway expansion and technological diffusion. While regional gaps grew, industrialization reached peripheral areas and fostered significant agglomeration in regional cities. The foundations of Japan's four major industrial zones were already visible during this era. This study compares Hamamatsu and Yokkaichi to clarify their divergent trajectories. Moving beyond planned districts, this research employs network analysis to track organic urban connections. By examining these distinct developmental patterns, the study addresses the challenge of visualizing complex inter-city linkages and provides deeper insight into the heterogeneous nature of Japan's industrial evolution (Takagi; Watahiki; Gatan and Vlad, 2026).

The paper *Do Intercommunity Development Associations favour Polycentric Development? An Analysis of Territorial Policies of the EU*, proposed by Cosmin Chiriac, develops an analysis of territorial policies of the EU. For over two decades, polycentric development has remained a foundational concept within both the official and informal strategic frameworks of the European Union, generating significant scholarly discourse and global policy interest. Parallel to Romania's pre-accession efforts, the national legal framework integrated Intercommunity Development Associations (IDA) as institutional vehicles designed to foster horizontal cooperation among administrative units. These structures were primarily conceived to mitigate the systemic challenges of territorial fragmentation and the chronic fiscal constraints afflicting rural municipalities. The objective of this research is to evaluate the territorial efficacy of these collaborative frameworks, specifically examining whether IDA catalyze polycentric evolution or, conversely, exacerbate the polarizing dynamics of established urban centers. To achieve this, the study adopts a robust quantitative methodological approach, encompassing the entire Romanian territory. By synthesizing granular datasets that characterize existing IDA and their constituent Local Administrative Units, the paper seeks to discern the impact of these associations on regional cohesion. In conclusion, the analysis addresses whether inter-municipal cooperation functions as a mechanism for balanced spatial distribution or merely reinforces existing monocentric dependencies within the national urban hierarchy (Chiriac, 2026).

The next paper, signed by Sylvie Christine Daphné Varellas, from University of Toliara (Madagascar), is *Tourisme, inégalités et recompositions sociales : pour une approche critique du développement touristique dans Le Sud-Ouest Malgache*. This article synthesizes research findings from Mangily, a rapidly expanding coastal resort in southwestern Madagascar. By integrating foundational theories from tourism studies, development economics, human geography, and Durkheimian sociology of anomie, the study examines social disparities, communal restructuring, and emergent processes of tourism-driven gentrification. Qualitative data reveal a profound structural paradox: while acting as a catalyst for economic growth, tourism simultaneously precipitates communal destabilization, cultural erosion, and the marginalization of indigenous populations. Consequently, the research advances an interpretive model that articulates the concept of disharmonious social recomposition alongside peripheral tourism gentrification. This dual framework captures how globalized leisure industries reconfigure local spaces, often at the expense of social cohesion and traditional livelihoods. Finally, the analysis underscores the complexities of sustainable development in ecologically and socially vulnerable coastal environments (Varellas, 2026).

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## **I. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND GOVERNANCE**

**Svetlana CEBOTARI, Violeta COTILEVICI** ⇔ *L'Initiative « Une Ceinture, Une Route » comme mécanisme de renforcement de la coopération multilatérale*

**Adrian – Ionuț BOGDAN** ⇔ *Hegemony at an Inflection Point: U.S. and the Crisis of the International System*

**Laurențiu PETRILA, Felix-Angel POPESCU, Ana Maria COATU** ⇔ *Analysis of Local Governance in Romania*

**Marco MARSILI** ⇔ *Ethical Governance in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Challenges and Opportunities for the Western Balkans*

**Svetlana CEBOTARI, Selena STEJARU** ⇔ *Theoretical and Conceptual Approaches to the Phenomenon of New Regionalism*



## L'INITIATIVE « UNE CEINTURE, UNE ROUTE » COMME MÉCANISME DE RENFORCEMENT DE LA COOPÉRATION MULTILATÉRALE

*Svetlana CEBOTARI\**

*Violeta COTILEVICI\*\**

**Résumé.** L'initiative « Ceinture et Route », lancée en 2013 par le président Xi Jinping et s'étalant sur plus d'une décennie, représente le plus grand projet d'infrastructure depuis le plan Marshall, avec un impact sans précédent dans l'histoire moderne.

L'article « L'initiative « une ceinture, une route » comme mécanisme de renforcement de la coopération multilatérale » examine les mécanismes par lesquels la BRI facilite la connectivité transrégionale, favorise l'investissement et harmonise les politiques, contribuant ainsi à la création d'un vaste cadre d'interdépendance économique. À travers l'analyse de données sur les infrastructures, le commerce et les partenariats institutionnels, cette recherche met en lumière comment les projets de la BRI stimulent l'intégration économique et diversifient les routes commerciales. L'article explore également l'impact de l'initiative sur la gouvernance mondiale et son potentiel pour renforcer le dialogue entre États aux niveaux de développement variés. Par ailleurs, la BRI agit comme un catalyseur de la coopération multilatérale, offrant des perspectives de croissance tout en posant des défis en matière de transparence et de durabilité, qui exigent une approche coordonnée entre les acteurs internationaux.

**Keywords:** Initiative, coopération, développement, investissement, infrastructure, Chine

### INTRODUCTION ET METHODOLOGIE

Plus d'une décennie après son lancement en 2013 par le président Xi Jinping, l'initiative chinoise des Nouvelles Routes de la Soie (BRI) est le plus grand projet d'infrastructure depuis le plan Marshall, avec un impact sans précédent dans l'histoire moderne (Apostolopoulou, 2022). Il y a dix ans, la Chine lançait un mégaprojet visant à financer la construction de routes, de ports, de voies ferrées, d'aéroports et d'installations industrielles dans des dizaines de pays à travers le monde. Ainsi, l'initiative « Une ceinture, une route » s'impose comme l'un des projets les plus ambitieux et les plus réussis en matière de renforcement de la coopération entre les États (Wong Erebus, Chi Lau Kin, Tsui Sit, Tiejun Wen, 2017). En 2013, lors de visites officielles au

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\* Docteur d'État en Sciences politiques, professeur titulaire, Université d'État de Moldova, Faculté de Relations Internationales, Sciences Politiques et Administratives, Département des Relations Internationales. Chisinau, République de Moldova, e-mail: [svetlana.cebotari@usm.md](mailto:svetlana.cebotari@usm.md). ORCID: 0000-0001-9073-104X

\*\* Docteur en Sciences politiques, maître de conférences, Université d'État de Moldova, Faculté de Relations Internationales, Sciences Politiques et Administratives, Département des Relations Internationales. Chisinau, République de Moldova, e-mail: [violeta.cotilevici@usm.md](mailto:violeta.cotilevici@usm.md). ORCID: 0000-0002-0485-9862.

Kazakhstan et en Indonésie, le président chinois Xi Jinping a lancé ce projet, alors connu sous le nom d'« Une ceinture, une route », devenu par la suite l'« Initiative Ceinture et Route » (BRI). La BRI est également appelée « Nouvelle Route de la Soie » (OBOR), « Ceinture économique de la Route de la Soie et Route maritime de la Soie du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle » ou encore « Nouvelle Route de la Soie » (Apostolopoulou, 2021). Son nom chinois est 一带一路 (yì dài yì lù) (Nedopil, 2025). Actuellement, l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI) est devenue l'une des initiatives de développement les plus ambitieuses et les plus controversées au monde, tant dans le monde des affaires que dans le milieu universitaire (Nedopil, 2023). Ce projet s'inspire de l'ancienne route commerciale de la soie et fait partie du vaste plan chinois « Une ceinture, une route » (Tudorică, 2024). La présente étude repose sur une approche méthodologique pluridimensionnelle, visant à analyser l'initiative « *Une Ceinture, Une Route* » (Belt and Road Initiative - BRI) en tant que mécanisme de renforcement de la coopération multilatérale dans le système international contemporain. Compte tenu de la complexité et du caractère multidimensionnel de ce phénomène, la recherche mobilise un ensemble de méthodes qualitatives, combinant des approches théoriques et empiriques.

La méthode de *l'analyse* et de la *synthèse* constitue l'outil principal de la recherche. Elle permet d'examiner de manière systématique les fondements conceptuels, les objectifs stratégiques et les instruments institutionnels de l'initiative « *Une Ceinture, Une Route* », tout en mettant en évidence ses implications politiques, économiques et géostratégiques pour la coopération multilatérale. Cette méthode facilite également l'intégration des différentes perspectives théoriques issues des relations internationales, notamment le néolibéralisme institutionnel, le réalisme et le constructivisme.

La *méthode comparative* est utilisée afin d'évaluer l'initiative BRI en relation avec d'autres cadres et mécanismes de coopération multilatérale existants, tels que les organisations internationales régionales et globales, les partenariats stratégiques ou les initiatives de connectivité transrégionale. Cette approche permet d'identifier les similitudes et les différences structurelles, fonctionnelles et normatives, ainsi que de mesurer le degré d'innovation institutionnelle apporté par l'initiative chinoise. Par ailleurs, la *méthode historique* est mobilisée pour analyser les conditions d'émergence de l'initiative « *Une Ceinture, Une Route* », en tenant compte de l'évolution du système international, des transformations de l'ordre économique mondial et du repositionnement stratégique de la Chine sur la scène internationale. Cette perspective diachronique permet de situer l'initiative dans une continuité historique des politiques de coopération et d'intégration régionales et transrégionales. La méthode *institutionnelle* et *normative* permet d'examiner le rôle des acteurs étatiques et non étatiques impliqués dans la mise en œuvre de l'initiative, ainsi que les cadres juridiques, institutionnels et normatifs qui structurent la coopération multilatérale dans le cadre de la BRI. Cette approche contribue à l'analyse des mécanismes de gouvernance, de coordination et de prise de décision associés à l'initiative.

Enfin, la *méthode webographique* et l'analyse documentaire sont utilisées pour la collecte et l'examen des sources primaires et secondaires, incluant les documents officiels des institutions chinoises, les rapports des organisations internationales, les accords de coopération, ainsi que les études académiques et analytiques publiées dans des revues scientifiques et sur des plateformes institutionnelles reconnues. Le recours à ces sources permet d'assurer la validité scientifique de la recherche et d'offrir une compréhension approfondie des dimensions théoriques et pratiques de l'initiative « *Une Ceinture, Une Route* ».

## **1. L'INITIATIVE « UNE CEINTURE, UNE ROUTE » COMME CADRE EVOLUTIF DE LA COOPERATION INTERNATIONALE**

La formation de la Route de la Soie remonte au II<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C. En 138 avant J.-C., l'empereur Wu Di a envoyé une ambassade, conduite par Zhang Qian, auprès des tribus Yuezhi afin de conclure une alliance contre les Huns. Bien que l'ambassade n'ait pas atteint son objectif principal, Zhang Qian ayant été fait prisonnier, sa mission a permis néanmoins de recueillir de précieuses informations sur la situation politique aux frontières nord-ouest de la Chine. Ces informations ont permis par la suite la création d'un réseau de routes commerciales qui, plus tard, a unifié de nombreux pays du monde (Hansen, 2012).

Le terme que nous utilisons aujourd'hui pour désigner ce réseau de routes commerciales a été employé pour la première fois par le géologue, géographe et voyageur allemand Ferdinand von Richthofen dans les années 1870, dans son ouvrage « La Chine. Récits de ses propres voyages ». Ferdinand von Richthofen définissait cette route comme « un système de routes qui, de 114 av. J.-C. à 127 apr. J.-C., reliait la Chine aux pays situés entre les fleuves Amou-Daria et Syr-Daria en Asie centrale, ainsi qu'à la Chine et à l'Inde, pour le commerce de la soie avec les pays occidentaux » (Frankopan, 2018). Le terme s'est largement répandu après la publication, en 1936, du livre du chercheur suédois Sven Hedin intitulé « La Route de la soie ». D'après le modèle d'A. S. Malkov, la Route de la Soie a connu, durant son développement, trois périodes : du II<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C. au II<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C., du VII<sup>e</sup> au Xe siècle et du XIII<sup>e</sup> au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle. C'est durant ces périodes que l'on a observé l'intensification des échanges commerciaux trans-eurasiens. « Le déclin de la Route de la Soie est lié, avant tout, au développement de la navigation commerciale, d'abord par les Arabes, puis par les Européens, le long des côtes du Proche-Orient, de l'Asie du Sud et de l'Asie du Sud-Est. Dès les XIV<sup>e</sup> et XV<sup>e</sup> siècles, le commerce maritime est devenu plus avantageux que les routes caravanières terrestres, devenues dangereuses. » En raison de ces facteurs géopolitiques et géoéconomiques, la Route de la Soie a disparu définitivement au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Cependant, certains tronçons ont continué de fonctionner - par exemple, le commerce caravanier entre l'Asie centrale et la Chine a persisté jusqu'au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle- influençant directement le développement des relations interétatiques de l'époque. Parmi les conséquences notables, on peut citer : la division internationale du travail ; l'essor des villes commerçantes ; la mise en place d'un système de protection des biens des marchands ; et le développement d'un système de paiement monétaire fondé sur des symboles monétaires universellement reconnus (Apostolopoulou, 2022). La Route de la Soie a joué un rôle essentiel dans la diffusion des acquis culturels - nouveaux biens, connaissances et idées. La Nouvelle Route de la Soie, également appelée Initiative « Ceinture et Route » (BRI) de la Chine, a été annoncée en 2013 par le président chinois Xi Jinping et représente le plus grand projet d'infrastructure depuis le plan Marshall, d'une ampleur et d'une dimension sans précédent dans l'histoire moderne (Ferdinand, 2016). Elle s'articule autour de six corridors économiques (OCDE, 2018). La Ceinture vise à faciliter l'intégration terrestre des constellations d'Asie centrale, d'Afrique et d'Europe. La Route cible les régions maritimes d'Asie du Sud-Est et du Sud, du Moyen-Orient, d'Afrique de l'Est et de la Méditerranée (Apostolopoulou, 2022).

Depuis le lancement de l'initiative en 2013, la Chine a connu de profondes transformations de son environnement géopolitique régional et mondial (Hong, 2024). Cette initiative représente actuellement un produit intérieur brut (PIB) de 41 000 milliards de dollars et concerne une population d'environ 5,1 milliards d'habitants (How Is the Belt and Road Initiative). D'ici mai 2025, 150 pays auront rejoint l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI) en signant un mémorandum d'entente avec la Chine (Nedopil, 2025). Les

États (à l'exception de la Palestine, qui a quitté l'initiative en février 2025, et de l'Italie, en 2023) participant à l'initiative « Une ceinture, une route » (BRI) sont répartis sur tous les continents. Ainsi, en Afrique, on compte 53 pays ; en Asie centrale, 6 ; en Asie de l'Est, 3 ; en Europe, 29 ; en Amérique latine et dans les Caraïbes, 22 ; au Moyen-Orient, 9 ; dans le Pacifique, 12 ; en Asie du Sud, 6 ; et en Asie du Sud-Est, 10. L'initiative inclut également 17 pays de l'Union européenne (UE) et 8 pays du G20 (Site officiel).

L'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI) est un projet visant à renforcer la connectivité de la Chine avec le reste du monde. Elle combine des projets anciens et nouveaux, couvrant une vaste zone géographique et incluant des efforts pour renforcer les infrastructures physiques, les infrastructures non techniques et les liens entre les populations. La BRI englobe une multitude de projets conçus pour promouvoir la circulation des biens, des investissements et des personnes. Les nouvelles connexions favorisées par la BRI pourraient remodeler les relations, réorienter l'activité économique et transférer le pouvoir au sein des États et entre eux. Parmi les objectifs politiques spécifiques de la BRI, on peut citer :

- Améliorer la communication intergouvernementale pour une meilleure harmonisation des politiques publiques de haut niveau, telles que les stratégies de développement économique et les plans de coopération régionale.

- Renforcer la coordination des plans d'infrastructure pour une meilleure connectivité des réseaux d'infrastructures physiques, comme les systèmes de transport et les réseaux électriques.

- Encourager le développement des infrastructures non techniques, notamment par la signature d'accords commerciaux, l'harmonisation des normes réglementaires et l'amélioration de l'intégration financière.

- Renforcer les liens entre les populations en développant les échanges étudiants, d'experts et culturels, ainsi que le tourisme (How Is the Belt and Road Initiative).

L'ensemble du processus d'élaboration du concept de l'Initiative peut être classiquement divisé en plusieurs étapes :

1. Septembre 2013 : définition du cadre. Durant cette période, l'idée de la « Nouvelle Route de la Soie » émerge et plusieurs projets sont développés.

2. Septembre 2013 – mai 2017 : mise en place du cadre juridique et des principales institutions. À cette étape, les principaux mécanismes de coopération entre les pays participant à l'initiative « Une Ceinture, Une Route » sont définis ; des institutions financières sont créées pour investir directement dans les projets de l'initiative ; plusieurs documents conceptuels sont élaborés.

3. De mai 2017 à aujourd'hui : approfondissement et développement du concept. Cette période est caractérisée par l'élargissement des itinéraires de l'initiative. En juillet 2017, un document a été publié proposant la création d'un « corridor économique bleu », qui traverserait l'océan Arctique et rejoindrait l'Europe (Apostolopoulou, 2021).

L'initiative combine également divers projets visant à développer les infrastructures de transport et de logistique dans plusieurs zones géographiques clés et s'articule autour de six corridors économiques (OCDE, 2018). La Ceinture vise à faciliter l'intégration terrestre des constellations d'Asie centrale, d'Afrique et d'Europe. La Route cible les régions maritimes d'Asie du Sud-Est et d'Asie du Sud, du Moyen-Orient, d'Afrique de l'Est et de la Méditerranée. Ouverte à la collaboration avec toutes les régions du monde, l'initiative vise à promouvoir :

- la coopération intergouvernementale ;

- le développement des échanges intergouvernementaux de politiques macroéconomiques et multilatérales ;
- la création de mécanismes de communication pour élargir les intérêts communs ;
- le renforcement de la confiance politique mutuelle ;
- la recherche de nouveaux consensus en matière de coopération (Apostolopoulou, 2021).

Cependant, les documents officiels privilégient les connexions entre la Chine et les États situés le long de l'ancienne Route de la Soie, proposant la construction de six corridors de transport terrestre : un nouveau pont terrestre eurasien ; Chine-Mongolie-Russie ; Chine-Asie centrale-Asie occidentale ; Chine-Pakistan ; Bangladesh-Chine-Inde-Myanmar et les corridors économiques Chine-Indochine (Rivera, Camilo). (Annexe 2).

De manière générale, les aspects les plus attrayants de l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI) concernent la fourniture d'infrastructures physiques. La Banque asiatique de développement (BAD) estime que les pays en développement d'Asie auront besoin collectivement de 26 000 milliards de dollars d'investissements dans les infrastructures pour soutenir leur croissance économique. À travers la BRI, la Chine a cherché à utiliser son poids économique considérable pour financer et construire ces projets d'infrastructure à travers le monde. Au cours des dix premières années de l'initiative (2013-2023), la Chine a signé des accords d'investissement et de construction d'une valeur d'environ 1 000 milliards de dollars avec les pays partenaires. Ces projets pourraient rapporter à la Chine d'importants gains politiques dans ces pays. En particulier, nombre des zones ciblées par la Chine souffrent d'un sous-investissement dû à des difficultés économiques internes (leur score est faible selon l'Indice de développement humain (IDH) des Nations Unies). Le Myanmar et le Pakistan, deux pays fortement ciblés par la BRI, se classaient respectivement 149<sup>e</sup> et 161<sup>e</sup> sur 191 pays en termes d'IDH en 2021 (How Is the Belt and Road Initiative).

La ligne ferroviaire à grande vitesse a été inaugurée officiellement le 2 octobre 2023, peu avant le troisième forum des Nouvelles Routes de la Soie. Ce projet de 7,3 milliards de dollars réduit le temps de trajet entre Jakarta et Bandung de trois heures à moins d'une heure. Bien que sa mise en service ait été initialement prévue pour 2019, de nombreuses difficultés, notamment des problèmes d'acquisition foncière et d'obtention des permis, ont entraîné des retards importants (How Is the Belt and Road Initiative).

L'un des plus grands mégaprojets de l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » est le Corridor économique Chine-Pakistan (CPEC), un axe d'environ 3 000 kilomètres reliant la ville de Kashgar, dans l'ouest de la Chine, au port de Gwadar, sur la côte pakistanaise. Le CPEC comprend un large éventail de projets d'infrastructure – autoroutes, voies ferrées, pipelines et câbles à fibre optique – mais la majeure partie des investissements a été consacrée au secteur de l'énergie, notamment à la construction de centrales électriques. Zheng Shanjie, président de la Commission nationale chinoise du développement et de la réforme, a souligné que le CPEC représente « un maillon essentiel de l'initiative la Ceinture et la Route » et peut faciliter le développement d'une « autoroute maritime du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle ». Les dirigeants pakistanais partagent ce point de vue et considèrent le CPEC comme un projet clé pour le développement du pays. Face au risque de ralentissement des projets en raison des tensions géopolitiques, le Premier ministre Imran Khan a adopté en octobre 2019 des mesures controversées pour accélérer la mise en œuvre du CPEC, notamment en accordant des exonérations fiscales à Chinese Overseas Ports Holding, l'exploitant du port de Gwadar (How Is the Belt and Road Initiative).

Le CPEC vise également à relier le Corridor économique de la Route de la Soie à la Route maritime de la Soie, et le port de Gwadar joue un rôle clé dans ce processus. Le gouvernement pakistanais a loué le port à une entreprise chinoise jusqu'en 2059. La Chine a élaboré des plans ambitieux pour moderniser et étendre la zone de Gwadar, mais leur mise en œuvre est lente. Le nouvel aéroport international de Gwadar, dont l'achèvement était initialement prévu pour 2023, a été reporté à 2024. De même, le projet de zone franche de Gwadar est au point mort : alors que la superficie totale prévue est de 2 281 acres, elle ne couvre que 60 acres en 2023 (How Is the Belt and Road Initiative).

En 2024, les investissements chinois dans les projets de l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI) ont atteint des niveaux records, totalisant environ 51 milliards de dollars d'investissements directs et 70,7 milliards de dollars de contrats de construction. Ces fonds ont été principalement alloués aux secteurs de l'énergie (y compris le pétrole et le gaz), des métaux et des mines, ainsi qu'aux technologies et à l'industrie manufacturière, avec une implication accrue au Moyen-Orient. L'année 2024 a marqué la plus forte participation à la BRI à ce jour, avec 70,7 milliards de dollars de contrats de construction et environ 51 milliards de dollars d'investissements. Parallèlement, les engagements énergétiques de la Chine sont devenus les plus importants, tant en valeur absolue que relative, depuis le lancement de l'initiative, atteignant 11,8 milliards de dollars, soit une augmentation de 60 % par rapport à 2023. Dans le même temps, les investissements dans le pétrole et le gaz ont également atteint des niveaux records, s'élevant à environ 24,3 milliards de dollars, notamment grâce aux contrats de construction d'installations de traitement du pétrole et du gaz au Moyen-Orient. La Chine a également maintenu son implication dans les projets liés au charbon, à la fois en développant les infrastructures nécessaires au transport vers les mines et en acquérant des participations dans des exploitations minières (How Is the Belt and Road Initiative).

Les pays du Moyen-Orient arrivent en tête des investissements dans le cadre de l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI), avec des engagements d'environ 39 milliards de dollars. À l'inverse, les pays d'Amérique latine ont enregistré leur plus faible niveau d'investissements chinois depuis près de dix ans. Le secteur des métaux et des mines a également atteint des sommets historiques, avec près de 22 milliards de dollars, principalement grâce aux investissements directs. Les technologies et l'industrie manufacturière ont poursuivi leur progression, établissant des records avec près de 30 milliards de dollars, grâce à des engagements majeurs dans des domaines de pointe tels que les batteries, le photovoltaïque et, hors du cadre de la BRI - en Espagne - l'hydrogène. En 2024, les investissements dans la BRI sont redevenus des investissements publics, sous l'impulsion de Sinopec, suivis par les entreprises privées. Les contrats de construction restent largement dominés par les entreprises publiques. Comparée au niveau mondial, la participation de la Chine aux projets internationaux a augmenté, tandis que les investissements directs étrangers (IDE) mondiaux dans les économies émergentes ont continué de diminuer en 2024, parallèlement à un recul des IDE en Chine. Depuis le lancement de cette initiative en 2013, la valeur cumulée de l'implication dans le projet BRI a atteint 1 175 milliards de dollars américains, dont environ 704 milliards de dollars américains correspondent à des contrats de construction et 470 milliards de dollars américains à des investissements non financiers (How Is the Belt and Road Initiative).

Pour 2025, l'engagement de la Chine dans l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI) devrait se stabiliser davantage, avec un accent croissant sur les partenariats dans les énergies renouvelables, l'exploitation minière et les technologies connexes. Dans un contexte de volatilité des échanges et des investissements mondiaux, les entreprises



chinoises devraient intensifier leurs investissements afin de renforcer la résilience des chaînes d'approvisionnement et de développer des marchés d'exportation alternatifs. À moyen terme, les principaux axes d'engagement potentiels restent inchangés et se répartissent en six catégories de projets : la production dans les secteurs des technologies émergentes (comme les batteries), les énergies renouvelables, les infrastructures facilitant le commerce (oléoducs, oléoducs, routes), les technologies de l'information et de la communication (y compris les centres de données), les accords relatifs aux ressources naturelles (minéraux, pétrole, gaz) et les projets stratégiques ou à forte visibilité, tels que les chemins de fer. En 2024, les entreprises d'État chinoises ont repris leur position dominante dans la BRI, inversant la tendance des dernières années. En termes d'investissement, le géant énergétique public Sinopec est arrivé en tête, devant l'entreprise privée PT Shengwei New Energy. En ce qui concerne les projets de construction liés à l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route », les entreprises les plus actives en 2024 étaient à nouveau PowerChina, suivie de China National Chemical Engineering et de China Petroleum and Chemical (Sinopec). Cette répartition reflète la continuité des tendances observées les années précédentes.

## 2. BRI-EUROPE

L'initiative « Une ceinture, une route », lancée en 2013, constitue le principal cadre stratégique de la politique économique étrangère de la République populaire de Chine. Le concept officiel de cette initiative met l'accent sur le renforcement de la connectivité et de la coopération internationales par la promotion du développement des infrastructures, des échanges commerciaux et des flux d'investissement le long de deux axes majeurs : la Ceinture économique de la Route de la Soie et la Route maritime de la Soie du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. La Ceinture économique de la Route de la Soie privilégie les corridors terrestres reliant la Chine à l'Europe via l'Asie centrale et le Moyen-Orient, tandis que la Route de la Soie maritime vise à renforcer les liaisons maritimes entre la Chine, l'Asie du Sud-Est, l'Afrique et l'Europe par la mer de Chine méridionale et l'océan Indien. Ensemble, ces composantes ambitionnent de constituer une architecture d'infrastructures intégrée - routes, voies ferrées, ports, oléoducs et gazoducs, et plateformes logistiques - conçue pour faciliter la circulation des biens, des services et de la main-d'œuvre.

Les États européens, membres ou non de l'UE, constituent un pôle stratégique pour les investissements chinois dans le cadre des Nouvelles Routes de la Soie. L'importance de l'Europe pour l'économie chinoise tient à son rôle de marché majeur pour les exportations chinoises, l'UE figurant parmi les principaux partenaires commerciaux de la Chine. En 2021, les échanges commerciaux entre l'UE et la Chine représentaient 16 % du commerce européen total de marchandises, pour atteindre 696 milliards d'euros (Statistisches Bundesamt, s.d.).

Dans cette optique, l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI) sert à renforcer les interdépendances économiques et à faciliter l'accès de la Chine aux marchés européens, afin de soutenir la croissance économique nationale et d'accroître les débouchés commerciaux pour les entreprises chinoises. Les investissements dans les infrastructures européennes - ports, lignes ferroviaires et plateformes logistiques - visent à optimiser les flux commerciaux et à renforcer la connectivité transcontinentale. Par ailleurs, le format « 17+1 », qui réunit la Chine et les États d'Europe centrale et orientale, constitue une plateforme complémentaire pour approfondir la coopération bilatérale et régionale. Comme l'illustre la figure 1, la BRI ambitionne de relier la Chine continentale à l'Europe par un réseau complexe de corridors ferroviaires, d'oléoducs et de gazoducs,

de ports et de zones économiques intégrées. La coopération entre la Chine et les États européens dans le cadre de la BRI repose essentiellement sur des relations bilatérales, reflétant l'approche pragmatique et flexible de la Chine en matière de partenariats économiques internationaux (Družbacká, Kittová).

Début 2023, la Chine a signé des protocoles d'entente relatifs à l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (ICR) avec un nombre important de pays européens, membres et non membres de l'Union européenne (voir Annexe 1). Les États membres de l'UE ayant signé des protocoles d'entente sont : l'Autriche, la Bulgarie, la Croatie, Chypre, la République tchèque, l'Estonie, la Grèce, la Hongrie, l'Italie, la Lettonie, la Lituanie, le Luxembourg, la Pologne, le Portugal, la République tchèque, la Roumanie, la Slovaquie et la Slovénie. Des protocoles d'entente ont également été signés avec des pays non membres de l'UE : l'Albanie, l'Arménie, l'Azerbaïdjan, le Bélarus, la Bosnie-Herzégovine, la Géorgie, la Moldavie, le Monténégro, la Macédoine du Nord, la Russie, la Serbie et l'Ukraine. En revanche, la Belgique, le Danemark, l'Allemagne, l'Islande, l'Irlande, les Pays-Bas, la Norvège, l'Espagne, la Suède, la Suisse et le Royaume-Uni n'ont signé aucun protocole d'entente lié à cette initiative. Toutefois, compte tenu du caractère large et souvent imprécis du concept d'ICR, l'absence de protocoles d'entente n'exclut pas la présence de projets ni l'intégration de sites dans ces États aux plans d'infrastructures liés à l'ICR. À titre d'exemple, citons la ville de Duisbourg en Allemagne, qui a longtemps servi de plaque tournante ferroviaire majeure pour le transport des marchandises chinoises vers l'Europe (Družbacká, Kittová). Par conséquent, la non-participation formelle à l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » n'implique pas automatiquement l'absence de projets opérationnels ou d'infrastructures développées dans le cadre de cette initiative. Le cas allemand montre que le scepticisme ou l'opposition politique à l'égard de cette initiative ne se traduisent pas nécessairement par un refus des investissements chinois dans les infrastructures critiques. Cet aspect illustre le décalage entre le positionnement politique au niveau national et la dynamique concrète de la coopération économique et logistique.

En 2021, malgré une réduction générale des financements alloués à l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI) en raison de la pandémie de COVID-19, la Chine avait investi dans environ 1 000 projets en Europe, pour un montant cumulé de plus de 226 milliards de dollars. Malgré ce volume important, l'Europe n'arrivait qu'au quatrième rang des destinations des financements de la BRI, devant l'Asie (plus de 469 milliards de dollars pour plus de 4 000 projets), l'Amérique (plus de 388 milliards de dollars pour plus de 2 400 projets) et l'Afrique (plus de 338 milliards de dollars pour plus de 7 900 projets) (China looks to expand global influence). Une analyse de la répartition des investissements en Europe montre que les financements chinois ont été principalement destinés à des pays hors UE, la Russie en étant l'exemple le plus frappant (voir Annexe 2).

Les investissements chinois dans ces pays répondent souvent au besoin criant de développement des infrastructures, caractéristique des économies en transition ou confrontées à des déficits structurels de capitaux. Dans ce contexte, la Chine exploite le vide stratégique créé par l'absence d'un programme d'investissement cohérent et suffisant de l'Union européenne dans les infrastructures, y compris dans les pays candidats à l'adhésion. Concernant la Russie, l'ampleur des investissements témoigne de l'approfondissement des relations stratégiques entre Pékin et Moscou, dans un contexte de réorientation délibérée de l'économie russe vis-à-vis des marchés énergétiques occidentaux. Ainsi, les flux de capitaux chinois sont particulièrement importants dans les pays où l'Union européenne n'a pas investi de manière significative.

Parallèlement, à l'instar d'autres régions bénéficiaires, les pays européens impliqués dans les projets des Nouvelles Routes de la Soie, ainsi que des représentants des institutions de l'UE, ont exprimé des inquiétudes quant à la viabilité financière de ces projets et au manque de transparence des financements chinois. En Asie notamment, les prêteurs chinois ont été accusés de pratiques relevant de la « diplomatie du piège de la dette », certains critiques suggérant qu'ils structurent délibérément des prêts créant des vulnérabilités en matière d'endettement, facilitant ainsi les gains géopolitiques de la Chine (Rajah, Dayant, Pryke).

Cependant, des travaux récents ont considérablement nuancé cette perspective, soulignant le rôle déterminant des décisions nationales des États bénéficiaires, ainsi que la contribution des créanciers occidentaux et des marchés financiers internationaux à l'accumulation des problèmes d'endettement dans les économies à revenu faible et intermédiaire (Jones, Hameiri, 2020). Quelle que soit l'origine de ces difficultés, force est de constater que les vulnérabilités liées à la dette constituent un problème concret pour de nombreux États participant à l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route », y compris en Europe (Jones, 2019).

L'exemple du Monténégro est révélateur : en 2014, son gouvernement a contracté un prêt d'un milliard de dollars auprès de la Chine pour financer la construction d'une autoroute dans le cadre de l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route ». Au plus fort de la crise, cette dette représentait plus d'un tiers du budget annuel de l'État et faisait peser un risque réel de défaut de paiement, jusqu'à l'intervention d'un consortium de banques européennes et américaines qui ont soutenu le processus de restructuration du prêt, contribuant ainsi à en rétablir la viabilité (Shad, Niaz, 2024). Malgré ces efforts, l'entreprise chinoise chargée de la construction de l'autoroute n'a pas achevé le projet. D'autres États européens ont également exprimé leurs inquiétudes quant aux investissements chinois, notamment dans des pays comme la Serbie, ce qui a contribué à tendre les relations entre Belgrade et Bruxelles. Dans les Balkans, l'influence croissante de la Chine est perçue avec suspicion par les décideurs de l'Union européenne. Dans ce contexte, les investissements chinois sont souvent considérés comme contraires aux intérêts à long terme des États européens et au rôle stratégique de l'UE dans le voisinage européen (Euston, Jui R, Iuldashov, 2025).

Au niveau de l'Union européenne, les préoccupations suscitées par l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI) ont influencé le développement de l'Initiative « Global Gateway » (GGI), par laquelle l'UE entend jouer un rôle plus important dans le financement des infrastructures des pays à revenu faible et intermédiaire. Grâce à la GGI, l'UE vise à mobiliser 300 milliards d'euros d'ici 2027 pour des projets dans les domaines du développement numérique, des énergies vertes, des transports, de la santé, de l'éducation et de la recherche. L'Initiative « Global Gateway » est largement perçue comme une tentative de concurrencer la BRI et de renforcer la présence géostratégique de l'Union européenne à l'échelle mondiale (Barbero, 2023). Cela reflète également une évolution plus large du discours de l'UE à l'égard de la Chine : alors que la stratégie UE-Chine de 2016 mettait l'accent sur les « avantages mutuels, tant politiques qu'économiques », le rapport stratégique UE-Chine de 2019 décrivait Pékin comme un « concurrent stratégique » et même un « rival systémique » (De Decker, 2023).

Dans ce contexte, l'Initiative mondiale pour les infrastructures s'inscrit dans un processus plus large de détérioration des relations sino-européennes, au sein duquel l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI) a joué un rôle central. Toutefois, cette initiative a été critiquée pour ne pas représenter un financement nouveau ou additionnel,

mais plutôt un cadre d'utilisation des fonds existants, sans précision sur la manière de mobiliser efficacement les investissements prévus (Amighini, 2017). Malgré ces limites, l'Initiative mondiale pour les infrastructures témoigne d'une tentative de l'Union européenne de contrebalancer l'influence de la Chine, illustrant l'évolution de la perception du risque lié à la Chine parmi les décideurs politiques européens, même si elle demeure jusqu'à présent partiellement sous-capitalisée et d'impact limité (China's Belt-and-Road Initiative in Europe Assessing).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Plus d'une décennie après son lancement en 2013 par Xi Jinping, l'initiative « Une ceinture, une route » (ou « la Ceinture et la Route ») constitue un cadre complexe et dynamique de coopération multilatérale, dépassant le cadre d'un simple projet d'infrastructure. Par la diversité de ses composantes – économiques, logistiques, technologiques et institutionnelles –, l'initiative contribue à la restructuration des flux commerciaux mondiaux et à la création de plateformes de dialogue entre États aux intérêts et niveaux de développement différents. Si l'initiative facilite l'intégration économique et stimule les investissements transfrontaliers, son impact dépend crucialement de la qualité de la gouvernance, de la transparence des processus et de la capacité des États participants à adapter leurs stratégies de développement. Parallèlement, des défis se posent en matière de durabilité, de gestion des risques financiers et de maintien de l'équilibre géopolitique.

Actuellement, l'initiative joue un rôle de catalyseur pour le renforcement de la coopération multilatérale. Ainsi, l'initiative « Une ceinture, une route » offre des opportunités considérables, mais exige une approche critique et adaptable pour maximiser les avantages et minimiser les vulnérabilités.

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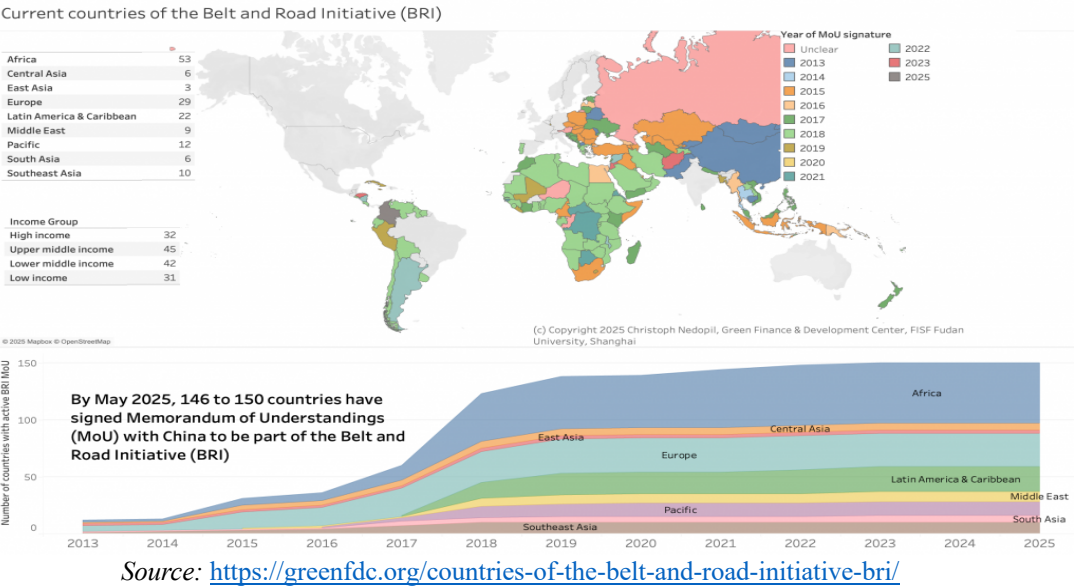
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Annexes

Annexe 1. Carte des pays participant à l'initiative « la Ceinture et la Route » (BRI) en mai 2025



Annexe 2. Principaux investissements de l'initiative « Ceinture et Route » dans les pays européens

| NN° | Pays                  | Nombre de projets | Investissements    |
|-----|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1.  | Fédération de Russie  | 251               | 169,568,380,000 \$ |
| 2.  | Turquie               | 144               | 28,333,420,000 \$  |
| 3.  | Biélorussie           | 125               | 11,653,930,000 \$  |
| 4.  | Serbie                | 86                | 6,091,040,000 \$   |
| 5.  | Ukraine               | 86                | 3,574,430,000 \$   |
| 6.  | Bosnie-Herzégovine    | 42                | 2,168,870,000 \$   |
| 7.  | Macédoine du Nord     | 50                | 1,403,050,000 \$   |
| 8.  | Bulgarie              | 50                | 1,375,910,000 \$   |
| 9.  | Monténégro            | 29                | 1,247,400,000 \$   |
| 10. | Roumanie              | 37                | 807,550,000 \$     |
| 11. | Albanie               | 53                | 128,500,000 \$     |
| 12. | République de Moldova | 46                | 82,340,000 \$      |

Source: China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2024 <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/asiainsights/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2024/>

## HEGEMONY AT AN INFLECTION POINT: U.S. AND THE CRISIS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

*Adrian – Ionuț BOGDAN\**

**Abstract.** *The current international system is defined by overlapping crises that strain global institutions and test the adaptability of U.S. leadership. The frameworks of the Perfect Storm, the Crises' Decade, and the Permacrisis provide valuable analytical tools to interpret this turbulence, capturing the interplay between short-term shocks, medium-term cycles of disruption, and long-term systemic fragility. This article employs a qualitative methodology, combining case-based analysis of contemporary conflicts, official policy documents, and scholarly literature to assess U.S. strategic responses under the Trump 2.0 Administration. The goal is not only to diagnose the vulnerabilities of the liberal international order but also to identify potential trajectories for U.S. power in a world marked by revisionism, economically rivalry, and democratic uncertainty.*

**Keywords:** *Perfect Storm; Crises' Decade; Permacrisis; U.S. foreign policy and international order.*

### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary international system is undergoing a period of exceptional turbulence, marked by overlapping crises that test the resilience of global institutions and the adaptability of national strategies. The erosion of the post-1945 liberal order, accelerated by geopolitical revisionism, technological disruption, socio-economic strain, and the resurgence of hard power politics, raises fundamental questions about the future of U.S. leadership in a transforming global environment. Concepts such as the Perfect Storm, the Crises' Decade, and the Permacrisis have emerged as analytical paradigms to conceptualize this volatility, each offering a framework to understand the temporal dynamics of instability and their impact on the balance of power. These paradigms illuminate how short-term shocks, medium-term turbulence, and long-term systemic fragility interact to shape the trajectory of the international order.

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative and interpretative research approach, drawing on comparative analysis of contemporary case studies, political documents, and scholarly literature in international relations and strategic studies. The study integrates primary sources, such as government documents with secondary academic analyses to evaluate U.S. responses to systemic disruption. By combining theoretical frameworks of systemic instability with empirical observations of recent crises, ranging from the Russia–Ukraine war and Indo-Pacific tensions to domestic political polarization under the Trump administration, the paper situates U.S. strategy

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\* PhD Candidate, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, [adrian.bogdan@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:adrian.bogdan@ubbcluj.ro).

within the broader dynamics of global transition. This approach allows for a structured yet flexible analysis, highlighting not only the risks of systemic breakdown but also the potential for innovation and adaptation in the American role within the emerging world order.

### **1. A DYNAMIC GLOBAL POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

The global political landscape is currently experiencing an unprecedented level of volatility, marked by rapid, overlapping crises that challenge the very foundation of the international order. This fragility stems from the accumulation of multiple, simultaneous, consecutive, or long-term crises, which test the resilience of global institutions and governance frameworks. Understanding these crises requires a structured analytical approach, which can be categorized into three explanatory paradigms, each defined by its duration, intensity, and magnitude of impact on the global system:

“Perfect Storm” (characteristics: short-term, 4-5 years, extremely powerful, with simultaneous crises and disruptive effects). Several relevant authors have approached the concept of “Perfect Storm” in recent years.

Johan Swinnen conceptualized the Perfect Storm in 2009, in the context of the Fischler Reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), as a rare convergence of political, economic, and institutional pressures that enabled substantial policy change in an otherwise resistant system (Swinnen, 2009: 137). He argues that CAP reform, historically constrained by entrenched interests and institutional inertia, became possible due to the simultaneous alignment of external trade negotiations (WTO), internal budgetary constraints, EU enlargement, and shifting societal preferences. This unique combination of factors undermined traditional resistance and allowed for a shift toward market-oriented and sustainability-focused policies, illustrating how deep policy change occurs when multiple reinforcing forces align at a critical moment. It is one of the first examples of situational management exposure where a Perfect Storm can become an opportunity.

Peter Margulies, in his article “Putting Guantanamo in the Rear-View Mirror: The Political Economy of Detention Policy,” examines the complex interplay of political, legal, and economic factors that have shaped U.S. detention policies, particularly concerning the Guantanamo Bay detention facility. While Margulies does not explicitly use the term “Perfect Storm,” he analyzes how a convergence of factors, such as national security concerns, legal challenges, international pressure, and domestic politics, created a unique environment (Margulies, 2010: 339) that both established and sustained the detention practices at Guantanamo Bay. He discusses how these intersecting dynamics have led to policy decisions that are difficult to reverse, even when they are controversial or counterproductive.

In 2022, in his paper “A Perfect Storm of War, Pandemic, Climate Crises and Global Dis-Governance: Unfolding Implications for Population Dynamics and Policies,” George Martine examines the simultaneous convergence of multiple global crises, namely warfare, pandemics, climate change, and governance failures, and their compounded effects on population trends and policy frameworks. He posits that these intertwined crises create a “perfect storm” scenario, where each exacerbates the others, (Martine, 2022) leading to unprecedented challenges in managing population dynamics. Martine emphasizes the necessity for integrated policy responses that address the root causes of these crises, advocating for sustainable development strategies that are resilient to such multifaceted threats.



Thomas B. Edsall, in his article “A Perfect Storm for the Ambitious, Extreme Ideologue,” published in *The New York Times* on September 20, 2023, explores how a unique convergence of political, economic, and cultural factors has facilitated the rise of extremist ideologies and populist leaders. He identifies key drivers of this perfect storm, (Edsall, 2023) including deepening political polarization, widening economic inequality, cultural anxieties, and the weakening of democratic norms. According to Edsall, these forces have collectively destabilized traditional political structures, creating an environment where radical movements can thrive. He underscores the need for proactive measures to counteract these trends and reinforce democratic resilience.

Riccardo Alcaro, in “The Perfect Storm: Trump and USA 2024,” explores how a unique convergence of political, institutional, and social factors has reinforced Donald Trump's dominance in the 2024 U.S. elections. He describes this perfect storm as the result of a fragmented Republican opposition, Trump's ability to galvanize his base despite legal challenges, and plans for a radical transformation of U.S. governance, such as the Project 2025 initiative (Alcaro, 2024). Alcaro warns that this alignment of forces could significantly alter the institutional and democratic landscape of the United States, making the 2024 election a pivotal moment in American politics.

Crises' Decade (characteristics: medium-term “vortex”, up to 10 years, powerful but consecutive crises, partly manageable although with some irreversible changes). In 2020, George Friedman dealt extensively in his book with aspects regarding this concept that is so useful today.

In “The Storm Before the Calm: America's Discord, the Coming Crisis of the 2020s, and the Triumph Beyond”, George Friedman presents a cyclical interpretation of American history, arguing that the United States is currently undergoing a profound period of crisis, what he terms the Crises' Decade. He attributes this turmoil to the overlapping breakdown of two major systemic cycles (Friedman, 2020: 90): the institutional cycle (Friedman, 2020: 108-109), which restructures the governing institutions approximately every 80 years, and the socio-economic cycle (Friedman, 2020: 130-131), which reshapes economic and social structures roughly every 50 years. While these cycles have historically occurred independently, their rare convergence in the 2020s has intensified instability, making the current crisis uniquely severe.

Friedman suggests that America's politico-administrative cycle is reaching its inflection point, characterized by institutional dysfunction, declining public trust, and government inefficiency, symptoms of a system that is due for restructuring.

Simultaneously, the socio-economic cycle, marked by technological shifts, economic inequality, and labor-market transformations, is exacerbating social divisions and uncertainty. The confluence of these cycles, he argues, explains the heightened polarization, institutional gridlock, and societal unrest seen during the beginning of this new decade.

Despite the turbulence, Friedman maintains an optimistic long-term outlook. He contends that the U.S. has repeatedly faced and overcome such cyclical crises, emerging stronger through institutional and economic reinvention. He predicts that by the 2030s, America will enter a new phase of stability and resurgence as the systemic realignment naturally unfolds. In this sense, the current storm is not an existential collapse but rather a necessary transition toward a more adaptive and resilient nation. Friedman's Crises' Decade framework provides a structured explanation for contemporary American discord, positioning it not as an anomaly but as part of an inevitable historical pattern of renewal and reinvention of the American nation.

Permacrisis (characteristics: long-term turbulence, over 15 years, sequence of changes at a moderate level, living in a culture of instability, uncertainty, threats and risks as a “new normality”, no stable order can be defined but rather a long transition between two eras).

In “Permacrisis: A Plan to Fix a Fractured World”, Gordon Brown, Mohamed El-Erian, and Michael Spence explore the concept of “permacrisis,” describing a prolonged period of global instability driven by overlapping economic, political, and environmental challenges (Brown, El-Erian, 2023: 144). The authors argue that traditional governance and economic models have become inadequate in addressing the complexity of contemporary crises, leading to persistent uncertainty and systemic dysfunction. They emphasize how financial volatility, income inequality, climate change, and geopolitical tensions have created a world in which short-term solutions are frequently prioritized over sustainable, long-term strategies. Their work highlights the failures of both national and international governance in managing these crises effectively, pointing to institutional weaknesses, lack of coordination, and diminishing public trust in political leadership (Brown, El-Erian, 2023: 145 – 147). The authors stress that the inability of governments and global institutions to respond decisively to economic recessions, climate-related disasters, and public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has deepened the sense of global fragmentation. They also critique the widening gap between economic policies and social realities, arguing that economic structures have favored market-driven solutions while neglecting social welfare and environmental sustainability.

Despite this bleak diagnosis, Brown and his co-authors propose a roadmap for addressing the permacrisis through systemic reform. They advocate for structural economic changes that prioritize equitable growth, investments in sustainable development, and a redefinition of global governance mechanisms to better coordinate responses to transnational threats. Strengthening multilateral cooperation, revitalizing democratic institutions, and adopting a long-term vision for economic stability are central to their vision for overcoming the persistent crises that define the modern era. Ultimately, their study serves as both a critique of the existing world order and a call for transformative policies that can restore stability and resilience. The authors argue that while the challenges facing global society are unprecedented in scale and complexity, they are not insurmountable, provided that policymakers embrace bold, cooperative, and forward-thinking approaches to governance and economic management.

### **How can the three concepts be linked?**

Transitions between these paradigms are fluid and unpredictable. A “perfect storm” may erupt within a crises’ decade, while a prolonged crises’ decade may gradually evolve into a permacrisis. Conversely, a permacrisis could culminate in an extreme shock, triggering a new “perfect storm.” The difficulty in predicting the next framework arises from the dynamic interplay of multiple variables, unknown factors, and emerging disruptions such as wars, economic collapses, social unrest, and technological transformations. One thing is certain: a combination of these situations or the escalation and deviation from one to another can lead to catastrophic consequences in the long term, especially in a context of interdependence such as the current one.

### **Why is the International Order so vulnerable today?**

The vulnerability of the international order can be attributed to the multiplication of complex and unprecedented challenges that global institutions and governance systems were never designed to handle comprehensively. Most international organizations were originally structured to address specific, isolated crises rather than overlapping, systemic crises that strain multiple dimensions of global stability. In response, there has been increasing attention to reinforcing resilience mechanisms, but these efforts remain insufficient in the face of growing uncertainty and systemic risks.

### **What would the 'Perfect Storm', the Crises' Decade, and the Permacrisis look like for the current international system and for the United States?**

A “perfect storm” in international politics denotes an exceptionally rare but profoundly disruptive convergence of major crises occurring within a compressed time frame. These crises, military, economic, political, technological, or environmental, do not emerge in isolation but rather interact in unpredictable and mutually reinforcing ways. What distinguishes a perfect storm is not only its intensity, but the simultaneity and complexity of systemic shocks that overwhelm national and international coping mechanisms. Historically, such episodes have included the World Wars, the Great Depression, or the concurrent collapse of empires and ideologies.

Key characteristics of a perfect storm include a relatively short temporal horizon, typically four to five years, during which institutional and societal stress reaches unsustainable levels. There are no predefined or readily applicable solutions, as the nature of the crisis defies conventional policy tools. In such contexts, resilience mechanisms, whether economic buffers, diplomatic frameworks, or institutional safeguards, are rendered insufficient. The rapid escalation of crises triggers chain reactions across systems, leading to widespread economic dislocation, political polarization, mass social unrest, and legitimacy crises for both domestic governments and international organizations.

From a geopolitical standpoint, a perfect storm places the liberal international order under existential strain. Multilateral institutions struggle to coordinate responses due to diverging national interests, rising populism, and eroded trust in governance structures. Moreover, the accelerating pace of crisis dynamics often surpasses the institutional capacity for collective action. Global interdependence, once considered a stabilizing force, becomes a channel for rapid contagion (Grynspan, 2022), magnifying localized disruptions into systemic breakdowns.

A “Perfect Storm” scenario for the United States would involve the simultaneous eruption of multiple, high-impact crises that severely test institutional resilience and strategic bandwidth. For instance, a concurrent great-power confrontation (Congressional Research Service, 2024: 1-6) in the Indo-Pacific and a protracted escalation in Eastern Europe, layered on top of a domestic economic downturn and cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, would stretch U.S. resources across military, economic, and political domains. Such simultaneity creates a crisis-management overload, overwhelming traditional decision-making processes and forcing reliance on emergency executive measures such as the Defense Production Act, strategic reserves, and rapid coordination with allies. Domestically, inflationary pressures, energy price volatility, and disinformation campaigns could polarize the electorate, eroding political cohesion at precisely the moment when strategic unity is most needed.

At the same time, history shows that “Perfect Storms” can serve as catalysts for structural innovation. They reveal institutional bottlenecks and push policymakers to adopt long-resisted reforms, whether in industrial base mobilization, cyber defense integration (Lynch, 2024: 85), or alliance burden-sharing. In this sense, the very convergence of crises can disrupt entrenched inertia, generating openings for systemic adaptation. Yet, the price is high: heightened risk of escalation, legitimacy crises, and erosion of public trust in governance. If mismanaged, a Perfect Storm risks entrenching populist distrust of elites and accelerating U.S. democratic fragility. If managed effectively, however, it can foster transformative change in defense-industrial policy and alliance structures.

The concept of a “Crises’ Decade” refers to a prolonged period, typically spanning up to ten years, characterized by successive global and regional disruptions that, while not necessarily cataclysmic, exert profound and irreversible pressure on political systems, economic models, and societal norms. Unlike a “perfect storm,” which is short-lived but acutely destructive, a Crises’ Decade unfolds gradually, with persistent “strong winds” of instability that reshape the international order over time—incrementally but decisively.

The 2020s have already presented a clear pattern of such cumulative turbulence. The global outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 triggered a public health emergency and subsequent economic shocks that reverberated across borders. This was swiftly followed by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, reigniting conventional war on the European continent and altering the security architecture of the post-Cold War order. Further escalation came with renewed violence in the Middle East, a surge in global inflation, declining real incomes, and growing tension in transatlantic relations. These were compounded by ideological radicalization, deepening polarization within democratic societies, and the weakening of global governance mechanisms.

Looking ahead, this vortex of crises may intensify. The risk of a large-scale economic recession, unsustainable sovereign debt in vulnerable economies, and budgetary imbalances across advanced and emerging markets remains acute. Moreover, geopolitical flashpoints such as the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, and a potentially expanded conflict in Eastern Europe represent latent threats. The erosion of liberal democracy, the rise of political extremism, and the decline in institutional legitimacy add further complexity to this already volatile picture. Despite these challenges, each individual crisis still allows for policy-based mitigation strategies, making the overall trajectory disruptive but not yet terminal.

A Crises’ Decade, therefore, is a liminal phase: it challenges existing paradigms without fully collapsing them. The long-term impact, while not uniformly catastrophic, is nonetheless significant. Structural changes in global governance (Zahidi 2024: 13-15), irreversible shifts in political cultures, and institutional adaptations are already underway. Climate policy, industrial strategy, technological sovereignty, and migration management are all areas undergoing redefinition.

Friedman argues that the United States is currently undergoing the overlapping breakdown of its institutional and socio-economic cycles, producing polarization, declining public trust, and recurring governance dysfunction. In this framing, the Crises’ Decade is not an anomaly but part of America’s cyclical realignment, wherein turbulence and discord precede renewal.

For the U.S., this decade-long vortex entails mounting domestic stress, partisan polarization, social fragmentation, and political violence, interacting with external

imperatives such as managing China's rise, stabilizing NATO commitments, and sustaining technological primacy. Unlike a Perfect Storm, the sequential nature of these crises allows for partial adaptation and reform, but the cumulative burden risks institutional fatigue. If the U.S. can navigate this decade by reforming electoral, fiscal, and security architectures, it may emerge stronger and more adaptive. If not, the system risks ossifying into permanent dysfunction, making it harder to meet global commitments. Thus, the Crises' Decade is best understood as a test of political adaptability and institutional reinvention.

The notion of permacrisis describes a long-term, persistent state of instability that extends over a decade or more, often shaping an entire generation's political, economic, and psychological landscape. Unlike short, intense shocks or episodic disruptions, a permacrisis is characterized by chronic uncertainty, recurrent systemic stress, and a general malaise that permeates the global order. It represents not a single event, but an enduring condition, a slow-burning accumulation of crises that never fully resolve and instead become embedded in the fabric of everyday life.

In a permacrisis scenario, instability becomes normalized. Individuals, institutions, and states adapt to fluctuating risk as a baseline condition. International relations are marked by heightened tensions, stalled diplomacy, and fragmented alliances. Economies operate under the shadow of protracted uncertainty, and societies face a continuous erosion of trust in public institutions, media, and political leadership. Although the intensity of individual crises may remain moderate, their persistence and interconnection challenge traditional mechanisms of resilience and demand continuous adaptation rather than resolution.

The impact of a permacrisis is primarily psychological and structural. It fosters a societal climate of fatigue, resignation, and defensive governance. Crisis becomes a mode of existence, not an exception. In such an environment, governments are often reactive rather than proactive (Brown, El-Erian, 2023: 73), struggling to maintain legitimacy while operating under constant pressure. Strategic foresight is replaced by tactical improvisation. Cultural values may shift toward risk aversion, political polarization, or disengagement, while innovation and long-term policy planning are stifled by permanent emergency management.

Yet, despite its corrosive effects, a permacrisis does not necessarily collapse the global system. Instead, it induces a drawn-out, confusing transition between two world orders, neither fully abandoning the previous paradigm, nor decisively shaping the next. The result is a multipolar, fragmented, and often incoherent geopolitical landscape, in which governance becomes more regionalized, and global coordination is sporadic and fragile (Brown, El-Erian, 2023: 78).

In the context of the United States, a Permacrisis would signify a long-term condition in which instability, fragmentation, and recurring shocks become normalized features of governance and society. Instead of sharp, episodic crises, the U.S. would experience enduring turbulence: sustained political polarization, chronic climate emergencies, technological disruption, and repeated challenges to electoral legitimacy. Such conditions would erode the stability of democratic institutions, embedding a culture of uncertainty and reducing public trust in federal capacity. The U.S. could find itself managing not "crises to be solved" but an ongoing state of systemic volatility, in which resilience rather than resolution becomes the strategic objective.

Economically, a Permacrisis implies structural stagnation punctuated by volatility, persistent income inequality, frequent financial instability, and climate-related

costs straining fiscal space. Geopolitically, it would erode U.S. credibility as a provider of global order, as domestic volatility undermines the consistency of external commitments. Brown, El-Erian, and Spence describe this as the “fracturing of the world,” where traditional governance frameworks are ill-suited to overlapping, persistent crises. For the U.S., the challenge lies in institutionalizing resilience through adaptive governance, multilateral burden-sharing, and long-term investments in climate and infrastructure. Failure to do so risks entrenching democratic malaise and strategic retrenchment; success could redefine American leadership as one based on resilience rather than primacy.

## **2. MAJOR CHALLENGES FOR THE U.S. UNTIL THE NEW DECADE**

### **Revisionism Against the Western Liberal Order (External and Internal)**

Between now and 2028/2029, revisionism will remain one of the most destabilizing forces acting against the Western liberal order, both from external geopolitical actors and from within democratic societies themselves. Externally, powers such as Russia and China continue to challenge the normative foundations of the post-1945 international system, promoting alternative models of governance rooted in authoritarianism, state-centric capitalism, and regional spheres of influence. Russia’s aggressive posture, demonstrated through the invasion of Ukraine, is not only territorial but ideological, rejecting liberal democracy as a framework for international legitimacy. Meanwhile, China asserts its own rules-based system, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, while expanding its institutional influence through mechanisms such as the Belt and Road Initiative or the Global Development Initiative. Internally, liberal democracies face rising populism, illiberal movements, and institutional erosion. In Europe and the United States, far-right and far-left forces question liberal tenets such as minority rights, judicial independence, and multilateral cooperation, often echoing external propaganda or exploiting systemic vulnerabilities (Petrilă, 2019: 178-192). This dual-front revisionism erodes trust in liberal institutions, fragments consensus, and risks democratic backsliding.

### **The Ascension of China: Expansion of Global Strategic Influence**

China's rise as a global strategic actor continues to redefine power dynamics in the international system, increasingly challenging the West’s political, economic, and technological leadership. From 2024 to 2029, this ascension is expected to become more assertive, particularly as China shifts from being a rule-taker to a rule-maker on the global stage. Through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has entrenched its presence across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and parts of Europe, offering infrastructure investment tied to political alignment. Simultaneously, it is consolidating influence in multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations and the BRICS+ grouping, by promoting narratives centered on “multipolarity,” “sovereignty,” and “non-interference.” In the Indo-Pacific, China is expanding military capabilities and strategic coercion around Taiwan and the South China Sea, triggering security recalibrations by the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia. Moreover, China is asserting technological hegemony through global leadership in AI, quantum computing, and digital infrastructure, via companies like Huawei and TikTok. Its strategic influence lies not only in hard power but in norm-shaping, offering an alternative governance model that appeals to many non-Western states frustrated with Western liberal conditionality.

### **The West's Strategic Dilemmas in Responding to Revisionist Provocations**

Despite its economic and military dominance, the United States and its Western allies have struggled in recent years to deliver unified, powerful, and strategically coherent responses to revisionist challenges posed by actors such as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. This difficulty stems from several factors: political polarization within key Western democracies (Kahl and Wright 2021: 384-392), strategic divergences between the U.S. and European allies, institutional fatigue (Corpădean, 2022: 76-94). in multilateral organizations, and a declining consensus on the values underpinning the liberal international order. While NATO has shown revitalization in the wake of Russia's war on Ukraine, fractures remain evident, particularly on burden-sharing, defense investments, and engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the U.S. foreign policy establishment is increasingly divided between advocates of global leadership and proponents of strategic retrenchment, a division amplified by domestic electoral cycles. In the Global South, Western efforts to isolate revisionist powers have been met with limited success, as many emerging states reject binary alignments and perceive the liberal order as self-serving. Consequently, the West often resorts to reactive crisis management rather than long-term strategic planning, undermining its ability to deter aggression or set a compelling vision for global governance.

### **The Axis of Anti-Western Authoritarian Powers: Assertiveness and Strategic Convergence**

In the evolving international system, a *de facto* axis of anti-Western authoritarian regimes (Sabbagh, 2024), comprising Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, has grown increasingly assertive, coordinated, and confrontational. While differing in ideology, geography, and strategic priorities, these states are united by a common interest: resisting the dominance of the Western liberal order and undermining U.S.-led global influence. Their cooperation has expanded beyond rhetorical solidarity into concrete forms of strategic alignment, including arms transfers, cyber collaboration, disinformation campaigns, and joint diplomatic efforts in multilateral forums. Russia and Iran have strengthened military and economic ties, particularly in the context of the Ukraine war and sanctions evasion. China and Russia have deepened energy, defense, and technology cooperation, with frequent joint military exercises and a shared narrative against "Western hegemony." North Korea, increasingly emboldened, has resumed weapons testing and reportedly supplied munitions and even troops to Russia, further integrating into this informal bloc. These regimes reinforce each other's international legitimacy while projecting a vision of sovereignty and authoritarian resilience. Their growing coordination poses a multidimensional challenge, not only militarily, but ideologically and normatively to the principles of open societies, democratic governance, and multilateral rules-based cooperation. The summit between President Trump and President Putin in mid-August 2025 is an attempt to partially remove Russia from this axis. Donald Trump has often stood out as one of the supporters of promoting Russian-American relations. This foreign policy strategy is inspired by Henry Kissinger's trilateral diplomacy (Kissinger, 2018: 616) reasoning that promoted the conjunctural alliance in order to counterbalance the main competitor. The US in the Cold War relied on a Sino-American agreement (taking advantage of the Sino-Russian ideological rupture) to counterbalance the Soviet Union. Currently, Russia can become the necessary force for the West to counterbalance the Beijing regime. Of course, this scenario is very optimistic and unlikely, but the idea is important to be imprinted in the American foreign

policy strategy and in the case of the possibility of achieving this goal with a post-Putin administration.

### **The Wars in Ukraine and the Middle East: Strategic Ruptures and Harsh Lessons**

The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, particularly the ongoing Israeli, and Palestinian conflict and the potential regional spillovers, have become twin epicenters of instability, highlighting the return of hard power, the fragility of international norms, and the erosion of Western strategic authority. In Ukraine, the brutal scale of Russia's invasion has shattered illusions about a post-ideological, rules-based Europe, revealing critical vulnerabilities in deterrence, defense planning, and supply chains. Meanwhile, the war between Israel and Hamas, with its dramatic humanitarian toll and risk of regional escalation involving Iran, Hezbollah, and others, has exposed the limitations of Western diplomacy in addressing deep-rooted ethno-political conflicts. Both wars underscore a broader lesson: that the international system is entering a phase where military force, territorial ambition, and zero-sum logic once again dominate geopolitical calculations. At the same time, the asymmetry in US responses, especially in the Global South's perception of "selective morality," has damaged the credibility of liberal internationalism. These conflicts also accelerate systemic shifts, diverting resources, polarizing societies, and reinforcing alliances among authoritarian powers, thus shaping a more unstable global order.

### **Donald Trump's Return to Power: Strategic Shockwaves and Systemic Recalibration**

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States for a second term in 2024 marks a turning point with unpredictable but potentially destabilizing effects on the international order. His return reactivates the "America First" doctrine, signaling a shift away from traditional multilateralism and alliances that have underpinned global stability since World War II. Within days of taking office, Trump reaffirmed his skepticism toward NATO, questioned continued U.S. support for Ukraine, and hinted at unilateral redefinitions of America's global commitments. This posture is already causing alarm among European allies, who fear a transatlantic decoupling (Greve, Smith and Tait, 2025) and are being pushed toward greater defense autonomy. Simultaneously, authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China may interpret Trump's foreign policy retrenchment as strategic permission to act more aggressively in their spheres of influence. On a normative level, Trump's re-election fuels a global narrative of democratic fatigue and the normalization of illiberal governance, weakening the West's ideological coherence. As the world adjusts to a more unpredictable U.S. presidency, global actors, both allies and rivals, are being forced into accelerated strategic recalibration.

### **Rising Tensions in Asia and the Indo-Pacific: The Return of Maritime Geopolitics**

In the next years, the Indo-Pacific region is set to become the world's most volatile geopolitical arena, where great power rivalry, nationalist ambition, and unresolved territorial disputes collide. Central to this dynamic is China's growing assertiveness in the South and East China Seas, Taiwan Strait, and broader Pacific sphere, supported by an expanding blue-water navy and an increasingly sophisticated military-



industrial base. U.S. strategic commitments to allies like Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines are being tested, particularly as China pressures Taiwan militarily and diplomatically (Naumescu, 2022: 128). Simultaneously, North Korea's nuclear provocations and missile tests add a layer of permanent instability. As Robert D. Kaplan warned in *Asia's Cauldron*, the South China Sea is not merely a regional issue, but "the throat of global sea routes," through which one-third of the world's maritime trade passes, making it a flashpoint with global consequences. The Indo-Pacific's crowded sea lanes, overlapping claims, and historical grievances create what Kaplan described as a geopolitical "cauldron," where even minor incidents could escalate uncontrollably. In this environment, strategic miscalculation, rather than deliberate war, is the greatest threat. As the U.S., China, and regional powers engage in competitive deterrence, the region risks becoming the 21st century's primary zone of systemic confrontation.

### **Russia's Hybrid War Against the West: Disinformation, Societal Vulnerabilities, and the Rise of Extremism**

Russia's ongoing war against the West is not limited to tanks and missiles, it is waged through a complex web of psychological, digital, political, and economic tactics designed to exploit the very openness of liberal democratic societies. One of the most effective tools in this strategy has been the weaponization of information (Herța, 2017: 135-143): disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, and coordinated manipulation of social media ecosystems. These efforts target societal cleavages, ideological, cultural, or generational, amplifying distrust, fragmenting public discourse, and delegitimizing democratic institutions. The spread of fake news and conspiracy narratives, often facilitated by Russian-linked troll farms or proxy media, has not only distorted debates on migration, health policy, and national identity but also eroded confidence in mainstream journalism and electoral processes. Democratic societies, by virtue of their transparency and freedom of expression, are particularly vulnerable to such tactics. This internal erosion of democratic consensus is, in itself, a strategic victory for revisionist powers like Russia, which aim not to defeat the West militarily, but to weaken it from within. In U.S. this situation is more visible than ever before.

### **Socio-Economic Pressures on Western Democracies: Living Costs, Demographic Strain, and Economic Competitiveness**

Western liberal democracies, of course including U.S., are increasingly constrained by a convergence of socio-economic pressures that threaten long-term stability (Mișcoiu, 2022: 51-58) and global influence. One of the most pressing challenges is the sharp rise in the cost of living, driven by inflation, energy volatility, and housing shortages, which has eroded the purchasing power of the middle class, traditionally the socio-political backbone of democratic systems. In parallel, Western societies face structural demographic problems, including rapidly ageing populations, shrinking workforces, and mounting public pension deficits. These demographic shifts (Brie, 2018: 245-248) place immense strain on state budgets, especially as demands for healthcare and social assistance rise while tax bases contract.

### **How the Trump Administration approaches these rather delicate subjects?**

Under the Trump administration, the United States treats revisionism in transactional terms (Nye, 2020: 185) rather than as an existential threat to the liberal order. Trump is reducing commitments to NATO and conditioning support for Ukraine,

which gives Russia room to maneuver and undermines Western unity. Internally, his polarizing rhetoric fuels illiberal (Mearsheimer, 2019: 35) currents and erodes trust in institutions, amplifying the very weaknesses that external revisionists exploit. These things can trigger a systemic crisis of the current world order.

Washington also addresses China's rise through direct economic confrontation (Allison, 2022: 166): tariffs, technological restrictions, and the promotion of "America First" in industry. Instead of building sustainable multilateral coalitions, the administration is focusing on bilateral agreements and relocating supply chains. This strategy intensifies the trade and technology conflict, but weakens coordination with allies, leaving Beijing with the opportunity to expand its influence through the BRI and BRICS+. We are witnessing a spectacular return of minilateral diplomacy, based on smaller diplomatic cooperation in terms of the number of participants, but more flexible and effective in certain cases.

Today, the West's strategic dilemmas are accentuated by Trump's policy of asking allies to take on more defense costs and threatening to withdraw American support. NATO is kept functional, but without the cohesion of after 2022, and American foreign policy remains marked by ad-hoc reactions rather than long-term planning. This incoherence weakens the West's ability to deter revisionist aggression.

Trump is trying to open channels with Russia to detach it from China, inspired by the logic of Kissinger's trilateral diplomacy. So far, the results are limited: Moscow maintains cooperation with Beijing, Tehran and Pyongyang. In contrast, American pressure on China has further strengthened the authoritarian axis. Thus, the attempt to redraw the geopolitical balance produces ambivalent effects and strains relations with European allies.

In Ukraine, Trump is reducing military aid and pressuring Kyiv to negotiate with Moscow, which strengthens Russian positions on the ground. In the Middle East, the administration offers staunch support to Israel but ignores mediation in the conflict with the Palestinians, amplifying the perception of double standards in the Global South. This combination of realpolitik and unilateralism weakens the moral legitimacy of the US and reinforces anti-Western discourses.

As for Southeast Asia, Trump emphasizes visible military deterrence: more freedom of navigation operations, arms sales and bilateral partnerships with Japan, the Philippines and Taiwan. However, support for extended multilateral partnerships is minimal, which reduces regional crisis management capacity. This strategy further militarizes the region, but without providing solid mechanisms to avoid escalation. The most important U.S. deal in the Pacific remains the trilateral AUKUS format that brings together the U.S., Australia and the United Kingdom.

Although federal agencies continue to combat cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, Trump's ambivalent messages towards Russia undermine institutional efforts. The lack of a firm presidential stance creates the perception of vulnerability and gives the Kremlin room to exploit (Blake, 2020: 201) American societal divisions. Thus, US resilience to hybrid warfare remains limited.

Regarding the socio-economic pressure in America, the Trump administration is addressing the problems through protectionism, tax cuts and deregulation, aiming at a rapid decrease in inflation and stimulating American industry. However, the measures do not address structural issues such as population ageing, inequalities or housing shortages. In the medium term, these vulnerabilities deepen, even if policies bring electoral gains in the short term.

### **3. POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR THE U.S. IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER**

#### **1. Continued Primacy through Selective Engagement**

A plausible trajectory for the United States is to sustain its primacy by concentrating power projection and diplomatic capital in regions and domains deemed strategically indispensable. This approach, often referred to as selective engagement, would prioritize the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe, where revisionist actors such as China and Russia pose the most direct challenges to U.S. interests and to the survivability of the liberal order. By reallocating resources toward naval modernization, cyber defense, and advanced technological development, Washington could maintain its role as the central security guarantor in high-stakes regions, while reducing commitments in theaters of peripheral significance such as Africa or the Middle East. Such concentration may preserve deterrence credibility and allow the U.S. to remain the pivotal actor in shaping regional balances of power.

However, selective engagement risks deepening perceptions of U.S. retrenchment in regions where Washington scales back, creating vacuums of influence that competitors will readily exploit. Moreover, maintaining primacy even in selected regions will require significant political cohesion at home and sustainable bipartisan support for defense spending, both of which are increasingly fragile. Should allies doubt the durability of American commitments, selective engagement could inadvertently trigger hedging behavior, weakening the very alliances on which U.S. primacy rests. Thus, while selective engagement allows Washington to conserve power, it remains vulnerable to domestic polarization and to the reputational costs of perceived abandonment.

#### **2. Transactional Minilateralism (Trumpian Approach)**

Under the current Trump administration, the U.S. is visibly gravitating toward a form of transactional minilateralism, wherein alliances and partnerships are judged less on shared values and more on immediate reciprocity and material contributions. Trump has consistently emphasized that NATO allies must increase defense spending, while signaling openness to pragmatic, even conciliatory, dialogues with Russia if such moves weaken Beijing's global position. This shift reflects a fundamental redefinition of America's role in the world: from the architect of a value-based order to a power broker leveraging asymmetrical deals to maximize U.S. advantage. In practice, this has translated into a series of short-term bargains (Ciot, 2021: 39-43), arms sales, tariffs, security guarantees, linked directly to financial or political concessions from partners.

While transactional minilateralism may yield tactical gains, such as temporary relief in defense costs or reduced confrontation with one adversary, it erodes long-term trust in U.S. commitments. Allies increasingly perceive Washington as unreliable, leading Europe to accelerate discussions on strategic autonomy and Indo-Pacific partners to hedge by accommodating Beijing. Moreover, this approach undermines America's traditional claim to normative leadership, reinforcing the legitimacy of authoritarian actors who also pursue transactional diplomacy. Over time, the risk is that U.S. influence becomes narrower, more contingent, and less institutionalized, reducing Washington's ability to set the agenda in global governance.

#### **3. Retrenchment and Neo-Isolationism**

Another potential path for the U.S. in the evolving order is retrenchment, or a new form of neo-isolationism. Here, Washington would deliberately scale back its

overseas military commitments and shift resources toward domestic renewal, border protection, and industrial competitiveness. The rhetoric of “America First” resonates strongly with this orientation, presenting a vision of national strength built on internal sovereignty, economic self-sufficiency, and limited entanglement in costly foreign wars. By reducing global responsibilities, the U.S. could redirect significant financial resources toward infrastructure, healthcare, and managing socio-economic divides, theoretically strengthening the domestic foundations of its power.

Yet, history suggests that large-scale U.S. retrenchment destabilizes rather than stabilizes the international system. Withdrawal from forward deployments in Europe or Asia would likely embolden revisionist actors, accelerating crises that eventually drag Washington back into confrontation under less favorable conditions. Moreover, allies forced into self-reliance may recalibrate their security policies in ways that dilute U.S. influence permanently, fostering a multipolarity unfavorable to American interests. Neo-isolationism therefore offers short-term domestic relief but risks long-term strategic erosion, as adversaries exploit vacuums, and global norms shift away from liberal principles.

#### **4. Shared Leadership and Coalition Building**

Alternatively, the United States could pursue a strategy of shared leadership, recognizing that its unipolar moment has passed but that durable influence can be preserved through cooperative hegemony with like-minded states. This path emphasizes strengthening NATO cohesion, revitalizing transatlantic dialogue, and expanding coalitions with democratic partners in Asia such as Japan, India, and Australia. Rather than shouldering unilateral burdens, Washington would invest in institutional innovation, reforming the UN, WTO, and climate governance frameworks, while building “clubs” of democracies to set standards in technology, security, and economics. By embedding leadership in multilateral structures, the U.S. could extend its influence by legitimacy rather than coercion.

The strength of this approach lies in its ability to counterbalance authoritarian blocs by offering a compelling, inclusive vision of governance and prosperity. Shared leadership reduces overextension by distributing burdens, while maintaining the liberal order’s normative appeal. However, it requires compromises that the U.S. has historically resisted, greater policy coordination with allies, willingness to subordinate unilateral preferences to collective decisions, and acceptance of reduced absolute dominance. In the Trump era, where skepticism toward multilateralism is strong, this direction appears less likely in practice, yet it remains the most viable path to sustaining long-term systemic legitimacy.

#### **5. Technological Hegemony and Norm-Setting**

Regardless of political leadership, one of the most sustainable paths for U.S. influence lies in maintaining technological hegemony and the ability to shape global norms. By leading in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotechnology, and renewable energy systems, the U.S. can preserve a disproportionate share of global power even in a multipolar environment. Control over critical supply chains (semiconductors, rare earths, digital infrastructure) allows Washington to wield leverage that transcends geography. Furthermore, by setting international standards in data governance, cyber norms, and green transition policies, the U.S. can establish itself as the central regulatory and technological hub of the global economy.

The advantage of technological hegemony is that it does not require the same degree of military dominance or constant crisis intervention; influence is exercised through networks, platforms, and standardization. Yet, the strategy demands sustained investment in R&D, strong partnerships with allies to maintain secure supply chains, and robust protection against intellectual theft. If the U.S. fails to protect its innovation ecosystem or cedes standard-setting to China, its technological edge could erode quickly, leaving it vulnerable to relative decline. In this sense, the race for technological supremacy is not just an economic contest but the decisive battleground for defining the future global order.

## CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of the international order in the 2020s illustrates a moment of acute systemic vulnerability, where overlapping crises converge with structural transformations of power. The analytical paradigms of the Perfect Storm, the Crises' Decade, and the Permacerisis provide useful lenses through which to interpret the volatility of contemporary geopolitics. Each framework highlights different temporalities of disruption, short, medium, and long term, and each suggests distinct implications for governance, resilience, and the capacity of states to adapt. For the United States, the challenge lies not only in navigating the immediate turbulence but also in anticipating the enduring consequences of a world in transition from one order to another.

At the core of this transition stands the question of American leadership. Revisionist actors, rising authoritarian coordination, and the erosion of liberal-democratic consensus have destabilized the foundations of the U.S.-led order. The Trump administration's embrace of transactional bilateral/minilateral underscores the fragility of traditional alliance systems, even as the United States retains unparalleled military, technological, and financial assets. The key issue is no longer whether the U.S. can remain powerful, but whether it can sustain legitimacy and cohesion as the anchor of global stability. The decline in trust, both at home and abroad, risks hollowing out the very basis of hegemonic endurance.

Looking forward, several trajectories remain possible. Selective engagement may preserve American primacy in critical theaters, but at the cost of abandonment elsewhere. Transactional minilateralism delivers tactical advantages but undermines long-term credibility. Retrenchment promises domestic renewal yet risks creating strategic vacuums easily exploited by adversaries. Shared leadership offers the most sustainable basis for legitimacy, though it requires concessions that run counter to current political currents in Washington. Finally, technological hegemony stands as the most enduring and plausible instrument of U.S. influence, enabling agenda-setting power without the need for perpetual military intervention.

What ultimately unites these scenarios is the recognition that the United States cannot escape systemic transformation. Whether through a perfect storm, crisis's decade, or permacerisis, the future global order will be marked by fragmentation, uncertainty, and competition. The extent to which Washington can adapt, by balancing domestic renewal with credible external commitments, by investing in technological supremacy, and by rebuilding alliances on more equitable foundations, will determine whether the U.S. remains a central architect of world politics or is relegated to one power among many. In this sense, the present turbulence is both a threat and an opportunity: it may erode the remnants of unipolarity, but it also compels the innovation and coalition-building necessary to shape a new, more resilient order.

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# ANALYSIS OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN ROMANIA<sup>1</sup>

*Laurențiu PETRILA\**  
*Felix-Angel POPESCU\*\**  
*Ana Maria COATU\*\*\**

**Abstract.** *The analysis of the electoral promises formulated in the 2012 campaign reveals a remarkable convergence towards a few dominant themes that reflect both the structural deficiencies of regional development in Romania and the politicians' perception of the electorate's expectations. The result was, almost invariably, the transition of these commitments to the register of promises without consequences, with a high reputational cost and with the side effect of disturbing the rational prioritization of budgets. Beyond individual failures and cases of corruption, the analysis reveals deep systemic problems. that transcend political affiliation or regional specifics.*

**Keywords:** *local, governance, electoral, promises, county, councils, Romania.*

## INTRODUCTION. THE ANATOMY OF ELECTORAL PROMISES BETWEEN NECESSITY AND IMAGE

Road infrastructure appears as a quasi-universal promise, being explicitly mentioned by almost all the candidates analyzed. This omnipresence of the infrastructure theme is not surprising, given that at that time, according to data from the European Statistical Institute, Romania ranked last in the European Union in terms of the number of kilometers of motorway per thousand square kilometers (Stancu, 2011).

