

# DIGITAL NATIONALISM AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: INSIGHTS FROM ROMANIA AS A MODEL FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

Reza TAVALLA\*

**Abstract.** *Purpose:* This study examines how digital nationalism manifests on social media platforms during European integration processes, using Romania's post-2007 EU membership experience as an analytical lens for understanding similar dynamics in Western Balkan candidate countries. The research addresses a critical gap in understanding how algorithmic curation and user-generated content on platforms like Facebook and Instagram shape national identity construction within supranational frameworks.

*Design/methodology/approach:* Employing a mixed-methods design, this research combines qualitative semi-structured interviews with 16 Romanian youth (ages 18-28), quantitative hashtag analysis of nationalist symbols including #MandruSaFiuRoman (450-point resonance score), corpus analysis via NVivo software, and the development of a novel mathematical model for Net Nationalist Sentiment ( $NS = SMI \times (P - Pol) \times (E/2)$ ). Data collection occurred during 2024-2025, capturing post-accession digital dynamics.

*Findings:* Digital nationalism is a double-edged phenomenon: online platforms both enhance cultural pride (mean score 3/5) and societal polarization (3.5/5) and educational attainment is the key moderating factor

*Practical implications:* The findings offer concrete policy guidance for Western Balkan countries pursuing EU membership. Serbia (22/35 chapters opened) and Bosnia (stalled candidacy) can implement scaled media literacy programs based on Romania's model, integrating critical digital skills into educational curricula to foster EU-compatible online identity formation while managing nationalist sentiments.

*Originality/value:* This research makes three distinct contributions: (1) first empirical analysis linking digital nationalism to EU integration outcomes through mixed methods; (2) development of a quantifiable model for nationalist sentiment applicable across contexts; (3) evidence-based policy framework for managing digital identity during accession processes.

**Keywords:** digital nationalism, European integration, social media, Romania, Western Balkans.

## INTRODUCTION

As Serbia proceeds to its 22nd EU negotiation chapter, social media stand out as fundamental arenas where European integration discourses are challenged and reinterpreted. Such online debates, on a deeper level, decisively influence national identity construction and EU accession proceedings within the Western Balkans.

The combination of digital media with European integration offers a core contradiction. Sites such as Facebook and Instagram, with a combined audience of more

---

\* Phd candidate, University of A Coruña, Spain, E-mail: [rezatavalla206@gmail.com](mailto:rezatavalla206@gmail.com)

than 3 billion worldwide, both enable the preservation of culture and produce divisive rhetoric that is at odds with successful EU integration's needed societal cohesion. Digital nationalism is a consequence of user-generated content intersecting with algorithmic curation to produce a series of feedback loops that both enforce and undermine European integration discourses.

This framework integrates three key perspectives. Mediatization theory demonstrates the way digital platforms reframe national identity construction with logics of media, with the interactivity of social media allowing individuals to produce and distribute nationalist discourses. Agenda-setting theory reveals the way algorithms function to work as gatekeepers, promoting emotionally charged content concerning a government failure or national achievement according to user engagement numbers. Echo chamber theory describes the way customized content distribution produces areas where individuals are only exposed to predominantly homogeneous views, reinforcing common beliefs with a minimum chance of experiencing alternative viewpoints.

Symbolic interactionism offers micro-level understandings of how digital symbols allow users to act out and negotiate national identity using hashtags and celebrations of heritage. Post-2007 Romanian integration is a prime example of this tension, where social media amplified debates involving nationalist heritage versus EU cosmopolitan values.

The necessity to comprehend such dynamics is derived from speeding Western Balkans integration schedules. With Bosnia looking to re-launch its dormant candidacy and Serbia advancing through the negotiating process, the role of digital platforms to influence public opinion is central. Transnational cooperation is needed to integrate into Europe, but digital nationalism makes this problematic since border-based identities are ingrained that are at odds with supranational convergence, posing core challenges to EU enlargement policy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a mixed-method analysis of Romanian social media's nationalist communication, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to achieve insightful analysis of digital nationalism and its consequences on European integration. Empirical data sourced on Chapter 4 of the PhD thesis (Author, 2025: ) among Romanian youth aged between 18 and 28 is used to establish the role played by Facebook and other social media platforms in the development of nationalist feelings

The qualitative element revolves around semi-structured interviews with 16 Romanian youth (8 females, 8 males), purposively selected for active participation on Facebook. Participants were snowball sampled to maximize representation in education level (high school graduates to PhD students) and political discourse. Interviews were done over Zoom and Skype to create flexibility and accessibility throughout the data-gathering period. Ethical principles were stringently followed: participants signed informed consent to the use of real names, ensuring openness and trust, with withdrawal provisions to protect autonomy. The interviews looked at participants' understanding of the role social media plays in fueling nationalist sentiment, including topics like media literacy, societal polarization, and the effects of globalized media. This approach created rich, context-specific understanding of Romanian youth's digital nationalism in the context of EU integration.

The NVivo software was used to analyze the qualitative data from interviews through corpus analysis of the transcripts. This meant coding the data to ascertain

dominant terms and word frequencies, and the resulting prevalent themes. For example, the dominant terms were "rețele sociale" (social networks, with 67 occurrences), "identitate" (identity, 37 occurrences), "național" (national, 38 occurrences), "România/Români" (Romania/Romanians, 40 occurrences), "mândrie" (pride, 10 occurrences), and "tradiții" (traditions, 15 occurrences), and these were significant in indicating the affective and persuasive characteristics of digital content. Through such analysis, there was a quantitative approach to qualitative narratives and the ability to understand in depth the role of social media influences in negotiating identities within algorithmic boundaries.

The quantitative analysis adds two major approaches: hashtag questionnaires and line graph data. A questionnaire of 50 students from the University of Transylvania scored nationalist hashtags by resonance, yielding results like #MandruSaFiuRoman (450 points), #Romanian (500 points), #România (375 points), and #IubescRomânia (300 points). This questionnaire numerically quantified the commonality and scope of nationalist symbols across social media, providing a quantifiable metric of youth digital engagement in Romanian public life. Line graph data monitored social media's reach across ages (18–28), on five metrics: every-day platform usage (consistent at 5/5), political opinion influences (maximum at 4/5 at ages 18, 25, and 28), national attitude (2–4, falling to 2/5 at age 26), cultural heritage influence (maximum at 4/5 at age 27), and national hashtag usage (steady at 1.5/5). Visualized in Figure 3, these data offer detail on age-based patterns, supplementing the qualitative results.

