

ROMANIA'S PATH IN THE EU: CHALLENGES, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND RELEVANCES FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract. *This paper analyzes Romania's trajectory seventeen years after its 2007 EU accession, examining the resulting economic and social outcomes and their relevance for the Western Balkans. While objective data reveals significant macroeconomic progress, including a quadrupled GDP and growth rates exceeding the EU average, this narrative of success is contrasted with persistent social challenges. Romania continues to grapple with high rates of poverty, ranking among the worst in the EU for social exclusion, material deprivation, and inadequate housing. Social cohesion has been significantly undermined by mass emigration, which resulted in the loss of nearly 20% of the population, and a persistent corruption problem that EU-led mechanisms only moderately improved. The article argues that a key issue has been the political class's complacency, leading to an over-reliance on EU frameworks and undermining national strategy. Ultimately, Romania's experience serves as a cautionary lesson for the Western Balkans, demonstrating that EU integration is not a panacea and that robust national governance is crucial to address structural problems.*

Keywords: *EU Integration, Romania, Poverty, Political Complacency, Emigration.*

Romania acceded to the EU in 2007, following 17 years of a difficult economic and political transition (Constantin, Goschin, & Danciu, 2011; Tatar, 2016). The Western Balkans are in a similar position to Romania before 2005, when its Accession Treaty was signed, grappling with comparable issues: emigration, poverty, corruption, and political instability (Mansi, Hysa, Panait, & Voica, 2020; Pržulj & Kostadinović, 2014).

The NATO and EU membership was viewed by the political elite and ordinary Romanians as a panacea for their economic, political and security problems (Papadimitriou & Phinnemore, 2008). Moreover, accession to the EU was an issue of national prestige, deeply ingrained in the Romanian collective psyche after 50 years of isolation from the West (Boia, 2001).

But has integration into NATO and the EU solved Romania's economic, social and security problems? Does the outcome of integration meet the expectations of Romanians before integration? In 2024-2025, Romania had one of the most contentious presidential elections in its post-communist history. The Romanian electorate was deeply dissatisfied with the political establishment that controlled the Romanian politics since 1989. The discontents formed a novel coalition which comprised mostly young people and a big portion of the Romanian diaspora and was labeled by the pro-establishment media as "anti-European". This conflict revealed a cleavage between the "winners" and "losers" of EU integration, a divide with complex economic, political, and cultural roots

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that were ignored by a political class content with achieving accession to the EU and NATO. The main question of this paper is whether this cleavage can be explained, even partially, by certain aspects of Romania's accession process.

THE NARRATIVE OF ECONOMIC PROGRESS

Analyzing certain social and economic indicators, Romania's integration into the EU can be presented as an unquestionable economic success. Romania's GDP has shown impressive growth within the context of the economic and political stability and predictability generated by its EU membership status (Radu, 2015). Romania's GDP grew from \$98.45 billion in 2005 to \$382.77 billion in 2024, almost quadrupling in 20 years (data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 07.07.2025). In Fig.1 we can observe that Romania has a considerably higher GDP per capita than the Western Balkan countries, but the tendencies in the evolution of GDP growth are rather similar.

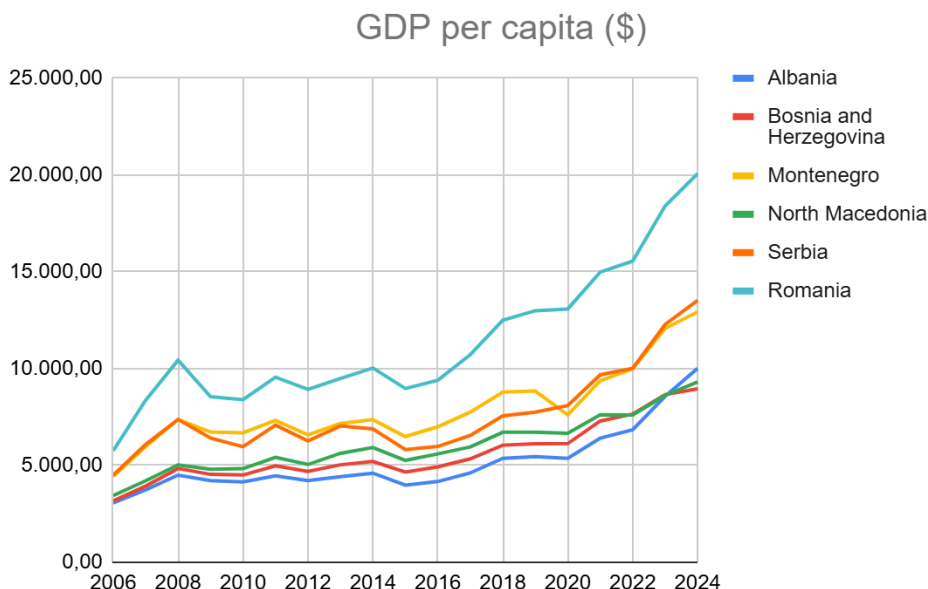


Figure 1. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 07.07.2025

Further analysis of Romania's GDP, using indicators such as GDP annual growth, GDP per capita (current US\$) and GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$), reveals the positive effect of EU integration on the Romanian Economy (see Fig.2 and Fig.3). Romania's GDP grew between 2006 and 2024 with an average of 2,85% per year, which is more than 2,4 times higher growth comparatively with the 1,17% registered by the EU and 1,01% registered by the Euro area. In Fig.3 we can see the proportion of the Romanian GDP per capita compared with the EU and Euro area. It can be observed that Romania's GDP per capita represents 46.52% of the EU average. The situation appears even better when considering the GDP per capita PPP (purchasing power parity) indicator which shows Romania at 78.02% of the EU average. Taken aside the questionable measuring of the PPP indicators (Seshaiah & Tripathy, 2018), the 31.05% difference

between the two GDP per capita indicators shows that there is room for interpretation of how much Romania's economy improved in the last 20 years of EU ascension.