Beyond road infrastructure, the promises converge on several other main axes: the modernization of water and sewage systems, the development of county health infrastructure, attracting European funds and creating jobs. On the one hand, what is surprising in this list is the elementary nature of many promises, ensuring access to drinking water and sewage in the 21st century should have represented a fundamental obligation rather than a development vision. These promises represent, on the one hand, the minimum response to the historical gap in basic infrastructure and to the social pressure for functional public services.

On the other hand, it betrays the absence of a development vision that goes beyond the level of utilities and curative assistance. In administrative practice, precisely these promises, although apparently modest, have been more frequently fulfilled or pushed into

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\* Ph.D. Lecturer, University of Oradea, Department of International Relations and European Studies, Oradea, Romania. E-mail: [lauren.petrila@gmail.com](mailto:lauren.petrila@gmail.com).

\*\* Ph.D Lecturer, Agora University of Oradea, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Oradea, Romania. E-mail: [felixangelpopescu@gmail.com](mailto:felixangelpopescu@gmail.com).

\*\*\* Ph.D. Assistant, Agora University of Oradea, Faculty of Economic Sciences, Oradea, Romania. E-mail: [anamaria.coatu@gmail.com](mailto:anamaria.coatu@gmail.com).

tangible phases of execution, as they align with the legal powers of the county councils, lend themselves to standardized European funding and can be implemented through consolidated inter-community development consortia and associations.

In contrast to these promises related to needs, we can also distinguish a series of image promises such as new airports, light rail, multiple industrial parks announced simultaneously, mega-tourism events without logistical and brand support, which functioned more as rhetorical tools than as projects. They generated, statistically, almost all of the disappointments with visibility, either because they exceeded the competence and real leverage of a county council, or because they were announced in the absence of pre-feasibility and feasibility documentation, sources of co-financing and any anchoring in national master plans.

A particularly relevant aspect is the discrepancy between the promises made and the specific potential of each county. The detailed analysis of the report highlights that the counties with remarkable tourism potential, such as Harghita, Covasna or Maramureș, had candidates who almost completely ignored this dimension in their electoral promises. Similarly, counties with a solid industrial tradition, such as Hunedoara or Galați, did not benefit from coherent promises regarding industrial reconversion or the development of modern economic clusters. This lack of correlation between local resources and strategic vision suggests a superficial understanding of regional development dynamics.

### **RECURRING PATTERNS IN THE FULFILLMENT OF PROMISES**

The stratification of performance in fulfilling electoral promises at county level, viewed as a whole and over the entire 2012–2016 cycle, reveals a surprisingly stable internal order, despite the political and judicial turbulence characterized in particular by the breakup of the coalition that had won these elections. The dissensions between the PNL and PSD that emerged during the Ponta government led in February 2014 to the exit of the liberals from the government and the intensification of political conflicts (RadioJurnal, 2014). A hierarchy of administrative capacity clearly emerges that transcends political affiliations and geography, producing three relatively coherent functional blocks.

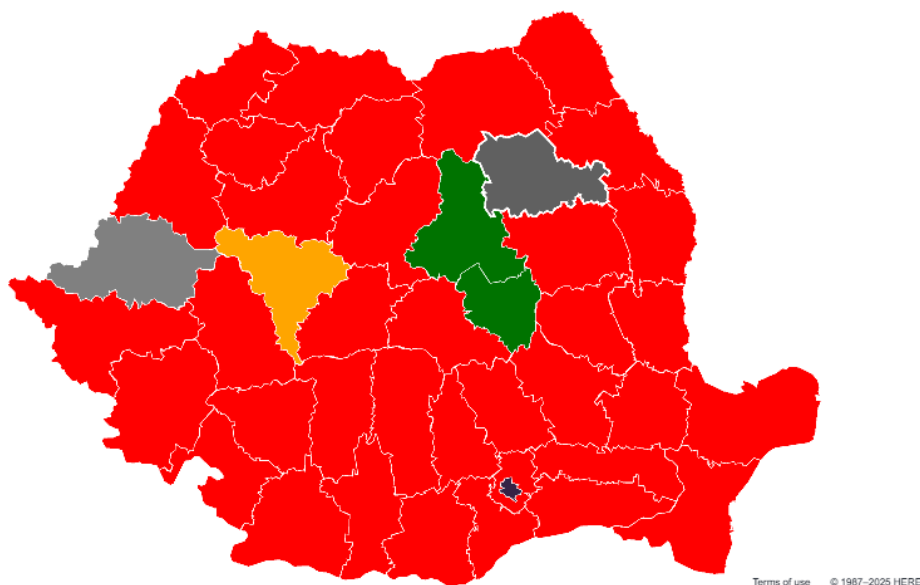
The first block, of operational performers, concentrates those county councils that have transformed promises into portfolios of fundable projects and, more importantly, into completed or highly executed works. The second block, of partial implementers, delivered punctual results with visibility, but failed structural promises or those that called for multi-annual coherence and inter-institutional coordination. The last block, of underperformers, remained captive to a toxic mix of unrealistic promises, vulnerability to integrity shocks and inability to govern large projects. This stratification is not just a snapshot of the past, but a map of risks and opportunities for the following cycles, as the defining features of each category prove persistent (Brie, 2025).

The assessment of the degree of fulfillment of electoral promises reveals complex patterns that transcend the simple success-failure dichotomy. First, a strong correlation is observed between administrative continuity and the rate of project completion. Presidents in their second or third consecutive mandate, such as Paul Stănescu in Olt or Marian Opreșan in Vrancea, show significantly higher project completion rates. In the case of the latter, beyond the fulfillment of specific campaign promises, the emphasis fell on infrastructure rehabilitation and modernization projects, which places him among the few candidates who fulfilled his promises punctually, according to the report (Ratiu Center for Democracy et al., 2017). In some cases, however, some of the promises made during the 2012 campaign had been initiated in previous mandates and presented as "new" promises.

A particularly interesting pattern is the phenomenon that we can call "promise substitution". In cases where original promises have proven unachievable or politicians have been faced with legal or financial constraints, we observe a tendency to present as achievements projects that had not been mentioned in the electoral campaign. This post-factum communication strategy is evident in cases such as that of Nicolae Dobrovici Bacalbaşa in Galaţi or Adrian Țuțuianu in Dâmbovița, where the lack of promised achievements is rhetorically compensated by highlighting secondary or complementary projects.

Out of 41 counties, USL won 36 of the county council presidencies, an impressive record that ensured the political alliance almost complete control. The next party was UDMR which won the presidencies of Harghita and Covasna counties. PDL had a single representative in Alba county, while in Arad county the Christian-Liberal Movement won, and in Neamț county the county council president represented the European Progressive Liberal People's Electoral Alliance (<https://istoric.rezultatevot.ro/elections/101/results?division=county>) [01.09.2025].

Map of the electoral results of the 2012 local elections. County council presidents.



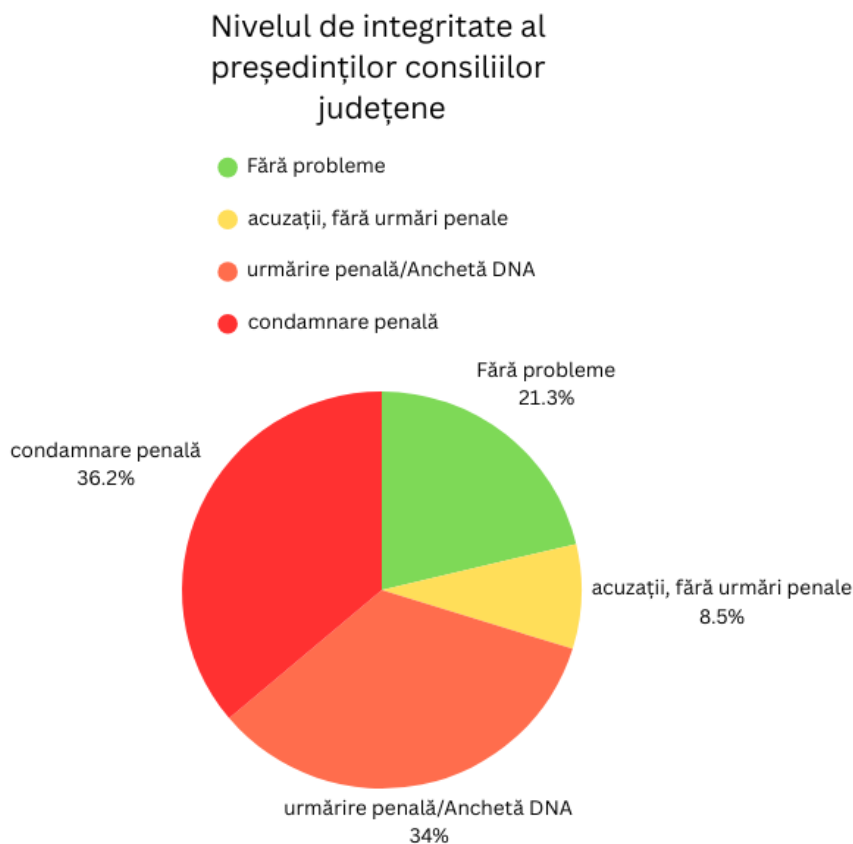
Source: rezultatevot.ro

The comparative analysis by political criteria reveals that there is no significant difference between political parties in terms of the rate of fulfillment of promises. The USL (Social Liberal Union) candidates, although they dominated the 2012 elections, do not have a higher success rate than the opposition in implementing their promises. This suggests that local governance problems transcend political affiliation and are rather related to individual administrative capacity and systemic pathologies of the Romanian public administration.

## CORRUPTION AS A DETERMINING FACTOR OF ADMINISTRATIVE FAILURE

Perhaps the most disturbing finding of the report is the extraordinary prevalence of criminal problems among county council presidents. A 2015 article reported that 24 county council presidents have problems with the law, having either been convicted or investigated by the DNA, or declared incompatible or in conflict of interest by the ANI (Ziare.com, 2015). In the meantime, the number has increased, and according to the updated analysis, 70% of the county council presidents monitored have had problems with the justice system, 36.2% having been convicted of corruption, influence peddling or abuse of office, and the remaining 34% having only been investigated by the DNA or put under criminal prosecution. In the case of the latter, the cases were most often dismissed due to the fact that the acts were time-barred, but in some cases the files are still pending, which increases the chances that they will fall into the first category.

**Chart no. 1.** Integrity level of the chairmen of the County Councils.



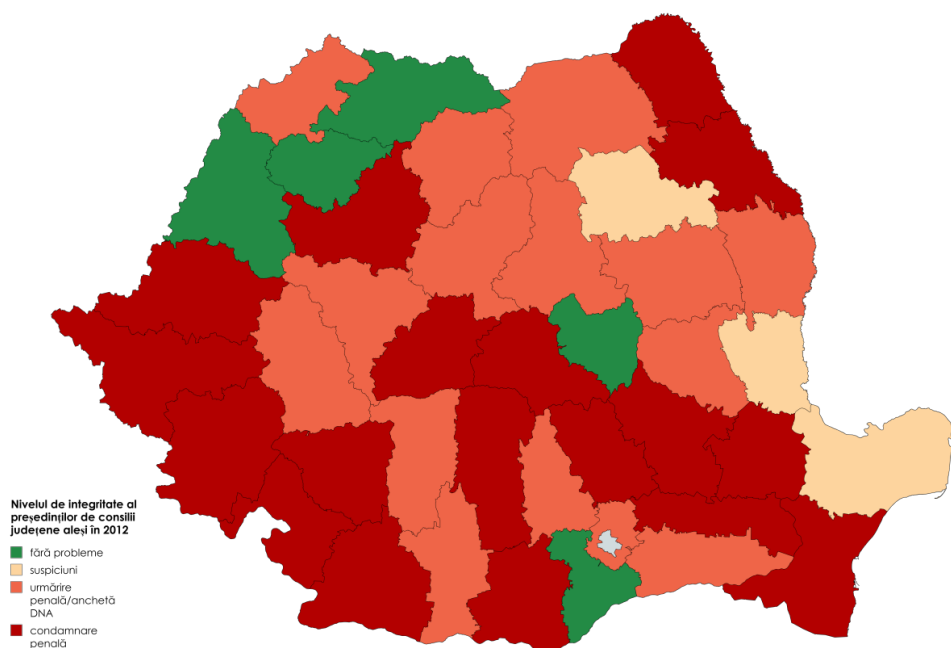
*Source:* the authors of this paper

It should be noted that the data was updated for the situation in 2025, in the report prepared by the Rațiu Center for Democracy and the Resource Center for Public Participation some of the politicians still appear as being under criminal prosecution, the

conviction occurring only in recent years. In addition to these, there is a percentage of 8.5% of politicians who, although they did not end up being put under criminal prosecution, were linked to scandals that significantly tarnished their image and cast a shadow on their integrity. Only the remaining 21.3% managed not to tarnish their name, maintaining a relatively moral and professional conduct over time. This shocking statistic does not only represent a moral failure of the political class, but has profound implications for administrative capacity and regional development.

Taking a look at the administrative map of the country, we notice that out of 41 county council presidents elected in 2012, an impressive 33 were either convicted or investigated. Unfortunately, only 5 county presidents managed to avoid problems with the law and not be involved in corruption scandals.

Administrative map of Romania illustrating the level of integrity of county council presidents elected in 2012.



Source: author of the paper

The corruption mechanisms identified show remarkable uniformity: preferential awarding of contracts to close companies, employing relatives in public positions, using public resources for personal gain, and creating conflicts of interest by owning shares in companies that contract with the state. The case of Constantin Nicolescu from Argeș, sentenced to 9 and a half years in prison for defrauding European funds, or that of Adrian Duicu from Mehedinți, investigated for multiple corruption offenses, illustrates not only the scale of the phenomenon, but also the sophistication of the mechanisms for embezzling public money.

Another example is that of the President of the Buzău County Council, Marian Cristinel Bîgiu, who was finally sentenced to five years and two months in prison for bribery only in December 2016. He was in pre-trial detention for almost six months, starting in December 2014, but once the Călărași Tribunal ordered the judicial control measure, it allowed him to return to work for a short time, ultimately requiring a judicial interdiction to prohibit him from exercising his function (Sterian, 2018).

Often, convictions came only at the end of his mandate or a few years after its end. An example in this regard is Nicușor Constantinescu, finally sentenced in 2019 by the High Court of Cassation and Justice to ten years in prison in the case in which he was accused of having paid 30 million lei from the County Council budget for the planting of forest curtains and for other projects that were not carried out (Free Europe, 2020). In turn, the former Minister of Education and former president of the Iași County Council, Cristian Adominte, was sentenced only in 2020 to 3 years and 2 months in prison for committing the crimes of aiding and abetting the perpetrator and intellectual forgery, committed when he was president of the Iași County Council (Free Europe, 2020).

Examples include Adrian Duicu, former head of the Mehedinți County Council, who was sentenced only in 2020 to a year and a half of suspended imprisonment (Budușan, 2020), while the former president of the Gorj County Council (CJ) Ion Călinoiu was sentenced to four months of suspended imprisonment for repeated false statements (Viteanu, 2016).

In some cases, the files opened during Laura Codruța Kovesi's mandate as DNA chief prosecutor were closed after 2018. Among these cases are the former president of CL Dolj Ion Prioteasa (Costache, 2020) or the president of Ilfov County Council, Marian Petrache, accused of bribery and blackmail (Sârbu, 2018).

In some cases, politicians escape punishment due to the statute of limitations. An example of this is the former president of the Prahova County Court, Mircea Cosma, who was sentenced to eight years in prison in November 2016 by a panel of three judges from the High Court of Justice. However, the appeal requested a retrial, and the Prahova Court ended up ordering the termination of the criminal trial due to the statute of limitations (AP, 2023).

The inverse relationship between lack of integrity and administrative performance is noticeable. Cases of incompatibility, conflict of interest, bribery, influence peddling and abuse of office have not only impacted ethically, but have also directly disrupted project governance, budgetary discipline and the cohesion of the technical apparatus.

Projects blocked or delayed due to criminal investigations have generated huge opportunity costs for local communities. Where presidents have been criminally investigated, the same recurring scenario is observed, which includes an increase in decision-making uncertainty and a tendency to prioritize projects with the potential to smear the image at the expense of those with a real impact on development. The phenomenon of contracts for just a few kilometers of asphalt road, inaugurated with pomp by the entire leadership of the county council, perfectly illustrates this perversion of administrative priorities. These risks becoming a political survival strategy, which absorbs institutional energy (Stoica, 2025).

Along with the evolution of criminal investigations comes the period of interims and the fragmentation of majorities in the council, which blocks allocations, re-quotes, work supplements and, ultimately, leads to missing the European absorption windows. Cluj County, for example, stagnated significantly during the period when Horea Uioreanu

was under preventive arrest, losing opportunities for financing and development. He was definitively sentenced to 6 years in prison in 2018 (Badea, 2018).

Financial corrections, prolonged appeals, contract terminations and court backlogs produce a ripple effect. The cost of the lost opportunity becomes difficult to quantify: projects worth tens of millions of euros remain unfinished, and qualified personnel migrate to more stable entities. This pattern, repeated in numerous counties, confirms that integrity is, in practice, a condition of institutional functionality, not just a virtue.

### **EUROPEAN FUNDS: BETWEEN OPPORTUNITY AND MIRAGE**

Attracting European funds was one of the universal promises of the 2012 campaign, reflecting both the opportunities offered by EU membership and the awareness of national budgetary limitations. However, a detailed analysis of the report reveals a nuanced and often disappointing picture of the absorption capacity of European funds at the county level (Gaidoș, 2025).

Counties with notable performances in attracting European funds, such as Bihor, Sibiu or Sălaj, share several common characteristics: administrative continuity, the existence of teams specialized in the management of European projects and, perhaps most importantly, the absence of major criminal problems in the leadership of the county council. The contrast with counties such as Vaslui, where administrative incompetence combined with systemic corruption to generate losses of tens of millions of euros in European funds, is edifying.

A particularly relevant aspect is the time lag between the promise of attracting European funds and the actual capacity to implement projects. Many of the projects presented as achievements in the 2012-2016 period had in fact been contracted in the previous programming period (2007-2013), and new applications submitted after 2012 were only starting to generate concrete results towards the end of the mandate. This temporal reality is rarely communicated to the electorate, generating unrealistic expectations and public frustration.

The capacity to absorb EU funds significantly contributes to the ability of county councils to implement the promises made during the electoral campaign. The capacity to absorb EU funds is emerging as the most predictive factor for the fulfillment of promises. High-performing counties share dedicated organizational architectures, with professional project management units, standardized procurement procedures, robust internal control and a culture of proactive portfolio preparation.

In these administrations, major projects have been matured since the previous term, and the new electoral cycle inaugurated serial execution: county roads in logical segments, outpatient clinics and hospital wards in the network, transfer stations and SMID infrastructures, integrated water and sewage networks through regional operators.

On the other hand, counties with poor absorption share the same symptoms. Tenders are launched late or with incomplete documentation, clarifications, appeals and cancellations multiply, and the procedures resume the cycle without institutional learning. Co-financing is not ensured in multi-annual budgets, and collaboration with regional operators is tense. The lack of routine in design, management and control makes projects fail not at the technical stages, but at the governance stage.

### **POLITICAL CLIENTELISM AND ASYMMETRIC DEVELOPMENT**

Another relevant pattern is political competition for allocations within the county. There is a perception, often well-founded, that county council presidents tend to

systematically favor localities led by mayors from the same political party or their areas of origin, ensuring them more funding for roads, water and sewerage or school rehabilitation. This politicization of resources undermines county cohesion and creates enclaves of modernization. In terms of fulfilling promises, this pattern produces an uneven distribution of achievements. Achievements accumulate in political islands, and the rest of the territory internalizes a justified cynicism.

A study conducted by Expert-Grup reveals that, during the electoral period, localities whose mayor was affiliated with the government received 2.3 to 2.6 times more financial allocations than those led by opposition mayors. Political clientelism generates the migration of mayors from one political party to another, being closely linked to the phenomenon of party politics (Anticoruptie.md, 2020).

The mechanisms through which this clientelism operates are varied: from the preferential allocation of funds for infrastructure to the prioritization of certain localities in European-funded projects. The case of Bihor County, where the opposition constantly accused the allocation of funds on political criteria, or that of Argeș, where the president of the county council was nicknamed "*the neighbor*" due to the multiple properties owned in the county, illustrate the extent of the phenomenon (Ratiu Center for Democracy et al., 2017:10).

The consequences of this clientelism are profound and long-lasting. Politically "punished" localities accumulate development deficits that become increasingly difficult to recover, generating internal migration and depopulation. Moreover, this practice undermines trust in institutions and fuels cycles of political revenge upon changes of power, preventing the development of coherent long-term strategies.

### TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL PATTERNS

An internal delivery schedule is also outlined, valid in most cases, reflecting administrative inertia, budget cycles and political logic. The first 18 months of the mandate focus on the results of previously prepared projects, when teams find documentation, approvals and open funding lines on the table. At this stage, inaugurations and receptions seem to flow, and campaign promises stick to planned achievements in the previous cycle. In the next twenty or so months, the pace drops dramatically, partly due to the complexity of the award and execution phases and partly due to exogenous shocks, such as the breakup of the governing alliance, which redrawn majorities at the county level and fueled an internal competition for resources. Towards the end, electoral pressure revives a wave of inaugurations, but this often covers works with a local impact or intermediate phases of large projects. In practice, few manage to break this cyclicity, and those who do have invested, constantly and discreetly, in the professionalization of the technical apparatus, in a project pipeline, and in the continuity of the teams.

There is also a geography of performance that is not sufficiently explained by the level of development. The North-West region is distinguished by an institutional culture oriented towards European projects and inter-county cooperation, while the South and North-East concentrate more administrations vulnerable to integrity shocks and limited technical capabilities.

An article by Ibinceanu et al. analyzes the regional situation up to 2016, showing that the South-West Oltenia and North-East regions were below 45% and 36% of the EU average GDP, respectively. In contrast, the West, Center and North-West regions



performed better, and Bucharest–Ilfov recorded the fastest GDP per capita growth in the EU (Ibinceanu et al., 2021).

Other sources also highlight that the West and Central regions have become industrialized and urban centers, while the South and East, predominantly rural, experience major gaps, especially in economic development and territorial cohesion (Mitrică et al., 2020:23).

There are positive contagion effects, so that neighboring counties with performers adopt similar practices, standards and tools, creating corridors of good practices. This is not just an academic curiosity, but a pragmatic invitation to replicate successful models on short administrative routes, rather than seeking miraculous solutions in the legislature.

### **CATEGORIES OF PROMISES AND THEIR FULFILLMENT RATE**

If we were to extract a taxonomy of promises based on the rate of achievement, we would see a clear gradient. Local road infrastructure works, rehabilitations and punctual modernizations have the greatest chance of completion within four years, because they are modularizable, have well-known technical standards and are financeable through established European lines or predictable national programs. Health modernizations involving facilities and outpatient clinics fall into the area of relative success, because they allow for the fragmentation of investments and can be delivered without massively depending on additional human resources. In contrast, water and sewage networks, where regional operators do not have a solid institutional design, suffer from a lack of synchronization between design, execution and operation, and the dependence on lengthy approvals and authorizations pushes deadlines beyond the electoral cycle.

Economic development and jobs represent the most rhetorical terrain and the poorest in direct results. Without regional fiscal instruments and no explicit competences in industrial strategies, county administrations have few levers to support net job creation, and where the narrative has translated into reality it has been due to the happy alignment of infrastructure, human capital and proximity to dynamic urban poles rather than a local magic formula. Tourism, despite the consistent potential of many counties, has remained the least fruitful promise, in the absence of an integrated approach that combines access, reception infrastructure, brand and a calendar of events with critical mass. Specific investments have been made, but without a coherent strategy, the effects have been dispersed.

Strategic coherence appears as another Achilles' heel. Few administrations have managed to insert promises into a clear public policy architecture, with measurable objectives, deadlines and credible budgetary vectors. Much more frequently, commitments have been formulated in the form of long, heterogeneous lists, with disparate objectives and without an order of priorities. This lack of strategic discipline has generated a dilution effect of efforts, in which too many projects started simultaneously fight for resources and management. When a volatile political context is superimposed on this, the daily order of political survival inevitably undermines the multi-annual perspective. Several county council presidents have compensated by institutionalizing a phased project portfolio and by publishing periodic reports to track the status of works, budget execution and result indicators. This transparency has functioned not only as a communication tool, but as an internal discipline, forcing the apparatus to report and correct deviations.

A persistent structural problem is the absence of organizational learning. Failures in one mandate are not systematically processed to rewrite the way of promise and implementation in the next. The same promises are repeated without local feasibility, the same explanations for failures are recycled, and the same patterns of tenders and appeals are resumed, as if time does not extract lessons. In a few administrations, this blindness has been broken by creating management units with institutional memory and by stabilizing careers around projects, but, on average, political turbulence and the attraction of the private sector to specialists undermine the construction of an administrative tradition.

The dependence on the central level produces another paradox. Many promises, especially those with media coverage, are in reality pleas for budgets or investments managed by ministries, national companies or agencies. This deliberate or not confusion between the role of operator and that of political advocate turns against the promiser. The electorate judges the results, not the institutional nuances, and when the highway or the bypass does not appear, the bill is placed on the account of the one who promised, not on the complicated division of competences. Where local leaders have simultaneously built a realistic portfolio on their own competences, expectations have been managed much more healthily.

An aspect often ignored in the public debate is the differential impact of the socio-economic context. It is true that counties with dynamic economies and rich human capital benefit from a comparative advantage in implementing promises, but the final difference is not determined by the context, but by the quality of governance. This is demonstrated by counties that, under similar starting conditions, have large divergences in results after four years. What made the difference was the professionalization of the apparatus, realistic planning, the integrity of the leaders and the ability to learn from mistakes in real time.

If we narrow the perspective to the internal mechanisms of a county administration that manages to fulfill its promises, the profile is remarkably homogeneous. At the top stands a leader who understands the difference between what he can operate directly and what he can influence through advocacy, who refuses to promise miracles and publicly assumes the realistic project calendar. Under him operates a project management unit that acts as a programming and tracking office, not as a formal department. Public procurement is treated as a critical business function, not as a bureaucratic chore. Legal is involved ex-ante, in drafting documentation and anticipating appeals, not just ex-post. Internal control reports along the way, not just at the end, so that slippages are corrected before they have significant consequences. Public communication is anchored in indicators, project maps and deadlines. Finally, the relationship with regional operators and ADIs is not formal, but one of co-governance, with arbitration mechanisms and transparency on financial flows.

In the mirror, administrations that fail to deliver look just as predictable. Leaders promise what they cannot deliver, intentionally or unintentionally confuse institutional roles, delay the preparation of documentation, do not assume co-financing, use the technical apparatus as a political appendage, rely on loyalties instead of skills, and treat integrity as an image issue, not an efficiency one. From here follows a chain of functional failures: problems with tenders, contractors who abandon work, necessary corrections for European projects, projects re-tendered after the funding window has been missed, losses of highly qualified personnel, and, finally, a list of promises that moves intact into the program of the next electoral cycle.

Subtly, but essentially, the role of political stability is also seen. Majority changes in county councils, especially when they are the result of the disintegration of national alliances, decisively slow down implementation. Any reset of power relations requires

renegotiations of priority lists, restarts discussions with suppliers and pushes back critical stages of projects. Where a minimum of political cohesion was maintained around the investment portfolio, even in conditions of electoral competition, the implementation effort continued, and the promises had an institutional, not partisan trajectory.

## **POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND MANIPULATION OF PUBLIC PERCEPTION**

The report's analysis reveals sophisticated strategies for manipulating public perception, which go beyond simple unfulfilled promises. A recurring tactic is the repeated inauguration of the same objectives, presented at different stages of execution as distinct achievements. County roads, in particular, are susceptible to this form of manipulation, being "inaugurated" successively upon pouring the first layer of asphalt, upon completion of markings, and upon final acceptance.

Another strategy identified is that of "transfer of responsibility", whereby failures are systematically attributed to the central government (invariably of a different political color), while achievements, however modest, are presented as personal successes. This rhetoric, evident in the statements of Paul Stănescu from Olt or Titu Bojin from Timiș, creates a narrative in which the president of the county council is permanently in battle with hostile external forces, thus legitimizing his own failures.

The selective use of statistical data is another form of manipulation identified. Presidents frequently present global amounts invested without detailing the nature or real impact of the investments, or use misleading units of measurement (kilometers of road "rehabilitated" can mean anything from filling potholes to completely rebuilding the road structure). Quite a few administrations have insistently communicated ongoing projects as if they were completed or have mixed initiatives financed and implemented by other authorities into their own balance sheets. This inflated balance sheets produces reputational costs in the medium term, when the physical reality of the works contradicts the rhetoric. Administrations that preferred a sober register, oriented towards result indicators, have built more robust trust, which has allowed them to manage failures without political collapse.

## **POSITIVE EXCEPTIONS AND BEST PRACTICE LESSONS**

Despite the overall bleak picture, the report also identifies some examples of good practice that are worth highlighting. Tiberiu Marc from Sălaj stands out for its administrative transparency, with all annual reports being publicly available and easily accessible. Tamás Sándor from Covasna, despite facing challenges specific to a county with a large ethnic minority, managed to implement significant development projects without being involved in major corruption scandals. These positive exceptions share several common characteristics that could form the basis for systemic reforms: proactive administrative transparency, genuine consultation with local communities, focus on projects with measurable impact and, perhaps most importantly, a clear separation between personal/political interests and administrative responsibilities.

## **CONCLUSIONS. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNANCE**

The comprehensive analysis of the performance of county council presidents in the period 2012-2016 offers valuable insights into the dynamics of local governance in post-communist democracies that impose three lessons. The first says that promises must be made in the vocabulary of institutional competence, that is, they must be formulated as

operational objectives within the scope of control of the county council, with budget annexes, deadlines and result indicators. Anything beyond this scope can be assumed as an advocacy priority, but not as a delivery commitment. The second sets integrity as a determinant of performance and treats prevention as a public policy. Integrity tests, procurement transparency, preventive control and whistleblower protection are instruments of operational efficiency, not just of public morale. The third claims professionalization as a current investment, not as a sporadic project. A career in public project management must be possible and attractive in the county administration, otherwise the skills deficit will deepen with each cycle, and promises will dissolve into the habit of failure.

Many county administrations have fallen into the middle capability trap, where institutions have enough capacity to maintain the appearance of functionality, but not enough to generate real and sustainable development. The increased pressure to deliver results leads to the use of shortcuts and a focus on short-term strategies, which affects administrative capacity in the medium and long term, causing the cycle to repeat itself.

The behavior of county council presidents confirms predictions regarding the maximization of personal utility at the expense of the public interest. The prevalence of corruption and clientelism suggests that current institutional incentives fail to align the personal interests of decision-makers with those of the communities they represent.

The analysis also reveals a fundamental problem of information asymmetry between voters and elected officials. The complexity of development projects, combined with administrative opacity and manipulation of public communication, makes it extremely difficult for citizens to truly assess administrative performance. This asymmetry is systematically exploited by politicians to ensure their re-election despite mediocre or even disastrous performances.

Electoral promises, for the most part, reflect basic development needs rather than strategic visions for the future. The fact that in 2012 candidates were still promising running water and sanitation as major achievements underscores Romania's dramatic development gap compared to European standards.

The extraordinarily high rate of criminal problems among county council presidents, with over 60% having problems with the justice system, is perhaps the most serious finding of the study. This reality not only undermines development by blocking or diverting resources, but fundamentally erodes public trust in institutions and the democratic process itself.

The experience of the 2012-2016 period suggests the need for deep structural reforms. First, it is imperative to strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms, including through mandatory and standardized publication of all information on budget execution and project status. Second, institutional incentives need to be revised to more effectively penalize corruption and clientelism, possibly by introducing performance evaluation mechanisms independent of the electoral cycle.

Finally, perhaps the most important lesson of this analysis is the need for a profound cultural shift in understanding the role of local public administration. As long as leadership positions in local administration are perceived primarily as opportunities for personal enrichment or the exercise of clientelistic power, Romania will continue to lag behind European development, despite the considerable resources available through structural and cohesion funds.

In the absence of an alchemy between realistic promises, integrity and professionalism, the probability that the following cycles will repeat the same scenarios remains high. But in the few places where this alchemy has been tried, the results have

been tangibly seen. County roads rehabilitated on complete and coherent corridors, equipped and functional outpatient clinics, waste systems that actually operate, modernized airports with growing traffic, water and sewage networks connecting tens of thousands of households, rehabilitated and operationalized social centers. There, the promises were no longer simple electoral texts, but governance propositions, written in the language of deliverables, not applause. And this is, after all, the only meaning that matters.

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## ETHICAL GOVERNANCE IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

Marco MARSILI\*

**Abstract.** *This paper examines the ethical and political implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in governance, with a focus on the Western Balkans in the broader context of European integration and democratic transformation. AI technologies increasingly shape decision-making, policy implementation, and public discourse, offering opportunities for efficiency, transparency, and citizen participation. Yet they also raise significant risks of surveillance, algorithmic bias, and reduced accountability, particularly in regions facing fragile democratic institutions, ethnic diversity, and complex security challenges. Drawing on political philosophy, ethical theory, and contemporary debates in digital governance, this study develops a normative framework for ethical AI adoption grounded in democratic values and human rights. Empirical references to governance practices in the Western Balkans, alongside comparative insights from Central and Eastern Europe, highlight both regional vulnerabilities and potential pathways for responsible AI integration. The paper argues for cross-border cooperation, civil society involvement, and policy harmonization with EU standards as essential conditions for building ethical AI governance. By addressing both risks and opportunities, it contributes to debates on democratization, security management, and the role of emerging technologies in shaping the future of governance.*

**Keywords:** *Artificial Intelligence; Ethical Governance; Western Balkans; Democratization; European Integration*

### INTRODUCTION

The accelerating integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into governance structures raises pressing ethical and political questions, especially in transitional and geopolitically sensitive regions such as the Western Balkans. In societies where democratic institutions are still consolidating and where the legacy of conflict and authoritarian governance remains palpable, the adoption of AI technologies may bring both opportunities for modernization and risks of reinforcing existing inequalities or enabling new forms of control. As Floridi (2019) has argued, AI poses unique challenges to the “infosphere”, demanding ethical frameworks that transcend technical issues and address broader concerns about autonomy, dignity, and justice. In this sense, the Western Balkans offer an important case study for assessing how ethical governance of AI can be aligned with the region’s democratization, European integration, and security imperatives.

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\* Assistant Professor PhD, Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage University of Venice, Italy, E-mail: [info@marcomarsili.it](mailto:info@marcomarsili.it).

The European Union (EU) has sought to position itself as a normative leader in the global governance of AI, developing regulatory instruments such as the proposed *Artificial Intelligence Act* (AI Act) and the *Digital Services Act* (DSA Act), which aim to balance innovation with the protection of fundamental rights. Yet, as Jobin, Ienca, and Vayena (2019) demonstrate in their comparative survey of global AI ethics guidelines, a proliferation of principles does not automatically translate into effective governance, particularly in contexts where institutional capacity is weak or political will is fragmented. The Western Balkans, situated at the crossroads of European, Russian, and Chinese spheres of influence, illustrate this tension vividly. Here, ethical governance of AI cannot be reduced to a checklist of values, but must be embedded within broader debates on sovereignty, democratic legitimacy, and the region's path toward EU integration.

The adoption of AI in governance promises certain advantages. Machine learning (ML) systems can enhance transparency in public administration, improve efficiency in service delivery, and strengthen mechanisms of accountability by detecting corruption or maladministration (Crawford, 2021). For societies in transition, where trust in institutions is often fragile, such technological affordances could support democratic consolidation. However, these opportunities are paralleled by profound risks. Algorithmic decision-making may replicate or even exacerbate existing social biases, erode privacy, and enable new forms of surveillance (Zuboff, 2019). Moreover, in a region marked by ethnical and confessional diversity, AI-driven governance could unintentionally magnify fault lines if not carefully managed.

From a normative perspective, the ethical governance of AI intersects with fundamental freedoms and rights. A previous study of the historical and contemporary trajectories of freedom of thought, emphasizes how digital technologies reshape not only the exercise of individual liberty but also the collective conditions of democratic life (Marsili, 2025a). This reflections resonate with the challenges faced by the Western Balkans, where fragile democratic institutions must contend with the dual pressures of digital transformation and external geopolitical competition. Ethical governance of AI in this context requires a commitment to safeguarding freedom of thought and information while resisting authoritarian temptations of control that emerging technologies may enable.

The geopolitical dimension is equally critical. As Nemitz (2018) has argued, the governance of digital technologies is not merely a technical or economic matter but a constitutional one, with implications for sovereignty, legitimacy, and human rights. In the Western Balkans, this dimension is magnified by external actors competing for influence. China's Digital Silk Road and Russia's information operations highlight how AI and digital infrastructures can become tools of soft power and hybrid warfare (Marsili, 2021). For states in the region, the challenge is not only to adopt ethical governance frameworks domestically but also to resist or navigate external pressures that may undermine democratic standards.

This paper seeks to contribute to these debates by examining the ethical and political implications of AI governance in the Western Balkans through the dual lenses of political philosophy and empirical developments in the region. It argues that while AI offers opportunities to strengthen transparency, efficiency, and democratic participation, it also carries significant risks of reinforcing authoritarian practices and deepening social divides. Addressing these challenges requires a governance approach that is both ethically robust and politically sensitive, attuned to the



specificities of the Western Balkans' democratic trajectories and their aspirations toward European integration.

The analysis unfolds in four sections. The first provides a theoretical and ethical framework, situating AI governance within broader debates on ethics, democracy, and human rights. The second examines the political and institutional context of the Western Balkans, highlighting opportunities and vulnerabilities in the adoption of AI technologies. The third explores case studies of AI applications in governance across the region, including digital identity systems, predictive policing, and e-government platforms. The fourth assesses policy implications, with particular attention to how regional cooperation and alignment with EU standards can ensure that AI development supports, rather than undermines, democratic governance. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for strengthening ethical governance in the Western Balkans, drawing on both theoretical insights and practical considerations.

Ultimately, this study aims to show that the ethical governance of AI is not merely a technical or regulatory concern, but a deeply political one, tied to questions of identity, legitimacy, and integration. For the Western Balkans, engaging critically with AI technologies is not only a matter of technological adoption but also of safeguarding democratic futures in an increasingly digital and contested global order.

## **1. THEORETICAL AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORK**

The ethical and political governance of Artificial Intelligence cannot be understood in isolation from broader theoretical debates on democracy, human rights, and the digital transformation of society. AI is not merely a technical tool but a socio-technical system that reflects, amplifies, and sometimes distorts the values and structures of the societies in which it is embedded. Any assessment of AI governance in the Western Balkans must therefore be situated within a normative framework that considers the role of technology in shaping political legitimacy, social cohesion, and the protection of fundamental rights.

At the most general level, the debate surrounding AI governance resonates with the philosophical concern over the relationship between human autonomy and external forms of control. Floridi (2019) has emphasized that the digital revolution is transforming the “infosphere”—the environment in which human life is increasingly lived—requiring an ethics that goes beyond traditional questions of responsibility or harm to encompass questions of agency, dignity, and justice. For Floridi, the ethical challenge lies not only in how AI makes decisions, but in how it reconfigures the conditions under which humans make their own. This shift demands a governance model that ensures AI systems respect and promote human flourishing rather than undermine it.

A related concern is the proliferation of ethical guidelines and principles without effective implementation. Jobin, Ienca, and Vayena (2019) documented the global landscape of AI ethics guidelines, highlighting broad convergence around principles such as transparency, justice, and accountability. Yet these principles are often aspirational, lacking mechanisms of enforcement or adaptation to specific political contexts. The Western Balkans illustrate this gap: while governments may adopt the rhetoric of ethical AI, the institutional weaknesses, corruption, and contested sovereignties characteristic of the region risk turning ethical principles into mere symbolic gestures. As such, the theoretical framework for analyzing AI

governance here must be attentive to the interplay between normative ideals and political realities.

The democratic implications of AI governance form a central dimension of this debate. As Nemitz (2018) has argued, the governance of digital technologies is not a technocratic question but a constitutional one, touching on the distribution of power and the protection of fundamental rights. In regions where democratic institutions are fragile, AI systems can either reinforce democratic accountability or provide new instruments of authoritarian control. The distinction depends on the values embedded in design, the transparency of implementation, and the safeguards for citizen participation. This makes the Western Balkans a critical site for examining how AI interacts with democratic consolidation and European integration.

Recent scholarship is particularly relevant here. Earlier research in *Libertà di pensiero nell'era digitale* (Marsili, 2025a) traces the genealogy of freedom of thought from antiquity to the digital age and shows how technological transformations continuously reshape individual autonomy and collective deliberation. In this perspective, the digital age presents both unprecedented opportunities for pluralism and significant risks of manipulation, surveillance, and erosion of critical reasoning. His analysis suggests that the ethical governance of AI must begin from the protection of cognitive freedom, understood not merely as the absence of coercion but as the active cultivation of conditions for informed and autonomous judgment. This perspective is vital for societies in the Western Balkans, where democratic cultures are still developing and where disinformation campaigns have repeatedly undermined public trust in institutions.

The question of freedom in the digital era also intersects with security. Earlier research in *Dal campo di battaglia al metaverso: la nuova frontiera delle operazioni militari* (Marsili, 2025b) shows how emerging technologies blur the boundaries between civilian and military domains, transforming cyberspace into a contested battlefield of narratives and perceptions. While his focus is on defense and hybrid warfare, the implications for AI governance are clear: technologies initially designed for efficiency or security can be repurposed for manipulation and control. In transitional societies with fragile democratic institutions, this risk is amplified. Ethical governance must therefore anticipate not only the intended uses of AI but also its potential misuses in the domains of propaganda, surveillance, and social control.

Earlier research on Europe's vulnerabilities in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war further underscores this point. In his analysis of the EU's geopolitical challenges (2023a), he emphasizes how information operations exploit democratic weaknesses and social divisions, undermining trust and resilience. Transposed to the debate on AI, this perspective highlights the necessity of embedding governance within a broader framework of cognitive resilience. It is not enough to regulate algorithms in the abstract; societies must cultivate the democratic capacities—such as media literacy, pluralism of voices, and participatory oversight—that allow citizens to critically engage with technologies and resist manipulation.

From an ethical standpoint, the Western Balkans present a particularly complex environment. The region's history of ethnical and confessional diversity creates both an opportunity and a challenge for AI governance. On one hand, AI systems designed to promote inclusivity and pluralism could help strengthen social cohesion and support democratic integration. On the other, if algorithms are trained on biased data or deployed without sensitivity to historical grievances, they risk

exacerbating divisions. As Crawford (2021) reminds us, AI is never neutral; it reflects the social, political, and economic structures that produce it. For the Western Balkans, ethical governance means ensuring that AI systems are not merely imported from external actors but adapted to the region's specific social realities.

This raises the issue of external influence. Both Russia and China have actively engaged in promoting digital infrastructures in the Western Balkans, often framing their involvement as support for modernization while embedding alternative governance logics. In this sense, the governance of AI becomes a question of geopolitical alignment: whether the region will adopt European models grounded in human rights and democratic values, or drift toward more authoritarian templates. Zuboff's (2019) concept of "surveillance capitalism" provides a useful warning here: when technologies are governed primarily by logics of control or profit extraction, they undermine democratic accountability and erode the very freedoms they promise to expand. The Western Balkans, caught between competing spheres of influence, must therefore be especially vigilant in adopting governance frameworks that resist both authoritarian and exploitative trajectories.

In theoretical terms, then, the ethical governance of AI in the Western Balkans can be understood as a contest between three logics: the logic of human rights and democracy, represented by the EU and supported by normative scholarship in this field; the logic of authoritarian control, exemplified by the technological models promoted by Russia and China; and the logic of market-driven surveillance, epitomized by global tech corporations and analyzed by Zuboff and Crawford. Navigating these competing logics requires not only sound regulation but also a robust ethical framework capable of integrating normative principles with empirical realities.

The Western Balkans' path toward European integration provides a critical opportunity to anchor AI governance in the first of these logics. Yet it is underscored in earlier research (Marsili, 2025a) that freedom of thought and democratic deliberation cannot be taken for granted; they must be actively protected and cultivated. Ethical governance of AI, therefore, is not simply about compliance with European regulations but about nurturing the democratic culture that makes such compliance meaningful. This involves embedding human-rights assessments into technology adoption, ensuring transparency and accountability in decision-making processes, and fostering regional cooperation to resist external pressures.

In conclusion, the theoretical and ethical framework for AI governance in the Western Balkans must combine normative commitments with political realism. It must recognize the transformative potential of AI while guarding against its risks, situating governance within the broader struggles for democracy, sovereignty, and integration. By drawing on philosophical insights (Floridi, 2019), global ethical guidelines (Jobin et al., 2019), critical analyses of digital capitalism (Zuboff, 2019; Crawford, 2021), and region-specific contributions (Marsili, 2023a; 2025a; 2025b), this framework provides the conceptual grounding for the subsequent sections of this paper. The ethical governance of AI in the Western Balkans is not a peripheral issue but a central question for the region's democratic future and its place in Europe.

**Figure 1.** Competing logics of AI governance in the Western Balkans: democratic-human rights logic (EU), authoritarian logic (Russia and China), and market-driven surveillance logic (global tech corporations).



## 2. AI AND GOVERNANCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The Western Balkans represent a region where democratic consolidation remains fragile and institutions are often caught between the aspirations of European integration and entrenched patterns of competitive authoritarianism. As Florian Bieber (2018, p. 338) demonstrates, governments across the region frequently combine electoral processes with illiberal practices, including media control, selective rule of law, and restricted civic space. In such contexts, the introduction of Artificial Intelligence into governance does not occur in a political vacuum: instead, it interacts with weak institutions and blurred boundaries between public interest and partisan control.

This institutional fragility raises profound questions about how AI might be deployed in governance. On the one hand, AI-driven tools for public administration—such as automated service delivery or predictive analytics in policymaking—could enhance efficiency and transparency. On the other hand, without strong safeguards, these same tools may reinforce existing power asymmetries, enabling new forms of surveillance or discrimination. Earlier research (Marsili, 2023b, p. 27) highlights that compliance with international law and ethical standards is essential if technological innovation is to align with democratic values.

The European Union has positioned itself as a key normative actor in promoting ethical AI. The AI Act entered into force in July 2024 emphasizing transparency, accountability, and human-centric approaches. Yet, in the Western Balkans, these principles encounter the persistent gap between policy frameworks and actual practice. The adoption of EU standards is often rhetorical, while implementation lags due to political resistance or administrative incapacity. In such an environment, AI risks becoming another instrument of elite consolidation rather than a driver of democratic deepening.

Ultimately, the governance challenge in the Western Balkans is not merely about introducing advanced technologies but about ensuring that their deployment strengthens, rather than undermines, democratic legitimacy. Bridging this gap requires embedding AI governance within broader reforms on the rule of law, institutional accountability, and civil society participation.

### **3. AI, DEMOCRACY, AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS: RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Artificial Intelligence presents a profound paradox for democratic governance in the Western Balkans. On the one hand, AI offers opportunities to modernize public services, enhance transparency, and support evidence-based policymaking. On the other hand, its deployment in fragile democracies poses significant risks for human rights, privacy, and political pluralism.

At the European level, the emerging regulatory framework on AI is explicitly grounded in the protection of fundamental rights. The EU has set out a vision for “trustworthy AI” anchored in legality, ethical robustness, and social benefit. This vision is operationalized in the AI Act, which categorizes AI systems by risk level and seeks to prevent their misuse in ways that could endanger democratic values. This approach resonates with broader EU commitments to human dignity, equality, and data protection, enshrined in the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (CFR) proclaimed in 2000.

Yet, as scholars have noted, the region’s hybrid political orders amplify the risks of misapplication. As Florian Bieber (2018, p. 345) argues, weak institutions and clientelist practices in the Western Balkans enable ruling elites to capture democratic mechanisms while maintaining a façade of compliance. Within such systems, the use of AI-driven surveillance, predictive policing, or algorithmic decision-making could easily be weaponized to monitor dissent, manipulate public discourse, and marginalize opposition voices.

It is noted in earlier research (Marsili, 2023, p. 43) that the ethical deployment of disruptive technologies depends on strong legal frameworks and an institutional culture of accountability. Without these safeguards, technological innovation risks reproducing existing asymmetries of power rather than democratizing access to information and services. The geopolitical dimension further complicates matters, since earlier research on global strategic competition (Marsili, 2025a, pp. 312–315) shows that digital infrastructures are also arenas of influence where external powers project narratives and exert control. The Western Balkans, already vulnerable to external influence campaigns, could thus see AI becoming an additional channel for authoritarian entrenchment.

Civil society emerges as a crucial counterbalance. Comparative studies indicate that civic actors have played a key role in advocating for human rights and democratic

oversight in transition contexts (Rakar & Kolarič, 2020, p. 132). Their involvement in monitoring algorithmic governance, promoting digital literacy, and ensuring transparency in AI procurement processes may help mitigate risks. However, civil society organizations in the Western Balkans often lack resources and political access, which makes EU support and cross-border partnerships indispensable.

Ultimately, the challenge is not only technological but normative: AI governance must be designed to reinforce democratic legitimacy, not erode it. The Western Balkans' trajectory towards European integration will depend on whether AI becomes a tool of authoritarian consolidation or a vehicle for embedding democratic values in digital governance.

#### **4. AI, DEMOCRACY, AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

The relationship between artificial intelligence, democratic governance, and civil society in the Western Balkans can only be understood against the backdrop of what Florian Bieber (2018) has identified as “competitive authoritarianism” in the region. Despite formal commitments to democratization and European integration, governments across the Balkans often display authoritarian practices: the concentration of executive power, the erosion of independent media, and the instrumentalization of institutions. Within this fragile democratic environment, the deployment of AI technologies—whether in the field of digital governance, policing, or electoral management—raises profound questions. AI can reinforce transparency and citizen engagement, but it can also consolidate power asymmetries, particularly where oversight institutions and civil society lack sufficient autonomy or resources (Bieber, 2018, p. 340).

The risks of AI misuse are evident in Serbia, where the government has promoted a strategy of “digitalization” as part of its modernization agenda. On the one hand, investments in e-government services and digital infrastructure are often presented as evidence of alignment with EU standards. On the other, reports by watchdog organizations have highlighted concerns about the large-scale deployment of facial recognition systems in Belgrade, often without transparent regulatory frameworks or adequate privacy safeguards. In a country where the media environment is polarized and civil society organizations are frequently targeted by delegitimizing narratives, such technologies can easily be appropriated for political surveillance and social control rather than citizen empowerment. Civil society actors in Serbia have raised these issues before EU institutions, underlining the need for conditionality mechanisms to tie candidate status more explicitly to guarantees of digital rights (Bieber, 2018, p. 344).

Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a different but equally telling case. Here, the fragmented political system, marked by ethnic divisions and weak central authority, complicates the creation of unified governance frameworks. AI-driven technologies are still in their infancy, but international actors, including the EU and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have begun supporting projects that use data analytics for public administration reform and anti-corruption monitoring. While such projects are promising, the lack of strong legal oversight mechanisms raises questions about accountability. Civil society organizations often operate in a contested political space, but they have nonetheless been crucial in advocating for transparency and pushing for stronger protections of personal data. This is consistent with earlier

research (Marsili, 2023b, p. 37), according to which emerging technologies can serve democratic ends only when embedded within a normative framework that privileges human rights and international legal standards over short-term political expediency.

Civil society, therefore, could play a decisive role in shaping the normative frameworks for AI across the region. Independent watchdogs, think tanks, and advocacy groups can demand transparency in the procurement of AI systems, ensure that impact assessments are carried out, and promote the inclusion of human rights clauses in contractual agreements with technology providers. The EU has already experimented with such approaches in its *Digital Services Act* and *Artificial Intelligence Act*, and extending these principles to candidate countries could help build “cognitive resilience” against both domestic authoritarian tendencies and foreign disinformation campaigns. Moreover, drawing on regional cooperation platforms, civil society actors can exchange best practices and establish cross-border monitoring initiatives, a necessity in a space where political transitions are interlinked and vulnerabilities are often exploited transnationally.

Ultimately, the democratic implications of AI in the Western Balkans cannot be separated from the broader struggle over the rule of law and European integration. If AI is adopted without proper safeguards, it risks deepening existing governance deficits, reinforcing executive dominance, and undermining fragile civic spaces. If, however, it is harnessed within transparent, participatory, and rights-based frameworks, it could empower citizens and strengthen democratic institutions. The challenge lies in ensuring that the latter path is chosen, and that civil society is not only a passive observer but an active architect of ethical AI governance in the region.

## **5. REGIONAL COOPERATION, EUROPEAN INTEGRATION, AND AI**

The governance of artificial intelligence in the Western Balkans cannot be addressed in isolation from the region’s European integration process. Since the 2003 Thessaloniki Agenda, the EU has repeatedly affirmed that the Western Balkans belong within the European family, provided they meet the standards of democracy, rule of law, and fundamental rights. Today, digital transformation and AI governance are increasingly becoming part of these standards, as reflected in the EU’s *Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans* (2018) and the AI Act. For aspiring member states, alignment with these frameworks is not only a technical requirement but also a political signal of their readiness to embrace European norms.

Regional cooperation plays a key role in this context. Initiatives such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Berlin Process have provided platforms to coordinate digital strategies and build capacity for technological governance. For instance, the RCC has launched programs promoting digital literacy and cross-border e-services, thereby laying the groundwork for harmonized AI adoption. Yet, as several scholars have pointed out, regional cooperation in the Western Balkans often suffers from a lack of institutionalization and political will, with states prioritizing bilateral disputes or domestic political gains over collective progress (Bieber, 2018, p. 349). This structural weakness risks creating fragmented regulatory environments that could be exploited by external actors, including global technology firms and non-EU powers.

The EU’s conditionality mechanisms remain a double-edged sword. On one hand, they create strong incentives for candidate states to harmonize their digital governance frameworks with EU acquis. On the other, the slow pace of accession negotiations and perceived double standards undermine the credibility of

conditionality, sometimes fueling nationalist narratives that frame EU requirements as externally imposed constraints. In this environment, the integration of AI regulation into accession negotiations could either accelerate reforms or entrench skepticism, depending on how it is implemented. Civil society once again becomes crucial here, not only to monitor compliance but also to communicate to citizens the democratic and practical benefits of aligning with EU digital norms.

Recent scholarship highlights that AI governance in transitional societies must address both the opportunities of technological modernization and the risks of entrenching existing political pathologies. It is emphasized in earlier research (Marsili, 2025a, p. 214) that digital technologies, including AI, carry a dual potential: they can serve as instruments of emancipation, enhancing democratic participation, or as tools of domination, enabling surveillance and information manipulation. This ambiguity is particularly acute in the Western Balkans, where unresolved statehood issues, ethnic divisions, and fragile institutions intersect with the diffusion of digital technologies. Embedding AI within the broader framework of European solidarity—described in earlier research as a “geo-strategic challenge” of integration (Marsili, 2025a)—may therefore provide not only a normative anchor but also a geopolitical imperative.

The cross-border dimension of AI is equally important. Disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, and algorithmically amplified hate speech often spill across national boundaries, exacerbating tensions in a region already prone to nationalist rhetoric. Coordinated regional responses, supported by EU institutions, could mitigate these risks by establishing joint monitoring mechanisms, shared databases of AI applications, and regional oversight bodies. Such approaches resonate with recent calls in European security studies for a more “holistic” understanding of security that integrates human rights, digital resilience, and democratic accountability (Marsili & Hughes, 2024, pp. 21–22).

In conclusion, regional cooperation and European integration provide both opportunities and constraints for AI governance in the Western Balkans. If approached strategically, they can transform AI into a driver of democratic consolidation and cross-border trust-building. If neglected, however, they risk entrenching fragmentation, dependency, and vulnerability to authoritarian appropriation of digital technologies.

## **6. NATIONAL CASE STUDIES: AI GOVERNANCE IN SERBIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, AND ALBANIA**

The trajectory of artificial intelligence governance in the Western Balkans reflects not only regional trends but also the specific political, institutional, and socio-economic realities of each state. Examining Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania offers insights into how differing degrees of institutional strength, EU integration, and civil society engagement shape the ethical and democratic implications of AI adoption.

Serbia presents one of the most paradoxical contexts in the region. On the one hand, it has positioned itself as a regional leader in digital transformation, launching the Digital Serbia Initiative and promoting ICT as a driver of economic modernization. On the other hand, Serbia has faced increasing criticism for democratic backsliding, media capture, and weak rule of law (Bieber, 2020, p. 13). This duality raises serious concerns regarding AI adoption. Without robust safeguards, AI-enabled technologies may be used to reinforce executive dominance, expand state surveillance, and restrict media freedom.



Furthermore, Serbia has developed close ties with non-EU actors, particularly China, through initiatives such as the Safe City surveillance systems implemented by Huawei in Belgrade. These projects raise ethical concerns regarding data privacy, transparency, and accountability, especially in a country with limited independent oversight institutions. While EU accession remains formally on the agenda, the reliance on non-EU digital infrastructures risks undermining Serbia's regulatory alignment with European standards.

Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates the challenges of adopting AI in a highly fragmented and ethnically divided political system. With two entities, ten cantons, and a weak central government, policy coordination in digital transformation is often inconsistent and politically contested. This institutional fragmentation has hindered the development of a coherent national AI strategy.

Civil society and international actors, including the EU Delegation and UNDP, have attempted to fill this gap by supporting digital governance reforms and pilot projects in e-governance. However, the lack of political consensus and the persistence of ethnonationalist rivalries limit the transformative potential of such initiatives. Earlier research (Marsili, 2023b, p. 34) suggests that emerging disruptive technologies may amplify pre-existing vulnerabilities when governance institutions lack both coherence and legitimacy. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, AI could either reinforce existing ethnic divisions—through the manipulation of online discourse and disinformation—or provide opportunities for cross-entity cooperation if framed as a neutral tool for modernization.

In contrast, Albania has demonstrated stronger reform momentum in the domain of digital transformation. Its *Digital Agenda 2022–2026* explicitly references the integration of AI and data-driven governance into public administration reforms, with a focus on transparency and service delivery. Albania's rapid progress in digitizing public services through the e-Albania platform has been lauded by the European Commission as a significant step toward modernization (European Commission, 2022, p. 45).

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Limited institutional capacity, high levels of corruption, and insufficient data protection frameworks risk undermining public trust in AI-driven governance. At the same time, Albania's stronger alignment with EU digital policies and its clear commitment to accession provide a framework within which reforms can be consolidated. This distinguishes Albania from Serbia, where digital modernization is often decoupled from democratic reform, and from Bosnia, where political fragmentation stalls systemic progress.

The comparison highlights three distinct trajectories. Serbia demonstrates how AI adoption can proceed in the absence of democratic safeguards, with risks of authoritarian appropriation. Bosnia and Herzegovina underscores the difficulties of fragmented governance, where institutional weakness impedes coherent AI strategies. Albania shows the potential of EU-driven reform momentum, though its progress remains fragile in the face of corruption and limited administrative capacity.

Across these cases, the ethical governance of AI depends not only on technical capacity but also on political will, institutional coherence, and the credibility of European integration as a transformative anchor. Earlier joint research (Marsili and Hughes, 2024, p. 21) observes that security and human rights frameworks must evolve together if digital technologies are to serve democratic rather than authoritarian ends.

## 7. CIVIL SOCIETY AND NON-STATE ACTORS IN AI GOVERNANCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

While state institutions remain the primary arena for setting policies on digital transformation and AI, the role of civil society, academia, and private sector actors is increasingly important in shaping the ethical, political, and social outcomes of AI adoption in the Western Balkans. In contexts characterized by fragile institutions and limited democratic accountability, these non-state actors often fill governance gaps, provide oversight, and mobilize societal debates on technology and rights.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in the region have traditionally played a crucial role in democratization processes, monitoring elections, and advocating for human rights. In recent years, their mandate has expanded to include digital rights, data protection, and freedom of expression online. For instance, in Serbia, organizations such as Share Foundation have actively documented cases of digital surveillance and advocated for stronger data protection legislation. These initiatives underscore the potential of CSOs to act as watchdogs against the misuse of AI in surveillance or political manipulation.

However, civil society faces structural obstacles, including political pressure, limited funding, and shrinking civic space. Bieber (2020, p. 67) notes that governments across the region have used legal and financial instruments to weaken independent NGOs, thereby reducing their capacity to engage effectively in digital governance debates. This raises concerns that AI governance could evolve as a predominantly state-controlled domain, with minimal participatory input.

Universities and research institutes in the Western Balkans, often supported by EU-funded programs such as Horizon Europe or Erasmus+, have become important sites for research on AI ethics, digital governance, and cybersecurity. These institutions not only produce technical expertise but also contribute normative frameworks, often aligned with EU standards. In Albania, for example, the University of Tirana has partnered with European counterparts to integrate AI ethics into curricula, creating new epistemic communities that promote democratic standards in technological adoption.

The need for interdisciplinary approaches to emerging disruptive technologies, particularly those that cross the boundaries between law, security, and ethics, is emphasized in earlier research (Marsili, 2023b, p. 28). Such epistemic communities can serve as crucial intermediaries between policymakers, international organizations, and local stakeholders, helping to adapt global AI debates to regional specificities.

The private sector, particularly tech companies and start-ups, also plays an important role in AI adoption. While local companies in the Western Balkans remain relatively small, international actors—including multinational corporations and Chinese digital infrastructure providers—exercise disproportionate influence. This dynamic is particularly visible in Serbia, where Chinese companies such as Huawei provide AI-driven surveillance systems. In contrast, Albania's closer alignment with EU partners has encouraged partnerships with European firms promoting digital services under GDPR-compliant standards.

International organizations, notably the European Union, Council of Europe, and NATO, act as both funders and norm-setters. Through accession negotiations, monitoring reports, and technical assistance, the EU in particular has become a key driver of digital governance reforms. The interplay between EU pressure and local civil society advocacy creates a normative environment where ethical concerns about AI—

privacy, transparency, accountability—can be articulated, even if implementation remains uneven.

The involvement of civil society and non-state actors offers opportunities to democratize AI governance, ensuring that technological innovation aligns with human rights and democratic norms. However, this potential is contingent upon the preservation of civic space, academic freedom, and independent media. In authoritarian-leaning contexts, these actors risk marginalization or co-optation. Conversely, in reform-oriented settings such as Albania, they may become critical partners in bridging the gap between European digital standards and domestic realities.

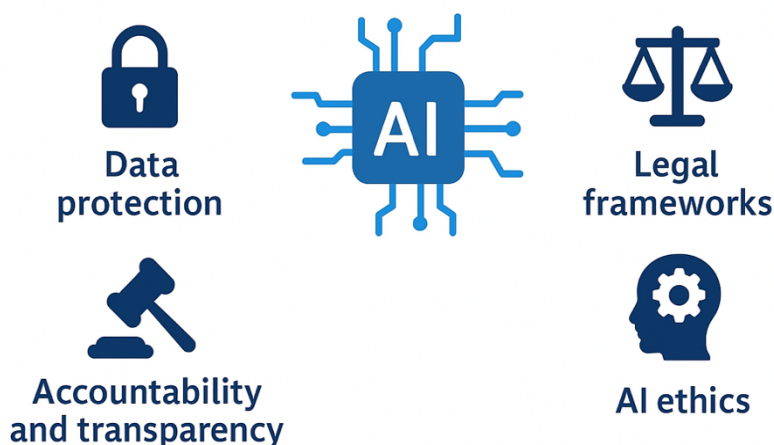
As Marsili and Hughes (2024, p. 21) argue in the broader security domain, human security frameworks require inclusive, multi-actor participation to be effective. This logic applies equally to AI governance: without civil society engagement, governance risks being reduced to a technocratic exercise, detached from democratic accountability.

## 8. AI, SECURITY, AND DISINFORMATION: GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The governance of artificial intelligence in the Western Balkans cannot be understood solely through a domestic lens. The region occupies a sensitive geopolitical position between the European Union, Russia, China, and Turkey, all of which project influence through economic, political, and technological channels. In this context, AI technologies intersect with issues of security, hybrid threats, and disinformation, reinforcing existing fragilities in governance and democratic institutions.

**Figure 2.** Geopolitical influence in AI and disinformation governance in the Western Balkans: external pressures from the EU, Russia, and China.

### AI in the Western Balkans: Key Political Challenges



The Western Balkans have long been a fertile ground for disinformation campaigns, both domestically generated and externally driven. Research has documented how Russia, in particular, has deployed media influence and online propaganda to destabilize pro-European narratives and amplify nationalist or anti-Western sentiments (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 154). With the growing adoption of AI-driven content production and distribution, these campaigns acquire new capacities for scale, personalization, and emotional manipulation. Automated bots and generative AI tools make it increasingly difficult for citizens to distinguish between authentic and fabricated content, deepening mistrust in institutions and the media.

It has been noted in earlier research (Marsili, 2021, p. 162) that Russian influence strategies in contested neighborhoods often rely on information warfare to erode societal cohesion and undermine integration projects. In the Western Balkans, such tactics intersect with pre-existing ethnic and political divisions, raising the risk that AI-driven disinformation could exacerbate polarization and hinder democratic consolidation.

The securitization of AI technologies is another dimension shaping governance in the region. Governments facing weak legitimacy and societal fragmentation may be tempted to deploy AI for surveillance and control, framing such measures as tools for security and stability. The Serbian government's collaboration with Chinese firms to install "safe city" surveillance systems powered by facial recognition is emblematic. While these projects are justified in terms of crime prevention, they raise profound ethical concerns about privacy, proportionality, and democratic oversight.

The tension between security and liberty has a broader geopolitical dimension: Chinese technology often comes bundled with infrastructure investments through the Belt and Road Initiative, while EU counterparts promote frameworks aligned with human rights standards. This creates a dual dependency in which Western Balkan states navigate between competing technological and normative orders. Earlier research (Marsili, 2023b, p. 38) notes that emerging disruptive technologies pose not only legal but also ethical challenges, particularly when adopted in fragile democratic contexts without robust accountability mechanisms.

Disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans have a direct impact on electoral politics and the credibility of European integration. During electoral cycles, AI-enhanced disinformation can shape public opinion, delegitimize opponents, and sow doubt about EU commitments. Bieber (2020, p. 114) underlines that illiberal actors within the region already exploit media capture and information manipulation; AI-based disinformation merely intensifies these dynamics, enabling faster and more targeted dissemination of polarizing narratives.

At the same time, the EU has recognized the vulnerability of the Western Balkans to hybrid threats. Initiatives such as the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell and the StratCom Task Forces aim to monitor and counteract disinformation, while candidate countries are encouraged to align with the EU Digital Services Act and cybersecurity frameworks. Yet, implementation remains partial, and the gap between EU standards and local practice persists.

Given the transnational nature of AI-driven security challenges, isolated national responses are insufficient. Regional cooperation, including through the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and NATO-supported platforms, is crucial to counter disinformation, promote digital resilience, and strengthen democratic oversight of AI technologies. Earlier joint research (Marsili and Hughes, 2024, p. 21) argues that

effective responses in the field of human security require multi-actor and multi-level engagement. This applies with even greater force in the AI domain, where the blurring of civil, military, and technological boundaries demands integrated governance frameworks that combine security imperatives with the protection of fundamental rights.

## 9. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The governance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the Western Balkans must be approached not only as a technical or regulatory challenge, but as a matter of political stability, democratic consolidation, and regional integration. As the European Union moves forward with a comprehensive legal framework for AI—the AI Act, complemented by the *Digital Services Act* and the *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR)—the Western Balkans face the dual task of aligning with this *acquis* while addressing domestic vulnerabilities. The “Brussels effect” (Bradford, 2020, p. 4) suggests that EU norms radiate beyond its borders, creating incentives for candidate and potential candidate countries to adopt European standards even before formal accession. This dynamic is particularly relevant for AI governance, where early adaptation can enhance both market access and political credibility.

Policy recommendations emerge at multiple levels. At the institutional level, Western Balkan states should establish national AI councils or inter-ministerial committees tasked with coordinating digital policy, ensuring interoperability with EU frameworks, and promoting accountability. These bodies should integrate civil society actors, as research shows that non-state participation increases transparency and legitimacy in transitional democracies (Kmezic, 2019, p. 117). At the regional level, the creation of a Western Balkans Task Force on AI Governance and Ethics, modeled on NATO’s cooperative security arrangements, could foster peer learning, resource pooling, and resilience against disinformation campaigns.

Another crucial dimension is capacity-building. The Western Balkans continue to suffer from brain drain and weak institutional infrastructures; without targeted investment in education and digital literacy, AI systems risk being imported and deployed without adequate oversight. It is emphasized in earlier research (Marsili, 2023b, p. 39) that resilience in the digital domain depends not only on regulation, but also on embedding democratic values and human rights at the design and procurement stage of technological infrastructures. Strengthening universities, supporting fact-checking networks, and creating regional hubs of excellence in AI ethics can help mitigate dependency on external actors.

Finally, geopolitical alignment must be considered. As Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania navigate relations with both Brussels and external actors such as Russia and China, AI governance becomes part of a broader strategic choice. Transparent, rights-based AI policies aligned with the EU could serve as a safeguard against authoritarian influence, reinforcing democratic trajectories while accelerating integration into European structures.

In sum, policy approaches to AI governance in the Western Balkans should not be limited to compliance with EU standards, but should aim at building cognitive resilience, empowering civil society, and securing democratic governance against external and internal threats. This requires a delicate balance between regulation, participation, and security—an approach that situates AI governance at the core of the region’s European future.

## CONCLUSION

The trajectory of Artificial Intelligence governance in the Western Balkans reveals the complexity of introducing disruptive technologies into societies marked by democratic fragility, contested institutions, and geopolitical vulnerability. From the theoretical perspective, the ethical dilemmas of AI are inseparable from broader questions of legitimacy, accountability, and the preservation of fundamental rights. As noted in critical scholarship on technology and governance, the challenge lies not only in regulating machines, but in safeguarding the moral and political fabric of democratic life itself.

The regional context underscores this tension. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania—while at different stages of political consolidation and European integration—share similar vulnerabilities: weak institutional capacity, exposure to disinformation, and persistent risks of state capture. The empirical analysis demonstrates how the uneven adoption of digital infrastructures intersects with governance gaps, producing both opportunities for modernization and risks of democratic backsliding. Civil society and non-state actors emerge as indispensable intermediaries, ensuring that technological governance is not monopolized by political elites but remains responsive to societal needs.

At the same time, the transnational dimension cannot be ignored. AI governance in the Western Balkans is conditioned by external pressures, from the “Brussels effect” of EU regulation to the geopolitical influence of Russia and China, which often promote alternative technological and normative models. In this sense, AI is not only a domestic governance issue but a geopolitical battleground where competing visions of sovereignty, democracy, and human rights collide.

The policy implications are clear. Western Balkan states must not reduce AI governance to a technical compliance exercise; rather, they must embed democratic values into the very architecture of AI deployment. This means building resilient institutions, investing in education and digital literacy, fostering regional cooperation, and ensuring meaningful participation of civil society. Alignment with European frameworks is essential, but so too is cultivating local ownership and societal trust.

Ultimately, the integration of AI into governance in the Western Balkans offers both risks and opportunities. If harnessed within an ethical, participatory, and rights-based framework, AI can enhance transparency, accountability, and regional cooperation—contributing to the democratic consolidation and European future of the region. If neglected or captured by authoritarian interests, it risks amplifying inequalities and eroding fragile democratic gains. The choice is therefore not merely technological but profoundly political: whether the Western Balkans will use AI as a tool for emancipation or as an instrument of control.

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## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES TO THE PHENOMENON OF NEW REGIONALISM

*Svetlana CEBOTARI\**

*Selena STEJARU\*\**

**Abstract.** *The phenomenon of "new regionalism" represents a contemporary trend in the analysis of international relations and territorial development, emerging in the context of global transformations after the end of the Cold War. Unlike "old regionalism," which was mainly focused on formal economic integration between states, new regionalism is multidimensional, encompassing economic, political, cultural, social, and security aspects. It is no longer solely state-driven, but also involves non-state actors such as NGOs, local authorities, and subnational regions.*

*In theoretical perspective, new regionalism is analyzed through various paradigms—from neoliberalism to constructivism—that highlight growing interdependencies and the fragmentation of the traditional international order. The process is influenced by globalization, which does not diminish the importance of regions but rather reconfigures them as strategic actors in global networks. A "bottom-up" orientation is observed in the formation of regional identities and interests, with emphasis on complementarity and interregional cooperation.*

*New regionalism is often perceived as a form of alternative governance, adaptable to local contexts yet connected to global dynamics. Therefore, it provides a relevant theoretical and practical framework for understanding the new forms of regional organization in a multipolar and complex world.*

**Keywords:** *region, regionalization, new regionalism, international relations*

### INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of the new regionalism emerged as a response to the major geopolitical and economic transformations of recent decades, marked by the end of the Cold War, the advance of globalization, and the diversification of international relations. Whereas classical regionalism was associated with strongly institutionalized political and economic structures, such as the European Union or the Economic Community of West African States, the new regionalism is characterized by its flexibility, its orientation toward multidimensional cooperation, and the integration of non-state actors, including international organizations, NGOs, and the private sector. In an increasingly interdependent and complex global context, regions have become essential actors in shaping the international order, not only from an economic perspective but also in areas

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\* Professor, PhD habilitatus, Moldova State University, Faculty of International Relations, Political and Administrative Studies. Department of International Relations. Chișinău, Republic of Moldova, e-mail: [svetlana.cebotari11@gmail.com](mailto:svetlana.cebotari11@gmail.com), orcid id: 0000-0001-9073-104X.

\*\* PhD, Moldova State University, Faculty of International Relations, Political and Administrative Studies. Department of International Relations. Chișinău, Republic of Moldova, e-mail: [selena.stejaru@gmail.com](mailto:selena.stejaru@gmail.com), orcid id 0000-0003-2778-2068

such as security, environmental protection, sustainable development, and human rights. The new regionalism is no longer a process of economic integration, but rather a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses political, social, and cultural dimensions, where cooperation is conceived both as a response to shared challenges and as a means of constructing a distinct regional identity.

For a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of the concept of “*new regionalism*”, as well as of the impact this phenomenon exerts on international relations, it is necessary to analyze the ways in which this term has been conceptualized in the specialized literature. In this regard, the present research, which focuses on the analysis of the conceptual and theoretical interpretations of the phenomenon of “*new regionalism*”, as well as on highlighting the main dimensions of the relationship “*new regionalism - regionalization - region*”, is based on the use of a set of general and specific research methods.

Accordingly, the methods of analysis and deduction, the phenomenological method, the historical method, the comparative method, and the webographic method were employed. The method of analysis and deduction enabled a systematic examination of the main theoretical approaches to the concepts of “*region*”, “*regionalization*”, and “*new regionalism*”, thereby contributing to the clarification of the conceptual relationships among them.

The use of the webographic method facilitated the investigation of the research subject at both the theoretical and practical levels, through the consultation of major academic and institutional sources available online, which contributed to a deeper understanding of the issue under examination. At the same time, the comparative method made it possible to critically analyze the concept of “*new regionalism*” in relation to the concepts of “*regionalization*” and “*region*”, highlighting both conceptual and functional convergences and divergences.

The application of the phenomenological method allowed for an in-depth analysis of the conceptual and theoretical interpretations of the phenomenon of “*new regionalism*”, by capturing its essential dimensions and the meanings attributed to it across various analytical contexts. Simultaneously, the use of the historical method ensured the examination of the specific conditions and transformations occurring within the international system, providing the necessary framework for analyzing the historical evolution of the issue and for understanding the circumstances that led to the emergence and consolidation of the concept of “*new regionalism*”.

## **1. CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES TO THE PHENOMENA OF “REGION,” “REGIONALIZATION,” AND “REGIONALISM”**

The contemporary international landscape is profoundly influenced by multiple processes, with globalization and regionalism emerging as particularly significant. For deeper understanding of the correlation between region-regionalization-regionalism, it is necessary to define these concepts from a theoretical perspective. Such an analysis establishes the logical framework that clarifies the key points, highlights the elements of interest, and delineates the scientific boundaries while also outlining the interaction among *region*, *regionalization*, and *regionalism*.

Starting from the most widespread scientific interpretations of the term *region*, it must be noted that the scholarly literature does not provide a single universally accepted definition. Over time, various definitions have been elaborated depending on different contexts and approaches. John Fraser Hart emphasizes this lack of standardization,

suggesting that regions are essentially “subjective artistic devices” (Hart). In turn, Klaus Roth (Roth, Brunnbauer, 2010) in his analyses of the concept of region, identifies two essential characteristics: internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Based on this understanding, he proposes a classification of regions into several categories: micro-regions, meso-regions, macro-regions, and global regions.

Anne Gilbert, examining the phenomenon of region, advances three possible approaches to the notion: “the region as a local response to processes occurring within a given space/territory; the region as a point of identification; and the region as a milieu of social interactions” (Gilbert). Regarding typologies of regions, she argues that they can be classified according to their level of scale: national, continental, and global. From a geographical perspective, the concept of region may also be defined on the basis of specific features such as relief (e.g., a lowland region) or climate (e.g., an arid region). When approached from an economic perspective, the definition does not entirely exclude the geographical criterion; thus, a region may be understood as “a functional spatial unit characterized by the relations among the economic actors that constitute it, as well as by the relations these actors establish with other regions, which can be empirically measured” (Gilbert).

At the supranational level, in this case within the European Union, there is a declared tendency toward strengthening the role of regional policy, and consequently, of the region itself. Yet even at this level, no single standard or operational definition exists. For instance, the definition adopted by the Assembly of European Regions is purely descriptive, characterizing the region as a “territorial public entity situated at the level immediately below that of the state and endowed with its own political powers”.

The establishment of the Committee of the Regions through the Maastricht Treaty further highlighted the impossibility of formulating a common institutional definition of the concept of region, given that its members were “representatives of regional and local communities,” appointed unanimously by the Council on the basis of proposals submitted by the Member States, each according to its own territorial structures. When the notion of region is examined in the context of debates on structural funds, it designates a space rather than an institution, serving as the basic unit of regional development.

To formulate the most appropriate and functional definition of the term “region”, it is essential to take into account the specific purpose it is meant to serve. Thus, the term “region” may be understood as a geographical area represented by an entity about which significant generalizations can be made that apply to the entire area viewed as a unified whole. A region may be defined as an area or territory characterized by a set of distinct internal features, whether physical or human, that provide it with a certain meaningful unity while, at the same time, distinguishing it from neighboring areas. The number of criteria that may contribute to the delimitation of a region is unlimited-ranging from physical attributes and socio-economic characteristics to linguistic features and beyond-while the typology of regions is equally diverse, encompassing metropolitan regions, geographical regions, historical regions, and others.

On the international arena, regions may be established:

*-on the basis of connections between the border areas of neighboring states*, as exemplified by the creation of Euroregions: the East Border Region (United Kingdom/Ireland); the Ems-Dollart Region (Germany/Netherlands); Espace Mont Blanc (France/Italy/Switzerland); the Tatry Euroregion (Poland/Slovakia); the Strymon-

Stouma Euroregion (Bulgaria/Greece); and the Black Sea Euroregion, which brings together local and regional authorities from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, the Russian Federation, Turkey, and Ukraine;

- *on the basis of shared economic, commercial, cultural, or other interests*, which lead to the establishment of regions formed by groups of states located within a well-defined geographical area. Examples include the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland) and the Pacific/Southeast Asian region (South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore).

Thus, according to the definition provided by the *Illustrated Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language*, a region is understood as: 1) a large expanse of land, more or less homogeneous, within a country or in another part of the world, displaying common characteristics (relief, climate, waters, economic resources); a district or area; and 2) an administrative-territorial unit comprising several districts (raioane) and one or more major citiee (DEXI: 2007).

According to the *Community Charter of Regionalization (Carta Comunitară a Regionalizării)* a development region is understood as a territory which, from a geographical perspective, constitutes a distinct unit, or a comparable set of territories marked by continuity, where the population shares certain common elements and seeks to preserve and further develop its specific identity, with the purpose of stimulating cultural, social, and economic progress.”

In the view of the Council of Europe, a “region” is an administrative-territorial unit situated immediately below the level of the state, whether unitary, federal, or otherwise, endowed with an elected public authority and possessing financial resources to sustain that authority. Within this framework, the Council of Europe defined the “region” as “a medium-sized territorial unit that can be geographically delimited and is regarded as homogeneous.” This definition emphasizes the interconnection between territory and the human element inhabiting it, the latter reflecting an awareness of the region’s homogeneity. Within the European Union, regions are entrusted with the role of supporting the consolidation of the economic unity of the Member States and of reducing disparities among them: namely, “...to strengthen the unity of their economies and ensure their harmonious development, while reducing the gap between different regions and the backwardness of the less-favored” (Preamble to the Treaty of Rome, 1957). Under European Union legislation, a “region” represents “the level immediately below that of the state”-a tier which, depending on the competences conferred within centralized systems, or assumed within federal systems, exercises administrative and political authority over a territorial community of widely varying size.

The most important programmatic document in this regard is the Declaration on Regionalism in Europe, adopted in 1996 (*Declarația asupra regionalismului în Europa*). The Declaration sets out the norms and criteria to be achieved in regional development and establishes the necessary steps for recognizing the region as a political actor. Article 10, paragraph 2, stipulates that “regions encourage cooperation among themselves, on a bilateral or multilateral scale, both within the state and across borders, for the realization of common projects.” Furthermore, “regions have the right to establish their own representation, either individually or jointly with other regions, in other states and before other competent international organizations” (p.3), and they may participate in the international activities of their state, in accordance with the relevant domestic legal provisions, whenever such activities concern their competences or their fundamental

interests (p.4). According to paragraph 5, “Before the conclusion of an international treaty affecting the fundamental interests of the regions, they shall be consulted by the state. If the state intends to conclude international treaties in areas pertaining to regional competences, the regions shall participate, together with the state, in the drafting and conclusion of such treaties. The modalities of such participation are determined by internal procedures agreed upon between the state and its regions. The implementation of a treaty is ensured following the allocation of competences between the state and its regions” (*Declarația asupra regionalismului în Europa*).