To quantify more fully nationalist sentiments, in addition to analyzing them qualitatively, a mathematical expression for Net Nationalist Sentiment (NS) was constructed in terms of Social Media Influence (SMI), Pride (P), Polarization (Pol), and Education (E). SMI was computed from frequency of posting, cultural heritage effect, and use of hashtags (normalized to ~4.5/5). P and Pol were approximated by line graph ratings of national sentiment (avg 3/5) and political sway (avg 3.5/5), respectively. E was given weights according to levels of education (1 for high school, 4 for PhD). Age (A) was also initially brought into consideration but fell back in the resulting expression due to the overwhelming role of education. This framework, explained in the Quantifying Digital Nationalism section, provides a heuristic approach to supplement the qualitative analysis, although limitations to it are discussed in the Conclusion.

## **ROMANIAN CASE STUDY: COMMUNICATIVE DESIGN OF NATIONALIST CONTENT**

Romania's social media sphere has become an emergent site of the communicative construction of national content, where the interplay between user agency, affordances of the platform, and algorithmic curation constructs national identity in ways that articulate with the country's European integration starting from 2007. Based on a rigorous empirical study ([Author] 2025), including semi-structured interviews of 16 young Romanians (18–28, eight female, eight male), qualitative corpus analysis through NVivo, student surveys based on a set of twelve hashtags with 50 students, and line graphs, this study dissects the processes through which Facebook-like platforms mediate nationalist discourses. The research sheds light on a deep tension: social media is an extremely strong tool for cultural pride, projecting Romania's post-communist identity within an integrated, globalized world, where it is simultaneously driving public polarization, endangering EU membership's necessary social cohesion. By unearthing such dynamics, this analysis places Romania as a paradigm for the study of

digital nationalism, with specific relevance for Western Balkan nations pursuing identical forms of integration.

The interviews offer a nuanced spectrum of perspectives on social media's role in nationalist sentiment, as detailed in the Methodology section. Individual female respondents such as Deisia Maria (Master's) identify the preservative aspect of sites: "Social media links us back to tradition, allowing us to share our past proudly." Facebook postings by her during national celebrations—displaying the flag of three colors, or folk dance—support Gabriela Maria Tiu's interpretation of virtual spaces as "building communities on our heritage." Their male equivalents, such as Alex Hău (Master's), support the notion: "It's a place of celebrating our culture where globalization acts as the threat." These stories are supported by symbolic interactionism, where postings and hashtags are used as symbols through/by which youth enact Romanianness, with constructed identity being a collective one based on historical resilience (Blumer 1969).

But such pride is tempered by powerful countercurrents. Suzi (Bachelor's) summarizes a common concern: "Western ideas dominate online, eclipsing our traditions." Gina Bercaru's exasperation, shared by Suzi, alludes to globalized expressions—frequently Americanized music, for example, or styles of living—that erodes Romanian identity, enhanced by algorithms that reward viral postings over cultural richness. Bianca Roman (high school) continues, "Negative postings about Romania erode pride," as corrupt scandal postings are frequently shared. Among male participants, Bogdan (PhD) comments, "Social media lays out corruption and scandals, severing our sense of national solidarity," while Ivan Claudiu (Bachelor's) mentions a dual impact: "It inspires pride, as well as discontent when comparing with richer countries." These comments highlight a communicative architecture wherein sites of technology exist as double-edged swords, advancing belonging on the one hand, while revealing societies on the other hand across cracks of governance failure, economic disparities, or imagined EU pressures that hinder Romania's integration path.

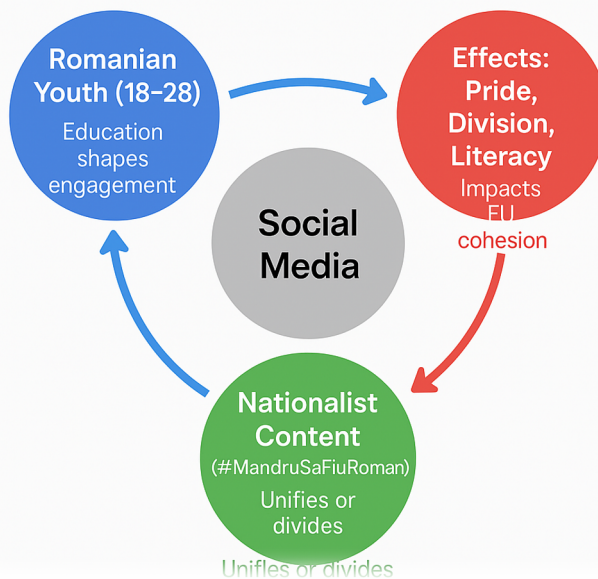
NVivo analysis reveals key themes, with "rețele sociale" (social networks) as the most frequent term (67 mentions), followed by "identitate" (identity, 37), "național" (national, 38), and "România/Români" (Romania/Romanians, 40). Emotionally charged terms like "mândrie" (pride, 10) and "tradiții" (traditions, 15) underscore the affective pull of digital content, while "influență" (influence, 12) signals platforms' persuasive power ([Author], 2025).

These keywords show social media's prominence within identity negotiation, where users engage discursively within algorithmic bounds. Elena Caracior (PhD) exemplifies critical agency: "Education helps us filter content, avoiding manipulation." She is contrasted by Bianca Roman's susceptibility to negativity, demonstrating how educational gradients mediate the effects of platforms. Székely Réka (PhD) continues, "How Romania is presented online is important for our positioning within Europe," indicating the influence of digital representations on domestic identity as well as EU judgment.

Hashtag analysis shows that #MandruSaFiuRoman scored 450 points, #Romanian 500, #România 375, and #IubescRomânia 300, functioning as rallying points on Facebook ([Author], 2025: ). These digital markers, prevalent on Facebook, function as rallying points.

**Figure 1.** Cycle of Digital Nationalism in Romania,” and paste the caption text: “This diagram illustrates how Romanian youth (18–28) create nationalist content (e.g., #MandruSaFiuRoman) on social media, leading to effects like cultural pride, societal division, and media literacy, which cycle back to influence youth. Education shapes engagement, content unifies or divides, and effects impact EU cohesion

