IDENTITY, SECURITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN BORDER AREAS OF SOUTH EAST EUROPE

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IDENTITY, SECURITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN BORDER AREAS OF SOUTH EAST EUROPE. EDITORIAL AND INTRODUCTORY STUDY

Mircea BRIE*

Abstract. *This paper serves as the editorial and introductory study for the 2026 special issue of the Annals of University of Oradea, published under the aegis of the EuroINCLUS Jean Monnet Center of Excellence. The volume gathers selected papers from the international conference „Identity, Security and Inclusivity in border areas of South East Europe". Its primary objective is to analyze collective identity, integration, societal security, and inclusion within these regions, specifically focusing on vulnerable groups such as minorities, migrants, and refugees. The papers evaluate societal resilience against multiple sources of regional insecurity, conflicts, and persistent integration barriers. At an academic level, this volume bridges critical gaps in regional literature by offering robust theoretical frameworks and fresh empirical data on how borders shape societal dynamics. Practically, the findings offer an actionable resource for policymakers and stakeholders. By addressing the asymmetrical management of diversity as a root cause of political instability, the volume proposes evidence-based public policies, expert knowledge, and best practice models. The volume comprises 25 analytical papers structured across four distinct thematic sections: 1. Identity and Societal Resilience; 2. Socio-Economic Inclusion; 3. International Affairs and Diplomacy; 4. Integration and Public Policies.*

Keywords*: Europe, border, identity, societal security, inclusivity, public policies.*

This paper is an introductory and editorial approach for the first special issue in 2026 of the journal *Annals of University of Oradea. Series International Relations and European Studies*. This issue is published under the aegis of the EuroINCLUS Research Center within the Department of International Relations and European Studies at the University of Oradea. This academic endeavor was carried out as part of the framework and activities of the EuroINCLUS Jean Monnet Center of Excellence project.

The central theme of this volume focuses on *Identity, Security and Inclusivity in border areas of South East Europe*. The volume brings together a selection of papers presented at the international conference of the same name, organized at the University of Oradea on June 10–11, 2026. The main focus is on analyzing and operationalizing the concepts of identity, integration, societal security and inclusion in the border areas of South-Eastern Europe. The research primarily targets key vulnerable groups, including national and religious minorities, migrants, and refugees. The main focus is on analyzing and operationalizing the concepts of identity, integration, societal security and inclusion in the border areas of South-Eastern Europe.

The scientific papers comprising this volume aim to identify and analyze the process of societal resilience against the backdrop of multiple sources of insecurity,

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interethnic or interreligious conflicts, and the persistent integration challenges faced by minorities, migrants, and refugees across Southern and Eastern Europe.

At an academic level, this volume bridges critical gaps in regional literature by offering robust theoretical frameworks and fresh empirical data on how borders shape societal dynamics. It advances the scholarly discourse on European integration and regional stability by exploring how collective identities, minority rights, and cultural heritage withstand or adapt to contemporary border anxieties and shifting political landscapes.

At a practical and applied level, the findings presented here serve as a resource for policymakers, civil society organizations, and regional stakeholders. The themes addressed identify complex, multifaceted needs regarding the generation of adequate public policies, the consolidation of expertise, and the proposal of best practice models. By highlighting the human dimension of security, the volume underscores that political instability, social insecurity, and even armed conflicts often stem from the asymmetrical management of diversity, integration, and community inclusion. These evidence-based insights therefore directly contribute to the design of more inclusive cross-border policies, effective societal security strategies, and sustainable cooperation mechanisms that protect vulnerable communities in South-Eastern Europe.

In addition to this editorial and introductory study, the volume includes 25 theoretical and analytical papers on specific fields. The articles have been grouped thematically into four sections: 1. *Identity and Societal Resilience*; 2. *Socio-Economic Inclusion*; 3. *International Affairs and Diplomacy*; 4. *Integration and Public Policies*.

1. Identity and Societal Resilience – is the first section containing 7 papers on various topics in the field of identity and societal resilience at various levels. These are both theoretical approaches and analytical research.

First paper, *A Multilingual Perspective on Communicative Competence for Developing Sustainable Peace in Society*, signed by Angela Solcan and Svetlana Burea from the "Ion Creanga" State Pedagogical University in the Republic of Moldova, reconsiders communicative competence from a multilingual perspective and explores its role in supporting social cohesion and sustainable peace through education. The authors emphasize that in modern societies, which are heavily marked by social polarization and hate speech, the core issue is not the absence of communication, but rather its quality. Contemporary language education must move beyond mere grammatical accuracy to develop the capacity to build relationships, listen actively, and navigate cultural differences. To achieve this, the paper proposes an expanded framework for communicative competence structured around six interconnected dimensions: linguistic, multilingual, intercultural, dialogic, digital, and axiological. This final, value-based dimension ensures that interaction is guided by core ethical values such as empathy, responsibility, openness, and solidarity. A fundamental pillar of the study is the promotion of multilingualism and "translanguaging" as transformative pedagogical practices. Translanguaging allows students to flexibly integrate and mobilize their entire linguistic repertoire to negotiate meaning. This process significantly reduces language anxiety, lowers performance barriers, and challenges traditional linguistic hierarchies, creating deeply inclusive classroom environments.The article incorporates a practical dimension through a case study focused on recent curriculum reforms in the Republic of Moldova. It analyzes the 2025 initiative to integrate value-based education into the National Curriculum, aligning it with international benchmarks like the OECD Learning Compass

2030. Furthermore, it highlights the new regulatory framework approved in September 2025, which formally recognizes multilingual education in allophone schools to address complex local realities, such as identity tensions and refugee integration.In conclusion, the research demonstrates that reshaping communicative competence into a "peacebuilding competence" is indispensable. It shifts communication from a simple exchange of information into an essential tool for building trust, resisting manipulation, and ensuring peaceful coexistence (Solcan and Burea, 2026).

The second paper, *Identity as a Geopolitical Border in South-East Europe*, is signed by Mircea Brie from University of Oradea (Romania). This analyzes how internal identity cleavages function as invisible geopolitical borders within contemporary societies. Shifting the analytical focus away from physical boundaries, the paper demonstrates a bidirectional relationship: societal fragmentation drives regional geopolitical polarization, while external pressures simultaneously reinforce internal identity structures (see for more kind of identity borders: Brie, 2023; Brie, 2021; Brie, 2024). Using a qualitative and comparative approach, the study evaluates three distinct case studies: 1. The Republic of Moldova: Electorate data from the 2024 constitutional referendum shows deep polarization. While the Moldovan-Romanian majority aligns with the West, the Gagauz, Bulgarian, and Russian minorities consistently display strong pro-Russian orientations (see for more Orjuhovschi and Brie, 2025; Brie and Goreainov, 2026); 2. North Macedonia: Internal ethnic dynamics are institutionalized along Macedonian and Albanian lines. Longitudinal data confirms that the Albanian minority exhibits a higher openness to external compromises to secure rapid Euro-Atlantic integration (see for more Brie and Solcan, 2025); 3. Bosnia and Herzegovina: The post-conflict architecture formalizes divisions between Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs (see for more Goga and Brie, 2026). In Republika Srpska, public perceptions and security imaginaries are oriented toward Russia and Serbia, contrasting directly with the Euro-Atlantic path of the Federation. In conclusion, the research highlights that without a firm integration strategy, these internal identity fractures will continue to harden and be weaponized by revisionist actors (Brie, 2026).

The paper *Professional Development for Inclusive Language Teaching in the Republic of Moldova*, proposed by Lucia Șchiopu from State Pedagogical University ”Ion Creangă” (Republic of Moldova), develops an analysis of inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova focusing on the role of English language teachers. Integrating document analysis with a mixed-method evaluation of 300 English teachers, the research explores how educators navigate psychological transitions across three developmental stages: resistance, exploration, and consolidation. The paper concludes that combining innovative digital tools, Artificial Intelligence, and structured teacher reflection is essential to create sustainable, inclusive environments that guarantee equal access for all (Șchiopu, 2026).

Marian Ionel Cutoi proposed the paper *Identity Construction and Dual Belonging within Romanian Community in Austria*. The study examines identity construction and dual belonging within the Romanian community in Austria and „explores the relationship between language practices, social networks, perceptions of belonging, and patterns of everyday life to examine how these dimensions relate to processes of identity construction”. The author highlights the formation of a hybrid identity among migrants. The research combines official Statistik Austria data with a survey from 2023–2024. Migration does not represent a linear cultural substitution but a combined and continuous adaptation. Romanians flexibly integrate both cultural spaces (Cutoi, 2026).

A very interesting analysis is proposed by Sorin Șipoș, Cosmin Patca, Ioana Târb Blajec and Manuela Bârza: *Slovak communities in Bihor and Sălaj counties (19th Century - present). Demography and settlement patterns*. The study analyzes the demographic evolution and settlement patterns of the Slovak community in Bihor and Sălaj counties from the late 18th century to the present. Initially settled in the high mountainous areas of the Plopiș Mountains for forestry and the glass industry, the Slovaks developed a dispersed habitat that allowed them to preserve their cultural identity. Analytically, the research validates two fundamental hypotheses: the existence of a historical migration from high forested areas toward valleys and lowlands, and the structural fragmentation of the community. The population reached its numerical peak in 1930 (16,904 inhabitants) due to positive natural growth. Subsequently, the communist period redirected internal migration flows toward mining basins in the valleys (coal and asphalt extraction), accelerating the decline of isolated mountain settlements. After 1989, the restoration of freedom of movement triggered a severe demographic decline driven by the re-emigration of young people to the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic. This exodus, combined with ethnic assimilation and mixed marriages, led to the disappearance of large communities and the multiplication of very small ones, increasing the vulnerability of the Slovak minority to the loss of their mother tongue and traditions (Șipoș, Patca, Târb Blajec and Bârza, 2026).

The paper *Refugee and migrant integration and border management in the South East European region*, proposed by István Polgár, analyzes border management and migrant integration in the South East European region, focusing on the Western Balkan route as a true epicenter of mixed migratory movements toward European Union member states. The author highlights the severe pressure placed on the institutional capacities of regional authorities. It underscores the urgent need to modernize legal and operational frameworks often outpaced by this accelerating phenomenon. Analytically, the research validates two fundamental hypotheses. Transnational cooperation in border management directly supports successful integration. Furthermore, ground-level transnational institutions enhance public policy monitoring. Modern border management requires a fragile balance. It balances national security objectives with facilitating legitimate flows of people and goods. Integration is a bidirectional, multi-dimensional, long-term process. Responsibility is shared between national decision-makers and local authorities. The study notes a lack of structured interaction between neighboring states. It advocates for stronger transnational partnerships. Efficient management demands coordination across three key pillars: intra-service, inter-agency, and international. This turns migration management into a strategic socio-economic investment for European societies (Polgár, 2026).

Pavel Vintilă proposes in his paper, *National Identity as an Object of Analysis in Contemporary Political Science: a Theoretical Framework and a Case Study of the Republic of Moldova*, a rigorous theoretical framework for analyzing national identity, clarifying the essential distinction between ethnicity and nation. The author evaluates the main explanatory paradigms in political science—primordialism, modernism, and ethno-symbolism—complementing them with analytical tools such as the civic–ethnic dichotomy, invented tradition, and the Hansen effect. This conceptual apparatus is applied to the case study of the Republic of Moldova to validate a central hypothesis: Moldovans and Romanians constitute the same ethnicity, sharing a common origin, language, and historical memory. In this context, the distinct "Moldovan" national identity represents an institutional construction of Soviet origin, developed as an invented tradition for political delimitation from Romania. The post-Soviet trajectory highlights a gradual recovery of the original Romanian ethnic and linguistic identity, driven mainly by younger generations, a

phenomenon described by analogy with the Hansen effect. This process is accompanied by a shift from ethnic to civic criteria in defining state belonging. However, this dynamic remains profoundly marked by the geopolitical cleavage between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations (Vintilă, 2026).

2. Socio-Economic Inclusion is the third section of this volume, containing 6 papers on various subjects in the field of socio-economic inclusion at various levels and different types of public policies about these topics.

The next paper is signed by Cristina-Matilda Vănoagă and Luciana-Mirela Butișcă and focuses on *Socio-Economic Inclusion in the Context of the Just Transition and the European Green Deal: An Analysis of Governance and Political Discourse in the European Union and Romania*. This paper examines how social inclusion is integrated into climate neutrality policies across the European Union, focusing specifically on Romania. Utilizing document analysis and critical discourse analysis, the study explores the institutional and narrative frameworks driving the green transition. The research highlights a significant structural asymmetry between different levels of governance: European Level and National Level (Romania). The focus shifts primarily toward fund absorption, infrastructure investment, and economic modernization rather than active community participation. Focusing on vulnerable mining areas like Gorj and the Jiu Valley, the authors warn that a purely economic approach risks reproducing marginalization. They conclude that narrative and participatory alignment across governance levels is vital to guarantee genuine equity (Vănoagă and Butișcă, 2026).

The paper *Unequal social justice between communist legacy and vulnerable democracy*, proposed by Gelanda Shkurtaj from Epoka University (Albania), investigates he failure of legal and institutional transitional justice mechanisms in post-communist Albania. It explores how the country's fragile democracy remains deeply polarized due to an unaddressed historical legacy, unpunished perpetrators, and a widespread "accountability gap". Confronting this systemic failure, the study evaluates the double role of education as *extrema ratio*—the final viable tool for preserving collective memory, uncovering historical truth, and fostering social repair. To analyze generational awareness, the author conducted a cross-sectional survey of 230 university students. The empirical data obtained from the research reveals a series of critical gaps regarding the younger generation's relationship with the historical past. First, there is a major reliance on informal narratives, with the vast majority of young Albanians acquiring knowledge about the dictatorial regime through subjective family accounts, while formal school education plays only a secondary role. This situation is fueled by an evident manipulation of the school curriculum; due to intense political pressures and societal polarization, history textbooks offer fragmented, contradictory, and often incomplete timelines. Nonetheless, despite having a rather superficial or fragmented level of knowledge, a strong awareness of the oppression from that era stands out. Over 70% of the surveyed students unequivocally recognize the massive violations of human rights during communism and express a clear moral and civic urgency regarding the analysis and condemnation of these past crimes. Ultimately, the text concludes that integrating educational and social policies is a structural requirement for reconciliation. True restorative social justice cannot be achieved merely through financial compensations, but by establishing an ideologically neutral, transparent curriculum that restores the dignity of historical victims (Shkurtaj, 2026).

The next paper, signed by Zsolt-Botond Bottyán form University of Oradea is *Infrastructural Interdependence, Energy Security, and Societal Inclusivity in East-Central*

Europe. It examines how regional energy dependencies are being transformed amid the 2022 gas crisis and the 2026 oil shock. Utilizing a most-similar-systems comparison of Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia, the study explores when shared cross-border infrastructure serves as a channel of external coercion or shifts toward regional cohesion. The research introduces an alignment condition, demonstrating that true integration requires synchronous cooperation across four distinct scales: supranational, regional, national, and local. While the EU provides supranational funding and regional gas corridors expand laterally, national policy choices remain the decisive variable, isolating Romania's proactive alignment against Hungarian and Slovak protectionist gate-keeping. Finally, by down-scaling the Schuman integration mechanism, the author evaluates the Oradea–Debrecen geothermal cooperation. The case yields a partial confirmation; functional trans-border association is real, but still relies heavily on EU subsidies and faces ongoing energy justice challenges regarding peripheral and Roma households (Bottyán, 2026).

The paper *Intercultural Dialogue and Diversity Management in Border Areas: Challenges and Opportunities for Social Inclusion in South-East Europe*, is signed by Andreea Trifa from the University of Oradea. Focusing on the Romanian–Hungarian border space, particularly the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar and Oradea–Debrecen relations, the study investigates how cultural diplomacy, intercultural education, and cross-border governance support European integration and strengthen societal security. The paper demonstrates that cultural diversity does not lead to a predetermined outcome; rather, its social effects depend on whether governance creates inclusive institutions or permits discrimination. By evaluating the Council of Europe's framework and regional Interreg programs, the author highlights that while long-term institutional partnerships reduce symbolic barriers and build relational social capital, symbolic inclusion must be backed by concrete material access to public services. The study concludes that inclusive, rights-based diversity management converts historical or migratory tensions into structural resilience (Trifa, 2026).

The paper *The Impact of Strategic Shifts in the 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plan on Non-Agricultural Diversification and Social Inclusion: A Case Study of Bihor County, Romania* in proposed by Claudiu Gabriel Bonaciu and Horia Laurențiu Carțiș. The study analyzes the impact of structural changes in the 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plan on non-agricultural diversification and social inclusion in rural areas, using Bihor County as a case study. The authors highlight a drastic decline in funding for non-agricultural activities due to shifting the responsibility to Local Action Groups (LAGs). The analysis, focused on five municipalities in Bihor County (Aușeu, Vadu Crișului, Șuncuiuș, Bulz and Bratca), reveals a reduction in the number of funded projects in the current programming period compared to the 2007-2013 interval. Research extended to three successful guesthouses (Casa Bucătarului, Carpathia, Skipass) demonstrates that consistent investments in tourism historically generated significant employment growth and tourist flows, effects that are now endangered. Another major issue identified is institutional fragmentation, as financial resources are dispersed among four disconnected ministries without an integrated vision or a unified definition of rural space. This dissipation prevents the capitalization of economic synergies, such as connecting Smart Specialization Parks with local small non-agricultural businesses (Bonaciu and Brie, 2026). To remedy these dysfunctions, the study proposes establishing a Department for the Development of Rural Areas within the Prime Minister's Chancellery to ensure a single legal framework, integrated annual reporting, and efficient interministerial coordination (Bonaciu and Carțiș, 2026).

The paper *Social Economy Business Models and Sustainable Growth: An Analysis of Emerging Regional Dynamics* in proposed by Luminița Șoproni, Florentina Chirodea. This study analyzes the essential role of social economy business models in driving sustainable growth within Romania's North-West Development Region. This territory is shaped by a pronounced urban-rural duality, demographic pressures, and strong cross-border interactions. Agro-food cooperatives, such as Someș Arieș (Cluj) and Samus Lact (Satu Mare), consolidate fragmented local production and stabilize rural value chains. In parallel, Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs), exemplified by Emmaus (Satu Mare) and BRICKED (Cluj-Napoca), directly support the inclusion of vulnerable groups into the labor market and promote circular economy practices. Interreg cross-border programs expand this ecosystem through tailored entrepreneurial training for youth. However, the sector faces low organizational density in rural areas and a critical dependence on temporary project funding (Șoproni and Chirodea, 2026).

3. International Affairs and Diplomacy is the third section of this volume, containing 6 papers on various subjects in the field of international affairs, diplomacy, international relations, European studies and different types of public policies about these topics.

The first paper of the chapter, *The Rise of Subnational Actors: Romanian Cities' Adaptation to the International dynamics through City Diplomacy initiatives* signed by Mihai Ovidiu Cercel and Andreea Roxana Țoi, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (Romania), brings into discussion the theoretical development of city diplomacy concept within the academic literature in order to understand how it is taking shape in the Romanian context. Having said that, their analysis focuses on major Romanian cities and their engagement in international relations by evaluating the effectiveness of their paradiplomatic efforts using a six-dimension framework of city diplomacy (security, development, economy, culture, networks, and representation (Cercel and Țoi, 2026).

The next article of the chapter is called *Border Cities as Laboratories of Europeanization: Cultural Diplomacy and Urban Inclusion* and it is signed by Alina Stoica and Bianca-Larisa Gaidoș from the University of Oradea, Romania. Their analysis aims at seeing how the Romanian cities of Oradea and Timișoara use cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion to promote European identity at the local level. As a result, the paper contributes to the literature on urban paradiplomacy and Europeanization by arguing that border cities function as local laboratories of European integration. However, it is highlighted by the authors that the sustainability of their contribution depends on their ability to move beyond project-based funding, tourism-oriented heritage promotion, and temporary cultural events, while ensuring the meaningful participation of socially and culturally underrepresented groups (Stoica and Gaidoș, 2026).

The next article is titled *Centripetal and Centrifugal Processes in the European Union: Dynamics of Cohesion and Fragmentation*, signed by Svetlana Cebotari from Moldova State University, the Republic of Moldova. This paper examines the main centripetal and centrifugal trends manifested within the European space, as well as their impact on the future prospects of the European integration process. This research takes place within the context of the simultaneous presence of centripetal and centrifugal processes within the European Union that configure a complex structural dynamic that shapes both the evolution of the integration process and the fragmentation tendencies of the European political and institutional system. In parallel, centrifugal processes are

generated by persistent economic and political divergences among Member States, by populist and Eurosceptic pressures, by structural differences in development, and by systemic crises (economic, migratory, sanitary, or geopolitical), which may intensify fragmentation and limit the Union's capacity to act in a coherent and unified manner (Cebotari, 2026).

The last article of the second chapter is called *Security through Integration? The EU Enlargement Process as a Stabilization Tool in South-East Europe* and it is signed by Maria Augusta Barsan-Moigradean from Bogdan Vodă University. The paper analyses whether the enlargement policy can still be used as a credible tool for bringing about peace and stability in the region. This research utilizes qualitative methodology, including document analysis and comparative case study methodology. The research compares the accession experiences of Romania and Bulgaria to those of the current Western Balkan candidate countries' accession experiences and relies upon the theoretical concepts of Democratic Conditionality, Europeanisation, Security Community Theory, and Normative Power Europe to draw comparisons and conclusions. According to these findings, the EU expansion will contribute to improvements in the institutional, legal and regional cooperation structures. Nevertheless, the power of transformation of the EU is reduced by the lack of credibility and the extended period of accession (Barsan-Moigradean, 2026).

The paper *French and Chinese Projection of Influence in the Republic of Moldova. A Comparative Analysis of Trade relations and Bilateral agreements* signed by Alin Ionuț Cornel Moise presents a comparative analysis of the projection of influence exercised by France and China in Republica Moldova, highlighting two distinct models of economic and legal cooperation. The author analyzes the evolution of trade exchanges and bilateral agreements across the 2001–2014 and 2015–2024 periods. The relationship with China is marked by a profound structural imbalance: imports from this country experienced an accelerated expansion, heavily concentrated on industrial and technological goods, such as machinery and electrical equipment. In contrast, the exports of Republica Moldova to the Chinese market are volatile and limited almost exclusively to agri-food products. Conversely, France offers a more balanced and diversified trade model, integrating chemical and industrial products alongside high value-added goods into its exports. On the legal front, agreements with France target institutional development, governance, administrative modernization, and alignment with European standards. China focuses on technical assistance, economic development grants, and specific sectoral projects. In conclusion, both states contribute to the country's development through complementary approaches (Moise, 2026).

The next paper is *The European Union and the Challenge of the Democratic Cosmopolis* signed by Sotiris Amarantos. The study explores the existential crisis of the European Union through the lens of cosmosystemic gnoseology, evaluating three classical political models to overcome the democratic impasse. The author rejects modern definitions that mistake a monarchically-governed oligarchy for true democracy, emphasizing the complete lack of citizen participation in European decision-making. The analysis compares the current structure of the Union with Thomas Hobbes's "Christian commonwealth" and Immanuel Kant's "federation of free states". Both the pre-modern and early-modern models are considered outdated, as they preserve bureaucratic structures or arbitrary power relations cut off from the interests of society. Instead, the cosmopolitical project of Rigas Velestinlis, based on the refounding of the Byzantine cosmopolis, offers a promising constitutional orientation. This model combines direct democracy at the local

level (in communes or cities) with genuine representation at the central level, reducing the influence of bureaucracy and market interests (Amarantos, 2026).

4. Integration and Public Policies is the fourth section of this volume, containing 6 papers on various subjects in the field of integration and public policies în Europe.

The next article is *titled Investor citizenship schemes in the Western Balkans and the EU enlargement* and it is written by Balázs Horváthy and László Knapp, Széchenyi István University, Hungary. The paper analyses investor citizenship programmes in the context of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and addresses the key question of whether strict EU law standards regarding investor citizenship schemes should be similarly applied to Western Balkan candidate countries regardless of the status or outcome of the accession negotiations. The first part of the paper outlines the criteria by which EU law assesses these programmes, and the requirements with which Member States must comply. The second part examines the importance of investor citizenship programmes in Western Balkan states, the principles upon which these regulations were established and the effect of the EU accession process on existing programmes in recent years. In the conclusion the paper determines the policy and regulatory leeway of candidate countries, and the available alternatives to increase their ability to attract foreign capital on the path to European Union membership (Horváthy and Knapp, 2026).

The next analysis is *Inclusiveness of electronic elections as a necessary component of European integration: the example of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia* signed by Yevheniya Yuriychuk and Oleksandr Fesenko, Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University (Ukraine). The article's main goal is to assess the need to examine the inclusivity of the digital electoral process and to assess its competitiveness and equality of opportunity for all citizens and groups across the existing political spectrum in the case of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia taking into consideration their status at the European Union's level (Yuriychuk and Fesenko, 2026).

The following article called *Digital Inclusion in Public Services: Challenges, Barriers and Strategies for Equitable Digital Administration* is signed by Dan Apăteanu from University of Oradea, Romania. The paper's goal is to analyse the phenomenon of digital inclusion in public services, starting from the observation that the accelerated digitalisation of public administrations risks deepening pre-existing social inequalities. Drawing on the framework of the digital divide with its three levels — access, skills and outcomes — it examines the technical, social and institutional barriers that hinder the equitable adoption of digital government services. The situations of the elderly, low-income individuals, rural populations and those with low levels of education are analysed. As a result, the research includes the European and Romanian contexts, highlighting Romania's persistent lag (Apăteanu, 2026).

The next paper, *Borderland education and multicultural perspectives in Central Eastern Europe* is signed by Marius Țepelea and Karla Barth. The study examines borderland education and multicultural perspectives in Central and Eastern Europe, focusing on complex regions such as Transylvania and Vojvodina. These territories function as "contact zones" where schools continuously mediate between preserving minority identity and integrating into the national or European space. The analysis evaluates the educational landscape across Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, and Serbia, highlighting the gap between inclusive theoretical policies and local reality. The research identifies three major challenges: linguistic disparities in resource access, monocultural national curricula that omit minority contributions, and insufficient teacher training in

intercultural competence. It also highlights a structural tension in European Union policies, which oscillate between an integration agenda based on individual mobility and the protection of collective identity preservation rights. The authors propose strengthening teacher training, expanding bilingual programs, cross-border university cooperation, and leveraging creative artistic initiatives to transform these zones into spaces of genuine intercultural coexistence (Marius Țepelea and Barth, 2026).

The paper *Fighting corruption and transparency of political parties finances as prerequisites of the EU's accession: The case of the Republic of Moldova* is proposed by Cristina Matiuța. The study evaluates the regulation and transparency of political party financing in the Republic of Moldova within the context of its accession to the European Union. The author highlights a major transition from an opaque system—historically controlled by oligarchic networks and marked by "state capture"—toward a legal framework aligned with international practices. Key progress includes a drastic capping of private donations, the expansion of the Central Electoral Commission's oversight powers, and rigorous fund auditing. However, a descriptive analysis of data (2016–2024) reveals a massive increase in party dependence on state subsidies, which reached 75% of revenues in 2024. This trend creates a risk of political system cartelization favoring large parliamentary parties like PAS and PSRM. Persistent issues like unreported expenditures, the use of cover entities, and illegal foreign financing (e.g., the pro-Russian Victory bloc) demonstrate that formal rules do not guarantee automatic compliance, meaning consolidation depends on strict institutional enforcement (Matiuța, 2026).

The study *Ethnic and Political Context in Intermunicipal Cooperation. The Case of Intercommunity Development Associations in Romania*, proposed by Cosmin Chiriac, examines how ethnic and political contexts influence the formation and continuity of Intercommunity Development Associations (IDA) in Romania. It is a continuation of previous research efforts directed at inter-municipal cooperation as mean of putting in practice the territorial policies of the EU (Chiriac, 2026; Chiriac and Țoca, 2024; Chiriac and Bucur, 2015). Using quantitative analysis across three complementary datasets, the research analyzes local political structures from the 2008, 2012 and 2016 electoral cycles and ethnic composition of the population. The results reveal widespread participation of territorial-administrative units in IDA (approximately 92%), with cooperation predominantly focused on providing essential public services (89%) rather than selective regional development projects (34%). Methodologically, the study innovates by analyzing whether local political and ethnic contexts are associated with the participation of local administrative units in inter-municipality cooperation, and with the activity of such enterprises. The primary analyses use binomial logistic regression with political and ethnic concentration measures and various other data analyses methods are tested to identify associations. The results show that political concentration is associated with lower odds of participation in inter-municipality cooperation, but the association with ethnic concentration is not statistically significant. Political concentration is also associated with the activity of inter-municipal association, though it is highly imprecise, while no statistically significant association is identified for ethnic concentration. The author maintains a cautious stance, emphasizing that the findings indicate statistical associations rather than direct causality. IDA formation remains shaped by unobserved factors like geographic proximity, administrative capacity, or funding opportunities (Chiriac, 2026).

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I. IDENTITY AND SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Angela SOLCAN, Svetlana BUREA ⇔ *A Multilingual Perspective on Communicative Competence for Developing Sustainable Peace in Society*

Mircea BRIE ⇔ *Identity as a Geopolitical Border in South-East Europe*

Lucia ȘCHIOPU ⇔ *Professional Development for Inclusive Language Teaching in the Republic of Moldova*

Marian CUTOI ⇔ *Identity Construction and Dual Belonging within Romanian Community in Austria*

Sorin ȘIPOȘ, Cosmin PATCA, Ioana TÂRB BLAJEC, Manuela BÂRZA ⇔ *Slovak communities in Bihor and Sălaj counties (19th Century - present). Demography and settlement patterns*

István POLGÁR ⇔ *Refugee and migrant integration and border management in the South East European region*

Pavel VINTILĂ ⇔ *National Identity as an Object of Analysis in Contemporary Political Science: A Theoretical Framework and a Case Study of The Republic of Moldova*

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A MULTILINGUAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE FOR DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE PEACE IN SOCIETY

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Svetlana BUREA[**]

Abstract. *This article aims to reconsider communicative competence from a multilingual perspective and to explore its role in supporting social cohesion and sustainable peace through education. It highlights that communication should be understood not only as a linguistic competence but also as a dynamic, relational, and value-oriented process shaped by multilingual and multicultural interaction. The article introduces the theoretical foundations of multilingual communicative competence by integrating perspectives from multilingual pedagogy, peace education, and dialogic learning. It describes how increasing linguistic diversity, migration, and recent educational reforms, particularly in the Republic of Moldova and across Europe, have shifted the focus from competence-based models toward more inclusive and value-oriented approaches to communication. Special attention is given to multilingualism and translanguaging as pedagogical practices that promote dialogue, empathy, participation, and the co-construction of meaning. The article concludes that traditional models of communicative competence require reconceptualization and proposes an expanded framework that integrates multilingual practices, dialogic interaction, digital context, and value-based communication as key dimensions of education for sustainable peace.*

Keywords*: Multilingualism, translanguaging, communicative competence, peace education, dialogic learning, value-based curriculum.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Modern societies are becoming multilingual, culturally diverse, and socially interconnected. However, despite this high level of connection, we can still observe many worrying phenomena. We see growing social polarization, hate speech, difficulties in dialogue between different groups, cultural and identity-based tensions, in both local and global conflicts. This shows us that the problem is not the absence of communication. The real problem is the quality of communication.

People speak, write, post, comment, and react more than ever before, but communication does not always lead to understanding. Sometimes it creates distance, conflict, fear, or exclusion. For this reason, education has an important responsibility. It should form not only effective communicators, but also people who are able to build relationships, understand others, switch between language codes and cultural

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perspectives, and manage differences in a constructive way. As a result, communicating effectively is no longer limited to using language accurately or mastering grammatical structures. It also requires the ability to listen, negotiate meaning, understand different perspectives, and build relationships across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

These changes are becoming more and more visible in educational policy and practice. Across Europe, and particularly in the Republic of Moldova, migration, linguistic diversity, and the growing need for social cohesion have encouraged educational community to reconsider the aims of language education. While communicative competence remains a central objective, *recent curriculum reforms place greater focus on values such as inclusion, empathy, dialogue, and responsible participation*. Communication is therefore understood not only as a professional or linguistic skill but also as a means of living and learning together in diverse communities.

This shift also changes the way multilingualism is viewed. Rather than treating languages as separate systems, multilingual education encourages learners to use all of their linguistic resources to understand, explain, and negotiate meaning. Practices such as translanguaging illustrate this approach by allowing learners to move flexibly between languages, express ideas with greater confidence, and participate more actively in classroom interaction. In this sense, multilingualism becomes not only a feature of contemporary classrooms but also a resource for creating more inclusive learning environments.

This article revises the concept of *communicative competence* through the lens of multilingualism. Drawing on multilingual pedagogy, peace education, and dialogic learning, digital context it examines how communicative competence can be reconceptualized to reflect the realities of multilingual modern societies. It argues that effective communication involves more than linguistic proficiency; it also requires the capacity to engage in dialogue, appreciate linguistic and cultural diversity, communicate critically and ethically in digital environments, and participate responsibly in building more cohesive and peaceful communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Multilingualism has become a main feature of modern societies because of increased mobility, migration, and global interconnectedness. It is no longer viewed merely as the ability to use more than one language, but as a complex social phenomenon that reflects patterns of identity, participation, and interaction within diverse communities (García, 2009; Cummins, 2000; 2017). From a sociolinguistic perspective, multilingualism represents a dynamic process through which individuals use multiple linguistic and cultural systems, constructing meaning and positioning themselves in relation to others.

At the same time, multilingualism has a strong linguistic dimension, as it involves the development of interconnected language systems that interact cognitively and functionally. Research has shown that languages are not stored or used separately, but rather form an integrated repertoire that speakers mobilize flexibly depending on context (Cummins, 2001; García and Li Wei, 2014). This perspective challenges traditional monolingual assumptions and calls for a reconsideration of how communication is conceptualized in both theory and practice.

Within educational contexts, multilingualism is now widely recognized as a resource rather than a challenge. It opens new possibilities for more inclusive communication by enabling learners to use all the languages they know to express ideas, negotiate meaning, and participate in dialogue (UNESCO, 2024). This perspective is

particularly relevant in the Republic of Moldova, where multilingualism is an integral part of everyday life and education. At the same time, schools operate in a social environment marked by the unresolved Transnistrian conflict, the arrival of refugees following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, competing information narratives, and ongoing debates about language, identity, and belonging. These realities place new expectations on education. Language classrooms are expected not only to develop communicative competence but also to nurture empathy, critical thinking, respect for different perspectives, and the ability to engage in constructive dialogue. Studies on the Moldovan context support this view, showing that multilingual education can strengthen inclusion, intercultural dialogue, social cohesion, and European integration (Solcan and Burea, 2025). Likewise, Dermenji-Gurgurov and Neaga describe multilingualism in Moldova as a bridge for communication and integration, highlighting its role in connecting linguistic communities within a shared social space. As such, multilingualism not only transforms communication at the individual level, but also contributes to broader processes of social cohesion and intercultural understanding, which are essential in contexts marked by diversity and social tension.

The fast development of global landscape, characterized by escalating human crises and information technology advancements, necessitates a re-evaluation of educational goals, particularly concerning language/s education (Leung and Scarino, 2016). This re-evaluation extends to the conceptualization of peace and its integration into educational frameworks, moving beyond normative understandings to embrace dialectical and context-dependent interpretations (Kruger and Evans, 2018). This requires an approach where language education actively grows critical thinking and empowers students to engage with relevant social justice and peacebuilding concepts, especially in socioeconomically challenging environments (Raton, Robin and Bagares, et al., 2024). This expanded perspective on communicative competence, therefore, moves beyond simple linguistic proficiency to encompass an understanding of intercultural norms, etiquette, and the ability to foster harmonious interactions. Such an approach lines up with intercultural learning, a continuous educational process that facilitates active engagement and promotes harmonious coexistence within diverse, pluralistic societies by fostering knowledge and skills for cross-cultural understanding and communication (Lazăr, 2007; Tsatzali, K., Beazidou et al., 2025). This process requires individuals to develop an individual's capacity to navigate cultural differences, discern subtle nuances, and communicate effectively across varied cultural boundaries (Liu, 2025).

Moreover, the learners have an immersive experience being facilitated by an authentic input that in many researches was appreciated as being formative. This transformative potential of multilingual education is also pointed out in the work of Barbăneagră and Cepraga (2024), who describe cultural-linguistic immersion as a process of personal and social development. Their study demonstrates that multilingual learning environments enhance not only communicative competence but also identity development, intercultural understanding, and value formation. Through authentic interaction with participants from different linguistic and ethnic communities, learners developed greater respect and tolerance for diversity, learned to appreciate differences, overcame prejudices, and gained "a clearer perspective on their own values and traditions." The authors therefore show that multilingual education extends beyond language acquisition to become a means of strengthening social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and active citizenship. This holistic view underscores the importance of integrating intercultural communicative competence/diversity into language education, as it extends beyond conventional

communicative competence to embrace the rich tapestry of experiences, lifeworlds, and ethical values exchanged in communication (Burdujan, 2010; Catarci, et al., 2015).

Specifically, Intercultural Communicative Competence equips learners with the capacity to interpret and express cultural understandings, facilitate problem-solving, and critically reflect on decisions and their ramifications with heightened empathy, all of which are fundamental to developing robust citizenship skills that promote peaceful shared living (Elias, et al., 2020; Curtis and Oxford, 2021). This requires an understanding of how language change social environments and the ability to negotiate meaning across diverse cultural contexts, helping individuals to engage reflectively with both self and others (Kramsch, 2014).

However, these competences cannot be developed independently of the values that guide human interaction. Communicating across cultural and linguistic differences requires more than linguistic knowledge and communicative skills; it also depends on values that are important and supporting for modern society development. These values are not acquired through direct instruction alone but are developed through dialogue, interaction, and shared experience. At the same time, authentic interaction is essential for the development of sociolinguistic competence, as learners gradually acquire the ability to interpret social norms, adapt language to different communicative contexts, and respond appropriately to diverse interlocutors. As argued by Burea (2019), sociolinguistic competence develops most effectively through engagement with authentic language and meaningful communication, where learners negotiate meaning within real social and cultural contexts. Consequently, a dialogic approach to communication becomes essential, as meaningful learning occurs when individuals engage with one another, exchange ideas, reflect on different perspectives, and negotiate meaning. This relational understanding of communication is also emphasized by Pânișoară (2004), who argues that individuals are shaped by the totality of their interactions, with each encounter contributing to the way they understand themselves and the world. Such a perspective is particularly relevant to multilingual and peace-oriented education, where communication is not merely a linguistic act but a formative process through which learners develop identity, values, empathy, sociolinguistic awareness, and the capacity to understand and engage constructively with others. As Hitlin (2003) mentions, values constitute the core of personal identity, providing the internal framework through which individuals interpret experiences, make decisions, and guide their behaviour. Consequently, fostering values in education becomes essential for developing learners who are capable of engaging constructively with diversity, navigating social challenges, and contributing to peaceful and democratic communities.

3. MULTILINGUALISM AND TRANSLANGUAGING AS TRANSFORMATIVE FACTORS

Multilingualism is a social, cognitive, cultural, and pedagogical reality. From a social point of view, it reflects the way people use languages in diverse societies in a constructive way. From a cognitive point of view, multilingualism develops flexibility, problem-solving, and the ability to compare meanings, it changes the way we understand communication. Meaning is not only transmitted from one person to another. It is built together through interaction, negotiation, and understanding. At the same time, multilingualism deepens cultural awareness by helping learners recognize that every language reflects particular values, traditions, and ways of interpreting the world.

A key pedagogical mechanism that operationalises this perspective is translanguaging. Rather than treating languages as separate systems, translanguaging

allows learners to use all their linguistic resources in an integrated and purposeful way (García and Li Wei, 2014). In classroom interaction, this means that students can switch, combine, and adapt languages in order to clarify meaning, express complex ideas, and engage more fully in dialogue. Such practices do not simply facilitate comprehension; they actively reshape communication by making it more accessible, participatory, and authentic. As it was noted, translanguaging creates spaces where learners feel recognised and valued, which increases their willingness to participate and reduces linguistic anxiety.

Moreover, translanguaging plays a central role in the negotiation of meaning. In multilingual classrooms, understanding is rarely immediate or fixed. Instead, it is co-constructed through dialogue, where learners compare perspectives, clarify intentions, and adjust their language use in response to others. This process reflects what Cummins describes as the interdependence of languages, where knowledge and skills transfer across linguistic boundaries, supporting deeper cognitive and communicative engagement (Cummins, 2000). Through such interaction, learners develop not only linguistic competence, but also the ability to navigate complexity, manage ambiguity, and engage constructively with difference.

At the same time, multilingual and translanguaging practices contribute significantly to inclusion. By legitimising the use of learners' home languages and linguistic identities, these approaches challenge traditional hierarchies that privilege one dominant language over others. In doing so, they create more equitable learning environments where all students have access to participation and expression. As research on multilingual education in Moldova demonstrates, valuing linguistic diversity strengthens students' sense of belonging and promotes social cohesion, particularly in contexts marked by historical and cultural diversity. Inclusion, in this sense, is not only about access, but about recognition and active participation in communication.

Ultimately, multilingual practices and translanguaging reshape communicative competence by shifting its focus from individual linguistic performance to collaborative, dialogic, and value-based interaction. Communication becomes a space where meanings are negotiated, identities are expressed, and relationships are built across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This transformation is essential for education systems that aim to prepare learners not only for communication in diverse societies, but also for contributing to sustainable peace through dialogue, understanding, and inclusive participation.

This broader understanding is increasingly reflected in educational policy. In the Republic of Moldova, multilingual education has become an important component of recent educational reforms. The regulatory framework approved by the Ministry of Education and Research in September 2025 formally recognises multilingual education in allophone schools and promotes the development of communicative competence in Romanian, learners' home languages, and international languages. Beyond language learning, the framework highlights multilingual education as a means of strengthening intercultural dialogue, inclusion, democratic participation, and social cohesion. In this way, educational policy reflects the broader shift towards a conception of communicative competence that responds to the realities of multilingual societies and the demands of contemporary education.

4. CASE STUDY- CURRICULUM CHANGES TOWARDS A COMPETENCE AND VALUE CURRICULUM ORIENTED

The National Curriculum of the Republic of Moldova has undergone significant transformation over the past decade. The curriculum revised in 2019 consolidated the

competence-based approach, placing the development of key competences, learner-centred teaching, authentic learning, and the practical application of knowledge at the core of the educational process. This framework continues to guide curriculum implementation across all levels of general education and remains the foundation of national educational policy.

Recent educational initiatives, however, indicate a new stage in curriculum development. Rather than replacing the competence-based model, current reforms seek to complement it by integrating values more explicitly into curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and school culture. This direction became particularly evident in 2025, when the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova, in collaboration with PractNet and the Centre for Ethics at the University of Tartu, launched the initiative *Integrating Value-Based Education into the National Curriculum*. The initiative does not introduce a new curriculum; instead, it strengthens the existing competence-based framework by recognising that competences achieve their educational purpose when guided by ethical values and responsible action.

This development reflects broader international trends in curriculum theory. According to the **OECD Learning Compass 2030**, education should prepare learners not only with knowledge and competences but also with learner agency, values, attitudes, and the capacity to make responsible decisions that contribute to individual and collective well-being (OECD, 2019). The focus therefore shifts from asking *What should learners know and be able to do?* to *Who should learners become?*

Within this perspective, values are understood not as fixed moral principles to be transmitted but as orientations that develop through experience, reflection, participation, and dialogue. Scholars from the **Centre for Ethics at the University of Tartu** (Sutrop et al., 2010; Schihalejev, 2012) argue that value education is most effective when learners engage with authentic ethical dilemmas, consider different perspectives, justify their decisions, and reflect on the consequences of their choices. Dialogue is therefore not simply a teaching strategy but the process through which values are examined, negotiated, and gradually internalised.

This approach is further supported by **Inglehart and Welzel's** (2023) theory of cultural change, which demonstrates that values evolve alongside social, economic, and political development. Their **World Values Survey** shows that national value orientations are closely connected to historical experience, cultural traditions, and contemporary social realities. As societies become more diverse and democratic, education is expected to cultivate tolerance, respect for diversity, civic participation, and social responsibility. At the same time, while some values may be interpreted differently across cultural contexts, fundamental ethical principles such as respect for human dignity, honesty, justice, and the rejection of violence provide the normative foundation of democratic societies.

Consequently, the role of schools also changes. Values are not acquired through isolated lessons or moral instruction but through everyday participation in school life, relationships with others, and opportunities to discuss authentic situations. Schools therefore become communities where learners develop judgement, negotiate differences, and learn to act responsibly within society. Value education extends beyond curriculum content to include classroom communication, school culture, and cooperation between teachers, families, and the wider community.

This understanding has particular significance for language education. Because communication is inherently dialogic, language classrooms provide authentic opportunities to explore different perspectives, discuss ethical dilemmas, negotiate meaning, and reflect on cultural experiences. Literary texts, collaborative learning, intercultural encounters, and

multilingual interaction enable learners to connect language with values and social responsibility. Communicative competence therefore extends beyond linguistic proficiency to include ethical judgement, intercultural understanding, and the ability to participate respectfully in dialogue across linguistic and cultural differences. For multilingual societies such as the Republic of Moldova, this evolution is especially important, as communication becomes the means through which respect, empathy, democratic participation, and social cohesion are cultivated in everyday educational practice.

Moreover, values are increasingly recognized as a central component of contemporary education, extending beyond the transmission of knowledge to shape learners' identities, relationships, and civic engagement. Rather than representing isolated moral principles, values function as broad guiding orientations that influence how individuals interpret experiences, interact with others, make decisions, and respond to social challenges (Schwartz, 1992; Sagiv and Schwartz, 2022). Because values underpin attitudes, behaviours, and participation in society, they become essential for preparing learners to communicate responsibly and contribute to peaceful, democratic communities. Recent research further suggests that values are not fixed traits but develop throughout life through education, social interaction, and lived experience, highlighting the important role of schools in creating environments where respect, empathy, responsibility, solidarity, and openness can be actively cultivated (Hitlin, 2003).

In the Republic of Moldova, this perspective has gained growing relevance as educational reforms respond to a fast-changing social landscape marked by linguistic diversity, migration, digital transformation, and the country's European integration agenda. While competence-based education continues to provide the structural foundation of the curriculum, recent curriculum discussions increasingly emphasize the integration of value-based education, recognizing that effective communication also requires values. Consequently, schools are expected not only to develop communicative with intercultural approach but also to foster the values that enable learners to negotiate differences constructively, appreciate diversity, and contribute to social cohesion and sustainable peace.

5. RESHAPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE

The concept of communicative competence has evolved considerably over the past five decades, reflecting changing understandings of language, communication, and the purposes of education. While early approaches to foreign language teaching focused primarily on grammatical knowledge, later theories progressively expanded communication to include social, cultural, intercultural, and, more recently, ethical and value-based dimensions.

The starting point of this development is Chomsky's (1965) distinction between *competence* and *performance*, where competence refers to the speaker's knowledge of the grammatical system of a language. Although highly influential, this perspective viewed language mainly as an abstract cognitive system and paid limited attention to the social contexts in which communication happen. Responding to these limitations, Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of **communicative competence**, arguing that successful communication requires not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately according to the communicative situation, cultural norms, and social relationships.

Building on Hymes' work, Canale and Swain (1980), later refined by Canale (1983), proposed a model comprising grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences. Their framework transformed language education by shifting attention from the mastery of linguistic structures to purposeful communication in authentic contexts. Communication was understood not merely as the transmission of information but as meaningful interaction through which speakers interpret, construct, and exchange meaning.

This pedagogical shift is also reflected in Moldovan research. Solcan (2003) observed that "the mere presentation of knowledge in foreign language teaching currently has a much-reduced role," arguing that communicative competence develops most effectively when learners engage in inquiry, discussion, and authentic problem situations. Her problem-based approach anticipates many contemporary dialogic pedagogies, where communication becomes a process of questioning, negotiating meaning, and collaboratively constructing knowledge rather than simply reproducing linguistic forms.

As societies became increasingly multilingual and culturally interconnected, communicative competence acquired an intercultural dimension. Byram (1997) argued that language learning also requires the ability to understand and interpret different cultural perspectives, mediate between cultures, and engage in dialogue free from prejudice and stereotypes. This perspective considerably broadened the aims of language education by linking communication with intercultural understanding, democratic citizenship, and responsible participation in society.

Communication as a social process was further developed by Habermas (1984), whose theory of communicative action views dialogue as the means through which individuals negotiate meanings, reach mutual understanding, and build consensus. This relational understanding of communication is also mentioned by Solcan (2006), who argues that linguistic and paralinguistic competences are acquired within relational contexts, where communication is shaped by interaction, cooperation, and shared experience. Communicative competence therefore develops through relationships rather than in isolation. Communication is therefore valued not simply for exchanging information but for creating shared understanding, strengthening democratic participation, and supporting social cooperation.

These theoretical developments have deeply influenced contemporary language education. The **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages** (Council of Europe, 2020) extends communicative competence through plurilingualism, mediation, and collaborative meaning-making, recognising learners as social agents who draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to participate effectively in diverse communicative situations. Likewise, multilingual pedagogies and translanguaging approaches demonstrate that communication is dynamic, flexible, and co-constructed rather than limited to a single language (García and Li Wei, 2014).

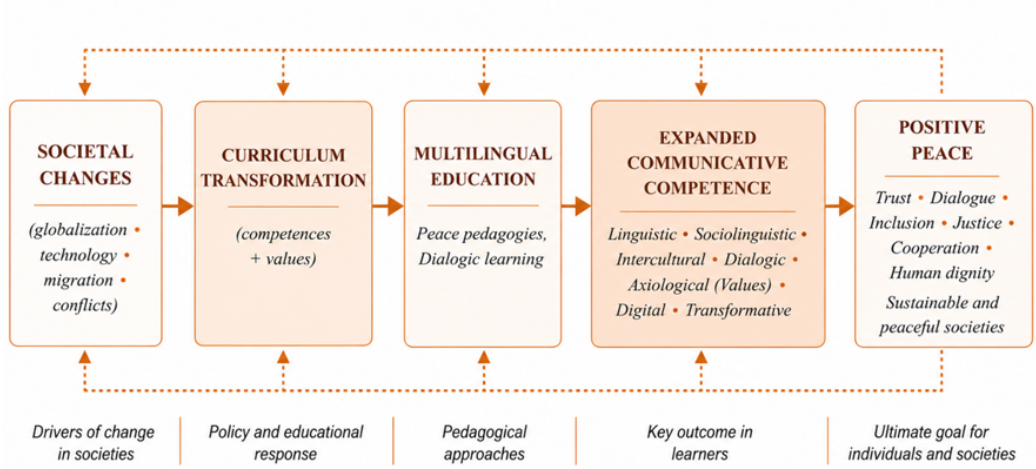
Within the Moldovan pedagogical tradition, these ideas have been further enriched through a strong emphasis on the cultural and axiological dimensions of communication. Nicolae Silistraru views language as the essential link connecting generations and communication as a process through which culture, identity, and human experience are transmitted. Long before intercultural education and peace education became prominent educational concepts, he highlighted the importance of preparing young people to understand cultural diversity, respect otherness, and participate actively in community life. Communication, therefore, extends beyond the exchange of information to become a means of forming personality and ensuring cultural continuity.

A similar humanistic perspective is developed by Tatiana Callo, who regards communication as one of the fundamental conditions of personal development. For Callo, communicative competence cannot be separated from the axiological dimension of education because communication involves building relationships with oneself, with others, and with the world of values. Consequently, responsibility, empathy, respect, cooperation, and moral judgement become integral components of communicative competence rather than desirable personal qualities developed independently of language education.

This multidimensional understanding is also reflected in the work of Aliona Afanas, who, in accordance with the **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages**, emphasizes that communicative competence integrates linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and intercultural dimensions. Effective communication therefore depends not only on language knowledge but also on the ability to select appropriate linguistic resources according to the communicative situation, interlocutor, intention, and broader social context.

Taken together, these international and national perspectives suggest that communicative competence has experienced a gradual but significant transformation. What began as the ability to use language appropriately has progressively expanded to include intercultural understanding, dialogue, mediation, multilingual communication, ethical responsibility, and value-based interaction. Contemporary societies characterised by cultural diversity, mobility, digital context, and increasing social complexity require learners not only to communicate effectively but also to listen actively, negotiate differences, resolve conflicts constructively, and communicate responsibly.

Figure 1. From societal value change to communicative competence for Positive Peace



Source: Author's elaboration based on the conceptual dimensions of the Inglehart–Welzel World Cultural Map – World Values Survey 7 (2023), World Values Survey.

Note. The figure was developed by the authors based on the value-transition logic of the Inglehart–Welzel World Cultural Map – World Values Survey 7 (2023), which distinguishes between Traditional/Secular-rational values and Survival/Self-expression values. The model adapts this logic to education by showing how societal changes

generate curriculum transformation, multilingual and peace-oriented pedagogies, expanded communicative competence, and Positive Peace.

Building on the mentioned theoretical perspectives, we propose an expanded framework of communicative competence that responds to the realities of multilingual societies and the growing emphasis on values in education. The framework preserves the linguistic foundations established by earlier models while integrating dialogic, intercultural, multilingual, digital context and axiological dimensions. These components function as an interconnected whole: *linguistic competence* provides the means of expression; *dialogic competence* develops active listening, mediation, and negotiation; *intercultural competence* enables understanding across cultures; *multilingual competence* encourages flexible use of learners' linguistic repertoires; *digital competence* that deals with communicating critically and ethically in digital environments and the *axiological dimension* ensures that communication is guided by respect, empathy, responsibility, openness, and solidarity. Together, these dimensions redefine communicative competence as a foundation not only for successful interaction but also for democratic participation, social cohesion, and sustainable peace.

6. POSITIVE PEACE MATRIX THROUGH MULTILINGUALISM AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Societal changes obviously point out new educational priorities. In contexts marked by conflict, migration, digital disruption, inequality, and cultural diversity, education can no longer be limited to knowledge transmission or competence development alone. UNESCO (2015) argues that education must be rethought as a global common good, grounded in human dignity, social justice, cultural diversity, solidarity, and shared responsibility. Later, UNESCO (2021) extends this idea through the call for a new social contract for education, one that rebuilds relationships between people, communities, technology, and the planet, and places cooperation and solidarity at the centre of learning.

This perspective helps explain why curriculum improvement becomes necessary in Moldova. A curriculum based on competences remains important, but contemporary education must also develop values, agency, responsibility, and the capacity to live together. In this sense, value-based education, multilingual education, and peace pedagogies are not separate additions to the curriculum. They are transformative directions that respond to the needs of learners living in complex and vulnerable societies.

The Positive Peace framework offers a useful lens for understanding this transformation. The Institute for Economics and Peace defines Positive Peace as the attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies. Its pillars include acceptance of the rights of others, good relations with neighbors, free flow of information, high levels of human capital, equitable distribution of resources, low levels of corruption, a sound business environment, and well-functioning government. Although this framework is usually applied at the societal level, its educational relevance is clear: schools can cultivate the communicative attitudes and practices that support these conditions.

Multilingualism and peace pedagogies deepen the educational interpretation of Positive Peace. Multilingual education supports recognition, inclusion, intercultural dialogue, and participation across linguistic communities. Peace pedagogies, particularly those grounded in vulnerability and critical dialogue, invite learners to examine their own

positions, listen to others, question structural and cultural violence, and act with hope rather than despair (Cremin and Kester, 2020). In this way, Positive Peace becomes not only a social condition but also an educational process developed through dialogue, reflection, and responsible interaction.

Table 1. Adapted version from: Positive Peace Matrix (by Cremin & Bevington, 2017)

Positive Peace Dimension	**Inner Peace and Wellbeing**	**Outer Peace and Relationships**	**Community and Global Peace**	**Ecological Peace**
Peace-building	Developing self-expression, self-awareness, and confidence through the learner's full linguistic repertoire. Recognizing the emotional value of the mother tongue and other languages.	Building dialogic competence through active listening, respectful questioning, clarification, and perspective-taking across languages and cultures.	Developing intercultural communicative competence for participation in multilingual communities, democratic dialogue, and global citizenship.	Exploring how different languages and cultures express care for nature, responsibility, and human connection with the planet.
Peace-making	Using language to name emotions, explain needs, and restore self-confidence after misunderstanding or exclusion.	Mediating conflicts through reformulation, translation, translanguaging, negotiation of meaning, and recognition of different communication styles.	Addressing tensions between groups by creating inclusive multilingual spaces for dialogue, shared problem-solving, and mutual recognition.	Using multilingual dialogue to compare cultural views of nature and restore more responsible relationships with the environment.
Peace-keeping	Protecting learners' linguistic identities and preventing shame, silence, or exclusion connected to language background.	Maintaining respectful interaction by preventing hate speech, stereotypes, linguistic discrimination, and harmful digital communication.	Protecting linguistic rights, encouraging participation across language groups, and strengthening social cohesion through multilingual education.	Preserving ecological responsibility through multilingual awareness, local knowledge, and global environmental communication.

The Table 1. displays the complexity of modern communicative competence and how it has evolved. The citizen of today needs more than linguistic accuracy and functional fluency, as we have already mentioned. An individual needs the ability to listen actively, mediate between perspectives, negotiate meaning across languages and cultures, recognise misinformation, respond ethically to disagreement, and participate constructively in democratic life. Thus, communicative competence becomes a peacebuilding competence: a multilingual, intercultural, dialogic, and value-based capacity that supports social cohesion and contributes to Positive Peace.

7. CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that communicative competence can no longer be understood solely as the ability to use language accurately

and appropriately in different communicative situations. Contemporary social realities—including multilingualism, migration, cultural diversity, fast technological development, digital communication, misinformation, and growing societal polarization—require a broader understanding of communication that integrates linguistic, intercultural, dialogic, ethical, and digital dimensions. The review of international and Moldovan scholarship shows a gradual evolution from classical models of communicative competence towards approaches that emphasize multilingual interaction, mediation, dialogue, value formation, and responsible participation in society.

The article also highlights that recent curriculum developments in the Republic of Moldova reflect this international shift by strengthening the existing competence-based curriculum through the integration of value-based education, multilingual pedagogies, and dialogic learning. These aspects recognise that communication is not only a means of exchanging information but also a process through which learners construct identities, negotiate meanings, build relationships, and contribute to democratic and inclusive communities.

Building on these theoretical and practical educational perspectives, the article proposes an expanded framework of communicative competence that integrates linguistic, multilingual, intercultural, dialogic, digital context and axiological dimensions. In this context, communicative competence evolves from an educational outcome into a transformative competence for peacebuilding, enabling learners to use verbal, nonverbal and digital communication not only to exchange information across differences, but also to build trust, resist manipulation, strengthen democratic participation, and sustain peaceful coexistence in multilingual societies.

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IDENTITY AS A GEOPOLITICAL BORDER IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

Mircea BRIE*

Abstract. *Collective identity frequently serves as a foundational pillar in state-building and institutional consolidation. We consider forms of ethnic, religious, linguistic, or even cultural identity. The state and its borders are not placed at the center of our analysis. The purpose of this research is to analyze the identity cleavages that lead to geopolitical borders within the societies of South-East Europe. Ours hypotheses are: 1. the development of societal divisions in these states leads to geopolitical fragmentation and the construction of geopolitical borders within the society; 2. identity cleavages lead to geopolitical borders and vice versa, geopolitical cleavages lead to identity borders. Methodologically, this study relies on a qualitative, analytical, and comparative framework. The conceptual and theoretical paradigms are empirically anchored through targeted case studies, cross-referenced with public perception metrics and descriptive quantitative data. We propose the development of case studies on three countries in South-East Europe: 1. The Republic of Moldova; 2. North Macedonia; 3. Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Dynamics of Republika Srpska.*

Keywords*: Western Balkans, Republic of Moldova, border, identity, geopolitics, public perceptions.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Traditionally, geopolitical and international relations studies have focused on the state and its linear, physical, and administrative borders as the primary pillars of spatial and political analysis. However, the complex realities of South-East Europe—particularly in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries—demonstrate that the deepest cleavages are not always those drawn on official maps, but those that make up and traverse the societal architecture. This paper proposes a paradigm shift, moving the analytical focus from state borders to identity borders, which are conceptualized as internal geopolitical boundaries within the studied societies.

The concept of identity—examined through its multiple facets: civic, ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, or alphabet-based—ceases to be a mere element of cultural heritage and becomes an instrument of political and strategic demarcation. In this geographical area, the nation-building process has followed sinuous trajectories, generating a fluid dynamic between borders and identity. This relationship is bidirectional: on one hand, a historical political or administrative border can crystallize a distinct identity over time; on the other hand, an internally fragmented identity tends to project new geopolitical borders into the public and electoral spheres.

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This dynamic often manifests through the tension between self-identification (how a community assumes its own belonging) and hetero-identification (attributes imposed by others or external actors). In South-East Europe, elements such as language and religion do not merely unite human groups; they function as clear geopolitical lines of demarcation. For instance, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet or affiliation with a specific Orthodox church structure (oscillating between competing centers of ecclesiastical authority, such as Bucharest and Moscow in the case of Orthodox churches in the Republic of Moldova) takes on major geopolitical significance, dividing communities based on regional vectors of influence. Essentially, the collapse of communism, in the absence of rapid and secure European integration, left an ideological vacuum quickly filled by radical nationalisms and armed conflicts. While these conflicts have apparently been frozen through international agreements, they tend to resurface amidst recent global crises, such as the Balkan wars of the 1990s and 2000s or the war in Ukraine, in the form of "Identity Revolutions" or secessionist movements heavily amplified by external logistical and ideological support.

2. METHODOLOGY

The ***purpose*** of this research is to analyze the identity cleavages that lead to geopolitical borders within the societies of South-East Europe.

Starting from the premise that the classical state dimension does not constitute the exclusive core of regional political dynamics, this investigation is grounded in the following central ***hypotheses***:

- *Hypothesis 1 (H1):* The development and deepening of societal divisions within South-East European states lead directly to geopolitical fragmentation and the construction of invisible geopolitical borders within the same society.
- *Hypothesis 2 (H2):* There is a relationship of circular and reciprocal causality in the region; identity cleavages lead to and manifest as geopolitical borders, and conversely, geopolitical cleavages and pressures generate or reinforce identity borders within communities.

To guide the analytical framework and test the validity of the hypotheses, this research aims to answer a fundamental set of ***research questions***.

- Q1: How does identity fragmentation within a society translate into geopolitical fragmentation at the state and regional levels?
- Q2: To what extent can identity construction at the micro-level (such as a family or a small village) serve as a catalyst for the emergence of a geopolitical border?
- Q3: How and under what conditions does identity volatility succeed in altering geopolitical choices over the medium and long term?
- Q4: To what extent do external factors (e.g., ideological and logistical support provided by third-party actors) succeed in instrumentalizing local ethno-linguistic cleavages to reverse a state's European integration path?

To validate the formulated hypotheses, this research adopts a ***mixed-methods approach***, combining the qualitative analysis of official documents with the quantitative analysis of statistical data and public perceptions. The analytical dimension is structured across three complementary tiers:

1. *Analysis of the Regulatory Framework and Official Reports:* Population censuses, language laws, bilateral agreements, and security strategies will be examined to capture how states codify or attempt to manage identity diversity.
2. *Analysis of Survey Data (Public Perceptions):* Particular attention will be paid to data from large-scale sociological research (e.g., Balkan Barometer, national polls,

referendum outcomes). These allow for the measurement of trust levels, perceived nationalism, barriers to regional cooperation, and the underlying rationales behind cast ballots.

3. *Comparative Case Study Approach:* The case study method will be applied to three state entities in the region, each illustrating a specific manifestation of identity borders functioning as geopolitical barriers.

To carry out this research, we propose the development of case studies on three countries in South-East Europe: 1. The Republic of Moldova; 2. North Macedonia; 3. Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Dynamics of Republika Srpska.

Through this tridimensional structure, the methodological chapter establishes a framework capable of demonstrating that, in South-East Europe, European integration and regional stability depend directly on the capacity to dissolve or reconcile these invisible geopolitical borders within societies.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW. THE INTERSECTION OF GEOPOLITICS AND IDENTITY BORDERS

The central pillar of this research involves demonstrating the interdependence between identity cleavages and geopolitical borders. We aim to analyze the mechanisms through which identity borders are geopolitically determined and, conversely, how geopolitical choices and strategies create or deepen existing identity cleavages within society.

On one hand, ***geopolitics creates identity borders*** when major international actors or domestic political elites exploit latent cultural differences to legitimize their spheres of influence or electoral strategies. In this manner, a simple dialectal nuance or confessional variance is ideologized and transformed into a rigid barrier. Citizens are driven to define themselves not just in relation to their neighbors, but in alignment with major geopolitical axes (the West/European Union/NATO axis versus the East/Russian Federation/Eurasian Union axis). External pressures and logistical or ideological assistance provided from the outside convert cultural distinctiveness into an instrument of societal security or insecurity.

On the other hand, ***identity borders determine geopolitics***. The internal fragmentation of a society translates directly into geopolitical volatility and instability. A state's strategic path no longer represents a national consensus; instead, it becomes reversible and entirely dependent on the demographic or electoral balance between various ethno-linguistic communities. Identities assumed at the level of the individual, family, or small village serve as catalysts for major foreign policy decisions. Identity communities tend to perceive, choose, and act in diametrically opposed ways geopolitically, even when sharing the exact same geographical territory, benefiting from identical socio-economic conditions, and being subject to the same legal framework. This behavioral asymmetry proves that identity attachment and cultural security often override economic rationality or civic cohesion.

In traditional studies of geopolitics and international relations, spatial analysis has focused on the linear and administrative dimension of state borders as the primary pillars of sovereignty. However, the realities of South-East Europe demonstrate that the deepest cleavages do not follow official maps, but rather traverse the internal societal architecture. This necessitates an analytical paradigm shift: moving the focus from state borders to ***identity borders***, conceptualized as internal geopolitical boundaries that fragment societies.

The nation-building process in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe has followed sinuous trajectories, generating a fluid and bidirectional dynamic between territory and identity.

Examined through its multiple facets, identity ceases to be a mere element of cultural heritage and becomes an active instrument of political and strategic demarcation. The concept of national identity entails two historical elements of specificity: identity rooted in ethnic belonging and identity born out of civic or citizen affiliation (Brie, 2016). In Western countries, identity was constructed around the civic dimension, where the territory of citizenship became the "national territory." Conversely, Eastern Europe followed a model in which ethnicity and cultural affiliation played the foundational role in identity construction (Flóra, 2011).

A defining characteristic of state architectures in the South-East European space is a chronic deficit or a fragmented state of legitimation. Through the conflation of statehood with a single ethno-national identity, alternative communities have been marginalized from the legitimation process, a fact that has functioned as a catalyst for inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. This mechanism has led to the sacralization of state territory, considered the exclusive property of a single nation (Flóra, 2011), while simultaneously delegitimizing the contributions of other communities (Brie and Blaga, 2015). In highly diverse regions, achieving solidarity based on civic identity has been elusive, with competition and mutual distrust marking the first post-communist decades—as evidenced by the realities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) or the disputes between Serbia and Kosovo (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2023; Polgar and Brie, 2024; Goga and Brie, 2026).

The 19th century was termed the "century of nationalities," characterized by a strong affirmation of national identity, national ideologies, and national movements aimed at realizing national ideals. The Napoleonic Wars contributed significantly to this effervescence of the national spirit. Furthermore, the national sentiment was frequently replenished in this process through religious emancipation.

In the Balkans, for example, peoples developed their national spirit through the shared struggle of Orthodox Christian populations against external Ottoman (Islamic) or Austro-Hungarian (Catholic-Protestant) oppression. Such associations were also facilitated by the geopolitical context of expanding Russian influence in this space. The pan-Orthodox discourse thus stimulated both the common struggle and the national ideals of these peoples. This rhetoric was extremely favorable to the process precisely because of a specific feature of Orthodoxy: the national church. The nationalistic rhetoric employed even by the Orthodox religious leaders of these Balkan peoples transformed national Orthodox churches into seeds of national emancipation and unification (Brie, 2018).

Historically, Albanian Muslim communities maintained strong structural links with the Ottoman Empire. Conversely, during the nineteenth century, when Orthodox Slavic peoples sought emancipation and separation from Ottoman rule, they found strategic support in their co-religionist "older brothers"—the Russians. These pan-Orthodox ties effectively transferred to the geopolitical arena following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In contexts where Western support is absent, Serbs have traditionally sought geopolitical refuge in the East. This dynamic fosters a pervasive structural perception of a regional geopolitical rivalry, wherein Albanians are supported by the United States and Serbs by the Russian Federation.

A similar underlying logic appears to be reflected in North Macedonia, where the Muslim Albanian community has historically anchored its emancipation efforts in a privileged relationship with the West, contrasting with the position of the majority Macedonian Orthodox community—at least during the initial stages of this process. Within the analytical framework of this study, the Albanian community played a decisive role in driving North Macedonia's pro-Western orientation and fostering a constructive

partnership with the ethno-national majority. Crucially, this dynamic was not unidirectional; the majority Macedonian community itself functioned as a primary vector for European integration, recognizing that the perspective of EU accession remains the most viable mechanism to normalize the inter-ethnic climate and secure the stability of the young Macedonian state (Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2021).

3.1. Identity Expressions of Geopolitical Borders

Language, alphabet, and religion acquire expressions of geopolitical identity and can become instruments in the construction of geopolitical borders:

- ***Language as a geopolitical border***. Linguistic distinctiveness has been systematically instrumentalized as a political weapon in the nation-building process (Brie, 2023). In Montenegro, public policies imposed the "Montenegrin language" as official through the 2007 constitution, replacing Serbian and generating identity-based friction (Morrison, 2018). Similarly, Bulgaria refuses to recognize the existence of an independent Macedonian language, viewing it as a Bulgarian dialect and demanding that the EU avoid using the term (Phillips, 2022; Marusic, 2017). In the Republic of Moldova, the promotion of "Moldovanism" as an identity distinct from Romanian served similar geopolitical objectives.
- ***The alphabet as a geopolitical border***. The choice of a writing system constitutes an eminently political act (Alexe and Ciapai, 2021). The use of the Cyrillic alphabet by Serbs, in opposition to the Latin alphabet used by Croats or Albanians, functions as a major cleavage (Brie, 2024). In September 2021, the parliaments of Serbia and Republika Srpska adopted mandatory laws for the use of Cyrillic in public institutions and private companies (offering tax reductions), thereby stimulating Balkan nationalism (Serbia, 2021; Cyrillic Alphabet Mandatory, 2021). In the Republic of Moldova, the imposition of the Cyrillic alphabet was a weapon of the Soviet regime, and Cyrillic script for the "Moldovan" language is still maintained today in the separatist Transnistrian region.
- ***Religion as a geopolitical border.*** The denominational mosaic in the Balkans separates Catholics (Slovenes, Croats), Orthodox Christians (Serbs, Montenegrins, Macedonians), and Muslims (Albanians, Bosniaks), with religion serving as the axis along which national boundaries have been drawn. This fragmentation also affects the unity of Orthodoxy, as demonstrated by the contestation of the Serbian Church's hierarchy in Montenegro (Brie 2021). In the Republic of Moldova, religious affiliation is deeply intertwined with politics: Orthodoxy functions as a symbolic public good used by political parties to anchor geopolitical projects (Putină, 2011; Putină, 2025; Sprînceană, 2013), generating antagonistic discourses regarding the state's orientation (Baar and Jakubek, 2017). Two metropolises coexist: 1. The Metropolis of Chișinău and All Moldova (also called the "Moldovan Orthodox Church"), affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate; 2. The Metropolis of Bessarabia and the Exarchate of the Plains, an autonomous church that is part of the Romanian Patriarchate. The two churches have frequently contested each other, maintaining tense relations that have been passed down to their parishioners. Moreover, this institutional division has reflected the geopolitical trends of Moscow and Bucharest. In the Republic of Moldova, the two churches carried the banners of a conflict that the two patriarchates could not afford to display openly themselves (Brie, 2021).

3.2. Geopolitical Polarization Determined by Identity Borders in the Three States

a. The Republic of Moldova: The Gagauz and Transnistrian Enclaves

The Republic of Moldova faces deep geopolitical polarization, which is driven by identity fragmentation rather than socio-economic or educational criteria. Citizens who embrace a Romanian identity support the European path, whereas the Russian-speaking, Gagauz, and Bulgarian minorities display a stable pro-Russian orientation (Brie, 2023). The Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) of Gagauzia represents a complex borderland community; although they are a population of Turkic origin, the Gagauz are Orthodox Christians and were heavily Russified during the Soviet period, becoming the most pro-Russian region of the state (Vintilă, 2025; Pârlog, 2012). The influence of the Russian Federation in ATU Gagauzia is structural, operating through economic, media, and memory policy mechanisms (Vintilă, 2025; Nantoi et al., 2016). Historical surveys conducted by the Institute for Public Policy (2015, 2021) highlighted that the option for the European Union in the southern part of the country was extremely limited, with over 80% of the population preferring the Eurasian Union (Nantoi et al., 2016). This identity-based resistance was empirically confirmed during the referendum on October 20, 2024, aimed at introducing the pro-European orientation into the constitution: at the national level, the "YES" option obtained 50.38% (CEC RM, 2026), but in ATU Gagauzia, 94.84% of voters voted "NO."

The situation is similar in the Transnistrian region, where 68.98% opposed the constitutional amendment.

b. Bosnia and Herzegovina: Consociational Paralysis and Republika Srpska

The institutional architecture established by the Dayton Agreement (1995) succeeded in stopping armed violence, but it formalized political representation exclusively on ethnic grounds (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats), turning identity into a structural barrier (Džankić, 2015; Bose, 2002). BiH functions as an incomplete consociational system (Keil, 2013), where the decision-making process is paralyzed by the "ethnic veto" and the "vital national interest" mechanism, transforming any reform necessary for European integration into a zero-sum game.

Republika Srpska acts as a central actor in contesting the unitary state, promoting an autonomist and secessionist agenda under the leadership of Milorad Dodik (Bieber, 2020). The political elites in RS reinterpret Dayton as an instrument of entity sovereignty and present federal structures as an external imposition (Keil, 2016). The geopolitical orientation of RS is closely linked to its mother-state, Serbia, and the Russian Federation, a fact that dilutes loyalty toward the Bosnian state (Džankić, 2015).

IRI surveys (2025) and those of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC, 2024) factually confirm this structural cleavage. Public perception regarding nationalism as a major problem increased by 11% in 2025, but the asymmetry is blatant: 44% of respondents in the Federation of BiH consider it a huge problem, compared to only 20% in RS (IRI, 2025). Furthermore, external preferences are completely polarized: while Bosniaks and Croats express trust in the EU and identify Serbia and Russia as the identitarian security threats, Serbs in Republika Srpska point to the US as a major threat (39%), perceive Russia and Serbia as their primary allies, and attribute the responsibility for the war in Ukraine exclusively to the "West" (51%), thereby adopting a completely divergent information ecosystem (IRI, 2025).

c. North Macedonia: The Identity Veto and the Macedonian-Albanian Cleavage

North Macedonia represents a symmetrical case of intersection between internal identity-based bottlenecks and external constraints on the path to Europeanization. Internally, the ethnic balance is regulated by the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001), which provided guarantees and representation rights to the Albanian minority (Koneska, 2017). Although Ohrid secured peace, it institutionalized ethnic and linguistic identity as the primary axis of political mobilization (Abazi Imeri, 2025). Language and segregated education remain the main obstacles to building a shared civic identity (Sorrells, 2025; Piacentini, 2020).

Externally, the state was kept outside Euro-Atlantic structures for decades due to the dispute with Greece regarding its name and historical heritage. A compromise was reached through the Prespa Agreement (2018), which renamed the state "North Macedonia," allowing for NATO accession in 2020 (Prespa Agreement, 2018). However, this enthusiasm was cut short by a new veto imposed by Bulgaria based on criteria of history, language, and national identity (Damjanovski, 2025). Although Skopje accepted the "French proposal" in 2022 to include the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution to open EU negotiation chapters, the lack of a parliamentary majority and the rise to power of the conservative government led by Hristijan Mickoski in 2024 blocked the implementation of the reform (Testorides, 2025).

Sociological research highlights that minorities in North Macedonia are much more willing to accept external identity-based compromises than the majority population (Damjanovski, 2025). In the 2024–2025 period, 82% of ethnic Albanian respondents strongly supported EU accession and an exclusively Western geopolitical orientation (62%), displaying a pragmatic approach and paying limited attention to the identity dilemmas of Macedonians in relation to Bulgaria. Conversely, among ethnic Macedonians, support for the EU dropped to 56%, as society experienced an accumulation of frustrations and a deep radicalization: 59% of those who oppose accession motivate their decision by associating it with the loss of national identity and the changing of the country's name (Damjanovski, 2025; Velinovska & Sofeska, 2025).

The review of the specialized literature demonstrates that traditional, exclusively state-centric approaches are insufficient to understand the dynamics of integration in South-East Europe. Identity borders function as rigid geopolitical barriers within the studied societies. The success of European integration and regional stability depend not only on institutional reforms but directly on the capacity of states to dissolve or reconcile these invisible borders, thereby preventing their hybrid instrumentalization by external actors.

4. IDENTITY-DETERMINED GEOPOLITICAL BORDERS. CASE STUDIES

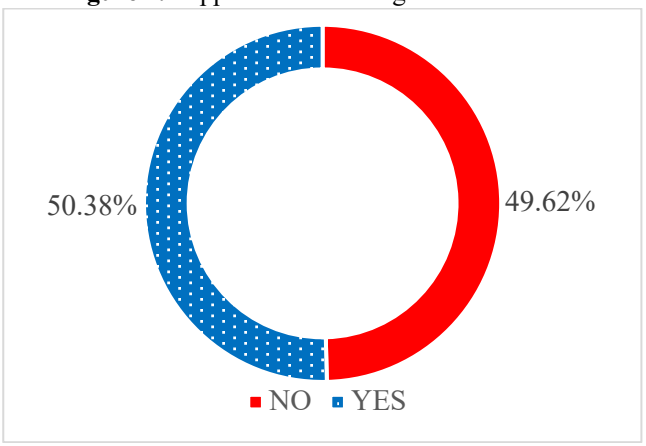
Our analysis aims to identify and analyze identity-based geopolitical borders within the three states selected as case studies. The logic of the argument is that at the community level, particularly regarding the geopolitical behavior and choices of various minorities, divergent directions can be observed in relation to the majority or state policy. Thus, identity provides a specific direction from a geopolitical perspective. As a result of this reality, even at the micro-level of small localities, major (global) or minor (regional or interstate) geopolitical lines of demarcation can manifest between ethnic, linguistic, cultural, or religious communities.

4.1. The case of Russians, Gagauzians and Bulgarians in the Republic of Moldova

Our previous research indicates that Moldovan society experiences both political and identity-based fragmentation regarding its foreign policy orientation (See more: Brie and Al. Solcan, 2025; Brie, 2016; Bărbulescu *et al.* 2016; Brie, Costea, and Toderaș, 2025; Brie, 2025; Brie, 2021; Brie, 2023).

Our analysis begins by highlighting a defining contemporary geopolitical reality: the existence of an internal geopolitical frontier within Moldovan society. While a majority of the population supports a pro-European foreign policy vector, this alignment remains fragile. Despite its current consolidation, this consensus remains susceptible to potential shifts and reversible trends. Beyond the numerous surveys indicating a strengthening pro-European trajectory in the Republic of Moldova, the constitutional referendum of October 20, 2024, remains a critical empirical benchmark (Brie and Putină, 2025). The question was: *Do you support amending the Constitution in order to join the Republic of Moldova to the European Union?*

Figure 1. Support for amending the Constitution



Source: own drawing with information from CEC RM (2026)

The chart illustrates an almost perfectly polarized electorate, where the marginal difference (50.38% for yes versus 49.62% for no) underscores a society fractured along deep-seated geopolitical lines. In the context of Moldovan politics, this statistical parity cannot be interpreted merely as a standard democratic disagreement over policy or European integration. Instead, it visualizes a profound, identity-driven geopolitical border that splits the domestic society into two distinct blocks.

The marginal difference demonstrates that the global geopolitical boundary between the West (EU/NATO) and the East (the Russian sphere of influence) does not merely stop at the state's external borders. It passes directly through the fabric of Moldovan society. It reflects a territorial and demographic friction where specific communities, ethnic minorities, and regions (such as ATU Gagauzia or the northern districts) vote systematically for the Eastern vector, while the capital and the diaspora push for the Western vector. The structural deadlock shown in the data proves that identity markers (language, ethnicity, memory politics) dictate geopolitical behavior. The society is evenly divided because individual and community identities are tied to competing historical narratives and media ecosystems. This structural polarization turns the state into a perpetual geopolitical

battleground. External actors can easily exploit the domestic identity-based fragmentation to stall reforms or shift the country's foreign policy vector during subsequent electoral cycles.

Alongside the strengthening of the Republic of Moldova's pro-European orientation, we believe that an important Romanian electorate is also consolidating, which supports the development of a strong European Romania that can support the Republic of Moldova's efforts in this process. The assumption of Romanian identity is also a cause (or perhaps a consequence) of the consolidation of a significant segment within the Republic of Moldova's population that supports the state's pro-European orientation.

Figure 2. Assumption of ethnic identity in the Republic of Moldova



	Moldovans	Romanians	Ukrainians	Gagauz	Russians	Bulgarians
1989	64.47	0.06	13.85	3.54	12.97	2.04
2004	76.12	2.17	8.38	4.38	5.97	1.95
2014	75.07	7	6.57	4.57	4.06	1.88
2024	77.2	7.9	4.9	4.2	3.2	1.6

Source: author's elaboration based on census data provided by BNSRM (2025a and 2025b)

The majority of the population identifies as ethnic Moldovan-Romanian (82.1%). The self-identified Romanian community has grown since the country gained independence (from 0.06% in 1989 – 2,477 people, to 2.17% in 2004 – 73,276 people, reaching 7.0% in 2014 - 192,800 people (BNSRM, 2025a), and 7.9% in 2024 (BNSRM, 2025b). Meanwhile, the proportion of Russian and Ukrainian communities within the total population has decreased. The share of Ukrainians fell from 13.85% in 1989 to just over 6.5% in 2014 and 4.9% in 2024. The phenomenon is similar in the case of the Russian community: from 12.97% (1989) to 4.06% (2014) and 3.2% in 2024 (BNSRM, 2025a and BNSRM, 2025b).

Table 1. Assumption of linguistic identity in the Republic of Moldova

	2004		20		20
	Number	%	Number	%	%
Moldovan	1,988,540	58	1,486,570	53	4
Romanian	554,814	16	652,394	23	33
Russian	540,990	16	394,133	14	15

Source: author's elaboration based on census data provided by de BNSRM (2025a and 2025b)

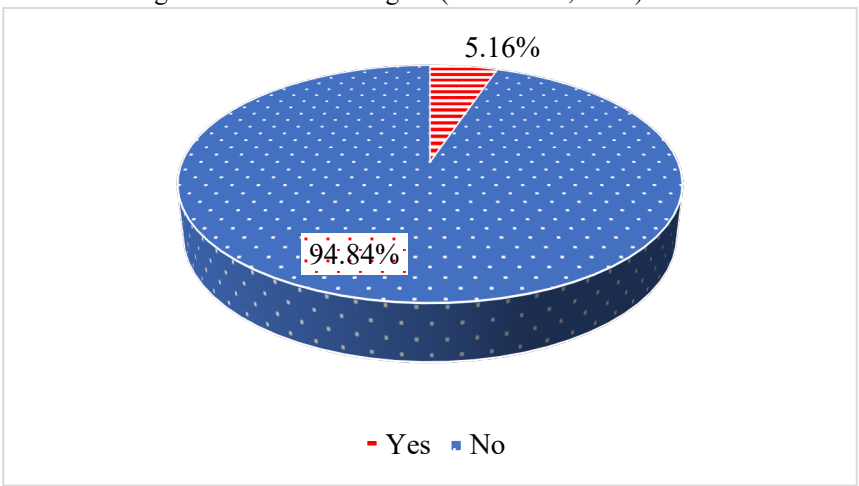
In terms of linguistic identity, censuses in the Republic of Moldova have revealed several trends (Brie and Putină, 2025):

- A continuous decline in the proportion of individuals claiming Russian as their native language, despite its persistent role as a primary language for a substantial non-Russian demographic (14.1% select Russian as their primary language, compared to only 4.06% who self-identify with Russian ethnicity).
- The steady consolidation of the broader Moldovan-Romanian ethno-linguistic bloc, which expanded from 75.2% in 2004 to 76.3% in 2014, with projections estimated to reach 79.2% in 2024.
- A concurrent strengthening of Romanian as a mother tongue alongside a paradoxically rising self-identification with the "Moldovan" linguistic label, with the latter group growing significantly from 16.4% in 2004 to 23.3% in 2014, and further to 32.2% in 2024.

This perspective directly informs our inquiry, as national consolidation among the Moldovan-Romanian ethno-linguistic population correlates with heightened pro-Western orientations and increased backing for EU accession.

This research aims to analyze the voting behavior within the ATU Gagauzia during the constitutional referendum of October 20, 2024. At a secondary level, we develop a comparative case study utilizing the Institute for Public Policy (IPP) database, which provides comprehensive sociological data on ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia—districts predominantly inhabited by Gagauz and Bulgarian communities. This serves to identify distinct behavioral and perceptual patterns within these identity-driven ethnic groups. The objective is to test the premise that specific minorities (in this case, Gagauz and Bulgarians) align with the Russian Federation and reject European integration due to deeply ingrained communal identities. Confirming this hypothesis would validate the model of an identity-fragmented society in the Republic of Moldova, wherein ethno-national and linguistic groups harbor diametrically opposed geopolitical orientations.

Figure 3. Vote in the referendum to amend the Constitution in view of EU accession in the Gagauz Autonomous Region (October 20, 2024)



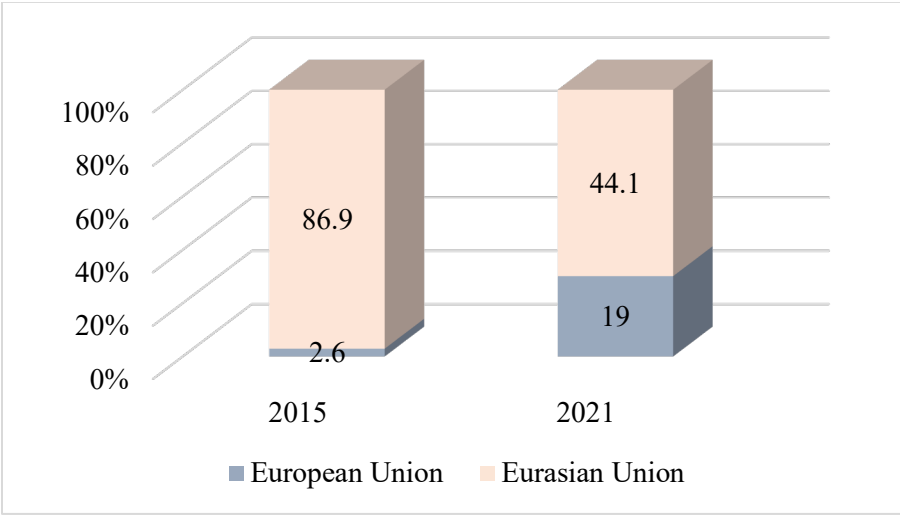
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Source: own drawing with information from CEC RM (2026)

From a methodological perspective, our hypothesis can be tested more clearly within the compact Gagauz communities of the ATU Gagauzia. In this case, the identity borders revealed through the expression of geopolitical preferences becomes even more pronounced: in ATU Gagauzia, only 5.16% of voters supported accession to the European Union. Thus, out of a total of 57,847 valid votes cast, only 2,985 were in favor of amending the Constitution to enable EU accession, while 54,862 voters opposed this initiative (CEC RM, 2026). The Gagauz population overwhelmingly rejects the idea of accession to the European Union, a stance accompanied by a strong preference for geopolitical rapprochement with the Russian Federation (Brie and Goreainov, 2026).

IPP also measured external orientation preferences, which allows us to observe and analyze options expressed through an exclusive choice, eliminating the possibility of selecting both of the tested alternatives as preferred options. Moreover, respondents are placed in a situation that requires a more categorical choice, and the results can more clearly illustrate potential associations anticipated in relation to ethno-national and cultural-linguistic identity. The outcome of such a joint measurement of external preferences can contribute to clarifying analyses aimed at testing our hypothesis that, in the Republic of Moldova, there exists a cleavage in the choice of geopolitical options between these Gagauz and Bulgarian communities in the south and the majority option expressed by the Moldovan/Romanian community in the rest of the country. Evidently, as in the case of the Transnistrian region, the Russian or Russian-speaking community displays a consistent inclination toward pro-Russian and anti-European options (Brie and Goreainov, 2026).

Figure 4. Voting option in the event of a referendum with the possibility of choosing between joining the EU or the Eurasian Union in the ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District (%)
Note: the remaining percentages are: „I don't know"/„I don't answer"



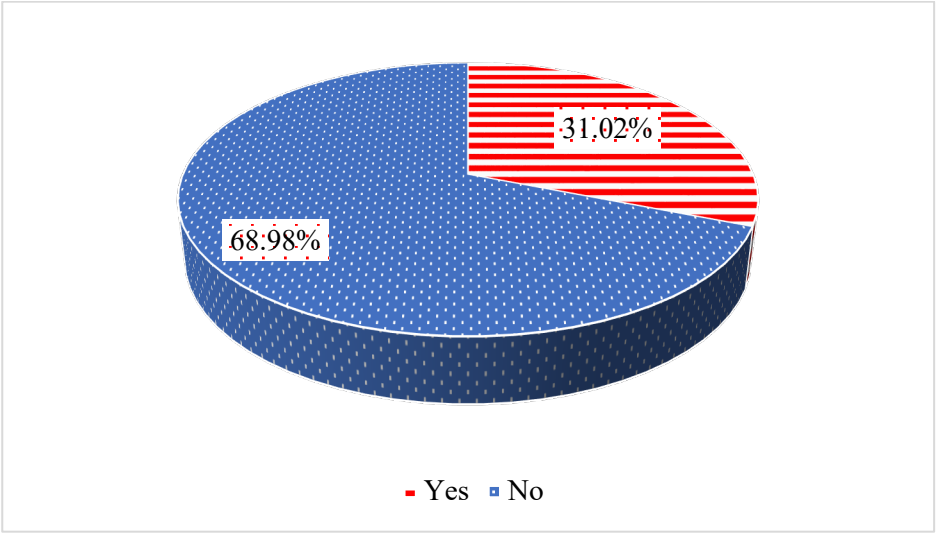
Source: own drawing with information from IPP, 2015, 2021

Support for EU accession in case of a referendum was very low in 2015 (2.6%), highlighting a correlation with the separate measurement of this option (the decrease was only 1% when measured jointly with the pro-Eurasian Union option). This could suggest that citizens who favor the pro-EU option hold more crystallized views, however, given the very small numbers involved, such an interpretation must be treated with caution.

More pronounced, however, are the dilemmas reflected in preferences for accession to either of the two unions in 2021 (19% in favor of EU accession and 44.1% in favor of accession to the Eurasian Union). Nevertheless, as in the categorical pattern observed in 2015, the Gagauz community in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia and the Bulgarian and Gagauz communities in Taraclia continue to show a stronger preference for accession to the Eurasian Union.

Only 31.02% of the citizens of the Transnistrian region answered "Yes". Thus, 68.98% of the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region present at the polls voted against the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (CEC RM, 2026). As the majority of the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region assume the ethnic and linguistic Russian identity, we tend to deduce that this ethno-national community chose to vote against an initiative that would set the direction of Moldova's EU accession at the constitutional level.

Figure 5. Vote in the referendum to amend the Constitution in view of EU accession in the Transnistrian region (October 20, 2024)



Source: own drawing with information from CEC RM (2026)

This behavior, in our opinion, can be extrapolated to other regions or localities where the Russian-speaking community is in the majority (of course, we cannot say that all Russians or Russian speakers voted No in the referendum) (Brie, 2025). The main conclusion is that Moldovan society is geopolitically polarized along ethnic and linguistic identity lines. Thus, Moldovan citizens of Russian ethnicity or Russian-speaking citizens, as well as Gagauz and Bulgarians, tend to prefer closer relations with the Russian Federation in terms of the Republic of Moldova's external orientation. The findings point not only to the existence of clearly delineated identity borders within Moldovan society, but also to the presence of an identity cleavage characterized by antagonistic and divergent positioning with respect to East-West geopolitical options. This cleavage has the potential to acquire conflictual dimensions. This reality reaffirms the premise that, in the Republic of Moldova, there exists a source of societal insecurity that may be geopolitically exploited by both internal and external actors (Brie and Goreainov, 2026).

4.2. The case of the Albanians from North Macedonia

Historically, Albanian Muslim communities maintained close ties with the Ottoman Empire. In the nineteenth century, as Orthodox Slavic peoples in the region sought independence from the empire, they received vital support from Russia, driven by Pan-Orthodox solidarity. This geopolitical dynamic persisted even after the collapse of Yugoslavia. Lacking Western support, Serbia naturally looked East for strategic alliances. The region often appears as a clear-cut geopolitical battleground: Albanians aligned with the United States, and Serbs backed by Russia. This logic was initially mirrored in Northern Macedonia, where the Muslim Albanian community's emancipation efforts relied heavily on a strong partnership with the West, contrasting with the Orthodox Macedonian majority. The Albanian community played a decisive role in steering Northern Macedonia toward a pro-Western path and fostering cooperation with the ethnic majority. However, this was a mutual process. The Macedonian majority also actively championed European integration, recognizing it as a shared benefit. Today, the prospect of EU integration remains essential for stabilizing inter-ethnic relations and safeguarding the young Macedonian state (Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2021: 71-72). „The Albanian community in the Balkans did not have many favorable geopolitical options besides a close relationship with NATO, facilitated by the historical cultural-identity relationship with Turkey. Subsequently, in the context of US direct involvement in the region, it led to the reality of a natural choice" (Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2021: 72).

Figure 6. Ethnic distribution in the Western Balkans



Source: Library of Congress*, Ethnic distribution in the western Balkans, 2008*, https://www.loc.gov/item/2008620837/, accessed in 12.07.2026

In this context, a geopolitical fault line divides the two ethno-linguistic and religious groups: identity effectively transforms into a *geopolitical border*.

Our analysis aims to identify different positions regarding the external orientation of the state in relation to identity.