With regard to the vision of the institutional architecture of the European Union (Art. 12, para. 4), “where the matter at issue falls within the exclusive competence of the region or directly involves its particular interests, the state may not deviate from the position established by the region, except where domestic law requires such deviation for reasons of integrity. In such cases, the state must provide justification for any departure from the region’s position. The region also enjoys the right to participate in the decision-making process of the Community institutions and, in particular, to designate a representative to be included in the national delegation” (*Declarația asupra regionalismului în Europa*). The Council of Europe has defined a region as “a medium-sized territorial unit that can be geographically delineated and is regarded as homogeneous” (*Declarația asupra regionalismului în Europa*). This definition emphasizes the intrinsic link between the territory and the human element, the latter manifesting as an awareness of the region homogeneous character.

Formulating a definition of the “region” that enjoys universal acceptance proves particularly challenging, owing to the diversity of perspectives from which this notion is approached. Nevertheless, the definitions advanced by European institutions contain a number of common elements. These include, above all, the spatial dimension (with boundaries that may be more or less clearly defined), the human community occupying that space and possessing specific characteristics, a certain degree of unity or identity, as well as the competences attributed to the region. Regions may acquire a variety of meanings: a region may be defined as an area within a territory that possesses a consistent set of internal characteristics, whether physical or human, that provide it with a significant degree of unity, distinguishing it from neighboring areas. The number of criteria that may contribute to the delimitation of a region is virtually unlimited: physical attributes, socio-economic features, linguistic characteristics, among others. Equally diverse are the types of regions: densely populated regions, declining regions, geographical regions, historical regions, natural regions, planning regions, underdeveloped regions, etc. From an analytical perspective, the concept of regionalization regards the region as one of the most effective forms of spatial organization of information, while functional regions are considered of major importance for both the process and the objectives of development planning.

A region encompasses a part of a territory (state, continent, geographical area, etc.) characterized by certain specific features, together with the community inhabiting that territory. The term “region” has an extremely broad scope of application. Three main categories of regions can be distinguished:

- regions within states;
- regions comprising several states within a given geographical area (e.g., Benelux, the Visegrad Group, the group of Black Sea countries);

- cross-border regions, which bring together geographical areas situated on either side of state borders, linked by tradition, language, religion, culture, and other commonalities.

Regions that form part of states acquire particular significance when viewed through the lens of the stages to be undertaken by Member States and associated states of the European Union. On the one hand, the principle of equal treatment is ensured in terms of financial support provided by the EU to both Member States and their regions; on the other hand, such arrangements create opportunities for effective cooperation between regions belonging to different states. Following the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, regions effectively became one of the pillars of European integration. Today, Europe is composed of a genuine mosaic of regions. Regions represent the outcome of the socio-economic and cultural diversity inherent in European society (Sienerth).

Thus, the region has become the fundamental basis of economic and social life, as well as the foundation of economic development. Amid the globalization of economic relations and the growing mobility of capital, regions and localities across different states have found themselves in fierce international competition to attract the highest possible share of investment (Bădescu, 1997: 32).

In the scholarly literature, the concepts of “regionalization” and “regionalism” are frequently employed, both referring to processes and phenomena that structure, defining regional dynamics (ibidem). Regionalism represents a bottom-up movement corresponding to the aspiration of communities to assume responsibility for solving problems that directly affect them (Constantin, 2000). It reflects the awareness of common interests, with the region perceived as a territory considered homogeneous by its inhabitants, coupled with their aspiration to participate in the management of these interests. Such a regional community is regarded as more capable of addressing these issues than the state, which is often seen as too distant and too large, accused of imposing a centralized model upon local particularities, and lacking the appropriate scale to resolve regional problems effectively. By contrast, regionalization is a top-down process, characterized by different objectives and distinct implementation mechanisms compared to those of regionalism. This fundamental distinction reappears at each stage of the so-called “regional process.” In response to regionalist movements, the state may recognize a regional identity (with the region now perceived as a territory considered homogeneous by the state) and adopt the necessary measures to enable regions to participate in the management of their own affairs. The starting point of regionalization lies in regional imbalances, or in the recognition of such imbalances (Bantuș-Gurduza). The term regionalization is generally understood as the creation of a new level of territorial organization within a state. The new institutions may vary considerably in terms of bodies, responsibilities, and powers, yet they are always established in relation to existing local institutions.

The process of regionalization has evolved differently from one country to another, depending on the form of state organization (unitary or federal), the legislative framework, ethnic composition, and historical traditions. It should also be emphasized that regionalization in each country is shaped by its specific context-legal, economic, social, demographic, and ethnic-as well as by its historical traditions.

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary ( *Merriam Webster Dictionary*) regionalization is defined as “division into regions or administrative districts.” Regionalization is often confused with regionalism and, by some, perceived as a potential

threat to national sovereignty. The Illustrated Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language (*DEXI*, 2007: 1654) defines regionalization as “the action of regionalizing and its result”.

In both the specialized literature and the practice of international relations, the phenomenon of regionalism is also widely present. Regionalism refers to the awareness of common interests, where the region is perceived as a homogeneous territory by its inhabitants combined with the aspiration to participate in the management of these interests (Şipkov, 2015:88-90). In other words, it reflects the emergence of a community that considers itself capable of addressing local problems, in contrast to the state, often perceived as too distant or too large. Regionalization, by contrast, originates in regional imbalances or in the awareness of such imbalances. The state may, in this regard, recognize a regional identity, where the region is perceived as a homogeneous territory by the state itself and adopt measures enabling regions to participate in the management of their own affairs.

Regionalism is often understood as a term with a dual meaning: “a top-down movement (regionalization) and a bottom-up movement (regionalism)” (Mihailescu). Both concepts describe dynamics at the regional level that interact with one another (Dezalay, 1998: 197-219). Regionalism, as a bottom-up process, reflects the profound aspiration of communities to assume responsibility for addressing issues that concern them directly. It embodies the awareness of shared interests, where the region is perceived as a homogeneous territory by its inhabitants together with the aspiration to participate in managing these interests (Muntschick, 2025). Such regional community considers itself more capable of resolving these matters than the state, which is often perceived as too distant and too large, accused of imposing a centralized model that disregards local particularities and lacking the appropriate scale to address regional problems effectively (Bantuş-Gurduza). Within this framework, several types of regionalization can be identified: *political regionalization*, as in Spain and Italy; *incorporated regionalization*, resulting from the creation of a unitary state through the union of multiple components that retain a degree of individuality (the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland); *diversified regionalization*, where regional structures are shaped not only by territorial and political criteria but also by language and culture (Belgium); *classical administrative regionalization*, through decentralization, whereby regions are established as administratively autonomous territorial entities (France); *functional regionalization*, through deconcentration, where regions function merely as administrative districts of the state (Greece); *regionalization through cooperation*, where regions take the form of institutionalized cooperation frameworks between local territorial communities (Romania).

## 2. THE NEW REGIONALISM

The evolution of international relations after the end of the Cold War reveals an intensification of regionalization processes. These processes, now referred to as “new regionalism”, developed rapidly across the globe and were already visible in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Nikitina). They first emerged in Northern Europe, a region divided during the Cold War by the Iron Curtain. Although the beginnings of regional cooperation can be traced back to the 1970s, most notably with the signing of the Helsinki Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea, an intensive regionalization process took shape in the late 1980s. The collapse of the Soviet Union was the most significant factor driving this development. Following the end of the Cold

War, interactions between Western and Eastern Europe expanded rapidly. At the intergovernmental level, this led to the creation of the Council of the Baltic Sea States in 1992. However, the new regionalism in Northern Europe was most clearly reflected in the active development of cooperation among non-governmental actors at all levels. Relations among regional and local authorities, civil society organizations, educational and cultural institutions, and business associations grew deeper and more extensive. As a result, hundreds of international organizations with diverse orientations emerged in the region (Lutaş, 2005).

The specific features of regionalization processes observed after the Cold War provide grounds for referring to a new regionalism. In order to distinguish between “old” regionalism and the “new” regionalism that took shape in the 1990s, it is necessary to clarify the differences between these two phenomena (Wheeler). New regionalism is not confined to formal interstate regional organizations and institutions; rather, it is characterized by multidirectionality, complexity, flexibility, and a departure from traditionalism. Moreover, it involves the participation of multiple actors, both state and non-state, who often interact in informal ways (Wang).

Thus, Björn Hettne develops the theory of new regionalism, drawing a clear distinction between the “old” and the “new” forms. He observes that “old regionalism” was essentially a Cold War phenomenon, limited in scope and objectives. By contrast, “new regionalism”, according to Hettne’s theses, represents a more comprehensive and multidimensional social process. It emerged within a multipolar world order and in the broader context of globalization (Urbano, 2024). becoming part of a global structural transformation. Within this transformation, numerous non-state actors began cooperating across multiple levels of the global system. In this sense, new regionalism arose both as a response to globalization and as a reaction to various dimensions of global processes (Lutaş).

A central premise of the new regionalism approach is the assertion that regions are inherently “artificial,” understood as constructed and reconstructed within the ongoing process of global transformation. Hence, a region is not a static entity but a dynamic and evolving form, open to change. Within this framework, regionalism is conceived as a multifaceted form of integration encompassing economic, cultural, political, and social dimensions. Its strategic objective lies in the creation of a region oriented toward strengthening unity and regional identity. The actors involved in regionalization processes include states, non-state actors, and social groups.

Regionalism is thus understood as both a policy and a project through which state and non-state actors collaborate and coordinate strategies of action within a given region, operating at supranational as well as interstate levels. Regional activities, whether sub-state or supranational, can significantly influence state-level dynamics.

In the context of new regionalism, there is a marked tendency toward the emergence of new forms of “multi-level” or “hybrid” governance. Fredrik Söderbaum, another prominent representative of this theoretical perspective, proposes a multi-level framework encompassing the national level, as well as macro- and micro-regional levels. Macro-regions (sometimes referred to as “world” or “international” regions) consist of large territorial units or subsystems positioned between the global order and the nation-state. Micro-regions, by contrast, comprise subnational territories, meaning parts of a country. Historically, micro-regions were understood as subnational units confined within the territorial boundaries of a specific state. New regionalism thus entails the evolution of a self-determined community of interests, which allows for an open debate



on a wide range of regional issues. This approach diverges from traditional security-centered and statist analyses, which emphasize national sovereignty and regional hegemony. Seeking to overcome state-centrism by focusing on regional organizations, the theory of new regionalism highlights the process of regionalization, describing it in terms of degrees of “regionality”. Regionality is understood as “a process through which a geographic area is transformed from a passive object into an active subject capable of articulating the transnational interests of an emerging region.” Hence, regionality implies that a region may exist to a greater or lesser extent, with its level rising or declining over time. Typically, when we refer to regions, we speak of entities in the process of formation.

There are no “natural” or “given” regions; rather, they are created and recreated within global transformation processes. Five stages can be identified in this process of regional formation: the regional space, the regional complex, the regional society, the regional community, and ultimately the region-state.

*Regional space* - refers to the existence of a region understood primarily as a geographically defined territory, delimited by more or less natural physical barriers and characterized by specific environmental features. Examples include Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, North America, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

*Regional complex* —denotes the intensification of social contacts and interactions among previously more isolated groups, leading to the creation of a social system. This facilitates the development of “regionality”, albeit at a relatively low level. An illustrative case is the emergence of the Catholic Christian world between 800 and 1200, which contributed to the birth of a European identity. This stage is considered the beginning of the regionalization process. The subsequent creation of states consolidated national territories, and during certain periods (e.g., the Westphalian era in Europe), this led to a greater inward orientation, resulting in a temporary decline in the level of regionality.

*Regional society* – at this stage, the process of regionalization develops and intensifies across different levels, involving a wide range of actors beyond the state. Communication and interaction expand across multiple domains—economic, political, cultural—giving regionalization a multidimensional character. This expansion can occur through both formalized regional cooperation and spontaneous processes. In the first case, the region is defined by the membership of the relevant regional organization. This level of regionality can be described as a regional form of the international society of cooperating states, but not limited to interstate relations alone. Growing interdependence and an externally oriented perception of this stage of regionality generate complex interactions among diverse actors. These include a broad spectrum of transnational non-state actors: markets, private businesses, multinational corporations, NGOs, social movements, and other types of social networks based on professional, ideological, ethnic, or religious ties. Together, they contribute to the emergence of a transnational regional economy or a regional civil society.

*Regional community* - the fourth level of regionality refers to a stage in which a region becomes an active subject, possessing a clear identity, institutionalized or informal functions, legitimacy, and decision-making structures in relation to regional civil society that transcend the traditional boundaries of the state. This implies the convergence of ideas, organizations, and processes within a specific region. A regional community is characterized by the mutually reinforcing relationship between a “formal” region-defined as a community of states-and a “real” region, in which a transnationalized regional civil

society also plays a central role. Such civil society may emerge spontaneously from below but depends on both formal and informal institutions and regimes that contribute to security, prosperity, social communication, and the convergence of values, norms, and identities within the region.

*Region-state* - the fifth level of regionality involves processes shaping both the “formal” and “real” region in similar ways. The ultimate outcome may be the creation of a region-state, which, in terms of territorial scope and cultural heterogeneity, may be compared to classical empires. A region-state must be clearly distinguished from the nation-state, as it will never achieve the degree of homogeneity and sovereignty typical of a Westphalian-type state. From a political order perspective, the region-state represents the voluntary evolution of previously independent national communities into a new political entity, in which sovereignty is reduced for the sake of the common good and where democratic principles are more deeply entrenched. While national interests may remain dominant, they do not necessarily coincide with the interests of individual states. Moreover, power and decision-making are not centralized but rather stratified and decentralized across local, micro-regional, national, and macro-regional/supranational levels. This idea is embodied in the European Union, as articulated in the Maastricht Treaty.

For a clearer understanding of the process of regional construction in Europe, a distinction can be drawn between “old” and “new” regions. The term “old regions” refers to those that have emerged over time and gradually become integral parts of governance systems. Such regions often carry particular significance for their inhabitants and, consequently, serve as important sources of regional identity. Historically developed regions of this kind are generally found at the subnational level. In Europe, they can be identified in most countries (e.g., the numerous Swiss cantons, Italian provinces, etc.). By contrast, “new regions” are typically established as ad hoc projects aimed at fostering development and enhancing the competitiveness of the spatial unit concerned. In the case of cross-border regions, a key motivation is often the reduction of the role of national frontiers.

The most significant factor driving regionalization has been the enlargement of the European Union. In 1995, Finland, Sweden, and Austria joined the Union, while 2004 marked the EU’s largest enlargement, with the simultaneous accession of ten states: Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Malta, and Cyprus. This new wave of enlargement also signaled the consolidation of Europe’s reunification after the Cold War. As a result, the significance of the European Union as a region within the Eurasian continent has grown steadily. One manifestation of the EU interest in regionalization processes in Northern Europe was the launch of the Northern Dimension program (Lutaş). Initiated in 1999, this program was established as a cooperative partnership between the EU, Russia, Norway, and Iceland, with the primary objective of fostering development in the northern region, including in areas such as transport, environment, health, and culture. However, following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the EU, Norway, and Iceland suspended cooperation with Russia and Belarus, which disrupted most projects under this framework. Although the program has not been formally dissolved, there are currently no interactions or new initiatives involving Russia, which had been one of its principal actors. The Environmental, Transport and Logistics, Cultural, and Health Partnerships continue to operate, albeit without the participation of Russia and Belarus. The remaining activities focus on cooperation among the EU, Norway, Iceland, and other stakeholders in the northern region (*Northern Dimension Policy*).

## CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of new regionalism represents a dynamic and complex response to the contemporary challenges of globalization and the geopolitical shifts of recent decades. Unlike the classical model of regional integration, characterized by rigid and institutionalized structures, new regionalism promotes flexibility, multidimensional cooperation, and the active participation of a broad spectrum of actors, including states, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector. This less centralized and more diversified approach reflects the realities of an ever-changing world, in which regions are no longer merely economic units but also geopolitical and social actors with their own identities and agendas. New regionalism combines the pursuit of economic development with the imperatives of security, environmental protection, and the strengthening of human rights, underlining the crucial role of regions in addressing global challenges.

Thus, new regionalism is not simply a continuation of regional integration processes, but rather a transformation of them, in which regions reassert themselves as key entities within the current international order. Regional approaches can provide solutions better adapted to the specificities of each region and contribute to a more balanced and inclusive form of global governance. Consequently, understanding new regionalism is essential for analyzing the geopolitical and economic developments of the twenty-first century and for anticipating future forms of cooperation and global integration.

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## II. IDENTITY, EDUCATION AND INCLUSIVITY

**Natalia ANDONE** ⇔ *The German Minority and the Romanian diaspora in Romanian-German Cultural Diplomacy*

**Georgiana-Diana HOROBEANU, Miruna BUTNARU-TRONCOTĂ** ⇔ *Europeanization in Segregated Schools? Third Parties' Efforts to Build a Trans-Ethnic Educational Space in Bosnia and Herzegovina*

**Simona Camelia FER** ⇔ *The Evolution of Political Language in the Digital Age. Linguistic Tendencies and Implications for the Legitimacy of Power*

**Claudiu Gabriel BONACIU, Mircea BRIE** ⇔ *Social Inclusion and European Rural Development Policy: The Case of Non-Agricultural Tourism Activities in Rural Bihor County*

**István POLGÁR** ⇔ *The Role of Border Management in the Process of Migration Management at the EU's South Eastern Borders*



## THE GERMAN MINORITY AND THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA IN ROMANIAN-GERMAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Natalia ANDONE\*

**Abstract.** *This article examines the role of the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany in shaping Romanian–German cultural diplomacy. It integrates the analysis of these two communities within a common framework of societal cultural diplomacy, emphasizing the contribution of non-state actors to the consolidation of bilateral dialogue. Drawing on a qualitative methodology that combines documentary analysis with cultural discourse analysis, the study explores how transnational cultural capital, collective memory, and civic networks are mobilized within the relationship between the two national contexts. The comparative findings indicate that the German minority operates primarily through institutional continuity, heritage preservation, and educational infrastructure, whereas the Romanian diaspora acts through mobility, associative structures, and contextual adaptability. The article advances the concept of “community soft power” to capture forms of symbolic influence generated at the societal level and underscores the complementarity of these modes of action in sustaining the stability of Romanian–German cultural relations.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural diplomacy, community soft power, transnational cultural capital, Romanian–German relations*

### 1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

21st-century international relations are marked by a progressively expanding diplomatic arena beyond the traditional frameworks of the nation-state (Buzan, 2004: 98-101). In a context characterized by globalization, interdependence, and increased mobility, diplomacy is no longer the exclusive purview of official institutions, but has become a diffuse process in which non-state actors (civil society organizations, ethnic minority communities, diaspora networks, and cultural institutions) are gaining increasing relevance (Andrew, 2015: 33-36). Cultural diplomacy thus becomes a key area of analysis, as it operates at the intersection of identity, memory, and symbolic power.

In the case of Romanian-German relations, this dynamic is particularly visible. The historical, cultural, and social ties between the two nations are not limited to governmental interactions, but are supported by a dense layer of transnational relations built over time by the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany (Koranyi, 2021: 1-10; Gabriela, 2016: 1-10). These communities have consistently functioned as cultural intermediaries, helping to maintain bilateral dialogue even in periods of political discontinuity or ideological tension (Loreng, 2025: 5-10).

The German minority in Romania is distinguished by its ability to secure cultural and institutional continuity in a era marked by successive changes of political and social

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\* PhD student, Babeș-Bolyai University, Faculty of European Studies, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail: [natalia\\_andone@yahoo.com](mailto:natalia_andone@yahoo.com).

order. Over time, this community has undergone distinct stages: from the autonomous forms of organization of medieval Saxon settlement, to the constraints imposed by the communist regime and later to the processes of identity redefinition in the post-1989 period, without losing its internal coherence and function of public representation (Ursprung, 2015: 3-6). Along the way, practices of collective memory preservation and intercultural interaction have been articulated that transcend the strictly ethnic dimension, integrating into a broader European framework of dialogue, cooperation, and cultural coexistence (Nicolaescu, 2024: 93-110).

Complementarily, the Romanian diaspora in Germany, mainly formed in recent decades, (OECD, 2019: 26-51) has established itself as a mobile and adaptive cultural actor, capable of projecting Romanian identity in a pluralistic Western space (Anghel, 2014: 112-136). Through cultural initiatives and civic networks, this community facilitates both the maintenance of links with its place of origin (Vochin, 2023: 158-175) and the intensified bilateral cultural exchanges, (Forumul de cooperare Bilaterală Româno-German, n.d.) contributing to the configuration and preservation of Romanian-German cultural dialogue from a transnational perspective.

Although recent research on non-state actors has increasingly emphasized the role of civil society in international relations, many of these analyses continue to be marked by a state-centric perspective. Historical minorities and diaspora communities are frequently mentioned, but rarely analyzed as structural factors that directly shape bilateral relations. In most cases, they are viewed as cultural extensions of the states involved, rather than actors exercising their own autonomous influence (Stengel, 2018: 2-4).

Starting from the premise that the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany are not peripheral entities in Romania-Germany bilateral relations, but active participants in shaping this relationship on a cultural level, it is assumed that, by mobilizing cultural capital, collective memory, and transnational networks, the two communities generate distinct but complementary forms of intercultural mediation that complement official diplomacy and contribute to the stability of the dialogue between the two nations.

The core issue of the study is formulated around the following research question: *To what extent and through what mechanisms contribute the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany to the establishment of a stable bilateral cultural dialogue and to the consolidation of Romanian-German relations through cultural diplomacy?*

This article starts from the idea that cultural relations between Romania and Germany cannot be understood solely through the prism of official diplomacy. We propose an analysis that brings together two categories of actors often discussed separately: the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany. Although the literature frequently treats historical minorities in the context of identity politics and the diaspora in the context of migration or transnationalism, this study focuses precisely on this intersection, showing that both communities contribute, through different means, to maintaining and strengthening Romanian-German dialogue. We propose extending the discussion on soft power to the community level in order to capture forms that are not initiated by the state but have visible effects on bilateral relations.

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretative methodological framework designed to capture the symbolic and relational dimensions of cultural diplomacy exercised by societal actors. Given that the phenomena under investigation



involve processes of identity construction, collective memory articulation, and the mobilization of cultural capital within transnational networks, quantitative measurement alone would be insufficient to grasp the complex mechanisms through which these dynamics operate. Consequently, the research prioritizes analytical tools capable of elucidating meanings, discursive strategies, and institutional practices that shape intercultural mediation between Romania and Germany.

Methodologically, the research combines several complementary analytical strategies. First, a documentary analysis was conducted on a heterogeneous corpus of sources, including programmatic documents, institutional publications issued by organizations representing the German minority in Romania, materials produced by Romanian diaspora associations in Germany, as well as relevant academic literature addressing cultural diplomacy, diaspora studies, and minority politics. This documentary corpus allows the reconstruction of the institutional and discursive frameworks through which these communities articulate their cultural presence and participate in bilateral dialogue.

Second, the study employs cultural discourse analysis, focusing on the narratives through which societal actors represent identity, heritage, and historical memory. This method makes it possible to identify the symbolic repertoires and legitimacy claims mobilized by minority and diaspora organizations in order to position themselves as credible intermediaries within Romanian–German cultural relations.

Finally, the empirical dimension of the research is structured around a comparative case study design. The German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany are examined as two distinct but interconnected configurations of societal cultural diplomacy. The comparative perspective facilitates the identification of both convergences and divergences in their modes of action, particularly with regard to levels of institutionalization, forms of cultural capital mobilized, and the nature of their interactions with the state of origin and the host state. Through this analytical strategy, the article aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how community-based actors contribute to the consolidation of Romanian–German cultural dialogue within the broader European diplomatic landscape.

Given these methodological considerations, it is necessary to clarify the main concepts underlying this approach. Therefore, the following section is dedicated to the theoretical delimitation of cultural diplomacy and the examination of the process through which societal actors gain relevance in the architecture of contemporary international relations. The analysis starts from an approach to cultural diplomacy that goes beyond the state-centric paradigm, seeking to highlight different entities as active participants in the configuration of international cultural relations.

## **2. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY BEYOND THE STATE**

In order to fully understand the significance and applicability of cultural diplomacy, a solid conceptual foundation is necessary, starting with the definition of the central concepts: culture and diplomacy.

In a broad sense, culture can be understood as the set of values, norms, traditions, languages, beliefs, representations, and symbolic expressions through which a social group or community builds its identity, regulates its internal life, and establishes relationships with other communities (Geertz, 1973: 89). This holistic view of culture is supported by anthropologists such as Edward B. Tylor, who defined it as early as 1871 as "the whole complex that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and

all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Taylor, 1871: 1). Later, Clifford Geertz conceptualized culture as a "system of shared meanings," (Geertz, 1973: 5) emphasizing its symbolic and intersubjective nature. Culture is not just a sum of external manifestations, but a code for interpreting reality and a way of giving meaning to the world (Geertz, 1973: 3-30), thus becoming a medium for articulating collective identity, but also, at the same time, a dynamic space for negotiation, representation, and influence in transnational interactions.

In literature, "diplomacy" is often defined as the art and practice of negotiation between states, with the aim of promoting national interests, maintaining peace, and establishing international relations based on mutual respect and cooperation (Satow, 1932: 1-4). In the contemporary sense, diplomacy extends beyond formal negotiations and involves a complex set of activities through which states communicate, cooperate, and promote their values and interests on the international stage. This includes traditional dialogue between governments, as well as interaction with civil societies, international organizations, the media, and other non-state entities (Hocking, 2006: 13-25).

Throughout history, the practice of diplomacy has undergone multiple transformations, adapting to the political, economic, social, and cultural developments of each era (Berridge, 2010: 1-3). The expansion of the spectrum of diplomatic actions has led to the emergence of specialized sub-branches: public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy (Berridge, 2010: 191-195).

Cultural diplomacy has traditionally been conceptualized as an instrument of state foreign policy, used to promote a positive image and cultivate respect and intercultural cooperation between states (Nye, 2004: 5-7). In this classical paradigm, the state appears as the main producer and distributor of cultural meanings on the international stage, and culture is instrumentalized as a resource of symbolic power (Cull, 2019: 138-140).

This interpretation of cultural diplomacy as an exclusively state instrument is increasingly difficult to sustain in the current context (Carbó-Catalan & Roig-Sanz, 2022: 1-21). The mobility of populations, the interconnection of societies, and the development of transnational civic networks show that the production and circulation of cultural meanings can no longer be attributed solely to official institutions (Tsuprykova, 2020: 29-31).

Scholarly debates on cultural diplomacy have progressively moved beyond the traditional state-centric paradigm, emphasizing the multiplicity of actors involved in the circulation of cultural meanings in international relations. Early theoretical approaches conceptualized cultural diplomacy primarily as an instrument of foreign policy through which states promote their cultural identity abroad. Milton Cummings defined cultural diplomacy as the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other cultural aspects among nations with the aim of fostering mutual understanding and cooperation (Cummings, 2003: 1-4). Similarly, Richard T. Arndt argued that cultural diplomacy functions through long-term processes of communication between societies, often extending beyond governmental institutions and involving educational networks, cultural organizations, and intellectual communities (Arndt, 2005: 3-10). These perspectives already suggested that cultural diplomacy cannot be reduced solely to official diplomatic initiatives, but rather unfolds through a broader ecosystem of cultural interactions.

The emergence of Joseph S. Nye's concept of **soft power** further expanded this analytical perspective. Nye emphasized that the ability of an actor to influence others increasingly depends on the attractiveness of its culture, political values, and institutional

credibility rather than on coercive resources (Nye, 2004: 5-11). Cultural diplomacy therefore operates as one of the main mechanisms through which symbolic resources are converted into international influence. Building on this theoretical foundation, later studies in public diplomacy—particularly those developed by scholars such as Jan Melissen and Nicholas Cull—have highlighted the growing importance of societal actors in the production and diffusion of cultural influence (Melissen, 2009: 12-18). Universities, civil society organizations, minority communities, and diaspora networks participate in the creation of transnational cultural spaces in which dialogue, cooperation, and mutual recognition can emerge independently of formal diplomatic structures.

Recent research conducted within the field of European studies illustrates how these dynamics operate particularly clearly in regions characterized by historical multicultural interaction. Studies focusing on cross-border cooperation emphasize that cultural diplomacy often manifests itself through local initiatives, educational exchanges, and community-based cultural projects that connect societies across political borders. In this sense, cultural diplomacy becomes not only a symbolic instrument of international representation but also a mechanism for strengthening intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. Research on the Romanian–Hungarian cross-border area, for example, demonstrates that cultural events, educational programs, and academic cooperation can function as practical forms of cultural diplomacy that facilitate dialogue between communities and contribute to the development of shared European identities beyond national frameworks (Stoica, 2025: 34–36).

This evolution requires a reconsideration of the relationship between the state and society in the sphere of international relations. Far from replacing official diplomacy, societal actors complement and nuance it, acting in areas where state intervention is limited or ineffective (Michael, 2024: 3-7). Through their organizational flexibility and proximity to communities, these entities are able to build relationships of trust and facilitate intercultural dialogue at the micro and meso-social levels (Putnam, 2014: 19-30).

The concept of societal diplomacy, a branch of public diplomacy, provides an appropriate analytical framework for understanding these dynamics. Societal diplomacy refers to the set of practices through which non-state actors participate in processes of representation, mediation, and international cooperation, using symbolic, cultural, and social resources (Melissen, 2008: 28-43). Unlike classical diplomacy, which is oriented towards the negotiation of political interests, societal diplomacy operates through the accumulation and conversion of cultural and symbolic capital (Melissen, 2008: 3-15).

Once these concepts have been clarified, it becomes necessary to define transnational cultural capital, which can be understood as the totality of skills, values, memories, and symbolic repertoires that flow between different national spaces and facilitate intercultural communication (Erel, 2010: 642–660). Minorities and diasporas are in a position to produce this type of capital, as they structurally integrate elements of both cultural spaces (Hack-Polay & Rahman & Bal, 2023: 3–5).

In this analytical framework, in which transnational cultural capital and societal diplomacy practices are recognized as components of intercultural mediation, (Cull, 2019: 45-52) it is necessary to further explore the forms of symbolic influence generated on a community level. The use of the concept of *soft power* allows us to capture how cultural resources, collective memory, and the relationships cultivated by minorities and

the diaspora are transformed into mechanisms of symbolic influence and recognition in the sphere of international relations (Gevorgyan, 2023: 66-70).

Cultural diplomacy is often associated with the concepts of public diplomacy and *soft power*. Although interconnected, these concepts are not synonymous (Lepădatu, 2020: 2). The conceptualization of cultural diplomacy cannot be dissociated from Joseph S. Nye's theory of non-coercive influence, known as *soft power* (Anghel, 2020: 59-61). The concept established in international relations literature to describe an actor's ability to influence through attraction and persuasion, (Nye, 2004: 5-11) rather than coercion undergoes a significant reformulation when applied to non-state actors (Nye, 1990: 153-156).

In the case of minority and diaspora communities, cultural influence is not manifested through formal strategies, but through recurring activities: cultural events, educational initiatives, professional networks, and local partnerships (Nye, 2004: 5-11). Their effect does not derive from political authority, but from credibility built over time and the ability to generate trust in the environments in which they operate (Melisen, 2009: 3-10). Minorities and the diaspora thus become bearers of an authority that cannot be replicated by state institutions (Shain& Barth, 2003: 450-453).

In conclusion, it can be said that, beyond the simple promotion of national values or the representation of identity in the external space, cultural diplomacy should be understood as a refined form of international communication, which functions through symbols, meanings, and cultural affinities, contributing to the construction of a global climate conducive to dialogue, cooperation, and mutual legitimacy (Ang&Isar&Mar, 2015: 365-381).

This dimension of diplomacy transcends the classic framework of formal negotiations and asserts itself as an institutionalised expression of non-coercive influence, in full accordance with the theoretical paradigm of soft power. Culture becomes a strategic tool for asserting identity, capable of shaping perceptions, generating convergence of values and mitigating ideological or civilisational differences (Nye, 2004: 99-120).

Through its plurality of manifestations, from educational exchanges and artistic collaborations to the promotion of language and intangible heritage, (Zanella&Neves Junior& Silva, 2024: 2-4) cultural diplomacy contributes to the articulation of a coherent international presence, sustained not by coercion but by attraction and mutual trust (And, 2005: 12-25). In this logic, it can no longer be conceived as a marginal or decorative field, but as an integral component of contemporary diplomatic strategies, capable of producing lasting effects in the global equation of symbolic power (Ang&Isar&Mar, 2015: 370-380). After clarifying the theoretical framework, the article cannot remain anchored exclusively in the sphere of theorising, but must be complemented by an empirical perspective that allows direct observation of the societal actors relevant to Romanian-German cultural diplomacy: the German minority in Romania and the Romanian community in the German constituency. The choice of the first case study is justified by its historical density, high degree of institutionalization, and the community's ability to transform cultural continuity into a resource for transnational dialogue. The German minority, therefore, provides an appropriate experimental framework for examining how the concepts discussed above are articulated in concrete practices open to contemporary dynamics.

### 3. SOCIETAL ACTORS IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: THE CASE OF THE GERMAN MINORITY IN ROMANIA

The German minority in Romania is one of the most consistent examples of a historical European community (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013) that has managed to transform cultural and institutional continuity into a resource of transnational relevance (Koranyi, 2021: 63-66). The presence of German communities, especially the Transylvanian Saxons, has been marked since the Middle Ages by a high degree of legal, administrative, and religious organization, which has generated stable forms of local autonomy and community cohesion (Evans, 2008: 212-216). The privileges granted to German settlers, the structures of self-government, and the central role of the church contributed to the early institutionalization of a community capable of long-term social and cultural reproduction (Gündisch & Beer, 2005: 45-78).

This early structuring allowed for the development of a collective identity, articulated not only around ethnic belonging, but also around civic values such as community responsibility, institutional discipline, work ethic, and constant reference to Central Europe (Alnæs, 2014: 21-46). The identity of the Saxon community took shape as a complex historical construct, in which cultural, religious, and civic dimensions overlapped, generating a model of belonging distinct from existing ethnic forms (Cercel, 2012: 83-86). Moreover, the German identity in Transylvania functioned more as an "institutionalized" identity, based on social practices, norms, and stable symbolic frameworks, rather than as an identity defined by strictly genealogical criteria (Gündisch & Beer, 2005: 100-115).

Over the centuries, this identity was built in constant interaction with the Romanian majority and other ethnic groups in the region. Daily coexistence, economic and cultural exchanges, and the joint management of urban and rural space have fostered the emergence of mechanisms of intercultural mediation, which have allowed the German community to adapt to successive political transformations without losing its internal coherence (Verdery, 1991: 201-2115). The Saxon identity thus remained a dynamic construct, capable of integrating structural changes, but also of functioning as a bridge between different cultural spaces.

The 20th century, and in particular the period of communist rule, represented a major discontinuity in this historical trajectory. Policies of nationalization, ideological control, (Locota, 2024: 99-100) and restriction of community autonomy, as well as the mass emigration of the German population, (Beer & Radu & Kühner-Wielach, 2020: 47-50) affected the social and institutional structures of the minority (Deletant, 1999: 126-130). While in 1930 the German minority numbered over 745,000 people, (Mărculeț & Mărculeț, 2009: 146-151) the 1992 census indicated less than 120,000, (Institutul pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2019) and the 2021 census approximately 36,000 (UN, 2025). However, the fundamental elements of collective identity were not completely destroyed. They survived in a latent form, preserved in particular through religious institutions, built heritage, and collective memory passed down from generation to generation (Verdery, 1991: 208-212).

After 1989, these resources were reactivated in a favorable political and cultural context, becoming central landmarks in the reconstruction of identity and the redefinition of the German community's position in Romanian society. The process of identity rearticulation was not purely restorative, but reflexive, oriented towards integrating historical experience into a discourse compatible with the European values of pluralism,

diversity and intercultural dialogue (Assmann, 2013: 98-115). Historical continuity was thus reinterpreted not as a form of cultural isolation, but as a resource for legitimacy and transnational mediation (Beer & Radu & Kührer-Wielach, 2020: 17-23).

In this context, the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania (FDGR) has established itself as the main civic actor through which community identity has been projected into the post-communist public sphere. The FDGR can be understood as a modern expression of an older tradition of community self-government, adapted to the new political and social realities of post-1989 Romania (Dragoman, 2015: 136-142).

Since its inception, the FDGR has not limited itself to the political representation of the German minority, but has evolved into a civic actor with a multidimensional profile, situated at the intersection of culture, education, and foreign relations (Dragoman, 2015: 142-148). Through its network of local organizations, the forum currently supports over 50 German-language educational institutions, attended not only by ethnic German students, but also by the majority population, which strengthens the intercultural dimension of its action (Iunesch, 2025: 48-49). This orientation has made it possible to move beyond a strictly ethno-political logic and integrate German identity into a broader discourse on democratic coexistence (Anghel & Olteanu & Schuster, 2017: 75-98). At the same time, the forum has developed sustainable partnerships with institutions in Germany, cultural foundations, and European organizations, facilitating the circulation of ideas, good practices, and symbolic resources between the two national spaces (Fuen.org, n.d.). These initiatives had an impact that went beyond the community sphere, contributing to the shaping of an image of Romania as a space of cultural diversity and European intercultural dialogue (Cercel, 2021: 80-84).

From the perspective of cultural diplomacy, the FDGR operates in an informal manner, but with significant efficiency, which is specific to entities involved in societal diplomacy. Its legitimacy does not derive exclusively from the legal framework for representing minorities, but from the historical continuity of the community it represents and its ability to transform this continuity into a resource for intercultural communication and mediation (Cercel, 2021: 83-87).

More than just a representative, the FDGR acts as a mediator between the German community, Romanian society, and the European space, operating in a symbolic framework that complements and often precedes state initiatives (*Forumul Democrat Al Germanilor Din România*, n.d.). This capacity for mediation is part of a broader logic of societal cultural diplomacy, in which non-state actors become bearers of credible identity narratives and values compatible with contemporary European discourse (EUNIC, 2016: 3-11).

Complementary to this civic function, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession provides the symbolic infrastructure that has made the community's identity continuity possible. In this complementary relationship, the two institutions can be understood as distinct but interdependent pillars of societal cultural diplomacy: one oriented towards civic representation and mediation, the other anchored in memory, heritage, and tradition.

Beyond its religious function, the Evangelical Church has played an important role over time in preserving the language, cultural practices, and community norms of the Transylvanian Saxons (*Evangelical church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania*, n.d.). Parish structures, educational networks, and church archives provide a stable institutional framework for transmitting collective memory and community identity, even in hostile political contexts. This function as an "institution of memory" became all the

more relevant during the communist regime, when public space was subject to ideological control and the cultural autonomy of minorities was severely limited. Thus, we can say that the church operated as a space of discreet symbolic resistance, maintaining community cohesion and the continuity of identity repertoires (Assmann, 2007: 34-42).

After 1989, the church's involvement in the restoration of architectural heritage, especially fortified churches and historic Saxon ensembles, transformed material memory into an active resource for cultural communication (Buchholz, 2018: 73-87). The relationships developed with churches, foundations, and cultural institutions in Germany facilitated the reintegration of the German community in Romania into a circuit of European values and the consolidation of Romania's image as a space of cultural pluralism and historical continuity (Beer & Radu & Kühner-Wielach, 2020: 201-205).

These heritage-related activities go beyond the logic of conservation, becoming an active instrument of community soft power. Through transnational projects, cooperation with German foundations, and the involvement of local communities, heritage is transformed into an opportunity for dialogue, symbolic reconciliation, and mutual recognition, especially in relation to the historical traumas of the 20th century (Anghel, 2014: 140-148).

The relevance of the German community is not limited to its status as a beneficiary of cultural policies, but acts as an active producer of cultural meaning and as a mediator between two national spaces, indispensable to the sustainable functioning of international relations (EUNIC, 2016: 3-5).

#### **4. SOCIETAL ACTORS IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: THE CASE OF THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA IN GERMANY**

The analysis of the German minority in Romania highlighted how an institutionalized historical community can function in the field of societal cultural diplomacy through continuity, collective memory and symbolic infrastructure. Complementarily, the study of the Romanian diaspora in Germany allows us to explore a different configuration, marked by recent mobility, plurality of identities, and flexible organizational structures (Schiller, 1998: 13-17). If the German minority represents a model of cultural diplomacy based on historical permanence, the Romanian diaspora illustrates an emerging form of transnational cultural diplomacy, built around circulation, adaptation, and intercultural mediation (Melisen, 2009: 91-110).

In this sense, the Romanian diaspora in Germany becomes a relevant case study for understanding how contemporary societal actors contribute to shaping bilateral cultural relations, not through nation-state institutions, but through cultural practices, civic networks, and informal soft power mechanisms.

The Romanian diaspora in Germany is one of the largest and most dynamic Romanian communities in Western Europe, being the result of post-communist mobility and Romania's integration into the European Union (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2021: 118-119). According to official data provided by the German authorities, the number of Romanian citizens residing in Germany has exceeded 850,000, registering a steady increase over the last decade and placing the Romanian community among the largest groups of citizens from EU member states (OECD, 2019). This quantitative evolution reflects the progressive diversification of the socio-demographic profile of the diaspora, increasingly including family and educational migration (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2021: 98-101).

From a structural point of view, the Romanian diaspora in Germany differs from historical minority communities in its relatively recent nature and lack of long-term traditional institutionalisation. However, it is precisely this condition of being a "community in formation" that gives the diaspora a high degree of flexibility and adaptability (Nicolăescu, 2011: 113-123). The literature describes the Romanian diaspora as a transnational community, defined by a dual anchorage: progressive integration into German society and the maintenance of cultural, symbolic, and emotional ties with the place of origin (Levitt, 2001: 4-8&195-201). This positioning generates an open identity framework, in which national belonging is negotiated and reinterpreted according to variable social, educational, and professional contexts (Brah, 1996: 181-188).

Family migration plays a major role in stabilizing the Romanian community in Germany. Family reunification, kids getting into the German education system, and having generations born or raised in Germany are helping to change the diaspora from a mostly temporary community into one with long-term goals (Chauvin&Garcés-Mascareñas&Kraler, 2011: 120-123). In this context, culture becomes an instrument for the intergenerational transmission of identity through language, cultural practices, and participation in community life (Assmann, 2013: 56-58). Educational migration, especially to university cities such as Berlin and Munich, bolsters this dimension, favoring the emergence of cultural and professional elites capable of operating simultaneously in both cultural spaces (Marin, 2014: 4884-4888).

From a geographical perspective, Berlin and Munich are emerging as major hubs of the Romanian diaspora (Departamentul pentru Românii de Pretutindeni, n.d.). Berlin, with its cosmopolitan character and dense cultural scene, offers a favorable environment for the expression of identity and cultural initiatives of the diaspora, while Munich, with its strong economic and educational profile, attracts a diaspora with a high level of educational and professional capital (OECD, n.d.; Vertovec, 2007: 1024-1030). In both cases, the Romanian community integrates into the German urban dynamic, actively participating in local cultural life and developing forms of cultural expression adapted to the host context (Wissenschaft weltoffen, n.d.).

Recent studies on the Romanian diaspora's access to culture indicate that cultural participation plays a role in maintaining community cohesion and collective identity, but also in the relationship with the local society. According to the CulturConect report, cultural events, educational activities, and artistic initiatives are the main channels through which the Romanian diaspora asserts its visibility and contributes to intercultural dialogue. Culture thus becomes a space for interaction and mutual recognition, where differences in identity are negotiated in a non-conflictual manner (Code for Romania, n.d.). From a diplomatic perspective, the Romanian diaspora does not act solely as a bearer of an "exported" identity. On the contrary, it acts as an active producer of contextualized cultural meanings, capable of translating elements of Romanian culture into a language that is intelligible and relevant to the German public (Zaharna, 2012: 10-40). This capacity transforms the diaspora into an actor of transnational cultural diplomacy, for which culture represents not only a repertoire of traditions, but also an instrument of dialogue, adaptation, and bridge-building between the two national spaces (Leonard et al., 2002: 8-14, 54).

If we have previously highlighted the transnational and hybrid nature of the identity of the Romanian diaspora in Germany, the role of cultural associations and civic networks can be understood as the main mechanism through which this identity is organized, articulated, and projected into the public space. In the absence of consolidated



historical institutional structures, the Romanian diaspora has developed flexible forms of association, which function simultaneously as spaces for community cohesion and as interfaces for dialogue with German society (Anghel et al., 2017: 34–56, 121–146).

According to data from the Department for Românii de Pretutindeni, there are dozens of active Romanian associations in Germany, with cultural, educational, or civic profiles, distributed in major urban centers such as Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, and Stuttgart (Departamentul pentru Românii de Pretutindeni, n.d.). These organizations constitute an essential community infrastructure for the identity aggregation of the diaspora and for transforming cultural belonging into a resource for visibility and public recognition (Koopmans & Statham, 2023: 84–90, 102–106). Unlike traditional associative structures, they are characterized by a high degree of adaptability, responding quickly to the needs of the community and the German socio-cultural context (Kuznetsov, 2006: 151–170).

Diaspora associations serve a dual function. On the one hand, they act as spaces for internal socialization and cultural reproduction, facilitating the transmission of the Romanian language, cultural repertoires, and collective memory, including to generations born in Germany. Educational activities—language courses, workshops for children and young people, extracurricular cultural programs—help maintain a link between generations (Asociația Româno-Germană din Niedersachsen, n.d.; Assmann, 2013: 36–45; Fishman, 1991: 355–380; Klein und frei, n.d.; LCCR, n.d.; Levitt, 2001: 151–172; Vertovec, 2011: 244–250). On the other hand, by organizing festivals, literary events, film screenings, exhibitions, and conferences, associations contribute to the visibility of Romanian culture. The emphasis is not exclusively on preserving traditions, but on integrating modern cultural expressions—contemporary literature, cinema, visual arts, civic themes—into a framework compatible with the sensibilities of the German public (Consulatul General al României la München, 2025; Departamentul pentru Românii de Pretutindeni, 2024; Fu et al., 2015: 202).

At the same time, associations contribute to the social integration of Romanians in Germany. They offer spaces for informal support, information, and cultural orientation, facilitating adaptation to the social and institutional norms of the host society (Tittel-Mosser, 2024: 7–8). Studies on the civic organization of migrants emphasize that these forms of association increase the social capital of diaspora communities and reduce the social vulnerability of newcomers (Kindler et al., 2025: 7–10, 13–15). Cultural action intersects with the social and educational dimensions, giving associations a broader role than the strictly cultural one: diaspora civic networks amplify this impact by connecting Romanian associations in different regions with local cultural institutions, civil society organizations, and municipal authorities (Ong'ayo, 2019: 152–163). They function as informal infrastructures of cultural diplomacy, enabling the circulation of good practices, the coordination of initiatives, and the increased visibility of Romanian cultural actions at the regional and national levels (Venté et al., 2025).

If the cultural associations and civic networks of the Romanian diaspora in Germany can be understood as informal infrastructures of transnational cultural diplomacy, the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR) represents the level of institutional articulation through which these initiatives can be connected to the strategic framework of the Romanian state's foreign cultural policy (Dâmaso, 2021: 8). The relationship between the ICR and the diaspora is not one of substituting civic action, but rather a functional interface in which the institutional logic of the state and the dynamics of civil

society meet, negotiate, and influence each other (Institutul Cultural Român, 2022: 7–8).

In its post-1989 evolution, the ICR has moved from a predominantly centralized model of cultural promotion to a more open approach that recognizes the role of non-state actors in shaping Romania's external cultural image (Institutul Cultural Român, 2022: 3–5). In Germany, this change was reflected in a focus on projects carried out in partnership with artists, intellectuals, and diaspora organizations, as well as in an openness to local cultural spaces and German professional networks (Institutul Cultural Român, n.d.). Thus, ICR representations functioned not only as promoters of Romanian culture, but also as institutional mediators in a competitive and dense European cultural field.

The relationship between the ICR and the Romanian diaspora in Germany can be described as one of asymmetrical complementarity. The institution provides the material and symbolic framework for external cultural action, offering logistical and financial resources, official legitimacy, visibility in the German institutional space, and access to European cultural networks (Institutul Cultural Român, 2022: 2). In return, the diaspora contributes contextual expertise, local social capital, and the ability to calibrate cultural content in relation to the sensibilities and expectations of the German public (Ong'ayo, 2019: 154–157). This differentiated articulation of roles mitigates the risk of a normative or rigid cultural discourse and favors the configuration of a more nuanced, credible, and context-appropriate representation of identity (Cull, 2019: 84–90).

Concrete examples of collaboration between the ICR and diaspora representatives in cities such as Berlin and Munich illustrate this dynamic. Cultural projects carried out in partnership with local associations, Romanian artists based in Germany, or the academic community have allowed Romanian culture to be integrated into local cultural circuits, avoiding isolation in an exclusively national framework. In these cases, the diaspora was not treated as a mere target audience, but as a co-producer of cultural content, actively involved in defining themes, formats, and target audiences (Cooperation Agreement, 2013; Institutul Cultural Român, 2024; Institutul Cultural Român, n.d.; *On the Move*, 2023).

However, analysis of the relationship between the ICR and the diaspora also reveals structural limitations of this institutional interface. The persistence of centralized selection mechanisms, the rigidity of administrative procedures, and differences in pace between civic initiative and institutional logic can sometimes reduce the institution's ability to respond to the real dynamics of diaspora communities (Cull, 2019: 62–70). In certain contexts, this gap has led to a perceived distance between institutional priorities and the concrete needs of local culture, affecting the potential for long-term mobilization (Cull, 2019: 130–135).

Despite these limitations, the ICR's role as an institutional interface remains essential for integrating diaspora initiatives into a coherent framework of cultural diplomacy. The participation of the diaspora in defining and implementing cultural projects contributes to the democratization of cultural representation and the diversification of narratives about Romanian identity in the European space. From this point of view, the ICR does not function exclusively as an instrument of the state, but as a space for negotiation between official representation and emerging cultural expressions of Romanian society outside the country's borders (Ho & McConnell, 2017: 235–255).

The relationship of institutional complementarity creates the conditions for a higher stage of transnational cultural action, in which civic initiative and social capital

accumulated at the local level are converted into lasting symbolic influence (Nye, 1990: 94–100). Consequently, the diaspora fulfills the role of a partner in foreign cultural policy and, at the same time, acts autonomously as an intercultural mediator, capable of generating specific forms of soft power (Bourdieu, 1992: 117–121).

The soft power produced by the Romanian diaspora in Germany is distinguished by its decentralized and relational character (Gamlen, 2014: 180–217).

Unlike classic state instruments, it is not the result of formal strategies or unidirectional messages. It is gradually built up through social interactions, everyday cultural practices, and civic participation in the German public sphere (Moise, 2022: 10–14). The cultural, educational, and social activities of the diaspora create contexts for encounter and dialogue that foster mutual understanding and reduce the symbolic distances between communities (Hannerz, 1996: 103–108).

The diaspora demonstrates that it can translate the values, sensibilities, and symbolic codes of the two national spaces. The mediating function is manifested concretely in the way Romanian identity is presented and reinterpreted in German cultural contexts: not as a monolithic or exclusively ethnic identity, but as a plural, European expression open to dialogue (Diaspora2030, n.d.). Through its active participation in German cultural life, the Romanian diaspora contributes to the construction of alternative narratives about Romania, which go beyond stereotypical frameworks and emphasize its contemporary cultural dimensions (Kurvet-Käosaar et al., 2019: 125–143).

At the same time, the literature draws attention to the limits and vulnerabilities of diasporic soft power. Organizational fragmentation, dependence on volunteerism and limited resources, as well as differences in vision within the community can reduce the long-term impact of cultural initiatives (Putnam, 2014: 48–64). In addition, there is a risk that the cultural action of the diaspora will be symbolically overburdened in the absence of a coherent framework of institutional support, or, conversely, excessively instrumentalized in official representation logics that diminish its autonomy (Délano & Gamlen, 2014: 43–53).

However, it is precisely its hybrid nature, situated between integration into German society and maintaining ties with Romania, that gives the Romanian diaspora a strategic position in the architecture of European cultural diplomacy. The community soft power generated in this way is not spectacular or immediately quantifiable, but it has structural durability, as it is based on stable social relations, symbolic capital accumulated over time, and mutual recognition.

## 5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The comparative analysis of the two entities is designed as a methodological approach aimed at highlighting the role of societal actors in shaping contemporary bilateral relations. The choice of the comparative method is not determined by a presumed symmetry between the two communities analyzed, but rather by their structural differences. These differences allow us to observe how similar diplomatic functions can be performed through distinct mechanisms, adapted to different contexts and resources. As a result, the comparison provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining contemporary forms of societal cultural diplomacy and how they contribute to the stability and depth of Romanian-German bilateral relations.

The comparison of the two case studies highlights, first of all, significant structural differences. The German minority in Romania is a historical indigenous

community, with centuries of continuity and an established legal status (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013), while the Romanian diaspora in Germany is a relatively recent transnational community, formed as a result of post-communist mobility and European integration (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, n.d.).

However, from the perspective of cultural diplomacy, the two communities perform convergent functions. Both operate in an intermediate space between the state of origin and the state of residence and transform this positioning into an informal diplomatic resource. While the German minority acts as a bearer of historical continuity and cultural memory, the Romanian diaspora asserts itself as a mediator of mobility, adaptation, and identity renewal. Their complementarity contributes to the densification of Romanian-German cultural relations (Anghel, 2014: 373–378) along different temporal and symbolic axes.

A major structural difference between the two case studies analyzed concerns the degree and type of institutionalization, elements that directly influence the nature of symbolic legitimacy and the capacity for external cultural projection. The German minority in Romania benefits from dense and stratified institutionalisation, built over time and supported by a coherent set of civic, religious, educational and heritage structures (Institutul pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, n.d.: 6–36). Organizations such as the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, German-language school networks, and the heritage infrastructure associated with Saxon communities give this minority a legitimacy that is simultaneously historical, legal, and symbolic (Constituția României, 2003, art. 6, art. 62(2); Philippi, 1991: 15–35, 210–225; Verdery, 1991: 302–315). This institutional architecture allows for the exercise of community soft power with a high degree of continuity, predictability, and public recognition, both in Romania and in Germany.

Solid institutionalization (Smith, 2006: 82–89) also facilitates the German minority's ability to support long-term cultural projects and transform historical memory and heritage into a stable diplomatic resource. Initiatives such as the restoration of fortified churches in Transylvania (EEA Grants, n.d.) or the consolidation of bilingual education (Iunesch & Pfützner, 2025) are mechanisms of symbolic communication and European legitimization, integrated into transnational networks of cultural cooperation, not just simple instruments of cultural preservation. The literature on the subject emphasizes that such institutionalization contributes to the accumulation of symbolic capital that is difficult to replicate in more recent community contexts (Lamont & Molnár, 2002: 168–178).

In contrast, the Romanian diaspora in Germany is characterized by fragmented and polycentric institutionalization (Pries, 2008: 268–273), based on cultural associations, civic initiatives, and informal networks with varying degrees of stability and visibility (Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration, n.d.). Its symbolic legitimacy derives from its capacity for cultural adaptation, the relevance of the themes it addresses, and its active insertion into the German public sphere (Bourdieu, 1986: 21–26). Urban cultural projects, film festivals, contemporary literature, and civic debates function as platforms for the production of cultural meaning, oriented towards dialogue and current events (Bourdieu & Johnson, 2011: 29–44). However, this legitimacy is more volatile and dependent on relational resources and cooperation with institutions such as the Romanian Cultural Institute or local cultural partners (Institutul Cultural Român, 2022: 39–46). Although flexibility favors innovation and the ability to respond to social dynamics, it also implies structural

vulnerabilities, such as project discontinuity, dependence on ad hoc funding, or the difficulty of long-term symbolic capitalization (Ashton, 2022: 388–407). Critics of diasporic cultural diplomacy point to the risk that the lack of stable institutionalization may limit the lasting impact of cultural initiatives, despite their creativity and immediate relevance (Dolea, 2024: 9–10).

This formalized relationship gives the actions of the German minority stability and visibility, which facilitates the exercise of coherent and predictable community soft power. At the same time, the literature warns of the risk that excessive proximity to state structures could lead to a certain instiAlthough the two communities analyzed mobilize distinct forms of transnational cultural capital, these differences do not reflect a value hierarchy, but result from different structural and temporal positions within Romanian-German relations. In the case of the German minority, cultural capital is articulated predominantly through a logic of symbolic sustainability, anchored in the continuity of tangible and intangible heritage and in the sedimentation of collective memory. Elements such as ecclesiastical architecture, community practices, and the tradition of education in German function as forms of cultural communication, generating recognition and legitimacy in the German space, beyond the strictly ethnic dimension (Bourdieu & Johnson, 2011: 29–50).

The Romanian diaspora in Germany, on the other hand, activates a cultural capital shaped around contemporary creativity, mobility, and urban intercultural interaction. Current artistic production becomes a space for identity negotiation, in which Romanian belonging is reinterpreted in relation to the cultural sensibilities of the host society (Viola, 2015: 29–39).

Overall, the difference between the two types of cultural capital highlights the fact that Romanian-German cultural diplomacy is built through the coexistence and interaction of multiple symbolic registers, which are not mutually exclusive but rather reinforce each other.

The relationship between the societal actors analysed and their country of origin is characterised by a balance between autonomy and cooperation. Both the German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany develop forms of engagement with state institutions that do not negate community autonomy, but rather integrate it into a framework of selective collaboration oriented towards common goals (Beer et al., 2020: 56–59).

In the case of the German minority in Romania, this relationship is part of a structural partnership with the Romanian state, based on the constitutional recognition of national minorities (Constituția României, 2003, art. 6, art. 62(2)) and the existence of formal mechanisms for political and cultural representation (Ciobanu & Radu, 2008: 60–80). The Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania functions, in this sense, as a legitimate institutional intermediary, capable of articulating the interests of the community in relation to state authorities and participating in the definition and implementation of relevant cultural policies (Forumul Democrat al Germanilor din România, n.d.). Collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, local authorities, and other public institutions has enabled the integration of the heritage and memory of the German community into national and European cultural strategies, thus strengthening the diplomatic dimension of these efforts (Ministerul Culturii, 2025, Annex 1, no. 4).

This formalized relationship gives the actions of the German minority stability and visibility, which facilitates the exercise of coherent and predictable community soft

power. At the same time, the literature warns of the risk that excessive proximity to state structures could lead to a certain institutional rigidity or limit the capacity for cultural innovation, especially in contexts marked by rapid social change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 150–157). Therefore, the relative autonomy of community actors remains an essential condition for maintaining their symbolic credibility.

The relationship between the Romanian diaspora in Germany and the German state is predominantly functional and indirect, mediated by civil society structures, local integration policies, and the federal architecture of cultural governance (Bendel, 2014: 20–27). Unlike the German minority in Romania, the Romanian diaspora does not enjoy a distinct collective status or formal mechanisms of representation in relation to the host state, but interacts with it mainly through general instruments designed to integrate migrants and promote cultural diversity (Bundesregierung Deutschland, 2021: 6–8, 20–21). At the same time, access to the German public space is conditioned by the ability of diaspora actors to fit into existing normative and institutional frameworks—municipal integration programs, local cultural funding, intercultural initiatives, or partnerships with German educational and cultural institutions (Huning&Droste&Gliemann, 2021: 127–130).

The comparative analysis indicates that societal cultural diplomacy works most effectively when it complements, rather than substitutes, state diplomacy. Societal actors contribute to deepening bilateral relations by creating a climate of trust, acting in areas where state intervention is limited or less effective (Rana, 2011: 89–92).

The complementarity between the institutional stability of the German minority and the associative flexibility of the Romanian diaspora highlights the fact that cultural relations are based on a hybrid architecture, in which civic initiative and official action support each other without negating their specificity.

Despite structural differences, the two communities show significant strategic convergence in the way they contribute to the architecture of Romanian-German cultural diplomacy. This convergence is not expressed through the standardization of cultural repertoires or forms of organization, but through the assumption of compatible diplomatic functions aimed at facilitating the circulation of European values, promoting cultural pluralism, and consolidating a space for symbolic dialogue between the two societies (Melisen, 2009: 99–103). Both actors act as cultural interfaces, capable of translating meanings, memories, and practices between two distinct national frameworks, thus contributing to the densification of bilateral relations beyond the official channels of state diplomacy (Riordan, 2005: 1–15).

A relevant example of this convergence is the activity of the Romanian-German Bilateral Cooperation Forum, an association based in Romania, which functions as a platform for dialogue and cooperation between institutional, societal, and economic actors from the two spaces (Forumul de cooperare Bilaterală Româno-German, n.d.; Ministerul Afacerilor Externe, n.d.). Through projects dedicated to cultural, educational, and civic cooperation, the forum capitalizes on the expertise of minority communities and diaspora networks, integrating them into a structured but flexible framework of cooperation (European Union, 2016: 6–8).

However, this convergence should not be idealized. Comparative analysis also reveals structural limitations to societal cooperation, generated by resource asymmetries, differences in public visibility, and sometimes excessive dependence on state institutional agendas (Lewis&Kanji, 2009: 75–82). In the case of the Romanian diaspora, participation in such cooperation frameworks often remains fragmented and concentrated around

cultural or associative elites, which can reduce the capacity to represent the internal diversity of the community (Marinescu, 2019: 145–167). Similarly, the German minority in Romania risks, in certain contexts, being perceived primarily through the prism of its patrimonial and historical role, which may limit the recognition of its contemporary and dynamic dimension as a European societal actor (Ziegler, 2017).

The German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany cannot be reduced to marginal or auxiliary actors, but must be understood as structuring elements of this diplomatic ecosystem, contributing, through different registers, to the stability, social legitimacy, and sustainability of bilateral relations (Assmann, 2013: 36–54). It is precisely this complementarity—between memory and mobility, continuity and innovation—that gives Romanian-German cultural diplomacy the ability to adapt to contemporary European transformations without losing its normative coherence (Risse, 2015: 65–78).

## 6. CONCLUSION

The analysis carried out in this article sought to go beyond the state-centric explanatory frameworks established in the study of cultural diplomacy, proposing a reading focused on the role of societal actors in shaping and maintaining the bilateral relationship between Romania and Germany. Following the analysis, the research question formulated in the introduction receives an affirmative and differentiated answer. Through the comparative investigation of two distinct types of communities, the article highlights how different forms of belonging, mobility, and institutionalization can generate convergent diplomatic functions relevant to the architecture of bilateral relations.

A first conclusion of the analytical approach is that Romanian-German cultural diplomacy cannot be understood exclusively as a product of public policies or official institutional initiatives. On the contrary, it constitutes a distributed process, the result of interaction between the state and society, between formal structures and informal networks, between historical continuity and contemporary mobility. The German minority in Romania and the Romanian diaspora in Germany function as relational nodes in this process, producing and circulating symbolic capital in a way that complements and deepens official diplomatic action.

The comparison of the two case studies reflects complementary registers of cultural action without the differences representing an obstacle to diplomatic relevance. The German minority in Romania mobilizes cultural capital anchored in heritage, collective memory, and institutional continuity, while the Romanian diaspora in Germany operates primarily through contemporary cultural production, contextual adaptation, and fluid transnational networks.

A significant contribution of the analysis is to highlight symbolic legitimacy as a central resource for societal actors. Unlike the formal political legitimacy of the state, the legitimacy of minorities and the diaspora is built through cultural credibility, narrative continuity, and the ability to generate trust in different social contexts (Bourdieu, 1992: 107–116).

This legitimacy is fragile and constantly negotiated, but it is precisely its relational nature that makes it effective in cultural diplomacy, where persuasion and recognition are more relevant than coercion.

The analysis also shows that the relationship between societal actors and the state is not one of subordination, but of selective complementarity. Both the German minority

and the Romanian diaspora retain significant functional autonomy, interacting with the state through different mechanisms and in distinct registers. This autonomy makes it possible to avoid the instrumentalisation of culture for strictly political purposes and favours the emergence of flexible forms of cooperation, adapted to local and transnational contexts (Council of Europe, 2008: 39–42). At the same time, the comparative approach also highlights the limitations of societal cultural diplomacy. Organizational fragmentation, dependence on external resources, and the risk of selective representation are recurring challenges, especially in the case of the diaspora. In the absence of coordination mechanisms and critical reflection, these limitations can reduce the long-term impact of cultural initiatives. However, the analysis suggests that it is precisely the plurality of forms of organization and the diversity of cultural repertoires that can serve as sources of resilience if they are integrated into an open and inclusive framework of cooperation (Council of Europe, 2008: 16–22).

From a broader perspective, the findings of this article contribute to expanding the theoretical debate on the concept of soft power beyond state borders. Both actors exercise forms of influence that cannot be reduced to mere extensions of foreign policy, but must be understood as expressions of a communal cultural power. This finding confirms the relevance of societal actors for understanding contemporary international relations, especially in bilateral contexts characterized by historical density and cultural interdependence.

In conclusion, the article demonstrates that maintaining and deepening the cultural dialogue between Romania and Germany does not depend exclusively on the continuity of political or economic relations, but also on the ability of minority and diaspora communities to function as credible mediators. By positioning themselves between national spaces, these communities contribute to the stability, social legitimacy, and sustainability of bilateral relations, confirming the pivotal role of societal cultural diplomacy in a Europe characterized by mobility, diversity, and interconnection.

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# EUROPEANIZATION IN SEGREGATED SCHOOLS? THIRD PARTIES' EFFORTS TO BUILD A TRANS-ETHNIC EDUCATIONAL SPACE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Georgiana-Diana HOROBEANU\*  
Miruna BUTNARU-TRONCOTĂ\*\*

**Abstract.** *Bosnia and Herzegovina's European integration has been marked by persistent stagnation, particularly in education, where ethnic segregation endures despite decades of reforms and external support. Most analyses approach reconciliation from a top-down perspective, focusing on constitutional reform and EU conditionality, yet this overlooks the everyday realities of divided schooling. This article addresses that gap by examining reconciliation from a bottom-up perspective, by examining third-party efforts to build trans-ethnic educational spaces in post-conflict societies.*

*The research adopts a qualitative case study design, triangulating European Commission progress reports (2018–2024), IPA funding allocations, and NGO project documentation. This approach investigates how EU support intersects with local agency and whether participatory practices foster sustainable change in a segregated educational landscape.*

*Findings show that while national reforms remain blocked, micro-level initiatives yield tangible improvements in interethnic cooperation, with some schools integrating inclusive models into curricula. These outcomes highlight the potential of participatory education projects to complement stalled macro-level reforms and illustrate how bottom-up approaches can plant the seeds of a trans-ethnic social fabric, offering both local benefits and pathways for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession.*

**Keywords:** *participatory approach, peacebuilding, reconciliation, NGO sector.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Thirty years after the signing of the *Dayton Peace Agreement* (DPA hereafter) that ended one of the bloodiest conflicts in Europe since the Second World War, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH hereafter) still bears the deep scars of its violent past. As the country most severely affected by the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, BiH continues to struggle with the social, political and institutional consequences of genocide, mass displacement and entrenched ethnic division. In recent years, however, BiH's status in relation to the European Union (EU hereafter) has shifted significantly. After a decade of stagnation, the country was granted candidate status in December 2022 and, in March 2024, the European Council formally opened accession negotiations. This renewed engagement to the region must be understood within the broader geopolitical context shaped by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has prompted the EU to reassess the strategic importance of enlargement in the

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\* Drd. Georgiana-Diana Horobeanu, PhD candidate at National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest, Romania, [georgiana.horobeanu.24@drd.snsa.ro](mailto:georgiana.horobeanu.24@drd.snsa.ro).

\*\* Dr. Miruna Butnaru-Troncota, Professor at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest, Romania, [miruna.troncota@dri.snsa.ro](mailto:miruna.troncota@dri.snsa.ro).

Western Balkans (Butnaru-Troncotă, 2025). These milestones have signaled renewed political momentum and raised expectations that BiH could finally move closer to EU membership.

However, BiH's progress is still conditioned by the fulfilment of the 14 key priorities outlined in the European Commission's 2019 Opinion on the country's membership application. These priorities form the political and institutional benchmarks against which reforms are measured, covering areas such as the rule of law, public administration, democratic functioning and fundamental rights. Importantly, they underline that accession cannot proceed without visible progress on issues directly related to equality, non-discrimination and reconciliation.

At the same time, the EU has assumed a dual role in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On one hand, the European Commission acts as the central political actor guiding the enlargement process. On the other hand, it acts as a guarantor of post-conflict stability through its largest civilian mission EUFOR Althea, which operates under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework. This dual engagement distinguishes BiH from other Western Balkan candidates, except for Kosovo\*, and underscores the enduring fragility of its institutions three decades after the war. Within this framework, the EU's conditionality takes on a broader meaning, linking technical reforms with the deeper goal of reconciliation. Among the 14 priorities, several are directly connected to this specific aspect of ethnic reconciliation, calling for eliminating discrimination in access to education, ensuring consistent implementation of human rights rulings and building a functional political system that transcends ethnonationalist divisions. One of the most striking illustrations in regard of this failure is the *Sejdić-Finci* case, in which the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2009 that BiH's Constitution discriminates against citizens who do not belong to the three "constituent peoples" (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs). Despite repeated calls from the EU and the Council of Europe, this ruling has never been implemented. As a result, citizens from minority groups remain excluded from high political office and Bosnia continues to breach its international human rights obligations (Troncotă, 2014).

The roots of these persistent divisions lie in the DPA, which ended the war in 1995 but also entrenched ethnicity as the primary organizing principle of the Bosnian state. The Constitution created under Dayton institutionalized a decentralized and asymmetric political order, granting extensive powers to the two entities and ten cantons, including full control over education (Chandler, 2000; Bose, 2002; Mulalic, 2024; Preljević, 2025). This fragmented and defective governance model has undermined any possibility of a unified educational policy and has allowed local ethno-political elites to sustain control by reinforcing divisions. Scholars have widely argued that the DPA has institutionalized "ethnic territoriality," producing a system where political legitimacy is drawn almost exclusively from ethnic affiliation rather than civic representation (Satterwhite and Campbell, 1999; Bose, 2002; Chandler, 2006; Pehlivanović, 2024; Pepić, 2025; Hasanović and Kapidžić, 2025). Moreover, maintaining the status quo has become a vital interest of ethno-political elites, since the Dayton system remains highly beneficial for their grip on power. Rather than pushing for systemic reform, elites have adapted to the incentives of international actors while avoiding any meaningful transformation, thus preserving Dayton's structural limitations (Troncotă, 2016).

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\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.



As a result, territorial and ethnic homogenization became the norm in post-war BiH, shaping not only political structures but also local communities. The education sector in BiH reflects perhaps the clearest example of how ethnic segregation has been institutionalized since Dayton. Designed originally as a temporary compromise to allow displaced communities to return and to ease post-war tensions, the so-called “*two schools under one roof*” model which was supposed to provide an interim solution for divided communities, in practice, entrenched separation instead of overcoming it. Under this system, students from different ethnic groups often attend the same building but are taught in separate classrooms, follow different curricula and are divided by language, history, religion and national symbols. Rather than fostering coexistence, the model has reproduced mistrust and exclusion from early childhood onwards. Today, more than fifty schools across the Federation of BiH still operate under this arrangement, despite court rulings that labelled it discriminatory (Freedom House, 2024). The system illustrates how the Dayton framework, by decentralising education to entities and cantons, created space for ethnonationalist parties to use schools as instruments of identity politics. Instead of being spaces for reconciliation, schools became a battleground for reinforcing division, effectively passing on the grievances of the war to new generations (Tveit, Cameron and Kovač, 2014).

Despite three decades of international involvement, most analyses of BiH's EU integration and reconciliation efforts have approached the problem from a top-down perspective, focusing on constitutional reforms, political negotiations, or compliance with EU conditionality. While these dimensions are essential, such approaches risk neglecting the everyday realities of segregation and the potential for change at the community level. Thus, one research gap that this article addresses is the need to examine reconciliation from a bottom-up perspective, particularly in the field of education, where the persistence of ethnic separation continues to undermine social cohesion. Is Europeanization possible to achieve in ethnically segregated schools? The main aim of this analysis is to assess whether third-party efforts (for example, those of the NGO sector) to create trans-ethnic educational spaces in the Federation of BiH can play a role in advancing ethnic reconciliation, promoting education for peace and supporting BiH's European integration process. The main hypothesis guiding this research is built around the fact that, despite many setbacks in reducing ethnic segregation in the field of education in BiH, over the past decade, there is still a positive impact of EU funded projects managed by local NGOs that use a participatory approach, which have produced visible results in building a trans-ethnic educational space. From this perspective, the study addresses the following research question: *How have EU-funded post-conflict peacebuilding efforts impacted ethnic reconciliation in BiH's education system between 2018 and 2024?*

By focusing on the case of the Nansen Dialogue Centres (NDCs), which combine EU funding with participatory local methodologies, the analysis seeks to uncover how micro-level initiatives can plant the seeds of cooperation even when macro-level reforms stagnate. The article is structured into four main sections: the first section situates BiH's post-Dayton political and institutional landscape, outlining how ethnic governance and EU conditionality intersect in the field of education. The second section analyses the allocation of EU financial assistance under IPA II (2014–2020) and IPA III (2021–2027), tracing the evolution of EU support for educational reform. The third section focuses on the case study of the Nansen Dialogue Centres, examining how their participatory peace education projects have contributed to building trans-ethnic cooperation between 2018 and 2024. Finally, the concluding section reflects on the implications of these findings for the broader debate on reconciliation, participatory development and BiH's European integration path.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Europeanization and the role of the NGO sector

To better understand BiH's path toward reconciliation and EU integration, it is essential to situate the discussion within the broader framework of Europeanization. Over the past decades, the concept has generated a wide spectrum of interpretations within academic and policy debates (for a synthesis of these debates see Ion, 2016). As Bandov and Herceg Kolman (2018) observe, the term has evolved far beyond its original institutional connotation of compliance with EU norms, now encompassing a broader understanding of how ideas, values and practices travel between the European and domestic levels. In their view, Europeanization can be understood simultaneously as a top-down process, through which EU rules and standards are diffused into national systems, as a bottom-up dynamic, where local actors reinterpret and adapt these norms and as a multi-directional exchange, reflecting the complex interplay between institutions, societies, and the EU framework itself (Bandov and Herceg Kolman 2018).

Building on this multidimensional understanding, this article adopts the following working definition of Europeanization: *the process through which EU political, economic and social norms, values and practices are internalized, institutionalized and implemented by non-EU member states, particularly those aspiring to EU membership, as part of their broader reform and integration efforts* (Butnaru-Troncotă, 2016; 2024). This perspective not only captures the transformative dimension of alignment with EU standards, but also acknowledges the normative and participatory aspects of Europeanization. In doing so, it allows the inclusion of non-state actors such as NGOs and local communities as legitimate agents of Europeanization and carriers of European values in everyday governance practices.

Thus, our view connects to what the literature describes as *bottom-up Europeanization*, a process in which European norms are not merely imposed from above but emerge through local reinterpretation and social practice (Džankić, 2019). Studies of EU support to civil society in enlargement countries have shown that NGOs often act as intermediaries between formal EU policies and local realities, translating abstract principles of democracy, participation and equality into contextually meaningful actions (Dereci, 2015). Similarly, analyses of the Western Balkans highlight that civil society organisations have become *change agents* capable of fostering Europeanization from below, creating micro-spaces where dialogue, inclusion and accountability take root despite political stagnation (Wunsch, 2012). This bottom-up approach reveals how education, culture and civic participation can operate as quiet but persistent vectors of Europeanization, producing long-term social transformation and contributing to 'trans-ethnic spaces' even when institutional reforms remain blocked.

### 2.2. Ethnic segregation of the educational system in BiH

The literature on post-war education in BiH consistently emphasizes how the school system has been used to sustain ethnic division rather than to overcome it, pointing to practices of segregation, the negative legacies of Dayton and the reproduction of exclusionary narratives through curricula (Hadžić, 2022; Kroening, 2024; Kovač, 2025). Hadžić (2022) highlights that the "two schools under one roof" model in FBiH remains an institutionalized practice of ethnopolitics that undermines peacebuilding, reconciliation and democratic development through structural and curricular separation of ethnic groups, where children are exposed to ethnically differentiated narratives in terms of language, history, religion and national symbols. This dysfunctional dynamic is exemplified by Hadžić through the case of the *Common Core Curriculum* project in BiH an initiative that sought to develop a structured

shared curriculum on general world history and geography knowledge while avoiding Bosnia's own national history and identity issues.

A key point raised by Hadžić is that segregation is not an accidental or inevitable outcome of diversity, but rather a practice intentionally orchestrated and sustained by political elites who benefit from the persistence of ethnic grievances and identities, which remain central to their political platforms. He illustrates this by quoting Greta Kune, former Minister of Education of the Central Bosnia Canton, who in 2007 declared that the system of 'two schools under one roof' is sound because "it does not mix pears and apples", thereby shifting the focus of education away from enriching students with knowledge and abilities and into perpetuating an ideological, religious-national depiction of reality (Hadžić, 2022: 37). Building on his critique of the political and structural dimensions of segregation, Hadžić also draws attention to its impact on students themselves, leading to the creation of a "systematic alienation", producing new generations who "do not agree and we do not want to interact" (Hadžić, 2022: 37).

In order to stop passing down the grievances of the past on the younger generations, Hadžić proposes a few important takeaways: firstly, a constitutional reform that would address the root cause of the problem, as the current framework gives the state no sovereignty over education and allows local ethnonationalist parties to maintain segregation given the current distribution of education ministries among different cantons. Secondly, he calls for a fundamental shift in the purpose of education, moving away from a "cognitive segregated ethnopolitical matrix" toward a school organized for "human enlightenment" (Hadžić, 2022 : 39) that values individuality, critical judgment, and multiculturalism over ethnic collectivism. Thirdly, he advocates for the implementation of peace education, which is currently "almost non-existent" in the Balkans, to promote alternative historical narratives, foster inter-ethnic communication and help youth understand the value of non-violent conflict resolution.

While Hadžić's overall perspective suggests that the eradication of educational segregation depends primarily on a top-down approach, with state institutions as the main drivers of change and youth as passive recipients, at the very end of his paper he briefly addresses an argument that should not be overlooked. As part of recommendations for further discussions, he suggests that "(...) *students should be part of debates held by policymakers, civil society personnel and scholars related to the education system and approaches to pedagogy. There should be a focus on local peace agencies, peace infrastructures and non-violent state formation dynamics* (Hadžić, 2022: 40)". Prior to this, most of his analysis is devoted to a macro-level structural critique, emphasizing how powerful institutions create and sustain division. Yet, he concludes his arguments with the brief introduction of the bottom-up idea that student participation is necessary, since legal and institutional reforms alone may not be sufficient to heal a divided society. The generation most affected by segregation must be empowered to co-create the new system, as the goal is not only administrative unification but genuine social reconciliation.

Kroening (2024) reinforces most of Hadžić's arguments on educational segregation, from the way the DPA institutionalized ethnic divisions and gave power to ethnically aligned political parties, to how decentralized control allows for the distortion of school curricula where each group teaches its own selective story and blocks genuine reconciliation. Kroening's contribution lies in demonstrating how international actors tried to push reforms but failed, as the very system created by Dayton made real change almost impossible. For example, she presents how "*The Peace Implementation Council (PIC)*" established the mandate for reform in 1997, urging BiH authorities to promote tolerance and a multi-ethnic

system, thereby setting the initial reform trajectory; “*The Office of the High Representative (OHR)*”, tasked with overseeing DPA implementation, led initial efforts, facilitating agreements such as the 1999 mandate to remove “objectionable material” from textbooks and the 2002 agreement accommodating returnee children; and how “*The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)*” assumed a broader role in the early 2000s, especially in addressing human rights and the needs of returnee children. Kroening argues that these reform efforts failed mainly because the DPA handed control of education to the entities and cantons, giving space for ethnonationalist politicians to dominate. In this setup, they had little incentive to compromise, since any change was seen as a threat to their group’s identity and to their own political power (Kroening, 2024 : 53). Decentralization allowed the dominant ethnic group in each region, through its aligned political parties, to shape education policies only for its own community and, because politics is organized almost entirely along ethnic lines, politicians do not need to compete for support across the whole population, but only within their own group, making real reform even less likely.

The previous observations lead us to argue that the shortcomings of these reforms cannot be attributed only to their external design, as the failure can also be seen as a consequence of working with the *beneficiaries* of this existing fragmented system, namely, the political elites. Lacking direct engagement with citizens and students, the reforms could not generate grassroots support or challenge ethnonationalist incentives, suggesting that greater involvement of citizens and those directly affected may be a crucial area missing from existing solutions.

Expanding upon the analyses of Hadžić and Kroening, Kovač (2025) turns attention to the content of education itself, providing empirical additions to the educational segregation field, focusing on the discursive tone and specific content strategies used in the school curricula. He systematically analyses 36 history textbooks across the three ethnic programmes to show how segregation is reproduced at the classroom level through “us vs. them” narratives. For instance, although differing in emphasis, the Croatian, Serbian, and Bosniak educational programs all follow a similar pattern of three key areas: (1) celebrating ‘us’, (2) devaluing ‘them’ and (3) being victimized by the two other groups. The *celebrating ‘us’* component follows the nationalistic pattern of glorifying its own group’s greatness and heroism, one example being the dispute over the famous scientific historical figure Nikola Tesla, who is portrayed as a Croat in Croatian textbooks, Serb in Serb books and “simply by his name” in Bosniak books (Kovač, 2025 : 278). *Devaluing ‘them’* component implies negative associations on other ethnic groups, portraying them in a negative light as aggressors or enemies through the usage of “politically explosive” formulations (Kovač, 2025 : 278). For example, the Croatian textbooks describing Mostar’s Old Bridge, a UNESCO World Heritage site widely known to have been destroyed by Croat forces in 1993, is presented in certain narratives as “the heart of the Croatian resistance.” While nationalist bias can also be found in history books elsewhere, in BiH the problem is sharper because positive self-representation is often achieved by devaluing the other two ethnic groups. Last but not least, the victimization among all three ethnic groups establishes the basis for the popular demand that “the truth” needs to be acknowledged as a path to healing, which often deepen antagonism rather than resolve it (Kovač, 2025 : 281). Moreover, the study found that “there are no chapters aimed at increasing reconciliation, peace, and mutual trust among the people in BiH” (Kovač, 2025 : 280).