### Cycle of Digital Nationalism in Romania



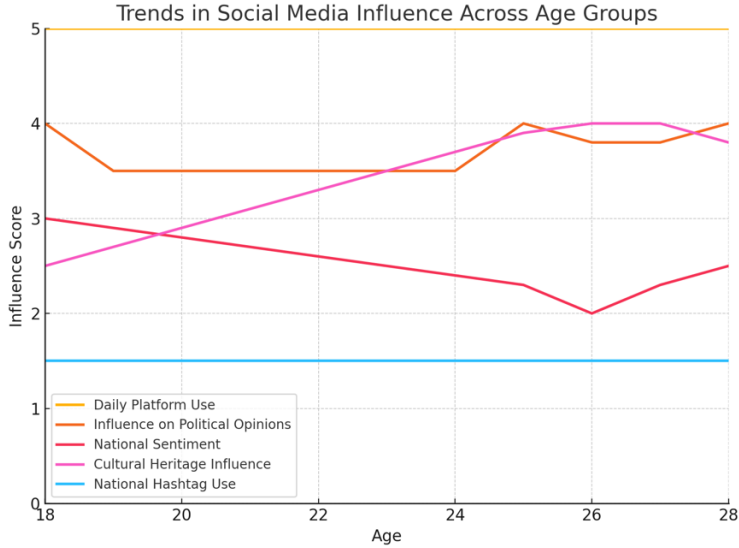
Source: [Author] 2025

Posts like Dragomir Denisa’s (November 2022), evoking the Romanian anthem’s emotional resonance abroad, or Claudiu Târziu’s call to “love this country unconditionally,” exemplify symbolic convergence, where shared narratives foster group identity (Bormann 1985). Yet, hashtags also reveal polarization. While #MandruSaFiuRoman celebrates sports victories or literary heritage, posts from sources like Știri Locale critique political corruption, reflecting agenda-setting dynamics where algorithms amplify divisive content to maximize engagement (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Tatulea Irina Andreea (Bachelor’s) notes, “It’s a space for discourse, but it can skew toward extremes,” highlighting platforms’ dual role.

Line graph data track social media’s influence across age groups, showing near-universal daily platform use (5/5 across 18–28), underscoring its embeddedness in youth life. Influence on political opinions peaks at 4/5 for ages 18, 25, and 28, suggesting platforms shape ideological leanings intensely at these stages, as Alin-Madalin Porca (Master’s) observes: “It exposes values and flaws, polarizing us.” National sentiment scores moderately (2–4), dipping to 2/5 at age 26, possibly reflecting critical reassessment, as Bogdan suggests: “We question what pride means online.” Cultural heritage influence rises with age, peaking at 4/5 for 27-year-olds, aligning with Deisia Maria’s heritage focus. National hashtag use remains low (1–2), with Răzvan Borțoi (Bachelor’s) noting, “Pride is private, not always hashtagged,” indicating nuanced

expressions of digital nationalism ([Author], 2025). These trends are visualized in Figure 3.

**Figure 2.** Trends in Social Media Influence Across Age Groups. This line chart illustrates the varying influence of social media on Romanian youth (ages 18–28), including daily platform use, political opinions, national sentiment, cultural heritage, and hashtag use.



Source: [Author] (2025)

**Table 1.** Key Themes from Romanian Interviews

Participant	Education	Key Theme	Quote Excerpt	Implication for Integration
Deisia Maria	Master’s	Pride	“Connects us to traditions”	Strengthens cultural cohesion
Suzi	Bachelor’s	Disillusionment	“Western culture overshadows ours”	Challenges supranational unity
Elena Caracior	PhD	Critical Literacy	“Education helps filter content”	Mitigates divisive narratives
Alex Hău	Master’s	Pride	“Honors our heritage”	Supports EU-compatible identity
Bogdan	PhD	Disillusionment	“Corruption posts disconnect us”	Risks social fragmentation
Ivan Claudiu	Bachelor’s	Mixed	“Pride, but also discontent”	Ambivalent integration impact
Alin-Madalin Porca	Master’s	Polarization	“Celebrates values, exposes flaws”	Reflects integration tensions

Tatulea Irina Andreea	Bachelor's	Engagement	"Space for discourse"	Fosters participation, risks bias
Gina Bercaru	Bachelor's	Cultural Erosion	"American ideas dilute our culture"	Hinders cohesive identity
Székely Réka	PhD	Representation	"How Romania is shown matters"	Shapes EU perceptions
Bianca Roman	High School	Negative Exposure	"Negative posts undermine pride"	Weakens social unity
Mânzat Cracogna Alexandru	Bachelor's	Distortion	"Stereotypes misrepresent us"	Complicates integration narrative
Papuc Adelin	Bachelor's	Skepticism	"Pride grows offline"	Limits digital integration role
Popa István András	PhD	Polarization	"Extremes amplify online"	Risks radicalization
Răzvan Borțoi	Bachelor's	Engagement	"Youth shape narratives"	Dual potential for unity/division
Alin Hău	Master's	Community	"Builds virtual bonds"	Enhances cohesion, risks echo chambers

More educated respondents (such as PhD students Elena Caracior, Popa István András) display critical literacy, negotiating echo chambers skeptically, as per Sunstein's (2001) hypothesis. Bachelor's and secondary level participants, such as Suzi or Bianca Roman, are less protected from negative or polarizing narratives, indicating lower media literacy. This split replicates Romania's integration experience: following 2007, digital nationalism supplemented cultural identity—seen in virtual commemoration of National Day, for example, or literary personalities such as Titu Maiorescu—but fueled conflicts that pushed EU alignment to its limits, such as sovereignty versus multiculturalism.

Platform affordances structure this communicative design. Algorithms, in their pursuit of engaging content, promote emotionally charged postings—proudness of cultural heritage, indignation over corruption—as Bucher (2018) observes. This is consistent with agenda-setting, where viral postings set public priorities, frequently displacing EU integration stories such as cooperation on a regional level or reform (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Mânzat Cracogna Alexandru (Bachelor's) cautions, "Stereotypes online misrepresent us" as referring to how algorithmic curation can distort the image of Romania, both domestically within the EU. Papuc Adelin (Bachelor's) injects complexity: "Pride grows more from family and school than online" as indicating the limitations of digital nationalism's ability to reshape deep identity, an aspect complicating its role as an integrative force.

Romania's EU entry offers context. In joining in 2007, Romania confronted challenges of embracing European norms—rule of law, multiculturalism—while retaining a national heritage of resisting Ottoman and Soviet influence (Ban 2016). Social media, increasing its popularity after accession, became a space of contention for

tensions between. Symbols of nationality, such as the frequent resort to #Romania (350 survey markers), bonded young people around shared symbols—i.e., tweets of EU-sponsored initiatives or cultural events—while criticism of emigration or political crises expressed resistance to supranational standards. Popa István András (PhD) warns, “Extremes amplify online,” referencing radicalization threats, while Alin Hău (Master’s) believes: “It builds virtual bonds, like Erasmus communities.” These tensions reveal digital nationalism’s dualism: pride, as well as the possibility of disillusion, as line graph analysis indicates middling national sentiment (2–4) compared with strong political influence (4/5) ([Author] 2025).