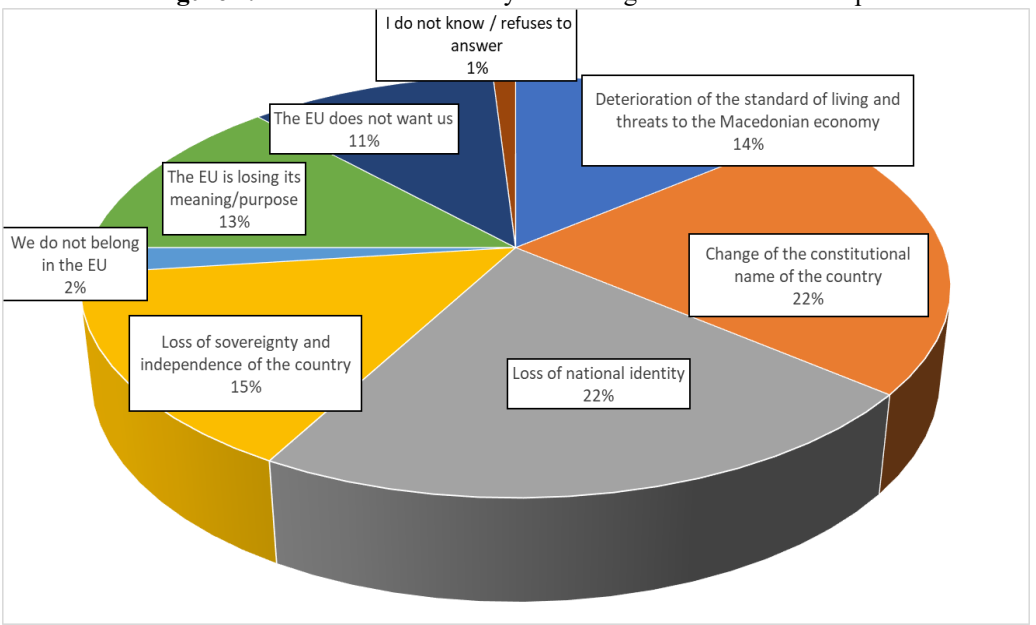
The focus is on the internal dispute between Albanians and Macedonians and the external conditioning on identity criteria that had in mind the integration into NATO (the current dispute with Greece for the name of the state) and the accession negotiations to the EU (the dispute related to the Bulgarian veto). We do not intend to present these provisions on this occasion (see for context and more details Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2021; Brie and Angela Solcan, 2025; Brie, 2023; Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2023).

The central premises and ideas are that: a. internal and external identity disputes have influenced the integration level and the process of rapprochement with the European Union; b. Albanians in North Macedonia are more willing than Macedonians to compromise on external identity disputes in order to ensure rapprochement with the EU and NATO.

We aim to develop a synthesis of opinion polls conducted in recent years to capture some trends recorded in relation to sensitive identity issues that have led to the identification of different identity behaviors in relation to geopolitical options or whether external orientation is influenced by identity.

Amid a perpetual cycle of identity disputes and a highly unpredictable geopolitical future, historical grievances and traumas rooted in identity crises continually resurface. This is evident as the long-standing name dispute re-emerges alongside ongoing tensions with Bulgaria. Driven by a perception that too many concessions have already been made, the public sphere is facing severe polarization, paving the way toward radicalization and political extremism.

Figure 7. What is the reason for your vote against EU membership?

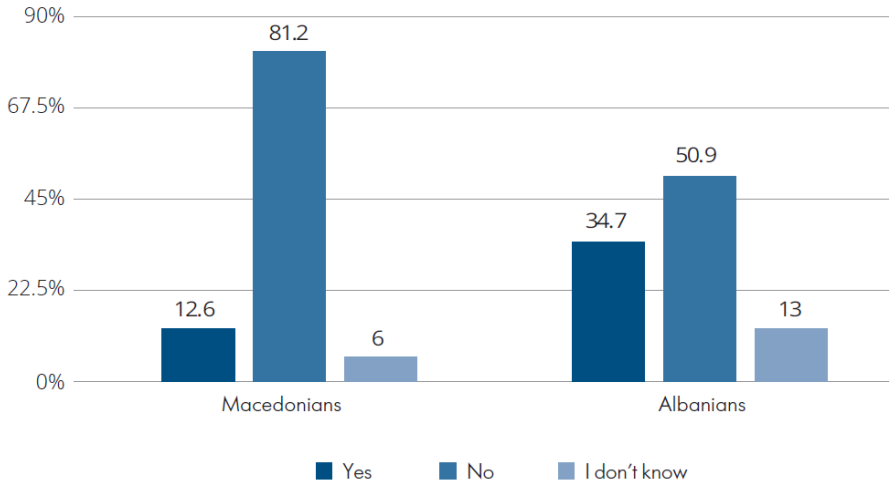


Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Damjanovski, 2025: 23 (public opinion survey research conducted in the period October-December 2024)

According to data from the aforementioned barometer, even the Albanian minority rejects altering the historical narrative merely as a concession for European integration—with only 34.7% of Albanians and a meager 12.6% of Macedonians

favoring such a compromise. This reluctance persists despite overwhelming pro-EU sentiment: general European integration is backed by 63% of ethnic Macedonians and a staggering 82% of ethnic Albanians (Damjanovski, 2022: 4; Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2023).

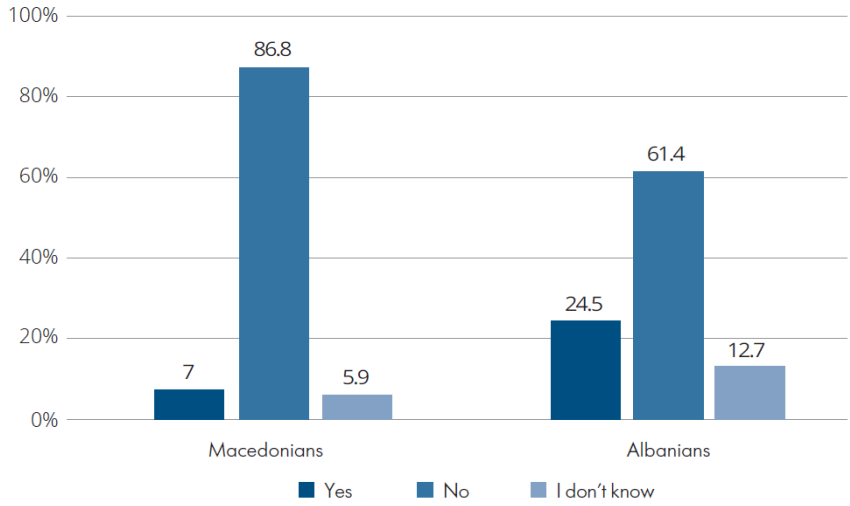
Figure 8. Do you think that North Macedonia should make concessions regarding the historical narrative in order to proceed with the EU integration? (%)



Source: Velinovska; Nikolovski and Kirchner, 2022: 8

Public opinion is even less open to compromise regarding the Macedonian language.

Figure 9. Do you think the the North Macedonia should make a concession regarding the language in order to proceed with the EU integration? (%)

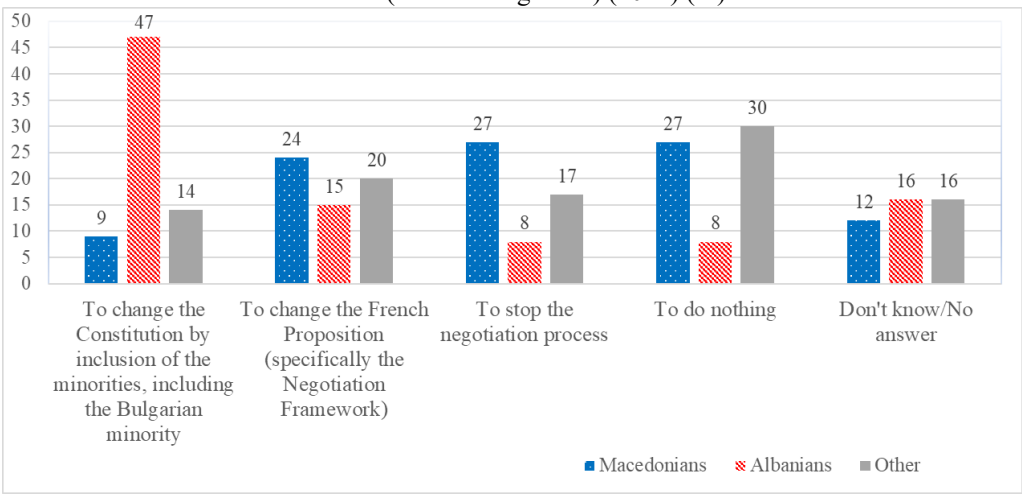


Source: Velinovska; Nikolovski and Kirchner, 2022: 11

The findings reveal a cohesive and nearly unanimous consensus among ethnic Macedonians, with 86.8% rejecting any linguistic concessions. Such compromises are similarly viewed as unacceptable by a narrower majority of ethnic Albanians, standing at 61.4% (Velinovska; Nikolovski and Kirchner, 2022: 11).

The radicalization of public opinion is directly mirrored in executive governance. The establishment of a conservative administration in Skopje, led by Hristijan Mickoski, institutionalized this lack of identity-related compromise into official state policy. By refusing to implement the agreed-upon constitutional amendments, the new government has severely complicated the country's EU accession process. This shift reflects a broader trend between 2022 and 2024, characterized by growing societal radicalization and a diminishing willingness to compromise. The resolution of constitutional changes regarding the Bulgarian minority—as mandated by the 2022 Macedonian-Bulgarian agreement—remains fundamentally stalled (Brie and Angela Solcan, 2025).

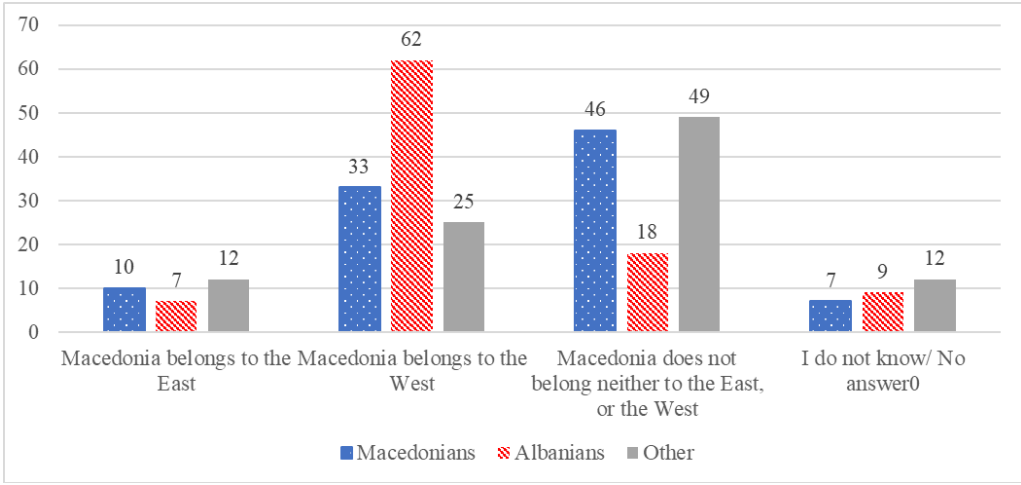
Figure 10. What changes do you think need to be made on the path towards the European Union? (ethnic background) (2024) (%)



Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025: 10

The Albanian minority in North Macedonia exhibits a significantly higher openness to compromise, remaining primarily focused on achieving European integration while showing less involvement in the identity-driven dilemmas surrounding Macedonian-Bulgarian relations. This pragmatic stance extends across highly sensitive issues, including historical narratives, the status of the Macedonian language, and the formal recognition of the Bulgarian minority. Consequently, the Albanian community serves as a compelling case study of how a minority group can become a powerful catalyst for a nation's Euro-Atlantic path, compelling the state to adopt a proactive approach and assume clear ownership of EU-related reforms (Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2021: 86-87). This divergent perspective is clearly reflected in longitudinal data. While enthusiasm for EU membership has remained consistently high among ethnic Albanians at 82% in both 2021 and late 2024, support within the ethnic Macedonian majority has experienced a notable decline, dropping from 63% in 2021 down to 56% by the end of 2024 (Damjanovski, 2022: 4; Damjanovski, 2025: 50; Brie and Angela Solcan, 2025).

Figure 11. Which statement do you agree with? (ethnic background) (2024) (%)



Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025: 17

Geopolitical alignment preferences in North Macedonia are deeply fractured along ethnic lines. The Albanian community has historically served as a critical anchor for the country's Euro-Atlantic trajectory. This divergence is explicitly quantified in recent empirical data: in 2024, pro-Western orientation commanded majority support among ethnic Albanian respondents at 62%, whereas it garnered a mere 33% approval within the Macedonian majority (Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025: 17).

4.3. The case of the Serbs from Republika Srpska

In the Balkans, national identity historically matured through the collective resistance of Orthodox Christian populations against external forces, namely the Ottoman (Islamic) and Austro-Hungarian (Catholic-Protestant) empires. This cohesion was further reinforced by the geopolitical expansion of Russian influence in the region, where a Pan-Orthodox discourse actively catalyzed both shared resistance and national aspirations. This rhetoric proved exceptionally effective due to a defining characteristic of Eastern Orthodoxy: the autocephalous national church. The highly patriotic discourse championed by Balkan Orthodox religious leaders effectively transformed these national churches into hotbeds of national emancipation and unification. The Slavic Orthodox communities within Bosnia and Herzegovina, alongside the Serbian populations, have historically been shaped by the geopolitical and cultural gravity of the Russian-Orthodox Eastern sphere.

Under the 1995 General Framework Agreement for Peace, the country is recognized as a single sovereign state under international law, divided into two semi-autonomous entities: the *Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* and *Republika Srpska*[1]. This intricate constitutional structure was expanded in 1999 through the Brčko Arbitration Final Award, which created the Brčko District. Operating as a condominium under joint ownership of both entities but under the state's direct sovereignty, this neutral, self-governing administrative unit functions outside entity jurisdiction to safeguard regional stability and

[1] Republika Srpska is the official name of the "entity". The concept of "Republic of Srpska" is a claim-making concept that could be used to designate and justify a stronger existence of a republican statehood.

multi-ethnic governance (Spahić and Čustović 2024, 28). Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a classic case of a deeply divided, post-conflict society where ethnic, religious, and political identities frequently clash. While the institutional framework designed by the Dayton Agreement successfully halted the war, it simultaneously institutionalized ethnic cleavages by formalizing the political representation of the three "constituent peoples"—Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs (Džankić 2015, 15; Goga and Brie, 2026).

Figure 12. Political map of Bosnia and Herzegovina



Source: Toal and Maksic, 2011

"The political path that Republika Srpska is following clearly illustrates the tensions among the three ethnic groups" (Goga and Brie, 2026). Russia's invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape, turning Bosnia and Herzegovina into an arena where conflicting foreign policy orientations are starkly exposed. While the leadership of Republika Srpska has cultivated close political ties with the Russian Federation, the Bosnian state—backed by the European Union and NATO—continues to pursue Euro-Atlantic integration (Turčalo, 2025, 6-13). This geopolitical polarization further deepens the country's internal identity borders. European integration is perceived differently across communities: for Bosniaks, it represents state consolidation, whereas for the Republika Srpska elites, it is viewed as a threat to their political autonomy. Therefore, domestic identity conflicts have become inextricably linked to regional geopolitical rivalries, transforming European integration from a technical reform process into a highly charged political and symbolic choice (Turčalo, 2025, 14-16).

The demographic structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects its deeply rooted historical diversity. According to the 1991 census, the population comprised approximately 43.5% Bosnian Muslims (now recognized as Bosniaks), 31.2% Serbs, and 17.4% Croats, with the remainder consisting of other minorities or individuals identifying as Yugoslavs (Burg and Shoup, 1999, 26).

Table 2. Ethnic structure of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina 1991 vs 2013

	1991		**2013**	
Total population	4.377.033		3.531.159	
Bosniaks	1.902.956	43,5%	1.769.592	50,1%
Croats	760.852	17,4%	544.780	15,4%
Serbs	1.366.104	31,2%	1.086.733	30,8%
Others	347.121	7,9 %	130.054	3,7 %

Source: Statistika.ba. 2013

In the post-conflict era, political identity transcended communal boundaries to become fundamentally territorialized. Because community and space grew inseparable, any administrative or electoral reforms faced deep-seated resistance. Within this framework, institutional reform is perceived as a redistribution of power between groups. This spatial-ethnic alignment is clearly illustrated by the 2013 census, which showed that the demographic structure of Republika Srpska had become overwhelmingly Serb-dominated (Goga and Brie, 2026: 43-44).

Table 3. Ethnic structure of the population of Republika Srpska 1991 vs 2013

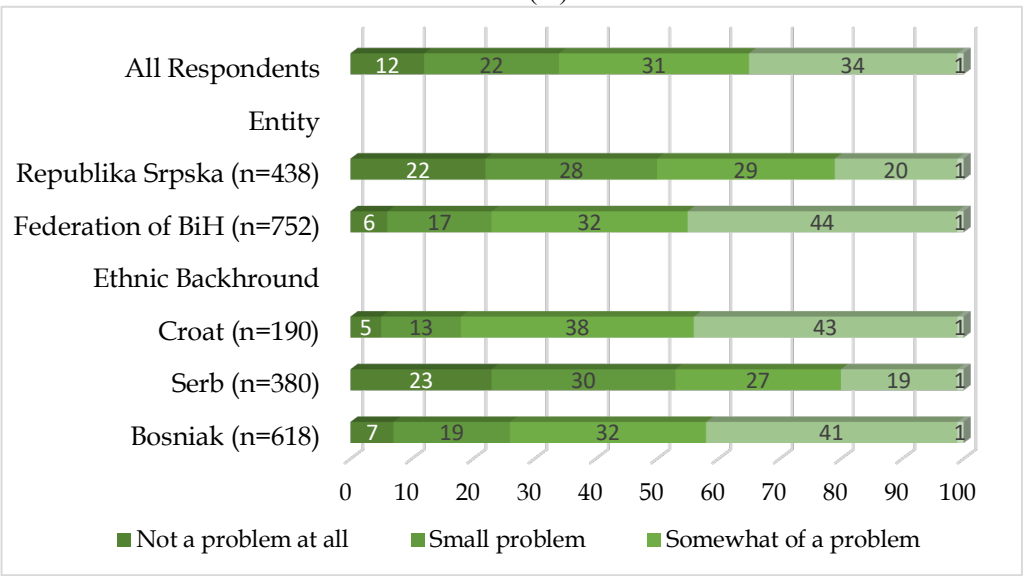
	1991		**2013**	
Total population	1.572.615		1.228.423	
Bosniaks	441.077	28,0%	171.839	14,0%
Croats	144.129	9,2%	29.645	2,4%
Serbs	872.610	55,5%	1.001.299	81,5%
Others	114.799	7,3%	25.640	2,1%

Source: Statistika.ba. 2013

Public opinion data reveals deep, systematic cleavages between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska regarding domestic integration, geopolitical alignment, and foreign policy vision.

A closer analysis reveals significant disparities between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska regarding perceptions of nationalism. While 44% of respondents in the Federation consider nationalism a major problem and another 32% view it as a moderate concern, only 49% of those in RS see it as either a big (20%) or moderate problem (29%). From an ethnic perspective, Bosniaks and Croats hold similar views, expressing notable concern over the societal impact of nationalism, whereas Serbs tend to be significantly less worried about this issue (IRI 2025, 53; Goga and Brie, 2026: 51).

Figure 13. Nationalism considered as a problem by the entities and ethnic groups in BiH, in 2025 (%)



Source: IRI 2025

Security threat perceptions mirror this sub-national divide, revealing two distinct geopolitical paradigms. In the Federation, threat anxieties are oriented eastward, with respondents identifying Serbia (42%) and Russia (23%) as the primary threats. Republika Srpska reverses this pattern, identifying the United States as the main adversary (39%) while marginalizing Russia and Serbia (IRI 2025, 60). This asymmetry highlights a deeply polarized geopolitical imaginary driven by ethnic identities, where the Federation fears regional and Russian influence, while RS projects threats onto Western actors (Goga and Brie, 2026: 55).

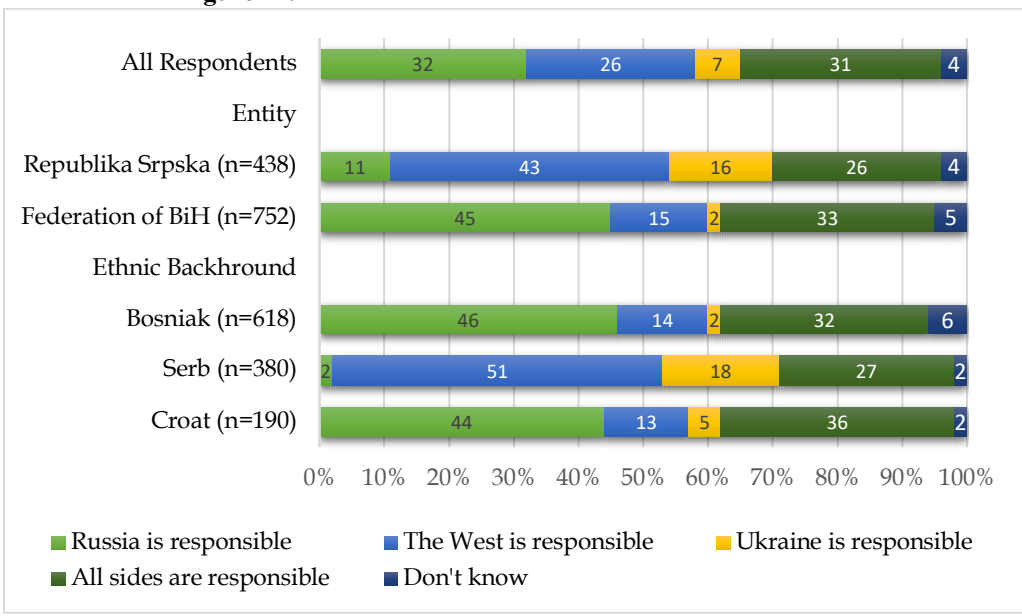
Table 4. Most significant threat

Most Significant Threat	All respondents	Entity		Ethnic background		
		Federation BiH (n=752)	Republika Srpska (n=438)	Bosniak (n=618)	Serb (=380)	Croat (n=190)
Serbia	28%	42%	5%	42%	<1%	40%
USA	18%	6%	39%	9%	42%	1%
Russia	16%	23%	5%	23%	1%	28%
EU	4%	1%	8%	1%	9%	2%
UK	3%	<1%	8%	-	9%	<1%
Germany	3%	1%	7%	1%	8%	1%
Croatia	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	-
Albania	2%	-	4%	-	6%	-
Hungary	1%	1%	-	1%	-	1%
France	1%	-	2%	<1%	2%	-
None	10%	10%	11%	9%	12%	10%
Don't know	9%	11%	5%	9%	4%	15%

Source: IRI 2025. Note: Spontaneous response; top 10 responses plus None and Don't know/Refused displayed.

The same deep polarization between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska, as between the main ethnic groups, is observed in the attitude towards the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. „In the Federation, responsibility is overwhelmingly attributed to Russia (45%), while only 15% point to the "West" and a marginal percentage to Ukraine (2%), suggesting a clear alignment with the dominant interpretation in the Euro-Atlantic space. On the other hand, in the Republika Srpska, an almost symmetrical reversal of these perceptions is observed: only 11% point to Russia as the main responsible party, while 43% attribute the blame to the Western countries, and 16% to Ukraine. It reflects an internalisation of an alternative narrative framework critical of Western actors. The same cleavage is reproduced at the ethnic level: Bosniaks (46%) and Croats (44%) predominantly point to Russia, while Serbs show an opposite orientation, attributing responsibility mainly to the "West" (51%) and to a significant extent to Ukraine (18%), with only 2% blaming Russia" (IRI 2025, 84; Goga and Brie, 2026: 56-57).

Figure 12. Views on Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine



Source: IRI 2025

All of these suggest not only divergences of opinion but also the existence of geopolitical borders between ethno-religious and linguistic communities.

CONCLUSIONS

The empirical evidence across the analyzed case studies strongly validates *Hypothesis 1*, demonstrating that the deepening of internal societal divisions directly causes geopolitical fragmentation and erects invisible, yet rigid, geopolitical borders within the same country. The reciprocal alignment of security threat perceptions and ethnic allegiances confirms *Hypothesis 2*, proving the existence of a circular causality where micro-level identity cleavages manifest as external geopolitical alignments, which in turn reinforce internal identity borders.

This research underscores that identity cleavages (ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, or even alphabetic) and geopolitical alignments share a deeply symbiotic, mutually reinforcing relationship. Identity is no longer merely a cultural descriptor; it functions as an active internal geopolitical border. There is an identity cleavage, with antagonistic positioning, divergent in relation to East-West geopolitical options.

This internal polarization directly translates into divergent, antagonistic geopolitical paradigms at the sub-national level. Public opinion data highlights a stark rift in security imaginaries and threat perceptions between communities. On a systemic scale, the collapse of communism, coupled with prolonged ambiguity regarding European integration, has allowed extreme ethno-nationalisms to fester. While the conflicts of the 1990s appeared to be frozen, the compounding global crises since 2008—culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—have unfrozen these fault lines, instigating localized "Identity Revolutions". These internal fractures create profound societal insecurity that is actively weaponized and logistically leveraged by both domestic elites and external revisionist actors. European integration has ceased to be perceived as a routine, technocratic reform process; it has evolved into a deeply polarized, symbolic, and easily reversible geopolitical choice.

This study demonstrates that internal identity disputes are linked to broader regional and global geopolitical competition. In the absence of a decisive, unambiguous, and firm integration strategy from the European Union and NATO, these internal geopolitical borders will continue to harden.

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract. *This article presents the development of inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova focusing on the role of English language teachers. It analyzes important national documents such as the National Program for the Development of Inclusive Education (2024–2027), which aims to provide equal access to quality education for all learners including those with special educational needs. Inclusive education in Moldova requires continuous teacher training and strong cooperation between educational institutions and social agencies to support the academic staff, community members and students. For this reason, the article describes the role of the In-Service Teacher Training English Language Program in the context of the Inclusive Reform and outlines the adaptation of teaching practices to create inclusive learning environments. It also examines the challenges faced by language teachers, who go through the process of change explained by the means of three stages: resistance, exploration, and consolidation. In the process of change the language teachers need to adapt their teaching methods, materials and assessment to diverse learners. The In-Service Teacher Training English Language Program is meant to help teachers develop inclusive teaching competences focusing on theoretical framework and practical activities embraced in digital collaboration, and reflection.*

Keywords*: Inclusive education, professional competences, professional training, differentiated instruction, inclusive practices.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The twenty-first century emphasizes diverse identities represented by multilingual citizens, ethnic and cultural minorities, migrants and refugees, vulnerable groups, underrepresented populations, marginalized communities, older adults, youth, economically disadvantaged individuals, people from rural and remote areas, religious minorities, gender-diverse individuals, persons with disabilities, and other social groups, whose unique perspectives enrich society. Robbins and Coulter define diversity "as the ways in which people are different from and similar to each other" (Robbins and Coulter, 2018: 147) focusing not only on differences but similarities also. The characteristics of diversity are: gender, race, age, language, presence/absence of physical disability; these are things seen at first sight representing the surface- level diversity (Robbins and Coulter, 2018: 151). Verbal or nonverbal behaviors represent the deep-level diversity i.e. personality, needs, attitudes, preferences of individuals (Robbins and Coulter, 2018: 147). Within human communication people look beyond surface-level diversity finding similar traits to bond reshaping the paradigm of communication (Robbins and Coulter, 2018: 151). The culture of inclusion incorporates a mindful language targeting the nurturing of opinions, decisions, differences, values, habits (Robbins and Coulter, 2018: 148).

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Salend defines inclusion as a philosophy that unites students, families, educators and community members in creating schools grounded in acceptance, belonging, and a sense of community. Within this framework, inclusive schools embrace and value all learners educating them together in high-quality, age-appropriate general education classrooms within their local communities (Hornby, 2014: 4). Salend (2011) synthesizes the four core principles for operationalising inclusion: ensuring access to challenging, engaging and flexible curricula for all learners; valuing diversity through responsiveness to individual strengths and needs; applying reflective practices alongside differentiated instruction; and fostering a collaborative community involving students, teachers, families, professionals, and wider community stakeholders (Hornby, 2014: 1).

Inclusive education is a multifaceted construct that encompasses the recognition and appreciation of diversity, while engaging with principles of human rights, social justice, and equity. It is aligned with perspectives such as the social model of disability and a sociopolitical understanding of education (Hornby, 2014: 1).

The Inclusive Education in the Republic of Moldova is an important approach that aims to improve access to quality education for gifted and talented students, students from different linguistic backgrounds, students from ethnic, cultural, religious minority groups, students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, students living in rural, urban or isolated areas, students affected by family instability, migration, or social exclusion, special educational needs students, or with temporary health conditions, or learning difficulties to give them the fair chance to be a part of the learning community (Republic of Moldova, 2014; Republic of Moldova, 2023; Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova, 2017). An important document in this respect is the National Programme for the Development of Inclusive Education in Moldova for 2024–2027 created to make the education system equal, flexible and supportive through the inclusive language (Republic of Moldova, 2023).

One of the pivotal components of the National Programme for the Development of Inclusive Education in Moldova is equal access to education that means integrating students regardless of their physical, intellectual, or social differences in different educational programs. This approach supports the idea that inclusivity is active and real participation in the process of learning (Republic of Moldova, 2023; Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova, 2017).

Another essential component outlined in the programme is the learning environment that addresses the issue of physical access, suitable teaching materials and supportive classroom practices to remove barriers that may prevent some learners from fully participating in education. Moldovan Educational institutions, in this respect, have become more accessible and better adapted to the needs of all students.

Inclusive Education in the Republic of Moldova has a broad and comprehensive character. There have been elaborated the conceptual and legal frameworks of inclusive education (through the guides "Educația incluzivă", "Educația incluzivă timpurie. Ghid metodologic", "Metodologia de implementare a educației incluzive") presenting the process of inclusion as a guide for action explaining the management of inclusive education, the identification and support of special educational needs, individualized educational planning, support services, classroom management, adaptation of the curricula, assessment, and inclusive teaching technologies. The documents are both theoretical and practical tools giving the praxeological orientation to educators in regard to job descriptions, annual plans, observation sheets, monitoring forms, models of the

Individualized Educational Plan (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova, 2017).

These inclusive conceptualized documents give the more specialized guidelines focusing on early childhood education to improve children's cognitive, emotional and social development. In the context of public kindergartens and schools in Moldova, these positive effects are often difficult to sustain over time due to overcrowded groups, shortages of qualified staff and support specialists, and limited institutional resources necessary for systematic, and continuous intervention.

In Moldova, the Ministry of Education and educators are making considerable efforts to support and promote such inclusive interventions that positively influence cognitive, motor, language and academic development across diverse groups, and program types (Hattie, 2009: 58).

The Inclusive Education in the Republic of Moldova (the early inclusive education guide) focuses on stages such as: case identification, data collection, interpretation, conclusions and recommendations for inclusive intervention, assessment, partnership, and psycho-pedagogical services for a complex evaluation of child's development (Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, 2020).

It shows that inclusive education in early childhood in Moldova must have an organized structure with institutions, specialists and local authorities with real educational practice not only through physical access to the institution but through support, adaptation, and participation, (Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova, 2025).

The culture of inclusion begins in schools where the most substantial school effects are generated by internal factors, particularly the classroom climate, class management, peer interactions, grade retention, frequent school mobility and differentiated curricula (Hattie, 2009). The structural factors such as mainstreaming, or class size have limited impact if not accompanied by effective pedagogical and organizational support (Hattie, 2009: 107).

These elements are important in Moldovan inclusive settings not only for learners but for the teaching staff also. The National Programme for the Development of Inclusive Education in Moldova for 2024–2027 gives great importance to In- Service teacher training and professional development, which are oriented to train educators to work with diverse groups of learners through inclusive methods, individualized support, and learner-centered teaching.

Due to the fact that inclusive education highlights the need for support services and cooperation between different sectors (social workers, psychologists, health professionals, teachers and families) the In- Service teacher training programs take into account this demand and focus on the monitorization and evaluation mechanisms to identify progress, difficulties, and areas that need further improvement (Republic of Moldova, 2023). For this reason, the In- Service teacher training programs stress the importance of monitoring and coordination of inclusive strategies and interventions as a continuous process involving planning, implementation, and follow-up. This process includes observing children's progress and adjusting support measures.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The major objective of the In- Service teacher training programs in the Republic of Moldova is to equip teachers with the knowledge, practical skills necessary for inclusive practices and for emotional adaptation to diversity, and inclusion. The effectiveness of this

model will be analyzed through the In- Service Teacher Training English Language Program to examine its contribution to the development of teachers' inclusive competences.

A useful conceptual perspective within In- Service English Teacher Training Curricula is analyzing the psychological process of adaptation that teachers undergo in the change model developed by Kurt Lewin and later elaborated by Stephen P. Robbins and Mary Coulter. The three folded model of change—Unfreeze, Change, and Refreeze—is used to describe how teachers go through psychological and behavioral stages when adapting to National Programme for the Development of Inclusive Education (Lewin, 1947; Robbins and Coulter, 2018; Burnes, 2004; Cameron and Green, 2019).

Within the context of psychological adjustment to inclusive environments and emotional readiness for inclusive education, the initial stage of change—The Stage of Resistance or "Unfreeze" —is characterized by resistance from teachers (Lewin, 1947; Robbins and Coulter, 2018; Burnes, 2004; Cameron and Green, 2019). English teachers may experience emotional reactions such as frustration, anxiety, or uncertainty when they are required to adopt inclusive teaching practices in classrooms that include students with diverse linguistic abilities and needs. When teachers have to adapt instruction for students which struggle with different learning difficulties, they are uncertain about how to design guided or modified curriculum, or to ensure the participation of all students in classroom activities.

Language teachers can become formally a part of the inclusive reform while in fact they cannot contribute to the inclusive practices as they simply don't know how to do it. Inclusive education requires additional pedagogical training on acquisition of skills, application of differentiated instruction, flexible teaching and assessment methods, elaboration and adaptation of inclusive objectives, tasks to diverse learning profiles. There is a crucial need for language teachers to collaborate with special needs specialists (psychologists, speech therapists, and support teachers). The end point of this stage that makes teachers resist is never ending teachers' sensation on their increasing number of professional responsibilities without adequate preparation and professional support.

The second stage is Exploration or "Change" characterized by the initial resistance that gradually decreases, when language teachers start experimenting with inclusive teaching strategies and trying to accommodate to the learning scenarios to (Lewin, 1947; Robbins and Coulter, 2018; Burnes, 2004; Cameron and Green, 2019):

- modify language tasks, design differentiated activities, use collaborative learning techniques;
- communicate with other specialists in this respect and gain knowledge on language disorders, and the needs of students with diverse learning profiles;
- support the institutional mechanisms in achieving the objectives of the language curricula.

The key role in this phase is promoting professional learning and collaboration among educators participating in training sessions, workshops, and professional discussions focused on inclusive pedagogy. Professional development programmes are constructed to offer collaborative reflection to develop a deeper understanding of principles of inclusive education.

The third Stage is Consolidation or "Refreeze" that occurs when inclusive practices become integrated into the everyday organizational culture of schools (Lewin, 1947; Robbins and Coulter, 2018; Burnes, 2004; Cameron and Green, 2019; Ministry of

Education of the Republic of Moldova, 2017). Inclusive education at this stage is perceived as a natural component of professional practice with differentiated instruction, individualized support strategies, collaborative approaches in teaching routines. At this stage occurs cultural transformation with inclusive practices embedded in lesson planning, assessment methods, and student support systems. Teachers and students perceive inclusive education as a normal and sustainable element of the educational environment.

Subsequently, inclusive education in Moldova is reflected in the In- Service English Teacher Training curricula through the theoretical framework based on three widely recognized approaches—Behaviourism, Cognitivism, and Constructivism—that promote teachers' participation, understanding, and competences development for inclusive classrooms. These perspectives provide the pedagogical foundation for developing teachers' competences in inclusive and digital educational settings.

Behaviourism-based inclusive practices constitute an important aspect of teachers' training that focus on observable behaviors and the reinforcement of learning through structured tasks. The teaching philosophy in Behaviourism is that learning occurs when behaviour changes as a result of reinforcement following students' responses (Harold and Corcoran, 2013). It is dominant for teachers to understand that in the early model of learning the behavior is viewed as acquiring stimulus–response pairs and is learned through interactions with the environment and reinforced over time. In inclusive classrooms, language teachers must use clear instructions, repetition and positive reinforcement to support all learners. Students with diverse educational needs will benefit from consistent feedback and step-by-step guidance, which will help them achieve specific learning outcomes and build confidence in their abilities with individualistic explanations (Harold and Corcoran, 2013). Within the In- Service Teacher Training English Language Program, the behaviorist principles help teachers develop competences of direct inclusive instruction (explicit instruction) as a structured approach where the educators monitor learning step by step through classroom routines, rather than leaving students to discover knowledge independently (Steele, 2005). This approach supports special needs learners who need clear guidance and scaffolded instruction with constant feedback (Steele, 2005). The teacher's role in this process is to (1) choose the right signals that help students give correct answers, (2) create practice activities where hints are connected to the main tasks met in real contexts, and (3) organize the learning environment so that students can respond correctly and receive positive feedback for their answers (Ertmer and Newby, 2013). These behaviourist principles contribute to the development of Language Instructional Competence and Curriculum and Assessment Competence enabling teachers to implement inclusive educational practices effectively.

Cognitivism-based practices in inclusive instruction emphasize understanding mental processes and problem-solving. Cognitivism is a theory that views learning as an active mental process in which learners organize, store and connect new information with prior knowledge, with instruction designed to support understanding and memorization (Ertmer and Newby, 2013). Language teachers are trained to use this approach in inclusive practice encouraging learners to think critically, organize information, and develop strategies for learning. In inclusive education this means: (1) learners should be actively involved in learning by planning, checking, and improving their own work; (2) tasks should be analyzed step by step to show what knowledge is needed before learning something new; (3) information should be clearly structured and organized using tools like outlines,

summaries and organizers to support understanding; (4) learning environments should help students connect new knowledge with what they already know by using examples, comparisons, and recalling previous skills (Tunmer et al., 2002). Cognitivist principles develop Professional Reflective and Digital Pedagogical Competences.

Cognitivism-based inclusive strategies constitute an important aspect of teachers' training, as they rely on instructional methods that focus on learning activities, such as note-taking (Boyle and Rivera, 2012), metacognitive strategies, modeling of problem- solving procedures (Swanson, Orosco and Lussier, 2014), summarizing (Wittrock and Alesandrini, 1990), writing to learn, outlining, mapping, and the PQ4R method- preview, question, read, reflect, recite, review (Slavin, 2009), which have shown positive effects for students with learning difficulties. Other evidence-based practices used within this teacher training program include metacognitive strategies, like study skills, concept mapping, and reciprocal teaching (Hornby, 2014). It also must be highlighted that metacognitive strategies are effective interventions helping English teachers understand how they think; when teachers are explicitly taught how to teach effectively, their teaching performance tends to improve significantly. As noted by Hattie, students with strong academic performance tend to possess a high self-concept, and educators view it as part of their role to foster students' self-confidence so that achievement can naturally follow (Hattie, 2009: 46).

Constructivism-based practices, within the professional development program, focus on active, meaningful learning through experience and collaboration (Liu and Chen, 2010). In inclusive settings, teachers construct knowledge by interacting with peers, exploring real-life problems, and reflecting on their learning. Constructivism emphasizes learner-centered, task-based and hands-on activities that are meaningful, and connected to real-life experiences (Shi, 2012; Lenjani, 2015). That is why classroom activities must include the search for meaning with internal and external scaffolding to support all learners (Shi, 2012; Lenjani, 2015). Language teachers should focus on the most important information to avoid overloading. Strategies like graphic organizers, reciprocal teaching, self-monitoring can help educators teach content, build confidence, support learning from errors, and promote success (Lenjani, 2015; Hattie, 2009).

Language teachers guide learners to discover concepts, apply prior knowledge and develop critical thinking supporting individualized learning pathways, and encourage students' participation with diverse educational needs fostering autonomy and deeper understanding (Hattie, 2009). In a constructivist inclusive framework, teachers benefit from practices like peer tutoring and cooperative learning, which allow them to interact and learn actively in real-world contexts (Hattie, 2009). Constructivist principles develop Communicative Teaching and Interdisciplinary Teaching Competences.

3. THE IN- SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM

English Language teachers encounter a great deal of difficulty in implementing Inclusive Education because learning a language is a very tiring and hard process requiring a sustained cognitive effort, continuous practice, the simultaneous development of multiple competencies and cultural adaptation within the learning experience. The language teachers perceive inclusive changes to their established professional practices with high concern because they need to adapt their instructional policies, teaching methods, and assessment procedures in order to support students with different linguistic needs.

The In- Service Teacher Training English Language Program aims to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to create an inclusive learning environment where all teachers can participate and succeed. It is designed for language teachers working in primary, secondary, or adult education comprising 75 hours of professional development activities delivered in online format. The main goal of the program is to help teachers understand how to plan and deliver lessons that respond to the diverse needs of learners.

The In- Service Teacher Training English Language Program, first of all, is relevant to the professional needs of English teachers through the delivered content which addresses areas such as competences development in digital setting, differentiated instruction, and learner-centred methodologies. The aims and objectives of the program are clearly formulated so that participants can understand the expected learning outcomes and professional competences. The main objectives of the professional program include:

- developing teachers' understanding of inclusive education principles and learner diversity;
- enhancing teachers' professional competences in teaching the four language skills — speaking, listening, reading, and writing — through the effective integration of digital technologies and interactive online methodologies;
- improving the ability to design differentiated and accessible English lessons;
- strengthening digital competences and the effective use of technology and Artificial Intelligence in teaching;
- promoting interactive and communicative teaching methods, such as task-based learning and multisensory activities;
- improving assessment practices through fair and inclusive evaluation methods;
- encouraging reflection, collaboration and continuous professional development;
- supporting teachers in creating motivating learning environments that increase student participation and autonomy.

The curriculum of the program includes updated, practical and well-structured content that combines theory with real classroom application. Teaching and learning methods encourage collaboration, reflection, task-based learning and active participation. Participants explore perspectives on teaching pronunciation instruction, grammar in context, critical thinking development, interdisciplinary teaching approaches, assessment strategies, learner autonomy and the effective use of multimedia resources, and online educational tools (See Table 1).

Table 1. Pedagogical Model of the In- Service Teacher Training Program

Theoretical Approach & Main Topics	**Main Competences and Concepts Developed**
Behaviourism – Grammar Teaching	Explicit instruction of grammar structures; controlled practice; reinforcement strategies; accuracy-focused activities; step-by-step teaching of modal verbs and sequence of tenses
Behaviourism – Assessment and Evaluation (partly)	Formative and summative assessment; structured feedback; performance monitoring; clear criteria; reinforcement of correct responses

Behaviourism – AI in Education (partly)	AI-assisted scaffolding; automated feedback; adaptive learning tasks; reinforcement-based learning support; structured digital practice
Behaviourism – Teaching Language Skills (basic skill training)	Explicit instruction of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills; guided practice; repetition; corrective feedback; structured task design
Cognitivism – Digital Pedagogy	Learner autonomy; self-regulated learning; cognitive engagement; information processing in digital environments; reflective use of technology
Cognitivism – Multisensory Learning	Cognitive activation; memory retention strategies; information processing through multiple channels; brain-based learning principles
Cognitivism – Assessment and Evaluation (partly)	Self-assessment; peer assessment; metacognitive reflection; feedback interpretation; monitoring learning progress
Cognitivism – Teaching Methods and Approaches	Reflective practice; cognitive structuring of lessons; professional self-reflection; learning strategy awareness
Constructivism – Teaching Methods and Approaches (core)	Task-based learning; collaborative learning; learner-centred instruction; active participation; knowledge construction through interaction
Constructivism – Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Learning	Project-based learning; cross-curricular integration; real-world problem solving; critical and creative thinking; knowledge construction across disciplines
Constructivism – Teaching Culture in EFL	Intercultural communicative competence; authentic cultural materials; experiential learning; global citizenship; meaning-making through cultural interaction
Constructivism – Teaching Language Skills in Digital Environments (communicative aspect)	Authentic communication; online interaction; collaborative digital tasks; learner engagement; meaning-focused language use in real contexts

(*Source:* author's own elaborations based on the theoretical frameworks of Behaviourism, Cognitivism, Constructivism and the analysis of relevant pedagogical literature on language teaching, assessment, and AI-supported learning)

The program focuses on the development of professional competences, the ability to use instructional strategies, assessment practices, communication skills, and digital tools effectively. An important stress is laid on assessment methods that should be continuous, fair and focused on practical application through activities such as portfolios, lesson planning, micro-teaching and reflective tasks.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative content analysis of teachers' assignments, lesson plans, portfolios, reflective journals, and micro-teaching products submitted in the Google Classroom environment complemented by a quantitative transformation. The study involved a total of 300 English teachers enrolled in the 2025 In-Service Teacher Training English Language Program organized by the State Pedagogical University "Ion Creangă". Participants represented primary, secondary, and adult education sectors and completed the

program in an online learning environment. Teachers' products were analyzed using a five-point analytical rubric (1 = very low; 5 = very high). Scores were transformed into percentages to determine the relative level of competence development. This mixed-method approach enabled the identification of professional competences developed through participation in the In-Service Teacher Training English Language Program.

The analytical framework was grounded in three complementary learning theories—Behaviourism, Cognitivism, and Constructivism—which underpin the structure and content of the training program. Behaviourist principles were operationalized through Language Instructional Competence and Curriculum and Assessment Competence reflecting teachers' ability to apply explicit instruction, scaffolding, reinforcement, structured assessment, and differentiated learning tasks. Cognitivist principles were examined through Professional Reflective Competence and Digital Pedagogical Competence emphasizing metacognitive reflection, information processing, self-regulated learning, digital literacy, and the pedagogical integration of Artificial Intelligence. Constructivist principles were represented by Communicative Teaching Competence and Interdisciplinary Teaching Competence focusing on teachers' ability to design task-based and collaborative learning activities, interdisciplinary projects, authentic communication tasks, and learner-centered instructional environments. These six competences constituted the units of analysis used to evaluate the effectiveness of the training program.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The six professional competences were evaluated through content analysis of teachers' assignments and were rated using a five-point analytical rubric (1 = very low; 5 = very high), and average scores were computed to indicate the level of competence development.

The In-Service Teacher Training English Language Program contributes to strengthening teachers' Digital Pedagogical Competence, demonstrated by an 88% level of development, capitalizing on the ability to examine how digital tools and multimedia resources can increase learner engagement and improve communication in online education. The integration of Artificial Intelligence in lesson planning, scaffolding, differentiated instruction, and the evaluation of AI-generated educational materials develops the ability to make pedagogically informed decisions about the use of AI in teaching.

The program also addresses the development of Language Instructional Competence, demonstrated by a 79% level of development. Participants enhance the knowledge of modern approaches to teaching pronunciation in EFL settings, grammar in context, modal verbs, sequence of tenses and translation difficulties. In addition, it has improved the teachers' ability to analyse methods for teaching the English language skills in digitalized environments including digital reading strategies, the ICAP and SAMR models, product-oriented and process-oriented approaches to writing instruction.

Another important area of training is exploration of Interdisciplinary Teaching Competence (83%) developing teachers ability to reflect on how to integrate English language instruction with subjects such as arts, history and mathematics, while also applying principles of brain-based learning, multiple intelligences, and multisensory methodology. The program further promotes the use of TED Talks, story exchanges, and communicative activities to enhance critical thinking and empathy strengthening Professional Reflective Competence.

Table 2 Level of Development of Teachers' Professional Competences (2025 Cohort, N = 300)

Competences	Operationalization	Indicators	Level of Development
Professional Reflective Competence	Content analysis of portfolios, reflective journals, and professional development tasks	Self-assessment, critical reflection, identification of learning needs, evidence of growth	92%
Digital Pedagogical Competence	Analysis of lesson plans, digital activities, ICAP/SAMR-based tasks	Digital tool use, instructional design quality, online interaction strategies	88%
Communicative Teaching Competence	Analysis of TBL tasks, TED Talks activities, speaking-oriented lesson plans	Authentic communication, interaction patterns, task-based design	86%
Interdisciplinary Teaching Competence	Analysis of interdisciplinary lesson plans and project-based tasks	Cross-curricular integration, real-world application, subject linking	83%
Curriculum and Assessment Competence	Analysis of assessment tasks and curriculum-aligned lesson designs	Formative assessment, alignment with outcomes, evaluation design	81%
Language Instructional Competence	Analysis of grammar, pronunciation, writing lesson tasks	Scaffolding, methodological accuracy, skill integration	79%

(*Source:* author's own elaboration based on data collected from teachers' portfolios, reflective journals, lesson plans, digital learning activities, assessment tasks, and project-based teaching products)

The teaching methodology of the program is highly interactive and practice-oriented. Since the program is delivered online, collaborative learning activities, digital interaction and experiential learning play a central role. Teachers improve their Communicative Teaching Competence (86%) participating in group discussions, practical tasks, reflection activities and micro-teaching sessions that allow them to apply inclusive, and technology-enhanced strategies in authentic contexts.

Curriculum and Assessment Competence, demonstrated at an 81% level of development, is supported by the active engagement in online activities, the design of inclusive and digitally-integrated lesson plans, micro-teaching, and reflective practice.

As a result of this professional training the highest level of development was identified for Professional Reflective Competence (92%), indicating a strong ability of teachers to engage in self-assessment, critical reflection, and professional growth. They become more confident in adapting instruction to diverse learners, integrating digital technologies and AI tools, applying multisensory and communicative methodologies, and using fair and inclusive assessment strategies. The program also strengthens their ability to collaborate online, foster learner autonomy, and create engaging educational experiences in contemporary digital learning environments.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova is an important reform for the entire society giving to all students equal opportunities to learn and succeed. The National Programme for the Development of Inclusive Education (2024–2027) supports this process of change guiding schools in creating supportive and safe learning environments. It also stresses the importance of continuous training of the academic staff to better fit in the inclusive paradigm.

For language teachers, inclusive teaching is a challenging matter because students have different learning styles, language levels and cognitive needs. The professional development program helps English teachers understand the theoretical underpinnings of the inclusive process through behaviorist, cognitivist and constructivist perspectives, and then develop the skills and confidence needed to work successfully with diverse groups of learners. Through topics such as differentiated instruction in teaching language skills, digital and interactive teaching methods, student-centered learning, multisensory activities, and the use of Artificial Intelligence teachers learn how to make lessons more accessible, interactive and engaging for all students.

The professional development program outlines the importance of digital tools in modern inclusive education because only by using multimedia resources, online collaboration, and technology-based activities, teachers can support student participation and motivation more effectively. Reflection activities and reflexive sessions are a must in this context because it allows participants to exchange ideas, improve their teaching practices, and learn from each other's experiences.

Overall, the In- Service Teacher Training English Language Program supports the development of key professional competences, particularly Digital Pedagogical Competence, Interdisciplinary Teaching Competence, Communicative Teaching Competence, Curriculum and Assessment Competence, Reflective Competence confirming the relevance of contemporary digital and innovative approaches in English language education.

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IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND DUAL BELONGING WITHIN ROMANIAN COMMUNITY IN AUSTRIA

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Abstract. *Intra-EU migration generates significant reconfigurations of identity and forms of belonging in the context of interaction between distinct social spaces. This article examines identity construction among Romanian migrants in Austria, with particular attention to dual belonging and the configuration of hybrid identity within the Romanian community. The analysis is grounded in a constructivist perspective, in which identity is conceptualised as a dynamic process shaped by social interactions and everyday experiences. The empirical component is based on a quantitative approach that combines data from a socio-economic survey conducted among the Romanian community in Austria with official statistical data. The study explores the relationship between language practices, social networks, perceptions of belonging, and patterns of everyday life to examine how these dimensions relate to processes of identity construction. The findings indicate a predominant pattern of dual belonging, characterised by differentiated orientations toward both the country of origin and the host society. Contextual language use, sustained social ties, patterns of belonging, and everyday practices reflect identity construction processes in which multiple elements are integrated into a coherent form of hybrid identity. The article proposes an interpretation of dual belonging as a process of identity construction, highlighting the processual and contextual nature of identity in the context of intra-EU mobility.*

Keywords*: identity construction; dual belonging; hybrid identity; Romanian community; intra-EU migration.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intra-EU migration has generated significant transformations not only at the socio-economic level but also in terms of identity and forms of belonging. In this context, cross-border mobility facilitates continuous interaction between distinct social spaces, fostering the emergence of complex forms of identity positioning. Among Romanian migrants in Austria, these processes are reflected in forms of belonging that are not confined to a single national framework but involve simultaneous orientations toward both the society of origin and the host society. The literature on migrant integration has often focused on measurable dimensions such as employment, housing, language acquisition, and income. However, Atalay et al. (2023: 10) note that existing integration research often overlooks micro-level processes and everyday encounters, drawing attention to the relevance of identity negotiation, social interactions, and experiences of belonging. Building on this perspective, the present article examines identity construction within the Romanian community in Austria, with particular attention to dual

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belonging and the configuration of hybrid identity. The analysis is grounded in a constructivist perspective, in which identity is understood as a dynamic process shaped through social interactions and everyday practices.

From a methodological perspective, the study employs a quantitative approach, combining primary survey data with secondary statistical data. The findings are examined through comparative analysis and theoretically informed interpretation. The analysis focuses on the relationship between language practices, the structure of social networks, perceptions of belonging, and patterns of everyday life in order to explore how these dimensions relate to processes of identity construction.

The article is structured into four main sections: the theoretical and conceptual framework, which outlines the main perspectives on identity and belonging; the context of the Romanian community in Austria; the research methodology; and the empirical analysis of identity construction and dual belonging. The concluding section synthesises the main findings in relation to the theoretical framework and highlights their implications for understanding identity and belonging in the context of intra-EU migration.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of contemporary mobility and the expansion of diasporic communities, the analysis of identity and belonging highlights their dynamic, relational, and deeply contextual nature. Identity is not constituted as a fixed reality but as a continuous process of construction, while belonging emerges as a situated experience shaped by social interactions, everyday practices, and simultaneous orientations toward multiple social spaces. Within this framework, the study integrates complementary theoretical perspectives, namely transnationalism, social network theory, and constructivism, alongside contributions from theories of identity and belonging.

Transnationalism provides a conceptual framework for understanding multiple forms of belonging in the context of contemporary migration. Schiller, Basch, and Blanc (1995: 48) define transnationalism as the process through which migrants build and maintain social relations that simultaneously connect the society of origin and the society of destination. This perspective is further developed by Portes (1997: 16; 2016: 83), who argues that migrants are not anchored in a single social space but participate simultaneously in the economic and social life of multiple contexts. In the case of Romanian migration, Sandu (2010: 100, 167) highlights the interconnectedness of the "social worlds" of migration, while Ducu (2018: 68) examines the distribution of family and social practices between the society of origin and the society of destination.

Such relationships are facilitated and reproduced through migration-related social networks, which constitute the social infrastructure of mobility. Massey et al. (1993: 450) argue that migration becomes self-sustaining through the development of networks of family and friends, which reduce the costs and risks associated with migration. Ritchey (1976: 389) highlights their role in migration decision-making, while Fawcett (1989: 678) distinguishes between familial, institutional, and cultural ties. From a social capital perspective, these networks facilitate access to resources and contribute to the structuring of social relations, playing an essential role in shaping the sense of belonging. Stark and Jakubek (2012: 15) emphasize the informal cooperative dimension of these networks, while Simon (2019: 3) highlights their self-reproducing character.

The identity dimension is examined from a constructivist perspective, which conceptualises identity as a product of social interactions and internalised norms. Wendt (1992: 397) argues that identities are products of social interaction rather than predefined realities, while Checkel (1998: 327–338) emphasises the role of norms and processes of social learning in their formation and internalization. Within this framework, migrant identity is not understood as a fixed reality but as a dynamic process shaped by everyday experiences and interactions within different social contexts. A complementary perspective is provided by Hall (1990: 225), who conceptualises cultural identity as situated simultaneously within the registers of "being" and "becoming", emphasising its processual and open-ended character. Identity is not a fixed essence but the outcome of continuous transformation shaped by the interplay of history, culture, and relations of power. In this sense, identities are understood as forms of positioning in relation to narratives of the past, through which individuals define and redefine themselves across different social contexts.

This processual dimension of identity is further developed through the conceptualisation of intermediate spaces of cultural negotiation. Bhabha (1994: 37) develops the notion of the "third space," emphasising that identity is not constituted exclusively in relation to either a culture of origin or a culture of destination, but within an intermediate symbolic space in which meanings are negotiated, reinterpreted, and reconfigured. This space does not represent a mere overlap of two cultural frameworks, but rather a site for the production of new meanings, where difference becomes constitutive of identity. In this context, the literature describes these dynamics through the concept of hybridity, which reflects the dynamic and recombinatory character of cultural interactions. Rowe and Schelling (1991: 231) define cultural hybridity as "the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices," emphasising the capacity of cultural forms to be reconfigured in new contexts. Along similar lines, Nederveen Pieterse (2009: 58–60) conceptualizes cultural mixing and hybridisation as ongoing processes through which cultural forms and practices are continuously recombined across different contexts.

This discussion is complemented by perspectives on belonging, which shift the focus from the structure of identity to the lived experience of social relatedness. Yuval-Davis (2006: 197) conceptualises belonging in terms of emotional attachment and the feeling of "being at home," emphasising its dynamic and contextual character, as it is constructed and reconfigured within specific social contexts. To capture the complexity of the concept, she proposes an analytical distinction between three interrelated levels: social locations, identifications and emotional attachments, and ethical and political value systems (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 199). These levels highlight how belonging is constituted at the intersection of structural positions, subjective experiences, and normative frameworks. From a complementary perspective, Antonsich (2010) provides an analytical clarification of belonging by distinguishing between two interrelated dimensions: on the one hand, belonging as the personal and emotional experience of "being at home" (place-belongingness) (Antonsich, 2010: 646), and, on the other, belonging as a discursive resource involved in processes of social inclusion and boundary-making (politics of belonging) (Antonsich, 2010: 649). This distinction highlights that belonging is not merely a subjective experience but is also constructed and reconfigured through social interactions and concrete contexts, in which individual

experiences intersect with processes such as social inclusion and exclusion, recognition, social participation, and the negotiation of identity positions.

At the conceptual level, Brubaker (2002: 164–167) challenges the tendency to understand social groups as fixed and clearly bounded entities. Instead, through the concept of "groupness," he emphasises the variable and context-dependent character of collective identification, which emerges and changes through particular social situations and interactions. Applied to belonging, this perspective suggests that attachment to social groups should not be understood solely in terms of formal membership but as a dynamic process shaped by context and social relations. Along similar lines, Anthias (2008: 5) conceptualises belonging through the notion of "translocational positionality," emphasising that it is not fixed but constructed in relation to context and individuals' social positions. Belonging therefore varies according to specific situations and the ways in which individuals relate to different social contexts.

The integration of these perspectives allows the migration experience to be conceptualised as a continuous process of negotiating identity and belonging, in which mobility does not lead to identity substitution but rather to transformation and reconfiguration across multiple social contexts. Within this framework, identity emerges as open-ended and dynamic, often characterised by hybridity, while belonging is understood as an experience constructed through simultaneous orientations toward multiple social spaces, particularly the society of origin and the host society. Social networks and everyday practices mediate these processes, providing the contexts through which individuals continuously negotiate their positioning and forms of belonging.

3. THE CONTEXT OF THE ROMANIAN COMMUNITY IN AUSTRIA

The Romanian community in Austria developed progressively, experiencing accelerated growth following the political changes of 1989 and, particularly, after Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007. The liberalization of access to the labour market contributed to increased mobility and the consolidation of predominantly economic migration, characterised by occupational diversification and an increasingly visible presence within the social structure of the host society (Cutoi, 2025: 25–26). This development is also reflected in the substantial growth of the Romanian population in Austria. While the Romanian presence was relatively limited in the early 1990s, it has increased steadily over the past two decades, with Romania becoming one of the main countries of origin of Austria's migrant population. According to Statistik Austria data, Romanian citizens currently constitute one of the largest groups of foreign nationals in Austria, second only to German citizens. At the end of 2025, 158,204 Romanian citizens were registered as residents in Austria (Statistik Austria, 2026).

At present, the Romanian community in Austria is characterised by a predominantly urban distribution, with a significant concentration in Vienna and in economically developed regions (Cutoi, 2025: 212–214). Beyond its numerical dimension, the community is characterised by active social networks and the maintenance of ongoing ties with the society of origin. In this context, social integration is shaped by everyday practices and the structure of social relations, while differentiated language use and participation in social networks contribute to the formation of specific patterns of integration and belonging (Cutoi, 2025: 39–42). The community thus functions simultaneously as a space of integration and a space for identity continuity.

In this context, the migration experience cannot be reduced to a unidirectional process of integration but involves simultaneous orientations toward both the society of

origin and the society of destination. A pattern of everyday life thus emerges, characterised by dual belonging and transnational practices, in which structural integration coexists with the maintenance of active ties with Romania (Cutoi, 2025: 49). From this perspective, the analysis of identity construction and belonging becomes relevant for understanding how individuals negotiate these multiple positions. The Romanian community in Austria thus provides an appropriate empirical context for investigating the relationship between social practices, networks of interaction, and perceptions of belonging under conditions of intra-EU mobility.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study employs a quantitative approach that combines the analysis of official statistical data with empirical data collected through an online questionnaire administered to members of the Romanian community in Austria. This combination makes it possible to relate the structural dimensions of migration to subjective experiences of belonging and identity construction. Statistical data provided by Statistik Austria are used to outline the socio-demographic profile of the community and to provide comparative reference points for interpreting the survey findings. In this sense, the analysis is not limited to presenting the empirical data but also examines them in relation to existing indicators in order to identify convergences and differences between the structural and subjective dimensions of the migration experience.

The empirical component consists of an online survey conducted among the Romanian community in Austria, designed to capture dimensions relevant to the analysis of identity and belonging, including language practices, the structure of social relations, perceptions of belonging, and aspects related to lifestyle. The questionnaire was completed by 241 respondents aged between 15 and 61, drawn from all nine administrative regions of Austria. It was distributed through digital channels frequently used within the community, including WhatsApp, Facebook, and email, which made it possible to reach respondents across different geographical and socio-demographic backgrounds.

The sample is non-probabilistic and based on self-selection; therefore, the findings cannot be considered statistically representative of the Romanian population in Austria as a whole. Nevertheless, they provide empirically relevant indications of internal patterns within the community and variations across subgroups. The data analysis is based on descriptive statistics and comparisons between subgroups, for example by age, gender, or generation, while the findings are interpreted in relation to official statistical data. This comparative approach makes it possible to examine how everyday practices and social interactions relate to processes of identity construction and belonging in the context of intra-EU mobility. The empirical analysis focuses on the period 2023–2024, in line with the timing of the survey and the comparative statistical data used in the analysis. More recent demographic data are used only to provide an updated contextual profile of the Romanian community in Austria. Spatially, the study covers the entire territory of Austria. The main methodological limitations arise from the non-probabilistic nature of the sample, the potential subjectivity of respondents' answers, and the limitations of a single primary data collection instrument in capturing the full complexity of identity construction and belonging.

5. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND DUAL BELONGING

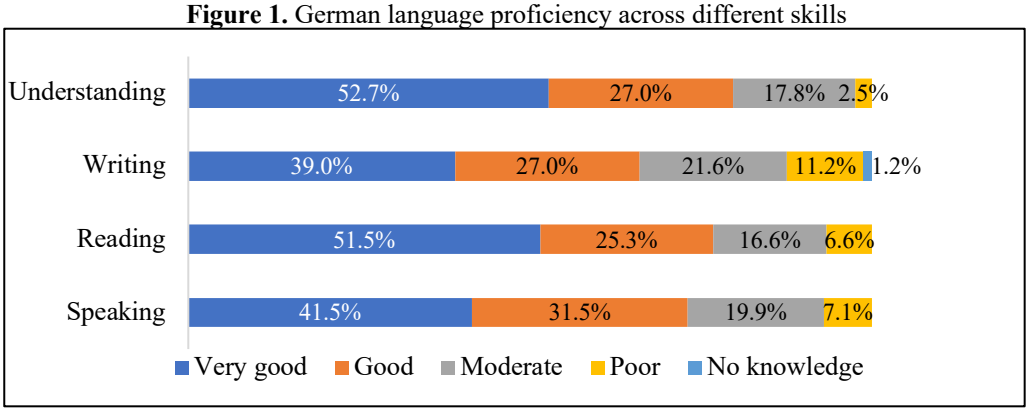
This section examines how identity and belonging are constructed in the context of migration through an analysis of the everyday practices and social relations of Romanian migrants in Austria. In this regard, language practices, social networks, perceptions of belonging, and lifestyle are examined as interdependent dimensions of the migration experience.

5.1. Language Practices and Identity

The analysis of language practices highlights how language use reflects individuals' positioning between the society of origin and the society of destination. Data provided by Statistik Austria show that members of the Romanian community in Austria generally have high levels of German language proficiency, with over 60% reporting good or very good levels in speaking and reading, and over 70% in comprehension (Statistik Austria, 2023: 109).

The results of the author's survey are broadly consistent with this trend, while providing a more detailed picture of German language proficiency among respondents. The highest levels are recorded for understanding and reading, with 79.7% and 76.8%, respectively, reporting good or very good proficiency. Speaking also shows a relatively high level, with 73.0% of respondents assessing their proficiency as good or very good, while writing records a somewhat lower proportion of 66.0%. The distribution therefore suggests stronger receptive language skills, particularly understanding and reading, alongside comparatively lower levels in written proficiency. This overall profile is consistent with the Statistik Austria data and indicates a substantial linguistic capacity for participation in different social and institutional contexts. The distribution of proficiency across the four language skills is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. German language proficiency across different skills

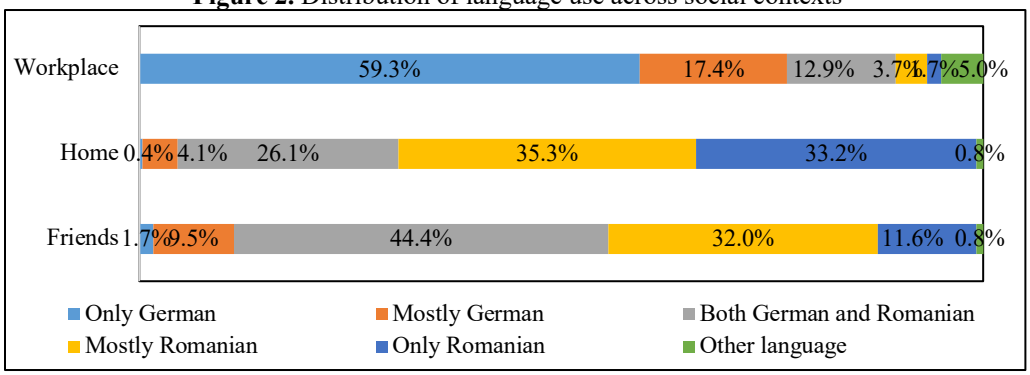


(*Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the author's survey)

Beyond the level of language proficiency, the analysis reveals that language use varies according to social context, reflecting a distinct organisation of everyday life. In the professional context, German is predominantly used, with 76.7% of respondents reporting that they use it exclusively or primarily. This pattern reflects adaptation to the institutional and functional requirements of the host society, where language proficiency becomes an important condition for economic and social participation. In contrast, Romanian predominates within the family environment, with 68.5% of respondents using

it exclusively or primarily. This distribution highlights the role of the family as a space for preserving cultural identity and indicates the persistence of forms of belonging anchored in the society of origin. Within social circles, mixed language use is evident, with 44.4% of respondents communicating in both Romanian and German. This linguistic alternation reflects flexible adaptation to diverse social contexts and suggests the presence of heterogeneous social networks in which interaction takes place among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Compared with Statistik Austria data, which indicate a higher use of German within the family environment, the results of the author's survey point to a more pronounced use of the mother tongue in the private sphere. This difference highlights internal variations within the community and underscores the context-dependent nature of language practices.

Figure 2. Distribution of language use across social contexts



(*Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the author's survey)

Overall, these findings indicate that language use does not reflect a process of substitution, but rather a functional distribution across different social spaces. German is primarily associated with the public and professional spheres, while Romanian remains dominant in the private and family spheres. In this sense, language practices can be understood as expressions of an identity shaped across multiple social and cultural spaces and as an expression of a dynamic process of negotiating belonging. Differentiated language use reflects not only adaptation to distinct social contexts but also the structure of the relationships in which individuals are embedded. From this perspective, the analysis of social networks becomes essential for understanding how spaces of belonging are configured.

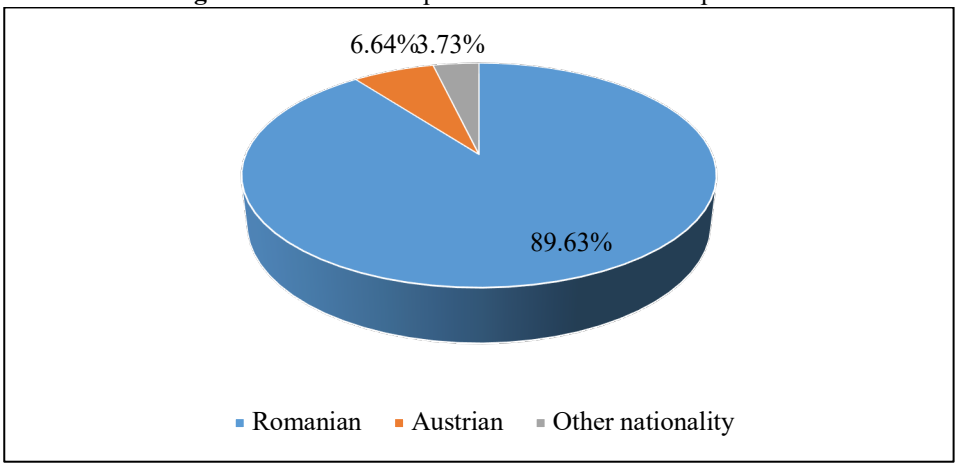
5.2. Social networks and spaces of belonging

The structure of social networks provides a relevant perspective on how belonging is configured in the context of migration. The analysis of respondents' circles of friends indicates that close relationships are concentrated primarily within the Romanian community, with 89.63% of respondents reporting that their closest friends are Romanian.

This concentration of relationships within the community reflects the presence of well-established social networks that can function as spaces of support and cultural continuity. At the same time, the presence of a segment of respondents (10.37%) who develop close relationships with people of other nationalities indicates openness to intercultural interaction and the existence of social networks extending beyond the

community of origin. This dual structure of social networks—predominantly internal, yet partially open—suggests a differentiated distribution of belonging, in which close relationships remain anchored in the community of origin, while external ties facilitate connection with the host society. This relational pattern is summarized in Figure 3.

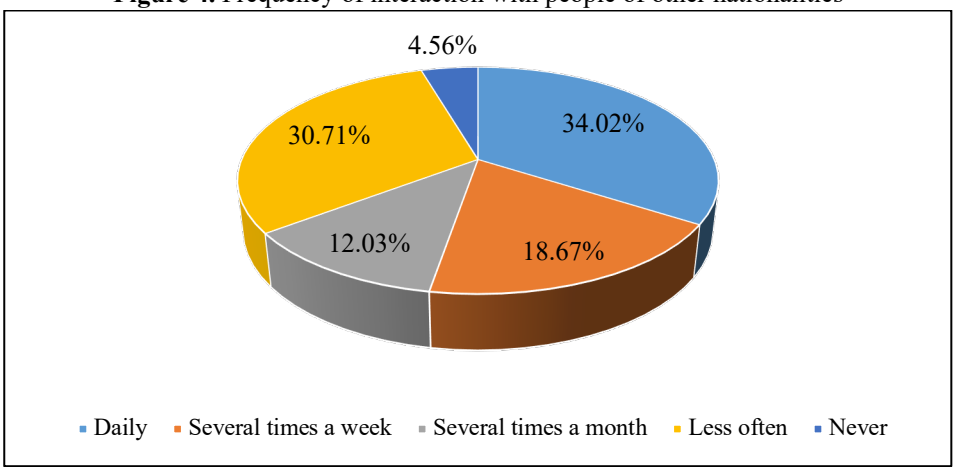
Figure 3. National composition of close friendship circles



(*Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the author's survey)

Beyond the structure of close relationships, the frequency of interaction with people of other nationalities points to a high level of social contact outside the Romanian community. More than half of respondents interact daily or weekly with people of other nationalities. This high frequency of interaction indicates that, although close relationships are predominantly internal, everyday social life unfolds within a broader social context characterised by frequent contact with members of other groups. The coexistence of close-knit networks and wider social interactions reflects a layered structure of belonging, in which individuals participate simultaneously in multiple social spaces. Figure 4 provides a visual overview of these interactions.

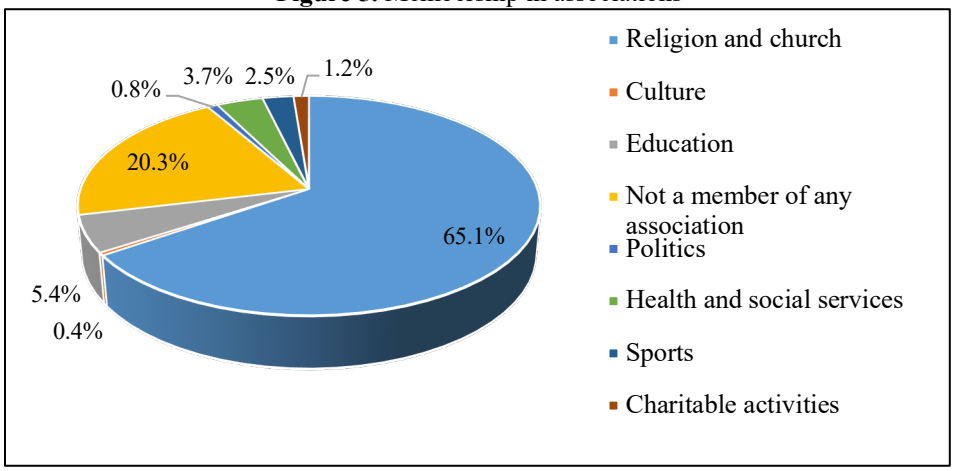
Figure 4. Frequency of interaction with people of other nationalities



(*Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the author's survey)

Another relevant element in the configuration of belonging is associational participation. The results indicate that approximately 80% of respondents are involved in at least one form of association, with religious organisations representing the most common form of participation. This type of involvement suggests the existence of institutionalised spaces of socialisation that strengthen relationships within the community and contribute to maintaining forms of collective belonging. At the same time, participation in different types of organisations indicates a diversification of social experiences and an expansion of networks beyond the immediate community sphere. These patterns are summarized in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Membership in associations



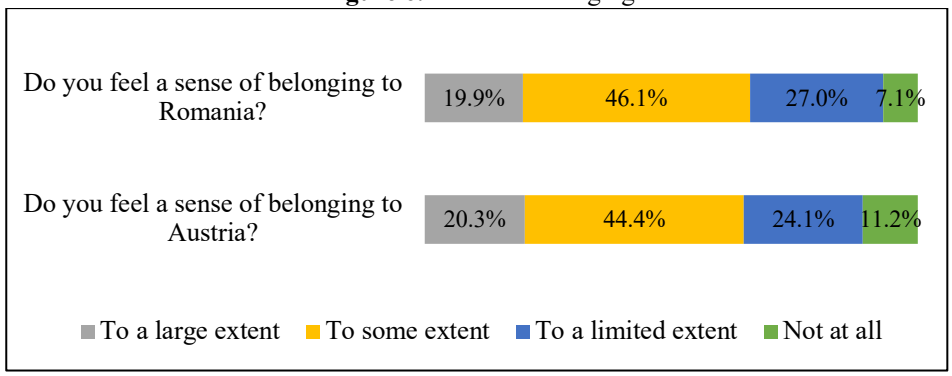
(*Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the author's survey)

Taken as a whole, these findings indicate that social networks are not uniform but are structured across multiple levels corresponding to different forms of belonging. Close relationships anchored in the Romanian community, frequent interactions with members of other groups, and participation in associational structures together shape a complex social space in which belonging is distributed across different social contexts and continuously negotiated through social interaction.

5.3. Perceptions of Belonging

Perceptions of belonging offer direct insight into how individuals define their relationship with the social spaces in which they live. Data provided by Statistik Austria indicate that 73.5% of Romanians in Austria report a sense of belonging to the host society, while 45.4% report a comparable sense of belonging to the country of origin (Statistik Austria, 2023: 97). These figures point to a stronger overall orientation toward the host society, while also indicating that attachment to the country of origin remains significant. The results of the author's survey provide a more nuanced perspective on the intensity of these forms of belonging. Figure 6 allows for a direct comparison of respondents' perceived belonging to Austria and Romania.

Figure 6. Sense of belonging

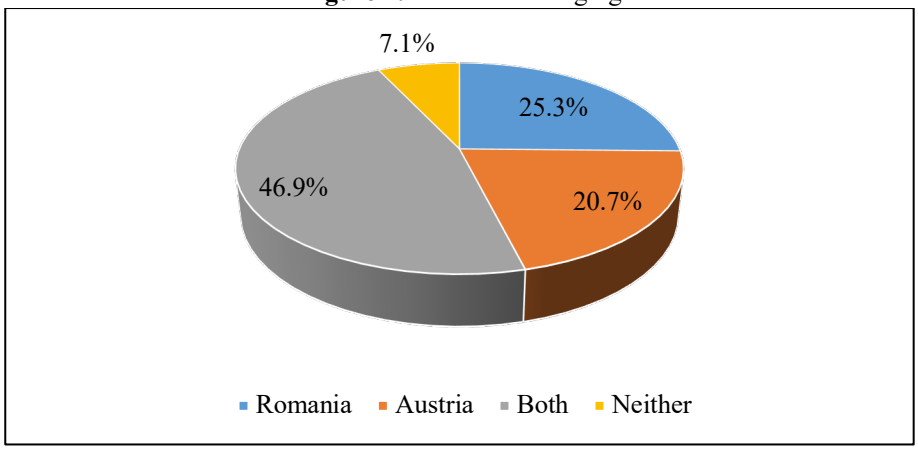


(*Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the author's survey)

When the categories "to a large extent" and "to some extent" are combined, 64.7% of respondents report a sense of belonging to Austria, compared with 73.5% in the Statistik Austria data. In relation to Romania, 66.0% of respondents report belonging to a large or some extent, compared with 45.4% recorded by Statistik Austria. The comparison therefore points to differences in the intensity and distribution of belonging across the two datasets: attachment to Austria is somewhat lower in the author's survey, while attachment to Romania is more pronounced. At the same time, 34.1% of respondents report belonging to Romania only to a limited extent or not at all, illustrating substantial variation in the intensity of attachment to the country of origin. More recent data also indicate some variation over time. According to the 2024 Statistik Austria report, 68.5% of Romanians report a sense of belonging to Austria (Statistik Austria, 2024: 97), compared with 73.5% in the previous report. This variation suggests that subjective belonging should not be understood as a fixed dimension of the migration experience but as one that may change in relation to social contexts and everyday experiences.

A clearer picture of the structure of belonging emerges when respondents are asked to position themselves between the two countries. The results show that 46.9% of respondents identify with both countries, while 25.3% identify exclusively with Romania and 20.7% with Austria. This distribution is presented in Figure 7.

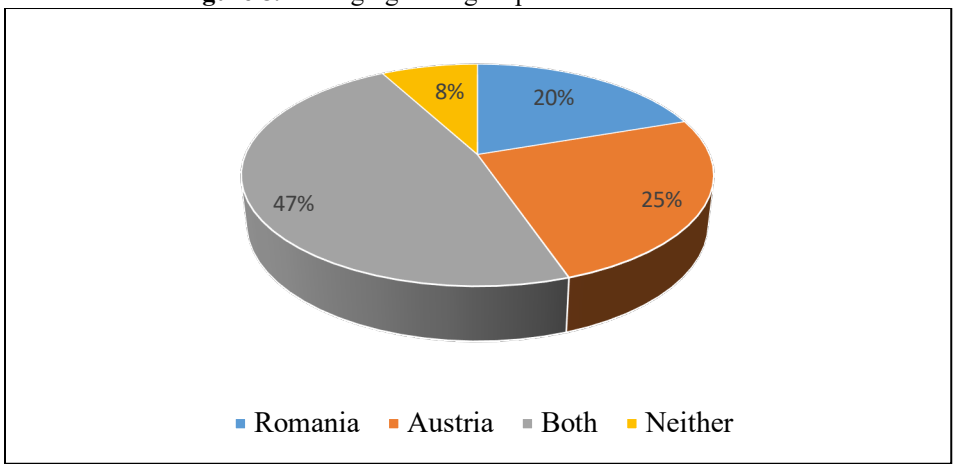
Figure 7: Declared belonging



(*Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the author's survey)

This distribution highlights dual belonging as the dominant form of identity orientation, suggesting the simultaneous articulation of multiple social and cultural frameworks. A relevant aspect for understanding these dynamics is the distinction between formal and lived belonging. Although 36.5% of respondents have acquired Austrian citizenship, only 20.3% report belonging to Austria to a large extent. At the aggregate level, this difference suggests that formal membership and the intensity of lived belonging do not necessarily coincide. Belonging therefore cannot be reduced to legal status alone but should also be understood as a subjective experience shaped through social interactions and everyday practices. A generational analysis shows that dual belonging remains the dominant orientation among respondents born in Austria, while exclusive identification shifts moderately toward Austria. This pattern is examined more closely in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Belonging among respondents born in Austria



(*Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the author's survey)

Among respondents born in Austria, 47% identify with both countries, while 25% identify with Austria and 20% with Romania. Dual belonging therefore remains at a level similar to that observed in the overall sample, while exclusive identification shows a moderate shift toward Austria. This distribution is consistent with simultaneous socialisation across two cultural frameworks and with the configuration of hybrid forms of identity.

The findings indicate that belonging is not structured in exclusive terms but rather as a relational and dynamic process through which individuals construct their positioning across different social contexts. Differences between Statistik Austria data and the results of the author's survey point to variations in the intensity and distribution of subjective belonging across the two datasets. These differences also reinforce the need to distinguish between formal membership, participation in the host society, and the subjective experience of belonging. At the same time, the distribution of responses shows that dual belonging represents the dominant form of identity orientation, with nearly half of respondents reporting simultaneous identification with both social spaces. This orientation reflects not only the maintenance of ties with the country of origin but also the integration of experiences and practices associated with the host society within a shared identity framework. The findings further indicate that belonging is not determined

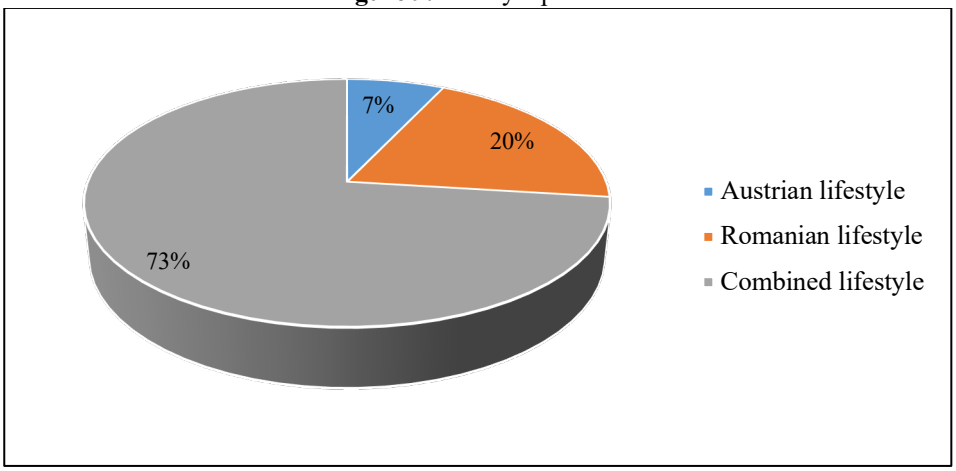
exclusively by formal factors such as citizenship but is constructed through everyday experiences, social interactions, and processes of symbolic negotiation. In this sense, the distinction between legal status and perceived belonging highlights its subjective and context-dependent nature.

The generational analysis further shows that dual belonging remains prominent among respondents born in Austria, while exclusive identification shifts moderately toward the host society. This configuration is consistent with an identity articulated across multiple and interdependent social and cultural frameworks rather than fixed within a single social space. Belonging can therefore be understood as a continuous process of negotiation in which individuals do not simply choose between two social spaces but integrate them into a complex identity configuration, reflecting the dynamic and multilayered nature of the migration experience.

5.4. Lifestyle and hybrid identity

The analysis of lifestyle provides an integrated perspective on how different dimensions of the migration experience are articulated in everyday life. Data provided by Statistik Austria indicate that a combined lifestyle predominates among Romanians in Austria, with 65.9% reporting that they combine elements of their culture of origin with those of the host society, while 31.5% predominantly adopt an Austrian lifestyle and only 2.6% predominantly follow the lifestyle associated with their country of origin (Statistik Austria, 2023: 105). The results of the author's survey are consistent with this overall pattern, while revealing a different distribution of responses. The predominance of a combined lifestyle is illustrated in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Lifestyle patterns



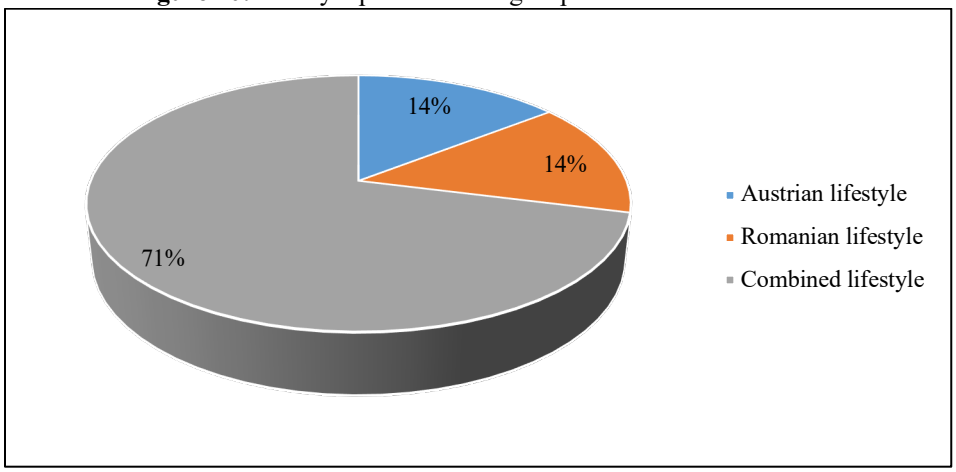
(*Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the author's survey)

Thus, 73% of respondents report combining the two lifestyles, while 20% identify predominantly with a Romanian lifestyle and only 7% with an Austrian one. Compared with Statistik Austria data, the proportion of respondents who predominantly adopt an Austrian lifestyle is considerably lower (7% compared with 31.5%), while orientation toward a Romanian lifestyle is more pronounced (20% compared with 2.6%). These differences suggest that, although everyday practices are adapted to the context of the host society, orientations associated with the society of origin remain significant. The

combined lifestyle thus appears not merely as a form of adaptation but as a way of organising everyday life that enables the simultaneous integration of elements from multiple cultural frameworks. More recent Statistik Austria data show a similar predominance of the combined lifestyle, although the distribution varies across categories. According to the 2024 report, 62.4% of Romanians report combining elements of the two lifestyles, while 27.7% predominantly follow an Austrian lifestyle and 9.9% the lifestyle associated with the country of origin (Statistik Austria, 2024: 105). The variation between the 2023 and 2024 figures suggests that lifestyle orientations are not fixed but may shift over time, while the combined pattern remains predominant.

This pattern can also be examined from a generational perspective. Figure 10 provides a closer view of lifestyle orientations among respondents born in Austria.

Figure 10: Lifestyle patterns among respondents born in Austria



(*Source:* Author's own elaboration based on data from the author's survey)

Among respondents born in Austria, the proportion predominantly adopting an Austrian lifestyle increases to 14%, while Romanian and combined lifestyles account for 14% and 71%, respectively. Compared with the overall sample, this distribution indicates a moderate shift toward the Austrian lifestyle, while the combined lifestyle remains clearly predominant. In this context, lifestyle can be understood as a space in which identity is articulated, as individuals selectively integrate elements drawn from different cultural contexts. Considered alongside differentiated language use, the structure of social networks, and the forms of belonging examined above, this organisation of everyday life points to a coherent pattern characterised by complementarity and contextual adaptation. The findings indicate that the combined lifestyle represents a predominant pattern within the data analysed rather than a simple process of cultural substitution. Everyday practices reflect a continuous articulation between cultural reference points associated with the society of origin and those of the host society. Within this framework, identity can be understood not as a fixed reality but as the outcome of continuous processes of negotiation through which individuals construct their positioning by integrating experiences acquired in different contexts. Lifestyle thus provides a concrete expression of these processes, reflecting how belonging is experienced, adapted, and reconfigured in everyday life.

The lifestyle patterns observed among Romanian migrants in Austria can therefore be interpreted as consistent with a form of hybrid identity, characterised by the integration of multiple cultural elements within a coherent configuration. Such an identity does not represent a simple combination of two cultural frameworks but rather reflects a continuous process of identity construction in which belonging is negotiated and rearticulated across different social contexts.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined identity construction and forms of belonging among Romanians in Austria, with particular attention to dual belonging and hybrid identity. By analysing language practices, social networks, perceptions of belonging, and lifestyle, and by relating the survey findings to official Statistik Austria data, the study explored how these dimensions are articulated within the migration experience. The findings indicate that the migration experience of Romanians in Austria cannot be understood in linear terms as a process of substitution between the society of origin and the society of destination, but rather as a continuous reconfiguration of practices, relationships, and forms of belonging. Taken together, the theoretical perspectives and empirical findings suggest that identity and belonging are dynamically constructed through interactions across multiple social contexts.

The analysis of language practices showed that language use is functionally distributed across different social spaces, with German primarily associated with the professional and public spheres and Romanian with the private and family spheres. This distribution reflects not only contextual adaptation but also the ways in which individuals organise their relationships and negotiate belonging in everyday life.

The structure of social networks revealed a concentration of close relationships within the Romanian community, alongside frequent interactions beyond it. This pattern indicates a differentiated configuration of belonging, in which rootedness in the Romanian community coexists with participation in broader social contexts.

Regarding perceptions of belonging, the findings indicate that belonging is not configured in exclusive terms but predominantly takes the form of dual belonging. Differences between Statistik Austria data and the results of the author's survey point to variations in the intensity and distribution of subjective belonging, while the significant proportion of respondents identifying with both countries highlights the coexistence of multiple identity orientations. The findings also suggest that formal membership, participation in the host society, and subjective experiences of belonging do not necessarily coincide.

The analysis of lifestyle reinforced these patterns, highlighting the predominance of a combined lifestyle in which elements associated with the culture of origin and the host society are integrated within everyday life. Rather than indicating cultural substitution, this configuration reflects a pattern of everyday life characterised by the integration of multiple cultural reference points and by contextual adaptation.

In this context, identity can be understood as emerging from a continuous process of negotiation through which individuals construct their positioning by integrating experiences across multiple social contexts. The findings therefore point to a form of hybrid identity characterised by flexibility, complementarity, and contextual adaptation, in which belonging is distributed across different social spaces and continuously reconfigured.

The contribution of this study lies in highlighting how identity and belonging are constructed in relation to everyday practices, social networks, and forms of interaction, providing an integrated perspective on the migration experience in the context of intra-EU

mobility. At the same time, the findings support a relational and processual understanding of belonging that moves beyond static and mutually exclusive interpretations of identity. In this regard, the analysis illustrates the value of integrating empirical findings with theoretical perspectives when examining processes of identity construction and forms of belonging.

Although the present analysis incorporates a limited temporal dimension by drawing on data from different years, future research could extend this approach through longitudinal methods capable of capturing changes in identity and belonging over a longer period. A more detailed examination of generational differences could also shed light on how socialisation across multiple cultural frameworks influences the configuration of identity and forms of belonging.

Comparative research involving other migrant communities or different national contexts could further contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how identity and belonging are constructed, negotiated, and reconfigured under conditions of contemporary mobility.

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SLOVAK COMMUNITIES IN BIHOR AND SĂLAJ COUNTIES (19TH CENTURY - PRESENT). DEMOGRAPHY AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

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Ioana TÂRB BLAJEC[***]
Manuela BÂRZA[****]

Abstract. *Bihor and Sălaj counties are currently home to the largest Slovak community in Romania. Slovaks were settled in the highland areas of the Plopiș Mountains between the late 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, primarily for economic reasons. An analysis of demographic sources reveals a significant decline in the Slovak population of the two counties after the Second World War and, particularly, after 1989. The study traces the evolution of Slovak communities in Bihor and Sălaj counties from the 19th century to the present, based on data provided by official population censuses, and proposes a classification of Slovak communities according to demographic criteria. The research confirms two fundamental hypotheses: the existence of a historical trend of migration of the Slovak population from the high forested areas towards the lowland and valley areas, as well as the process of structural fragmentation of the community.*

Keywords*: Bihor and Sălaj counties, Slovak settlements, demography, habitat, migration.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the 2011 Population Census, Romania was home to 13,654 Slovaks (NSI, 2025). The counties with the largest Slovak populations were Bihor (6,091), Arad (4,462), Timiș (1,424), and Sălaj (1,118). Among these areas, Bihor and Sălaj counties stand out as the main concentration of the Slovak population in Romania. The geographical backbone of this area is the Plopiș Mountains, located in the north-western part of the Apuseni Mountains, which are characterized by relatively low elevations and predominantly covered by deciduous forests.

The presence of the Slovak population in this part of present-day Romania is the result of several waves of migration that took place primarily for economic reasons. The process began in the second half of the 18th century and continued throughout the first half of the 19th century, when Slovak settlers established communities in four distinct geographical areas: the lowland areas of Banat, the forested areas of Bihor and Sălaj

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counties, the lowland areas and mining settlements of Satu-Mare and Maramureș counties and north-eastern Bukovina (Štefanko, 1998: 22).

Based on data from the official population censuses, the Slovak population of the Bihor-Sălaj region increased from 6,224 in 1880 to 7,209 in 2011, representing a total increase of 15.8% (985 persons) and an average annual growth rate of 0.12%. These figures are considerably lower than those recorded for the total population of Bihor and Sălaj counties, which increased by 317,546 persons (95.8%), with an average annual growth rate of 0.5%. However, the comparatively low growth of the Slovak population was not consistent throughout the period under analysis. Between 1880 and 1930, its growth rates exceeded those of the total population of the two counties. As no further colonization took place during this period, the increase in the Slovak population can be attributed to positive natural growth. The highest average annual growth rate, at 2.2%, was recorded in both the 1880-1890 and 1910-1930 periods, while the largest absolute increase, of 5,239 persons, occurred between 1910 and 1930. From 1930 onwards, the Slovak community entered a period of demographic decline, with the exception of 1956-1966. A comparative analysis of the average annual rates of population growth and decline shows that the decline in the Slovak population of Bihor-Sălaj was more pronounced than that of the total population of the region. This trend reached its highest intensity between 2002 and 2011, when the Slovak population recorded an average annual decline of 1.9%. Romania's accession to the European Union subsequently opened up access for Slovak workers to the European labour market, with most migrating to the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic (Șipoș, Patca, Blajec, Bârza, 2023a: 9-10).

2. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The present study examines the demographic evolution of Slovak communities in the Bihor-Sălaj region, comprising Bihor and Sălaj counties, based on official population census data collected by different states (the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Hungarian state, and the Romanian state) over different historical periods, from the 19th century to the beginning of the 21st century. The sources were subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analysis in order to identify several categories of Slovak communities according to population size and to assess their evolution over time, under different state authorities and political regimes, from their establishment to the present day. Data from the official censuses for the period 1850-2002 were partially published in the *Studia Censualia Transsilvanica* collection, edited in Cluj-Napoca under the coordination of Traian Rotariu and based on the research of Varga E. Árpád. The data are available online at http://www.kia.hu/konyvtar/erdely/erd2002.htm (accessed on 13 January 2025). Data for the 2011 census were obtained from the National Institute of Statistics (NIS) upon request. NIS data were also used to document the evolution of the total population of Bihor and Sălaj counties throughout the period under analysis.

In our study, we considered two working hypotheses: 1. The Slovak community in the Bihor-Sălaj region has exhibited a tendency to migrate from the highland areas of the Plopiș Mountains towards the valley areas. In this context, to what extent has migration been driven primarily by economic factors? Can distinct stages be identified in the evolution of these communities from the 19th century to the present day? 2. The Slovak community in Bihor and Sălaj counties has exhibited a tendency towards fragmentation during the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. In this context, to what extent has the process of ethnic assimilation of Slovaks contributed to

the overall decline of the Slovak community? How could the demographic data obtained through the analysis contribute to identifying solutions for strengthening Slovak communities in Bihor and Sălaj counties?

The study area comprises the counties of Bihor and Sălaj, currently located in north-western Romania. Until the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, this area broadly corresponded to the historical counties (*comitatus*) of Bihor and Sălaj. Our analysis focused on all settlements within this area in which the presence of at least one Slovak inhabitant was recorded, based on official population censuses conducted between 1880 and 2011. We considered only those settlements that are currently part, administratively and territorially, of Bihor and Sălaj counties, as identified and classified by researcher Varga E. Árpád (Arpad, 2002). The ethnic and confessional mosaic of Bihor and Sălaj counties gives this area a distinctive character and contributes to an understanding of how Slovaks interacted over the centuries with other ethnic groups living alongside them.

3. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS: SLOVAKS IN THE BIHOR-SĂLAJ REGION

The historiography concerning the Slovaks of the Bihor-Sălaj region can be broadly classified into two major categories: works published in Czechoslovakia/the Slovak Republic, in Slovak and/or English, and works published in Romania, in Romanian and Slovak. One of the first important works contributing to knowledge of the history of Slovaks in Romania was published by Rudolf Urban during the interwar period. It provides valuable information on the settlement of Slovaks in the Plopiș Mountains area, although much of this information is not corroborated by historical sources (Urban, 1930). Following the signing of the cultural agreement between Romania and Czechoslovakia in 1936, the number of publications addressing the history and culture of Slovaks in Romania, including those in the Bihor-Sălaj region, increased significantly, with works being published in both countries. During the communist period, the number of studies and publications concerning the Slovaks of Bihor-Sălaj was limited; in Romania, such works appeared mainly in the scientific yearbook *Slováci v zahraničí*. Romania's return to democracy after 1989 led to a significant increase in research and publications concerning the Slovak community. An important role in advancing knowledge of the history and culture of Slovaks in Romania was played by the "Ivan Krasko" Cultural and Scientific Society, established in 1994 with the aim of preserving and safeguarding the cultural identity of the Slovak minority in Romania. Ondrej Štefanko, a poet and writer of Slovak origin, was among those most actively involved in researching and publishing materials on the history and culture of Slovaks in Romania, serving as the coordinator of several publications (Patca, 2022: 73). An important work on the history and culture of Slovaks in the Bihor-Sălaj region is *Atlasul culturii populare a slovacilor din* România *(Atlas of the folk culture of Slovaks in Romania)*, published in 1998 in both Romanian and Slovak. The atlas comprises scholarly studies by several authors addressing the settlement of Slovaks in Romania (Ondrej Štefanko), the folk culture of Slovaks in Romania (Ondrej Štefanko), and the history and demography of localities with Slovak populations (Bianca Pasková, Pavel Hlásnik). References to Slovaks in the Bihor-Sălaj region can also be found in other general works on Slovaks in Romania, published mainly by the *Ivan Krasko* Publishing House in Nădlac (Patca, 2022: 73-74). General information on the causes of Slovak migration in the 17th and 18th centuries and on its various stages was published in Romanian by a team of Slovak-origin authors through the Institute for the Study of National Minority Problems (Jakab, Peti, 2018).

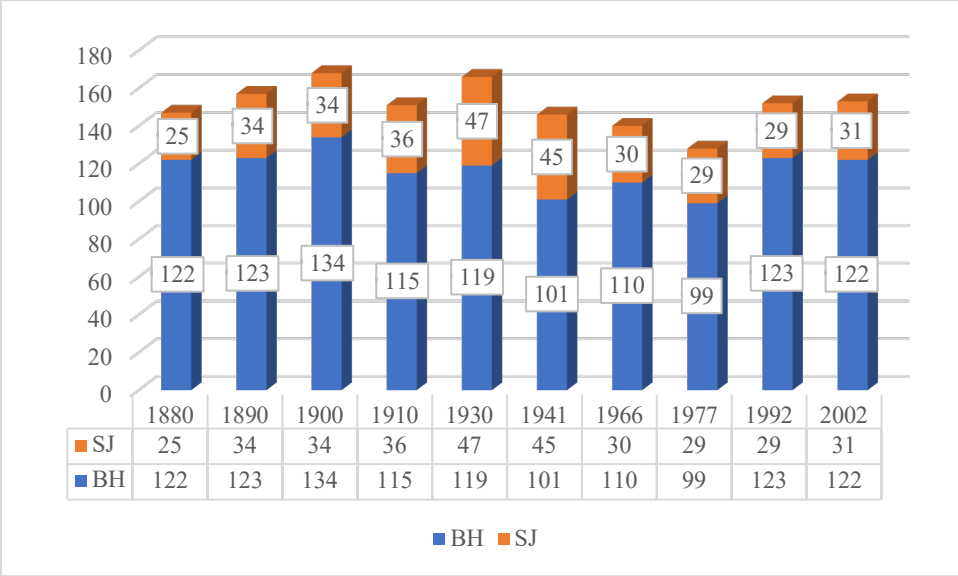
The study *The perspectives of the Slovak minority in Romania in the context of migration and socio-demographic challenges*, authored by Claudia Cardoș, Ștefan Herchi, Radu Carp, and Cristina Matiuța and published by Eikon Publishing House in Bucharest in 2020, analyses the evolution and prospects of the Slovak minority in Romania, with particular emphasis on migration and socio-demographic challenges (Cardoș, Herchi, Carp, Matiuța, 2020).

In recent years, researchers from the University of Oradea, within the Doctoral School of History and the "Silviu Dragomir" Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies, have increasingly engaged in the study of the history and culture of Slovaks in Bihor and Sălaj counties. Stelian Nistor and Sorin Șipoș have addressed historical and demographic aspects of the Slovak community in the Upper Bistra Valley (Nistor and Șipoș, 2013: 184-194). Cosmin Patca has examined the Slovak community in the villages of the Bistra Valley (Patca, 2022), as well as demographic aspects concerning Slovaks in Bihor and Sălaj counties (Patca, 2021: 236-247). Ioana Blajec has investigated, in particular, traditional Slovak architecture in this region (Blajec, 2021: 168-179). Other scholarly studies by a team of authors have documented the historical and cultural heritage of Slovaks in the Plopiș Mountains (Șipoș, Blajec, Patca, Bârza, 2022; Șipoș, Iabloncsik, Târb-Blajec, Patca, Bârza, 2025) and have explored approaches to preserve Slovak cultural heritage (Șipoș, Patca, Blajec, Bârza, 2023a: 5-26; Șipoș, Patca, Blajec, Bârza, 2023b: 80-97).

Among researchers and authors from Slovakia who have made significant contributions to the study of the history and culture of Slovaks in the Bihor-Sălaj region are Eva Michalčaková, whose research addresses the internal migration of Slovaks from the Plopiș Mountains, and Javor Pavol, whose work concerns the glass factories where Slovaks worked (Patca, 2022: 65-66).

4. EVOLUTION OF SLOVAK COMMUNITIES IN BIHOR AND SĂLAJ COUNTIES

Figure 1. Changes in the population size of Slovak communities in Bihor and Sălaj counties (1880-2002)



(*Source:* Official population census data provided by Varga, 2002)

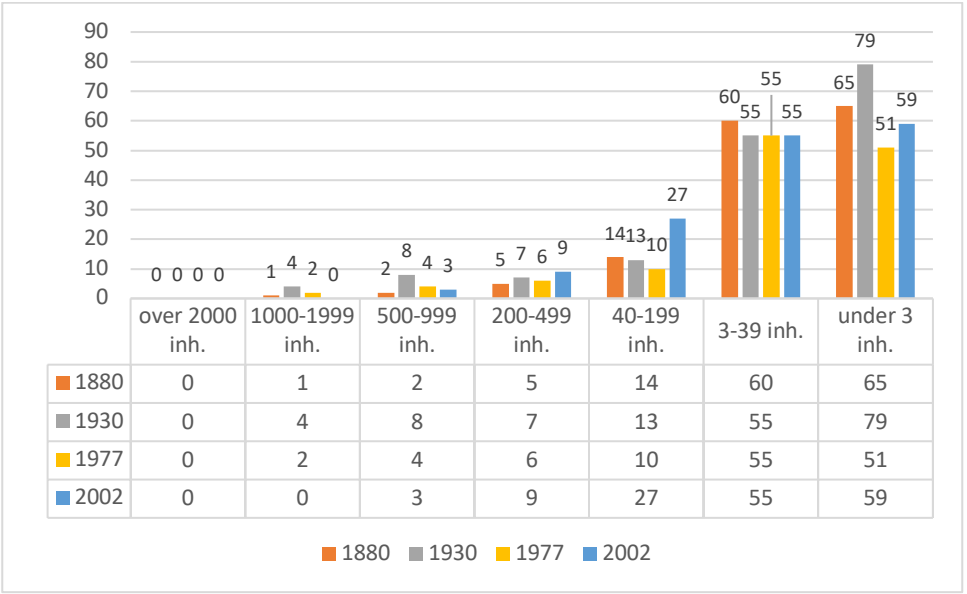
For the purposes of this analysis, we considered those settlements in which ethnic Slovaks were recorded (at least one person), based on official population censuses conducted between 1880 and 2002, which recorded data according to mother tongue (a) and/or nationality (n). Based on this criterion, in terms of population size, we methodologically identified several categories of communities with ethnic Slovak populations: communities with more than 2,000 inhabitants (very large communities); communities with between 1,000 and 1,999 inhabitants (large communities); communities with between 500 and 599 inhabitants (medium-sized communities); communities with between 200 and 499 inhabitants (small communities); and communities with between 40 and 199 inhabitants (very small communities). The classification was established at the recommendation of the United Nations, in accordance with the 1957 classification (Bolovan, 2000: 95). In order to include very small Slovak communities as well, we established two additional categories for methodological purposes: communities with between 3 and 39 inhabitants and communities with fewer than 3 inhabitants. We sought to trace the evolution of these categories of communities at four points in time considered representative of the period under analysis: 1880 (the first census to provide reliable data on the presence of Slovaks in the settlements of Bihor and Sălaj, conducted by the Austro-Hungarian authorities); 1930 (a census conducted by the authorities of the Romanian state, and the only one carried out during the interwar period); 1977 (a census conducted by the authorities of the Romanian state during the communist period); and 2002 (a census conducted by the democratic authorities of the Romanian state). Regardless of the legislative changes concerning administrative-territorial organization between 1880 and 2011, our analysis focused on identifying the Slovak ethnic population in rural and urban settlements currently located in Bihor and Sălaj counties.

Examining the changes in the number of Slovak communities in Bihor and Sălaj counties between 1880 and 2002 (Figure 1), we can observe a fluctuating pattern. In 1880, 147 settlements were identified as having an ethnic Slovak population. Of these, 122 were located in Bihor County, accounting for almost 83% of the total, and 25 in Sălaj County, accounting for approximately 17%. The higher number of settlements in Bihor compared with Sălaj was maintained throughout the period under analysis, although the figures fluctuated from one point in time to another. In 1930, 166 settlements with Slovak inhabitants were identified, representing the highest number of such settlements during the period under analysis. Of these, 119 settlements were located in Bihor County (71.6%), while 47 were located in Sălaj County (28.4%). In 1977, 128 settlements with ethnic Slovak inhabitants were recorded: 99 in Bihor County (77.3%) and 29 in Sălaj County (22.7%). In 2002, of the total of 153 settlements in which ethnic Slovaks lived, 122 were located in Bihor County (79.7%) and 31 in Sălaj County (20.3%). Examining the changes in the number of settlements with ethnic Slovak inhabitants in Bihor county, we find an increase between 1880 and 1900, with the highest number recorded in 1900. Between 1900 and 1977, the trend fluctuated, with an overall tendency towards decline, while after 1977 the trend was one of increase. In Sălaj county, the pattern was somewhat different: the highest number of settlements with ethnic Slovak inhabitants was recorded in 1930; the period from 1880 to 1930 was characterized by steady growth; the period from 1930 to 1977 by decline; and after 1977, a tendency towards growth can also be observed here.

The changes in the number of settlements in which ethnic Slovaks were recorded were determined primarily by the degree of mobility of the Slovak community. However,

this was not the only factor influencing this evolution. Another factor to be considered is the manner in which the population censuses were conducted, which was influenced by the characteristics of the political regimes in the respective periods.

Figure 2. Evolution of Slovak community categories in Bihor and Sălaj (1880-2002)



	over 2000 inh.	1000-1999 inh.	500-999 inh.	200-499 inh.	40-199 inh.	3-39 inh.	under 3 inh.
1880	0	1	2	5	14	60	65
1930	0	4	8	7	13	55	79
1977	0	2	4	6	10	55	51
2002	0	0	3	9	27	55	59

(*Source:* Official population census data provided by Varga, 2002)

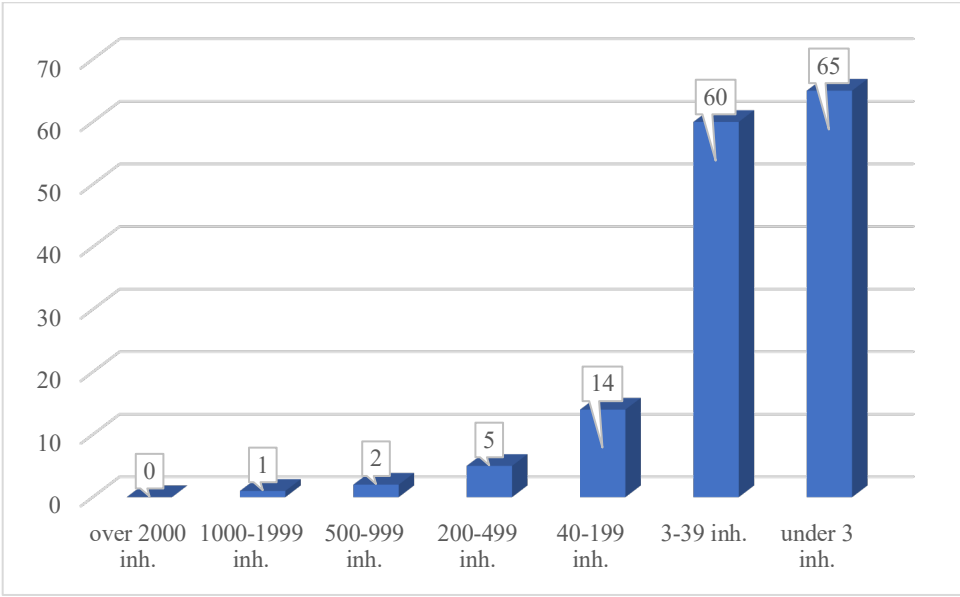
Analysing the evolution of the categories of Slovak communities in Bihor and Sălaj counties at the four key points in time, based on the demographic criterion (Figure 2), we find that the most numerous communities were the very small ones (with fewer than 3 or between 3 and 39 Slovak inhabitants). Their substantial presence at all four census points confirms the existence of internal migration throughout the period 1880-2002. The depletion of timber resources, the low soil productivity in the highland areas, as well as the spectacular population growth in the Plopiș Mountains area prompted Slovaks to migrate towards the valley areas, to settlements with predominantly Romanian or Hungarian populations, in search of better living conditions. Very large Slovak communities, with more than 2,000 inhabitants, did not exist in the Bihor-Sălaj region, while the number of large communities, with between 1,000 and 1,999 inhabitants, was limited. The natural conditions of the Plopiș Mountains area, together with the Slovaks' specialization in timber cutting and forest clearing, hindered the development of these types of settlements.

By contrast, medium-sized settlements, with between 500 and 999 inhabitants, and small settlements, with between 200 and 499 inhabitants, remained representative of the Slovak settlement pattern. The largest number of such communities was recorded in 1930, when the Slovak community in Bihor and Sălaj counties reached its numerical peak: eight medium-sized communities and seven small communities. Throughout the period under analysis, the majority of the Slovak population in the Bihor-Sălaj region lived in these communities. In 1880, the eight largest Slovak communities (one large, two medium-sized, and five small communities) accounted for approximately 67% of the total Slovak population in Bihor and Sălaj. In 1930, the large, medium-sized, and small communities (four large, eight medium-sized, and seven small) accounted for more than 82% of the total

Slovak population. In 1977, two large, four medium-sized, and six small communities together accounted for approximately 64% of the total Slovak population, while in 2002, the three medium-sized and nine small communities accounted for only about 60% of the total Slovak population in Bihor and Sălaj counties. Another category that was emblematic of the Slovak settlement pattern consisted of very small communities, with between 40 and 199 inhabitants each. The forested area of the Plopiș Mountains and the Slovaks' specialization in forest cutting favoured the development of these communities among the Slovak population. Many such settlements were temporary and were abandoned as a result of the depletion of forest resources.

Slovak communities in 1880

Figure 3. Categories of Slovak communities in 1880



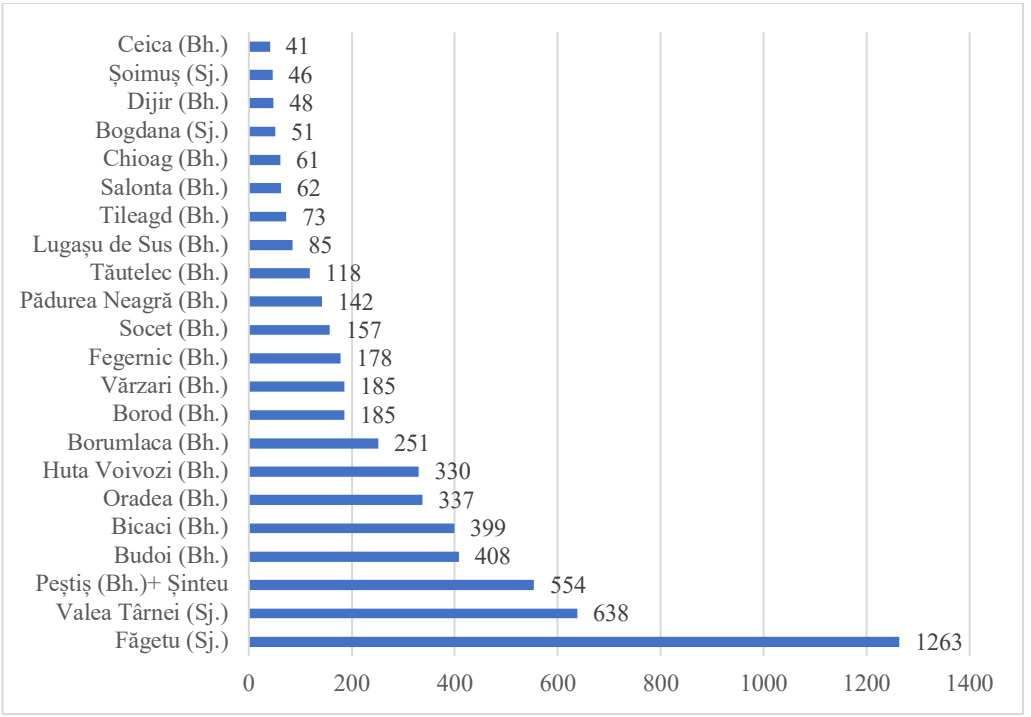
(*Source:* Official population census data provided by Varga, 2002)

The census conducted by the authorities of the Austro-Hungarian state in 1880 was the first official population census to provide clear data on the presence of ethnic Slovaks in the settlements of Bihor and Sălaj counties. The 1880 census classified the population according to mother tongue. According to the official data, 6,224 ethnic Slovaks lived in the counties of Bihor and Sălaj, representing 1.2% of the total population of the two counties (Patca, 2021: 240). Of the 147 settlements in which the presence of Slovaks was recorded, the majority were very small Slovak communities: 65 communities with fewer than 3 inhabitants each, 60 communities with between 3 and 39 ethnic Slovak inhabitants, and 14 communities with between 40 and 199 Slovak inhabitants (Figure 3). These figures indicate that the process of fragmentation of the Slovak community in Bihor and Sălaj counties was already underway, as a result of internal migration. Only one large Slovak community was recorded, in the settlement of Făgetu in Sălaj County. There were also two medium-sized Slovak communities (in Valea Târnei and Peștiș), and five small communities (in Budoi, Bicaci, Oradea, Huta Voivozi, and Borumlaca). Of the 147

settlements in which ethnic Slovaks lived according to the 1880 census, ten accounted for 73% of the total Slovak population in the Bihor-Sălaj region.

Based on the graph showing the main settlements inhabited by ethnic Slovaks in 1880 (Figure 4), we can observe that most Slovak communities were located in the Bistra Valley area, and fewer along the Barcău Valley and Crișul Repede Valley. This indicates that, during this period, forestry was the main occupation of the majority of Slovaks, as the central area of the Plopiș Mountains was almost entirely covered by deciduous forests. In addition to forest work, Slovaks were engaged in the craft and industrial activities specific to the period, including potash and glassworks, documented at Huta Voivozi, Șinteu, and Pădurea Neagră, as well as in pastoral activities, particularly cattle raising. Although the number of workers employed in the glassworks was small, the use of wood as the main resource for glass melting ensured growing demand for timber supplied by Slovak woodcutters.

Figure 4. Main Slovak communities in Bihor and Sălaj in 1880



(Source: Official population census data provided by Varga, 2002)

The emergence of Slovak communities in the Bihor-Sălaj region is directly linked to the large landowners in the area. Four major noble families held estates in the Plopiș Mountains area: Bárányi, Bánffy, Batthyány, and Kereszegi. Before the arrival of the Slovaks, the entire mountain plateau was almost entirely covered by deciduous forests. Initially, the settlement of Slovaks in the Plopiș Mountains was primarily driven by economic reasons. Slovaks were specialized in forestry and timber cutting. Local nobles, influenced by the ideas of Austrian cameralism, sought to obtain additional income by exploiting local resources. The extensive forests could provide substantial revenues for the local landowners. The spectacular growth of the European population in the 18th century

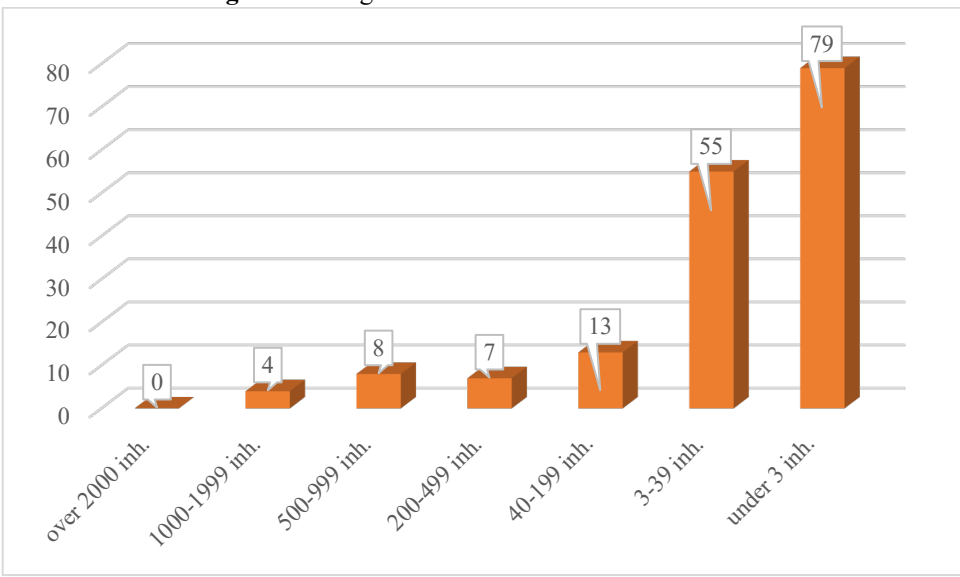
increased the demand for construction timber in major cities. There was also a high demand for potash, obtained from the ashes of deciduous wood. Potash (potassium carbonate) was a raw material used both in soap production and in glassmaking. The Slovaks who were settled in the area were promised timber for the construction of their houses, land obtained through forest clearing, and a form of remuneration. Some were also settled as skilled labour for the newly established glassworks. This process led to the emergence of the Slovak-inhabited settlements on the plateau of the Plopiș Mountains: Șinteu (Slov. Nova Huta, Hung. Sólyomkő), Huta Voivozi (Slov. Stara Huta, Hung. Almaszeghuta), Socet (Slov. Sočet, Zachotar, Hung. Forduló), Valea Târnei (Slov. Židáreň, Židarňa, Hung. Hármaspatak), Făgetu (Slov. Gemelčička, Hung. Magyarpatak), and Șerani (Slov. Šarany, Hung. Sárán) (Ocelák, 2007; Șipoș, Iabloncsik, Patca, Blajec and Bârza, 2025: 18-19).

These are mountain settlements characterized by a dispersed settlement pattern, with relatively large distances between individual households. Each family chose a site for its house near a water source (spring). The conditions for settlement in the area were particularly difficult, as they depended on the prior clearing of the forests and the acquisition of plots of arable land. Following the allocation of cleared land for use, the regional character of the settlement developed as a dispersed pattern, with households arranged concentrically around a courtyard and located at significant distances from one another, depending on the parcel of land each family had chosen to clear (Blajec, 2021: 171-175).

From a confessional perspective, the majority of Slovaks settled in Bihor-Sălaj were Roman Catholics. Initially, they were assigned to the existing Roman Catholic parishes in the vicinity: Aleșd, Mișca, and Suplacu de Barcău. As the number of settlers increased considerably, new Roman Catholic parishes were established, consisting predominantly of ethnic Slovaks. Thus, the parishes of Budoi, established in 1829, and Șinteu, established between 1839 and 1844, came into being. Both parishes belonged to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Oradea.

Slovak communities in 1930

Figure 5. Categories of Slovak communities in 1930



(*Source:* Official population census data provided by Varga, 2002)

Between 1880 and 1930, the growth rates of the Slovak population in Bihor and Sălaj were higher than those of the total population of the two counties. We have no information indicating any significant settlement of ethnic Slovaks during this period. Consequently, the increase in the Slovak population can be attributed to positive natural growth. The highest average annual growth rate, at 2.2%, was recorded both between 1880 and 1890 and between 1910 and 1930. The largest absolute numerical increase, of 5,239, occurred between 1910 and 1930. Thus, 1930 marked the numerical peak of the Slovak community in Bihor and Sălaj counties, with 16,904 inhabitants. The high number recorded for the Slovak community in 1930 can be explained not only by the steady population growth during the preceding period, but also by two other factors. The first concerns the fact that, in the 1930 census, the Czech population was recorded together with the Slovak population. Consequently, the 16,904 inhabitants recorded in 1930 were not exclusively Slovaks, but also Czechs. The number of Czechs in the region was, however, small. We do not know their exact number in 1930, but we know that in 1956 there were 108 in Bihor (representing 1.6% of the Slovak population in Bihor in 1930) and 22 in Sălaj (representing 1% of the Slovak population in Sălaj). The second explanation concerns the fact that, in 1930, the year of the first census conducted by the authorities of the Romanian state in these areas, Bihor County had a smaller area than the former Bihor County; some of the settlements of the former county, with fewer Slovak inhabitants, remained within the borders of the Hungarian state (Șipoș, Patca, Blajec, Bârza, 2023a, p. 9-10).

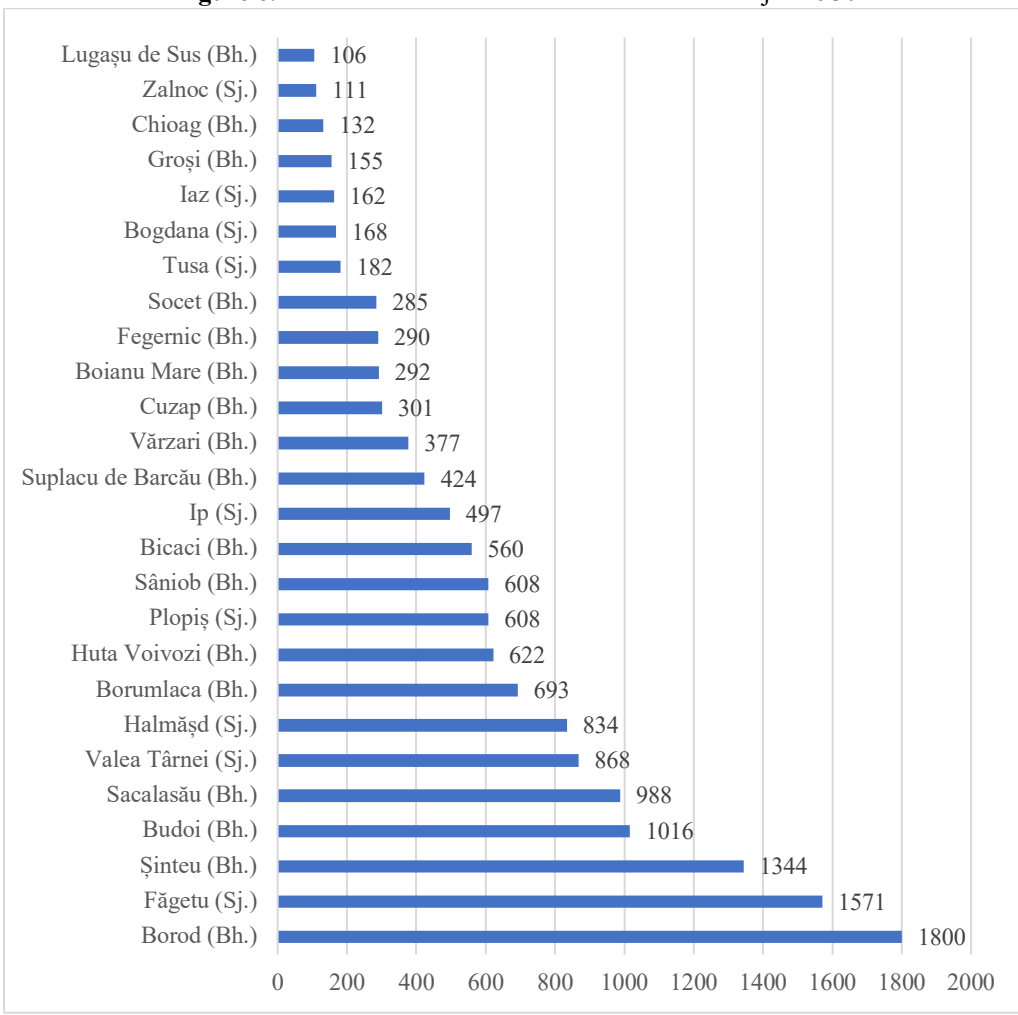
The statistical analysis (Figure 5, Figure 6) reveals the existence of four large Slovak communities (in the settlements of Borod, Făgetu, Șinteu and Budoi), representing an increase compared with 1880. The census also records eight medium-sized communities (in Sacalasău, Valea Târnei, Halmășd, Borumlaca, Huta Voivozi, Plopiș, Sâniob and Bicaci), and seven small communities, in Ip, Suplacu de Barcău, Vărzari, Cuzap, Boianu Mare, Fegernic and Socet. Borod was the settlement with the largest Slovak community, including the hamlets in the highland area (particularly Șerani), although the settlement itself had a mixed population. All the settlements recorded relatively high figures, in almost all cases, the Slovak communities reached their numerical peak over the entire period under analysis.

The communities in the Bistra Valley remained large and important (in the settlements of Șinteu, Huta Voivozi, Budoi and Socet, as well as in their immediate vicinity, but still within the highland area: Sacalasău and Făgetu). At the same time, significant Slovak communities developed along the Barcău Valley (particularly in settlements with mixed populations: Halmășd, Borumlaca, Plopiș, Ip, Suplac), along the Crișul Repede Valley (also in settlements with mixed populations: Borod, Groși, Lugaș), and in the lowland areas of the south-western and western parts of the county (Bicaci, Sâniob, Fegernic, Chioag).

Based on the statistical data analysed, it can be inferred that forestry remained the main occupation of the Slovaks during this period, as was characteristic of the highland area of the Plopiș Mountains. At the same time, the depletion of the forests, the spectacular growth of the Slovak population in the mountainous area, and the gradual replacement of wood by coal as an energy source for the glassworks/factories led to an increase in the migration of Slovaks from the highland areas towards the valleys and lowlands, which offered greater and more varied economic opportunities (crop cultivation) and a higher standard of living. The number of very small Slovak

communities increased compared with 1880: 79 communities with fewer than 3 Slovak inhabitants each and 55 communities with between 3 and 39 Slovak inhabitants. The increase in the number of very small Slovak communities was a consequence both of the demographic growth of the Slovak community in these two counties and of the intensification of internal migration.

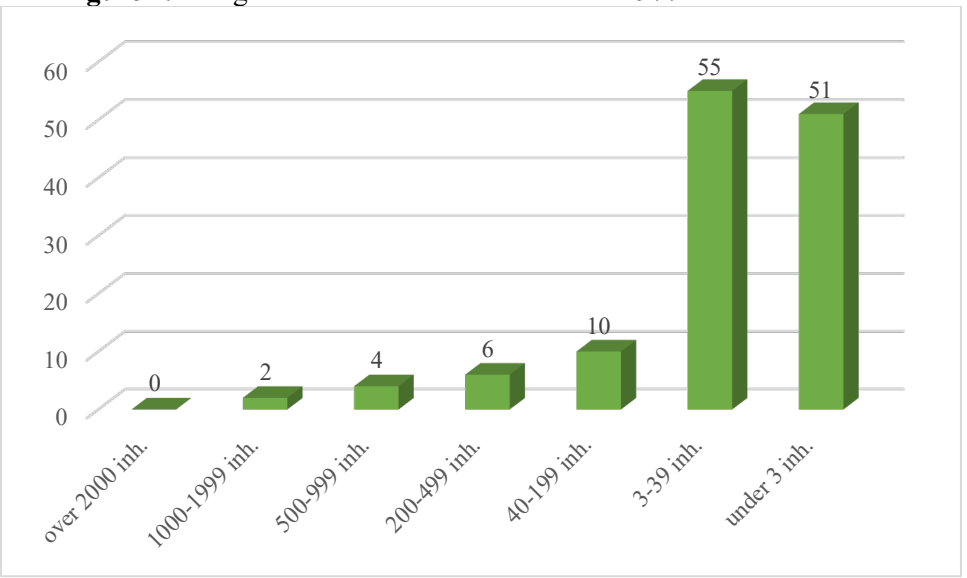
Figure 6. Main Slovak Communities in Bihor and Sălaj in 1930



(*Source:* Official population census data provided by Varga, 2002)

SLOVAK COMMUNITIES IN 1977

Figure 7. Categories of Slovak communities in 1977



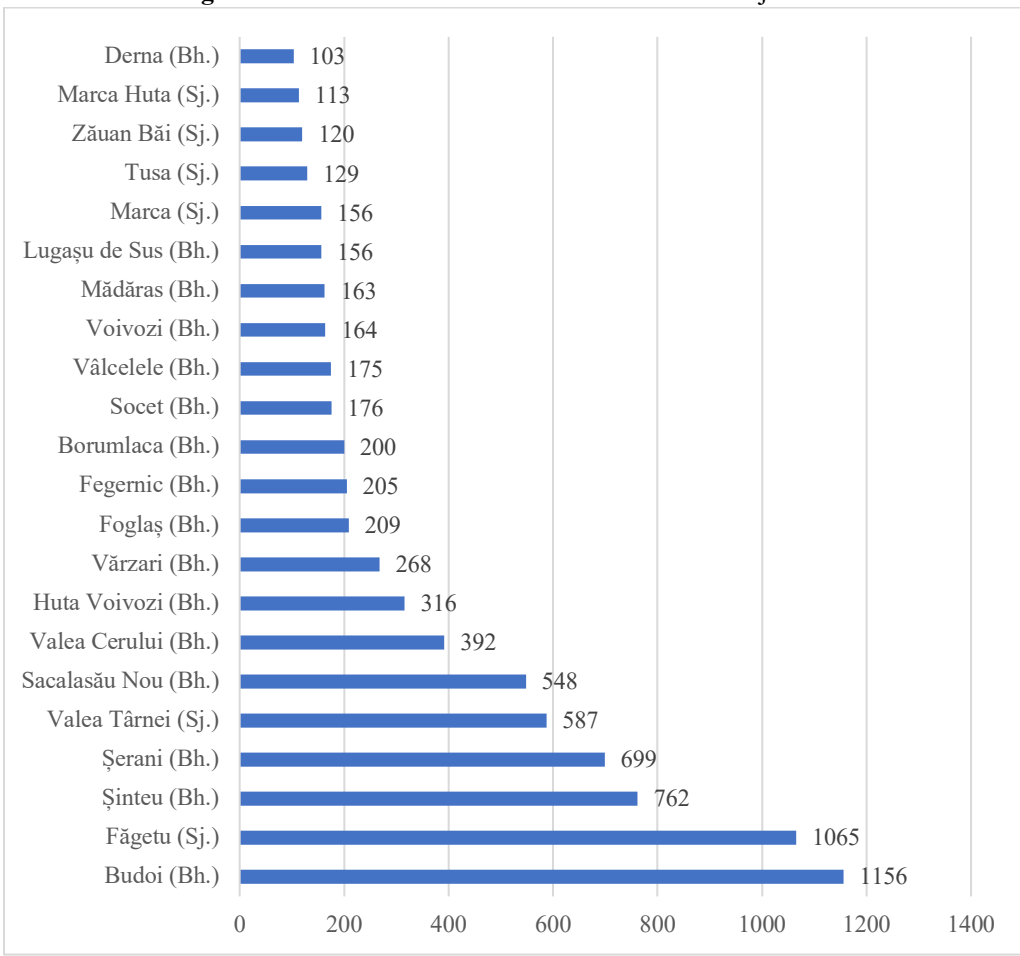
(*Source:* Official population census data provided by Varga, 2002)

After 1930, the Slovak community entered a period of demographic decline, with the exception of the period 1956-1966 (Patca, 2021: 241). Between 1941 and 1966, the number of Slovaks declined sharply, mainly as a result of the re-emigration process, which was particularly pronounced between 1945 and 1948. The average growth rate of the entire Slovak population in the Bihor-Sălaj region recorded very low negative values for the period 1930-1956. After 1966, during the communist period, the number of Slovaks increased in the valley areas (Budoi, Derna, Voivozi, Popești, Ciutelec, Cuzap, Pădurea Neagră) as a result of coal extraction in the Bistra and Barcău basins and asphalt extraction in Budoi-Derna. However, the number of Slovaks declined in the settlements belonging to the Șinteu parish, where economic development was still at an early stage. Most of the timber had already been exploited, while the agricultural land had low productivity (Șipoș, Patca, Blajec, Bârza, 2023b: 90).

The statistical analysis of the Slovak communities (Figure 7, Figure 9) reveals a major decrease compared with 1930. This decline is consistent, however, with the decrease in the Slovak population of Bihor and Sălaj counties between 1930 and 1977: 10,008 Slovaks were recorded in 1977, compared with 16,904 in 1930, representing an absolute numerical decrease of 6,896 inhabitants (Patca, 2021: 239). The number of very small Slovak communities also declined significantly according to the statistical data: 46 communities with fewer than 3 inhabitants each were recorded in 1977, compared with the 79 recorded in 1930. This situation may have been caused by the assimilation of ethnic Slovaks within predominantly Romanian or Hungarian settlements and by the external mobility of Slovaks, but it may also have been related to the manner in which the communist authorities conducted the 1977 population census. Two large Slovak communities were recorded (in Budoi, Bihor county, and Făgetu, Sălaj county), along with four medium-sized communities (in Șinteu, Șerani,

Valea Târnei and Sacalasău Nou) and six small communities (in Valea Cerului, Huta Voivozi, Vărzari, Foglaș, Fegernic and Borumlaca). A decline in population can be observed in the highland settlements (Șinteu, Făgetu etc.), alongside population growth in the valley settlements, particularly in those with a pronounced industrial character (the Budoi-Derna area, specialised in the extraction of bituminous shales and polar oils; the Voivozi-Popești area, specialised in lignite extraction), as well as in other settlements with an agricultural character, across all three main valleys (Bistra, Barcău, Crișul Repede).

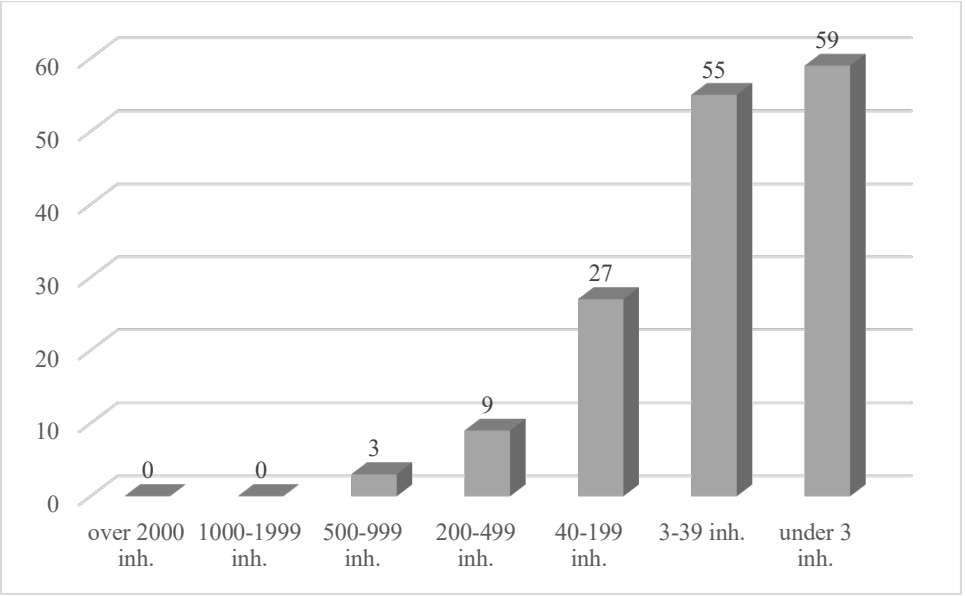
Figure 8. Main Slovak communities in Bihor and Sălaj in 1977



(Source: Official population census data provided by Varga, 2002)

Slovak communities in 2002

Figure 9. Categories of Slovak communities in 2002



(*Source:* Official population census data provided by Varga, 2002)

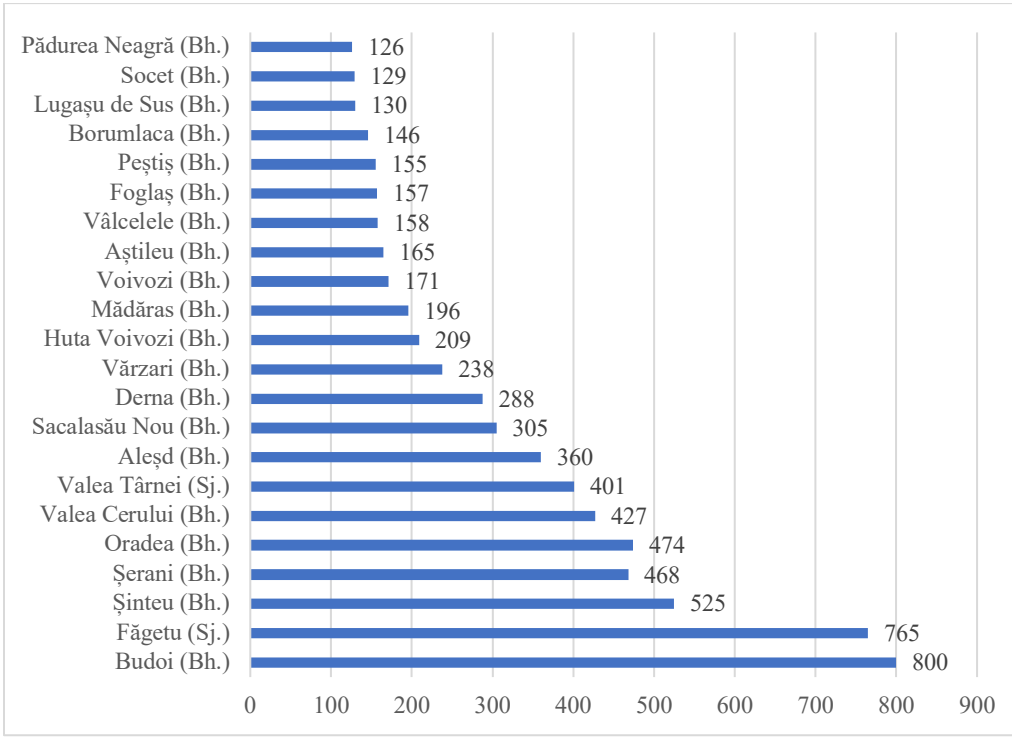
After 1977, demographic decline became evident within the Slovak community in Bihor and Sălaj counties: 9,401 ethnic Slovaks were recorded in 1992; in 2002, 8,736 were recorded, while in 2011 there were only 7,209. The average annual rates of growth of the Slovak population were negative between 1977 and 2011: -0.4% for the period 1977-1992, -0.7% for the period 1992-2002, and -1.9% for the period 2002-2011 (Patca, 2021: 239-240). After 1989, once freedom of movement was restored, Slovak communities declined numerically in all settlements, both in those with a Slovak majority and in those with Slovak minorities. A large number of Slovaks re-emigrated to the Slovak Republic. They were predominantly young people, a fact also evidenced by the low number of marriages recorded in the Budoi parish between 1992 and 2000 (Șipoș, Patca, Blajec, Bârza, 2023b: 90).

The statistical analysis of the data concerning Slovak communities in 2002 (Figure 9, Figure 10) provides the following picture: there were no longer any large Slovak communities, only three medium-sized communities (in the settlements of Budoi, Făgetu and Șinteu) and nine small communities (in the settlements of Șerani, Oradea, Valea Cerului, Valea Târnei, Aleșd, Sacalasău Nou, Derna, Vărzari, Huta Voivozi), indicating a drastic reduction in the Slovak population. The number of very small communities (between 40 and 199 inhabitants) increased as a result of the demographic decline. The number of communities with fewer than three inhabitants each also increased, in the context of the overall decline in the Slovak population, ethnic assimilation through mixed marriages, as well as internal and external migration.

The demographic decline was widespread. The trend was towards the spread of the Slovak community into valley and lowland areas, particularly towards urban centres (along the Crișul Repede Valley, in the direction of Oradea-Aleșd; along the Barcău

Valley, between Marghita and Suplacu de Barcău; along the Bistra Valley, in the area of Popești commune).

Figure 10. Main Slovak communities in Bihor and Sălaj in 2002



(*Source:* Official population census data provided by Varga, 2002)

5. CONCLUSIONS

The settlement of Slovaks on the plateau of the Plopiș Mountains towards the end of the 18th century and during the first half of the 19th century was driven primarily by economic factors. Slovaks were initially brought to the area as woodcutters to work in the extensive deciduous forests and later as workers in potash and glassworks. Their specialisation in timber exploitation and their settlement in an uninhabited mountainous environment favoured the development of a distinctive settlement pattern. Slovaks established new dispersed settlements in the highland areas and more compact settlements in the valley areas. This enabled them to maintain a relative degree of homogeneity and preserve their distinct cultural identity. The largest Slovak communities have consistently been located in the highland areas of the Plopiș Mountains, along the boundary between Bihor and Sălaj counties, regardless of the political regimes or state authorities under which they found themselves in the following centuries. The relative isolation of the Slovak communities in the mountainous area favoured the preservation of their ethnic and cultural identity. Economic conditions encouraged demographic growth within the Slovak community, which reached its numerical peak in 1930.

The economic factor played a very important role in both the internal and external migration of Slovaks: whereas until 1930 the majority of Slovaks were engaged in forestry in the highland areas of the Plopiș Mountains, during the communist period the Slovak community increasingly migrated towards industrial and agricultural centres

in the valley and lowland areas. Internal migration within the Slovak community can be observed as early as 1880. A large number of very small communities emerged, due to the low productivity of agricultural land in the highland areas and the desire for a better standard of living. After 1930, the Slovak community underwent a gradual decline, primarily as a result of external migration. After 1990, the phenomenon of re-emigration intensified within the Slovak communities of Bihor and Sălaj, with negative effects on demographic development. Over the last century, the tendency towards a decline in the Slovak community has remained constant. The movement of the Slovak community from the highland mountainous areas towards the valley areas was determined primarily by economic factors. This internal migration led to the fragmentation of Slovak communities and the movement of Slovak groups towards the lowland areas for engagement in agriculture and industrial activities. In this way, the Slovak community has been and continues to be exposed to new threats and vulnerabilities: demographic decline as a result of low birth rates, an increased risk of ethnic assimilation resulting from the smaller size of Slovak communities and the stronger influence of neighbouring ethnic groups, the loss of ethnic identity as a result of mixed marriages, and the loss of the mother tongue and distinctive traditions.

The overall decline in population affected all Slovak communities, including those in which Slovaks constitute the majority. This resulted in the disappearance of large Slovak communities (between 1000 and 1999 inhabitants) from Bihor and Sălaj counties. In 2002, medium-sized and small Slovak communities accounted for only 60% of the total Slovak community in Bihor and Sălaj. By contrast, the number of very small communities, with between 40 and 199 inhabitants, increased, thereby potentially heightening the vulnerability of the Slovak community.

The research validates the two hypotheses formulated: the historical tendency of the Slovak population to migrate from the highland forested areas towards the lowland and valley areas, and the process of structural fragmentation of the community. In the first stage (1880-1930), the initial settlement based on forestry and glass manufacturing activities generated a network of dispersed settlements, with the population reaching its numerical peak in 1930 as a result of pronounced positive natural increase. Subsequently, industrialisation during the communist period, centred on the mining and coal-bearing basins in the valley areas, redirected internal migration flows, leading to the decline of isolated mountain settlements and the emergence of dispersed mixed communities.

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REFUGEE AND MIGRANT INTEGRATION AND BORDER MANAGEMENT IN THE SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN REGION

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Abstract. *The issue of migrant integration goes beyond geographical, economic and legal approaches. If we intend to treat the phenomenon from a specific point of view, we will find ambiguities and uncertainties regarding the role of states and the functioning of some institutions in the process of migration management.*

The European Union's South Eastern border region, and bordering countries are representing a so-called epicenter of the migration process. Basically, it is one of the main migration routes, also called the Western Balkan track, used by thousands of migrants and refugees on their way to the EU member states.

By the end of 2025, Europe, hosted about one-third of all refugees globally. Large-scale arrivals in 2015 – 2016 highlighted the limits of conventional approaches to refugee integration and called for more coordinated responses across different stakeholders and levels of government.

Managing migration and integration in the EU and in the neighboring countries is a social and economic investment that enables societies to strengthen their cohesion and resilience and become more prosperous. It can be considered also a societal process in which the responsibility does not rest with a specific group, but with several.

The increased and more complex mixed migration movements from recent years have placed additional pressure on the already strained capacities of the authorities dealing with migration management. This extra pressure led to difficulties in terms of effectively manage the borders and address arising border security issues.

The study aims to realize an inventory of the measures, proposals and activities which had an impact on transnational institution building which focuses on migration and border management.

Keywords*: border, migration, integration, Western Balkans, transnational.*

INTRODUCTION

South-Eastern Europe remains one of the key regions in Europe witnessing mixed movements of migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers. The region serves both as a destination and a transit route for many individuals aiming to reach other parts of Europe.

The European Union's South Eastern border region, and bordering countries are representing a so-called epicenter of the migration process. Basically, it is one of the main migration routes, also called the Western Balkan track, used by thousands of migrants and refugees on their way to the EU member states.

One of the great challenges of the region is related to border management and the need for integration of minority communities, including immigrants. Evaluations

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conducted have shown that there is a great need for expertise and policies regarding the integration of minorities in both their countries of origin and in the new host countries which are dealing with migration.

The significant variation and diversity in migration and displacement in South East Europe make grabbing the new trends difficult. Migration issues and demographic issues are two of the key elements of modern society, bringing benefits and conflicts both to the receiving places and to the place of origin and raising issues of security, social measurements and multiculturalism in our globalized world.

The overwhelming majority of people migrate internationally for reasons related to work, family and study, involving migration processes that largely occur without fundamentally challenging either migrants or the countries they enter. This migration is mostly safe, orderly and regular. In contrast, other people leave their homes and countries for a range of compelling and sometimes tragic reasons, such as conflict, persecution and disaster (IOM, 2024).

Regular migration pathways boost public confidence in migration systems, while also protecting migrants. International migration and mobility occurring within regional and global economic, social, political and security environments increasingly reflect migration policy settings. Where, how, when and with whom people migrate often depends on the options available to them, with many of these options being determined or shaped by national level policies as well as regional integration (IOM, 2024).

In recent years, the discourse on migration has become increasingly negative. It is more and more obvious that the complex, transnational migration challenge cannot be handled or managed anymore only by the state. Especially because the states are no longer the most important actors in the migration process. As a consequence, there is an increasing tendency to advocate for closing the borders and trying to stop migration (Brie, 2025).

If we are trying to figure out how to manage migration, or how to elaborate comprehensive and sustainable migration policies, the issue of integration of migrants it must to be considered. Usually, the question of integration, or the method of integration is a very sensitive subject. When it is already difficult to discuss whether and how the migratory trajectory should happen, it is even harder to discuss how and whether immigrants should be helped to integrate.

The inclusion of newly arrived asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and stateless people have become a key priority for national, regional, local authorities, civil society organizations and service providers (Vidal Lopez, 2024). While national policies set the broad policy framework, it is local authorities who face the often-daunting task of implementing them and finding practical solutions.

Integration and inclusion are recognized as a shared responsibility. National and local authorities, the private sector and local organizations have emerged as crucial agents of innovation and key partners for the EU. The success or failure of achieving effective inclusion and integration at the local level can influence subsequent decision-making in asylum, resettlement and complementary pathways procedures. It is therefore essential that this procedure is successfully concluded (Polgár, 2026).

METHODOLOGY

The increased and more complex mixed migration movements from recent years have placed additional pressure on the already strained capacities of the authorities dealing with migration management. This extra pressure led to difficulties in terms of effectively manage the borders and address arising border security issues. While authorities from the

South East European region, with international and EU support, have developed national identity management systems, some aspects there of remain outdated, and do not provide the adequate legal and operational frameworks to effectively respond to the new, evolving challenges.

In the given context, the study aims to realize an inventory of the general trends and evolutions from the past decade, regarding the development of the border management process in the South East European space, but also focuses on the process of migrant integration which had an impact on transnational institution building.

One of our research hypotheses is represented by the fact that cooperation between states in the field of border management play an important role in the process of migrant integration. Transnational cooperation and partnerships between institutions can carry out valuable work by providing guidance and support in this process.

A second hypothesis that we want to test starts from the idea that the creation of certain transnational institutions in the field of migration management, working on the ground can play a more efficient role in monitoring the implementation and the impact of new policies and initiatives.

The present research is intended to be an analysis through which we would like to emphasize the lack of interaction between neighboring states border authorities at different levels in the field of migrant integration at the South Eastern borders of the European Union.

In the frame of the proposed methodology two different methodological approaches were used in the writing of this paper. First, a policy analysis was conducted, which forms the majority of the findings. Secondly, a content analysis of selected documents was carried out which supplements the analysis of the legal and policy framework.

The analysis of the policy and legal framework was desk based focusing on key legislative and policy documents, database in order to query the current legislative status of proposals and other policy initiatives and thus built a corpus of policy and legislative documents that reflect the current status of the EU framework on migration and borders.

Other secondary sources such as academic literature, European Parliament briefings, European Commission documents, research reports and reports by UN and European human rights agencies were used to supplement the analysis of key legal and policy developments.

The strengthening of EU border management was prioritized in the EU response to the refugee crisis. The EU developed a border management strategy and a migrant integration strategy, which aims at an "integrated and global response" to the challenges emerging from irregular migration through the common external borders. The Sout Eastern borders constitute one of the fundamental targets being addressed by this strategy.

FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

After the significant migration wave from 2015 from the South East border of the EU, it became obvious that a well-regulated system must also provide avenues for international cooperation in managing the flows of people from source, through transit, to destination countries and, often, back to the source country or into another destination country.

The challenges from the integration and inclusion of refugees and migrants at the local, national and European levels became particularly even more prominent following the Mediterranean Crisis peak, whose effects continued to be felt in the subsequent years. The main challenges for successful refugee integration are interconnected and involve complex processes (Brie, M., & Goreainov, V. (2026).

There is a different perception between countries with regard to the definitions of the terms: migrant, national minority and ethnic minority. In some cases, states from the South East European region are treating migrants and minorities like own citizens, in other cases like non-citizens - their migration or minority background is viewed as irrelevant in statistical terms (Centre for Strategy & Evaluation Services 2011). There are also differences in the way these people are viewed as having an ethnic minority background irrespective of how long they have been in the certain country (Polgár-Popescu 2016).

Migrant integration is a dynamic, multi-faceted and long-term process aimed at mutual accommodation and acceptance among migrant and host society populations. Integration assumes equal opportunities for migrants in their economic mobility and social, civil, political and cultural inclusion; their active participation in the integration process; and their respect for fundamental norms and values, without having to relinquish their own identity.

The legal and normative framework on international migration includes binding international law as well as non-legally binding best practices and principles. Still, existing international law provides useful contributions to a normative and legal framework regarding (GCIM, 2005):

- the powers and responsibilities of individual states to manage movements of people across their borders,
- the rights and responsibilities of international migrants,
- state cooperation in managing international movements of people.

In line with the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, successful international integration can be managed as a dynamic and multidirectional process that covers inclusion in several fields.

The Council of Europe defines integration as a dynamic and bidirectional process conductive to a "full and equal membership in society", where "all members of society find common ground and make compromises, while inclusion implies that all members of the society have the opportunity to participate in social, cultural and political life and encourages a sense of togetherness" (Council of Europe, 2023).

Table 1. Core policy documents for integration

Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027)	the main strategic framework guiding current EU inclusion policies and funding allocation
New Pact on Migration and Asylum	adopted in May 2024, this major reform package links screening, border management, and asylum procedures with inclusion and solidarity mechanisms.
Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration (CBPs)	the foundational reference framework adopted by the Council to ensure consistent integration standards across member states

Source: European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs (2026), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/migrant-integration/eu-integration-policy_en

The main strategic framework in EU inclusion policies is the Action Plan, which promotes inclusion for all, recognizing the important contribution of migrants to the EU and addressing the barriers that can hinder participation and inclusion of migrants and people

with a migrant background in EU countries. It addresses integration barriers in the main policy areas: housing, education, employment and healthcare (European Commission, 2026).

Effective integration policies are essential for building inclusive, cohesive and prosperous societies. They play a crucial role not only in enabling migrants to fully participate in their new communities but also in supporting social stability, economic growth and democratic resilience across Europe.

When integration is well-managed, it benefits both newcomers and the wider population by fostering equal opportunities, reducing inequalities and strengthening trust in public institutions.

Failure to integrate the newly arrived migrants and refugees can lead to a significant waste of resources, not only for the individuals concerned, but also for the economy and society in general. The legal, economic and social inclusion of recently arrived refugees in the host society depends on how the different rights they are entitled to under EU and national law can be realized in practice (Vidal Lopez, 2024).

Migrant integration policies and measures should not be limited to long-term migrants, but should also respond to the needs of those staying for short terms. The process of migrant integration involves and affects a number of parties: migrants themselves, host governments and their institutions, local governments and their institutions, and the local receiving community, as well as communities of origin, to name just the most significant.

While in many countries across the South East European region integration policies are formulated at the national level, they are mainly implemented through local administrative and public institutions. Local authorities, even when not directly tasked with migrant integration, can do a lot to assist this process, and cities increasingly have their own approaches to migrant integration.

Actively engaging in the migrant integration process does not mean that local authorities need to do everything on their own. There are a number of possible partners, including local migrant organizations, mainstream civil society organizations, local media, public institutions and private businesses that can contribute to the process.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Migrant integration

It is more and more visible that border management and the question of integration as a topic has been a subject for political and public arguments which requires evidence-based information, crucial to respond to this complex problem. As a result to this massive flow of people in Europe, immediate actions and measures, policy priorities for the host countries were obviously demanded in order to help them cope with this crisis.

The European Union's South Eastern border region, and bordering countries are representing a so-called epicenter of the migration process. Basically, it is one of the main migration routes, also called the Western Balkan track, used by thousands of migrants and refugees on their way to the EU member states (Polgár, 2024).

Based on the statistical data, the Western Balkan route can be considered one of the main migratory ways towards the EU**.** After the record number of arrivals in the European Union in 2015, the number of irregular migrants choosing this route fell steadily for a few years. However, since 2019 it has started to pick up again (European Council, 2024).

Many irregular migrants reaching the EU via the Western Balkans route, move from the EU member state in which they first arrived to another EU country. This results in high numbers of detections of irregular migrants and asylum applications in Europe.

Migration has long been a significant driver of economic, social, and cultural transformation. In an increasingly interconnected world, its impact on regional development and economic resilience has garnered growing attention (Łukaniszyn-Domaszewska, K. and Mazur-Włodarczyk, K., 2025).

As a core concept specialist agree that migration is a complex process of spontaneous or forced interactions between individuals and groups. These contacts are often between people who identify themselves as different from each other and who really are culturally distinct.

Different states through their different institutions can apply a range of different policies to the societal diversity resulting from migration.

While in the past migrants were often expected to assimilate, with national institutions doing little to facilitate the relationships between migrants and receiving societies, the importance and benefits of policies that promote integration are now widely accepted.

More recently, studies have been done on multiculturalism and interculturalism that reflect on the multiple identities that people in diverse societies often have, and the policies and processes that can shape such societies (OSCE, 2018).

Table 2. Types of institutional and policy methods to manage diversity resulting from migration

Multiculturalism	A set of discourses, philosophies and policies which aim to recognize the unique contributions of multiple cultural traditions. In the same vein as pluralism, the goal of multi-culturalism is to instill a sense of belonging between people from different cultural backgrounds. Emphasizes equal rights and opportunities for all cultural groups, with almost no dominant culture.
Assimilation	The process by which an ethnic or racial minority gradually loses its distinctive identity and conforms to the cultural patterns of the dominant group. Sometimes refers to whether an immigrant achieves the same socioeconomic status or spatial distribution as the dominant society
Integration and interculturalism	A policy situated between multiculturalism and assimilation that entails a give and take between state institutions, receiving societies and migrants, and implies rights and duties on all sides (Integration can also include intercultural approaches that support cross-cultural dialogue based on a recognition of both the differences and similarities between cultures.)
Segregation	This involves the marginalization of migrants, their physical separation from the receiving society and the ignoring of their needs. This policy does not demand anything of migrants, but also does not provide them with any support.

Source: OSCE (2018), *Good Practices in Migrant Integration: Trainee's Manual*

The concept of integration is difficult to define as there is no legally binding and universal definition of the term. Integration policies can range from a "close-to-assimilation" model to a multiculturalism model, as countries differ in their migratory traditions and/or government approaches to integration. The practical interpretations and social connotations of integration may differ significantly across countries.

The International Organization for Migration defines migrant integration as "the process by which immigrants become accepted into society, both as individuals and as groups. The particular requirements for acceptance by a receiving society vary greatly from country to country; and the responsibility for integration rests not with one particular group, but rather with many actors: immigrants themselves, the host government, institutions and communities" (IOM, 2011).

On the other hand, the United Nations Refugee Agency defines migrant integration as "understood as a dynamic and multifaceted two-way process with three interrelated dimensions: a legal, an economic and a social-cultural dimension (UNHCR, 2005).

Integration requires efforts by all parties concerned, including preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity, and a corresponding readiness on the part of host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and to meet the needs of a diverse population.

At the core of UNHCR's definition is the concept of integration as a two-way process and this is premised on "adaptation" of one party and "welcome" by the other. It does not, however, require the refugee to relinquish their cultural identity and integration therefore differ from assimilation" (UNHCR, 2005).

The issue of migrant integration is therefore critical for many societies all over the world and concerns both internal and international migrants. Integration does not only mean meeting migrants' basic needs, such as housing, food, or health care, but also creating an urban environment in which civic, social and economic inclusion is understood as essential prerequisites for sustainable development (UN Habitat, 2015).

If we speak about the term "migration management", we can observe that there is a similar absence of tangible definitions or policies, even though there is extensive consensus on what types of policy measures constitute migration controls (RESPOND 2018).

Boswell defines policies of migration control as measures adopted to exclude irregular migrations or other unwanted foreign nationals through entry restrictions, border control, detention and deportation (Boswell 2011).

Vogel defines migration control policies as all governmental efforts to prevent access to seemingly legal entry, residence or work by foreign nationals who are not eligible by law especially if they try to gain access under false pretenses, identities or with fraudulent documents.

Also considers that migration management is necessary to prevent illegal entry, residence or work by ineligible foreign nationals (Vogel 2000).

As Vogel's definition suggests, migration control policies have a dual focus on entry into a territory and lawful residence/presence (Anderson 2013; Faist and Kivisto 2010) that corresponds to the classification of controls as external and internal (Frank 2014; Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini 2011; Vogel 2000).

External controls regulate the admission and entry of migrants at the border or beyond it; they also include externalized and remote-control policies and measures.

Internal controls ensure that migrants already in the territory of a state have a legal right to reside and sanction them for breaching regulations related to residence/stay rules (Boswell 2011).

Hebling et al. (2017) similarly differentiate between policies that target external populations (i.e. entry controls/visa regimes etc.) and those internally-focused, such as length of stay of residence permits or right to work.

Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini in their work introduce a further distinction between 'gatekeeping 'and 'fencing' strategies, the former preventing legal access to the territory of a state or its institutions and the latter focusing on the removal or expulsion of unauthorized migrants (Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini 2011).

Migration control policies seem to incorporate both legal frameworks as well as implementing and enforcement measures (Anderson 2013; Faist and Kivisto 2010; Castles 2004; Vogel 2000). However, Brochmann and Hammar differentiate between 'regulations', which refer to laws and 'mechanisms of control', which refer to mechanisms that monitor whether the regulations are adhered to (Helbling et al., 2017).

Castles includes regulatory systems such as Schengen and common EU migration and asylum policies in migration control. Building on the above, there might be scope for differentiating between migration control regimes or systems (Fahrmeir, Faron, and Weil 2005; Vogel 2000) which incorporates laws, regulation and policies, and measures/mechanisms which refer to specific policies and actors like security agencies, local authorities, bureaucracies which enforce laws.

One difference in conceptualizing migration management concerns which migration processes they target – all types of migration or migratory movements that are designated as 'unwanted' such as irregular migration or asylum seeking (RESPOND 2018). Some of the literature treats migration controls as concerning the admission and residence of all migrants (Bloch, Sigona, Zetter 2013; Bosworth and Guild 2008; Castles 2004; Faist and Kivisto 2010; Messina 2007) even though control policies can discursively and practically target mainly unwanted migration. This approach could suggest that all contemporary migration policies could be considered control policies, or at least could have a control orientation (RESPOND 2018).

Border management

The EU's Sout Eastern borders constitute one of the fundamental targets being addressed by this strategy. Already on November 2006, the European Commission published a communication calling for the reinforced management of the EU's Sout Eastern borders and for the maximization of the capacities of the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union – FRONTEX (RESPOND 2018).

Under the auspices of coordinated efforts, the Council agreed on a common definition of what 'Integrated Border Management' (IBM) means in the EU. The prioritization of borders has been coupled with the emergence of a 'global approach to migration', which aims to ensure a multifaceted response covering all the dimensions relevant to migration, with particular attention to irregular mobility by third-country nationals coming from Africa.

The EU policy seems to be based on two distinct but closely interrelated and complementary approaches: on the one hand, an integrated approach to the management of common territorial borders, and on the other hand a global policy covering migration (CEPS 2007).

Efficient and effective border management will enable citizens to live in an area of security and freedom where they can travel more freely and where cross–border trade will be facilitated, all of which are key prerequisites for economic growth and poverty reduction. Enhanced cross-border flows will also support the development of more open societies with a better understanding and tolerance of their neighbors and their cultural, religious and linguistic differences. At the same time, threats related to abuse of malfunctioning border management systems, such as smuggling of goods and trafficking in human beings, drugs and arms, can be more effectively addressed if authorities responsible for the management of state borders improve their communication, exchange of information and overall cooperation (CARDS 2007).

We can say that there are no explicit definitions of neither border management nor migration management in EU documents. The closest explicit definition of what European Integrated Border Management encompasses can be found in Article 4 of the 2016 Regulation establishing the European Border and Coast Guard (RESPOND 2018).

Still, if we summarize the principles and goals of border management, we can say that border management represents the national and international coordination and cooperation among all the relevant authorities and agencies involved in border security and trade facilitation to establish effective, efficient and integrated border management systems, in order to reach the objective of open, but well controlled and secure borders.

The European Integrated Border Management (IBM) Guidelines are of a technical nature and should be viewed as a working tool, providing guidance on how to enhance cooperation and coordination at various levels. They should not be seen as detailed technical specifications on how to develop the individual border management systems in the countries of South Eastern Europe. Rather, they should be regarded as a useful basis and supporting document when developing national IBM systems (CARDS 2007).

A variety of actors are involved in tasks related to the management of state borders in every country. While they clearly have a different focus and thus different objectives depending on their responsibilities and powers, they all work towards a common strategic goal.

Traditionally, the strategic goals at the state level in relation to border management lie in the protection of the borders against threats to national security, the national economy and public health, but also in the prevention of cross-border criminal activities and unlawful entry into or exit from the state. Border services, including border guards as well as customs, veterinary and phytosanitary inspection services, all play an important role in this regard.

Border services are obliged to ensure the security and health of people, animals, plants and cultural heritage. As the potential threats are numerous, an expeditious and at the same time effective control system is required, of which the management is accordingly complex.

On the other hand, increased international trade and tourism, as well as the increase in cultural and educational exchanges make the facilitation of licit movement of persons and goods also an important strategic goal of most countries. Border services are therefore forced to strike a delicate balance between strict controls concerning risks and fully open borders (CARDS 2007).

In order to balance these twin goals of modern border management – that is, border security and facilitated movement of persons and goods – in an efficient and effective manner, appropriate equipment and well-trained and motivated staff are as

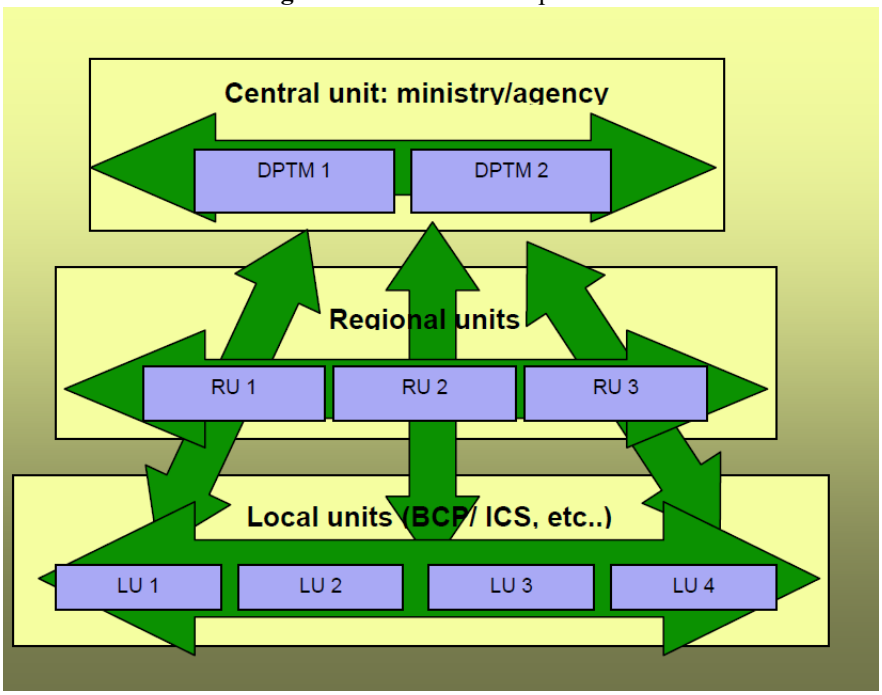
important as a strong legal basis, a clear division of tasks and responsibilities, streamlined processes and an efficient exchange of information.

Taking into account the complexity of the task, this cooperation and coordination should not only be limited to the units within one ministry or agency, but should also occur both between all actors involved in border management within a certain country and at the international level. Most importantly, the services need to realize that they have common objectives and tasks, and that their individual objectives can only be reached by frank communication and by working together.

In order to conceptualize integrated border management, we can say that the key aspects of it are cooperation and coordination. The specialty literature defines that these are carried out at three pillars: intra-service cooperation, inter-agency cooperation and international cooperation (CARDS 2007).

Intra-service cooperation refers to cooperation between units within a state body: both the vertical aspect of intra-service cooperation between the different administrative levels from the state body to the units working at the borders and the horizontal aspect of cooperation between the various border crossing points (BCPs) as well as inland control stations should be taken into account.

Figure 1 Intra-service cooperation



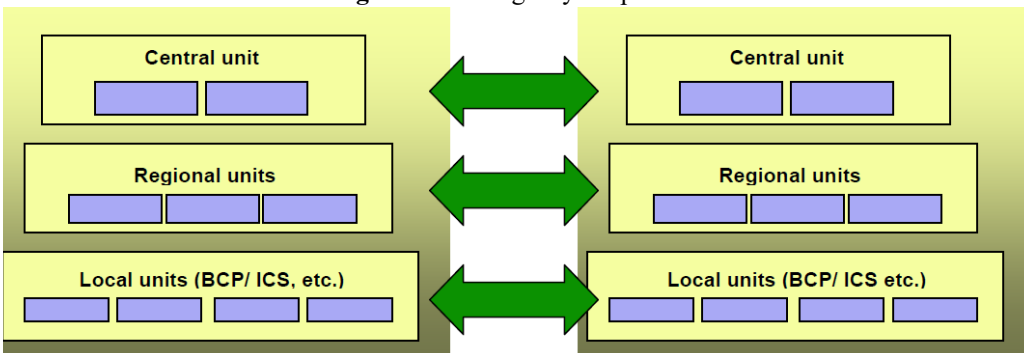
Source: European Commission, Guidelines for and Integrated Border Management in the Western Balkans, updated version (CARDS) 2007

Intra-service cooperation therefore describes the efficient internal cooperation and management of processes, information and resources within a ministry or agency responsible for specific tasks: (a) Between local, regional and central levels (vertical cooperation); (b) Between different units of the same levels (horizontal cooperation).

Inter-agency cooperation takes a horizontal approach based on cooperation and coordination between officers of the different services active at the border (local level), as well as among the regional and central ministries/authorities responsible for those services. This starts with day-to-day operational contact at the BCP (at the formal and informal levels) and extends to the need to coordinate discussions on mid- and long-term strategies between the regional directorates and within and between the ministries.

There are three types of inter-agency cooperation at the border and within the country: coordinated processing at border crossings, integrated information technology systems and awareness-building and joint responsibilities (CARDS 2007).

Figure 2. Inter-agency cooperation



Source: European Commission, Guidelines for and Integrated Border Management in the Western Balkans, updated version (CARDS) 2007

Inter-agency cooperation therefore describes the cooperation at the border (local level) - at the regional and central level - between ministries or state bodies with different tasks related to border management.

International cooperation, the cooperation between agencies involved in border issues in different countries, exists at the local, regional and multinational levels:

(a) Local cooperation between officials on both sides of the border. This cooperation would focus on improving day-to-day operations. It can range from information exchange up to the flexible solving of possible operational challenges in the interest of the facilitation of legitimate cross-border movements.

(b) Bilateral cooperation between neighboring states. Bilateral cooperation should include meetings between neighboring countries at the regional and central levels to discuss matters such as the status of the different BCPs.

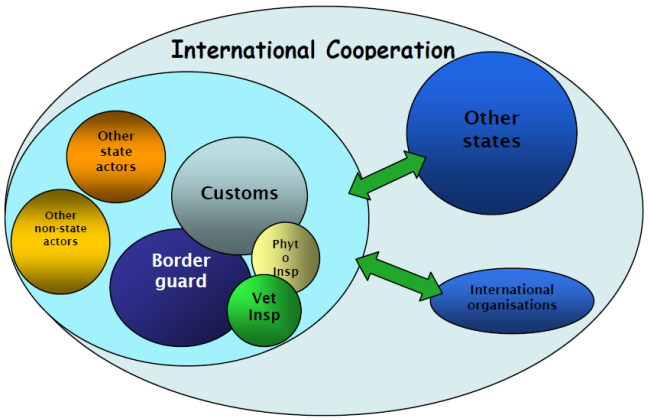
(c) Multinational cooperation, focusing on border management issues.

It should be kept in mind that international cooperation initiatives can also have an interagency cooperation aspect, and that at least the ministries of foreign affairs have to be associated in the negotiation process of related bilateral and multilateral agreements. Further inter-agency cooperation aspects of international cooperation, for example, include the possibility of establishing a common contact office for custom and border guard officers from different countries (CARDS 2007).

Closer international cooperation in the field of border management with neighboring and other relevant countries is an effective tool to facilitate trade and address cross-border crime and irregular migration. This can be achieved, for example, by

establishing appropriate working mechanisms and communication channels, local contact points, joint emergency plans or exercises and handling of incidents in a factual manner to avoid political disputes. While the central level will focus on coordination of strategic aspects such as the joint organization of the protection of the most endangered border sections, cooperation at border crossings focused on operational issues should be carried out on a continuous day-to-day basis.

Figure 3. International cooperation



Source: European Commission, Guidelines for and Integrated Border Management in the Western Balkans, updated version (CARDS) 2007

International cooperation thus means cooperation: at the local level between officials on both sides of the border; Between neighboring states (covering various issues, e.g. from border limitation and border management to the organization of patrols and the organization of common contact offices); At the multinational level to better approach common fields of work such as transborder crime, irregular migration, trafficking in human beings, terrorism and smuggling of goods.

Migration trends in the South Eastern European region.

The European Union's South Eastern border region, and bordering countries are representing a so-called epicenter of the migration process. Basically, it is one of the main migration routes, also called the Western Balkan track, used by thousands of migrants and refugees on their way to the EU member states.

Based on the statistical data, the South Eastern European route can be considered one of the main migratory ways towards the EU. After the record number of arrivals in the European Union in 2015, the number of irregular migrants choosing this route fell steadily for a few years. However, since 2019 it has started to pick up again (European Council 2024).

Many irregular migrants reaching the EU via the South Eastern European route, move from the EU member state in which they first arrived to another EU country. This results in high numbers of detections of irregular migrants and asylum applications in Europe.

The emphasis on preventing unwanted migration is consistent with the paradigm of migration management. Migration management is a key policy term adopted by

international organizations (Kalm 2010), the European Union (Squire 2009) and governments (Castles 2004; Geddes 2005).

Broadly speaking, liberal democratic states allow migration that is seen as economically beneficial while they curtail migration that is seen as undesirable – irregular migration and refugee movements (Hampshire, 2013; Kalm 2010; Squire 2009). This approach underpins EU policy as well (Favell and Hansen 2002).

In this context migration control policies have a 'filtering' function, differentiating between 'wanted' and 'unwanted' migrants, facilitating the movement of the former and restricting the movement of the latter (RESPOND 2018).

This region can be characterized also through its specific features, context and trends in the fields of economy, demography, socio-politic environment and migration. Although there are several differences between the countries of the region, the so-called sub regional migration dynamics connect these countries and create similar challenges and opportunities. The majority of the common issues and challenges are identified as a side effect of migration. These issues are concerning demographic shifts, skills and labor gaps, human trafficking and stranded migrants, inadequate access to health care, environmental and climate change impacts, irregular migration, and return and reintegration, as well as unaccompanied and separated children (International Organization for Migration 2020).

The history of South Eastern Europe, with a population consisting of different ethnic groups that overlap national borders makes it challenging to define and measure migration. Nowadays the region is experiencing an unprecedented influx of migrants, making the so-called Western Balkan route the most frequented migratory track.

Figure 4. Main migration travel routes in South Eastern Europe



Source: European Parlament (2025), The Western Balkan Route, (Meanwhile, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania entered the Schengen Area, but the routes are unchanged) https://epthinktank.eu/2016/10/06/serbias-role-in-the-migration-crisis/dynamics-along-the-western-balkan-route/

Based on the data available data, an increase is visible in the number of migrants registered in all countries or territories in the Western Balkans in 2025 compared to 2024, except for Albania and Kosovo. This reduction is possible because in the past years fewer

migrants choose the Albania-Kosovo-Serbia route. Instead of this route, nowadays the Albania-Montenegro track is preferred. Serbia remains the main transit hub in the region, accounting for almost two-thirds of all registrations (Global Data Institute 2025).

Also, data show that in 2023 and 2024 there is a decreasing tendency of the migratory flow through the Western Balkans. These numbers refer to any registration of a migrant in one of the six countries or territories of the Western Balkans. We can state that this tendency it can be a result of the increasing cooperation between state entities from neighboring countries which deal with migration.

The increasing number of arrivals and high turnover rate are representing a significantly bigger challenge to the entities involved in humanitarian actions. Authorities from the region face the same issue, their institutions are overwhelmed by the scale of the problem. In this case, neither the legal framework which stipulates the process of handling migrants and asylum seekers is enough. Over the logistic problems, there are missing mechanisms which should ensure the implementations of the laws and procedures (Malkki 1995). Even if these mechanisms or methodologies would exist, several times these are inadequate.

All these remarks are underlining the need of cooperation and common work between neighboring states.

But, over the high number of migrants, logistic and social issues, the importance of transnational partnerships and institution building in migration integration also represents a sensitive policy concern to (Tanasijević, Škorić, Nijemčević Popovski, 2025).

Most of the actions delivered by state entities are taking place in border areas. These borderlands, or border areas represent key sovereign objectives over which states claim full control (Fauser-Di Stefano-Fattorelli 2023). Because of the specific reasons mentioned above, actions delivered by these entities face specific challenges. These specific challenges can represent a serious obstacle especially if the beneficiaries (migrants) have needs that are unrecognized or even forbidden by the state law.

All the data and information presented above underlines the complex and multi-faceted roles of the partnerships between state entities in neighboring countries as a distinct category of actors working in contemporary migrant integration and border regimes. It is also visible that there still are unclear situations, lack of unity and motivation in the actions of these state entities. Also, there is no clear antagonism between public authorities from the different side of the borders as both can perform the same tasks. But it is more than obvious that public authorities need to focus and consider the role of transnational partnership and cooperation in migration management.

CONCLUSION

A variety of actors are involved in tasks related to the management of state borders in every country. While they clearly have a different focus and thus different objectives depending on their responsibilities and powers, they all work towards a common strategic goal.

Traditionally, the strategic goals at the state level in relation to border management lie in the protection of the borders against threats to national security, the national economy and public health, but also in the prevention of cross-border criminal activities and unlawful entry into or exit from the state.

In order to balance these twin goals of modern border management that is, border security and facilitated movement of persons and goods in an efficient and effective manner, appropriate equipment and well-trained and motivated staff are as important as

a strong legal basis, a clear division of tasks and responsibilities, streamlined processes and an efficient exchange of information.

Taking into account the complexity of the task, this cooperation and coordination should not only be limited to the units within one ministry or agency, but should also occur both between all actors involved in border management within a certain country and at the international level. Most importantly, the services need to realize that they have common objectives and tasks, and that their individual objectives can only be reached by frank communication and by working together.

Managing migration in the European Union and at its South Eastern borders is a social and economic investment that enables European societies to strengthen their cohesion and resilience and become more prosperous. It can be considered also a societal process in which the responsibility does not rest with a specific group, but with several: migrants, host communities, public authorities and institutions, social and economic partners, civil society organizations, churches, religious and other philosophical communities, and the private sector (European Commission 2020).

Transnational cooperation between state entities and its organizations plays an important role in migrant and refugee integration in all the target countries. The result of this type of cooperations carry out valuable work assisting or even substituting domestic governmental institutions by providing guidance and support in integration processes. However, their involvement in the design of integration policies and integration activities does not always correspond to the importance of their role. Basically, the results of this study confirm H1, which assumes that cooperation between states in the field of border management play an important role in the process of migrant integration. Transnational cooperation and partnerships between institutions can carry out valuable work by providing guidance and support in this process and can play an important role in migrant management. Therefore, South East European states should step up their efforts to achieve more structured cooperation between their governments, authorities so as to create synergies and make better use of the knowledge and resources available on both sides. Sharing the expertise and the good practice should be much more used and capitalized when designing integration strategies and measures in order to increase their efficiency.

The second hypothesis which assumes that the creation of certain transnational institutions in the field of migration management, working on the ground can play a more efficient role in monitoring the implementation and the impact of new policies and initiatives is also confirmed. State entities can be relevant and can operate at different levels. Some entities are active at EU level, others at national level, and others at regional or local level. Activities at different levels complement each other (EESC, 2020). State entities working on the ground are monitoring the implementation and impact of new policies and initiatives. However, in addition to impacting political decisions, these entities also deliver services to the people it represents.

In order to achieve and establish a well-functioning migrant integration system and an efficient border management system national and international coordination and cooperation among all the relevant authorities and agencies involved in border security and trade facilitation represents a basic ingredient.

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NATIONAL IDENTITY AS AN OBJECT OF ANALYSIS IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SCIENCE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND A CASE STUDY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract. *This article proposes a theoretical framework for studying national identity as an object of research in contemporary political science. It clarifies the distinction between ethnicity and nation, reviews the main explanatory paradigms concerning the formation of national identities—primordialism, modernism/constructivism, and ethno-symbolism—and examines several related analytical tools, including the civic–ethnic nationalism dichotomy, the concept of "invented tradition," and the generational identity-revival hypothesis known as the "Hansen effect." The framework is subsequently applied to a specific case study: the Republic of Moldova. These analytical tools make it possible to assess the hypothesis that Moldovans and Romanians constitute the same ethnic group, while the "Moldovan" national identity was an institutional construction of Soviet origin that is currently undergoing a process of reconfiguration. The conclusions show that the hypothesis is confirmed at the conceptual, explanatory, and institutional levels. It is qualified, however, by the persistence of "Moldovan" ethnic self-identification and by the distinct trajectory of the Gagauz community. The possibility that a European civic identity may emerge remains an open question.*

Keywords*: national identity, ethnicity, nation, primordialism, constructivism, ethno-symbolism, civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism, invented tradition.*

1. INTRODUCTION

For more than four decades, the study of national identity has occupied a central place in comparative political science, historical sociology, and international relations. The fundamental difficulty in this field lies not so much in the lack of empirical data as in terminological ambiguity. Terms such as "people," "ethnicity," "nation," and "nationalism" are frequently used interchangeably, although they designate different types of social phenomena governed by distinct temporal logics. An ethnic group may persist for centuries as a form of cultural solidarity, almost independently of political structures. A nation, however, in the modern sense of the term, presupposes the existence of an organized political community with institutions, citizenship, and, generally, its own state or an aspiration to establish one. The confusion between these two dimensions, the cultural-genealogical and the political-institutional, generates a significant proportion of the apparently irreconcilable debates in the literature on nationalism. The purpose of this section is to construct a coherent conceptual framework capable of analytically separating what everyday language tends to conflate. The proposed framework follows three steps: (1) the rigorous definition of the concepts of ethnicity and nation; (2) a review

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of the major theoretical paradigms explaining the emergence and persistence of collective identities—primordialism, modernism, and ethno-symbolism—including a recent and less conventional position that challenges the modernist premise of national "invention"; and (3) the introduction of two complementary analytical tools, namely the civic–ethnic dichotomy and the concept of invented tradition, together with a hypothesis concerning the generational dynamics of identity-based memory.

This theoretical apparatus is applied, in the second part of the paper, to the case study of the Republic of Moldova.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Ethnicity and Nation: Clarifying Two Fundamental Terms

The first step in this undertaking consists in clarifying two fundamental terms that are often used interchangeably in common language: ethnicity and nation. The term "ethnicity", borrowed from French and adopted by the Anglo-Saxon literature because it lacked an equally precise equivalent, designates, in the tradition initiated by the British sociologist Anthony D. Smith, an analytical category distinct from both "race" and "nation." Smith proposed an operational definition comprising six constitutive attributes of an ethnic group:

- A proper collective name.
- A myth of common ancestry.
- Shared historical memories.
- One or more differentiating elements of a common culture, such as language, religion, or customs.
- An association with a "homeland," even when the population no longer effectively lives there.
- A sense of solidarity, present at least among the community's elites.

The more of these attributes a population possesses, and the more intensely they are experienced, the more closely that population approximates the ideal type of an ethnic group (Smith, 1991). An essential element of this definition is the character of the common-ancestry narrative as a myth, an issue on which theorists disagree. For Smith, what matters for group cohesion is not necessarily the genealogical or biological demonstration of common ancestry, but rather the shared conviction among members that such ancestry exists. From this perspective, ethnicity is primarily a community of belief and memory, rather than one defined strictly in biological terms.Primordialists reject this relativization. For authors such as Van den Berghe or, in a more radical form, Shirokogorov and Gumilev, discussed below, kinship is real rather than merely symbolic. Ethnic cohesion would therefore rest precisely on actual biological descent, and not merely on the perception of such descent. Despite this dispute, Smith's explicit distinction between "ethnicity" and "race" remains useful. The former is based on cultural elements—language, customs, and a history perceived as common, whereas the latter is based on allegedly fixed physical characteristics.

From a temporal perspective, ethnicity is a long-term formation, a phenomenon of the *longue durée*. It develops and changes slowly over several generations or even centuries through processes of cultural assimilation, migration, and reinterpretation of collective memory, rather than through an instantaneous political decision. In general, belonging to an ethnic group is a condition into which an individual is born, rather than one deliberately chosen. Unlike ethnicity, the nation is, in most contemporary theoretical

traditions, a modern structural phenomenon associated with the emergence of the centralized state, citizenship, and an integrated market economy. Smith's definition is illustrative in this regard. A nation is a named population that shares a historic territory, common myths and memories, a mass public culture, a common economy, and common legal rights and duties among its members (Smith, 1991). The elements added to the definition of ethnicity—legally defined territory, standardized public culture, usually established through education and the press, an integrated economy, and a common legal framework, are precisely those that presuppose the existence of a state apparatus capable of producing and enforcing them.

Benedict Anderson proposed, in a formulation that has become canonical, the definition of the nation as an "imagined political community." It is imagined because no member of a nation can personally know more than a tiny fraction of their fellow citizens, yet still represents the community as a coherent entity; limited because every nation has boundaries, however elastic, beyond which another nation begins; and sovereign because the concept historically emerged as a replacement for dynastic monarchies of divine right, in the context of the Enlightenment (Anderson, 1983/2006, pp. 6–7). Anderson emphasizes that being "imagined" does not mean being false or arbitrarily fabricated, but rather pertains to the nature of any community large enough that its members cannot know one another directly.

Ernest Gellner goes further, arguing that the causal relationship between nationalism and the nation is the reverse of what common sense assumes. It is not pre-existing nations that generate nationalism as a political movement, but rather nationalism—understood as the principle demanding congruence between political unity and cultural unity—that "invents" nations where they did not previously exist as such (Gellner, 1983, pp. 48–49). For Gellner, the emergence of nationalism is inextricably linked to the transition from agrarian to industrial society. The modern industrial economy requires a mobile, literate workforce capable of communicating within a standardized culture, imposed from above through a mass education system, conditions that, in his view, neither existed nor were necessary in agrarian societies structured around "low," fragmented, and isolated cultures.

The distinction between ethnicity and nation is not merely terminological but has direct methodological consequences. The two concepts operate according to different "rules." Ethnicity changes slowly, through diffuse cultural processes, whereas the nation can, at least in certain respects, be constructed or even decreed by a state through deliberate policies, such as the education system, linguistic standardization, official symbols, or the legal framework of citizenship. At the same time, the vast majority of theorists, including those of a modernist orientation, acknowledge that modern nations never emerge completely *ex nihilo*. They usually constitute themselves starting from a pre-existing "ethnic core," whose myths, memories, and symbols are reactivated, reinterpreted, and institutionalized by the modern state (Smith, 1986). This observation makes it theoretically possible for a single ethnicity to generate, under certain historical and political conditions, more than one national identity, a question revisited in the application to the case study in the second part of the paper.

The Czech historian Miroslav Hroch offered one of the most influential descriptions of this process of transition from ethnicity to nation. He showed that no nation, however "pure" it may appear in retrospect, is anything other than the result of a long and complicated historical coalescence of several distinct ethnic groups, often of different origins, gradually united under a single collective identity through conquests,

migrations, intermixing, and, subsequently, through the deliberate action of national movements.

The classic example invoked in this regard is that of the English nation. Viewed today as a coherent identity bloc, it historically results from the successive superimposition of Romanized Celts, Anglo-Saxon Germanic tribes, French-speaking Norman conquerors, and the later effects of constitutional monarchy, colonialism, and industrialization. It is a process of synthesis, not an immutable original essence (Hroch, 1985).

2.2. Primordialism and Modernism: The Two Classical Paradigms

Contemporary literature on nationalism is conventionally organized around three major explanatory paradigms: primordialism, modernism (or constructivism), and ethno-symbolism, to which a more recent revisionist position has been added, one that challenges the very chronological premise of modernism. These four orientations should not be viewed as rival theories in the strict Popperian sense, but rather as perspectives focused on different levels of social reality. Some explain the persistence of ethnic ties, others explain the emergence of modern national political institutions.

Anthony D. Smith himself devoted a seminal synthetic study to this confrontation of paradigms, critically reviewing the main modernist theories and their primordialist and ethno-symbolist critics (Smith, 2002). Primordialism is the theoretical orientation according to which ethnic and national identities are ancient, inherited, and rooted in family ties, descent, and "blood," being considered almost natural, quasi-objective givens of social existence (Coakley, 2018). The intellectual roots of this perspective lie in 19th-century European Romantic thought and in certain currents of early cultural anthropology, which treated ethnic belonging as a fixed category, transmitted biologically or quasi-biologically.