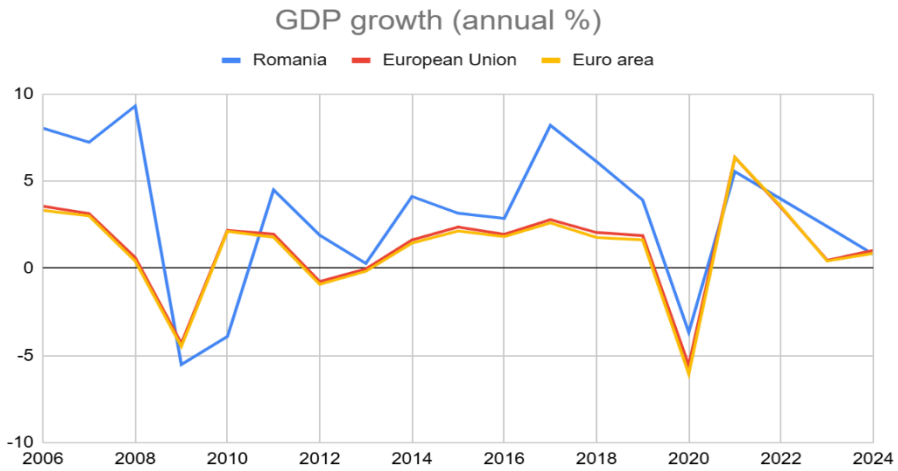


Figure 2. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 07.07.2025

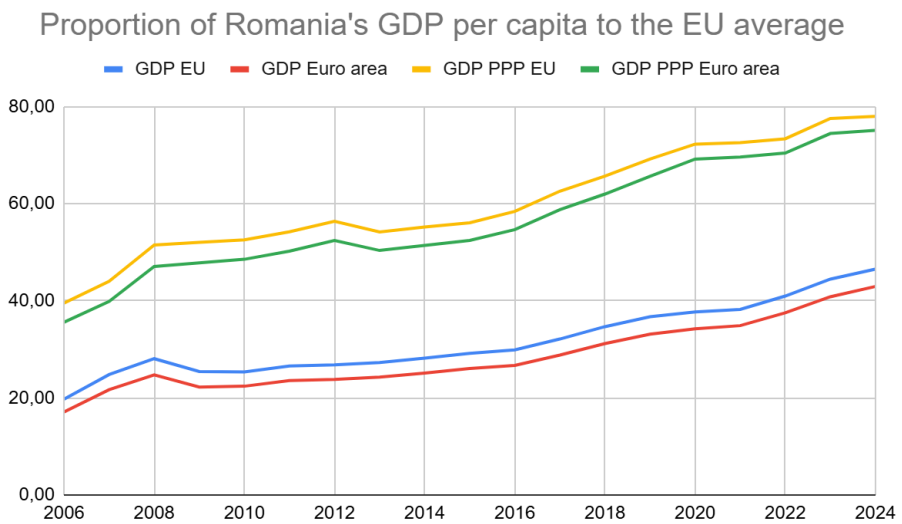


Figure 3. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 07.07.2025

EU accession had an initial negative effect on economic inequality in Romania (Fig.4). Subsequently, however, the general Gini index showed a downward trend, decreasing from 39.6% in 2006 to 32.3% in 2022. This figure points towards moderate inequality, although the situation can differ for certain age cohorts (Oancea, Andrei, & Pirjol, 2017). In the Western Balkan countries, the Gini index shows a fairly similar situation after 2020, ranging between 35.7% and 32.8%, which represents moderate inequality.

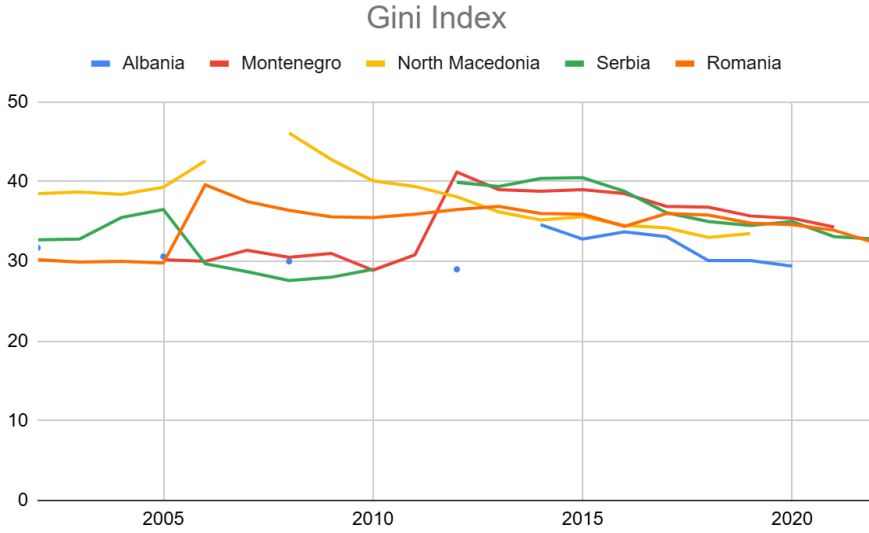


Figure 4. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 07.07.2025

The objective data on the economy can be corroborated with the subjective data reported through annual barometers taken at the EU level. The Romanian sentiment on the economy mirrors the general sentiment in the EU (Fig.5), but at much lower levels until 2018. The subjective opinion on the economy was pronouncedly negative between 2009 and 2012, when the economic crisis and its aftermath strongly affected the Romanian economy. Economic sentiment started to change in 2014, improving steadily, reaching in 2024 similar levels of positive sentiment towards the economy as the EU average.

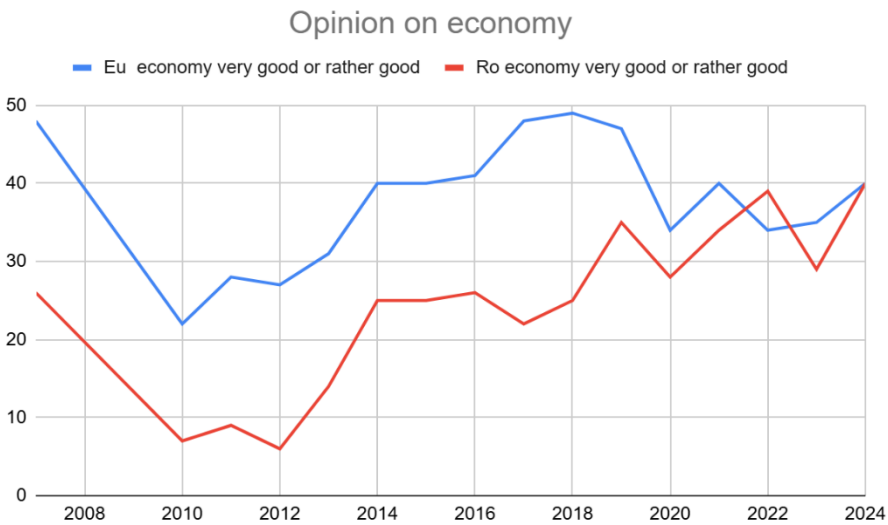


Figure 5. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 08.07.2025

Less than 30% of Romanians believe the EU contributes significantly to their economic prosperity (Fig.6), which is far lower than those who considered, for example,

that the EU is ensuring freedom to travel, to study, and work in the EU, answer which scored constantly over 50%.