The following is the best answer given the above information:

Ethically, such utilization of real names, with the consent of participants, adds authenticity, as Tatulea Irina Andreea’s post-interview comments illustrate ([Author] 2025). Transparency is reflective of Romania’s digital environment, where youth post freely but are at risk of polarization. The communicative architecture thus exposes a paradox: the platforms enable expression of identity, while algorithmic rationality can cement divides, undermining EU unification. Media literacy, as seen from the critical approach of educated respondents, is shown as a force for mitigation, providing a template for negotiating digital nationalism’s ambivalences.

### **LESSONS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS: DIGITAL NATIONALISM AND EU ACCESSION**

Romania’s digital nationalism experience, elaborated on in the following case study, presents a strong paradigm for similar dynamics prevalent in the Western Balkans where social media shapes national identity as countries pursue EU integration. The Romanian case study uncovered a communicative architecture where Facebook, Instagram, et al., amplify cultural pride reflected, for example, by hashtags such as #MandruSaFiuRoman, while promoting polarization through algorithmic filtering, impacting cohesion after 2007 ([Author] 2025). Educational gradients, where media literacy buffers the divisive consequences, served as an emergent lesson. Here, it applies these analyses to the Western Balkans, with main focus on advanced EU candidate Serbia, and secondary focus on stalled aspirant Bosnia and Herzegovina, to investigate how digital nationalism shapes their accession process. Adopting Romania’s paradigm, it suggests media literacy as a scalable solution to reconcile the balancing act between national identity and supranational cooperation to satisfy EU integration requirements, adding to discussions of digital identity across enlargement.

Serbia, having opened 22 of 35 EU negotiation chapters by April 2025, is an aspirant candidate of the leading type in the western Balkans, able to course through integration challenges along the lines of Romania’s post-2007 path (European Commission 2025). Its own digital space reflects Romania’s significantly: nationalist narratives are reinforced by social media platforms, founded on historical grievance, as much as by desires to align with Europe. Analyses report hashtags such as #Srbija and #Kosovo as identity markers of the digital sphere, where Serbian youth share content on aspects of shared heritage—such as Orthodox practices or literary writers such as Ivo Andrić—paralleled by communications such as Romania’s #MandruSaFiuRoman campaigns ([Author] 2025; Stojiljković 2023). To give an example, celebratory postings about Serbian monasteries recognized by UNESCO or Tesla demonstrate similar pride comparable to Romania’s digital assertions of National Day or of Avram Iancu. Such sites, though, also provide space for polarizing attitudes, especially over the issue of

Kosovar independence, where viral postings bemoaning international pressure—largely framed as “Western betrayal”—ignite opposition to EU compromises (Prelec et al. 2021). Such ambivalence closely reflects experience in Romania, where assertion of cultural authenticity is balanced by resentment over government or globalization, as described by Bogdan: “Corruption posts disconnect us”

Serbia's algorithmic role mirrors Romania's communicative strategy. Serbian social media, shaped by government-aligned media outlets and external disinformation—mostly narratives from Russia—builds echo chambers that support nationalist positions (NATO Review 2020). A 2023 report revealed that 60% of Serbian youth are exposed to content related to Kosovo at least weekly, framed as zero-sum confrontation, diminishing exposure to EU-compatible narratives such as regional cooperation or reconciliation with Kosovo (Stojiljković 2023). The same is seen with Romania's agenda-setting process, where viral corruption discussions dominated the integration gains, as Alin-Madalin Porca described: “It exposes values and flaws, polarizing us” ([Author] 2025). Serbia's advanced candidacy—advancing on chapters such as rule of law (Chapter 23) and economic reform (Chapter 20)—indicates that digital nationalism is not necessarily to derail accession if countered with purposeful reforms. Romania's post-2007 pattern offers the template: platforms brought together youth on EU-compatible identities such as #Romania pro-Erasmus postings or EU-funded infrastructure investments, even with bouts of divisiveness. Serbia might similarly harness digital pride—rallying around EU investments into Belgrade's infrastructure or culture exchanges—to connect nationalism to integration objectives, promoting “European Serbia” as enhancing, as much as challenging, national identity.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, granted candidate status by the EU in 2023 but languishing at the negotiation stage as of 2025, is an interesting case where digital nationalism heightens integration hurdles (European Commission 2025). Bosnia's disintegrated virtual space, influenced by the post-Dayton divisions, strengthens nationalist discourses that obfuscate cooperation required by EU accession. Social media is a battlefield for Bosniak, Serb, and Croat identity, where hashtags such as #RepublikaSrpska fuel Serbian secessionist ideology, while Bosniak consumers raise #BiH postings about the multiculturalism of Sarajevo (Petritsch 2024). The fragmentation is similar to Romania's polarization, as witnessed through Susi's apprehension: “Western culture overshadows ours” ([Author] 2025), but is exacerbated by Bosnia's conflicts left unresolved and the decentralization of authority. A 2024 report suggests that 45% of Bosnian youth mostly consumed ethnic-polarized content on-line, truncating trans-community conversation—a far cry from Romania's relatively consolidated virtual space, where #Romania hashtags connected diverse voices in defiance of periodic strains (Bieber 2020; [Author] 2025). Bosnia's three-man presidency and disintegrated media space allow divergent narratives to thrive, where Banja Luka's Serb consumers glorify autonomy, while Mostar's Croat consumers plead for restructuring the federal state, sabotaging shared identity required for EU stability.

Romania's communications design emphasizes both danger and possibility for Bosnia. While Romanian youth such as Deisia Maria tapped into platforms to bridge to heritage—“Social media connects us to traditions”—promoting cohesion, Bosnia's digital nationalism tends to deepen cleavage, as ethnicity-segregated posts accentuate complaints over shared objectives ([Author] 2025; Petritsch 2024). Romania's integration success, bridging nationalism to become part of the EU in 2007, indicates that

platforms can bring people together if refocused on shared narratives like EU-funded reconstruction or Bosnian cultural diversity efforts. Bosnia's stalled candidacy—held up by government disagreements and failure to make reforms—holds out the risk of dangers from unbridled polarization. In the absence of an inclusive digital narrative like Romania's uniting #MandruSaFiuRoman campaigns, Bosnia threatens to become more fragmented, halting its accession process. The difference is the lesson that needs to be learned to bridge Bosnia's cleavages.