While Hadžić emphasizes constitutional design and student socialization and Kroening traces the repeated failure of international reforms, Kovač gathers evidence on how the curricula are portraying others as threatening, thereby obstructing reconciliation, calling

this system an "accomplice" in perpetuating the "ethnocracy trap," where ethnicity governs political and organizational decision-making (Kovač, 2025 : 280). Kovač concludes that textbooks are active obstacles to reconciliation because they systematically devalue other groups and he explicitly links this to the need for comprehensive reform and inclusive, multi-perspective teaching, such as: create inclusive textbooks that encourage people to share perspectives, take civic action and support peacebuilding, explain to children why history matters in order to achieve peace, present BiH as shared homeland, present ethnic and religious diversity in a manner that stresses unity, fairly present historical figures from all groups and avoid the usage of inflammatory or romanticized descriptions of the past.

An important observation we draw from Kovač's study is that, instead of fostering collaboration, current educational narratives turn groups against each other. Reconciliation cannot emerge spontaneously under such conditions as it needs to be actively taught, with an emphasis on dialogue, cooperation and the recognition that peace can only be built together.

### **2.3. Peacebuilding education as a path towards ethnic reconciliation**

The previously discussed literature shows how BiH's education system sustains division through constitutional design, failed international reforms and curricula that reinforce "us vs. them" narratives. These arguments make it clear that top-down reforms alone would not be enough, as they would overlook the people most directly affected by segregation and lose sight of the importance of exploring bottom-up perspectives. Thus, the following section shifts from a structural and content analysis of division to examining the perspectives and direct voices of actors in the classroom and how students' and teachers' awareness and participation can shape the prospects for peace education (A. Mulalic, 2023; Kasumagić-Kafedžić and L. Mulalić, 2024).

Mulalić (2023) expands the conversation on ethnonationalist reproduction by focusing on students' lived experiences, the absence of systemic peace education and the missed opportunities for transformation. While indirectly reinforcing Hadžić's claims that schools are not neutral institutions but active contributors to the deepening of ethnic polarization, she moves beyond this diagnosis by focusing on Education for Peace (EFP) as a potential countermeasure, exposing the systemic failure to implement it: "*The EFP is both an educationally and socially directed process that involves knowledge of values and virtues, which will enable young people to develop a culture of peace-related capacities (Mulalic, 2023 : 350)*". She describes EFP as an educational and social process aimed at building young people's capacity for peace by fostering both values and skills necessary for dialogue, coexistence and conflict resolution. Rooted in principles such as love, trust, justice, respect, and non-violence, it equips students with practical abilities, such as listening, reflection, cooperation and problem-solving, while cultivating attitudes of compassion and understanding. Its final goal is to shape a sustainable culture of peace in the mindset and behavior of young people.

Through a comprehensive survey of 366 first-year university students, she finds that awareness and participation in EFP are extremely low. For example, "*59% of the respondents stated that they were not aware of the presence of the EFP in their primary and secondary schools*" (Mulalic, 2023: 355). She interprets this not as a coincidence, but as a consequence of ethnically segregated curricula, ideologically influenced teachers and a lack of institutional responsibility. Students reported minimal exposure to interethnic dialogue or peace-related content, echoing Hadžić's view of youth being "mentally mutilated" by segregated, ethnocentric instruction. Mulalić's original contribution lies in tracing the institutional abdication of peace education responsibilities. She writes that: "*The peace activities have not*

*been institutionalised and are run mostly by international organisations with the support of local non-governmental organisations”* (Mulalic, 2023: 363). This is most visible in her discussion of USAID’s 2022 Sarajevo peace education conference, which, while commendable, is illustrative of the overreliance on foreign actors: *“The programme in the past two years was implemented in more than 60 schools (...). However, the literature review indicated that there is a very serious lack of initiative by the local stakeholders and institutions”* (Mulalic, 2023: 363). This builds on and complicates Hadžić’s argument by showing that even when reform efforts exist, they are often externally driven and unsustainable, with no long-term systemic integration.

Another interesting finding brought by her research is the discovery of readiness among young students in BiH to embrace intercultural learning, empathy training and structural reforms connected to peace education. Despite being products of an ethnically polarized system, there are students who consistently voiced their belief in the transformative potential of Education for Peace to foster reconciliation and social harmony. One example in this regard is the results registered to one of her survey question, “The Education for Peace can help in shaping the future based on cooperation, intercultural awareness and common social interests in BiH”, as this statement was strongly agreed upon by 76.5% of students (Mulalic, 2023 : 358). However, the findings suggest that while many students demonstrate openness to intercultural learning and reconciliation, others may hold entrenched views that are harder to shift in late adolescence or early adulthood, as attitudes and identities are already deeply formed by that time.

Mulalić’s shift from diagnosis to prescription distinguishes her contribution through the fact that she presents a concrete pedagogical vision for integrating EFP into school curricula through cooperative learning, teacher training and inclusive content. Her emphasis on critical thinking and dialogue as antidotes to xenophobia and nationalism marks a constructive extension of Hadžić’s work. For instance, she argues: *“Peace and dialogic culture could transform the interethnic relationships in Bosnian post-conflict society (Mulalic, 2023: 358)”*. An additional takeaway suggests that Education for Peace should begin in the early school years, not just in higher education. At a young age, children’s values and attitudes are still forming, which makes it easier to encourage openness and inclusion. Starting early gives reconciliation a stronger chance, since it is much harder to alter fixed views later on after years of ethnonationalist schooling exposure.

From a broader perspective, these peace education efforts can also be understood through the theoretical lens of the bottom-up Europeanization perspective outlined earlier. As previously discussed, bottom-up Europeanization captures how EU norms are locally reinterpreted and embedded through social practice rather than imposed solely through institutional mechanisms. In this sense, the activities of NGOs and educators in BiH mirror this process by translating European principles of inclusion, dialogue and equality into classroom experiences, thus operationalizing Europeanization in everyday educational settings. Peace education, therefore, becomes not only a tool for reconciliation but also a tangible expression of Europeanization from a bottom-up reform approach (Makarychev and Butnaru-Troncotă, 2022).

In addition to student-centered perspectives, Larisa Kasumagić-Kafedžić and Lejla Mulalić (2024) shift the lens toward teacher education and intercultural pedagogy, underscoring how educators and higher education institutions can act as agents of change in overcoming ethnonationalist divisions. Their key insight is that teachers can act as peace agents when they critically reflect on their own biases and positionalities. They are encouraged to see teaching as a space that provides students with both “mirrors” of their own

identity and “windows” into other cultures. This approach frames teachers as drivers of change rather than neutral deliverers of curriculum: *“Teachers are not neutral actors; they are socially and politically positioned in relation to the conflict legacy in their localities (Kasumagić-Kafedžić and Mulalić, 2024 : 18)”*. One interviewed teacher explained: *“As an educator, I want my students to develop their own identity, not the assumed identity of their environment. I want them to critically think of their own culture and challenge stereotypes and labels they have been served throughout their lives, labels pertaining to them or the people from other cultures (Kasumagić-Kafedžić and Mulalić, 2024 : 16)”*. This shows how teacher education can encourage future educators to see themselves not as neutral transmitters of knowledge, but as guides who help students question stereotypes, reflect on their own culture and develop independent identities. This research shows that students are not the only actors guiding the process of public participation, as teachers also play a crucial role as drivers of positive change. Even in the absence of strong institutional structures or systemic reforms, teachers emerge as the first agents capable of fostering reconciliation within a still segregated education system.

#### **2.4. A bottom-up approach for combatting ethnic segregation through public participation**

A key takeaway we draw from the previous sections is that peace education, as part of the post-conflict Europeanization process, can only be effective when it integrates perspectives from all levels, from institutions to teachers and students. In this regard, the role of local peace activists and practitioners becomes particularly significant, as their work has long been acknowledged as a concrete way in which bottom-up participation takes shape and as a useful tool for addressing the past and fostering reconciliation in the Western Balkans. For example, there are various ways in which local civil society organizations complement formal justice in the Balkans, such as challenging denialist or distorted official narratives, documenting and verifying war-related deaths, supporting families of the missing and publicizing evidence of atrocities (Fischer and Petrović-Ziemer, 2013). Similarly, education for peace and reconciliation starts at the ground level of society, from individuals or small groups whose direct interaction can transform grievances into coexistence. The key challenge, however, is where and how these two spheres meet: whether civil society can act as a “transmission belt” (Bloomfield, 2006: 2) between grassroots interaction and political or institutional reconciliation so that the two tracks converge rather than remain parallel.

Thus, the concept of public participation becomes essential, particularly in the complex case of Bosnia still marked by the scars of genocide denial. In 2025 the Bosnian state court found Vojin Pavlovic, the head of the Eastern Alternative NGO, guilty of breaching legislation banning genocide denial and the glorification of war criminals – the first sentence of its kind in the country (Balkan Insight, 2025). This verdict was issued in the context of the genocide denial legislation that creates numerous tensions in the country as it was imposed in July 2021 by Valentin Inzko, who at the time was BiH’s High Representative (OHR), the international official responsible for overseeing the implementation of the peace deal that ended the 1992-1995 war. Thus, in the particular case of Bosnia the concept of public participation provides not only a framework for connecting institutions, civil society, and citizens, but also acts as a means of amplifying the efforts of peace activists by embedding them within broader, more inclusive processes, such as Europeanization and transformation toward a trans-ethnic society. As scholars argue, public participation allows grassroots initiatives to move beyond isolated practices, ensuring that the voices of those most directly affected are integrated into decision-making and reforms (Sen, 1999; Jennings, 2001; Long,

2001; Cowen and Shenton, 2005). It provides citizens with the power to shape decisions that affect their lives and contribute to “the enhancement of freedoms that allow people to lead lives that they have reason to value (Sen, 1999)”.

In this context, we look at the tools of public participation and their role in the Europeanization of education in Bosnia as a platform that allows citizens not only to benefit from decisions, but to *co-create* them, offering a pathway for transforming local peace efforts into sustainable post-conflict reconciliation. The literature on this topic consistently highlights public participation as a cornerstone of sustainable governance, particularly in the context of EU’s norm transfer process. Participation is broadly defined as the involvement of citizens and stakeholders in shaping decisions that directly affect their lives, rooted in the belief that those most impacted must have a voice in determining outcomes (Jennings, 2001). Far from being a mere consultation tool, participation represents a shift toward bottom-up approaches that counterbalance technocratic or externally imposed reforms, as it enhances legitimacy. As Webler and Tuler (2006) note, effective participation requires a plurality of voices, from individuals, NGOs and communities to institutions, ensuring inclusivity beyond elite-driven decision-making. The International Association for Public Participation (2017) further stresses that citizen input should not only be heard but demonstrably shape outcomes, otherwise participation risks becoming a tokenistic exercise.

More recent agendas, such as the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, embed participation explicitly, as goal 16.7 calls for “inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels.” This reflects a global consensus that citizen input is indispensable for responsive governance. Yet, translating these universal frameworks into the Bosnian context remains problematic, since, despite formal commitments, participatory practices are rarely institutionalized. Applied to post-conflict contexts such as BiH, public participation acquires an even deeper relevance in our discussion, addressing it not necessarily as a governance mechanism, but as a peacebuilding tool, where dialogue and cooperation across ethnic lines can gradually erode exclusionary narratives (Escobar, 1995; European Think Tanks Group, 2022).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Building on the previous inter-disciplinary literature review, this article turns to the empirical analysis of how EU funding intersects with local agency in BiH’s education system in the context of Europeanization. The focus is on understanding whether EU support, when channeled through participatory projects, can create ‘trans-ethnic’ spaces of reconciliation in a context still marked by segregation and division. More precisely, we are interested in assessing the role of NGOs in building a trans-ethnic space in BiH’s educational system through instruments of norm transfer that are part of the EU accession process, namely the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA hereafter) funds between 2018 and 2024.

This specific timeframe was selected because it captures a decisive stage in BiH’s EU integration process - from the moment the SAA entered into force until the country granted candidate status in March 2024. While the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) formally entered into force in 2016, it was only after 2018 that the EU intensified its monitoring of reforms and financial support under IPA II, such as the European Commission’s 2019 Opinion identifying 14 key priorities for accession, the European Council’s decision to grant BiH candidate country status in December 2022 and the formal opening of membership negotiations in March 2024. By aligning with these milestones, the chosen timeframe makes it possible to observe how EU political conditionality, financial



instruments and local participatory projects interacted during a phase when BiH's European perspective gained renewed momentum.

In terms of research methods, the article employs a qualitative case study design, relying on the triangulation of secondary data. A qualitative case study design was chosen because reconciliation in education is a complex and context-dependent process that cannot be fully captured through quantitative indicators alone. Segregation, dialogue and trust-building are social and relational dynamics, best understood through narratives, institutional reports and project documentation rather than statistical trends (Yin, 2018). The triangulation method is particularly appropriate for this study because it combines evidence from different sources and levels of analysis, allowing for a more balanced and reliable understanding of EU peacebuilding efforts in education. For our analysis, we rely on three main sources:

First, we review IPA II and IPA III funding allocations in the educational sector, using the European Commission's financial programming tables to track annual and multiannual amounts, shifts in priorities and any lines explicitly linked to inclusion or anti-discrimination.

Second, we examine the European Commission Progress Reports from 2018 to 2024. We focus on Chapter 23 (Fundamental Rights and Non-Discrimination) and Chapter 26 (Education and Culture) in order to identify whether any improvements in these areas have been recorded over time. Chapter 23 is central since it addresses discrimination and equality before the law, including the legal and institutional frameworks that condemn practices such as the "two schools under one roof" system and language-based exclusion, while Chapter 26 complements this perspective by assessing the education sector more specifically, covering curriculum development, harmonisation across entities and cantons and the promotion of inclusive, quality education. Together, these two provide both the legal-institutional dimension (protection against discrimination) and the sectoral-pedagogical dimension of the problem (education reform).

Thirdly, we analyze project documentation from the Nansen Dialogue Centres (NDC hereafter) between 2018-2024 as our main third-party actor active in BiH in the field of ethnic reconciliation, focusing mostly on their initiatives funded through IPA instruments that applied participatory approaches in schools, at the local level. The aim here is to have a more detailed illustration of how a trans-ethnic space could be created in BiH's schools, by assessing how these projects were implemented, what outcomes they produced at the local level and whether they contributed to fostering inter-ethnic cooperation and reducing segregation in education. We selected NDC because it is one of the most prominent and long-standing NGOs in post-war Bosnia, and it represents an interesting combination international support and local agency in peace education, being funded by various types of donors, including IPA funds, which makes them directly relevant to assessing the role of EU-financed interventions. At the same time, unlike many externally designed projects, NDC initiatives are rooted in local contexts and carried out in cooperation with Bosnian schools, teachers, parents and municipalities. They have also developed and applied their own methodology of public participation, combining intercultural dialogue, cooperative learning, and community engagement and this specific methodology is of relevance for investigating our hypothesis on bottom-up Europeanization. This dual position, externally supported but locally implemented, makes NDC centers in BiH a particularly valuable case for examining how participatory approaches can translate international funding into tangible reconciliation outcomes within a still segregated educational system.

In our analysis, public participation is used not only as a theoretical concept but also as an analytical framework for evaluating NGO-led initiatives funded under IPA II. Building on Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation and the International Association for Public

Participation principles, participation will be assessed in terms of depth (consultation vs. co-decision), inclusivity (the extent to which diverse groups are engaged) and sustainability (whether practices continue beyond the project cycle). Specific indicators include:

1. the presence of structured dialogue forums between citizens and institutions;
2. the extent to which beneficiaries are involved in designing, not only implementing, project activities;
3. the degree to which initiatives foster local ownership rather than reliance on external actors.

As such, in analysing peace education projects managed by the NDC, we paid particular attention to these specific indicators and whether the projects created meaningful opportunities for inter-ethnic dialogue among students and parents, or whether activities remained symbolic, short-term interventions.

## 4. MAIN RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Europeanization through EU funds: IPA II and IPA III in the field of education

Following the methodological outline, the first step in the analysis was to examine the financial support that the EU provided to BiH through the IPA funds. Since 2007, IPA has been the EU's main tool for helping candidate and potential candidate countries prepare for membership. Its objectives have been to strengthen democratic institutions, support socio-economic development and promote reconciliation in post-conflict societies (European Commission, 2014). By examining the funding allocated under IPA II (2014–2020) and IPA III (2021–2027), the analysis aimed to trace how EU support evolved over time and to highlight the scale of resources made available for potential reforms in the education sector.

For IPA II, we discovered that allocations were organised along specific sectors, making it possible to identify funding directed at education, social inclusion and youth, as portrayed in the table below:

**Table 1.** Bilateral IPA II indicative funding allocations for BiH (2014–2020).

| Bosnia and Herzegovina                                         | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | Total 2014-2017 | 2018  | 2019  | 2020  | Total 2018-2020 | Total 2014-2020 | Of which climate change relevant (%) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW</b>                               | 9.7  | 39.7 | 21.9 | 44.8 | 116.1           | 22.4  | 39.3  | 45.4  | 107.1           | 223.2           |                                      |
| Democracy and governance                                       | 7.9  | 17.2 | 18.9 | 15.3 | 59.3            | 47.3  |       |       |                 | 106.6           |                                      |
| Rule of law and fundamental rights                             | 1.8  | 22.5 | 3.0  | 29.5 | 56.8            | 59.8  |       |       |                 | 116.6           |                                      |
| <b>COMPETITIVENESS AND GROWTH</b>                              | 66   | 0    | 25.1 | 30   | 121.1           | 80.1  | 65.5  | 62.2  | 207.8           | 328.9           |                                      |
| Environment, climate action and energy                         | 51   | 0    | 0    | 0    | 51.0            | 63.2  |       |       |                 | 114.2           | 40%                                  |
| Transport                                                      | 0    | 0    | 0    | 20   | 20.0            | 21.7  |       |       |                 | 41.7            | 40%                                  |
| Competitiveness, innovation, agriculture and rural development | 14   | 0    | 20   | 0    | 34.0            | 65.4  |       |       |                 | 99.4            |                                      |
| Education, employment and social policies                      | 1    | 0    | 5.1  | 10   | 16.1            | 57.7  |       |       |                 | 73.8            |                                      |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                                                   | 75.7 | 39.7 | 47   | 74.8 | 237.2           | 102.5 | 104.8 | 107.6 | 314.9           | 552.1           |                                      |

*Source:* BiH – financial assistance under IPA. Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/bosnia-and-herzegovina-financial-assistance-under-ipa\\_en?utm](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/bosnia-and-herzegovina-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en?utm)

The gathered data illustrate a notable increase in IPA II allocations over the 2014–2020 period, particularly within the sector of *Education, employment and social policies*. Starting from only €1 million allocated in 2014, the funding gradually reached €57.7 million for the 2018–2020 period, with a total of €73.8 million across the entire timeframe. This upward trend is especially significant given the persistent challenge of ethnic segregation in BiH's schools, reflecting the EU's intention to promote reforms in education and social inclusion.

However, when researching IPA III funds, the analysis reveals the introduction of a restructured model, moving away from sector-specific allocations towards a thematic “windows” approach (European Commission, 2022). For BiH, education is no longer reported as a distinct category but is grouped together with employment, social protection and social inclusion. While this may promote integrated reforms across interconnected areas, it has also reduced sectoral transparency and made it more difficult to trace exact education-related spending. Additionally, because the current financial framework is still ongoing, comprehensive data for the 2021–2027 period remains limited, which makes it difficult to clearly identify how much funding is allocated on an annual basis making systematic analysis more difficult. The available information indicated that BiH had access to over €309 million in financial and technical assistance, provided in the form of non-repayable grants (European Commission, 2025). The allocations covered a broad range of priorities, including a €70 million Energy Support Package to protect vulnerable families and SMEs from rising energy costs, €23 million for the EU4People programme targeting employment and social inclusion and €13 million for the EU4 Rule of Law and Equality programme aimed at strengthening justice, gender equality and Roma inclusion. Moreover, in July 2025, the Commission adopted a further €140.5 million under the IPA III 2025–2027 multiannual action (European Commission, 2025).

The evolution of funding allocations under IPA II and IPA III shows that the EU has consistently made resources available to support education and social inclusion in BiH as a critical sector of Europeanization for a post-conflict society. However, while more money was allocated overall, it is no longer possible to precisely track how much of it directly targeted education or, more specifically, ethnic reconciliation in schools, making it difficult to establish a straightforward link between EU funding and progress in reducing segregation in schools.

#### **4.2. European Commission Progress Reports (2018 - 2024) - Review of Chapters 23 and 26**

Building on the previous premise, financial data alone are not enough to understand whether it was translated into meaningful reforms, which implied the need to examine another category of evidence: the European Commission's annual Progress Reports, since these are official EU documents that evaluate BiH's performance on accession criteria and provide detailed assessments of areas such as justice, fundamental rights and education, which constitute the focus of this analysis. To capture the evolution of reforms in this field over time, we reviewed the Commission's annual reports from 2018 to 2024, focusing specifically on Chapter 23 and Chapter 26. The main findings were coded and synthesised year by year into a comparative table (**Table 2**), which highlights the recurring problems noted by the Commission and allows us to track whether any substantive progress was recorded:

**Table 2.** European Commission's Communications on EU Enlargement Policy (2019–2024):  
Observations from Chapter 23 and Chapter 26

| Chapter:                             | Year of report    |                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                      | 2018 <sup>1</sup> | 2019                                                                                                                                                            | 2020                                                                                                                                          | 2021                                                                                                                                                                    | 2022                                                                                                | 2023                                                                                                                         | 2024                                                                                                                                     |
| 23. Justice and protection of rights | -                 | - <i>Two schools under one roof</i> are recognised as discriminatory since 2014, but 56 schools still operate this way.<br>- Implementation of rulings lacking. | - No registered progress in eliminating <i>two schools under one roof</i> , breaching the 2014 ruling of the Federation entity Supreme Court. | - No registered progress in eliminating <i>two schools under one roof</i> .                                                                                             | - No registered progress in eliminating <i>two schools under one roof</i> .                         | - Disputes over education continue.<br>- Systemic solutions for inclusive and non-discriminatory education are still absent. | -- No registered progress in eliminating <i>two schools under one roof</i> .<br>- Language discrimination continues in Republika Srpska. |
| 26. Education, culture               | -                 | - Common core curriculum based on learning outcomes is not completed nor applied throughout the country.                                                        | - Common core curriculum is not completed or applied.                                                                                         | - Need to align legislation with framework laws and ensure application of the common core curriculum.<br>- The social inclusion at all levels of education is required. | - No progress in education reform;<br>- Inclusive access at all stages of education is not ensured. | - Continued stagnation.<br>- Harmonisation, inclusion and curriculum reform remain blocked.                                  | - BiH must shift from content-oriented to competency-based education;<br>- Harmonisation and curriculum transformation are needed.       |

Source: Authors' synthesis based on European Commission, *BiH Progress Reports* (2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024).

As illustrated in the table, the analysis of the European Commission's six reports between 2018 and 2024 reveal a consistent pattern of limited to no progress addressing educational segregation in Bosnia. Under Chapter 23, the practice of "two schools under one roof" remained in place year after year despite repeated court rulings declaring it discriminatory. Similarly, Chapter 26 shows that the common core curriculum was never meaningfully implemented and efforts toward inclusive access to education largely stalled. While some reform efforts were noted, the overall picture reflects persistent stagnation, in other words, an absence of Europeanization. These observations are further supported by independent monitoring bodies, as presented below:

<sup>1</sup> The lack of 2018 data is due to the fact that, until 2019, reports were not yet aligned with the structured chapter-by-chapter format of the EU acquis. The 2018 report generally discusses education and fundamental rights under thematic sections, such as democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights, socio-economic development, with findings not so different from the following years reports.

**Table 3.** The Integration Process of BiH to the EU: 14 Priorities from the Opinion of the European Commission 4 Years Later

| CHAPTERS                                    | MN   | SRB  | NMK  | TUR  | ALB  | URR  | GEORG | KOS* | MD   | BH   |
|---------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|------|------|------|
| 1. Free movement of goods                   | 2    | 2    | 2    | 3    | 1,5  | 2    | 1     | 1    | 1    | 0    |
| 2. Free movement of workers                 | 1    | 2    | 0    | 0    | 1    | 0    | 0     | 1    | 0    | 1    |
| 3. Establishment and provision of services  | 2    | 2    | 2    | 0    | 2    | 1    | 2     | 2    | 1    | 0    |
| 4. Free movement of capital                 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 2     | 1    | 1    | 2    |
| 5. Public procurement                       | 2,5  | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 1     | 1,5  | 0    | 1    |
| 6. Commercial law                           | 3    | 3    | 3    | 4    | 2    | 1    | 1     | 1    | 0    | 1    |
| 7. Intellectual property                    | 3    | 3    | 2    | 3    | 1,5  | 0    | 1     | 1    | 1    | 2    |
| 8. Competition policy                       | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 1,5  | 1    | 0     | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 9. Financial services                       | 2    | 2    | 2    | 3    | 2    | 1    | 1     | 2    | 0    | 1,5  |
| 10. Digital media                           | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 2    | 2    | 1     | 1    | 1    | 0    |
| 11. Agriculture, research and development   | 2    | 1    | 2    | 1    | 1    | 0    | 0     | 1    | 0    | 0    |
| 12. Food safety                             | 2    | 2    | 3    | 1    | 1    | 2    | 1     | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 13. Fishing                                 | 1    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1,5  | 0    | 1     | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 14. Transport policy                        | 2,5  | 3    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 1    | 1     | 0    | 1    | 1    |
| 15. Energetics                              | 3    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 3    | 1     | 1    | 1    | 0    |
| 16. Tax policy                              | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 1     | 1    | 0    | 1    |
| 17. Economic and monetary system            | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 2    | 1    | 0    |
| 18. Statistics                              | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 1     | 1    | 1    | 0    |
| 19. Social protection, employment           | 1    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 1    | 0    | 1     | 0    | 0    | 1    |
| 20. Entrepreneurship and industrial policy  | 2,5  | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 2     | 2    | 1    | 0    |
| 21. Trans-European networks                 | 2,5  | 2    | 3    | 4    | 1    | 1    | 1     | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 22. Regional policy                         | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 0     | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 23. Justice and protection of rights        | 2    | 1    | 1,5  | 0    | 1,5  | n/a  | n/a   | 0,5  | n/a  | 1    |
| 24. Public order and peace                  | 2    | 1    | 2    | 2    | 1,5  | 1    | 1     | 0,5  | 1    | 1    |
| 25. Science and research                    | 3    | 3    | 3    | 4    | 1    | 2    | 2     | 0    | 2    | 1    |
| 26. Education, culture                      | 3    | 3    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1    | 2     | 0    | 1    | 0    |
| 27. Environment, climate                    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 0    | 0     | 0    | 0    | 5    |
| 28. Consumer protection                     | 2    | 2    | 2    | 3    | 0    | 1    | 1     | 0    | 1    | 0    |
| 29. Customs Union                           | 2    | 3    | 3    | 3    | 2    | 3    | 2     | 2    | 1    | 1    |
| 30. International relations                 | 3    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 3    | 3    | 2     | 0    | 2    | 1    |
| 31. External, security and defense politics | 3    | 2    | 3    | 1    | 3    | 3    | 2     | n/a  | 2    | 1    |
| 32. Financial control                       | 2    | 2    | 2    | 3    | 2    | 0    | 1     | 1    | 0    | 1    |
| 33. Finance and budget                      | 1    | 1    | 0    | 1    | 1    | 0    | 0     | n/a  | 0    | 0    |
| Total*                                      | 70,0 | 67,0 | 66,5 | 63,0 | 54,0 | 37,0 | 35,0  | 26,5 | 23,0 | 22,0 |
| Average (0-4)                               | 2,1  | 2,0  | 2,0  | 1,9  | 1,6  | 1,2  | 1,1   | 0,9  | 0,7  | 0,7  |

\* Kosovo was rated for 31 chapters, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine for 32 chapters.

\*\*Grade: early stage (0), certain level of preparedness (1), moderately prepared (2), good level of preparedness (3), well advanced (4).

**Source:** Transparency International (2023), available at: <https://ti-bih.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ispunjanje-prioriteta-2023-prelom-WQ-ENG.pdf>

**Table 4.** Enlargement scorecard reports for 2019-2024 for BiH

| Bosnia and Herzegovina                      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|---------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Rule of Law fundamentals                    | 2015 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
| Functioning of judiciary                    | 1.0  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  |
| Fight against corruption                    | 1.0  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  |
| Fight against organized crime               | 1.0  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  |
| Freedom of expression                       | 1.0  | 1.0  | 1.0  | 1.0  | 1.0  | 1.0  | 1.0  |
| Total Rule of Law fundamentals              | 4.0  | 2.5  | 2.5  | 2.5  | 2.5  | 2.5  | 2.5  |
| Average (out of 4.0)                        | 1.0  | 0.6  | 0.6  | 0.6  | 0.6  | 0.6  | 0.6  |
| Chapters                                    | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |      |
| 1. Free movement of goods                   | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 2. Freedom of movement for workers          | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 3. Establishment and service provision      | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 4. Free movement of capital                 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    |
| 5. Public procurement                       | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 6. Company law                              | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 7. Intellectual property law                | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    |
| 8. Competition policy                       | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 9. Financial services                       | 1.5  | 1.5  | 1.5  | 1.5  | 1.5  | 1.5  | 1.5  |
| 10. Digital transformation and media        | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 11. Agriculture and rural development       | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 12. Food safety, veterinary, phytosanitary  | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 13. Fisheries                               | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 14. Transport policy                        | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 15. Energy                                  | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 16. Taxation                                | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 17. Economic and monetary policy            | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 18. Statistics                              | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 19. Social Policy and employment            | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 20. Enterprise and industrial policy        | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 21. Trans-European networks                 | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 22. Regional policy, structural instruments | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 23. Judiciary and fundamental rights        | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 24. Justice, freedom and security           | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 25. Science and research                    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 26. Education and culture                   | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 27. Environment and climate change          | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  |
| 28. Consumer and health protection          | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 29. Customs union                           | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 30. External relations                      | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 31. Foreign, security and defence policy    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    |
| 32. Financial control                       | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| 33. Financial and budgetary provisions      | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| Total chapters (out of 132)                 | 21.0 | 21.0 | 21.0 | 22.0 | 22.0 | 22.0 | 22.0 |
| Average chapter rating (out of 4.0)         | 0.6  | 0.6  | 0.6  | 0.7  | 0.7  | 0.7  | 0.7  |

Source: European Commission country reports 2015, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024.

Rating: early stage  , some level of preparation  , moderately prepared  , good level of preparation  , well advanced  .

**Source:** European Stability Initiative. (2024). Scorecard 2024. <https://www.esiweb.org/sites/default/files/reports/pdf/Scorecard%202024%20-%20Enlargement%20reports%2031%20October%202024.pdf>

Both Transparency International's 2023 review of BiH's progress on the 14 key priorities and the European Stability Initiative's 2024 Scorecard present almost identical findings, as they rely on the European Commission's readiness scale (0–4). BiH records an average score of 0.7, the lowest level of preparedness in the Western Balkans, with chapters 23 and 26 continuing to register scores at the 0–1 level, suggesting that reforms remain at an early stage, with institutions and laws either incomplete or only partially implemented.

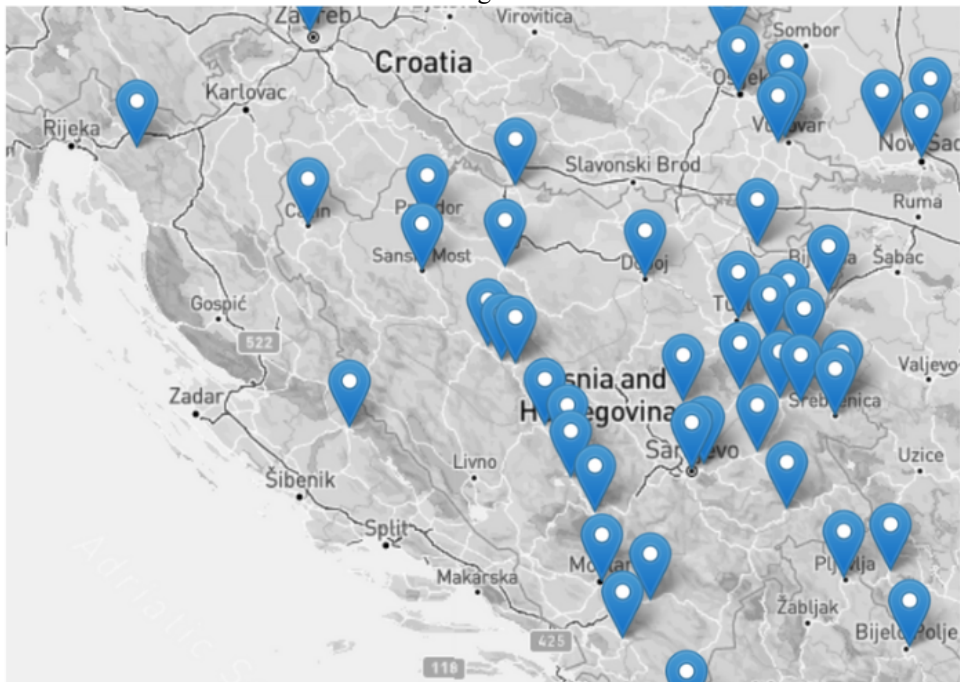
From a top-down, macro-level analysis, these negative evaluations indicate a persistent pattern of slow or stalled progress, with the same challenges highlighted repeatedly across successive reports regarding the addressing of educational segregation or broader reforms in BiH. Yet such a conclusion risks overlooking smaller, micro-level changes that remain invisible in aggregated assessments, such as NGO efforts that, although they might not shift national indicators or court rulings, they can still generate tangible improvements for their communities, with the possibility of a later national expansion. Although they may not alter national indicators or court rulings, their initiatives can still bring tangible improvements in communities, with the potential to scale up over time. By examining the work of NDCs as one of the most important civil society actors in the field of ethnic reconciliation in Bosnia, the following section illustrates how EU resources, when combined with a locally grounded participatory approach, can generate concrete improvements in interethnic cooperation, even within a broader context of political stagnation. As a result, the analysis of IPA funds support for education requires a bottom-up approach to Europeanization, reinforcing the importance of case studies, such as the NDC, which make it possible to trace the link between EU funds, NGO-led participatory initiatives, and micro-level improvements in reconciliation and inclusive education.

#### **4.3. The Nansen Dialogue Centres' approach to combating ethnic segregation in BiH (2018-2024)**

Established in the early 2000s in Sarajevo, Mostar and Prijedor, the Nansen Dialogue Centres emerged as part of the wider Nansen Dialogue Network, originally founded with support from the Nansen Academy in Lillehammer, Norway. Their mission has consistently been to promote interethnic dialogue, inclusive education and peacebuilding in post-conflict societies such as BiH. Positioned between international support and local ownership, NDCs combine external funding from Norway, the EU (through IPA instruments), OSCE, and UNDP with the participatory implementation led by local staff, teachers, parents and municipalities (Šavija and Šahić, 2020). While NDC functions as a non-EU actor, the organization operates as a supporter for BiH's path towards European integration.

As illustrated in the map below, the Nansen Dialogue Centres have gradually expanded across BiH, establishing local branches and partnerships in more than twenty municipalities, including Sarajevo, Mostar, Srebrenica, Bratunac, Jajce and Prijedor, reflecting both the geographical spread and the localised strategy.

**Figure 1:** Map of Nansen Dialogue Centres and partner communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina



**Source:** Nansen Dialogue Network (no date), *The Nansen Dialogue Impact*, available at: <https://nansen-dialogue.net/>

Over time, the centers have developed their own public participation methodology, the Nansen Dialogue Approach (NDA), directly addresses the dual challenge of reconciliation and democratic transition in BiH (Šavija and Šahić, 2020). This approach is built on several defining characteristics: first, it begins with trust-building through dialogue seminars, creating safe spaces for interethnic encounters. Second, it promotes joint decision-making structures, such as interethnic school boards, parent councils and youth groups, ensuring that different community voices are included in shaping outcomes. Third, the NDA is gradual and long-term, moving from interpersonal dialogue to institutional cooperation, thereby avoiding short-term, externally imposed fixes. Fourth, it emphasizes local ownership and co-creation of activities and, finally, it links dialogue to practical community projects, ensuring that reconciliation is not only discursive but also visible in shared initiatives. Through the lenses of these principles, we first analysed the 2018-2024 timeframe and discovered a series of projects which, while not large enough to be registered by the EU progress indicators, planted meaningful seeds of reconciliation at the community level and we would like to underline their relevance for the local context in Bosnia.

The year 2018 marked a stage of both expansion and institutional strengthening for NDCs, by expanding NDC's activities in the newly targeted schools in Jajce and Mrkonjić Grad, and by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Herzegovina-Neretva Cantonal Ministry of Education. According to the PeaceNexus 2018 Annual Report, this agreement paved the way for NDC to roll out integrated education and social cohesion projects in new communities, while preparing to engage in policy dialogue on inclusive education with school authorities and municipal officials (PeaceNexus, 2018: 14). This marked early evidence of NDC's combinations of participatory grassroots work

with efforts to enter institutional policymaking. In the context of a system resistant to reform, such a MoU reflects an intentional blurring of boundaries between civic dialogue and formal policymaking, thereby embedding participation into the architecture of education governance itself (NDC Mostar, 2018).

The following year placed youth agency at the centre of attention, as NDC Sarajevo published the results of its work documenting the 2016 student-led protest in Jajce, where young people stood up against a government decision to divide their school along ethnic lines. Marching under the slogan “We want to stay together” and tying Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian flags together as a symbol of unity in a divided society, the students sent a powerful message: “We want quality education, not division,” as one student declared, while another insisted, “We don’t want to fall back 20 years into the past (Spaic, 2017)”. Although the protest was entirely student-led, NDC Sarajevo played an important role in what followed. By documenting the Jajce case and publishing the results in 2019, it helped amplify the students’ voices through research, publications and advocacy, thereby providing greater visibility to their struggle. As a follow-up of the successful protest, NDC engaged the students in dialogue workshops and intercultural activities, establishing the Nansen Forum of Young Peacebuilders, where over 120 students were trained in interethnic dialogue, with 60 of them continuing to design and lead local projects (Nansen Dialogue Centre, Sarajevo, 2019). Thus, Jajce became a symbol of unity in Bosnia, as one young participant reflected: “They wanted to separate us, but we showed that we can be stronger if we stand together”. This story demonstrates how grassroots resistance, when supported rather than co-opted by NGOs, can become the foundation for structured, participatory peacebuilding. It also underscores the central argument of this article: that while macro-level reforms often stagnate, micro-level initiatives like Jajce reveal the possibility of change when youth agency and civil society come together.

Moving forward, 2020 provided a moment of reflection and consolidation, as NDC Sarajevo published the comprehensive study on *Building Trans-Ethnic Space: Interethnic Dialogue, Social and Political Action in Local Communities of BiH*, which documented more than a decade of their work in places such as Srebrenica, Bratunac, Jajce, and Zvornik. Far from being a simple retrospective, the publication distilled lessons learned from years of community engagement, presenting dialogue not as a series of isolated initiatives but as a long-term strategy for transforming relations across ethnic divides. What made the study particularly valuable was its ability to portray the lived impact of interethnic dialogue at the grassroots level: “Instead of waiting for systemic reforms that often remain on paper, dialogue groups proved that change can start at the micro level, through everyday cooperation between teachers, parents, and students (Šavija and Šahić, 2020 : 68)”. In doing so, NDC Sarajevo positioned itself not only as a practitioner but also as a knowledge-producer, offering both local communities and international partners a concrete portrayal of how peacebuilding and democratic participation could intersect in BiH: “What we see in these communities is not just temporary cooperation, but the seeds of a sustainable social fabric that can resist political manipulation and ethnic polarization” (Šavija and Šahić, 2020: 92).

Building on these lessons, in 2021 NDC Mostar advanced its efforts to embed peace education into the formal school system of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton. Together with the Cantonal Ministry of Education, the Centre conducted several Peace Education training cycles for 21 high-school teachers, equipping them with tools to serve as multipliers of interethnic dialogue and non-violent communication. These teachers went on to deliver more than 40 intercultural classes, directly reaching over 600 students across



the canton (Mostarski.info, 2021). While the program participation varies from year to year, NDC Mostar estimated that in 2025, their program has managed to reach and engage about 1,000 students and 70 teachers (SMART Balkans, 2025). This initiative illustrates how NDC's work can also operate at the intersection of participatory grassroots engagement and institutional cooperation, since it was carried out in formal partnership with the Ministry.

Ambition grew even further in 2023, when NDC Mostar launched the *Advocacy of New Educational Practices* program, a bold step toward moving peace education beyond classrooms and integrating it into legislation and policy. The project's stated objectives include crafting proposals for inclusive curricula, engaging in public advocacy and building partnerships with education authorities. It specifically aimed at "promoting the necessity of educational reforms and mobilizing local communities" while embedding peace and intercultural components into partner schools (SMART Balkans, 2023). The project envisaged working with 15 schools across Herzegovina and Central Bosnia to reach thousands of students and train 300 teachers and staff through capacity-building and curriculum development activities. In doing so, NDC Mostar is actively attempting to close the gap between grassroots peacebuilding and systemic structural change-bridging micro-level dialogue with macro-level policy aspirations.

Finally, 2024 brought an impactful institutional recognition for the public participation methodology, as NDC Mostar consolidated its role as a key partner in peace education by signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Education of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton. The agreement laid the groundwork for active collaboration in strengthening school capacities, training teachers and supporting the work of student and parent councils. Moreover, several of the schools involved had already integrated the Nansen Model of Education into their annual curriculum, making it the first such program to move from extracurricular activities into official teaching practice. As the Ministry emphasized at the signing, the partnership was built on the recognition that "quality education must rest on respect for human rights, regardless of religious, political, national, or gender affiliation". This MoU not only formalized cooperation at the cantonal level but also extended to other ministries and municipal authorities across BiH, signaling growing institutional and local buy-in for NDC's participatory approach (SMART Balkans, 2024).

These elements stand in sharp contrast with the European Commission's progress reports, which have consistently criticized BiH for failing to implement the common core curriculum and for blocking inclusive reforms at the national level. By demonstrating that integrated approaches can work in practice and gain formal acceptance, NDC's initiatives position the organisation as a potential contributor to future debates on a unified, competency-based curriculum, an EU priority that remains stalled. In a system where top-down reforms are paralyzed, such bottom-up agreements illustrate how local initiatives can create institutional footholds for inclusive education, planting the seeds of a future common curriculum and, with it, a more reconciled educational landscape. Ultimately, these findings reveal the ambivalent nature of bottom-up Europeanization in BiH. While structural ethnic segregation persists and EU-level reforms remain blocked, grassroots initiatives like those of the NDC demonstrate that tangible progress toward a trans-ethnic educational space is possible when European values are locally reinterpreted and enacted from below.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Over the past decade, BiH's EU accession process has been marked by persistent stagnation. The European Commission's progress reports consistently highlight the lack

of meaningful reforms, particularly in the field of education. Despite repeated calls for action, ethnic segregation in schools remains one of the most visible and unresolved challenges, with practices such as “two schools under one roof” continuing to undermine the principles of inclusion and equality. In this context, reconciliation in education must be understood as more than a policy aspiration, and instead as a requirement for visible improvements in interethnic cooperation and the gradual dismantling of segregated structures that keep BiH’s pupils in isolation from one another. This raises the question of whether Europeanization can become palpable in the field of education. In this article, we argue that the answer is ambivalent. The creation of a trans-ethnic educational space, including the implementation of a common curriculum in all schools, therefore remains central both to social cohesion and to BiH’s EU path.

While macro-level reforms remain blocked, this article has shown that micro-level initiatives, such as those implemented by NGOs like the NDC, demonstrate the potential of participatory approaches to generate meaningful change. By engaging various actors in dialogue and cooperative practices, NDC projects provide tangible examples of how reconciliation can be built from the bottom up. Their work illustrates that participation is not merely symbolic, but a practical tool for creating spaces where interethnic trust and cooperation take root.

These experiences suggest that even in the face of structural stagnation, participatory peace education can open pathways toward Europeanization. By embedding inclusive practices in schools and gradually institutionalizing them through local partnerships, BiH can move closer to fulfilling EU values of democracy equality, and social cohesion. Our analysis opens new avenues for research into how EU assistance should prioritize scaling participatory models, ensuring that grassroots reconciliation efforts are connected to broader EU accession reforms, so that local seeds of change can grow into systemic transformation.

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# THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL LANGUAGE IN THE DIGITAL AGE. LINGUISTIC TENDENCIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LEGITIMACY OF POWER

*Simona Camelia FER\**

**Abstract.** *This study examines the evolution of political discourse in digital environments, focusing on the strategies through which political actors articulate power relations and legitimacy. Guided by theoretical and qualitative approaches, including critical discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics, the research investigates four interrelated dimensions of digital political communication: lexical networks and semantic polarization, pronominal usage and the formation of in-group versus out-group identities, metaphorical strategies and the amplification of emotional appeal, and moral binaries and the simplification of political discourse. Findings indicate that digital platforms facilitate rapid dissemination of messages and also amplify ideological polarization and emotional engagement, creating iterative cycles that support group cohesion and marginalize dissenting voices. Metaphors, pronouns, moral framing and selective lexical choices function as powerful tools for persuasion, structuring both cognition and affect, and influencing public perception in ways that sustain political authority and social hierarchies. By integrating classical and contemporary scholarship, this study highlights the complex interplay between language, technology and political power in the digital age, demonstrating that online discourse is highly dynamic and, at the same time, deeply influential in presenting public opinion and political identities.*

**Keywords:** *digital political discourse, critical discourse analysis, lexical polarization, pronominal strategies, metaphor and emotion, moral binaries*

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has profoundly altered the landscape of political discourse in the digital age when political language is no longer confined to institutional settings or mediated exclusively through traditional channels such as television and print media. In this context, it flows across decentralized, interactive platforms that enable immediate dissemination and reinterpretation, and these transformations have altered both the form and style of political communication and its audiences and effects.

Within this evolving communicative environment, political actors increasingly adapt their linguistic strategies to the affordances of digital media, emotional resonance and rhetorical polarization having become notable features of contemporary political language, privileging immediacy over deliberation. At the same time, the rise of algorithmically curated content and participatory communication has contributed to the proliferation of competing discourses, challenging the stability of meaning and the

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\* Associate Professor PhD., University of Oradea, Romania, [simonag\\_1976@yahoo.com](mailto:simonag_1976@yahoo.com).

authority of traditional political discourse. These developments call for a renewed analytical focus on the linguistic mechanisms through which political realities are constructed and contested.

From the perspective of political science, such linguistic transformations are closely linked to broader questions of power and legitimacy and political language plays here a central role in legitimizing authority and creating public perceptions of governance. In digital contexts the processes through which legitimacy is established and maintained become increasingly complex, as political messages are subject to rapid flow, reinterpretation, but also contestation by diverse audiences. Consequently, the relationship between discourse and legitimacy requires careful re-examination in light of these structural changes.

This article aims to explore the evolution of political language in the digital age by examining the key linguistic transformations that characterize contemporary political discourse and their implications for the legitimacy of power. Drawing on insights from discourse analysis and political communication studies, the paper investigates the way in which digital environments influence rhetorical strategies and discursive practices, influencing the construction of authority. It also seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how language functions as both an instrument of political influence and a site of ongoing negotiation over legitimacy in modern democratic societies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a theoretical and qualitative approach to examine the evolution of political language in the digital age, but the research also relies on an extensive review of scholarly literature from political science, discourse analysis and communication studies, including both classical theorists and contemporary analyses of digital media. Foundational works on political rhetoric and discourse construction have been consulted to establish the conceptual framework for the analysis. Building on this theoretical foundation, the study conducts a critical analysis of political discourse in digital contexts, focusing on the ways in which language constructs and negotiates power and legitimacy. The analysis is structured around four interrelated dimensions: lexical networks and semantic polarization, pronominal usage and the formation of in-group versus out-group identities, metaphorical strategies and the amplification of emotional appeal and moral binaries and the simplification of political discourse. By combining theoretical consultation with targeted discourse analysis, this methodology facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic transformations that characterize contemporary political communication. It situates the analysis firmly within the digital age, acknowledging both the structural affordances of online platforms and the evolving strategies of political actors to influence audience perception and maintain legitimacy.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW OF THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS**

The study of political discourse in digital environments has attracted increasing scholarly attention, reflecting the transformative impact of online platforms on political communication and public engagement. Foundational research in political science and communication studies has explored the ways in which digital media rethink persuasion and the construction of political authority. The pace of these changes has precipitated much speculation about political change and transformation, from visions of direct democracy and erosion of processes of representation and institutional deliberation



because of new technology to enhancement or degradation of the “public sphere” and the state of citizens’ civic engagement (Bimber, 2003). Another theorist is Benjamin Barber, who in *Strong Democracy* advocates the use of information and communication technologies for enhancing citizen engagement with democratic affairs: “Technology and communications, to which I pointed twenty years ago as crucial conditioners of democratic innovation, have also continued to evolve and now present not just striking opportunities for but troublesome challenges to participatory democracy” (Barber, 1984). The phrase used by R.K. Nielsen “slaves to the algorithm” is used broadly in discussions about digital media to transmit a critical concern that content creators and even institutions become subordinated to the automated decision-making processes of digital platforms, in ways that build what information is seen and engaged with, without transparency or user control. While this exact phrase isn’t a formal technical concept in Nielsen’s work, the idea resonates with themes in his research on digital platforms and political communication (Nielsen, 2022). Papacharissi argues that digital platforms allowed locally organized groups to coordinate actions, share information and connect with a global network, creating a transnational culture of activism, protest and creative expression: “Importantly, however, locally organized assemblies used online means to organize, mobilize, and connect nationally and globally; Internet Relay Chat (IRC) Facebook, Twitter, blogs, websites and Meetup were among the technologies and platforms used prominently to coordinate events and disseminate information. Communities and organizations expressing support plugged into these channels, contributing diverse multimedia content that further enabled a global culture of protest, art and expression” (Papacharissi, 2015).

We cannot fail to notice the change in the perspective in which things are presented: each state can decide its level of European integration, respectively the areas of cooperation or the objectives it aspires to in its relationship with the EU (Brie, 2025). In the digital age, this dynamic is further intensified by the evolving landscape of political communication, where messages about integration, cooperation, national interest or participation to electoral campaigns are disseminated instantly across platforms.

Some research highlights the constructive role that social media can play in political communication. For example, Carvalho (2007) examines how ideological influences create media portrayals of social and political issues, revealing the plurality of perspectives and discourses that coexist within public communication. In addition, Pennycook et al. (2019) demonstrate that encouraging users to focus on accuracy can help curb the dissemination of false information online, suggesting that targeted interventions may reduce the spread of misinformation in digital environments.

Complementing these perspectives, critical discourse analysis provides tools to examine how language constructs power, ideology and identity, offering insights into the mechanisms behind polarization and legitimacy: “Discourse is not only a reflection of social reality, but also a means by which social reality is constructed and contested, making it a key site for the exercise of power and the negotiation of identities” (Fairclough, 2010). Ruth Wodak is concerned with the micro-politics of right-wing populist parties how they actually produce and reproduce their ideologies and exclusionary agenda in every day politics, in the all types of media, in campaigning, in posters, slogans and speeches. He is concerned with how they succeed or fail in sustaining their electoral success (Wodak, 2015). In the same context, in 2005, Ernesto Laclau published his work titled *On Populist Reason*, which is central to understanding his contributions to political theory, particularly in relation to discourse theory and

populism. Laclau emphasizes that discourse is fundamental in the construction of political identities. He argues that political identities are not pre-existing but are formed through discursive practices that represent and articulate demand and discontent. For Laclau, the role of language and symbols in constructing political legitimacy is central (Laclau, 2005).

Empirical studies focusing on digital platforms have highlighted specific strategies used by political leaders, including lexical choices, pronoun use, metaphorical framing and moral dichotomies or binaries, which collectively influence audience way of thinking and emotional engagement: "Persuasion exists at the heart of political rhetoric, which appeals to political authority and context to influence listeners by addressing their assumptions and beliefs" (Khashan, 2025). Puri (2023) demonstrates that social media platforms both democratize political communication and amplify polarization and emotional engagement, thereby significantly influencing how political messages are constructed and received. Nandini Puri demonstrates that social media platforms both democratize political communication and amplify polarization and emotional engagement, thereby significantly influencing how political messages are constructed and received: "A more complex forms of decentralized activism, movements that function without centralized leadership, is made possible by such emerging technologies. Traditional activism involved a leader, and a hierarchical setup with different level of organizers and decision makers" (Puri, 2023). The content creators can promote absolutely anything online, and no one can hold them accountable for what they say or verify what they do. Influencers have been accused by authorities of participating in social media electoral campaigns that artificially inflated candidates online visibility (Ungur-Brehoi, 2025). Sven Engesser et.al. examine in their research the role of social media within the hybrid media system, analyzing how political actors across multiple national contexts (Austria, Switzerland, Italy and the United Kingdom) utilize platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, renamed X to transmit populist messages.

Drawing on existing literature, five main dimensions of populism are identified: the emphasis on popular sovereignty, the advocacy for "the people," the critique of political elites, the exclusion of perceived out-groups and the invocation of a shared "heartland." Through authors' qualitative textual analysis, the findings indicate that political discourse on social media is expressed in a fragmented manner, with its elements appearing across different countries, political parties, and levels of political authority (Engesser et al., 2017).

Finally, context-specific research illustrates how these theoretical and methodological insights apply across different national and cultural settings, revealing the nuanced ways in which digital discourse constructs political discourses and social identities. Building on the theoretical and empirical perspectives outlined above, the findings of Cotoc and Radu (2022) provide a context-specific illustration of the way in which these discursive mechanisms operate in practice within digital environments. While scholars such as Fairclough, Wodak and Laclau emphasize the role of discourse in constructing power and collective identities, and more recent studies (Puri, 2023; Engesser et al., 2017; Khashan, 2022) that highlight the impact of digital platforms on polarization and fragmented political communication, Cotoc and Radu demonstrate how these dynamics materialize during crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Their analysis of pandemic-related digital discourse reveals the coexistence of competing speeches ranging from fear-driven and emotionally charged messages to rational, science-oriented perspectives, which reflect the complexity of the socio-political context.

The COVID-19 pandemic took many governments by surprise and forced them to make decisions that have been neglected during the time regarding the communication in urgent situations (Buda, 2023). Moreover, the rapid, “snowball-like” expansion and subsequent dissipation of these discourses illustrate the volatile and ephemeral nature of communication in digital spaces, reinforcing the idea that online discourse is both highly dynamic and deeply influential in shaping public perception and collective responses (Cotoc & Radu, 2021).

Together, these studies provide a rich foundation for analyzing the evolution of political language in digital contexts, bridging theory and practice to illuminate the dynamics of power and legitimacy in contemporary political communication.

## **DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES IN DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

The analysis of political discourse in the digital age reveals a complex interplay of linguistic strategies that influence public perception, reinforce ideological positions, influence political identities and contribute to the construction of political legitimacy. Media literacy and safety refer to the ability of users to critically and safely engage with new media, recognize manipulation, misinformation and harmful content, and understand the psychological and social impact of digital media (Ungur-Brehoi, 2025). In the context of the theoretical framework outlined above, this case study examines contemporary digital political communication through four interrelated dimensions: lexical networks and semantic polarization, pronominal usage and the formation of in-group versus out-group identities, metaphorical strategies and the amplification of emotional appeal and moral binaries and the simplification of political discourse. These dimensions provide a comprehensive lens through which to understand the manner in which politicians adapt their language to the affordances of digital platforms.

### **Lexical networks and semantic polarization**

One of the most visible features of digital political discourse is the strategic use of lexical networks that reinforce semantic polarization. Political leaders select and repeat specific keywords and expressions that gather around ideologically charged meanings, such as “democracy”, “freedom”, “security”, “stability” or “reform”. These terms are paired with contrasting lexical items such as: “threat”, “corruption”, “crisis”, “chaos”, “failure”, “elite” or “propaganda”, in order to construct opposing semantic fields that frame political reality in binary terms. For instance, expressions like “defending freedom” or “protecting national security” are frequently juxtaposed with phrases such as “corrupt elites,” “dangerous outsiders” or “systemic failure,” thereby reinforcing a polarized interpretation of politicians and events.

These lexical choices are rarely neutral and contribute to the construction of polarized semantic fields that divide political reality into opposing camps. In digital environments, the rapid circulation and repetition of such terms, amplified by hashtags (e.g., #freedom, #crisis, #TakeBackControl, #StopCorruption) and algorithm-driven visibility, significantly intensify their impact, creating echo chambers in which particular interpretations become dominant and where these lexical networks are continuously reproduced and rarely challenged.

As users engage with like-minded content, the repeated exposure to the same semantic associations consolidates particular interpretations of reality, while marginalizing alternative perspectives. In this context, language functions not only as a

descriptive tool but also as a powerful mechanism for structuring political perception, guiding interpretation and consolidating ideological boundaries. Consequently, lexical networks play a central role in the construction and maintenance of polarization in contemporary digital political discourse.

### **Pronominal usage and the identity of in-group versus out-group identities**

An early and influential contribution to this field is the study by Brown and Gilman (1960), which examines how pronouns derived from the Latin *tu* and *vos* in different European languages function to express speakers' relative positioning, thereby reflecting and constructing relations of hierarchy and solidarity. Building on this foundation, later research has demonstrated that pronoun use systematically encodes social relationships, capturing distinctions related to formality, status, power, class and gender (Levinson, 1983; Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1990). In this way, such social orientations build and constrain the way in which speakers use pronouns in interaction.

Pronominal strategies are instrumental in defining collective identities, within political discourse. The use of pronouns such as "we", "us" and "our" serves to create an inclusive in-group, associated with legitimacy and shared values. Conversely, pronouns like "they" and "them" are used to designate out-groups, frequently portrayed as threats or sources of instability. In digital political communication, these distinctions are amplified by the interactive nature of platforms, where audiences are invited to identify with particular groups and participate in the reinforcement of these divisions. This discursive construction of "us versus them" aligns with broader processes of identity formation and political mobilization, contributing to heightened polarization and emotional investment among users.

By repeatedly invoking in-group and out-group distinctions, politicians solidify boundaries that may otherwise remain fluid or contested. At the same time, more and more "border" cleavages are emerging within European societies. These boundaries are most often symbolic and ideological. The process of European construction was accompanied by a certain blurring of the national identity, particularly in terms of the expression of nationalist-extremist movements (Brie, 2025). This process is particularly evident in moments of crisis or uncertainty, when appeals to collective identity become more distinctive and persuasive. Moreover, the strategic deployment of pronouns operates alongside other discursive elements, such as metaphors and rhetorical expressions, which further reinforce group differentiation. For instance, positive attributes are frequently attached to the in-group, while negative characteristics are projected onto the out-group, thereby legitimizing certain political positions and delegitimizing others.

And it is obvious that the modern world offers human beings a lot of different contradictory moral values and orientations, which creates a fertile ground for political communication in electoral campaigns to construct discourses and mobilize voters through emotionally resonant messages (Fer, 2025). The political environment is shaped by a long disturbance of distrust in most parties and institutions and a polarised society and media rewards anti-establishment mobilisers. social media campaigning and influencer networks rethink electoral competitions, particularly when institutional trust is already deemed fragile (Hoza, 2026). In online environments, these mechanisms are intensified through practices such as commenting and algorithmic amplification. As users engage with and circulate content that identifies with their perceived in-group, echo chambers can emerge, limiting exposure to alternative perspectives. Consequently,

pronominal strategies become embedded within broader communicative patterns that sustain ideological alignment and deepen social and political divides. The analysis of pronoun usage in political discourse reveals the way in which seemingly simple linguistic features can carry significant ideological weight, functioning as powerful tools in the construction and maintenance of collective identities.

### **Metaphorical strategies and the amplification of emotional appeal**

Metaphorical conceptualization represents another priority dimension of digital political discourse, enabling political actors to simplify complex issues and evoke strong emotional responses. Metaphors such as “war”, “battle”, “fight” and “invasion” are used to describe political challenges, transforming abstract or multifaceted situations into more accessible and emotionally charged narratives. In the digital context, where attention is limited and competition for visibility is intense, such metaphorical constructions are particularly effective in capturing audience engagement. They show how issues are understood and also influence how they are felt, contributing to the emotional intensification of political communication. Consequently, metaphorical language becomes a powerful tool for persuasion, capable of mobilizing support and reinforcing ideological positions.

This perspective is strongly supported by work in Cognitive Linguistics, particularly the influential theory of conceptual metaphor developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). They argue that metaphors are not only stylistic devices, but fundamental mechanisms through which individuals understand abstract concepts in terms of more concrete experiences. In political discourse, this means that metaphorical conceptualization structures not only how issues are communicated, but how they are cognitively processed by audiences. Building on this foundation, George Lakoff (1996, 2004) further demonstrates in what way political ideologies are grounded in competing metaphorical frameworks, such as the well-known “nation as family” model, which creates attitudes toward authority and social policy. Similarly, Paul Chilton (2004) emphasizes the role of metaphor in constructing political realities, arguing that spatial and force-based metaphors such as those related to conflict or movement are central to how political leaders present both allies and adversaries.

Research within critical discourse analysis (CDA), mainly by Teun A. van Dijk and Norman Fairclough, further highlights in what way metaphorical strategies contribute to the reproduction of power relations and ideological dominance. From this perspective, metaphors such as “war” or “invasion” are not neutral descriptors, but discursive tools that legitimize exclusionary practices and heighten perceptions of threat. More recent studies focusing on digital communication, such as those by Zoltán Kövecses, underline the emotional dimension of metaphor use, showing the way through which culturally embedded metaphorical patterns intensify affective responses and facilitate rapid interpretation in fast-paced online environments. In social media contexts, these metaphorical constructions are easily replicated and disseminated, contributing to what some scholars describe as the “viralization” of emotionally charged discourses.

Taken together, this body of research demonstrates that metaphorical strategies do more than enhance rhetorical appeal: they actively build political cognition and amplify emotional engagement. In digital political discourse, their persuasive power is magnified by the speed and participatory nature of online platforms, making them an important mechanism in the formation and polarization of public opinion.

### **Moral binaries and the simplification of political discourse**

Finally, the construction of moral binaries plays a main role in simplifying political discourse in digital environments. Political leaders frame issues in terms of clear-cut oppositions, which is good versus bad, right versus wrong, honest versus corrupt, thereby reducing complex realities to easily digestible speeches. This simplification facilitates rapid communication and enhances message clarity, which are essential in fast-paced digital platforms. However, it also limits nuanced debate and encourages the adoption of rigid, polarized viewpoints. By appealing to moral judgments, such discourse reinforces group cohesion while delegitimizing opposing perspectives, ultimately presenting the way through which political legitimacy is perceived.

Scholars such as George Lakoff, mentioned in the previous sections too, argue that moral framing is a main mechanism through which political ideologies are thought. By mapping issues onto intuitive moral schemas, leaders make abstract or contested issues emotionally and cognitively accessible to audiences. Similarly, Jonathan Haidt (2012) outlines the role of moral intuitions in political reasoning, highlighting how appeals to fundamental moral dichotomies, care versus harm, fairness versus cheating, loyalty versus betrayal, activate strong affective responses and shape judgments.

Research in critical discourse analysis demonstrates that such binary constructions are not neutral but serve to legitimize certain actors while delegitimizing others. Teun A. van Dijk (1998) shows that moral polarization in discourse strengthens in-group cohesion and fosters ideological conformity, particularly in contexts where media and digital platforms amplify selective narratives. Likewise, Norman Fairclough (2003) highlights the way through which the simplification of complex issues into moral opposites contributes to the perpetuation of power relations and propels public perceptions of legitimacy.

In digital political communication, moral binaries are amplified by the participatory nature of online platforms. Users consume content and also actively contribute to and disseminate it, supporting polarized perspectives and heightening emotional investment. This interaction creates feedback loops that amplify moral judgments, making sophisticated debate less likely and entrenching ideological divisions, and in this sense, the moralization of political discourse operates as both a cognitive and social mechanism; it simplifies understanding and sustains collective identity while marginalizing dissenting voices.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Taken together, these four dimensions illustrate the way through which digital political discourse is strategically constituted to influence both cognition and emotion. The interplay between lexical choices, identity construction, metaphorical framing and moral simplification reveals a discursive environment that is highly dynamic and emotionally charged. In the digital age, political language not only reflects social realities but actively participates in their construction, presenting the ways in which power and collective identities are negotiated in contemporary political life.

Moral binaries condense multifaceted realities into clear-cut oppositions, making political messages more accessible but simultaneously limiting sophisticated debate and encouraging polarized viewpoints. In digital environments, the participatory nature of social media amplifies these effects. Users consume content, while also interacting with it through commenting and circulating messages, which reinforces ideological

alignment, strengthens emotional investment and magnifies the visibility of particular discourses.

This case study demonstrates that digital political discourse is not a reflection of pre-existing social and political structures, but it is also an active force that constructs and legitimizes power relations and collective identities. Understanding these discursive strategies is essential for comprehending in what manner political legitimacy is communicated and how polarization and affective engagement are intensified in contemporary online political life.

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# SOCIAL INCLUSION AND EUROPEAN RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY: THE CASE OF NON-AGRICULTURAL TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN RURAL BIHOR COUNTY

Claudiu Gabriel BONACIU\*  
Mircea BRIE\*\*

**Abstract.** Rural areas in Romania face structural vulnerabilities stemming from geographical isolation and limited economic activity, factors that restrict access to sustainable employment opportunities. However, the potential of the private sector and the synergy among local actors are essential drivers of social inclusion, with the rate of job creation serving as the benchmark for the success of development policies. Through Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Union has sought to establish a strategic framework aimed at diversifying the rural economy by stimulating non-agricultural activities. However, the absence of a long-term strategic vision has limited the effectiveness of the social inclusion process; although economic diversification is an imperative necessity for rural entrepreneurs and residents, the fragmented implementation of this concept has hindered the achievement of the intended cohesion objectives.

This study aims to analyze the contribution of non-agricultural activities to labor market dynamics in rural areas, while also examining the spillover effects on the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly in the tourism sector. The research focuses on the administrative-territorial units of Așeu, Vadu Crișului, Șuncuiș, and Bratca (Bihor County), localities located within a tourist area defined in part by the Crișul Repede Gorge protected natural area. The theoretical and empirical foundation of this study is based on the analysis of data from official statistics (European, national, and local), government documents, as well as a rigorous review of the specialized literature, including doctoral dissertations and relevant scientific articles.

**Keywords:** rural development, social inclusion, tourism, Romania, Bihor.

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Rural areas in Romania face structural vulnerabilities stemming from geographic isolation and restrictive economic dynamics, factors that severely limit access to sustainable employment opportunities. However, the resilience of the private sector and

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\* Innovation Manager, manager in rural development projects and coordinator of public policies in tourism development, at the Bihor Destination Management Agency. PhD in the field of International Relations and European Studies, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. E-mail: [gabibonaciu@gmail.com](mailto:gabibonaciu@gmail.com).

\*\* Mircea Brie, PhD Professor at the University of Oradea, Department of International Relations and European Studies. E-mail: [mbrie@uoradea.ro](mailto:mbrie@uoradea.ro).

the synergy among local actors are essential drivers of **social inclusion**, with the **job creation rate** serving as the benchmark for evaluating the success of cohesion policies.

Within the European Union, Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) sought to establish a strategic framework for the diversification of the rural economy by mobilizing resources from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). This mechanism aimed to reduce dependence on the primary sector by directly funding non-agricultural activities, considered essential for the modernization of the Romanian countryside. The development of these sectors (tourism, crafts, services) is not merely an economic alternative but an imperative necessity for local entrepreneurs, offering solutions to labor outflow and demographic aging. However, the effectiveness of these instruments has often been undermined by the absence of a long-term strategic vision and fragmented planning. Although the concept of **non-agricultural rural development** is consistent with prevailing market demands, its suboptimal implementation has led to disparities in the process of social inclusion, thereby risking the transformation of one-off investments into interventions lacking true sustainability in the absence of a link between the specific needs of communities and European funding priorities.

**The research objective** of this study is to analyze the contribution of non-agricultural activities to labor market dynamics in rural areas, while also examining the spillover effects on the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly in the tourism sector. The units of analysis selected for this study are the communes of *Aușeu*, *Vadu Crișului*, *Șuncuiuş*, and *Bratca* in Bihor County, located within a tourist area that is partially situated within the Crișul Repede Gorge protected/natural area. The information analysed was sourced from a range of European, national, and local statistics, government sources, as well as doctoral theses, articles, and studies published in various academic journals.

The **research hypotheses** from which we proceed in conducting this analysis are:

- H1. A reduction in European funds allocated to the development of non-agricultural activities will lead to fewer jobs in rural areas;
- H2. Continuous financial support from European funds for non-agricultural activities leads to job creation and the development of other businesses in rural areas.

**The research question** addressed throughout the documentation and analysis process is: *What is the impact of investments in non-agricultural activities under the second pillar of the CAP, Rural Development, on the process of social inclusion in rural areas?*

**The research methodology** was designed using the following methods and levels of investigation: documentary analysis (including material found in specialized literature), comparative analysis of quantitative data, qualitative analysis, and analysis of existing statistical data. The research tools employed were case studies, observations and graphical representations in the form of tables and figures. **The investigation period** considered for the case study spans 2000–2022, for which complete data is available for analysis in accordance with the established research methodology and tools.

**The expected results** take into account the fact that the development of non-agricultural activities in the tourism sector within the rural area under analysis contributes directly and indirectly to job creation, fostering social inclusion in the medium and long term.

The private sector in rural Europe received over 60 billion euros in funding between 2000 and 2022 (European Commission, Cohesion Data 2000–2006, 2007–2013, 2014–2020), which helped generate moderate job growth (AGRIDATA, 2026). Between

2000 and 2022, across three multiannual programming periods, over 14 billion euros were allocated through the Common Agricultural Policy to support non-agricultural activities in rural areas (European Commission, 2024), but which, alongside other European programs, supported coherence in the social inclusion process (PNDR 2007–2013, 2015: 445).

Rural social inclusion in Romania is also a priority for the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), the institution responsible for rural development. All policy documents on rural development from the period under review identify social inclusion as a central concern and describe the different ways in which MADR has addressed this issue in three European-funded programs.

***The Special Accession Program for Agriculture and Rural Development 2000–2006*** (hereinafter referred to as *SAPARD 2000–2006*) aimed, with regard to job creation, to provide funding, through Measure 3.4 under Priority Axis 3, for projects requiring support for the development of non-agricultural activities. It should be noted that during the 2000–2006 period, from the perspective of specialists at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), the concept of *non-agricultural activities* was “insignificant in economic terms,” and “the rural economy is poorly diversified and still dependent on agricultural activities” (MADR, 2011: 75). Measure 3.4, titled “*Development and Diversification of Economic Activities Generating Multiple Activities and Alternative Incomes*,” although it does not explicitly include support for non-agricultural activities in its title, is aimed at economic operators in rural areas, who, through the projects they submit, can create new jobs or at least maintain jobs in rural areas through activities unrelated to agriculture (MADR, 2011: 76). At the national level, Measure 3.4 was utilized in 81% of its financial allocation, equivalent to over 68 billion euros. Its effectiveness stemmed precisely from the non-agricultural activities under the *Tourism sub-measure*, which accounted for over 80% of expenditures. According to official evaluations, Measure 3.4 also yielded good results in terms of impact indicators, namely job creation. The SAPARD program created over 8,000 new jobs, of which approximately 2,800 were jobs preserved as a result of this measure’s initiatives, the majority of which—about 85%—were in the tourism sector (MADR, 2011:150–151).

***The 2007–2013 Rural Development Program*** (hereinafter referred to as the *2007–2013 RDP*) included an economic component, the primary objective of which was also to create jobs in rural areas. With regard to promoting social inclusion, through the PNDR 2007–2013, Romania, in accordance with European rural development policy, set out to support two categories of beneficiaries—public and private—through funding measures. Support focused on funding private beneficiaries specifically aimed to encourage small businesses to develop non-agricultural activities outside the agricultural sector (PNDR 2007–2013, 2015: 349).

To generate alternative income, any entrepreneur or resident in rural areas was encouraged to diversify their activities into the *non-agricultural sector* and to develop activities in the production sector (crafts, service provision) or rural tourism (agritourism, recreational activities). Compared to the previous program (SAPARD 2000–2006), specialists from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), encouraged by the results achieved previously, created through the National Rural Development Program (PNDR) 2007–2013 two specific measures to support non-agricultural activities aimed at creating at least one job, namely: *M312—Support for the creation and development of micro-enterprises* and *M313—Promotion of tourism activities*. Compared to the previous period, the results achieved fell far short of

expectations According to post-implementation evaluations, M312 achieved 71.86% of its allocated budget in terms of financial effectiveness, while M313 achieved considerably less, only 45.39% of the allocated amount (MADR, 2017: 5–7). In terms of the gross number of jobs created, both measures were deemed ineffective, as the two measures together created only 4,617 new jobs out of the 14,071 projected (MADR, 2017: 6–7).

*The 2014–2020 Rural Development Program* promoted the diversification of the rural economy and the creation of new job opportunities to address the surplus of labor in the agricultural sector and increase rural incomes. In Romania, nearly 4,000 projects were supported for the creation or development of non-agricultural enterprises in rural areas (AFIR, 2025), resulting in the creation of over 13,000 jobs (approximately 5,000 under LEADER).

Compared to the other two programs analyzed, the 2014–2020 National Rural Development Program (PNDR) allocated resources to a single measure, Measure 6, which specifically supported the establishment and development of small rural non-agricultural businesses. An important role in this objective was played by the diversification of economic activities in rural areas and the creation of income alternatives, stimulated by two sub-measures: SM 6.2 and 6.4, respectively. Support was granted based on a business plan and was directed toward the establishment of new non-agricultural activities for the purpose of creating jobs (sM 6.2). Support focused on production, crafts, agritourism, and service activities. To generate alternative sources of income, farmers and their family members were encouraged to diversify their activities into the non-agricultural sector. SM 6.4 aimed to stimulate the rural business environment, particularly in the tourism sector, by creating productive activities (including in sectors with growth potential) and providing essential services to the population. By facilitating access to financing, continuity in the development process was ensured for newly established non-agricultural micro-enterprises and small enterprises, but not for firms in rural areas with entrepreneurial experience or those implementing a project with European funding. This misinterpretation of the process of developing non-agricultural activities in rural Romania resulted in the failure to meet a target indicator set by the program. Of the 21,940 jobs projected under the supported projects (Measure 6, Intervention Area 6A), only 8,092 were created (MADR, 2024:42).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing rural development at the level of local or regional administrative units, through the contribution of non-agricultural activities—particularly tourism—requires a broader analytical perspective that includes: 1. regional development policies, programs, and instruments; 2. secondarily, documents referring to the development strategies of these administrative units are also particularly important.

In the context of our paper, the debate regarding regional development as a concept, but also as a direction for public policies, is a highly complex one. In the framework of our analysis, understanding this concept involves both the European and national perspectives, as well as outlining several directions for regional development policy at the level of Bihor County (Pantea and Brie, 2020: 39; Brie and Mészáros, 2015). The conceptual delimitation of our debate must be defined through a broad analysis of not only the concept of regional development, but it must of course refer to the concept of region, but also to that of regional policy. This triad is in a very close regional connection (Hurjui, 2015). *The regional development* policy promoted by the EU focuses

on reducing development disparities between territorial units. The territorial area subject to the implementation of this policy is *the region*. The latter can be defined as „an area of a territory with a set of distinct and consistent own characteristics (these can be physical or human), which gives it a certain significant unity and distinguishes it from other neighbouring areas” (Apud Verga, 2017). In the European context, regions are therefore the subject of regional development policies. *Regional development* is a concept through which "the aim is to boost and diversify economic activities, stimulate investment in the private sector, contribute to reducing unemployment and not least an improvement in living standards" (Cîrnu, 2010: 75). This development must meet present and future needs. It “responds to the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Apud Verga, 2017). Without being prisoners of the concept of development, EU Cohesion Policy allows us to introduce the concepts of *cohesion and regional competitiveness* into the sphere of conceptual debate. Regional competitiveness is closely related to regional territorial development, and the latter is not the result of economic growth, but is one of the causes of growth (Cojanu et. al., 2009: 6; Pantea and Brie, 2020: 39).

At the level of Bihor County, *the principles of development* start from the need for a coherent link and organization at the level of development measures and programs. In this sense, a special emphasis is placed on the development of economic competitiveness, as a foundation for the other levels of development of society. In this sense, the following principles are followed (see more Brie and Pantea, 2020):

- *Convergent development* aims to stimulate performance without creating development gaps at the territorial level.
- *The inter-correlation* implies that the objectives of the strategy take into account the objectives of the national and European plans and strategies but also the adaptation of the projects according to the recommendations of the governance policies of the different institutions acting at local and county level.
- *Sustainable development* means proposing a type of development that ensures a balance between social, economic and environmental aspects and that takes into account the issues related to restricting access to resources for future generations.

The international component of this development is becoming increasingly important as European transnational economic interconnection. The positioning of the county in the immediate vicinity of the border imposed a deep inclination on the cross-border dimension of its sustainable development. Cross-border cooperation therefore becomes one of the important vectors of regional development that Bihor County can not only exploit, but must also do. Inter-connectivity at all levels, including cross-border, can ensure a sustainable perspective on development. However, cross-border cooperation is only part of the dimension of international cooperation (see more about the role of international cooperation Brie, Mărcuț and Polgar, 2023; Brie, Mărcuț and Polgar, 2022). A direct example related to the analysis of our case study is the fact that the twinning of the municipality of Vadu Crișului with Körösszegapáti (Hungary), Székkutas (Hungary), and Felsőpakony (Hungary) has led to the organization of cultural events that directly contribute to the growth of tourism activities (Brie, Mărcuț, and Polgar, 2023: 203, 207). In fact, according to a survey on international cooperation conducted in 2022 across all local administrative units in Bihor County, representatives from Aușeu and Vadu Crișului identified the development of international cooperation for tourism development as a priority, and vice versa (Brie, Mărcuț and Polgar, 2023: 211).

Within the CAP, particularly the second pillar—Rural Development—between 2000 and 2020, the issue of diversifying economic activities in rural areas remains linked to agriculture and farm-level economic outcomes. Analyses and studies of the CAP's multiannual programs demonstrate that rural development has, for several years, been part of the post-agricultural productivism paradigm, where the expansion of rural governance to include non-agricultural actors is a key element (Wilson, 2007: 77).

Some researchers argue that the second pillar of the CAP is not particularly concerned with addressing the socioeconomic problems of rural communities through the development of non-agricultural activities (McAreavey, 2009: 15). Recent research supports this view, namely that the main focus of rural development policy has gradually shifted primarily toward supporting multifunctional agriculture, with less emphasis on non-agricultural activities (Pelucha and Kasabov, 2020: 44–47). However, at the EU level, rural non-agricultural firms provide inputs, services, and markets for farms and agricultural businesses and ensure a solid tax base for local governments in rural areas (Green, 2013: 45). For example, investments in the construction of tourist guesthouses generate added value on multiple levels: annual local taxes paid on the construction, diversified jobs, as well as the indirect development of other non-agricultural activities related to tourism. Other scientific studies indicate that entrepreneurs and residents in rural areas believe that non-agricultural activities create a higher quality of life and more stable jobs compared to agricultural activities (Bonaciu, 2025: 364–373).

The results of another study conducted in Romania, which analyzed the development and impact of non-agricultural activities on rural development and income diversification in rural Romania between 2000 and 2020, demonstrate that through EU funding and consistent national policies supporting non-agricultural activities, this new concept is becoming an alternative source of income, a means of job creation, and a way to reduce rural-urban disparities (Sima, 2020: 237–251).

In Spain, between 2007 and 2013, projects that generated business and jobs focused on productive investments such as: increasing the value of agricultural production, tourism, diversifying non-agricultural activities, and creating and developing micro-enterprises. The highest levels of investment per project were recorded in projects promoting tourism activities (Measure 313), many of which involved the development of sports and recreational facilities and diversification into non-agricultural activities (Measure 311). These initiatives by Iberian entrepreneurs were funded with over 100,000 euros per project through the European rural development policy (Cañete, Nieto, Cejudo, 2020: 92–102).

A group of researchers examined, prior to the year 2000, several of the main rural areas facing development challenges in the U.S., China, and Latin America. The results revealed interesting contrasts in rural development opportunities and the constraints facing rural areas in these different contexts. The findings demonstrate that *non-agricultural activities* are not a new concept; on the contrary, they have been used in scientific analyses for several decades. As in the EU, non-agricultural activities contribute to the diversification of the rural economy, reducing exclusive dependence on crops and agriculture; they also lead to job creation and demographic stability, thanks to economic diversification and cooperation between farmers and non-farmers (Dax, 2020: 14; Li Zhang, 2013: 304; Dougherty, 2013: 336; Lucatelli, 2006: 46). Studies conducted in China show that industrial enterprises in rural areas have created employment opportunities on farms (Fei, 1989), absorbing surplus agricultural workers; subsequently, rural enterprises have had the effect of gradually creating a non-agricultural workforce,

which to some extent slows the flow of rural workers to cities (Goldstein, Goldstein, and Gu, 1991: 289–314). For their part, American researchers analyzed the economic transformations in North America through the lens of U.S. non-agricultural programs. Their conclusion was that if these programs are tailored to local populations, they are far more effective than agricultural programs when the goal is to stimulate rural development (Irwin, Isserman, Kilkenny, and Partridge, 2010: 522–553).

In conclusion, based on scientific analyses to date, we observe that non-agricultural jobs are essential globally for the transformation and survival of rural areas, offering a vital alternative to traditional agriculture. They contribute to economic stability and social inclusion by reducing poverty and modernizing communities through the diversification of local economic activities.