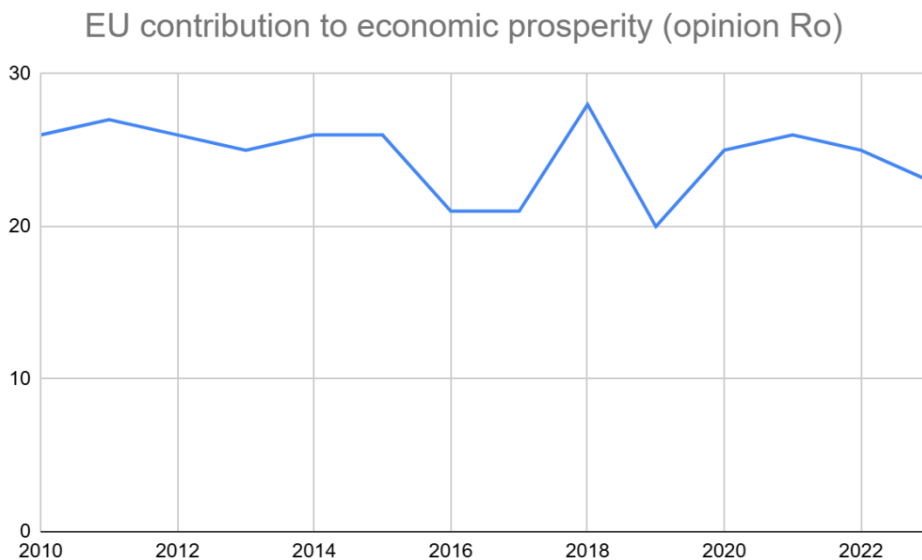


Figure 6. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 08.07.2025

In conclusion, the data shows an objective and significant improvement of the Romanian economy since its ascension to the EU. Only 24.64% of Romanians, on average, considered that the EU meant economic prosperity for them since 2007. Romanians subjectively acknowledged the betterment of the economy towards the end of the period, starting with 2021, when the opinion on the national economy reached the EU average. This positive appreciation of the national economy could explain partially the discontent of the Romanian diaspora, as the perceived differences between the Romanian and EU economies made working abroad less attractive.

ECONOMIC REALITY: POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

The problem of the “winners” and “losers” of the economic transition after the fall of the communist regimes was analyzed throughout Central and Eastern Europe (Hellman, 1998; Mateju, 1996; Titma, Tuma, & Silver, 1998). The first phase of the transition was characterized by the forced transformation towards a market economy, through various privatization processes of the state economy. In Romania, the privatization process was politically controlled and included some populist components, such as the distribution of state-owned equity based on citizenship. However, corruption ultimately favored a small portion of the population that came to control the vast majority of the economy's assets (McCollum & Schoening, 2002; Popescu-Birlan, 1994). In this context, two economic classes emerged, the “winners”, which appropriated the state assets through the privatization process, and the “losers”, which represented most of the Romanian population who struggled with poverty caused by high unemployment and low wages.

The Gini index shows moderate inequality in Romania, which is not worse than the EU average, but the economic data hints towards an ongoing economic differentiation. The 31% difference between the classic GDP per capita indicator and its

PPP variant compared to the EU average suggests the complexity of how economic growth translated into economic well-being for Romanians.

The persistent problem of poverty

Romania struggled with poverty since the catastrophic mismanagement of the economy by the communist regime (Rotariu & Popescu, 1999). After a difficult transition, Romania's poverty situation started to improve markedly during the ascension in the EU (see Fig.7). The "poverty headcount ratio at \$8.30 a day (2021 PPP) (% of population)" metric provides a standardized and internationally comparable statistic, and represents the percentage of a nation's population whose daily income or consumption falls below an international poverty line of \$8.30, adjusted for differences in purchasing power across countries (Foster, Jolliffe, Ibarra, Lakner, & Tetteh-Baah, 2025). While the headcount ratio of those living on \$8.30 a day declined decisively during Romania's EU membership—from 40% in 2007 to 8.6% in 2022—the poverty headcount ratio at the societal poverty line has remained persistent, hovering around 25%.

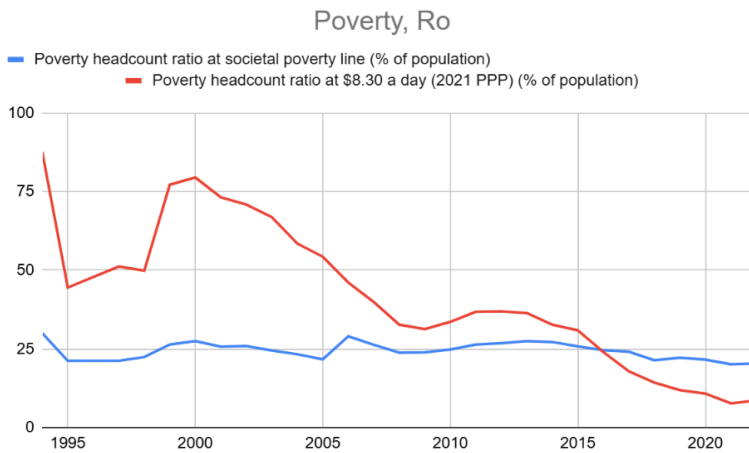


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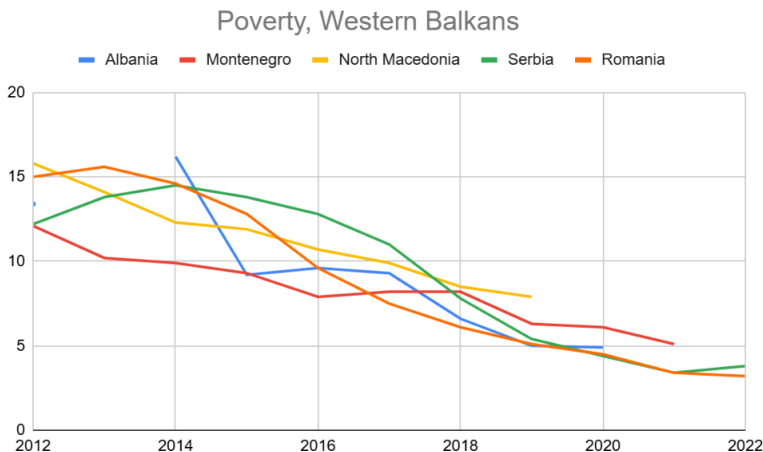


Figure 8. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 08.07.2025

The Western Balkans are also struggling with poverty (Mansi et al., 2020). From Fig.8 we can observe a similar trend regarding the "poverty headcount ratio at \$8.30 a day (2021 PPP) (% of population)" metric in the Western Balkan countries. The indicator improved significantly, even these countries not being members of the EU, and it can be observed that the values are close to those obtained from Romania. Besides potential measurement issues, this proximity between Romania and the Western Balkans can be explained by the historically low wages with which Romania has grappled since the collapse of the communist regime.