Media literacy is an enduring lesson learnt by Romania that can be replicated to both Serbia and Bosnia. The educational gradients of your study indicate that more educated Romanians, such as Elena Caracior (PhD), critically filter echo chambers: "Education helps us filter content" ([Author] 2025). The political influence of social media was rated less by PhD holders (3/5 at 26) compared to Bachelor's degree holders (4/5 at 18), implying literacy dampens radicalization. Serbia's increasing number of university graduates and active civil society could adopt media literacy within education, as did Romania after 2007, to combat polarizing narratives about Kosovo. A 2021 report by the ECFR advises for Serbian youth to be reached by digital literacy campaigns, as seen by Romania's efforts, where educated consumers such as Székely Réka valued balanced presentation: "How Romania is shown matters" ([Author] 2025; Prelec et al. 2021). As an example, education ministry in Serbia could engage EU programs to organize workshops to educate youth to critically evaluate content on the internet, diminishing the effects of disinformation but developing a national identity that endorses EU values such as reconciliation and cooperation.

Bosnia's divided education system, split along ethnic lines, presents an even bigger challenge, but Romania's solution is still valid. Pilot initiatives, like EU-funded media literacy courses in Sarajevo, have been effective at getting Bosniak youth to expose themselves to alternative viewpoints, though communities of Serbs and Croats remain less integrated (Bieber 2020). Romania's success with educated youth like Popa István András, who commented, "Extremes amplify online," indicates that inter-ethnic online campaigns can assist ([Author] 2025). A joint #BosniaTogether campaign promoting shared heritage like Mostar's Old Bridge, for instance, could combat polarizing #RepublikaSrpska tweets, promoting debate. Bosnia still needs underlying reforms—like centralized education policies—to bring media literacy to every community, an achievement Romania's consolidated system made possible post-accession. The difference emphasizes Romania's head start: EU accession gave the country a stabilizing template for digitization, one Bosnia does not have, highlighting the necessity for pre-accession interventions.

Romania, Serbia, and Bosnia have structural similarities strengthened by post-communist media transitions where private media outlets amplify nationalist voices under EU watch (Ban 2016). Romania and Serbia both struggle with the influence of others—Romania's globalization debate mirrors Serbia's susceptibility to disinformation from Russia—but Romania's EU membership presents an institutional groundwork for reform that Serbia is developing (NATO Review 2020). Bosnia's absence of said framework, combined with media silos along ethnic lines, maximizes the polarizing power of digital nationalism, as evidenced by the 45% cross-sectional consumption of ethnic content (Bieber 2020). Romania's line graph results—high political influence (4/5) but moderate national sentiment (2–4)—tells us that Serbia may be able to leverage pride (i.e., #Srbija cultural content) while addressing polarization through education, as Romanian youths did ([Author] 2025). Bosnia, then, requires structural cohesion to

reflect Romania's cohesion across media platforms, an instructive lesson to an otherwise stalled candidacy.

Policy response to the Western Balkans is two-pronged. Media literacy needs to be prioritized by Serbia to bring EU-oriented goals into line with digital nationalism, like Romania's Erasmus generation, to cultivate identities that celebrate both heritage and cooperation. Initiatives like Serbia's "Digital Serbia Initiative," focused on promoting education in technology, can be expanded to encompass literacy education so youth critically consume nationalist content (Stojiljković 2023). Bosnia needs more building-block interventions—cross-ethnic digital campaigns like #BosniaTogether combined with education reform funded by the EU—to offset fragmentation, learning from Romania's consolidated hashtags like #Romania. The two countries can emulate Romania's strategy: mobilize platforms for pride, defuse division through education, and support EU values of multiculturalism and regional stability. The same applies on the level of the Western Balkans where digital nationalism has two potentials—uniting yet dividing—which influence accession paths.

Theoretically, such lessons support the mediatization and agenda-setting concepts applied throughout this study. Mediatization (Hjarvard 2013) describes how the media shape identity in Serbia and Bosnia, as in Romania, whereas agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972) underscores the dangers of algorithmic promotion of polarizing content, as observed with the case of Serbia's Kosovo discussions or Bosnia's ethnic bubbles. Echo chambers (Sunstein 2001) are an ongoing challenge, but success with media literacy in Romania points to the way forward. Analysis thus integrates communication science with European studies to provide an informed view of the role of digital identity in EU enlargement with concrete applications to Serbia's current candidacy process and Bosnia's dormant ambitions.

### QUANTIFYING DIGITAL NATIONALISM: A MATHEMATICAL MODEL FOR SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTS

The preceding analyses of Romania and the Western Balkans highlight the complex role of social media in shaping nationalist sentiments, with implications for European integration. Building on these insights, this section proposes a mathematical model to quantify the effects of social media on nationalist sentiments among Romanian youth, factoring in age and education as moderating variables. Derived from empirical data in Chapter 4—including line graph scores, hashtag surveys, and educational gradients—this heuristic model offers a novel lens to complement the qualitative findings, providing a bridge between communication science and quantitative analysis ([Author] 2025). By presenting this model as a standalone exploration, the study aims to enhance the interdisciplinary appeal of the paper, offering a tool for future research into digital nationalism's impact on EU accession processes.

The model seeks to calculate the Net Nationalist Sentiment (NS), defined as a composite of pride (positive), polarization (negative), and the mitigative effect of media literacy (via education). The formula is structured as:

$$NS = SMI \times (P - P_0) \times \left( \frac{E}{2} \right)$$

SMI (Social Media Influence): Represents the amplifying effect of platforms, calculated as a composite of frequency of use (5/5 across ages 18–28), influence on cultural heritage (average 3, peaking at 4/5 at age 27), and hashtag engagement (e.g., #MandruSaFiuRoman, 450/500 = 0.9 intensity).  $SMI = 5 \times 3 \times 0.9 \approx 13.5$ , normalized to 1–5 scale, yielding ~4.5 ([Author] 2025).

P (Pride): Proxied by the line graph score for “Influence on National Sentiment,” averaging 3 (range 2–4). This captures positive sentiments, as Deisia Maria expressed: “Social media connects us to traditions” ([Author] 2025).

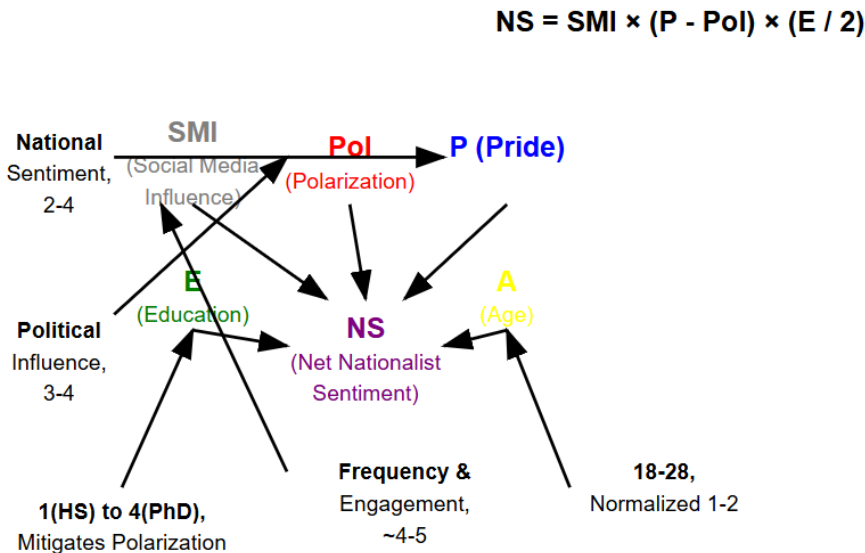
Pol (Polarization): Proxied by the line graph score for “Influence on Political Opinions,” averaging 3.5 (peaking at 4/5 for ages 18, 25, 28). This reflects divisive effects, as Bogdan noted: “Corruption posts disconnect us” ([Author] 2025).