### 3. PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF NON-AGRICULTURAL SERVICES IN THE TOURISM SECTOR IN THE BIHOR COUNTY COMMUNES OF AUȘEU, BRATCA, ȘUNCUIUȘ, AND VADU CRIȘULUI. CASE STUDY

#### 3.1. Statistical analysis of the study area

This analysis compares the evolution of three economic indicators over the 2007–2020 period in the four communes under analysis, namely: the number of active firms, turnover, and the average number of employees.

According to NIS statistical data, in the study area—comprising the four municipalities and their respective villages—there were a total of 1,360 active economic entities during the analyzed period, with turnover ranging from 12 to 28 million lei and an average number of employees of 81 per thousand inhabitants. These companies covered all sectors funded by the measures of the National Rural Development Program (PNDR) during the reference period.

**Figure 1.** Evolution of economic indicators during the 2007–2020 period at the level of the communes in the study area

|     | Economic indicators | No. of active companies 2007-2013 | No. of active companies 2014-2020 | Turnover (million lei) 2007-2013 | Turnover (million lei) 2014-2020 | Average number of employees per 1,000 inhabitants 2007-2013 | Average number of employees per 1,000 inhabitants 2014-2020 |
|-----|---------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
|     |                     |                                   |                                   |                                  |                                  |                                                             |                                                             |
| UAT | Aușeu               | 99                                | 206                               | 28.230                           | 72.091                           | 48                                                          | 86                                                          |
|     | Bratca              | 99                                | 230                               | 17.219                           | 58.634                           | 50                                                          | 74                                                          |
|     | Șuncuiuș            | 104                               | 189                               | 12.786                           | 16.245                           | 71                                                          | 102                                                         |
|     | Vadu Crișului       | 163                               | 270                               | 23.468                           | 24.872                           | 106                                                         | 118                                                         |
|     | Total               | 465                               | 895                               | 81.703                           | 171.842                          | 275                                                         | 380                                                         |

*Source:* Authors' analysis based on data published by the National Institute of Statistics (2020)

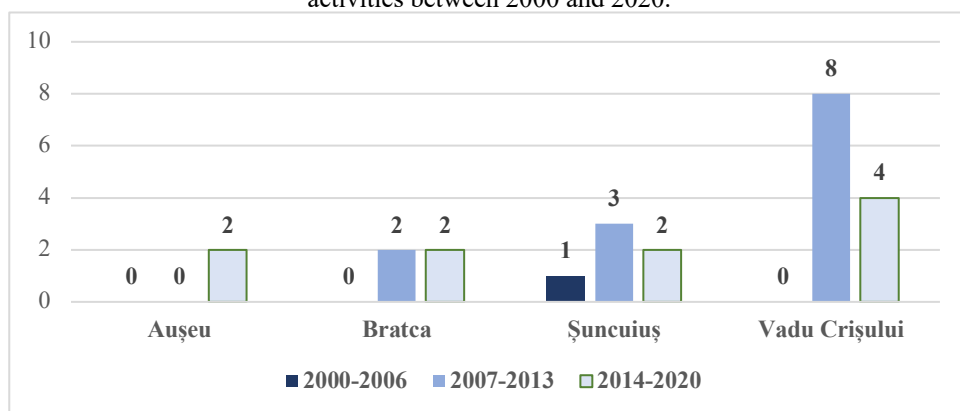
Figure 1 shows that all three indicators analyzed point to a positive trend in all the municipalities included in the analysis. The increase in the number of active firms has also led to a significant increase in turnover, which naturally resulted in an increase in the number of jobs, with this indicator showing a rise in the average number of employees from 275 to 380. These increases indicate that the entrepreneurial ecosystem

was in a period of development, providing the population with jobs and diverse economic activities, which represented a source of potential beneficiaries for rural development programs whose businesses could be funded.

### 3.2. Analysis of projects submitted under non-agricultural measures

During the three programming periods in the study area, 24 non-agricultural businesses were funded through measures (3.4, 313, 6.2, and 6.4). The projects selected for funding were direct investments in the tourism sector and consisted of the construction of accommodation facilities (13 agritourism lodgings, 6 guesthouses, and a campground) and the development of recreational activities (4) in the tourism sector.

**Figure 2.** Distribution of projects funded through support measures for non-agricultural activities between 2000 and 2020.



*Source:* Authors' analysis based on data collected from MADR (2026)

Figure 2 indicates that the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Bihor research area located in the Crișul Repede Gorge responded tentatively to opportunities for financing non-agricultural activities through European funds. As can be seen, during the pre-accession period to the EU (2000–2006), only a single project was submitted at the level of the Șuncuiș commune. During the 2007–2013 period, the number of projects increased dramatically to 13 funded, only to see a decline in investment projects for non-agricultural activities in the tourism sector to 10 during the third programming period. Although fewer projects were selected for funding, it should be noted that during the 2014–2020 period, compared to the other two periods, four projects were implemented for the first time in the Crișul Repede Gorge, introducing new non-agricultural activities specific to the tourism industry. Through all four projects, new non-agricultural businesses specific to the mountainous area within the analyzed municipalities were established. The investments consisted of purchasing equipment for recreational activities (rafting, via ferrata, caving, cycling tourism, Aușeu, Vadu Crișului) as well as establishing an adventure park (Vadu Crișului). The growth of these investments in non-agricultural activities was driven by the success of other non-agricultural investments, namely the construction of guesthouses and agritourism accommodations. Another finding based on field observations is that all these non-agricultural businesses in the study area, funded with European money, will still be active in 2026, continuing to

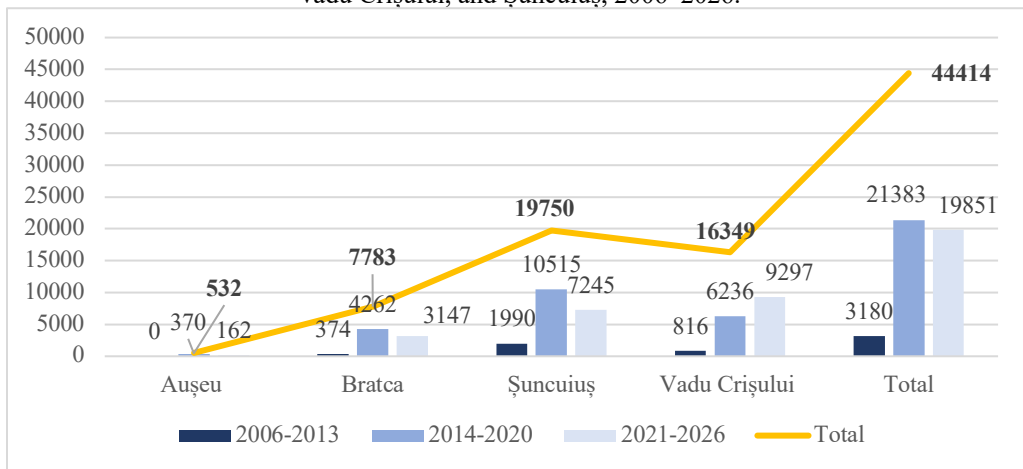


generate jobs and income for other economic activities due to the influx of tourists attracted to the tourist area (Appendix 1).

### 3.3. Data analysis

All the investments made in the study area have created new jobs in rural areas, generated revenue for local budgets, stimulated other non-agricultural businesses, and contributed to an increase in the number of tourist arrivals in the area, who in turn have spent considerable amounts on other types of non-agricultural services available in the Crișul Repede Gorge. The impact of investments in non-agricultural activities, the construction of guesthouses, and the establishment of recreational activities is reflected in the trend of tourist arrivals between 2006 and 2026, who utilized tourism services in the study area.

**Figure 3.** Evolution of the number of arrivals at guesthouses and campgrounds in Aușeu, Bratca, Vadu Crișului, and Șuncuiuș, 2006–2026.



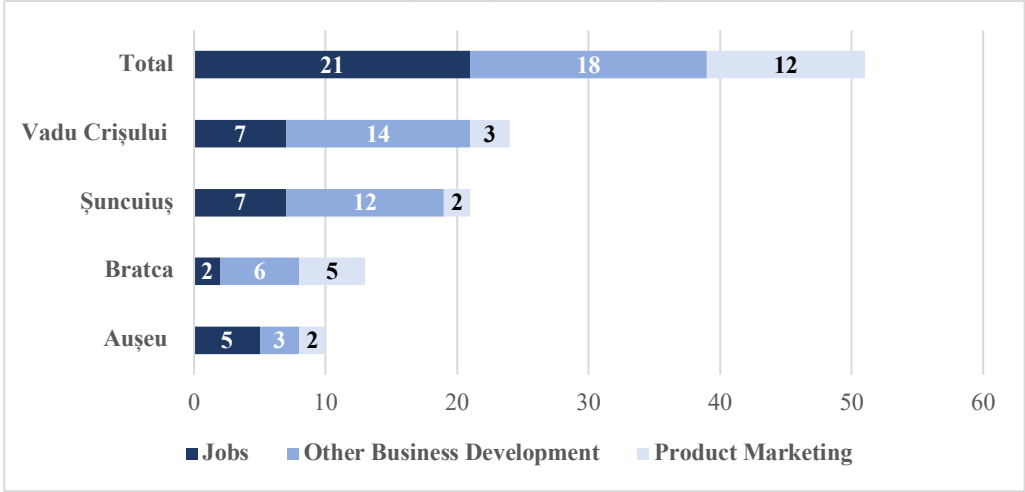
*Source:* Authors' analysis based on data published by the National Institute of Statistics (2026)

The quantitative data in Figure 3 indicate that, due to investments in non-agricultural activities, the number of tourist arrivals has increased significantly, particularly in localities where investment levels were highest. Thus, it can be observed that in the commune of Șuncuiuș, where six guesthouses were built with European funding during the three programming periods analyzed, the number of arrivals increased the most between 2014 and 2020, rising by 19% compared to the 2006–2013 period, and then declined between 2021 and 2026. In the commune of Vadu Crișului, where 9 accommodation units were built and 3 non-agricultural leisure businesses were established, the number of arrivals increased by 9%, in the commune of Bratca, where 4 guesthouses were built, the number of arrivals increased by 8.8% between 2014 and 2020, with a decline projected for 2021–2026. The commune of Aușeu recorded the fewest tourist arrivals; however, statistical data indicate that funding for the two non-agricultural activities—guesthouse construction and the development of leisure services—contributed significantly to the increase in tourist arrivals.

The economic and social effects of active non-agricultural activities in the study area reflect the fact that these investments have been beneficial not only to entrepreneurs but also to local residents. Data collected between December 2023 and March 2024

through semi-structured interviews with 40 residents—10 from each locality—indicate that non-agricultural investments benefit residents of the local communities under analysis.

**Figure 4.** Benefits of non-agricultural investments for residents of the communes of Auşeu, Bratca, Şuncuiuş, and Vadu Crişului.



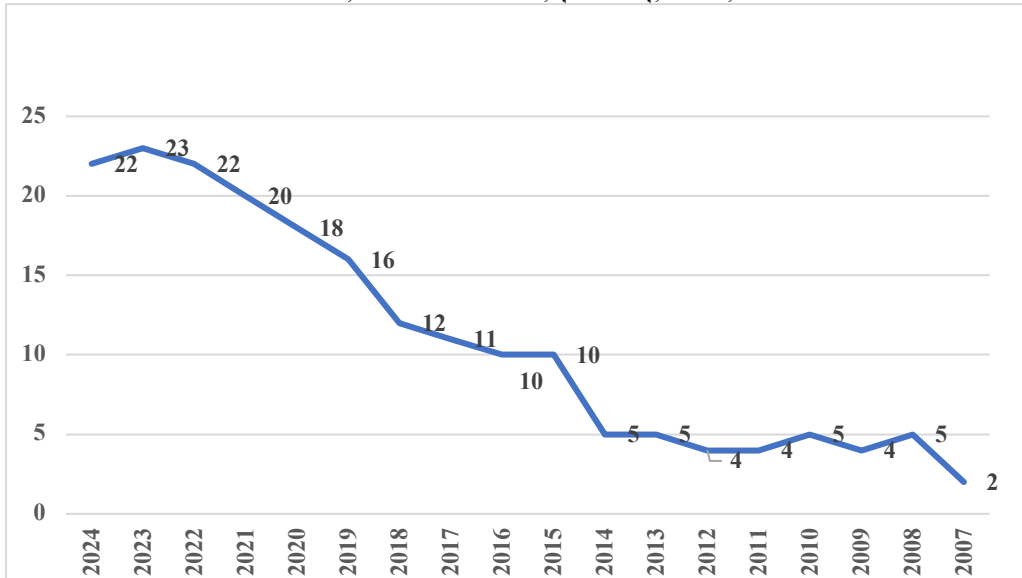
*Source:* authors’ interpretation based on a semi-structured interview (Brie, Bonaciu, 2025)

According to the residents interviewed, the main benefit of non-agricultural investments in tourism in their communities is job creation. Of the 40 residents interviewed, 52.5% believe that these local investments have created jobs close to home, 45% say that other local businesses have developed, and 30.0% say they have been able to market various local food products (milk, cheese, jams, traditional pies, beverages), or handicrafts (white pottery from Vadu Crişului).

The most telling example of the success and positive impact of a non-agricultural tourism business on the process of social inclusion in rural areas is that of SC Padaflora SRL in the commune of Şuncuiuş, village of Bălnaca.

In 2005, the Gavrilăş family from the village of Şuncuiuş submitted a funding proposal to OJFIR and received 90,000 euros to build a 6-room guesthouse in the village of Bălnaca. To carry out the investment, they contributed an additional 90,000 euros from their own funds, so that in December 2006 they were able to open six rooms at the new tourist location in the Crişul Repede Gorge, under the name Pensiunea Casa Bucătarului. In the first year after opening, the guesthouse had only two employees: the couple, Dana and Florin. In 2008, with the help of a loan, they increased the number of rooms to 14 (37 beds) and added three more employees. Although the ratio of expenses to revenue was not encouraging, nor was the financial crisis of that period, the couple did not lose heart. In 2011, they made another investment worth 228,000 euros, partly with funds obtained through AFIR and partly from their own resources. This time, with the help of European funds, they built a complex within the guesthouse featuring four solar-heated pools. As a result of these investments, the business gradually began to generate steady income and create jobs for the local community, regardless of the season.

**Figure 5.** Development of the number of jobs created through non-agricultural activities by SC. Padaflora S.R.L., Casa Bucătarului, Șuncuiuș, Bihor, 2007–2024.



*Source:* Compiled by the authors based on data published online by TopFirme (2026)

New job creation began to rise in the first two years of operation, from two people in 2007 to five in 2008. This was followed by a downward trend between 2009 and 2014 due to the financial crisis during that period. Immediately after the completion of investments in 2014, the number of jobs doubled, from 5 to 10 people, in 2015. The upward trend continues annually, reaching an average of 22 employees by 2024. The annual increase in jobs indicates that, in the Crișul Repede Gorge area, the company featured in this case study has become the largest employer in the hospitality sector.

Investments in non-agricultural activities, such as lodging facilities, have generated a ripple effect of economic development across the rural economy of Bihor County. Thanks to these investments, other local non-agricultural businesses have also developed, both in tourism and in other sectors, supporting the establishment of new employment opportunities and increased income for entrepreneurs in rural areas. For example, in Șuncuiuș, a mountaineering club set up several via ferrata routes, which encouraged young people in the area to obtain their guide certification and subsequently provide paid guiding services. Locals have invested in seasonal dining establishments or in infrastructure for street-side souvenir sales. In Bratca, in the village of Valea Crișului, Aventura Trekking, a tour operator based in the commune of Aușeu, has partnered with the local community to develop and offer a new tourism service: traditional brunches (Digi24, 2018, 2019). Through this service, tourists are offered dishes specific to the area, prepared with local ingredients, as well as cultural activities such as visiting wooden churches or exploring protected areas in the region (AMD Bihor, 2017: 2-27). The operator, Interregional Călători, in the field of rail transport, has adapted its train cars and coaches to facilitate the travel of cycling enthusiasts in civilized conditions to recreational areas within the studied region (Digi24, 2018; Bihoreanul, 2025). Local authorities have also set up new, modern campgrounds in the villages of Bratca, Șuncuiuș, and Vadu Crișului, which in turn generate jobs and revenue (Bihoreanul: 2025).

## CONCLUSIONS

The creation of employment opportunities in non-agricultural sectors is a fundamental pillar for the resilience and structural transformation of rural areas, offering a strategic alternative to traditional farms. This economic diversification helps strengthen financial stability and social inclusion, directly contributing to poverty alleviation and the modernization of local communities.

Within the four administrative-territorial units analyzed, the 2007–2020 period (which overlaps with the three financial programming cycles) was marked by a direct correlation between business growth and economic performance. Thus, the proliferation of active legal entities generated a substantial increase in turnover, while also facilitating the consolidation of the labor market; this is reflected in the trend of the average number of employees, which rose from 275 to 380. The positive dynamics of these indicators attest to the maturation of the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, with the diversification of economic activities providing a solid base of potential beneficiaries for the funding lines associated with rural development programs.

During the three programming periods, 24 non-agricultural businesses were funded in the study area. The projects selected for funding were direct investments in the tourism sector and consisted of the construction of accommodation facilities (13 agritourism establishments, 6 guesthouses, and a campground) and the development of recreational activities (4) in the tourism sector.

The investments implemented in the study area generated a significant multiplier effect on the rural economy, contributing to the creation of new jobs and the strengthening of local budget revenues. Economic diversification, through the development of the accommodation sector (guesthouses) and recreational infrastructure, has stimulated interdependence among non-agricultural sectors and fostered increased tourist flows in the Crișul Repede Gorge. The impact of these investments is reflected in the upward trend of the arrival indicator between 2006 and 2026, with tourist flows generating positive externalities through the consumption of complementary services, a factor that has supported the viability of local entrepreneurship.

The economic and social effects of active non-agricultural activities in the study area reflect the fact that these investments have been beneficial not only to entrepreneurs but also to local residents. Data collected between December 2023 and March 2024 through semi-structured interviews with 40 residents—10 from each locality—indicate that non-agricultural investments benefit residents of the local communities under analysis. Investments in non-agricultural activities, such as lodging facilities, have produced a ripple effect of economic development in the rural economy of Bihor County. Thanks to these investments, other local non-agricultural businesses have also developed, both in the tourism sector and in other sectors, contributing to: the creation of new jobs and increased income for entrepreneurs in rural areas.

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## ANNEX 1

**Table of active businesses in the Bihor County communes of Auşeu, Bratca, Şuncuiuş, and Vadu Crişului that provide non-agricultural services in the tourism sector, funded between 2000 and 2022 through the European rural development policy.**

| Type of non-agricultural activity                              | Business Name     | Location      | Web                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse                          | La vie            | Auşeu         | <a href="https://cabanesipensiuni.ro/listing/la-vie/">https://cabanesipensiuni.ro/listing/la-vie/</a>                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Leisure tourism service                                        | Aventura Trekking | Auşeu         | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/AventuraTrekking.ro">https://www.facebook.com/AventuraTrekking.ro</a><br><a href="https://youtu.be/rn5teWBONJ4">https://youtu.be/rn5teWBONJ4</a><br><a href="https://www.facebook.com/BrunchArdelenesc.ro/">https://www.facebook.com/BrunchArdelenesc.ro/</a> |
| Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse                          | Grădina cu soare  | Bratca        | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/p/Pensiunea-Gr%C4%83dina-cu-soare-100065476029430/">https://www.facebook.com/p/Pensiunea-Gr%C4%83dina-cu-soare-100065476029430/</a>                                                                                                                           |
| Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse                          | Lavanda           | Bratca        | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/p/PensiuneaLavanda-100084062137045/">https://www.facebook.com/p/PensiuneaLavanda-100084062137045/</a>                                                                                                                                                         |
| Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse                          | Cabana Lorău      | Bratca        | <a href="https://www.cazaretransilvania.ro/lorau-cazare-cabana_lorau.html">https://www.cazaretransilvania.ro/lorau-cazare-cabana_lorau.html</a>                                                                                                                                                 |
| Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse                          | Dolina            | Bratca        | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/pensiunea.dolina">https://www.facebook.com/pensiunea.dolina</a>                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Accommodation, restaurant, recreational facilities, guesthouse | Casa Bucătarului  | Şuncuiuş      | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/casabucatarului/">https://www.facebook.com/casabucatarului/</a>                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Accommodation, restaurant, vacation home                       | Casa bucătarului  | Şuncuiuş      | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/casabucatarului/">https://www.facebook.com/casabucatarului/</a>                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Agritourism guesthouse                                         | Gradia            | Şuncuiuş      | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneagradia/?locale=ro_RO">https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneagradia/?locale=ro_RO</a>                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Accommodation, restaurant, agritourism guesthouse              | Lavinia           | Şuncuiuş      | <a href="http://www.facebook.com/pensiunealaviniashuncuius">www.facebook.com/pensiunealaviniashuncuius</a>                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Apartments for rent                                            | Dolina village    | Şuncuiuş      | <a href="https://dolinavillage.com/contact/">https://dolinavillage.com/contact/</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse                          | Corimen           | Vadu Crişului | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneacorimen/">https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneacorimen/</a>                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse                          | Cori-men          | Vadu Crişului | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneacorimen/">https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneacorimen/</a>                                                                                                                                                                                             |



| Type of non-agricultural activity                 | Business Name                      | Location      | Web                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse             | Cuibul naturii - leisure & retreat | Vadu Crişului | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/p/Cuibul-Naturii-Leisure-Retreat-61578582233741/">https://www.facebook.com/p/Cuibul-Naturii-Leisure-Retreat-61578582233741/</a> |
| Rooms for rent                                    | La grotta resort                   | Vadu Crişului | <a href="http://www.lagrottaresort.ro">www.lagrottaresort.ro</a>                                                                                                  |
| Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse             | Retreat belvedere                  | Vadu Crişului | <a href="https://www.facebook.com/retreat.belvedere.vaducrisului/">https://www.facebook.com/retreat.belvedere.vaducrisului/</a>                                   |
| Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse             | River house                        | Vadu Crişului | <a href="https://pensiuneariverhouse.cazare7.ro/">https://pensiuneariverhouse.cazare7.ro/</a>                                                                     |
| Accommodation, restaurant, agritourism guesthouse | Roua Munţilor                      | Vadu Crişului | <a href="http://www.pensiunearouamuntilor.ro/">http://www.pensiunearouamuntilor.ro/</a>                                                                           |
| Accommodation, camping                            | Vadu crişului                      | Vadu Crişului | <a href="http://csabanovak.com/">http://csabanovak.com/</a>                                                                                                       |
| Adventure Park                                    | Tomnatic adventures                | Vadu Crişului | <a href="https://adventurespark.ro/">https://adventurespark.ro/</a>                                                                                               |
| Leisure tourism services                          | Vadu river camp                    | Vadu Crişului | <a href="https://vadurivercamp.ro/">https://vadurivercamp.ro/</a>                                                                                                 |
| Leisure tourism services                          | Base camp                          | Vadu Crişului | <a href="https://vadurivercamp.ro/">https://vadurivercamp.ro/</a>                                                                                                 |

*Source:* Compiled by the authors based on data published by MADR (2010, 2015), AFIR (2020), and MEDAT (2026)



## THE ROLE OF BORDER MANAGEMENT IN THE PROCESS OF MIGRATION MANAGEMENT AT THE EU'S SOUTH EASTERN BORDERS

István POLGÁR\*

**Abstract.** *The issue of migration goes beyond geographical, economic and legal approaches. If we intend to treat the phenomenon from a specific point of view, we will find ambiguities and uncertainties regarding the role of states and the functioning of some institutions in the process of migration management.*

*The European Union's South Eastern border region, and bordering countries are representing a so-called epicenter of the migration process. Basically, it is one of the main migration routes, also called the Western Balkan track, used by thousands of migrants and refugees on their way to the EU member states.*

*Managing borders and the migration management in the EU and in the neighboring countries is a social and economic investment that enables societies to strengthen their cohesion and resilience and become more prosperous. It can be considered also a societal process in which the responsibility does not rest with a specific group, but with several. The study aims to realize an inventory of the general trends and evolutions from the past decade, regarding the perception of the border in the South East European space, but also focuses on the process of migration management which had an impact on transnational institution building.*

*One of our research hypotheses is represented by the fact that cooperation between states in the field of border management play an important role in the process of migrant management. Transnational cooperation and partnerships between institutions can carry out valuable work by providing guidance and support in this process.*

*A second hypothesis that we want to test starts from the idea that the creation of certain transnational institutions in the field of migration management, working on the ground can play a more efficient role in monitoring the implementation and the impact of new policies and initiatives.*

*The present research is intended to be an analysis through which we would like to emphasize the lack of interaction between neighboring states border authorities at different levels in migration management at the South Eastern borders of the European Union.*

**Keywords:** *border, migration, cooperation, Western Balkans, transnational.*

### INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The creation of today's status quo from the European continent is the result of a long and complex process. Over the years, this process has been influenced by numerous historical, political, economic and social factors. The understanding and good management of borders and neighborhood relations had a key role in the European construction process. The expansion of the European community has gradually changed

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\* Polgár István Ph.D, Associate professor at the Department of International Relations and European Studies, University of Oradea, str. Universității no. 1, Oradea, Romania, E-mail: [istvan.polgar@uoradea.ro](mailto:istvan.polgar@uoradea.ro).

the situation of the external borders of the EU. These changes produced socio-economic and political transformations that generated many opportunities in the field of regional development, but also created many potential problems and tensions. The new conjuncture created in an expanded Europe emphasizes the need for long-term commitments to support local and regional cross-border cooperation initiatives.

The European Union's South Eastern border region, and bordering countries are representing a so-called epicenter of the migration process. Basically, it is one of the main migration routes, also called the Western Balkan track, used by thousands of migrants and refugees on their way to the EU member states.

Enhanced cross-border flows will also support the development of more open societies with a better understanding and tolerance of their neighbors and their cultural, religious and linguistic differences (Brie 2025). At the same time, threats related to abuse of malfunctioning border management systems can be more effectively addressed if authorities responsible for the management of state borders improve their communication, exchange of information and overall cooperation.

Managing borders and the migration management in the EU and in the neighboring countries is a social and economic investment that enables societies to strengthen their cohesion and resilience and become more prosperous. It can be considered also a societal process in which the responsibility does not rest with a specific group, but with several.

## METHODOLOGY

In the given context, the study aims to realize an inventory of the general trends and evolutions from the past decade, regarding the development of the border management process in the South East European space, but also focuses on the process of migration management which had an impact on transnational institution building.

One of our research hypotheses is represented by the fact that cooperation between states in the field of border management play an important role in the process of migrant management. Transnational cooperation and partnerships between institutions can carry out valuable work by providing guidance and support in this process.

A second hypothesis that we want to test starts from the idea that the creation of certain transnational institutions in the field of migration management, working on the ground can play a more efficient role in monitoring the implementation and the impact of new policies and initiatives.

The present research is intended to be an analysis through which we would like to emphasize the lack of interaction between neighboring states border authorities at different levels in migration management at the South Eastern borders of the European Union.

In the frame of the proposed methodology two different methodological approaches were used in the writing of this paper. First, a policy analysis was conducted, which forms the majority of the findings. Secondly, a content analysis of selected documents was carried out which supplements the analysis of the legal and policy framework.

The analysis of the policy and legal framework was desk based focusing on key legislative and policy documents, database in order to query the current legislative status of proposals and other policy initiatives and thus built a corpus of policy and legislative documents that reflect the current status of the EU framework on migration and borders.

Other secondary sources such as academic literature, European Parliament briefings, research reports and reports by UN and European human rights agencies were used to supplement the analysis of key legal and policy developments.

The strengthening of EU border management was prioritized in the EU response to the refugee crisis. The EU developed a border management strategy which aims at an “integrated and global response” to the challenges emerging from irregular migration through the common external borders. The South Eastern borders constitute one of the fundamental targets being addressed by this strategy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

**Border management.** The EU’s South Eastern borders constitute one of the fundamental targets being addressed by this strategy. Already on November 2006, the European Commission published a communication calling for the reinforced management of the EU’s South Eastern borders and for the maximization of the capacities of the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union – FRONTEX (RESPOND 2018).

Under the auspices of coordinated efforts, the Council agreed on a common definition of what ‘Integrated Border Management’ (IBM) means in the EU. The prioritization of borders has been coupled with the emergence of a ‘global approach to migration’, which aims to ensure a multifaceted response covering all the dimensions relevant to migration, with particular attention to irregular mobility by third-country nationals coming from Africa.

The EU policy seems to be based on two distinct but closely interrelated and complementary approaches: on the one hand, an integrated approach to the management of common territorial borders, and on the other hand a global policy covering migration (CEPS 2007).

Efficient and effective border management will enable citizens to live in an area of security and freedom where they can travel more freely and where cross-border trade will be facilitated, all of which are key prerequisites for economic growth and poverty reduction. Enhanced cross-border flows will also support the development of more open societies with a better understanding and tolerance of their neighbors and their cultural, religious and linguistic differences. At the same time, threats related to abuse of malfunctioning border management systems, such as smuggling of goods and trafficking in human beings, drugs and arms, can be more effectively addressed if authorities responsible for the management of state borders improve their communication, exchange of information and overall cooperation (CARDS 2007).

We can say that there are no explicit definitions of neither border management nor migration management in EU documents. The closest explicit definition of what European Integrated Border Management encompasses can be found in Article 4 of the 2016 Regulation establishing the European Border and Coast Guard (RESPOND 2018).

Still, if we summarize the principles and goals of border management, we can say that border management represents the national and international coordination and cooperation among all the relevant authorities and agencies involved in border security and trade facilitation to establish effective, efficient and integrated border management systems, in order to reach the objective of open, but well controlled and secure borders.

The European Integrated Border Management (IBM) Guidelines are of a technical nature and should be viewed as a working tool, providing guidance on how to enhance cooperation and coordination at various levels. They should not be seen as

detailed technical specifications on how to develop the individual border management systems in the countries of South Eastern Europe. Rather, they should be regarded as a useful basis and supporting document when developing national IBM systems (CARDS 2007).

A variety of actors are involved in tasks related to the management of state borders in every country. While they clearly have a different focus and thus different objectives depending on their responsibilities and powers, they all work towards a common strategic goal.

Traditionally, the strategic goals at the state level in relation to border management lie in the protection of the borders against threats to national security, the national economy and public health, but also in the prevention of cross-border criminal activities and unlawful entry into or exit from the state. Border services, including border guards as well as customs, veterinary and phytosanitary inspection services, all play an important role in this regard.

Border services are obliged to ensure the security and health of people, animals, plants and cultural heritage. As the potential threats are numerous, an expeditious and at the same time effective control system is required, of which the management is accordingly complex.

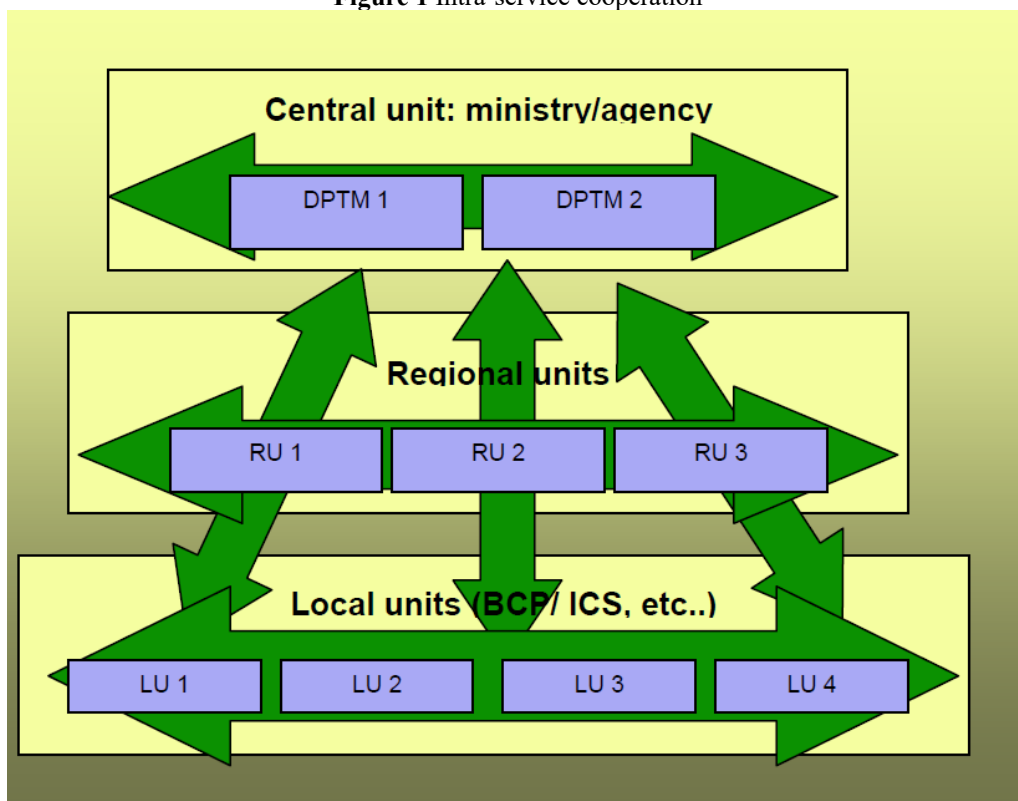
On the other hand, increased international trade and tourism, as well as the increase in cultural and educational exchanges make the facilitation of licit movement of persons and goods also an important strategic goal of most countries. Border services are therefore forced to strike a delicate balance between strict controls concerning risks and fully open borders (CARDS 2007).

In order to balance these twin goals of modern border management – that is, border security and facilitated movement of persons and goods – in an efficient and effective manner, appropriate equipment and well-trained and motivated staff are as important as a strong legal basis, a clear division of tasks and responsibilities, streamlined processes and an efficient exchange of information.

Taking into account the complexity of the task, this cooperation and coordination should not only be limited to the units within one ministry or agency, but should also occur both between all actors involved in border management within a certain country and at the international level. Most importantly, the services need to realize that they have common objectives and tasks, and that their individual objectives can only be reached by frank communication and by working together.

In order to conceptualize integrated border management, we can say that the key aspects of it are cooperation and coordination. The specialty literature defines that these are carried out at three pillars: intra-service cooperation, inter-agency cooperation and international cooperation (CARDS 2007).

**Intra-service cooperation** refers to cooperation between units within a state body: both the vertical aspect of intra-service cooperation between the different administrative levels from the state body to the units working at the borders and the horizontal aspect of cooperation between the various border crossing points (BCPs) as well as inland control stations should be taken into account.

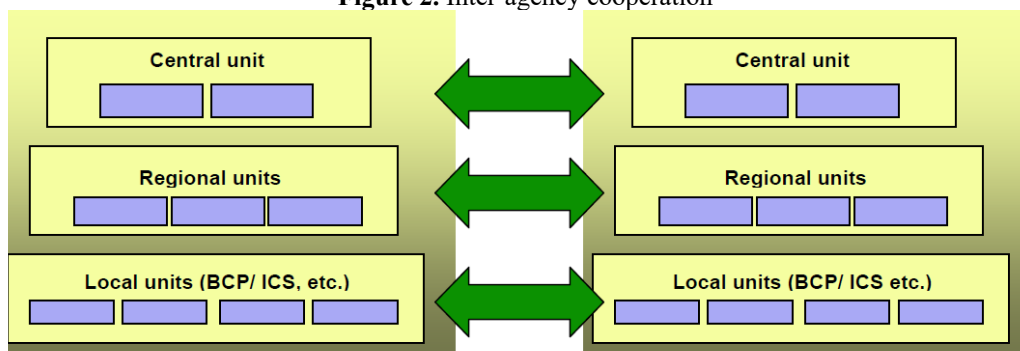
**Figure 1** Intra-service cooperation

Source: European Commission, *Guidelines for and Integrated Border Management in the Western Balkans*, updated version (CARDS) 2007

Intra-service cooperation therefore describes the efficient internal cooperation and management of processes, information and resources within a ministry or agency responsible for specific tasks: (a) Between local, regional and central levels (vertical cooperation); (b) Between different units of the same levels (horizontal cooperation).

**Inter-agency cooperation** takes a horizontal approach based on cooperation and coordination between officers of the different services active at the border (local level), as well as among the regional and central ministries/authorities responsible for those services. This starts with day-to-day operational contact at the BCP (at the formal and informal levels) and extends to the need to coordinate discussions on mid- and long-term strategies between the regional directorates and within and between the ministries.

There are three types of inter-agency cooperation at the border and within the country: coordinated processing at border crossings, integrated information technology systems and awareness-building and joint responsibilities (CARDS 2007).

**Figure 2.** Inter-agency cooperation

Source: European Commission, *Guidelines for and Integrated Border Management in the Western Balkans*, updated version (CARDS) 2007

Inter-agency cooperation therefore describes the cooperation at the border (local level) - at the regional and central level - between ministries or state bodies with different tasks related to border management.

**International cooperation**, the cooperation between agencies involved in border issues in different countries, exists at the local, regional and multinational levels:

(a) Local cooperation between officials on both sides of the border. This cooperation would focus on improving day-to-day operations. It can range from information exchange up to the flexible solving of possible operational challenges in the interest of the facilitation of legitimate cross-border movements.

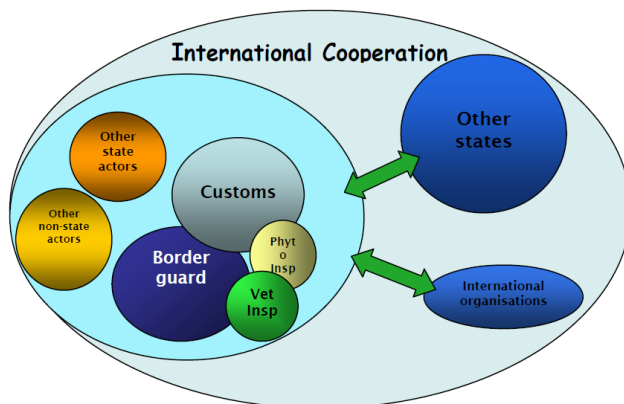
(b) Bilateral cooperation between neighboring states. Bilateral cooperation should include meetings between neighboring countries at the regional and central levels to discuss matters such as the status of the different BCPs.

(c) Multinational cooperation, focusing on border management issues.

It should be kept in mind that international cooperation initiatives can also have an interagency cooperation aspect, and that at least the ministries of foreign affairs have to be associated in the negotiation process of related bilateral and multilateral agreements. Further inter-agency cooperation aspects of international cooperation, for example, include the possibility of establishing a common contact office for custom and border guard officers from different countries (CARDS 2007).

Closer international cooperation in the field of border management with neighboring and other relevant countries is an effective tool to facilitate trade and address cross-border crime and irregular migration. This can be achieved, for example, by establishing appropriate working mechanisms and communication channels, local contact points, joint emergency plans or exercises and handling of incidents in a factual manner to avoid political disputes. While the central level will focus on coordination of strategic aspects such as the joint organization of the protection of the most endangered border sections, cooperation at border crossings focused on operational issues should be carried out on a continuous day-to-day basis.



**Figure 3.** International cooperation

*Source: European Commission, Guidelines for and Integrated Border Management in the Western Balkans, updated version (CARDS) 2007*

International cooperation thus means cooperation: at the local level between officials on both sides of the border; Between neighboring states (covering various issues, e.g. from border limitation and border management to the organization of patrols and the organization of common contact offices); At the multinational level to better approach common fields of work such as transborder crime, irregular migration, trafficking in human beings, terrorism and smuggling of goods.

### **MIGRATION MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE**

Migration issues and demographic issues are two of the key elements of modern society, bringing benefits and conflicts both to the receiving places and to the place of origin and raising issues of security, social measurements and multiculturalism in our globalized world. One of the great challenges of contemporary Europe is related to migration and the need for European integration of minority communities, including immigrants. Evaluations conducted have shown that there is a great need for expertise and policies regarding the European integration of migrants in both their countries of origin and in the new host countries which are dealing with migration (Polgár 2016).

In recent years, the discourse on migration has become increasingly negative. It is more and more obvious that the complex, transnational migration challenge cannot be handled or managed anymore only by the state as actor. Especially because the states are no longer the most important actors in the migration process (Newland 2010). As a consequence, there is an increasing tendency to advocate for closing the borders and trying to stop migration.

If we are trying to figure out how to manage migration, or how to elaborate comprehensive and sustainable migration policies, the issue of integration of migrants it must to be considered. Usually, the question of integration, or the method of integration is a very sensitive subject. When it is already difficult to discuss whether and how the migratory trajectory should happen, it is even harder to discuss how and whether immigrants should be helped to integrate.

There is a different perception between countries with regard to the definitions of the terms: migrant, national minority and ethnic minority. In some cases, EU Member States are treating migrants and minorities like own citizens, in other cases like non-

citizens - their migration or minority background is viewed as irrelevant in statistical terms (Centre for Strategy & Evaluation Services 2011). There are also differences in the way these people are viewed as having an ethnic minority background irrespective of how long they have been in the certain country (Polgár-Popescu 2016).

There are several legal issues and obstacles which are identified especially at the Eastern and South Eastern border of the EU. These obstacles are directly related to the status and the rights of migrants in the Member States. Therefore, one of the main questions of the research is: How have the migration tendencies impacted the development of cooperation processes in actions regarding border management and migration management?

Some believe that the solutions can be fined if the political leadership, civil society and also employers from the labor market will focus on the role and importance to achieve broad representation of different ethnic groups (Jusufović 2025). This can have important implications for the stability and quality of democracy, especially for states in transition to democracy and emerging out of long periods of authoritarian rule. Withal, the way that minority groups are included in the democratic process strongly influences the inter-ethnic relations at the state level and the creation of an inclusive society is an important task for any democratic government.

The issue of migration and the so called „new minorities” are, in the process of European construction, one of the most important aspects that European countries have had to manage. Learning about and researching migration, for them to transmit knowledge and experience to young people through education, have become an essential pillar of European values on the construction of an intercultural society based on direct and indiscriminate cooperation and collaboration between ethno-religious communities. It is known that European legislation and practice promote the idea of living together in the sense of social value consisting in accepting otherness, good understanding of the various ethnic groups within the same local communities and openness to communication and cooperation (Briand, 2016:13-14).

As the economy expands to become increasingly more global, society and workplaces are more diverse than ever before. To succeed in a multi-cultural workplace, it is essential to be able to work with and adapt to the work styles and habits of people of varying ages and cultural identities. To be a successful job candidate it is a must to be able to demonstrate a sensitivity and awareness to other people and cultures.

A theme that appears frequently in public debate, in recent years, concerns the future and destiny of a united Europe, from the cultural approach of the European integration, the relationship between national and European level, the relationship between the national cultures in the European space and the possibility of the emergence of a European cultural identity with supranational character.

Managing migration in the EU and in the neighboring countries is a social and economic investment that enables societies to strengthen their cohesion and resilience and become more prosperous. It can be considered also a societal process in which the responsibility does not rest with a specific group, but with several.

If we speak about the term “migration management”, we can observe that there is a similar absence of tangible definitions or policies, even though there is extensive consensus on what types of policy measures constitute migration controls (RESPOND 2018).

Boswell defines policies of migration control as measures adopted to exclude irregular migrations or other unwanted foreign nationals through entry restrictions, border control, detention and deportation (Boswell 2011).

Vogel defines migration control policies as all governmental efforts to prevent access to seemingly legal entry, residence or work by foreign nationals who are not eligible by law especially if they try to gain access under false pretenses, identities or with fraudulent documents.

Also considers that migration management is necessary to prevent illegal entry, residence or work by ineligible foreign nationals (Vogel 2000).

As Vogel's definition suggests, migration control policies have a dual focus on entry into a territory and lawful residence/presence (Anderson 2013; Faist and Kivisto 2010) that corresponds to the classification of controls as external and internal (Frank 2014; Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini 2011; Vogel 2000).

External controls regulate the admission and entry of migrants at the border or beyond it; they also include externalized and remote-control policies and measures.

Internal controls ensure that migrants already in the territory of a state have a legal right to reside and sanction them for breaching regulations related to residence/stay rules (Boswell 2011).

Hebling et al. (2017) similarly differentiate between policies that target external populations (i.e. entry controls/visa regimes etc.) and those internally-focused, such as length of stay of residence permits or right to work.

Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini in their work introduce a further distinction between 'gatekeeping' and 'fencing' strategies, the former preventing legal access to the territory of a state or its institutions and the latter focusing on the removal or expulsion of unauthorized migrants (Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini 2011).

The European Union's South Eastern border region, and bordering countries are representing a so-called epicenter of the migration process. Basically, it is one of the main migration routes, also called the Western Balkan track, used by thousands of migrants and refugees on their way to the EU member states (RESPOND 2018).

Migration control policies seem to incorporate both legal frameworks as well as implementing and enforcement measures (Anderson 2013; Faist and Kivisto 2010; Castles 2004; Vogel 2000). However, Brochmann and Hammar differentiate between 'regulations', which refer to laws and 'mechanisms of control', which refer to mechanisms that monitor whether the regulations are adhered to (Helbling et al., 2017).

Castles includes regulatory systems such as Schengen and common EU migration and asylum policies in migration control. Building on the above, there might be scope for differentiating between migration control regimes or systems (Fahrmeir, Faron, and Weil 2005; Vogel 2000) which incorporates laws, regulation and policies, and measures/mechanisms which refer to specific policies and actors like security agencies, local authorities, bureaucracies which enforce laws.

One difference in conceptualizing migration management concerns which migration processes they target – all types of migration or migratory movements that are designated as 'unwanted' such as irregular migration or asylum seeking (RESPOND 2018). Some of the literature treats migration controls as concerning the admission and residence of all migrants (Bloch, Sigona, Zetter 2013; Bosworth and Guild 2008; Castles 2004; Faist and Kivisto 2010; Messina 2007) even though control policies can discursively and practically target mainly unwanted migration. This approach could suggest that all

contemporary migration policies could be considered control policies, or at least could have a control orientation (RESPOND 2018).

The emphasis on preventing unwanted migration is consistent with the paradigm of migration management. Migration management is a key policy term adopted by international organizations (Kalm 2010), the European Union (Squire 2009) and governments (Castles 2004; Geddes 2005).

Broadly speaking, liberal democratic states allow migration that is seen as economically beneficial while they curtail migration that is seen as undesirable – irregular migration and refugee movements (Hampshire, 2013; Kalm 2010; Squire 2009). This approach underpins EU policy as well (Favell and Hansen 2002).

In this context migration control policies have a ‘filtering’ function, differentiating between ‘wanted’ and ‘unwanted’ migrants, facilitating the movement of the former and restricting the movement of the latter (RESPOND 2018).

This region can be characterized also through its specific features, context and trends in the fields of economy, demography, socio-politic environment and migration. Although there are several differences between the countries of the region, the so-called sub regional migration dynamics connect these countries and create similar challenges and opportunities. The majority of the common issues and challenges are identified as a side effect of migration. These issues are concerning demographic shifts, skills and labor gaps, human trafficking and stranded migrants, inadequate access to health care, environmental and climate change impacts, irregular migration, and return and reintegration, as well as unaccompanied and separated children (International Organization for Migration 2020).

The history of South Eastern Europe, with a population consisting of different ethnic groups that overlap national borders makes it challenging to define and measure migration. Nowadays the region is experiencing an unprecedented influx of migrants, making the so-called Western Balkan route the most frequented migratory track.

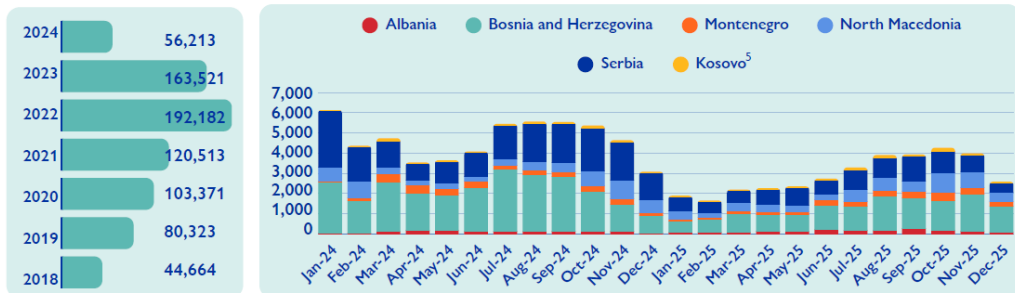
**Figure 4.** Main migration travel routes in South Eastern Europe



Source: Global Data Institute (2025): IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM): Migration Trends in The Western Balkans

As it is presented in figure 1, as migrants reach the Western Balkan countries, the most active routes are through North Macedonia, Serbia and then directly attempting to cross into the European Union through the Hungarian border (Tanasijevici, Popovski, Skoric 2025). Alternatively, once in Serbia, many others cross the border into eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina and then attempt the crossing into Croatia from the north and north-western part of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Figure 5.** Number of arrivals in South Eastern Europe (Western Balkan countries)



Source: IOM UN MIGRATION (2025): *Mixed Migratory Flows in The Western Balkans*

According to the official statistical data, since 2018, authorities in the Western Balkans have consistently been registering more migrant arrivals until the year of 2022. As it is presented above in figure 2, in 2022, authorities registered 192,182 migrants in the Western Balkan countries. This is a 59.5 per cent increase in arrivals compared to 2021 and a 348 per cent increase when compared to 2018.

Nevertheless, data show that in 2023 and 2024 there is a decreasing tendency of the migratory flow through the Western Balkans. These numbers refer to any registration of a migrant in one of the six countries or territories of the Western Balkans (IOM UN MIGRATION 2025). We can state that this tendency it can be a result of the increasing cooperation between state entities from neighboring countries which deal with migration.

**Figure 6.** Yearly arrival figures broken down per country or territory

|                        | 2018          | 2019          | 2020           | 2021           | 2022           | 2023           | 2024          |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|
| Albania                | 3,339         | 3,067         | 3,628          | 18,496         | 12,216         | 4,802          | 1,394         |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | 24,067        | 29,196        | 16,150         | 15,740         | 27,429         | 34,409         | 25,147        |
| Montenegro             | 4,645         | 8,695         | 3,007          | 3,336          | 8,318          | 4,987          | 2,970         |
| North Macedonia        | 3,132         | 19,716        | 37,937         | 17,919         | 22,379         | 11,795         | 6,107         |
| Serbia <sup>3</sup>    | 22,817        | 30,162        | 58,103         | 60,075         | 124,127        | 108,828        | 19,483        |
| Kosovo <sup>1</sup>    | 594           | 2,038         | 3,001          | 1,487          | 957            | 642            | 992           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>           | <b>58,594</b> | <b>92,874</b> | <b>121,826</b> | <b>117,053</b> | <b>195,426</b> | <b>165,463</b> | <b>56,093</b> |

Source: Global Data Institute (2025): *IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Annual report for 2024*

Based on the data from figure 3, an increase is visible in the number of migrants registered in all countries or territories in the Western Balkans in 2022 compared to 2021, except for Albania and Kosovo. This reduction is possible because in the past years fewer

migrants choose the Albania-Kosovo-Serbia route. Instead of this route, nowadays the Albania-Montenegro track is preferred. Serbia remains the main transit hub in the region, accounting for almost two-thirds of all registrations (Global Data Institute 2025).

Also, data show that in 2023 and 2024 there is a decreasing tendency of the migratory flow through the Western Balkans. These numbers refer to any registration of a migrant in one of the six countries or territories of the Western Balkans. We can state that this tendency it can be a result of the increasing cooperation between state entities from neighboring countries which deal with migration.

The increasing number of arrivals and high turnover rate are representing a significantly bigger challenge to the entities involved in humanitarian actions. Authorities from the region face the same issue, their institutions are overwhelmed by the scale of the problem. In this case, neither the legal framework which stipulates the process of handling migrants and asylum seekers is enough. Over the logistic problems, there are missing mechanisms which should ensure the implementations of the laws and procedures (Malkki 1995). Even if these mechanisms or methodologies would exist, several times these are inadequate.

All these remarks are underlining the need of cooperation and common work between neighboring states.

But, over the high number of migrants, logistic and social issues, the importance of transnational partnerships and institution building in migration management also represents a sensitive policy concern to (Boit 2025). Most of the actions delivered by state entities are taking place in border areas. These borderlands, or border areas represent key sovereign objectives over which states claim full control (Fauser-Di Stefano-Fattorelli 2023). Because of the specific reasons mentioned above, actions delivered by these entities face specific challenges. These specific challenges can represent a serious obstacle especially if the beneficiaries (migrants) have needs that are unrecognized or even forbidden by the state law.

In order to present some specific examples, first we choose the case of undocumented migrants. For these the most important thing is to stay and not to be deported. Another example is the case of migrants in transit, specific to the South East European territories. For them the most important is to continue their journey towards the destination country. All these situations are difficult to be handled and solved by mono statal entities, since most of the carried out activities can be considered illegal by neighboring state public authorities. Interfering and delivering actions to solve these issues can generate legal problems, both for the migrants and organization from the neighboring states (Cuttitta-Pécoud-Phillips 2023). Since, the given context and status quo is at least awkward, but the need for support in migration management is high, compromises are necessary. This compromise means that several state entities are limiting their actions to humanitarian support for migrants, covering their basic needs. This way legal and political issues are avoided. On the other hand, we must emphasize that through these humanitarian actions, state entities directly contribute to the fulfilment of governments agenda (Cuttitta 2018).

All the data and information presented above underlines the complex and multifaceted roles of the partnerships between state entities in neighboring countries as a distinct category of actors working in contemporary migration and border regimes. It is also visible that there still are unclear situations, lack of unity and motivation in the actions of these state entities. Also, there is no clear antagonism between public authorities from the different side of the borders as both can perform the same tasks. But

it is more than obvious that public authorities need to focus and consider the role of transnational partnership and cooperation in migration management.

## CONCLUSIONS

A variety of actors are involved in tasks related to the management of state borders in every country. While they clearly have a different focus and thus different objectives depending on their responsibilities and powers, they all work towards a common strategic goal.

Traditionally, the strategic goals at the state level in relation to border management lie in the protection of the borders against threats to national security, the national economy and public health, but also in the prevention of cross-border criminal activities and unlawful entry into or exit from the state. Border services, including border guards as well as customs, veterinary and phytosanitary inspection services, all play an important role in this regard.

In order to balance these twin goals of modern border management that is, border security and facilitated movement of persons and goods in an efficient and effective manner, appropriate equipment and well-trained and motivated staff are as important as a strong legal basis, a clear division of tasks and responsibilities, streamlined processes and an efficient exchange of information.

Taking into account the complexity of the task, this cooperation and coordination should not only be limited to the units within one ministry or agency, but should also occur both between all actors involved in border management within a certain country and at the international level. Most importantly, the services need to realize that they have common objectives and tasks, and that their individual objectives can only be reached by frank communication and by working together.

Managing migration in the European Union and at its South Eastern borders is a social and economic investment that enables European societies to strengthen their cohesion and resilience and become more prosperous. It can be considered also a societal process in which the responsibility does not rest with a specific group, but with several: migrants, host communities, public authorities and institutions, social and economic partners, civil society organizations, churches, religious and other philosophical communities, and the private sector (European Commission 2020).

Illiberal tendencies impacted negatively transnational cooperation processes and their actions in the process of migration. The main tool was the creation and the spread of fake ideas about the other, the neighbor, which were presented as an engine and promoter of illegal migration (Freedom House 2022). But the new frame for cooperation and the European organizational culture and dynamics made thrust in partnerships to reproduce, to answer new tendencies and to accommodate or remain receptive to new challenges and demands of the society and the environment (Brie, Goreainov 2026).

Transnational cooperation between state entities and its organizations plays an important role in migrant and refugee integration in all the target countries. The result of this type of cooperations carry out valuable work assisting or even substituting domestic governmental institutions by providing guidance and support in integration processes. However, their involvement in the design of integration policies and integration activities does not always correspond to the importance of their role. Basically, the results of this study confirm H1, which assumes that cooperation between states in the field of border management play an important role in the process of migrant management. Transnational cooperation and partnerships between institutions can carry out valuable work by

providing guidance and support in this process and can play an important role in migrant management. Therefore, South East European states should step up their efforts to achieve more structured cooperation between their governments, authorities so as to create synergies and make better use of the knowledge and resources available on both sides. Sharing the expertise and the good practice should be much more used and capitalized when designing integration strategies and measures in order to increase their efficiency.

The second hypothesis which assumes that the creation of certain transnational institutions in the field of migration management, working on the ground can play a more efficient role in monitoring the implementation and the impact of new policies and initiatives is also confirmed. State entities can be relevant and can operate at different levels. Some entities are active at EU level, others at national level, and others at regional or local level. Activities at different levels complement each other (EESC, 2020). State entities working on the ground are monitoring the implementation and impact of new policies and initiatives. However, in addition to impacting political decisions, these entities also deliver services to the people it represents.

Generally speaking, countries facing migration should apply a multi-level governance and multi-stakeholder approach involving national, local and regional authorities, employers, trade unions and civil society organizations when developing integration policies to ensure that they correspond to actual needs and circumstances and benefit migrants and refugees in an optimal way.

The overall picture that emerges from the article presents that societies from the South East European region are in fact becoming more confrontational, more political, more polarized, and less open to compromise: these characteristics apply both to the government and to civil society itself. Civil society acts as a counterbalance in this so-called social turbulence, with a special focus on the question of migration management and integration, drawing new policy recommendations (Freedom House 2022).

Thus, transnational partnerships and cooperation between neighboring states is experiencing increasing difficulty in engaging with each other because of the emerging political polarization. The cooptation of the civil society in the decision-making process can generate a higher acceptance and legitimacy for the state in implementing reforms or new policies. At the same time, the civil society sector is diversifying, with many of the newcomers themselves less open to constructive dialogue and working within the confines of the system (Gautier 2018).

The EU and the cooperation frame proposed by this remains at the forefront in the defense and promotion of values across the South East European states, but its constant and tireless endorsement of values is not without challenges in the present volatile and interdependent national, European and global contexts.

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### III. PUBLIC POLICIES. DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC REALITIES

**Yu TSUCHIYA, Nobumichi WATAHIKI, Cristian VLAD** ⇔ *Entrepreneurial Networks in Tochigi Prefecture During the Meiji Period: Unraveling Regional Development Disparities from Human Connections*

**Tamás SUSZTER** ⇔ *Health Risk management for the Safety of Festival Tourism*

**Ehlimana SPAHIĆ, Anisa GRADAŠČEVIĆ, Mirza POJSKIĆ** ⇔ *Transforming the Brain Drain into Transfer of Knowledge and Technology to Strengthen the Healthcare System of Bosnia and Herzegovina*

**Luciana-Mirela BUTIȘCĂ, Cristina-Matilda VĂNOAGĂ** ⇔ *The Future of Green Industrial Policy: An Overview of Policy Communication*

**Masamichi TAKAGI, Nobumichi WATAHIKI, Luiza GATAN, Cristian VLAD** ⇔ *Comparative Analysis of Industrial Agglomerations in the Chūbu Region during the Meiji Period. A Quantitative Examination through Network and Statistical Analyses*

**Cosmin CHIRIAC** ⇔ *Do Intercommunity Development Associations Favour Polycentric Development? An Analysis of Territorial Policies of the EU*

**Sylvie Christine Daphné VARELLAS** ⇔ *Tourisme, inégalités et recompositions sociales : pour une approche critique du développement touristique dans Le Sud-Ouest Malgache*



# ENTREPRENEURIAL NETWORKS IN TOCHIGI PREFECTURE DURING THE MEIJI PERIOD: UNRAVELING REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT DISPARITIES FROM HUMAN CONNECTIONS

*Yu TSUCHIYA\**  
*Nobumichi WATAHIKI\*\**  
*Cristian VLAD\*\*\**

**Abstract.** *As the world strives to reach new realms in sustainability, education and innovation, the topics of geopolitics, social impact and regional entrepreneurship have attracted attention globally, both in corporate and academic environments. This paper further explores these topics, while describing how some of these key elements have contributed to spatial economics, innovation, leadership and social impact in a Japanese organization.*

**Keywords:** *Social, Impact, Entrepreneurship, Japan, Geopolitics, Sustainability, Strategy*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Fujita and Thisse (2013) attempted to explain the reasons for the concentration of population and wealth from the perspective of spatial economics. Toyoda (2013), from the perspective of economic geography, analyzed estimated values of population and income, stating that population movement expands regional disparities in economic scale. Both focus on people, but they view employees from the perspective of their proportion of the total population. Since executives determine a company's operating policies, it is necessary to focus on executives when considering their impact on the economy. Some executives hold positions in multiple companies, forming networks through these individuals. This study explores the causes of disparities in regional development by analyzing the human networks constructed by these executives.

Suzuki et al. (2009) and Minami (2016) focused on human connections and attempted to identify individuals who contributed to economic development using entrepreneurial networks. However, they only counted the number of concurrent executive positions.

Watahiki et al. (2023) conducted a centrality analysis of networks in Niigata Prefecture in 1897. By creating a heatmap based on executive addresses, they visualized the characteristics of executive connections on a map. As a result, they discovered that entrepreneurial networks in Niigata Prefecture have regional

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\* Student, Nagaoka University of Technology, E-mail: [s223307@stn.nagaokaut.ac.jp](mailto:s223307@stn.nagaokaut.ac.jp).

\*\* Professor, Nagaoka University of Technology, E-mail: [nwatahiki@kjs.nagaokaut.ac.jp](mailto:nwatahiki@kjs.nagaokaut.ac.jp).

\*\*\* PhD Candidate, Babes Bolyai University, Globis University Partner Faculty, E-mail: [cristian@japancreativeenterprise.jp](mailto:cristian@japancreativeenterprise.jp)

characteristics. However, since the analysis was for a single year, time-series analysis such as decline or development is insufficient.

This study visualizes connections in Tochigi Prefecture data, similar to Watahiki et al. (2023). Data from 1902, 1907, and 1912 will be analyzed to observe changes over a decade. This will investigate whether the regionality of entrepreneurial networks is a characteristic unique to Niigata Prefecture. Furthermore, the relationship between three types of centrality and their strengths and weaknesses will be examined in relation to economic development.

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1. Data Sources and Processing**

The "Directory of Executives of Companies Nationwide in Japan" is treated as the data source. This document contains information such as company names, locations, capital, directors, and executive addresses for companies established throughout Japan during the Meiji period. Although there are typos and missing data, it is a valuable historical document that covers all of Japan during the Meiji period.

Regarding typos, if the Levenshtein distance was 1 or less and the person could not be confirmed as a different individual by referring to the official gazette, they were treated as the same person. However, if the Levenshtein distance was 1 or less but the two individuals belonged to the same company, they were treated as different individuals.

Among the listed individuals, there are not only executives but also staff members. In this study, to focus on the analysis of executives, it is necessary to distinguish them. According to Suzuki et al. (2009), directors, auditors, executive officers, advisors, presidents, supervisors, and consultants were treated as executives for joint-stock companies. After differentiation, staff data was excluded from the database.

### **2.2. Analysis Target**

For the Tochigi Prefecture portion of the data source, the 1902, 1907, and 1912 editions were put into a database to create entrepreneurial networks. Major events during this period include the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War between 1902 and 1907, and the annexation of Korea between 1907 and 1912. Under these circumstances, industries related to import and export were greatly affected. At the same time, this was also a period when the center of transportation within Japan shifted from water transport to railways. Given that this was a transitional period for Japanese industry, the data from 1902, 1907, and 1912 were deemed suitable for time-series analysis.

### **2.3. Centrality Analysis**

As stated by Kanemitsu (2003), centrality analysis is highly practice-oriented and has yielded results in various organizational studies in politics and economics. Centrality analysis was performed on the network created in 2.1 to obtain three types of centrality. To ensure consistent conditions, the three types of centrality used were degree centrality, betweenness centrality, and eigenvector centrality, similar to Watahiki et al. (2023).

Degree centrality gives higher scores to nodes with more connections. In human networks, individuals with many acquaintances fall into this category. Betweenness centrality gives higher scores to nodes through which more shortest paths



pass when connecting all pairs of nodes. In human networks, individuals who bridge groups fall into this category. Eigenvector centrality considers the importance of connected nodes. That is, it gives higher scores for connections to important nodes with high degrees. In human networks, politicians often have strong eigenvector centrality.

The calculation methods for degree centrality and betweenness centrality followed Wasserman and Faust (1994), and the calculation method for eigenvector centrality followed Bonacich (1972).

## **2.4. Increase and Decrease in the Number of Companies**

For time-series analysis, we define regional development and decline. Here, the number of companies is used as an evaluation index. We use data from 1902, 1907, and 1912 for municipalities in Tochigi Prefecture. Since dealing with all municipalities would be too extensive, municipalities with 4 or fewer companies in any given year were excluded. As mentioned later, Ujiie Town is an exception despite having a small number of companies. Regions with a small number of companies are almost always not displayed on the heatmap. Regions where the number of companies increased were considered developed regions, and regions where it decreased were considered declining regions.

## **3. HEATMAP**

A heatmap is a data visualization method that expresses the magnitude of numerical values using color intensity. In this study, we used QGIS (Quantum GIS), a geographic information system software, to create heatmaps of executive distribution, weighted by each centrality from 2.3.

The internal boundaries of each prefecture are based on administrative divisions in 1919, obtained from the National Land Numerical Information download site<sup>1</sup>. This is the oldest available data, and there were no significant changes from the 1912 boundaries, so the 1919 data was adopted.

To ensure comparability, each centrality was normalized.

### **3.1. Heatmap (Degree Centrality)**

Figures 3.1.1 to 3.1.3 are heatmaps of executive distribution weighted by degree centrality, for 1902, 1907, and 1912, respectively.

From Figures 3.1.1, 3.1.2, and 3.1.3, it can be seen that degree centrality is strong in the central, western, and southern parts of the prefecture (within the black ellipse in the figures). This area included Utsunomiya City, Awano Town, and Tochigi Town.

As shown in Figures 3.1.1 and 3.1.2, Sano Town had high centrality in both 1902 and 1907. However, as shown in Figure 3.1.3, centrality is barely present in 1912. In 1912, centrality is weaker in most regions compared to previous years. This is also true for Awano Town and Tochigi Town within the ellipse. What is the difference between Awano Town and Tochigi Town, where centrality continues to appear weakly, and Sano Town, where centrality has almost disappeared?

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<sup>1</sup> National Land Information Division, National Spatial Planning and Regional Policy Bureau, MLIT of Japan (<https://nlftp.mlit.go.jp>) AccessDate 2025.05.07

**Figure 3.1.1. 1902 Heatmap (Degree)**

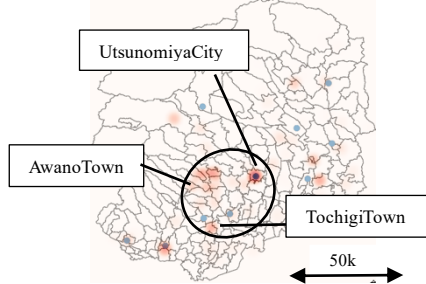


**Figure 3.1.2. 1907 Heatmap (Degree)**

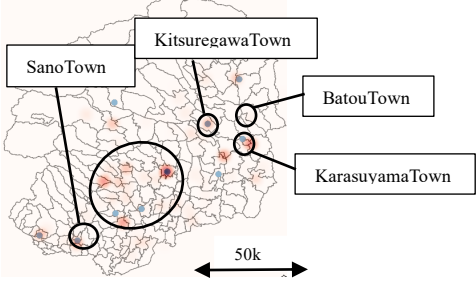
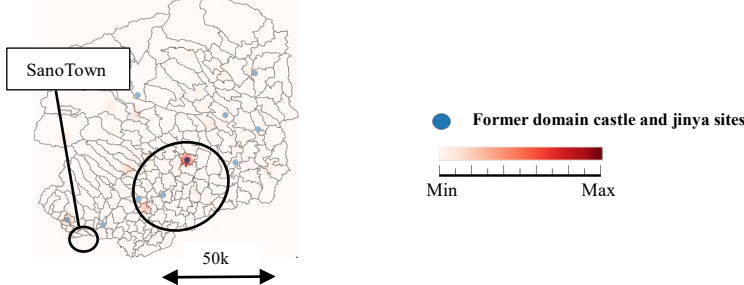


**Figure 3.1.3. 1912 Heatmap (Degree)**



*Source:* author's own preparations based on data collected from internal materials and participatory observation.

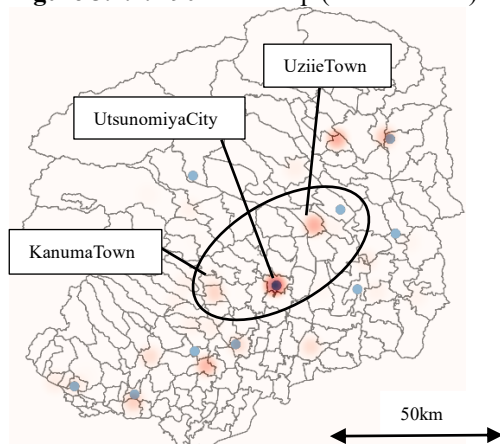
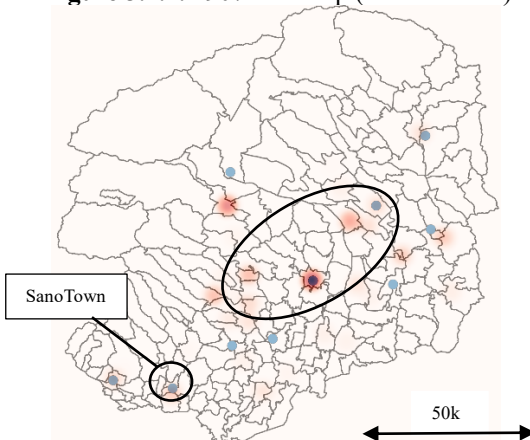
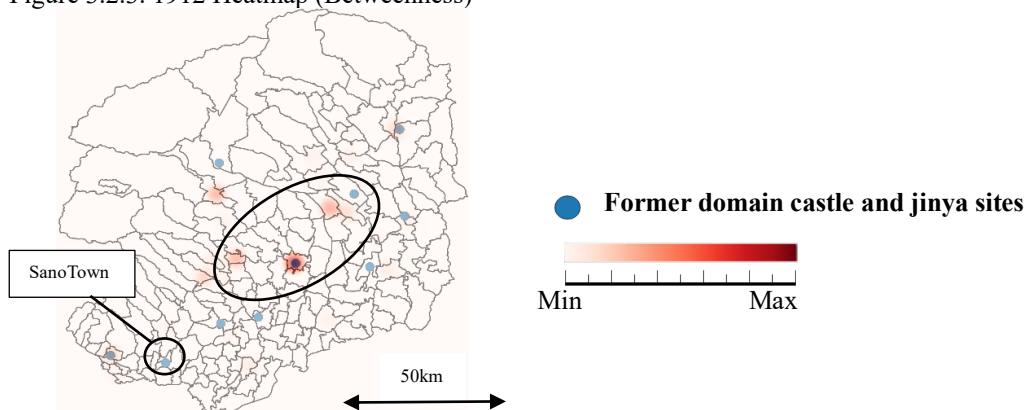
### 3.2. Heatmap (Betweenness Centrality)

Figures 3.2.1 to 3.2.3 are heatmaps of executive distribution weighted by betweenness centrality, for 1902, 1907, and 1912, respectively.

From Figures 3.2.1, 3.2.2, and 3.2.3, it can be seen that betweenness centrality is strong in the central part of the prefecture (within the black ellipse in the figures). This area included Utsunomiya City, Kanuma Town, and Ujiie Town.

Ujiie Town has a small number of companies and resident executives, and its degree centrality is weak, but its betweenness centrality is strong. This is likely due to the presence of Kiheiji Takizawa, a prominent businessman residing in Ujiie Town. He was known as a powerful businessman nationwide and was cited by Suzuki et al. (2009) as a person with many concurrent company positions.

Regarding Sano Town, similar to degree centrality, its centrality was strong in 1902 and 1907 but weak in 1912. While centrality in various regions weakens in 1912, the number of regions where it weakens is smaller compared to degree centrality.

**Figure 3.2.1. 1902 Heatmap (Betweenness)****Figure 3.2.2. 1907 Heatmap (Betweenness)****Figure 3.2.3. 1912 Heatmap (Betweenness)**

*Source:* author's own preparations based on data collected from internal materials and participatory observation.

### 3.3. Heatmap (Eigenvector Centrality)

Figures 3.3.1 to 3.3.3 are heatmaps of executive distribution weighted by eigenvector centrality, for 1902, 1907, and 1912, respectively.

Eigenvector centrality shows a different pattern from the other two. In 1902, centrality was strong around Kanuma Town but weak in 1907 and 1912. In 1902, centrality was barely present in both Utsunomiya City and Ashikaga Town, but it was strong in 1907 and 1912.

In 1902, eigenvector centrality was concentrated around Kanuma Town, but in 1907, it was scattered across various locations. In 1912, it concentrated again, but this time in Utsunomiya City instead of Kanuma Town.

The distribution of eigenvector centrality tends to appear most locally among the three types of centrality examined in this study.

Figure 3.2.1. 1902 Heatmap (Eigenvector)



Figure 3.2.2. 1907 Heatmap (Eigenvector)

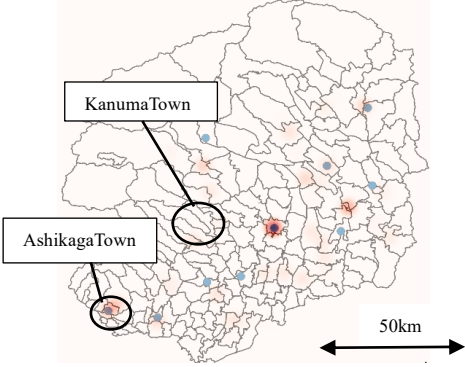
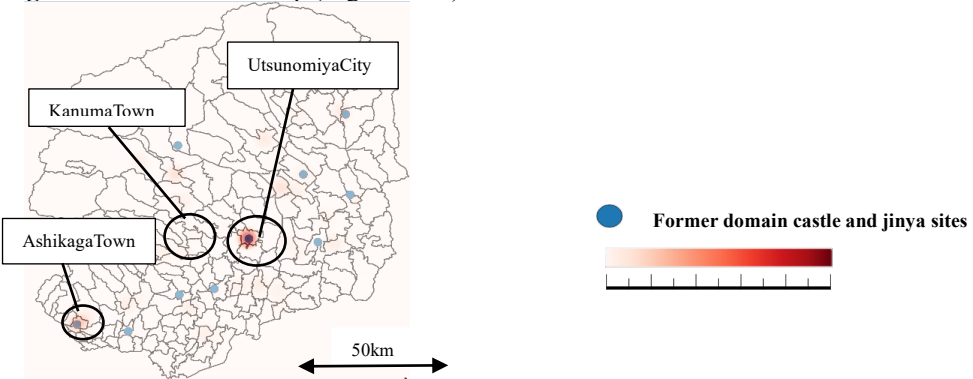


Figure 3.2.3. 1912 Heatmap (Eigenvector)



Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from internal materials and participatory observation.

Since each type of centrality shows a different pattern, it is clear that entrepreneurial networks in Tochigi Prefecture also have regional characteristics. Furthermore, the strong centrality that persists over the years varies by region. This indicates that the strength and weakness of centrality are not due to random distribution bias but are based on regional characteristics.

4. TIME-SERIES ANALYSIS

In 3.1 to 3.3, heatmaps were created from three years of data for each centrality to visualize changes over time. Here, we classify regions as developed or declining according to 2.4 and perform time-series analysis in conjunction with the heatmaps.

Table 1. Transition in the Number of Companies

|        | UtsunomiyaCity | TochigiTown | KanumaTown | SanoTown | OtawaraTown | KarasuyamaTown  | AshikagaTown |
|--------|----------------|-------------|------------|----------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|
| In1902 | 15             | 6           | 6          | 5        | 5           | 3               | 2            |
| In1907 | 24             | 9           | 5          | 5        | 5           | 7               | 6            |
| In1912 | 31             | 17          | 6          | 8        | 5           | 6               | 11           |
|        | AwanoTown      | BatouTown   | MotegiTown | MokaTown | UjiieTown   | KitsuregawaTown |              |
| In1902 | 2              | 2           | 1          | 1        | 1           | 0               |              |
| In1907 | 4              | 6           | 7          | 3        | 3           | 5               |              |
| In1912 | 6              | 5           | 11         | 5        | 4           | 2               |              |

Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from internal materials and participatory observation.

Table 1 shows the number of companies in major municipalities in Tochigi Prefecture in 1902, 1907, and 1912. Between 1902 and 1907, the number of companies increased in all regions except Kanuma Town, Sano Town, and Otawara Town. Therefore, regions where the number of companies decreased between 1907 and 1912 are treated as declining regions. These are Karasuyama Town, Bato Town, and Kiguregawa Town. Regions where the number of companies continuously increased between 1902 and 1912 are treated as developed regions (Sano Town is also included here). These are Utsunomiya City, Tochigi Town, Sano Town, Ashikaga Town, Awano Town, Motegi Town, Moka Town, and Ujiie Town, a total of 8 regions. For Kanuma Town and Otawara Town, the change in the number of companies is small, and the number of companies remains the same between 1902 and 1912, so they are treated as stable regions here.

We compare the heatmaps from 1902 to 1912 for each centrality. In declining regions (see Figure 3.1.2 for locations), centrality strengthened between 1902 and 1907, then weakened towards 1912. Alternatively, it was too weak to appear in any year. In developed regions, Utsunomiya City shows strong centrality in all figures except Figure 3.3.1. As shown in 3.1 and 3.2, centrality in Tochigi Town and Sano Town weakened between 1907 and 1912.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Regions with strong centrality differ for each type of centrality, but Utsunomiya City consistently shows strong centrality, except for Figure 3.3.1. We considered that Utsunomiya City being the prefectural capital might be a factor, but in Watahiki et al. (2023), centrality was stronger in Nagaoka City than in Niigata City, suggesting that being the prefectural capital is not the sole determinant. Table 2 shows the population of Utsunomiya City, Tochigi Town, Kiguregawa Town, Ujiie Town, and Karasuyama Town in 1911. From Tables 1 and 2, it can be seen that Utsunomiya City has a larger population and number of companies compared to others. This might suggest an influence on the concentration in Utsunomiya City. However, there is a counterexample. Figure 3.1.2 shows that between Kiguregawa Town and Karasuyama Town, Karasuyama Town has stronger centrality. As shown in Table 1, Karasuyama Town has more companies, but as shown in Table 2, its population is about 55% of Kiguregawa Town's. Also, Utsunomiya City's population is about 10 times that of Karasuyama Town, but the difference in centrality strength does not appear to be equivalent. Regarding the number of companies, Tochigi Town has more than Karasuyama Town, but Karasuyama Town has stronger centrality. Therefore, regional characteristics cannot be explained solely by population or the number of companies.

**Table 2.** 1911 Population

| Utsunomiya City | Tochigi Town | Kiguregawa Town | Ujiie Town | Karasuyama Town |
|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|------------|-----------------|
| 50885           | 23528        | 8942            | 7368       | 4928            |

*Source:* Created by the authors based on data from “Tochigi Prefecture Statistical Report.”

Ujiie Town is not a large town in terms of both the number of companies and population. While its degree centrality and eigenvector centrality are both weak, only its betweenness centrality is strong. This is likely influenced by the presence of Kihei Takizawa, one of Tochigi Prefecture's leading businessmen during the Meiji period.

Kiheiji Takizawa resided in Ujiie Town and belonged to 11 companies within the prefecture in 1907, thus possessing a very strong influence. In fact, when ranking executives by centrality, he is among the top few in betweenness centrality. This suggests that regional characteristics are susceptible to the influence of highly influential individuals.

From the heatmaps, it is clear that most regions with strong centrality are located on or around the sites of former clan castles and jinya (administrative headquarters) from the feudal era. This suggests the influence of connections and urban functions accumulated during the former feudal period. The government may have been able to change municipal boundaries and the residents belonging to them, but it may not have been able to change their connections or their original sense of belonging to a community. Therefore, it is believed that the influence of the former feudal domains remained strong even more than 30 years after the abolition of the han system and establishment of prefectures.

In section 4, Tochigi Town was cited as an example of a developed region where centrality weakened. While the heatmaps indeed suggest a weakening of centrality, is this truly the case? Comparing the heatmaps of 1907 and 1912, centrality appears to weaken in all regions except Utsunomiya City across all types of centrality. However, considering that these heatmaps provide a relative assessment, another interpretation is possible. That is, Utsunomiya City's centrality is overwhelmingly strong, but other regions are not necessarily weak. This study used normalization to ensure comparability, performing a relative assessment. Based on these results, when considering regions with excessive concentration like Utsunomiya, the use of absolute assessments should also be considered.

## 6. CONCLUSION

For entrepreneurial networks in Tochigi Prefecture, centrality analysis was conducted to determine three types of indicators. Heatmaps of executive distribution weighted by the obtained centralities revealed that each centrality had a different pattern of appearance. This indicates that each centrality has regional characteristics in its connection patterns, which is consistent with the results of Watahiki et al. (2023).

For time-series analysis, heatmaps were created and compared using data from 1902, 1907, and 1912. For each centrality, there were regions where centrality consistently appeared across multiple years. This implies that the regionality of the network is not due to accidental distribution bias. Furthermore, as shown in section 5, regionality cannot be explained by population or the number of companies alone.

To investigate the causes of disparities in regional development, we observed changes in heatmaps and the number of companies over a decade. As shown in section 4, in some regions, changes in the number of companies and changes in centrality strength were linked. While it was thought that the strength or weakness of centrality might affect regional development or decline, there were also regions like Tochigi Town where the number of companies increased but centrality weakened. From the current results, no relationship was found between the strength or weakness of centrality and economic development.