Underscoring Romania's poverty situation, the country has the second-highest rate (27%) of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) in the EU in 2024, surpassed only by Bulgaria (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 08.07.2025). The severe material and social deprivation (SMSD) indicator, which is part of the AROPE rate, was defined in the framework of the EU 2030 target on poverty and social exclusion (Guio et al., 2016). It measures household and personal aspects such as the ability to cover unforeseen expenses, the ability to finance a one-week annual vacation, the mortgage or utility bills, the ability to secure food, adequate clothing, home heating or internet access. In Romania, 19.8% of residents have problems ensuring the aspects measured by the SMSD indicator, ranking last in the EU in 2024. (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 08.07.2025).

If we analyze other poverty indicators, that regards living standards such as housing, we can observe that Romania is again at the bottom of EU rankings. In 2023, Romania recorded an overcrowding rate of 40.0%, an indicator that measures the percentage of the population living in an overcrowded household, which is substantially higher than the EU average of 16.8% (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 08.07.2025). The housing cost overburden rate, which measures the percentage of the population living in households where the total housing costs represent more than 40 % of disposable income, registers 16.0% in Romania, in 2023, as the average rate in the EU was 8.8%. Also, in 2023, 15.4% of Romanian homes lacked bath, shower, or indoor flushing toilet, compared to an EU average of just 2.1% (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 08.07.2025). The economic and poverty data in 2025 will be affected by Romania's record budget deficit (8.65% of GDP), the largest recorded in the EU.

As a conclusion, the ascension in the EU didn't solve Romania's poverty problem after 15 years of membership. It certainly improved the situation as it helped the national economy to lift over 30% of the population from extreme poverty, but poverty persists in many forms and affects large swaths of the population, Romania remaining one of the poorest countries in the EU.

Economic inequality

In the last 20 years, the Romanian economy has developed structural problems that have contributed towards economic inequality. Starting with 2004, when the European Council confirmed January 1, 2007, as the accession date for Romania, the economy began to grow rapidly due to a massive increase in foreign investment (Fig.9) (Nistor, 2014). Also, with the easing of travel restrictions in Western Europe after Romania's ascension in the EU, the migration of Romanians to work in the West accelerated. This process represented a "valve" that allowed for the reduction of tension in the labor market, as unemployment began to decline (Fig.10), while generating a continuous flow of remittances that fueled domestic consumption (Horváth & Anghel, 2009).

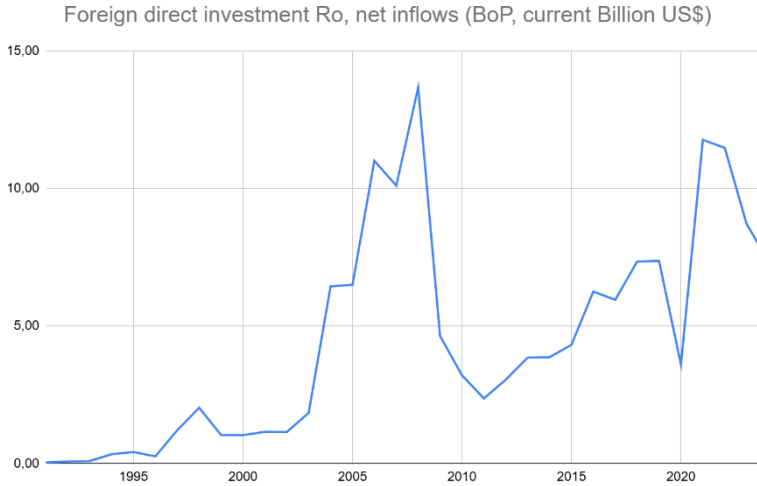


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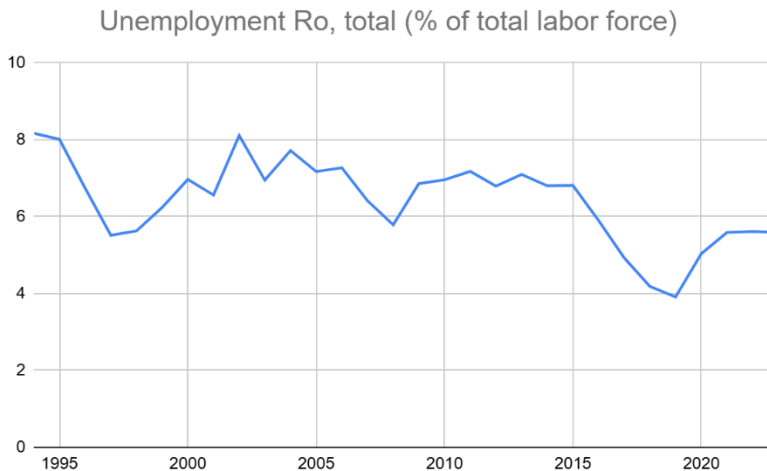


Figure 10. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 08.07.2025

After the ascension, the Romanian economy diversified through investments by multinational companies and the establishment of small and medium-sized enterprises, a process that gave a strong impulse to the development of the middle class (Mărginean, 2015). In this phase, the economic differentiation was determined mostly by growing inequality between earnings (Dorjnyambuu & Galambosné Tiszberger, 2024). The class of economic "winners" has begun to expand, including, in addition to business owners, self-employed individuals, well-paid employees in the private and public sector public sector (Ioniță & Vasile, 2015). The "losers" were represented by the employees in low-wage positions in industry, agriculture, retail and hospitality. If we take in consideration the average net earnings of Romanians, it is becoming clearer why a large part of Romanians still struggles with some form of poverty (see Fig.11). Romania has an economy where the

main attraction for foreign capital is Romania's EU membership and a relatively educated and qualified workforce that is remunerated at one third of the EU average.

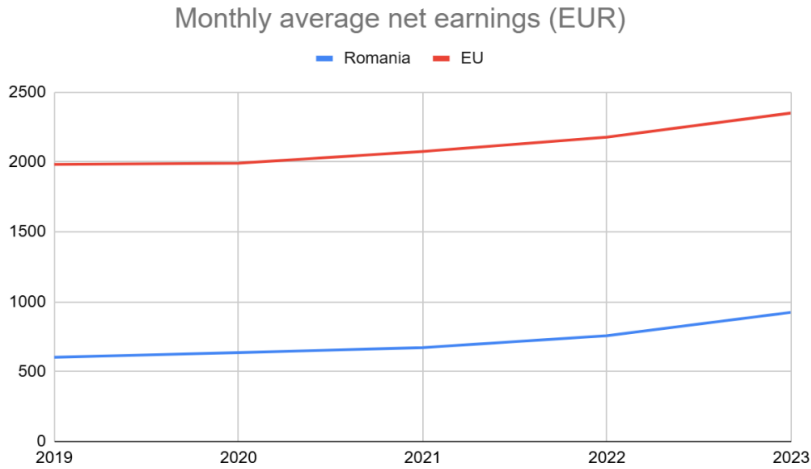


Figure 11. Data source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 08.07.2025

Inequality was also amplified by significant regional imbalances (Florina, Alpopi, & Burlacu, 2018). Romania, as a condition for EU accession, defined 8 development regions. From Fig.12 we can observe that, among the 8 regions, the capital and its surroundings (Ilfov County) have a GDP per capita almost three times higher compared to the other regions. Also, a more moderate differentiation can be observed between the western and central regions of the country, which are more developed, compared to the southern and eastern parts. There are some historical differences regarding economic development between the regions, but the most important differentiators were represented by the absorption rate of EU funds and the attractiveness for foreign direct investment (Mitrică, Grigorescu, Săgeată, Mocanu, & Dumitrașcu, 2020).