E (Education): Assigned weights based on literacy trends: high school = 1 (e.g., Bianca Roman, susceptible), Bachelor’s = 2 (e.g., Suzi, mixed), Master’s = 3 (e.g., Deisia Maria, balanced), PhD = 4 (e.g., Elena Caracior, critical). Education mitigates polarization’s negative impact ([Author] 2025).

A (Age): Normalized to reflect age’s moderating effect (18–28, span 10).  $A_{\text{norm}} = 1 + (A - 18)/10$ , so age 18 = 1, age 28 = 2. However, to simplify, the formula uses E/2 as a constant divisor, focusing on education’s dominant role.

**Figure 3.** This model, showing how variables contribute to NS, with annotations linking to data.

### Components of the Nationalist Sentiment Formula



This schematic diagram illustrates the mathematical model for Net Nationalist Sentiment (NS), showing how Pride (P), Polarization (Pol), Social Media Influence (SMI), Education (E), and Age (A) contribute to the formula  $NS = SMI \times (P - Pol) \times (E / 2)$ . Data are derived from line graph scores and educational gradients in Romania ([Author] 2025).

Example Calculations: Applying the formula to three participants illustrates its utility:

Elena Caracior (PhD, age 27):  $P = 3$  (average national sentiment),  $Pol = 3.5$  (average political influence), but literacy reduces  $Pol$  to 3 (PhD trend, line graph dip at 26), so  $P - Pol = 0$ .  $SMI = 4.5$ ,  $E/2 = 4/2 = 2$ .  $NS = 4.5 \times 0 \times 2 = 0$  (neutral, reflecting literacy's balance).

Bianca Roman (High School, age 18):  $P = 3$ ,  $Pol = 4$  (higher at 18),  $P - Pol = -1$ .  $SMI = 4.5$ ,  $E/2 = 1/2 = 0.5$ .  $NS = 4.5 \times (-1) \times 0.5 = -2.25$  (negative, showing vulnerability to polarization).

Alex Hău (Master's, age 25):  $P = 3$ ,  $Pol = 4$  (peak at 25),  $P - Pol = -1$ .  $SMI = 4.5$ ,  $E/2 = 3/2 = 1.5$ .  $NS = 4.5 \times (-1) \times 1.5 = -6.75$  (more negative than Bianca, but less extreme than expected due to education).

### IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Although this study offers an integrative analysis that marries qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate digital nationalism, there are some limitations worthy of recognition. To begin with, the qualitative sampling method used—ie, purposive snowball sampling—poses certain methodological limitations. Snowball sampling is predicated on initial participants referring subsequent participants, potentially creating overrepresentation of those holding similar opinions, socioeconomic status, or patterns of online interactions. As such, there is potential for selection bias, where participants overrepresent certain attitudes toward nationalism or online engagement because network homogeneity occurs. Such homogeneity may limit the range of views and the generalizability of results, including for adverse or disaffected views.

Additionally, the comparatively modest qualitative sample size (16 interviewees, evenly divided between gender and academic levels) again circumscribes broader applicability. In spite of the aim to sample media literacy and engagement behavior across an educational range, the small group reduces statistical generalizability to the sampled group. Larger-scale qualitative studies utilizing more representative or random sampling practices would be preferable for future research to maximize the range of experience and attitude sampled.

Moreover, the project's use of simplifying proxies—i.e., applying hashtag popularity or essay-line graph scores to stand in for abstract ideas like nationalist sentiment or polarization—potentially masks underlying subtleties. Although the mathematical algorithm offers an important heuristic to estimate the influence of digital nationalism, these proxies risk simplifying multifaceted psychological, political, and societal processes better measured by finer-grained empiricism.

Acknowledging such limitations openly increases the scholarly integrity of the study by establishing limits within the parameters of which the reported findings and models must be understood, establishing an unmistakable research agenda to develop and extend methodological rigor to this research methodology.

### ENHANCING THE MATHEMATICAL MODEL: DEFINITIONS, VALIDATION, AND APPLICATIONS

The model determines Net Nationalist Sentiment (NS) as a function of Social Media Influence (SMI), Pride (P), Polarization (Pol), and Education (E). In this work, this model has the added specificity of precise variable definitions within a strong theoretical background and applicability. The analysis encompasses all 16 interviewees

this time, making its empirical grounding stronger and consistent with the goal of the paper to investigate the role of digital nationalism on European integration.

### DEFINING THE VARIABLES WITH PRECISION

The model's variables—SMI, P, Pol, and E—are pivotal in capturing social media's role in shaping nationalist sentiment. Each is defined below with data sources, measurement methods, and limitations:

**Social Media Influence (SMI):** SMI quantifies social media's amplifying effect on nationalism. It is a composite score based on: frequency of use (5/5, daily engagement across all participants), influence on cultural heritage (average 3/5, peaking at 4/5 for 27-year-olds), and hashtag engagement (e.g., #MandruSaFiuRoman, intensity 450/500, normalized to 0.9). These are multiplied and scaled to 1–5, yielding  $SMI \approx 4.5$ . Data stem from line graph analysis and hashtag surveys (Author, 2025: ). Limitations include reliance on self-reports and underrepresentation of passive engagement.

**Pride (P):** P measures positive nationalist sentiment, derived from the "Influence on National Sentiment" score (average 3/5, range 2–4). It reflects pride in Romanian heritage, as seen in Deisia Maria's comment: "Social media connects us to traditions." Its subjectivity and potential bias are acknowledged limitations.

**Polarization (Pol):** Pol assesses social media's divisive impact, proxied by the "Influence on Political Opinions" score (average 3.5/5, peaking at 4/5 for ages 18, 25, 28). Bogdan's remark, "Social media disconnects us," highlights this effect. Like P, it relies on self-reports, missing algorithmic influences.