The term "primordialism" was introduced in 1957 by the sociologist Edward Shils, who observed that, in archaic societies, tribal ties are felt as kinship ties, that is, as primordial (Shils, 1957). The anthropologist Clifford Geertz developed the idea in 1963, in an essay that became a classic: every person inherits, by birth, certain "givens" of blood, language, and custom, and these ties have an almost overwhelming force, felt as natural rather than as the result of social interaction (Geertz, 1963). Geertz did not claim, however, that these ties are biologically real on a large scale, but only that people feel them as such even when direct kinship can no longer be proven, through a mechanism he called "presumed blood ties."

There are, however, authors who have advocated a much firmer primordialist position than Geertz, without his nuances. In Russian and Soviet ethnography, Sergei Shirokogorov regarded ethnicity as a natural biological entity, adapted to its environment (Shirokogorov, 1923/2010, cited in Furtună, 2026). Yulian Bromley proposed a "dual theory of the ethnos," in which a stable primordial core, consisting of language, psychological pattern, and identity consciousness, coexists with a broader social sphere. He even argued that endogamy functions as a "genetic barrier" between ethnic groups, treating the ethnic group as a practically biological unit (Bromley, 1969, 1983, cited in Furtună, 2026).

Lev Gumilev went even further, situating the origin of ethnicities at the intersection of history, geography, and biology, and stating directly that ethnicity is a biological unit of the human species (Gumilev, 1967, 1989, cited in Furtună, 2026). These positions show that "pure" primordialism existed, at least in the Russian and Soviet

tradition, as an explicit and self-assumed school of thought, not merely as a label applied from the outside (Furtună, 2026).

John Coakley critically analyzed Western literature on primordialism, particularly that focused on nationalism theory rather than ethnography. He shows that, in this specific framework, the "pure" version of the theory, the idea that ethnic identity is fixed and biologically determined, is hard to find in any serious contemporary theorist. "Primordialism" functions more as a label that critics apply to other authors than as a real, self-assumed school of thought (Coakley, 2018).

Nevertheless, Coakley acknowledges that some "primordialist" elements remain useful. People subjectively feel that they share a common origin and a symbolic kinship tie across generations, and this sentiment explains the emotional intensity of ethnic and national attachment, even if the "objective" origin does not withstand historical verification. Coakley's conclusion is simple: primordialism is useful as an ingredient in explaining nationalism, but it does not function as a standalone theory.

A more recent and much more extensive treatment of these mechanisms comes from the Moldovan ethologist Dorian Furtună. Starting from current sociobiological research, he analyzes precisely the elements that Coakley considered indispensable: kinship ties, endogamy, Dunbar's number, and the evolutionary origin of ethnocentrism and xenophobia as the basis of the identity instinct (Furtună, 2026).

A frequently cited formulation of this balance between the two paradigms belongs to the anthropologist Pierre van den Berghe, who observes that ethnicity or race "cannot be invented or imagined out of nothing." They can be manipulated, exploited, accentuated, merged, or subdivided by political actors, but must always be correlated with a pre-existing population, linked by preferential endogamy and by a historical experience that its members perceive as common (Van den Berghe, 1995, p. 360). This observation is methodologically important, as it suggests that "primordial" elements function more as raw material that political actors can reshape than as a category that is either fully constructed or, conversely, fully fixed and immutable.

The position opposite to primordialism is the modernist (often also called constructivist) one, which holds that nations, unlike older ethnic communities, are products of modernity, emerging from the 18th century onward, generated by specific processes such as industrialization, state bureaucratization, mass literacy, and the development of the printed press. Ernest Gellner is the most influential representative of this orientation. For him, nationalism has as its sole condition of possibility industrial society, and the central claim of his theory is that nationalism invents nations, not the other way around (Gellner, 1983; O'Leary, 1997).

Benedict Anderson adds to this structural explanation a cultural dimension, that of the emergence of "print capitalism," that is, the mass production, in standardized vernacular languages, of books and, above all, periodicals. This allowed extensive communities of speakers of the same language to imagine, for the first time, their belonging to a simultaneous community, synchronized in time, even if its members did not know one another personally (Anderson, 1983/2006).

A distinct but related conceptual contribution within the modernist paradigm is that of the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, authors of the concept of "invented tradition." According to them, numerous cultural practices perceived today as authentic and ancient are, in fact, of relatively recent origin and were deliberately constructed by identifiable historical actors, often states or political elites, in order to create the impression of continuity with a remote past (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

An "invented tradition" differs from the mere "initiation" of a new practice in that the former claims, falsely or exaggeratedly, an antiquity that it does not possess. As the two authors show, this phenomenon is particularly relevant for understanding the "nation" as a relatively recent historical innovation that nevertheless almost universally claims immemorial roots. This conceptual tool acquires direct methodological relevance for any case in which a modern state constructs, through deliberate policies, a national identity distinct from that of the ethnic population from which it originates, as will be seen below.

2.3. Ethno-symbolism and Related Debates

The third major paradigm, developed primarily by Anthony D. Smith, is ethno-symbolism. This is more a method of study than a unitary explanatory theory, and it attempts to overcome the rigid opposition between primordialism and modernism (Smith, 2009). Smith accepts the modernist premise that nationalism, as a political ideology and mass movement, is a modern phenomenon. However, he rejects the idea that modern nations are formed in a cultural vacuum, through pure invention.

In his view, modern nation-states almost always rely on pre-existing "ethnic cores," whose myths, symbols, memories, and cultural repertoires are selectively reactivated, reinterpreted, and institutionalized by nationalists, rather than fabricated out of nothing. The central concept of ethno-symbolism is that of the *mythomoteur*, a nucleus of myths and symbols, such as the temporal origin of the group, its migration and territorial settlement, the myth of common ancestry, and an idealized "heroic age", that confers upon an ethnicity narrative coherence and the capacity for political mobilization over time.

The direct debate between the two paradigms took place, symbolically, within the so-called "Warwick debates" (1995), where Gellner and his former student Smith publicly confronted their modernist and ethno-symbolist positions, respectively. The central question was, metaphorically, whether nations have an "umbilicus" or not, that is, a real connection with an ethnic past preceding modernity (Smith, 1995).

A more recent and more radical position in relation to the modernist consensus is that of the Israeli historian Azar Gat, who directly challenges the chronological premise according to which nations are essentially products of the last two or three centuries. In his seminal work, Gat argues, on the basis of an extensive comparative historical analysis, that ethnicity has always had a political dimension and that nation-states, in the sense of a relatively stable overlap between a people of common ethnic origin and a state formation, have existed since the early periods of statehood, thousands of years before the modern era. Examples range from ancient Egypt, "congruent with a people of distinct ethnicity," to city-states and ethnic confederations in Greco-Roman antiquity (Gat & Yakobson, 2013).

Gat's argument is not only historical but also anthropological. He situates the roots of ethnic attachment in human evolution itself, as an extension of kin selection at the level of broader cultural groups, a "kin-culture" community that logically and chronologically precedes statehood proper. From this perspective, the causal relationship is not, as in Gellner, from nationalism to nation, but from pre-existing ethnic groups toward the political form they repeatedly assume throughout history.

Gat's position remains minority in relation to modernist orthodoxy, but it is relevant for this theoretical framework because it offers a useful counterpoint to any

analysis that would treat, without nuance, any contemporary national identity as a mere "invention" of the modern state, without any prior ethnic basis.

Beyond the relatively "institutionalized" positions presented above, two synthetic formulations are worth noting, useful for avoiding a rigid, either–or reading of the relationship between primordialism and constructivism. The political scientist David D. Laitin proposes, as an integrating metaphor, the image of national identity as a Janus with two faces: a "primordial" and immemorial avers, oriented toward the past, and a "modern" and constructed revers, oriented toward the political project of the present. The two faces belong to the same entity, not to rival entities (Laitin, 1998, pp. 11–12). This image memorably synthesizes the conclusion reached by much of contemporary literature, namely that the dispute between primordialism and constructivism, although historically relevant for structuring the field, is partially exhausted, and the line of consensus tends to recognize simultaneously the "given" and the "constructed" component of any national identity.

A more radically critical position, of postmodern inspiration, is that of Julia Kristeva, who proposes abandoning the presupposition that nations are real, stable, and persistent communities over time, in favor of treating the nation as a mere practical category, an institutionalized cultural and political form, an event or a contingent occurrence, rather than an essence. Her programmatic formula is to think of "nationalism without nations" and "the state without nation" (Kristeva, 1993).

A related interrogation, from Moldovan essayistics, is proposed by Tamara Cărăuș, who questions the very premise that the question about the meaning of life could receive a plausible answer within a given "national container," delimited territorially and historically in an arbitrary manner (Cărăuș, 2011). Although this position is minority in relation to the Smith–Gellner–Anderson literature, it has important heuristic value for the case study in the second part of the paper, especially where a state precedes or fails to generate a fully consolidated nation, a situation that Rogers Brubaker explicitly analyzes, with direct reference to the post-Soviet space, including the Republic of Moldova, in his work *Nationalism Reframed* (Brubaker, 1996). In such contexts, the classic distinction between state and nation, implicitly presupposed by the Western-type "nation-state" model, partially loses its descriptive relevance.

2.4. Civic Nationalism and Ethnic Nationalism

A second important analytical tool, complementary to that of ethnicity/nation, is the classic distinction between "civic" and "ethnic" nationalism, formulated by the historian Hans Kohn in his works from the 1940s (Kohn, 1944). In its ideal-typical formulation, civic nationalism (sometimes called "Western") is based on voluntary belonging to a political community, defined by citizenship, common territory, and adherence to shared political institutions and values. Ethnic nationalism (sometimes called "Eastern"), by contrast, is based on elements considered inherited (origin, language, common culture) and tends to be perceived as exclusive and hereditary.

This dichotomy has remained extremely influential in the specialized literature but has been subjected to sustained theoretical critique over the last three decades. Rogers Brubaker has shown that the boundary between "civic" and "ethnic" is analytically unstable. If "ethnic" is defined in a narrow sense, as a blood tie, then almost any non-racial reference to culture becomes, by exclusion, "civic." If the definition of "ethnic" is extended to include cultural elements (language, traditions), then almost any existing nationalism becomes, by the same logic, "ethnic" (Brubaker, 2004).

Other authors, such as Taras Kuzio, have shown that Kohn's dichotomy tends to reproduce an implicit normative hierarchy, which associates the "civic" with a rational West and the "ethnic" with an Eastern Europe presented as captive to tribal passions. Critics argue that this distinction has roots more in discourse about Western superiority than in an empirically neutral classification (Kuzio, 2002).

Coakley proposes a pragmatic middle-ground solution. The civic/ethnic dichotomy can remain a useful heuristic tool, provided it is "stripped of its normative content" and treated as representing ideal types that coexist, in varying proportions, within the same nationalist movement. No real case is ever purely civic or purely ethnic (Coakley, 2018, cited in Heiskanen, 2023). This nuance is methodologically important, as it allows the civic/ethnic distinction to be used as a descriptive instrument of a dominant tendency at a given historical moment, without falling into the trap of attributing to an entire society a fixed essence, "purely civic" or "purely ethnic."

2.5. Invented Tradition and the Hansen Effect

As shown above, when presenting the contribution of Hobsbawm and Ranger, the concept of invented tradition designates a set of practices, usually ritual or symbolic, governed by rules accepted tacitly or explicitly, which seek to inculcate certain values and behavioral norms through repetition, suggesting continuity with a presumed past, although they are, in fact, of relatively recent date (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). The phenomenon becomes particularly visible in periods of rapid social change, when old social patterns and the "traditions" associated with them lose their functionality or are eliminated by a new political regime, which needs alternative instruments of legitimization and cohesion (Hobsbawm, 1983, pp. 4–5).

From the perspective of political science, the concept has a dual analytical value. On the one hand, it explains how modern states, democratic or authoritarian alike, mobilize symbols, rituals, commemorative calendars, and standardized historical narratives (through education, the press, public ceremonies) to produce social cohesion and political legitimacy.

On the other hand, it offers a critical tool for analyzing cases in which a state constructs, through deliberate political decision, a distinct collective identity, including, in certain situations, a "new" ethnic or linguistic identity, presented publicly as ancient, although it has no prior historical counterpart before the political decision that produced it.

This latter type of situation is relevant for any case study in which the boundaries of a national identity are redrawn by a political regime, through institutional means (linguistic standardization, alphabet, school textbooks, historiographic censorship), rather than through organic cultural evolution. An empirical example of this type of process, even if oriented toward a result opposite to the Moldovan one, is offered by the historian Lucian Boia, who documents how Romania itself ethnically homogenized its population over the 20th century, through the almost complete disappearance of the ethnocultural diversity characteristic of the Old Kingdom and interwar Greater Romania (Boia, 2015).

The general mechanism by which states homogenize their populations, often through exactly the same type of institutional tools discussed above, was systematically theorized by Heather Rae, in a study dedicated to how modern states construct national identities congruent with their political boundaries, including through purges, forced assimilation, or exclusion of populations that do not fit the desired identity (Rae, 2005).

A final theoretical tool, of a different nature from those discussed above (it does not concern the origin of national identity but its temporal dynamics across generations), is the hypothesis formulated in 1938 by the American historian Marcus Lee Hansen, known as the "third-generation law" or the "Hansen effect." Observing immigrant communities in the United States, Hansen formulated the principle that "what the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember" (Hansen, 1938/1952).

According to this model, the first generation of immigrants preserves the language, religion, and customs of the country of origin. The second generation, eager for assimilation and social acceptance in the new society, tends to reject or conceal these traits, perceived as an obstacle. The third generation, already raised in a socially secure environment, no longer feels the same pressure to assimilate and rediscovers, often with pride, the identity elements that the parents' generation had abandoned.

It must be specified methodologically that Hansen's "law" was initially formulated to explain the dynamics of immigrant assimilation in American society, and subsequent research has shown that it is only partially confirmed. The transition from the first to the second generation (from preservation toward assimilation) is empirically robust, whereas the "return" of the third generation to the actual cultural practices of the grandparents is documented more as a symbolic, identity-based association than as a proper behavioral resumption (research cited in later literature on Hansen).

Applying this model beyond the immigration context—for example, to the intergenerational dynamics of ethnic memory under authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, where the generation that directly experienced repression tends to conceal certain identity traits for reasons of safety, the next generation grows up in a climate of diminished fear, and the third generation recovers, in the absence of direct threat, previously suppressed identity elements—represents an analogical extension of the original model. It is heuristically useful for understanding similar phenomena of discontinuity and identity return, but must be treated, from a methodological point of view, as such: that is, as a conceptual adaptation, not a direct application of Hansen's law in its initial form, which was designed for the dynamics of voluntary immigration, not political repression.

3. METHODOLOGY

From the combination of elements discussed in the previous sections, a multi-level analytical framework emerges, useful for the empirical study of any case of contested or ambiguous national identity:

- **Conceptual level:** the analytical separation between ethnicity (a community of origin, language, and memory, with slow change) and nation (a modern political community, with potentially rapid change, under the impulse of the state).
- **Explanatory level:** placing the analyzed case along the spectrum from primordialism to modernism/constructivism and ethno-symbolism, with attention to the possibility, suggested by Gat, that ethnic elements historically precede the current political form.
- **Typological level:** the nuanced, non-binary evaluation of the relationship between the civic and ethnic components of the studied national identity, avoiding the reification of a distinction that is, theoretically, an ideal type, not a pure empirical category.
- **Institutional level:** the identification of concrete mechanisms through which the state has actively intervened in the construction or reconstruction of national identity,

through linguistic, educational, and symbolic policies, using the concept of invented tradition as a critical analytical tool.

- **Generational level:** the analysis of the temporal dynamics of identity within the same population, from one generation to another, using, with due methodological caution, the analogy with the Hansen effect.

This five-level framework is applied, in the continuation of this paper, to the case study of the Republic of Moldova, a case of particular interest precisely because it seems to simultaneously put all five levels of analysis described above under tension. For that stage, the above framework will be articulated with two additional theoretical references, specifically oriented toward the post-Soviet space. These are Rogers Brubaker's analysis of how the Soviet regime institutionalized ethno-territorial republics—institutions that functioned as "a persuasive system of social classification, an organizing principle of the vision and division of the social domain" and which generated, at the collapse of the USSR, not a struggle of pre-existing "nations," but of nationally constituted elites (Brubaker, 1996), and Charles King's interpretation of the emergence of the "Soviet Moldovan state" as a combination of expansionist reasoning of imperial origin, pre-existing forms of local identity, and a deliberate agenda of political and cultural elites (King, 2002).

These two perspectives offer, for the case of the Republic of Moldova, exactly the type of instrument capable of articulating the institutional level with the explanatory level of the analytical framework proposed above. The previous sections have constructed a five-level theoretical framework (conceptual, explanatory, typological, institutional, and generational), intended to rigorously separate ethnicity from nation and to provide the necessary tools for the study of any case of contested national identity. This section applies this framework to a concrete case: the Republic of Moldova, an independent state since 1991, whose majority population officially self-identified for three decades as "Moldovan," speaking a language initially declared "Moldovan," although it is identical, from a linguistic point of view, to literary Romanian.

The research question structuring this case study is simple in formulation but has considerable theoretical and political consequences. Do "Moldovans" constitute a people distinct from Romanians, or is "Moldovan" merely another name for "Romanian"? To answer this, we propose the following working hypothesis (H), derived directly from the theoretical framework expounded above:

H: Moldovans and Romanians constitute, from an ethnic point of view, the same ethnicity, with common origin, language, and historical memory, and the "Moldovan" national identity, in its form distinct from Romanian identity, is the result of a deliberate institutional construction, initiated by the Soviet state between 1924 and 1991, as an "invented tradition" in the sense of Hobsbawm and Ranger, pursuing political goals of delimitation from Romania. The post-Soviet trajectory (1991–2026) shows a gradual recovery of the original ethnic identity, carried mainly by younger generations (a phenomenon analogous to the "Hansen effect"), coupled with a shift in the criteria for defining state belonging from ethnic to civic, and complicated by an active geopolitical cleavage (pro-European versus pro-Russian orientation) that partially overlaps existing ethnic lines.

Hypothesis H is not tested here in a strict statistical sense but is evaluated qualitatively, level by level, on the basis of the analytical framework constructed in the previous sections and the available empirical data (historical, linguistic, census,

sociological, and electoral). The final confirmation or refutation of the hypothesis, as well as the discussion of possible limits and counterarguments, are the subject of the conclusions section, which will be developed separately, as a subsequent stage of the paper.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS: THE CASE STUDY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

4.1. The Historical Reference Point and Common Ethnicity

Applying the conceptual level first requires establishing the historical reference points that separate state trajectory from ethnic trajectory. In 1812, the Russian Empire annexed the territory between the Prut and Dniester rivers, detached from historical Moldavia, and named it Bessarabia. In 1918, at the end of the First World War, Bessarabia united with Romania. In 1924, as a direct political response to this union, the Soviet Union established, on the left bank of the Dniester, the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), an explicitly geopolitical instrument intended to support a territorial claim over Bessarabia by creating a distinct "Moldovan" state entity separate from Romania, a move that realist theory in international relations would describe as a classic instrumentalization of a population's identity in the service of a territorial claim by a more powerful state. In 1940, following the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, Bessarabia was occupied by the USSR and, together with a part of the MASSR, formed the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Republic of Moldova obtained independence in 1991, and in 2024 the population voted, by a narrow margin, to include accession to the European Union as a constitutional objective.

The time window during which Bessarabia could have undergone the process of nation-building described by Gellner—through education, the press, and common citizenship, was extremely short. For 106 years, between 1812 and 1918, the territory had been under Russian administration, with administrative and, partially, cultural Russification. The 1918 union with Romania opened only 22 years of Romanian schools, press, and army, until the Soviet annexation in 1940, compared with the decades of linguistic and institutional standardization that the rest of the Romanian space had already undergone after the 1859 union. This short window left the Romanian identity in Bessarabia insufficiently sedimented institutionally to resist, without effort, a competing project supported by a state—exactly the condition that modernist theory considers necessary for consolidating a national identity.

This brief historical reference point is relevant for the conceptual level for two reasons. First, it shows that the state entity "Soviet Moldova," the direct institutional ancestor of today's Republic of Moldova, emerged as a political project, not as an organic expression of a pre-existing ethnicity distinct from the Romanian one, since the territory of the 1924 MASSR did not even geographically correspond to historical Bessarabia, but had been chosen precisely to serve as a political "bridgehead." Second, it shows that, unlike other post-Soviet cases (the Baltic states, Georgia, or Armenia), which could rely, in 1991, on a historical and often state memory preceding the Soviet experiment, the Republic of Moldova entered independence without such a precedent—a situation that Rogers Brubaker explicitly discusses and that Charles King develops in detail for the Moldovan case.

Applying the six attributes of ethnicity proposed by Anthony D. Smith, the majority population of the Republic of Moldova and the Romanian population on the left bank of the Prut meet, almost point for point, the same criteria:

- **Common historical name**, since "Moldovan" was, until the Soviet project, a Romanian regional identity label, similar to "Transylvanian," "Oltenian," or "Banatian," not the name of a distinct ethnicity.
- **A myth of common origin**, anchored in the Latin and medieval genesis of the three medieval Romanian principalities.
- **Widely shared historical memories** (Stephen the Great, the 1918 union).
- **A common language**, a matter treated in detail below.
- **An association with the same historical "homeland,"** medieval Moldavia, politically divided only in 1812.
- **A sense of solidarity**, attested today especially through declared cultural and linguistic proximity, even among those who publicly assume the civic label of "Moldovan."

From the perspective of the conceptual level of the analytical framework, the partial conclusion is that ethnicity is, empirically, common; what differs is exclusively the political-institutional plane, that is, the state trajectory, discussed below.

4.2. The Institutional Construction of "Moldovan" Identity

Rogers Brubaker's analysis of how the Soviet regime institutionalized ethno-territorial republics provides the explanatory key for this case. According to Brubaker, the Soviet system did not limit itself to repressing national identities but constructed, through its very institutions (union and autonomous republics delimited "ethnically," internal passports with a "nationality" field, national academies of sciences, national writers' unions), "a persuasive system of social classification, an organizing principle of the vision and division of the social domain" (Brubaker, 1996, p. 24). Not coincidentally, at the collapse of the USSR, the ensuing conflict was not, primarily, a struggle of pre-existing "nations" for self-determination, but a competition among national elites already institutionally constituted by four decades of existence of these Soviet frameworks.

Charles King develops this argument specifically for Moldova, showing that the emergence of the "Soviet Moldovan state" resulted from the combination of three factors: an expansionist reasoning of imperial origin (the creation of a territorial instrument against Romanian claims), some forms of pre-existing local, regional identity (the "Moldovan" regionalism in the historical, benign sense, discussed above), and a deliberate agenda of Soviet political and cultural elites interested in consolidating a "Moldovan" identity distinct from the Romanian one. King's conclusion is memorably formulated: the result of this process was a state, but not a strong and unanimously assumed nation (King, 2002, p. 62).

This diagnosis is confirmed by an entire volume of studies coordinated by Monica Heintz, suggestively titled *Weak State, Uncertain Citizenship*, which documents, from the perspective of several disciplines, precisely this discrepancy between state existence and the consolidation of a fully assumed civic nation (Heintz, 2007). This is exactly the distinction that the theoretical framework presented above develops: state and nation do not automatically coincide, and where the nation does not organically follow the state, precisely the identity tensions that this case study documents emerge.

A primordialist interpretation of the same facts would, however, contest the conclusion that Moldovan identity was simply "invented" out of nothing. A primordialist, in the line of Van den Berghe or Gat, would emphasize that the Soviet regime could not create a population and a culture out of nothing, but exploited, renamed, and institutionally isolated an already existing ethnicity, without managing to erase the ties of language, custom, and memory that survived, even suppressed, until 1991. From this angle, the identity recovery after independence would not be proof of the failure of a state construction, but proof of exactly the opposite: that real ethnic ties are sufficiently strong to resist seven decades of institutional pressure and reappear as soon as the constraint disappears. Both readings, the constructivist and the primordialist, are compatible with the same empirical data; the difference between them concerns the question of whether we view the Romanian ethnicity in Moldova as something preserved under pressure or as something recreated after 1991.

The primordialist counterargument, however, requires a clarification related to the layered structure of ethnic identity. "Moldovan" has always been an authentic regionalism within Romanianism, similar to "Transylvanian," "Oltenian," or "Banatian," not a Soviet invention. What the Soviet project constructed was not this regionalism itself, but its artificial inflation to the rank of a separate national identity, cut off from the broader Romanian identity, which had anyway only just begun to institutionally consolidate in the 22 years between 1918 and 1940. There is, in other words, a more restricted primordial core, Moldovan regionalism, real and present today on both sides of the Prut, and a broader one, Romanian identity, more recent institutionally but with equally real cultural and linguistic roots. The Soviet regime exploited the fissure between these two layers; it did not create a new layer out of nothing, exactly the pattern that Van den Berghe describes when insisting that ethnicity can be manipulated but not invented out of nothing.

From the perspective of the paradigms discussed above, the Moldovan case precisely illustrates the modernist/constructivist position. We are not faced with a pre-existing ethnicity that organically found its own state (as primordialism or, in a more nuanced form, Gat's thesis on the ancient roots of ethnic statehood would suggest), but with a state that preceded and actively produced an alleged distinct ethnic identity, a situation critically described by Julia Kristeva as the possibility of a "nation without nation," that is, an institutionalized state-political framework that does not correspond to a real, distinct ethnic community.

Directly applying the concept of invented tradition presented above, four concrete institutional mechanisms can be identified through which the Soviet regime constructed the "Moldovan" distinction from "Romanian," following exactly the pattern described by Hobsbawm and Ranger, that of recent practices presented as old and natural. Octavian Țîcu documents this process in detail, showing that "Homo Moldovanus Sovietic" was ideologically conceived within the Communist International as early as February 1924 and institutionalized through the establishment of the M(A)SSR, as an identity project conceived outside the historical and imaginary space of the Moldovans proper (Țîcu, 2018).

1. **Differentiating linguistic standardization.** The Soviet regime officially supported the thesis that "Moldovan" was a language distinct from Romanian, although identical from a grammatical and lexical point of view, and imposed its writing in the

Cyrillic alphabet, as opposed to the Latin alphabet used in Romania—a classic form of symbolic marking of difference, without real linguistic correspondence.

2. **Elimination of Romanian identity from the public sphere.** Self-identification as "Romanian" was, during the Soviet period, practically impossible in the public and institutional sphere, Romanian identity surviving, when it survived, mainly in the private, family, and rural sphere.

3. **Direct repression of elites.** Deportations to Siberia and Kazakhstan, along with the man-made famine of 1946–1947, disproportionately targeted the intelligentsia and the prosperous peasantry—that is, precisely the social segments most attached to the pre-existing Romanian cultural identity—a mechanism of repression that functioned simultaneously as an instrument of social disciplining and as an instrument of identity engineering.

4. **Functional Russification.** The Russian language became the language of cities, higher education, and well-paid jobs, creating a social hierarchy that associated social mobility with the abandonment of Romanian linguistic and cultural practices, thus indirectly reinforcing the officially promoted identity separation.

A direct empirical test of the persistence, or, conversely, the reversibility, of this invented tradition is offered by the evolution of the legal status of the language, which can be traced point by point. In 1991, the Declaration of Independence named the official language "the Romanian language." In 1994, the new Constitution reverted, under political pressure, to the designation "the Moldovan language." In 2013, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova ruled that, from a legal point of view, the formulation in the Declaration of Independence prevails, and the state language is the Romanian language (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova, 2013). In 2023, the Parliament explicitly aligned the text of the Constitution with this interpretation, formally replacing "the Moldovan language" with "the Romanian language" (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2023).

This sequence of four decisions, spanning three decades, illustrates exactly what the concept of invented tradition theoretically predicts: namely, that a relatively recent institutional construction, lacking objective linguistic basis, can be maintained administratively as long as it serves a political purpose, but tends to gradually yield under the pressure of the cultural and linguistic reality it attempted to overwrite.

4.3. From Ethnic to Civic Criteria

Kohn's civic/ethnic dichotomy, critically discussed above, acquires in the Moldovan case an instructive application precisely because it captures a movement, not a fixed state. A comparative sociological survey, which questioned the population about the meaning of the expression "to be Moldovan," shows a significant change. In 2005, dominant responses invoked ethnic criteria (Moldovan family, language, traditions). In 2016, dominant responses became civic (being born and living in the Republic of Moldova, having its citizenship) [IMAS]. The measured shift is of approximately twenty percentage points, within only a decade, from ethnic criteria toward civic ones.

Applying the methodological nuance proposed above by Coakley, this result should not be read as a complete transformation of Moldovan nationalism into a "purely civic" form, but as a gradual shift in the relative weight between the two components, both coexisting, in changing proportions, within the same collective identity. This civic shift overlaps, in turn, an active ethnic cleavage, visible especially in geopolitical

orientation. Data show marked differences between groups. Approximately 74% of ethnic Romanians (self-identified as such) clearly opt for European integration. The population that self-identifies as "Moldovan" is divided, with approximately 47% of respondents expressing a preference for balanced relations with both geopolitical directions. Ethnic minorities (Russians, Gagauz) orient predominantly toward Russia and the Eastern European space.

This pattern shows that, unlike the ideal-typical situation described by Kohn (a nationalism either predominantly civic or predominantly ethnic at the level of the entire society), the Republic of Moldova presents an overlap of the two criteria on different axes, and the ethnic label remains a relevant predictor of geopolitical orientation, even if the civic definition of state belonging gains ground at the discursive and institutional level.

4.4. The Generational Recovery of Identity

The generational level of the analytical framework finds, in the Moldovan case, its most direct empirical application. Census data from 2014 and 2024 show a clear evolution. The proportion of the population declaring their language as "Romanian" increased by approximately eight percentage points compared to the previous census (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2014, 2024), and among young people aged between 3 and 29, "Romanian" is already the majority response.

At the same time, at the level of general ethnic self-identification, approximately 77% of respondents continue to declare themselves "Moldovans," a relevant discrepancy that shows that identity recovery is occurring, for now, more at the linguistic level than at the level of the publicly assumed ethnic label, an important distinction for any subsequent discussion about the real degree of "confirmation" of hypothesis H.

Applying the analogy discussed above, with the methodological cautions formulated there (since Hansen's model was conceived for the dynamics of immigrant assimilation, not political repression), Moldovan identity evolution can be described on three generational tiers. The generation that directly lived under the Soviet regime concealed or publicly attenuated Romanian identity and language, for reasons of personal and professional safety. The generation formed in the transition years (1991 and after) grew up in a climate of diminished constraint but marked by the institutional ambiguity maintained by the 1994 Constitution. The young generation of today, which has directly experienced neither Soviet repression nor immediate post-Soviet uncertainty, recovers, through freely expressed linguistic choice, the identity that the grandparents' generation had concealed. The census data cited above are compatible with this descriptive model, although the association remains analogical and qualitative, not a rigorous causal testing of Hansen's original law.

4.5. The Geopolitics of Identity

The five-level framework proposed in the methodology section did not explicitly include a geopolitical dimension, but the Moldovan case shows that this variable functions as a transversal amplifier of the other levels, especially the typological and generational levels discussed above. A relevant indicator is how young people from different ethnic groups perceive Russia's war against Ukraine. Approximately 60% of ethnic Romanian young people consider the war unjust, a percentage close to that recorded among young people self-identified as "Moldovan" (53%), while only 27% of

Gagauz young people share the same position, the majority remaining closer to the official Russian narrative (FES 2023).

The relative convergence between "Romanian" and "Moldovan" young people on this indicator suggests an identity consolidation beyond the self-declared ethnic label, while the persistent divergence of the Gagauz community confirms the limits of this convergence at the level of the entire society.

Since 2021, President Maia Sandu and the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) have proposed what can be described as a third identity path: neither Soviet-type "Moldovanism" nor openly assumed "Romanianism," but a European identity constructed "from the bottom up," through civic belonging to a common political project. In 2024, this orientation was constitutionally consecrated through a referendum whose results were extremely close, with only 50.35% votes in favor (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

This third path is theoretically relevant in relation to Charles King's observation cited above, that if the result of the Soviet project was "a state, but not a strong and assumed nation," the European identity project could be interpreted as an attempt, still fragile and contested, to construct precisely this missing nation, not by recourse to an ethnicity (whether Moldovan or Romanian), but by recourse to a new type of civic community, institutionally anchored in European belonging, rather than in origin, language, or common descent.

The mechanism by which belonging to European institutions could gradually reshape collective identity corresponds to the central hypothesis of institutional liberalism in European integration theory, according to which sustained participation in supranational structures transforms the interests and identities of actors, not only their external behavior.

4.6. Applied Synthesis of the Five Levels

Recapitulating, the application of the analytical framework presented in the methodology section to the case of the Republic of Moldova produces the following synthetic tableau:

- **Conceptual level:** Romanian and "Moldovan" ethnicity are, empirically, the same ethnicity; the distinction functions exclusively at the state-political level.
- **Explanatory level:** the case confirms the modernist/constructivist paradigm; the state precedes and produces the distinct ethnic identity, not the other way around.
- **Institutional level:** the Soviet "Moldovan" project is a textbook example of the concept of invented tradition, and its institutional reverse (1991–2023) is documented point by point through the evolution of the legal status of the language.
- **Typological level:** the civic definition of belonging gains ground over the ethnic one, but the ethnic label remains a strong predictor of geopolitical orientation.
- **Generational level:** census data support, analogically, a "Hansen effect"-type model—linguistic recovery carried by the young generation, although the recovery of the "Romanian" ethnic label remains, for now, minority.
- **Geopolitical variable:** the European/Russian cleavage amplifies and, partially, overlaps ethnic lines, and the "European" identity project appears as a third possible trajectory, distinct from both the Soviet heritage and a possible identity reunification with Romania.

This synthesis provides the empirical and analytical basis necessary to rigorously evaluate the extent to which hypothesis H formulated above is confirmed by the data. As specified from the beginning, the final verdict on the hypothesis, including the explicit discussion of elements that unconditionally support it (conceptual, explanatory, and institutional levels) and those that nuance or complicate it (persistence of "Moldovan" ethnic self-identification, the distinct role of the geopolitical variable, the possible emergence of a third European civic identity), will be developed in the paper's conclusions, as a separate and subsequent stage of the research.

5. CONCLUSIONS

We return, in conclusion, to hypothesis H formulated at the beginning of the case study. Moldovans and Romanians constitute the same ethnicity, and the "Moldovan" national identity, distinct from the Romanian one, was an institutional construction of Soviet origin, currently undergoing a process of reconfiguration carried by younger generations, coupled with a shift in the criteria of belonging from ethnic to civic, and complicated by an active geopolitical cleavage. As specified from the outset, the evaluation of this hypothesis is not a statistical testing but a qualitative judgment on the convergence between the five levels of analysis and the available empirical data. Three distinct conclusions emerge from this evaluation: one firm, one nuanced, and one open to further research.

First, the conceptual, explanatory, and institutional levels confirm the hypothesis without significant reservations. The six attributes of ethnicity proposed by Smith (1991) apply identically to the majority population in the Republic of Moldova and to that in Romania, and their political separation since 1812 did not produce, until the Soviet project of 1924, any distinct Moldovan ethnicity.

The analyses of Brubaker (1996) and King (2002) convergently show that the "Moldovan nation" was the product of deliberate institutionalization, and the four mechanisms identified (differentiating linguistic standardization, elimination of Romanian identity from the public sphere, direct repression of elites, and functional Russification) correspond point by point to the definition of invented tradition proposed by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). The reverse of this construction, documented through the legislative and jurisprudential sequence in the period 1991–2023 (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova, 2013; Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2023), confirms exactly what theory predicts: namely, that an institutional construction lacking objective basis gradually yields under the pressure of the reality it attempted to overwrite. A primordialist reading of the same facts, discussed above, remains possible at the explanatory level. It does not, however, contest the institutional evidence of the Soviet construction, but only its interpretation: either as the failure of an invention or as proof of the resilience of real ethnic ties.

Second, the typological and generational levels lead to the same conclusion. The shift of approximately twenty percentage points from ethnic to civic criteria in defining belonging (2005–2016) and the eight-percentage-point increase in Romanian linguistic self-identification between the 2014 and 2024 censuses (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2014, 2024) move in the same direction: that of an identity gradually recomposing the components suppressed by the Soviet project. The analogical application of the Hansen effect offers a useful language for describing this process, provided the methodological caution formulated above is respected: that of not confusing an analogy with a rigorous causal law. The hypothesis is, however, nuanced in two

important respects. The first concerns an internal discrepancy within the data themselves. While linguistic self-identification is clearly shifting toward "Romanian," ethnic self-identification remains majority "Moldovan" (approximately 77% of respondents). This discrepancy shows that identity recovery is not, for now, complete or uniform, but advances faster at the level of declared linguistic practice than at the level of the publicly assumed ethnic label.

This suggests either an inertia of administrative habituation to the term "Moldovan," or the persistence of a distinct civic identity, compatible with Romanian ethnicity, rather than a simple delay in the same return process.The second important nuance arises from an internal comparison that the theoretical framework presented above makes possible. Not all groups within the Republic of Moldova follow the same generational trajectory. The author's research on the ethnopolitical identity of the Gagauz community (Vintilă, 2025) shows a significantly different pattern. Among young Gagauz, support for European integration remains minority (33% support a "pragmatic integration" that preserves local traditions, versus a large majority oriented toward Russia), and Soviet nostalgia and attachment to Russian Orthodox Christianity function as active mechanisms for maintaining Eastern orientation, supported by a persistent informational dependence on Russian mass media. This pattern confirms the more general observation, valid for the entire Eastern European space, that confessional belonging remains one of the strongest markers of ethnic identity and of the representation of the Other (Preutu & Enache, 2018). The difference between the trajectory of the majority population, where the Hansen effect seems to operate relatively clearly, and that of the Gagauz minority, where it is only incipiently visible and contested by parallel religious and informational factors, shows that the identity recovery described in this paper is not a mechanical process, uniformly valid for any ethnic group under the same Soviet institutional regime. Instead, it depends on additional variables, such as religious belonging, the structure of consumed mass media, and the degree of separate institutionalization of the group (Gagauz autonomy, as opposed to the purely regional status of Moldovan identity in relation to Romanian identity). Hypothesis H, formulated for the relationship between Moldovans and Romanians, cannot be extended without modifications to any minority in the post-Soviet space. It remains valid for the specific case of the politically divided Romanian ethnicity, not as a general law of post-Soviet identity return.

Third, the hypothesis opens a research direction that exceeds its initial framework: that of the possible emergence of a third identity, civic and European, distinct from both Soviet "Moldovanism" and a possible purely Romanian re-identification. King's observation (2002), according to which the Soviet project produced "a state, but not a strong and assumed nation," remains partially valid today. However, the political project inaugurated by President Maia Sandu and the Party of Action and Solidarity since 2021 suggests an explicit attempt to construct precisely this missing nation, not by recourse to an ethnicity, but by recourse to a civic community anchored in European belonging. The close result of the 2024 constitutional referendum (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2024) shows, however, that this project remains fragile and contested, and the distinction between a reformed European Moldovan civic identity and an ethnic return to Romanian identity is by no means resolved in the data. If the second nuance shows the limits of generalizing the model beyond the Romanian–Moldovan case, this third observation shows the limits of the model itself in relation to its own object of study. It is possible that the post-Soviet

trajectory of the Republic of Moldova will end neither in the full recovery of Romanian ethnic identity nor in the persistence of Soviet "Moldovanism," but in a third, European configuration. The theoretical framework presented above can describe this possibility, but only further research, based on longitudinal data, will be able to confirm or refute it.

In conclusion, hypothesis H is confirmed at its conceptual, explanatory, and institutional level. Moldovans and Romanians constitute the same ethnicity, and the Moldovan national identity was a Soviet institutional construction currently undergoing a real, although incomplete, process of recomposition. It is nuanced by the persistence of "Moldovan" ethnic self-identification and by the non-uniform character of identity recovery within the same country, illustrated by the contrast with the trajectory of the Gagauz community. And it remains open regarding the final direction of this process, which may mean Romanian ethnic recovery, Moldovan civic persistence, or, most likely, a new European synthesis, which will have to be empirically tracked as the Republic of Moldova advances, or not, on the path of accession to the European Union.

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II. SOCIO-ECONOMIC INCLUSION

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SOCIO-ECONOMIC INCLUSION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE JUST TRANSITION AND THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL: AN ANALYSIS OF GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ROMANIA

Cristina-Matilda VĂNOAGĂ[*]
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Abstract. *The transition towards climate neutrality promoted through the European Green Deal is redefining the relationship between environmental policy, economic development and social cohesion in the European Union. Within this context, socio-economic inclusion has become a central principle of the European normative architecture. This article examines how socio-economic inclusion is conceptualised and integrated into the European Commission's strategic documents and Romania's national public policies, as well as how it is discursively constructed at the European and national levels. The research adopts a qualitative design based on document analysis and critical discourse analysis. The findings demonstrate that, at the European level, socio-economic inclusion is articulated as a constitutive normative principle of the green transition, incorporating the dimensions of solidarity, equity and territorial cohesion. By contrast, in national discourse and strategic documents, inclusion is often incorporated into a predominantly economic and investment-oriented framework, with emphasis placed on modernisation and the absorption of European funds. This discursive and institutional asymmetry may influence the coherence of implementation and the effectiveness of measures intended for vulnerable communities.*

Keywords*: Inclusion, just transition, European Green Deal, national policies, political communication, multi-level governance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Green Deal (EGD), launched by the European Commission in December 2019, represents not only a roadmap for achieving climate neutrality by 2050, but also a fundamental reorientation of the European Union's policy priorities (Sikora, 2020). This growth strategy aims to transform the Union into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy in which net greenhouse gas emissions are eliminated (European Commission, 2019). Nevertheless, the scale of this transformation generates profound systemic challenges for social cohesion, necessitating a 'just transition' that guarantees 'that no person and no region are left behind' (Stapper et al., 2026; European Commission, 2019). The concept of socio-economic inclusion at community level thus becomes the central pillar of the political legitimacy of this ambitious project, which is intended to mitigate the social and economic costs of decarbonisation and prevent the deepening of territorial and structural inequalities. Institutionalised through instruments such as the Just Transition Mechanism, this framework seeks to support the

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regions and communities disproportionately affected by the transition to a green economy, particularly those dependent on carbon-intensive industries.

Romania provides a relevant case study for the critical analysis of just transition governance. On the one hand, its status as a Member State characterised by pronounced regional disparities and mono-industrial regions dependent on coal extraction and coal-based energy production heightens the social stakes of decarbonisation. On the other hand, the processes of developing and implementing Territorial Just Transition Plans highlight tensions between European imperatives, national administrative capacity and the effective participation of local stakeholders. An analysis of these dynamics enables a critical assessment of how multilevel governance operates in practice and the extent to which it facilitates or constrains the genuine inclusion of affected communities. While the official discourse of European leaders promotes a vision centred on opportunities and innovation, the realities of regions historically dependent on extractive industries, such as Romania's coal-mining areas—the Jiu Valley and Gorj County—reveal a significant gap between political rhetoric and the socio-economic absorptive capacity of local communities (Koretsky & Bruno, 2026).

In the context of the dramatic socio-economic transformations generated by climate change and decarbonisation, the concept of socio-economic inclusion has become central to public policy at both European Union and Member State level, including in Romania. The transition towards a carbon-neutral economy, promoted through the European Green Deal, entails profound adjustments to economic and social structures, with risks and opportunities distributed unevenly across different social groups and territories (European Commission, 2019). Within this framework, the idea of a just transition reflects growing concern for social equity, job protection and the creation of sustainable economic opportunities for vulnerable communities (Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2016). Socio-economic inclusion is defined as the process of ensuring that all individuals and groups have access to resources, services and opportunities, as well as full participation in economic and civic life (United Nations, 2016). In the literature on the European Green Deal, emphasis is placed on the need for integrated governance policies capable of addressing both environmental challenges and the structural disadvantages faced by marginalised communities (Atterton et al., 2020). Governance analysis therefore becomes essential to understanding how institutional frameworks, decision-making models and political discourses influence how the principles of inclusion are articulated and implemented.

At the European level, the European Green Deal has been presented not merely as an environmental agenda, but as an 'inclusive growth strategy' intended to reduce inequalities and promote social cohesion throughout the transition process (European Commission, 2019). Nevertheless, recent research suggests that tensions exist between the EU's normative ambitions and actual implementation practices in the Member States, where local economic interests, budgetary constraints and public perceptions may diminish the effectiveness of inclusive policies (Schreurs, 2021). In Romania, these tensions are particularly evident in public and political discourse, where economic development priorities are often placed above considerations of social and environmental justice.

The main objective of this article is to assess the extent to which just transition governance, within the context of the European Green Deal, promotes substantive socio-economic inclusion at the community and societal levels or, conversely, reproduces pre-existing power asymmetries and forms of marginalisation. To this end, the research seeks to: (1) analyse the European conceptual and normative framework for the just transition; and (2) investigate how this framework is internalised and reinterpreted in Romanian

public discourse and policy. Through its proposed approach, the article contributes to the debate on the social dimension of the climate transition, highlighting that the success of the European Green Deal cannot be assessed exclusively through emissions-reduction indicators, but must also be evaluated in relation to its capacity to generate inclusive, equitable and democratic transformations within European societies.

Nevertheless, beyond its financial and normative architecture, the just transition raises fundamental questions concerning socio-economic inclusion at the community and societal levels:

1). How is socio-economic inclusion conceptualised and integrated into the European Commission's strategic documents and Romania's national public policies concerning the implementation of the European Green Deal and the Just Transition Mechanism?

2). How do European and Romanian political discourses construct the narrative of the just transition, and what differences or tensions emerge between the supranational and national levels?

From a theoretical perspective, the article is situated at the intersection of European governance studies and the critical analysis of political discourse. It proceeds from the premise that the just transition is not merely a technocratic process of resource reallocation, but also a field of political and symbolic negotiation in which definitions of 'justice', 'equity' and the 'public interest' are contested and reconfigured. Accordingly, examining the European normative framework and its transposition in Romania requires both institutional and discourse analysis. Through this approach, the study seeks to identify discrepancies, convergences and contradictions between declared commitments and institutional practices, as well as their implications for the socio-economic inclusion of vulnerable communities. The findings may contribute to a better understanding of how transition policies can be formulated and implemented in ways that ensure social equity, cohesion and sustainability.

The research strategy adopted is qualitative and is based on two principal methods: document analysis—including policy strategies, action plans, and official statements issued by EU institutions and the Romanian Government—and discourse analysis, focusing on speeches delivered by European and national leaders and examining how political actors construct meanings and negotiate priorities in public and media communications. The study contributes to the literature on multilevel governance and climate justice by highlighting the relationship between discourse, institutional design and the integration of the social dimension into climate policies.

The article is structured into six sections. The first, introductory section establishes the research context and rationale; the second provides an overview of the literature on socio-economic inclusion within the context of the EGD and the JTM; the third presents the research design and methodology; the fourth analyses the rhetoric underpinning strategic documents and discourses on inclusion, as well as the challenges associated with inclusion at the national level; the fifth is devoted to reflections on governance and discourse concerning inclusion; and the article concludes with a final section presenting its conclusions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on socio-economic inclusion in the context of the green transition has developed significantly over the past decade, against the backdrop of intensifying debates concerning climate change, climate justice and the structural transformation of

European economies. The intersection of environmental policy, governance and social cohesion constitutes an emerging field of analysis in which concepts such as 'just transition', 'multilevel governance' and 'social inclusion' are approached from interdisciplinary perspectives.

Early research in environmental studies and public policy highlighted the importance of integrating the principles of equity and justice into socio-technical transition strategies, arguing that unsuccessful ecological transformations frequently result from a failure to address pre-existing social inequalities (Agyeman, 2013; Scoones et al., 2015).

A first strand of relevant theoretical contributions concerns the conceptualisation of the 'just transition' as a multivalent construct. Initially employed in trade union and industrial policy discourses to denote the protections afforded to workers affected by economic restructuring, the term was subsequently adopted in the literature on socio-ecological transitions as part of an emerging normative agenda seeking to reconcile decarbonisation objectives with social protection (Galgóczi, 2019; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). Critics of this tradition nevertheless highlight a tendency towards the 'depoliticisation' of the concept in strategic documents, where the emphasis on financial instruments and compensation mechanisms may obscure the absence of structural reforms addressing inequalities in power and resources (Ahlqvist et al., 2021).

The European Commission's adoption of the communication on the European Green Deal marks a defining moment in the institutionalisation of this paradigm (European Commission, 2019). The literature nevertheless highlights the discursive ambivalence of the European Green Deal, which oscillates between a narrative of sustainable economic growth and one of profound structural transformation (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2019). A recurring criticism in the academic literature is that the European Green Deal tends to adopt a technocratic, top-down approach that limits the role of communities to that of mere implementers of predetermined objectives (Gray & McArdle, 2025). Although official discourse employs terms such as 'energy democracy', in practice, community inclusion is often restricted to traditional forms of consultation, without enabling genuine deliberative participation capable of transforming socio-economic systems (Gray & McArdle, 2025). A tension exists between the model of the 'creative and entrepreneurial city' promoted by European strategies and the specific conditions of formerly mono-industrial areas, which face progressive 'ruralisation' and a loss of local identity (Koretsky & Bruno, 2026).

The literature on European governance provides a robust analytical framework for understanding how European Union norms and mechanisms influence national policies. Studies of multilevel governance demonstrate that successful policy implementation depends on the capacity of subnational actors to negotiate resources and adapt European directives to local realities (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005). In this respect, critical analyses of the European Green Deal highlight the normative ambiguities underlying commitments to cohesion and equity, suggesting that the integration of the social dimension often remains superficial within legislative and strategic packages (Allen et al., 2020; Mehling et al., 2021).

Another important framework explores the discursive and ideological dimensions of sustainability transitions. Scholars such as Dryzek (2013) and Hajer (1995) argue that dominant discourses surrounding the 'green economy' tend to privilege technocratic and optimistic narratives while minimising social and cultural tensions. Within this literature, 'climate justice' is analysed not merely as a normative standard,

but as a field of discursive contestation in which various actors—from states and corporations to community groups and social movements—challenge or redefine the meanings of equity, responsibility and risk.

The concept of the 'just transition' originated in North American trade union movements during the 1980s and was subsequently incorporated into the normative architecture of international climate policy (Heffron & McCauley, 2018). In the European literature, the just transition is analysed as a mechanism for reconciling decarbonisation objectives with the protection of communities dependent on polluting industries (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). The just transition has evolved from a concept focused on job protection into a multidimensional paradigm of '[climate] justice'. The literature identifies three essential pillars of justice within the context of the transition: procedural justice, distributive justice and recognition justice (Stapper et al., 2026). Procedural justice refers to the inclusion of all affected stakeholders in decision-making processes, ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities for participation (Stapper et al., 2026). Distributive justice concerns the equitable allocation of the costs and benefits of the transition, particularly protecting low-income households that may be disproportionately affected by rising energy prices or job losses in coal-dependent sectors (Stapper et al., 2026). Recognition justice entails acknowledging histories of discrimination and respecting the values and rights of vulnerable communities in political decision-making (Stapper et al., 2026).

Associated financial instruments, such as the Just Transition Mechanism, are critically examined in terms of their actual capacity to reduce territorial inequalities (Crespy & Munta, 2023). Some studies indicate that the distribution of funding reflects both socio-economic criteria and political negotiations at the national level, which may limit the transformative potential of the policy (Carley & Konisky, 2020).

Empirical case studies provide a complementary perspective on how just transitions unfold in practice. Recent research on mining regions in Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom demonstrates that the planning and implementation of transition policies can generate both opportunities for social innovation and strong resistance from affected communities, depending on the degree of participatory inclusion and the distribution of resources (Kemp et al., 2020; Boso et al., 2022). These studies emphasise that the success of sustainability transitions cannot be assessed exclusively through emissions reductions or the allocation of funding, but must also be measured in terms of transformations in power relations and the capacity of local actors to define their own priorities.

Socio-economic inclusion is frequently addressed in relation to EU cohesion policies and the objectives of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2016). The literature emphasises the role of territorial governance in addressing regional disparities, particularly in mono-industrial regions affected by decarbonisation (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Research on Central and Eastern Europe demonstrates that the energy transition may exacerbate existing structural vulnerabilities, including energy poverty and dependence on extractive industries (Bouzarovski & Simcock, 2017). Concerning Romania, the national literature is increasingly attentive to the tensions between European directives and the domestic socio-economic context. Research on energy and cohesion policies identifies major structural challenges—such as limited administrative capacity, pronounced regional disparities and the inadequate inclusion of vulnerable communities in decision-making processes—that constrain the effective implementation of just transition mechanisms (Popescu & Rădulescu, 2021; Iancu & Jianu, 2023). These

studies highlight the need for an approach that is not merely technical, but also political, incorporating participatory instruments, institutional reforms and transparent accountability mechanisms.

In Eastern European Member States, political discourse may incorporate themes of energy sovereignty and economic development, sometimes in opposition to European climate ambitions (Siddi, 2020). In Romania, public debate often reflects a pragmatic and economic approach in which the transition is justified by access to European funding rather than by normative arguments concerning climate justice or intergenerational solidarity.

The literature therefore suggests an emerging consensus regarding the importance of an integrated approach to the just transition that combines financial instruments with critical analyses of power, discourse and participation. Nevertheless, significant gaps remain—particularly regarding comparative assessments of transnational implementation and the effective involvement of affected communities—which the present research seeks to address.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative research strategy, employing document analysis and discourse analysis to investigate how socio-economic inclusion is conceptualised, articulated and operationalised within just transition policies associated with the European Green Deal and their implementation in Romania. This methodological approach is justified by the normative and discursive nature of the concept of the 'just transition', as well as by the need to analyse the institutional and symbolic dimensions of the governance process simultaneously.

The research employs a comparative design, examining two levels of governance: the supranational level (the European Union) and the national level (Romania). Comparing these levels enables the identification of convergences and discrepancies between the European normative conceptualisation and the practical integration of the principles of socio-economic inclusion at the national level. The research follows an extended case-study design, with Romania selected as a relevant example of a Member State characterised by carbon-intensive regions and an evolving administrative capacity. The materials analysed comprise strategic and legislative documents, official political speeches and programming documents concerning the implementation of just transition funds.

By combining the two methods, the research seeks to capture both the formal architecture of the policies and the dynamics of power and meaning that underpin them.

Document analysis is employed to examine normative content, stated objectives, proposed instruments and thematic priorities. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic method for reviewing and interpreting official documents, enabling the identification of recurring themes and the conceptual frameworks underpinning public policies. Procedurally, the analysis encompassed official European Commission communications concerning the European Green Deal; regulations and guidelines associated with the Just Transition Mechanism; and relevant national strategic documents, including sustainable development strategies, energy plans and cohesion programmes.

The epistemological approach proceeds from the premise that public policies and institutional strategies are not merely technical instruments, but also discursive constructions that reflect power relations, normative frameworks and political priorities

(Hajer, 1995; Fairclough, 1995). In this respect, the research treats strategic documents and official speeches as normative texts that produce meaning and influence policy implementation. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Hajer, 1995) is also employed to explore how notions such as 'equity', 'cohesion', 'solidarity' and 'competitiveness' are discursively constructed and incorporated into the official narrative of the green transition. Public addresses and statements by Ursula von der Leyen, Teresa Ribera and Klaus Iohannis were selected for discourse analysis. The selection was based on the relevance of these speeches to the themes of the just transition and socio-economic inclusion, as well as on their official character, encompassing institutional speeches, public statements and addresses delivered at European or national events.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Socio-economic inclusion has become one of the normative pillars of the European Commission's strategic agenda in recent years, against the backdrop of increasingly prominent sustainability and social cohesion objectives. Strategic documents issued alongside the European Green Deal emphasise the need for the transition towards a climate-neutral economy to be 'just and inclusive for all regions and social groups' (European Commission, 2019, p. 4). The present analysis examines the normative and strategic architecture of the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) at the European Union level and the manner in which it is transposed into national documents, with particular emphasis on Romania. Its objective is to assess the coherence between the discourse of socio-economic inclusion and concrete implementation instruments, as well as to identify potential tensions between the European and national levels.

4.1. The Analysis of Strategic Documents: The Just Transition Mechanism and the National Plans

The institutionalisation of the just transition at the European Union level was strengthened through the adoption of the normative framework associated with the European Green Deal, which establishes climate neutrality as a strategic objective to be achieved by 2050 (European Commission, 2019). Within this context, the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) constitutes the principal instrument designed to mitigate the adverse socio-economic effects of decarbonisation in regions dependent on fossil fuels and high-emission industries. Conceptually, socio-economic inclusion is defined as a combination of access to economic opportunities, social mobility, protection against vulnerability and full democratic participation in decision-making processes (United Nations, 2016). Viewed through this lens, the European Green Deal is not merely a set of environmental measures, but also a policy framework intended to reduce the territorial and social inequalities generated by economic transitions. The concept of 'socio-economic inclusion' is explicitly embedded within the transition framework as a cross-cutting principle, meaning that policies must generate equitably distributed benefits, prevent the deepening of inequalities and ensure the participation of all social groups in the transformation process (Consilium, 2024). The integration of social considerations into the European Green Deal therefore forms part of the broader strategic vision of making the green transition compatible with economic and social cohesion.

In the European Commission's strategic communications, the just transition is described as an approach intended to 'ensure that no one is left behind' in the process of economic decarbonisation, explicitly recognising that climate change and structural transformations generate risks for employment, fossil-fuel-dependent regions and

vulnerable groups (European Commission, 2025a). The European Green Deal is therefore not merely a climate or environmental strategy, but one with a pronounced socio-economic dimension, encompassing policies for vocational retraining, investment in local businesses and the creation of new employment opportunities in emerging sectors (European Commission, 2025a). The strategic report 'EU Strategy for Social Cohesion' (European Commission, 2020) highlights the need for public policies to address structural inequalities between regions and among vulnerable groups, including long-term unemployment, social exclusion, poverty and unequal access to education and healthcare services. These priorities are reaffirmed in the guidelines for structural and investment funds, which make part of the funding conditional upon programmes specifically targeting socio-economic inclusion (European Commission, 2020).

The European Green Deal introduces concrete mechanisms for operationalising socio-economic inclusion. In particular, the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) is designed as a financial instrument dedicated to supporting the regions and economic sectors most affected by the transition towards climate neutrality (European Commission, 2021). In theory, the JTM seeks to mitigate the socio-economic impact of decarbonisation by financing workforce reskilling, supporting local enterprises, modernising infrastructure and stimulating local innovation (Crespy & Munta, 2023; Carley & Konisky, 2020). Emphasis is placed on co-development and consultation at the local level—a key element of inclusive governance—to avoid reproducing pre-existing inequalities. Pillar I, represented by the Just Transition Fund (JTF), is dedicated to investment in economic diversification, worker reskilling, research, innovation and environmental rehabilitation (Stapper et al., 2026). To access these funds, the Member States have developed Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs), which identify the regions most affected and establish investment priorities (Stapper et al., 2026). Pillar II comprises a dedicated scheme under the InvestEU programme intended to attract private investment in sustainable projects. At the same time, Pillar III consists of a public-sector loan facility managed by the European Investment Bank (EIB) for infrastructure projects that do not generate sufficient revenue of their own (Stapper et al., 2026). The Mechanism explicitly aims to mitigate the social and economic effects of the transformation by mobilising approximately EUR 55 billion between 2021 and 2027 (European Commission, 2025a). This includes funding for the local economy, workforce protection, vocational retraining and support for small and medium-sized enterprises undergoing transition (European Commission, 2025a; European Commission, 2023b).

Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 establishing the Just Transition Fund explicitly defines the objective of 'enabling regions and people to address the social, economic and environmental impacts of the transition towards a climate-neutral economy' (European Parliament & Council, 2021). The document analysis reveals a dual normative logic: on the one hand, a redistributive logic, through the allocation of funds to the regions most affected; on the other hand, a conditional logic, whereby funding is linked to firm commitments to decarbonisation and economic restructuring. Discursively, European documents articulate the just transition in terms of 'solidarity', 'cohesion' and 'territorial equity', although these concepts are predominantly incorporated into a narrative of competitiveness and economic modernisation (European Commission, 2020). Critical literature emphasises that this integration may lead to the 'subordination' of the social dimension to the imperatives of the market and green growth (Ahlqvist et al., 2021). At the same time, the analysis reveals an increased emphasis on the responsibility of the Member States to develop Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs), reflecting the logic

of multilevel governance (Bache & Flinders, 2004). Thus, although the financial framework is European, its effective implementation is decentralised, generating significant variations in the conceptualisation and application of the principles of inclusion.

In Romania, the Territorial Just Transition Plans primarily target counties such as Gorj, Hunedoara, Dolj, Galați, Prahova and Mureș—regions historically dependent on coal extraction or energy-intensive industries (Romanian Government, 2022), of which Hunedoara and Gorj are the most exposed owing to their dependence on coal mining (JUSTEM). Development strategies for these regions emphasise the creation of new jobs in green sectors, the development of small and medium-sized enterprises and improvements in regional connectivity (JUSTEM). Nevertheless, a discrepancy exists between the ambitious climate-neutrality objectives and the capacity of local administrations to develop viable projects (Nicola & Schmitz, 2022).

At the national level, Romania has adopted a series of documents to transpose the objectives of the European Green Deal and the JTM into public policy. In this respect, Romania's National Strategy for Sustainable Development 2030 (Romanian Government, 2020) includes priorities concerning the energy transition and emissions reduction, as well as social inclusion objectives such as reducing energy poverty and supporting employment in emerging sectors.

Nevertheless, a critical analysis of these documents suggests a significant difference between the supranational and national levels in the conceptualisation of socio-economic inclusion. While European documents explicitly position social equity and cohesion among their principal objectives, national strategic documents tend to treat inclusion as a consequence or an 'externality' of the economic transition rather than assigning it a central position in transition governance. For example, in the Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan, the primary emphasis remains on energy and efficiency objectives (PNIESC, 2024), while references to social inclusion are often linked to social protection measures for vulnerable consumers, without consistently incorporating participatory or co-creation mechanisms at the regional level (Dumitru & Popescu, 2020).

A recurring difference between governance levels concerns the manner in which 'community participation' is operationalised. EU documents emphasise the need to involve local and regional stakeholders in defining investment priorities for the JTM as part of a multilevel governance framework. By contrast, national strategies and programmes are often developed within a centralised framework, with limited public consultation and minimal input from directly affected groups (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Dumitru & Popescu, 2020).

This discrepancy reflects a broader tension in the implementation of the European Green Deal: between the ideal of a participatory and equitable transition and the domestic administrative and political constraints of the Member States. The literature argues that the success of a just transition policy depends not only on the allocation of financial resources, but also on how these resources are incorporated into an inclusive and adaptive decision-making process (Healy & Barry, 2017; Jordan et al., 2018).

Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) constitutes the most significant programming document for the country's transition and includes the 'Decarbonisation Law'. This legislation establishes a strict timetable for phasing out lignite- and hard-coal-based production capacity by 2032, while also incorporating social protection measures for workers made redundant (JUSTEM). Nevertheless, documents

such as the Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) have been criticised for the absence of concrete measures at the regional level and for an insufficiently detailed approach to the social impact of the transition (JUSTEM).

At the national level, Romania's strategic documents—including the Territorial Just Transition Plans, the strategic framework for sustainable development and cohesion programmes—seek to align interventions with the requirements of the European Green Deal and the JTM. Romania has developed and approved its Territorial Just Transition Plan, thereby securing access to an allocation of EUR 2.14 billion from the Just Transition Fund for the regions most affected by decarbonisation (Dolj, Galați, Gorj, Hunedoara, Mureș, Prahova) (European Commission Press Corner, 2022).

Table 1. Strategy and financing at a national level

Target region	Strategic projects	Financing sources
Valea Jiului (Hunedoara County)	vocational retraining centre; sustainable tourism; digitalisation.	JTF, Modernisation Fund, National Budget.
Gorj County	Green business incubator; solar parks on degraded sites; hydrogen.	JTF, InvestEU, PNNR.
National level	Decarbonisation Law; Prosumer Programme for Former Miners.	PNNR, Environmental Fund.

Source: authors' design based on data collected from TSI (2019); JTP Groundwork (2024); Ministerul Energiei (2024).

Overall, the European Commission's strategic documents conceptualise socio-economic inclusion as a cross-cutting element of the European Green Deal and the Just Transition Mechanism, combining the objectives of equity, social cohesion and sustainability. In Romania, the incorporation of these principles is evident in planning and strategic documents. Still, it remains largely instrumental and partial, reflecting an approach that is more technocratic and economic than socially participatory.

Transforming strategic commitments into tangible socio-economic inclusion outcomes requires not only the alignment of national documents with European directives, but also the strengthening of local administrative capacity, increased community participation and the development of evaluation and accountability mechanisms capable of monitoring the actual impact of implemented policies.

National strategies contain clear socio-economic inclusion components, including support for reskilling workers affected by the transition, measures to diversify local economies, incentives for job creation in green or emerging sectors, and social investment in local infrastructure (Ministry of Finance, 2021). These components reflect recognition that the green transition and decarbonisation may generate socio-economic shocks unless accompanied by inclusion policies that support workforce transition and the adaptation of vulnerable communities.

Nevertheless, major challenges remain in national-level implementation. Contemporary analyses indicate that consultation processes and the involvement of local stakeholders and marginalised groups in the development of territorial and regional plans in Romania remain limited, potentially undermining the capacity to respond effectively to community needs (Bankwatch/RPP Insights, 2025). This suggests that, although official documents incorporate principles of inclusion, their implementation remains dependent on administrative capacity and the commitment of local stakeholders.

4.2. The Challenges of Inclusion in the Romanian Mining Regions

Romania occupies a delicate strategic position: it must honour its European decarbonisation commitments while simultaneously guaranteeing national energy security and social stability in regions historically dependent on coal (Lazăr, 2025). An analysis of the situation in the Jiu Valley and Gorj reveals the complexity of implementing the just transition within a context of 'hesitant policies' and economic disparities (Nicola & Schmitz, 2022).

The Jiu Valley is Romania's most significant mono-industrial area, having developed exclusively around hard-coal mining (Koretsky & Bruno, 2026). The restructuring process, which began in the 1990s, led to a dramatic decline in employment and continuous demographic decline (JUSTEM). The Jiu Valley Development Strategy (2021–2030) seeks to improve quality of life, promote economic diversification through innovation and harness the region's natural and cultural heritage (TSI, 2019). Nevertheless, the social reality is characterised by high unemployment and a poverty rate five times higher among those without employment than among those in work (JUSTEM). The closure of the remaining mines—Livezeni, Vulcan, Lupeni and Lonea—by 2032 is placing immense pressure on local social assistance services, which are struggling with limited budgets (JUSTEM). Young people are leaving the region in large numbers, while the school-age population has declined by more than 30% over the past decade in towns such as Vulcan(Bankwatch).

Gorj County, which encompasses the Rovinari and Motru mining basins, faces the loss of approximately 5,400 jobs owing to the closure of lignite mines and associated thermal power plants. Unlike the Jiu Valley, Gorj has benefited from technical assistance through the JTP Groundwork programme (2024) to identify viable economic alternatives, such as green business incubators. Young people in Gorj are motivated to participate in the green transition but face a lack of mentorship and limited access to start-up funding (JTP Groundwork, 2024). Innovative projects, such as converting former mining sites into solar parks or developing sustainable agriculture through the 'Tomato Village' project, are regarded as potential means of retaining young people in the region (JTP Groundwork, 2025). Organisations such as Greenpeace Romania promote the 'miner-prosumer' model, calling for support to enable workers made redundant to become owners of renewable energy generation capacity(Greenpeace, 2022).

4.3. Analysis of Communication on Socio-Economic Inclusion and the Just Transition in the European and Romanian Contexts

The present analysis employs an approach informed by critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Hajer, 1995), examining how political leaders construct the meanings of 'socio-economic inclusion' and the 'just transition' within different institutional contexts. It analyses public addresses by President Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission Executive Vice-President for a Clean, Just and Competitive Transition

Teresa Ribera, and statements by Romanian President Klaus Iohannis concerning the implementation of the European Green Deal and the Just Transition Mechanism.

The analysis examines three dimensions: the interpretative frames employed to define the transition; legitimation strategies—economic, moral and technocratic; and the positioning of vulnerable social actors within the transition narrative.

4.3.1. Ursula von der Leyen's Discourse: Inclusion as a Moral Imperative and a Civilisational Project

The discourse of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has played a defining role in shaping public perceptions of the European Green Deal. Since the beginning of her mandate in 2019, von der Leyen has employed powerful metaphorical language, describing the European Green Deal as 'our new growth strategy' and 'Europe's "man on the moon" moment' (European Commission, 2019). This rhetoric served to legitimise an accelerated transition by presenting the fight against climate change as an existential necessity for the planet and its citizens. In her speeches on the European Green Deal, Ursula von der Leyen frames the green transition as a 'defining moment for Europe' and insists that 'no one should be left behind' (European Commission, 2019). This formulation becomes a central normative frame, articulating the transition as a moral project grounded in solidarity rather than as a merely technical and economic undertaking.

From a discursive perspective, three recurring elements can be identified (European Commission, 2019): the 'moralisation' of the transition—inclusion is associated with intergenerational responsibility and European solidarity; the integration of cohesion into economic growth—the transition is presented as a 'growth strategy' capable of creating jobs and reducing inequalities; and the universalisation of impact—European citizens are constructed as the collective beneficiaries of the transformation. The discourse is characterised by legitimation through shared European values, with social justice and environmental protection incorporated into a unified narrative. Socio-economic inclusion appears as part of a 'Europe that protects', thereby strengthening the Commission's institutional legitimacy (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2019).

An analysis of speeches delivered between 2019 and 2025 reveals a significant evolution. While the emphasis in 2019 was on inclusion ('leaving no one behind') and benefits for health and the climate, speeches delivered following the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine reframed the green transition as a pillar of security and strategic autonomy (European Commission, 2023a). In the State of the Union Address of September 2025, von der Leyen adopts a considerably more forceful and confrontational tone, stating that 'Europe is in a fight' to determine its own destiny and take control of the energies of the future (European Commission, 2025b). This discursive shift indicates a transition from the 'European Green Deal' to a 'Clean Industrial Deal'. Within this new framework, the competitiveness of European industry and the security of critical raw material supplies become priorities equal in importance to sustainability (European Commission, 2025b). Socio-economic inclusion is now presented through the lens of 'quality jobs' created by investment in clean technologies rather than through purely social assistance measures (European Parliament, 2025). The President consistently emphasises that the future of clean technologies must be 'made in Europe', using this principle to justify anti-subsidy investigations—such as that concerning Chinese electric vehicles—to protect the internal market and the European workforce (European Commission, 2023a).

During official visits, such as her visit to Czechia, von der Leyen sought to illustrate the benefits of the just transition by citing projects involving the electrification of glass furnaces and investment in 'hydrogen valleys'. The message is one of partnership: the European Union stands alongside businesses and mining regions in transforming 'a great past into a future' (European Parliament, 2025). Nevertheless, this optimistic vision clashes with realities on the ground, where the promised 'thousands of jobs of the future' remain at the planning stage while mine closures are imminent.

4.3.2. Teresa Ribera: The Governance of Transition

Teresa Ribera, in her capacity as Executive Vice-President for a Clean, Just and Competitive Transition, represents the voice of pragmatism and the technical implementation of the European Green Deal. Her discourse, particularly during her confirmation hearings before the European Parliament, focused on the need to provide predictability for businesses and align climate objectives with competitiveness objectives (European Parliament, 2024). In her statements concerning the implementation of the Just Transition Mechanism, Teresa Ribera emphasises the concrete social dimension of the transformation, insisting on support for workers in carbon-intensive industries and structurally affected regions (European Commission, 2023a). Ribera maintains that no conflict exists between the green and economic agendas, stating that 'decarbonisation and competitiveness are inseparable objectives' (European Parliament, 2025). Her commitments include developing a new State aid framework intended to accelerate the deployment of renewable energy and industrial decarbonisation while simplifying bureaucratic procedures (Von Bonnin et al., 2024). This approach is viewed as a response to the challenges identified in the Draghi and Letta reports, which emphasise the need for substantial investment to preserve Europe's prosperity amid global competition (Von Bonnin et al., 2024).

Concerning socio-economic inclusion, Ribera places particular emphasis on intergenerational equity and the social dimension of the transition (Latham & Watkins, 2025). She has pledged to work towards integrating considerations relating to skills, housing and gender equality into European policies, stressing that the success of the transition depends on citizens' confidence in the Union's promise of prosperity (European Parliament, 2024). Unlike Ursula von der Leyen's often idealistic discourse, Ribera focuses on market instruments and regulations capable of enabling a 'frictionless' transition for industry and small and medium-sized enterprises (SME UNITED, 2024).

A central element of Ribera's discourse is the protection of the European single market. She opposes a 'subsidy race' among Member States that could fragment the Union and disadvantage countries with limited financial resources (Von Bonnin et al., 2024). Her proposal for a 'European Competitiveness Fund' is intended to ensure that all regions can participate in the green transition, irrespective of their national fiscal capacity (Von Bonnin et al., 2024). This vision is crucial for countries such as Romania, whose domestic budgetary resources are insufficient to support large-scale industrial transformations.

Compared with von der Leyen, Teresa Ribera's discourse is more technical and implementation-oriented. Inclusion is presented through vocational retraining (reskilling and upskilling), regional economic diversification and measures to address energy poverty (European Parliament, 2025). The legitimation strategy is predominantly technocratic and functional: the just transition is justified by the need to manage its economic impact and ensure the efficient use of European funds. Vulnerable stakeholders

are defined in concrete socio-economic terms—workers, small and medium-sized enterprises and mono-industrial regions—while inclusion acquires an operational dimension (Parlamentul European, 2025).

Table 2. Discourses and vision

Discursive theme	Ursula von der Leyen	Teresa Ribera
General vision	geopolitics; security	sustainable competitiveness; simplification; market realism
Social focus	intergenerational solidarity; creating new industries	skills; housing; gender equality; intergenerational justice
Key-instruments	Green Deal; Climate Law; anti-subsidy investigations	state aid reform; Clean Industrial Deal; cross-border investment
Attitude toward the transition	strategic support for ecosystems; clean transition dialogues	predictability; reducing bureaucracy; scaling up innovation

Source: authors' design based on data collected from Von Bonnin et al. (2024); Parlamentul European (2024); Sikora (2020); Comisia Europeană (2023a); Comisia Europeană (2023c).

European discourse thus exhibits a complementary dynamic: von der Leyen constructs the normative and symbolic framework, while Ribera translates it into practical policy terms.

4.3.3. Political Communication in Romania

In public statements concerning the green transition and the use of European funds, President Klaus Iohannis emphasises economic modernisation and the historic opportunity provided by European funding for Romania's development (Administrația Prezidențială, 2022). Socio-economic inclusion is mentioned but incorporated into a predominantly economic and strategic framework: the transition is justified by the need to modernise infrastructure and increase competitiveness; emphasis is placed on the absorption of European funds; and the participatory dimension and social dialogue are less visible in the discourse (Administrația Prezidențială, 2022).

A major barrier to genuine socio-economic inclusion in Romania is the nature of political communication. National-level discourse analysis indicates a pattern of 'hesitant politics', manifested in the postponement of difficult decisions, attempts to circumvent European rules and denials of the need to close mines (Gavriș & Popescu, 2024). This attitude creates a 'dissonant' environment between the requirements of EU environmental policy and the commitments of domestic economic and political elites to supporting the survival of state-owned energy enterprises (Koretsky & Bruno, 2026).

Turning to Romanian decision-makers, they tend to blame the European Union for the social difficulties generated by the green transition, using Brussels as a 'scapegoat' to avoid taking responsibility for unpopular decisions (Păvălașc & Avram, 2023). This narrative undermines trust in the European project and creates opportunities for manipulation by extremist parties, which thrive in areas where economic prospects are uncertain (Păvălașc & Avram, 2023). Rather than presenting the transition as an opportunity for modernisation, the dominant political discourse focuses on the 'struggle for survival', thereby fuelling social anxiety and resistance to change (Nicola & Schmitz, 2022).

The absence of clear communication concerning the long-term benefits of the transition and the available support mechanisms leads the public to perceive the process as externally imposed rather than as a community-driven project. The media play an active role in reframing the energy transition, often through politicised perspectives that do not reflect the holistic paradigm of the European Green Deal (Gavriș & Popescu, 2024).

The success of the just transition depends critically on communities and their capacity to initiate collective action (Nicola & Schmitz, 2022). Nevertheless, in Romania's mining regions, community resilience is undermined by historical mistrust of local and national authorities, fuelled by unfulfilled promises and the inadequate management of previous restructuring processes (Nicola & Schmitz, 2022). There is a risk that, rather than correcting existing inequalities, the transition process will exacerbate them, leaving vulnerable communities even more marginalised in the face of global market forces (Nicola & Schmitz, 2022).

5. DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the section devoted to the conceptualisation and integration of socio-economic inclusion within the European Green Deal and the Just Transition Mechanism highlights the existence of a coherent normative architecture at the level of the European Commission, as well as significant challenges concerning its transposition and operationalisation at the national level in Romania.

In European documents, socio-economic inclusion is conceptualised as a cross-cutting principle and a prerequisite for the legitimacy of the climate transition. The European Green Deal is presented not exclusively as a decarbonisation strategy, but as a structural transformation project intended to strengthen social and territorial cohesion. The recurring formula 'no one is left behind' (European Commission, 2019) functions as an integrative normative framework through which the social dimension is placed on an equal footing with climate objectives. Inclusion is thus articulated in terms of redistribution, access to economic opportunities, vocational retraining and efforts to address structural vulnerabilities.

Institutionally, this conceptualisation is supported through dedicated financial and governance mechanisms. The Just Transition Mechanism constitutes a concrete expression of the integration of the social dimension into climate policies, providing instruments for regional economic diversification, workforce reskilling and support for communities dependent on carbon-intensive industries (European Commission, 2023). In this respect, a relatively high degree of coherence can be observed at the European level between normative discourse and the institutional design of public policy.

In Romania, the analysis of strategic documents indicates the formal adoption of the European conceptual framework. The Territorial Just Transition Plans and cohesion

policy programming documents include explicit measures concerning reskilling, support for small and medium-sized enterprises, social investment and the development of local infrastructure (European Commission Press Corner, 2022). The allocation of substantial funding to affected regions demonstrates the procedural integration of the principle of inclusion into national planning.

National strategic documents adopt the official European terminology, emphasising 'economic diversification', 'vocational retraining' and the 'creation of green jobs'. Nevertheless, the critical analysis highlights three problematic aspects:

1. The predominance of the economic approach over the social dimension—although inclusion is identified as a cross-cutting objective, concrete measures are primarily directed towards infrastructure investment and business development rather than strengthening community capacity or reducing structural inequalities (Popescu & Rădulescu, 2021).
2. Limited participation by local stakeholders—although the documents emphasise the partnership principle, the public consultation process has often been largely formalistic, with limited involvement from directly affected communities (Iancu & Jianu, 2023). This finding reflects a tension between participatory discourse and centralised institutional practices.
3. Ambiguities concerning long-term sustainability—national plans focus on the absorption of funds during the 2021–2027 period, without clearly integrating them into long-term structural strategies for labour market reform or social protection.

A comparison of the European framework with national documents indicates relative rhetorical coherence, but also differences in the extent to which the principles of social justice are operationalised. At the European level, the just transition is presented as a prerequisite for the legitimacy of decarbonisation (European Commission, 2019). In contrast, at the national level, the emphasis is placed on procedural compliance and the absorption of funds. This dynamic confirms observations in the literature on the political economy of transitions, according to which justice is often reduced to a compensatory mechanism without structural transformations in power relations (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; Ahlqvist et al., 2021). In this respect, the document analysis suggests that socio-economic inclusion remains partially instrumentalised, being incorporated into the dominant paradigm of green economic growth.

Nevertheless, the principal difference emerges at the level of governance and implementation. The literature on Europeanisation demonstrates that the internalisation of European norms is often mediated by administrative capacity and domestic political priorities (Börzel & Risse, 2012). In Romania, the inclusion of the social dimension is frequently formulated in programmatic terms. Still, participatory and consultative mechanisms remain limited, while the emphasis is often placed on the absorption of funds and the investment dimension of the transition. This orientation may lead to a predominantly technocratic approach in which inclusion is treated as a secondary objective or as a consequence of economic development, rather than as the normative foundation of policy.

Turning to the communicative dimension, the European Commission's discourse is constructed around a dual source of legitimacy: moral and institutional. In communications concerning the European Green Deal, socio-economic inclusion is framed as a constitutive principle of the European project—'no one is left behind'—integrating solidarity, cohesion and intergenerational responsibility into a coherent

normative framework (European Commission, 2019). This formulation functions as a 'hegemonic framework' (Hajer, 1995), normalising the idea that the climate transition is inseparable from social justice. Inclusion thus becomes not merely a public policy objective, but also an identity-defining element of the European Union.

The critical analysis of speeches delivered by Ursula von der Leyen, Teresa Ribera and Klaus Iohannis reveals the existence of a multilevel discursive architecture surrounding socio-economic inclusion and the just transition, characterised by normative convergences as well as significant differences in the prioritisation and operationalisation of social principles.

Table 3. Comparative Analysis at the Discursive Level

Political actor	Institutional context	Interpretative frames	Legitimation strategies	Positioning of vulnerable stakeholders
Ursula von der Leyen	The European Commission – Implementation of the European Green Deal	transition as a project of economic modernisation; green competitiveness; global climate leadership	economic (growth, green jobs); technocratic (expertise, climate objectives); moral (intergenerational responsibility)	beneficiaries of reskilling programmes and structural funds; emphasis on 'leaving no one behind'
Teresa Ribera	European Commission – Clean Transition and Competition	transition as a systemic necessity; the integration of sustainability and competitiveness; territorial equity	technocratic (regulation, financial instruments); economic (structural benefits); moral (climate justice)	priority groups in the distribution of support; emphasis on social cohesion
Klaus Iohannis	Romania – National Implementation of the European Green Deal and the Just Transition Mechanism	transition as an opportunity for modernisation and European convergence; regional development	economic (investment, infrastructure); moral (European solidarity); political (strategic alignment with the EU)	coal-dependent communities and mono-industrial regions presented as requiring economic restructuring and support

Source: authors' design based on data collected from Von Bonnin et al. (2024); Parlamentul European (2024); Sikora (2020); Comisia Europeană (2023a); Comisia Europeană (2023c); Administrația Prezidențială (2020, 2022).

An integrated analysis of European discourse and Romanian realities reveals several contradictions within the process of socio-economic inclusion under the European Green Deal. First, there is a tension between the objectives of 'speed' and 'justice' in the decarbonisation process. While the climate emergency requires mines to

be closed rapidly, rebuilding a diversified regional economy and reskilling an ageing workforce require time and social investment extending beyond the planning horizons of European budgetary cycles (Sikora, 2020). Each day by which mitigation measures are delayed increases the ultimate social cost and prolongs the decline of affected regions (Nicola & Schmitz, 2022). Second, the concept of 'community' employed in European documents is often idealised and homogeneous. Critical discourse analysis highlights that policies tend to overlook the internal complexity of communities, marginalising groups that are not directly connected to the unionised workforce, including women, young people without formal education and minorities (Gray & McArdle, 2025). A genuinely inclusive transition should move from 'leaving no one behind' to 'acting together', providing meaningful opportunities for deliberative participation and energy democracy (Gray & McArdle, 2025). Third, dependence on large-scale industrial projects, such as 'hydrogen valleys' or extensive solar parks, may reproduce patterns of external dependency in which major economic decisions are made far removed from the local community. Promoting prosumers and energy communities in which citizens own the means of production would provide a considerably more robust form of inclusion and control over living costs (JTP Groundwork,2024).

The principal tension lies in the difference between European normative discourse, which places social justice at the heart of the transformation, and national discourse, in which priority is often given to economic efficiency and the absorption of financial resources. This difference may influence how policies are implemented at the local level, as discursive emphasis shapes administrative priorities and public perceptions of the transition (Hajer, 1995; Fairclough, 1995).

In Ursula von der Leyen's discourse, the transition is presented as a civilisational project in which the social dimension legitimises climate ambition. Inclusion is articulated as a European value, while equity is incorporated into a narrative of sustainable modernisation. This discursive strategy reflects what the literature describes as 'legitimation through shared values' (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2019), strengthening public support for transformative policies by appealing to solidarity and collective responsibility.

By contrast, Teresa Ribera's discourse—centred on the implementation of the Just Transition Mechanism—shifts the emphasis from the normative to the operational level. Inclusion is conceptualised through concrete instruments: worker reskilling, support for small and medium-sized enterprises, measures to address energy poverty and regional economic diversification (European Commission, 2023). This approach reflects a 'technocratisation' of climate justice, in which legitimacy derives from the institutional capacity to manage the economic impact of decarbonisation (Fairclough, 1995). In this respect, inclusion is transformed from a moral principle into a set of measurable and fundable public policy mechanisms.

At the national level, Klaus Iohannis's discourse indicates a different configuration of priorities. The green transition is presented primarily as an opportunity for economic modernisation and the utilisation of European funds. Socio-economic inclusion is incorporated into the discourse, but not as a normative foundation; rather, it is presented as an outcome of development and economic growth (Presidential Administration, 2022). This difference suggests a shift in emphasis: whereas inclusion legitimises the transition at the European level, the transition legitimises inclusion at the national level.

This discursive reversal has important implications for multilevel governance. The literature on Europeanisation demonstrates that the transposition of European norms at the national level is often selective and mediated by domestic priorities (Börzel & Risse, 2012). In Romania, discourse analysis indicates the formal incorporation of the vocabulary of the just transition, albeit with a predominantly economic and investment-oriented focus. The participatory dimension and social dialogue—both essential to genuine inclusion—are less visible in national rhetoric.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The research examined governance and political discourse concerning socio-economic inclusion in the context of the Just Transition and the European Green Deal, comparing institutional approaches and political rhetoric at the European and national levels (Romania).

In response to the first research question, socio-economic inclusion is conceptualised in EU documents as a central element of the transition towards a climate-neutral economy: it entails supporting vulnerable communities, reskilling the workforce, promoting economic diversification and preventing social disparities. In Romania, these principles are incorporated into national just transition programmes. Still, their implementation depends on administrative capacity and the prioritisation of public policies at the local level, which may generate divergences between European strategic commitments and national realities.

There is an asymmetry between the European normative level and the national operational level. While socio-economic inclusion is conceptualised at EU level as a constitutive pillar of the just transition, at the national level it is integrated primarily as an instrument for managing the economic impact of decarbonisation. This difference may affect the coherence of implementation and create a risk that social cohesion objectives will be subordinated to those of economic efficiency. In the long term, the sustainability and legitimacy of the green transition in Romania will depend on the capacity to transform inclusion from a formal principle into an effectively participatory and redistributive process. This requires strengthening social dialogue, increasing transparency in resource allocation and developing mechanisms to monitor the social impact of investments financed through the Just Transition Mechanism. Without these elements, there is a risk that the transition will be perceived as externally imposed or predominantly oriented towards economic objectives, which could undermine public support and social cohesion. The analysis also highlights that the integration of socio-economic inclusion within the European Green Deal and the Just Transition Mechanism is conceptually robust at the European level but requires substantial development at the national level to ensure coherence between strategic commitments and tangible social outcomes. Only through normative, institutional and participatory alignment across governance levels can a genuinely just and inclusive transition be achieved.

In Romania, the mining regions of the Jiu Valley and Gorj serve as a warning: without genuine socio-economic inclusion grounded in procedural, distributive and recognition justice, the transition risks becoming a source of marginalisation and political instability. The ‘Decarbonisation Law’ and funding from the Just Transition Fund (JTF) provide the necessary instruments, but the ‘soul’ of the just transition must derive from communities’ capacity to see themselves as active agents in shaping their own future. European rhetoric concerning ‘strategic autonomy’ and ‘clean competitiveness’ must

translate into functioning business incubators in Gorj and retraining centres in the Jiu Valley that offer young people genuine career prospects.

In response to the second research question, socio-economic inclusion functions as a polysemous and strategic concept. At the European level, it constitutes a normative and identity-defining pillar; at the operational level, it becomes a technocratic instrument; and at the national level, it is incorporated into a pragmatic discourse of modernisation. This discursive variation may generate differences in implementation, as interpretative frameworks influence resource allocation, policy prioritisation and the mobilisation of local stakeholders. Moreover, the analysis reveals a potential structural tension between the transformative ambition of the European Green Deal and the domestic political and administrative constraints faced by the Member States. If inclusion remains predominantly a rhetorical element at the national level, there is a risk that the transition will exacerbate regional and social inequalities, contrary to the European Union's stated objectives. Conversely, convergence between European normative discourse and local participatory practices could strengthen the legitimacy and sustainability of the decarbonisation process. Discourse analysis therefore demonstrates that the success of the just transition depends not only on financial instruments or institutional design, but also on narrative coherence across levels of governance. Socio-economic inclusion must simultaneously constitute a normative principle, an operational mechanism and a genuine political priority if it is to avoid becoming merely an element of strategic rhetoric.

Only by aligning technocratic visions at the European level with the organic realities of local communities can Europe fulfil its solemn promise to leave no one behind, transforming the climate crisis into an opportunity to renew solidarity across the continent.

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UNEQUAL SOCIAL JUSTICE BETWEEN COMMUNIST LEGACY AND VULNERABLE DEMOCRACY

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Abstract. *In Albania, communism was established after Bolshevik model before the end of Second World War. From its foundation to its fall, thousands of Albanians were killed, imprisoned, and politically persecuted as they opposed the dictatorial ideology within it. The regime's collapse posed the challenge of the transitional justice' implementation, to repair social disbalance legacy. After thirty years, no persecutor was punished, no regrets, no forgiveness is made. The extended period of vulnerable democracy lacked historical truth. Indeed, the most serious risks are the time passing-by and the restoration of social justice coming over. The article reveals the education's role to overcome social division, in post-communist particular context, where other means of transitional justice have failed. Research through a local historical narrative, intertwined with sociology theories, highlights the double decisive role of education in presenting the past and healing of wounds, thus addressing the discrepancies towards social repair. A fragile democracy, built upon the ruins of communism, serves as a case study of how social equality can be fostered through education, thus influencing the international paradigm of social justice.*

Keywords*: Social inequality, social justice, communist crimes, education process, transitional justice, social repair.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The communist regime in southern Europe was established in a particular historical context (Ekiert & Hanson, 2003). The Second World War found in Albania a rural country, without schools, governance and in extreme poverty. Against such a background, bolshevism (Xhaferri, 2024) as a theory and dogma were supported by many people, who made this ideology the banner of their war against Nazism and fascism (Lambourne, 2014). This sociological background paved the way for installing a new governing system, apparently proclaimed as a social, but in reality, a dictatorial one (Këllici, 2020). With the end of war, the People's Republic of Albania came into power, and beyond the political denomination, the core of politics was one and only form of mono-party ruling system (Kaba, 2020). The Constitution of 1946 was established in support of this state political ideology, enshrining the system of leadership, by applying the death penalty for people committing political opposition, agitation and propaganda, or escaping from state borders; closure of churches and mosques (Bezati, 2019); as well as the suppression of private property by returning all property to the state as a sole owner (Fischer, 2010).

Thus, a totalitarian political system was set up, which blocked the movement out of the country, killed the nation's intellectuals, the elites, the clergy, and filled prisons with dissidents and opponents of the system. This situation lasted for almost forty-six

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years, and certainly, the pressure and reprisals against opponents, at best, ended in life imprisonment (Meta & Frashëri, 2018), at worst, with murdering. This situation came to be unchanged, until the fall of Berlin Wall, a moment that signed the break of communist totalitarianism, built in Eastern Europe (Brown, 2015). The day after, many persecuted people closed in camps like Nazi's lager, were set free, without families, homes and properties. Albania was found in the crossroad with a split population politically and ideologically, with the only common ground of starvation from long poverty the communism had carried out. Social inclusion, which would have been possible through transitional justice, to rejoin persecuted with the rest who didn't experienced perpetration out of camps, never came. This process has been impossible, because of a strong legacy with the past and the disruption of a fragile democracy, conditioned by many internal and external factors such as economic and institutional transition, ignorance, concealment of truth, manipulation of history, political influence or interference, and people negligence.

As Erich Fromm mentions in "The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness" everything must be seen in the context of the place and time where facts develop (Fromm, 1973). The Albanian case constitutes an ad hoc paradigm in the theory of transitional justice, because violence and ideological persecution took place in the context of an internal hegemonic conflict.

Indeed, the culture of non-impunity of the past seem to be radicalized, and punishment of the past risks being distrusted, as a way to restorative justice (Subotic, 2013), thus the country has a present-day social division. Albania's experience reveals the dysfunction of the former persecuted class inclusion, through the legal and institutional means of transitional justice, in the context of a post-communist country (Mëhilli, 2021). The only means that still encourages the telling of the truth and reconciliation, so far, is the education. Therefore, the story of almost thirty years of break with the past, has shown that even history could be manipulated, in the transition countries. The two-opponent ruling political parties, which appoint even the simplest history teacher in a village, have influenced to a deeper discrepancy to the social division. There is no unification of school's program regarding the last German' soldier, who left Albania at the end of World War II, either November 28th or 29th, 1944 (Austin & Ellison, 2008).

This reality may sound ridiculous and unbelievable, but it comes as testimony of a wrinkled mentality, and where the issue of reconciliation with the past, seems to leave neither a trace, nor an interest (Austin R. C., 2015). This conclusion comes after a cross-sectional survey included in the methodology, conducted with young students on how they know the communist-past (1945-1991), their views on the regime's political system, elections, freedoms and dissident repression. It analyzes the students' knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and addresses a gap in understanding young Albanians' engagement with the historical legacy and truth. These outcomes are analyzed under a double perspective that education enhances simultaneously and directly to the social justice process. On one side, it shows that manipulation of curricula, due to political pressure, has created disinformation, influencing a negligence that taken along with other factors, has made-up an insensitive society towards the persecuted history and exclusion.

By analyzing the factors of long-term social harm, where other means of transformation have failed to be implemented in the vulnerable democracy of a small country in the East Europe (Hansen, 2017), the research seeks to undergo the process of social equality through the lens of education. So far, the later constitutes *extrema ratio* for saving the collective memory, for telling the truth and raising awareness over

misunderstandings or misinterpretations. The only pillar where hope remains pending, is that conflicts of the past could be told and make people sensitize, through the process of education (Hysa, 2021). It requires restoring the strength of reason and belief in people, especially the young generation, to make them have an authentic idea and to not get influenced by either family or politics. From the other perspective, education still remains the tool to foster critical engagement with Albania's communist past, and to build bridges of dialogue for reconciliation, thus making social justice functional.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social justice

The first political uprisings in '45 did not start from nothing, but were a continuum of an ideological conflict between the left and the right since Liberation War (Szczerbiak, 2015). The crimes of communists (Fischer, 1999) began with the murder of clerics of different faiths and sects (Dervishi, 2016), and ended in 1967 with the official closure of churches and mosques and the prohibition of acceptance and practice of religions. The word God was forbidden (¡) (Bezati, 2019). When communism fall in the early 1990s in all countries of the socialist camp, according to data from the Institute for the Integration of Former Politically Persecuted Persons, a total of 42.772 individuals, including their families and relatives, were either shot, imprisoned, died in prison, or were persecuted in camps (Institute for the Integration of Former Politically Persecuted, 2025). So far, in the post-communist countries, the transitional justice aims to put the social equality, by considering it from a threefold perspective: the persecutor-victim relationship; the state-persecuted class relationship and the society-communist crimes-rehabilitation relationship of the persecuted class (Fraser, 2003).