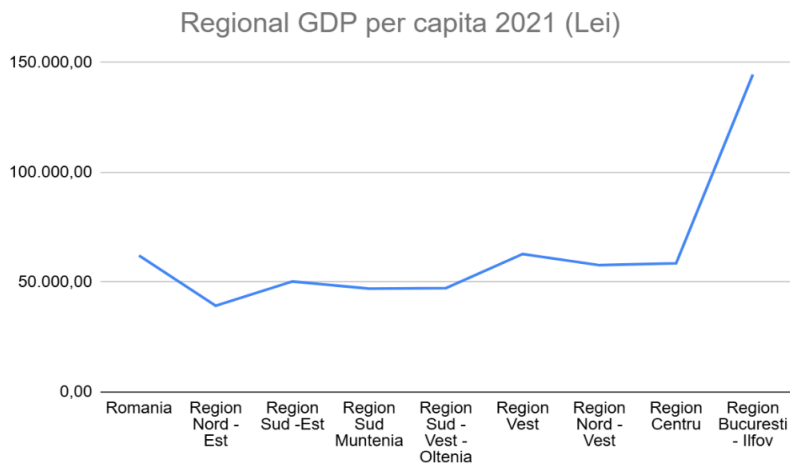


Figure 12. Data source: <https://insse.ro/cms/ro/>, visited on 09.07.2025

In theory, economic equality is maintained by the limited effectiveness of the social protection and healthcare systems in redistributing income (De Vogli, 2014; Standing, 1996). In Romania, the social protection expenditure rate (as % of GDP) was 16.5% in 2022, compared to an EU average of 27.58% (Fig.13). The healthcare expenditure was in 2022 four times lower in Romania compared with the EU average (see Fig.14).

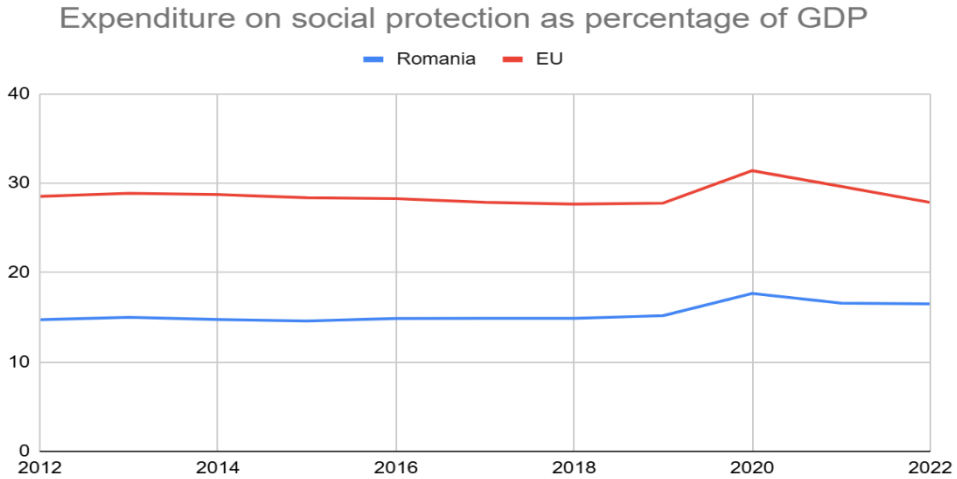


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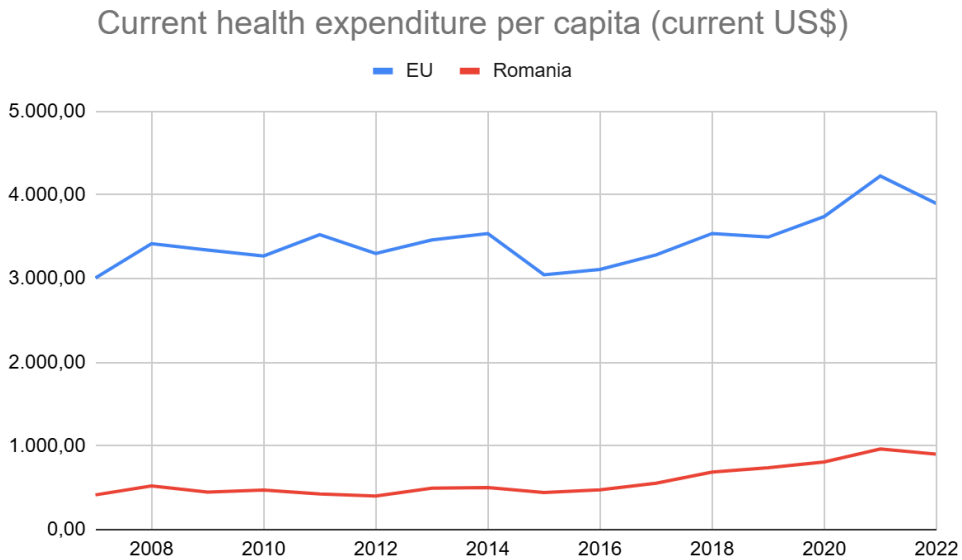


Figure 14. Data source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data>, visited on 09.07.2022

In conclusion, the economic data shows a general improvement of the economic well-being for the Romanians but also shows that this improvement is not distributed equitably due to structural problems of the economy, many Romanians still struggling with persistent poverty.

SOCIAL COHESION

In addition to the economic aspects discussed in the previous chapter, Romania's social cohesion was affected by emigration and the political complacency induced by the EU accession. Oddly enough, Romania's political system was healthier in the pre-accession period, as political debates and power-opposition dynamics maintained a significant political participation of Romanian society (Crowther, 2010). After accession, the political class developed a degree of self-sufficiency, effectively "outsourcing" the country's strategic development coordination to international institutions like the EU and NATO.