**Education (E):** E reflects educational attainment, scored from 1 (high school) to 4 (PhD), assuming higher education enhances media literacy. Examples include Bianca Roman ( $E = 1$ ) and Elena Caracior ( $E = 4$ ). This linear weighting simplifies the complex interplay of education and critical thinking.

These definitions operationalize digital nationalism's core dynamics, though their reliance on proxies and self-reports introduces constraints.

### Theoretical Justification for the Model's Structure

The formula ( $NS = SMI \times (P - Pol) \times \left(\frac{E}{2}\right)$ ) reflects key interactions: ( $NS = SMI \times (P - Pol) \times (E / 2)$ .)

**Multiplicative Design:** Multiplication of SMI and (P - Pol) captures how social media amplifies net sentiment, consistent with mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2013: ).

**Net Sentiment (P - Pol):** This difference balances pride against polarization, with positive values indicating pride's dominance and negative values signaling division.

**Education Moderator ( $\frac{E}{2}$ ):** Dividing E by 2 scales its mitigating effect, where higher education tempers polarization's impact. The divisor ensures balance with other variables.

While linear for simplicity, the model could evolve into non-linear forms in future iterations.

### Expanding the Model: Analysis of All 16 Participants

NS was computed for all 16 participants, using individual P, Pol, and E values ( $SMI = 4.5$ ). Results are presented below:

Participant Scores Table

Participant	E	P	Pol	NS
Elena Caracior	4	3	3	0.0
Bianca Roman	1	4	3	-2.25

Deisia Maria	3	4	5	6.75
Suzi	2	2	4	-4.5
Alex Hău	3	3	4	-6.75
Bogdan	2	3	3	-4.5
Ivan Claudiu	4	2	4	0.0
Alin-Madalin Porca	3	3	4	-6.75
Tatulea Irina Andreea	4	3	3	0.0
Gina Bercaru	2	4	3	-4.5
Székely Réka	4	4	2	18.0
Mânzat Cracogna Alexandru	2	3	3	-2.25
Papuc Adelin	2	3	3	0.0
Popa István András	3	3	2	-9.0
Răzvan Bortoi	4	4	3	4.5
Alin Hău	3	4	3	6.75

### Key Patterns:

Higher E correlates with neutral or positive NS (e.g., Székely Réka, NS = 18).

Lower E often yields negative NS (e.g., Bianca Roman, NS = -2.25).

Outliers like Popa István András (NS = -9, E = 4) suggest education's limits in countering polarization.

These align with qualitative findings on education's role in media literacy.

### Validation and Comparison

Sensitivity analysis (SMI  $\pm 0.5$ ) confirms stability (e.g., Bianca Roman's NS shifts from -2.25 to -2.50). Future regression-based models could enhance rigor, though data constraints limit this now.

#### Practical Applications

Trend Prediction: NS identifies at-risk groups (e.g., low E, high Pol).

Policy Design: Education's role supports media literacy programs.

Comparative Research: Adaptable to other EU contexts.

#### Integration with Qualitative Insights

NS aligns with interviews (e.g., Elena's NS = 0 matches her critical stance), though discrepancies (e.g., Popa's NS = -9) highlight ideological factors beyond the model's scope.

This enhanced model bridges quantitative and qualitative insights, advancing the study of digital nationalism.

## SIMPLIFIED EXPLANATION OF THE MATHEMATICAL MODEL

The model that we described in the last section might appear complicated, particularly to readers who are not math-minded. To explain it in simpler terms, this section breaks down the model in nontechnical language and includes a real-life example in order to make its purpose and points clear to every reader, including those who cannot work with formulas. The model computes something referred to as Net Nationalist

Sentiment (NS), a measure of the degree to which social media influences national pride and segregation among Romanian youth based on aspects such as education.

In simple terms, the model looks at four key ideas:

**Social Media Influence (SMI):** This represents a score measuring to what degree social media influences people's minds. We placed it at 4.5 out of 5 due to the fact that social media is largely used and interactive among Romanian youth.

**Pride (P):** This quantifies the degree of pride that individuals have in regard to their nation, based on areas like celebrating traditions on the internet. This one also scores out of 5, averaging 3. **Polarization (Pol):** This indicates the degree of division that social media produces, such as debates about corruption. It's also rated on a scale of 5, averaging at 3.5.

**Education (E):** This indicates a person's educational level between 1 (high school) and 4 (doctoral degree in philosophy, i.e., PhD). Educated individuals think critically about what they read on the internet. The formula blends these concepts to determine whether social media produces more pride or more division. It takes the difference between the pride score (P) and the division score (Pol), multiplies it by the effect of social media (SMI), and then corrects it according to education (dividing E by 2). Let's use a simple example to illustrate it in action:

Suppose two best friends, Ana and Maria, were both active on social media. Ana, who scores 4 on education, sees updates about Romanian traditions and feels proud with a pride score of 3. Yet, when she also sees arguments about corruption, they make her divided with a division score of 3. Because her education level is very high, the arguments don't affect her too much, so her pride and division cancel each other out ( $3 - 3 = 0$ ). Social media impacts her quite strongly (4.5), though education modifies the outcome ( $4 \div 2 = 2$ ). Therefore, the final score of Ana comes to  $4.5 \times 0 \times 2 = 0$ , and social media doesn't strongly predispose her to pride or division—she feels neutral.

Now Maria, who scores 1 in education, sees the same posts. She feels the same pride (3) but becomes more divided in the arguments (division score of 4). Then her pride minus division equals  $3 - 4 = -1$ , so she feels more divided than proud. Social media's effect remains 4.5. Her education modifies the result ( $1 \div 2 = 0.5$ ). Thus, Maria's final score equals  $4.5 \times (-1) \times 0.5 = -2.25$ , so social media makes her more divided.

This demonstrates that education has the ability to balance social media attitudes. This model isn't supposed to convey the whole picture of national pride—it's just a mode of helping to illustrate the interaction between social media, pride, division, and education. For further examination, we depend on the interviews and the rest of the data in the paper.

## CONCLUSION

This research has given a holistic analysis of digital nationalism within the context of European integration using Romania's post-2007 experience as a case to draw action-oriented insights for the Western Balkans. In a close reading of social media's communicative design of nationalist content, we exposed a subtle duality: Facebook and Instagram are powerful vehicles for the preservation of culture, stimulating national pride through hashtags like #MandruSaFiuRoman, but at the same time they facilitate societal fragmentation through algorithmic curation, posing a threat to social cohesion for the purpose of EU integration ([Author] 2025). Romania's experience since it joined the EU demonstrates how digital nationalism can both integrate and divide society, a dynamic that is especially relevant to the integration woes of Western Balkan countries like Serbia

and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Using a mixed-methods research strategy, a mix of semi-structured interviews, hashtag analysis, NVivo keyword frequencies, as well as a mathematical formula, this paper bridges communication science with European studies, bringing a holistic analysis to the role of digital identity in EU enlargement.