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## HEALTH RISK MANAGEMENT FOR THE SAFETY OF FESTIVAL TOURISM

*Tamás SUSZTER\**

**Abstract:** *This research, conducted at the Doctoral School of Police Sciences and Law Enforcement (Ludovika University of Public Service), investigates the law enforcement dimensions of festival tourism safety. It identifies health protocols as critical determinants in the security framework of large-scale events. Objective: the study evaluates Hungarian regulatory environments and operational health safety standards, exploring the correlation between medical security and event safety through empirical examples. A multi-methodological approach was employed, including a review of Hungarian and international literature and legal frameworks. Qualitative insights were gathered through interviews with Árpád Zimányi (OZORA Festival organizer) and a festival attendee, supplemented by a quantitative survey on public safety perceptions. Results: Findings indicate that health safety is a cornerstone of festival security; inadequate provision correlates with declining regional attractiveness. Subjective safety is significantly dictated by the visibility and efficiency of medical services.*

*The study introduces the concept of "cooperative safety," integrating statutory regulations with organizational intent and private providers. It concludes that implementing health protocols exceeding regulatory requirements is not merely a compliance issue but a fundamental strategic interest for organizers.*

**Keywords:** *tourism safety, festival tourism, law enforcement, health security, medical risk management, cooperative safety.*

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Thanks to the favorable economic and social effects of recent decades, tourism has become a global way of life (Hall et al., 2004). It has grown to such an extent in terms of social and economic potential in recent decades that ensuring safe travel and accommodation is no longer just in the interests of service providers and local authorities, but also of the states concerned (Bujdosó, 2010).

One of the key prerequisites for the emergence and successful development of the tourism industry is safety (Pizam & Mansfeld, 1996; Hall et al., 2004; Mátyás, 2014). If a tourist destination is unable to eliminate the dangers lurking for visitors, avert threats to tourists, and convey a sense of security, then it cannot be considered competitive, even if it offers attractive local conditions (Puczkó & Rátz, 1998). Nowadays, safety determines the functioning of an existing or potential tourist destination to such an extent

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\* Tamás SUSZTER: Police Colonel, Deputy Chief of Police (Criminal Matters) at Veszprém County Police HQ, Hungary. Certified Law Enforcement Leader and Security Policy Expert. Final-year PhD student at the Doctoral School of Police Sciences and Law Enforcement, Ludovika University of Public Service, Budapest. His research focuses on the law enforcement dimensions of festival tourism safety, Ludovika University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary.

E-mail: [suszttert@veszprem.police.hu](mailto:suszttert@veszprem.police.hu), [suszter.tamas@gmail.com](mailto:suszter.tamas@gmail.com). ORCID: 0009-0004-8478-478-4603

that safety factors can also be interpreted as basic conditions for the tourism industry (Michalkó, 2012).

Institutionalized threats, public health conditions, and living conditions are security factors whose perceived deficiencies, individually or collectively, can become a continuous or temporary obstacle to the development of the tourism industry and the expansion of traffic (Michalkó, 2012).

Festivals, as institutionalized products of the tourism industry, can be excellently linked to tourism and have a positive impact on the economic and social structure of a given municipality or region. The most significant aspect of festivals is their economic role. Festivals enhance the attractiveness of tourist destinations and offer additional programs for tourists visiting for other purposes (Sulyok & Sziva, 2009). One of the main segments of festivals is music festivals, which are a type of festival based on a specific theme, focusing on musicians and bands who entertain participants with their music in a unique environment over several days or weeks (Ding & Hung, 2021). In Hungary, there are local, national, and international festivals, which are among our most successful tourism products (Magyar Turisztikai Ügynökség [MTÜ], 2021).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more and more music festivals are being held in Hungary, covering a wide range of genres (MTÜ, 2021). Domestically organized festivals are therefore not only important from a musical point of view, but also have a significant impact on Hungary's tourism and economy.

The popularity of these events is also reflected in the fact that in 2019, most of the major domestic festivals (such as Balaton Sound) achieved record attendance figures (MTÜ, 2021).

When examining the complex system of festival tourism safety, it is essential to explore the tasks related to the safety of various events. It is a fundamental human right to have one's right to safety and protection upheld (Németh, 2020).

Festival and event security refers to the set of measures and activities implemented to ensure the smooth running of a given event and to protect the life and property of participants.

In other words, the purpose of event security is to ensure the smooth running of the event, to screen out and keep away unauthorized persons, to protect the participants and their property, the event area and its surroundings, and to prevent disorder.<sup>1</sup>

Ágota Németh's research highlights that the special environment of festivals (closed spaces, large crowds, heightened search for experience) creates unique security challenges (Németh 2025).

When insuring events, it is essential and necessary for the organizers, private security services (personal and property protection, health care, fire protection, etc.) and the authorities and police to cooperate (Juhász, 2008).

In his presentation entitled "An example of 21<sup>st</sup> century Ozora, the meeting of public safety and private interests in the hybrid model of festival security," Árpád Budavári analyzes the sources of festival security and presents security as, on the one hand, the product of professional organization, risk management, and adequate infrastructure, and as a condition for the festival's competitiveness in tourism.

However, based on his position, the interpretation of security at music festivals goes beyond mere law enforcement control. In his presentation, he will present empirical research which found that the primary source of security for festival audiences is not the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vedspedition.hu/fogalmak/> downloaded: January 31, 2026.

presence of police or formal supervision, but rather the trust that arises from the community and the ethos of the festival. The research concluded that festival safety must be approached in a complex manner: in addition to law enforcement, the community dimension, which forms the basis of participants' subjective sense of safety, is at least as important (Budavári, 2025).

## METHODOLOGY

The methodological basis of my study was provided by a combination of several sources and research methods. By examining these sources together, I analyzed the development of tourism, and within that, festival tourism, at the domestic and international levels, highlighting the security factors that have a significant impact on the given area. The first phase of my work consisted of a review of the literature, in which I processed several domestic scientific dissertations, daily newspapers, and online sources.

An important part of my research was the analysis of the legal environment. During the analysis, I reviewed the relevant domestic regulations, such as Government Decree 23/2011 (III. 8.), which defines the safety requirements for music and dance events, Act CLIV of 1997 on health care, and EüM Decree 5/2006 (II. 7.) on rescue services.

Exploring and understanding the legal background provides an excellent framework for exploring health and safety at festivals, and the study also shows that in most cases, festival organizers go above and beyond these regulations.

In the methodology of my study, I placed great emphasis on the collection and processing of empirical data. As part of my research, I interviewed Árpád Zimányi, the organizer of the OZORA festival, and Adrienn Riba, an "experienced" festival-goer (personal communication, [2025, 2026]). The interviews played a particularly important role in presenting the measures taken by the organizers to ensure the health and safety of the festivals, while the interview with the festival-goer presents the other side, i.e., the perspective of people who want to have fun without any worries, their thoughts and expectations regarding the health safety of festivals.

As part of my research, I also conducted a questionnaire survey in which I sought to find out the opinions of festival visitors on various factors relating to the safety of festival tourism, including health safety. The questionnaire has been completed by approximately 200 festival-goers in Hungarian and English, which means that it is not yet representative, but I will present the results of the completed questionnaires in my study.

My research is based on a combination of direct observation and qualitative methods. The literature review provides the theoretical framework, my personal experiences at festivals, recorded interviews, and completed questionnaires provide the practical perspective, while legal documents present the formal regulatory environment. Through this complex methodological approach, my study provides an opportunity to present the health safety and challenges of festival tourism and to highlight the importance of health safety within the safety factors.

## HEALTH RISK MANAGEMENT FOR THE SAFETY OF FESTIVAL TOURISM

In order to guarantee the safety of music festivals, i.e., festival tourism, great emphasis must be placed on ensuring health safety as one of the key factors in festival tourism safety. From a global perspective, epidemics have caused significant and

memorable destruction throughout human history (e.g., plague, cholera, Spanish flu, COVID-19), so the general public health situation of a tourist destination is of fundamental importance when making travel decisions.

No tourist wants to fall victim to an infectious disease far from home, even if it is known in the country concerned and may be less dangerous to the local population. Despite the fact that the public health situation in countries frequented by tourists is satisfactory, it is precisely thanks to tourism, and often to irresponsible tourists, that bacteria and viruses that cause epidemics enter and spread. The number one source of danger for foreign tourists is water, which we consume several times a day to quench our thirst, use for personal hygiene, or to clean food. In places where water consumption causes serious illnesses in tourists, countries can expect a decline in tourism. In addition to water, animal-borne infectious diseases, such as Lyme disease, avian influenza, or infections caused by insect bites (e.g., Zika virus, malaria) also curb tourist traffic (Michalkó, 2020).

The topic of health safety is very diverse, as it covers many risks, from hazards caused by microorganisms to infections caused by insect bites, foodborne illnesses, and poisoning. This is especially true when it comes to health safety at music festivals, which is primarily the responsibility of the organizers, but Hungarian legislation has built strong guarantees into the system. This clearly shows that safe travel and stay, including the guarantee of safe entertainment and health safety, is now not only in the interest of service providers and local governments, but also of the states concerned (Bujdosó, 2010).

Providing health care at festivals in accordance with the law involves compliance with legal and professional requirements, risk assessment, a rescue plan, and the provision of on-site medical staff.

The specific requirements and measures introduced depend on the type, size, and location of the event. Other important factors include the number of visitors, the duration of the festival, and the expected weather conditions.

Health insurance for festivals and other events, on-site care, and rescue services must be planned and implemented in accordance with the law and the specifics of the event (number of participants, type, location).

It is important to note that any event may be restricted or prohibited if an infection or epidemic breaks out, and that the restrictive or prohibitive measure prevents the spread of the epidemic or infection (Act CLIV, 1997). Domestic legislation clearly defines the extended concept of rescue and rescue, i.e., event insurance.

Rescue means the immediate medical care of a patient in need of immediate medical attention at the place of discovery, emergency care provided by an organization authorized to provide rescue services, or, if necessary, transport to the nearest healthcare provider capable of providing care appropriate to the patient's condition, as well as care provided during transport (Act CLIV, 1997).

Rescue also includes providing rescue standby services at the event venue, for a fee, at a specified location and for a specified period of time (Act CLIV, 1997).

The organizer is responsible for providing health insurance for events in accordance with the law, and depending on the expected number of participants, it is mandatory to provide foot patrols or ambulances (Gov. Decree 23/2011). The organizer of a music or dance event, the festival organizer, shall ensure the presence of personnel trained in first aid at the venue.

In order to organize health insurance for festivals, a rescue plan based on risk analysis must be prepared, which also includes a professional opinion. It is a requirement

that rescue services appropriate to the number of participants must be provided at the event venue so that injured persons in need can receive assistance quickly (EüM Decree 5/2006). The provision of emergency services may include stationary or mobile (on foot, by motorcycle, or by car) medical personnel.

The rules set requirements based on the number of people at the event (EüM Decree 5/2006), which are as follows:

- 300-1000 people (in an enclosed space): At least one foot patrol is required.
- Over 1000 people: An ambulance is also required.
- 1,000-5,000 people: At least one ambulance.
- 5001-10,000 people: At least one ambulance and one rescue vehicle.
- 10,001-50,000 people: At least one emergency vehicle, one ambulance, and one rescue vehicle.
- Over 10,000 people: One additional ambulance must be provided for every additional 10,000 people.
- Over 100,000 people: A separate agreement is required.

Based on the relevant provisions, various private companies and civil actors may also participate in the organization and implementation of health care services at festivals and other events.

"...An important criterion for participants is that they must have an operating license issued by the National Chief Medical Officer's Office to perform their tasks. In my opinion, the involvement of private actors reinforces and complements László Christián's view of complementary policing, according to which ensuring safety and, through this, the health safety of festivals is based on cooperation (Christián, 2022)."

It should be emphasized that medical units are not allowed to leave the secured festival area, and the organization providing medical services for the event must ensure that injured persons and others in need of care are transported to the nearest medical facility appropriate for the event, so that other medical personnel of a specified number and composition remain on site (EüM Decree 5/2006).

The festival organizers place great emphasis on ensuring that visitors enjoy themselves at the event under all circumstances and return year after year, or perhaps spread the good news about the event to others, thereby increasing the number of visitors. Géza Szeles refers to these circumstances, highlighting the fact that festivals are not usually held in built-up areas with concrete and asphalt, but practically in a meadow or park (Index, 2023), where, based on my experience, you have to be prepared for the summer heat, sudden changes in weather, a lot of dust, and other environmental challenges. According to Szeles, most cases requiring medical attention are accidents, mainly ankle and knee injuries (Index, 2023), but based on my research data, there are also a large number of cases of sunburn, insect bites, injuries caused by thorns or splinters, and respiratory diseases associated with high levels of dust.

At larger festivals, the organizer provides various screening tests through participating service providers and also supports prevention by organizing information points. I consider it essential that water supply points are available in the summer heat, or that water is provided, and that the organizers ensure the provision of misting gates, cooled areas, and adequate shading techniques. The purpose of health insurance at festivals is to protect the safety and health of participants and to ensure the rapid and effective treatment of emergencies. In an interview with Géza Szeles, he explained the importance of insurance at festivals: "You have to put together a good system, that's the

basis, and you have to be able to plan for where problems might arise. Problems usually arise when something happens that was not planned for, and even the smallest things can cause trouble." Géza Szeles emphasized that it is possible to organize a large festival well, but it requires a serious staff and serious reserves, as well as "a good dose of luck" (Index, 2023).

For the Sziget Festival, which is held every year in Budapest (Sziget, 2026), a large-capacity, wide-range ambulance service was set up to provide medical care, which means that they are not only prepared to treat urgent cases, but also provide specialist and basic care to those in need. A so-called "triage unit" has been set up within the ambulance, which is a waiting and control room where decisions are made about what kind of care each patient will receive. In addition, there are other examination units available, including traumatology, surgery, internal medicine, etc.

For patients in critical condition, there is a fully equipped shock room with all the tools and equipment needed to stabilize acute patients. In addition, there is a 12-bed ward where patients can be admitted for a few hours, but unfortunately, some patients are unable to return to the festival and require ambulance transport to a hospital. In many cases, festivals and entertainment go hand in hand with excessive alcohol consumption, so there is a detoxification room specifically designed for such patients.

Twenty-five doctors work in the ambulance service throughout the entire duration of Sziget, supplemented by 40-45 nurses. During a 12-hour shift, there are usually 5 doctors on duty, including the shift supervisor, and 8-10 nurses. Due to the higher number of cases observed at night, the professional staff is also reinforced (Helperek, 2016).

## **SPECIFIC HEALTH INSURANCE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE OZORA FESTIVAL**

I asked Árpád Zimányi, organizer of the OZORA Festival, about the specifics of health safety at the festival. He began the conversation by saying, "You have to be prepared for everything." He explained that the insurance plan and its implementation comply with legal regulations and are provided by a private health insurance company, which exceeds the requirements in terms of staffing, medical personnel, and transport capacity. A fully equipped, air-conditioned container station provides medical care and management on site. Additional first aid patrols and health stations have been set up in the festival area, using tents, cars, and, due to the large crowds and distances involved, quad bikes (OZORA, 2025).

A landing pad for rescue helicopters has also been set up on the festival grounds. To combat the heat, mist gates have been installed in several locations, including around the performance tents, and contracted firefighters are spraying the moving audience with cooling water. There are about 500 designated points where drinking water can be obtained, and water enriched with magnesium and minerals is also distributed at designated locations to ensure adequate mineral replenishment. Zimányi said that he had arranged for the purchase of large quantities of medical oxygen, as experience had shown that the number of patients with upper respiratory symptoms increased significantly during the move-in period due to the high level of dust, and that the provision of oxygen had a very positive effect on their treatment. Upper respiratory tract diseases and symptoms have decreased significantly in recent years after a significant portion of the roads and sidewalks were paved (OZORA, 2025).

The organizer considers it extremely important for health reasons that the water in the lake, which was created for swimming, is continuously monitored to prevent infections. Árpád Zimányi said that in 2024, they had to deal with a serious outbreak of vomiting and diarrhea, which was very negative in terms of visitor comfort. At the time, it seemed almost unstoppable and required significant medical resources to treat. By the start of the 2025 festival, hand sanitizer was available at all restrooms and water stations, and the emptying and cleaning of toilets was redesigned (OZORA, 2025).

As a result, there were no gastrointestinal infectious diseases in 2025. He emphasized that, for the sake of prevention, information points were set up to provide preventive information to those who sought it. They provide spiritual comfort and quiet rest, with the cooperation of the Indít public foundation<sup>2</sup> (Á. Zimányi, personal communication, 2025).

Condoms are provided free of charge to visitors throughout the festival. As part of further prevention activities, lectures are held in the form of workshops, and visitors can participate in yoga, capoeira, and cooking programs to promote a health-conscious lifestyle. Árpád Zimányi emphasized that they have observed a decline in smoking, alcohol, and drug consumption among festival visitors, and that a health- and environmentally-conscious lifestyle is becoming increasingly prevalent.

Zimányi said that one of their plans for the future is to establish a "simple" pharmacy to facilitate the purchase of over-the-counter medicines, but they also plan to organize the purchase of prescription medicines.

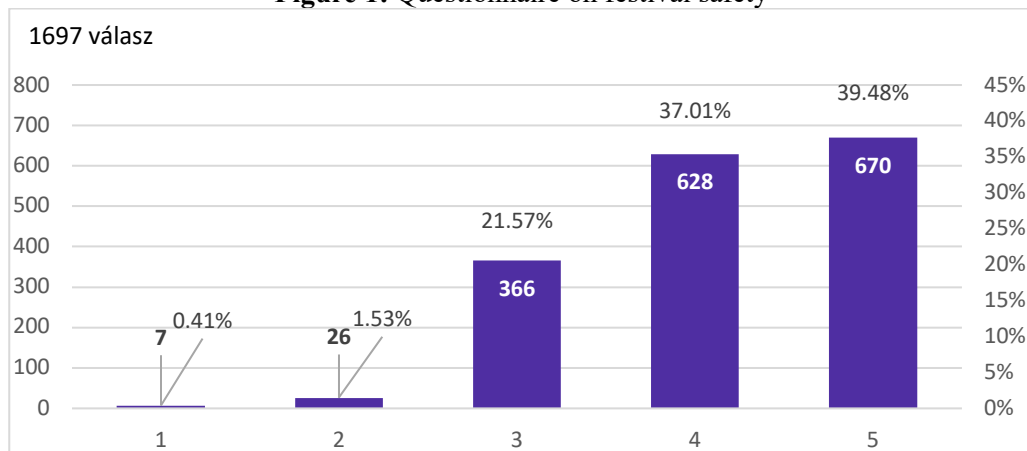
Their plans include the purchase of a universal X-ray machine so that injuries involving only sprains and bruises can be treated on site. In the future, they plan to set up additional health promotion and information points<sup>3</sup>.

The attached graph shows that festival visitors are generally satisfied with the organizers' health and safety measures (Figure 1).

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<sup>2</sup> INDIT is an addiction service provider system offering services ranging from prevention to meaningful leisure programs, outreach and harm reduction services to rehabilitation and resocialization, with institutional and professional backing and a stable team of professionals. <https://www.indit.hu/> Downloaded: January 31, 2026.

<sup>3</sup> The significance of the planned healthcare complex lies in its ability to alleviate the burden on regional emergency departments through on-site diagnostics (universal X-ray) and pharmaceutical supply, thereby enhancing participants' security. The legal framework for implementation is established by Act XCVIII of 2006 on the Safe and Economical Supply of Medicines and Medical Devices, and Decree No. 41/2007 (IX. 19.) EüM of the Minister of Health, which regulates the operation of pharmacies and permits temporary medication dispensing under professional supervision. On-site X-ray diagnostics and prescription management are subject to a specialized health insurance and medical oversight plan, requiring authorization from the National Centre for Public Health and Pharmacy (NNGYK) and the involvement of certified medical personnel.

**Figure 1: Questionnaire on festival safety**

Source: author's own drawing based on the collected data (2025)

### SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF HEALTH AND SAFETY: THE FESTIVAL-GOER'S EXPERIENCE

As part of my research on festival tourism safety, I interviewed Adrienn Riba, who has been regularly attending festivals in Hungary for almost ten years, but also has international experience. She usually attends festivals as a guest, but in many cases also performs as a fire juggler. During the interview, I asked her several questions about health and safety at festivals, which gave me the impression that health and safety is one of the most important safety factors in festival tourism from a participant's perspective.

Riba Adrienn said that, based on his experience, festival safety correlates with festival size: the larger the festival, the greater the safety. In his view, completely different laws apply to festivals with fewer than 1,000 attendees and those with more than 10,000 attendees in terms of the full spectrum of safety.

In the first part of the interview, he pointed out that the risk of infection differs between smaller and larger festivals. He said that smaller festivals in Hungary attract fewer foreign visitors than, for example, the larger OZORA Festival, which attracts visitors from all over the world.

There, you have to be prepared for the possibility that "people might bring something home with them." There is already a word for this in festival-goer slang: "ozoritis," meaning festival sickness. Vomiting, diarrhea, fever, sore throat, everything that goes with it.

"If you go to the OZORA festival regularly, it's worth catching it quickly, because it's like chickenpox, and your immune system will be stronger afterwards. Since I've been going to festivals, my immune system has become much stronger."

Adrienn has seen many people fall ill at the OZORA festival due to a lack of proper hygiene, but she says that the festival has improved a lot in this area, because she sees that when something comes up, the organizers react immediately and make changes.

She said that last year there were many more toilets in operation, which were cleaned much more often than in previous years. The OZORA festival has its own toilets, unlike many domestic and international festivals, where a service provider delivers the toilets to the venue. The OZORA festival organizers continuously disinfect the toilets,



wash them with high-pressure washers, and have installed hand sanitizers at several points, which are constantly refilled.

Riba considers it essential from a health and safety perspective that the festival provides adequate shade from the heat and sun, as well as misting stations, water collection points, and water distribution points.

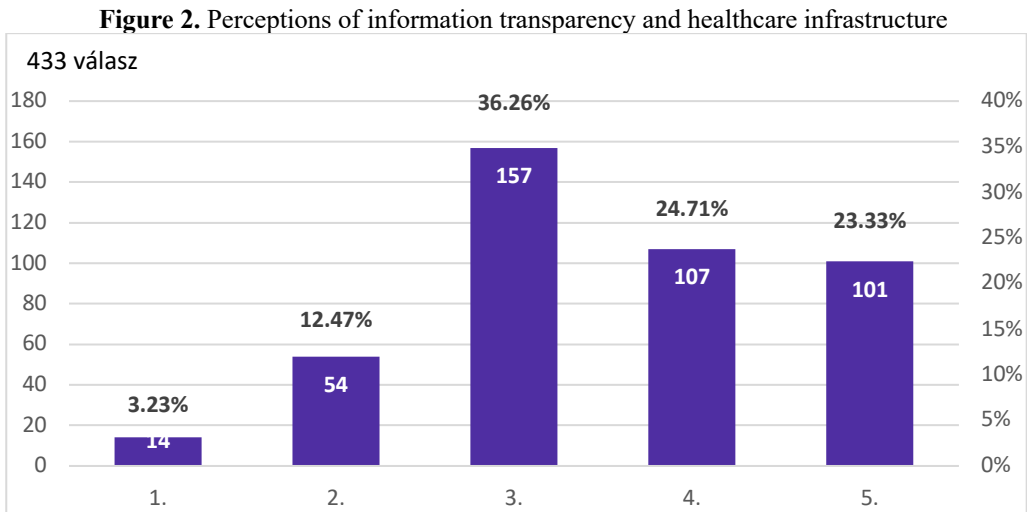
He said that at most festivals, the decorations are designed to provide shade and even protect against rain. Last year at the OZORA festival, he noticed that the decorations not only protected against heat and sunburn, but also against rain.

He emphasized that the OZORA festival has several mist gates and sprinkler columns, but in hot weather, firefighters spray festival-goers with water, and there are many high-quality water taps throughout the festival area.

To his knowledge, there are harm reduction teams who can help if someone is feeling unwell. They distribute magnesium water, condoms, glucose tablets, and pretzels free of charge. A separate section has been set up for harm reduction points where these items can be accessed.

According to Riba, she has been to festivals in many other countries, but she believes that Hungarian festival organization is at the forefront. At a festival in Romania, for example, there was no water available anywhere, no water fountains or water distribution points. She was particularly surprised that beer and mineral water cost the same in stores. This is not the case here, and the festival organizer would be penalized if there were no water. At the international level, this is not clear, because where he went, there were no designated water collection points or no indication of whether the water was drinkable or not.

The attached graph illustrates how important festival visitors consider it for organizers to provide clear information, an adequate number of healthcare facilities, and medical personnel to ensure health and safety (Figure 2).



*Source:* author's own drawing based on the collected data (2025)

## CONCLUSIONS

Health security represents a definitive factor within the broader frameworks of tourism safety and festival tourism security; its absence or compromise exerts a significant impact on the attendance of a specific region or event. Festivals that fail to provide adequate security, lack fundamental safety protocols, or neglect preventive measures and solutions designed to enhance visitor comfort, are likely to experience a decline in public interest. Consequently, festival organizers must continuously monitor emerging health and safety challenges and implement robust countermeasures.

Qualitative evidence from an interview with a festival attendee clearly underscores the primacy of health security, as the interviewee prioritized medical and safety measures as critical factors at the very outset of the discussion. This is further corroborated by a quantitative questionnaire survey, which confirms the fundamental role of health safety in the context of festival tourism. A distinctive characteristic of health security in this sector is its emergence as a result of "cooperative safety": while rooted in statutory regulations, it simultaneously reflects organizational intent and advances the organizer's strategic interests through the integration of private service providers.

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# TRANSFORMING THE BRAIN DRAIN INTO TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNOLOGY TO STRENGTHEN THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

*Ehlimana SPAHIĆ\**  
*Anisa GRADAŠČEVIĆ\*\**  
*Mirza POJSKIĆ\*\*\**

**Abstract.** *In addition to the introduction (first part) and concluding remarks (last part), the article consists of three parts. In the second part, the authors elaborate on the complex political system that governs healthcare. The strengths and weaknesses of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian healthcare system are analyzed, with a focus on brain drain in medicine, in the next part of the article. In the fourth part, the authors illustrate the human capital crisis in the context of brain drain with a specific focus on how brain drain can be converted into the transfer of knowledge and technology. For this purpose, as an example of good practice, the authors used a case study analysis of the BHAG E.V. Association. In the concluding remarks, the authors reflect on the research's limitations and emphasize how the process can be improved with the recommendations.*

**Keywords:** *healthcare, brain drain, transfer of knowledge, transfer of technology, investments.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a complex political and institutional structure that significantly shapes the organization and governance of its healthcare system. The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Annex 4 (Constitution), has created a multi-level governance system consisting of state, district, entity, cantonal, and local authorities. The complexity of the governance system shapes the models of collaboration between numerous ministries, agencies, public and private medical institutions, and health insurance funds. Considering this specific governing model, the authors emphasize the need to analyze the broader political and institutional environment in which the healthcare system operates.

In this article, the authors analyze the interconnection and interdependency between Bosnia and Herzegovina's political system and its healthcare governance, with particular emphasis on structural challenges in human capital management.

Following the previous direction, the authors analyze medical brain drain, which has become one of the most significant challenges to the sustainability and development of Bosnia and Herzegovina's healthcare system. Authors recognized the need to address

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\* Associate Professor, University of Sarajevo – Faculty of Political Sciences, Department of Political Science. E-mail: [ehlimana.spahic@fpn.unsa.ba](mailto:ehlimana.spahic@fpn.unsa.ba).

\*\* MD, PhD., KfH Kidneycenter Aschaffenburg. E-mail: [anisagradascevic1980@gmail.com](mailto:anisagradascevic1980@gmail.com).

\*\*\* Associate Professor, Dr. med. Department of Neurosurgery, Marburg University Hospital, Philipps University Marburg, Email: [Mirza.Pojskic@uk-gm.de](mailto:Mirza.Pojskic@uk-gm.de).

the migration of medical professionals from the perspective of its long-term implications for the quality, accessibility, and stability of healthcare services in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, based on the case study analysis, the authors recognized the potential and efforts of the medical diaspora in facilitating knowledge exchange, technology transfer, and professional cooperation with domestic healthcare institutions.

The article consists of three interconnected parts, along with the introduction and concluding remarks. In the second part, the authors elaborate on the complex political system that governs healthcare in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A systemic analysis of the country's political structure serves as a basis for a comprehensive understanding of the healthcare system presented in the third part of the article. In this section, the authors analyze the key strengths and weaknesses of Bosnia and Herzegovina's healthcare system, with a particular focus on the structural factors that have created an environment conducive to the brain drain of medical professionals. In the fourth part of the article, the authors reflect on the human capital crisis and the structural drivers of medical brain drain. In the selected case study, the authors demonstrate how brain drain can create an opportunity for knowledge and technology transfer. Concluding remarks reflect on the research's limitations and offer recommendations for future policy development and academic research.

The previously explained research employs a qualitative analytical approach that integrates institutional analysis, a literature review, and a case study methodology. The analysis is based on secondary data sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and international reports on healthcare systems and migration trends in the Western Balkans, with a specific focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Authors have used a case study approach to analyze diaspora-driven cooperation initiatives that aim to strengthen the healthcare sector through knowledge transfer and professional collaboration. The chosen case study focuses on the activities of the Bosnian Herzegovinian Doctors Association in Germany (BHÄG). Research findings highlight how diaspora networks can facilitate clinical training, mentorship, and technological exchange between international medical centers and healthcare institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Authors have combined institutional analysis with empirical examples of diaspora engagement to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the structural challenges and the opportunities to strengthen the healthcare system through international professional cooperation.

## **2. POLITICAL SYSTEM OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

Although this article focuses on the current political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is important to note that the continuity of statehood is reflected in the evolution of the political system over time.

More precisely, "Bosnia and Herzegovina has a long historical continuity that can be traced from the tenth century to the present. It went through complex processes of crisis, occupation, and wars, but managed to survive and maintain its statehood. The last challenge to its survival was aggression in the period 1992 - 1995. In that political context, aggression was ended by the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Spahić, Čustović, 2024:28).

Evidently, the current political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina is based on the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Dayton

Agreement)<sup>1</sup> and its Annex 4 (Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina). The Constitution has recognized statehood continuity<sup>2</sup> by reframing and reshaping state-level institutions and their jurisdiction<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the Constitution has defined the state's composition in terms of two entities.<sup>4</sup> However, there was still a need to find a solution for the municipality of Brčko.

“The Dayton Constitution did not define the inter-Entity Boundary Line in the Brčko area (Annex 2, Article V). All parties agreed to use the Arbitral Tribunal that issued the Final Award and Annex in 1999, establishing the Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Office of the High Representative, 2015). The Decision on the Brčko District of B&H was published in 2000. With this Decision, internal structural modification of the state was finished, and due to this process, a complex political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged” (Spahić, Čustović, 2024:28).

Based on the Constitutions (state and entities) and the Decision on the Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2000), the state has the following levels of governance: state-level, entity-level, and Brčko District institutions. At the entity level, the structure differs. One entity is more centralized (Republika Srpska), while the other, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is more decentralized, including ten cantons. Each canton has its own government and, in the context of this research, its own healthcare system. Both entities have a local level, comprising cities and municipalities that also play a role in implementing health care policies.

### 3. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS IN GOVERNING HEALTHCARE OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

After briefly elaborating on the complex political system<sup>5</sup> in the next section, we will examine how this complexity is reflected in health care governance.

<sup>1</sup> UN Peacemaker (1995), General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Dayton Agreement), Link: <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2024/05/ba951121daytonagreement.pdf> accessed 21.01.2026.

<sup>2</sup> “Continuation. The Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the official name of which shall henceforth be “Bosnia and Herzegovina,” shall continue its legal existence under international law as a state, with its internal structure modified as provided herein and with its present internationally recognized borders. It shall remain a Member State of the United Nations and may as Bosnia and Herzegovina maintain or apply for membership in organizations within the United Nations system and other international organizations” Ibid. Annex 4. Article 1. Paragraph 1.

<sup>3</sup> Responsibilities of the Institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The following matters are the responsibility of the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina: a. Foreign policy. b. Foreign trade policy. c. Customs policy. d. Monetary policy as provided in Article VII. e. Finances of the institutions and for the international obligations of Bosnia and Herzegovina. f. Immigration, refugee, and asylum policy and regulation. g. International and inter-Entity criminal law enforcement, including relations with Interpol. h. Establishment and operation of common and international communications facilities. i. Regulation of inter-Entity transportation. j. Air traffic control.” Ibid. Annex 4. Article 3. Paragraph 1.

<sup>4</sup> “Composition. Bosnia and Herzegovina shall consist of the two Entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska (hereinafter “the Entities”).” Ibid. Annex 4. Article 1. Paragraph 3.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Banović, D., Gavrić, S., & Mariño, M. B. (2021). The political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

The Constitution itself does not address healthcare governance beyond establishing that it will be organized through entity-level institutions<sup>6</sup>.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's governance of the health care system follows the logic of the political system. In effect, there are 14 ministries of health and 13 health insurance funds. Local levels of governance (municipalities and cities) in both entities have certain responsibilities in the field of public health (primary healthcare and the implementation of preventive health programs). In addition to governmental institutions, healthcare systems include hospitals, health centers, and specialized institutions.

Governance is based on the regulatory framework<sup>7</sup> that reflects the previously explained complexity. The health care system at the state level is governed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs<sup>8</sup>, which has a coordinating role among the entities' ministries, cantonal ministries, and the Department of Health and Other Services under the Government of the Brčko District of BiH.

The health care subsystem of the entity Republika Srpska is more centralized and comprises the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the Health Insurance Fund, the Agency for Certification, Accreditation, and Health Care Quality Improvement of the Republic of Srpska, and the Public Health Institute of Republika Srpska.

However, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's healthcare subsystem is decentralized. At the entity level, there are the Federal Ministry of Health, the Health Insurance and Reinsurance Institute of the Federation of BiH, and 10 cantonal ministries

<sup>6</sup> "Law and Responsibilities of the Entities and the Institutions.

a. All governmental functions and powers not expressly assigned in this Constitution to the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina shall be those of the Entities." (UN Peacemaker, 1995), Annex 4. Article 3. Paragraph 3. a".

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see Federal Ministry of Health (2025). List of legal documents and bylaws in the field of healthcare. Link: [https://fmoh.gov.ba/uploads/files/LISTA\\_PROPIISA\\_-\\_za\\_WEB\\_-\\_azurirana\\_20072023.pdf](https://fmoh.gov.ba/uploads/files/LISTA_PROPIISA_-_za_WEB_-_azurirana_20072023.pdf) (accessed 21.01.2026); The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare of the Republic of Srpska (2019a). Health Care Laws. Link: [https://vladars.rs/sr-SP-Cyrl/Vlada/Ministarstva/MZSZ/dokumenti/Pages/Zdravstvena\\_zastita.aspx](https://vladars.rs/sr-SP-Cyrl/Vlada/Ministarstva/MZSZ/dokumenti/Pages/Zdravstvena_zastita.aspx) (accessed 21.01.2026); The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare of the Republic of Srpska (2019b). Public Health Laws. Link: [https://vladars.rs/sr-SP-Cyrl/Vlada/Ministarstva/MZSZ/dokumenti/Pages/Javno\\_zdravstvo.aspx](https://vladars.rs/sr-SP-Cyrl/Vlada/Ministarstva/MZSZ/dokumenti/Pages/Javno_zdravstvo.aspx) (accessed 21.01.2026); The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare of the Republic of Srpska (2019c). Policies, laws and by-laws. Link: <https://vladars.rs/sr-SP-Cyrl/Vlada/Ministarstva/MZSZ/farmacija/lijekovi/zakoni/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed 21.01.2026); The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare of the Republic of Srpska (2019d). Laws and by-laws. Link: <https://vladars.rs/sr-SP-Cyrl/Vlada/Ministarstva/MZSZ/farmacija/hemikalije/zakoni/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed 21.01.2026); The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare of the Republic of Srpska (2019e). Health insurance. Link: <https://vladars.rs/sr-SP-Cyrl/Vlada/Ministarstva/MZSZ/dokumenti/Pages/zdravzastita.aspx> (accessed 21.01.2026); Health Insurance Fund of Brčko District (2006-2026). Laws. Link: <http://fzobrcko.ba/zakoni> (accessed 21.01.2026).

<sup>8</sup> "The Ministry of Civil Affairs coordinates activities in the field of health at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the activities are carried out through the activities of the Health Sector. The Department for Health in the Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina has a role in the coordination of health policies at the state level. The activities are aimed at harmonizing the plans of entity authorities, defining strategies on the international level, and ensuring efficient data exchange and cooperation with domestic and international institutions." The Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2026). *About the healthcare sector*. Link: <https://mcp.gov.ba/en/about-healthcare-sector> (accessed 21.01.2026).



of health and 10 cantonal health insurance institutes. On the federal level, there is an Institute for Public Health FB&H.

The healthcare subsystem in the Brčko district is governed by the Department of Health and Other Services and the Health Insurance Fund of Brčko District. Like entities, health care can be provided by organizations founded with government or private capital.

After we elaborate on the complex health care system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we will address its strengths and weaknesses in the next segment. For this purpose, we will analyze the Health Systems in Action series published by the World Health Organization in 2025<sup>9</sup>.

In the context of this article, the focus is on institutional, organizational, financial, and human capital aspects that are sorted into strengths and weaknesses:

| STRENGTHS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | WEAKNESSES                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some health care providers have increased transparency and targeted corruption.</li> <li>• There have been efforts to strengthen primary health care through a robust family medicine model.</li> <li>• Health reforms aim to improve prevention and digitalization</li> <li>• Accessibility of health services has improved, but some gaps remain</li> <li>• Improvements in perinatal and neonatal care have led to significant reductions in maternal and infant mortality</li> <li>• The rates of physicians and nurses are increasing</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bosnia and Herzegovina has a complex and fragmented health system</li> <li>• While benefits packages are relatively comprehensive, coverage is not universal</li> <li>• Resource pooling is mainly at the cantonal level in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with limited redistribution across health insurance funds</li> <li>• Despite strengthening primary health care, health service provision remains hospital-centered</li> <li>• Health spending per capita is higher than in countries with similar income levels</li> <li>• The strong reliance on employment- related contributions raises concerns about financial sustainability</li> <li>• Rates of doctors and nurses are comparatively low</li> <li>• The ageing of health workers is a concern</li> <li>• Many young health professionals leave Bosnia and Herzegovina</li> </ul> |
| <p>Graphical presentation made by authors based on the publication Litvinova Y, Rebac B, Cooreman E, Rechel B (2025). Health Systems in Action (HSiA) Insights – Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2024. Copenhagen: European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, WHO Regional Office for Europe. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

<sup>9</sup> “The Health Systems in Action Insights series supports Member States in the WHO European Region that are not in the European Union. The Insights for each country are intended to: provide core information and data on health systems succinctly and accessibly; outline the country health system context in which WHO’s European Programme of Work is set; flag key concerns, progress and challenges the health system by health system and build a baseline for comparisons, so that Member States can see how their health systems develop over time and in relation to other countries. The series is co-produced by the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies. It draws on the knowledge and understanding of the WHO Country Offices and of the Division of Country Health Policies and Systems (CPS), the Barcelona Office for Health Systems Financing, and other WHO/Europe technical programmes; as well as the Health Systems in Transition series and the work of the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies.” (Litvinova et al., 2025:4).

Considering earlier findings and detected weaknesses in the healthcare system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we can see that the lack of governance of human capital, in general, and in health care in particular, has become a long-term challenge that needs to be addressed. The management of the comprehensive flow of human resources in healthcare is fragmented and disjointed. It seems that normal generational change is threatened by the inadequate process for introducing new, educated medical professionals into the healthcare system.<sup>10</sup>

The demand for this staff on the labor market is growing rapidly, which increases the pressure to integrate these young people systematically and continuously, starting in their student days. Unfortunately, the authorities are aware of these challenges, but their approach to overcoming them is fragmented. Poor general socio-economic conditions, corruption and nepotism, and the continuous threat of wars and conflicts, as general drivers of migration, are often combined with difficult working conditions and inadequate pay in the healthcare sector.

A comprehensive approach is needed to solve this problem across all stages, causes, current processes, and consequences. Unfortunately, we are mainly concerned with a list of causes and an analysis of consequences. There is a lack of systemic and strategic commitment to managing brain drain and its conversion into brain gain.

#### **4. HUMAN CAPITAL CRISIS AND STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF MEDICAL BRAIN DRAIN**

In addition to the structural weaknesses described above, Bosnia and Herzegovina faces a profound human capital crisis in the healthcare sector. The basis of any decision-making process on the development and improvement of the system is quantitative and qualitative indicators of the situation. In the context of available statistics, in addition to the previously mentioned institutes whose data are used by the entity and state statistical agencies, there are also data from healthcare professional associations. The challenge is to functionally connect these data at the state level to provide a holistic picture of the state of healthcare human resources.

We need additional data on the number and qualification structure of employees, with a specific focus on the field of specialization. Detailed information is also needed on their geographical distribution within the system, their age status, and education processes in the context of lifelong learning. All of this data, along with the data already

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<sup>10</sup> In both entities, public health institutes collect statistics on the number of beds, the number of patients, and human resources in healthcare. What distinguishes them is the structure of the data they collect, beyond standard statistical reporting. The Institute of Statistics of the Republika Srpska publishes a publication called Health Statistics that does not include information on the age of employees in the healthcare sector. On the other hand, the Institute of Public Health of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina collects data on employees' age and specialization by canton and at the entity level. Given this, it is evident that the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina can manage the outflow of employees more adequately. However, this process is unfortunately not holistic. For more information, see: Institute for Public Health FB&H (2025). Health Statistical Yearbook of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2024). Link: [https://www.zzjzfbih.ba/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Godisnjak\\_ZZJZ\\_2024.pdf](https://www.zzjzfbih.ba/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Godisnjak_ZZJZ_2024.pdf) pp. 70. (accessed on 12.03.2026) and Republic of Srpska Institute of Statistics (2024). Health statistics. Link: [https://www.rzs.rs.ba/static/uploads/saopstenja/zdravstvo/godisnja\\_saopstenja/2024/ZdravstvaStatistika\\_2024.pdf](https://www.rzs.rs.ba/static/uploads/saopstenja/zdravstvo/godisnja_saopstenja/2024/ZdravstvaStatistika_2024.pdf) (accessed on 12.03.2026).

collected on the number of beds and disease types, can contribute to better planning and management of the system.

Also, information is missing on the equipment and available technologies in healthcare institutions in both the public and private sectors. A comprehensive collection of this data, even when it is not part of standard reporting, is necessary in order to improve the healthcare system for both healthcare workers and service users.

Inadequate detection and elimination of systemic problems, due to insufficient and holistic indicators, combined with the previously mentioned socio-economic and political challenges, create fertile ground for brain drain. When collecting data on brain drain in this field, we face the challenge of finding reliable sources. There are no official statistics on the composition of health sector employees who have left the country, nor on the countries of reception. Apart from fragmented information and estimates from medical associations of entities, media reports, and data from the Labour and Employment Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we do not have a holistic overview of the actual level of losses.

Effectively, the range of human capital losses among healthcare professionals cannot be estimated with this lack of reliable information. However, based on the available data, higher salaries, better working conditions, and opportunities for development and advancement are strong motivators for younger generations.

On the other hand, the age structure of the medical staff, along with the lack of new hires, seriously threatens to destabilize the health system and force the authorities to create hybrid solutions to address the shortage of specialists. The real danger lies in neglecting the need to collect the data required to create a realistic plan for the maintenance and development of Bosnia and Herzegovina's health system.

In addition to employment in public health institutions, medical personnel can also work in the growing private sector, funded by domestic and foreign capital, which presents its own challenges. Bosnia and Herzegovina currently has approximately 1,000 private medical practices and more than 300 private pharmacies, with private providers increasingly offering diagnostic and specialized services.

The development of private health services has some positive aspects, such as fostering innovation and competition. However, the rapid growth of this sector, coupled with existing public health challenges, poses a risk to the public health system. These risks can be reduced with better governance coordination.

The previously mentioned lack of reliable data, combined with insufficient coordination between the public and private healthcare sectors, presents a challenge. Data reporting is an obligation for both public and private healthcare institutions, but compliance with this requirement is often inconsistent. This inconsistency creates gaps in healthcare data.

When it comes to secondary and higher education for medical personnel, it is primarily delivered by public institutions, but private institutions have recently entered this segment. Experiences with the development of private education in other areas can serve as a warning that the standards of medical personnel education must be monitored and controlled.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, with all previously mentioned limitations, still has considerable medical expertise and institutional capacity. University hospitals in Sarajevo, Tuzla, Mostar, and Banja Luka, along with several cantonal and regional hospitals, can offer a wide range of services.

However, many of these institutions face difficulties due to outdated equipment, limited financial resources, and growing debt burdens.

In this context, the growing medical diaspora of Bosnia and Herzegovina represents both a consequence of the brain drain and a potential strategic resource. Large communities of Bosnian doctors now work in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the United States, Canada, Scandinavia, and Australia.

Based on estimates, we have around 1,000 Bosnian-origin physicians in Germany alone. Currently, they are practicing in hospitals and academic medical centers. Most of them maintain strong professional and emotional ties to their country of origin. Furthermore, they express interest in supporting its healthcare development through training programs, mentorship, research collaboration, and technology transfer.

Evidently, in addition to addressing healthcare system challenges in the country, governments at all levels, within their respective jurisdictions, need to create institutional mechanisms to transform migration into brain circulation. These mechanisms would enable the transfer of knowledge, technology, and clinical expertise from the diaspora to domestic healthcare institutions. Such mechanisms are explored in the following section through the example of diaspora-driven cooperation initiatives.

#### **4.1. Literature Review of Migration and Brain Drain in the Field of Medicine**

A broader literature review shows that research worldwide addresses brain drain and migration in general. However, for the purpose of this article, and without any intent to diminish the contributions of researchers worldwide, we will focus on research related to the region.

Most of the available research focused on migration and brain drain from the Western Balkan region emphasizes economic, social, and political motivations of migrations (Çali, 2024; Jusufi & Ukaj, 2020; Kupiszewski et al., 2009; Lulle, 2020; Malaj & Malaj, 2017; Taravari et al., 2025). Furthermore, challenges of brain drain in the region as a specific form of migration have been addressed in several studies (Icoski, 2022; Jansen et al., 2024; Kacani et al., 2025; Ströhm, 2023; Radonjić & Bobić, 2021), coming from a more general scope of the phenomena rather than focusing on one group of highly skilled and educated professionals, like medical professionals.

Although we have limited research on regional and national brain drain in the medical field (doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists, pharmacists), there has recently been increased interest in this topic within the academic community. Most of the regional and national research on brain drain in this field emphasizes the need to identify motives and consequences (Blagojević et al., 2023; Gëdeshi et al., 2024; Lazarevik et al., 2016; Sudžuka & Pašić, 2025; Qehaja et al., 2025), patterns of mobility (Mara, 2023), and the drivers and prediction of further migration (Jurić, 2021).

Furthermore, there is an obvious necessity to address the needs and concerns not just of medical professionals but also of students, as they are the future of the health care system. Exposure to international mobility, internships, and other educational and professional opportunities significantly shapes the expectations of younger generations in the region. The need to address these specificities has been recognized in research in Albania (Prifti et al., 2025) and Croatia (Bojanić et al., 2015).

While some authors focus on identifying the motivations, patterns, and consequences of brain drain among medical professionals, others seek to determine how

receiving countries can support countries losing medical professionals (Schmitz-Pranghe et al., 2020) through intergovernmental cooperation.

Considering the earlier observation, we can see that, in the regional context, research into the brain drain of medical professionals is gaining importance. Effectively, we are gradually seeing more studies that, in addition to the regional context, focus on national challenges.

In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the most recent research shows that “a significant number of healthcare workers are contemplating leaving due to dissatisfaction with political instability, corruption, and poor socio-economic conditions” (Jahić et al. 2024: 21). Furthermore, these motivations are not related only to medical professionals but to students in this field as well. The same research shows the following: “while a minority hopes to stay and make a future in the country, others plan to emigrate soon after completing their education or specialization, often viewing this move as permanent” (Jahić et al. 2024: 21).

Considering this brief overview of regional research on brain drain and migration, as well as the more specific issue of medical professional brain drain, it has become clear that we have significant research gaps. Obviously, it needs to be addressed by the government and the academic community in joint efforts to fund more research on these issues, which have lasting effects on society. Although governmental funding for this type of research can be politically provocative and challenging because it reveals system failures, it remains necessary.

#### **4.2. Transforming the Brain Drain into Transfer of Knowledge and Technology: A Case Study BHÄG E.V. Association**

Transforming brain drain into the transfer of technology, knowledge, and know-how is analyzed using the example of BHÄG (Bosnisch-Herzegowinische Ärztgesellschaft in Deutschland E.V. - Bosnian Herzegovinian Doctors in Germany e.V.

Although BHÄG primarily brings together physicians of Bosnian and Herzegovinian origin working in Germany, the Association also maintains an open and inclusive regional orientation. Its membership includes medical professionals from neighboring regions with close historical and professional ties to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, the Association promotes dialogue and cooperation with professional medical societies in Serbia, Croatia, and other Western Balkan countries, recognizing that many healthcare challenges are shared across the region. Through conferences, workshops, and joint initiatives, BHÄG seeks to foster a climate of professional cooperation, open scientific discussion, and regional collaboration.

This Association, based on data available on its website, is a Germany-based association that networks physicians of Bosnian-Herzegovinian origin, organizes scientific congresses and workshops, and builds links of cooperation with medical institutions and professional bodies in BiH (BHÄG, 2026). It explicitly positions itself as a bridge for knowledge exchange, professional development, and joint projects between doctors in Germany (and the wider diaspora) and Bosnia & Herzegovina. The transfer of knowledge and technology is organized into several activities, as shown in the graphic below.

| Congress & workshop platform for knowledge transfer                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Formal cooperation agreements with Bosnian institutions/academies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Targeted clinical projects (example: neurosurgery / spinal procedures)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Association organizes scientific congresses (e.g., the 2nd Congress in Berlin, June 14, 2025) that bring together clinicians from Germany, BiH, and other countries for lectures, workshops, and networking. These events create the institutional space to plan training fellowships, mentor partnerships, and clinical projects.                                                      | The Association has reportedly signed cooperation agreements with Bosnian scientific/medical organizations (e.g., BHAAAS) for exchanges, internships, and clinical mentoring. These agreements explicitly mention strengthening departments in BiH through mentoring and training in German clinics.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Announced joint projects include mentorship and training to develop modern spinal procedures at the Neurosurgery Department of the University Clinical Center Sarajevo (KBC Sarajevo), as well as measures to improve the functioning of operating theatres — activities that normally require both hands-on training and equipment/OR upgrades. |
| Transfer of knowledge and technology<br>In Bosnia and Herzegovina                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| The Association leverages Bosnian-origin clinicians working in high-end centers (Germany, USA, other EU countries) to mentor younger colleagues, develop training curricula, and organize internships/fellowships at foreign clinics. This targeted training pipeline directs skill transfer to public hospitals when combined with return visits, tele-mentoring, or in-country workshops. | By connecting stakeholders (clinicians, embassy, professional bodies, sponsors), BHÄG creates channels through which equipment donations, joint grant proposals, or industry partnerships can be mobilized — evidenced by sponsorships and multi-partner event organization on their site.<br><br>BHÄG mobilizes highly skilled clinicians abroad who can deliver up-to-date training, mentoring, and curriculum support without the high fixed costs of establishing new domestic training centers. This is a high-leverage, low-overhead model for targeted upskilling.<br><br>Projects already announced (neurosurgery/spinal procedures, operating theatre functioning) focus on specialties where a relatively small set of training + equipment upgrades can substantially raise local capacity and outcomes. |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Diaspora mentoring & clinical placements                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Networking that enables donations/project partnerships                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Graphical presentation prepared by authors based on data available on the Association's official web page (BHÄG, 2026).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

Based on the activities presented by BHÄG, a relatively young Association (founded in 2024), we can conclude that they have achieved important results in connecting intended stakeholders. Furthermore, their efforts to acquire funding for further development of these activities are based on public budgets, donor grants, and industry partners. Evidently, funding needs to be scaled to match planned activities and to produce the desired outcomes.

The transfer of technology through the donation and procurement of equipment is an initial step needed to support the advancement of the Bosna and Herzegovina healthcare system. However, more systematic collaboration with governing institutions is needed, as equipment will require spare parts, maintenance contracts, and educators who can use it. Educating staff on the use of this equipment is an integral part of the Association's activities, but ensuring technical support and maintenance for donated equipment remains a challenge. The terms of the donated equipment must contractually obligate the recipients and the competent authorities to assume maintenance obligations; otherwise, the donated and purchased equipment may become unusable at the first failure or software update and be stored.

Another challenge for the Association's well-planned activities is the recognition of acquired knowledge and skills in public hospitals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this context, sending doctors for internships/fellowships in Germany is valuable, but returning clinicians may face issues with licensing, recognition of skills, or a lack of formal career pathways. Therefore, agreements and arrangements need to include clear instructions for recognition. Given the many authorities governing health care systems, the Association will need to adjust its approaches to these issues accordingly.

A complex governance system poses a challenge for other projects as well, since each project must be tailored to its respective legal and operational framework. Furthermore, the Association needs to develop cooperation with governing institutions to achieve sustainable results for its activities.

In a short time, the Association has achieved significant results. The possibilities and advantages of cooperation have been recognized by healthcare institutions, medical professionals, and the academic community. The remaining challenge is to connect the fragmented healthcare system's governing structures to this network.

#### **4.3. Diaspora-Driven Medical Cooperation and Knowledge Transfer**

In addition to the BHÄG association's activities, several other initiatives demonstrate the growing importance of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian medical diaspora in strengthening the country's healthcare system. One of the most prominent organizations is the Bosnian-Herzegovinian American Academy of Arts and Sciences (BHAAAS)<sup>11</sup>, which includes many physicians, scientists, and researchers of Bosnian origin working in the United States and other countries. BHAAAS has been actively involved in organizing medical conferences, educational workshops, and academic collaborations with universities and clinical centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through these initiatives, BHAAAS facilitates the transfer of modern medical knowledge,

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<sup>11</sup> BHAAAS (n.d). The Medicine and Health Division of the Bosnian Herzegovinian American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Link: <https://www.bhaas.org/en/page-medicine-and-health> Accessed on 12.03.2026.

research cooperation, and the development of academic networks between Bosnian institutions and leading international medical centers.

Concrete examples of diaspora-driven cooperation include several specialized clinical development projects. One such initiative is the development of a Center for Modern Spine Surgery at the Clinical Center of the University of Sarajevo, led by Professor Ibrahim Omerhodžić and supported by diaspora neurosurgeons, including Dr. Mirza Pojskic from Philipps University Marburg. This project aims to strengthen spinal surgery capacity through training programs, the introduction of modern navigation technologies, and international fellowships.

In practice, collaborative initiatives of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian medical diaspora included the involvement of 11 physicians from across Bosnia and Herzegovina in establishing a Center for Urogenital Surgery. This Center provides educational training activities in Germany and Bosnia and Herzegovina under the auspices of Dr. Senad Habibović, a Bosnian gynecologist working in Germany. The idea is that, through mentoring programs, surgical training, and the introduction of minimally invasive techniques, they can lay the groundwork for improving the treatment of gynecological and urological diseases in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Similar initiatives are emerging in other medical fields, including cardiology, where cooperation between diaspora specialists and domestic institutions aims to strengthen diagnostic and therapeutic capacities and introduce modern treatment protocols. Development of a STEMI center and a modern national STEMI network for the treatment of myocardial infarction and heart failure.

Long-term capacity building involves developing structured academic mobility and research exchange programs between Bosnia and Herzegovina and European universities. Furthermore, increasing the number of research fellowships, doctoral exchanges, and clinical training placements for students and medical staff would significantly modernize medical education and clinical practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Institutional support for diaspora engagement is also reflected in government initiatives such as the “TRANSFER” program of the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>12</sup>. This program enables experts of Bosnian origin living and working abroad to visit institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina for short academic stays upon invitation. During these visits, experts can deliver lectures, conduct workshops, participate in clinical training, and initiate collaborative research projects. Such initiatives represent an important mechanism for facilitating the circulation of knowledge between the diaspora and domestic institutions.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The complex political system and the corresponding healthcare system in Bosnia and Herzegovina have their strengths and weaknesses. In this context, the authors systematized the observations in the publication *Health Systems in Action Insight for Bosnia and Herzegovina*, published by WHO in 2025.

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<sup>12</sup>For more information, see The Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2026). Program for transferring knowledge of experts from the diaspora to institutions and public institutions in BiH. Link: <https://dijaspora.mhrr.gov.ba/media/dokumenti/Ostali-dokumenti/Informacija%20o%20prenosu%20znanja%20iz%20iseljenistva%20u%20BiH%202024.pdf> (accessed 12.03.2026). Note: documents are in local languages.



In this publication, the following are highlighted as key strengths of the health system: increased transparency among health care providers and targeted anti-corruption efforts. Efforts have been made to strengthen primary health care through a robust family medicine model. Authors recognize efforts in health reforms aim to improve prevention and digitalization. Furthermore, access to health services has improved, but some gaps remain. Significant reductions in maternal and infant mortality were achieved through improvements in perinatal and neonatal care. Authors have recognized that the rates of physicians and nurses are increasing.

However, authors in the same publication show that the system's weaknesses in the organizational and financial context include: complex, fragmented health systems; benefits packages that are relatively comprehensive but not universally covered; limited distribution of funds across health insurance funds; and health service provision that remains hospital-centered. The specific focus is on human capital, in the sense of the ageing of health workers on the one hand and the many young health professionals leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina on the other.

The combination of the above strengths and weaknesses has created conditions that increase population migration, not just among medical professionals but also among the general population. Although brain drain and migration significantly affect the region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, the research shows that the academic community has inadequately addressed mapping and research on this problem. The limited number of general studies underscores the need for greater funding for research projects that analyze the causes, motives, and consequences of brain drain.

The identified strengths and weaknesses of the health care system can be analyzed in the continuation of the research by using a SWOT analysis, since it is also necessary to design a suitable strategy. However, the previously observed gap in research on these processes at this stage prevents a comprehensive SWOT analysis of the health care system in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this context, there is an evident need for further research that will, on the one hand, analyze the causes, motivations, and consequences in the homeland, and, on the other hand, examine how medical professionals organized themselves to actively work to improve the situation in the homeland.

Also, this research can serve as a solid basis for stronger ties between the Bosnian and Herzegovinian medical diaspora and the homeland. The selected case study indicates that patriotism can contribute to improving conditions in the homeland through knowledge transfer, staff exchanges, scholarships, study stays, conferences, and technology transfer. Although the article was focused on a specific case study, the authors noted that future research should include a survey or structured interviews on both sides of this process: the incoming side (doctors and medical staff) and the receiving side. This extended research would better capture motivations, needs, and opportunities and foster a predisposition for deeper cooperation.

Although the healthcare system of Bosnia and Herzegovina evidently faces significant structural challenges, including brain drain, fragmented governance, and limited financial resources, several emerging developments offer grounds for optimism. Over time, we are witnessing greater engagement by the medical diaspora through an increasing number of international academic partnerships and the development of targeted clinical cooperation projects. These activities demonstrate that brain drain need not be an irreversible loss of human capital. Diaspora networks with adequate governmental institutional support can contribute significantly to the transfer of

knowledge, technology, and clinical expertise. When combined with emerging forms of public-private cooperation alongside increased international academic integration, these processes may gradually strengthen the resilience and development of Bosnia and Herzegovina's healthcare system.

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## THE FUTURE OF GREEN INDUSTRIAL POLICY: AN OVERVIEW OF POLICY COMMUNICATION

*Luciana-Mirela BUTIȘCĂ\**  
*Cristina-Matilda VĂNOAGĂ\*\**

**Abstract.** *Green industrial policy has become a key element of contemporary economic and environmental governance, aiming to reconcile industrial competitiveness with climate neutrality and sustainable development. As governments increasingly adopt such strategies, policy communication plays an important role in shaping their formulation, implementation and public legitimisation. This paper examines the evolution of the European Union's institutional discourse on industrial policy between 2021 and 2025 by analysing three major policy documents: the updated Industrial Strategy (2021), the Green Deal Industrial Plan (2023), and the Clean Industrial Deal (2025). Using a qualitative research strategy based on document and discourse analysis, the study investigates shifts in institutional narratives and the transformation of key concepts. The findings indicate that EU institutional discourse reflects political priorities while functioning as a strategic instrument for adapting legitimacy in response to economic and geopolitical constraints.*

**Keywords:** *European Green Deal, green industrial policy, net-zero, transition, political communication.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusivity represents a central concern of European public policy, particularly in relation to migration, minority rights and social cohesion (Nica, 2025:153). In this context, inclusion operates across multiple governance levels, from national and subnational (regional and local) to supranational and global levels, including the sphere of international organisations (Brie, 2025:10). At the same time, Green Industrial Policy has become a key element of contemporary economic and environmental governance, aiming to reconcile industrial competitiveness with climate neutrality and sustainable development. The last decade has marked a profound reconfiguration of industrial policy in the European Union (EU), amid the convergence of several structural crises: climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis and the intensification of global geopolitical competition. In this context, European industrial policy has evolved from a predominantly competitiveness and internal market-oriented framework towards an integrated model, combining the objectives of decarbonisation, strategic autonomy and economic resilience.

The update of the EU Industrial Strategy (2021), the launch of the Green Deal Industrial Plan (2023) and the adoption of the Clean Industrial Deal (2025) reflect not

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\* Associate teacher, University of Oradea, E-mail: [luciana.butisca@yahoo.com](mailto:luciana.butisca@yahoo.com).

\*\* Associate Professor, "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia/ IRES PhD student at "Babes-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca, E-mail: [cristina.vanoaga@uab.ro](mailto:cristina.vanoaga@uab.ro), ORCID: 0000-0003-0725-0590.

only adjustments to public policy instruments, but also a transformation of the normative and discursive framework through which European industrial development is conceptualised. The literature emphasises that contemporary industrial policies can no longer be analysed exclusively in economic terms but must be understood as political and symbolic projects that build legitimacy for major structural transformations (Rodrik, 2004; Mazzucato, 2018). In parallel, research on sustainability discourse shows that climate and industrial policies are accompanied by strategic narratives aimed at reducing tensions between competitiveness and decarbonization (Hajer, 1995; Eckert & Kovalevska, 2021). The Green Deal has been interpreted as an example of a transformative discourse that combines climate urgency with the promise of economic modernization (Eckert & Kovalevska, 2021). However, the discursive dynamics of European industrial policy in the post-Green Deal phase remain insufficiently explored, especially in relation to new geopolitical and economic pressures.

Thus, this research starts from the premise that the evolution of EU industrial policy between 2021 and 2025 represents not just a succession of institutional reforms, but a strategic discursive recalibration, through which the European Commission adapts the language, priorities and legitimization frameworks to a changing international environment. Although there is a consistent literature on the Green Deal and European industrial policy, the comparative analysis of the evolution of the strategic and discursive framework between 2021 and 2025 remains limited. In particular, the relationship between: decarbonization objectives, global competitiveness imperatives, and the discursive construction of “strategic autonomy” is not sufficiently investigated. Therefore, the central question of the research is to identify how the EU redefines industrial policy in a context marked by the tension between climate ambition and economic and geopolitical constraints. Thus, the present scientific approach aims to answer several research questions:

(1) How is the discourse on EU industrial policy evolving between 2021 and 2025?

(2) How is the institutional discourse on EU industrial policy changing (keywords, narratives, rhetoric), and what type of legitimacy is constructed through discourse – technocratic, transformative or pragmatic?

This research uses a qualitative approach, drawing on methods such as document and discourse analysis, to examine the evolution of the European Union's strategic framework for industrial policy between 2021 and 2025. The methodology is appropriate to the objective of identifying both the normative and strategic content of the documents, as well as the rhetorical and narrative mechanisms through which they construct legitimacy and political meaning. The study is based on a comparative analysis of three official documents of the European Commission: the Updated EU Industrial Strategy (SI, 2021), the Green Deal Industrial Plan (GDIP, 2023), and the Clean Industrial Deal (CID, 2025). The documents are treated as institutional products that reflect both public policy orientations and discursive constructions of the industrial transition.

The study contributes to the literature on: the transformation of European industrial policy; the relationship between sustainability and competitiveness; the analysis of institutional discourse in the EU. In addition, the research provides insight into how discourse becomes a strategic tool for managing tensions between climate objectives and industrial pressures. In a geopolitical context characterized by technological competition and green protectionism, understanding this dynamic is essential for assessing the long-term coherence of the European industrial project.

The article is structured in six sections – the first section, the introductory one, provides the framework and motivation for the research; the second section provides an overview of the specialized literature on industrial policy and its associated discourse; the third section presents the research design and methodology; the fourth section proposes an analysis of the rhetoric behind the three industrial policy documents – SI (2021); GDIP (2023); CID (2025); the fifth section is dedicated to reflections on the changing narrative of industrial policy; and the paper concludes with the conclusions and implications for future industrial policies.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The traditional industrial policy of the European Union has historically focused on increasing competitiveness, technological innovation and adapting to structural changes in the market economy (Council of the European Union, 2024). However, in the context of the EU's climate ambitions, this policy is taking on a “green” dimension, oriented towards decarbonisation, climate neutrality and sustainability. The literature treats this transformation both as a conceptual evolution and as a change in public policy discourse and practices. In the context of climate challenges and the transition towards a sustainable economy, the concept of “green industrial policy” has become central to research on the European Union's development strategies. The term reflects efforts to reorient traditional industrial policies – focused on competitiveness and productivity – towards objectives of decarbonisation, energy efficiency and eco-innovation (Smith & Timmer, 2020). The literature highlights both the theoretical foundations of green industrial policy and the implementation mechanisms within the European framework.

At a general level, the concept of integration is understood as a multidimensional process that combines structural integration (labor market, education), cultural integration (language, values), social integration (relationships and participation) and identificational integration. Some authors emphasize structural components as central indicators of integration, while others distinguish between integration at the legal-political, socio-economic and cultural-religious levels (Cutoi, 2025: 27-18).

Conceptually, the notion of “green industrial policy” combines industrial traditions with environmental objectives, involving government interventions designed to stimulate the development of low-emission technologies and vice versa, reducing emissions through sectoral support (Rodrik, 2015). Although Rodrik (2015) argues that traditional principles of industrial intervention remain valid, the shift to green technologies requires institutional adaptations that respond to both economic efficiency and climate imperatives.

A significant body of work discusses the roots and evolution of the concept in the economic literature. Poli (2018) argues that green industrial policy is not a complete break with classical industrial policies, but an extension aimed at internalizing the external costs of production and encouraging activities with low environmental impact. The authors thus highlight a convergence between endogenous growth theory and economic arguments on market failures associated with climate change (Jones & Klenow, 2019). At the EU level, a significant body of literature analyses the policy strategies and instruments that structure the green approach. The European Green Deal strategy, launched in 2019, is often cited as a benchmark for the detailed formulation of climate objectives and their integration into key industrial sectors (European Commission, 2019; Weber & Rohrer, 2021). Researchers highlight the role of the Just Transition Mechanism and sustainable financing schemes (e.g. the NextGenerationEU Recovery

Plan) as concrete examples of policies aimed at reducing regional disparities and supporting green reindustrialization (Mazzucato & Semieniuk, 2018; Becker et al., 2022).

According to the literature, a common feature of all definitions of industrial policy is that it refers to “government policies, which aim to affect the structure of an economy, generating benefits for society” (Taglapietra and Veugelers, 2019). New trends in studies on industrial policy, called “new industrial policy”, emphasise that industrial policy should have objectives beyond short-term competitiveness and economic growth; it should have a broader, multidimensional objective that can be captured by the notion of long-term social well-being (Taglapietra and Veugelers, 2019).

The delineation of a “green” version of industrial policy becomes necessary once decarbonisation is established as a primary societal objective, as the EU has done through the EGD. Taglapietra and Veugelers (2019) introduce an interesting vision of green industrial policy, according to which: while the objective of climate policy is decarbonisation and the objective of (new) industrial policy is social well-being, green/green industrial policy needs to reconcile the objectives of decarbonising the economy (such as climate policy) and social well-being (such as industrial policy). According to Taglapietra and Veugelers (2019), this combination of objectives immediately highlights the challenge of green industrial policy: meeting both objectives simultaneously – a task that becomes particularly difficult when they are in conflict, when compromises must be made, or when one of the objectives is not met. Green industrial policy must also take into account “market failures in climate terms”, the main of which is that GHGs are a side effect of economic activities. However, those responsible for their generation do not pay the related costs. Moreover, according to the authors, green industrial policy requires implementing specific instruments that go beyond classic industrial policy measures; these instruments need not be new, but they must be adapted to fit a green industrial policy.

Also, drawing on previous studies on industrial policy, Lucchese and Pianta (2020) argue that a more ambitious industrial strategy for Europe is essential to develop a combined set of policies that steer Europe's investments towards environmentally sustainable activities, manage structural change and ensure equity of economic outcomes across countries and regions (a perspective also shared in the studies of Pollin (2017) and Pettifor (2019)). The green transition of the industrial sector will entail a reorganization of institutions and their governance, as well as of production and technological processes, and even of technologies themselves, which will represent a real challenge at the level of the EU and its Member States - as Rodrik (2014) has pointed out, “the challenge of climate change directly affects the basic structure of national economies and places industrial policy squarely on the policy agenda of governments”.

Another important point concerns the institutional dimension and governance. According to Laponche (2021), the effectiveness of green industrial policy depends on the capacity of European institutions to coordinate transnational actions, harmonise environmental standards, and mobilise both the public and private sectors. However, critics highlight the risks of “greenwashing” and the fragility of implementation, especially in Member States with low institutional capacities (Van den Bergh, 2020).

Finally, emerging literature emphasises the socio-economic impact of the green transition. Empirical studies suggest that green industrial policies can generate new business and employment opportunities, but can also increase tensions in traditional labour markets (Fankhauser et al., 2021). Critical perspectives warn of the need for a



balance between climate ambitions and social coherence to prevent polarisation and inequality (Böhringer & Rutherford, 2022).

A distinct dimension of this literature is discourse analysis, which explores how public policies are formulated, legitimised, and communicated. Discourse analyses on EGD reveal that the EU's institutional discourse favours the legitimisation of sustainability in political terms, but can overwhelm or even contradict critical social science perspectives on sustainability (Eckert & Kovalevska, 2021). Thus, key elements such as “climate neutrality” or “green transition”, “net-zero industry”, become discursive tools that shape the policy framework, but also public and academic perceptions of what an effective green industrial policy entails.

The importance of discourse analysis in this field stems from its ability to identify the conflict between traditional economic narratives — focused on competitiveness — and ecological narratives — oriented towards sustainability — and to highlight the role of political actors, institutions, and interests that shape policy formulation and implementation (Eckert & Kovalevska, 2021). Thus, contemporary literature suggests that a truly “green” version of EU industrial policy is not merely a set of economic measures but a discursive and institutional device that negotiates economic, technological, and ecological priorities in a complex geopolitical context. Overall, the literature provides a robust analytical framework for understanding green industrial policy as a multidimensional process: combining classical industrial theories with the objectives of the ecological transition and using methodological tools such as discourse analysis to decipher not only what policies are promoted, but also how they are constructed and their legitimacy in public and institutional discourse.

### 3. DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative strategy, drawing on methods such as document and discourse analysis, to examine the evolution of the European Union's strategic framework for industrial policy between 2021 and 2025. The study is based on the comparative analysis of three official documents of the European Commission: The updated EU Industrial Strategy (2021), the Green Deal Industrial Plan (2023), and the Clean Industrial Deal (2025).

Document analysis examines the normative content, stated objectives, proposed instruments, and thematic priorities. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic method for reviewing and interpreting official documents, enabling the identification of recurring themes and the conceptual framework of public policies. Procedurally, the analysis included identifying dominant themes (e.g., transition, green industry, competitiveness, resilience, net-zero, strategic autonomy); coding key terms; comparing the structures of policy objectives and instruments; and identifying changes in priorities across documents. The analysis was guided by the literature on paradigmatic shifts in public policies (Hall, 1993), looking at whether the documents indicate incremental adjustments or paradigmatic transformations in European industrial policy.

To capture the symbolic and rhetorical dimensions of industrial policy, the research draws on elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and on the model used by Eckert and Kovalevska (2021), which analyses the Green Deal discourse through the lens of sustainability and the narrative construction of transition.

Critical discourse analysis is a research strategy designed to reveal its “hidden” agenda and objectives and to identify the themes around which a topic is built, as well as those it avoids. In the current scientific approach, the analysis has become a way of

discovering what the new industrial policy implied when it was established as a political program by the European Commission. The analysis was mainly directed at the language addressed in the main documents on industrial policy, examining the content of the first industrial policy strategy, the post-strategy industrial plan, and the Clean Industry Pact, respectively, through phraseology, concepts, keywords and sentence patterns. Particular attention was paid to the phrases introduced to industry-related concepts, the registers that feed the content, and the style used to represent it. A series of keywords was identified and quantified, together with their contexts, assuming that any text can be characterised by its key linguistic units (cf. Eckert and Kovalevska, 2021; Stubbs, 2001; Fidler & Václav, 2018). The distribution of grammatical structures was analysed, and recurrent verbs, noun phrases, patterns and sentence constructions that mark the agents of specific actions were observed. The linguistic research falls within studies of critical linguistics and discourse analysis (Cohen, 2010; Fairclough, 2001; Nichols, 2007; van Dijk, 2008) and is based on recent research on discourse in the green industry. Also, following the model of Eckert and Kovalevska, textual analyses (including percentage counts of grammatical patterns, influence, and other textual features) and word category analyses were performed to identify words associated with certain concepts. After analyzing the text of SI, GDIP and CID, the most relevant results were manually selected, which allowed to outline a picture of how the key theme of the European future in relation to green industry was presented and developed in the documents, what were the critical concepts supporting it and in what ways its content opened the way to a reflection on the concept of net-zero industry.

The discursive analysis focused on the following dimensions:

a) Keywords and semantic fields: identifying the frequency and centrality of concepts such as "industry", "clean", "resilience", "net-zero", "competitiveness", "green", etc. These were analysed as indicators of the dominant regulatory framework.

b) Dominant message and narrative: it was observed whether the documents build a narrative of climate emergency, a narrative of economic opportunity, or a narrative of protecting European industry.

c) In the sense proposed by Hajer (1995), the analysis aimed at how the discourse creates "storylines" capable of coagulating political consensus.

d) Language and rhetoric: the type of language used was analysed: technocratic, mobilising, pragmatic, defensive.

e) Addressing and target audience: the analysis assessed to whom the discourse is addressed: industrial actors, investors, Member States, and European citizens. This dimension is relevant in the framework of discursive institutionalism, where legitimacy depends on the capacity of the discourse to build coherence between the ideational and institutional levels (Schmidt, 2008).

Combining document analysis with discourse analysis is appropriate for the study of green industrial policy, as it is not only a set of economic instruments, but also a normative project of societal transformation. The literature shows that climate and industrial policies are strongly dependent on discursive legitimacy and the capacity to build narrative consensus (Eckert & Kovalevska, 2021; Schmidt, 2008). Therefore, the adopted methodology allows the capture of both the material dimension (instruments, financing, regulation) and the symbolic dimension (narratives, legitimacy, strategic framing).

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

In recent years, the European Union has progressively revised its industrial policy framework to respond simultaneously to the global challenges of competitiveness, climate change and economic security. From the 2021 update of the Industrial Strategy, continuing with the Green Deal Industrial Plan (2023) and culminating in the Clean Industrial Deal (2025), the EU's industrial policy reflects a dynamic discourse, combining environmental objectives with concerns for economic resilience. This section summarises the main features of these documents. It provides an analysis from a discourse perspective, examining key words, dominant messages, rhetoric, and the way the target audience is addressed.

##### *Context and objectives of the EU Industrial Strategy (2021)*

The European Union Industrial Strategy updated in May 2021 reflects the institutional response to recent crises – in particular the COVID-19 pandemic – and aims to transform European industry into a driver of sustainable growth, innovation and competitiveness in a globalised economy (European Commission, 2021). The updated document highlights the need to accelerate the green and digital transitions, strengthen the resilience of the internal market, and reduce strategic global dependencies (e.g., in raw materials and technology), while also supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, which are essential for European industrial dynamics.

The main themes of the strategy include: resilience and strategic autonomy – reducing vulnerabilities to disruptions in global supply chains; green and digital transition – technological transformation of traditional industries; global competitiveness – supporting innovation and financial support measures for key industrial ecosystems; addressing recent crises – the pandemic and economic disruptions have highlighted the need for proactive industrial policies (European Commission, 2021).

This initial strategic framework serves as the conceptual basis for later, more specific plans for decarbonisation and industrial competitiveness. The strategy document reflects a vision that combines traditional economic objectives (increasing competitiveness) with new sustainability imperatives, thus providing a framework for reindustrialisation in a sustainable manner.

The 2021 strategy is descriptive and adaptive, focusing on lessons learned from the crisis and prioritising industrial policies aligned with the EGD and digitalisation objectives. It can be noted, however, that the emphasis on resilience can be vague, without specific implementation and measurement tools.

The language of the 2021 EU industrial strategies is normative-programmatic, focused on terms such as “resilience”, “competitiveness”, and “digital and green transition”. The dominant message is one of balance between ecological transformation and economic modernisation, addressed primarily to public decision-makers and strategic economic actors in the EU. According to the literature on European industrial policy, this alignment reflects global trends in modern industrial policies, combining sustainability objectives with traditional economic imperatives (Oehler-Şincai, 2022).

##### *Green Deal Industrial Plan (2023): focus on net-zero technologies*

The Green Deal Industrial Plan, launched in 2023, introduces a more specific instrument to accelerate the industrial transformation towards climate neutrality. The Green Deal Industrial Plan has a clearer mandate focused on the net-zero industrial transition and on strengthening production capacity for clean technologies. The document highlights four essential “pillars” for increasing competitiveness in the net-zero technology sector: a predictable, simplified regulatory framework, rapid access to

finance, skills development, and resilient supply chains. Key components include: simpler regulations to reduce administrative burden and accelerate project implementation; financing and support for scale-up in clean tech sectors; addressing skills through education and training; opening up external markets and resilient supply chains (e.g. critical raw materials).

The message of the plan is very similar to that of the 2021 Strategy. However, it emphasises the role of net-zero technologies as a competitive advantage and not just a regulatory challenge. The European Commission sees this plan as a “once-in-a-generation opportunity” to position European industry at the forefront of net-zero technologies, while supporting job creation and innovation (European Commission, 2023).

The distinctive element of this plan is the proactive orientation towards the industrialisation of clean technologies, in the context of intense global competition, for example with the United States and China (through measures such as the Net-Zero Industry Act and the Critical Raw Materials Act). However, the literature is divided on the effectiveness of the instruments and the risks associated with excessive deregulation in practice. Critics argue that there are tensions between the simplification of regulations and the demands of sustainability, especially for SMEs (Financial Times, 2024).

The language of the GDIP is much more ambitious and visionary than that of the 2021 strategy. Terms such as “global leadership”, “green tech revolution”, and “scaling up” reflect not only a commitment to sustainability but also to strengthening the EU’s position on the world stage. The message is built around the idea that sustainability and industrial competitiveness are not contradictory, but complementary – a rhetoric frequently analysed in the literature on industrial transformation strategies (Eckert & Kovalevska, 2021). This approach is likely to appeal to technology companies and investors, emphasising “economic opportunity” rather than just “moral obligation”.

*Clean Industrial Deal (2025): from strategy to concrete measures*

In February 2025, the European Commission adopted the Clean Industrial Deal, a more detailed and practical plan for industrial transformation, with a strong focus on competitiveness, decarbonisation, affordable energy and financing (European Commission, 2025).

Key elements include: access to cheaper energy and the acceleration of clean energy; stimulating demand for clean products (including public and private procurement criteria); dedicated financing – a new state aid framework, a potential “industrial decarbonisation bank” and budgetary provisions of over €100 billion; circularity and access to critical materials; developing skills and quality jobs; reducing bureaucracy and increasing coordination between political levels. CID is often presented as a “growth engine” and a response to global competitive challenges – especially from China and the United States – but also as a tool to turn decarbonization into a strategic advantage (Reuters, 2025).

Compared to the Green Deal Industrial Plan, the CID places a more explicit emphasis on: global competitiveness (e.g. significant financial support and local procurement criteria), affordable energy as an economic foundation for the competitiveness of European industries, financing innovation and accelerating technological deployment.

Independent evaluations point to the challenges of rapid adoption, the fragmentation of national policies, and the risk that some measures benefit polluting industries without strict controls. Civil society and environmental experts have raised

concerns about the dilution of reporting requirements and the possible maintenance of fossil fuel dependency in certain segments.

The CID discourse combines pragmatic economic elements with green themes, but places greater emphasis on “global competitiveness”, “affordable energy costs”, and “support for traditional industries”. The language tends to be more instrumental than that of the GDIP, addressing not only eco-innovators but also traditional sectors of the European economy facing severe competitive pressures. This shift reflects a rhetorical adjustment towards a wider audience, including traditional economic actors and regions with energy-intensive industries. Journalistic analyses indicate a tense discourse between maintaining climate goals and regulatory concessions for heavy industry sectors (The Guardian, 2025).

#### *The evolution of the discourse on industrial policy*

For an analysis of the discourse on the axes of keywords, language, message and rhetoric, we can identify recurring elements:

##### *i. Keywords and meanings*

- Competitiveness – appears constantly in all documents, emphasising the EU’s ability to compete on the global stage (European Commission, 2021;2023; 2025).
- Decarbonization / clean energy / net-zero – symbolises not only a climate target, but also a driver of innovation and economic growth in the political discourse (European Commission, 2021;2023; 2025).
- Circularity – appears as an integral part of the “clean economy” and long-term competitiveness (European Commission, 2021;2023; 2025).
- Resilience – this concept acts as a link between the lessons of recent crises and the need for industrial policy adaptation (European Commission, 2021;2023; 2025).

##### *ii. Language and rhetoric*

The EU’s official discourse presents a positive, solution-oriented rhetoric, using terms such as “growth”, “prosperity”, “quality jobs” and “innovation”. The CID plan, for example, emphasises that decarbonisation is not just a regulatory obligation but an “engine for growth” and a means of creating conditions for economic prosperity (European Commission, 2025). Similarly, the 2021 and 2023 plans emphasise both economic resilience and structural transformations, reflecting a rhetoric aimed at reducing negative perceptions of technological change and building consensus on the “green component” of industry.

##### *iii. Addressing and targeting*

The discourse is aimed at multiple audiences:

- national governments – through support in implementation;
- economic actors/industry – through promises of financing and simplified regulatory framework;
- the general public/citizens – through promises of quality jobs and cheaper energy;
- external partners – through emphasis on global competitiveness and strategic autonomy.