John Rawls (Rawls, 1971), in his conceptualization of social justice, defines it as a functional normative order that guarantees the equitable distribution of fundamental freedoms and opportunities. Functional democracy after the fall of a totalitarian regime requires, through transitional justice mechanisms, the inclusion of society and institutions in a three-factorial process: recognition of the past, adaptation of new institutions to the multi-party regime and market economy, and above all, the transformation of the inherited social culture, in the sense of moral punishment and ideological separation from the past (Teitel R. G., 2000). In the Albanian context, this mechanism has only partially functioned, due to an ambivalent social approach between the unwavering communist legacy and a vulnerable democracy (Elbasani, 2009).

The concept of social justice has a long theoretical history and the attempt to enter this debate, aims to place the specific case within it, with the aim of expanding the social justice debate. Also related to this conception are the approaches of Iris Marion Young (Young, 2002), and Axel Honneth (Honneth, 1995), who see social justice as a process of uprooting social differentiation and domination, through the creation of relationships of mutual recognition and respect. The experience deriving from post-communist countries, learns that the means of transitional justice, in their particular context, are not all functional. The judicial and institutional approaches seem to be far from reaching a social reparation.

In the context of dictatorial countries, social injustice was created and institutionalized through the war of classes, which produced a harsh climate of disruption and hostility within society. It concurrently served as a means of manipulation for some part of the population and as an instrument of repression toward the remaining part (Kymlicka, 1995). Amartya Sen (Sen, 1992) and Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2011)

shift the emphasis to justice as the capacity that individuals have to build a life they value as worthy of living. The vulnerable democracy followed, was characterized by a distracted attention to the crimes of communism: on one hand the installation of a harsh market economy and on the other hand, the continuation of the logic of social exclusion, now moving on, in the opposite direction (Arendt, 1951).

This situation in the post-communist transitions has remained "in-between" the past heritage and political culture being negligent toward it (Offe, 2004). Accordingly, the politically persecuted, remained marginalized between the lack of social sensitization and lack of knowledge, remorse or asking for institutional forgiveness. In the meantime, Will Kymlicka (Kymlicka, 2008) and David Miller (Miller, 1999) emphasize the active role of state in guarantying the equality through the consolidated politics of social inclusion (Young, 1990). The case of smal seems to represents, rather what Guillermo O'Donnell (O'Donnell, 1998) has called "accountability gap" (Stan & Scheppele, 2015). In summary, after so many decades, the mechanisms of transitional justice have no positive probability of being implemented (Amy, 2010), excluding the role of education.

The later, not because it has had or continues to have a positive trend, on the contrary, but being the process itself undated and timeless, there is always the possibility of being used in favor of collective memory. Therefore, education enriches the debate, with experiences on how it can deal with the reasons of either social justice or social injustice. The research in fact, is conceived to treat the education pillar, extended over two perspectives. In one aspect, and based on concrete facts, it highlights the dysfunction and also the manipulation that can be done to society, using history, both as a tool of education and knowledge. And in fact, this has happened in Albania for three decades after communism (Beyme, 1996).

From the second perspective, it suggests strategies that can be considered to maintain and use education as the unique mechanism, in a delayed terrain for recognizing and confessing the truth. In the light of concepts of Young and Honneth (Honneth, 1995) the case of Albania represents the typology of states which have created structural barriers of recognition and reconciliation with the past, deepening social inequality in the sense of social restorative justice (O'Donnell, 1998). The possibility to tell the truth through education could be at any time, thus making it the only means of healing the wounds of the past, reconciliation and establishing social equity culture. The only task within it should be the one to learn about the past, without ideological and political influence, as it was really in the socio-political and historical context of the time when it occurred.

2.2. Education between the social justice and transitional justice

Education has a key role, along with other factors of transitional justice. Its role is threefold: firstly, as an indicator of truth about the communist past; secondly, as a preventive tool against the repetition of repressive experiences of the past; and thirdly, as an instrument of social equality, built on reconciliation between victims, on one hand, and persecutors, state and population, on the other hand (Teitel R. G., 2000). According to Pablo de Greiff (Greiff, 2012), education - especially in the Albanian context - represents the only instrument that can sustainably link transitional justice with social justice (Greiff, 2009). Within it, and also beyond in other post-communist countries, education has not only remained the main means of hope for the realization of transitional justice, but by its very nature, also remains the most functional mechanism for *conflict resolution* and *reconciliation*, acting as a form of social repair.

As noted below, in Albania this function has not worked properly. Teachers are often unprepared, due to the lack of a consolidated curriculum over the communist past, while ongoing political influence has directly interfered with the interpretation of historical events (Hayner, 2010). This educational vacuum, which will be demonstrated through the *survey* presented below, constitutes a significant indicator, among others, of why transitional justice has not functioned effectively in Albania. As a result, a deep political polarization regarding the past continues to exist, while the lack of social reconciliation has significantly weakened trust in state institutions (Elbasani, 2018). This reality has direct repercussions on the unequal treatment of former political prisoners.

Therefore, transitional justice has failed to establish the foundations of a restorative social justice, where partial compensation or the delayed opening of files, already manipulated, no longer guarantee real dignity and equality (Godole, 2015). On the other hand, this educational vacuum prevents the development of civic competences to understand, judge and react to social injustices. Education must effectively ensure ideological neutrality and critical functionality, because generations that grow up with distorted historical narratives, construct distorted forms of social justice (Davies, 2004).

In this sense, it aims to increase social cohesion, by making the sufferings of the persecuted part of the collective memory, as well as by restoring the dignity of victims through truth-telling in public discourse. Thus, it directly contributes to the construction of social justice, by analyzing social divisions, explaining their causes and promoting reconciliation processes, even minimally through symbolic forms such as a *public pardon* (Greiff, 2006). Education should ensure *equal opportunities* to understand the past, as a society where generations grow up with incorrect interpretations, cannot build righteous institutions in the future.

3. SURVEY AND METHODOLOGY

The idea of creating and using this survey was to understand what students know about communist crimes and the transitional justice role. The results showed a confuse and weak understanding of both arguments, reason for which, it was constructed this theoretical debate over the correlation between education and transitional justice. For this purpose, the study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to capture a snapshot of Epoka University students' knowledge and perceptions of the communist period in Albania, as well as their views on transitional justice. This design was chosen for its efficiency in gathering data from a relatively large sample (n=230). The research addresses an evident gap in the existing Albanian scholarly literature, where limited research exists on university students' understanding of the communist period and their perspectives on transitional justice (Creswell, 2012).

However, given the study's exploratory purpose, this limitation is not considered significant to prevent its primary aim of providing preliminary insights into students' perceptions. Also, in order to have a more coherent and correct conception, this survey has been taken in a comparative perspective with the data of another survey conducted among a large number of Albanian citizens, about 1200 people, used in the framework of a book on transitional justice by another researcher (Stasa, 2025). The purpose of the comparison was to reveal communalities and differences, in order to make the present research out of any subjective influence. The intersection of both surveys over the lack of school programs, politicization of transitional justice, so far demanding the need to use education, as a means for social justice.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND EXTENT OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE COMMUNIST PERIOD

Data was collected in April 2025 via KoboToolbox, a digital platform for data collection. The link was shared electronically among students, and participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to survey completion to ensure participants understand the study's purpose and their rights. To adhere to research standards, responses were collected anonymously to maintain confidentiality. A total of 230 complete responses were obtained. Data was exported from KoboToolbox, then cleaned to remove inconsistencies, and analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to explore participants' profiles and knowledge sources, and various insights on the importance of addressing the topics under study. On the other hand, Mean and Standard Deviation were used to explore perceptions and attitudes of the constructs under investigation. Inferential analysis was beyond this study's scope but is recommended for future studies building upon these exploratory findings.

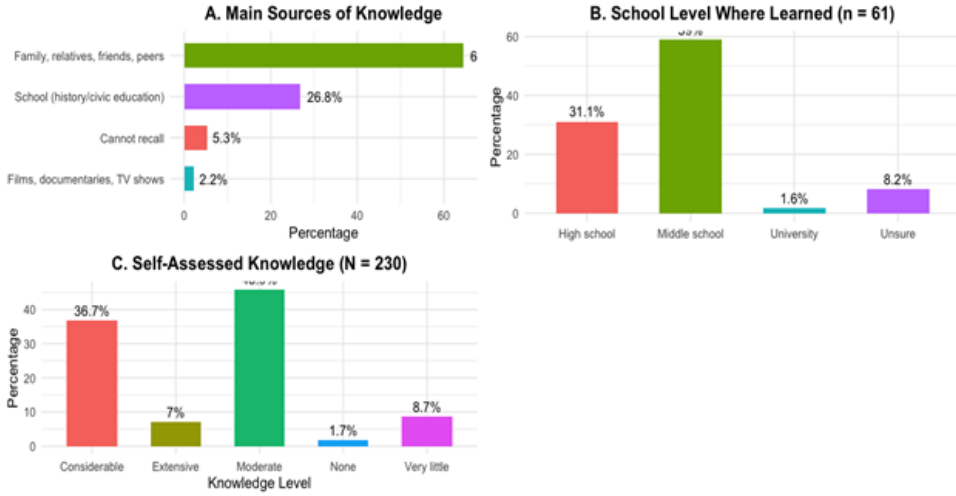
Figure 1. Participants' Demographic Profile (N = 230)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	130	62.2
	Male	74	35.4
	Not disclosed	5	2.4
Age group	18-25 years	215	93.9
Region	Central Albania	111	48.3
	Northern Albania	52	22.6
	Southern Albania	44	19.1
Political preference	No preference	96	41.8
	Right-wing	48	20.9
	Prefer not to say	48	20.9

Source: Author's survey

Data presented in Figure.2 suggest that surveyed students' knowledge of the communist period primarily comes from informal sources, reporting learning about the regime through family members, relatives, friends, or peers, compared to a small number through school (history or civic education classes). A smaller proportion learned via films, documentaries, or TV shows, while the lowest percentage could not recall their source of information. Among those who learned about the regime through school, many recall receiving this information in middle school, and the rest at other lower levels. When asked to assess their knowledge of the communist regime, students reported different levels and these findings suggest that informal education predominantly shapes students' understanding, with formal education playing a secondary role, often at earlier school levels.

Figure 2. Sources and Self-Assessed Knowledge about the Communist Regime



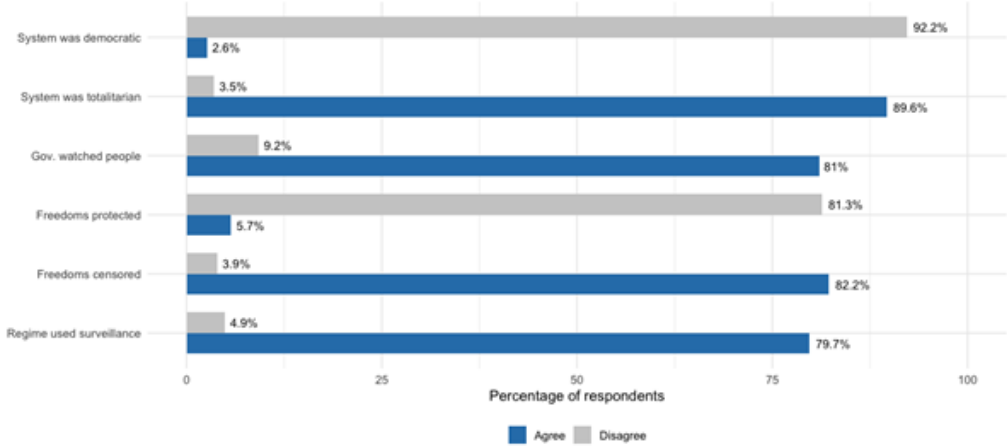
Source: Author's Survey

Perception of the past and restrictions on individual freedoms

The views and perceptions on the nature of Albania's political system under communism, were assessed through the construct 'Perception of communism among the young generation'. The overall construct yielded a high mean score, suggesting that students generally believed that personal freedoms were heavily limited during the regime, as shown in Figure 3. As per the results of each item, data show that the statement "Freedom of speech, thought, and press were protected and legally guaranteed during the communist regime", suggesting that most students do not believe these freedoms, were protected under the regime.

For the statement "During the communist time in Albania, the government watched people to stop them from speaking freely", these findings show that most of the surveyed students believe that the communist regime imposed significant restrictions on individual freedoms, particularly through censorship and surveillance. The low mean score for protected freedoms and high mean scores for censorship and surveillance support this perception. However, the small percentage of students who believed freedoms were protected, highlights a need for better education or awareness efforts to help clarify what really happened during that time.

Figure 3. Perceptions of the Past and Restrictions on Individual Freedoms (N=230)

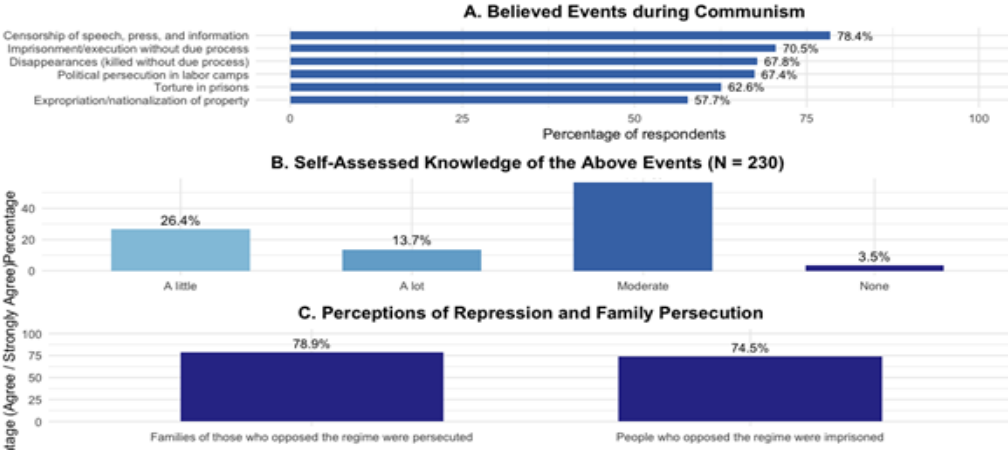


Source: Author's Survey

Perceptions of repression and family persecution during communist regime

The results illustrated in Figure 1, show that they believed censorship of speech, press, and information occurred, followed by imprisonment or execution of regime opponents without due legal process. Additionally, they acknowledged the disappearance of individuals killed without due legal process, also recognized political persecution in forced labor camps, noted torture in prisons and believed expropriation and nationalization of private property, took place. These findings suggest that students believe severe human rights violations were widespread during this period, indicating strong awareness of the regime's authoritarian practices.

Figure 4. Perceptions of Repression and Family Persecution during the Communist Regime



Source: Author's Survey

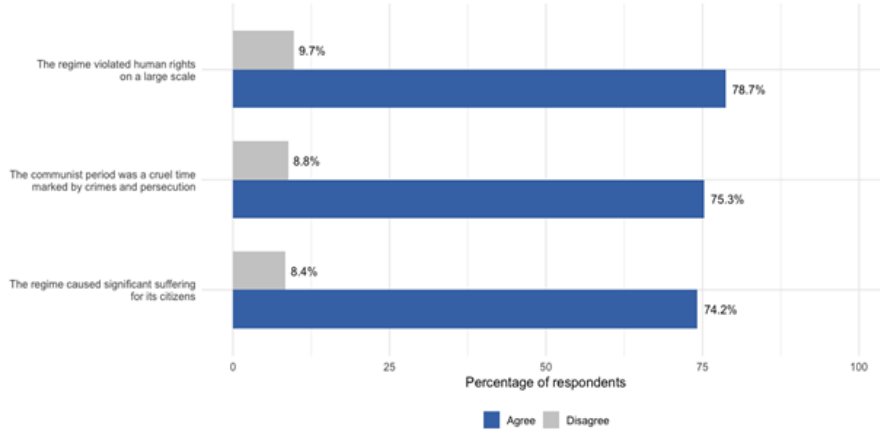
Even though these findings suggest that more than half of the students believe they have a moderate understanding, it is important to interpret this carefully, since it is a self-assessment, which may not always reflect their actual level of understanding. Nonetheless, the group of students-nearly 30 percent, who reported limited or no knowledge points, again points to a notable gap in awareness, highlighting areas where

further educational efforts may be needed. Students' perceptions of repression and persecution during communist regime were assessed through two statements (Figure.4). The statement "People who opposed the regime were imprisoned" and the statement "Families of those who opposed the regime were politically persecuted".

Perceived oppression and human rights violations

Students' perceptions of oppression and human rights violations were assessed through the construct "Perceived oppression and human rights violations during the communist period", composed of four items. The overall score indicated a strong perception of oppression and violations. This finding suggests that students strongly perceive the communist period as oppressive, with a construct mean of 3.17 (SD = 1.08), and 74.2 percent to 78.7 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing across statements that the regime was cruel, caused significant suffering, and violated human rights on a large scale.

Figure 5. Perceived Oppression and Human Rights Violations (N=230)

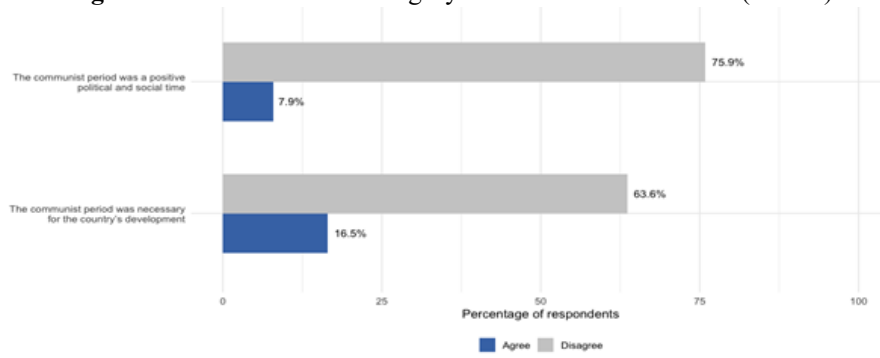


Source: Author's Survey

Perceived positive legacy of the communist period

Students' perceptions of the positive legacy of Albania's communist period were assessed through the construct "Perceived positive legacy of the communist period". The overall construct indicated a generally negative perception of the regime's legacy.

Figure 6. Perceived Positive Legacy of the Communist Period (N=230)



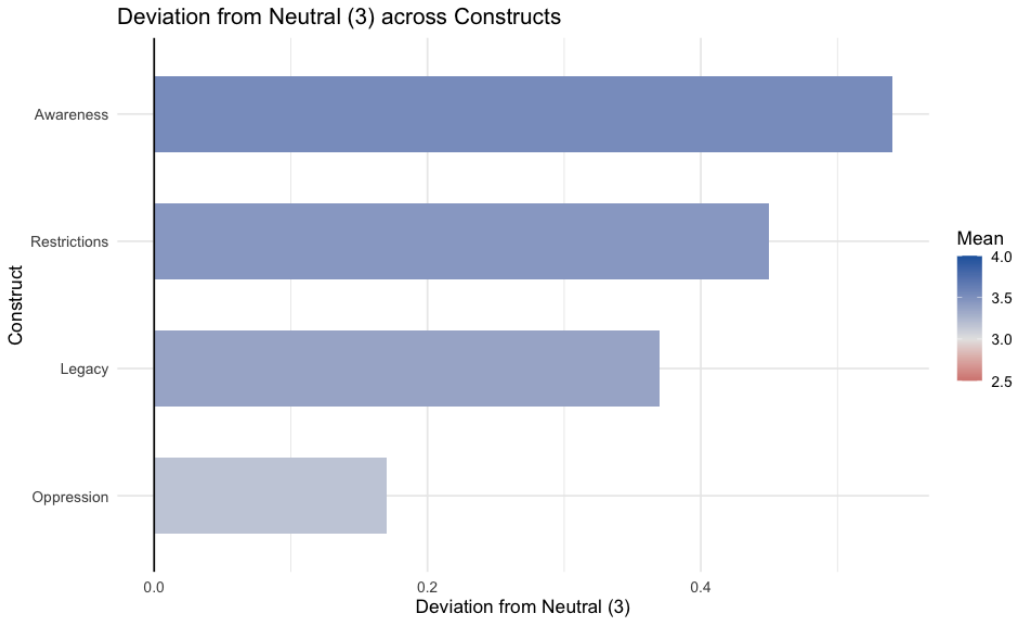
Source: Author's Survey

Perceived importance of addressing crimes from the communist regime

When asked how important it is to address the crimes committed during communist period, the majority of students expressed a clear sense of moral and civic urgency. Over seventy percent (70.6%) of respondents (*n = 161*) considered this process *very important*, while 17.1 percent (n = 39) found it *somewhat important*. Only a small fraction viewed it as less relevant: 6.6 percent (n = 15) deemed it *not very important*, 2.2 percent (n = 5) considered it *not important at all*, and 3.5 percent (n = 8) were *unsure*. The overall findings point toward four recurring patterns shaping students' understanding of transitional justice:

- *Superficial and contradictory knowledge of communism's crimes, suggesting fragmented historical awareness.*
- *Reliance on subjective, family-based narratives as primary information sources.*
- *Absence of structured educational programs in the communist period across school levels; and*
- *Lack of an institutional curriculum or pedagogical framework dedicated to studying the past and introducing reconciliation strategies for younger generations*.

Figure 7. Deviation from Neutral (3) across Constructs.



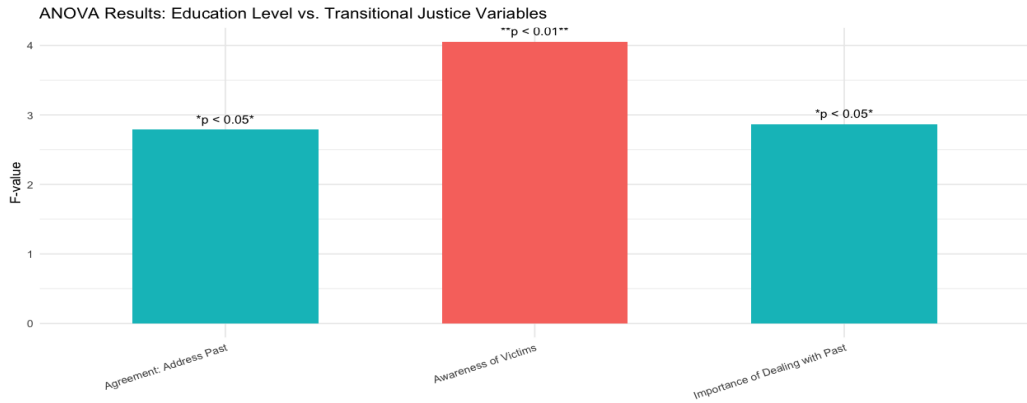
Source: Author's Survey

Perceived concept of transitional justice and the level of education

Through this analysis, there can be significant differences between respondents of different levels of education and their awareness of the number of victims of the communist regime in Albania, whether Albania should address the past, how important they consider this process, and whether they have any communication with the family about communist past. The analysis was performed through a one-way statistical test.

Perceived level of education and other factors

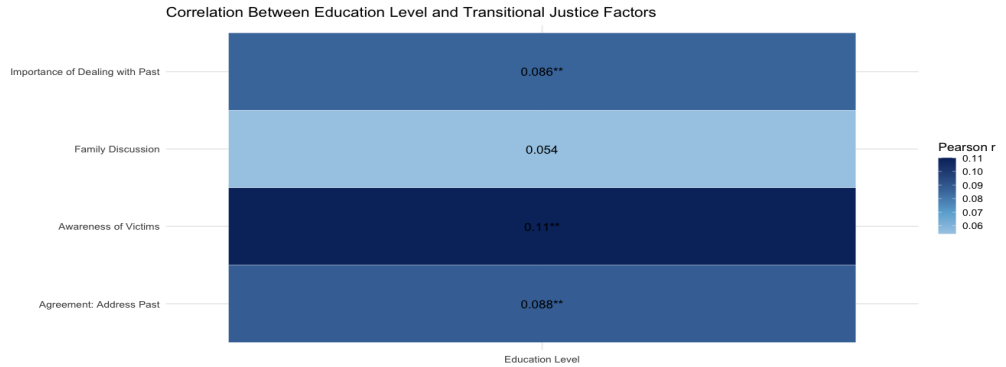
Figure 8: ANOVA



Source: Author's Survey

Through correlation analysis, the author measured the relationship between the level of education of the respondents as an independent variable and other dependent variables, such as "Are you aware of the number of victims during the communist regime in Albania"?; "Do you agree, in your understanding of Transitional Justice that Albania should address the communist past"? etc. In this case, the Pearson correlation was applied, where, according to the results, a significant correlation was found in almost all cases between the education level and the questions.

Figure 9: Correlation between Education Level and Transitional Justice Factors

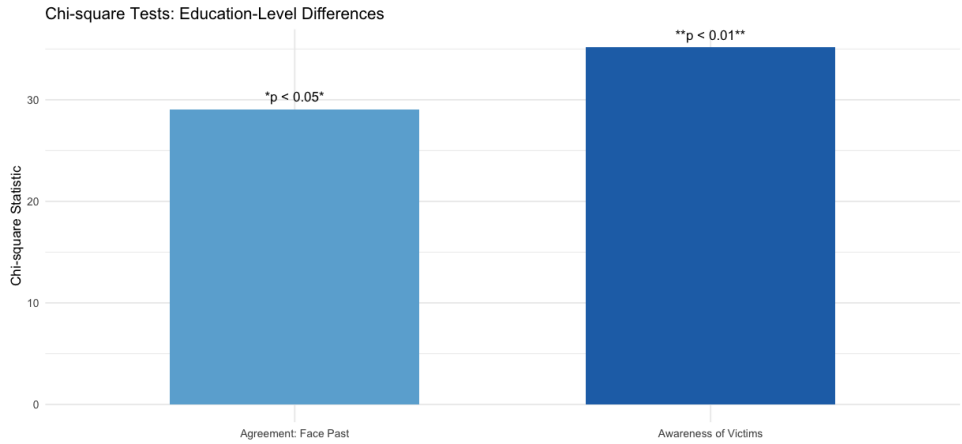


Source: Author's Survey

The questions correlate with education level. Are you aware of the number of victims during communist regime in Albania? For questions like: "Are you aware of the number of victims during communist regime in Albania?" and "Do you agree, in your understanding of transitional justice, that Albania dealt with the communist past?" In the first question, the difference is significant between respondents holding a Master's Degree, who have reported having more information on the number of victims, and respondents belonging to other levels of education. Chi-square = 35.189, P value = 0.004. In the second question, the results show that respondents with Bachelor's

and Master's Degrees are more likely to report they agree that Albania should face its communist past. Chi-square = 29.065, P value = 0.024

Figure 10: Chi-square Tests



Source: Author's Survey

5. CONCLUSIONS

Concerning the survey's outcomes and reflections (Sharp, 2018), it seems that the key problem, for the non-disruption with the communist past, is the unsaid truth. The little information received is not provided by the school, but mainly by the family and a small number of participants confirmed it by the films of that period (Sooka, 2006), which are still broadcasted. This understanding reflects that the country is far from the philosophy for implementing the main mechanisms of transitional justice (Balas, 2010). The issues are both political as well as organizational, and finally and mostly, due to the lack of people's general sensitivity (Vukaj, 2020). There was not an interest for the files to be released (Horne, 2017), reason for what they were classified as secret since 1991 under the protection of the National Intelligence Service, to be disposed of by the Files Authority only a few years ago (Horne, 2015). From an organizational point of view, in terms of an educational strategy, there has been no clear policy on which subject and in which age group the intervention should be made to equip students with accurate knowledge of the communist period (Knabe, et al., 2023).

This is so true that, as a result of the questionnaire developed, the majority of the minority who learned about communism from school did so at the middle school level (Knabe, et al., 2023). Also, this intervention has been focused on a target group of pupils, unclear both for political and historical concepts, and at the same time, lacking the necessary maturity to understand and judge that period objectively (Elbasani & Lipinski, 2013). The teachers of history throughout the country were not able to unanimously establish the dates, which means, still gaps in ideology (Gready & Robins, 2014). Regarding the indifference related to communist crimes, it must be said that for many people, even politically neutral, the start of transition was an utterly unclear future. Yesterday's perpetrators appear to have been rehabilitated even by public opinion, while the goal of cause of the persecuted today, probably more than in early days of democracy, is at a crossroads, threatened by strong legacy of the past.

When students were asked for the preferred methods for educating young people about communist regime, results show that the majority were in favor of educational means, such as school, history, museums etc. For the first time in Albania, a center of excellence for transitional justice studies has been established at the Master's level, but apparently, enrollment remains extremely low. In fact, in a market economy, it is almost acceptable that studies on transitional justice will not attract interest (Teitel R. G., 2014). This indicator sustains the researchers suppose that the narrative of truth would be much more functional with extracurricular programs (Bell & Bryman, 2007). Reference is made to the testimonies of victims and human pain for the experiences lived during that period of time. This form creates the possibility of recognition and at the same time that of touching the conscience and human sensitivity of young people. More or less, in a way, the model was made in South Africa, where, similarly to Albania, a past full of violence, blood and murder is experienced.

The aim is not to judge, since sensitivity is worth more than any other lesson, but to recognize mistakes and convert them into lessons of democracy and mechanisms to prevent violence (OSCE, 2016). The same narrative will also create an example of peacebuilding and mechanisms that can prevent the repetition of history and its consequences. Thus, the long-term goal is cultural transformation on tolerance and peace, as well as on the language of communication and coexistence. The analysis of the situation in Albania shows that even if legal remedies were efficient, the ideological, moral, and social division continues to be very strong, and thus removes the purpose and objective of transitional justice (Skaar, Malca, & Eide, 2015).

Its experience teaches that integration of these values can be enabled by focusing more on the model of creating institutions by civil society, by an educational mandate, with a school program focused only on narrative, history, and education, which can make the objective of transitional justice achievable (Quinn, 2017). It can influence the universal debate on social justice, firstly by demonstrating that delay in the involvement of mechanisms will lead to denied justice, and secondly, the role of storytelling outside of political control and involvement could be most efficient means that will fulfill the ideal of transitional justice. The research and analysis of this case argues that transitional justice, in the context of post-communist countries, should not be seen, nor can it function as a limited legal or institutional process. It cannot be approached only from the perspectives of criminal punishment, opening of files or financial compensation, which in the case of Albania, are anyway partial.

The goal it must fulfill, and it is precisely the construction of a restorative social justice, must be conceptualized and realized in the framework of a long-term project. Analyzing the issue from this perspective, education appears as the most sustainable transitional justice mechanism, although less apparent. It thus acts simultaneously as an instrument for telling the truth, as a guarantee for the non-repetition of past crimes, and as a means of symbolic reparation. Unlike other mechanisms, which are often politicized, education can resist this direct influence, especially if sustained by civil society organizations. The legal tool of transitional justice, taken alone, to preserve collective memory and to make it an integral part of the collective conscience (Teitel R. G., 2014), could not be enough. In some way, this kind of positioning sustains the thoughts of critical authors towards transitional justice mechanisms, who are of the opinions that these mechanisms are not very clear from a legal perspective, or are not effective in their implementation.

In fact, it is worth mentioning Judith Shklar's skeptical position on "legal morality" (Shklar, 1986), also the critical approach of David Kennedy (Kennedy, 1986) concerning the liberal universalism contained in the transitional justice. Also, the position of Rosalind Shaw (Shaw, 2002) about the imposition by narratives for reconciliation (Kennedy D., 2004), has demonstrated and then impacted the limitations of classical models of transitional justice. The counter-argument exactly focuses here, as such critiques are rather focused on legal and institutional mechanisms, leaving behind exactly the role of education as a linking bridge between justice and society. In this regard, it is worth the opinion of Pablo de Greiff, who argues specifically in harmony with the purpose intended to be achieved by this paper. The failure of transitional justice in Albania was not basically caused for non-compliance with normative objectives, but due to its non-integration with social and educational policies.

Based on the specific experience of a post-communist country, where impunity, recycling of elites and politicization of collective memory have led to non-functioning of transitional justice, it transpires that education is not an option associated with legal mechanisms, but an indispensable and structural requirement for its functioning (Greiff, 2006; Greiff, 2009). In this line, education remains the only probably non-manipulable instrument enjoying legitimacy to build a transparent narrative and to reconcile the parties to conflict (Davies, 2004; UNESCO, 1995). The case of Albania, as a post-communist country, has shown what Nancy Fraser has articulated with regard to social justice. According to her, lack of knowledge and of symbolic representation of victims constitutes an unavoidable form of injustice (Stan, 2009).

The role of education, in this context, is the restoration of victims' dignity, making the past publicly known. Thus, its contribution is to the moral equality of social groups (Fraser, 2003). The Albanian case clearly illustrates two components, firstly, because education remains the only tool, probably less influenced by politics, especially when it can be supported by non-governmental authorities. Secondly, because it is a clear paradigm of the fact that, when education is not introduced as an instrument of transitional justice, it leads to social oblivion and sustainable social inequality (Godole, 2015). In fact, transitional justice has remained formally applicable, but really and materially is failed.

Therefore, in conclusion, the purpose of this study is precisely a new way to conceptualize transitional justice in post-communist countries, focusing no longer on legal and institutional mechanisms, but on education, proposing it as a tool that leads to sustainable social processes. Education is worth emphasizing as a linking bridge between three factors, historical truth, moral reparation and the construction of social justice. Through education, which remains the most valuable form of integration, it can be achieved to overcome the gap of injustice, aiming to achieve social justice. Likewise, the transition process, whether political or ideological, will not be a simple historical phase with its concerns, but a real emancipatory process, with social inclusion (Elster, 2004).

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INFRASTRUCTURAL INTERDEPENDENCE, ENERGY SECURITY, AND SOCIETAL INCLUSIVITY IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

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Abstract. *The 2022 gas crisis and the 2026 oil shock have made infrastructural interdependence the central axis of European security. This article asks how three East-Central European borderland states, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia, are managing that transformation and when infrastructure that transmits coercion can become a substrate of cohesion. The analysis joins multi-level governance to a neo-Schumanian reading of functional integration, complemented by securitization, weaponized-interdependence and energy-justice perspectives. The central claim is an alignment condition. The EU's response operates at four scales at once, through a supranational architecture that authorizes and funds, a regional lattice of multi-state gas corridors, national governments that variously implement or obstruct, and a local borderland politics of cross-border energy cooperation, and genuine integration occurs only where the four scales align. A most-similar-systems comparison isolates the national scale as the decisive variable, with material constraints limiting ideology in all three countries. The geothermal cooperation between Oradea and Debrecen serves as the explanatory case for re-scaling the Schuman mechanism to a historically contested border. The case yields a partial confirmation. Functional pressure and institutional development are real, but the cooperation still runs on EU subsidy, and its inclusiveness for peripheral households and the borderland Roma remains to be achieved.*

Keywords*: energy security; multi-level governance; cross-border cooperation; EGTC; energy justice; EU enlargement.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Energy security has become a central question of European integration. One of the EU's most exposed regions is the east-central borderland of Romania, Hungary and Slovakia. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 turned a half-century of energy interdependence into an instrument of coercion and liability. Yet, the same cross-border infrastructure that transmits vulnerability also has the potential for cooperation. The pipelines, grids and shared resources that expose these states to coercion are also the material basis on which they build common institutions. This duality can be analyzed in three steps: the crisis and its escalation; the asymmetric national exposure of the three countries and the limits it places on ideology; the cooperative counter-current already visible along the same borders.

1.1. The crisis: from the 2022 gas shock to the 2026 oil shock

The first stage of the crisis began when, in 2022, Russia throttled pipeline flows and the EU answered with REPowerEU (European Commission, 2022), embargoes on

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Russian coal and seaborne oil, and an emergency build-out of liquefied natural gas and storage. Prices surged, and security of supply became, for the first time since the 1970s, a question of European security. The second stage started on January 1, 2025, when the transit of Russian gas across Ukraine ended with the expiration of the Gazprom–Naftogaz contract. That severed a sixty-year-old route and removed roughly five per cent of total EU gas supply, concentrated on Austria, Hungary and Slovakia (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025). Russian gas to the latter two countries did not stop but was rerouted southward through TurkStream and Hungary. The third stage was this year's oil shock: on 27 January 2026 a Russian drone strike on the Brody hub in western Ukraine cut the southern leg of the Druzhba pipeline that feeds the Hungarian and Slovak refineries. Slovakia, dependent on a single refinery, declared a national emergency in the oil sector. It released strategic reserves and switched to non-Russian crude through the Adriatic route, and pipeline flows resumed on 23 April 2026 (Institute of Central Europe, 2026). A Council–Parliament agreement adopted on 26 January 2026, established a stepwise ban on Russian gas, short-term contracts first and long-term pipeline gas by 30 September 2027. It was carried by qualified majority over the objection of the only two countries to vote against, Hungary and Slovakia (Council of the European Union, 2026).

1.2. National exposure and the limits of ideology

The energy infrastructure of the former communist countries of East-Central Europe was built in the Soviet era to run from East to West. The Druzhba ("Friendship") oil pipeline opened in 1964 as the world's longest. The Bratstvo ("Brotherhood") and Soyuz gas lines followed. All were laid to carry Soviet energy into the socialist bloc and onward toward Western markets. The region's refineries, Slovnaft in Bratislava and the MOL Danube plant at Százhalombatta, were designed for the crude the Soviets delivered. In the same period, Western Europe diversified toward North Sea and Norwegian gas, Algerian and Qatari liquefied natural gas, and a plurality of suppliers. The result is what Bouzarovski (2018) calls Europe's infrastructural divide: a continent split between a Western half with optionality and an Eastern half largely dependent on a single supplier. Accession to the EU moved these states into a new legal and market order, but it did not rebuild the infrastructure beneath them. The divide is therefore a matter of infrastructure rather than of political attitude, which is why the shocks of 2022 and 2026 were felt the hardest in the most exposed countries: Slovakia and Hungary.

Hungary's energy dependence deepened after 2022. Its share of Russian crude rose toward 90% by 2025, drawn by a discounted price under the open-ended pipeline exemption (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2026). Its single large refinery at Százhalombatta is configured for the Russian crude, and a full reconfiguration, estimated by its operator at several hundred million dollars, is not yet complete. Gas remains overwhelmingly Russian, delivered through TurkStream under a fifteen-year contract. The Paks nuclear plant, which supplies over two-fifths of Hungarian electricity, is tied to Russian fuel and to Rosatom financing for its expansion. As the International Energy Agency observes, Hungary has diversified its supply routes but not its supply sources (IEA, 2022).

Slovakia is also exposed, mainly on oil (Mišík & Oravcová, 2024), its economy depends on the single Slovnaft refinery in Bratislava, likewise, built for Russian Urals crude. With the loss of the Ukrainian transit route, it forfeited both supply security and a transit role worth, on the government's own contested estimate, several hundred million euros a year. The 2026 Brody crisis struck Slovakia hardest because it has no second

refinery to fall back on. Yet, non-Russian gas is physically within reach through interconnectors with Poland, Austria and the Czech Republic. Slovak gas dependence is sustained less by geography than by a long-term Gazprom contract running to 2034 and by political choice (Mišík & Oravcová, 2024; cf. Kratochvíl & Mišík, 2020).

Romania is more resilient energetically (Buzogány & Davidescu, 2022). It became the European Union's largest natural-gas producer in 2024, with around 9.4 billion cubic meters, covering roughly three-quarters of demand. The Neptun Deep project in the Black Sea, with first gas targeted for 2027, is set to roughly double output and turn the country into a net exporter (OMV Petrom, 2023). Romania's refineries run largely on non-Russian crude. The Cernavodă reactors use Canadian CANDU technology rather than the Russian VVER design. Through the BRUA (Bulgaria–Romania–Hungary–Austria) pipeline, the Vertical Gas Corridor and the Iași–Chișinău link, the country already exports energy to Moldova (Ciot & Butișcă, 2025). Its resilience is fuel-specific rather than total, since Romania was a net electricity importer in 2024 after a poor hydrological year. On gas, oil and nuclear, however, it is structurally independent of Russia (Buzogány & Davidescu, 2022).

These energy constraints are turned into politics by certain primary social facts, such as the country's national interest which has two layers. There is a non-ideological substrate, the economy's energy needs and what is geographically available. On the other hand, there is an ideological layer, the way governments and oppositions define and contest that substrate (Vancsó, 2024). The standing framework of European norms supplies one pole: the energy acquis, the solidarity principle of Article 194 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (European Union, 2012), and the Fit-for-55 instruments. The documented European response, from REPowerEU through to the 2026 phase-out regulation (Council of the European Union, 2026), is the nearest observable proxy for a "European interest". Against this common backdrop the three governments diverged. Romania supported the phase-out, its domestic substitute arriving on schedule (Drăgoi et al., 2023). Hungary and Slovakia opposed it, cast the ban as a violation of sovereignty, and brought it before the Court of Justice of the European Union.

In April 2026 Hungarian voters replaced Viktor Orbán's government with the pro-European TISZA party of Péter Magyar, which won a two-thirds majority (Al Jazeera, 2026). Instead of a clean ideological break with the previous energy posture, the incoming prime minister converged on caution: "no one can change geography," a phase-out target of 2035 rather than the EU's 2027, and a pledge to keep buying "in the cheapest and safest way" (Kyiv Independent, 2026). In Slovakia the pro-European opposition likewise contests the timing of the cut-off, not its principle. In Romania a sovereigntist surge that nearly captured the presidency in 2024–25 left the country's energy trajectory untouched. Across all three cases, then, the material layer appears to discipline the ideological one (Mišík & Oravcová, 2024).

The energy issue is neither a purely objective situation nor a free political choice. It is materially constrained and politically underdetermined, in the sense that the physical facts rule some options out while politics selects among those that remain. The constraint is one of path dependency. The east-to-west system is self-reinforcing, and its sunk costs, complementary investments and the coalitions built around them make reorientation slow and contested (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney, 2000).

1.3. Energy cooperation

If the crisis reveals how shared infrastructure transmits coercion, the same borders also carry an integrative aspect. Cross-border cooperation along the Romanian Hungarian frontier became institutionalized. The Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion, established in 2002, has coordinated local development across the border for two decades, and successive Romanian–Hungarian Interreg programmes have funded joint energy and infrastructure projects (Polgár & Brie, 2025). This is a form of transnational institution-building from below, with local and regional authorities constructing common structures in the space the EU's cohesion instruments open up (Popoviciu & Toca, 2011).

Energy is among the most concrete domains of this cooperation. Oradea and Debrecen lie some seventy kilometers apart, in the adjacent counties of Bihor and Hajdú-Bihar, atop one of Europe's richest geothermal basins. The RENEW project ("Renewable Energy Works Well", code ROHU00617), funded by the Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary programme, is developing that resource. Led by Hajdú-Bihar County Council with Bihor County Council, four Hungarian municipalities and the county development agency, it is installing geothermal and solar heating across twenty-seven public buildings, twenty-six in Hungary and one, the multifunctional cultural center, in Oradea (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme, 2025; Consiliul Județean Bihor, 2025). Cooperation in energy supply was named a founding rationale for deeper institutionalization as early as 2011, when the prospect of a Debrecen–Oradea European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) was first set out (Popoviciu & Toca, 2011). That grouping is not yet constituted, the European Committee of the Regions' register records no Oradea–Debrecen EGTC, and the Debrecen–Oradea "Eurometropolis" remains a proposal, even as registered EGTCs operate elsewhere along the Romanian–Hungarian border (European Committee of the Regions, 2026). The case is thus one of an EGTC in formation, with functional cooperation developing around a shared border and the formal institution as its anticipated next step.

This development has a social dimension as the communities along this border are bound by kinship and language as well as by infrastructure. The national minorities who are involved in the Euroregion's coordination act as bilingual, bicultural facilitators in cross-border governance (Neagu & Klatt, 2025).

Not all concerted actions along these borders are integrative. Hungary and Slovakia have acted together, but largely in opposition to Brussels. They each contested the 2026 phase-out regulation before the Court of Justice, and in February 2026 they jointly asked Croatia to facilitate Adriatic transit so that Russian-contracted crude could keep reaching their refineries. This cooperation defends a shared dependence. It is directed against an EU policy, and it belongs with the tensions set out above rather than with the integrative process traced here.

1.4. A geopolitical reset

The region's dependence on Russian energy was engineered, under the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, as a centralized network that tied each "satellite" to Moscow rather than to its neighbors. The collapse of the bloc in 1989 dissolved the political order but left the infrastructure in place. This was a technological and institutional dependence that successive investment only entrenched (Unruh, 2000). Each successor state carried its own bilateral relationship with Russia forward, and no intra-regional model of energy cooperation took the center's place (Bouzarovski, 2018).

At the moment of EU accession this exposure was an unremarkable inheritance. When Hungary and Slovakia joined the EU in 2004 and Romania in 2007, deep Russian

energy dependence was treated as a settled fact of supply, inexpensive and reliable, and it remained largely outside accession negotiations centered on market liberalization. The Russia–Ukraine transit disputes of 2006 and 2009, the second of which cut Slovak gas in midwinter, brought energy security into regional politics (Kratochvíl & Mišík, 2020), but those disputes reorganized perceptions, while the pipelines remained as they were.

In 2022 the infrastructure itself did not change, but its meaning did. A system built to bind the region to Moscow became, almost overnight, the principal channel of its vulnerability, and across the following four years the EU answered with binding law that will sever its largest supplier by 2027. The reset falls especially hard on these countries because they inherited no lateral cooperation to fall back on. The horizontal links that might substitute, the Arad–Szeged and Balassagyarmat interconnectors and the Vertical Gas Corridor, are recent and still partial (Mišík & Oravcová, 2024; ICGB, 2024). For the first time, the regional response to a shared dependence runs laterally between neighbors as well as through Moscow and Brussels.

2. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to explain when the cross-border energy infrastructure of East-Central Europe operates as a channel of coercion and when it becomes a substrate of cohesion. Three objectives serve this aim.

My first objective is to specify the alignment condition for establishing a cross-border energy infrastructure, which becomes a substrate of cohesion only where four scales align: the supranational, which authorizes and funds; the regional, the multi-state corridors; the national, which implements or obstructs; and the local, the cross-border agency. The four scales are also the study's levels of analysis.

My second objective is to show that the Schuman mechanism of functional integration, almost always read at the supranational level, can be re-scaled downward to a historically contested borderland, analyzed on the Oradea–Debrecen cross border cooperation model.

My third objective concerns the micro-foundation: to explain how shared infrastructure actually produces shared political subjectivity.

From a methodological standpoint, these objectives should be treated differently. The alignment condition will be analyzed through a most-similar-systems comparison of Romania, Hungary and Slovakia. These are countries alike in many relevant aspects yet divergent in outcome, which isolates the alignment, or misalignment, of scales as the operative variable. The re-scaling hypothesis, regarding the Oradea–Debrecen cooperation, will be treated as an explicative case, tested against the disconfirmation criterion stated below.

The working hypothesis is that the Schuman mechanism of functional integration can operate at the local scale: pooling a strategic resource at a contested border generates functional pressure for adjacent cooperation, convergence of governance and a deepening of trans-border association. The disconfirmation criterion is that if the Oradea–Debrecen geothermal cooperation generates none of these effects, or runs on EU subsidy alone rather than endogenous functional linkage, it fails.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review requires four strands that rarely meet. Integration theory explains how sectoral cooperation hardens into political community, through neofunctionalist spillover (Haas, 1958; Niemann, 2013) and the multi-level governance

architecture it produces (Hooghe & Marks, 2003), but says little about infrastructure as integration's material substrate. Security scholarship, in its securitization and weaponized-interdependence variants (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Farrell & Newman, 2019), treats that infrastructure as an instrument of threat, with no account of its integrative potential. Urban and border studies supply the micro-concepts of infrastructural citizenship (Lemanski, 2020) and borderland identity (Paasi, 1996), detached from integration theory. Energy justice asks who benefits from energy systems (McCauley et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2016), but is seldom applied to cross-border cooperation. The framework below joins these strands in a scale-sensitive account.

3.1. The alignment condition and the re-scaled Schuman method. Energy as weaponized-interdependence

The objectives set out in the methodology can be approached through integration theory, which theorizes how sectoral cooperation hardens into political community and how authority is distributed across scales. Neofunctionalism supplied the founding mechanism of functional "spillover", whereby integration in one sector raises the cost of non-cooperation in adjacent ones (Haas, 1958; Lindberg, 1963). Contemporary versions treat spillover as conditional rather than automatic, held in tension with compensatory forces (Niemann, 2013), so that a crisis may yield integration, intergovernmental "spill-around", or disintegrative "spill-back" (Nicoli, 2020). The 2022 and 2026 shocks can be read in these terms.

The architecture that spillover produces is multi-level governance, with authority dispersed across nested general-purpose (Type I) and task-specific, intersecting (Type II) jurisdictions (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, toward which the Oradea–Debrecen cooperation is moving, is an example of a Type II jurisdiction: task-specific, intersecting and cross-border (Popoviciu & Toca, 2011). But multi-level governance cannot, on its own, say which level is decisive (Jordan, 2001), and the answer proposed here is the condition of alignment. The cross-border project acquires real power only when the four scales align, with the national level performing what Jessop (2013) calls "interscalar articulation" rather than obstruction and the local level supplying the cooperative agency that the Romanian-Hungarian border has in fact generated (Polgár & Brie, 2025). Jessop's account of the state hollowed out upward, downward and sideways into region-states across national frontiers gives the down-scaling its mechanics. The alignment condition gives it its scope conditions, where any scale defects, integration stalls. The Hungarian and Slovak gate-keeping shows that it can, once integration touches identity and sovereignty and a "permissive consensus" hardens into a "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

The Schuman Declaration of 1950 is conventionally read as the charter of supranational, top-down integration, recent studies reviving its language of pooled "sovereignty" and "solidarity" and keeping it firmly at the European level (LaBelle, 2024). However, read from a structural point of view, Schuman's hypothesis is independent of scale. Pooling the production of a strategic resource at a contested border makes war "not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible" (Schuman, 1950), and it gradually builds a common political subjectivity. If that is a mechanism rather than a single historical episode, it can operate wherever its conditions are met. It can operate at the geothermal aquifer beneath the Romanian-Hungarian border just as it operated at coal and steel on the Franco-German border in 1950. Neofunctionalism is often charged with non-falsifiability (Moravcsik, 2005), but read as a conditional theory it can be tested (Rosamond, 2005). This

is the ground of the working hypothesis and of the disconfirmation criterion stated in the methodology.

The securitization and weaponized-interdependence literature explain how energy is constructed as an existential threat and how efficiency networks become instruments of coercion. Energy moves through escalating registers, from politicization to geopoliticization to securitization (Herranz-Surrallés, 2024). The last of these constructs it as an existential threat that licenses extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). For the case analyzed here, the productive perspective is the reversibility of securitization. The same framing that lets the Commission cast REPowerEU as imperative lets Budapest and Bratislava cast the 2026 phase-out as the existential threat. Securitization, as the literature on the Energy Union anticipated, both drives integration and legitimizes resistance to it (Judge & Maltby, 2017; Wilson, 2019). Beneath the speech-acts lies the material engine of weaponized interdependence, in which efficiency networks turn coercive once they create chokepoints, such as the Druzhba pipeline, the single-refinery Slovnaft configuration and the Brody hub described above (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Two qualifications matter: the chokepoints are firm-owned, since Slovnaft is a MOL asset, so weaponization runs through the state–firm relation (Gjesvik, 2023), and it fuses with hybrid-threat tactics (Jore et al., 2025). The main challenge comes from the literature itself, namely that interdependence through trade has not, historically, prevented war (LaBelle, 2023). The neo-Schumanian hypothesis answers it by resting on the joint ownership and management of a single asset at the border rather than on diffuse trade.

3.2. The micro-foundation: infrastructural citizenship and borderland identity

At this level the neo-Schumanian mechanism acquires sociological content and the cooperative counter-current becomes intelligible. The fusion of two concepts, which the literature usually leaves vaguely defined, "infrastructural citizenship" and "borderland identity", clarifies how a shared grid constitutes at once a trans-border subject and a trans-border region.

Infrastructural citizenship, in Lemanski's (2020) formulation, captures a two-way relation between people and public infrastructure. The everyday experience of obtaining and using services molds citizenship identity and practice, and those practices in turn remake the infrastructure itself. Rather than a neutral conduit serving a pre-constituted citizen, infrastructure is the material medium through which the state-citizen relationship is constituted, negotiated and contested. Anand's (2017) "hydraulic citizenship" shows Mumbai residents becoming members of the polity through their water connections, and von Schnitzler's (2016) prepaid electricity meter is a site of technical and political negotiation. Transposed to the case analyzed here, the cross-border district heating that shared geothermal production would generate is such an infrastructure, and the households drawing heat from it would be co-implicated in one another's tariffs and seasonal vulnerabilities across the state border.

According to Paasi (1996, 2003), a region and its identity are not given, but institutionalized over time through four shapes: the territorial, the symbolic, the institutional, and the region's establishment within a wider system. "Regional identity" thus denotes both a region's distinguishing features and the regional consciousness of its inhabitants. A borderland identity is such an identity organized around and spanning a state border, constantly unmade and remade through de- and re-bordering (Newman & Paasi, 1998; van Houtum, 2005).

Shared cross-border infrastructure is the material and institutional practice through which a trans-border region is institutionalized. Infrastructural citizenship supplies the micro-mechanism by which individuals come to be co-implicated across the border, and Paasi's institutionalization supplies the macro-process by which a region and its identity accumulate from that practice. The EGTC, a Type II jurisdiction and, in Jessop's terms, a region-state across national frontiers, is the vehicle that would carry it, and the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion is its institutional precursor. This gives the neo-Schumanian mechanism its sociological content: pooling a resource at the border raises the cost of conflict, and it also institutionalizes a trans-border region and constitutes trans-border subjects.

Infrastructure can include and exclude groups at the same time (Börzel & Heard-Lauréote, 2009). The grid that builds a trans-border community in the Oradea–Debrecen area, can also bypass those left off its map, the borderland Roma community, even as the bilingual minorities who live near the frontier can serve as brokers who widen inclusion (Neagu & Klatt, 2025). Paasi's four shapes specify in advance what such evidence would have to look like, and the case study examines whether the case is congruent with them.

4. THE ALIGNMENT CONDITION

The four scales, supranational, regional, national and local, are analyzed here through the most-similar-systems comparison set out in the methodology, supported by process-tracing of the 2022-2026 crisis. The three countries are similar in nearly every relevant aspect: post-communist economies that inherited the same centralized, Soviet-built grid, comparable in the structure, if not the degree of their exposure, members of the European Union under the same energy acquis, and served by the same regional corridors. Yet their energy trajectories have diverged. The comparison therefore isolates the national scale as the variable that turns one architecture into three trajectories.

4.1. The supranational scale

On the supranational scale the EU has moved, across the crisis, from exhortation to binding architecture. It now authorizes and finances the reorientation the region's infrastructure requires. REPowerEU set the direction in 2022, with diversification, energy saving and accelerated renewables, and some €210 billion in additional investment mobilized to 2027 (European Commission, 2022). That direction has since hardened into law, regulation (EU) 2026/261 converts the commitment to end Russian gas into a binding, dated schedule, banning short-term pipeline imports from mid-2026 and long-term pipeline supply by 30 September 2027 (European Union, 2026). Beyond permitting the member states to diversify, the EU withdraws the incumbent option from all of them at once, converting what had been a contested national choice into a shared legal obligation. This is an exercise of solidarity that EU law renders binding even on dissenting members (Huhta & Reins, 2023), and it removes the ground on which gate-keeping had stood.

The Trans-European Networks for Energy Regulation (European Union, 2022) designates Projects of Common Interest. These are cross-border corridors granted accelerated permitting and access to Connecting Europe Facility co-financing, and the corridors that matter for this region sit on the EU list, the second iteration of which entered into force in 2026 (European Commission, 2026a). Project authorization is accompanied by financing that also addresses the social cost of the projects. Emissions trading is being extended to heating and road-transport fuels through ETS2 (European Union, 2023a), whose revenues capitalize a Social Climate Fund of €65 billion in EU money for 2026–

2032, close to €86.7 billion with mandatory national co-financing. The Fund was established to shield vulnerable households and transport users from the price effects of decarbonization (European Union, 2023b). The phased introduction of ETS2 has itself been contested over household price effects, and the 2026 Middle-Eastern shock prompted the Commission's emergency AccelerateEU package (European Commission, 2026b), both facts confirming the political importance of the distributive question. The supranational scale, in sum, authorizes the reorientation and pays toward both the infrastructure and the people involved.

The second axis embeds societal inclusivity directly into the structural design, and the burden is unevenly distributed. Regarding the EU's statistical measures of energy poverty, Romania is the most exposed of the three countries. In 2024, 10.8 per cent of Romanians could not keep their home adequately warm and 14.5 per cent were in arrears on their utility bills, against EU averages of 9.2 and 6.9 per cent. Slovakia (8.3 and 6.3 per cent) and Hungary (6.0 and 7.1 per cent) lie closer to or beneath those averages (Eurostat, 2026a, 2026b), even as Romania remains among the EU's countries most affected by heating-related deprivation (Grigorescu et al., 2024). Romania is the EU's fifth-largest recipient from the Social Climate Fund at up to €6 billion, ahead of Hungary (€2.8 billion) and Slovakia (€1.5 billion) (European Union, 2023b). The transfer is explicitly redistributive, since the heating carbon price falls hardest on low-income, often solid-fuel-reliant households concentrated in the region's east. The supranational scale builds and also redistributes, in proportion to where the transition's burden will fall hardest. It is also the prerequisite for a transition that includes border populations rather than pushing them into energy poverty (Śmiech et al., 2025).

4.2. The regional scale

Between the EU and the national capitals sits the regional scale theorized by the literature on energy regionalism (Hancock et al., 2020; Johnson & VanDeveer, 2024). The radial Soviet grid historically lacked this dimension. Today it exists as a growing lattice of multi-state corridors and the cooperation that coordinates them, a network of bidirectional interconnectors that ties the three countries to non-Russian supply: the Arad–Szeged line between Romania and Hungary (operational since 2010), the Hungary–Slovakia interconnector at Balassagyarmat (2015), and the Poland–Slovakia interconnector (2022), which alone can deliver some 4.7 billion cubic metres a year into the Slovak system (Mišík & Oravcová, 2024). The north–south axis is growing denser in parallel. Romania's BRUA pipeline, its operational first phase part-financed by a Connecting Europe Facility grant, carries Black Sea and Caspian gas toward Hungary, with a capacity of 1.75 billion cubic metres a year (Transgaz, 2020; European Commission, 2019). The multi-operator Vertical Gas Corridor runs along the same line, joined by Slovakia, Moldova and Ukraine in 2024, it raises the Greece–Bulgaria interconnector from 3 to 5 billion cubic meters a year and is designed to move up to some ten billion cubic meters of Aegean liquefied and Caspian gas northward (ICGB, 2024; European Commission, 2026a).

These corridors form a governed regional space. The Central and South-Eastern Europe Energy Connectivity group (CESEC), the European Commission-backed high-level forum established in 2015, is the vehicle through which Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and their neighbors, together with the Energy Community candidates, coordinate priority interconnections. It institutionalizes the regional gas-security cooperation that is reshaping Central European supply (Kochanek, 2019), and it was under its auspice that the 2024 Vertical Corridor agreement was concluded (European Commission, 2026c). This lateral

cooperation, whose absence was identified above as the legacy of the centralized inheritance, makes a regional response physically possible. The corridors are open to each country and CESEC binds each, so the regional scale, like the supranational, is held roughly as a constant.

4.3. The national scale

If the supranational and regional scales are largely common to all three countries, the national scale is where they part ways.

Romania is the case in which the national scale performs the articulation that the alignment condition requires. It backed the phase-out regulation, has timed its domestic substitute, the Neptun Deep field with first gas scheduled for 2027, to the EU's 2027 cut-off (OMV Petrom, 2023), and has carried the corridor eastward to Moldova through the Iași–Chișinău pipeline (Ciot & Butișcă, 2025). Romania is an EU member state that is aligning policy upward to the EU and downward to a neighbor at once (Buzogány & Davidescu, 2022).

Unlike Romania, Slovakia obstructs selectively, by litigating against the 2026 regulation before the Court of Justice and clings to a Gazprom contract running to 2034, even as the Poland–Slovakia interconnector places non-Russian gas physically within reach. Here it can be observed that the regional hardware is aligned but the national choice is not (Mišík & Oravcová, 2024).

Hungary obstructs even more deeply, compounding its Russian dependence and bringing its own action against the same regulation, yet its territory carries the very interconnectors a successor government could activate. The 2026 change of government left that latent capacity, and the geographic constraint behind it, largely as they were.

The decisive contrast, Romanian implementation against Hungarian and Slovak gate-keeping, is not determined by differences in hardware, scale or supranational treatment, all held constant. The decisive variable is the national scale's decision to implement the regional architecture or to resist it, even when EU money is available. The cancellation of BRUA's larger second phase (S&P Global, 2020) shows that alignment cannot be assured from the scales above the nation alone.

4.4. The local scale

The fourth, local scale is where borderland authorities can act jointly across the frontier, and it varies as sharply as the national. Along the Romanian–Hungarian border the cooperation is integrative. As presented in the energy cooperation section, two decades of the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar Euroregion and the Interreg geothermal initiative bind the Oradea and Debrecen authorities to the joint development of a shared resource (Popoviciu & Toca, 2011; Polgár & Brie, 2025).

On the Hungarian–Slovak border there is no such cooperation. The comparison thus is limited to the Romanian–Hungarian borderland, where the local scale is most developed.

5. THE ORADEA–DEBRECEN CASE

Along the Romanian-Hungarian border the supranational authorization, the regional connective infrastructure and the local cooperative agency are all in place, leaving the national scale, ambivalent on the Hungarian side, as the open variable. This configuration makes Oradea-Debrecen the paper's explanatory case. If the re-scaled Schuman mechanism can convert aligned infrastructure into cohesion anywhere in the

region, it can do so here, so a failure to deliver here would amount to a disconfirmation of the hypothesis itself rather than a local accident (Rosamond, 2005). The disconfirmation criterion stated in the methodology applies here in full.

5.1. Re-scaled functional integration

The reservoir studied between Létavértes and Săcueni is a single transboundary aquifer (Buday et al., 2012), part of a wider basin whose Romanian wells supply on the order of 400 GWh of geothermal heat a year, Oradea among the principal fields (Bendea et al., 2015). Cooperation along the border has widened over two decades from general development coordination to the joint development of that strategic resource, generating functional pressure for adjacent cooperation. This is recognizable in the building of cross-border governance institutions from bottom-up (Perkmann, 1999), in the functional spillover on a small scale, in which cooperation in one domain raises the value of cooperation in the next. The sequence is not purely endogenous, however, as the Euroregion's coordination structures preceded the geothermal projects and contributed to their initiation. Convergence of governance is likewise visible but incomplete. The trajectory toward a Debrecen–Oradea grouping is a convergence toward a joint, task-specific, cross-border authority of the Type II kind (Hooghe & Marks, 2003), and the Euroregion is its working precursor. Yet the grouping remains unfinished (European Committee of the Regions, 2026). That gap matters, because the EGTC instrument has often promised more integration than its members have delivered (Durand & Decoville, 2020).

The cooperation is substantially sustained by EU financing. The RENEW works carry a €9.01 million budget, roughly four-fifths met by the European Regional Development Fund (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme, 2025), and the cooperation has not yet outlived that subsidy, so the endogenous functional linkage cannot yet be shown to be self-sustaining. What weighs on the other side is that the geothermal aquifer is a transboundary physical asset whose joint management carries its own rationale independent of any subsidy. The endogenous driver (the resource) that the mechanism requires is present, even where the institutions remain generated by the subsidy mechanism. Functional integration is thus under way but unproven on its critical point, present as pressure and as governance convergence while not yet established as endogenous. The strong hypothesis therefore remains open, neither confirmed nor disconfirmed.

5.2. The micro-foundation tested

My third objective was to show how shared infrastructure produces shared subjectivity, and the case permits the testing of the two component concepts. Infrastructural citizenship is the constitution of political subjects through their everyday, material relation to shared infrastructure (Lemanski, 2020; Anand, 2017; von Schnitzler, 2016), so that material participation in energy systems can itself generate a form of citizenship (Ryghaug et al., 2018). The case requires that cross-border district heating, drawn from the shared geothermal production, make the households of Oradea and Debrecen mutually dependent in their tariffs and winter provision. The cooperation so far installs geothermal and solar heating in public buildings, schools and clinics in Hungary and in a geothermally heated multifunctional cultural center in Oradea (Consiliul Județean Bihor, 2025), rather than delivering shared district heat to households across the border. The trans-border subject the mechanism would constitute is therefore anticipated rather than observed. The micro-mechanism is plausible and materially prepared, but not yet implemented.

Borderland identity can be tested more directly, against the four shapes through which Paasi (1996, 2003) considers a region and its identity to be institutionalized. The territorial shape is present in the bounded space the Euroregion defines. The symbolic shape is carried less by a settled iconography than by the kinship and language that bind communities across this frontier (Neagu & Klatt, 2025). The institutional shape is present but thin, with the Euroregion realized and the EGTC pending. The shape Paasi calls establishment within a wider system is only partial, since the fuller recognition of a registered Type II jurisdiction or region-state across national frontiers would confer has not yet been obtained (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Jessop, 2013). Congruence with the four shapes is thus real but incomplete. The border region is still institutionalizing, and its functional de-bordering proceeds even as national gate-keeping re-borders it politically (Newman & Paasi, 1998; van Houtum, 2005).

5.3. Inclusivity: who is included, who is excluded

The Oradea–Debrecen cooperation can also be assessed through the energy-justice framework first formulated by McCauley et al. (2013) and consolidated by Jenkins et al. (2016). I measure the cooperation against its three tenets, distributional, procedural and recognition justice. Distributionally, the benefit of cheaper, cleaner heat, if and as the cross-border system is built, would accrue first to the urban households of two mid-sized cities, since the present works are concentrated in public buildings on the two sides of the frontier (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme, 2025; Consiliul Județean Bihor, 2025). The affordability test that energy justice demands (Sovacool & Dworkin, 2015) is most at risk of failing where deprivation is deepest, in the peripheral households of a country among the EU's most affected by heating-related deprivation (Grigorescu et al., 2024). Still on distribution, a review of cross-border INTERREG spending finds that it has often reinforced uneven development and privileged urban cores over their peripheries (Martín-Uceda & Vicente Rufí, 2021), the inverse of the territorial cohesion such cooperation is meant to serve (Demeterova et al., 2020). Procedurally, the governance is intergovernmental and technocratic, run by county councils and programme authorities, and thin in community participation. It is an instance of the exclusionary dynamics that the European community-energy literature warns of, in a regional setting that was largely overlooked (van Bommel & Höffken, 2021). On the third tenet, recognition, the cooperation cuts both ways. The bilingual minorities who straddle the frontier act as brokers who widen inclusion (Neagu & Klatt, 2025). The borderland Roma, whose extreme energy poverty in Romania's urban peripheries is already documented (Teschner et al., 2020), occupy the "spaces of misrecognition" most likely to be bypassed by a grid mapped to formal connection (Bouzarovski & Simcock, 2017).

The third objective is partially confirmed. The re-scaled Schuman mechanism is present at Oradea–Debrecen in nascent form: a shared resource, two decades of institution-building, and partial congruence with Paasi's shapes. Governance has not yet converged into a constituted authority, the infrastructural-citizenship mechanism awaits operational cross-border heating, endogenous linkage cannot yet be disentangled from subsidy, and inclusion is granted for some while it remains at risk for others.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The paper asked when cross-border energy infrastructure operates as a channel of coercion and when it becomes a substrate of cohesion. The answer took the form of a condition. Integration advances only where the four scales, supranational, regional,

national and local, align. The most-similar-systems comparison of Romania, Hungary and Slovakia isolated the national scale as the variable that turns one shared architecture into three trajectories: Romanian implementation, timed to the EU's 2027 cut-off, against Hungarian and Slovak gate-keeping that even a change of government in Budapest left largely intact. The fate of BRUA's second phase, cancelled when bookings failed to materialize, confirmed that alignment cannot be secured from the scales above the nation alone. The Oradea–Debrecen case then tested whether, where all four scales meet, the Schuman mechanism can be re-scaled to a contested border. The result is a partial confirmation. A shared geothermal resource and two decades of institution-building have generated functional pressure and a strengthening of trans-border association. Yet, the governing authority remains unestablished, household-level infrastructural citizenship is still prospective, and the cooperation cannot yet be shown to run on endogenous linkage rather than EU subsidy.

The paper findings have relevance to the EU's south-eastern frontier. The supranational and regional scales already reach the candidates: the six Western Balkan states, Moldova and Ukraine are Contracting Parties to the Energy Community, bound to the energy acquis and embedded in the CESEC coordination through which the corridors are planned (European Commission, 2026c), and, since March 2022, the Ukrainian and Moldovan power systems have run synchronously with continental Europe (ENTSO-E, 2022). The candidates lack what the comparison showed to be decisive, namely robust national articulation and the local cross-border agency that the Oradea–Debrecen case examined. Their predicament is the single-source dependence the architecture is meant to dissolve, whether Moldova's reliance on the Cuciurgan plant, which runs on Russian gas, or the Western Balkans' largely dependent on coal. Functional spillover across the accession frontier is real but bounded (Niemann, 2013; Rabinovych, 2025). From above, the EU can authorize the architecture, fund it and even connect the grids physically, as the synchronization of the Ukrainian and Moldovan power systems showed. Whether energy infrastructure becomes a substrate of inclusion or remains a channel of vulnerability is settled lower down, by the national governments and local actors who decide whether to meet the architecture.

The borderland shows the same logic on a small scale. Pooling a strategic resource across a contested frontier can begin to build the shared subjectivity the Schuman method promised. It does so, however, only under conditions. The scales must align, the process takes time, and the grid must be deliberately built to include those it most easily bypasses, the peripheral households most affected by heating-related deprivation and, above all, the borderland Roma (Teschner et al., 2020; Neagu & Klatt, 2025). For the next enlargement, energy infrastructure is at once an acute vulnerability and a powerful instrument of inclusion. The outcome will depend on the EU, but also, and more heavily, on the articulation of national governments and the agency of border communities.

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INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AND DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT IN BORDER AREAS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

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Abstract. *The border regions of South-East Europe represent some of the most dynamic and culturally diverse spaces within the contemporary European landscape, where ethnic, linguistic, religious and historical particularities continue to shape social interaction, regional cooperation and identity construction. In the context of globalization, migration dynamics and European integration, intercultural dialogue and diversity management have become essential instruments for social cohesion, inclusion and societal resilience. This paper examines the role of interculturalism and multiculturalism in border areas, with particular emphasis on the Romanian–Hungarian border space and the broader East-Central and South-East European context. Using a qualitative, interdisciplinary design that combines literature review, policy analysis, comparative reasoning and an illustrative case study, the research assesses how cultural diplomacy, intercultural education and institutional cooperation can reduce fragmentation, combat stereotypes and strengthen mutual trust. It argues that diversity is neither inherently a security threat nor automatically a social asset: outcomes depend on the quality of governance, everyday interaction and inclusive institutions. Intercultural dialogue should therefore be understood not merely as a cultural or educational dimension, but as a strategic component of societal security and European integration in border regions.*

Keywords*: intercultural dialogue, diversity management, border regions, social inclusion, societal security, European integration.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Border regions are not simply peripheral territories located at the external or internal margins of states. They are socially produced spaces in which political boundaries, historical memories, mobility patterns and multiple identities overlap. In South-East Europe, borders frequently connect communities that share economic interests, cultural practices and family networks, while simultaneously recalling periods of conflict, exclusion and competing national projects. This dual character makes borderlands particularly useful for analysing how diversity is transformed either into cooperation and social capital or into mistrust and fragmentation. The central premise of this article, derived from the conference presentation on which it is based, is that border regions are places where identity, inclusion and security intersect (Newman, 2006: 143–148; Paasi, 2011: 11–15).

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The relevance of the topic has increased because contemporary European societies are shaped by migration, population mobility, demographic change, urbanisation and transnational communication. On 1 January 2025, 46.7 million people living in the European Union had been born outside the EU, while another 18.0 million had been born in an EU Member State other than the one in which they lived. These figures do not describe border regions alone, yet they demonstrate that cultural diversity is embedded in the demographic structure of Europe rather than confined to exceptional localities. In regions situated along national borders, mobility and diversity are often even more visible because residents cross boundaries for employment, education, health care, trade, family life and cultural events (Eurostat, 2025).

Diversity, however, does not produce a predetermined political or social outcome. The same ethnic, linguistic or religious plurality may coexist with stable institutions and strong interpersonal trust in one region, while being interpreted through stereotypes and security fears in another. As the analytical statement formulated in the presentation emphasises, diversity is not automatically a risk or an advantage; its effects depend on how societies manage interaction, trust and inclusion. This observation calls for a shift from treating diversity as a static demographic fact to analysing the institutional and communicative processes through which difference acquires meaning (Vertovec, 2010: 83–87; 92–94).

The paper addresses four related questions. First, how does intercultural dialogue contribute to social inclusion? Second, what role does diversity management play in border areas? Third, can intercultural policies strengthen societal security? Fourth, how does cross-border cooperation support European integration? These questions link cultural policy to the study of security and regional cooperation. They also respond to the practical concern that inclusion is not achieved by declarations alone, but through institutions, education, representation, access to public services and repeated interaction among communities.

The argument is developed in eight parts. Following this introduction, the paper clarifies the concepts of multiculturalism, interculturalism, borders and societal security. It then explains the qualitative methodology and presents South-East Europe as a borderland of diversity. A section on demographic and policy evidence situates the discussion within contemporary European transformations. The Romanian–Hungarian border area, with specific reference to the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar and Oradea–Debrecen relationship, is examined as an illustrative case. The subsequent analysis identifies challenges, opportunities and mechanisms linking dialogue to resilience. The final sections formulate policy recommendations and conclusions.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: FROM COEXISTENCE TO INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION

Multiculturalism and interculturalism are related but analytically distinct approaches. Multiculturalism generally recognises the presence and rights of different cultural groups within the same political community. Its normative contribution is important because it challenges assimilationist assumptions and affirms that equal citizenship does not require cultural uniformity. Nevertheless, critics have argued that a model centred only on the recognition of separate communities can insufficiently address interaction, shared public spaces and the risk of parallel social lives. Interculturalism places greater emphasis on communication, reciprocal learning and the creation of

common practices across cultural boundaries (Vertovec, 2010: 83–95; Meer and Modood, 2011: 175–181).

The Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue defines dialogue as an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage. It presents intercultural dialogue as a means of promoting mutual understanding, cooperation, participation and social cohesion while respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law. This formulation is particularly relevant for border regions because their inhabitants often negotiate several levels of belonging at once: local, regional, national, minority, European and transnational (Council of Europe, 2008: 10-13).

Diversity management refers here to the set of public policies, institutional practices and social mechanisms used to ensure that cultural differences do not translate into unequal access, exclusion or structural vulnerability. It includes anti-discrimination measures, minority rights, language access, inclusive education, migrant integration, representation in decision-making, cultural diplomacy and support for civil-society initiatives. In a border context, diversity management also involves cross-border governance, because many everyday problems and opportunities cannot be addressed adequately by institutions operating exclusively within one state (Council of Europe, 2008: 4–7; 11–20).

Border studies have moved beyond the image of the border as a fixed line separating sovereign territories. Newman shows that borders continue to separate societies even under conditions of globalisation, but also argues that their meanings and functions change through political and social processes (Newman, 2006: 143–161). Paasi similarly conceptualises boundaries as institutions that are reproduced through narratives, symbols, administrative practices and everyday life (Paasi, 2011: 11–31). Rumford's work on theorising borders highlights that borders are increasingly dispersed and experienced through multiple sites rather than only at territorial edges (Rumford, 2006: 155–169). These perspectives help explain why an open internal EU border may remain socially significant even when physical controls are reduced.

The security dimension is developed through the concept of societal security. In the Copenhagen School framework, societal security concerns the ability of a society to preserve essential patterns of language, culture, association, religious and national identity under changing conditions. The concept has sometimes been used in ways that frame migration or minority claims as threats. This paper adopts a different, inclusion-oriented interpretation: long-term societal security depends on the capacity of communities to preserve identity while participating in a shared democratic order. Security is therefore not produced by suppressing difference, but by building institutions that allow differences to be expressed without becoming sources of exclusion or violent mobilisation (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 119-140).

This relationship can be summarised as a sequence: intercultural dialogue supports social inclusion; inclusion strengthens social cohesion; cohesion contributes to societal resilience. The sequence is not automatic and should not be read as a linear law. Dialogue without equal access may become symbolic, while inclusion policies without meaningful participation can remain technocratic. The model nevertheless provides a useful analytical structure for assessing how culture and security interact (Council of Europe, 2008: 3–4; 16–18; 36–40).

Figure 1. Analytical model: intercultural dialogue, inclusion, cohesion and societal resilience



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on the conceptual framework developed from Council of Europe (2008); Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) and Vertovec (2010))

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing importance of intercultural dialogue and diversity management has generated an extensive body of interdisciplinary literature spanning European Studies, Sociology, Political Science, Border Studies and Security Studies. While early research primarily focused on multiculturalism as a framework for recognising minority rights and protecting cultural identities, more recent scholarship increasingly emphasises interculturalism, which promotes interaction, dialogue and shared participation among culturally diverse communities (Kymlicka, 1995: 10–26; Meer and Modood, 2011: 175–181).

One of the central debates concerns the relationship between multiculturalism and interculturalism (Kymlicka, 1995: 108–130) argues that liberal democracies require institutional recognition of minority cultures in order to ensure genuine equality. However, subsequent authors suggest that recognition alone is insufficient if cultural groups remain socially separated (Meer and Modood, 2011: 176–183) contend that interculturalism complements rather than replaces multiculturalism by encouraging communication, reciprocity and everyday interaction between communities. Similarly, (Vertovec, 2010: 83–95) argues that increasing social complexity and "super-diversity" require governance models capable of managing multiple identities simultaneously rather than relying exclusively on traditional multicultural approaches.

Border Studies scholars have also significantly contributed to understanding intercultural relations (Newman, 2006: 143–161; Paasi, 2011: 11–31; Rumford, 2006: 155–169) demonstrate that borders are no longer understood merely as territorial lines separating sovereign states. Instead, borders function as dynamic social institutions continuously reproduced through political practices, historical narratives and everyday interactions. Their work highlights that European internal borders simultaneously facilitate mobility and preserve symbolic distinctions, making them particularly suitable environments for analysing intercultural dialogue.

From the perspective of Security Studies, the Copenhagen School introduced the concept of societal security, referring to the ability of communities to preserve their identity under changing political and social conditions (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 119–140). Although societal security has sometimes been associated with the securitisation of migration and minority issues, more recent research argues for an inclusive interpretation, where social cohesion, democratic participation and institutional trust constitute the foundations of long-term security rather than cultural homogeneity (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 23–26; 119–140).

European institutions have further expanded this perspective through policy documents promoting intercultural dialogue and inclusion (Council of Europe, 2008: 10–18) defines intercultural dialogue as a continuous process of respectful exchange based on human rights, democracy and equal dignity. Likewise, the European Commission's *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027* presents integration as a two-way process involving migrants, host communities and public institutions (European

Commission, 2020: 4–20). The mid-term review published in 2025 further emphasises that successful inclusion requires coordinated policies addressing education, employment, housing and civic participation rather than isolated cultural initiatives (European Commission, 2025).

Despite the substantial literature on multiculturalism, migration and border governance, relatively fewer studies integrate these perspectives within the specific context of South-East European border regions. Existing research frequently examines minority rights, migration management or cross-border cooperation separately. Less attention has been devoted to analysing how intercultural dialogue simultaneously contributes to social inclusion, societal resilience and European integration in border areas. This paper seeks to address that gap by combining insights from Border Studies, Intercultural Communication and Security Studies within the illustrative case of the Romanian–Hungarian border region.

4. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The study uses a qualitative and interdisciplinary research design combining European Studies, Security Studies and Intercultural Communication. This design is appropriate because the research problem cannot be reduced to a single variable or measured exclusively through demographic indicators. Intercultural dialogue involves meanings, institutional arrangements and social relationships, while societal resilience is influenced by political, economic and historical contexts (Creswell, 2018: 42–47; 73–76).

Four methods are employed. First, a literature review identifies conceptual approaches to borders, multiculturalism, interculturalism and societal security. Second, policy analysis examines the Council of Europe's intercultural framework, the European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027, Eurostat demographic evidence and the Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027. Third, comparative reasoning is used to situate the Romanian–Hungarian border within the broader South-East and East-Central European context. Fourth, an illustrative case study explores the Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar cross-border area and the Oradea–Debrecen axis (European Commission, 2020: 4–7; Council of Europe, 2008: 10–18; Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, 2011: 11–18; 37–61).

The case study is illustrative rather than statistically representative. Its purpose is to identify mechanisms through which long-term cooperation can reduce symbolic and practical barriers. The analysis therefore focuses on institutional partnerships, infrastructure, education, cultural exchange and programme architecture rather than measuring individual attitudes through an original survey. This limitation is important: the paper does not claim to establish causal effects of specific projects on all dimensions of social inclusion. Instead, it triangulates policy documents, official statistics and established theoretical literature to develop a grounded analytical argument (Yin, 2018: 37–43; 50–56).

The methodological corpus was selected according to three criteria: institutional reliability, relevance to the research questions and connection to the presentation. Official European sources provide demographic and policy data; programme documents offer information about cross-border priorities; and peer-reviewed academic works supply theoretical concepts. The research also adopts a critical approach to policy language. Terms such as inclusion, resilience and cooperation can become broad labels, so the analysis asks what concrete mechanisms they imply and whose participation they enable.

The study follows an interpretive logic rather than a hypothesis-testing design. Evidence is read for convergences and tensions between normative commitments and implementation mechanisms. Particular attention is paid to the difference between formal openness and effective accessibility: a programme may be legally open to all residents while language, transport, information or socioeconomic barriers limit participation in practice. This distinction is essential when evaluating inclusion in border areas, because cross-border opportunities are not distributed evenly. The approach also recognises researcher positionality. Selection of an illustrative EU internal border foregrounds cooperation under a relatively supportive institutional framework and may understate the difficulties found at external EU borders or in areas affected by recent conflict. Future research should complement this analysis with interviews, participant observation and comparative survey data from several border regions (Denzin, 2009: 291–307; Yin, 2018: 126–132).

5. DIVERSITY AS A STRUCTURAL EUROPEAN REALITY

Official demographic evidence supports the argument that diversity is not marginal. Eurostat estimated that the EU population on 1 January 2025 included 46.7 million people born outside the Union, representing 10.4 per cent of the total population, and 18.0 million people born in another EU Member State. The distinction between citizenship and country of birth is analytically important. A person may have acquired citizenship while remaining foreign-born, and an EU citizen may live in another Member State. Both forms of mobility shape linguistic needs, education systems, labour markets and local participation (Eurostat, 2025).

The figures presented in the conference presentation were used not as a direct measure of intercultural dialogue, but as a contextual indicator. They demonstrate the scale at which European institutions and local authorities must address inclusion. The demographic structure also varies greatly between states and regions, so uniform policies are unlikely to be sufficient. Border cities may experience temporary mobility, circular migration and cross-border commuting differently from large capitals receiving long-term international migration (European Commission, 2020: 3–7).

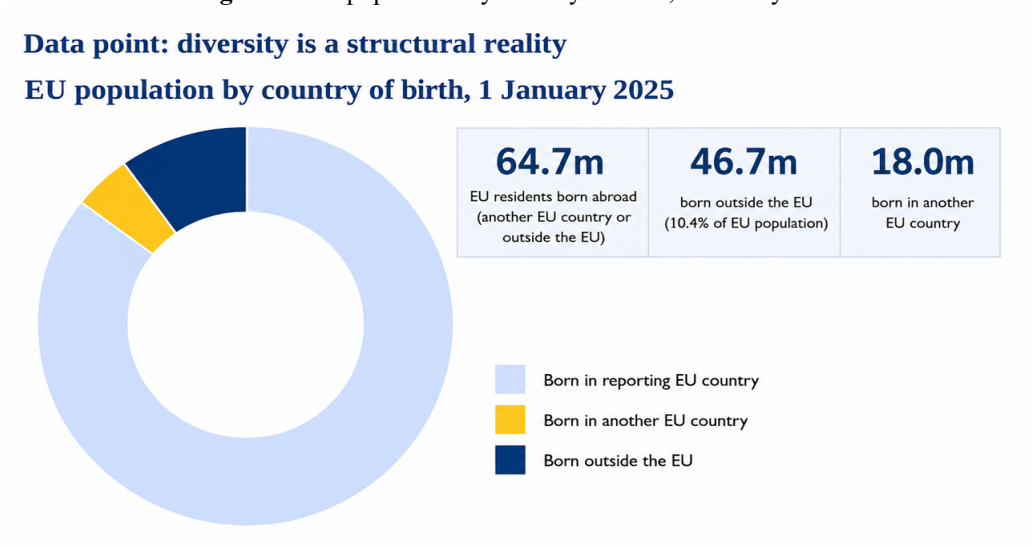
The European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 responds to this diversity through the principle of inclusion for all. It emphasises education and training, employment and skills, health and housing, while also recognising that successful integration requires partnerships involving migrants, host communities, public authorities, civil society and social partners. The plan is relevant to border regions because inclusion is presented as a two-way process and because local and regional authorities are central to implementation (European Commission, 2020).

A mid-term review published in 2025 noted continuing pressure on public services and housing and reaffirmed integration as an investment in long-term cohesion and a means of reducing vulnerabilities. This framing is consistent with the paper's security argument. When access to schools, employment, health care and housing is unequal, cultural difference can become associated with competition and resentment. Inclusive service provision is therefore not separate from intercultural dialogue; it creates the material conditions under which dialogue can be credible (European Commission, 2025).

The demographic evidence should not be used to securitise migration. Numbers alone do not establish social risk, and foreign-born populations are internally diverse in legal status, skills, socioeconomic position and length of residence. A responsible

security analysis distinguishes between vulnerabilities generated by exclusion and the presence of diversity itself. The policy question is how institutions respond to demographic change while protecting rights and maintaining public trust (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 119–140; Vertovec, 2010: 88–94).

Figure 2. EU population by country of birth, 1 January 2025



(*Source:* adapted from Eurostat (2025), "EU population diversity by citizenship and country of birth")

6. CHALLENGES: WHEN DIVERSITY IS POORLY GOVERNED

The presentation identifies four main clusters of challenges: migration pressures, nationalist discourses, stereotypes and prejudice, and historical legacies. These factors do not automatically lead to conflict, but they can weaken cohesion when institutions fail to provide fair procedures, reliable information and spaces for dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008: 16–18; Vertovec, 2010: 83–94).

Migration pressures are often experienced locally through schools, housing, health services and labour markets. The perception of pressure may be stronger than the measurable burden, especially when political actors frame newcomers as competitors or security threats. At the same time, public authorities can lose credibility when they deny genuine capacity problems. Inclusive governance requires both protection against scapegoating and transparent management of resources. Local residents and newcomers need to understand how decisions are made and how costs and benefits are distributed (European Commission, 2020: 9–17).

Nationalist discourses simplify complex border histories into narratives of ownership, victimhood and threat. In border regions, references to historical territories or minority populations may be mobilised during electoral campaigns even when everyday relations are cooperative. Such narratives can transform cultural symbols into tests of loyalty and make bilingualism or cross-border cooperation appear suspicious. The answer is not to suppress historical debate, but to encourage plural interpretations, joint research and educational practices that acknowledge different memories (Todorova, 1997: 140–160; Council of Europe, 2008: 43–44).

Stereotypes and prejudice operate through daily interactions and institutional routines. They may affect employment, housing, school expectations, media representation and access to services. Intercultural events can challenge stereotypes, but occasional festivals are insufficient when discrimination is embedded in procedures. Diversity management must therefore combine symbolic recognition with enforceable equality standards, complaint mechanisms and professional training (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017: 21–35; 54–67).

Historical legacies remain powerful because borders in South-East Europe have often changed through war, treaties and state transformation. Communities may preserve memories of displacement, forced assimilation or unequal treatment. These memories deserve recognition, yet they can also be selectively used to reproduce hostility. Cross-border dialogue is most effective when it neither demands forgetting nor turns remembrance into permanent antagonism (Council of Europe, 2008: 43–44; Todorova, 1997: 3–20).

A further challenge is the fragmentation of policy responsibilities. Cultural institutions may promote dialogue, while security institutions, schools, municipalities and social services operate with separate priorities. Without coordination, intercultural dialogue becomes isolated from the decisions that shape inclusion. The phrase used in the presentation—diversity without dialogue may become a vulnerability—should therefore be understood institutionally. Vulnerability emerges when communication, representation and equal access are weak, not from diversity as such (Council of Europe, 2008: 36–47).

7. OPPORTUNITIES: DIVERSITY AS SOCIAL CAPITAL

Diversity becomes an opportunity when it is connected to inclusive institutions and sustained daily interaction. Four mechanisms highlighted in the presentation are especially relevant: cultural diplomacy, intercultural education, cross-border cooperation and EU programmes (Putnam, 2007: 137–150: 159–167).

Cultural diplomacy at the local and regional level can create shared spaces in which communities present their heritage without reducing culture to fixed folklore. Museums, theatres, festivals, libraries and media partnerships can support bilingual or multilingual participation and joint historical reflection. Their contribution is strongest when projects are co-designed by communities rather than presented to passive audiences. Cultural diplomacy can also strengthen the external visibility of border cities and support tourism and creative industries (Council of Europe, 2008: 45–49).

Intercultural education develops the knowledge and skills required to live in diverse democratic societies. It includes language learning, critical media literacy, historical multiperspectivity, anti-discrimination education and opportunities for students to cooperate across borders. The Council of Europe's framework treats education as a central domain for learning democratic citizenship and dialogue. Schools and universities are particularly important because they can create repeated contact over time rather than one-off encounters (Council of Europe, 2008).

Cross-border cooperation transforms the border from a barrier into an interface. Joint infrastructure projects improve mobility, while institutional networks allow municipalities, universities, hospitals, emergency services and civil-society organisations to address shared problems. Cooperation also produces relational capital: officials and professionals learn whom to contact, how neighbouring systems operate and how to

negotiate differences. These relationships may become especially valuable during crises (Scott, 2012: 83–99; Rumford, 2006: 160–166).

EU programmes provide funding, legal frameworks and strategic incentives for such cooperation. Yet funding alone does not guarantee inclusion. Projects need continuity, community participation and measurable social outcomes. A new road may increase mobility without increasing trust; a cultural event may attract already engaged participants without reaching marginalised groups. Programme evaluation should therefore examine who participates, which languages are used, whether partnerships continue after funding and whether access barriers are reduced (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 37–61: 82–91).

When these mechanisms reinforce one another, diversity can generate social capital. Intercultural education prepares participants for cooperation; cultural diplomacy creates public narratives of shared belonging; infrastructure enables contact; and inclusive policies ensure that participation is not limited to privileged groups. The result is not the disappearance of differences, but an increased capacity to manage disagreement peacefully (Putnam, 2007: 137–150).

8. CASE STUDY: THE ROMANIAN–HUNGARIAN BORDER AREA

The Romanian–Hungarian border area offers a relevant illustrative case because it combines historical proximity, minority communities, EU membership, established institutional relations and a long experience of cross-border programmes. The Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar area and the Oradea–Debrecen axis are particularly significant. Both cities function as regional centres with universities, cultural institutions, health services and economic networks that extend beyond the administrative border (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 11–18; 24–30).

The case is not presented as an ideal model without tensions. Romanian–Hungarian relations have been shaped by different national narratives and by debates concerning minority rights, language and history. Nevertheless, the institutional context of the European Union has provided stable mechanisms for cooperation. The border can increasingly be approached as a shared development space, even though differences in administrative systems, funding capacity and political priorities remain (Kymlicka, 1995: 108–130; Council of Europe, 2008: 13–18).

The Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027 defines a cooperation framework for the eligible border area and supports priorities related to climate adaptation, biodiversity, health care, culture, tourism and institutional cooperation. Its importance for diversity management lies not only in explicitly cultural projects. Health, transport and environmental cooperation create practical interdependence and can increase public confidence in cross-border institutions. When residents experience concrete benefits, the neighbouring region becomes less abstract and less easily represented through stereotypes (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme and official programme priorities, 2021).

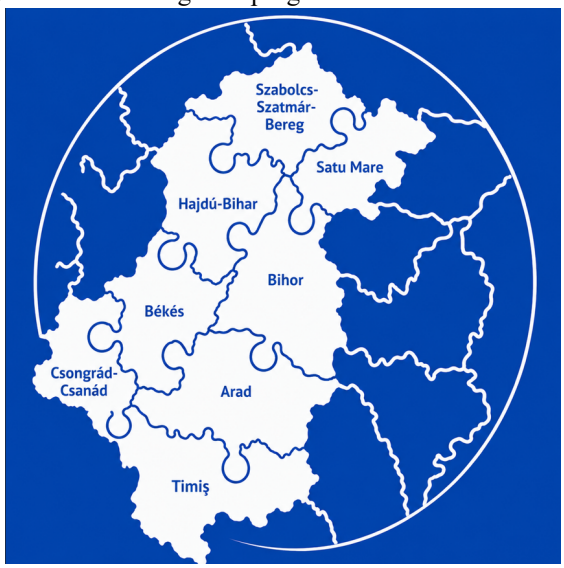
Educational and cultural exchanges are another important mechanism. Universities in Oradea and Debrecen can facilitate student mobility, joint conferences, research networks and multilingual professional communities. Schools, museums and cultural organisations can develop projects that present local history from more than one perspective. Such initiatives are especially valuable for younger generations who may inherit national narratives without having direct experience of the neighbouring society

(Council of Europe, 2008: 43–47; Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 55–61).

Infrastructure and institutional partnerships reduce practical barriers. Improved transport, coordinated services and professional networks allow residents to use the border as a resource. Yet accessibility must be examined socially as well as geographically. People with limited income, weak language skills or disabilities may benefit less from mobility unless projects include targeted measures. Inclusion therefore requires that cross-border development be designed for diverse users (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 37–61: 82–91).

The main observation is that long-term cooperation can reduce symbolic and practical barriers between communities. The word long-term is essential. Trust is cumulative and depends on repeated encounters, predictable institutions and the ability to manage disagreements. Short projects may initiate contact, but durable networks are needed to withstand political change.

Figure 3. Romanian–Hungarian programme area used in the case-study



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on the Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027 visual materials)

9. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis supports the main finding formulated in the presentation: effective diversity management can transform potential tensions into social capital. This conclusion is based on six linked observations (Putnam, 2006: 137–150; 159–167; Council of Europe, 2008: 16–18).