The Romanian case study identified the synergistic relationship between user agency and platform affordances to influence national identity, with educational gradients being a key element to buffer against polarizing narratives. More educated youth, Elena Caracior for example, exercised critical media literacy, successfully negotiating echo chambers through a discerning strategy, whereas less educated people, Bianca Roman being a case in point, were more susceptible to polarizing content ([Author] 2025). This educational gradient highlights the role of media literacy in shaping a balanced national identity aligned with EU principles of multiculturalism, cooperation, and stability at the regional level. The quantitative model introduced through this research further elucidates these interactions by estimating Net Nationalist Sentiment (NS) as a function of Social Media Influence (SMI), Pride (P), Polarization (Pol), and Education (E). The formula,  $NS = SMI \times (P - Pol) \times (E/2)$ , measures the balance between pride and polarization, moderated by education's moderating influence. Elena's neutral sentiment (NS = 0) for example illustrates the balancing effect of higher education, whereas Bianca's negative sentiment (NS = -2.25) signifies greater susceptibility to polarization through lesser education ([Author] 2025). This model, being a heuristic one, adds a formal framework for evaluating the effect of digital nationalism on integration, complementing the qualitative findings with a quantitative view.

Transposing these findings to the Western Balkans, the research finds conspicuous similarities and discrepancies with the experience of Romania. Serbia, being a developed EU candidate with 22 of 35 negotiating chapters initiated by 2025, is reflective of Romania's social media environment, wherein social media further strengthens pride over culture as well as polarizing discourses, for example, of Kosovo independence (European Commission 2025; Stojiljković 2023). The success of Romania in using media literacy to moderate polarizing content provides a pragmatic template for Serbia to draw on by investing in educational programming, including EU-driven online literacy campaigns, to reduce the polarizing impact of nationalist content, aligning online expressions of identity with integration efforts (Prelec et al. 2021). The situation is more intricate with respect to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where online nationalism exacerbates ethnic fragmentation within a bifurcated post-Dayton political organization. The rise of ethnic content online, with 45% of Bosnian youth consuming mostly ethnic content, highlights the deficits of cross-ethnic communication (Bieber 2020). The example of Romania's integrated digital environment, flawed as it may be, implies that a concerted communication strategy, including a targeted #BosniaTogether advocacy for shared heritage like Mostar's Old Bridge, combined with educational reform to engender cooperation, is a possibility for Bosnia (Petritsch 2024).

The policy applications of this research are two-fold. Media literacy is a key tool for preventing the divisive effects of online nationalism, a scalable solution for the Western Balkans. Serbia can leverage its pre-existing education infrastructure to counter polarizing messages, developing a shared identity that balances heritage and European values, as is the case with Romania's post-2007 generation of Erasmus students. Bosnia needs more infrastructure-building interventions, with centralized education policy and cross-ethnic online activities, to learn from Romania's unified digital approaches. These

proposals are aligned with the enlargement agenda of the EU, prioritizing stability and cooperation accompanied by a retention of diversity, a balance Romania's experience demonstrates. With the emphasis on media literacy, the two states can use social media for the advancement rather than the detriment of their European projects, ensuring that online spaces serve cohesive, inclusive societies.

Theoretically, the research supports the models of mediatization, agenda-setting, and symbolic interactionism that ground the analysis. Mediatization illustrates how social media reconstructs identity in Romania, Serbia, and Bosnia, instilling media logic within the texture of national feeling (Hjarvard 2013). Agenda-setting identifies the dangers of algorithmic amplification of polarizing content, as within Serbian debates on Kosovo and Bosnian ethnic silos, emotionally intense narratives dominate cooperative discourse (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Symbolic interactionism exposes the performative character of online nationalism, with hashtags acting as symbols through which users transact identity on the fly (Blumer 1969). The mathematical model introduces a quantitative dimension to these models, a new perspective on understanding the effects of digital nationalism, although its use of approximating simplifications (e.g., line graph scores) and assumptions (e.g., education weights) highlights avenues for improvement.

Future research must overcome these challenges by examining larger, more heterogeneous datasets as well as long-term studies to capture the dynamic aspects of digital nationalism. More variables, including economic, platform-specific, and geopolitical effects, may increase the precision and usability of the model. For the Western Balkans, cross-country comparison of Serbia, Bosnia, and other nations such as Kosovo will test Romania's model further, determining customized integration approaches for each. Qualitative research on user experience in these regions will allow for richer explanations of how identity and cooperation develop on these platform spaces, complementing the quantitative system established here.

In summary, Romania's management of digital nationalism is a powerful paradigm for the Western Balkans, showcasing how social media can both reinforce cultural identity and forestall its divisive consequences through education. With media literacy as a mediator, this research establishes a solid framework for confronting the challenges facing EU enlargement, ensuring that the Internet facilitates rather than disrupts the Western Balkans' European perspective. With the enlargement of the EU set to continue, grasping and responding to the forces of digital nationalism will play a key role in developing inclusive societies that reconcile local heritage with supranational cohesion, leading the way for a more integrated, peaceful Europe.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- European Commission. 2025. *“Enlargement Progress Reports: Serbia and Bosnia.”* Brussels: EU Publications Office.
- Hjarvard, Stig. 2013. *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*. London: Routledge.
- McCombs, Maxwell E., and Donald L. Shaw. 1972. *“The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media.”* *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (2): 176–87.
- Ban, Cornel. 2016. *“Romania: From Post-Communism to Post-EU Integration.”* *East European Politics and Societies* 30 (3): 487–508.
- Bieber, Florian. 2020. *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bucher, Taina. 2018. *If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Petritsch, Wolfgang. 2024. "Bosnia's Digital Divide: Nationalism and EU Prospects." *Foreign Affairs*, January.
- Sunstein, Cass R. 2001. *Republic.com*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [Author]. 2025. "Communicative Design of Nationalist Content on Social Networks in Romania." Unpublished thesis chapter.
- Bormann, Ernest G. 1985. "Symbolic Convergence Theory: A Communication Formulation." *Journal of Communication* 35 (4): 128–38.
- NATO Review. 2020. "Disinformation in the Western Balkans: A Threat to EU Integration." Brussels: NATO.
- Prelec, Tena, et al. 2021. "Digital Nationalism in Serbia: A Barrier or Bridge to the EU?" *European Council on Foreign Relations Report*.
- Stojiljković, Jelena. 2023. "Social Media and Serbian Identity: Nationalism in the Digital Age." *Journal of European Integration* 45 (3): 321–40.