A country torn by emigration

Large-scale temporary emigration to Western Europe intensified after the 1989 collapse of the communist regime (Sandu, 2005). Salary differentials make Romanian jobs less attractive for qualified workers, many of whom do not return after migrating (Goschin, 2016). Overall, Romania has sustained an average negative net migration of 69,646 people annually between 1992 and 2024, losing close to 4 million people, roughly 20% of its population, to emigration (Fig.15). It can be observed that the annual emigration grew until 2009 and then stabilized at under 50.000 emigrants per year. The same trends can be observed in some Western Balkans countries, where people are emigrating mainly for economic reasons, social injustice, corruption and discriminatory group behaviors (Matoshi & Mulaj, 2021).

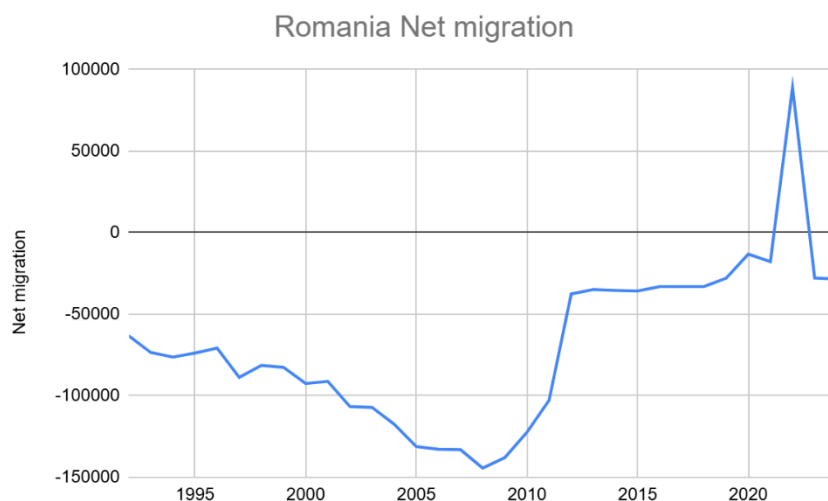


Figure 15. Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, visited on 10.07.2025

The mood related to working and living abroad in Romania has changed considerably after the pandemic. It can be seen in Fig.15, that in 2022, for the first time since the collapse of the communist regime, Romania recorded a positive net migration of 89,076 people. This is due to the negative experiences of many Romanians in Western European countries during the COVID pandemic, where the crisis highlighted their status as second-class citizens (Ulceluse & Bender, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the existence of a "two-tier" EU citizenship. This situation was created by the combined effect of differentiated rights, such as labor market restrictions imposed after the 2004 and 2007

enlargements, and the prejudicial practices of exploitation and exclusion that Eastern European migrant workers commonly face. The COVID crisis highlighted a significant contradiction: while Western European nations were closing borders and repatriating their own citizens, they were actively recruiting and facilitating the travel of thousands of Eastern European workers to sustain essential sectors like agriculture (Ulceluse & Bender, 2022). This recruitment often occurred with a disregard for the workers' safety as they were transported and housed without proper protective measures or enforcement of social distancing rules, in stark contrast to the regulations imposed on the general public. Eastern European migrant workers were often excluded or neglected from receiving health and social assistance during the COVID-19 crisis (Ulceluse & Bender, 2022). This experience undermined the rhetoric around emigration to work that used concepts such as European citizenship and the right to work in the EU.

The discontent of the Romanian diaspora was visible in the 2024-2025 elections, where it voted in majority, in protest, for the nationalist, anti-establishment parties, for the first time in the post-communist era. The participation of the diaspora in the elections is an indicator of their integration in the host countries (Gherghina & Basarabă, 2024). This can be explained by two factors: the increased economic convergence between Romania and Western Europe and the structure of the Romanian diaspora. Romania's economic convergence with the EU has significantly reduced the social valuation of the status of temporary migrant for work, the costs of migration not being compensated by the potential earnings. A minority part of the Romanian diaspora is made up of highly qualified people who emigrated for better working conditions and salaries and who have properly integrated into the host societies (Camară, 2019). But many of the Romanians who have emigrated in the past 15 years have left Romania running from poverty, to support themselves and their families. These emigrants are mostly young and attached to Romanian traditional values and their integration has been hampered by cultural changes and economic difficulties in Western Europe. These factors led to an unprecedented diaspora participation in the 2024-2025 Romanian elections, in which part of the diaspora adopted a critical position towards Romania's relationship with the EU, being characterized as "anti-European" by the pro-establishment media.

In conclusion, while emigration temporarily played a positive role by alleviating labor market pressures during the 1990-2007 transition, it proved to be a disruptive process in the long term. It undermined the country's social cohesion, generating a deep rift between those who built a future at home and those forced to emigrate for the hope of a better life.

5.7. The never-ending fight against corruption

Poverty and corruption exist in a circular relationship: poverty can fuel corruption, while corruption undermines the economy, thereby maintaining or even generating more poverty (Chetwynd, Chetwynd, & Spector, 2003).

After 1990, corruption became a major issue of the Romanian political and economic transition, as it blossomed on the fertile ground generated by poverty and social mores inherited from an authoritarian system that functioned based on state corruption (Badescu, 2011; Precupetu, 2007). Consequently, anti-corruption measures were among the EU's fundamental requirements for Romania's ascension. The anticorruption commitments were not explicitly presented within the main text of the Treaty of Accession but were instead formalized through a unique monitoring system known as the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). This mechanism was established by the European Commission to assist Romania in addressing shortcomings in judicial reform and the fight

against corruption and to ensure the country's continued progress in these areas post-accession (Carp, 2014). The CVM outlined a series of benchmarks which served as a roadmap for the necessary reforms and provided a framework for the EU to regularly assess Romania's progress (Vachudova & Spendzharova, 2012).

The EU required a consolidation of the legal framework for combating corruption (Carp, 2014). This involved aligning Romanian legislation with EU and international standards, ensuring that all forms of corruption were criminalized, and providing for effective and dissuasive sanctions. The CVM had important concrete institutional requirements, such as the creation of the National Anti-corruption Directorate (DNA), a specialized prosecution office tasked with investigating and prosecuting high-level corruption cases. Similarly, the National Integrity Agency (ANI) was established to verify the assets, incompatibility, and potential conflicts of interest of public officials. The independence and operational capacity of these institutions were paramount. To ensure a transparent and efficient judicial process through the CVM were required reforms within the judiciary to guarantee its independence, professionalism, and impartiality. Measures included strengthening the role and accountability of the Superior Council of Magistracy, the body responsible for safeguarding the independence of the judiciary. Romania had to strengthen its administrative capacity to prevent and fight corruption effectively. This aspect included better coordination between different government agencies and the provision of adequate resources for anti-corruption efforts.

There has been informal pressure from the EU to investigate and prosecute high-level corruption cases, regardless of political affiliation. This pressure has led to a series of high-profile arrests, accused by some in the press and public opinion of being politically motivated to demonstrate Romania's commitment to fighting corruption. The mechanism was officially lifted in September 2023, with the Commission considering that Romania made significant progress in strengthening its rule of law and anti-corruption framework.