First, dialogue quality matters more than the mere existence of contact. Interaction can reinforce prejudice when participants meet under unequal conditions or when institutions tolerate discrimination. Productive dialogue requires equal dignity, clear rules, opportunities for participation and mechanisms for addressing conflict. The Council of Europe's human-rights framework is therefore not an external addition to dialogue but one of its preconditions (Council of Europe, 2008: 10–13).

Second, inclusion has both symbolic and material dimensions. Recognition of languages, traditions and identities is important, but it cannot substitute for access to education, employment, housing, health care and decision-making. Conversely, service provision that ignores identity and communication barriers may remain formally equal but practically inaccessible. Diversity management is effective when recognition and redistribution are combined (Fraser, 1995: 68–93).

Third, trust is built through institutions as well as interpersonal relationships. Citizens assess neighbouring communities partly through their experiences with schools, municipalities, border authorities, media and programme organisations. Transparent procedures and reliable services reduce uncertainty. Institutional cooperation also creates professional networks capable of responding quickly to shared problems (Putnam, 2006: 137–150; Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 82–91).

Fourth, border regions reveal the multi-level nature of inclusion. Local governments, national authorities, EU institutions, universities and civil society all influence outcomes. A policy can fail because responsibilities are unclear or because local actors lack resources to implement national commitments. Cross-border governance adds another layer, requiring coordination between different legal and administrative systems (European Commission, 2020: 18–22; Council of Europe, 2008: 36–42).

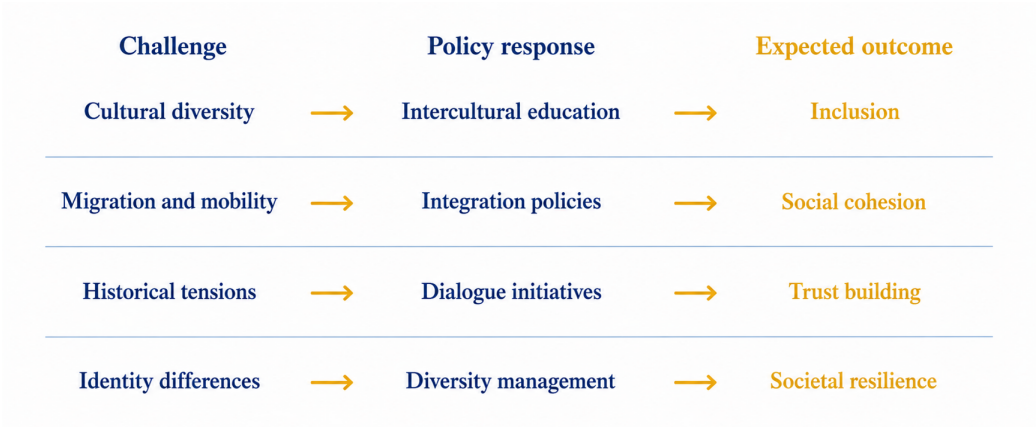
Fifth, societal security is strengthened when communities can maintain identity without interpreting other identities as existential threats. This differs from a zero-sum model in which the visibility of one language or culture is assumed to weaken another. Intercultural dialogue encourages a relational understanding of identity: communities can preserve distinctiveness while creating shared institutions and public spaces (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 119–140; Council of Europe, 2008: 13–18).

Sixth, European integration is experienced through everyday practices. Border residents may evaluate the EU less through institutional debates than through mobility, employment, infrastructure, education and access to neighbouring services. Cross-border cooperation can therefore strengthen the legitimacy of integration, but only when benefits are visible and inclusive (Scott, 2012: 83–99).

These findings also identify limits. Intercultural dialogue cannot resolve structural inequalities by itself, and cross-border projects cannot replace national minority policies or social protection. Dialogue may be instrumentalised for image-building while difficult questions are avoided. Similarly, resilience discourse can place excessive responsibility on communities to adapt without addressing institutional failures. The concept must therefore remain connected to democratic accountability and rights (Fraser, 1995: 68–93; European Commission, 2020: 4–7).

The relationship between diversity and security should be understood through prevention rather than securitisation. Preventive security seeks to reduce exclusion, misinformation and institutional mistrust before they are mobilised into polarisation. It does not label cultural groups as risks. In this sense, intercultural dialogue is strategic because it improves the capacity of societies to negotiate difference, recognise grievances and cooperate during periods of pressure (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998: 23–26; 119–140).

Figure 4. Synthesis of findings: policy mechanisms and expected social outcomes



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on Council of Europe (2008), European Commission (2020) and Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998))

10. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy logic derived from the analysis is that inclusion is not only a social goal; it is a preventive security strategy. Five recommendations follow (Council of Europe, 2008: 36–50).

First, intercultural education should be expanded across formal and non-formal settings. Curricula should include critical media literacy, minority histories, democratic citizenship and opportunities for cross-border collaboration. Language learning should be supported as a practical tool of participation rather than framed solely as a marker of national identity. Teacher training is essential because educators need methods for addressing controversial histories and prejudice (Council of Europe, 2008: 43–45).

Second, local cultural diplomacy should be strengthened. Municipalities and cultural institutions should support bilingual and co-created programmes, joint heritage initiatives and public spaces in which multiple identities are visible. Evaluation should consider whether projects involve marginalised groups, encourage sustained interaction and avoid reproducing exotic or stereotypical representations (Council of Europe, 2008: 45–49).

Third, cross-border cooperation should be designed for continuity. Programme authorities can reward partnerships that demonstrate institutional commitment beyond the funding period, include community organisations and build reusable networks. Small-scale people-to-people projects should complement major infrastructure investments because trust grows through both practical benefits and human relationships (Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027, Cooperation Programme, 2021: 82–91).

Fourth, inclusion policies for minorities and migrants should be integrated with mainstream public services. Language access, anti-discrimination procedures and participation mechanisms should be embedded in schools, health services, employment agencies and municipal administrations. The European Commission's inclusion-for-all principle provides a useful orientation, but local implementation requires adequate funding and data (European Commission, 2020: 7-20).

Fifth, border-region governance should incorporate participatory monitoring. Authorities should collect disaggregated data where legally and ethically appropriate,

consult communities regularly and publish accessible information on project outcomes. Monitoring must protect privacy and avoid turning identities into rigid administrative categories. Qualitative feedback is needed alongside indicators to understand how residents experience inclusion (European Commission, 2020: 20–22).

A cross-cutting recommendation concerns communication. Institutions should explain the benefits, costs and limits of cooperation honestly. Overly celebratory narratives can undermine trust when residents encounter unresolved problems. Public communication should acknowledge disagreement while showing how democratic procedures and cross-border institutions manage it (Council of Europe, 2008: 36–40; 50).

Figure 5. Policy recommendations



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on the policy recommendations derived from Council of Europe (2008), European Commission (2020) and the Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027)

11. CONCLUSION

This article has examined intercultural dialogue and diversity management in border areas through the combined perspectives of European Studies, Security Studies and Intercultural Communication. Its central argument is that diversity is neither inherently a threat nor automatically an advantage. Outcomes depend on the quality of governance, the distribution of resources, opportunities for participation and the capacity of institutions to support interaction based on equal dignity.

South-East European border regions are especially significant because ethnic, linguistic, religious and historical layers intersect with contemporary mobility and European integration. These regions can experience polarisation when nationalist narratives, stereotypes and unequal access are left unaddressed. They can also become laboratories of integration when cultural diplomacy, education, institutional cooperation and EU programmes create repeated and meaningful interaction.

The Romanian–Hungarian border case illustrates how long-term cooperation can reduce symbolic and practical barriers. The Bihor–Hajdú-Bihar and Oradea–Debrecen relationships show that infrastructure, education, culture and institutional networks are mutually reinforcing. The case also demonstrates that cross-border cooperation must be socially inclusive and durable if it is to generate trust.

The societal-security perspective adds a strategic dimension. Security is not only about controlling borders or protecting institutions; it is also about the capacity of

communities to coexist peacefully, preserve identity and maintain confidence in a shared democratic framework. Intercultural dialogue contributes to this capacity by preventing difference from being transformed into existential threat narratives.

The future of Europe will depend not only on institutions at the supranational level, but also on the capacity of diverse communities to communicate, cooperate and build trust. Border regions are where this capacity is tested most visibly. Managing diversity through rights, participation and dialogue is therefore a practical requirement for social inclusion, democratic resilience and sustainable European integration.

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THE IMPACT OF STRATEGIC SHIFTS IN THE 2023-2027 CAP STRATEGIC PLAN ON NON-AGRICULTURAL DIVERSIFICATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION: A CASE STUDY OF BIHOR COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Horia Laurențiu CARȚIȘ [**]

Abstract. *During previous programming periods (2007-2013, 2014-2020), through Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and funding via the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Union aimed to establish a strategic framework for diversifying the rural economy by stimulating non-agricultural activities. However, the new rural development policy outlined in the 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plan places the funding of non-agricultural activities under the responsibility of Local Action Groups (LAGs).This study aims to analyze the contribution of non-agricultural activities to the labor market dynamics in rural areas, comparatively examining the effects of shifting strategic orientations in rural development policy and underfunding on economic activities in rural space.*

The research focuses on the administrative-territorial units of Auşeu, Vadu Crişului, Şuncuiuş, Bulz and Bratca (Bihor County). The first three localities are members of the Local Action Group Association Zona Aleşd – Valea Crişului Repede, and the last two are part of the Poarta Transilvaniei Local Action Group Association. The research is completed with a case study extended to three individual companies (SKIPAS, Casa Bucătarului, Carpathia) with an analysis of the strategic changes introduced by the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027, followed by an analysis of the main institutions of the Romanian state that directly or indirectly implement properties with European or national funding in the Romanian rural area.

The theoretical and empirical foundation of this endeavor is based on processing data from official statistics (European, national, and local), government documents, as well as a rigorous analysis of specialized literature, including doctoral theses and relevant scientific articles.

Keywords*: rural development, social inclusion, tourism, Romania, Bihor, CAP 2023-2027, Strategic Plan, non-institutional integrated.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Rural areas in Romania face structural vulnerabilities, derived from geographical isolation and restrictive economic dynamics, factors that severely limit access to sustainable occupational opportunities. However, the resilience of the private ecosystem

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and the synergy between local actors are key drivers of social inclusion, the benchmark for assessing the success of cohesion policies being the job creation rate.

Within the European Union, through Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the aim was to establish a strategic framework aimed at diversifying the rural economy by mobilizing the resources of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). This mechanism aimed to reduce dependence on the primary sector by directly financing non-agricultural activities, considered essential for the modernization of the Romanian village. The development of these sectors (tourism, crafts, services) is not only an economic alternative, but a necessity for local entrepreneurs, providing solutions for the exodus of the workforce and demographic aging. However, the performance of these tools has often been influenced by the lack of a unified long-term strategic vision and fragmented planning. Although the concept of non-agricultural rural development is aligned with the requirements of the current market, its heterogeneous implementation has produced variable results in the process of social inclusion, with the risk that punctual investments will not turn into long-term sustainable interventions, in the absence of a correlation between the specific needs of the communities and the European funding directions.

The research objective of this study is to analyze the impact of institutional and financial architecture changes operated through the NSP 2023-2027 on non-agricultural diversification and social inclusion in rural areas. The research aims to identify the limits of the current rural governance model, characterized by inter-ministerial fragmentation, and to substantiate the need for an integrated coordination structure at government level.

The research hypotheses from which we start this analysis are:

H1. The current architecture of financing non-agricultural activities, by transferring responsibility to Local Action Groups (LAGs), has led to a decrease in absorption capacity and a decrease in the rate of job creation in rural areas.

H2. The fragmentation of responsibilities between multiple ministries, in the absence of an integrating body, prevents the capitalization of synergies between sectoral investments (e.g. industrial parks and related rural businesses), leads to a dissipation of the impact of European funds.

The research questions pursued during the documentation and analysis process are:

Q1. Do the changes in the financial and institutional architecture introduced by the PNS 2023-2027 affect the development of non-agricultural activities and social inclusion in rural areas?

Q2. To what extent does the institutional fragmentation of rural development policies in Romania undermine the efficiency of non-agricultural investments and what integrated governance mechanisms could remedy this dysfunction?

The research was based on a mixed methodological approach, which integrated literature review, comparative analysis of quantitative data, qualitative analysis and statistical analysis of available information. For the collection and presentation of the results, the case study, observation, as well as the graphical representation of the data through tables and figures were used.

The expected results take into account the fact that the development of non-agricultural activities in the rural area under analysis contributes directly and indirectly to the creation of jobs, providing a process of social inclusion in the medium and long term, and without an integrated support, of the financing of activities not related to

agriculture, based on specific legislation, the phenomenon of abandonment of small businesses intensifies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Between 2000 and 2027, the private ecosystem in Europe's rural areas benefited from more than 70 billion euros in funding from European Union cohesion policy funds (European Commission, Cohesion Data 2000–2006, 2007–2013, 2014–2020, 2023–2027). These investments have contributed to a moderate increase in the number of jobs in rural areas (AGRIDATA, 2026). At the same time, through the four programming periods of the Common Agricultural Policy, between 2000 and 2026, more than 20 billion euros were allocated to support non-agricultural economic activities in rural areas (European Commission, 2025). Together with other European financial instruments, these interventions have supported the strengthening of social inclusion and the diversification of the rural economy.

The attention of research on social inclusion in rural areas is found in analyses that evoke the importance of this phenomenon, emphasizing the role played by local actors through participation, but also public policies. The success of European programmes should not only be measured by the number of participants or beneficiaries, but also by their ability to reduce social barriers and facilitate equal access to opportunities. From this perspective, rural development needs to be looked at in a broader context than just participation in projects. In practice, however, authorities and decision-makers tend to consider that people who do not participate in local projects are automatically socially excluded. The researcher demonstrates that this approach is too simplistic and can lead to erroneous interpretations of the realities in rural areas. (Shortall, 2008: 450-457).

Recent work demonstrates that the current challenges of Europe's rural environment are multidimensional and can no longer be addressed exclusively through the instruments of the Common Agricultural Policy. Digitalisation, reducing territorial disparities, developing public services and combating social exclusion must be integrated into a coherent territorial approach, adapted to the needs of each rural community (Salemink, Townsend and Chapman, 2025; Benner, Trippl, & Hassink, 2024). In this context, European rural development policies are called upon to combine economic investments with measures aimed at social inclusion, innovation and strengthening the resilience of local communities.

In addition, international cooperation can see the strengthening of the capacity of local administrations in the process of responding to the needs of communities, by facilitating access to financing, education, employment and exchanges of good practices (Brie, Mărcuț and Polgár, 2022).

The results of another study conducted between 2007 and 2022 show that although most countries have made progress in reducing rural poverty, the differences from the European Union average remain significant. Bulgaria, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania consistently rank among the countries with the highest levels of risk of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. As for Romania, the authors point out that it has the highest values of rural poverty and social exclusion among the new member states of the European Union (Memo, Pieńkowski, 2025: 51). In contrast, Poland is highlighted as a positive example, being the only country analyzed that has consistently reduced the indicators of poverty and social exclusion in both urban and rural areas over the entire period analyzed (Memo, Pieńkowski, 2025: 59). The study explains this

situation by limited access to education and public services, reduced employment opportunities and the persistence of structural imbalances in rural development. The authors believe that reducing these disparities requires sustained investment in education, infrastructure and public services, as well as integrated policies aimed at developing human capital and diversifying the rural economy (Memo, Pieńkowski, 2025: 61-63).

According to a recently published article, social inclusion in the Romanian rural area is one of the responsibilities of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), an institution with responsibilities in the development and implementation of rural development policies. The authors highlight the fact that the analyzed programmatic documents treat social inclusion as a priority objective and present the way in which it was integrated into the three programs financed by European funds (Bonaciu and Brie, 2026: 159). Although all programmes contributed to the development of rural entrepreneurship and the promotion of social inclusion, the results were different, with the highest impact being recorded under SAPARD and PNDR 2014–2020, especially in the fields of tourism, services and productive activities (Bonaciu and Brie, 2026: 160), but as highlighted in this study the lowest impact on social inclusion is recorded in the current programming period of the PNS-CAP 2023-2027.

According to the European Commission, about 45% of Romania's population lives in rural areas, and 87% of the country's surface is classified as a rural area, of which 57% represents agricultural land and 30% forests (EC, 2023). In other words, less than half of the population on almost nine-tenths of the territory — an imbalance that, precisely because it is so severe, should be at the heart of any coherent public policy. On the other hand, it is not in the full mandate of any ministry.

Since 2000, Romania has benefited from three consecutive cycles of European funding for agriculture and rural areas, followed by the new strategic format of the CAP, which is still being implemented. The historian speaks for itself: from 1.3 billion euros in SAPARD (2000-2006) to 15.8 billion euros in the 2023-2027 NSP — eleven times more money — but with an increasingly agricultural orientation and an increasingly smaller presence of the non-agricultural component (Chereji, Maerescu, Țuțui, Chereji jr. and Chiurciu, 2023).

Budgetary figures confirm this where the data are comparable: in SAPARD (2000-2006), Measure 3.4 dedicated to non-agricultural received 13.2% of the allocation; in the PNDR 2007-2013, Axis 3 — diversification and quality of life — received 24.7% of the budget, a historical peak of the allocation for the non-agricultural component. In the PNDR 2014-2020 (9.3 billion euros) and in the PNS 2023-2027 (15.8 billion euros), the public records on the exact share of non-agricultural interventions are more fragmented, but the architecture of the two cycles is clearly lacking a dedicated axis equivalent to Axis 3 of the PNDR 2007-2013 or PNDR 2014-2020 sub-measures: non-agricultural funding appears today dispersed in interventions placed under the responsibility of the community, of Local Action Groups (DR-36), with budgets clearly lower than direct payments, eco-schemes or irrigation (MADR, 2000, 2022).

The NSP 2023-2027, approved by Decision C (2026) 884 of the European Commission on 18 February 2026, after five successive amendments, is essentially an agricultural strategy. 25% of the EAGF is blocked for eco-schemes, 41.32% of the EAFRD for environmental and climate commitments and irrigation, 15% of direct payments for redistributive support. The new implementation model through the PNS-CAP gives states greater autonomy, without this flexibility automatically leading to more ambitious policies. At the level of France, the NSP prioritises the competitiveness of farms, but shows a relative

status quo in terms of climate and environmental ambitions, and the comparison with the strategic plans of Germany and Spain highlights the existence of different national options in using the flexibility offered by the new CAP (Bureau, 2024: 10–14). In the case of Spain, support for non-agricultural activities is not concentrated in a homogeneous national intervention, but is dispersed between regional interventions and LEADER. This architecture allows for territorial adaptation, but makes it more difficult to benchmark the national financial effort aimed at diversifying the rural economy (EC, 2023; Massot, 2022).

The financial weight given to non-agricultural diversification is visibly lower although the PNS-CAP for Romania 2023-2027 states that: „Investments in non-agricultural activities in rural areas lead to the development of the rural economy and the encouragement of entrepreneurship and by promoting the prioritization of investments in digitalization and innovation, the reduction of disparities at the level of rural enterprises compared to urban ones will be ensured" (PNS-CAP 2023-2027, 2022: 1067). The analysis of the implementation of the PNS CAP 2023–2027 highlights an interest of the beneficiaries which, for open rural development interventions, exceeds the available financial resources, indicating a gap between the investment needs of the rural environment and the financing capacity of the programmed interventions (Pascar, Copăcian, Baliban and Chereji, 2025: 803).

In the current programming period, Local Action Groups (LAGs), funded by the LEADER approach, have lower financial resources than in previous cycles. Also, new interventions, such as DR-36 – Local development placed under community responsibility (PNS-PAC, 2022: 959-967), have a relatively modest financial allocation compared to direct payments and eco-schemes. From the perspective of social inclusion, the DR-36 intervention retains the LEADER philosophy of involving communities in decision-making, but the focus falls on the local governance mechanism rather than on measurable social results. The NSP mentions contributions to the indicators on social inclusion and local development, but does not set clear quantitative targets for poverty reduction, integration of vulnerable groups or increased employment in rural communities. Although the intervention of DR-29 – Investments in the creation and development of non-agricultural activities is designed to meet the needs of entrepreneurs in rural areas, its applicability has so far remained limited (PNS-CAP, 2022: 914-918). In Romania, the NSP started with 150 million euros for DR-29, explicitly intended for the creation and development of non-agricultural activities. Subsequently, the documents of the 2024 Monitoring Committee record a total allocation of only 20 million euros, in the context of a discussion on the reduction/elimination of the intervention. This means a nominal reduction of approximately 86.7% compared to the initial allocation of 150 million euro (MADR, 2024: 11). At the time of the elaboration of this study, the call for projects had not yet been launched, which prevented accessing funding and assessing the real impact of this intervention, as well as carrying out a punctual analysis.

Another critical aspect is the fragmentation of support instruments. In previous programming cycles, non-agricultural activities benefited from dedicated measures and separate calls, which facilitated access to finance for rural entrepreneurs. In the current NSP, local development through LEADER coexists with other interventions, and the effectiveness of this complementarity depends on the timing of calls and the administrative capacity of the LAGs. In practice, delays in implementation can diminish the economic multiplier effect that the LEADER approach had in previous periods (Crunțeanu, Comșa, Fîntîneru, 2024).

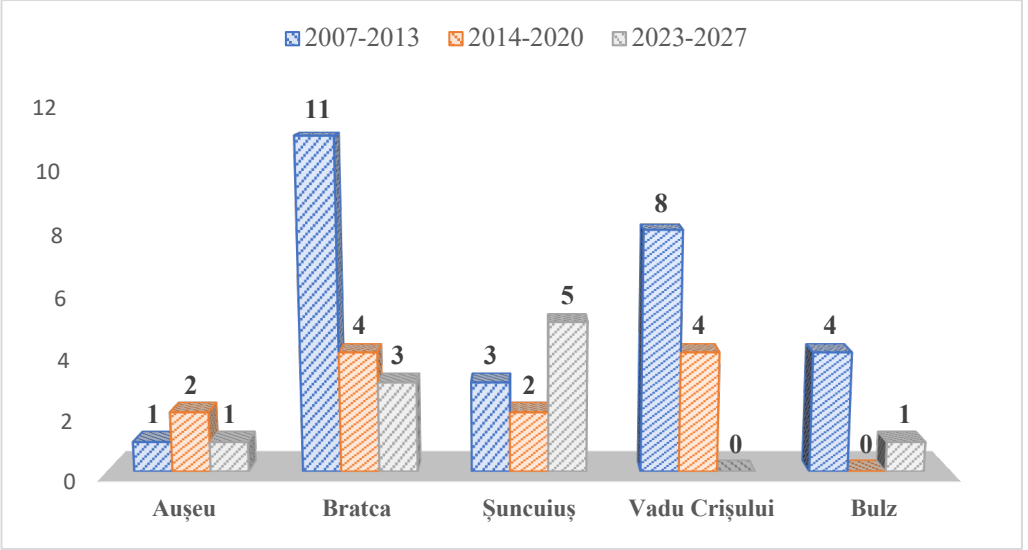
At Member State level, the approach to financing non-agricultural activities has been different. While Romania ***formally retains a distinct national intervention*** for non-agricultural investments, but with a relatively low financial allocation, the Spanish model distributes support for the diversification of the rural economy between regional interventions and LEADER. This decentralisation allows funding to be adapted to territorial needs and the integration of objectives relating to entrepreneurship, social inclusion, employment and depopulation, but reduces transparency on the total amount allocated exclusively to non-agricultural activities (Annex 1).

Starting from these gaps identified in the literature, the present study aims to analyze how the changes in financial and institutional architecture introduced by the CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027 influence the development of non-agricultural activities and the dynamics of the labor market in rural areas, using Bihor County as a case study.

3. EFFECTS OF CHANGES IN FINANCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE ON NON-AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES. CASE STUDY – BIHOR COUNTY.

The data of the research carried out on the territory of the Aleșd Zona – Valea Crișului Repede LAG and the Poarta Transilvania LAG suggest that the current institutional architecture of financing through the LAG has reduced the efficiency of interventions dedicated to non-agricultural activities.

Figure 1. Distribution of project funding for non-agricultural activities 2007-2027, in the research area, Bihor, Romania.



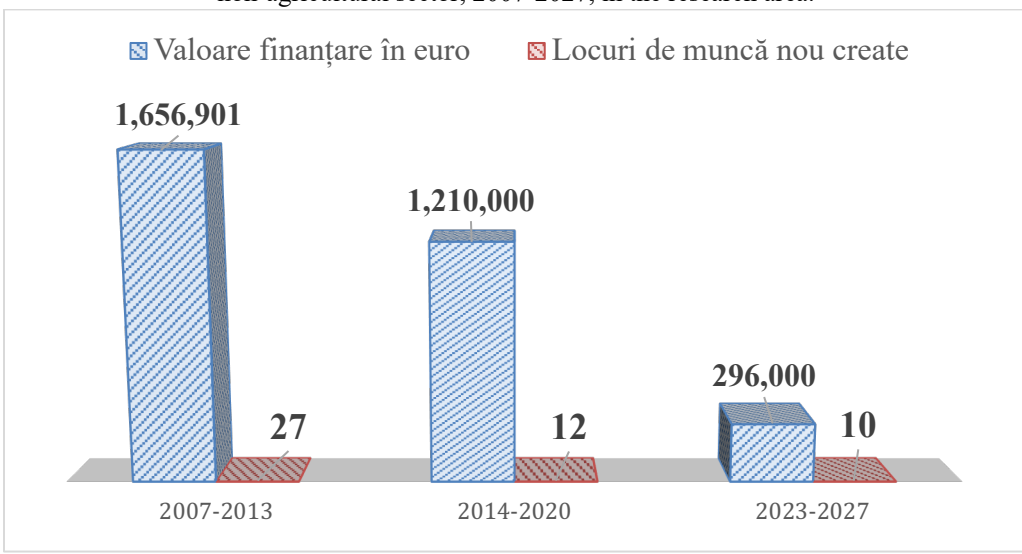
Source: authors' processing based on data collected from MADR(2026)

Figure 1. indicates that in the 5 communes, between 2007 and 2013, 27 non-agricultural projects were implemented; in 2014-2020, 12 projects, none in Bulz; through PNS 2023-2027, only 10 projects — and none in Vadu Crișului, although the demand from entrepreneurs was high. According to the programmatic documents of the two LAGs, at the level of the two territories, the funding applications submitted (PNS 2023-2027) exceeded the allocated ceilings by 51.11% and 47%, respectively (LAG-AFIR, 2026).

There is also a significant decrease in the number of projects funded in the current programming period, 62.96% lower than in the 2007-2013 period and 16.67% lower than in 2014-2020. Through the Aleșd Area LAG, 6 projects for non-agricultural activities were financed in the 3 communes, each worth 36,000 euros, and 4 projects were financed through the Poarta Transilvaniei LAG, each worth 20,000 euros. In the four programming periods in the research area, 49 non-agricultural businesses were financed through the measures (3.4, 313, 6.2 and 6.4, respectively Leader - Business Startup for Women and Youth). The projects selected for financing were direct investments in the field of tourism and consisted of the construction of accommodation units (22 agro-pensions, 17 pensions or rooms for rent, 3 campsites, a local gastronomic point) and the development of leisure activities (6) in the field of tourism.

Regarding the financial absorption and the newly created jobs in the research area, we find, by comparing the quantitative data recorded in the three programming periods analyzed, a gradual decrease in the amounts invested in non-agricultural activities.

Figure 2. Comparison between the value of funding and the number of new jobs created in the non-agricultural sector, 2007-2027, in the research area.



Source: authors' processing based on data collected from MADR (2026)

Figure 2. indicates that in the current programming period the value of funded projects has decreased compared to previous programming periods by approx. 100%, which also led to a decrease in the number of new jobs created, by about 62%. These data quantitatively support the H1 hypothesis of the present study.

3.1. Data analysis

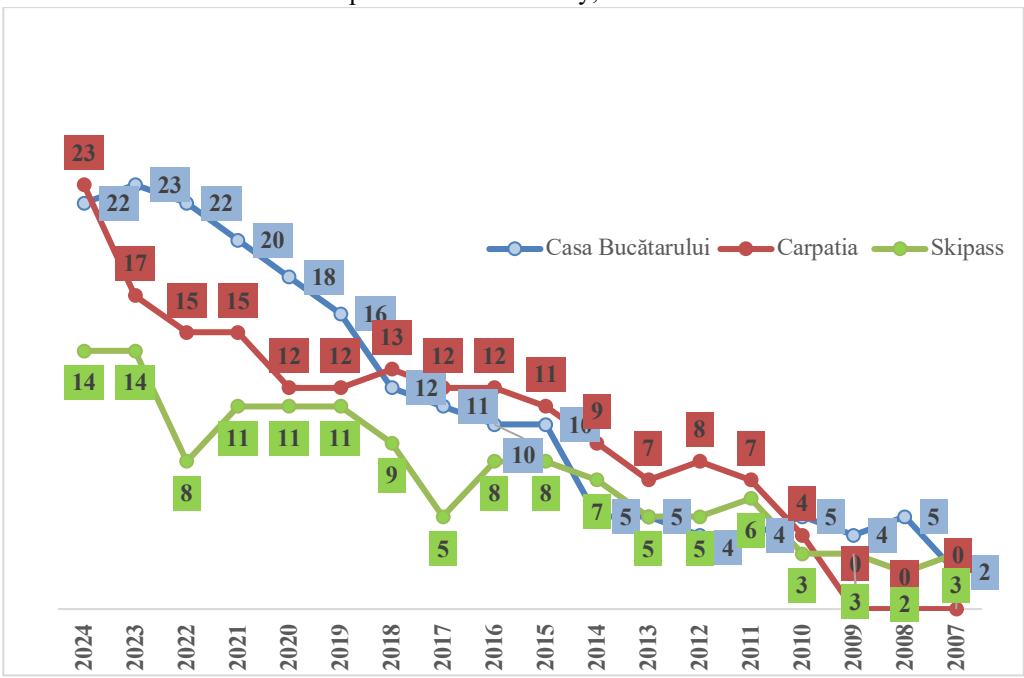
The present study aims to test the degree of generalization of the research conclusions by extending the analysis to three non-agricultural companies located in two **communes in the researched area Casa Bucătarului (SC Padaflora SRL,** Șuncuiuș) and **Carpathia** (SC JAQY & ALY TOUR, Bulz) and one outside the **Skipass** research area (SC SKIPASS SRL, Nucet, Vârtop), all pensions built and modernized with European funds, in similar or different financing cycles, with a clear trajectory of job growth. The analysis of the evolution of the number of employees in these companies —

presented in Figure 3 of the field research — shows, in all three cases, a marked increase in employment over the horizon 2007-2024, to an extent that far exceeds what a linear extrapolation of the demographic and economic trend of the municipalities to which it belongs would have predicted.

For the Casa Bucătarului, the article already provides a detailed benchmark : 2 employees in 2007, 5 in 2008, 10 in 2015, 22 in 2024 — an eleven-fold increase. The other two companies confirm, through the graph presented in the field research, the same general trajectory of employment growth.

It is important to emphasize that these three companies, although located in different tourist areas, represent precisely a case study that goes beyond the initial area, but which confirms that in another area, apart from the in-depth one, there is the same result: the financed non-agricultural has led to the emergence of jobs in the rural area. The effect of investments made in non-agricultural activities, the construction of pensions and the establishment of leisure activities, is reflected in the dynamics of tourist arrivals between 2006 and 2026, who consumed tourist services in the researched area.

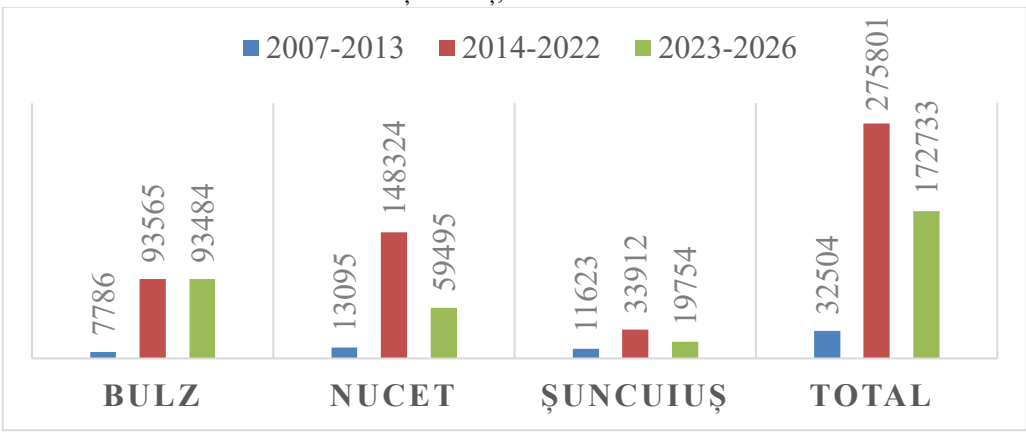
Figure 3. Evolution of jobs created with the help of non-agricultural activities at 3 commercial companies in Bihor county, 2007-2024.



Source: authors' processing based on data published online by TopFirme (2026)

The quantitative data in Figure 4 indicate that due to investments in non-agricultural activities, the number of tourist arrivals increased significantly between the periods 2007-2013 and 2014-2022 and decreased dramatically in the period 2023-2026. Thus, it can be seen that in Nucet, Vârtop village where the Skipas pension is located, the largest increase in the number of overnight stays is recorded between 2014 and 2022, compared to the period 2007-2013.

Figure 4. Evolution of the number of arrivals in accommodation units in Bulz, Nucet and Șuncuiuș, 2007-2026.



Source: authors' processing based on data published by INS (2026)

The same growth trend for the same periods is recorded in Bulz and Șuncuiuș. In the current programming period, the most significant decreases, compared to the other two periods, are recorded in Nucet and Șuncuiuș. As for the statistical data for Bulz commune, we note that the number of overnight stays in this programming period, compared to the previous period, is almost equal, with the possibility of increase given that the data analyzed for all localities include reports until June 2026.

3.2. Institutional fragmentation: four ministries, no integrator

An additional element that needs reflection, which this study formulates, is the absence of an integrated vision of the rural area, which also influences the impact of non-agricultural investments. At least four ministries pour money into rural areas, but each on its own legislation, indicators and definition of rural areas.

The results presented so far explain the effects of non-agricultural investment on the rural economy, but do not fully explain the causes of the performance differences observed between programming periods. In order to understand these differences, it is necessary to extend the analysis beyond the financial dimension, to the institutional framework in which rural development policies are developed and implemented. The case studies presented converge in demonstrating that non-agricultural investments create jobs and stimulate the development of rural communities. However, they also highlight the existence of a structural limitation: the institutional fragmentation of public policies that have effects on rural areas.

The Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration (MDLPA) finances water-canal, county and local roads and, through regional agencies (including North-West RDA), infrastructure such as the four Smart Specialization Parks (PSI) in Bihor — in Marghita, Aleșd, Beiuș and Ștei — financed 60% of European funds through the North-West Regional Program 2021-2027 and 40% of the budget of the Bihor County Council, with a combined contractual value of over 62 of millions of lei, the execution stage in October 2025: Aleșd 98%, Marghita 95%, Beiuș 62%, Ștei completed (CJ Bihor, 2025). Each park is located in a small town on the immediate border of the rural area, with utilities, inland roads and access prepared for private companies to invest — generating a horizontal spillover effect, in the rural fabric (catering, suppliers, maintenance, logistics, etc.).

The Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure finances the construction of national roads and railways, including the 9.6 billion euro Transport Programme 2021-2027 (MTI, 2026).

The Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests finances water-sewerage, afforestation and waste management at the commune level, including over 500 projects through the PNRR (MMAP, 2023).

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR) finances the PNS-CAP.

Each ministry operates on its own legal basis, with its own indicators, its own budget lines and its own — or absent — definition of rural space. What illustrates the case of the PSIs in Bihor is a synergy that has not yet been fully exploited: the MDLPA has financed the parks, while the small non-agricultural companies that the parks need around them (catering, suppliers, maintenance, logistics, in neighboring communes) do not benefit from a dedicated funding channel through the CAP to develop. If the NSP as well as the local development strategies (LEADER, LAG) had been better financed on a non-agricultural basis and correlated with the MDLPA, these companies could have been directly supported through Pillar 2 of the CAP, contributing to accelerating the emergence of non-agricultural jobs in rural areas.

No one in the Romanian public administration can, therefore, regard the rural space as a unique object. There is no framework law for rural development, there is no inter-ministerial body that brings these flows together, harmonizes indicators and proposes integrated directions. The European money that reaches the countryside is real, but because it comes through disconnected channels, it cannot be evaluated, adjusted or planned as a whole.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The data presented converge in support of both hypotheses formulated in the present study. H1 — according to which the underfunding and placement of non-agricultural funding under the management of the LAG causes a decrease in jobs in rural areas — is supported by quantitative data from field research: financial absorption decreased by 100% in the 2023-2027 NSP compared to the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 NRDP, and the number of newly created jobs decreased by approximately 62%. It is also convergent with the assessment made in the research carried out on the territory of the two LAGs, according to which the current institutional architecture of LAG funding has reduced the effectiveness of interventions dedicated to non-agricultural activities.

H2. The fragmentation of responsibilities between multiple ministries, in the absence of an integrating body, prevents the capitalization of synergies between sectoral investments, leads to a dissipation of the impact of European funds is supported by the results of the analysis through which institutional fragmentation was demonstrated.

From the data presented, it follows that continuously and dedicatedly financed non-agricultural activities produce clear, measurable, sustainable spillover effects, while the fragmentation of the current architecture, by placing the funding under the management of the LAG and by dispersing it between four ministries without an integrator, diminishes these effects.

The results also raise a question that goes beyond the framework of agricultural policy itself: in the absence of an integrated vision of rural areas, sectoral investments collide with each other without enhancing each other. The case of the PSIs in Bihor, financed by

the regional program, and of the small non-agricultural companies around them, financed (or not financed) by the PNS-CAP, illustrates exactly this dissipation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The generation of employment opportunities in non-agricultural sectors is a fundamental pillar for the resilience and structural transformation of the rural environment, constituting a strategic alternative to traditional farms. This economic diversification facilitates the strengthening of financial stability and social inclusion, directly contributing to the alleviation of poverty and to the process of modernisation of local communities in previous programme periods. The DR-36 intervention (PNS PAC 2023-2027) preserves the fundamental principles of participatory local development and provides continuity to the LEADER approach in Romania. However, the decrease in its financial weight within the PNS - CAP, the delays in implementation and the lack of measurable social indicators have reduced its impact on the social inclusion and economic development of rural communities in the researched area.

In the three programming periods in the research area, 49 non-agricultural businesses were funded. The projects selected for financing were direct investments in the field of tourism and consisted of the construction of accommodation units and the development of leisure activities in the field of tourism.

The investments implemented in the study area have generated a significant multiplier effect on the rural economy, contributing to the creation of new jobs and to strengthening the revenues of local budgets. Economic diversification, through the development of the accommodation segment (pensions) and leisure infrastructure, stimulated the interdependence of non-agricultural sectors and favored the increase of tourist flows in the Crișul Repede Gorge. The impact of these investments is reflected in the upward dynamics of the arrivals indicator between 2007 and 2026, the flow of tourists generating positive externalities through the consumption of complementary services, which supported the viability of local entrepreneurship.

The economic and social effects of the non-agricultural, active activities in the research area reflect the fact that these investments have been beneficial for entrepreneurs but also for locals. The data collected, between December 2023 and March 2024, with the help of the semi-structured interview applied to 40 inhabitants, 10 from each locality, indicate that non-agricultural investments represent a benefit for the inhabitants of the local communities under analysis (Bonaciu, 2025: 364-373). Investments in non-agricultural activities, such as accommodation units, have produced a horizontal economic development effect in the rural economy of Bihor County. Thanks to them, other local non-agricultural businesses have also developed, both in the field of tourism, but also in other fields, which have contributed to: the emergence of new jobs and the increase of income for entrepreneurs in rural areas.

The institutional solution. The data presented show that, currently, the PNS 2023-2027 does not constitute a strategy for the Romanian rural area — because the rural area is not, in the public administration of Romania, a recognized object of policy. Non-agricultural activities that employ rural Romanians and contribute to the socio-economic dynamics of villages currently benefit from a level of funding below their potential — reflecting institutional fragmentation rather than a lack of political will.

The remedy already exists, in another field. Romania has, since 2017, a Department for Sustainable Development (DDD) within the Prime Minister's Chancellery, which coordinates, at the level of all ministries, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the 17

Sustainable Development Goals. DDD has demonstrated that an integrative structure at the center of government can gather data and indicators from multiple sectors and turn them into a coherent picture.

The same principle can be applied to rural areas. What is required is the creation, development and establishment of a **Department for the Development of Rural Areas (DDSR),** within the Prime Minister's Chancellery, with three concrete tasks:

Single legal framework. Develop a **framework law** that would officially define rural space at the level of the entire public administration — a single, operational, legally established definition to replace the current fragmented definitions, different from one ministry to another.

Interministerial coordination. Coordination, at the level of all the ministries involved (MADR, MDLPA, MIPE, MT, MMAP, MF), of indicators, budget lines and evaluations of investments with an impact on the rural area — by creating an **Interministerial Council for the Development of Rural Areas**, with quarterly meetings.

Integrated annual reporting. Producing, every year, an **Integrated Report on the State of the Romanian Rural Area** — a public document, presented to the Government and Parliament, which captures for the first time, in a coherent picture, the real size of the investments, their results and the implementation gaps.

Anticipated benefits. Such a department would allow:

(I) harmonisation of definitions and indicators between ministries,
(II) identifying synergies that have not yet been exploited — as is the case of the PSIs in Bihor, not connected to non-agricultural financing through the NSP,
(III) assessment of the opportunity costs generated by the current fragmentation, and
(IV) proposing budgetary and legislative corrections on the basis of a uniform record.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The present study has some limitations. Firstly, the data on the three budget cycles are not entirely comparable: for the PNDR 2014-2020 and PNS 2023-2027, the public records on the exact share of non-agricultural interventions are more fragmented than for SAPARD and PNDR 2007-2013. Secondly, the analysis is based on the empirical data collected from the research carried out on the territory of 5 communes from two neighboring LAGs (LAG Zona Aleșd – Valea Crișului Repede, LAG Poarta Transilvaniei) and on qualitative data on three companies from Bihor. Extending the study to other LAGs and counties, on a wider sample of non-agricultural firms, would allow for a more robust testing of both hypotheses.

Future research directions include: (i) a quantitative analysis of the impact of the NSP 2023-2027 on non-agricultural employment at national level; (ii) a comparative study of how other Member States have defined and integrated the non-agricultural component into their strategic plans; (iii) an assessment of the opportunity costs generated by the current institutional fragmentation.

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SOCIAL ECONOMY BUSINESS MODELS AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH: AN ANALYSIS OF EMERGING REGIONAL DYNAMICS

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Abstract. *This paper analyses how social economy business models contribute to sustainable growth by reinforcing regional competitiveness and supporting inclusive development. It examines the mechanisms through which these organisations enhance labour market participation, diversify local production systems and generate resource efficient activities that strengthen long term economic resilience. Evidence from Romania's North-West Region illustrates how such models operate in territories shaped by mixed urban-rural structures, demographic pressures and cross border economic interactions. The analysis shows that social economy organisations complement traditional market actors, consolidate local value chains and create favourable conditions for territorially embedded development. The paper argues that systematically integrating the social economy into regional strategies can generate significant economic spillovers and support more balanced and resilient growth trajectories.*

Keywords*: social economy, sustainable growth, regional competitiveness, territorial dynamics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union's current strategic orientation marks a decisive shift toward inclusive, sustainable and territorially balanced development, redefining how regions pursue growth and cohesion. This transition intensifies the need for economic models that integrate competitiveness with social inclusion, particularly in territories facing structural constraints. Within this context, the social economy offers a practical lens for understanding how cooperative and community-based business models can enhance regional competitiveness, support labour market participation and strengthen long-term economic resilience.

The relevance of these models is especially visible in border and mixed urban-rural regions, such as those in North-West Romania, where demographic decline, fragmented labour markets and persistent gaps in essential services challenge sustainable development. These territorial dynamics underscore the importance of socially oriented alternatives capable of addressing systemic vulnerabilities.

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2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study examines how social economy business models contribute to sustainable regional growth, with a specific focus on the territorial dynamics of Romania's North-West Development Region. It pursues three *core objectives*: to assess how social economy organisations support sustainable growth, to identify the mechanisms linking them to regional competitiveness and inclusive development, and to analyse region-specific evidence emerging from the North-West Region.

These objectives are structured through three *analytical propositions*:

P1. Social economy business models generate sustainable growth by combining economic activity with social inclusion and territorially anchored value creation.

P2. Their contribution to regional competitiveness operates through aggregation, shared infrastructure, territorial branding, supported employment and circular practices.

P3. The North-West Region illustrates how territorial conditions shape the evolution, diffusion and impact of social economy organisations.

The study employs a *qualitative case study design* to examine how organisational models interact with territorial dynamics. The North-West Region is selected because its mixed urban-rural structure, demographic pressures, fragmented labour markets and strong cross-border links provide a relevant context for analysing how social economy mechanisms function across diverse territorial settings.

The analysis is based on a *combination of documentary and statistical sources*, drawing on EU, national and regional policy frameworks, demographic and labour market indicators, regional development strategies and sectoral reports, academic literature on social economy and territorial development, and illustrative organisational cases from the regional social economy landscape.

The methodological approach is *descriptive-analytical*, combining structured description of territorial and organisational features with interpretive analysis aimed at identifying mechanisms, patterns and regional effects rather than testing causal relationships. This approach supports a concise, evidence-based examination of how social economy business models contribute to sustainable growth, competitiveness and inclusion, offering insights relevant for regional development strategies and social economy policy frameworks.

Limitations of the study

The study's qualitative and region-focused design introduces several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies primarily on documentary and secondary statistical sources, which may not fully capture informal or emerging social economy initiatives that operate outside formal reporting channels. Second, the territorial specificity of the North-West Region limits the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other Romanian or Central and Eastern European regions with different institutional capacities, demographic structures or labour market configurations. Third, the absence of longitudinal organisational data constrains the ability to assess long-term performance, diffusion patterns and the durability of social economy impacts. These limitations do not undermine the study's analytical contribution but indicate areas where future research can expand evidence and improve comparisons.

3. CONCEPTUAL AND TERRITORIAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE SOCIAL ECONOMY. LITERATURE REVIEW

The *social economy* traces its roots to the cooperative and mutualist movements of the 19th century, which emerged as collective responses to industrialisation, insecure labour conditions and widening social inequality. Early cooperatives, such as the Rochdale model[1], introduced principles of democratic governance, shared ownership and the reinvestment of surplus for community benefit (Birchall, 2010). During the 20th century, European scholars brought these practices together under the concept of the social economy, highlighting their capacity to mobilise local resources and strengthen community resilience (Defourny and Develtere, 1999). This historical trajectory shaped today's understanding of social economy business models as territorially grounded and socially oriented organisational forms.

The *concept of social economy* has developed across several disciplines, resulting in a diverse and sometimes fragmented set of definitions. In EU policy, it is understood through its main organisational forms (cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, and foundations), each defined by collective ownership and democratic governance (European Commission, 2021; OECD/European Commission, 2025). Economic and sociological perspectives place greater emphasis on social objectives, participatory decision-making and the reinvestment of profits into community benefit (Monzón and Chaves, 2012). It is also important to distinguish the social economy from related ideas: social enterprises tend to use entrepreneurial tools to address social challenges (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010), while the solidarity economy highlights broader socio-political transformation and citizen-driven change (Nyssens and Bouchard, 2026). By contrast, the social economy remains grounded in established, legally recognised organisational structures (Defourny et al., 2014).

Social economy business models have evolved substantially, moving beyond traditional cooperative structures toward hybrid, multi-stakeholder arrangements. Contemporary models combine market-based mechanisms with social missions, allowing organisations to diversify their revenue sources while maintaining community-oriented objectives (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001). This shift is visible across social services, circular-economy initiatives, community-energy projects and local development programmes (Huybrechts and Mertens, 2014; European Commission, 2021). Increasingly, social economy organisations adopt innovative governance forms, such as platform cooperatives, community trusts and participatory budgeting, that strengthen their ability to respond to complex territorial challenges (Scholz, 2016; Scholz and Schneider, 2016; Ghirlanda and Kirov, 2024; Davis, 2010; Sintomer et al., 2008, European Commission, 2020).

The development of social-economy business models draws on several complementary theoretical perspectives. *Institutional economics* explains how collective governance can reduce transaction costs, build trust and support cooperative behaviour (Ostrom, 1990; 2010). *Social innovation theory* focuses on trying new approaches, solving

[1] **The Rochdale model** refers to the cooperative principles formulated by the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers (1844), which established democratic governance ("one member, one vote"), open membership, limited return on capital, equitable surplus distribution, and a strong commitment to education. These principles became the foundational framework for modern cooperative enterprises and the broader social economy. *Source: International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), Cooperative identity, values & principles,* https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity/#toc-definition-of-a-cooperative, accessed on 20 July 2026

problems within communities and expanding initiatives that create social benefits (Moulaert et al., 2014). *Territorial development approaches* highlight the local anchoring of social-economy organisations and their ability to mobilise endogenous resources to strengthen regional resilience (Pike et al., 2017). At the policy level, *EU cohesion and multilevel governance frameworks* position the social economy as a tool for inclusive growth, labour-market participation and territorial cohesion (European Commission, 2021; Barca et al., 2012). Together, these perspectives offer a multidimensional view of how such organisational forms function and adapt within complex regional environments.

Operationally, social economy business models are defined by their mechanisms of value creation, organisational features and performance criteria. Value creation extends beyond economic outputs to include social inclusion, community empowerment and improved access to essential services (Borzaga and Tortia, 2007; Moulaert et al., 2014). Organisationally, these models rely on participatory governance, diversified financing (combining grants, membership fees and market revenues) and multi-stakeholder engagement (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001; Pestoff, 2012). Performance is now judged mainly through social impact indicators, territorial cohesion measures and sustainability outcomes, reflecting a growing need for evaluations grounded in evidence (Nicholls, 2009).

Viewed as an ecosystem, the social economy comprises cooperatives, non-profit associations and social enterprises characterised by social governance, mission-driven profit distribution and a commitment to generating social value through economic activity and innovation. By combining monetary and non-monetary resources, these ecosystems align economic outputs with social value creation and reinforce the expansion of social economy entities (Catala et al., 2023).

Current debates focus on the tension between economic competitiveness and social mission. Some scholars point to the risk of "mission drift", arguing that market-oriented strategies can dilute the social objectives of these organisations (Ebrahim et al., 2014). Others draw attention to the effects of institutionalisation, noting that regulatory frameworks may limit innovation or reinforce bureaucratic routines (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Mair et al., 2015). Ongoing challenges also relate to measurement, especially when it comes to capturing social value and assessing long-term territorial impact (Nicholls, 2009; Mulgan, 2010). Overall, these debates show why analytical approaches should incorporate both the economic and social facets of the social economy.

The relevance of social economy business models for emerging regional dynamics is particularly evident in territories facing demographic decline, fragmented labour markets and uneven access to services, conditions characteristic of many Central and Eastern European regions. In Romania's North-West Development Region, social economy organisations contribute to labour market inclusion, community-based service provision and local development initiatives, yet they also face capacity gaps, limited institutional support, and uneven territorial diffusion. These regional characteristics highlight the importance of understanding how social economy business models evolve within specific territorial contexts and how they can be strengthened to support sustainable growth.

Social economy business models have developed from classic cooperative forms into more varied, hybrid organisations able to respond to territorial challenges. The literature provides strong theory but pays uneven attention to Central and Eastern Europe, where empirical studies remain limited. This gap shows why region-focused studies are needed to understand how these models contribute to sustainable growth, resilience and inclusion. The insights from the literature inform the paper's analytical framework and support the analysis of Romania's North-West Development Region.

4. INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE SOCIAL ECONOMY

The social economy brings together a range of institutional forms that differ in structure, governance and operating logic, while still sharing a commitment to collective benefit, democratic decision-making and long-term community value. Across Europe, cooperatives, social enterprises, mutual societies, associations, foundations, and Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) form the core organisational landscape through which communities organise resources, deliver essential services, and address social and territorial needs (European Commission, 2021; Official Journal of the European Union, 2023; OECD/European Commission, 2025).

Cooperatives, based on member ownership and democratic control, represent the entrepreneurial backbone of the social economy ecosystem. They are people-centred economic organisations, reinvesting surplus to improve member welfare and support community development (Birchall, 2010; Cooperatives Europe, 2026; International Cooperative Alliance, 2017). **Social enterprises** combine entrepreneurial activity with explicit social missions, often operating in areas where markets are weak or public services are insufficient (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010; Defourny et al., 2014; Social Firms Europe, 2026). **Mutual societies** deliver solidarity-based services such as insurance and healthcare through collective risk-sharing arrangements that sustain trust-driven welfare mechanisms (Archambault, 2010; European Economic and Social Committee and CIRIEC-International, 2017; The International Association of Mutual Benefit Societies (AIM), 2026). **Associations** mobilise voluntary engagement to provide social, cultural, educational, and community services, frequently acting as intermediaries between citizens and public authorities (Salamon and Anheier, 1997; Social Services Europe, 2026). **Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs)** focus on labour-market inclusion for people facing structural barriers, offering tailored support that combines training, assisted employment, and personalised guidance (Davister et al., 2004; EURICSE, 2026).

Despite their institutional variety, social economy entities share *a set of defining features* that shape their contribution to sustainable regional development:

- Their primary organisational purpose is the generation of *community benefit* rather than profit maximisation, a principle that forms the foundation of cooperative, mutualist and associative traditions across Europe (Defourny and Develtere, 1999; Official Journal of the European Union, 2023).
- Revenues are systematically *reinvested into mission-driven activities*, strengthening social inclusion, expanding service provision, and supporting territorial cohesion, a foundational element widely acknowledged in European social enterprise research (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010).
- These organisations are *territorially anchored*, ensuring that economic and social value remains within the region and contributes to local development trajectories, a dimension consistently emphasised in EU analyses of the social economy's contribution to regional resilience (European Economic and Social Committee and CIRIEC-International, 2017).
- Their objectives also align with *EU sustainability frameworks*, integrating social and environmental priorities that support inclusive growth, green transitions and community resilience (European Commission, 2021).

Taken together, these characteristics position social economy models as mechanisms that generate multidimensional value: economic, social and territorial. Their activities stretch across many fields (agriculture, forestry, construction, reuse and repair,

waste management, retail, energy and climate, ICT, finance, real estate, professional services, education, health, social care, arts, culture, and media), highlighting both the extent of the social economy's economic footprint and its relevance within regional development strategies (European Commission, 2021).

5. EU FRAMEWORKS SUPPORTING THE SOCIAL ECONOMY

Recent EU policy developments increasingly recognise the social economy as a distinct pillar of the European socio-economic model, complementing both public institutions and profit-oriented enterprises. *The Social Economy Action Plan* defines social economy organisations as private actors that operate independently of public authorities and pursue people-centred, social, environmental and general-interest goals rather than profit maximisation (European Commission, 2021). The Action Plan sets out measures to support the creation and growth of social enterprises. EU instruments such as *InvestEU, ESF+*, and *Cohesion Policy Funds* expand access to finance and help address investment gaps, enabling the sector to realise its job-creation potential across Member States and regions (European Commission, 2026). Capacity-building programmes strengthen managerial skills, digital competencies and innovation practices, allowing organisations to operate more sustainably and increase their impact.

Building on these developments, a key milestone was the adoption of the *2023 Council Recommendation on developing framework conditions for the social economy* (Official Journal of the European Union, 2023). The Recommendation provides Member States with a shared basis for integrating the social economy into national policy frameworks and for designing measures that strengthen the supportive environment for social economy organisations.

In parallel, EU action has increasingly focused on strengthening the policy and regulatory conditions that allow the social economy to operate and expand. Member States receive guidance on creating favourable ecosystems and on integrating social economy actors into industrial strategies. *The European Competence Centre for Social Innovation* contributes to this effort by operating a dynamic knowledge hub and coordinating five communities of practice (European Competence Centre for Social Innovation). A set of practical tools has also been developed, such as a code of conduct for managing and using data in the social economy (*EU Code of Conduct for Data Sharing in the Social Economy*, 2024) and a guide presenting tailored approaches to social impact measurement and management (OECD, 2023). Targeted measures also address specific groups, notably through the *Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy*, a joint initiative of the Commission and the OECD, which brings together policymakers and networks of young entrepreneurs through policy and capacity-building workshops aimed at improving entrepreneurship policies, including those relevant for young social entrepreneurs (The Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy; European Commission, 2026).

Cross-border cooperation and knowledge exchange remain central priorities, particularly in border regions with integrated labour markets and service networks. Through the *Social Economy Gateway*, the Commission consolidates access to information, funding opportunities and best practices, enabling local actors to navigate EU support instruments more effectively (European Commission, *EU Social Economy Gateway*).

Further efforts reinforce this direction. *Inclusive entrepreneurship programmes* widen access to business opportunities for groups facing structural barriers: women,

migrants, youth, seniors, the unemployed and people experiencing poverty or exclusion. These programmes address limited access to finance, weaker networks and lower skills, and are seen by the European Commission as essential for mobilising Europe's full human capital, especially during the green and digital transitions (European Commission/ OECD, *The Better Entrepreneurship Policy Tool*; European Commission, *Inclusive entrepreneurship and microfinance*).

The *EU Social Inclusion Strategy* reinforces the integration of social economy organisations within broader efforts to reduce poverty and ensure equal access to essential services. Guided by the *European Pillar of Social Rights,* it prioritises quality education, healthcare, housing, childcare, and active labour-market participation (European Commission, *European Pillar of Social Rights*). The Strategy expands access to affordable, high-quality services, such as early childhood education and care, digital connectivity and community-based social services, and strengthens inclusive labour-market pathways through skills development and targeted activation measures (European Commission, *Social inclusion*).

Together, these initiatives form a coherent EU-level framework that supports inclusive, sustainable and territorially balanced development. Their relevance is reflected in growing public engagement: a special Eurobarometer in 2025 found that half of Europeans had interacted with social economy organisations in the past five years, and that 75% considered the social economy important for society (Eurobarometer, 2025). Across the European Union, more than 4.3 million associations, cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, foundations and social enterprises advance social and environmental objectives over profit and operate through participatory or democratic governance models. Together, they provide at least 11.5 million jobs, representing around 6.3% of total employment, and are active across a wide range of sectors, including care services, finance, agri-food, retail and culture (European Commission, European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency, Euricse, CIRIEC, Spatial Foresight, 2024).

Yet, even with this strengthened policy architecture and growing public engagement, EU institutions recognise that social economy organisations continue to face structural constraints that limit their full potential. Many still experience uneven access to support, markets and finance. For WISEs, these constraints are particularly visible: policy recognition remains uneven, funding frameworks fragmented, and labour-market barriers for workers with support needs persist, limiting their ability to expand inclusive employment pathways. Cooperatives continue to encounter difficulties in securing equity investment due to their ownership structure, especially in worker buyouts aimed at preserving employment and viable economic activity. Mutual benefit societies highlight regulatory frameworks that insufficiently acknowledge their not-for-profit nature, prompting EU efforts to raise awareness among national authorities. Foundations and associations likewise report obstacles in fully benefiting from the Single Market, including restrictions on cross-border operations (OECD/European Commission, 2025; European Commission, 2026; EURICSE, 2026).

At the same time, substantial untapped potential remains at regional and municipal levels, where authorities are closest to citizens and to the activities of social economy organisations. Although initiatives have multiplied across many territories in recent years, the exchange of knowledge and practices between them remains limited (European Commission, 2026).

6. REGIONAL FOCUS: NORTH-WEST DEVELOPMENT REGION (ROMANIA)

The North-West Development Region is one of Romania's eight development regions (NUTS2) and comprises six counties: Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Maramureș, Satu Mare and Sălaj. Its territorial structure includes 49 urban settlements (6 county head municipalities, 12 municipalities and 25 towns) and 404 rural settlements organised as communes. In 2021, 53.94% of the region's population lived in urban areas, while 46.06% resided in rural territories. This fragmented settlement pattern shapes the region's development dynamics, reinforcing a marked urban-rural duality. Urban centres such as Cluj-Napoca and Oradea function as regional growth poles, concentrating investment, skilled labour and innovation-driven activities. By contrast, extensive rural areas continue to influence demographic trends, labour market participation and access to essential services. The result is a set of differentiated development trajectories: while urban areas attract capital and human resources, rural communities face persistent demographic decline, limited economic diversification and reduced institutional capacity (*North-West Regional Development Agency. Regional Development Plan 2021–2027; Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities in the North-West Region 2021–2027; OECD Reviews of Labour Market and Social Policies: Romania 2025;* Pop and Stamos, 2023).

6.1. Socio-economic profile

The region has a population of approximately 2.5 million inhabitants, with a steadily rising share of people aged over 65. Its *demographic evolution* reflects long-term structural pressures characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe. Population ageing, declining birth rates and sustained out-migration, particularly among young and skilled workers, have reshaped local labour markets and increased dependency ratios. Urban centres in Cluj and Bihor concentrate internal migrants and foreign workers, while rural areas experience continuous population shrinkage, intensifying territorial disparities and reinforcing uneven development patterns (*OECD Reviews of Labour Market and Social Policies: Romania 2025;* EURES, 2025).

Labour market performance varies significantly across the region. Cluj and Bihor counties register high employment rates, diversified economic bases and strong demand for skilled labour, driven by manufacturing, ICT, creative industries and business services. In contrast, counties such as Sălaj, Maramureș and Bistrița-Năsăud face fragmented labour markets, lower participation rates, and limited access to quality employment. Agriculture remains an important source of jobs in rural areas, indicating continued vulnerability to seasonal and low-productivity employment. This divide between fast-growing urban centres and structurally limited rural labour markets underscores the relevance of social economy organisations in promoting inclusive employment and labour market activation (*OECD Reviews of Labour Market and Social Policies: Romania 2025;* EURES, 2025; *North-West Regional Development Agency. Regional Development Plan 2021–2027*).

The regional economy is supported by a dense *SME fabric*, with strong representation in manufacturing, agro-food, construction, retail, creative industries and emerging green sectors. SME density is particularly high in Cluj and Bihor, where entrepreneurship and innovation capacity exceed regional and national averages. Urban centres have seen rapid expansion in ICT and knowledge-intensive services, while rural territories remain anchored in agriculture, agro-processing and small-scale manufacturing (*Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities in the North-West Region 2021–2027*).

The region's western counties maintain strong economic, social and institutional ties with Hungary. Cross-border labour mobility, integrated service networks and SME cooperation shape daily economic activity and contribute to regional resilience. Seasonal and daily commuting flows, particularly from Bihor and Satu Mare counties, support household incomes but also accentuate labour shortages in certain sectors (*Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities in the North-West Region 2021–2027; North-West Regional Development Agency. Regional Development Plan 2021–2027*). The region participates actively in *cross-border economic cooperation* with Hungary, engaging in trade flows and joint development initiatives. It is consistently involved in Interreg programmes that support transport connectivity, health service cooperation, environmental management and SME development across the border. (*Interreg Romania-Hungary Programme;* Șoproni, 2023). These interactions illustrate the region's deep integration into wider European territorial dynamics and create favourable conditions for cross-border social economy initiatives.

Table 1. Core territorial indicators and readings. North-West Development Region (RO)

Dimension	Key indicators	Territorial reading
Demography	Population, ageing, migration, urban-rural split	Growing urban poles, shrinking rural areas
Labour market	Employment, unemployment, sectoral structure	Strong urban employment, weaker peripheral labour demand
SMEs and sectors	SME density, sectoral mix, productivity	Diverse SME base, uneven innovation capacity
Cross-border	Commuting, trade, project cooperation	High RO-HU functional integration

(*Source:* Author's elaboration based on North-West Regional Development Agency. Regional Development Plan 2021–2027; OECD Reviews of Labour Market and Social Policies: Romania 2025; Regional Strategy for Sustainable Urban Mobility and Smart Cities in the North-West Region 2021–2027; EURES, 2025; Interreg Romania-Hungary Programme)

6.2. Main social economy business models in the region

Building on these structural characteristics, the North-West Region exhibits a distinctive and increasingly diversified social economy landscape, shaped by its territorial duality, labour market fragmentation and sectoral heterogeneity. The region's social economy actors operate across agriculture, manufacturing, services, circular economy activities and community development, forming an ecosystem that complements conventional economic structures and addresses gaps in labour market inclusion, service provision and territorial cohesion.

Cooperative models

Across agro-food production, crafts and traditional goods, and small retail networks, **cooperative and quasi-cooperative groups** shape much of the region's local economy. They rely on shared decision-making**,** collective resource mobilisation and coordinated market access, which helps small producers operate more efficiently and remain competitive. Each type of organisation contributes in its own way to territorial resilience, supporting stable local value chains and strengthening the region's capacity to sustain locally rooted economic activity.

The region's **agro-food cooperatives** constitute the most consolidated segment of its social-economy landscape. Operating across dairy, fruit, vegetable and mixed farming systems, they provide shared infrastructure, collective bargaining power and coordinated distribution channels that strengthen small producers' position within regional value chains. In a context marked by structural disadvantages (fragmented structures, low production volumes and limited negotiating capacity) cooperation becomes a critical mechanism for accessing markets, resources and investment opportunities. By pooling assets, standardising quality and organising collective marketing, these cooperatives mitigate individual constraints and enable producers to participate more competitively in regional and national agro-food systems.

Among the most representative examples is *Someș Arieș Agricultural Cooperative* (Cluj), widely recognised as a benchmark for integrated milk collection, processing and territorial branding. Formed by more than fifty mixed farms from Cluj, Sălaj and Bistrița-Năsăud counties, it functions as a flagship unit of Romanian agriculture, demonstrating how cooperative organisation can consolidate fragmented production structures and enhance regional market visibility (Someș Arieș website).

Similarly, *Samus Lact Agricultural Cooperative* (Satu Mare) has become a national reference point in the dairy sector. Its model centres on regional milk collection and quality standardisation while adhering to the European „farm-to-fork" concept, ensuring freshness, quality and food safety. By reducing long-distance transport and fuel consumption, *Samus Lact* significantly lowers its carbon footprint. Member farmers also implement environmental protection projects, including modern composting platforms and the use of manure as natural fertiliser, which substantially reduces chemical inputs (Samus Lact website; Gazeta Nord-Vest, 2026). Its cooperative governance and community-centred reinvestment practices make it a representative social-economy business model.

Cooperative practices also extend to **producer groups for agricultural and forestry products** recognised in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development's national registry. Active in Bihor (34), Cluj (9), Sălaj (7), Bistrița-Năsăud (7), Maramureș (8) and Satu Mare (15), these groups organise producers across diverse agricultural and forestry activities, facilitating joint marketing, quality assurance and coordinated distribution (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development - Romania, 2026). Although not always formally registered as cooperatives, they operate through similar organisational logics, functioning as collective marketing structures that strengthen small producers' market position and enhance their visibility.

This cooperative ecosystem is reinforced by regional innovation structures such as the *AgroTransilvania Cluster*, Romania's only gold-certified agro-industrial cluster, and the *Agrofood INNO smart-specialisation domain* coordinated through the INNO platform of the North-West Regional Development Agency. The cluster offers advanced laboratory services, training and innovation support, while Agrofood INNO functions as a regional knowledge hub that connects cooperatives, SMEs, universities and public institutions. Together, these networks create an integrated innovation environment that enables cooperatives to modernise, diversify and strengthen their contribution to territorial cohesion (AgroTransilvania Cluster; INNO; Deiac and Arion, 2025).

Craft-based and traditional-product cooperatives represent a second category of cooperative models in the region. Their activities are rooted in cultural heritage, artisanal skills and small-scale production, and they operate through three main structural forms. The first consists of **formal cooperatives** producing traditional goods, relatively

rare but present in both food and artisan sectors. The second includes **associations and producer groups** integrated into the regional brand *Crafted in Transylvania*, a mechanism coordinated by the North-West Regional Development Agency that promotes territorial identity, quality signalling and market visibility. Under the *Crafted in Transylvania* brand, producers of traditional textiles (Sălaj, Maramureș), woodcraft (Maramureș, Bistrița-Năsăud), ceramics (Cluj, Sălaj) and traditional foods (Bihor, Cluj, Maramureș) operate in associative structures that closely resemble cooperative models (Crafted in Transylvania website). These groups rely on shared governance, collective market access and territorial branding to overcome constraints related to scale, visibility and distribution, enabling small artisans to participate more effectively in regional value chains.

Support for these producer groups is reinforced by the Local Action Groups (LAGs) participating in the *Microregiuni* cooperation project implemented in 2024–2025 by five LAGs in Cluj and Bihor counties: Câmpia Transilvaniei, Poarta Apusenilor, Crișul Negru, Someș Transilvan and Someș Nadăș. These LAGs operate as local partnerships bringing together public authorities, private actors and civil society organisations across rural microregions composed of several communes or small towns. Their core mission is to design and implement locally tailored development strategies based on the LEADER approach, which promotes bottom-up planning and community-driven solutions. Targeted interventions, such as micro-financing, training, territorial branding and community mobilisation, reinforced collective practices and stimulated cooperative behaviour among producer groups, even in the absence of formal cooperative structures. The project also advanced local identity and the valorisation of cultural and natural heritage, contributing to more resilient rural economies and improving the region's capacity to sustain locally rooted development (Microregiuni; GAL Poarta Transilvaniei; GAL Poarta Apusenilor; GAL Someș Nadăș).

The third structural form comprises **community-based micro-processing units**, which provide shared facilities for traditional recipes, herbal products and small-scale food processing. A representative example is the *Local Gastronomic Point in Făgetul Ierii* (Cluj). Supported through LEADER/CLLD (Community-led Local Development), it equips a small rural enterprise with essential processing tools to prepare traditional meals using local ingredients, preserve culinary heritage, and strengthen short supply chains. The initiative enhances community identity, supports women's entrepreneurship and demonstrates how micro-processing units can diversify rural economies and reinforce local capacities (EU CAP Network, 2026).

All these structures preserve cultural heritage, diversify rural livelihoods and expand community-based economic opportunities, reinforcing inclusive development in line with EU priorities for sustainable and cohesive regional growth.

A third category of cooperative models consists of **small retail networks**. Although less visible than agro-food cooperatives, they play a strategic role in reinforcing short value chains, stabilising prices and supporting local producers. In the North-West Region, these structures appear primarily as collective retail arrangements and community-level distribution networks supported through LEADER/CLLD initiatives (LEADER/CLLD. EU CAP Network; Neicu and Fîntîneru, 2026). LAGs have been essential in creating micro-distribution networks and promoting territorial branding, strengthening short food supply chains and consumer access to local products. Examples include *Cenana* (Cluj), a shared fruit-and-vegetable retail outlet coordinated through LAG Poarta Apusenilor, and *Ferma Ardeleană* (Cluj), which operates joint retail points

for horticultural products within the LAG Câmpia Transilvaniei network. In Sălaj, *Fermele Ecologice Silvania* provide consumers with coordinated access to eco-certified products through shared distribution channels (CoopNet website). These small retail networks function as demand-side collective organisations: they aggregate consumer needs, stabilise local markets and ensure predictable outlets for regional producers.

Functional mechanisms and regional outcomes of cooperatives models

Across all cooperative categories, the region's social-economy business models share a set of functional mechanisms that underpin their effectiveness. *Aggregation and collective bargaining* enable producers to secure better prices and more stable contracts. *Short supply chains* reduce intermediaries and increase producer margins, while *shared infrastructure* (processing, logistics and distribution) lowers operational costs and facilitates compliance with quality standards. *Market diversification* expands access to local retail, HoReCa and cross-border agro-food flows, and *territorial branding* strengthens identity-based competitiveness for rural areas.

These mechanisms generate tangible outcomes for sustainable regional growth:

- strengthened territorial capital and rural resilience,
- increased income stability for small farmers and artisans,
- enhanced cross-border agro-food networks,
- reduced vulnerability to market shocks,
- contribution to balanced regional development through locally rooted value chains.

Social enterprises and Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs)

Alongside cooperative structures, the North-West Region hosts a dynamic segment of **social enterprises and Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs)**. These organisations address labour market exclusion, service gaps and community-level development needs through models that combine entrepreneurial activity with explicit social missions. While cooperatives focus on collective production and shared market access, social enterprises prioritise social impact, reinvestment of surpluses and employment pathways for vulnerable groups, forming a complementary pillar of the region's social economy architecture.

Social enterprises in the region operate across multiple domains, such as social services, community development, cultural production, circular economy activities and local employment schemes. Many are formally certified under the national social enterprise framework, while others function as de facto social enterprises through NGO-based economic activities or hybrid organisational forms (European Commission, 2019). Their presence is particularly significant in rural and peri-urban areas where public service provision is limited and labour market fragmentation persists.

A central category within this segment is represented by **WISEs**, which integrate disadvantaged individuals into the labour market through supported employment, vocational training, and personalised social assistance. These organisations respond to structural challenges in the region (low skills, rural isolation, demographic decline) by offering transitional jobs and tailored support that enable beneficiaries to acquire stable income and reintegrate into mainstream labour markets.

One of the most representative WISEs in the region is *Emmaus Satu Mare*, founded in 2010 to support young people leaving the child protection system. The

organisation provides a combined package of residential support, social services and protected employment, helping vulnerable youth move toward independent living and stable participation in the labour market. Its economic activities focus on the collection, repair, resale and delivery of second-hand goods through two solidarity shops in Satu Mare. These activities pursue both social and environmental objectives: they create sustainable jobs for vulnerable youth while reducing waste and promoting reuse. Complementing these operations, *Emmaus Integrare SRL* functions as a certified social insertion enterprise, offering employment opportunities for young people with disabilities and generating additional revenue that is reinvested into *Emmaus'*s social mission, reinforcing the organisation's long-term sustainability and impact (ENSIE's WISEs Database; Emmaus website; RISE Romania).

In Cluj-Napoca, *BRICKED* illustrates a distinct model of *circular and craft-based social enterprise*. Founded in 2019, the workshop specialises in the collection, treatment, recycling and re-use of old bricks recovered from historic building demolitions. Its mission combines artisanal restoration, creative collaboration, and sustainable construction practices, promoting the reuse of traditional materials as an alternative to resource-intensive production. The initiative is operated by a certified social enterprise in which half of the employees come from vulnerable backgrounds and bring extensive experience in brick recovery and restoration. The enterprise was created through the *Social Enterprise Accelerator* project, co-financed from the European Social Fund under the Human Capital Operational Programme 2014-2020. *BRICKED* demonstrates how WISE-type structures can integrate circular economy principles, artisanal skills and social inclusion into a coherent business model that contributes to both environmental sustainability and labour market integration (ENSIE's WISEs Database; BRICKED website; ADV Romania).

Also in Cluj-Napoca, *Cofeels* represents a *service-oriented social enterprise* that combines specialty coffee production with a strong social mission. The enterprise employs persons with disabilities and promotes workplace inclusion through community-based economic activity. *Cofeels* operates both a coffee shop and an online specialty coffee store, offering companies socially responsible procurement options and the possibility to collaborate through mechanisms supporting the employment of persons with disabilities. Its owner is an *Authorized Protected Unit*, enabling partnerships with firms seeking to align corporate consumption with social impact (ENSIE's WISEs Database; Cofeels website).

In Bihor, *Caritas Eparhial Oradea* operates socio-professional integration workshops that follow a WISE-type model, even though the organisation is not formally registered as a WISE. *Caritas* provides vocational training, occupational support and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities and vulnerable adults. Through these workshops, the organisation facilitates gradual labour market integration and strengthens the employability of beneficiaries who face structural barriers. *Caritas'*s approach illustrates how NGO-based socio-professional integration services can replicate the core mechanisms of WISEs (training, supported work environments and reinvestment into social missions) into a coherent model that addresses both labour market barriers and local service gaps (Caritas Eparhial Oradea website).

In Maramureș, *ASSOC Baia Mare* stands out as one of the most active social economy organisations in Romania. Established in 1995 as one of the country's first accredited social service providers, it has become a regional leader in social innovation and labour market inclusion. Since 2015, the organisation has created 72 entrepreneurial

structures and developed social enterprises that have created over 300 jobs for vulnerable individuals. Its model combines social services, supported employment and community-based economic activities, offering long-term solutions for persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. Through these initiatives, ASSOC has set national good-practice standards for NGO-driven social enterprises and strengthened the long-term sustainability of social service provision by diversifying its economic activities (ASSOC website).

Functional mechanisms and regional outcomes of WISEs

In the case of social enterprises and WISEs, the North-West Region displays a distinct operational logic shaped by several core mechanisms. These organisations are anchored in a *strong social mission*, directing their activities toward vulnerable groups and the specific needs of local communities. They build *structured pathways into employment*, offering supported integration for individuals facing barriers in the labour market. Their *financial model* reinforces long-term stability by *reinvesting surpluses* into organisational development and local service provision, while combining market revenues with grants, public funding and EU programmes.

Innovation is also central to their functioning, particularly *through circular and craft-based practices* such as reuse, restoration, upcycling and environmentally responsible production. *Governance* remains closely tied to the community, relying on participatory decision-making and the active involvement of local stakeholders.

A set of region-wide effects follows, reflected in:

- improved labour market inclusion for vulnerable groups,
- expanded access to social and community services,
- strengthened local capacities for social innovation,
- enhanced circular and green practices through upcycling and sustainable production,
- a measurable contribution to territorial cohesion by anchoring services in rural and disadvantaged areas.

Table 2. Territorial logics of social economy models in the North-West Region (RO)

Model	Core logic	Territorial role	Territorial effects
Agro-food cooperatives	Consolidating fragmented production systems	Anchor for regional agro-food value chains	▪ Stronger competitiveness ▪ Reduced fragmentation ▪ Enhanced market visibility
Producer groups (agriculture and forestry)	Organising dispersed small producers	Coordinator of small-scale production flows	▪ Improved market access ▪ Lower transaction costs ▪ Increased territorial visibility
Craft-based and traditional product groups	Mobilising cultural identity as economic resource	Driver of cultural and artisanal identity	▪ Rural diversification ▪ Strengthened cultural capital ▪ Competitive niches

Model	Core logic	Territorial role	Territorial effects
Community micro-processing units	Local value-addition through shared facilities	Local enhancer of community-based production	▪ Stronger local identity ▪ Growth of micro-enterprises ▪ Expanded community capacities
Small retail networks	Stabilising demand for local producers	Demand-side stabiliser for regional producers	▪ Reinforced short chains ▪ Predictable outlets ▪ Greater consumer access
WISEs	Integrating vulnerable groups through economic activity	Social inclusion engine within local labour markets	▪ Labour market integration ▪ Expanded social services ▪ Circular practices ▪ Territorial cohesion

(*Source:* author's elaboration based on regional case studies and organisational documentation)

In addition to these internally anchored dynamics, the region's social economy landscape is further shaped by cross-border cooperation, which introduces complementary forms of capacity building, institutional coordination and community-driven innovation across neighbouring areas.

6.3. Cross-border extensions of regional social economy models (RO-HU cooperation)

Building on this foundation, the North-West Region engages in a series of cross-border initiatives with neighbouring Hungarian territories that activate new training and employment mechanisms, expanding the range of interventions available to local communities.

Social entrepreneurship training forms a central pillar of this cross-border ecosystem. Romanian-Hungarian partnerships deliver entrepreneurial, managerial and digital skills programmes for vulnerable groups, youth and early-stage social economy actors. Through workshops, mentoring and peer learning, these initiatives build human capital and support the emergence of micro enterprises and community ventures in border areas.

The *youngSTER project* exemplifies how such training interventions are implemented. Under the *Interreg VI A Romania–Hungary Programme 2021–2027*, it equips young adults with practical competences for developing and managing social enterprise initiatives through cross-border training, mentoring and cooperative learning formats, strengthening socially oriented business development across Satu Mare (RO) and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg (HU) counties (youngSTER project). The *CROSSLOCALDEV project (Interreg V-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2014–2020)* applied a similarly integrated approach in Bihor (RO) and Hajdú-Bihar (HU), combining entrepreneurship training, job-matching activities and agri-business support with cross-border training centres in the agri-food sector. It expanded local skills, reinforced short food supply chains and improved the integration of agri-food actors into cross-border value networks (CROSSLOCALDEV project).

Youth-focused employment initiatives further connect the Romanian and Hungarian labour markets through joint training and certification, mentoring, mobility

schemes and cross-border job-matching events, creating structured pathways for young people and NEETs.

The *YES. Youth Entrepreneurship Support project* (*Interreg V-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2014-2020*) complements these efforts by promoting self-employment through an online curriculum tailored to Romanian and Hungarian youth, strengthening entrepreneurial competences, networking and early-stage business development (YES. Youth Entrepreneurship Support project). The *CBC-EMPLOYMENT project* (*Interreg V-A Romania–Hungary Programme 2014-2020*) adds a broader labour-market dimension by improving employment in Bihor and Hajdú-Bihar through enhanced local infrastructures and stronger cooperation among labour-market actors, supporting employability, entrepreneurial skills and inclusive access for disadvantaged groups (CBC-EMPLOYMENT project).

Table 3. Territorial logics of cross-border social economy extensions (RO-HU Cooperation)

Cross-border mechanism	Core logic	Territorial role	Territorial effects
Entrepreneurial training	Building human capital through joint training and cooperative learning	Cross-border skills accelerator for early-stage social economy actors	▪ Stronger entrepreneurial skills ▪ Emergence of micro-enterprises
Youth-focused employment pathways	Youth activation via counselling and job-matching	RO-HU labour-market connector through shared services	▪ Higher employability ▪ Structured mobility and job-matching routes
Labour-market coordination mechanisms	Improving cooperation among employment and training services	Shared cross-border service and coordination platform	▪ Broader access to employment services ▪ Stronger territorial cohesion

(*Source:* author's elaboration based on Interreg Romania-Hungary Programme project materials)

Cross-border learning, shared training infrastructures and coordinated labour-market interventions collectively extend the North-West Region's social economy ecosystem beyond national boundaries. By strengthening human capital, widening access to employment and supporting community-anchored economic activities, these initiatives enhance territorial cohesion and reinforce the capacity of border communities to address socio-economic challenges collaboratively. In this sense, cross-border cooperation functions as a complementary layer of the region's social economy landscape, amplifying the impact of locally rooted organisational models.

More broadly, Romanian-Hungarian cooperation introduces concrete mechanisms that enrich the region's social economy architecture. Through entrepreneurial training programmes, youth-focused employment pathways, agri-food value-chain development and improved coordination among labour-market actors, these interventions diversify the organisational landscape and expand the range of stakeholders engaged in socially oriented economic activity across the border area.

6.3. Why the region is a strategic case

The North-West Region of Romania offers a particularly relevant context for analysing social economy business models due to its diverse territorial structure and mixed socio-economic dynamics. It hosts an increasingly broad ecosystem of initiatives across agriculture, services, circular economy activities and work-integration structures. Its socio-economic and territorial profile, marked by pronounced urban-rural duality, demographic pressures, labour-market fragmentation and sectoral heterogeneity, creates multiple entry points for cooperative, social-enterprise and WISE-type models. Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) monitoring reinforces this picture: the region records progress across 13 SDGs, supported by 47 indicators that capture territorial dynamics and highlight persistent gaps in service provision (Pop and Stamos, 2023; Bertozzi et al., 2023).

This configuration provides valuable empirical insight into how social economy models operate within a territorially diverse and structurally constrained environment. Cooperative structures, social enterprises and WISEs illustrate the institutional practices through which social economy organisations respond to local challenges and generate territorially rooted development outcomes.

Cooperative models demonstrate a strong capacity to consolidate fragmented production systems and reinforce territorial value chains. As a core form of cooperative organisation, *agro-food cooperatives* show how shared infrastructure, collective bargaining and coordinated distribution mitigate structural disadvantages and enhance producers' market visibility. *Cultural and craft-based producer groups* extend these dynamics by mobilising territorial identity and heritage as economic resources, improving market access and stimulating collective practices. *Community-based micro-processing units*, although less widespread, further diversify rural economies, strengthen short supply chains and support local entrepreneurship.

Social enterprises and WISEs add a complementary layer to this landscape. Their models integrate supported employment, vocational training, circular-economy practices and community-embedded governance, demonstrating how social innovation can be anchored in territorially rooted enterprises. These organisations create structured pathways into employment for vulnerable groups and expand access to essential community services, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas.

Alongside these strengths, the region also displays important limitations that shape its strategic relevance. Despite the presence of consolidated cooperative structures and emerging social enterprises, the overall number of socio-economic initiatives remains modest relative to the region's needs. Many rural and small-town areas lack sufficient organisational density to address labour-market fragmentation, demographic decline or service gaps. Furthermore, the uptake of European instruments remains uneven. Numerous actors rely on project-based interventions rather than developing long-term, locally adapted organisational practices. This partial institutionalisation limits the capacity of social economy organisations to scale, professionalise and sustain their activities beyond project cycles.

Viewed as a whole, these empirical insights show that the North-West Region functions as an emerging ecosystem where social economy models can consolidate, diversify and scale, but where further development is still required. The region highlights the mechanisms (aggregation, shared infrastructure, territorial branding, supported employment, circular practices) that generate measurable outcomes such as strengthened territorial capital, increased income stability, improved labour-market inclusion,

expanded access to services and enhanced sustainability. At the same time, its limitations underscore the need for deeper institutional commitment, stronger use of EU instruments and more locally adapted models.

Overall, the region offers a valuable illustration of how social economy organisations contribute to inclusive, resilient and territorially cohesive development within a complex socio-economic landscape, while also revealing the structural gaps that must be addressed to fully unlock their transformative potential.

7. CONCLUSIONS. SOCIAL ECONOMY MODELS AS DRIVERS OF SUSTAINABLE REGIONAL GROWTH

The social economy has emerged as a strategically relevant component of European regional development, operating at the intersection of economic innovation, social cohesion and territorial resilience. Its organisational diversity provides a flexible infrastructure capable of addressing complex socio-economic challenges across different territorial contexts. Within EU policy frameworks, social economy organisations are increasingly recognised as mechanisms that translate Union-level objectives into locally embedded practices, thereby reinforcing sustainable regional growth (European Commission, 2026).

The analysis confirms the three guiding propositions of the study and demonstrates that social economy organisations operate as structural drivers of inclusive, competitive and territorially cohesive development, while also revealing several limitations that shape their capacity to scale and institutionalise.

P1. Social economy business models generate sustainable growth by combining economic activity with social inclusion and territorially anchored value creation.

Cooperatives, social enterprises and WISEs integrate economic and social objectives in ways that reinforce long-term development. Their activities diversify local production systems, expand labour-market participation and embed circular and resource-efficient practices within regional economies. These mechanisms show how social economy organisations transform local resources into sustainable outcomes, particularly in territories facing demographic decline, fragmented labour markets and service gaps.

At the same time, the overall number of initiatives remains modest relative to regional needs, especially in rural and small-town areas. Limited organisational density constrains the ability of social economy actors to address structural labour-market vulnerabilities at scale.

P2. Their contribution to regional competitiveness operates through aggregation, shared infrastructure, territorial branding, supported employment and circular practices.

The North-West Region illustrates how cooperative aggregation strengthens local value chains, reduces economic leakage and enhances market visibility. WISEs and social enterprises expand supported employment pathways, improving labour market inclusion for vulnerable groups. Circular economy initiatives generate green jobs and reduce environmental pressures. Together, these mechanisms reinforce regional competitiveness by mobilising local assets and strengthening territorial resilience.

However, the uptake of European instruments (ESF+, ERDF, InvestEU, Social Economy Action Plan tools) remains uneven. Many organisations rely on project-based interventions or adopt external organisational models that are not fully adapted to regional conditions, rather than developing long-term, locally embedded institutional

practices. This limits continuity, professionalisation and the capacity to scale beyond individual projects.

P3. The North-West Region illustrates how territorial conditions shape the evolution, diffusion and impact of social economy organisations.

The region's mixed urban-rural structure, demographic pressures, labour-market fragmentation and strong cross-border integration create both opportunities and constraints for social economy development. Urban centres support innovation and organisational diversification, while rural territories rely on cooperatives and community-based enterprises to stabilise local economies. Cross-border cooperation with Hungary enhances institutional learning and joint value-chain development.

Yet territorial disparities also restrict diffusion: rural areas often lack institutional capacity, skilled labour and stable funding streams, which slows organisational development and limits the replication of successful models.

Mechanisms linking social economy to regional growth

Regional growth is influenced by several mechanisms activated by social economy organisations, particularly in the areas of labour market inclusion, local value creation, circular practices and territorial resilience.

Labour-market inclusion. Social-economy organisations expand access to employment for vulnerable groups through tailored support, training and skills development. They act as territorial stabilisers in fragmented labour markets, directly supporting EU priorities on quality employment and social cohesion. WISEs exemplify this role by combining productive activity with personalised social support, creating structured pathways into the labour market.

Territorial diversification and local value creation. Cooperatives, associations and social enterprises mobilise community resources, stimulate entrepreneurship and reinforce local value chains. These dynamics align with Smart Specialisation Strategies, which emphasise place-based innovation and regional competitiveness. By embedding economic activity within local ecosystems, social-economy entities reduce dependency on external markets and strengthen the adaptive capacity of rural, cross-border and mixed urban–rural regions.

Circular and resource-efficient practices. Many social economy organisations operate in sectors central to the EU's ecological transition: reuse and repair, waste management, renewable energy and sustainable consumption. Their activities advance the Circular Economy Action Plan and the European Green Deal by promoting low-waste production, extending product lifecycles and generating green jobs. These practices reduce environmental pressures and embed circularity within territorial development trajectories.

Long-term economic resilience. Community-anchored economic structures retain value locally through reinvestment of surpluses. They build social infrastructure (care, education and community services) that enhances regional capacity to withstand economic shocks. Cross-border cooperation and participatory governance further reinforce cohesion and stability, particularly in peripheral or demographically challenged territories.

Taken together, these mechanisms show how the social economy transforms local resources into sustainable outcomes and supports the EU's vision of inclusive, competitive and territorially cohesive development. Yet the consolidation of this sector across Europe remains uneven: organisational density differs widely between regions,

the use of EU instruments is inconsistent, and some initiatives rely on short-term project formats or externally designed models that are not fully adapted to local conditions, limiting continuity and long-term institutionalisation.

Despite these constraints, the social economy remains a dynamic institutional field capable of advancing sustainable regional growth. By combining social purpose with economic activity and anchoring value within communities, social-economy organisations act as structural drivers of regional transformation across Europe. These insights point directly to a set of policy measures needed to strengthen the sector's capacity, improve territorial coverage and ensure that social-economy models can scale and consolidate over time.

Policy implications

- *Integrating social economy into regional strategies*

Regional authorities should embed social economy actors more systematically into strategic planning instruments such as RIS3, county development plans and regional operational programmes. Doing so would allow cooperatives, social enterprises and WISEs to function as levers for balanced territorial development, labour-market inclusion and green transition, ensuring that regional strategies reflect the full potential of socially oriented business models.

- *Building stronger local ecosystems with improved skills and financing*

Expanding the use of ESF+, ERDF, InvestEU and social-innovation instruments can support managerial development, digitalisation and organisational professionalisation. Complementary support structures (incubators, hubs and clusters) would further consolidate the ecosystem by providing technical assistance, networking opportunities and shared infrastructure.

- *Promoting cross-border and interregional cooperation*

Interreg programmes offer opportunities for joint value-chain development, green initiatives and labour-market integration. Strengthening networks among cooperatives, WISEs, NGOs and municipalities can scale cooperation, enhance knowledge transfer and reinforce territorially cohesive development across the border area.

- *Supporting rural social economy development*

Rural areas should receive targeted support through CAP and LEADER/CLLD instruments to expand cooperatives, community enterprises and short supply chains. Strengthening locally anchored services can help stabilise rural economies, counter demographic decline and reinforce territorial cohesion.

- *Advancing circular and green social business models*

Circular economy social enterprises should be integrated into regional green-transition strategies. Reuse, repair, recycling and green job creation align with EU Green Deal priorities and support environmentally responsible production.

In perspective, the social economy offers regions new strategic capacities for navigating long-term socio-economic change. Its ability to anchor value locally, integrate vulnerable groups and promote resource-efficient practices positions it as a lever for rethinking development pathways rather than merely complementing existing ones. The North-West Region of Romania illustrates both the opportunities and the constraints of these models: while territorially embedded initiatives can consolidate and diversify local

ecosystems, uneven institutional capacity and fragmented support structures still limit their full potential. These dynamics suggest that, when backed by coherent policy frameworks and sustained cooperation across governance levels, social economy models can evolve into forward-looking instruments for strengthening regional resilience and shaping more balanced development trajectories across Europe.

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THE RISE OF SUBNATIONAL ACTORS: ROMANIAN CITIES' ADAPTATION TO THE INTERNATIONAL DYNAMICS THROUGH CITY DIPLOMACY INITIATIVES

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Abstract. *The rapid pace of globalization and increasing urbanization in recent decades have significantly challenged the traditional diplomacy paradigm, in which sovereign states are the exclusive actors in international relations. In this changing landscape, subnational actors, particularly large cities, have emerged as relevant players on the global stage through a phenomenon scholars refer to as city diplomacy. This article explores the theoretical development of this concept within academic literature to understand how it is taking shape in the Romanian context. To this end, the analysis focuses on major Romanian cities and their engagement in international relations. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on document analysis of official documents and strategic reports retrieved from municipal websites. It evaluates the effectiveness of their paradiplomatic efforts using a six-dimension framework of city diplomacy (security, development, economy, culture, networks, and representation), not to exhaustively characterize each dimension, but to understand the maturity of Romanian cities' paradiplomatic efforts. Results suggest that Romanian cities are increasingly integrated into European networks and international economic partnerships, with notable differences in strategic orientation. The paper contributes to the broader understanding of how Central and Eastern European cities reshape their international role to foster local development.*

Keywords: *City diplomacy, Paradiplomacy, International relations, Multilayered diplomacy, decentralization.*

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, international relations were conceptualized and analyzed as a dialogue conducted almost exclusively between states. The order established by the Peace of Westphalia and subsequently consolidated by the realist paradigm reinforced the image of the state as the sole legitimate actor of foreign policy and international representation. Nevertheless, the realities of the twenty-first century have begun to call into question the sufficiency of an exclusively state-centric perspective. Contemporary challenges do not stop at the border, and their effects are felt, first and foremost, in urban space. It is cities that manage migration flows, respond to health crises, attract investment, develop international networks, and build cross-border partnerships. Without

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substituting for the state, they have become relevant actors in global governance, and their rise reflects one of the most important transformations of the contemporary international order (van der Pluijm & Melissen, 2007; Acuto, Kosovac, & Hartley, 2021).

If the twentieth century belonged to states, the beginning of the twenty-first century has demonstrated that international influence is no longer exercised exclusively by actors who hold sovereignty, but also by those who hold the capacity to connect people, capital, innovation, and cooperation. Cities have become nodes of these global flows, and their international visibility is today determined not only by belonging to a state, but also by their own capacity to generate development and to participate in global governance.