The evolution from the Industrial Strategy 2021 to the Green Deal Plan 2023 and the Clean Industrial Deal 2025 shows a coherence in the vision of industrial transformation, but also a “maturation” of the policy instruments – from general strategic guidelines, to concrete financial measures and regulation. The EU’s political discourse is

based on a dual rhetoric: combining the commitment to climate neutrality with the need to protect and develop the competitiveness of European industry in an increasingly challenging global environment.

For each of the three strategies analyzed, certain semantic and communication features are highlighted (see table 1).

**Table 1** Keywords and language

| Aspect                  | 2021 (Strategia UE)                                | 2023 (GDIP)                                | 2025 (CID)                                            |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Keywords</b>         | resilience, digital, green, competitiveness        | net-zero, green tech, leadership, scale up | clean, competitiveness, energy costs, decarbonization |
| <b>Dominant message</b> | balance between sustainability and economic growth | rapid and global industrial transformation | pragmatic support for industry and decarbonization    |
| <b>Language</b>         | programmatic/formative                             | visionary/ambitious                        | pragmatic/strategic                                   |
| <b>Public address</b>   | policymakers and industry                          | cleantech companies, investors, innovators | traditional sectors and energy-intensive economies    |

Source: authors' design, based on European Commission, 2021; European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2025.

The comparative analysis highlights a discursive evolution from structural and generalist priorities (2021), towards an explicit language oriented towards clean technologies and global leadership (2023), and then towards a more balanced discourse between green and industrial (2025). This evolution reflects changes in the geopolitical and economic context, as well as the EU's internal pressures to maintain cohesion among its members.

#### *Messages, rhetoric, discourse*

For the discursive analysis, the literature on the political discourse of sustainability and the narrative construction of the green transition is relevant (Hajer, 1995; Eckert & Kovalevska, 2021). Eckert and Kovalevska (2021) show that the Green Deal discourse is based on three dominant elements: (1) the narrative of climate emergency; (2) the promise of green economic growth; (3) consensus building through inclusive and technocratic language.

Applying this grid to the three documents, a clear evolution is observed: Strategy 2021 builds a balanced narrative between the traditional economy and emerging transitions, using a relatively neutral and technical vocabulary. Green Deal Industrial Plan 2023 combines aspirational language ("Net-Zero Industry", "lead the clean tech revolution") with a pragmatic message about reducing barriers and accelerating investments. Clean Industrial Deal 2025 adopts a "business plan" rhetoric for industry, emphasising increased competitiveness alongside decarbonization, reflecting a hybrid discourse: ecological and pro-business.

The discursive analysis suggests an evolution from a theoretical and structural language (Strategy, 2021), to a more instrumental and implementation-oriented vocabulary (Green Deal Industrial Plan), culminating in a rhetoric in 2025 that integrates

immediate economic reasons (costs, competitiveness) alongside nominal environmental concerns. This evolution can be interpreted either as a response to external constraints (market, geopolitics) or as an adaptation of the political discourse towards a broad industrial audience. Compared with the Industrial Strategy (2021), the Green Deal Industrial Plan (2023) offers ambitious directions towards clean technologies, and the Clean Industrial Deal (2025) translates these directions into a pragmatic set of measures for competitiveness and decarbonization. The discursive analysis shows an increase in emphasis on economic competitiveness, while the commitment to sustainability remains, but is adapted to the real constraints of European industry.

Industrial Strategy 2021 – the discourse of resilience

Discursively, the Strategy 2021 is marked by:

- technocratic vocabulary (“ecosystems”, “value chains”, “financial instruments”)
- call for post-pandemic “resilience”
- emphasis on “open strategic autonomy”

The rhetoric is moderate and consensual. It is not the climate crisis narrative that dominates, but that of economic vulnerability. Applying Hajer’s (1995) terms, the document builds a broad discursive coalition while avoiding polarisation. Sustainability is integrated, but not radicalized.

This strategy corresponds to a phase of paradigmatic consolidation, in which legitimacy is built through balance and technical rationality

*Green Deal Industrial Plan 2023 – the transformative discourse*

GDIP marks a change in tone. Terms such as:

- “net-zero”
- “global leadership”
- “green industrial revolution”
- “acceleration”

The discourse becomes more mobilizing and strategic. According to Eckert and Kovalevska (2021), this type of language produces a “normalizing radical transformation” effect – systemic change is presented as inevitable and opportunistic.

A double rhetorical strategy is observed:

1. Urgency – the transition must be accelerated;
2. Opportunism – the transition generates competitive advantages.

This combination reflects what the literature calls the “ecological modernisation narrative” (Mol & Spaargaren, 2000): environmental protection is compatible with economic growth. However, from a critical perspective, this rhetoric can minimise redistributive conflicts and social costs of the transition (Blyth, 2002).

Clean Industrial Deal (2025). – the discourse of reconciliation

The CID introduces a more balanced, even defensive, discourse. Dominant terms:

- “affordable energy costs”
- “energy-intensive industries”
- “global competitiveness”
- “quality jobs”

The emphasis shifts from green leadership to maintaining the industrial base. The rhetoric is more pragmatic and more oriented towards economic cohesion. In a theoretical key, the CID can be interpreted as a discursive recalibration strategy (Schmidt, 2008), through which the Commission adapts the narrative to maintain political legitimacy in a tense geopolitical context.

Compared to the GDIP, the CID language is less idealistic and more oriented towards “transition management” than towards “revolutionary transformation”.

The evolution of the three documents can be summarised as follows:

- 2021: technocratic stabilization discourse;
- 2023: transformative and mobilizing discourse;
- 2025: pragmatic discourse of reconciliation;

This dynamic reflects what the literature on public policies calls “adaptive policy framing” (Schmidt, 2008): adjusting the narrative framework to respond to external changes (energy crises, global competition, internal pressures).

At the same time, a tension is observed between two paradigms: the “green transformation” paradigm and the “industrial competitiveness” paradigm, within which the EU seeks to discursively integrate them. Still, the balance between them changes over time.

*“Net-zero industry” – Phrases and keywords used in industry communications*

According to Cohen (2010), keyword analysis extracts the predominant concepts reported to a reference point. To evaluate the keywords relevant to “green industry”, following the model applied by Cohen in another field, thirty keywords of the Industrial Strategy (2021), the GDIP Communication, respectively the CID, were quantified, their context was considered, and then the first ten were chosen, which proved to be predominant. In descending order, the keywords identified in the tables (see table 2, table 3, table 4), are followed by the number of occurrences within the text, and by their percentage, by a report on the total number of words. Given that the total number of words of each document, the percentage was calculated by multiplying the number of occurrences by one hundred and dividing the result by the total number of words.

The most frequent and repeated words were: industry/industrial; net-zero; green; clean, energy; technology/technologies/technological; qualification/requalification; plan(s); development/in development; trade; transition; investments; economy/economic; financing.

**Table 2.** Keywords associated with the green transition – A new Industrial Strategy for Europe (2021)

| <b>Keywords</b>                   | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Industry</b>                   | 92               | 1,06%             |
| <b>Technology</b>                 | 38               | 0,43%             |
| <b>Transition</b>                 | 34               | 0,39%             |
| <b>Investment</b>                 | 31               | 0,35%             |
| <b>Economy/economic</b>           | 27               | 0,31%             |
| <b>Competitiveness</b>            | 27               | 0,31%             |
| <b>Green</b>                      | 25               | 0,28%             |
| <b>Sustainable/sustainability</b> | 22               | 0,25%             |
| <b>Plan</b>                       | 20               | 0,23%             |
| <b>Development</b>                | 19               | 0,21%             |

*Source:* Authors’ design, based on European Commission, 2021; Butișcă, 2023.



The new industrial strategy (2021) relies on the fact that EU industry must play a leading role in achieving the climate neutrality objective: “European industry must play a leading role in the ecological transition”, “this strategy lays the foundations for an industrial policy that will support the twin transition, make EU industry more competitive globally and strengthen Europe’s strategic autonomy”, etc. The industrial strategy also relies on “net-zero technologies” presented as “disruptive technologies”, “qualification”, “innovation” or “competition”. The strategy identifies broad objectives (e.g. open strategic autonomy), but the concrete implementation mechanisms are not always clearly explained, which risks leaving interpretation at the political or technocratic level. This observation reflects Eckert and Kovalevska’s (2021) idea that discourse can have performative value — to influence perception and legitimize institutions — without guaranteeing real transformations.

**Table 3.** Keywords associated with the transition to green industry – GDIP (2023)

| <b>Keywords</b>                                 | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Industry/industrial</b>                      | 85               | 0,81%             |
| <b>Net-zero</b>                                 | 82               | 0,78%             |
| <b>Green</b>                                    | 74               | 0,70%             |
| <b>Energy</b>                                   | 68               | 0,64%             |
| <b>Technology/<br/>technologies/technologic</b> | 63               | 0,60%             |
| <b>Qualification/re-<br/>qualification</b>      | 58               | 0,55%             |
| <b>Plan(s)</b>                                  | 47               | 0,44%             |
| <b>Development/<br/>developing</b>              | 46               | 0,43%             |
| <b>Transition</b>                               | 45               | 0,42%             |
| <b>Clean</b>                                    | 30               | 0,28%             |

*Source:* Authors’ design, based on European Commission, 2021; Butișcă, 2023.

In the case of GDIP, the word “industry/industrial” appeared 85 times (0.81%), especially in established expressions such as “net-zero industry”, “European industry”, “green industry”, “industrial transformation”, “industrial revolution”, etc. “net-zero” was also extremely frequent (it appeared 82 times, at a percentage of 0.78%), especially in expressions such as: “net-zero industry”, “net-zero technologies”, “net-zero products”, “net-zero economy”, etc. The words “green”, “energy”, “technologies”, “qualification/requalification” (presented in the context of the green, just transition that leaves no one behind) were also very frequent. Judging by the number of words and the meaning of certain established expressions, the most important themes of the “net-zero industry” turned out to be “transition”, “transformation”, “challenge”, “plan”, “measure”, “regulation” or “technological change”, which supported meanings associated not only with the industry but also with the economic sector and the business environment.

A distinct topic of the GDIP register, and particularly addressed within the PEE (which, as mentioned, underpins the GDIP), is that of “economic transformation/growth” (“the economic shape of the net-zero era will be firmly established”), which conceptually stands in the way of the sustainability that the EU is pursuing.

Other meanings of the keywords were adjusted similarly, for example, “economy” became “green”, “clean”, and “circular”, to be implemented through a “new circular economy action plan”.

**Table 4:** Keywords associated with the green transition – CID (2025)

| Keywords         | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------|-----------|------------|
| Clean            | 107       | 0,85%      |
| Industry         | 83        | 0,66%      |
| Investment       | 62        | 0,49%      |
| Economy/economic | 56        | 0,44%      |
| Transition       | 50        | 0,39%      |
| Technology       | 48        | 0,38%      |
| Circular         | 40        | 0,31%      |
| Competitiveness  | 35        | 0,27%      |
| Resilient        | 24        | 0,19%      |
| Green            | 9         | 0,07%      |

*Source:* Authors’ design, based on European Commission, 2025.

As for the CID, the keyword is “clean”, which appears in the text of the 107th Communication, in structures such as “clean industry”, “clean energy”, “clean production”, “clean transition”, “clean technology”, etc. The CID uses terms such as “clean”, “competitive”, “circular” and “resilience” — a vocabulary similar to that of the EGD — which can be interpreted more as a rhetorical framework for political legitimisation than as a guarantee of actual results. The emphasis on economic growth and competitiveness (at the same time as environmental terms) may favour the maintenance of the existing economic structure over a fundamental change in the mode of production and consumption — a structural tension that critics of the EGD have already highlighted.

**5. DISCUSSION**

Between 2021 and 2025, the European Union’s institutional discourse on industrial policy has evolved significantly, reflecting major geopolitical, economic, and climate changes: the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis generated by the war in Ukraine, global industrial competition (USA–China), and the acceleration of the green transition. The comparative analysis of the updated Industrial Strategy (2021), the Green Deal Industrial Plan (2023) and the Clean Industrial Deal (2025) highlight a gradual transformation of the discursive framework – from a predominantly technocratic-structural narrative to a pragmatic-competitive one, with transformative-strategic accents.

Starting from the discursive perspective proposed by Eckert and Kovalevska (2021), which emphasises the role of institutional language in building legitimacy and configuring the political agenda, the present analysis examines: (1) the modification of keywords and semantic associations, (2) the reconfiguration of dominant narratives, and (3) the type of legitimacy constructed through discourse.

The political communication of the European Union’s industrial strategies constitutes a complex field, in which European institutions not only announce policies but also construct a political discourse aimed at mobilising public support, consolidating institutional legitimacy, and positioning the EU as a global actor. This communication is

not limited to the transmission of information, but includes the semantic construction of key concepts, such as "competitiveness", "climate neutrality", "green and digital transition" or "global leadership".

In 2021, the EU Industrial Strategy, updated after the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthened the objectives of global competitiveness, internal market resilience, and strategic autonomy, emphasising the dual objectives of the green and digital transitions.→ Subsequently, in 2023 and 2025, the EU introduced two major communications, the Green Deal Industrial Plan and the Clean Industrial Deal, which transform these objectives into concrete policies, communicating a proactive vision of European industrial transformation.

A central element of political communication is the selection and repetition of certain terms, which create thematic frames through which the public shapes the understanding of political reality.

For the Industrial Strategy 2021, frequent terms include "strategic autonomy", "internal market", "value chains", "green and digital transition", "SMEs", "industrial ecosystems", "competitiveness", "innovation", "resilience" and "quality jobs". These are used to connect the EU economy to social values and to the European project as such. The discourse builds a semantic network centred on the idea of internal consolidation and systemic protection. "Strategic autonomy" is consistently associated with "openness", avoiding protectionist connotations and positioning the EU as a balanced actor in a globalised economy.

The main narrative is one of structural recovery and consolidation after the pandemic crisis. European industry is presented as the foundation of prosperity and green transition, but the emphasis is on systemic adaptive capacity.

The rhetoric behind the Industrial Strategy emphasises technical formulations; frequent nominalisations ("competitiveness", "diversification", "digitalisation"); modal verbs ("must", "shall strengthen", "shall support"); language of systemic management.

The central actor is the EU as a guarantor of stability, and the type of legitimacy is predominantly technocratic (Scharpf, 1999). Legitimacy is based on institutional expertise, economic analysis, strategic coordination, and public policy instruments. The discourse conveys the idea that the EU knows how to manage global complexity. Power is justified by competence. The 2021 discourse mainly builds a technocratic legitimacy: the use of dense, conceptualised language; the predominance of nominalisations ("digitalisation", "integration", "diversification"); the centrality of expertise and the normative framework. The EU institutions present themselves as the architects of structural stability, and legitimacy derives from technical competence and coordination capacity.

In the Green Deal Industrial Plan (2023), the discourse emphasizes "net-zero technologies", "clean technologies", "acceleration", "simplification", "investment", "global leadership", "competition", "clean energy", "quality jobs", "access to finance", "simplified framework" and "global leadership in clean technologies". Thus, a positive narrative is built, oriented towards economic opportunities and structural transformation. The technical terms of 2021 are partially replaced by a vocabulary more oriented towards action and urgency. Dynamic verbs ("to accelerate", "to boost", "to strengthen") become more frequent.

The rhetoric behind the GDIP focuses on: more mobilising energy; a call for urgency ("race to net-zero"); combining climate language with that of the market; the

constant association between “decarbonization” and “growth”; and the idea of “Europe will lead the global transition”.

The narrative becomes one of geopolitical opportunity. The green transition is no longer just a climate necessity, but a strategic opportunity for global repositioning. The discourse creates a direct link between decarbonization and industrial competitiveness. Thus, the Green Deal Industrial Plan transforms the climate agenda into an offensive industrial project.

Regarding the type of legitimacy: transformative + technocratic (Burns, 1978; Scharpf, 1999) - the discourse does not just administer reality; it redefines it. Legitimacy derives from: the EU's capacity to transform the economy; the historical mission of the climate transition; the discourse evokes the future (“future-proof economy”, “next generation industries”); the moral role of Europe in combating climate change. A normative identity is built: Europe as a responsible and visionary actor.

In the Clean Industrial Deal (2025), the communication shifts the focus to terms such as “clean industry”, “decarbonization”, “low energy costs”, “global competition”, “circularity”, “€100 billion financing” and “competitive industrial ecosystem”.

The dominant narrative becomes one of economic realism. The green transition is maintained, but integrated into a discourse about burden reduction, investment stability, and immediate global competitiveness.

The rhetoric is less idealistic and more oriented towards concrete solutions. The CID rhetoric envisages a more direct language; less idealistic rhetoric; emphasis on “feasibility”, “implementation”, “concrete instruments”; frequent combination of the terms “clean” + “competitive”. A reduction in the symbolic dimension and an increase in the instrumental dimension are observed. The type of legitimacy is pragmatic (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010), and economic efficiency, measurable results, the protection of European industry, and a response to global competition justify power. It is no longer just about vision or expertise, but the capacity to deliver tangible results. EU institutions legitimise their actions through the capacity to produce tangible results in a competitive environment.

An adaptive discursive dynamic is observed: from internal consolidation (2021), to strategic mobilisation (2023), to competitive realism (2025).

In the terms of Eckert and Kovalevska (2021), this evolution demonstrates how institutional discourse functions as a tool for adjusting legitimacy according to context. Language is not neutral; it shapes perceptions of priorities and redefines the EU's role in the global economic order.

The communication of these policies is structured on several levels of address:

a) Political and institutional leadership:

The speeches are often anchored by statements from the President of the European Commission or other leaders, who position the initiatives as expressions of “European leadership” in the industrial and climate transition. The messages emphasise the EU's role as a global leader in clean technologies and innovation, trying to create political and emotional legitimacy around these projects.

b) Multiple addresses:

The target audience is diverse: from Member States and international partners, to private industry, civil society and citizens. Terms such as “quality jobs”, “financing”, and “investment opportunities” are used to generate cross-cutting support.

c) Consensus mobilisation:

The communication includes calls for institutional and social cooperation, reflecting not only a persuasive technique, but also a semi-normative framework of European public dialogue, in which the emphasis is on consensus and co-construction.

The discursive style of official EU communications is generally formal, technical and prescriptive, characterised by: complex sentences with multiple subordinate clauses linking strategic objectives to concrete actions; modal and intention verbs (“must”, “will support”, “will promote”), which communicate both commitments and future directions; frequent use of nominalisations (e.g. “competitiveness”, “decarbonisation”, “financing”) to focus the discourse on concepts rather than actors. This creates a dense, abstract symbolic register that favours institutional authority.

This style is effective for official policy documents, but can create obstacles to the accessibility of communication and direct engagement with the general public.

Eckert & Kovalevska (2021) provide a critical framework for discursive analysis that reveals how political discourse, through the choice of certain terms, lexicon, and structures, legitimises institutional power and shapes the agenda. The authors show that, in the case of the European Green Deal, the discourse emphasises the EU as an expert and leader, using a technical language that can distance the general public. Applying this perspective to industrial strategies, we can similarly observe that the discourses of these communications: construct the EU as a central and legitimate actor in the industrial, ecological and digital transitions; create strong connections between economic competitiveness and climate policies, which can hide tensions between social/participatory objectives and economic logic; use a technical register that can reflect institutional orientations rather than the immediate needs of citizens.

The keywords mentioned above are frequently associated in the EU discourse to form positive metaframes: “green transition” + “economic opportunities”, “global competitiveness” + “innovation and jobs”, “decarbonization” + “sustainable growth”.

These associations contribute to a narrative in which sustainability is integral to economic progress, and they also reflect the academic critique of the “ecological modernisation discourse” — a dominant way of expressing environmental policies through the lens of the market and technology.

Words, phrases, metaphors, and sentence patterns mediate intended messages, aiming to highlight or marginalise a subject, emphasise or marginalise an agenda, and gain the trust of the audience (Stubbs, 2001). Naming central concepts for a subject, relexicalizing words, giving them innovative meanings, and using euphemisms are strategies for improving a certain social reality (Stubbs, 2001). Moreover, the constant repetition of phraseological patterns and collocations prioritises and fixes meanings in the minds of speakers and establishes habits that lead to thinking about certain problems.

Linguistic analysis shows that the EU has constructed a discourse on “net-zero industry” and has used certain keywords, established expressions and grammatical patterns to support its traditional agenda and prioritise certain familiar topics (Butișcă, 2023). Communication does not deviate from these in any major direction; as a result, the transition of the industrial sector remains a key topic that must be discussed in Europe by the institutions of power that mediate knowledge and seek to position readers to support it. By doing so, the EU promotes its “hegemony” and controls the public discourse and, implicitly, the “consumers” of the discourse. Given the current power structure, it will be difficult for the EU to manage these topics, despite the revolutionary approach to industrial policy. The results clearly show that it has opted for the language of business, institutional diplomacy, and language specific to economic or technological

fields to communicate to the public the future of the net-zero industry (Butișcă, 2023). Linguistic analysis highlighted that the established expressions, concepts, keywords and grammatical patterns of the register supported the traditional agenda of supporting the EU as a coordinating institution (Butișcă, 2023). The complexity of the lexicon, the lack of clarity in the transfer of meanings and the ambiguity support the institutional/administrative character, rather than the public character of the communication. The choice of words, established phrases, metaphors, and sentence patterns mediated the intended messages of communication, highlighted or avoided topics or agendas, and helped gain the trust of the audience (Butișcă, 2023). Naming the central concepts of the topic, relexicalizing familiar words by endowing them with innovative meanings, and using euphemisms were also strategies used to improve a particular social reality.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The research aimed to identify how the EU is redefining industrial policy in a context marked by the tension between climate ambition and economic and geopolitical constraints.

Answering the first research question, the EU's industrial policy from 2021 to 2025 reflects a complex discursive and strategic trajectory in which sustainability and economic competitiveness priorities intertwine and redefine one another. The 2021 Industrial Strategy laid the foundations for the twin transition, the 2023 GDIP pushed for net-zero ambitions and international leadership in clean technologies, and the 2025 CID adopts a more pragmatic tone, addressing both traditional and emerging industries. From a discursive perspective, the language evolves from normative to visionary and then to strategic, adapting to a diverse audience – from institutions and innovators to traditional industrial sectors. The 2021 discourse reflects this positioning by using a technocratic language and is oriented towards “industrial ecosystems”, “resilience” and “strategic autonomy”. In the logic of public policy theory (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003), the document operates at the level of a “policy paradigm shift”, reconfiguring the objectives of industrial intervention from purely economic competitiveness towards sustainable structural transformation. The Green Deal Industrial Plan (2023) radicalises this approach, approaching the “transformative industrial policy” model described in the literature on socio-technical transitions (Weber & Rohrer, 2012). The “net-zero industry” discourse introduces an explicitly normative dimension: not just modernisation, but the reconfiguration of energy and productive systems. The Clean Industrial Deal (2025), on the other hand, seems to rebalance the paradigm towards a more pragmatic approach, close to the concept of “embedded autonomy” (Evans, 1995): the state maintains the strategic direction, but adapts the instruments to maintain the support of traditional industrial actors.

In response to the second research question, the comparative and discursive analysis highlights that the EU industrial policy between 2021 and 2025 is not just an evolution of instruments, but a transformation of the narrative framework. The 2021 Strategy consolidates the double transition in a technocratic and consensual framework. The GDIP radicalises ambition, using a mobilising and strategic language. The CID introduces a pragmatic dimension, reconciling climate objectives with industrial realities. The political discourse of European industrial policy between 2021 and 2025 is not static, but reflects a continuous strategic recalibration. If the 2021 Industrial Strategy consolidates a technocratic legitimacy based on expertise and coordination, the Green

Deal Industrial Plan introduces a transformative legitimacy, centred on global leadership and structural change. Finally, the Clean Industrial Deal crystallises a pragmatic legitimacy, anchored in efficiency, competitiveness and immediate economic results. Thus, the EU institutional discourse is evolving from a predominantly administrative model to a strategic-mobilising one and subsequently to a pragmatic-economic register, demonstrating the capacity of political communication to adapt sources of legitimacy according to historical context and systemic pressures.

The transition to a climate-neutral industry will therefore be a defining task. The challenges are numerous, but they also bring opportunities for growth and efficiency through synergies with industry, the development of innovation hubs, and global leadership. The efforts led by EU industry have been vast so far. However, their continuation will require a dynamic EU industrial policy, comprising an ambitious industrial strategy, together with a mission-oriented EEP that supports and multiplies industry's efforts. A successful industrial transition in the EU would not only provide a credible path for the rest of the world. However, it would also make a historic contribution to the global fight against climate change.

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## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INDUSTRIAL AGGLOMERATIONS IN THE CHŪBU REGION DURING THE MEIJI PERIOD. A QUANTITATIVE EXAMINATION THROUGH NETWORK AND STATISTICAL ANALYSES

Masamichi TAKAGI\*  
Nobumichi WATAHIKI\*\*  
Luiza GATAN\*\*\*  
Cristian VLAD\*\*\*\*

**Abstract.** *This study seeks to elucidate the developmental disparities between Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City—both regional industrial centres and clusters that prospered during the Meiji period—by comparing the structural and statistical characteristics of their entrepreneurial networks.*

*The significance of this research lies in its comparative examination of the divergent developmental trajectories of individual cities within Japan's industrial clusters, employing historical data and network analysis methodologies. As Robinson (2014) highlights, a central challenge in inter-city comparative studies is the effective "tracking and visualising of the diverse connections between cities," and this study seeks to address this challenge directly. Specifically, by focusing on Japanese industrial cities that evolved organically, rather than planned industrial districts as examined in Lewis's (2004) study of Chicago, this research aims to elucidate the heterogeneous patterns of urban industrial development.*

**Keywords:** *Culture, Leadership, Japan, Networks, Influence, Communication.*

A salient feature of Japan during the Meiji period was the marked increase in manufacturing labour productivity from the 1890s to the 1900s, driven by the expansion of the railway network and the diffusion of new technologies. Although regional disparities widened, industrialisation simultaneously extended to peripheral areas (Settsu et al. 2016). Within this broader process of nationwide industrialisation, regional cities also exhibited notable progress in industrial agglomeration. Furthermore, prior research has observed that the foundations of Japan's four major industrial zones—Keihin, Hanshin, Chukyo, and Kitakyushu—which later became the nation's principal industrial centres in the early twentieth century, were already discernible during the Meiji industrial revolution (Yamazaki 1999; Ishii 1997).

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\* Master's Programme, Graduate School of Technology and Science, Nagaoka University of Technology (Japan), E-mail: [masamichi.takagi@riken.jp](mailto:masamichi.takagi@riken.jp).

\*\* Professor, Nagaoka University of Technology (Japan), E-mail: [nwatahiki@kjs.nagaokaut.ac.jp](mailto:nwatahiki@kjs.nagaokaut.ac.jp).

\*\*\* PhD Candidate, Bucharest University of Economic Studies (Romania), Email: [yumepartners@gmail.com](mailto:yumepartners@gmail.com).

\*\*\*\* Babes Bolyai University PhD Candidate, Globis University Partner Faculty, E-mail: [cristian@japancreativeenterprise.jp](mailto:cristian@japancreativeenterprise.jp).

Regarding industrial agglomeration, Porter (1998) identifies it as a catalyst for regional economic development, accelerating growth through the promotion of knowledge sharing and technological innovation arising from both cooperation and competition among firms. In theoretical terms, several mechanisms underlying industrial agglomeration have been delineated. For example, MAR (Marshall-Arrow-Romer) externalities underscore the significance of learning effects and knowledge spillovers resulting from industry-specific specialisation, while Jacobs-type externalities propose that the concentration of diverse industries fosters technological innovation and economic expansion. Nevertheless, empirical industrial clusters seldom conform precisely to a single theoretical model, as individual cities often demonstrate unique configurations and developmental paths. To address this complexity, it is imperative to undertake comparative analyses of clusters with different formative processes and to explicitly identify their distinguishing features. Consequently, this study undertakes a comparative examination of two industrial clusters—Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City—with the aim of elucidating the differential trajectories of their development.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior research reveals two key issues: firstly, existing studies have largely confined themselves to comparisons at the metropolitan or prefectural level, failing to adequately elucidate differences in development trajectories between cities; secondly, analyses integrating statistical characteristics with network structures have scarcely been attempted. In contrast, this study focuses on regional cities. By combining structural analysis of entrepreneurial networks with comparative examination of statistical characteristics, it aims to empirically elucidate the divergent developmental trajectories of industrial clusters.

Drawing on case studies in network analysis, Suzuki et al. (2009) constructed a network of Meiji-period entrepreneurs using company director directories. Nonetheless, their analysis remained predominantly tabular and did not extend to quantitative measurement. In contrast, Watahiki et al. (2023) applied centrality analysis and heatmap visualisation to Niigata Prefecture, revealing that regional development is shaped more profoundly by human networks than by geographical conditions. Accordingly, this study concentrates on human networks to examine the representation of developmental disparities.

Furthermore, Brandt et al. (2009) visualised collaborative relationships between research institutions and businesses in the Hanover metropolitan area of northern Germany. However, their analysis was confined to network construction and visualisation, with limited integration of statistical perspectives. Additionally, the study covered a broad geographical area of approximately 18,600 km<sup>2</sup>, which impeded a detailed understanding of the region's internal structures. Comparative studies in Japan include Higaki and Watabiki (2019), who examined Niigata Prefecture (approximately 12,584 km<sup>2</sup>) and Hyogo Prefecture (approximately 8,400 km<sup>2</sup>), as well as Ito and Watabiki (2023), who compared Gunma Prefecture (approximately 6,362 km<sup>2</sup>) and Tochigi Prefecture (approximately 6,408 km<sup>2</sup>). Nevertheless, these studies have not sufficiently explored the industrial structures or developmental processes of regional cities within the respective prefectures.

## 2. SUBJECT OF ANALYSIS

### 2.1. Subject Regions

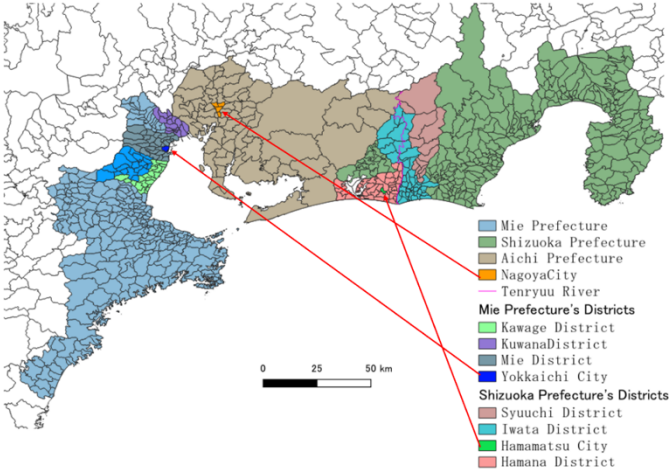
The subject regions of this study, Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City, are regional municipalities that do not serve as prefectural capitals. Both are situated within the Chūkyō economic sphere and, although influenced by the distributional, economic, and cultural domain centred on Nagoya City, they have pursued distinct paths of industrial development since the late Meiji period (Yamaguchi 2015). The locations of the respective prefectures and their principal cities are presented in Figure 1. The map shown in Figure 1 was prepared by the author using Japanese data from 1920, which was selected because it exhibits no spatial discrepancies relative to the study period, approximately 1910.

Hamamatsu City implemented its municipal system in 1911 and underwent rapid industrial development during the latter half of the Meiji period, particularly following the Russo-Japanese War. This development is well-documented in the History of Shizuoka Prefecture. Of particular significance was the expansion of the textile and musical instrument industries. The Enshū region's long-established tradition of cotton weaving, combined with its abundant labour force and the technical ingenuity of its craftsmen, fostered a distinctive industrial cluster unique to the area. Within the musical instrument sector, the founding of Yamaha marked a significant milestone, as it evolved into a globally recognized enterprise. While initially catering primarily to local residents and the domestic market, the industries in Hamamatsu also pioneered new demand. By 1912, the city had the highest number of companies and capital investment in the prefecture. Thus, Hamamatsu forged its own industrial cluster centered on domestic markets, establishing itself as the economic hub of Shizuoka Prefecture. Today, Hamamatsu is recognized as one of Japan's ordinance-designated cities, reflecting its sustained industrial and economic importance.

Meanwhile, Yokkaichi City implemented its municipal system in 1897 and developed by capitalizing on its strategic location as a port town. In 1899, it was designated as the first official port to open in Ise Bay, cementing its status as a significant port city. This strategic port facilitated the import and export of diverse industries, including spinning, silk reeling, fishing nets, and ceramics, both domestically and internationally through Yokkaichi Port. Consequently, Yokkaichi evolved into an international industrial city primarily oriented toward overseas markets. Notably, despite not being the prefectural capital of Mie Prefecture or serving as an administrative center, Yokkaichi successfully established an export-driven industrial structure.

Thus, while Hamamatsu City developed predominantly as an industrial city focused on meeting domestic demand, Yokkaichi City pursued an external demand-oriented industrial model, serving overseas markets via its port. A defining characteristic of both cities lies in their ability to build customer bases finely attuned to their geographic contexts and industrial features, resulting in divergent developmental pathways.

**Figure 1.** Location of Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City

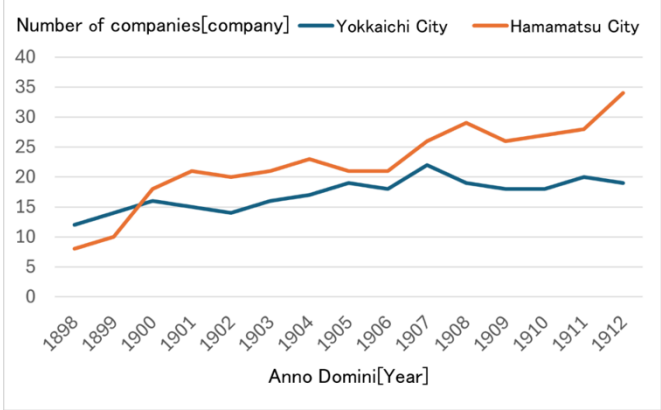


Source: authors' own preparations based on data collected from participatory research

Graph 1 illustrates the trend in the number of companies in Hamamatsu and Yokkaichi Cities from 1898 to 1912. In 1898, Hamamatsu had 8 companies compared to Yokkaichi's 12. However, by 1912, Hamamatsu experienced significant growth, reaching 34 companies, while Yokkaichi, after peaking in 1907, saw a decline to 19 companies. It is important to note that during the Meiji period, joint-stock companies were equivalent to modern listed companies, and obtaining corporate legal status indicated a certain level of capital strength and scale.

This data reveals that though both cities developed industrial clusters, their trajectories diverged over time. Hamamatsu exhibited sustained growth in company numbers, reflecting its domestic market orientation, while Yokkaichi showed a rise and subsequent decline, likely linked to its export-oriented structure and port-based economy. This study will analyze this divergence further through network analysis, integrating metrics such as company numbers, population, and industrial shipments to provide a comprehensive understanding of their industrial development patterns.

**Graph 1.** Changes in the Number of Companies in Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City  
(Compiled from the “Directory of Company Officers throughout Japan”)



Source: authors' own preparations based on data collected from participatory research

## 2.2. Periods Analysed

The periods analyzed in this study are 1902, 1907, and 1912, which correspond closely to the timeframe around the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and the broader industrial revolution in Japan. These years represent significant moments in the industrial development of both Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City, reflecting nationwide economic shifts.

In 1902, the increased loan amounts exceeding deposits at several Hamamatsu banks signal a heightened demand for industrial funding, marking the beginning of an industrial expansion phase. By 1907, Yokkaichi City reached the peak in its number of companies, marking a critical juncture where the industrial trajectories of Hamamatsu and Yokkaichi began to diverge. Hamamatsu continued to experience growth in company numbers, especially in textiles and musical instruments, while Yokkaichi started to decline after its peak in 1907. By 1912, the transition from Meiji-era industrialization to the Taisho period became clear, with Hamamatsu demonstrating continued industrial growth and Yokkaichi entering a period of contraction. This divergence highlights the differing sustainable growth capacities of the two cities, with 1912 serving as a definitive year to confirm these distinct developmental paths.

## 3. ANALYTICAL METHODS

### 3.1. Data

#### 3.1.1. *Data Sources*

This study analyzed data on companies located in Shizuoka and Mie Prefectures using the Meiji-period publication *Directory of Company Officers* throughout Japan (hereafter referred to as the *Officers Directory*), complemented by the *Statistical Book*, which comprises government-published statistics from the Meiji period. These sources were employed to investigate regional development and the industrial structure during this transformative era. Additionally, data on Hamamatsu City prior to its formal establishment in 1911 were compiled by the author using records for Hamamatsu-machi, the predecessor administrative unit of Hamamatsu City.

The *Officers Directory* is a comprehensive resource listing company names, affiliated officers, locations of both officers and companies, capital amounts, and other relevant details organized by prefecture. This makes it an invaluable tool for understanding corporate activities and industrial dynamics in modern Japan.

The *Statistical Yearbook* was compiled by the statistical departments of each prefecture and published by the prefectural offices. It provided data on population, industrial output value, and other key indicators of the regional economy during the Meiji period. The *Yearbook* serves as an essential resource for understanding the economic context underpinning corporate activities at that time. This study utilized the *Statistical Yearbook* specifically for the target years of 1902, 1907, and 1912 to analyze regional industrial development and economic characteristics more comprehensively.

#### 3.1.2. *Data Correction*

The *Register of Officers* contains inherent errors and omissions, with some records lacking essential information such as company names or locations. To maintain the integrity and reliability of the analysis, this study deliberately excluded incomplete data that posed difficulties for accurate assessment, such as entries missing confirmed company names or location details.

Additionally, name variations posed a challenge, as the same individual's name could appear in multiple forms due to differences in kanji characters—whether old-style or

new-style—or homophones written with different kanji. To address this, the Director Directory was converted into CSV format, allowing systematic comparison. Names with a Levenshtein distance of one were extracted and examined; where it was determined they referred to the same person, kanji spellings were standardized. This verification process involved consulting the directors' addresses and cross-referencing with other biographical sources such as the Personnel Directory and Japanese Who's Who to ensure consistent identification.

### 3.2. Network Analysis

To visualise the entrepreneurial networks examined in this study, a network was constructed to represent the relationships between companies and their directors, based on data obtained from the “Company Directors Register”. Specifically, an undirected bipartite graph was generated, in which companies and their associated directors were defined as “nodes”, and the connections between them were defined as “edges”.

#### 3.2.1. Betweenness Centrality

Betweenness Centrality is a network analysis metric that measures the frequency with which a node lies on the shortest path between other nodes within a network. More precisely, a node with high betweenness centrality significantly influences the flow of information and resources throughout the network by mediating interactions among multiple nodes. Consequently, individuals or organisations with high betweenness centrality values function as bridges linking different communities, thereby occupying positions as structural intermediaries within the network. If  $g_{jk}$  is the number of paths passing through element  $i$  among the shortest paths between elements  $j$  and  $k$ , then  $g_{jk}$  of element  $i$  is expressed by elements in Equation (1).

$$C_B(n_i) = \sum_{j=1, i \neq j}^n \frac{g_{jk}(n_i)}{g_{jk}} \quad \dots (1)$$

### 3.3. Scatter Diagram

This study employed network indicators alongside various statistical data to conduct comparative analyses of industrial structures both across regions and within specific industries. Population density and industrial shipment values were sourced from the “Statistical Yearbook,” while the number of companies was obtained from the “Company Directory” to serve as key indicators. Additionally, the number of edges, derived from network analysis, was utilised as a network metric.

To visualize relationships among these indicators and elucidate regional characteristics and divergences, the data were represented through scatter plots.

For each scatter plot, regression lines were fitted separately by prefecture to assess correlations between indicators, with the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) reported as a measure of model fit. The regression line delineates the linear relationship between paired variables, while its slope quantifies the magnitude of influence exerted by one variable upon the other. The coefficient of determination, ranging from 0 to 1, indicates explanatory power, with values approaching 1 signifying that the regression line closely approximates the data distribution. Thus, elevated  $R^2$  values denote strong variable associations, whereas lower values imply the involvement of additional unmodeled factors. The coefficient of determination  $R^2$  is defined by Equation (2).



$$R^2 = 1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2}{\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \bar{y})^2} \quad \dots (2)$$

Furthermore, the regression line equation depicted in each figure (e.g.,  $y = ax + b$ ) quantifies the responsiveness of the vertical-axis variable to changes along the horizontal axis. The coefficient  $a$ , representing the slope, denotes both the strength and direction of the linear relationship between the variables. Larger absolute values of  $a$  indicate greater responsiveness of dependent indicators to increments in company counts. The intercept  $b$  signifies the baseline value of the dependent variable when company counts equal zero.

Thus, joint examination of the slope ( $a$ ) and coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) enables quantitative assessment of correlation strengths and region-specific structural characteristics.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.4. Centrality Analysis

This study constructed entrepreneurial networks for Shizuoka and Mie Prefectures utilizing a database derived from the "Director's Register." Tables 1 through 3 present the centrality metrics calculated from the entrepreneurial networks of both prefectures for the years 1902, 1907, and 1912, respectively.

#### 4.4.1. Year 1902

To elucidate the characteristics of the entrepreneurial networks in Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City in 1902, Table 1 presents the results identifying the top individuals by betweenness centrality.

**Table 1.** Top 5 individuals by betweenness centrality among executives in both cities in 1902

| Executive          | Company                          | Betweenness Centrality | Area      | Remarks                                                                  |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kuki Monshichi     | Yokkaichi Bank, Co., Ltd.        | 0.0534                 | Yokkaichi | Large Taxpayer, Member of the House of Representatives                   |
| Yoshida Tsunekichi | Yokkaichi Bank, Co., Ltd.        | 0.0106                 | Yokkaichi | Executive Board Member of the Yokkaichi Chamber of Commerce and Industry |
| Mizutani Goroku    | Yokkaichi Bank, Co., Ltd.        | 0.0094                 | Yokkaichi | Member of the Mie Prefectural Assembly                                   |
| Kuki Sotaro        | Yokkaichi Bank, Co., Ltd.        | 0.00437                | Yokkaichi | The 5th Chairman of the Yokkaichi City Council                           |
| Okawa Magojiro     | Yokkaichi Dentou Co., Ltd.       | 0.00152                | Yokkaichi | Member of the Town Assembly                                              |
| Tashiro Eisaku     | The 138th Bank, Co., Ltd.        | 0.0261                 | Hamamatsu | Mayor of Futamata Town                                                   |
| Nakamura Tokichi   | The 35th Bank, Co., Ltd.         | 0.0209                 | Hamamatsu | Mayor of Hamamatsu Town                                                  |
| Uchida Tadashi     | The 35th Bank, Co., Ltd.         | 0.0182                 | Hamamatsu | Mayor of Hamamatsu Town                                                  |
| Kimura Kotaro      | Totoumi Tyochiku Bank, Co., Ltd. | 0.00604                | Hamamatsu | Council Member of the Hamamatsu Chamber of Commerce and Industry         |
| Imaizumi Shobei    | Yoshikawa Bank, Co., Ltd.        | 0.00526                | Hamamatsu | Founding Member of the Hamamatsu Chamber of Commerce                     |

Source: authors' own preparations based on collected and analyzed data

In Yokkaichi City, Kuki Monnichi of Yokkaichi Bank exhibited exceptionally high betweenness centrality, underscoring his pivotal position within the regional financial network. Kuki Monnichi served concurrently as a director of Yokkaichi Bank Co., Ltd. and Mie Spinning Co., Ltd., and was active as a Diet member during the Taisho period. Moreover, given Yokkaichi City's limited banking infrastructure with only one institution, his influence was particularly pronounced. While other directors maintained betweenness centrality values around 0.01, this suggests a concentration of mediating functions among select industrialists.

In contrast, Hamamatsu City featured multiple bank directors—including Tashiro Eisaku of Hyakujusan-hachi Bank Co., Ltd., Nakamura Tokichi of Sanjugo Bank Co., Ltd., and Uchida Tadashi—with comparably high centrality measures, indicative of a distributed intermediary role. Nakamura Tokichi, notably, held directorships at several banks, including the 35 Bank and Hamamatsu Savings Bank Co., Ltd., as well as at Nippon Gakki Co., Ltd., reflecting substantial engagement across both finance and regional industry. A shared characteristic across both cities was the prominence of bank directors as central network nodes.

#### 4.4.2. Year 1907

Table 2 presents the results identifying the leading individuals based on betweenness centrality, which were analyzed to elucidate the structural characteristics of entrepreneurial networks in Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City in 1907.

**Table 2.** Top five individuals ranked by betweenness centrality among executives in both cities in 1907

| Executive           | Company                          | Betweenness Centrality | Area      | Remarks                                                          |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Inaba Koutarou      | Ise Bay Onibune Co., Ltd.        | 0.0271                 | Yokkaichi | The 6th Vice Chairman of the Yokkaichi City Council              |
| Yamanaka Genzaburou | Yokkaichi Bank, Co., Ltd.        | 0.0241                 | Yokkaichi | The 5th Vice Chairman of the Yokkaichi City Council              |
| Kuki Sotaro         | Yokkaichi Bank, Co., Ltd.        | 0.00437                | Yokkaichi | The 5th Chairman of the Yokkaichi City Council                   |
| Hayami Kanzou       | Yokkaichi Printing Co., Ltd.     | 0.019                  | Yokkaichi | Industrialist                                                    |
| Kuki Monshichi      | Yokkaichi Bank, Co., Ltd.        | 0.0534                 | Yokkaichi | Large Taxpayer, Member of the House of Representatives           |
| Nakamura Tokichi    | The 35th Bank, Co., Ltd.         | 0.0209                 | Hamamatsu | Mayor of Hamamatsu Town                                          |
| Miyamoto Jinshichi  | Hamamatsu Dentou Co., Ltd.       | 0.0413                 | Hamamatsu | Council Member of the Hamamatsu Chamber of Commerce and Industry |
| Yamaha Torakusu     | Hamamatsu Dentou Co., Ltd.       | 0.0389                 | Hamamatsu | Council Member of the Hamamatsu Chamber of Commerce and Industry |
| Uchida Tadashi      | The 35th Bank, Co., Ltd.         | 0.0182                 | Hamamatsu | Mayor of Hamamatsu Town                                          |
| Tsurumi Shinpei     | Hamamatsu Shinyo Bank, Co., Ltd. | 0.0253                 | Hamamatsu | The First Mayor of Hamamatsu City                                |

*Source:* authors' own preparations based on collected and analyzed data

In Yokkaichi City, Kotaro Inaba of Yokkaichi Bank Ltd. exhibited high betweenness centrality, whereas Monosaburo Kuki, who had occupied the top position in 1902, declined to fifth place. Inaba Kōtarō served as a director of Ise Bay Onsen Co., Ltd. and Narunaga Co.,

Ltd., and later held the position of Vice-Chairman of the City Council. These results suggest that, compared with 1902, the proportion of bank executives declined, while directors from a broader range of industries increasingly fulfilled intermediary functions within the network.

In contrast, in Hamamatsu City, Nakamura Tōkichi, who ranked second in 1902, recorded the highest centrality in 1907. Moreover, non-banking directors such as Torakusu Yamamoto and Jinichi Miyamoto also occupied prominent positions, revealing a distinguishing feature of a more dispersed intermediary structure, not confined to the banking sector. Torakusu Yamamoto, notably, served as a director for multiple manufacturing enterprises—including Nippon Gakki Co., Ltd., Hamamatsu Denko Co., Ltd., and Nippon Katazome Co., Ltd.—demonstrating extensive involvement across the regional industrial domain. Miyamoto Jinshichi, through firms such as Teikoku Seibo Co., Ltd., represented the light industry sector and exerted significant influence on the local economy. Similar to Yokkaichi City, this trend indicates a reduction in the proportion of bank-affiliated directors compared with 1902 and a corresponding expansion in the intermediary roles of directors from more diverse industrial backgrounds.

#### 4.4.3. Year 1912

To elucidate the characteristics of entrepreneurial networks in Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City in 1912, Table 3 presents the results identifying the leading individuals based on mediating centrality.

**Table 3.** Top five individuals ranked by mediating centrality among executives in both cities in 1912

| Executive        | Company                           | Betweenness Centrality | Area      | Remarks                                                          |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hirano Daishichi | Ise Railway Co., Ltd.             | 0.205                  | Yokkaichi | The 19th Chairman of the Yokkaichi City Council                  |
| Kuki Sotaro      | Yokkaichi Bank, Co., Ltd.         | 0.00437                | Yokkaichi | The 5th Chairman of the Yokkaichi City Council                   |
| Hirota Kyujiro   | Yokkaichi Bank, Co., Ltd.         | 0.0318                 | Yokkaichi | Council Member of the Yokkaichi Town Federation                  |
| Kuki Monjurou    | Yokkaichi Rice Exchange Co., Ltd. | 0.0261                 | Yokkaichi | Industrialist                                                    |
| Yamanaka Densiro | Yokkaichi Warehouse Co., Ltd.     | 0.0248                 | Yokkaichi | Large Taxpayer                                                   |
| Nakamura Tokichi | The 35th Bank, Co., Ltd.          | 0.0209                 | Hamamatsu | Mayor of Hamamatsu Town                                          |
| Uchida Tadashi   | The 35th Bank, Co., Ltd.          | 0.0182                 | Hamamatsu | Mayor of Hamamatsu Town                                          |
| Kimura Kotaro    | Totoumi Tyochiku Bank, Co., Ltd.  | 0.00604                | Hamamatsu | Council Member of the Hamamatsu Chamber of Commerce and Industry |
| Yamaha Torakusu  | Hamamatsu Dentou Co., Ltd.        | 0.0389                 | Hamamatsu | Council Member of the Hamamatsu Chamber of Commerce and Industry |
| Inagaki Sadasuke | Nakano Town Bank, Co., Ltd.       | 0.00428                | Hamamatsu | Industrialist                                                    |

In Yokkaichi City, Daishichi Hirano of the Ise Railway exhibited high centrality. He served as a director of Yokkaichi Railway Co., Ltd. and Toyo Suisan Co., Ltd., and subsequently held the position of Chairman of the City Council. A notable feature, compared with 1907, is the further decline in both the number of bank-affiliated executives and the proportion of such individuals among the top five.

In contrast, in Hamamatsu City, Nakamura Tōkichi, who held the highest centrality in 1907, maintained this position in 1912. The composition of top executives remained largely consistent, with bank directors continuing to occupy central positions. However, a significant shift is observed: Jinichi Miyamoto, who had ranked highly in 1907, disappeared from the 1912 list, while Teisuke Inagaki of Nakanochō Bank Co., Ltd. newly entered at fifth place. In other words, relative to 1907, Hamamatsu City experienced the disappearance of executives from manufacturing backgrounds and a concomitant rise in the prominence of banking figures.

#### 4.4.4. Summary

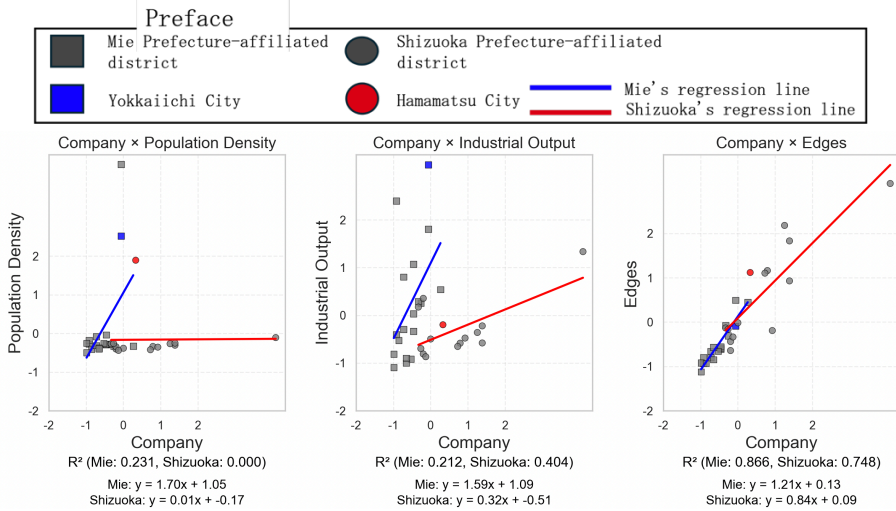
The analysis presented above identifies a shared structural feature in both cities: executives serving in a larger number of companies exhibited higher intermediary centrality. This pattern indicates that individuals occupying bridging positions between different firms functioned as facilitators of information and resource flows across the entire network. Industrialists such as Nakamura Tōkichi, who operated across both banking and manufacturing sectors, served as pivotal nodes connecting diverse segments of the regional economy.

Moreover, the prevalence of directors concurrently holding positions within financial institutions represents another salient characteristic common to both regions. Representative figures include Kuki Monnichi and Inaba Kōtarō in Yokkaichi City, and Tashiro Eisaku and Nakamura Tōkichi in Hamamatsu City. Each utilized their foundation in the financial sector to engage with enterprises in other industries, thereby reinforcing their role as mediators within the regional business network. The financial sector, by virtue of its capital provision function, occupied a central position in the regional economic structure. The concurrent directorships held by bank executives across multiple firms further strengthened the interdependence between financial and industrial networks.

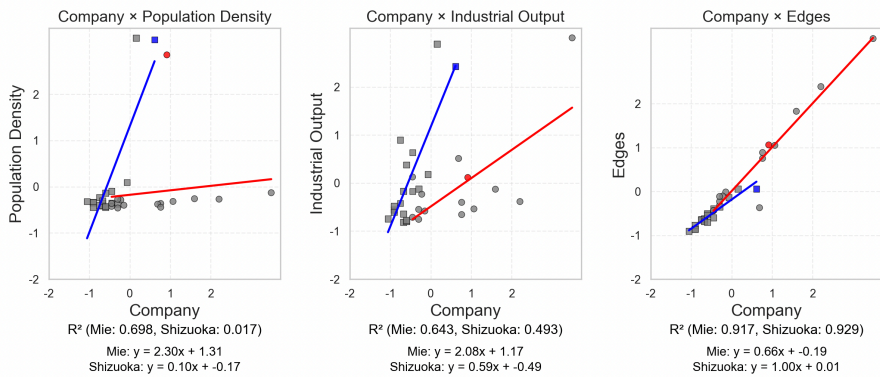
Accordingly, in both Yokkaichi and Hamamatsu, concurrently appointed directors—particularly bank executives—played a crucial mediating role that connected heterogeneous enterprises and contributed significantly to the development of the regional economy.

### 4.5. Scatter Diagram

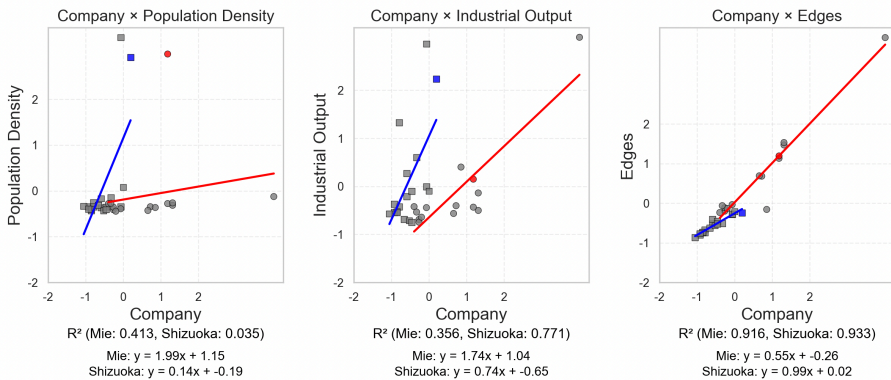
This study constructed scatter plots by standardizing data based on the number of edges derived from network analysis, the number of companies obtained from the *Directory of Directors*, and socio-economic data (population density and industrial shipment values) from the *Statistical Book*. Figures 5, 6, and 7 respectively illustrate the relationships among these variables for the counties and cities within both prefectures in 1902, 1907, and 1912. In each plot, the horizontal axis represents the “Number of Companies,” while the vertical axis corresponds to “Population Density,” “Industrial Shipment Value,” or “Number of Edges.” The relationships among variables are presented using regression lines, differentiated by prefecture.

**Figure 5.** Scatter plot for both prefecture in 1902

*Source:* authors' own preparations based on collected and analyzed data

**Figure 6.** Scatter plot for both prefectures in 1907

*Source:* authors' own preparations based on collected and analyzed data

**Figure 7.** Scatter plot for both prefectures in 1912

*Source:* authors' own preparations based on collected and analyzed data

By comparing the scatter plots presented in Figures 5–7, distinct shifts in the relative positioning of Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City across economic and network indicators between 1902 and 1912 become evident. In 1902 (Figure 5), Hamamatsu City surpassed Yokkaichi City in both the number of companies and network density (measured by edges). Conversely, Yokkaichi City exceeded Hamamatsu in population density and achieved the highest industrial shipment value among districts in both Mie and Shizuoka Prefectures. This elevated industrial output stemmed not from a greater number of companies or broader corporate connectivity, but from concentrated production within a limited set of firms. Consequently, Hamamatsu developed an industrial structure characterized by numerous enterprises and extensive inter-firm networks, whereas Yokkaichi exhibited a production model reliant on fewer, larger-scale companies.

This pattern persisted fundamentally unchanged through 1907 (Figure 6). Although both cities recorded increases in company counts, network density, population density, and industrial shipments, Hamamatsu retained its advantage in corporate quantity and network breadth. Yokkaichi, meanwhile, maintained leadership in population density and industrial shipments, again attaining the highest prefectural value as in 1902. By 1912 (Figure 7), Hamamatsu further expanded its company count, network density, and population density, ultimately surpassing Yokkaichi in the latter metric. In contrast, Yokkaichi displayed declining trends in companies and edges, with industrial shipments contracting from 1907 (Meiji 40) onward. These dynamics suggest Yokkaichi may have attained its developmental peak between 1902 and 1907, followed by decelerated growth. Hamamatsu, starting from a position of relative disadvantage in 1902, demonstrated sustained expansion across all indicators from 1907, propelled by intensified corporate formation and executive network growth.

Furthermore, examining the overall trends in both prefectures reveals that in Mie Prefecture, from 1902 through 1912, increases in population density and industrial shipments contributed to the rise in the number of companies. The slopes of the regression equations (1902: population density 1.70, industrial shipments 1.59; 1912: population density 1.99, industrial shipments 1.74) were consistently high, indicating that population and industrial production responded sensitively to the increase in the number of companies. Particularly in 1907, the coefficients of determination ( $R^2$ ) were high at 0.698 for population density and 0.643 for industrial shipments, suggesting that population concentration and expanded industrial activity strongly promoted new company formation and business expansion.

However, by 1912, the coefficients of determination for the number of companies relative to population density and industrial shipments had declined to 0.413 and 0.356 respectively, indicating that these indicators alone could no longer fully explain fluctuations in the number of companies. This suggests that factors such as population concentration and industrial scale expansion alone cannot fully account for the situation in Mie Prefecture during this period.

In contrast, throughout Shizuoka Prefecture from 1902 to 1912, the correlation with population density remained consistently weak (slope: 0.01 in 1902, 0.10 in 1907, 0.14 in 1912), suggesting that the development of entrepreneurial networks, rather than population concentration, tended to drive regional industrialisation. Particularly in the relationship between “number of companies  $\times$  industrial shipments” and “number of companies  $\times$  number of edges”, the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) increased over the time series (industrial shipments: 0.404 $\rightarrow$ 0.493 $\rightarrow$ 0.771; number of edges: 0.748 $\rightarrow$ 0.929 $\rightarrow$ 0.933), while the slope also progressively increased (industrial

shipments: 0.32→0.59→0.74; number of edges: 0.84→1.00→0.99). This clearly demonstrates that in Shizuoka Prefecture, the increase in the number of companies was linked to an increase in the number of edges between companies, leading to growth in industrial shipments through the expansion of the network structure.

Synthesising these results, Mie Prefecture, including Yokkaichi City, developed as a region based on urban agglomeration and a limited company structure. Conversely, Shizuoka Prefecture, including Hamamatsu City, developed as a network-driven region through the expansion of company numbers and networks. In other words, while both regions expanded their corporate activities during the same period, clear differences existed in the underlying factors driving their development.

## 5. ANALYSIS

The network analysis and scatter plot results presented in this study confirm that Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City pursued divergent developmental trajectories between 1902 and 1912. Hamamatsu sustained growth in both company counts and network density (edges), ultimately surpassing Yokkaichi in population density. In contrast, Yokkaichi maintained elevated industrial shipment values through 1912 but exhibited decelerated growth after 1907. This divergence appears substantially influenced by contemporaneous external conditions within the Japanese economy. The present chapter examines the underlying factors contributing to this developmental disparity.

### 5.1. The Number of Banks

The proliferation of banks in Hamamatsu City provided institutional infrastructure that facilitated the formation and expansion of diverse local industries. Conversely, the relative scarcity of banking institutions in Yokkaichi City constituted a structural constraint impeding its developmental momentum.

**Table 4.** Changes in the Number of Banks in Both Cities

|           | Year 1902 | Year 1907 | Year 1912 |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Hamamatsu | 11        | 12        | 18        |
| Yokkaichi | 1         | 1         | 1         |

This disparity manifests clearly in the network structure as well. Table 4 reveals that Hamamatsu City experienced an increase in the number of banks between 1902 and 1912, thereby enhancing their capacity to facilitate inter-firm capital flows. In contrast, Yokkaichi City maintained only a single banking institution throughout this period, constraining the availability of funds for local industries.

Moreover, as Section 5.2 demonstrates, the concentration of high-intermediary centrality among executives declined progressively in Yokkaichi City. This pattern likely reflects the limited opportunities for expansion into new brokerage roles offered by the solitary local bank, resulting in a diffusion of intermediary functions across executives from other sectors.

During this period, both national and private banks operated with relatively modest deposit bases—particularly private deposits—yet extended loans aggressively to industry. When lending funds proved insufficient, banks frequently supplemented them with their own capital, exhibiting what Ōtsuka (1984) characterizes as a pronounced “lending

company-like character.” Consequently, banks fulfilled an indispensable function in providing capital for emerging industries.

Given these dynamics, the multiplicity of banks in Hamamatsu City constituted a critical institutional foundation that enabled industrial diversification and sustained growth. Conversely, the paucity of banking institutions in Yokkaichi City restricted financing channels, ultimately emerging as a structural impediment to regional development.

### 5.2. Timber Supply

Timber provides a crucial lens for examining the factors enabling Hamamatsu City’s sustained development and those contributing to Yokkaichi City’s progressive growth deceleration.

As Yamaguchi (2011) observes, during Japan’s modern industrialization, timber served as energy, construction material, and raw input for both emerging and traditional industries, underscoring its indispensable role in industrial expansion.

Following the Russo-Japanese War (1904), Yokkaichi City experienced expanded timber demand<sup>1</sup>. In response, Taishō-period initiatives promoted bamboo cultivation and artificial afforestation. This development, conversely, reveals that during the Meiji era, Yokkaichi lacked a timber supply infrastructure adequate to meet rising demand.

Hamamatsu City, by contrast, harnessed timber from the adjacent Tenryū River basin to cultivate industries such as musical instruments and textiles<sup>2</sup>. Thus, Tenryū basin resources constituted a foundational element supporting Hamamatsu’s industrial trajectory. Moreover, Tsuchiya (2020) documents the planting of approximately 3 million cedar and cypress saplings in this basin between 1886 and 1900, evidencing the prior establishment of a robust supply base.

The Shizuoka Prefecture districts bordering the Tenryū River—Shūchi, Iwata, and Hamana (see Figure 1)—served as primary timber suppliers to Hamamatsu City. Comparing forested areas between these Tenryū basin districts and those adjacent to Yokkaichi City elucidates regional disparities in supply capacity. Table 4 presents 1902 forested area data for Yokkaichi’s surrounding counties (Mie, Kuwana, Kawage, and Suzuka) alongside those in the Tenryū River basin counties.

**Table 4.** Comparison of Forest Area in the Yokkaichi Area and the Tenryū River Basin

| Area (District)  | Forest Area (km <sup>2</sup> ) |
|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Mie District     | 73.587                         |
| Kuwana District  | 19.085                         |
| Kawage District  | 32.678                         |
| Suzuka District  | 119.213                        |
| Syuuchi District | 578.437                        |
| Iwata District   | 180.31                         |
| Hamana District  | 84.371                         |

<sup>1</sup> Yokkaichi City History, Vol. 18: General History, Modern Era, Yokkaichi City, 2000, pp. 402-403

<sup>2</sup> Shizuoka Prefecture History: General History Volume 5, Modern and Contemporary Period I, Shizuoka Prefecture, 1996, pp. 602-603



As Table 4 indicates, the aggregate forested area across districts surrounding Yokkaichi City (Kuwana, Mie, Kawage, Suzuka) totals approximately 245 km<sup>2</sup>, whereas that within the Tenryū River basin districts (Shūchi, Iwata, Hamana) reaches approximately 843 km<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the Hamamatsu region possessed over three times the forest resources of the Yokkaichi vicinity.

This disparity underscores the divergent timber supply capacities between the two regions. Hamamatsu City benefited from a stable supply infrastructure supported by the Tenryū basin's abundant forest resources, while Yokkaichi City—confronted with resource scarcity—struggled to satisfy escalating timber demand. Accordingly, the presence or absence of a robust timber supply base emerges as a key factor contributing to the divergent industrial trajectories observed in the two cities.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study conducted a comparative analysis of entrepreneurial networks in Hamamatsu City and Yokkaichi City through centrality measures and statistical indicators. The findings confirm distinct developmental divergences between the two cities. In Hamamatsu City, the proliferation of banks enabled their directors to mediate across industries via concurrent directorships, sustaining the emergence of highly centralized actors and demonstrating both the stability and scalability of the network structure. Conversely, Yokkaichi City's limited banking presence resulted in a progressive decline in directors bridging financial and industrial sectors, yielding an increasingly unstable network configuration.

Moreover, scatter plot analysis reveals that Hamamatsu City sustained growth across company counts, network density (edges), and population density, whereas Yokkaichi City—despite a transient advantage in industrial shipment values—exhibited contractions in companies and edges, evidencing unsustainable development. These patterns indicate that Hamamatsu City's industrial trajectory rested on the complementary foundations of Tenryū River basin timber resources and multiple banking institutions, while Yokkaichi City's growth decelerated amid forest resource scarcity and financial underdevelopment.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that regional developmental divergences were determined not merely by variations in company counts or population size, but substantially by the abundance and sustainability of “bridging actors”—such as mediating executives—and complementary financial and resource infrastructures. Specifically, Hamamatsu City, where bridging actors operated robustly, enhanced network cohesion and achieved sustained growth, whereas Yokkaichi City, constrained by limited such actors, experienced developmental deceleration.

This divergence demonstrably shaped the subsequent industrial trajectories of both cities. Post-World War II, Yokkaichi City developed a major industrial complex under national and prefectural auspices, evolving into a heavy chemical industry hub centered on energy and petrochemicals. In contrast, Hamamatsu City leveraged its Meiji-era industrial and human networks, fostering post-war collaboration among small and medium-sized enterprises in musical instruments, motorcycles, and transport equipment. Firms such as Yamaha, Suzuki, and Kawai Musical Instruments, in particular, benefited from accumulated local craftsmanship and inter-firm connectivity, propelling the city toward recognition as a national industrial center.

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## DO INTERCOMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS FAVOUR POLYCENTRIC DEVELOPMENT? AN ANALYSIS OF TERRITORIAL POLICIES OF THE EU

Cosmin CHIRIAC\*

**Abstract.** *For more than two decades now, amongst some of the concepts put forth by informal and official documents of the EU we find polycentric development. The term has been extensively studied in many research papers sparking interest in other parts of the world too. On the other hand, in preparation of Romania's integration into the EU, Intercommunity Development Associations (IDA) were included in the Romanian legislation to facilitate collaboration between various administrative units of Romania, to address the shortcomings of the administrative fragmentation of its local administrative level and the financial limitations that most rural administrative units face.*

*The purpose of this paper is to understand whether these territorial structures lead to polycentric development or, on the contrary, they enhance the polarizing effect of existing urban centres. To reach our conclusions, we rely mainly on quantitative methods. Our research covers the entire territory of Romania, as we attempted to get sufficient details that describe existing IDAs and that characterize the local administrative units of Romania.*

**Keywords:** *Intercommunity development associations, polycentric development, effects of EU territorial policies, intra-regional development, Romania.*

### INTRODUCTION

*Polycentric development*, as part of the territorial policies of the European Union, has been adopted in an uneven manner by the various EU members, however, in the early years it was a major aim in the formal policies of many European countries (Waterhout et al., 2005: 165). In Romania, some attempts were made to introduce polycentric development aimed mechanisms and policies at lower administrative levels, in parts of Romania (Chiriac and Bucur, 2015), and a territorial development strategy was proposed for a *polycentric Romania 2035* (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016). One of the means of achieving these goals is for rural territorial units to constitute *Intercommunity Development Associations*, to jointly achieve development objectives that would otherwise not be attainable because of underprepared staff and financial limitations (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 4.3.2.9).

In this context, the question that prompted this research is whether this association possibility for local territorial administrative units (TAU) could provide the necessary legislative tools to promote a polycentric development pattern. The fact that these associations helps local TAUs access EU funding, is especially important for lower tier rural areas, that individually lack the financial power to do it. Instinctively, one could easily answer that it could. However, that does not actually mean that it can or that it will. Polycentric development can be considered at various analytical scales, however, in this

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\* PhD Lecturer, University of Oradea, Department of International Relations and European Studies, E-mail: [cchiriac@uoradea.ro](mailto:cchiriac@uoradea.ro).

case we will focus strictly at the sub-national level, both at the level of the entire administrative hierarchy of Romania, but also at county levels.

The paper is divided in five sections, including the *Introduction*. The next section is that of the *Methodological specifications*, followed by the section titled *From EU territorial policies to national territorial strategies*, the *Data analysis & Discussion* section and the *Conclusion*. The *Methodological specifications* section presents the research process adopted for this paper. It presents the research questions and hypotheses, it presents the aims of the literature review, the presentation of the main data sources, the data gathering process, and the main data analysis methods used to reach the conclusions of this research. The Literature review section is constructed around the two main topics of this study: *Intercommunity Development Associations* (IDA) and *Polycentric development*, focusing not only on studies that explain the two concepts, but also on studies that look for drivers of polycentric development and the link between the EU territorial policies and Romania's territorial development strategies. The *Data analysis & Discussion* section presents in detail the data analysis that was performed to try to reach a conclusion regarding the potential of IDAs to generate polycentric development.

The conclusions of the data analysis is that, in general, these association, especially those that have been created for the local/regional/zonal development of the areas they represent, are biased towards top level local territorial administrative units, thus favouring a more monocentric development pattern at county level, a pattern that is generally consistent throughout the country.

## METHODOLOGICAL SPECIFICATIONS

As it was mentioned in the Introduction, the aim of this research is to find whether Intercommunity Development Associations, as defined in the Romanian legislation, could lead to polycentric development patterns. Thus, the main objective is to find whether these associations could provide the context for alternative nodes of development in the Romanian territory, however, it will not assess whether polycentric development patterns have emerged or are likely to emerge.

Before delving into the ins and outs of IDAs, and how they may influence the territorial development of the administrative hierarchy of Romania, the focus falls on the two concepts relevant for this study:

- the territorial policies of the EU, more specifically those mechanisms built to support polycentric development adopted by Romanian territorial policies.
- defining IDAs, in their past and current form.

For this part of the research existing specialty literature is analysed, such as various official EU and Romanian official documents, and the Romanian legislation. The aim of this part of the research is to understand the link between the territorial policies of the EU and their adoption in the Romanian policies and legislation. In addition, another objective is to identify the main attributes and characteristics of IDAs, which, in turn, help further develop the research design.

As the literature review shows, there are several interpretations to the concept of polycentric development and the research design of this paper is justified on previous research efforts, considering that the focus falls on the local level of the Romanian administrative hierarchy. As mentioned, we are testing the potential, not the actual impact of these associations.

The research process is constructed as a cross-sectional, observational study. The most up to date known status of these IDAs is analysed to reach our conclusions.

IDAs are analysed to understand their structure, why and when are they created, what are their members and what are the characteristics of their members, along with other relevant factors. This part of the research provides the necessary insights for the next step in the analysis, in which the situation is assessed at county level. The aim is to answer the following research question: Are IDAs created for zonal/regional/local development founded around larger urban centres more likely to be active than those founded around lower urban structures or by rural-only structures?

The data collected for this research relies on multiple sources. The main ones, used to identify IDAs, are the data.gov.ro platform (Ministerul Dezvoltării Regionale și Administrației Publice, 2016), the website of the National Institute for Statistics of Romania (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2023), the website of the General Secretariate of the Government (Secretariatul General al Guvernului, 2020) and the website of the Ministry of Justice that provides an up to date registry of the active NGOs, which includes IDAs as well ("Registrul National ONG – Ministerul Justiției", 2026). These data sources were checked against the status of the IDAs (fiscally active/inactive) through the Firme on line platform, which provides data collected from the Ministry of Finance (FirmeOnLine, 2026), and the databases of the Romanian Ministry of Finance were also used directly, sometimes, to confirm inconsistent data (Ministerul Finanțelor, n.d.).

Several technologies were used to obtain and process the data used in this research, and to quantitatively evaluate the research questions presented above. Python was used to collect IDA data in an automated manner, specifically their status, the date when they were founded, their location (locality, county), and Public Acquisition Electronic System (SEAP) activity data. QGIS was used mainly to generate spatial representations of the collected and processed data. GitHub Copilot, integrated in the Visual Studio Code IDE, was used to assist and speed up the Python code writing scripts needed to collect and process data. Several models were used in this process.

Unfortunately, there was no readily available data regarding the TAU membership and scope of IDAs, and there was no way to obtain such data in a dynamic manner. At least, there was no up to date and complete data that could be used to simplify this process. Thus, a semi-automatized process was put in place. In order to minimize the efforts, this data was only collected for active IDAs. Various official documents of the IDAs, or of the members of the IDAs were collected through manual searches, namely constitutive and status documents, as well as adherence or other administrative documents emitted by the member TAUs, that sometimes contained such details. Where this was not possible, the name of the IDAs were sometimes suggestive enough for their membership, and the data.gov.ro database was also used where possible (Ministerul Dezvoltării Regionale și Administrației Publice, 2016). Additionally, the NGO registry from the website of the Ministry of Justice was also used to find the scope of many IDAs ("Registrul National ONG – Ministerul Justiției", 2026). The most up-to-date information was used. Nevertheless, there were cases for which data was simply not available, as the *Data analysis and discussion* section shows. The SEAP activity was collected from the Firme on line platform as well (FirmeOnLine, 2026).

The unit of analysis of the econometric model of analysis of this research is the IDA. All identified IDAs were initially considered, regardless of their current status. The territorial coverage of these IDAs was analysed at the level of local TAUs, each TAU being mapped to IDAs that serve its territory.

The activity of the IDAs was assessed at administrative and operational level. If the IDAs are considered active by the ministry of finance, they are considered

administratively active. The operational activity was assessed through the SEAP activity data (number of contracts) which should be a good indicator of how active the IDAs actually are (Chiriac, 2025: 322, 324). The administrative status is by definition binary (active = 1, dissolved or suspended = 0). Operational activity status is evaluated through a numerical indicator (total number of contracts awarded through SEAP), but also as a binary indicator, an IDA being considered active if it is at least registered in the SEAP system, even without running a contract through it.

The difference between the number of administratively active and operationally active IDAs has analytical significance, as it shows that there are several “ghost” IDAs that exist formally but do not produce any measurable output, at least not through SEAP. This group of IDAs could be at the centre of separate research efforts, but it will not be analysed in detail here.

The scope of the IDAs, as is shown in the Literature review section, includes *public services*, *development* (local, regional, zonal), or *mixed*, which implies that those IDAs were created to provide public services and to implement development projects, usually, by attracting EU funding. Further in this research, when referring to development scoped IDAs, we refer to all IDAs that have such objectives, including *mixed* scoped ones.

Another significant aspect for analysing IDAs is that of the anchor tier, which reflects the structural position of the most institutionally capable member of the IDA. These tiers reflect the typology of local TAUs: Tier 1/T1 – county seat municipality (including Bucharest), Tier 2/T2 – non-seat municipality, Tier 3/T3 – town, Tier 4/T4 – commune. Rural only IDAs are also flagged.

Two hypotheses are evaluated:

*H1*: IDAs anchored to T2, T3 and T4, are significantly less likely to be operationally active than T1 anchored IDAs.

*H2*: Rural only T4 IDAs are further disadvantaged by their exclusively rural membership.

These hypotheses are evaluated using four regression models. All four models use the natural logarithm of IDA membership size as a control variable, to absorb variation in IDA size.

The first is a Logit model (C1) which tests whether the anchor tier of an IDA predicts its probability of operational activity (dependent variable). The second model (C2) extends on the first one, by testing whether rural only IDA membership is significant, thus including an additional predictor: T4 + rural only. The third (C3) and fourth (C4) models, for which SEAP awarded contract counts are used, are estimated as Negative Binomial, as contract count data is severely over dispersed ( $\alpha \approx 14.6$ ), and a Poisson model would underestimate standard errors and would overstate statistical significance. The purpose of these models is to test whether the administrative tiers and membership size systematically affect contract volumes. The fourth model (C4) extends on C3 by adding the T4 + rural only predictor.

The first hypothesis is assessed based on models C1 and C3, while the second one is evaluated based on models C2 and C4. Findings are classified as statistically supported when the coefficient sign is consistent with the expected direction and the p-value is below 0.05.

Additionally, several other statistics were computed to understand and present the status of IDAs, in Romania, in general and at county level.

## FROM EU TERRITORIAL POLICIES TO NATIONAL TERRITORIAL STRATEGIES

*Polycentric development* is a topic that gained attention in the speciality literature since the EU has proposed it at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as part of the European Spatial Development Perspective. It was considered a solution to uneven development levels within the EU, after “past enlargements, and the prospect of future extensions, [...] which demands a spatial development strategy” (European Commission, 1999b: 20), but also to provide a balanced level of competitiveness of the European territory, within the EU, but also at the global level (European Commission, 1999a: 10, 20; Shaw and Sykes, 2004: 302).

However, EU’s normative interpretation of polycentric development is essentially different from the analytical perspective used at intra-urban, inter-urban and inter-regional scale (Davoudi, 2003: 988). In the analytical perspective, the intra-urban scale refers mostly to the decentralization processes within cities, while the inter-urban and inter-regional scales are linked with multiple separate urban centres which collaborate to some extent, but in which the separation between these urban areas is not always evident. Polycentric urban regions, conurbations, urban fields, metropolitan areas are somewhat similar concepts (Davoudi, 2003: 981–987). Polycentric urban regions, a concept seem to extend through both inter-urban and inter-regional scales and usually consist of the dissolution of physical delimitation between administratively distinct urban areas, which extend to gigantic proportions in East Asia (Davoudi, 2003: 987). These concepts are, however, closely linked to cooperating urban areas, which are usually not too distant from each other. However, their characteristics are somewhat relative. Parr proposes a set of seven potential criteria for the identification of PURs, such as clustering of centres, upper limit and lower limit on centre separation, size and spacing, size distribution, interaction and level of specialization of centres, which are relative and somewhat overlapping (Parr, 2004: 232–233). Alternative definitions refer to administrative separation, unclear hierarchical ranking, reasonable proximity and functional interconnection (Davoudi, 2003: 986). Nevertheless, some view the separation of the centres of a PUR as also physical, consisting of unbuilt, green areas (Bailey and Turok, 2001: 698–699).

The normative interpretation of polycentricity provided by the EU, especially through the ESDP, is viewed by many as an attempt to reconcile the conflicting goals of competitiveness and balanced development (Davoudi, 2003: 994–995), while the concept has become stretched (Van Meeteren et al., 2016: 1280–1281), is elusive and also malleable (Shaw and Sykes, 2004: 285), and is many times used without providing a clear definition. Its application by the member states of the EU is non-binding, as the ESDP document is legally non-binding (European Commission, 1999a: 11), and real effects were limited (Faludi, 2018: 514, 515).

No clear definition is provided by the Territorial Development Strategy of Romania either, even though it proposes policies to implement the “European concept of polycentricity” and specific strategic options are proposed (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 169). In fact, there are evidences of a variety of interpretations of this concept depending on local factors and characteristics, and the concept itself may also be compatible with bottom-up perspectives and strategies (Shaw and Sykes, 2004: 300–302).

The ESPON 1.1.1. report defines a micro, meso and macro scale to which the concept of polycentricity can apply, with *Functional urban areas*, *Metropolitan regions*

and urban clusters, and *Global economic integration zones* as constituting elements, respectively (Nordregio, 2004: 51), and the identification of these structures relies on three characteristics: size, location, and connectivity (Nordregio, 2004: 61). Functional urban areas include multiple municipalities which are part of a geographic area which, in terms of everyday activity, is somewhat contiguous and, depending on their size may qualify as either regional/local, transnational/national, or Metropolitan European Growth Areas (Nordregio, 2004: 10). These are the building blocks, the centres, of polycentric regions, however, zooming in, they may also constitute polycentric urban regions, or areas.

Polycentric development is also at the heart of the territorial development strategy of Romania, subtitled *Polycentric Romania 2035*, which relies on a set of principles to shape the development of the Romanian territory, such as coherence between the national, inter-regional, European and intercontinental development scales, urban-rural solidarity, while also protecting, promoting and capitalizing on the natural and cultural heritage (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 11). These principles are then infused into the strategic objectives that this document proposes, which also includes aspects relevant for polycentric development (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 21–22).

The development of Romania's urban network through polycentric development was also part of the measures Romania proposed to the European Commission, as part of the agreement for the 2014-2020 programming period (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 22). One aim of this strategy is also to promote medium and large urban areas at national level, as connectivity hubs and providers of optimal basic services for lower urban and rural settlements (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 133). *Intercommunity development associations* represent one of the solutions to extend these basic public services to lower tier settlements (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 59, 79, 156). However, with regard to their potential scope of local, regional or zonal development associations, the strategy only mentions them as “strengths” of urban areas in a SWOT analysis, without directly stating the scope (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 65), and a shallow and imprecise reference is also made to the existence of more than 600 such associations constituted around the main development poles of Romania (Ministerul de dezvoltare teritorială a României, 2016: 32). Thus, according to this strategy, IDAs are considered mostly for the potential of extending public services to areas for which individual efforts are not feasible and only hints are made to their potential for local, regional or zonal development, mostly with regard to main urban development poles.