As it can be observed in Fig.16, Romania obtains constantly a value under 50 for the corruption index (where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean), ranking at position 65 from 180 countries in 2024, only Bulgaria and Hungary are ranked worst in the EU. Romania's corruption perception index score improved somewhat because of the implementation of the CVM, but from 2016, we can observe a stagnation in the evolution of the index. This stagnation underlines that the fight against corruption has certain institutional limitations and the economic and cultural conditions are much harder to overcome.

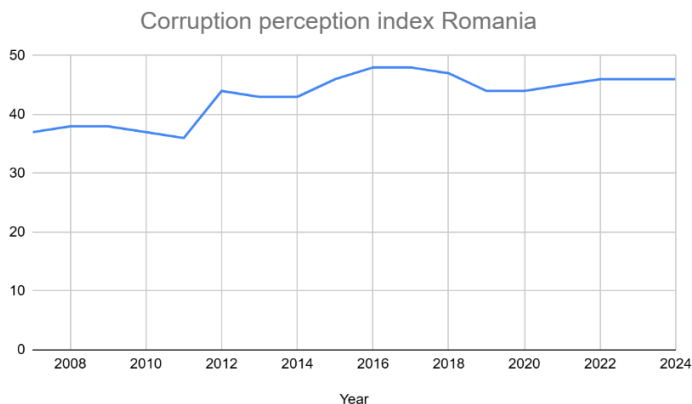


Figure 16. Data source: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/>, visited on 10.07.2025

Romanians do not trust the administration, where corruption is perceived to occur, but they have a better perspective on the institutions that should combat corruption, such as the police and the judiciary (see Fig.17). Regarding the police, there is a slightly majority positive perception of the institution, this being due less to its responsibility to combat corruption, but rather to the low crime rate and traditional respect for authoritarian institutions. We can also observe that the perception of the legal system has improved in parallel with the corruption perception index, an aspect that correlates with the implementation of the CVM.

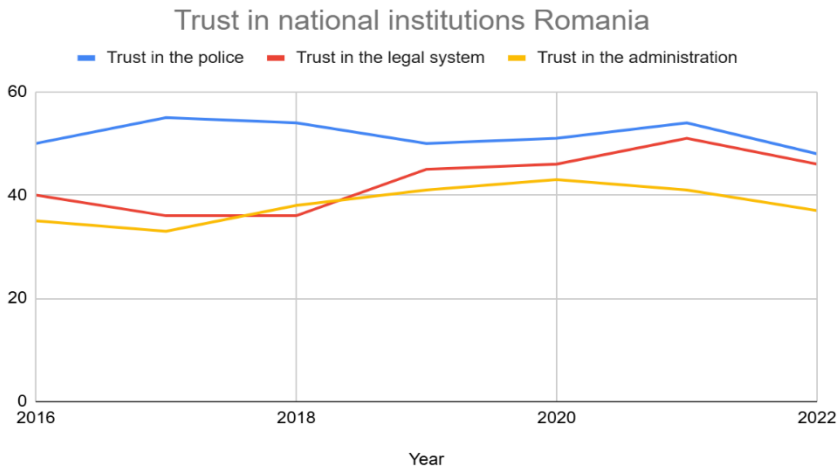


Figure 17. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 11.07.2025

In conclusion, the EU's strong involvement in the fight against corruption has only yielded moderate results, corruption remaining a persistent problem in Romania even after 17 years of EU membership.

Political complacency

The political and academic establishment has largely ignored corruption and the social and economic costs of constant emigration. Corruption has been treated as a chronic disease, rooted in Romanian culture, that will be “overcome” with deeper integration into the EU and the rise in the standard of living of Romanians. Emigration to the EU has been presented by politicians and the media as “normality” in the context of European “citizenship” and a direct consequence of the right to free movement within the EU. The complacency that characterized Romania’s political establishment after the accession was based on the fundamental assumption, somewhat accepted by Romanian society, that Romania could not have distinct interests from those of the EU and NATO. This represented a de facto recognition of Romania’s peripheral status in the EU and NATO, as any significant decisions regarding the economy, security, foreign policy, or even cultural trends are made by the European bureaucracy, controlled by the great European powers, France and Germany, and by NATO, controlled by the US. This assumption was constantly present in various political decisions made by the representatives of the establishment and became their only political message in the 2024-2025 political campaign.

The political complacency took a concrete political form through the unification of the political establishment into a broad coalition, which undermined Romanian

democracy. In the periods 2012-2014 and 2021-2025, Romania had a “grand” coalition of the two main political parties, the left leaning Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the right leaning National Liberal Party (PNL), which left Romania without a significant opposition.

As can be seen in Fig.18, Romanians have low trust in national political institutions. Political parties, which are the fundamental units that formulate group interests in the political system, enjoyed less than 10% trust from Romanians during the economic crisis. Trust in the EU, its institutions, and NATO was over 50% (Fig.19), on average 20% higher compared to trust in national institutions. It should also be emphasized that trust in national institutions has been steadily increasing, and local authorities enjoy trust well above that of national institutions, reaching levels of trust in EU institutions in 2023-2024.