This transformation has been accompanied by the development of paradiplomacy, a concept that designates the involvement of subnational actors in international activities carried out in complementarity with the state's foreign policy or, in certain contexts, through the promotion of interests of their own (Kuznetsov, 2014). Within this broader phenomenon, city diplomacy represents the expression through which cities develop their own external relations with a view to promoting local interests, attracting investment, exchanging good practices, and participating in global governance processes (Karvounis, 2025). Thus, city diplomacy can be understood as one of the most visible manifestations of paradiplomacy, through which cities project their interests and contribute to the management of challenges that exceed the state's exclusive capacity for action.

Far from constituting a uniform phenomenon, city diplomacy takes different forms from one state to another and even from one city to another, being influenced by institutional particularities, the degree of local autonomy, administrative culture, and the relations between local and central authorities. It is precisely this diversity that makes it difficult to formulate a universal model of city diplomacy. Beyond the common conceptual elements, each national experience is shaped by a set of institutional, political, and administrative factors that give the international cooperation practices of cities characteristics of their own. The analysis of city diplomacy calls for a context-sensitive approach, capable of capturing not only the activities carried out by local authorities, but also the constraints and opportunities that shape their external action. This diversity also raises a methodological challenge. A conceptual framework elaborated on the basis of the experience of cities from decentralized states cannot be applied mechanically to different institutional contexts. Precisely for this reason, the analysis of city diplomacy must take into account the particularities of each political and administrative system, evaluating not only what cities do internationally, but also the limits and opportunities created by the institutional environment.

These considerations acquire particular relevance in the case of Romania, where manifestations of city diplomacy must be analyzed through the lens of the particularities of the constitutional and administrative framework. Unlike states characterized by a high degree of decentralization, Romania offers the example of a unitary and centralized state, in which the international initiatives of local authorities develop within an institutional space carefully delimited by the competences of the central authorities (Guvernul României, 2017).

Starting from this context, the present article analyzes the way in which five of Romania's cities, use the instruments of city diplomacy to project their interests internationally and to contribute to contemporary processes of international cooperation.

For the evaluation of these practices, the conceptual framework proposed by van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007) is used, one of the most influential models dedicated to the analysis of city diplomacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The conventional framework of international relations was built on the premise of the centrality of the state. Rooted in the Westphalian system of 1648, diplomacy was traditionally conceived as the exclusive domain of sovereign states, mediated through national foreign ministries and formal intergovernmental channels (van der Pluijm & Melissen, 2007). Within this paradigm, substate entities, namely cities, regions, and municipalities, were excluded from the arena of foreign policy, this attribute being monopolized by the state.

The accelerated pace of globalization and urbanization in the second half of the twentieth century, however, fundamentally disrupted this premise. The growing interdependence of economies, the cross-border character of challenges such as climate change, migration, and public health crises, as well as the increasingly pronounced concentration of political and economic power in urban centers, eroded the nation-state's monopoly on international engagement (Karvounis, 2025). Cities feel the effects of globalization most rapidly, and this exposure has led them to develop a capacity for reaction that often places them ahead of national governments in managing cross-border challenges (Kihlgren Grandi, 2020) . This dynamic has led researchers to reconceptualize the traditional international system as one with multiple actors, in which substate governments are increasingly recognized as legitimate participants in global governance (Leffel, 2021; Acuto, 2013).

The academic effort to theorize the international activities of substate actors gave rise to the concept of paradiplomacy, a term that has become central in the literature on sub-state international relations. (Kuznetsov, 2014) defines paradiplomacy as the capacity of substate governments, including federal ones, autonomous regions, and municipalities, to conduct external relations in parallel with and sometimes in contradiction to the foreign policy of the central state.

Panayotis Soldatos (1990) introduced the term into the literature to describe the international activity of federated entities in relation to the foreign policy of the federal state (Cercel, 2023), and the concept subsequently extended its scope beyond the federal-federated relationship to encompass the diplomatic-type activities of local authorities more broadly. The intellectual foundations of this expansion were laid in the 1980s and 1990s, as researchers began to document the cross-border activities of regions and provinces in federal systems such as Canada, Spain, or Belgium (Kuznetsov, 2014), before the framework extended further to unitary states, once evidence showed that cities in strongly centralized systems were also forging independent international ties. The concept has not met with full academic consensus: Hocking considers that what could be included under this name is nothing other than the need for cooperation that exists at the level of the state, between central and local authorities (Hocking, 1993). Karvounis (2025) traces this conceptual evolution, observing that paradiplomacy has progressively moved from a marginal curiosity in international relations studies to a recognized and theoretically robust subject, and situates city diplomacy within it as a specific and increasingly prominent form, focused exclusively on cities as international actors, distinct from the broader category of regional or sub-state diplomacy.

In the present research, the concept of paradiplomacy, and implicitly city diplomacy, designates a complex reality in which regions and cities carry out international cooperation activities manifesting variable degrees of autonomy from the foreign policy of the central state. This dynamic does not describe a simple translation of diplomacy to the reduced scale of a local authority, but implies a certain independence from the foreign policy of the state to which the region or city belongs, an autonomy that can vary from coordination and complementarity to open conflict with the central authority (Cercel, 2023).

Cities have long contributed to diplomacy and public diplomacy by building relations between people and governments, while increasingly using diverse tools and strategies to advance their agendas in global politics (Amiri & Sevin, 2020). Within the broad spectrum of paradiplomacy, city diplomacy appears as a distinct conceptual species. The most widespread definition is that of van der Pluijm and Melissen, who describe city diplomacy as "the institutions and processes by which cities engage in relations with actors on the international political stage, with the aim of representing themselves and their interests" (2007), and consider urban diplomacy a decentralized form of international cooperation in which cities are the principal actors. (Karvounis, 2025) offers a more extended framework, defining city diplomacy as the ensemble of strategies through which urban governments pursue their own foreign policy objectives, build international partnerships, and position themselves in global networks, from bilateral twinning agreements to multilateral advocacy on themes such as climate change, migration, and urban sustainability. (Kihlgren Grandi, 2020) likewise underlines the strategic dimension, arguing that city diplomacy is increasingly a deliberate choice of municipal governments seeking to leverage international engagement for local development. Although definitions vary, there is broad consensus that city diplomacy is distinguished from general municipal internationalization by its explicitly political and diplomatic character: it involves not only economic or cultural exchange, but also active participation in international norm-setting, advocacy, and governance (Leffel, 2021)

The literature identifies several structural and contextual factors shaping the nature and intensity of a city's diplomatic engagement. (Karvounis, 2025) synthesizes these into a multicausal framework distinguishing enabling conditions (legal autonomy, financial resources, institutional capacity) from motivating factors (economic interests, political ambitions, normative commitments). (Leffel, 2021) offers a more nuanced typology built around four principles: norm enforcement, where cities engage internationally when central governments fail to meet internationally agreed standards on human rights, climate, or refugee protection; regime type, since democracies allow cities a foreign policy of their own while authoritarian contexts reduce city diplomacy to a vehicle of national policy; alignment between officials and citizens, as local demand for international engagement shapes municipal leaders' incentives; and economic growth interests, which make cities with significant economic assets more inclined to invest in international positioning. (Kosovac, Hartley, Acuto, & Gunning, 2020) add city size, administrative capacity, and access to international networks as further key predictors of diplomatic activity. More recent research on European cities also examines collaboration with academia and business and coordination with higher levels of government as factors shaping municipal international cooperation (Kamiński, Ciesielska-Klikowska, Karpińska-Krakowiak, & Gzik, 2026).

These factors translate into a diverse repertoire of instruments, varying by formality, scope, and strategic intention. At the more institutionalized end, cities conclude

formal bilateral agreements, twinning arrangements, memoranda of cooperation, and partnership protocols, which form durable frameworks for continuous exchange (Karvounis, 2025; Kihlgren Grandi, 2020).

Acuto, et al. (2021) periodize the historical evolution of city diplomacy into three generations reflecting the evolving capacities of urban actors internationally. The first, covering much of the twentieth century, was characterized by bilateral engagement through formal city twinning (jumelage), originating in the postwar period as instruments of reconciliation between European cities, especially French and German municipalities, and gradually expanding globally to thousands of city pairs, largely symbolic and oriented toward interpersonal contacts (Acuto, Kosovac, & Hartley, 2021; Karvounis, 2025). The second, emerging between the 1950s and 1990s, saw the proliferation of multilateral city networks, such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Eurocities, and the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), marking a transition from bilateral cultural diplomacy to collective political advocacy (Acuto, Kosovac, & Hartley, 2021). The third, accelerating from the 2000s to the present, is defined by the integration of cities into global governance architectures as recognized actors; the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated this concretely, as municipal governments organized the first response measures, from local restrictions to vaccination campaigns, often ahead of national coordination (Acuto, Kosovac, & Hartley, 2021). This generation also shows a significant expansion of research beyond Western Europe and North America, although, as Acuto, Kosovac and Hartley (2021) note, Central and Eastern Europe remains significantly underrepresented in the literature.

The most useful operational framework for the analysis of urban diplomacy remains that of van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007), which identifies six substantive dimensions along which cities engage internationally: security, development, economy, culture, networks, and representation. This framework has become a standard reference precisely because it moves beyond conceptual debates and offers an analytical map of the diverse activities that constitute city diplomacy in practice. The authors emphasize that these dimensions are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but rather an instrument of analysis that allows researchers to identify and compare the areas in which cities engage internationally.

The academic attention devoted to city diplomacy in Central and Eastern European contexts remains limited, constituting a significant gap in the existing literature. The dominant frameworks and empirical datasets have been developed mainly on the basis of urban contexts in Western Europe, North America, and, increasingly, East Asia, leaving the specific dynamics of post-communist municipal internationalization insufficiently addressed (Acuto, Kosovac, & Hartley, 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Starting from the gap identified in the scholarly literature, the present study proposes a systematic mapping of the international activities of the main Romanian cities and a theoretically grounded evaluation of the strategic orientation of their paradiplomatic efforts. The absence of this type of analysis from the existing literature is all the more surprising given that Romania is the largest country in the Central European region in terms of population and territory, and its main urban centers, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, or Iași, have undergone significant transformations in their international orientation since accession to the European Union in 2007, expanding their networks, accessing European funding, and cultivating international profiles along

cultural, economic, and development dimensions. This process, however, has remained largely undocumented in academic research.

The study adopts a qualitative approach, based on the analysis of official documents published in the last ten years by five large municipalities in Romania: Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Iași, Oradea, and Timișoara. These cities were selected following a preliminary documentation exercise aimed at identifying Romanian municipalities with a visible presence in international cooperation, external relations, and participation in international urban networks. The principal selection criterion was the existence of a sufficient volume of information available on official websites and on those of external partners, so that the analytical framework proposed by van der Pluijm and Melissen could be applied rigorously.

From a methodological point of view, the research uses the six-dimension framework of city diplomacy proposed by van der Pluijm and Melissen, namely security, development, economy, culture, networks, and representation (van der Pluijm & Melissen, 2007). This framework was applied to each city analyzed in order to identify and organize city diplomacy actions according to their typology. The analysis was carried out comparatively, but only after the individual examination of each city, so that the profile of each municipality could be understood in its own institutional and international context.

The process of data collection and sorting was supported by an artificial intelligence tool, namely Gemini, used for the initial identification of relevant information from the official websites of the municipalities analyzed. The information provided was subsequently verified by the authors using the classic manner on the official websites of the city halls and, where applicable, on the websites of the external partners or European programs involved. This verification stage was essential for ensuring the quality and credibility of the data used in the analysis. The extracted results and the initial prompts were organized in the annexes of the paper.

The research focuses exclusively on actions involving the external relations of cities, such as twinnings, accessions to international networks, transnational projects, cultural partnerships, solidarity initiatives, and international representation activities. Purely administrative actions or local investments without an external dimension were not included except insofar as they were explicitly connected to a form of city diplomacy.

RESULTS

Before analyzing the six dimensions in the case of the selected Romanian cities, a structural observation is in order. Romania is a centralized state, and competences in the field of external relations are traditionally reserved to the central level. The legal framework in force, (Guvernul României, 2017) on the organization and functioning of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explicitly stipulates that the MFA ensures the coordination at national and local level of the activity of implementing foreign policy objectives, structurally limiting the space of action of local authorities in areas with diplomatic stakes.

THE SECURITY DIMENSION

The first dimension in the framework of van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007) is the security dimension, one of the most complex forms of city involvement in international politics. Van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007) identify three types of activities through which cities can contribute to conflict management: conflict-

prevention diplomacy, involvement during an active conflict, and post-conflict reconstruction. The central argument for the role of cities in this field starts from the premise that the roots of conflicts are, in essence, local, which gives municipal authorities a unique capacity to understand the realities on the ground. Unlike states, cities do not possess military force and tend to approach conflicts through civilian instruments, such as humanitarian assistance, the strengthening of local governance, and the promotion of intercommunity dialogue. These characteristics give them a degree of perceived neutrality and an added value in relation to traditional state actors.

Among the cities analyzed, Timișoara records the most structured response on the security dimension, materialized in the context of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine beginning in 2022. Through its twinning relationship with Chernivtsi, the city coordinated the "Timișoara for Ukraine" campaign, a coalition of approximately 30 NGOs, companies, and institutions, initiated by the City Hall, through which human resources, medical equipment, and support for refugees were rapidly mobilized, demonstrating the capacity of a local authority to act concretely during an active conflict (Primăria Municipiului Timișoara, 2022).

Iași stands out through an involvement on several levels of the security dimension, strongly influenced by its geographical proximity to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. On the one hand, the city functioned as a logistical and administrative hub for humanitarian assistance directed toward the twinned cities of Chernivtsi and Chișinău . On the other hand, the twinnings with Haifa and Ashdod, in Israel, have generated a distinct form of memory diplomacy and cultural security: the March of the Living organized annually in Iași, with the participation of a large delegation from Israel, and the exchanges dedicated to the commemoration of the Pogrom and the Holocaust (Primăria Municipiului Iași - Orașe înfrățite).

The Municipality of Bucharest records a single documented action on the security dimension, of a reactive and punctual character. Unlike Timișoara and Iași, where security actions took place within pre-existing twinning relationships and generated more structured partnerships, Bucharest's intervention remains a singular episode, unintegrated into a broader security diplomacy strategy. The active cooperations with Chișinău, Lisbon, and Madrid, as well as the twinning with Tbilisi, are predominantly aimed at economic and cultural fields, without a conflict-prevention or post-conflict reconstruction component identifiable in the official sources analyzed (Primăria Municipiului București - Acorduri de înfrățire, cooperare și aderare; Consiliul General al Municipiului București, 2022).

THE DEVELOPMENT DIMENSION

The development dimension of urban diplomacy concerns the involvement of cities in assistance projects for less developed communities, whether through the transfer of financial and material resources or through partnerships for strengthening local institutional capacity. Van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007) identify two main forms of this dimension: development assistance, oriented toward long-term crises, and emergency assistance, directed toward sudden crises. The central argument for the role of cities in development starts from the premise that local authorities know best the needs of communities similar to their own and that interventions at the local level generate the most concrete and durable results.

Among the cities analyzed, Oradea records the most consistent profile on this dimension, materialized through the twinning with the commune of Băcioi, a suburb of

Chișinău, signed in 2020 at the initiative of the then mayor, Ilie Bolojan, with the declared purpose of creating the legal framework for allocating municipal budgets for the benefit of the partner community. This institutional framework subsequently produced a concrete development action: Oradea and Bihor County allocated €200,000 for the rehabilitation of a public park in the partner community (eBihoreanul, 2023).

Cluj-Napoca also stands out through its twinning with the city of Ungheni in the Republic of Moldova, signed in November 2016, which has generated concrete development activities over time. The emblematic project of this collaboration is the rehabilitation of the Central Park in Ungheni, renamed "Micul Cluj" (Little Cluj) in honor of the partner community, an investment of over 600,000 euros carried out over the course of six years, publicly recognized by the Moldovan authorities as one of the best examples of Romanian-Moldovan cooperation (Primăria Municipiului Ungheni, Republica Moldova, 2020).

The Municipality of Bucharest illustrates a distinct form of development through the cooperation program signed with Chișinău in 2018, whose provisions cover several areas of concrete assistance in the fields of public transport, health and education (Primăria Municipiului București, 2018).

Iași contributes to the development dimension through the Interreg NEXT Prut Valley project, carried out in partnership with the municipality of Ungheni in the Republic of Moldova, with a total budget of 2.2 million euros, targeting education and cross-border tourism. Compared to the models described above, which mobilize their own budgetary resources, Iași leverages European instruments of territorial cooperation to generate concrete impact in relations with communities in the Republic of Moldova, an approach that reflects the city's specific diplomatic profile, oriented toward maximizing access to European funding (Primăria Municipiului Ungheni & Primăria Municipiului Iași - Cultural Gates of the Prut Valley -Interreg VI-A NEXT Romania–Republic of Moldova (ROMD00219)).

Continuing in the register of Interreg projects, Timișoara features on the development dimension through the HEARTS project, Healthy Aging Care Resources and Practices, financed through the Interreg VI-A Romania–Hungary program and implemented by the Social Assistance Directorate of the Municipality of Timișoara in partnership with the Hódmezővásárhely-Makó Health Care Centre in Hungary. Unlike the other cities, Timișoara approaches the development dimension through a distinct form, not through unilateral assistance offered to a less developed community, but through bilateral cooperation for the strengthening of social services (Timișoara - Direcția de Asistență Socială a Municipiului, 2025).

THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION

The economic dimension of urban diplomacy concerns the activities through which cities seek to generate economic benefits for their community, whether by attracting capital, tourism, international campaigns, and events, or by exporting services and knowledge or through economic partnerships with other cities. Van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007) distinguish between pull-type activities, oriented toward attracting capital and investment, and push-type activities, oriented toward the export of services and knowledge or toward partnerships of mutual benefit. The economic dimension tends to be the most pragmatic of all the dimensions of city diplomacy, reflecting the self-interest of local authorities in generating prosperity for their citizens.

Cluj-Napoca records, in this respect, the most diversified profile on the economic dimension, articulating several complementary strategies simultaneously. On the line of innovation and the green transition, Cluj obtained the EU Mission Label within the EU Mission for 100 climate-neutral cities, becoming one of the first ten European cities to receive the label (European Commission, 2023). It also participates actively in the NetZeroCities network, through which it develops transferable instruments for the transformation of apartment-block neighborhoods into climate-neutral districts (NetZeroCities, 2024).

Oradea stands out through the most consistent economic city diplomacy activity in terms of verified budgets, concentrated almost exclusively around the twinning with Debrecen. The TRANSBORDER project, implemented between 2019 and 2021 through the Interreg V-A Romania–Hungary Programme, had a total budget of €2.93 million and aimed to improve cross-border public transport through joint planning, new vehicles, real-time passenger-information systems and journey-planning tools (Oradea Transport Local S.A. - TRANSBORDER -ROHU-390).

Iași orients the economic dimension in two complementary directions. On the one hand, the twinning with Houston, with a view to attracting investment and concluding partnerships in the fields of IT, health, and education. On the other hand, the twinning with Seville, from 2017, favored Iași's participation in the Global Smart City Forum organized annually by the Spanish city, in 2017 and 2019, an event dedicated to identifying partnerships on urban digitalization, tourism, and the environment (Primăria Municipiului Iași - Orașe înfrățite).

Timișoara approaches the economic dimension predominantly through instruments of city branding and capital attraction, in the logic of the pull-type activities described by van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007). The most significant example in this respect is the participation, for the first time, in March 2025, in MIPIM, the Global Urban Festival in Cannes, the most important international real estate fair, where Timișoara was the first public administration from Romania to be present (Primăria Municipiului Timișoara., 2025).

The Municipality of Bucharest records the most limited activity on the economic dimension among the cities analyzed, without documented actions of economic city diplomacy at the level of the Bucharest Municipality City Hall. At submunicipal level, however, Sector 2 participates in the EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities (Primăria Sectorului 2, București - Misiunea „Orașe inteligente și neutre climatic"). This initiative falls outside the PMB-level unit of analysis and therefore does not alter Bucharest's assessment in this study.

THE CULTURAL DIMENSION

The cultural dimension, in the understanding of van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007), encompasses the activities through which cities promote cultural exchanges, shared values, and intercultural dialogue with international partners. Similar to the cultural diplomacy of states, cities use culture as a diplomatic instrument, whether through twinning projects with a cultural component, through international events, or through membership in global cultural networks. The cultural dimension has a double function: on the one hand, it consolidates the city's bilateral and multilateral relations, and on the other hand it contributes to building its international image and to attracting visibility and resources.

Timișoara records the strongest profile on the cultural dimension among the cities analyzed, culminating in the title of European Capital of Culture in 2023, the most prestigious European cultural label, which positioned the city on the international cultural map and generated a significant intensification of cultural relations with cities and institutions from all over Europe (Timișoara 2023 – Capitală Europeană a Culturii). Through the associated cultural programme, Timișoara created opportunities for European and international partners to present their cultures as part of a shared European heritage (Timișoara 2023 – Capitală Europeană a Culturii). A second distinct form of cultural city diplomacy is the Timișoara Prize for European Values (Primăria Municipiului Timișoara, 2025) a diplomatic initiative through which the city annually awards a distinction to personalities who promote European values.

Oradea builds a coherent diplomacy around its Art Nouveau heritage, which constitutes both the city's distinctive cultural identity and its principal instrument of international projection (Réseau Art Nouveau Network). Through its active membership in RANN, the European Art Nouveau Network, Oradea is the only city in Romania present in this elite network, alongside institutions from cities such as Riga, Barcelona, or Nancy, which connects it to a specialized European cultural ecosystem. The twinning with Mantua, signed in 2005, had at its origin cultural and entrepreneurial affinities between the two communities and has supported, over time, bilateral cultural exchanges and projects, independently of Oradea's membership in RANN (Primăria Municipiului Oradea - Orașe înfrățite). On the line of heritage valorization, the Oradea City Hall has implemented several projects with European funding and international visibility: the Art Nouveau museum hosted by Darvas-La Roche House represents one of the city's principal heritage initiatives (Visit Oradea). The revitalization of Oradea Fortress was implemented through projects with European funding (Primăria Municipiului Oradea - Proiecte cu finanțare nerambursabilă). The CBC OrDe HERITAGE project, with a total budget of approximately EUR 2.82 million, will transform the historic Husarilor Barracks into a multifunctional cultural centre, in partnership with the Méliusz Juhász Péter Library of Debrecen (Interreg VI-A Romania-Hungary Programme).

Iași structures its international cultural profile around its status as a UNESCO City of Literature, having joined the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2023 (UNESCO), with the International Festival of Literature and Translation (Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române Iași, 2025). Beyond FILIT, Iași also practices cultural diplomacy through its twinning agreements with Poitiers, Villeneuve-d'Ascq, and Chernivtsi (Primăria Municipiului Iași - Orașe înfrățite).

Cluj-Napoca anchors its cultural dimension mainly through the UNESCO City of Film title, obtained in 2021 thanks to the Transilvania International Film Festival, TIFF, the first and largest film festival in Romania, accredited by FIAPF and supported by the Creative Europe program of the European Commission, with over 100,000 participants at each edition and guests of world caliber (TIFF, 2021; TIFF - About the Festival). The Cluj City of Film project was initiated by TIFF and developed together with Cluj-Napoca City Hall and the Cluj Cultural Centre, demonstrating the municipality's institutional role in this international cultural platform (TIFF, 2021).

The Municipality of Bucharest records the most limited activity on the cultural dimension from the perspective of city diplomacy. Membership in the Intercultural Cities program of the Council of Europe, reconfirmed in 2022, reflects an alignment with the values of cultural diversity promoted at the European level, without, however, generating

documented cultural diplomatic activity (Primăria Municipiului București - Acorduri de înfrățire, cooperare și aderare).

THE NETWORKS DIMENSION

The networks dimension occupies a special place in the van der Pluijm and Melissen framework, being the only dimension in which international cooperation constitutes a diplomatic goal in itself, not merely a means for achieving other objectives. The authors distinguish between the traditional forms of urban networking, city twinnings, present since the 1950s, and the more recent forms of pragmatic cooperation through specialized thematic networks, which have gradually replaced the predominantly cultural and symbolic character of classic twinnings with partnerships oriented toward the transfer of good practices, European funding, and influencing public policies at the supranational level. Globally, city networks have gained increasing importance, constituting a form of power based on expertise and moral positions, rather than on economic or military force (van der Pluijm & Melissen, 2007).

Iași records the most extensive networking profile of all the cities analyzed, combining a dense network of active twinnings with membership in multiple specialized international organizations. On the twinning line, the municipality's official list includes 26 partner municipalities and documents numerous cooperation activities, including several carried out after 2015, a remarkable number for a city of this size (Primăria Municipiului Iași - Orașe înfrățite).

Cluj-Napoca stands out through the most productive transformation of memberships into concrete European projects with verified budgets, a model of pragmatic and results-oriented networking. The city is the leader of the Com'ON City project, within the URBACT program, for the period 2025-2028, coordinating a network of six European cities on the theme of youth participation in urban life (Primăria Municipiului Cluj-Napoca - Com'ON City). At the same time, Cluj also participates as a partner in the 2Nite – Liveable Urban Spaces for Safer Cities project, financed through the URBACT IV Programme alongside Turin, Riga, and partners from Spain and Portugal, focused at the local level on the Iris neighborhood and on strengthening perceived safety in public space, a project finalized in July 2026 through a conference in Riga (Primăria Municipiului Cluj-Napoca- Proiectul 2Nite). Likewise, Cluj participates as a partner in DANUBE ADAPT, within a consortium of 16 partner organizations from eight countries of the Danube Region (Interreg Danube Region Programme). It also participates in the EU Mission for 100 climate-neutral cities (European Commission, 2023). Membership in Eurocities, the network of large European cities, materialized through the hosting of the Eurocities 2024 annual conference in Cluj-Napoca, an event that strengthened the city's visibility within European municipal cooperation (Eurocities, 2024). Cluj has also signed, in the recent period, new twinning agreements with Ialoveni, in the Republic of Moldova, in 2025, with Cahul, in the Republic of Moldova, in 2024, and with Chernivtsi, in Ukraine, in 2024, while also maintaining active relations with Braga, in Portugal, since 2018, with Ungheni, in the Republic of Moldova, since 2016, and with Eskișehir, in Turkey, since 2020, which reflects a twinning policy oriented both toward solidarity with communities outside the European Union and toward European partnerships with potential for joint projects (Primăria Municipiului Cluj-Napoca - Orașe înfrățite).

The Municipality of Bucharest records the largest number of formal networks of all the cities analyzed, but also the lowest level of concrete activity derived from them,

the resulting contrast illustrating the difference between formal networking and active networking. The Bucharest Municipality City Hall is a member of METROPOLIS since 1991, AIMF since 1992, Energy Cities since 2008, WeGO since 2012, and Major Cities Europe since 2014 (Primăria Municipiului București - Acorduri de înfrățire, cooperare și aderare). It has also participated in the Council of Europe's Intercultural Cities Programme since 2015, with its participation formally renewed through a new Declaration of Intent in 2022 (Consiliul General al Municipiului București, 2022).

Timișoara builds a networking profile based on the quality and political relevance of the networks, rather than on their number. Membership in Eurocities materialized through the co-organization of the Timișoara Cities Summit in September 2025 (Timișoara Cities Summit, 2025). The event culminated in the adoption of the Timișoara Declaration, which emphasized the role of cities in EU enlargement and supported the European paths of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and the Western Balkan countries (Eurocities, 2025). Participation in the Pact of Free Cities, a political initiative for the defense of democratic values in the cities of Central and Eastern Europe, but also in the Covenant of Mayors for climate, completes the city's profile of political networks (Primăria Municipiului Timișoara, 2025; Primăria Municipiului Timișoara, 2014). Timișoara is a member of the Art Nouveau European Route alongside cities such as Nancy, Riga, and Barcelona (Art Nouveau European Route). In the material analyzed, however, this membership appears less active than Oradea's participation in the same network. The active twinnings include Karlsruhe, Germany, a partnership dating back to 1992 (Primăria Municipiului Timișoara, 2012). Karlsruhe Deputy Mayor Albert Käuflein also participated in the 2025 Timișoara Cities Summit. The twinning relationship with Chernivtsi, Ukraine, became particularly visible after 2022 through municipal solidarity initiatives (Primăria Municipiului Timișoara, 2022).

Oradea represents the most concentrated networking profile in the analysis, with few networks and twinnings in number, but with a remarkable diplomatic productivity. Membership in RANN through Oradea Heritage represents the city's principal thematic networking channel (Réseau Art Nouveau Network). The active twinnings number six: Debrecen, in Hungary, since 1992, Mantua, in Italy, since 2005, Coslada, in Spain, since 2005, Givatayim, in Israel, since 2005, Ceyrat, in France, since 2008, and Băcioi, in the Republic of Moldova, since 2020 (Primăria Municipiului Oradea - Orașe înfrățite). The twinning with Debrecen has generated several Interreg projects in fields such as public transport and cultural heritage, including TRANSBORDER and CBC OrDe HERITAGE (Oradea Transport Local S.A. - TRANSBORDER -ROHU-390; Interreg VI-A Romania-Hungary Programme). The capacity to transform a single bilateral relationship into an engine of productive European cooperation represents one of the most efficient networking models in the entire analysis.

THE REPRESENTATION DIMENSION

The representation dimension constitutes the form of city diplomacy closest to the classic diplomacy of states, encompassing activities through which cities participate in supranational decision-making processes and promote their image and interests before international organizations (van der Pluijm & Melissen, 2007). The authors distinguish between representation within formal political structures, such as the Committee of the Regions at the EU level or the Chamber of Local Authorities within the Council of Europe, and informal representation, through lobbying and advocacy at international organizations. An essential condition for effective representation is the existence of

dedicated institutional structures at the level of the municipality, which ensure the continuity and coherence of diplomatic actions.

Timișoara records the most active representation profile of all the cities analyzed, standing out through three complementary forms of action. The first is the institutionalization of diplomatic representation through the International and Economic Cooperation Service, a permanent structure of the City Hall dedicated to managing external relations, attracting investment, and promoting the city economically at the international level (Primăria Municipiului Timișoara - Serviciul Cooperare Internațională și Economică). The second form is the Timișoara Prize for European Values, a diplomatic instrument through which the city promotes its values and visibility on the European stage through the annual award of a distinction to persons of the first rank, in 2024 the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, and in 2025 the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola (Primăria Municipiului Timișoara, 2025). The third form, and the closest to representation in the sense defined by van der Pluijm and Melissen, is the organization of the Timișoara Cities Summit in September 2025, an event co-organized with Eurocities (Timișoara Cities Summit, 2025). The event culminated in the adoption of the Timișoara Declaration, a position document concerning the role of cities in the EU enlargement process and support for Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and the Western Balkan countries (Eurocities, 2025). Through this summit, Timișoara moved from the status of a city participating in networks to that of initiator of a diplomatic document with European addressability, marking a significant evolution in the city's diplomatic maturity.

Cluj-Napoca supports its dimension of diplomatic representation mainly on the existence of the External Relations and Investors Service, a permanent institutional structure of the City Hall dedicated to managing international relations and attracting investment, similar in function to the eponymous structure in Timișoara (Primăria Municipiului Cluj-Napoca - Biroul Relații Externe și Investitori). Although less visible on the international diplomatic stage, Cluj compensates through the consistency of its presence in European networks, especially by hosting the Eurocities 2024 conference (Eurocities, 2024). It was also a runner-up in the European Capital of Innovation - iCapital 2020 - competition organized by the European Commission (European Commission, 2020).

Oradea builds its international representation predominantly through instruments of city branding, leveraging the international recognition of its Art Nouveau heritage as a diplomatic argument. The most significant example in this respect is the performance in the European Best Destinations 2022 ranking, in which Oradea obtained 1st place in the category "Best Art Nouveau Destination in Europe" and 6th place in the category "Best European Destination", ranking ahead of European capitals such as Budapest or Barcelona (European Best Destinations, 2022). This recognition, although coming from a tourism platform and not from a public institution, fulfills the function of representation in the van der Pluijm sense, managing to position Oradea on the European map and to give it a voice in the international public space based on cultural and heritage excellence. However, no dedicated international-relations office was identified in the municipal structures reviewed, which limits Oradea's capacity to develop this dimension further.

Iași has an indirect form of representation at the European level through the Brussels office of ADR Nord-Est, which represents the wider North-East region rather than the municipality alone (Agenția pentru Dezvoltare Regională Nord-Est - Biroul de Reprezentare la Bruxelles). Representatives of Iași's local administration also

participated, alongside the ADR Nord-Est delegation, in Cities Forum 2025 in Kraków (Agenția pentru Dezvoltare Regională Nord-Est, 2025). At the regional level, ADR Nord-Est is also part, alongside ADR Nord-Vest and twelve county councils, of the Regional Alliance for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, an initiative aimed at supporting reconstruction, infrastructure development, and interinstitutional cooperation (Agenția pentru Dezvoltare Regională Nord-Est, 2025). These activities cannot be attributed exclusively to the Municipality of Iași, but they provide the city and the wider region with indirect access to European institutions and international cooperation networks. By contrast, no comparable permanent city-specific representation office in Brussels was identified in the official structures reviewed for Bucharest or the other municipalities analyzed. Representation therefore remains predominantly indirect and regional, revealing a shared institutional gap and an incipient stage in the diplomatic maturity of Romanian cities.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the five cities reveals a clear distinction between city diplomacy activity that is formally present, through network memberships and signed twinning agreements, and effective activity, translated into projects with budgets, dedicated institutional structures, or diplomatic initiatives of one's own. This distinction cuts across all six dimensions analyzed and constitutes, probably, the most important transversal conclusion of the study. Bucharest illustrates this gap best: it holds the largest number of formal memberships of all the cities analyzed, METROPOLIS, AIMF, Energy Cities, WeGo, Major Cities Europe, Intercultural Cities (Primăria Municipiului București - Acorduri de înfrățire, cooperare și aderare), but the lowest level of documented diplomatic activity. The explanation of this paradox does not necessarily lie in a lack of administrative capacity, but rather in the particular status of the capital, which benefits from structural attractiveness, institutional status, and access to national resources, which reduces the incentives to invest in active city diplomacy, unlike the regional cities, for which international engagement often represents a compensatory instrument of development.

COMPARATIVE TABLE · THE FIVE ROMANIAN CITIES[1]

	Bucharest	**Cluj-Napoca**	**Iași**	**Oradea**	**Timișoara**
Security	Partial	Partial	Active	Partial	Active
Development	Partial	Active	Active	Active	Partial
Economy	Absent	Active	Partial	Active	Active
Culture	Partial	Active	Active	Active	Active
Networks	Partial	Active	Active	Active	Active
Representation	Partial	Partial	Partial	Partial	Active

[1] The three-level scale reflects the intensity of documented engagement on each dimension. Active indicates sustained engagement with concrete, verifiable outputs (funded projects, institutionalized partnerships, or proactive initiatives). Partial indicates engagement that exists but remains limited, reactive, or largely symbolic, without sustained programmatic follow-through. Absent indicates that no relevant activity was identified in the official sources analyzed for that dimension.

Three distinct patterns of city diplomacy emerge from the comparative analysis, most visible on the networks dimension but recognizable across the others as well. Iași illustrates diversity: a large number of twinnings and networks spanning an extended geography, from Moldova and Ukraine to France, China, Israel, Spain, and the United States, but with a relatively modest conversion rate into confirmed funding (Primăria Municipiului Iași - Orașe înfrățite). Cluj-Napoca illustrates systematic productivity through its participation in European networks and programmes, generating concrete projects in digital innovation through SYSTEMEU (Primăria Municipiului Cluj-Napoca - SYSTEMEU), climate transition through the EU Mission for climate-neutral cities (European Commission, 2023), and urban safety through 2Nite (Primăria Municipiului Cluj-Napoca- Proiectul 2Nite). Oradea illustrates intensity: it has relatively few bilateral relationships, but cooperation with Debrecen has generated multiple cross-border projects, including TRANSBORDER, with a total budget of EUR 2.93 million (Oradea Transport Local S.A. - TRANSBORDER -ROHU-390), and CBC OrDe HERITAGE, with a total budget of approximately EUR 2.82 million (Interreg VI-A Romania-Hungary Programme). Timișoara combines the second and third patterns with a component absent elsewhere: the capacity to act as an agenda initiator rather than a mere beneficiary of European cooperation, through the 2025 Cities Summit and the resulting Timișoara Declaration (Timișoara Cities Summit, 2025; Eurocities, 2025). Bucharest, by contrast, remains anchored to a model of formal networking that does not translate into diplomatic activity of its own.

A second factor concerns the unequal distribution of the six dimensions across cities, correlated with two structural elements. The first is geographic and historical proximity to Moldova and Ukraine, which explains the disproportionate security and development activity in Iași, Timișoara, and, to a lesser extent, Cluj and Oradea. Nearly all identified security actions were reactions to the 2022 Russian aggression rather than proactive, sustained policy, confirming the largely reactive character of Romanian cities' engagement on this dimension, unlike the more proactive typology van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007) describe for cities in states with a peace-building tradition. Timișoara is a partial exception: it moved from reactive humanitarian assistance in 2022 toward agenda-setting related to Ukraine's reconstruction through the 2025 Timișoara Declaration, suggesting that diplomatic maturation can begin with punctual crises and evolve into strategy over time (Primăria Municipiului Timișoara, 2022; Eurocities, 2025).

The second structural factor is access to European funding, which functions as a principal vehicle of Romanian city diplomacy across the economic, development, and networks dimensions. This is illustrated by TRANSBORDER under Interreg, SYSTEMEU under Horizon Europe, Com'ON City under URBACT, and DANUBE ADAPT under the Interreg Danube Region Programme (Oradea Transport Local S.A. - TRANSBORDER -ROHU-390; Primăria Municipiului Cluj-Napoca - SYSTEMEU; Primăria Municipiului Cluj-Napoca - Com'ON City; Interreg Danube Region Programme). This finding also tests whether the established six-dimension city-diplomacy framework retains explanatory relevance in a strongly centralized context such as Romania (van der Pluijm & Melissen, 2007). The results indicate that all six dimensions remain identifiable, but their activation mechanisms differ. Because the national framework assigns the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a coordinating role in implementing foreign-policy objectives at both national and local levels, Romanian municipalities generally exercise city diplomacy through indirect instruments, including

twinnings, European projects, and city branding (Guvernul României, 2017). The representation dimension illustrates this limit most clearly: no city-owned Brussels office was identified among the five municipalities in the official structures reviewed, while Iași benefits from indirect regional access through the ADR Nord-Est Brussels office (Agenția pentru Dezvoltare Regională Nord-Est - Biroul de Reprezentare la Bruxelles). This points to a shared institutional gap in direct municipal representation.

The findings are consistent with broader city-diplomacy research showing that effective international engagement depends on adequate resources, specialized expertise, and institutionalization, while many cities continue to face insufficient funding, limited training, and weak formal recognition (Kosovac, Hartley, Acuto, & Gunning, 2020). Timișoara constitutes the most significant exception among the cases analyzed, moving beyond passive beneficiary status toward proactive agenda-setting, a form of behavior associated with the third generation of city diplomacy (Acuto, Kosovac, & Hartley, 2021). The contrast among the five cases further suggests that dedicated administrative structures may help explain variation in diplomatic activity. Timișoara maintains a Service for International and Economic Cooperation, while Cluj-Napoca has an External Relations and Investors Office (Primăria Municipiului Timișoara - Serviciul Cooperare Internațională și Economică). These findings point to the importance of institutionalized capacity, although the present study does not establish a causal relationship.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The study presents several limitations. First, the level of transparency and updating of the official websites differs from one municipality to another, which may affect the exhaustiveness of the available data. Limiting the research to only five municipalities does not exclude the possible existence of other cities in Romania that are very active in the field of international relations but less transparent in communicating these actions through their official websites. Second, access to the full text of some cooperation agreements or protocols was at times limited, which restricted the possibility of fully verifying all the information. Third, although the artificial intelligence tool used was helpful in finding, organizing, and sorting the material, it does not replace manual verification and critical interpretation. In order to reduce any errors that Gemini might have supplied, the information provided through artificial intelligence was verified by the authors on the websites of the city halls. Following these verifications, no erroneous data generated by the prompts used were identified. For this reason, the results should be regarded as an image, as rigorous as possible, of the publicly available information and not as a complete list of all the international activities of the municipalities analyzed.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study has sought to map the city diplomacy practices of five Romanian cities, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Iași, Oradea, and Timișoara, using the six-dimension framework proposed by van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007) ,and to evaluate the extent to which this framework, elaborated on the basis of the experience of cities from decentralized Western states, retains its explanatory relevance in a strongly centralized administrative context.

The results show that city diplomacy exists and is developing in Romania, though structured differently from the Western model underlying the theoretical framework used. The absence of a legal framework recognizing a diplomatic role for local authorities has not prevented these cities from developing external relations, but has oriented them

toward indirect instruments, twinnings, EU-funded projects, city branding, rather than the formal representation channels available to cities in decentralized states. The framework's six dimensions remained analytically useful across all cases, confirming the model's adaptability to institutional contexts different from the one in which it was originally developed.

The comparative analysis reveals a heterogeneous profile: Timișoara stands out for the most mature and proactive diplomatic trajectory, Cluj-Napoca for systematically converting network membership into concrete projects, Oradea for the efficiency extracted from few bilateral relationships, Iași for the breadth of its partner network, and Bucharest for a notable gap between formal membership and effective diplomatic activity. This variation is consistent with broader research emphasizing resources, expertise, and institutionalization as conditions for effective city diplomacy (Kosovac, Hartley, Acuto, & Gunning, 2020). Timișoara constitutes a partial exception through its recent shift toward agenda-setting at the European level, a trajectory closer to the third generation of city diplomacy (Acuto, Kosovac, & Hartley, 2021).

The study contributes to the literature in two ways: it offers the first systematic mapping of city diplomacy practiced by Romania's main cities, addressing an empirical gap explicitly noted in recent Central and Eastern European scholarship, and it tests the applicability of a framework developed for decentralized contexts in a unitary, centralized state, informing the broader debate on how Western models of city diplomacy adapt elsewhere.

Future research could extend this analysis to a larger sample of Romanian municipalities, including smaller cities or those with a different economic profile, to verify whether the patterns identified here hold more broadly. Complementing the documentary analysis with direct interviews with municipal officials responsible for international relations would also help surface motivations and institutional obstacles not visible in public documents. Timișoara's trajectory in particular deserves longitudinal follow-up, to establish whether its recent shift toward proactive diplomacy reflects a durable strategic change or a moment favored by the coincidence of its European Capital of Culture title and the post-2022 regional geopolitical context.

Beyond its analytical value, this mapping has practical utility. Observing how Oradea converted a single twinning into a constant flow of EU-funded projects, how Cluj-Napoca converted network membership into concrete projects, or how Timișoara moved from reactive assistance to diplomatic initiative of its own offers a replicable model for Romanian cities still at an early stage of internationalization. Future research could examine whether such mechanisms are actually taken up by other municipalities, and with what results, turning this descriptive analysis into a starting point for understanding how good city diplomacy practices circulate among Romanian cities.

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BORDER CITIES AS LABORATORIES OF EUROPEANIZATION: CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND URBAN INCLUSION

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Abstract. *Border cities occupy a distinctive position in the European integration process. While they remain embedded within national political and administrative frameworks, they also function as spaces of cross-border cooperation, intercultural interaction, and local experimentation with European values. This article examines how the Romanian cities of Oradea and Timișoara use cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion to promote European identity at the local level. It addresses the following research question: how do different models of urban cultural diplomacy contribute to the Europeanization of border cities, and what factors affect their capacity to generate sustainable and socially inclusive outcomes?*

The study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design based on the analysis of municipal strategies, cultural programmes, European projects, institutional documents, and relevant academic literature. The comparison focuses on five dimensions: urban narratives of European identity, institutional instruments of cultural diplomacy, cross-border and transnational cooperation, the relationship between cultural initiatives and social inclusion, and the sustainability and limitations of each model.

The findings identify two distinct but complementary approaches. Oradea relies primarily on heritage-led regeneration and institutionalized Romanian–Hungarian cooperation, particularly through partnerships with Debrecen and projects supported by European territorial cooperation programmes. Timișoara places greater emphasis on multicultural civic identity, participatory cultural production, and transnational networking, especially through the European Capital of Culture 2023 programme and its legacy initiatives. The analysis shows that cultural diplomacy can contribute to European integration not only by improving the international visibility of cities, but also by reshaping local narratives, institutional relationships, and opportunities for participation.

The article contributes to the literature on urban paradiplomacy and Europeanization by arguing that border cities function as local laboratories of European integration. However, the sustainability of their contribution depends on their ability to move beyond project-based funding, tourism-oriented heritage promotion, and temporary cultural events, while ensuring the meaningful participation of socially and culturally underrepresented groups.

Keywords*: border cities; cultural diplomacy; urban paradiplomacy; Europeanization; European identity; urban inclusion; Oradea; Timișoara.*

1. INTRODUCTION

European integration has traditionally been understood as a process driven by supranational institutions, common policies, legal harmonisation, and economic

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cooperation. However, beyond treaties and formal governance structures, European integration is increasingly shaped through local initiatives that translate European values into everyday practices. In this context, cities have emerged as important actors in promoting intercultural dialogue, democratic participation, cross-border cooperation, and territorial cohesion. As places where local, national, and European dynamics intersect, cities contribute to the construction of European identity and to the implementation of European policies beyond the nation-state (Delanty, 2005; Acuto, 2013).

Among European cities, border cities occupy a particularly significant position. Historically located at the intersection of different political, cultural, and economic spaces, they have evolved from peripheral territories into strategic nodes of European cooperation. Supported by European Union policies and programmes, many border cities have transformed historical divisions into opportunities for institutional collaboration, cultural exchange, and regional development. Their multicultural heritage and proximity to neighbouring countries enable them to function as spaces where European integration is experienced through everyday interactions, cross-border partnerships, and shared cultural initiatives (Scott, 2006; Paasi, 1999).

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined the international role of cities through the concepts of cultural diplomacy, paradiplomacy, and Europeanization. Existing studies demonstrate that municipalities are no longer passive implementers of national policies but active participants in international governance, city diplomacy, and European cooperation (Nye, 2004; Tavares, 2016). At the same time, research on urban inclusion has emphasised that successful cultural policies should be assessed not only through their international visibility or economic impact but also through their capacity to strengthen social cohesion, civic participation, and intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe, 2021).

Despite these important contributions, relatively little attention has been devoted to the interaction between cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion in the context of Romanian border cities. Existing studies generally analyse cross-border cooperation, heritage regeneration, or major cultural programmes separately, while fewer studies investigate how these processes collectively contribute to Europeanization at the local level. Consequently, there remains a need for an analytical framework capable of integrating the external dimension of cultural diplomacy with the internal dimension of urban inclusion in order to explain how border cities contribute to European integration.

This article addresses this gap through a comparative analysis of Oradea and Timișoara, two Romanian border cities that have developed distinct yet complementary models of cultural diplomacy. While Oradea has primarily relied on heritage-led urban regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation with neighbouring Hungarian cities, particularly Debrecen, Timișoara has built its European profile around multicultural civic identity, participatory cultural governance, and international cultural networks, especially through the European Capital of Culture 2023 programme. The comparison of these two cases provides an opportunity to examine how different governance models contribute to Europeanization while promoting urban inclusion.

Accordingly, the article seeks to answer the following research question:

How do different models of urban cultural diplomacy contribute to the Europeanization of Romanian border cities, and under what conditions do they strengthen urban inclusion and the European identity of local communities?

To answer this question, the study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design based on the analysis of municipal development strategies, European

programmes, institutional documents, policy reports, and relevant academic literature. The analytical framework developed in the following section integrates insights from cultural diplomacy, paradiplomacy, border studies, and urban inclusion, operationalising them through five comparative dimensions: European identity narratives, institutional instruments of cultural diplomacy, cross-border and transnational cooperation, urban inclusion mechanisms, and the sustainability of local governance models.

The article makes three contributions to the existing literature. First, it conceptualises Romanian border cities as local laboratories of European integration, highlighting their role in translating European values into local governance practices. Second, it develops an integrated conceptual framework linking cultural diplomacy, urban inclusion, and Europeanization within a comparative perspective. Third, by examining Oradea and Timișoara, it demonstrates that the long-term effectiveness of urban cultural diplomacy depends not only on international visibility and access to European programmes but also on the institutional capacity to generate inclusive participation, durable partnerships, and sustainable cultural development.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical and conceptual framework by reviewing the relevant literature and presenting the analytical model that underpins the study. Section 3 describes the research methodology. Sections 4 and 5 examine the cases of Oradea and Timișoara, while Section 6 presents the comparative discussion. The final section summarises the main findings and discusses their implications for European integration, cultural diplomacy, and urban governance.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that cultural diplomacy, urban paradiplomacy, border governance, and urban inclusion have generally been examined as interconnected but analytically distinct fields. While these perspectives provide valuable insights into the growing international role of cities, they do not fully explain how these processes interact in the context of Romanian border cities. Building on these theoretical contributions, this study develops an integrated conceptual framework that links cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion as complementary dimensions of Europeanization. This framework provides the analytical basis for the comparative examination of Oradea and Timișoara presented in the following sections.

2.1. Literature Review

The increasing involvement of cities in international affairs has fundamentally reshaped contemporary debates on European integration and multi-level governance. While diplomacy has traditionally been regarded as the exclusive domain of sovereign states, recent scholarship argues that cities have become increasingly influential actors in international relations through cross-border cooperation, participation in transnational networks, and engagement in European governance processes (Acuto, 2013; Tavares, 2016). This evolution reflects the growing recognition that many contemporary challenges—including cultural exchange, sustainable development, migration, and territorial cohesion—are addressed not only by national governments but also by local authorities operating within complex systems of multi-level governance.

Within this broader context, cultural diplomacy has emerged as one of the principal instruments through which cities establish international partnerships and promote their identities abroad. Initially conceived as an instrument of state foreign

policy, cultural diplomacy has progressively evolved into a multidimensional governance practice involving municipalities, universities, museums, cultural institutions, foundations, and civil society organisations (Nye, 2004; Bound et al., 2007). Contemporary approaches no longer interpret cultural diplomacy exclusively as a branding strategy or a form of soft power, but rather as a long-term process of dialogue, trust-building, and intercultural cooperation capable of strengthening international relationships while simultaneously reinforcing local cultural development (Ang, Isar & Mar, 2015).

Closely related to cultural diplomacy is the concept of paradiplomacy, which explains the expanding international activities of subnational governments. Paradiplomacy refers to the capacity of regions and cities to establish direct relations with foreign partners independently of national diplomatic structures, particularly in areas such as economic development, environmental governance, innovation, education, and culture (Lecours, 2008; Tavares, 2016). Within the European Union, programmes such as Interreg, Creative Europe, Erasmus+, and the European Capital of Culture have considerably strengthened these forms of cooperation by providing institutional frameworks and financial resources that enable municipalities to develop long-term international partnerships and participate in European policy implementation.

Border regions occupy a particularly important place within this literature. Earlier studies frequently portrayed border areas as peripheral territories characterised by economic disadvantage, geopolitical fragmentation, and institutional discontinuity. More recent research, however, argues that European integration has progressively transformed many border regions into spaces of interaction, cooperation, and innovation (Paasi, 1999; Scott, 2006). The removal of physical and administrative barriers, together with the development of European Territorial Cooperation programmes, has enabled border cities to become important actors in regional development, cross-border governance, and European integration.

At the same time, an expanding body of scholarship has highlighted the importance of urban inclusion as an essential dimension of sustainable urban governance. Urban inclusion refers to the capacity of local institutions to ensure equitable participation in economic, social, political, and cultural life regardless of ethnicity, language, religion, age, gender, or socio-economic status. From this perspective, successful cultural policies should be evaluated not only through their contribution to international visibility or tourism development but also through their capacity to strengthen social cohesion, civic participation, intercultural dialogue, and equal access to cultural resources (Council of Europe, 2021).

Despite these significant advances, existing scholarship generally examines cultural diplomacy, paradiplomacy, border governance, and urban inclusion as relatively distinct research fields. Studies focusing on border cooperation often emphasise institutional partnerships and territorial development, while research on cultural diplomacy primarily examines international image-building and soft power. Likewise, studies addressing urban inclusion tend to concentrate on local governance and social cohesion without explicitly linking these processes to international cultural cooperation or Europeanization. Consequently, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how these dimensions interact within Romanian border cities, where cross-border cooperation, multicultural heritage, and European policies converge.

This article addresses this gap by comparatively analysing Oradea and Timișoara as two representative Romanian border cities that have developed different yet

complementary models of cultural diplomacy. By integrating insights from cultural diplomacy, paradiplomacy, border studies, and urban inclusion into a common analytical perspective, the article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how local governments participate in European integration through culture.

2.2. Conceptual Framework

Building upon the literature discussed above, this study conceptualises border cities as local laboratories of European integration. Rather than understanding Europeanization exclusively as the implementation of European legislation or institutional reforms, the article approaches it as a broader process through which European values, governance practices, and patterns of cooperation become embedded within local institutions and everyday urban life.

Within this perspective, cultural diplomacy represents the external dimension of Europeanization. Through participation in international networks, European programmes, heritage initiatives, cultural exchanges, and cross-border partnerships, cities strengthen their international visibility while simultaneously contributing to the implementation of European objectives related to territorial cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and regional cooperation.

Urban inclusion constitutes the internal dimension of this process. International visibility alone cannot ensure the success of cultural diplomacy if local communities remain excluded from cultural participation or if the benefits of international cooperation are concentrated within a limited number of institutions. Consequently, sustainable Europeanization requires that cultural diplomacy be accompanied by inclusive governance capable of promoting participation, recognising cultural diversity, ensuring equal access to cultural resources, and strengthening social cohesion.

From this perspective, cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion should not be regarded as separate policy domains but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of local Europeanization. International cooperation creates opportunities for institutional learning, cultural exchange, and transnational networking, while inclusive local governance determines whether these opportunities generate durable forms of civic participation, intercultural dialogue, and European identity.

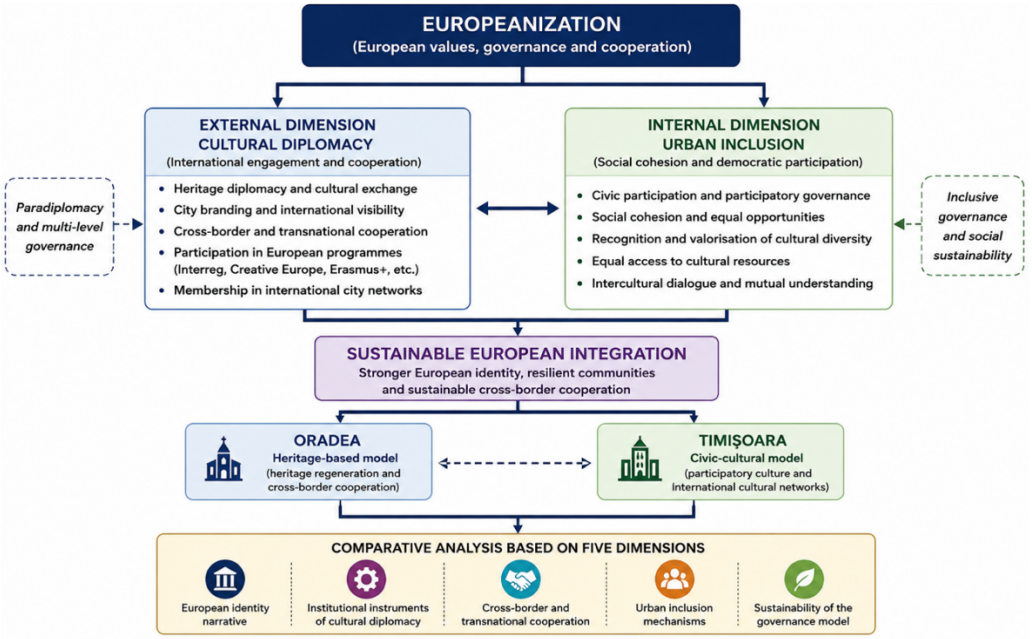
Based on this conceptual understanding, the comparative analysis of Oradea and Timișoara is organised around five analytical dimensions that emerge directly from the literature. The first examines the dominant urban narrative through which each city constructs its European identity. The second analyses the institutional instruments employed to implement cultural diplomacy. The third investigates patterns of cross-border and transnational cooperation. The fourth explores the relationship between cultural initiatives and urban inclusion. Finally, the fifth evaluates the long-term sustainability of each governance model, particularly regarding institutional capacity, continuity of partnerships, and the ability to extend the benefits of cultural diplomacy beyond individual projects or major cultural events.

This analytical framework provides the basis for the comparative examination developed in the following sections and enables a systematic assessment of how different models of cultural diplomacy contribute to European integration at the local level.

To operationalise the conceptual relationships identified in the literature, the study develops an analytical framework that integrates cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion as complementary dimensions of Europeanization. As illustrated in Figure 1,

the framework explains how the interaction between the external and internal dimensions of local governance contributes to sustainable European integration and provides the conceptual basis for the comparative analysis of Oradea and Timișoara.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study



Source: Authors' own elaboration with the assistance of AI.

The conceptual framework is operationalised through five analytical dimensions that guide the comparative examination of the two case studies. These dimensions translate the theoretical concepts discussed above into observable analytical categories and ensure the consistency of the comparative analysis.

Table 1. Analytical dimensions and operational indicators of the comparative framework

Analytical dimension	**Operational focus**	**Oradea**	**Timișoara**
European identity narrative	How the city constructs and communicates its European identity	Heritage-led European identity based on multicultural legacy and Art Nouveau heritage	Civic and multicultural European identity based on democracy, diversity and the European Capital of Culture legacy
Institutional instruments of cultural diplomacy	Main instruments used to support international cultural engagement	Heritage regeneration, Oradea Heritage Foundation, Interreg projects, municipal cultural policies	European Capital of Culture 2023, TM2023 Association, international cultural networks, cultural governance

Analytical dimension	Operational focus	Oradea	Timișoara
Cross-border and transnational cooperation	Forms of international cooperation and institutional partnerships	Long-term cooperation with Debrecen and Romanian–Hungarian Interreg programmes	European cultural partnerships, international artistic collaborations, European institutional networks
Urban inclusion mechanisms	Policies and initiatives promoting participation and cultural diversity	Multicultural heritage, bilingual initiatives, educational programmes, university partnerships	Participatory governance, community-based cultural projects, diversity policies, minority inclusion
Sustainability of the governance model	Capacity to ensure long-term impact beyond individual projects	Institutional continuity through cross-border partnerships and heritage management	Legacy governance, institutional capacity building, long-term support for the cultural sector

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The analytical dimensions presented in Table 1 provide the methodological foundation for the comparative analysis developed in the following sections. Rather than evaluating the two cities according to a single performance indicator, the framework enables a multidimensional assessment of how different models of cultural diplomacy contribute to Europeanization, urban inclusion, and sustainable cross-border cooperation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodological approach adopted to investigate the relationship between cultural diplomacy, urban inclusion, and Europeanization in Romanian border cities. It outlines the research design, explains the rationale for selecting the case studies, describes the documentary sources analysed, and introduces the analytical framework guiding the comparative examination.

3.1. Research Design

The study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design to examine how different models of cultural diplomacy contribute to Europeanization and urban inclusion in Romanian border cities. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on institutional practices, governance models, and policy processes rather than on testing causal relationships through quantitative indicators. Comparative case studies enable a systematic examination of similarities and differences while preserving the complexity of local contexts (Yin, 2018).

The analysis follows the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 and the analytical dimensions operationalised in Table 1, which guided both the selection of documentary sources and the interpretation of the empirical evidence.

3.2. Case Selection and Data Collection

The research adopts a purposive case-selection strategy. Oradea and Timișoara were selected because they are two representative Romanian western border cities sharing several structural characteristics, including multicultural historical legacies,

active participation in European cooperation programmes, and strong engagement in cultural development. At the same time, they have developed distinct approaches to cultural diplomacy. Oradea has primarily relied on heritage-led regeneration and long-term Romanian–Hungarian cross-border cooperation, whereas Timișoara has promoted a civic-cultural model centred on participatory governance, multicultural identity, and the legacy of the European Capital of Culture 2023 programme. These similarities and differences provide an appropriate basis for comparative analysis.

The empirical research relies on qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009). The documentary corpus includes municipal development strategies, cultural policy documents, institutional reports, European project documentation, official websites of local authorities and cultural institutions, reports produced within European cooperation programmes, and relevant academic literature. These sources were selected because they provide consistent information regarding governance objectives, institutional arrangements, cultural initiatives, and mechanisms of international cooperation.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The documentary evidence was analysed through a structured comparative approach derived from the theoretical and conceptual framework developed in the previous chapter. The analysis is organised around five analytical dimensions: (1) European identity narratives, (2) institutional instruments of cultural diplomacy, (3) cross-border and transnational cooperation, (4) urban inclusion mechanisms, and (5) the sustainability of local governance models. Rather than ranking the two cities according to their performance, the analysis identifies different governance models and evaluates their contribution to Europeanization at the local level.

3.4. Limitations of the Study

The study presents several limitations. First, it relies primarily on documentary sources produced by public institutions, which generally emphasise policy objectives and achievements more than implementation challenges. Second, it does not include interviews with local stakeholders or quantitative indicators measuring the social impact of cultural initiatives. Consequently, the findings primarily reflect institutional approaches to cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion. Finally, although Oradea and Timișoara provide valuable insights into Romanian border cities, the results should be understood as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable to other European urban contexts.

4. ORADEA: HERITAGE-BASED CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND CROSS-BORDER EUROPEANIZATION

Oradea represents one of Romania's most relevant examples of how cultural diplomacy can contribute to Europeanization through heritage-led urban regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation. Located only 13 kilometres from the Romanian–Hungarian border, the city has transformed its multicultural historical legacy into a strategic resource for urban development, international visibility, and regional cooperation. Rather than treating cultural heritage as a passive element of the past, local authorities have integrated it into a broader governance model linking heritage conservation, cultural diplomacy, tourism development, and European cooperation. Consequently, Oradea illustrates how local governments can translate European values

into concrete urban policies while strengthening both cross-border collaboration and local identity.

4.1. Heritage, European Identity and Cultural Diplomacy

Oradea's European identity is deeply rooted in its historical role as a gateway between Transylvania and the Pannonian region. Romanian, Hungarian, Jewish, German, Slovak and other communities have shaped the city's cultural landscape over centuries, while Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Jewish traditions have contributed to its religious diversity. This multicultural legacy is most visibly reflected in Oradea's architectural heritage, particularly its exceptional concentration of Art Nouveau buildings, which today constitute one of the city's most distinctive European symbols.

Over the last two decades, heritage-led regeneration has become the central pillar of Oradea's urban development strategy. The restoration of historical façades, public squares, synagogues, pedestrian areas and cultural monuments has substantially reshaped the city's image, positioning Oradea among the best-preserved Central European urban centres in Romania. This vision is reflected in the *Integrated Urban Development Strategy 2021–2027*, which links heritage preservation with accessibility, sustainable development, quality of life and cooperation between public authorities, universities, businesses and civil society (Municipality of Oradea, 2021). Within this strategic framework, heritage is understood not only as an economic resource supporting tourism and urban competitiveness, but also as an essential component of the city's multicultural and European identity.

An important institutional role is played by Oradea Heritage, the municipal foundation responsible for heritage conservation, cultural programming, tourism management and international promotion. Rather than limiting restoration to the physical conservation of monuments, the foundation has promoted the adaptive reuse of historical buildings as multifunctional cultural spaces capable of connecting historical memory with contemporary cultural life (Oradea Heritage, 2024).

The restoration of the Sion Neolog Synagogue represents one of the most representative examples of this approach. Implemented through cooperation with partners from Debrecen, the project transformed a former religious building into an active cultural venue hosting concert, exhibitions, conferences, book launches and intercultural events (Oradea Heritage, 2024). Beyond preserving Jewish heritage, the initiative illustrates how cultural diplomacy can simultaneously support historical recognition, intercultural dialogue and international cultural cooperation. The project also reinforces the visibility of Jewish heritage as an integral element of the city's European identity while creating a shared public space where memory and contemporary culture coexist.

Similarly, the international promotion of Oradea's Art Nouveau heritage extends beyond urban branding. Participation in European cultural networks has strengthened the city's visibility while encouraging a broader reinterpretation of its multicultural past. Heritage diplomacy, however, cannot rely exclusively on architectural restoration. Its long-term contribution to Europeanization depends equally on educational initiatives, multilingual communication and the active participation of minority communities capable of transforming restored heritage into living cultural spaces rather than symbolic tourist attractions.

4.2. Cross-Border Cooperation as Urban Paradiplomacy

If heritage provides the symbolic foundation of Oradea's cultural diplomacy, cross-border cooperation represents its institutional dimension. The long-standing partnership with Debrecen demonstrates how municipalities can establish stable international relationships independently of national diplomatic structures, illustrating the growing importance of urban paradiplomacy within European integration (Tavares, 2016).

Supported by successive European Territorial Cooperation programmes, Oradea has developed extensive partnerships involving local administrations, theatres, museums, libraries, universities, religious organisations and cultural institutions. Rather than consisting of isolated initiatives, these collaborations have gradually evolved into a permanent institutional network facilitating joint planning, cultural exchanges and integrated regional development (Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme, 2021).

Several projects illustrate this governance model. Interreg-funded initiatives have supported investments in cultural infrastructure, artistic exchanges and integrated tourism products connecting Oradea and Debrecen. The EduCultCentre project promoted the shared Romanian and Hungarian cultural heritage through educational and cultural activities, while partnerships involving the Szigligeti Theatre strengthened artistic cooperation through joint productions, professional workshops and investments in cultural infrastructure (Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme, 2021). These initiatives demonstrate that cultural heritage within border regions can be understood as a common European resource rather than as an exclusively national legacy.

The institutional dimension of cooperation has recently been reinforced through the CBC OrDe Heritage project (2025–2028), implemented jointly by the Municipality of Oradea and the Méliusz Library of Debrecen. With a budget exceeding €2.8 million, the project combines the restoration and digitalisation of the Husarilor Barracks with exhibitions, conferences, educational activities, cultural tourism and the development of a joint cross-border cultural strategy (Municipality of Oradea, 2025). Similar objectives characterise initiatives dedicated to the Swabian heritage of the border region, including multilingual digital platforms, thematic cultural routes, festivals and joint promotion strategies addressed to Romanian, Hungarian and wider European audiences.

The representative projects supporting Oradea's model of cultural diplomacy are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Representative Cross-Border Cultural Projects Supporting Oradea's Cultural Diplomacy

Project	Programme	Main partners	Main objective	Contribution to cultural diplomacy
Restoration of the Sion Neolog Synagogue	Cross-border cultural cooperation	Municipality of Oradea, partners from Debrecen	Adaptive reuse of Jewish heritage	Preservation of multicultural heritage and intercultural dialogue
EduCultCentre	Interreg Romania–Hungary	Romanian and Hungarian cultural institutions	Promotion of shared Romanian–Hungarian cultural heritage	Educational cooperation and institutional networking

CBC OrDe Heritage (2025–2028)	Interreg Romania–Hungary	Municipality of Oradea – Méliusz Library Debrecen	Heritage restoration, digitalisation and cultural tourism	Joint heritage management and long-term cross-border cooperation
Swabian Heritage Project	Cross-border cooperation	Romanian and Hungarian local partners	Multilingual digital platform, cultural route and festivals	Promotion of multicultural heritage and European cultural visibility

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Municipality of Oradea (2021; 2025), Oradea Heritage (2024), Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme documentation and project documentation.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate that European integration in Oradea is embedded in institutional practice rather than limited to symbolic partnerships. Cross-border cooperation has evolved into a stable governance mechanism connecting heritage conservation, cultural production, tourism development and regional planning. At the same time, the model also reveals one of its principal vulnerabilities. The continuity of many initiatives remains closely linked to successive European funding cycles, making long-term sustainability dependent on the institutional capacity to diversify partnerships and financial resources beyond individual projects.

4.3. Urban Inclusion and the Sustainability of the Heritage Model

The effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends not only on its capacity to strengthen international cooperation but also on its ability to generate inclusive forms of local development. In Oradea, urban inclusion is closely connected to the city's multicultural character, reflected in its bilingual cultural environment, religious diversity, Hungarian educational and cultural institutions, and long-standing cross-border interactions. These characteristics support an understanding of cultural diversity as a resource for local development rather than as a source of division, positioning Oradea within a broader European border region (Council of Europe, 2021).

This inclusive approach is also reflected in educational and academic initiatives that connect local governance with European debates on social cohesion and border cooperation. A representative example is the collaboration between the Municipality of Oradea and the University of Oradea through the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence EUROINCLUS, which promotes research, education and international cooperation in areas such as social resilience, participatory governance, multiculturalism, urban inclusion and cross-border development (University of Oradea, 2025). Such initiatives demonstrate that universities can act as important intermediaries between European policies and local communities by facilitating knowledge transfer and encouraging civic participation.

At the same time, the Oradea model illustrates the limitations of heritage-based cultural diplomacy. Although the regeneration of historic districts has considerably improved the city's attractiveness and international visibility, physical restoration alone cannot ensure inclusive participation. Heritage sites may remain primarily spaces for tourism and cultural consumption unless accompanied by educational programmes, community engagement and targeted policies addressing disadvantaged groups. Equal access to cultural life requires the active participation of young people, elderly citizens, persons with disabilities, Roma communities, minority organisations and independent

cultural actors, whose involvement extends the social impact of heritage beyond architectural conservation.

Similarly, multilingual communication, although essential in a multicultural border city, should be regarded as only one component of inclusion. Lasting Europeanization requires opportunities for intercultural dialogue, collaborative cultural production and civic participation capable of transforming cultural diversity into an everyday practice rather than a symbolic representation of European values.

From this perspective, Oradea's greatest contribution to Europeanization lies in its ability to transform a historically contested border into a space of institutionalised cooperation. Heritage regeneration has become more than an urban development strategy; it has evolved into an instrument of cultural diplomacy through which European values are translated into local governance. Stable partnerships with Debrecen, sustained participation in European Territorial Cooperation programmes and the adaptive reuse of multicultural heritage demonstrate how local governments can employ culture to strengthen trust, dialogue and regional cooperation.

Nevertheless, the sustainability of this governance model depends on two complementary conditions. First, institutional cooperation must continue beyond successive European funding cycles through diversified partnerships and long-term strategic planning. Second, heritage diplomacy should increasingly broaden its social reach by integrating community participation, inclusive cultural programming and educational initiatives into heritage management. Only by combining external cooperation with internal inclusion can cultural diplomacy generate durable forms of European identity and social cohesion.

Overall, Oradea illustrates a model of heritage-based Europeanization in which cultural diplomacy is institutionalised through cross-border cooperation and urban regeneration. Its experience demonstrates that European integration is not achieved solely through infrastructure investments or cultural events but through the gradual construction of institutional trust, shared historical narratives and participatory governance. At the same time, the case highlights that the long-term success of heritage diplomacy depends on its capacity to remain socially inclusive and institutionally sustainable. These characteristics provide an important point of comparison with Timișoara, whose model of cultural diplomacy is built less on heritage regeneration and more on civic participation, multicultural governance and international cultural networks.

While Oradea illustrates a model of heritage-based cultural diplomacy rooted in institutionalised cross-border cooperation, Timișoara represents a different trajectory of Europeanization, centred on multicultural civic identity, participatory governance and international cultural networks. Examining these two complementary models provides the basis for the comparative discussion developed later in the article.

5. TIMIȘOARA: CIVIC CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND EUROPEAN NETWORKS

Timișoara represents a complementary model of cultural diplomacy to that developed by Oradea. While Oradea has built its European profile primarily through heritage-led regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation, Timișoara has emphasised civic identity, multiculturalism and international cultural networking. Located in the historical region of Banat, close to both Serbia and Hungary, the city has long been characterised by ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. Rather than placing historical heritage at the centre of its European narrative, Timișoara has increasingly

constructed its international identity around democratic values, civic participation and cultural innovation. This approach reached its highest expression through the European Capital of Culture 2023 programme, which transformed the city into an important platform for international cultural cooperation and urban diplomacy.

5.1. Civic Identity, European Values and Cultural Diplomacy

Timișoara's multicultural identity has historically been shaped by the coexistence of Romanian, German, Hungarian, Serbian, Jewish, Bulgarian, Roma and other communities. This diversity is reflected not only in the city's cultural heritage but also in its universities, multilingual theatres, cultural institutions and religious traditions. Unlike many European border cities, however, Timișoara has not based its European identity primarily on its geographical location or architectural heritage. Instead, it has developed a civic narrative rooted in the democratic values associated with the 1989 Romanian Revolution and in its image as an open, innovative and culturally diverse city.

This civic identity became the conceptual foundation of the European Capital of Culture programme. Rather than focusing exclusively on cultural events, the programme promoted diversity, innovation, participation, freedom of expression and critical thinking as long-term principles of urban development (TM2023 Association, 2023). Consequently, the title was conceived not merely as a one-year cultural celebration but as a catalyst for structural transformation within the city's cultural ecosystem.

This approach distinguishes Timișoara from the heritage-based model developed by Oradea. Cultural diplomacy was understood less as the international promotion of historical heritage and more as a process of creating opportunities for dialogue, artistic cooperation and civic participation. The opening programme in February 2023 illustrated this vision through exhibitions, performances, public debates, digital heritage projects and community events involving artists, cultural organisations and audiences from across Europe (TM2023 Association, 2023).

Consistent with contemporary approaches to cultural diplomacy (Nye, 2004; Ang, Isar & Mar, 2015), international cooperation extended beyond cultural representation. Co-productions, artist residencies, partnerships between local and international organisations and interventions in public spaces transformed Timișoara into a meeting point connecting local traditions with wider Central European and international cultural networks. Consequently, cultural diplomacy functioned not only as an instrument of international visibility but also as a mechanism for strengthening civic engagement and European identity.

5.2. The European Capital of Culture as a Platform for Urban Diplomacy

The designation of Timișoara as European Capital of Culture created an exceptional framework for urban paradiplomacy by bringing together local authorities, the Timiș County Council, the Ministry of Culture, universities, cultural institutions, independent organisations, foreign cultural institutes, embassies, artists, donors and European institutions. This multi-actor governance structure considerably expanded the city's international visibility while creating new opportunities for cooperation across Europe.

One of the programme's most significant achievements was institutional learning. The preparation and implementation of the European Capital of Culture required new governance structures, funding mechanisms, communication strategies and partnerships between public institutions, civil society organisations and the private sector

(TM2023 Association, 2023). Rather than being coordinated exclusively through municipal administration, cultural diplomacy developed as a polycentric governance network in which responsibilities and decision-making were shared among multiple stakeholders. Although this governance model generated challenges related to coordination, accountability and financial sustainability, it also increased institutional flexibility and encouraged innovation.

The programme itself was organised around four interconnected pillars: People**,** Places**,** Connections and Capacity Building. Together, these dimensions linked local participation with broader European objectives. *People* emphasised civic engagement and active citizenship; *Places* focused on expanding the city's cultural infrastructure; *Connections* strengthened European and international partnerships; while *Capacity Building* aimed to consolidate the long-term resilience of Timișoara's cultural sector (TM2023 Association, 2023).

Official evaluations indicate that the programme substantially increased Timișoara's visibility at both national and international levels, positioning the city as a regional centre of cultural innovation (Ministry of Culture, 2024). Equally important, legacy initiatives developed under the TM2023+ framework seek to preserve cooperation networks, maintain support for cultural operators and avoid the common "event-year" phenomenon in which international visibility rapidly declines after the conclusion of a mega-event.

Beyond its promotional dimension, the European Capital of Culture enabled Timișoara to connect its multicultural history with contemporary European debates concerning democracy, migration, digital transformation, environmental sustainability, cultural memory and social resilience. In this sense, cultural diplomacy functioned not only as a branding strategy but also as a platform through which the city actively contributed to ongoing European cultural and intellectual debates.

The principal initiatives illustrating this model of cultural diplomacy are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Representative International Cultural Initiatives Supporting Timișoara's Cultural Diplomacy

Initiative	Institutional framework	Main objective	Contribution to cultural diplomacy
European Capital of Culture 2023	European Union / TM2023 Association	International cultural programme	Strengthened European visibility and international partnerships
Opening Programme 2023	TM2023 Association	Exhibitions, performances, debates and community events	Promotion of civic participation and intercultural dialogue
TM2023+ Legacy Programme	Municipality of Timișoara / Cultural operators	Continuation of cultural cooperation	Sustainability of international partnerships and cultural networks
Capacity Building Programme	TM2023 Association	Strengthening cultural organisations and governance	Institutional learning and long-term resilience of the cultural sector

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on TM2023 Association (2023), Ministry of Culture (2024) and official programme documentation.

Overall, Timișoara illustrates a model of civic cultural diplomacy in which international cooperation is generated primarily through cultural networks, participatory governance and institutional innovation rather than through heritage-led regeneration alone. The long-term significance of this model, however, depends on whether the institutional capacities and partnerships created during the European Capital of Culture programme continue to shape the city's cultural development beyond the event itself.

5.3. Urban Inclusion and the Sustainability of the Civic Model

Urban inclusion represents one of the defining characteristics of Timișoara's approach to cultural diplomacy. While the European Capital of Culture significantly increased the city's international visibility, its long-term relevance depends on the extent to which cultural initiatives contribute to civic participation, social cohesion and equal access to cultural life. In this respect, Timișoara has promoted a model in which cultural diversity is understood not merely as a symbolic representation of European values but as an active component of urban governance and community development.

The city's multicultural character provides an important foundation for this approach. Romanian, German, Hungarian, Serbian, Jewish, Bulgarian and Roma communities have long contributed to the cultural identity of Timișoara, while multilingual theatres, educational institutions, religious organisations and independent cultural operators create opportunities for continuous intercultural dialogue. According to the Council of Europe, Timișoara represents one of the most culturally diverse urban environments in Romania, where minority-language theatres, intercultural festivals and multicultural public initiatives have become integral elements of local cultural life (Council of Europe, 2021).

The European Capital of Culture programme further expanded these opportunities by extending cultural participation beyond traditional institutions. Community-based projects, interventions in public spaces, educational activities and partnerships with independent organisations sought to involve broader categories of citizens in cultural life. Practical measures, including the provision of free public transport during the opening weekend of the programme, reflected the understanding that participation depends not only on the availability of cultural events but also on reducing barriers to access (TM2023 Association, 2023).

The programme also encouraged new forms of collaboration between public authorities, universities, cultural institutions and civil society organisations, reinforcing participatory governance as an essential dimension of cultural diplomacy. In this sense, inclusion was approached not simply as cultural representation but as an ongoing process of strengthening relationships between institutions and local communities. Such initiatives demonstrate that international cultural programmes can generate lasting local benefits when they encourage civic engagement and institutional cooperation alongside artistic production.

Nevertheless, the Timișoara model also faces important challenges. The exceptional concentration of cultural activities during 2023 inevitably raises questions regarding the long-term sustainability of the programme's achievements. International visibility generated by a major cultural event does not automatically guarantee the continued development of the local cultural sector. Maintaining the networks established during the European Capital of Culture requires stable financial resources, transparent governance, continued support for independent cultural organisations and the permanent activation of cultural venues throughout the city.

Equally important is the extension of inclusion policies towards groups that remain underrepresented within cultural life. The adoption of strategies addressing the social inclusion of Roma communities illustrates an increasing awareness that multicultural branding alone cannot ensure equitable participation (Municipality of Timișoara, 2026). Sustainable cultural diplomacy therefore requires integrated policies connecting culture with education, employment, housing, anti-discrimination measures and social participation.

From this perspective, Timișoara's principal contribution to Europeanization lies in demonstrating that cultural diplomacy can function as a mechanism of civic transformation rather than solely as an instrument of international promotion. The European Capital of Culture programme generated new institutional partnerships, strengthened international cultural networks and encouraged broader civic participation while positioning the city within contemporary European debates on democracy, diversity, migration, sustainability and cultural memory.

The long-term success of this model, however, will depend on the capacity to transform the legacy of the European Capital of Culture into a permanent component of urban governance. Institutional learning, participatory decision-making, continued investment in the cultural sector and sustained cooperation with European partners will determine whether the achievements of 2023 evolve into durable forms of Europeanization or remain primarily associated with a successful cultural event.

Overall, Timișoara illustrates a model of civic cultural diplomacy in which European identity is constructed through democratic participation, multicultural governance and international cultural cooperation. Unlike Oradea, where Europeanization is primarily articulated through heritage-led regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation, Timișoara demonstrates how cultural diplomacy can emerge from civic engagement, international cultural networks and collaborative governance. Together, the two cities reveal complementary pathways through which Romanian border cities contribute to European integration. These similarities and differences constitute the basis for the comparative discussion presented in the following chapter.

6. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis demonstrates that Oradea and Timișoara have developed two distinct yet complementary models of urban cultural diplomacy, both contributing to the broader process of Europeanization. Although the two cities share several structural characteristics—including multicultural historical legacies, strategic border locations and sustained participation in European cooperation programmes—they differ significantly in the ways cultural diplomacy is conceptualised, institutionalised and translated into local governance. Rather than representing competing approaches, the two models illustrate complementary pathways through which border cities strengthen European identity, cross-border cooperation and urban inclusion.

The first major difference concerns the construction of European identity. Oradea has developed a heritage-based narrative in which restored architectural heritage, multicultural memory and cross-border historical ties constitute the principal resources of cultural diplomacy (Municipality of Oradea, 2021; Oradea Heritage, 2024). Heritage regeneration functions not only as an urban development strategy but also as a diplomatic instrument through which the city promotes European values by preserving cultural diversity and reinterpreting shared historical memory. In contrast, Timișoara has

constructed its European identity around democratic values, civic participation and cultural innovation. Rather than emphasising the material dimension of heritage, the city presents Europe as a living civic project based on freedom, diversity, participation and intercultural dialogue (TM2023 Association, 2023). These findings support Delanty's (2005) argument that European identity is a dynamic social and cultural construction rather than a purely institutional process.

The analysis also reveals significant differences in the institutional organisation of cultural diplomacy. Oradea's governance model is characterised by relatively stable municipal leadership supported by specialised heritage institutions and long-term cross-border partnerships. Cultural diplomacy has gradually become institutionalised through successive European Territorial Cooperation programmes and sustained cooperation with Debrecen (Municipality of Oradea, 2021; Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme, 2021). By contrast, Timișoara illustrates a more networked governance model in which municipalities, universities, cultural organisations, foreign cultural institutes, artists and civil society jointly contribute to international cultural cooperation. The European Capital of Culture programme accelerated this process by creating new institutional partnerships and expanding opportunities for collaboration beyond traditional administrative structures (TM2023 Association, 2023). These findings confirm previous research emphasising the growing role of cities as autonomous actors within systems of multi-level governance and urban paradiplomacy (Acuto, 2013; Tavares, 2016).

Cross-border cooperation also assumes different functions within the two cities. In Oradea, cooperation with Debrecen has become an institutionalised component of local governance through shared cultural infrastructure, joint heritage projects and long-term European programmes (Municipality of Oradea, 2025; Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme, 2021). Cross-border cooperation therefore functions as a permanent mechanism of Europeanization embedded within everyday institutional practice. Timișoara also benefits from its geographical location near international borders; however, its international strategy extends beyond bilateral cooperation towards broader European and international cultural networks. The European Capital of Culture programme considerably expanded these connections by integrating the city into international artistic, cultural and institutional partnerships (TM2023 Association, 2023). Together, the two cases illustrate different territorial scales of cultural diplomacy: one centred on institutionalised cross-border cooperation, the other on wider European networking.

Urban inclusion constitutes a second major dimension through which the two models converge. In both cities, cultural diplomacy extends beyond external image-building and contributes to local social development. However, different mechanisms are employed to achieve this objective. Oradea promotes inclusion primarily through the adaptive reuse of multicultural heritage, bilingual initiatives, educational cooperation and the recognition of historical diversity (University of Oradea, 2025). Timișoara adopts a broader participatory approach based on community projects, independent cultural initiatives, multilingual cultural institutions and policies explicitly addressing social inclusion (Council of Europe, 2021; Municipality of Timișoara, 2026). These findings reinforce the argument that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends not only on international visibility but also on its capacity to strengthen civic participation, intercultural dialogue and equal access to cultural life (Council of Europe, 2021).

Despite their different trajectories, both cities face similar challenges regarding the long-term sustainability of cultural diplomacy. European funding has played a

decisive role in supporting heritage regeneration, institutional cooperation and cultural programming. Nevertheless, maintaining these achievements requires governance structures capable of ensuring institutional continuity beyond individual funding cycles or flagship cultural events (Interreg Romania–Hungary Programme, 2021; TM2023 Association, 2023). Likewise, neither restored heritage nor internationally recognised cultural programmes automatically generate inclusive urban development. Sustainable Europeanization depends on the continuous interaction between external cooperation and internal inclusion, requiring diversified financial resources, long-term institutional commitment and active community participation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by distinguishing between two complementary pathways of local Europeanization. The Oradea case illustrates a heritage-based model, in which European identity is strengthened through heritage regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation. The Timișoara case demonstrates a civic model, centred on participatory governance, international cultural networks and cultural innovation. Rather than representing alternative approaches, these models complement one another by illustrating different mechanisms through which cities translate European values into local governance. In this respect, the findings extend previous research on cultural diplomacy and paradiplomacy by demonstrating that Europeanization is shaped not only by international cooperation but also by the interaction between cultural diplomacy and urban inclusion.

Overall, the comparative analysis confirms the conceptual framework proposed in this article. Europeanization at the local level emerges through the interaction of two complementary dimensions. The external dimension is represented by cultural diplomacy, international partnerships and cross-border cooperation, while the internal dimension is expressed through urban inclusion, participatory governance and social cohesion. Neither dimension alone is sufficient to generate durable forms of European integration. International cooperation without inclusive local governance risks remaining primarily symbolic, whereas local inclusion policies disconnected from transnational cooperation have a more limited European impact.

The findings therefore suggest that Romanian border cities should be understood not merely as beneficiaries of European policies but as active contributors to European integration. Through different governance models, Oradea and Timișoara translate European values into concrete institutional practices, cultural initiatives and forms of civic participation. Consequently, cultural diplomacy emerges not only as an instrument of international representation but also as a mechanism through which local governments strengthen European identity, promote inclusive urban development and reinforce the long-term sustainability of European integration.

CONCLUSIONS

This article examined how different models of urban cultural diplomacy contribute to the Europeanization of Romanian border cities through a comparative analysis of Oradea and Timișoara. The findings demonstrate that cultural diplomacy has become an important instrument through which cities translate European values into local governance, cross-border cooperation and community development.

The comparative analysis identified two complementary pathways of Europeanization. Oradea illustrates a heritage-based model in which urban regeneration and institutionalised cross-border cooperation reinforce European identity through the

preservation and promotion of multicultural heritage. Timișoara represents a civic model centred on participatory governance, international cultural networks and the legacy of the European Capital of Culture programme. Although based on different governance strategies, both models confirm that sustainable Europeanization depends on combining international cooperation with inclusive local policies.

The main theoretical contribution of the study is the development of an integrated framework linking cultural diplomacy, urban inclusion and Europeanization. By distinguishing between heritage-based and civic models of cultural diplomacy, the article demonstrates that border cities are not passive recipients of European policies but active actors shaping European integration through locally embedded governance practices.

The findings also have practical implications. They suggest that local authorities should integrate cultural diplomacy into broader urban development strategies, strengthen long-term institutional partnerships and promote inclusive cultural policies that ensure broad civic participation. European funding programmes can generate more sustainable outcomes when heritage conservation, cross-border cooperation and social inclusion are addressed as interconnected policy objectives.

The study is limited by its reliance on documentary sources and the analysis of only two case studies. Future research could expand the comparative framework by including additional border cities or incorporating interviews with local stakeholders to explore how cultural diplomacy is experienced by different social groups.

Overall, the article argues that border cities should be understood as laboratories of European integration where cultural diplomacy supports not only international visibility but also democratic participation, social cohesion and sustainable urban development. The experiences of Oradea and Timișoara demonstrate that different local governance models can make complementary contributions to the European project while reinforcing the role of cities as active actors in Europeanization.

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CENTRIPETAL AND CENTRIFUGAL PROCESSES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: DYNAMICS OF COHESION AND FRAGMENTATION

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Abstract. *The simultaneous presence of centripetal and centrifugal processes within the European Union configures a complex structural dynamic that shapes both the evolution of the integration process and the fragmentation tendencies of the European political and institutional system. The interaction between these two types of processes reflects the polymorphic nature of the European construction, situated at the intersection between the deepening of supranational integration and the persistence of the interests and autonomy of the Member States. Centripetal processes-manifested through the consolidation of common institutional mechanisms, the expansion of the acquis communautaire, the increasing economic interdependencies, and the progressive institutionalization of common policies-contribute to strengthening internal cohesion and to deepening supranational integration. In parallel, centrifugal processes are generated by persistent economic and political divergences among Member States, by populist and Eurosceptic pressures, by structural differences in development, and by systemic crises (economic, migratory, sanitary, or geopolitical), which may intensify fragmentation and limit the Union's capacity to act in a coherent and unified manner.*

In this context, the present article aims to analyze and highlight the main centripetal and centrifugal trends manifested within the European space, as well as their impact on the future prospects of the European integration process.

Keywords*: centripetal process, centrifugal process, European Union, integration, mechanism, consolidation.*

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The European Union (EU) represents one of the most sophisticated and ambitious regional integration projects in contemporary history, functioning simultaneously as a political, economic, and social actor within a complex system of multilevel governance. As a leading actor in international relations, widely acknowledged for its political influence, economic strength, and normative power, the EU continues to attract significant scholarly attention. It constitutes a unique model of regional integration in which forces of cohesion coexist with dynamics of fragmentation (Börzel & Risse, 2017). Within the academic literature, these dynamics are commonly conceptualized through the analytical dichotomy of centripetal processes, which reinforce integration and institutional cohesion, and centrifugal processes, which generate political tensions, institutional divergence, and tendencies toward fragmentation. This conceptual framework provides a valuable analytical lens for understanding the mechanisms through which the European Union preserves its unity

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despite profound economic, political, cultural, and institutional heterogeneity among its Member States. Consequently, the interaction between centripetal and centrifugal forces has become one of the central themes in contemporary European integration studies.

Centrifugal processes are manifested through the resurgence of nationalism and sovereignist politics, growing divergences in foreign and security policy, recurrent economic crises, structural disparities among Member States, as well as social polarization fuelled by migration and identity-related tensions (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2001). Developments such as Brexit and the sovereign debt crises have demonstrated how these forces can undermine institutional solidarity, erode confidence in the European integration project, and weaken perceptions of a shared European interest, thereby increasing the risk of political and institutional fragmentation.

Conversely, the European Union has continuously strengthened a broad range of centripetal mechanisms designed to foster unity, resilience, and cooperation among its Member States. Supranational institutions most notably the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Court of Justice of the European Union—serve as fundamental instruments of legislative harmonization, policy coordination, and legal integration, thereby mitigating intergovernmental conflicts and enhancing institutional coherence. At the same time, the European Single Market, the Economic and Monetary Union, and the EU Cohesion Policy create extensive networks of economic interdependence and reinforce financial solidarity across the Union. Complementing these institutional and economic dimensions, programmes promoting educational mobility, cultural exchange, and common social standards contribute to the gradual emergence of a shared European identity and strengthen the social foundations of integration (Bachtler, Mendez & Wishlade, 2013).

From a methodological perspective, this study employs a qualitative research design grounded in the comparative and systemic analysis of the principal centripetal and centrifugal dynamics shaping the evolution of the European Union. The research combines institutional analysis with the examination of political, economic, and socio-cultural factors influencing the balance between integration and fragmentation. Drawing upon the conceptual approaches of European integration theory, neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, and contemporary governance studies, the article analyses the interaction between supranational institutions and Member States in order to assess the resilience of the European integration project in the context of multiple and overlapping crises. Particular attention is devoted to identifying the mechanisms through which the European Union adapts to internal and external challenges while preserving its institutional cohesion and strategic capacity for collective action. The analysis is based on an extensive review of the relevant scholarly literature, complemented by the examination of official European Union documents and recent policy developments, thereby ensuring both theoretical rigour and empirical relevance.

The coexistence of centripetal and centrifugal processes transforms the European Union into a dynamic and evolving political system in which forces of cohesion and fragmentation operate simultaneously and continuously shape one another. Understanding this duality is essential for assessing the Union's institutional stability, the effectiveness of its common policies, and the resilience of the European integration project in the face of recurrent economic, social, political, and geopolitical crises. By adopting a systematic perspective on the interaction between centripetal and centrifugal forces, this study seeks to provide an integrated analysis of the mechanisms that shape

the dynamics of European integration while exploring the prospects for preserving and strengthening cohesion within the European Union.

The present research aims to examine the centripetal and centrifugal dynamics that have shaped the evolution of the European Union within a context characterized by profound political, economic, legal, and geopolitical transformations. The complexity of this research subject, situated at the intersection of European Union law, political science, and international relations, necessitates a multidisciplinary and integrated methodological framework capable of simultaneously capturing the factors that reinforce European cohesion and those that stimulate fragmentation within the Union's system of governance (Krippendorff, 2004).

The study is primarily based on documentary research, employing a systematic and critical examination of the principal normative, institutional, and scholarly sources relevant to the subject. Primary sources include the founding Treaties of the European Union, secondary legislation, strategic documents adopted by the European institutions, European Council conclusions, communications, reports and White Papers issued by the European Commission, resolutions of the European Parliament, the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, as well as documents produced by EU agencies and other institutional bodies. Secondary sources comprise an extensive body of scholarly literature, including monographs, edited volumes, articles published in peer-reviewed international journals, reports prepared by international organizations, and analytical studies produced by research institutes specializing in European integration (Bowen, 2009, pp. 27–40).

The documentary analysis is complemented by qualitative content analysis, which facilitates the identification of the principal conceptual frameworks, analytical categories, and interpretative models associated with the centripetal and centrifugal processes of European integration. This methodological approach involves the systematic examination of institutional discourse, European strategies, and key policy documents in order to identify the mechanisms through which cohesion, solidarity, convergence, and deeper integration are promoted, while simultaneously analysing the factors that foster Euroscepticism, political divergence among Member States, challenges to the Union's common values, and the growing tendency towards the renationalisation of public policies.

To enhance the analytical robustness of the research, the study also employs the comparative method, enabling a systematic comparison of the principal mechanisms that promote integration with those that generate fragmentation within the European Union. This comparative perspective makes it possible to assess the relative significance of institutional, political, economic, and socio-cultural variables influencing the evolution of the European integration process, while identifying the conditions under which centripetal or centrifugal dynamics become predominant.

Furthermore, the research adopts a systems approach, conceptualising the European Union as a complex adaptive system composed of multiple interconnected political, legal, economic, and societal subsystems. From this perspective, centripetal and centrifugal processes are analysed not as isolated phenomena but as mutually interacting dynamics whose cumulative effects determine the resilience, adaptability, and long-term sustainability of the European integration project. Such an integrated methodological framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional nature of European integration and offers a solid basis for evaluating both the current challenges confronting the Union and the future trajectories of European cohesion.