Inter-municipal cooperation is seen by some as “second-best” alternatives to “fully-fledged metropolitan authority”, as would be the case for the Randstad urban region in the Netherlands (Hall and Pain, 2012: 144), a common example of polycentric urban regions. Nevertheless, inter-municipal cooperation for the provision of public services may be more beneficial especially to smaller administrative entities than privatization (Bel et al., 2014: 28), which is preferred by larger municipalities (Bel et al., 2013: 20). The effects of inter-municipal cooperation on spending may be limited (Frère et al., 2014: 22), however, the benefits may be found in the possibility of providing services that would otherwise not be available to individual administrative entities.

The Intercommunity Development Associations, which provide the context for inter-municipal and inter-regional cooperation in Romania, have the theoretical potential to instil polycentric patterns within these associations, through the strategic development



of multiple centres of activity within the territory of cooperating administrative units, but also at higher administrative levels such as the county or national level, lower tier urban administrative units benefit from the activity of these associations. There is a parallel to be found here with the *functional urban areas* defined above.

*Intercommunity Development Associations* were introduced in the Romanian legislation in 2006 (Parlamentul României, 2007), just before Romania became a member of the European Union, one of the purposes being that of helping local administrative units collaborate on various projects and fields of activity that fall under their responsibility and jurisdiction. Other reasons for which this legislative initiative was required in Romania is the very fragmented administrative hierarchy and the lack of financial power of many of the local administrative units.

Currently, these associations are defined by the Administrative Code introduced in 2019, and a dedicated legislation was introduced for metropolitan areas a special kind of IDA, which added some changes that brought some clarity, diversified the scopes of these associations, but also added limitations regarding acceptable member administrative units (Parlamentul României, 2022).

The main characteristics of IDAs, as defined by the Romanian legislation, was already identified and analysed (Chiriac, 2025: 322–324). In short, they may be constituted by territorial administrative units such as counties and urban and rural localities, they may be constituted either as *metropolitan areas*, around county seat and non-county seat municipalities, or as regular IDAs, they may be created to provide *public services*, or *jointly implement local, regional, or zonal development projects*, or both, and they have the statute of contracting authority, which, since 2016 have the obligation of using the SEAP platform.

In summary, the implementation of the territorial policies of the EU, and specifically those related to polycentric development are subject to interpretation and are unevenly adopted at the level of member states. In Romania, the strategic document that proposes a polycentric territorial development for Romania does not explicitly present a definition of polycentric development and makes little reference to the concept of IDAs as part of this strategy, and mainly as a solution to provide public services for underprivileged territorial administrative units. Nevertheless, Intercommunity development associations could prove important as a combination of bottom-up and top-down initiatives, that could help impress a polycentric pattern both within their territories, but also at county and national levels.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The outcomes of the data analysis presented in the methodology section is presented and discussed in the following paragraphs.

Following the compilation of IDA related data from the various sources mentioned in the methodology section, 684 IDAs were identified, out of which 553 (80.8%) are still administratively active, and only 336 (49.1%) are operationally active. However, some of them are no longer administratively active, which brings the number down to 296 operationally and administratively active IDAs.

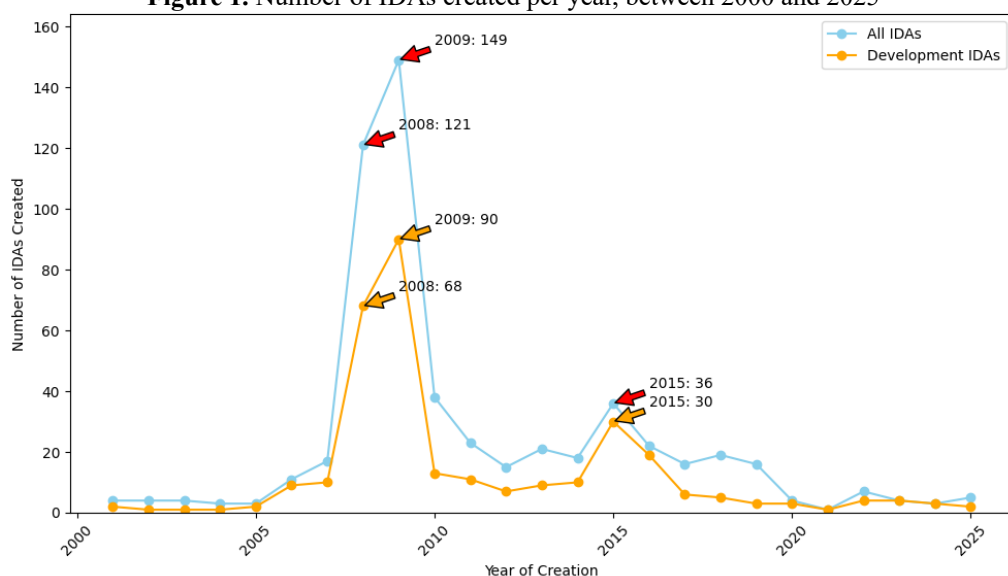
A significant number of IDAs (257 – 37.6%) are only administratively active, but not operationally, which means that there are either used in other ways, or data at the ministry level is not appropriately updated, or they are simply kept active, waiting for appropriate opportunities. Either way, a separate investigation could help uncover relevant aspects regarding the activity and use of IDAs, or certain institutional failures.

Close to 20% of the identified IDAs are no longer administratively active. This percentage includes operationally active and inactive IDAs, which may have served a purpose on short term, or failed to deliver on their objectives.

The timeline of IDA creation was computed to identify some relevance regarding the moment when they were created. There is a main spike, around 2008 and 2009, which is most probably related to funding availability, considering these moments are at the beginning of an EU budgetary cycle. This moment comes also after Romania became an EU member, that also meant increased access to EU funding. The secondary spike in 2015 confirms the link to EU funding availability.

Development IDAs (which includes Mixed scoped ones) follow the same pattern, however, in 2015, there are far less IDAs created with the purpose of providing public services than in 2008 and 2009.

**Figure 1.** Number of IDAs created per year, between 2000 and 2025



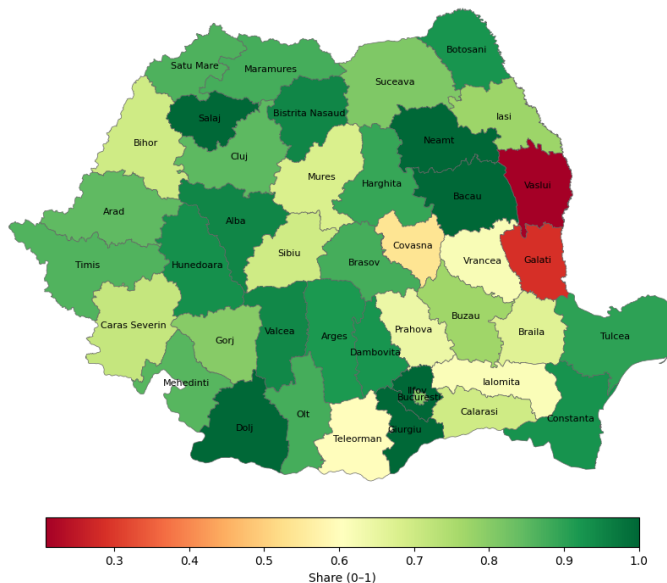
*Source:* own computations based on data from multiple sources, as presented in the methodology

The counties with the highest number of IDAs created are Cluj, Bihor, Iași, Sălaj and Harghita, and the ones with the lowest number of IDAs created are Mehedinți, Caraș-Severin, Galați, București and Ilfov. When it comes to development IDAs created, the situation is almost the same, with Bihor and Iași trading places, while at the bottom the only change is that Ialomița takes the place of Mehedinți. The situation in Bucharest and Ilfov, which now have 1 and, respectively, 0 active development IDAs, is somewhat natural, considering that any such association that includes Bucharest would make any other association around it pointless. Bucharest is part of a metropolitan type IDA in which it partnered with the Ilfov county council directly, and not the local TAUs that are part of the Ilfov county, which is usually an odd type of association considering how the legislation defines metropolitan areas.

The share of administratively active IDAs per county shows that in many counties, the percentage is generally high. The two exceptions are Galați and Vaslui, that have a ratio of 0.28 and 0.20 active IDAs from the total number of IDAs created in these counties. All the rest have more than 0.50 still active IDAs, from an administrative point

of view. At the top, Dolj, Sălaj, Neamţ, Bacău, Giurgiu and Ilfov have a perfect record, but the first two stand out as having far more IDAs than the others (around 30). These numbers paint a picture that, intuitively, is not expected to be true, as these associations rely on external funding for development projects that would improve the social and economic status of their members, and there is only so much funding to go around.

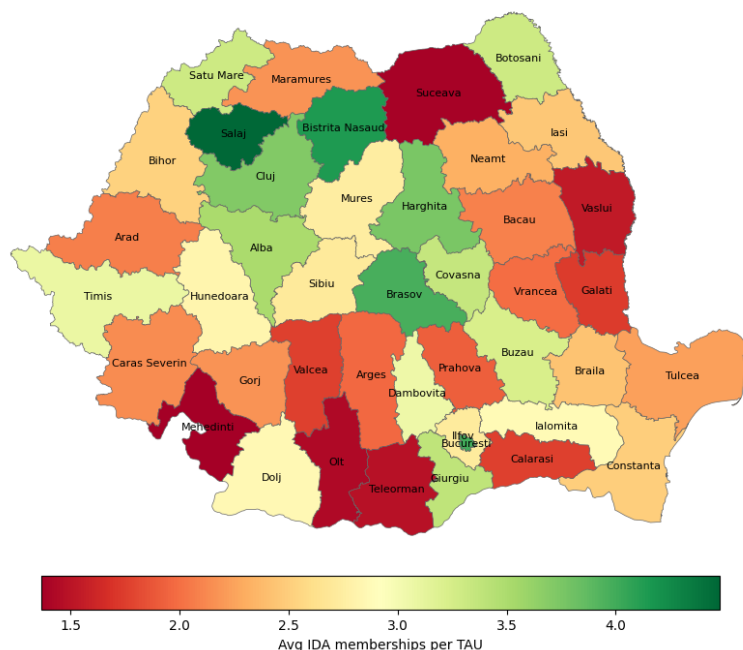
**Figure 2.** Share of administratively active IDAs per County



*Source:* own computations based on from multiple sources, as presented in the methodology

An interesting aspect about IDAs, as defined by the Romanian legislation, is that they may overlap, meaning that TAUs may participate in more than one such association. In fact, a TAU may be part of an IDA created to provide sanitation services, another created to provide water supply and sewage services and be part of one or more development scoped IDAs. It all depends on the prevalent strategy of the region. However, there are also cases of TAUs that seem to have tried to create several partnerships with neighbouring TAUs, one with each neighbour TAU. By analysing the IDA population data, 68 IDAs consisting of 2 or 3 members, across 16 counties, 25 active and 43 inactive, were identified as containing at least one member which is present in several similarly sized associations. For example, Cluj County has 22 such IDAs, with bilateral pairings centred on communes like Mociu (6), Cătina (4), Geaca (4), Luna (4) and Mărgău (4). In the county of Dolj similar patterns are present around Perișor (6) and Plenița (4).

Even though all counties have an average of over 1 IDA per TAU, there are quite a few units that are not members in any IDA. The coverage is generally close to 75% or over. Nevertheless, the situation is somewhat different when it comes to administratively active development IDAs. Out of the around 3200 local TAUs, approximately 43% are part of at least one administratively active development IDA while 57% are not part of any such association. This shows that the high percentage of coverage of administratively active IDAs is due to those that have public services within their scope.

**Figure 3.** Average number of administratively active IDAs per TAU, at county level

*Source:* own computations based on from multiple sources, as presented in the methodology

Considering these initial insights, especially the fact that there is such a large share of local territorial administrative units that are not part of a development scoped intercommunity development association (which includes mixed scoped ones), and the fact that there are so many IDAs that are not operationally active, prompts an investigation into why that is.

The rest of the analysis focuses strictly on development IDAs. Thus, whenever IDAs are mentioned in the remaining part of this section, it is implied that their scope is development of mixed.

The distribution of IDAs that have, at least, registered in the SEAP platform already shows an interesting outcome:

- County seat municipalities (T1): 159 IDAs, with an 79.5% activation rate.
- Municipalities (T2): 32 IDAs, with a 37.5% activation rate.
- Towns (T3): 70 IDAs, with a 33.3% activation rate.
- Commune anchor (T4): 152 IDAs, with a 43.3% activation rate.

This already shows that, as opposed to IDAs created around county seat municipalities, all the other tiers have a very low activation rate, towns being even more disadvantaged than other municipalities or communes. Thus, without considering the results of the four models, this already indicates a bias towards higher ranks, suggesting a monocentric pattern at county levels. Nevertheless, the four models presented in the methodology section test whether this activation gap and volume of SEAP activity, can be explained by the administrative tier of the anchor TAU.

However, for the econometric analysis, 381 development scope Intercommunity Development Associations were used (IDAs with mixed or development scopes). Out of these, a number of 177 (46.5%) are operationally active, meaning that they are registered in the SEAP platform. The procurement output data analysis shows that there are 4087 total

contracts awarded across the sample. However, most IDAs (76.9%) have zero contracts awarded, which results in an extremely right-skewed distribution, in which the median is at 0, with the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile at only 14 contracts and a maximum of 538 contracts.

Table 1 shows that the 44 T1 anchored IDAs (11.5% of the sample) account for 70% of all contracts, while the 321 T3 and T4 anchored IDAs (84% of the sample) account for only 22% percent of the contracts. Geographically, with the exception of Iași, which also has one of the first (if not the first) metropolitan area type IDA ever created in Romania, most contracts are awarded by counties in the North-western, Western and Central regions of Romania (67%, with 689 in Harghita, 644 in Brașov, 554 in Bihor, 540 in Cluj, and 233 in Iași. Six counties have no contracts at all, and 1 county has no active development IDA (Galați).

**Table 1.** Statistics about contract count distributions per tier, for development scope IDAs.

| Tier | n   | Active      | Median contracts | Mean | Total contracts |
|------|-----|-------------|------------------|------|-----------------|
| T1   | 44  | 35 (79.5%)  | 10               | 65.0 | 2,862           |
| T2   | 16  | 6 (37.5%)   | 0                | 20.6 | 329             |
| T3   | 30  | 10 (33.3%)  | 0                | 4.1  | 122             |
| T4   | 291 | 126 (43.3%) | 0                | 2.7  | 774             |

*Source:* own computations based on data from the SEAP platform

The results of the four models, synthesized in Table 2, show support for the initial assumptions regarding the IDA anchor tier, in most cases of models C1 and C3, but not at all for the C2 and C4 models. The models test whether the administrative tier around which an IDA is anchored, systematically explain the activation gap of the development scoped IDAs.

The first two models (C1 and C2) test the activation probability. Model C1 confirms that the anchor tier is a strong predictor of whether a development IDA becomes operationally active or not. Relative to the reference category (T1), all the other tiers show far lower probabilities. Tier T2, with a log-odds coefficient of -1.810 ( $p = 0.006$ ), corresponds to a marginal effect of -41% in activation probability. The third tier (T3), representing town anchored IDAs, show the largest disadvantage, with a coefficient of -1.915 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and a marginal effect of approximately -44 percentage points, confirming the 33.3% activation rate mentioned above. Rurally anchored IDAs (T4), with a coefficient estimated at -1.211 ( $p = 0.004$ ), shows a marginal effect of -28%, corresponding to the 43.3% activation rate. The control variable,  $\ln(\text{members})$ , is positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.395$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) in all specifications, thus showing that larger IDAs are more likely to be operationally active, regardless of tier.

As mentioned in the methodology, Model C2 extends the baseline logit model by including a rural only flag in interaction with the T4 dummy. The corresponding term is not statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.272$ ,  $p = 0.34$ ). This shows that for the T4 tier, a purely rural membership does not imply an even lower probability for an IDA to be operationally active, besides the effect of the corresponding tier level. Consequently, from the point of view of the operational activation dimension, the second hypothesis is not supported.

The last two models (C3 and C4) test the hypotheses from the point of view of the number of awarded contracts. The Negative Binomial model only shows robustly significant deficit for T4 anchored IDAs ( $\beta = -2.298$  ( $p < 0.001$ ; IRR = 0.100), suggesting 90% fewer contracts than T1 anchored IDAs. For T3 anchored IDAs the results are not statistically significant ( $p = 0.072$ ), so the 83% fewer contracts disadvantage could be a

sampling artefact. T2 anchored IDAs show indistinguishable contract volume from T1 anchored IDAs ( $\beta = -0.483$ ,  $p = 0.668$ ). Once again size matters, as the size control  $\ln(\text{members})$  term is positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.641$ ,  $p = 0.014$ ), confirming that larger IDAs award more contracts.

The second hypothesis is not supported on the procurement volume dimension either, as the interaction coefficient is not statistically significant, and the point estimate is positive ( $\beta = +0.438$ ,  $p = 0.387$ ). The T4 anchor effect remains large and significant in model C4 as well ( $\beta = -2.574$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; ~92% fewer contracts).

**Table 2.** Summary of the results of the four models used to analyse

| Variable                         | C1<br>Logit          | C2<br>Logit+Int      | C3<br>Neg. Bin.      | C4<br>NB+Int         |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Intercept                        | 0.627<br>(0.441)     | 0.543<br>(0.450)     | 2.589***<br>(0.780)  | 2.504***<br>(0.758)  |
| Tier T2 (Municipality, non-seat) | -1.810**<br>(0.654)  | -1.815**<br>(0.659)  | -0.483<br>(1.126)    | -0.461<br>(1.120)    |
| Tier T3 (Town)                   | -1.915***<br>(0.552) | -1.911***<br>(0.556) | -1.799<br>(1.002)    | -1.732<br>(0.993)    |
| Tier T4 (Commune)                | -1.211**<br>(0.418)  | -0.974*<br>(0.486)   | -2.298***<br>(0.682) | -2.574***<br>(0.732) |
| T4 × Rural-only                  | —                    | -0.272<br>(0.283)    | —                    | 0.438<br>(0.505)     |
| $\ln(\text{Members})$            | 0.395**<br>(0.129)   | 0.445**<br>(0.141)   | 0.641*<br>(0.260)    | 0.683**<br>(0.251)   |
| N                                | 381                  | 381                  | 381                  | 381                  |
| Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>            | 0.067                | 0.068                | 0.038                | 0.039                |
| Log-likelihood                   | -245.6               | -245.1               | -570.9               | -570.6               |

Significance: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*  $p < 0.05$

Standard errors in parentheses.

Reference category: T1 — Municipality, county seat + Bucharest Municipality.

C1/C2: logit coefficients (log-odds) C3/C4: Neg. Binomial coefficients (log-count;  $\alpha=15.0$ ).

In summary, the evidence produced by the four models, consistently supports the first hypothesis, showing that IDA shaped inter-municipal governance in Romania is monocentrically biased towards upper tier urban administrative units on the operational activation dimension. The T4 tier shows extreme marginalization on both dimensions, as the only tier with statistically significant results on the procurement volume dimension. However, the effect of rural only membership is not statistically significant in models C2 and C4. Consequently, H2 is not supported in either model. On the other hand, the size of the IDAs is significant across all models, as large IDAs are more likely to be operationally active and award more contracts.

## CONCLUSIONS

Considering the results of the data analysis presented in the previous section, the evolution of these bottom-up initiatives does not indicate a potential for polycentric development at the intra-regional scale. After a laborious data collection process, 684 IDAs were identified, out of which less than 300 are both operationally and administratively active, while around 250 are only administratively active, without showing traces of operational activity through the SEAP system.

There were two prevalent moments in which Intercommunity Development Associations were created, both in the beginning of new EU financial cycles, when new funding opportunities were available. The most significant period was in the first couple of

years after Romania achieved EU membership status. However, as mentioned above, many of them did not manage to capitalize on these opportunities, as SEAP procurement output shows.

The IDAs that have the purpose of providing public services usually include a large number of TAUs as members, thus helping provide a more balanced playing field for all the included territories. However, they do not have the potential to lead directly to polycentric development. Rather, they solve persistent issues with lacking basic public services and the lack of institutional capacity of rural territorial administrative units.

Some IDAs were specifically created to access funding dedicated to development projects, as their constituting and statute documents show. Others have multiple objectives related to local, regional or zonal development, or simply state that they were created for this general purpose, or for more specific development objectives (e.g. tourism). However, if national coverage is very high, when all IDA types are included, this changes when only development IDAs are considered.

Only 55% of all IDAs were created for local/regional/zonal development, and less than half of them are operationally active. County seat municipality anchored IDAs are by far the most active (2,862 awarded contracts), while rurally anchored IDAs are severely disadvantaged in terms of contract numbers, which could be considered normal, to some extent, as the needs and possibilities of large urban areas are far greater than those of rural areas. However, non-county seat municipalities and towns are less present as contractors on the SEAP platform than rural areas, which suggests that they are far less active as part of inter-municipal governance associations than their rural counterparts. The results of the models that test their operational activity on the procurement output volume dimension are not statistically significant to support the first hypothesis. Nevertheless, considering they are far less present on the SEAP platform, and that they are the territorial entities that are more likely to close the gap to top-tier municipalities, does suggest a monocentric bias towards top level territorial administrative units in terms of IDA activity, at county level.

In some instances, a few territorial administrative units also attempted to create several small associations with several neighbouring counterparts, which suggests that, at least in these cases, IDAs served more as shallow attempts to attract funding, rather than associations that could be used to devise and implement a common development strategy for a more territorially extended area, with common interests.

Thus, even though, theoretically, these associations provide the legislative framework needed to promote polycentric development, in practice, the effect seems to be reversed considering the activity of development scoped Intercommunity Development Associations.

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## TOURISME, INÉGALITÉS ET RECOMPOSITIONS SOCIALES : POUR UNE APPROCHE CRITIQUE DU DÉVELOPPEMENT TOURISTIQUE DANS LE SUD-OUEST MALGACHE

*Sylvie Christine Daphné VARELLAS\**

**Abstract.** *Cet article présente une synthèse des résultats de recherches menées à Mangily, une station balnéaire en pleine croissance du Sud-ouest malgache. Combinant les théories pionnières en tourisme, en économie du développement, en géographie humaine et en sociologie durkheimienne de l'anomie, il analyse les dissemblances sociales, les recompositions communautaires et les processus de gentrification touristique observés. Les données qualitatives révèlent un paradoxe structurel : levier de développement, le tourisme favorise simultanément une déstructuration communautaire, un effritement culturel et la pauvreté des autochtones. Un modèle d'interprétation articulant la notion de recomposition sociale dysharmonique avec celle de gentrification touristique périphérique est alors proposé.*

**Keywords:** *Madagascar, tourisme, distinctions, recompositions sociales, gentrification*

### INTRODUCTION

Le tourisme constitue, à l'échelle mondiale, un vecteur privilégié de développement économique pour les pays du Sud (Hilali, 2003 ; Evrard, 2006). À Madagascar, ce secteur contribue à environ 14 % du PIB national et génère plus de 350.000 emplois directs et indirects (Sarrasin, 2007 ; Ravaoarline, 2018). Toutefois, derrière ces indicateurs macroéconomiques se dissimule, bien qu'à une échelle plus réduite, une réalité plus nuancée : loin de bénéficier uniformément aux populations locales, le développement touristique produit inévitablement des inégalités structurelles, des recompositions sociales profondes et des formes d'anomie communautaire.

Le Sud-ouest malgache, considéré jusqu'ici comme la deuxième destination touristique du pays, constitue un terrain d'observation privilégié de ces dynamiques contradictoires. Marqué par la semi-aridité de son climat, ce territoire est pourtant doté de la plus longue bande côtière s'étendant sur près de 500 km (Hoerner, 1987). Mais ce privilège semble jouer en défaveur de la zone elle-même dans la mesure où elle est devenue depuis deux décennies un espace de tensions entre développement touristique balnéaire, conservation de la biodiversité et survie des communautés autochtones Vezo (pêcheurs du littoral) et Masikoro (agropasteurs de l'hinterland) (Veriza, 2019). Le village touristique de Mangily situé à 27 kilomètres au Nord de Toliara cristallise l'ensemble de ces tensions : croissance hôtelière rapide, afflux d'investisseurs étrangers, gentrification foncière, tourisme sexuel, déscolarisation des mineurs, effritement des solidarités lignagères, etc.

Le présent article propose une synthèse analytique des résultats d'enquêtes de terrain menées à Mangily, interprétés à la lumière de quatre cadres théoriques fondateurs : la science du tourisme (cycle de Butler, modèle d'impacts de Mathieson et Wall), l'économie du développement (théorie de la dépendance, approche par les capacités),

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\* Docteure en Géographie, Université de Toliara (Madagascar), E-mail: [sylvievarellas5@gmail.com](mailto:sylvievarellas5@gmail.com).

la géographie humaine (territorialité et culture) et la sociologie (anomie durkheimienne, recomposition sociale). L'objectif est de démontrer que le développement touristique dans le Sud-ouest malgache, en l'absence de politiques publiques structurantes, produit une restructuration de la communauté qui piège les populations autochtones dans un cycle d'anomie sociale, de sous-développement et de pauvreté au lieu d'une structuration pour le développement.

## **1. CADRES THÉORIQUES FONDATEURS : UNE LECTURE PLURIDISCIPLINAIRE DU TOURISME COMME PHÉNOMÈNE SOCIAL TOTAL**

### **1.1. Science du tourisme : le cycle de vie et les impacts comme grilles de lecture**

Le modèle du cycle de vie des destinations touristiques proposé par Butler (1980) constitue le premier cadre structurant de l'analyse. Inspiré de la théorie du cycle de vie du produit en marketing, il postule qu'une destination traverse six phases – exploration, implication, développement, consolidation, stagnation, déclin ou renaissance – dont la trajectoire dépend de la capacité de charge du territoire et de la qualité de la gouvernance locale. Appliqué au littoral Sud-ouest malgache, ce modèle révèle que Mangily se situe dans une phase de développement accéléré non régulé, caractérisée par une croissance du nombre d'hôtels et de visiteurs qui outrepassa la capacité d'absorption du tissu social et culturel local (Ravaoarline, 2018).

Le modèle d'impacts développé par Mathieson et Wall (1982) complète cette lecture en proposant une grille d'analyse tri-dimensionnelle (impacts économiques, socioculturels et environnementaux). Les données de terrain confirment l'ensemble de ces dimensions : impacts économiques contrastés (enrichissement des opérateurs étrangers versus précarité des emplois locaux), impacts socioculturels déstructurants (tourisme sexuel, déscolarisation, perte d'identité), et impacts environnementaux (déforestation, pression sur la barrière corallienne) (Varellas, 2024).

### **1.2. Économie du développement : dépendance, capacités et tourisme extractif**

La théorie de la dépendance développée par Frank (1966) offre une clef de lecture structurelle pour comprendre la dynamique économique du tourisme à Mangily. Loin d'irriguer le tissu économique local, les revenus touristiques sont captés par une minorité d'acteurs extérieurs (investisseurs étrangers, tours opérateurs internationaux) tandis que la population locale reste cantonnée dans des emplois précaires et saisonniers. Ce mécanisme de « fuite économique » reproduit, à l'échelle micro-territoriale, les rapports Centre-Périphérie décrits par les théoriciens de la dépendance.

L'approche par les capacités de Sen (1999), quant à elle, permet d'évaluer le développement non par la croissance du PIB touristique mais par l'élargissement réel des libertés et des possibilités d'action des individus. Or, dans le cas de Mangily, les données de terrain révèlent que le tourisme réduit les capacités des populations autochtones : accès restreint au foncier, érosion de la transmission des savoirs (navigation, pêche, artisanat), déscolarisation au profit d'activités informelles dépendantes du tourisme, etc. Comme le résume l'un des informateurs Masikoro : « Mangily est comme un *ravimbele*<sup>1</sup> *kîra* – les feuilles sont luxuriantes mais il n'y a aucun tubercule en-dessous ».

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<sup>1</sup> Feuille de patate douce

### **1.3. Apports de la géographie humaine : territoire, culture et recompositions spatiales**

Dans le langage de ses spécialistes qui ont étudié le Sud-ouest malgache dans sa globalité comme Hoerner (1987), et de ceux qui se sont intéressés particulièrement au littoral Vezo comme Veriza (2014 ; 2019), Veriza et *al* (2017), la géographie humaine met en relief la dimension territoriale et culturelle du tourisme. À Mangily, le territoire n'est pas un simple support géographique. Il est le dépositaire des identités lignagères (tombeaux Vezo Tejory, Hazomanga<sup>2</sup> sacré), des toponymies ancestrales (Tsivonoambé, Andombiry, Ambovorekapoky) et des règles coutumières d'accès aux ressources (système du ziva<sup>3</sup> entre Vezo et Sara). La recomposition spatiale induite par le tourisme – installation d'hôtels sur les anciennes plantations Masikoro, privatisation de fait du littoral – constitue une dépossession territoriale qui affecte directement l'identité culturelle des communautés autochtones (Serquet & Rebetez, 2012).

Cette dynamique rejoint les récents travaux sur l'inclusivité territoriale menés dans le cadre européen, notamment par Brie (2024) sur les frontières identitaires dans les Balkans occidentaux. La comparaison entre les processus d'exclusion/inclusion observés dans le Sud-est européen et à Madagascar permet de dégager des mécanismes structurels communs où l'identité culturelle devient une « frontière » face au développement économique non intégré.

### **1.4. Sociologie : anomie durkheimienne et dysharmonie sociale**

Le concept d'anomie forgé par Durkheim à la fin du 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle et perfectionné tout au long du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle par des sociologues comme Merton (1938) désigne l'état d'une société dans laquelle les normes régulatrices du comportement individuel sont affaiblies ou détruites, entraînant désorganisation sociale, déviance et souffrance collective. Appliqué au cas de Mangily, ce cadre permet d'interpréter la multiplication des comportements transgressifs (prostitution de mineures, consommation de drogues, vols) non comme des pathologies individuelles mais comme les symptômes d'une anomie généralisée produite par l'effondrement des structures normatives traditionnelles sous la pression du tourisme (Serquet & Rebetez, 2012).

L'hypothèse centrale de l'article est que la culture, entendue comme cadre structurant des rapports sociaux, des solidarités communautaires et des normes de comportement, constitue le rempart principal contre l'anomie sociale. Lorsque le tourisme déstructure cette culture – par la folklorisation des pratiques, la rupture de la transmission intergénérationnelle, la substitution des valeurs marchandes aux valeurs lignagères –, il crée les conditions d'une dysharmonie sociale durable, piégeant la communauté dans un cercle vicieux de sous-développement.

## **2. RÉSULTATS DE TERRAIN : LE PARADOXE DE MANGILY**

### **2.1. Gentrification touristique et dépossession foncière**

Les données ethnographiques révèlent un processus de gentrification touristique périphérique qui s'opère selon un mécanisme de dépossession progressive : les terrains ancestraux des Masikoro, autrefois dédiés à l'élevage et à l'agriculture, sont vendus – souvent sous pression ou par des intermédiaires peu scrupuleux – à des investisseurs

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<sup>2</sup> Poteau rituel signe de l'identité lignagère.

<sup>3</sup> Parenté à plaisanterie entre deux groupes sociaux.

étrangers qui y construisent des hôtels. Le témoignage de l'informateur Masikoro est éloquent :

*« Là où se trouvent les hôtels des Vazaha actuellement, c'est là que se trouvaient nos plantations. [...] La plupart des terrains appartiennent tous aux Blancs. Ce sont eux qui occupent tout l'espace ici. »*

Ce processus s'inscrit dans ce que Harvey (2005) qualifie d'« accumulation par dépossession » et ce que Smith (1996) conceptualise comme le « rent gap » : l'écart entre la valeur foncière actuelle (usage agricole/pastoral, occupation des sites de débarquement piroguier) et la valeur potentielle (usage touristique) crée une rente différentielle qui attire les investisseurs et déplace les populations autochtones vers les marges territoriales.

## **2.2. Inégalités sociales et communautaires : une économie extravertie**

L'analyse des entretiens confirme l'existence d'une économie touristique à deux vitesses. D'un côté, les opérateurs hôteliers étrangers bénéficient de la quasi-totalité de la valeur ajoutée. De l'autre, les populations locales se trouvent confinées dans des activités subalternes (guidage, piroguage, petite restauration, massage) dont les revenus sont aléatoires et saisonniers. Le Président du Fokontany<sup>4</sup> de Mangily résume cette situation avec une formule saisissante :

*« Quand il y a du tourisme, c'est une grande joie pour nous à Mangily car c'est notre gagne-pain. [...] Mais quand les Blancs ne viennent pas, comme en ce moment, les gens souffrent. »*

Cette dépendance structurelle à la fréquentation touristique illustre le mécanisme de « piège à pauvreté touristique » : les communautés abandonnent progressivement leurs activités traditionnelles (pêche, élevage, agriculture) au profit d'activités touristiques informelles dont elles ne maîtrisent ni les flux ni les revenus. Un éleveur Masikoro en témoigne : « C'est fini, j'ai arrêté car il y a trop de vols et de pillages. Notre seul travail maintenant c'est de tailler des pierres et de transporter du sable pour ceux qui construisent des maisons ».

## **2.3. Effritement culturel et anomie : la dissolution des normes communautaires**

Le phénomène le plus alarmant révélé par les données de terrain est la dissolution progressive des normes sociales et culturelles qui structuraient la communauté Vezo et Masikoro. Trois indicateurs convergent et attestent d'un processus d'anomie au sens durkheimien :

- **L'exploitation sexuelle des mineures** : cette pratique est encouragée par les parents eux-mêmes dans une logique de survie économique. Le Président du Fokontany rapporte : « Les parents ne les retiennent pas. Ils disent – va chercher de l'argent, nous avons faim. Ils utilisent l'enfant comme un moyen de subsistance. » L'informateur Masikoro confirme avec une netteté brutale : « On vend nos enfants aux Vazaha pour avoir de belles maisons ».

- **La déscolarisation systémique** : les enfants quittent l'école pour vendre des colliers sur la plage, proposer des massages ou servir d'intermédiaires. « Leurs mères les sortent de l'école : regarde les enfants des voisins, ils sont avec des Blancs, va à la plage ! »

- **L'inversion des rapports d'autorité intrafamiliaux** : les parents qui tentent de protéger leurs enfants sont accusés de jalousie. L'ancien Président du Fokontany

<sup>4</sup> Président du Fokontany désigne en quelque sorte le Chef du village ou du quartier.

témoigne : « Quand j'empêchais les mineures de fréquenter les discothèques, les parents portaient plainte contre moi. Ils disaient que je détestais leurs enfants ».

Ces trois phénomènes interprétés conjointement attestent un effondrement des structures normatives traditionnelles – autorité des aînés, respect du Hazomanga, valeur de l'éducation, fady (tabous) – sous l'effet décomposant d'un tourisme qui substitue la valeur marchande à la valeur sociale. On assiste à ce que Lévi-Strauss (1955) appelait la « dissolution des structures » au contact d'une modernité non médiatisée.

### **3. INTERPRÉTATION : RECOMPOSITION SOCIALE DYSHARMONIQUE ET PIÈGE À SOUS-DÉVELOPPEMENT**

#### **3.1. De l'harmonie culturelle à la dysharmonie sociale**

L'analyse croisée des données de terrain et des cadres théoriques permet de formuler la thèse suivante : l'homogénéité culturelle des communautés Vezo et Masikoro constituait historiquement le fondement de l'harmonie sociale à Mangily. Les systèmes de parenté (ziva entre Vezo Tejory et Sara), les règles foncières coutumières (validation par le Hazomanga), la spécialisation économique ethnique (pêche pour les Vezo, élevage pour les Masikoro, guidage forestier pour les Masikoro) et la transmission intergénérationnelle des savoirs constituaient un écosystème social cohérent.

En introduisant de nouveaux acteurs (étrangers, migrants internes Betsileo, Tanalana), de nouvelles valeurs (argent facile, prestige du « Vazaha », consommation ostentatoire) et de nouvelles logiques spatiales (privatisation foncière, zones hôtelières fermées), le tourisme a involontairement brisé cette cohérence sans proposer ni cadre de substitution ni mesures d'accompagnement. Il ne s'agit pas d'une structuration pour le développement mais d'une restructuration de la communauté qui fragmente le tissu social en strates inégales et non communicantes.

#### **3.2. La métaphore du « ravimbelé kira » : une théorie locale du développement en trompe-l'œil**

L'un des apports les plus remarquables de l'enquête est la formulation, par un informateur Masikoro, d'une théorie locale du développement en trompe-l'œil à travers la métaphore du « *ravimbelé kira* » – une variété de patate douce dont les feuilles sont luxuriantes mais qui ne produit pas de tubercules :

*« Mangily est comme un ravimbelé kira. Tu ne vois pas les fruits, mais les feuilles sont énormes. On est célèbre, on se développe en apparence, mais si on n'a pas de racines, comment peut-on savourer cela ? »*

Cette métaphore végétale condense avec une précision remarquable la critique du développement touristique : la visibilité internationale de Mangily (les feuilles) masque l'absence de bénéfices réels pour la communauté (les tubercules/fruits). Elle rejoint, par une voie endogène, les critiques formulées par Sarrasin (2007) et Hillali (2003) sur le « tourisme de façade » dans les pays en développement.

#### **3.3. L'absence de politiques publiques comme facteur aggravant**

Un résultat transversal à l'ensemble des entretiens est la dénonciation unanime de l'absence de l'État et des collectivités locales. Par ses mots, le Président du Fokontany résume : « On ne voit rien de durable ici. Rien ne nous parvient directement car tout passe par la commune ou le district. C'est nous-mêmes qui essayons de rendre notre village propre. » L'aspiration à l'autonomie communale (« que le village devienne lui-même une

commune ») traduit le désir d'un développement endogène et d'une gouvernance territoriale de proximité.

L'absence de politiques publiques de développement territorial – régulation foncière, protection des mineures, redistribution des revenus touristiques, soutien aux activités traditionnelles – n'est pas seulement un manque : elle est un facteur actif de déstructuration qui amplifie les effets négatifs du tourisme. Sans médiation institutionnelle entre les logiques du marché touristique et les besoins des communautés autochtones, le développement touristique tourne le dos à ceux qui sont censés bénéficier.

## **4. DISCUSSION : RÉSILIENCES LOCALES ET PISTES POUR UN TOURISME INCLUSIF**

### **4.1. Formes de résistance et d'adaptation**

Malgré la tonalité critique de l'analyse, les données de terrain révèlent également des formes de résilience et de résistance locale qui nuancent le tableau. Loin de disparaître, l'identité Vezo est valorisée par le tourisme lui-même : « Les touristes, dès qu'ils arrivent, cherchent un Vezo pour aller en mer. Ils ne demandent pas – êtes-vous guide ? – mais – êtes-vous pêcheur ? » L'association Fimihara, gérée par des Vezo, illustre une forme d'auto-gouvernance communautaire de la ressource marine (surveillance du Massif de Rose, rotation d'ouverture/fermeture pour les poulpes) qui constitue un modèle endogène de gestion durable.

Par ailleurs, la spécialisation ethnique des activités touristiques (Vezo = mer, Masikoro = forêt et charrettes) reproduit, dans le contexte touristique, la complémentarité fonctionnelle qui préexistait. Cette continuité structurelle suggère que les communautés ne sont pas des simples réceptacles passifs du tourisme mais des acteurs qui réinterprètent les opportunités à travers leurs propres catégories culturelles.

### **4.2. Vers un modèle de tourisme territorialement ancré et inclusif**

Les résultats de cette recherche, mis en perspective avec les travaux sur l'inclusivité menés dans le cadre européen, suggèrent cinq pistes d'action pour un tourisme inclusif et territorialement ancré dans le Sud-ouest malgache :

- Régulation foncière : moratoire sur les ventes de terrains communautaires aux non-résidents, cadastre participatif respectant les droits coutumiers.
- Gouvernance de proximité : érection de Mangily en commune autonome, création d'un comité local du tourisme associant Vezo, Masikoro et opérateurs.
- Redistribution des revenus : taxe de séjour affectée au développement local, quotas d'emploi local dans les hôtels, soutien aux coopératives de piroguiers.
- Protection des mineures : renforcement des contrôles policiers, campagnes de sensibilisation, sanctions parentales effectives.
- Valorisation de la culture comme ressource de développement : intégration des savoirs Vezo (navigation, conservation marine) et Masikoro (connaissance de la forêt, feu par friction, pharmacopée traditionnelle) dans l'offre touristique, non comme folklore mais comme patrimoine vivant.

## **CONCLUSION**

Cette synthèse analytique nourrie par des données ethnographiques de première main collectées à Mangily et interprétées à travers quatre cadres théoriques fondateurs aboutit à un constat sans équivoque : le développement touristique dans le Sud-ouest malgache, en l'absence de politiques publiques structurantes et de médiation



institutionnelle, ne produit pas un développement endogène mais une recomposition sociale dysharmonique qui piège les communautés autochtones dans un cercle vicieux d'anomie, de dépendance économique et de dépossession foncière et culturelle.

Le concept de « gentrification touristique périphérique » proposé ici – processus par lequel un territoire rural du Sud global est progressivement accaparé par des acteurs économiques extérieurs au détriment des populations autochtones, sans le mécanisme de plus-value foncière qui caractérise la gentrification urbaine classique – mérite d'être approfondi et testé dans d'autres contextes du Sud global.

La métaphore du « ravimbelé kîra », formulée par un informateur Masikoro, constitue peut-être la contribution la plus originale de cette recherche : elle démontre que les communautés locales disposent de leurs propres catégories analytiques pour décrypter les illusions du développement touristique. Toute politique de tourisme inclusif devra intégrer cette intelligence locale si elle veut éviter de reproduire les « belles théories » que les communautés ont apprises à décoder depuis longtemps.

Dans la perspective d'un échange Erasmus et d'une comparaison internationale, les dynamiques observées à Mangily trouvent des échos dans les travaux sur les frontières identitaires en Europe du Sud-est, les re compositions territoriales sur le littoral roumain de la mer Noire et les études postcoloniales sur la globalisation inégale. Ces convergences thématiques ouvrent la voie à des collaborations fécondes entre chercheurs malgaches et européens autour d'un objet commun : le tourisme comme révélateur des inégalités territoriales et comme terrain d'expérimentation de modèles de développement inclusif.

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#### **IV. BOOK REVIEWS**

**Edina Lilla MÉSZÁROS** ⇔ *Digital Humanism Reimagined: Between Algorithmic Threats and the Promise of an Ethical Global AI Governance*

**Ioana Lucia BORDEIANU, Lois LAZA** ⇔ *The European Union and the New Dynamics of Global Security*

**Andreea VLADIUC** ⇔ *Republic Moldova's EU Aspirations and Romania's Strategic Support*



## DIGITAL HUMANISM REIMAGINED: BETWEEN ALGORITHMIC THREATS AND THE PROMISE OF AN ETHICAL GLOBAL AI GOVERNANCE

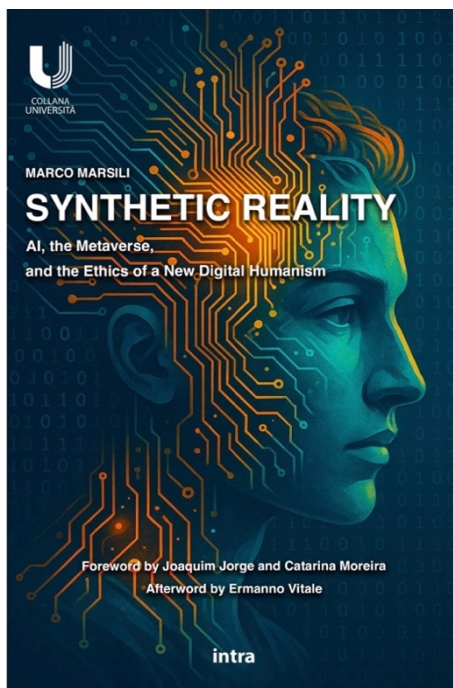
Edina Lilla MÉSZÁROS\*

**Book review of** Marsili, M. (2026). *Synthetic Reality. AI, The Metaverse, and the Ethics of a New Digital Humanism*. Pesaro: Edizioni Intra. 135p. ISBN 979-12-5991-825-3.

**Keywords:** *digital humanism; global AI governance; metaverse; ethics; digital authoritarianism; regulatory framework.*

As noted by numerous researchers, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a pervasive phenomenon and an unavoidable aspect of our everyday life. It is not merely an in-vogue concept and a significant topic of public discourse, but a technology that significantly impacts and shapes diverse domains including employment, consumerism, science, warfare, decision-making, logistics, education, agriculture, public administration, culture, healthcare, media, recreation, and the list could continue. Some scholars are even speculating about a groundbreaking technological revolution taking place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, poised to remodel the core framework of human society. It is widely assumed that artificial intelligence will play a crucial role in this transformation (Fuchs, 2022: 1-2).

Even though, pundits usually trace back the origins of the concept Artificial Intelligence to the 1950s, highlighting the pioneering works of Turing and McCarthy, they acknowledge that the aspiration for a systemic approach to understanding intelligence precedes contemporary times, discussed in the earlier writings of Rene Descartes, Louis Leon Thurstone, Francis Galton etc. (Paaß, Hecke, 2024: 10; Shafik, 2026: 2). While the British mathematician, Alan Turing is recognized to have laid down the theoretical basis for AI, developing the Turing test assessing a machine's cognitive capabilities in 1950, the coining of the concept itself is attributed to John McCarthy, the author of the LISP programming language, at the Dartmouth Workshop in 1956 (Paaß, Hecke, 2024: 10; Abhivardhan, 2024: 131; Wood, 2024: 15; Shafik, 2026: 3). Conversely, despite AI contouring as a self-standing



\* PhD Lecturer, University of Oradea, Romania, E-mail: [edina\\_lilla@yahoo.com](mailto:edina_lilla@yahoo.com).

discipline in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea to generate artificial beings is not a modern aspiration but rather an enduring human ambition, deeply rooted in human history and mythology. Since antiquity, mankind has been preoccupied with ideas bringing into life artificial creatures endowed with intelligence by their inventors (Paaß Hecke, 2024: 15).

As other disciplines, AI also boosts with a significant number of branches, such as (Gregi , Lesinger, 2024: 437):

- *Problem-solving* aimed at formulating search algorithms within specific problems domains;
- *Knowledge representation* referring to the process of data storage and constructing a knowledge base with the capacity of integrating various forms of know-how;
- *Automated reasoning* involving the development of programs grounded in logical principles;
- *Planning and acting* envisaging the identification and implementation of the most optimal objectives;
- *Reasoning in uncertain environments* employing paradigms of probability and utility for the development of decision-making systems;
- *Learning*, directed towards developing algorithms enabling different types of machine learning;
- *Natural language processing* engaged in activities facilitating human-computer interaction by enabling speech recognition and automated translation;
- *Computer vision* tackling challenges in visual perception;
- *Robotics*, incorporating a wide range of aforementioned disciplines in physical machines.

Although widely acknowledging the positive effects of AI fostering the progression of human society and enhancing the quality of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both specialists and laymen draw attention to the hidden dangers and potential risks associated to its headway. While experts are more focused on resolving technical vulnerabilities, problems in algorithms and systemic failures, the average citizens are concerned about the dimensions of AI directly influencing their existence through privacy breaches, job displacement, risks to economic frameworks, societal manipulation and even mental health issues. Additionally, the arising ethical preoccupations and blind spots, misinformation and various state and non-state actors exploiting the opportunities offered by Artificial Intelligence in order to threaten democracies, polarize societies, erode the trust of citizens in public institutions, have prompted the need for establishing adequate legal and regulatory frameworks (Shafik, 2026: xxiii-xxviii, 14). These legal frameworks are absolutely imperative on regulating the research in the field of AI and its societal impact, putting pressure on states and international organizations to enact AI legislations (Shafik, 2026: 16-20; Abhivardhan, 2024: 58; Paaß, Hecke, 2024: 412). While the need for an AI legal framework is well acknowledged across many decision-making levels, a consensus remains elusive, with countries such as the US, China, India or Canada pursuing divergent agendas, not to mention the supranational approach of the EU (Shafik, 2026: 187-194; Fuchs, 2022: 155; Prenga, 2024: 32-33). For instance, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is regarded as a model on how privacy can be protected while enabling the proper application of AI, some authors even arguing in favour of its extension and accommodation in tackling the negative impact of emerging

technologies such as facial recognition, predictive policing and political campaigning informed by data analysis (Wood, 2024: 159).

Undoubtedly, the progress of AI has brought many benefits to mankind, promoting innovation in various fields such as transportation and education, the elimination of human errors and risks by enhancing diagnostic accuracy in healthcare, also making things more efficient through automation. Nevertheless, it has also resulted in the emergence of a varied plethora of challenges. For example, the consolidation of digital surveillance didn't only lead to safer cities and environments by reducing crime and strengthening community cohesion, but has also given more power to dictatorial regimes to curtail human rights and democracy, therefore establishing actual digital authoritarianism. Authors further argue that the advent of AI and digital automation has enhanced our lives, yet simultaneously introduced greater risks, like "digital warfare, digital fascism, [...], racism and hate speech online, electronic waste and unsustainable digital economies, the exploitation of precarious digital workers, digital dictatorships, digital inequalities and divides", fake news and deepfakes etc, turning contemporary societies more inhumane (Fuchs, 2022: 45-46). Ideas that a few decades ago seemed a fantasy, representing the main synopsis of books and Hollywood movies forecasting terminators and machines taking over authority from humanity via a rapid, calculated, and technological apocalypse, nowadays are closer to reality. Humanity being threatened by digital domination, digital capitalism and the violation of privacy, calls for the establishment of clear rules and boundaries. *Digital humanism* emerges as a solution cited in the specialty literature countering digital devastation, -domination, -exploitation, and digital dictatorship advocating for its widespread adoption in both academic and public discourse (Fuchs, 2022: 46-47). According to the prominent UN specialised agency, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Culture Organization) AI and algorithms must prioritize and serve human interest not the opposite, highlighting the imperativeness of the development of digital technology and policies grounded in human rights, democracy, inclusiveness, diversity and ethics (DigHum, 2026; UNESCO, 2026).

In this context, Marco Marsili's book is an excellent academic contribution, shedding light on how these major technological advancements in the field of AI and the metaverse make notable anthropological shifts, thus demanding the establishment of a renewed ethnical framework grounded in respect for human dignity and commitment to democratic rule and accountability. Investigating how AI, synthetic reality and algorithmic governance are reshaping human experience lies at the very core of the monograph. The author while combining technical critique and humanistic inquiry within his research, also concurrently transposes insights from different fields, starting with law, philosophy, geopolitics, cognitive science and political theory. The monograph is structured around five main pillars and ten consecutive chapters. The work debuts with a preamble and an introductory section and concludes with an afterword, rather than rigorous scientific conclusions. The researcher does not only rely on the analysis of contemporary AI ethics and legislative frameworks, but borrows consistently from the works of prominent philosophers, like Arendt, Bachelard, Baudrillard, Nietzsche or Jonas, the book acting as a bridge, connecting philosophical inquiries with insights about current technological developments (Marsili, 2026).

The first part of the monograph comprising the initial three chapters is dedicated to offer a compelling historical and theoretical foundation, guiding the reader through several stages of AI evolution, starting with the early utopian visions about the internet, and concluding with the assessment of contemporary algorithmic infrastructure. The

reader acquires valuable insights into the Internet, beginning with its embryonic form, the ARPANET, tracing its evolution until its newest developments, the Web3 and the Metaverse. Here, the author formulates a serious critique on behalf of Web3, which despite promising free internet and a higher level of decentralization, instead has evolved into a reproducer of novel forms of control. According to Marsili, the concept of free internet has shifted towards surveillance capitalism and platform power, remaining just a utopian myth. Furthermore, the author highlights the potential adverse consequences of the tools that have arisen from Metaverse designs, including VR, AR, and MR on fields such as politics or warfare for instance, formulating concerns related to ethics, digital rights, manipulation and even autonomy. In the second part of the book the writer gives voice to well-founded preoccupations related to the potential degenerate nature of Artificial Intelligence. DeGen AI as cited, explores AI's dual nature, both the innocuous, beneficial and the harmful one, Marsili even drawing attention to addressing situations when AI chatbots have encouraged suicide to its users, persuading them towards self-sacrifice for example for the sake of climate change. In the authors' view, we cannot speak about enhancing the efficiency of AI without ethical constraints, thus calling for the establishment of a well-grounded legal framework at global level. Marsili underscores the trailblazing role of Europe/European Union in this regard, in his opinion the EU "becoming a global legal laboratory for the regulation of artificial intelligence and digital platforms", listing the GDPR, the Digital Services Act and the AI Act as the pillars of a cohesive regulatory framework (Marsili, 2026: 50). Marsili is even contemplating on the formulation of an authentic digital constitution. The third part of the book, emphasizes the necessity of educating the machine, introducing the concept of 'algorithmic pedagogy', analysing the development of AI through the lens of a pedagogical process. Creativity, hallucinations and the intriguing complexity of collective understanding occupy a central position within this section, the writer pinpointing the acuteness of cognitive sustainability, namely the necessity of preserving human autonomy in the face of potential overdependence on artificial intelligence. The penultimate, fourth section, reiterates the European Union's role as a global legal powerhouse for the governance of AI and digital platforms, further delving into its regulatory leadership, the EU advocating for a governance approach centred on humanity (human-centric governance model), dignity, ethics and accountability. The line between digital sovereignty and human sovereignty is thin, akin to the foundational ethical principle of liberal democracy "your freedom ends where the freedom of others begins," namely digital sovereignty must be anchored in human sovereignty. Beside the legislation established by the EU in this regard, this section familiarizes the reader with the regulatory AI frameworks set out by eminent UN and international institutions and agencies, such as UNESCO, OECD, ITU, Marsili lobbying not just for the creation of a global alliance for the ethical use of AI, but also for the involvement of the Global South countries as well in shaping AI governance (Marsili, 2026: 81-84). The last part of the book brings forward future scenarios, the author cautioning against possible harmful geopolitical ramifications resulting from the influence of AI, emphasizing disinformation, digital authoritarianism and algorithmic power. These novel challenges pose a great risk, targeting the erosion of democratic societies and values. Based on the recommendation of the UN Secretary-General's High- Level Advisory Body on AI, Marsili promotes the idea of establishing of a Global AI Council and a clear shift from non-binding regulations to an enforceable worldwide constitution for AI. This book is highly recommended as an essential reading for scholars, politicians, laymen, and



everyone interested in the future of artificial intelligence, as well as in comprehending the boundaries of digital sovereignty and digital humanism. Well-grounded theoretically and philosophically, and without resorting to scaremongering or apocalyptic rhetoric, Marsili's book is aimed at providing its reader both a cautionary message and a guide: a warning about the hidden dangers behind cognitive manipulation and ethical decline, and a guide towards reaching digital humanism anchored in dignity, accountability and global partnership.

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## THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE NEW DYNAMICS OF GLOBAL SECURITY

Ioana Lucia BORDEIANU\*

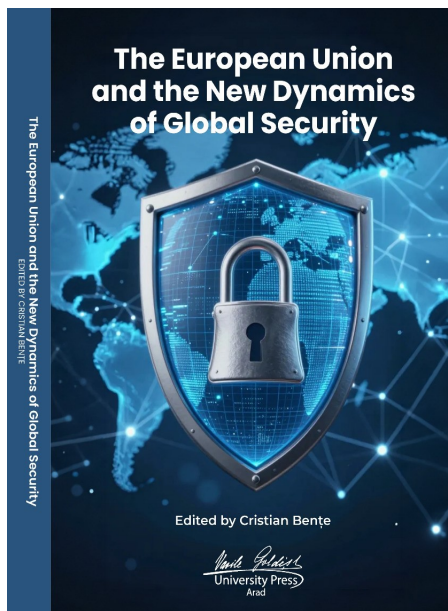
Lois LAZA\*\*

**Book review of** Bențe, Cristian (ed.) (2025). *The European Union and the New Dynamics of Global Security*. “Vasile Goldiș” University Press – Arad, Trivent Publishing – Budapest. ISBN: 978-630-6728-46-6.

**Keywords:** *European Union, Security studies, Geopolitics, Hybrid threats, Emerging trends.*

In an increasingly interconnected and rapidly evolving world, recent global assessments point to shifting patterns. According to the 2025 Global Peace Index report (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025), recent years have seen a gradual decline in peacefulness, with conflicts becoming more internationalised and more numerous. Additionally, the World Social Report 2025 identifies economic insecurity, inequality, and weakening social cohesion as interconnected trends that are reshaping societies globally, while calling on renewed policy approaches centered on fairness, shared security and solidarity (United Nations, 2025).

The collective volume under review offers a nuanced and multilayered exploration of contemporary security, moving decisively beyond traditional, state-centric, and militarized understandings of the concept, providing a detailed evaluation of emerging challenges. Across its seventeen contributions, the volume gives a broad analytical framework in which geopolitical competition, technological transformation, social dynamics, and human vulnerability are deeply intertwined. Rather than treating security as a fixed condition, the volume conceptualizes it as an evolving process shaped by power transitions, governance choices, and various other factors, presenting the EU's increasingly multidimensional security environment in 2025.



\* PhD, lecturer, Department of International Relations and European Studies; Faculty of History, International Relations, Political Science and Communication Sciences, University of Oradea, Romania, E-mail: [ioanabordeianu@hotmail.com](mailto:ioanabordeianu@hotmail.com).

\*\* MA student - European Security, Department of International Relations and European Studies; Faculty of History, International Relations, Political Science and Communication Sciences, University of Oradea, Romania, E-mail: [lois.laza11@gmail.com](mailto:lois.laza11@gmail.com).

## THEMATIC OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME AND ANALYTICAL REFLECTIONS

### Part I - Global Geopolitical Shifts and Emerging Threats

Adrian Toma opens the first part of the volume with an analysis of the dynamics between China and the West through the lens of the Thucydides' Trap, which describes the heightened risk of conflict when a rising power challenges an established hegemon. The author presents that the contemporary competition is driven by economic competition, diplomatic manoeuvring, and hybrid conflicts rather than direct conflict, China's strengths are found in its intricate industrial infrastructure and the shift towards innovation, while the global landscape could be shaped by variables such as emerging power centers and the EU's growing political and military assertiveness. This is supported by other research, including Nye's argument that in the twenty-first century, power is increasingly exercised through soft power, economic and institutional domains, agenda-setting, and the mobilization of intangible resources, as war is no longer the primary arbiter of outcomes (Nye, 2011: 7-15).

Following this systemic perspective, the next contribution shifts toward China's security governance framework, examining a coherent counterterrorism policy grounded in legal principles, cooperation, and the strategic use of emerging intelligence technologies. The article highlights a holistic approach that combines firm sanctions with preventive measures and root-cause mitigation, rejects double standards, intensifies dialogue and advances bilateral anti-terrorist exercises. Additionally, the author mentions the growing role of Large Language Models (LLMs) in leveraging large volumes of data to support coordinated and effective prevention and responsive actions.

The concluding analysis of the first book section also addresses Artificial Intelligence (AI), exploring how it increasingly shapes the global security landscape by enhancing facial recognition, surveillance, and data analysis, while also being exploited by non-state actors for propaganda and operational purposes. Mereanu Vitia's findings highlight intensified technological competition and the growing complexity of threats, arguing that effective AI deployment requires robust legal and ethical frameworks to balance innovation, operational efficiency, and the protection of fundamental rights. On the topic of emerging technologies and the challenges they present, the articles in the book offer a coherent and normatively grounded discussion, putting an emphasis on legal frameworks and ethics. Other research also points to the need for strong ethical frameworks addressing data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and fairness, which must be developed immediately due to the quick integration of AI into industries including healthcare, banking, and communication (Radaliev, 2025: 3).

### Part II - The European Union as a Security Actor

The second part debuts with an article written by Aurora Lupaş which examines diplomacy and security as mutually reinforcing parts of contemporary international relations, emphasizing their interdependence in an era shaped by cybersecurity risks, disinformation and hybrid warfare. Her findings show how negotiations, alliances, mediation, information exchange, and defence diplomacy contribute to stability, while comparing Romania's role with EU approaches, revealing both convergence and divergence. Across several contributions, the volume implicitly engages with the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of insecurity, drawing attention to the less visible barriers that complicate the peace-building process. In doing so, it moves beyond purely strategic or institutional explanations of conflict, highlighting how collective

perceptions, social narratives, and accumulated psychological strain shape political attitudes and constrain the space for compromise. Other research showcases this, highlighting how societal and psychological factors are obstacles, and continuous violence may result in a recurrent pattern of conflict: “by increasing the psychological distress of the civilian population and magnifying threat perceptions, particularly collective threat, leading to increased support for the ethos of conflict, and consequently to decreased support for political compromise” (Canetti, Elad-Strenger, Lavi, Guy & Bar-Tal, 2017: 103).

The subsequent analysis indicates a need for recalibration of the balance between fundamental rights protection and security requirements within the EU. Anca-Florina Morosteş emphasizes the importance of human security in the context of contemporary challenges and exposes the fragility between personal liberty and collective order, underscoring proportionality during sanitary emergencies. Her research highlights how although EU law provides solid protection for human rights, it remains vulnerable to exceptionalism and fear-based governance, requiring human dignity to be reaffirmed as a normative foundation of European law. Human security has the potential to resonate strongly with the current situation. The concept, which emphasises the individual, has arisen as an addition and alternative to conventional state-centered approaches. The UNDP defines it, mentioning how “Human security is people centred. It is concerned with how people live and breathe in a society, how freely they exercise their many choices, how much access they have to market and social opportunities and whether they live in conflict or in peace” (United Nations, 1994). Human security, though difficult to define precisely, rests on two core principles: shifting the focus of security from the state to the individual, and adopting a comprehensive view of insecurity that recognizes the interconnection of multiple threats (Gilder, 2021: 494), highlighting its relevance in the framework of the book. The explicit engagement with human security constitutes one of the volume’s valuable contributions, particularly in light of the current shift towards a more strengthened protection of fundamental rights. In an era marked by exceptional measures and occasional fear-based governance during crises, the emphasis placed on safeguarding human dignity emerges as both timely and necessary.

The second part concludes with two articles that highlight how security governance in the EU increasingly intersects with territorial and energy dynamics. Nicoleta Lăşan presents a global rise in population density in border regions, which can be economically, socially, and culturally marginalized, making cross-border cooperation essential for European security, despite funding and bureaucratic shortcomings. Irina Ionela Pop demonstrates how the war in Ukraine reshaped the EU’s energy landscape, accelerating diversification away from Russian fuels, boosting investments in solar, wind, and hydrogen technology. The need for coherent integration of short and long-term energy and climate strategies is one of the recommendations in this analysis.

### **Part III - Regional and Societal Security Challenges in Europe**

The first piece of research from the third part argues that inland waterway transport is increasingly promoted at the EU level due to its lower logistics costs, environmental efficiency, and capacity to decongest road and rail networks. Florentina Chirodea and Ioana Lucia Bordeianu’s findings reveal how the Gdańsk-Galaţi waterway is a strategic yet postponed project with significant geo-economic and geopolitical potential for Romania and the EU, despite persistent financial, regulatory, and political constraints. The volume turns to energy security as a key dimension of contemporary

stability. This shift is particularly relevant in the current context, as European societies and economies are increasingly relying on energy resources and their supply networks to sustain everyday life and economic activity (Gujejian, 2023: 53). Energy security therefore extends beyond technical or commercial concerns, as energy resources can be located in politically unstable regions, where control over supply may become a tool of geopolitical influence. Additionally, according to the literature, defence strategies must incorporate both transport and electricity generation infrastructure in the current security environment because doing so lessens reliance on outside energy sources and provides security (Iancu, 2024: 28), confirming the thesis that can be found in the book. This concept emphasises the need for a paradigm change in modern strategic thinking, where security must now take into account vital aspects of contemporary society like energy and accessibility, rather than solely military considerations. While not an energy infrastructure per se, the Gdańsk-Galați waterway holds indirect relevance for energy security by supporting the transport of energy-related goods and enhancing the efficiency and resilience of the European supply chain. By addressing this corridor, the contribution adds a valuable geo-economic and infrastructural perspective, illustrating how transport connectivity intersects with broader debates on security, resilience, and strategic autonomy in Europe.

Two articles from the volume jointly frame migration as both a barometer of social change and a structural security challenge for the EU. The Romanian case (during 2007-2017) analysed by Vendelin Francisc Glazer highlights a sustained rise in temporary and permanent emigration, largely driven by economic rationality, with long-term losses in human capital and unrecovered public investment in education. Cristian Bențe's research reveals how at the EU level, migration simultaneously generates opportunities and intensifies border management pressures, political polarization and social cohesion debates. The author's observations present how the securitization of migration has improved operational control, but also exposed persistent tensions between security imperatives and human rights obligation, shaping the contemporary security landscape. As a phenomenon that stems from both necessity and aspiration, migration unfolds at the intersection of vulnerability, policy, and power, making it inherently difficult to address. As other research also supports, securitization policies strongly illustrate their inherently conflicting nature, including the deaths of thousands of migrants and the challenges associated with their assimilation (Jaskulowski, 2019: 710).

The scholarly contribution of Ruslan Șevcenco presents the political landscape of Moldova, showing how Russian propaganda has become increasingly destructive for the country. Soviet-era economic narratives are used, promoting Russia and disseminating messages through media, public figures and cultural platforms.

Ban Emilian examines the deinstitutionalization of persons with disabilities in Romania, finding how social and professional integration must become a collective mindset. The contributor demonstrates that investing in mental health services, community-based support, and social inclusion of persons with disabilities strengthens public order by fostering social cohesion and reaffirming human dignity as a core societal value.

#### **Part IV - Communication, Culture, and Technology in European Security**

The analysis of intercultural communication in the EU done by Speranța Sofia Milancovici opens the last section of the book. It reveals how this type of communication is a structural necessity amid linguistic fragmentation, cultural stereotyping and digital

divides that constrain cooperation and social cohesion. The author used case studies from Brussels, Tallinn and the HEICOMP project, and demonstrated how initiatives such as Erasmus+ and intercultural training mitigate barriers, positioning intercultural competence as a core future capacity.

Dima-Laza Ramona Stăncuța's research examines the fascinating intricacies of non-verbal communication, highlighting how innate and culturally acquired European gestures shape political and diplomatic interaction. The article details communication components, including microexpressions and other gestures, underscoring their growing relevance in a visually oriented era. Dima-Laza illustrates cross-national differences and diplomatic hand gestures and reveals body language as a powerful, culturally contingent tool of political influence and human understanding. As a researcher also reminds in his research, the quote of sociologist Goffman "the gestures which we sometimes call empty are perhaps in fact the fullest things of all" (Wong, 2021: 354), supporting the importance of researching non-verbal communication. As Wong hypothesizes, when political leaders interact face to face, their encounters are structured through ritualized practices, ranging from attire and greeting to spatial arrangement, which shape how authority, respect, and relational intent are interpreted (Wong, 2021: 354). This line of analysis highlights the broader importance of examining security with an interdisciplinary approach, closely connected to psychology, in order to capture the full complexity of political and diplomatic engagement.

In the closing sections of the volume, Andrea Peterlicean observes how Romanian political actors construct online political identities through multimodal strategies combining visuals, text, and interaction. This article shows how informal imagery and inclusive language are some ways in which credibility and approachability is built, while populist performances emerge, and how digital engagement further cultivates parasocial relationships, fostering trust and loyalty.

The last two pieces of research converge on language as a strategic enabler of European progress and resilience. Raul Pașcalău argues that effective bioterrorism preparedness depends on precise cross-cultural and multilingual communication, strengthening cooperation across public health, diplomacy and intelligence communities. In the last article of the volume, Laura-Rebeca Stiegelbauer describes AI's capacity to enhance language education in the EU, reinforcing linguistic diversity while requiring ethical safeguards and coordinated policy action to translate technological potential into sustainable security and educational gains.

## CONCLUSIONS

Taken as a whole, the collective volume *The European Union and the New Dynamics of Global Security* succeeds in articulating a vision of security that is neither static nor confined to traditional strategic registers. Instead, the volume invites the reader to approach security as a layered and evolving condition, shaped simultaneously by geopolitical shifts, institutional responses, technological acceleration, and deep human vulnerabilities. Its main contribution lies in assembling a plural and interdisciplinary conversation that reflects the complexity of the security environment in which the European Union is currently situated. One of the volume's notable strengths is its capacity to move swiftly between systemic analysis and case studies, demonstrating how abstract power dynamics are translated into tangible societal and psychological effects. By putting together discussions of competitions between great powers and technological innovation with examinations of migration, energy dependence, communication

practices, and social inclusion, the volume tells us how contemporary insecurity is rarely the product of isolated threats. The volume's relevance lies in its ability to frame security as a multifaceted and interdisciplinary concern, offering analytical tools that remain applicable beyond the specific cases discussed. Its actuality is accentuated by the current European and global context, marked by a certain degree of geopolitical uncertainty, rapid change, and a need for adaptability, all of which demonstrate that the volume's insights are particularly timely.

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## REPUBLIC MOLDOVA'S EU ASPIRATIONS AND ROMANIA'S STRATEGIC SUPPORT

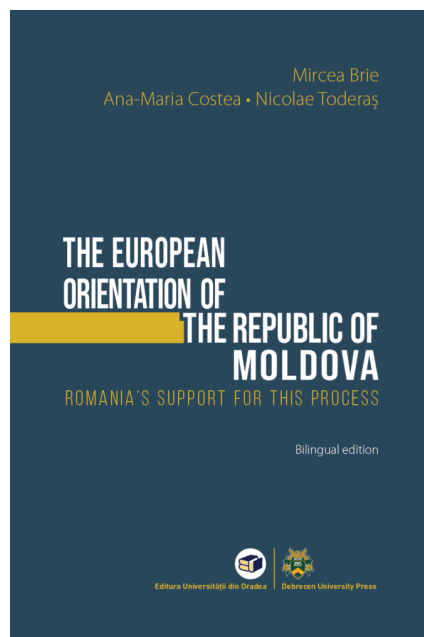
Andreea VLADIUC\*

**Book review of** Mircea Brie, Ana-Maria Costea and Nicolae Toderaș, *The European orientation of the Republic of Moldova. Romania's support for this process / Orientarea Europeană a Republicii Moldova. Demersuri de sprijinire din partea României; bilingual edition*, Editura Universității din Oradea / Debrecen University Press, Oradea/Debrecen, 2025, 218 p., ISBN 978-606-10-2446-9, ISBN 978-963-615-260-4.

**Keywords:** *European integration, Republic of Moldova, geopolitics, international relations, European Union.*

The volume *The European orientation of the Republic of Moldova. Romania's support for this process*, coordinated by Mircea Brie together with Ana-Maria Costea and Nicolae Toderaș, represents a solid and timely contribution to the field of international relations and European studies, addressing a topic of major strategic importance: the European integration of the Republic of Moldova. The work is situated within an academic and political context characterized by accelerated regional transformations, offering a relevant analysis of how this state seeks to redefine its external positioning in relation to the European Union. Through its coherent structure and argumentative rigor, the volume goes beyond a merely descriptive presentation and proposes an in-depth analytical approach, centered on the interdependencies between internal and external factors influencing the European trajectory of the Republic of Moldova.

The authors succeed in highlighting the complex and non-linear nature of the integration process, emphasizing that it cannot be understood solely through the lens of institutional reforms or legislative alignment, but must be analyzed in correlation with regional geopolitical dynamics and developments within the international system. In this regard, the volume provides a multidimensional perspective in which political, institutional, and security dimensions are addressed in an integrated manner. Furthermore, the work stands out through its ability to connect the theoretical level with



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\* Bachelor's degree student, International Relations and European Studies, Faculty of History, International Relations, Political Science and Communication Sciences, University of Oradea, Romania. E-mail: [andreeavladiuc@gmail.com](mailto:andreeavladiuc@gmail.com).

the practical one, highlighting both the conceptual foundations of European integration and its practical implications for the Republic of Moldova.

Moreover, the analysis proposed by the authors is supported by the use of appropriate methodological tools, which allow for a nuanced evaluation of the opportunities and challenges associated with the integration process. Thus, the work not only explains recent developments but also contributes to understanding possible directions of development in the medium and long term. Through this approach, the volume becomes not only a relevant academic resource but also a useful instrument for decision-makers involved in the formulation and implementation of public policies in the field of European integration (Brie, Costea and Toderas, 2025).

One of the main strengths of the work lies in contextualizing the European integration process within an international environment marked by instability and geopolitical competition. The authors emphasize that recent developments, particularly the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, have led to a significant reconfiguration of the European security architecture and have directly influenced the European Union's enlargement policy (Brie, Costea and Toderas, 2025). In this sense, the integration of the Republic of Moldova can no longer be analyzed exclusively from the perspective of technical criteria but must be understood as part of a broader geopolitical process in which regional security and stability play a central role.

This interpretation is also supported by other contributions in the specialized literature, which highlight that the Eastern Partnership was initially conceived as an instrument of gradual rapprochement, but recent developments have given it a much more pronounced strategic dimension (Brie, 2017). At the same time, the European trajectory of the Republic of Moldova must be understood in the context of the limitations of European Union policies in the eastern neighborhood. The literature shows that the effectiveness of these instruments is often constrained by geopolitical factors and by the limited capacity of partner states to implement consistent reforms, which leads to an uneven and sometimes reversible integration process (Delcour, 2011). At the same time, the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union must be analyzed in the context of dual pressure: on the one hand, the European aspirations of the political elite and of a significant part of the population, and on the other hand, the persistent influence of the Russian Federation in the region (Goreainov and Brie, 2018).

The European integration of the Republic of Moldova is strongly influenced by the regional geopolitical context, characterized by competition between the European Union and the Russian Federation. Studies show that states in the eastern neighborhood operate within a contested sphere of influence, being subject to divergent external pressures, which complicates the integration process and limits the effectiveness of European policies (Popescu and Wilson, 2009). The work also analyzes in detail the stages of the European integration process, from participation in the Eastern Partnership to obtaining candidate status, offering a coherent chronological and conceptual perspective on the evolution of relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union.

The authors emphasize that the Eastern Partnership represented an initial institutional framework through which the Republic of Moldova was anchored in the European Union's neighborhood policy, facilitating the initiation of a gradual process of political and economic rapprochement. In this context, the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) are presented as essential instruments of Europeanization, contributing to the harmonization of national legislation

with the *acquis communautaire*, to trade liberalization, and to the progressive integration of the Moldovan economy into the European market (Brie, Costea and Toderaș, 2025). Therefore, the Eastern Partnership should be analyzed not only as a technical framework for cooperation but also as an instrument with increasingly evident strategic implications. Recent developments in the region have led to a redefinition of this mechanism, which increasingly reflects the geopolitical interests of the European Union and the need to strengthen security in the eastern neighborhood (Brie and Solcan, 2025; Korosteleva, 2016).

The authors highlight that these mechanisms have had a significant impact on the institutional and economic modernization of the Republic of Moldova, stimulating reforms in key areas such as justice, public administration, competition, and market regulation. At the same time, the DCFTA has facilitated the reorientation of trade flows toward the European Union, reducing economic dependence on the eastern space and strengthening interdependence with EU member states. However, the work draws attention to the fact that these advances are neither uniform nor irreversible, often being affected by internal political fluctuations and by the limited capacity of institutions to implement consistent reforms.

The process of European integration of the Republic of Moldova can also be analyzed through the concept of Europeanization, which implies not only the formal adoption of European legislation but also profound transformations at the institutional, political, and normative levels. In this sense, Europeanization involves the internalization of the values and rules of the European Union, being a complex, long-term process influenced both by the internal dynamics of the state and by external pressures (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005).

In this regard, the process of Europeanization is characterized by the authors as incomplete, fragmented, and subject to persistent structural constraints. These include institutional fragility, the politicization of public administration, high levels of corruption, and the lack of continuity in reform policies. It is also emphasized that, despite an advanced normative framework, the effective implementation of reforms remains deficient, generating a gap between assumed commitments and concrete results.

In addition, the authors underline that the Europeanization of the Republic of Moldova is influenced not only by internal factors but also by the external geopolitical context, which introduces an additional degree of uncertainty and vulnerability. Thus, the integration process does not follow a linear trajectory but is marked by periods of progress and regression, reflecting both internal political dynamics and external pressures. Through this approach, the work provides a realistic and nuanced interpretation of European integration, highlighting its complexity and its deep conditioning by multiple factors (Brie, Costea and Toderaș, 2025).

Among these, political instability occupies a central place, being characterized by frequent changes of government and pronounced polarization. This instability limits the state's capacity to implement coherent reforms and affects the continuity of public policies. Similarly, the specialized literature highlights that the lack of political consensus represents one of the main barriers to European integration in Eastern neighborhood states (Brie, 2022).

Corruption and institutional fragility are also analyzed as major obstacles to European integration. The authors emphasize that high levels of corruption undermine citizens' trust in state institutions and affect the credibility of the Republic of Moldova in its relations with the European Union (Brie, Costea and Toderaș, 2025). In this context,

strengthening the rule of law and reforming the judicial system are presented as essential priorities. These conclusions are supported by recent research showing that Europeanization is closely linked to the capacity of candidate states to implement profound institutional reforms (Putină and Brie, 2023).

Another essential element analyzed in the work is the Transnistrian conflict, which continues to represent a major challenge for the European trajectory of the Republic of Moldova. The authors highlight that this frozen conflict is not merely a territorial issue but has profound implications for the functioning of the state and its capacity to advance in the European integration process. The lack of effective control over the Transnistrian region limits the full exercise of sovereignty and affects the coherence of internal policies, while also generating uncertainties in the external relations of the Republic of Moldova (Brie, Costea and Toderaş, 2025).

From a geopolitical perspective, the Transnistrian conflict is interpreted by the authors as an instrument of strategic influence, allowing the Republic of Moldova to be maintained in a zone of ambiguity between East and West. The presence of external interests in the region contributes to the perpetuation of the status quo and hinders the identification of a durable solution. Thus, the conflict becomes not only an internal issue but also a factor of regional instability, influencing the European Union's perception of Moldova's capacity to meet accession criteria. Moreover, the authors underline that the existence of this conflict also affects the implementation of reforms, as political and administrative resources are often directed toward managing this situation. At the same time, the conflict generates additional vulnerabilities in areas such as energy security, border control, and the fight against cross-border crime (Brie, 2021; Brie, 2016).

Beyond the Transnistrian region, the work also highlights the role of other areas with distinct geopolitical characteristics, such as the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025). In this region, the geopolitical orientations of the population differ significantly from those promoted at the central level, reflecting the existence of deep internal cleavages within Moldovan society. The authors show that these differences are not only political in nature but are also influenced by identity, economic, and cultural factors, which contribute to the fragmentation of public opinion regarding the state's foreign policy direction (Brie and Goreainov, 2026).

This diversity of geopolitical orientations highlights the difficulty of building a national consensus around the objective of European integration. In the absence of such a consensus, the process of Europeanization becomes more vulnerable to internal political changes and external influences. Therefore, the authors suggest that managing these internal divisions represents an essential condition for advancing the European trajectory of the Republic of Moldova, requiring the strengthening of social cohesion and of a shared strategic vision (Brie, Costea and Toderaş, 2025).

In this complex context, the relationship between Romania and the Republic of Moldova is presented as a key factor in supporting European integration. The authors argue that Romania has played a constant and active role in supporting Moldova's European trajectory, both through political support at the European level and through the transfer of expertise and best practices (Brie, Costea and Toderaş, 2025). Romania's experience in the accession process is considered a relevant model that can be adapted to the specificities of the Republic of Moldova.

The transfer of public policies represents an important mechanism in this regard. Previous studies highlight that Romania has contributed to the modernization of the educational and administrative systems in the Republic of Moldova, facilitating the

process of Europeanization (Toderas, 2012; Solcan and Burea, 2026). This institutional cooperation is essential for strengthening administrative capacity and for preparing accession negotiations.

From a methodological point of view, the work stands out through the use of relevant analytical tools, such as comparative analysis, SWOT analysis, and scenario planning. SWOT analysis provides a balanced perspective on the situation of the Republic of Moldova, highlighting both strengths, such as international support and pro-European orientation, and vulnerabilities, including institutional fragility and economic dependencies (Brie, Costea and Toderas, 2025).

Scenario planning represents one of the most interesting elements of the work. The authors propose several development scenarios, ranging from an optimistic one, which foresees the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union by 2030, to pessimistic scenarios that involve stagnation or even blockage of the integration process (Brie, Costea and Toderas, 2025). This approach reflects the high degree of uncertainty that characterizes the contemporary international environment and highlights the importance of adaptability in public policies.

In addition, the authors pay particular attention to the security dimension, including new risks generated by the cyber environment. In the context of European integration, cybersecurity becomes an essential element, and the Republic of Moldova must strengthen its capacity to respond to these threats (Costea et al., 2024). This perspective highlights the multidimensional character of the integration process, which is not limited to economic or institutional aspects.

The work also has an important applied dimension, the authors formulating concrete recommendations for supporting the Republic of Moldova in the process of European integration. These include accelerating reforms, strengthening democratic institutions, and improving public communication. In this regard, the importance of increasing citizens' level of information and combating disinformation is emphasized, as this can affect public support for European integration.

However, it can be observed that the analysis pays relatively limited attention to the role of civil society. Recent research shows that the development of civil society is essential for strengthening democracy and supporting the European integration process (Putina and Brie, 2023). The active involvement of non-governmental organizations and civil society can contribute to increasing transparency and to monitoring reforms (Costea and Brie, 2025).

In conclusion, the work coordinated by Mircea Brie represents a complex and well-grounded analysis of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. Through its multidimensional approach and the use of diverse analytical tools, the volume succeeds in highlighting both the opportunities and the challenges of this process. At the same time, the emphasis placed on the role of Romania offers a relevant perspective on regional cooperation and the transfer of expertise. The work thus constitutes a valuable resource both for the academic environment and for decision-makers involved in the elaboration of public policies.

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