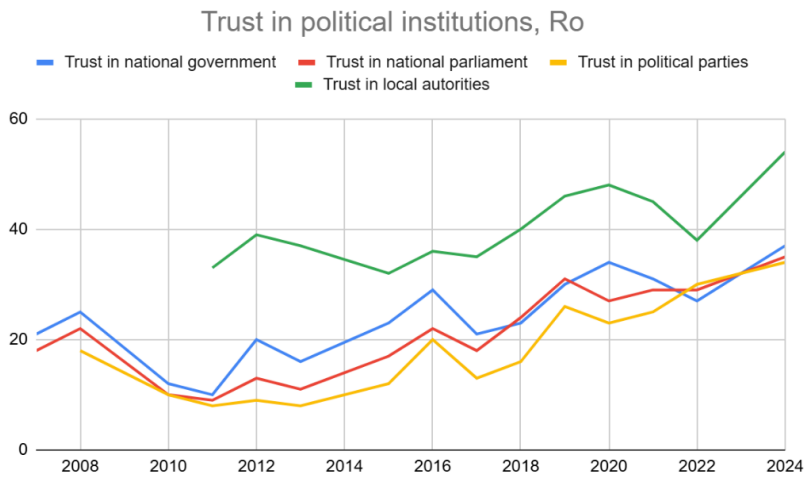


Figure 18. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 11.07.2025

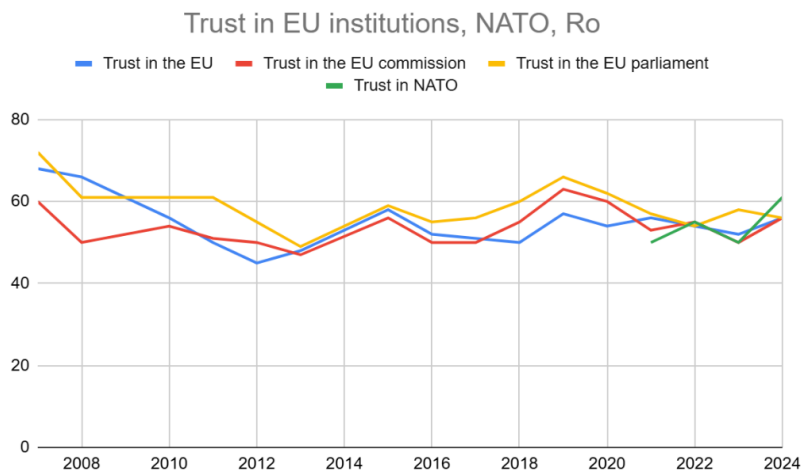


Figure 19. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 11.07.2025

These trends confirm the social basis for the political complacency that engulfed the political class after the EU ascension, as the public trusted significantly more the EU institutions and NATO compared with the national institutions. The situation changed during the COVID pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war, when the gap in Romanians' trust in national institutions compared to EU institutions narrowed, with part of the electorate no longer accepting the transfer of political responsibility to international institutions such as NATO and the EU. The increase in trust in national political institutions reflects not so much trust in the parties and personalities leading these institutions, but a reassessment, on the part of the electorate, of their importance compared to international institutions.

This complacency of the Romanian political class came to the surface during the political debate regarding Romania's involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian war. The “grand” coalition and its supporters in the media championed an aggressive position of involvement in the war represented by the EU, NATO and the Biden administration, against the backdrop of virulent anti-Russianism. Romanians overwhelmingly agreed (over 60% during 2022-2024) that the Russo-Ukrainian was a threat to the national security, will negatively affect the economy, Ukraine must be supported from a humanitarian point of view and that Russia is responsible for the war (data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 11.07.2025). The situation is more nuanced when we analyze the support for EU funds that should finance the war operations and the Ukrainian economy. In Fig.20 it can be observed that after the shock of the start of the war in 2022, the Romanian opposition for the EU to directly finance Ukraine increased considerably.

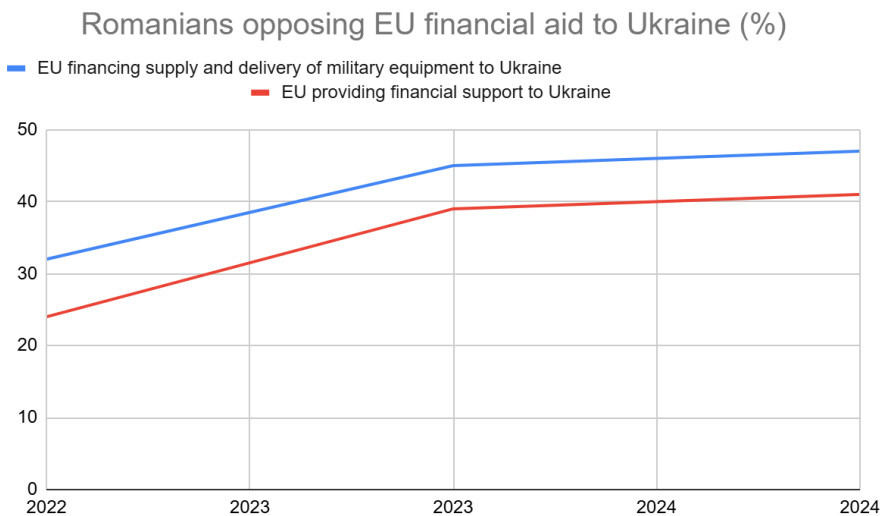


Figure 20. Data source: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/>, visited on 11.07.2025

The results in Fig. 20 do not include the effects on public opinion of the political debates that took place towards the end of autumn 2024. Nationalist-populist parties, which emerged during the COVID period following the general dissatisfaction with the restrictive measures, questioned the establishment's national security strategy, underlining the subordination of Romania's interests to international institutions that

acted outside their mandate: NATO is a defensive organization of member states and the EU is an economic cooperation organization aimed at promoting peace. During the political debates in 2025, the populist opposition attacked the superficial presumptions of the governing coalition regarding Romania's security guarantees by NATO and the EU, given that the change of administration in Washington has undermined NATO's unity and the EU lacks common defense capabilities.

In conclusion, the "grand" coalition that controlled Romanian politics post-accession undermined its own political standing. As a result of its complacency, it shrank its support base, pushing a part of the electorate toward nationalist-populist parties of questionable vision and political effectiveness, thereby opening the possibility of a period of political instability.

CONCLUSION

After 15 years of membership in the EU, Romania has experienced strong economic growth, which has lifted 30% of Romanians out of extreme poverty, that would not have been possible without the direct investments, European funds and the economic stability provided by European integration. On the other hand, in 2025, Romania is a country facing problems related to poverty and social inequality, remaining among the poorest countries in the EU. Along with its economic problems, Romania is facing a period of political instability.

In the context of European integration, Romania's major problem has been the complacency of its political class, which has been content to implement European programs and directives while abandoning their critical analysis and the development of a national strategy that prioritizes Romania's interests. The political elite has not formulated coherent strategies regarding the national economy, corruption, migration and Romania's security problems, which have become acute in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Romanians had high hopes when they joined the EU, for some of them the hopes became reality, but for a large part of Romanians the results are disappointing. The EU can help economically and with expertise, can create a framework of stability, but cannot fulfill a member country's economic, social, political or security expectations. Despite direct involvement through the CVM mechanism, the EU has not solved the corruption problem in Romania. Although Romania has received considerable EU funds, it still struggles with structural economic problems that cannot be solved without a coherent national economic strategy. Romania is economically dependent on the EU (72% of imports and exports), in terms of security on NATO, but does not have an independent strategy regarding economic, political and security relations with the rest of the world. The utopia of living in the EU as "European citizens" was tempered by the reality check offered by the COVID pandemic, migration and the Russo-Ukrainian war. The coveted membership of the Schengen Area, obtained by Romania in 2025, is devaluing as more and more European countries reintroduce border controls and restrict access (Gülzau, 2023).

I consider that the experience of Romania can be instructive for the Western Balkans countries which do not have the demographic and economic size of Romania but have similar problems and political culture. Migration, for example, can have profound consequences that can threaten some of these countries' survival as distinct societies and cultures. European integration is a great opportunity for the Western Balkans, but the dynamic between the national governance and the European

bureaucracy will always favor the later, so avoiding the political complacency that plagued Romanian politics will be difficult, as only a crisis, that the EU bureaucracy cannot and has no mandate to solve, can shake up the political establishment to face the issues and the expectations of their citizens.

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