The comparative method constitutes another fundamental pillar of the research design. It is based on a diachronic analysis of the successive stages in the evolution of the European Union, combined with a comparative assessment of the institutional responses developed to address the major crises that have shaped the European integration process. This approach seeks to identify both continuity and change in the mechanisms of European governance while evaluating the capacity of the Union's institutions to transform successive crises into opportunities for deeper integration (Sartori, 1994, pp. 131–152).

To complement the theoretical framework with empirical evidence, the study also employs the case study method. The selected cases were chosen because they are representative of the principal dynamics of both consolidation and fragmentation within the European Union. They include the European economic recovery mechanism established through the NextGenerationEU instrument, the EU's energy solidarity policy, the coordination of sanctions adopted against the Russian Federation, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Brexit), disputes concerning compliance with the rule of law in certain Member States, and the evolution of the European Union's migration and asylum policies. Examining these cases makes it possible to assess how contemporary crises influence the balance between integrative forces and disintegrative dynamics within the European Union, while also evaluating the institutional capacity of the Union to preserve cohesion under conditions of heightened political and geopolitical uncertainty.

Finally, the research is grounded in a systems approach, which conceptualises the European Union as a complex political and legal system characterised by multiple interdependent relationships among European institutions, Member States, and the diverse actors involved in international governance. This perspective facilitates the analysis of interactions between the supranational and national levels of decision-making, while highlighting the mechanisms through which European policies shape domestic governance and, conversely, the ways in which political, economic, and social developments within Member States influence the trajectory of the European integration project.

The integration of documentary analysis, qualitative content analysis, the comparative method, case study research, and the systems approach provides the present study with a coherent, methodologically rigorous, and theoretically grounded analytical framework. This multidimensional methodological design enables a comprehensive examination of the centripetal and centrifugal processes shaping the European Union, facilitates an assessment of their implications for the Union's institutional resilience and political cohesion, and provides a robust analytical basis for evaluating the future evolution of the European integration project within an increasingly volatile and rapidly changing international environment.

This methodological framework also ensures a balanced integration of normative, institutional, political, economic, and geopolitical perspectives, thereby allowing for a holistic interpretation of the factors that simultaneously strengthen and challenge the cohesion of the European Union. Such an approach enhances both the explanatory and analytical value of the research and contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving architecture of European integration in the twenty-first century.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of centripetal and centrifugal processes within the European Union is situated within a complex theoretical framework encompassing the principal theories of European integration, institutionalist approaches, and contemporary analyses of the systemic crises affecting the cohesion, resilience, and long-term stability of the European project. The existing body of scholarship consistently highlights the enduring structural tension between forces driving deeper integration and those fostering political, institutional, and societal fragmentation. These opposing dynamics have evolved differently across successive historical periods and have become particularly pronounced during episodes of major political, economic, and geopolitical crisis.

The theoretical foundations of European integration are primarily rooted in neofunctionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism. From a neofunctionalist perspective, Haas (1958) conceptualizes integration as a gradual and self-reinforcing process driven by *spillover* mechanisms, whereby increasing interdependence across policy sectors generates the progressive transfer of competences from the national to the supranational level. In contrast, Moravcsik (1998) advances the theory of liberal intergovernmentalism, arguing that European integration is fundamentally determined by the national preferences of Member States and by rational intergovernmental bargaining. Within this framework, European institutions are not regarded as autonomous political actors but rather as institutional mechanisms designed to facilitate, stabilize, and implement agreements reached among sovereign governments. Nevertheless, critics such as Anderson (2000) and Müller (1999) have argued that this approach tends to underestimate the historical, ideational, and political dimensions of integration, particularly the role of collective identities, normative commitments, and the autonomous evolution of supranational institutions.

The traditional dichotomy between neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism has been substantially reinterpreted by the postfunctionalist approach developed by Hooghe and Marks (2009), which introduces the concept of "constraining dissensus." According to this perspective, European integration is no longer sustained by the permissive consensus that characterized earlier stages of integration but is increasingly constrained by the politicization of European affairs, the growing salience of identity politics, and the rise of domestic political contestation. Building upon this framework, Börzel and Risse (2017) argue that successive crises-including the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis, the migration crisis, and Brexit-have fundamentally transformed the nature of European integration by intensifying the structural tensions between supranational governance and national sovereignty. Rather than constituting temporary disruptions, these crises have exposed the inherent fragility of the balance between integration and national autonomy, making the interaction between centripetal and centrifugal forces a defining characteristic of the contemporary European Union.

From this perspective, recent scholarship increasingly conceptualizes the European Union not as a linear integration project but as a dynamic and adaptive political system, in which periods of institutional deepening coexist with episodes of contestation, differentiated integration, and partial disintegration. This evolving understanding has shifted academic attention from explaining integration solely through institutional expansion towards analysing the conditions under which integration can be sustained, challenged, or reconfigured in response to internal and external shocks. Consequently, the concepts of centripetal and centrifugal dynamics have become central analytical categories for explaining the resilience, adaptability, and future trajectory of the European integration process.

Alongside the major theories of European integration, institutionalist approaches provide a complementary explanatory framework for understanding the stability, evolution, and transformation of European political systems. North (1991) emphasizes the fundamental role of institutions in reducing uncertainty and structuring political and economic interactions through formal and informal rules that shape collective behaviour. Within the context of Europeanisation, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) demonstrate that the diffusion of European norms and legal standards exerts a transformative influence on the domestic institutions of candidate countries. However, they also argue that the effectiveness of this process depends largely on domestic political conditions, administrative capacity, and the willingness of national elites to implement European reforms. Similarly, Bieber (2011), in his analysis of the Western Balkans, highlights the structural limitations of state-building under the EU's conditionality framework, thereby illustrating the constraints and uneven outcomes of the Union's normative and institutional expansion.

Recent scholarship has devoted increasing attention to the dynamics of cohesion and fragmentation, conceptualised through the analytical categories of centripetal and centrifugal forces. Szapáry (2005) and Landesmann (2020) define centripetal forces as the institutional, economic, and political mechanisms that promote economic convergence, market integration, policy coordination, and social cohesion across the European Union. In contrast, centrifugal forces refer to the economic disparities, political divergences, and social cleavages that weaken solidarity among Member States and undermine the cohesion of the integration project. Adopting a geopolitical perspective, Fièvre (2008) interprets these opposing dynamics as characteristic features of integrated regional systems, arguing that long-term stability depends on maintaining a sustainable equilibrium between integrative and fragmentary tendencies.

Empirical research further demonstrates that major crises constitute critical junctures during which the interaction between centripetal and centrifugal dynamics becomes particularly visible. Featherstone (2011) argues that the Greek sovereign debt crisis exposed deep structural asymmetries within the Economic and Monetary Union, intensifying tensions among Member States and challenging the foundations of European financial solidarity. Likewise, studies on Brexit (Hobolt, 2016; Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018; Cebotari & Goreacii-Budurina, 2021) reveal how the interaction between socio-economic grievances, identity politics, and Eurosceptic discourse generated powerful centrifugal dynamics that culminated in the first withdrawal of a Member State from the European Union. These analyses demonstrate that fragmentation cannot be explained solely by economic variables but must also be understood through the interplay of political identities, public perceptions, and domestic institutional contexts.

At the same time, the literature emphasizes the European Union's capacity to generate centripetal responses in times of crisis. Landesmann (2020) argues that although the COVID-19 pandemic initially accentuated national divergences and exposed institutional weaknesses, it subsequently facilitated the emergence of unprecedented mechanisms of financial solidarity and macroeconomic coordination. Initiatives such as the NextGenerationEU recovery instrument illustrate a process of partial recentralisation, whereby common challenges stimulated deeper cooperation and strengthened the Union's fiscal and institutional capacity. This dual development suggests that the processes of integration and disintegration are neither linear nor mutually exclusive but rather cyclical, interactive, and deeply interdependent.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the works of Mann (2010), Tilly (1992), and Giddens (1984) situate the European Union within a framework of multilevel governance and distributed power, in which continuous interactions among Member States, supranational institutions, and societal actors generate enduring tensions between centralisation and fragmentation. Their analyses underscore the inherently dynamic and structurally unstable character of European governance, which rests upon a constantly evolving equilibrium between political authority, economic resources, institutional capacity, and social legitimacy. Within this perspective, the European Union is understood not as a static institutional arrangement but as a continuously evolving political order whose resilience depends upon its ability to reconcile competing pressures for integration and national autonomy.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates that the relationship between centripetal and centrifugal processes constitutes one of the principal analytical frameworks for understanding the evolution of the European Union. Nevertheless, despite the considerable body of research devoted to European integration, relatively few studies have systematically examined these opposing dynamics within a unified conceptual and methodological framework that simultaneously integrates institutional, political, economic, legal, and geopolitical dimensions. The present study seeks to address this gap by developing a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis of the mechanisms through which centripetal and centrifugal forces interact, compete, and mutually shape the contemporary evolution of the European Union.

From a methodological perspective, Bowen (2009) and Krippendorff (2004) emphasize the importance of documentary research and qualitative content analysis as essential methodological tools for the systematic examination of European policies, institutional developments, and governance processes. Documentary analysis provides a rigorous framework for critically assessing legal, institutional, and policy documents, while content analysis facilitates the identification of recurring concepts, interpretative patterns, and policy narratives embedded within official European discourse. Complementing these approaches, Sartori (1994) highlights the importance of conceptual rigour in comparative political analysis, arguing that meaningful comparison requires clearly defined analytical categories in order to avoid conceptual ambiguity and ensure theoretical coherence across different empirical contexts.

Overall, the scholarly literature converges on the view that the European Union is inherently characterised by a permanent tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Nevertheless, existing research remains fragmented with regard to providing an integrated explanatory framework capable of capturing the systemic interaction between these opposing dynamics. While current theoretical approaches offer valuable insights into either the mechanisms of European integration or the dynamics of political and institutional crises, they generally analyse these phenomena in isolation and rarely conceptualise their reciprocal relationship within a comprehensive analytical model. Consequently, the interaction between processes of cohesion and fragmentation remains insufficiently theorised.

This theoretical limitation constitutes a significant gap in the contemporary literature on European integration. It underscores the need for interdisciplinary research capable of integrating institutional, political, economic, legal, and geopolitical perspectives into a unified analytical framework. Against this background, the present study seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship by developing a comprehensive conceptual model for analysing the interplay between centripetal and centrifugal

processes within the European Union. By examining these dynamics as interconnected and mutually constitutive rather than as separate phenomena, the research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underpinning the resilience, adaptability, and long-term evolution of the European integration project in an increasingly complex international environment.

CENTRIPETAL PROCESSES WITHIN THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION SPACE

European integration can be effectively analysed through the interaction between centripetal and centrifugal processes, which together constitute one of the principal analytical frameworks for understanding the evolution of the European Union (EU). In the literature on European integration, these concepts are regarded as complementary yet conceptually opposed categories that describe the dynamics of convergence and divergence among the Member States of the European Union (Szapáry). Whereas centripetal processes promote cohesion and integration, centrifugal processes generate fragmentation and institutional divergence, and the balance between these opposing forces largely determines the resilience and future trajectory of the European integration project.

From an analytical perspective, centripetal processes encompass the set of political, economic, legal, and social mechanisms that strengthen cohesion among Member States by fostering unity, coordination, and cooperation within the European Union. These integrative forces are reflected in the harmonisation of legislation, the deepening of the Single Market, the consolidation of common institutions, and the implementation of shared policies in areas such as agriculture, trade, monetary governance, foreign policy, and security. Equally important is the gradual development of a shared European identity based on common values, democratic principles, and the rule of law, which reinforces the social and normative foundations of European integration.

Conversely, centrifugal processes refer to the political, economic, and societal pressures that weaken the cohesion of the Union by amplifying differences among Member States (Szapáry). These dynamics may manifest themselves through resistance to common policies, the resurgence of nationalism and sovereignty-based political agendas, increasing divergence in economic and social policies, institutional contestation, and, in extreme cases, initiatives aimed at withdrawal from, or disengagement with, the structures of the European Union (Landesmann, 2020, pp. 439–453). Rather than representing isolated phenomena, centrifugal forces constitute structural challenges that continuously test the capacity of the Union to preserve political solidarity and institutional coherence.

Understanding the dynamics of European integration and anticipating the future trajectory of the European Union therefore requires a comprehensive analysis of the interaction between these two opposing processes. In an international environment characterised by increasing economic interdependence, geopolitical instability, and multidimensional political and societal challenges, evaluating the impact of centripetal and centrifugal forces necessitates identifying both the mechanisms that strengthen European cohesion and the factors that generate political tensions, institutional divergence, and fragmentation. Such an analytical perspective not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the simultaneous processes of convergence and disintegration

but also contributes to the formulation of political and economic strategies aimed at reinforcing the Union's stability, resilience, and solidarity.

Among the principal drivers of centripetal dynamics are the European Union's cohesion policy and the Structural and Cohesion Funds, which seek to reduce regional economic disparities and promote balanced socio-economic development across the Union. In addition, supranational institutions—including the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Court of Justice of the European Union-play a fundamental role in facilitating legislative harmonisation, policy coordination, and institutional integration (Neimark, 2024, pp. 174-185). Through their legislative, executive, and judicial functions, these institutions contribute to strengthening the coherence of the European legal order while promoting consistent implementation of common policies throughout the Union.

By contrast, centrifugal dynamics tend to intensify during periods of economic recession, financial instability, social crises, ideological divergence among Member States, or the resurgence of nationalist and Eurosceptic political movements. Under such circumstances, the effectiveness of common European policies may be significantly constrained, institutional solidarity weakened, and the overall stability of the Union challenged (Fièvre). These developments illustrate that European integration is not a linear or irreversible process but rather one characterised by continuous interaction between integrative and disintegrative forces.

To fully understand the contradictions currently shaping the European Union, particular attention must also be devoted to the historical evolution of the European integration process, including the factors that have contributed to the emergence and development of both centripetal and centrifugal forces across Europe. Since the 1950s, the gradual integration of Europe's most economically advanced states has consistently revealed the coexistence of powerful integrative tendencies alongside persistent political, economic, and societal divergences (Gotin & Todykov, 2019). Consequently, the history of European integration demonstrates that periods of institutional consolidation have frequently coincided with episodes of political contestation, highlighting the inherently dynamic nature of the integration process.

Accordingly, any comprehensive analysis of European integration must simultaneously incorporate the perspectives of both centripetal and centrifugal processes. Such a dual analytical framework makes it possible not only to explain the achievements of European integration but also to identify its structural vulnerabilities and the factors capable of undermining institutional cohesion. Beyond its academic relevance, this perspective also provides valuable guidance for policymakers by demonstrating that the long-term success of the European integration project ultimately depends on the Union's capacity to reconcile diversity with unity, manage internal differences effectively, and transform recurrent crises into opportunities for deeper cooperation and institutional adaptation.

THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CONTEXT OF CENTRIPETAL PROCESSES

To achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of **"centripetal processes,"** it is necessary to examine the conceptual significance of this notion. In the specialized literature, the concept of a centripetal process is employed to describe a specific type of social dynamic in which the internal forces of a system—whether social, political, or economic-operate towards a central core, generating concentration, cohesion,

and integration (Scott, 2001, pp. 813–826). This concept refers to the ensemble of structural and behavioural mechanisms through which resources, actors, and influence move from the periphery towards the centre, thereby promoting the consolidation of a central point of attraction and reducing systemic dispersion.

Thus, a centripetal process may be understood as a structural and functional dynamic of socio-political and economic systems through which constituent elements-including resources, power, information, and identity-are attracted, concentrated, and integrated around a central decision-making framework. As a result, such processes generate internal cohesion while reducing the degree of fragmentation and peripheral autonomy. This definition encompasses two interdependent conceptual dimensions (Appendix No. 1):

a) *Structural dimension,* which refers to the distribution and reallocation of resources and power within a system (Giddens, 1984);

b) *Interactional dimension,* which concerns the mechanisms of social, normative, and symbolic attraction through which individual and collective actors orient themselves towards the centre (Mann, 1986).

The analysis of centripetal processes reveals several essential characteristics that contribute to understanding both their mechanisms of operation and their effects within complex systems. The main characteristics of centripetal processes include:

Concentration of resources and power.

Centripetal processes involve the continuous or cumulative transfer of economic, informational, political, or symbolic resources towards the centre of the system. This dynamic produces an asymmetrical redistribution of capacities, whereby the central core becomes the principal locus of decision-making, coordination, and control (North, 1991, pp. 97–112). Within political systems, this concentration contributes to institutional consolidation and strengthens the capacity of central authorities to implement common objectives.

Strengthening of internal cohesion.

The reinforcement of internal cohesion represents the defining effect of centripetal processes, as it aims to consolidate the links connecting the different components of a system. Through social and cultural mechanisms—including shared norms, collective identity, common values, and a sense of belonging—these processes contribute to the stability of the central core and enhance solidarity among participating actors (Giddens, 1984). In the context of the European Union, this dimension is reflected in the gradual construction of a common normative space based on democratic principles, the rule of law, and shared institutional commitments.

Attraction and integration of peripheral actors.

Centripetal processes are characterised by their capacity to attract and integrate peripheral actors through normative, symbolic, economic, or institutional incentives. This orientation towards the centre facilitates greater coordination among actors, reduces political fragmentation, and promotes a higher degree of coherence in decision-making and collective behaviour (Tilly, 1992). In the European integration framework, this mechanism is illustrated by the progressive incorporation of Member States into common policies, institutions, and legal structures.

Reduction of systemic fragmentation.

By consolidating the centre and integrating peripheral elements, centripetal processes reduce dispersion, segmentation, and internal divisions within a system. This contributes to improved coordination of activities, greater institutional effectiveness, and

enhanced functional capacity of the system as a whole (Mann, 1986). In the case of the European Union, these processes support the development of common governance mechanisms and strengthen the coherence of the European project.

Interdependence between structural and interactional dimensions.

Centripetal processes are not limited to formal structures of power and institutional arrangements; they also involve complex interactions among actors, norms, symbols, and institutions. This interdependence generates both formal and informal forms of cohesion, increasing the resilience of the system and enhancing its capacity to adapt to external transformations (Giddens, 1984). Consequently, integration is not merely an institutional process but also a social and identity-based phenomenon.

Therefore, the centripetal process should not be interpreted merely as an administrative phenomenon of centralisation, but rather as a *multidimensional operational mechanism* reflecting both institutional arrangements and deeper social dynamics governing the integration of actors around a coherent central framework. In this sense, centripetal processes represent those dynamics that facilitate the deepening of cooperation among Member States, the transfer of competences towards the supranational level, and the strengthening of internal cohesion within the European Union (Haas, 1958).

Within the European integration framework, these processes operate across several interconnected dimensions:

The economic dimension is expressed through the creation of the Single Market, the establishment of the Economic and Monetary Union, common economic governance mechanisms, and cohesion policies aimed at reducing disparities among regions and Member States. These instruments generate interdependence, economic convergence, and incentives for collective action.

The political dimension is reflected in the gradual development of common decision-making mechanisms, the strengthening of supranational institutions, and the coordination of Member States' policies in areas of strategic importance. The European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Council of the European Union constitute central institutional mechanisms through which collective European interests are articulated and implemented.

The institutional and legal dimension is manifested through the primacy and uniform application of European Union law, the jurisprudence of the Court of Justice of the European Union, and the harmonisation of national legislation. These mechanisms contribute to the consolidation of a common legal order and reinforce institutional coherence.

The identity dimension concerns the development of a shared European identity based on common values, historical experiences, democratic principles, and civic belonging. Although national identities remain fundamental, European identity functions as an additional layer of collective identification that strengthens social cohesion within the Union.

Consequently, centripetal processes constitute one of the fundamental explanatory mechanisms of European integration, illustrating how the European Union has succeeded in transforming a historically diverse set of sovereign states into an increasingly interconnected political, economic, and legal community. However, these processes operate permanently in interaction with centrifugal dynamics, and the stability of the European project depends on the Union's ability to maintain an effective balance

between integration and diversity, unity and autonomy, central coordination and Member State sovereignty.

The origins of centripetal processes are closely linked to the historical context of post-war Europe and the search for mechanisms capable of ensuring peace, stability, and economic reconstruction through institutionalised cooperation. In 1951, the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) represented the first significant example of a supranational mechanism of economic cooperation, placing strategic industrial sectors under joint management and creating a system of mutual interdependence among participating states (Meshcheryakova, 2009). By transferring control over essential resources from the national level to a common institutional framework, the ECSC marked a fundamental shift from traditional intergovernmental relations towards a new model of shared sovereignty and functional integration.

The expansion of this cooperative framework through the Treaties of Rome of 1957, which established the European Economic Community (EEC), constituted a decisive stage in the development of a broader process of economic integration (Meshcheryakova, 2009). The creation of a common market, the gradual elimination of trade barriers, and the development of common policies transformed economic relations among participating states, reinforcing patterns of interdependence and generating additional incentives for institutional cooperation. These developments illustrate the centripetal logic of European integration, whereby initial sectoral cooperation generated pressure for wider forms of coordination and collective governance.

From a theoretical perspective, these centripetal dynamics can be explained primarily through the framework of neofunctionalism and Ernest B. Haas's concept of "spillover." According to Haas (1958), integration in one policy area creates functional and political pressures for extending cooperation into adjacent sectors. The process of integration therefore develops through a cumulative mechanism whereby initial cooperation generates new areas of interdependence, requiring additional supranational coordination and institutional development. In this sense, European integration is not understood as a linear decision imposed exclusively by governments but as a dynamic process driven by the interaction between economic interdependence, institutional innovation, and political adaptation.

A concrete illustration of this mechanism is provided by the establishment of the European Single Market through the Single European Act (1986). By removing internal trade barriers and introducing the four fundamental freedoms-the free movement of goods, services, capital, and persons-the Single Market significantly intensified economic interdependence among Member States. These measures not only facilitated market integration but also stimulated greater coordination of national economic policies and strengthened the role of European institutions in regulating cross-border economic relations (Moravcsik, 1998). The Single Market thus represents a major manifestation of centripetal dynamics, as it encouraged Member States to transfer increasing areas of regulatory competence to the European level.

The phenomenon of centripetal processes within the European space is also particularly evident in the monetary dimension of integration. Through the signing of the Maastricht Treaty (1992), Member States committed themselves to the creation of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the introduction of the single currency, the euro. This decision involved a significant transfer of national sovereignty, as monetary policy responsibilities were progressively transferred from national authorities to the supranational level, particularly to the European Central Bank (ECB) (Müller, 1999). The

establishment of the euro represents one of the clearest examples of a centripetal process, as it transformed economic cooperation into a deeper and more institutionalised form of integration.

The adoption of a common currency created new forms of economic interdependence, strengthened financial integration, and increased the need for coordinated economic governance among Member States. At the same time, it demonstrated that centripetal processes within the European Union are not limited to institutional centralisation but also involve the creation of shared frameworks of action, common rules, and collective responsibilities. Through these mechanisms, the European Union has progressively developed characteristics of a multidimensional political and economic system in which national interests are increasingly embedded within a broader European governance structure.

Consequently, the historical evolution of European integration demonstrates that centripetal processes have been fundamental to the construction and consolidation of the European project. From sectoral cooperation in strategic industries to the establishment of a common market and monetary union, these processes have continuously expanded the scope of collective action and strengthened institutional cohesion. Nevertheless, their development has always occurred in parallel with centrifugal tendencies linked to questions of sovereignty, economic asymmetries, and political divergences among Member States, confirming the inherently dynamic and contested nature of European integration.

From an institutional perspective, centripetal processes are supported by the development of strong supranational institutions capable of shaping, coordinating, and implementing common European policies. The European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) perform essential functions in maintaining the coherence and effectiveness of the European integration framework. The European Commission acts as a central initiator and guardian of European policies, the European Parliament contributes to the democratic legitimacy of the Union's decision-making process, while the Court of Justice ensures the uniform interpretation and application of European Union law.

In particular, the jurisprudence of the Court of Justice has played a decisive role in strengthening the supranational character of the European Union by consolidating fundamental principles such as the primacy of European Union law over conflicting national legislation in areas falling within EU competences (Nugent, 2017). Through landmark legal developments, the Court has contributed to the gradual constitutionalisation of the European legal order, reinforcing the perception of EU law as an autonomous and binding system that integrates national legal frameworks into a common institutional structure.

Another important manifestation of centripetal dynamics is represented by the European Union's policies of solidarity and economic convergence. The EU Cohesion Policy constitutes one of the most significant instruments aimed at reducing regional disparities and strengthening economic, social, and territorial cohesion among Member States. Through the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund, less developed regions receive financial assistance for infrastructure development, education, innovation, digital transformation, and competitiveness enhancement. These mechanisms contribute not only to economic convergence but also to the reduction of regional inequalities, thereby limiting potential sources of political and social tension within the Union (Hooghe, Marks & Buche, 2009, pp. 1-23).

Centripetal processes become particularly visible in periods of systemic crisis, when common challenges generate incentives for deeper cooperation and institutional innovation. During the Eurozone crisis, the European Union responded by establishing the European Banking Union, which introduced common mechanisms for banking supervision and resolution in order to strengthen financial stability and reduce vulnerabilities within the monetary union. Similarly, in response to the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU adopted the NextGenerationEU recovery instrument, representing an unprecedented collective financial mechanism based on common borrowing and coordinated investment strategies. These initiatives demonstrate that crises, while initially generating centrifugal pressures, may also stimulate new forms of integration and reinforce the Union's capacity for collective action.

A further dimension of centripetal processes concerns mobility, education, and social cooperation. Programmes such as Erasmus+ have significantly contributed to increasing the mobility of students, researchers, and academic communities across Europe, strengthening cooperation among universities and fostering transnational networks of knowledge exchange. Beyond their economic and educational benefits, such programmes contribute to the development of a shared European identity by encouraging interpersonal contacts, intercultural dialogue, and a sense of belonging to a broader European community (Hooghe, Marks & Buche, 2009, pp. 1–23).

Thus, centripetal processes within the European Union operate through a complex interaction between institutional consolidation, economic interdependence, social integration, and identity formation. They demonstrate that European integration is not limited to the transfer of competences from national to supranational levels but also involves the creation of common norms, shared practices, and collective forms of solidarity. These mechanisms have enabled the European Union to maintain a high degree of cohesion despite significant internal diversity and recurrent crises.

However, the effectiveness of these centripetal dynamics remains dependent on the Union's ability to reconcile deeper integration with respect for national diversity and democratic legitimacy. Consequently, the evolution of the European project continues to be shaped by the permanent interaction between forces promoting unity and those generating differentiation, making the balance between centripetal and centrifugal processes a defining characteristic of contemporary European governance.

A particularly significant example for analysing centripetal processes within the European integration space concerns the states that have obtained the status of European Union candidate countries. In this context, particular attention should be given to the countries of the Western Balkans, including Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, despite being situated at different stages of the accession process, demonstrate a clear orientation towards strengthening internal mechanisms of adaptation to the political, legal, and economic requirements established by the European integration framework (Börzel & Risse, 2018, pp. 83–108).

This orientation may be interpreted as a centripetal process insofar as institutional, political, and normative resources become increasingly concentrated around the standards and values promoted by the European Union-namely the rule of law, democratic governance, administrative effectiveness, protection of fundamental rights, and economic convergence. Through this mechanism, the geopolitical and legislative periphery of these states gradually aligns itself with the normative and institutional centre of the Union (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). European integration thus functions

as a powerful attraction mechanism, encouraging candidate countries to restructure their political, legal, and administrative systems according to the principles and requirements of the EU acquis.

I n this regard, the centripetal dynamics observed in the Western Balkans are reflected through several interconnected dimensions:

a) *Legislative harmonisation.*

Candidate countries progressively adopt and implement the European Union acquis**,** a process through which their domestic legal systems are restructured in order to comply with European standards and regulatory frameworks. This harmonisation involves profound transformations in legislative priorities, institutional procedures, and administrative practices, reflecting the attraction of national systems towards the normative centre represented by the European Union (Moravcsik, 1998). Beyond the technical approximation of legislation, the adoption of the acquis represents a broader process of political and institutional socialisation, through which candidate states internalise European norms and governance principles.

b) *Institutional transformation.*

Within the framework of accession preparation, central state institutions-particularly ministries responsible for justice, public administration, economic governance, and European affairs—become key centres for coordinating and implementing reforms. These institutions progressively redirect human, administrative, and financial resources towards achieving the strategic objective of European integration (Bieber, 2011). The accession process therefore generates a reconfiguration of domestic governance structures, strengthening administrative capacities and promoting institutional models compatible with EU requirements.

c) *Normative adaptation and Europeanisation of governance.*

The accession process encourages candidate countries to internalise European norms related to democracy, transparency, accountability, judicial independence, and the fight against corruption. Through conditionality mechanisms, the European Union acts as a normative centre capable of influencing domestic reforms and shaping political behaviour. This dynamic reflects the logic of Europeanisation, whereby national institutions gradually adjust to supranational standards in order to gain access to the European political and economic space (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).

d) *Economic convergence and integration into the European market.*

Centripetal dynamics are also evident in the economic sphere, as candidate countries undertake structural reforms aimed at increasing competitiveness, improving market regulation, and integrating their economies into the European Single Market. Financial assistance instruments provided by the EU, including pre-accession funds, contribute to infrastructure development, institutional modernisation, and economic convergence, thereby strengthening the attractiveness of the European integration model.

The experience of the Western Balkan countries demonstrates that the European Union functions not only as an institutional structure but also as a centre of normative, economic, and political attraction. The accession perspective creates incentives for peripheral states to undertake extensive transformations in order to become part of a wider system based on common rules and shared values. In this sense, the enlargement process represents one of the clearest examples of centripetal dynamics within the European integration framework.

At the same time, the effectiveness of these centripetal mechanisms depends on both the credibility of the EU accession perspective and the domestic capacity of

candidate states to implement sustainable reforms. Delays in the accession process, domestic political instability, weak administrative capacity, or insufficient commitment to democratic reforms may reduce the intensity of these dynamics and generate new centrifugal tendencies. Therefore, the European integration of candidate countries should be understood as a continuous interaction between attraction towards the European centre and the internal challenges that may slow or constrain this process.

Consequently, the Western Balkans illustrate the broader logic of centripetal processes within the European Union: the capacity of the Union to expand its normative and institutional influence beyond its current borders while simultaneously strengthening its internal model of governance. The accession process demonstrates that European integration operates not only through institutional enlargement but also through the diffusion of values, standards, and governance practices that progressively reshape the political and administrative landscape of participating states.

c) *Strengthening of internal political cohesion.*

The adoption of a pro-European agenda as a strategic political priority among governing elites and within public discourse contributes to the creation of symbolic consensus and the consolidation of a European-oriented identity. The prospect of EU membership often becomes a central organising principle of domestic political strategies, encouraging political actors to align national development objectives with European values and institutional standards. In this context, European integration functions not only as an external policy objective but also as a mechanism for internal political mobilisation and identity construction. The orientation towards the European project can strengthen societal expectations regarding democratic governance, institutional accountability, and economic modernisation, thereby reinforcing the centripetal attraction of the European model.

d) *External pressures and influence mechanisms.*
The monitoring and conditionality mechanisms established by the European Union-including progress reports, accession benchmarks, and, in specific cases, the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM)-create significant incentives for candidate governments to implement institutional and legislative reforms. Through these instruments, the EU exercises a form of normative influence by linking political and economic benefits to compliance with European standards (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). Such conditionality reinforces the centripetal attraction of EU norms by encouraging candidate states to restructure their governance systems, strengthen administrative capacities, and adopt principles associated with the European legal and political order.

Therefore, centripetal processes in the Western Balkans extend far beyond administrative adaptation; they represent complex dynamics involving the redistribution of resources, the diffusion of norms, and the transformation of political identities. Through the accession process, candidate states progressively orient themselves towards the institutional and normative core of the European Union, adapting their political, legal, and economic systems to the requirements of membership. These processes demonstrate both the necessity of internalising convergence criteria and the transformative impact that such criteria exert on domestic governance structures, political cohesion, and reform trajectories.

More broadly, centripetal processes constitute a fundamental element in the historical and contemporary evolution of the European Union. They are expressed through the deepening of economic integration, the development and consolidation of

supranational institutions, the strengthening of financial solidarity mechanisms, and the expansion of interdependence among Member States. These processes have enabled the EU to transform a group of sovereign states with diverse historical experiences and national interests into a highly interconnected political, economic, and legal community.

Concrete examples-including the European Single Market, the single currency (the euro), the European Banking Union, cohesion funds, and programmes such as Erasmus+-demonstrate the capacity of the European Union to preserve and expand cooperation even under conditions of significant economic, political, and geopolitical challenges. These mechanisms illustrate how centripetal dynamics operate not only through institutional centralisation but also through the creation of shared interests, common regulatory frameworks, and forms of solidarity that reinforce the long-term sustainability of the European integration project.

Nevertheless, the strength and effectiveness of centripetal processes remain dependent on the Union's ability to maintain a balance between deeper integration and respect for Member States' diversity. The European experience demonstrates that cohesion cannot be achieved solely through institutional mechanisms; it also requires political legitimacy, social support, and the continuous reproduction of shared values. Consequently, the future of European integration will largely depend on the capacity of the Union to transform centripetal forces into sustainable mechanisms of solidarity while managing the centrifugal pressures generated by economic inequalities, identity conflicts, and divergent national interests.

THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CONTEXT OF CENTRIFUGAL PROCESSES

Unlike centripetal processes, which, according to Stein Rokkan, represent dynamics oriented towards a central core that generate concentration, cohesion, and integration, centrifugal processes refer to a set of forces and dynamics that tend to fragment, weaken, or limit the deepening of European integration. These processes reveal the tensions existing among Member States, the divergence of national interests, as well as economic, political, and cultural disparities that may undermine the internal cohesion of the European Union. Such dynamics emerge when national priorities, economic asymmetries, political disagreements, or societal pressures come into conflict with the collective objectives of the Union (Hooghe, Marks & Buche, 2009, pp. 1–23).

Within the framework of European integration, centrifugal processes are manifested through various tendencies, including the reaffirmation of national sovereignty, the strengthening of Eurosceptic movements, conflicts regarding the distribution of competences between national and supranational levels, and disagreements over common European policies. Furthermore, economic, migration-related, or political crises may intensify these dynamics by encouraging Member States to prioritise national responses over collective European solutions. Consequently, centrifugal processes highlight the structural limitations and challenges of European integration, demonstrating that the European Union constitutes a complex political system in which the dynamics of integration are continuously shaped by the interaction between forces of cohesion and forces of fragmentation.

In contrast to centripetal dynamics, which promote convergence and institutional consolidation, centrifugal processes within the European space operate across multiple levels and reveal tensions capable of weakening institutional cohesion and solidarity among Member States. At the political level, the rise of nationalism and sovereignty-

oriented political movements in certain Member States, particularly Hungary and Poland, has generated significant conflicts with European institutions regarding compliance with the principles of the rule of law, judicial independence, and the limits of national sovereignty within the EU legal order. These developments illustrate the tension between national democratic mandates and supranational commitments, highlighting one of the fundamental contradictions of the European integration model.

The fragmentation of European party systems and the growing influence of Eurosceptic political formations, such as the National Rally (Rassemblement National) in France and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, have further intensified centrifugal pressures within the Union. These political forces challenge aspects of European integration, question the legitimacy of certain EU policies, and exert pressure on collective decision-making processes, thereby complicating the adoption of coherent common positions at the European Parliament level (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018). The increasing politicisation of European issues at the domestic level has transformed the EU from a largely technocratic integration project into a contested political arena, where competing visions of Europe coexist and confront one another.

Another significant manifestation of centrifugal processes concerns divergences in foreign policy and security strategies among Member States. Despite the development of mechanisms for cooperation within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Member States continue to demonstrate different strategic priorities, threat perceptions, and geopolitical orientations. These divergences are particularly visible in debates concerning relations with external actors, defence cooperation, energy security, and responses to international crises. Differences in national approaches may limit the Union's ability to formulate unified external positions and reduce its strategic autonomy as a global actor.

Economic disparities also represent an important source of centrifugal dynamics within the European Union. Differences in levels of development, fiscal capacities, competitiveness, and social welfare systems between Member States create asymmetries that may weaken perceptions of solidarity and generate tensions regarding the distribution of financial responsibilities. The sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone revealed structural divisions between creditor and debtor countries, demonstrating how economic imbalances can translate into political disagreements and challenges to mutual trust among Member States.

Similarly, migration and asylum policies have become a major arena of centrifugal tensions. Divergent national approaches to migration management, border control, and refugee redistribution have exposed significant differences between Member States regarding solidarity mechanisms and the balance between national responsibility and collective European action. These disagreements have contributed to the strengthening of nationalist narratives and have challenged the Union's capacity to develop common solutions to transnational problems.

Therefore, centrifugal processes should not be interpreted merely as factors of disintegration but rather as structural features of the European integration process. They reflect the persistent tension between the logic of supranational integration and the preservation of national sovereignty, between common European objectives and differentiated national interests. The European Union's resilience depends largely on its ability to manage these centrifugal pressures through institutional adaptation, political dialogue, and mechanisms capable of reconciling diversity with unity.

In this sense, the coexistence of centripetal and centrifugal dynamics represents a defining characteristic of the European integration model. While centripetal forces provide the foundations for cooperation, solidarity, and institutional consolidation, centrifugal forces reveal unresolved contradictions and limits within the European project. The future trajectory of the Union will therefore depend on its capacity to transform internal tensions into opportunities for reform, ensuring that diversity among Member States becomes a source of resilience rather than a factor of fragmentation.

Uneven responses to relations with the Russian Federation-particularly following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022-have highlighted significant differences among Member States regarding foreign policy priorities and security perceptions. While many Eastern European countries have advocated for a more restrictive approach towards Moscow, including stronger sanctions and enhanced deterrence measures, certain Western European states have historically maintained deeper economic interdependencies, particularly in the energy sector. Similarly, divergent positions concerning Chinese investments, strategic economic dependencies, and the nature of cooperation with the United States of America have intensified internal debates and complicated the emergence of a unified European foreign policy approach (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2018). These differences illustrate the persistence of centrifugal dynamics within the EU's external action, where national strategic interests may sometimes prevail over collective European objectives.

At the economic level, centrifugal processes are manifested through structural asymmetries among Member States, particularly between the more competitive northern European economies, characterised by higher productivity and trade surpluses, and the southern European economies, which have experienced slower economic growth, higher unemployment rates, and greater fiscal vulnerabilities. These economic disparities represent a significant source of tension within the Union, as they influence perceptions of solidarity, burden-sharing, and the legitimacy of common economic governance mechanisms.

The Eurozone crisis (2009–2012) revealed these structural divisions particularly clearly, exposing tensions between northern European states, often perceived as "creditor countries," such as Germany and the Netherlands, and southern European states, including Greece, Spain, and Portugal, which were more severely affected by sovereign debt pressures and were perceived as "debtor countries" (Featherstone, 2011). Disagreements over fiscal discipline, budgetary redistribution, financial assistance mechanisms, and austerity policies generated substantial domestic political pressures in affected countries, contributing to the rise of Euroscepticism and opposition to certain aspects of European integration (Szapáry & Vonnák, 2024). This experience demonstrates how economic divergences can transform into broader political and social tensions, thereby reinforcing centrifugal tendencies and challenging the cohesion of the European project.

Centrifugal processes are also evident in the field of the rule of law and the protection of fundamental European values. Conflicts between the European Union and certain Member States, particularly Hungary and Poland, concerning judicial independence, media freedom, constitutional reforms, and compliance with democratic standards have resulted in infringement procedures, legal disputes, and financial conditionality mechanisms. These tensions demonstrate how divergences in political orientations and institutional practices can weaken mutual trust among Member States,

challenge the authority of common European norms, and strengthen centrifugal forces within the Union.

From a social and cultural perspective, migration, identity-related tensions, and the growth of Eurosceptic attitudes represent important centrifugal dynamics that contribute to political polarisation and resistance to deeper integration. The migration crisis of 2015 revealed significant differences among Member States regarding approaches to asylum policy, refugee redistribution, border management, and humanitarian responsibility. While several Western European countries demonstrated greater willingness to accept refugees and support common European relocation mechanisms, some Central and Eastern European states strongly opposed mandatory distribution quotas, emphasising national sovereignty and domestic security concerns. These disagreements generated tensions surrounding identity, cultural change, and national autonomy, reinforcing opposition to common European policies and intensifying centrifugal dynamics within intergovernmental relations (Hobolt, 2016).

Furthermore, the perception of the European Union as a distant and overly bureaucratic entity, combined with tensions between national legislation and European legal requirements, contributes to weakening institutional legitimacy and reinforcing centrifugal tendencies. A significant number of citizens and political actors criticise what they perceive as a "democratic deficit" within the Union or argue that European regulations may interfere with national traditions, legal systems, and political autonomy. Such perceptions contribute to the strengthening of Eurosceptic narratives and create resistance to further integration.

Another important manifestation of centrifugal dynamics is represented by differentiated integration and opt-out mechanisms. Although these arrangements provide flexibility and allow Member States to participate in European integration according to their specific political and economic circumstances, they also illustrate the fragmented nature of the integration process. For example, Denmark and Sweden have not adopted the euro, while Ireland has maintained specific arrangements regarding participation in certain areas of European cooperation. These differentiated forms of participation demonstrate that the European Union does not develop through a uniform model of integration but rather through multiple levels of engagement and variable geometries of cooperation.

While differentiated integration can function as a pragmatic solution for accommodating national diversity and preventing complete blockage of collective action, it simultaneously highlights the structural limits of the European integration project. The existence of different levels of commitment among Member States reflects the permanent tension between the objectives of unity and the realities of political diversity within the Union.

Therefore, centrifugal processes within the European Union should be understood as multidimensional phenomena operating across political, economic, institutional, social, and cultural spheres. They do not necessarily indicate an inevitable process of disintegration but rather reveal the challenges inherent in governing a complex political system composed of diverse states with distinct historical experiences, interests, and identities. The resilience of the European project depends on the Union's capacity to transform these centrifugal pressures into mechanisms of adaptation, dialogue, and institutional reform while preserving the fundamental balance between unity and diversity.

A clear and highly significant example of a centrifugal process within the European integration framework is represented by Brexit, through which the United Kingdom decided to withdraw from the European Union following the referendum held in 2016. This decision resulted from a complex combination of political, economic, and societal factors, including perceptions of the erosion of national sovereignty, dissatisfaction with European migration policies, and opposition to the United Kingdom's financial contributions to the EU budget (Moravcsik, 1998).

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, commonly referred to as "Brexit"-an abbreviation of *British exit*—represents one of the most significant and far-reaching political processes affecting contemporary Europe (Medar). It constituted the first case of a Member State leaving the European Union and therefore marked a major institutional and political precedent in the history of European integration.

The legal framework governing withdrawal from the European Union was established by the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) through the introduction of Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). According to this provision, "any Member State may decide to withdraw from the Union in accordance with its own constitutional requirements." Once a Member State chooses to withdraw, it must negotiate an agreement establishing the arrangements for its departure, while also taking into account the framework of its future relationship with the Union (Popovici). The inclusion of Article 50 reflected the recognition that European integration, despite its objective of creating an increasingly close union among European states, remains based on the voluntary participation of sovereign states.

The organisation of a referendum on the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU was announced as an electoral commitment by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron in early 2013. At that time, many European leaders, including the British Prime Minister himself, remained confident that the electorate would support continued membership of the Union. However, the referendum held on 23 June 2016 produced an unexpected outcome: 51.9% of voters supported leaving the European Union, while 48.1% voted in favour of remaining (Technical Note).

The referendum result revealed significant territorial and political divisions within the United Kingdom. While England and Wales voted in favour of withdrawal, Scotland and Northern Ireland supported continued EU membership. This internal fragmentation demonstrated that Brexit was not only a manifestation of tensions between the national and supranational levels but also reflected competing visions of identity, sovereignty, and political belonging within the United Kingdom itself.

Following the referendum result, David Cameron resigned as Prime Minister, and Theresa May assumed responsibility for negotiating the withdrawal process. The political debate surrounding Brexit revealed three major categories of arguments supporting withdrawal: economic, political, and security-related considerations.

From an *economic perspective*, supporters of Brexit emphasised the restoration of national control over budgetary decisions, trade policies, and regulatory frameworks. They argued that leaving the EU would allow the United Kingdom to regain greater autonomy in determining economic priorities and international trade relations. Conversely, opponents of withdrawal highlighted the economic interdependence created by EU membership and the potential costs associated with leaving the Single Market and European regulatory structures.

From a *political perspective,* Brexit was strongly associated with debates regarding sovereignty, democratic accountability, and the distribution of competences

between national institutions and European bodies. The withdrawal movement was largely driven by the perception among segments of British society and political elites that EU institutions exercised excessive influence over domestic decision-making processes. In this sense, Brexit reflected a broader centrifugal tendency centred on the reassertion of national sovereignty against supranational integration.

From a *security and identity perspective,* debates surrounding migration, border control, and national identity played a crucial role in shaping public attitudes. Concerns regarding the free movement of persons and the capacity of national authorities to regulate migration flows became central elements of the withdrawal discourse, illustrating how identity-related issues can generate pressures against deeper integration.

The formal withdrawal process was initiated on 29 March 2017 through the activation of Article 50 TEU. After extensive negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union, a political agreement on the terms of withdrawal was reached in October 2019 between the UK and the remaining 27 EU Member States. The agreement was subsequently approved by both European and British institutions and entered into force on 1 February 2020 (Cebotari & Goreacii-Budurina).

Brexit represents a paradigmatic case of a centrifugal process because it illustrates the tension between national sovereignty and the logic of supranational integration. It demonstrated that European integration, despite its institutional depth and economic interdependence, remains vulnerable to political dynamics generated at the national level. The British withdrawal revealed the limits of the integrative model based on the progressive transfer of competences to the European level and highlighted the persistent importance of national identities, domestic political preferences, and perceptions of sovereignty.

At the same time, Brexit also generated a paradoxical effect: while it represented a major centrifugal shock for the European Union, it also encouraged stronger internal cohesion among the remaining Member States. The withdrawal of the United Kingdom stimulated debates regarding the future of European integration, strategic autonomy, and institutional reform, demonstrating that centrifugal processes may simultaneously weaken and reshape the European project. Therefore, Brexit should be understood not merely as an act of withdrawal by a single Member State but as a complex manifestation of the structural tension between integration and differentiation, European solidarity and national autonomy, and centripetal and centrifugal forces that continue to define the evolution of the European Union.

Thus, centrifugal processes within the European Union represent a concrete reality rather than merely a theoretical construct, manifesting themselves through political, economic, and social divergences that reveal the limits of European consensus and the challenges associated with maintaining institutional unity and solidarity among Member States. These processes constitute a structural component of the European integration system and emerge in response to various internal pressures, whether economic, political, institutional, or societal in nature.

Examples such as Brexit, the Eurozone crisis, disputes concerning the rule of law, and the migration crisis demonstrate how internal tensions may constrain the deepening of integration and generate temporary fractures within the Union. These cases highlight the fact that European integration is not a linear or irreversible process but rather a dynamic and contested phenomenon shaped by the permanent interaction between forces of cohesion and forces of fragmentation.

Nevertheless, the European Union has developed a wide range of adaptive mechanisms aimed at managing centrifugal pressures and preventing systemic disintegration. These mechanisms include differentiated integration arrangements, legal and financial conditionality instruments, as well as economic solidarity mechanisms designed to maintain cooperation despite divergent national interests and unequal levels of commitment among Member States. Through these instruments, the EU demonstrates a capacity for institutional flexibility and resilience, allowing the continuation of the integration process while accommodating internal diversity (Szapáry, 2005, pp. 118–129).

Differentiated integration, although sometimes perceived as a manifestation of fragmentation, can also function as a pragmatic mechanism that enables Member States with different political preferences and economic capacities to participate in the European project at varying levels of intensity. Similarly, legal procedures and financial conditionality mechanisms provide instruments for safeguarding common values and ensuring compliance with fundamental principles of the Union, particularly regarding democracy and the rule of law.

Economic solidarity instruments, including cohesion policies, recovery funds, and common financial mechanisms, contribute to mitigating structural inequalities and reducing the risk that economic disparities transform into deeper political divisions. These measures demonstrate that centrifugal pressures do not necessarily lead to disintegration; rather, they may stimulate institutional innovation and encourage the development of new forms of cooperation.

Consequently, centrifugal processes should be understood as an inherent and permanent feature of the European Union's political system, reflecting the complexity of governing a highly integrated yet diverse community of states. Their existence does not necessarily undermine the European project but reveals the necessity of continuous adaptation, negotiation, and institutional reform. The long-term stability of the Union depends on its ability to transform centrifugal tensions into constructive dynamics, preserving the balance between unity and diversity, supranational integration and national sovereignty, cohesion and differentiation.

CONCLUSIONS

Centripetal and centrifugal processes within the European Union represent two complementary dimensions of the dynamics of European integration, illustrating both the forces that strengthen cohesion and those that generate fragmentation. The European Union operates as a complex and adaptive system in which decision-making centralisation, common norms, and supranational institutions function as centripetal vectors, while economic disparities, nationalist political tensions, and cultural differences act as centrifugal forces. This duality demonstrates that the EU cannot be perceived as a homogeneous or monolithic entity, but rather as a political space in which cohesion and fragmentation coexist within an unstable and constantly evolving equilibrium.

Economic factors play a decisive role in shaping these dynamics. Structural disparities among Member States and regions generate centrifugal pressures that may weaken perceptions of fairness, solidarity, and legitimacy within the integration process. At the same time, common economic governance instruments, cohesion policies, structural funds, and convergence programmes represent important centripetal mechanisms that promote economic proximity, interdependence, and solidarity among Member States. This interaction demonstrates that the sustainability of European

integration depends on the ability to maintain a balance between economic harmonisation and respect for regional diversity.

The political and institutional dimension reveals a similar complexity. European institutions, through common norms, legal mechanisms, and regulatory frameworks, operate as centripetal forces by reducing legislative fragmentation, ensuring the uniform application of European law, and facilitating collective decision-making. However, the rise of Euroscepticism, sovereignty-oriented political movements, and nationalist approaches constitutes a significant centrifugal force challenging the resilience of political cohesion within the Union. In this context, the European Union is continuously required to negotiate the relationship between supranational authority and national autonomy, maintaining a delicate balance between unity and diversity.

Socio-cultural processes reflect the same duality. Academic and professional mobility, cultural exchange programmes, and the promotion of common European values contribute to strengthening social cohesion and developing a transnational European identity. Initiatives such as educational cooperation and cross-border interaction create networks of solidarity that transcend national boundaries. At the same time, linguistic, historical, and cultural differences continue to generate diverse interpretations of common interests and collective priorities, acting as centrifugal factors. Sustainable cohesion therefore requires policies capable of recognising and integrating identity diversity while preserving attachment to the European project.

The analysis demonstrates that centripetal and centrifugal processes do not operate independently; rather, they are mutually interconnected and continuously influence one another. The deepening of economic and institutional integration may generate new political tensions, while centrifugal pressures may stimulate centripetal responses through institutional reforms, solidarity mechanisms, and renewed forms of cooperation. European integration therefore cannot be understood as a linear progression either towards complete unity or towards fragmentation, but rather as a cyclical and interdependent process shaped by the interaction of internal and external factors.

The contemporary evolution of the European Union confirms that its resilience derives precisely from its capacity to manage these opposing dynamics. The coexistence of centripetal and centrifugal forces is not an anomaly but an inherent characteristic of a political system composed of diverse sovereign states sharing common institutions, norms, and strategic objectives. The future of European integration will depend on the Union's ability to transform tensions into mechanisms of adaptation, ensuring that diversity becomes a source of strength rather than a factor of division.

Ultimately, the balance between centripetal and centrifugal processes represents one of the fundamental conditions for the sustainability of the European project. The Union's capacity to preserve solidarity, reinforce institutional legitimacy, and respond collectively to crises will determine its ability to remain a coherent and influential actor in the international system. Consequently, centripetal and centrifugal processes demonstrate that the European Union constitutes a system in continuous evolution, whose stability depends on the capacity of political, institutional, and societal actors to manage tensions between the centre and the periphery. The sustainability of the European project requires the continuous strengthening of mechanisms of economic, political, and cultural cohesion, while simultaneously recognising and accommodating the centrifugal forces generated by national and regional diversity.

This perspective highlights that European integration cannot be understood solely as a uniform process of institutional centralisation or the progressive transfer of

competences towards the supranational level. Rather, it represents a complex and dynamic equilibrium between convergence and pluralism, between the pursuit of common objectives and the preservation of the specific identities, interests, and development trajectories of Member States and regions.

The long-term resilience of the European Union depends therefore on its ability to reconcile these apparently contradictory imperatives: deepening integration while respecting diversity, strengthening common institutions while maintaining democratic legitimacy at the national level, and promoting solidarity without eliminating differentiated approaches. In this sense, the coexistence of centripetal and centrifugal dynamics should not be perceived exclusively as a source of instability, but as an inherent characteristic of the European governance model.

The European Union's capacity to adapt to internal tensions and external challenges will remain a decisive factor in determining the future trajectory of integration. By transforming centrifugal pressures into opportunities for institutional innovation, dialogue, and reform, the Union can preserve its cohesion and reinforce its role as a unique political, economic, and normative actor within the international system. Thus, the future of European integration will depend not on the elimination of differences, but on the ability to manage diversity through effective mechanisms of cooperation, solidarity, and shared governance.

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Appendix No. 1

Comparative Aspects of Centripetal and Centrifugal Processes within the European Union

Dimension	**Processus centripètes**	**Processus centrifuges**
Définition	Forces and mechanisms that strengthen cohesion, centralization, and the integration of Member States around a common center	Forces and dynamics that tend to fragment the Union, limit integration, or promote the autonomy of Member States.
Main Objective	Strengthening unity, coordination, and supranational cooperation.	Maintaining national sovereignty, preserving autonomy, and expressing divergent interests.
Areas of Action	Economic, political, institutional, and socio-cultural.	Economic, political, social, and cultural.
Economic Examples	Cohesion Policy, structural funds, the Single Market, the euro, and the European Banking Union.	Economic crises and sovereign debt (e.g., Greece, Spain), North–South divergences, and fiscal tensions
Political and Institutional Examples	Supranational institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, Court of Justice of the European Union), legislative harmonization, and policy coordination.	Euroscepticism, nationalism, opposition to common policies, and tensions regarding respect for the rule of law (e.g., Hungary, Poland).
Socio-Cultural Examples	Erasmus+ programmes, academic and professional mobility, common European values, and a shared European identity.	Linguistic, historical, and cultural differences, opposition to migration, perceptions of a democratic deficit, and opt-out mechanisms (e.g., Denmark, Sweden).
Effects on Integration	Increased cohesion, economic and political convergence, and strengthened supranational institutions.	Risk of fragmentation, internal tensions, limitations on common action, and constraints on further integration.
Interactions	Centripetal processes can stimulate reforms and reduce internal tensions.	Centrifugal processes can trigger adjustments or strengthen centripetal mechanisms, thereby creating a dynamic cycle.

Source: Developed by the author on the basis of the research findings.

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SECURITY THROUGH INTEGRATION? THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS AS A STABILIZATION TOOL IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

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Abstract. *For a long time, the European Union has used its enlargement policy to further democratic and stable governments in the South-Eastern part of Europe, and to bring about greater stability and security. The effectiveness of the enlargement policy to achieve these objectives has recently been questioned by Russia's war in Ukraine, the greater competition from other superpowers (the geopolitics of the situation), and more external influence in the Western Balkans Region.*

This article will look into whether the enlargement policy can still be used as a credible tool for bringing about peace and stability in the region.

This research utilizes qualitative methodology, including document analysis and comparative case study methodology. The research compares the accession experiences of Romania and Bulgaria to those of the current Western Balkan candidate countries' accession experiences and relies upon the theoretical concepts of Democratic Conditionality, Europeanisation, Security Community Theory, and Normative Power Europe to draw comparisons and conclusions. According to these findings, the EU expansion will contribute to improvements in the institutional, legal and regional cooperation structures. Nevertheless, the power of transformation of the EU is reduced by the lack of credibility and the extended period of accession.

Keywords*: EU enlargement, Europeanisation, Security, Western Balkans, Democratic Conditionality, Regional Stability.*

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The Expansion Policy of Europe has proved one of the most effective instruments of external policy of the European Union (EU) as it provides an opportunity for expansion of democracy, stability, security and rule of law to all parties within Europe, apart from ensuring that all parties are economically integrated. At the point of adoption of the Copenhagen criteria in 1993, which laid out the political and economic standards for the accession of new member states to the EU, the enlargement served as the means of accession for new member states to the EU, but it also served as a means of fostering changes in the institutions of an applicant country and creating stability in the region (European Council, 1993; Grabbe, 2006). According to the principle of democratic conditionality, prospective countries should be provided incentives to commit to extensive political, legal, and administrative reforms in anticipation of joining the European Union (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).

A significant turning point in the South-East European countries' integration was the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. While both countries had serious

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challenges of reforming their judiciary and dealing with corruption issues as well as increasing their administrative capacity and implementing democratic reforms, their accession fundamentally changed institutional structures and improved regional cooperation and security in the region (Grabbe, 2006; Vachudova, 2005). The experiences that followed accession also showed there were important challenges to this process. The creation of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) showed that accession itself did not ensure the continuation of reforms or that the institutions established after accession would be democratic in nature (European Commission, 2019).

In the decades since, the geopolitical situation around the European Union has changed significantly. The Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 caused a major shift in the European way of doing things and put expansion back in the middle of the EU's strategic plan (European Commission, 2024a). Meanwhile, the Western Balkans continue to be troubled by flawed governments and less democracy than before, along with old problems between neighboring states, rough relations between different ethnic groups, and more global competition from powerhouses like Russia, China, and Turkey (Freedom House, 2024; European Commission, 2024b). Consequently, people now believe more than ever that the stability in Southeastern Europe is directly tied to how well the EU can do with respect to their expansion plans.

Political leaders have recommitted themselves to expanding the EU, but the application process grows in length, unpredictability, and complexity. Repeated extensions of the application timeline and fluctuating or unclear signals demonstrated by the member states and the resurgence of the EU expansion process have also weakened the traditional transforming force of the EU conditions (Vachudova, 2005; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). As the perception of credibility of the candidate countries' perspective of joining the EU declines, many candidate countries face the risk of experiencing internal political stagnation, the further erosion of democratic governing structures, and competing external influences. This raises broader questions about the ability of the EU to shape its neighbours through normative and institutional instruments.

Building on this context, the article seeks to examine whether the EU enlargement process continues to serve as an effective regional stability and security instrument in Southeast Europe. The study aims to explore the research question outlined below: **To what degree does EU enlargement serve as a credible stabilizing tool for the Western Balkans within the current context of geopolitical conditions?**

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative research design grounded in documentary analysis and comparative case study methodology. The choice of a qualitative approach is justified by the nature of the research question, which requires an interpretive understanding of institutional processes, political conditionality and normative influence rather than a purely quantitative measurement of outcomes. The primary sources of data consist of official EU documents (European Commission progress reports, enlargement strategies, Council conclusions), reports issued by independent monitoring bodies (Freedom House, Balkan-specific think tanks), and secondary academic literature on enlargement theory, Europeanisation and regional security.

The comparative case study method is applied in two stages. First, the article undertakes a retrospective analysis of the accession trajectories of Romania and Bulgaria, treated as a "most similar case" comparison given their shared Communist legacy, simultaneous 2007 accession and post-accession monitoring under the CVM. This retrospective case functions as a benchmark against which the current trajectories of the

Western Balkan candidate states are subsequently assessed. Second, the article conducts a cross-case comparison of the Western Balkan candidates, examining the extent to which the conditions, incentives and monitoring mechanisms that shaped the Romanian and Bulgarian accession are present, absent or altered in the current enlargement round.

Four theoretical frameworks structure the analytical approach: Democratic Conditionality, Europeanisation, Security Community Theory, and Normative Power Europe. These frameworks are not treated as competing explanations but as complementary analytical lenses, each illuminating a different dimension of the enlargement process — respectively, the incentive structure, the domestic institutional transfer, the regional security externalities, and the normative legitimacy of EU influence. The selection of these four frameworks reflects the multidimensional nature of the research question, which spans political, institutional and security concerns simultaneously.

Limitations of the chosen methodology should also be acknowledged. Qualitative document-based analysis does not permit statistical generalisation, and the comparative logic relies on the assumption that the Romanian and Bulgarian cases remain analytically relevant despite the seventeen years separating their accession from the present-day Western Balkan context. To mitigate this limitation, the analysis explicitly accounts for the altered geopolitical environment — in particular, the post-2022 security dimension — when drawing comparative inferences.

The first section provides the theoretical foundations for the research methodology used in the paper, while the second discusses how enlargement has transformed the two member states of Romania and Bulgaria. The third section identifies and analyses the principal political and security challenges facing the Western Balkan region, and examines the influence of external geopolitical actors on the Western Balkans, while the fourth is being framed around the argument that EU enlargement should be reconceptualised as a long-term security strategy. In the conclusion, the paper argues that the EU must rebuild the coherence and credibility and the overarching relevance of the enlargement processes to enable successful candidate countries to integrate smoothly into the EU and to ensure that the long-term security structure of the EU stays intact.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous theoretical frameworks have been utilized in the study of the Enlargement Policy of the European Union, specifically how the membership process impacts political change, democratic consolidation, and regional stability. Enlargement is not simply the institutional process of becoming a member state; it is also a means of governance multidimensionally propagating the standards, values, and security interests of the EU in other areas of the world and outside its borders. This paper utilizes four complementary theoretical models of Democratic Conditionality, Europeanization, Security Community Theory, and Normative Power Europe to determine whether or not enlargement continues to function as an effective tool for promoting stability in South-East Europe.

The literature engaging with these four frameworks has largely developed in parallel rather than in dialogue. Democratic conditionality scholarship (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Vachudova, 2005) has tended to focus narrowly on the pre-accession bargaining process, while Europeanisation scholars (Radaelli, 2003; Börzel & Risse, 2003) have concentrated on post-accession institutional adaptation, and Security

Community and Normative Power theorists have addressed regional security and international legitimacy as largely separate concerns. Few studies bring these strands together into a single analytical model capable of assessing enlargement's credibility as a security instrument under present-day geopolitical conditions — a gap this review seeks to identify and which the article subsequently addresses.

1.1. Democratic Conditionality

Democratic conditionality has served as a major way for the European Union to create a positive incentive for political and institutional change in candidate countries. The basic principle behind it is that the pace of moving toward full membership in the EU will be determined by meeting specific political, legal, and economic standards (European Council, 1993).

Conditionality is similar to an incentive program; therefore, applicant nations consent to initiate reform processes while EU membership is held out as a reward. The "conditionality" model of accession is only effective if there is believed to be realistic hope of receiving full EU membership, and that the governing body is consistent with its application of conditionality. As described in Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier (2005), the model is based on the principle of governments weighing their domestic political costs to introducing reforms and their ultimate benefit of being granted membership as a whole.

Democratic conditionality has motivated candidate countries to improve the rule of law, strengthen judicial independence, fight corruption, protect minority rights, and build modern public institutions under the enlargement process. A good example of the effect of conditionality on the institutional changes taking place under difficult domestic conditions is the experience of accession of Romania and Bulgaria.

The same body of work also identifies some important limitations. For example, when the prospect of accession becomes either very uncertain or very delayed, there will be little incentive for ongoing reforms. As Vachudova (2005) notes, the effect of conditionality as a transformative force depends almost exclusively upon the credibility of accession. Once credibility is lost, domestic elites will be unlikely to undertake any more costly reforms; hence, they are at greater risk both of suffering democratic setbacks and stagnating institutions.

Building on this foundational literature, successive scholars have increasingly questioned whether the original conditionality model, designed for the 2004–2007 enlargement wave, remains analytically adequate for the Western Balkans. Grabbe (2006) already noted that the effectiveness of EU leverage rests on mechanisms — gate-keeping, benchmarking, model-setting — whose force weakens considerably once the accession horizon becomes indeterminate, a condition that has characterised much of the Western Balkans' recent trajectory. This raises the question, addressed later in this article, of whether conditionality theory needs to be supplemented by other frameworks to explain candidate-state behaviour under conditions of prolonged or uncertain accession prospects.

As a result, democratic conditionality is still a primary factor in understanding why democratization processes are successful or how they currently restrict the ability for the EU to expand further.

1.2. Europeanisation

Europeanisation is a complementary process to democratic conditionality in so far as it provides an explanation of how EU rules, norms and governance practices become internalised in the governing structures of national governments. However, the focus of this analysis is not limited to accession-related standards of compliance, and it looks at the broadest dimension of changes made by European integration in terms of institution building, public policymaking and political behaviour at the national level (Radaelli, 2003).

According to Börzel and Risse (2003), Europeanisation is defined as a process of domestic adaptation by which States gradually adopt and incorporate European values through institutional learning, policy transfer and administrative reforms. Accession negotiations require candidate countries to align with the acquis in many areas of public policy, which leads to an intense Europeanisation process.

Europeanisation, in the context of enlargement, is about more than simply creating laws that are the same across different countries. In addition, it helps build democratic institutions, improve administrative capacity and develop better standards of governance. Europeanisation and the government assist in building cooperation between countries in neighboring areas. The result of this strength is the stability of the region because there is now less weakness in the institution. However, Europeanisation is not a given process either. Several scholars have stated that reforms should be sustained during an accession phase. The oversight of these reforms will most likely weaken when the domestic political actors no longer have incentives to comply after the country becomes a member state. While some CEE countries have experienced successfully becoming a member of the EU, it did not prevent some of them from slipping backward in their democratization processes (Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).

This "backsliding" strand of the Europeanisation literature is directly relevant to the present study's comparative logic: if Europeanisation can reverse even after formal accession, as documented for Romania and Bulgaria through the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (European Commission, 2019), then the depth and durability of pre-accession institutional adaptation in the Western Balkans becomes an open empirical question rather than an assumed outcome of the accession process itself.

Therefore, Europeanization should be regarded as a continuing process rather than a singular event, which demands ongoing political dedication by both European and national governments.

1.3. Security Community Theory

Security Community Theory (developed by Karl Deutsch, 1957) provides another lens through which to analyze the intersection of European integration and regional security. According to Deutsch, security communities emerge when the member states have developed reliable expectations that they will use peaceful means to resolve political differences rather than using force.

Security in these communities comes from more than just being able to stop fights with weapons. It comes from trusting each other, having the same rules, working together in politics, and valuing the same ideas. The European Union is an excellent example of a pluralistic security community because it has used economic integration, institutional cooperation, and democratic governance to achieve long-term peace (Deutsch et al., 1957).

From a regional security standpoint, expansion enhances security by enlarging the standards and structures which make up the European safety community into adjacent states. The requirements for candidate states to resolve bilateral conflicts, improve democratic governance and develop relationships with neighboring countries before they join the EU help to decrease the risk of armed conflict between countries and to create stable political systems over time.

Although Deutsch's original formulation predates the EU's contemporary enlargement architecture by decades, later scholarship has applied security community logic specifically to EU foreign and enlargement policy, arguing that accession conditionality functions simultaneously as a conflict-prevention mechanism and as a community-building instrument. This literature has gained renewed attention since 2022, as the security-community function of enlargement — rather than its purely economic or normative function — has moved to the center of EU strategic discourse (European Commission, 2024a).

This perspective of theory is of great relevance to the Western Balkans, especially because the unresolved issues (such as Serbia/Kosovo relations or Bosnia and Herzegovina having constitutional challenges) keep affecting regional stability. Enlargement can accordingly be perceived as not only being a tool for developing the region economically, but also as being one of the many tools that will help to prevent conflicts and build peace.

1.4. Normative Power Europe

Democratic Conditionality Theory focuses on the EU's method of promoting reforms, Security Community Theory refers to the contribution of these reforms in achieving peace, and Normative Power Europe identifies how the EU can influence international conduct through norms and values, instead of force or military might.

The notion of normative power was initially proposed by Ian Manners (2002), who argued that the EU influences states or societies by advancing democracy, human rights, rule of law, equality, and respect for international law. While traditional geopolitical tools play an important role in the process of neighborhood transformation by the EU, the EU pursues the transformation of its neighbouring countries through the promotion of normative values.

One of the most obvious, if not clear examples of such normative influences exists through the enlargement of the EU. The candidate countries voluntarily choose to meet European standards by aligning their domestic legislation and institutions to the same standards, as membership in the EU is seen as a way to achieve political legitimacy, economic prosperity, and democratic governance (Manners, 2002).

However, the legitimacy of Normative Power Europe depends on how credible and consistent the Union remains. Political means of enlargement can undermine the Union's influence if the accession criteria are applied inconsistently, while at the same time they can open the door for other competing external actors to further struggle for greater political, economic and strategic influence in candidate countries.

More recent literature has extended Manners' original framework to account for a more contested normative environment, in which the EU's ability to diffuse norms through enlargement is challenged by external actors offering candidate states alternative, non-conditional partnerships. Freedom House (2024) and European Commission (2024b) reporting on democratic backsliding and external influence in the Western Balkans lend empirical weight to this theoretical concern, suggesting that

Normative Power Europe cannot be assessed in isolation from the region's broader geopolitical competition.

When we combine all four theoretical perspectives, a complete analytical model will be established that is essential to evaluate the role of EU Enlargement as a credible instrument of achieving democratic change, regional integration, and sustainable peace in South-East Europe.

2. ROMANIA AND BULGARIA: ENLARGEMENT AS A SECURITY TRANSFORMATION

The entry of Romania and Bulgaria into the European Union in 2007 was a significant mark on the map of the EU's eastward expansion efforts. Through their inclusion into the union, the EU demonstrated a continued commitment towards furthering stability, democracy and security throughout South-East Europe. This enlargement resulted in two countries being economically united but it was also viewed as a strategic tool to help strengthen democratic institutions, stabilise the region as a whole and continue to expand on the area of peace that had existed among more established members of the European Union (Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005). The two countries provide a useful point of reference to help determine whether enlargement will continue to function as a tool to stabilise the Western Balkan countries, who are now candidates to join the European Union.

2.1. Challenges before Accession

Before they joined the EU, both countries ran into many political and institutional issues, democratic institutions having been rather fragile at that point in time. They had inefficient government agencies and court systems that are largely criticized due to limited freedom and poor implementation of the law. Corruption had been one of the biggest hindrances to establishing democracy for many years and led to problems of public trust and economic growth and the proper functioning of the government. The European Commission pointed out a lack of judicial responsibility, poor transparency, and failure to prosecute high-level corruption, as important issues during their negotiations to join the EU (European Commission, 2006).

While Romania and Bulgaria didn't face the same level of violent conflict that the former Yugoslavian countries did during dissolution, the broader South-East European region continued to face political instability and unresolved ethnic tension. The two countries joining the EU was seen not only as a chance for them to change their own government but also to help protect their region more by having the EU's political stability reach out to the east and southeast (Phinnemore, 2006).

Another major governance challenge had to do with ethnic diversity. A large percentage of the Hungarian population lives as a minority in Romania, while Bulgarian Turks are the largest minority population group in Bulgaria. Both countries therefore had to adopt policies that would protect the rights of minorities, ensure their participation in politics and promote intercultural dialogue according to the standards set out in Europe. The two states were to be guided by the Copenhagen Political Criteria that outline the fundamental rights of minorities, together with the general principles of democracy as stable forms of governance (European Council, 1993).

When looking at all the political, institutional and societal challenges present during this time, the EU had a reason to place very strict conditions on the accession

process. Thus, it was not simply a means of adapting to new institutions, but rather a means of making a long-term investment in the peace and security of the region.

2.2. Reforms Required by the European Union

Romania and Bulgaria had to undertake a lot of reforms across a large number of policy areas as part of the accession negotiations. At the center of the process was stronger rule of law through comprehensive reforms to the judicial system that were designed to enhance independence, efficiency, and accountability in the judiciary. The European Commission closely monitored changes to the legislation, judicial appointments, and the functioning of courts during the negotiations (European Commission, 2006).

Fighting corruption took on a significant amount of importance. Each country had established specific agencies identified as anti-corruption organizations, created new laws, and other forms of legislation, while also strengthening their investigative as well as prosecutorial abilities. Implementation of the above mentioned initiatives was not equal in all cases but still represented a major improvement over the initial stages of transition (Grabbe, 2006).

Another significant accession requirement was the protection of minority rights. To adopt the anti-discrimination legislation, the minority community has more participation in the political process and better protection of their languages and cultures. These measures were the contributing factors to the growth of democracy while also decreasing the chances of ethnic conflict, thus providing internal stability (Toggenburg, 2004).

Moreover, the issue of border management became increasingly relevant with the accession process. As the future external borders of the European Union, Romania and Bulgaria had to update their border facilities, bolster the customs systems they had with each other, better control immigration, and collaborate more effectively with the countries around them on organized crime and human trafficking issues. All of these reforms showed how much more connected enlargement and the European Security Policy were becoming, particularly in relation to Justice and Home Affairs (European Commission, 2006).

In general, these reforms show that the EU expansion acted as a full governance plan that was not just about harmonising laws. The accession procedure improved domestic and regional security through promotion of institutional capacity building, democracy and regional cooperation, in order to build an internally stronger and externally safer region of European countries.

2.3. Limits of Post-Accession Conditionality

All the significant reforms achieved during the accession process demonstrated the transformative nature of enlargement in Romania and Bulgaria. In recognition of the fact that there were significant deficiencies remaining in the judicial reform processes and anti-corruption initiatives in both countries, the European Commission established the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) at the time of their accession in 2007, as a means of monitoring the progress made in both countries.

The verification mechanism has granted Bulgaria and Romania the opportunity to work towards meeting the same standards used to accede to the EU. Although both nations have made significant advances over time, there are still substantial differences

in how these standards are being implemented, whilst the problems of judicial interference and corruption remain major issues (European Commission, 2019).

In the academic literature generally, it is indicated that the effectiveness of the conditions of the EU substantially decreases after the membership has been obtained. With the major incentive of accession gone, therefore, the domestic political actors have fewer sources of external pressure to continue with the gains of their reforms, thus having a greater potential for democratic regression and/or institutional stagnation (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005; Vachudova 2005).

The joint experience of both Romania and Bulgaria indicates that the overall enlargement experience contributed to a significant political and institutional transformation compared with the period immediately preceding accession. The accession process resulted in more robust democratic governance structures and an improved administrative capacity as well as a greater contribution to the creation of a stable security environment in South-East Europe despite many of the reforms being unsustainable. The experience of Romania and Bulgaria provides important lessons for the EU membership process in the Western Balkans, in which it is critical that the EU maintain its high degree of credibility and consistency with respect to the conditionality associated with the membership process to ensure that the next wave of EU enlargement is successful.

3. THE WESTERN BALKANS: ENLARGEMENT UNDER PRESSURE

Romania and Bulgaria joining the European Union did show that enlarging the EU can transform countries, but the Western Balkans is still a lot more complicated politically and security wise than Romania or Bulgaria was when they joined. It has essentially been more than 20 years since the Thessaloniki Summit said that the Western Balkans still had a chance to join the EU and the progress that countries in the Western Balkans are making to become members of the EU has been very uneven and even less certain ever since (European Council, 2003). Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo have all advanced their relationship with the European Union to varying degrees, but accession negotiations have been delayed due to persistent governance losses, the inability of finding solutions to their political conflicts and development of geopolitical conflict (European Commission, 2024b).

However, the previous rounds of enlargement did not combine the patterns of democratic stagnation with weak state institutions and unresolved conflicts. Currently, the public has less confidence in the enlargement process, and due to the interrelated nature of such challenges, the EU conditionality has less transformative effect and concerns have been raised about the long-term stability of this region.

3.1. Democratic Backsliding and State Capture

Democratic backsliding and state capture remain one of the primary barriers to Western Balkan countries' accession to the European Union. All candidate countries have committed, as a matter of form, to pursuing democratic reforms, but the implementation of these commitments has often been uneven, with serious concerns persisting in many areas as a result of ongoing apprehensions regarding the independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, political pluralism and the functioning of public institutions (Freedom House, 2024).

Serbia is continuing to negotiate its accession but also experiencing criticism regarding its executive power concentration and the independent pressures being placed on the media and judiciary. The European Commission has continued to state that the rule of law and democratic government still need to be reformed before Serbia can continue its accession negotiations (European Commission, 2024). Similarly, for Montenegro, political instability and institutional polarisation have created hardships in implementing reforms, although Montenegro still remains the most advanced accession candidate (European Commission, 2026a).

The constitutional system that Bosnia and Herzegovina have is extremely decentralised due to the Dayton Peace Accord. As a consequence, Bosnia and Herzegovina have multiple governments and officials with overlapping jurisdictions and responsibilities (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2026b). At the same time, Albania has experienced a substantial improvement in its judiciary, particularly the judicial vetting process; however, corruption, organized crime, and institutional capacity are still key factors that influence how fast Albania can negotiate and become a member of the EU (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2026a).

The problems in governance show that only having democracy-related conditions will not help to exhibit sustainable changes in institutions, if the reform will continue to be at the least not supported domestically.

3.2. Ethnic Fragmentation and Frozen Conflicts

In addition to weak institutions, ethnic conflicts that have yet to be fully resolved are still an obstacle to the achievement of stable regional peace. Before Romania and Bulgaria were allowed to join the EU, several of the Western Balkan countries still faced unresolved issues relating to sovereignty, constitutional government and interethnic relations that are or will have a direct impact on their ability to join the EU.

Serbia and Kosovo are still the best example of such a substantial relationship today. The European Union has been helping these two governments talk with each other for about ten years, and while there has been progress in some places, that progress has not been uniform; there are still occasional flare-ups of tension in the northern parts of Kosovo, which goes to show how unsure the security situation is (European External Action Service, 2024). Unless the two countries will have normalized their relationship, this will remain a significant feature for Serbia to not be able to join the European Union. The country's multi-layered constitutional arrangement and political fragmentation are deeply interconnected. Ethnic political divisions are often an impediment to institutional decision-making and an obstacle to implementing the reforms required to move forward on the European Union accession path. While creating delays in Europe becoming more integrated, ethno-political divisions are creating opportunities for outside political influence as well as internal destabilization (Bieber, 2021).

North Macedonia demonstrates contrast. The country signed the Prespa Agreement with Greece in 2018, in order to settle the long-standing dispute over their name, yet its accession process remains hampered by political factors. Other disputes have developed between Bulgaria and North Macedonia over historical and language issues. These developments have strengthened the belief that the decisions regarding accession are based on political conditions in addition to the Copenhagen criteria (European Commission, 2024).

Together, all of these conflicts that remain to be solved show that the expansion of the Western Balkans still can't be separated from big issues like peace, building bridges between people and countries, and working together as a region.

3.3. Enlargement in an Increasingly Competitive Geopolitical Environment

EU enlargement continues to confront effectiveness challenges from the increasing presence of outside actors in the Western Balkans, in order to expand their spheres of influence and ability to shape the region. Russia continues to maintain political, economic, and cultural ties to a number of countries including Serbia and the Bosnian and Herzegovinan' Republika Srpska entity, while promoting narratives critical of the EU and NATO (Bieber, 2021). Moreover, China has been able to enter the region with a large amount of economic investment through both infrastructure and loans, as well as the establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative, while Türkiye maintains a significant amount of political, economic and cultural ties to the region (Nuhanović, 2026).

The increasing involvement of outside parties does not completely take over the position of the EU, but reflects the fact that the longer period of delay regarding enlargement provides strategic opportunities to the competing powers. The less predictable the accession process is for the EU, the less likely it will be that democratic conditionality and Europeanisation will be effective catalysts of reform.

However, across most of the Western Balkans, the public continue to support the idea of joining the European Union (European Commission, 2026b), that is because they see that integrating with the EU brings political, economic, and security advantages. Therefore, the restoration of the enlargement process credibility is not only a matter of the EU enlargement policy itself, but at the same time it indicates the strategic investment in the long-term stability and security of South-East Europe.

Overall, the example of the Western Balkans indicates that the enlargement policy of the EU continues to be an influential tool for change, but its usefulness is now much more dependent on the credibility, the consistency, and the geopolitical resolve of the EU. The case of Romania and Bulgaria's entry occurred in a far more different international context than the one present today. In the current enlargement process, domestic governance challenges are interlinked with regional security issues and global strategic competition.

4. REIMAGINING ENLARGEMENT AS A STRATEGIC SECURITY INSTRUMENT

The changing state of geopolitics means looking at EU enlargement more broadly than just an accession process that is largely technical in nature. EU Member States and EU institutions are now faced with a growing number of new geopolitical realities that are causing new pressures on traditional modes of conducting business within the EU. Enlargement should also be considered as a long-term strategic investment in the security of the region, as well as in its democratic systems and social infrastructure. Romania's and Bulgaria's experiences and those of today's Western Balkans countries show that the effects of enlargement extend much further than membership itself. It fosters the growth of durable institutions, amicable relations between states, and enhanced resilience of societies to both domestic and foreign threats.

A central requirement for restoring the effectiveness of enlargement is the re-establishment of credibility and predictability. The "democratic conditionality" model of enlargement will only be successful if the candidate states clearly see the connection

between the reforms they undertake and the progress they have made toward full membership (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). The EU should not lower its standards of assessment, but all progress must be measured fairly and openly and not subjected to unnecessary political delays. A credible accession platform motivates candidates to implement reforms, build public support, and also create transformations that will not stall democracy in the candidate countries.

The rule of law similarly provides the foundation for democratic government and the development of democracies in a secure, peaceful region. Experience has demonstrated that corrupt practices and weak court systems erode the state's ability to resist organized crime groups, foreign intervention, and political unrest, as well as the development of democratic processes (European Commission, 2024b). Therefore, sustaining long-term judicial independence, reform of public administration, and anti-corruption efforts beyond the formal process of enlargement is necessary to achieve sustainable expansion.

But the success of enlargement will never rely only upon government reform. Constructing an inclusive and resilient community involves public organisations, local government, schools and colleges and other media. Civil organisations also play a major part in democratic accountability for the society. Additionally, higher educational and research organisations encourage democratic values via tutoring, academic mobility, policy research and international collaboration. Initiatives such as the Erasmus+, Horizon Europe and The European University Initiative (by the European Commission in 2023) illustrated that academic collaboration develops interindividual relations and creates a European identity that is independent from political presences (European Commission, 2023).

The concept of enlargement is key for security purposes, having two dimensions; one key example of this is Cross-border Cooperation. The border regions of South-East Europe have historically faced political divisions and ethnic tensions, with economic differences having added to the problems. Now, those same areas will be able to work together by way of cross-border infrastructure projects, joint environmental programs, education exchanges, and local government partnerships that are being funded through the European Union's Interreg and Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) programs. All of these partnerships allow for the building of trust between neighboring communities and also lessen some of the socioeconomic differences that exist, thus creating a lesser degree of instability between these communities (European Commission, 2021).

In the European integration, identity, security, and inclusivity are interconnected and mutually supportive. European integration involves creating new institutions and developing a shared identity based on common democratic values, respect for diversity, and cross-cultural cooperation. With that in mind, it must be understood that enlargement is not a process of expanding EU institutions; instead, it is a process of developing a new, larger, European security community based on shared norms, mutual trust, and democratic resilience (Deutsch et al. 1957; Manners 2002).

The future growth of the EU will be determined by how the European Union reconciles the complex political reality with its values. The expansion of the EU is still one of the most powerful tools at the disposal of the union to promote peace, democracy, and regional stability in a world that is becoming increasingly competitive. Through the development of the credibility of the accession processes, investments in robust institutions, support for civil society and higher education, and expansion of the cross-

border cooperation, the European Union will ensure that the enlargement process continues to be both an accession policy and a comprehensive strategy for promoting security and inclusivity across the whole of the South-East Europe.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this article was on the continuous effectiveness of the European Union Enlargement Policy to maintain peace and security in the South-East European region. Given the different theoretical frameworks of Democratic Conditionality, Europeanisation, Security Community Theory, and Normative Power Europe, the research used a comparative analysis of Romania, Bulgaria, and the Western Balkans to prove that the Enlargement Policy still stands as an extremely important tool of the Foreign Policy of the European Union. However, its transformative capacity increasingly depends on the credibility, consistency, and strategic implementation of the accession process.

Romania and Bulgaria's experience also shows that the political, institutional, and security changes associated with enlargement can be very substantial when backed by credible conditionality regime, coupled with ongoing incentives for reform. Although the experience of post-accession challenges has shown some of the limits of using external conditionality, both Romania and Bulgaria illustrate that EU membership is a major positive force in the consolidation of democratic government and in the promotion of institutional development and stability throughout the region. In contrast, the countries of the Western Balkans continue to experience serious problems with governance and democracy, as well as unresolved bilateral disputes and increased levels of competition among states both inside and outside their enlarged borders. These factors create significant challenges for an enlargement process that continues to weaken the ability of the EU to exert leverage on candidate countries for future accessions.

According to the research, the most important challenge facing the European Union today has less to do with the actual concept of enlargement than it does with a loss of confidence in how the process of joining the EU works. The very long negotiation process, mixed signals from political leaders, and the impact of bilateral disputes have undermined the motivational power of democratic conditionality. So, in order to rebuild the trust that has been lost, the EU will need to establish a process that is predictable, transparent and based on merit that rewards actual progress and maintains rigorous standards for joining the EU.

The article shows that besides institutional changes, enlargement should be viewed as an overall plan to improve democracy, as well as the extent to which Europe has the ability to withstand security issues as a region. Creating democratic societies that can withstand present day security issues entails expenditure on the establishment of legal systems, independent institutions, civil society, higher education, academic collaboration and cross-border programmes. Therefore, universities and research networks along with local and regional partnerships play an even greater role in increasing dialogue, promoting innovation, and developing democratic participation internationally.

The European Union's capacity to reaffirm its pledge to enlargement as an actual strategic commitment, along with the candidate countries' willingness to move towards reforms, will ultimately determine the future of South-East Europe. With the current state of affairs in terms of geopolitics, the concept of enlargement should not only be seen as a policy to become a member state, but also represents a long-term investment in the

establishment and growth of peace, security, democracy and the stability of the region. Therefore, while continuing to cooperate with each other and to create a strong foundation of democratic values, the member countries of the EU can build a new European identity that is based on inclusivity, resilience and trust. It is of utmost importance to recognize that the enlargement of the EU is not only a process of integration but also a significant pillar in the development of Europe's long-term security structure.

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FRENCH AND CHINESE PROJECTION OF INFLUENCE IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TRADE RELATIONS AND BILATERAL AGREEMENTS

Alin Ionuț Cornel MOISE*

Abstract: *The study is based on a comparative analysis of bilateral agreements between the Republic of Moldova and the two states, France and the China, as well as on the foreign trade of the Republic of Moldova structured by groups of goods according to the Combined Nomenclature. The main objective is to evaluate the implications of these two states—characterized by different models of cooperation—in the Republic of Moldova.*

The study refers to 1) the analysis of the interests of the two states, which employ different models of assistance to a beneficiary state, depending on exports and imports structured by groups of goods; 2) the analysis of the interests of the two states in relation to the bilateral agreements between the signatory states.

By analysing statistical data and bilateral documents, the article seeks to provide an original contribution to the specialized literature. The result offers an integrated perspective on the interests of the two states in the Republic of Moldova.

Keywords*: Development assistance; development grants; bilateral relations; foreign trade; Republic of Moldova, France and China.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a comparative analysis of bilateral agreements between the Republic of Moldova and the two states, France and China, as well as on the foreign trade of the Republic of Moldova structured by groups of goods according to the Combined Nomenclature. The main objective is to evaluate the implications of these two states—characterized by different models of cooperation—in the Republic of Moldova.

This study adopts a meso-level analytical approach, examining trade relations through commodity groups classified under the Combined Nomenclature (CN) rather than through individual products. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on structural changes in bilateral trade at the level of commodity groups, without disaggregating these categories into their constituent products. A micro-level analysis, examining individual products within each CN commodity group, will be undertaken in a subsequent study.

Republic of Moldova constitutes an arena in which different models of external economic engagement intersect. These models are promoted both by donor countries providing Official Development Assistance (ODA), including France, and by China through the provision of economic development grants. They rely on different policy

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instruments, ranging from institutional cooperation and bilateral agreements to the expansion of trade relations.

Existing scholarship has generally examined either international trade or official development assistance as separate fields of inquiry. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to analysing how different categories of external actors shape their economic engagement with Republic of Moldova by linking the evolution of bilateral trade with the development of bilateral legal frameworks.

Furthermore, only a limited number of studies compare traditional ODA donors with China's model of development financing. This study seeks to address this gap by providing a comparative assessment of China as a provider of economic development grants and France as a representative ODA donor.

The detailed analysis of individual products within each CN commodity group is reserved for a separate study employing a micro-level analytical framework. Consequently, the present chapter constitutes an intermediate stage between the macro-level analysis of Republic of Moldova's foreign trade undertaken in previous research and the subsequent micro-level examination of product structures.

The **research design of the study** is organised into five subsections. The first reviews the relevant theoretical framework and the literature review. The second analyses the economic engagement of China and France with the Republic of Moldova through imports by CN commodity groups during 2001–2014 and 2015–2024. The third examines exports to these countries using the same analytical framework. The fourth analyses the bilateral agreements of China and France with Republic of Moldova before 2001, 2001-2014 and 2015-2024.The final subsection synthesises the empirical findings and presents the main conclusions.

The research adopts a comparative, longitudinal, and explanatory design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. It analyses bilateral trade structures by CN commodity groups and examines changes in trade composition and bilateral economic relations. The objective is to compare China's and France's patterns of economic engagement with the Republic of Moldova and identify differences in their external economic involvement.

The general objective of this study is to compare the economic engagement of China and France like an ODA donor country in Republic of Moldova by examining bilateral trade at the level of CN commodity groups during the periods 2001–2014 and 2015–2024, together with bilateral agreements concluded before 2001, during 2001–2014, and during 2015–2024.

The **specific objectives** are to: O1 Compare trade evolution by CN commodity groups during 2001–2014 and 2015–2024; O2 Identify and compare bilateral agreements concluded during the analysed periods before 2001, 2001-2014 and 2015-2024; O3 Assess the relationship between legal frameworks and changes in trade structures and O4 Identify comparative patterns of external economic engagement.

The ***research questions****:* Q1. How has China's economic engagement with the Republic of Moldova evolved compared with France's engagement? Q2. How do bilateral trade structures differ by CN commodity groups? Q3. What structural changes occurred between the two analysed periods? Q4. Is there a relationship between bilateral agreements and changes in trade structures? Q5. What comparative patterns of external economic engagement can be identified?

The ***hypotheses*** *is* H1 The strengthening of the bilateral legal framework is associated with the development of trade relations between Republic of Moldova and

the external actors included in the analysis; H2 China and France like an Official Development Assistance (ODA) donor country employ different models of external economic engagement, reflected in both the structure of bilateral agreements and the composition of bilateral trade and H3 A comparative analysis of trade relations by Combined Nomenclature (CN) commodity groups, together with bilateral agreements, enables the identification of distinct models of external economic engagement.

Methodological Details. *T*he quantitative analysis employs comparative analysis, time-series analysis, analysis of foreign trade by CN commodity groups, structural change analysis comparing the periods 2001–2014 vs. 2015–2024, and comparative tables. The qualitative analysis relies on documentary analysis and content analysis of bilateral agreements before 2001, 2001-2014 and 2015-2024. The quantitative analysis uses official trade statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. Imports and exports are analysed by CN commodity groups for 2001–2024.

Data exclude trade operations conducted by enterprises located on the left bank of the Nistru River and the municipality of Bender. The symbol "–" indicates the absence of recorded transactions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

To present the importance and relevance of this topic within the current theoretical and scientific context, we would like to bring to the forefront Official Development Assistance (ODA), which, according to the IMF, represents "official flows of financing administered with the primary objective of promoting the economic development and welfare of developing countries" (IMF, 2003, p. 263).

Starting from this conceptual definition, we can observe the potential benefits that this type of assistance may bring to beneficiary states, as it falls within the framework of development cooperation policies. It can also be argued that this form of assistance provides support to donor states by helping to reduce the pressure they face because of humanitarian crises.

The aim of this research is to examine how a state that has provided Official Development Assistance and another state that has offered economic development grants have generated an impact on an underdeveloped state.

According to Victor Negrescu, the essential concepts that need to be considered when discussing development cooperation are developing countries, power, and the economics of development. These concepts are interconnected with development assistance (Negrescu, 2016).

Negrescu (2016) argues that when the concept of development cooperation is discussed, it is necessary to examine it within the interaction between theories of international relations and theories of development economics. This approach is necessary in order to obtain a more comprehensive perspective, which is also the position adopted in this research.

Sauvy (1952) was the first author to use the term "Developing Countries", replacing the concept of the "Third World". This concept gained significant importance only three years after its emergence, when developing countries began to appear and take shape on the international stage following the Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia.

The concept of power can be examined through three different perspectives in relation to development assistance. When viewed through the lens of realism, the

concept of power reveals a reality that can be interpreted through the realist approach of Hans Morgenthau (2007). From this perspective, development assistance is seen merely as a mechanism through which donor states demonstrate their economic superiority at the global level, while simultaneously promoting their own national interests.

However, through another lens, we can observe the realist approach of Nye (2005). From this perspective, the concept of power is expanded through the introduction of the concept of soft power, and development assistance can be understood as an indirect form of influence exercised by donor states over beneficiary states.

When the concept of power is viewed through the lens of liberalism, it reveals a reality in which humanitarianism intersects with development cooperation. In this context, the approach of Keohane and Nye (1977) becomes relevant, as it highlights that the interdependence between donor and beneficiary states increases alongside the expansion of global interactions among states.

Viewed through the third perspective, namely the radical approach, the concept of power can be understood through multiple dimensions. However, the overall perspective suggests that imperialism gains new forms of influence through development cooperation policies, creating and maintaining dependencies between states. One of the perspectives through which development assistance can be analyzed, according to Dunaway (1992), is based on Raoul Prebisch's critique of the relationship between core and peripheral states. According to this view, core states disregard peripheral states except through a capitalist framework that enables their exploitation. For this reason, the Global South has not achieved the same level of development as the Global North, as argued by the economist.

The other dimension is understood according to the perspective of Immanuel Wallerstein (1988), where development cooperation is viewed as a normalization of unequal exchanges due to the existence of a hierarchy among states. From this perspective, exchanges cannot be considered equal, as they are shaped by structural differences between states. This dimension is also addressed by Fernand Braudel through his theory of concentric circles (Roche, 2006).

The perspective explained by Samir Amin (1988) highlights the existence of a vicious circle in which states from the Global South participate in the international system. Within this system, they often assume the role of raw material producers, and consequently, within development cooperation policies, they frequently become beneficiary states.

Following this exploration of the two concepts discussed above, it is essential to also introduce the concept of development economics, together with the concept of international trade. In this context, the aim is to present the theories of international trade and theories of development. These concepts are also necessary in order to obtain a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the concept of development assistance (Negrescu, 2016).

The concept of international trade from the perspective of liberal theorists refers to David Ricardo, who introduced the concept of comparative costs through his works, and Adam Smith, who developed the concept of the international division of labour. In Smith's approach, reference is made to the specialization of states in a specific field of activity that corresponds to their particular advantages, allowing them to develop this specialization and participate in international trade. In contrast, Ricardo

does not argue that a state requires a particular specialization of its own; rather, it is sufficient for a state to participate in international trade (Brasseul, 2008).

Some authors, such as Heckscher, Ohlin, and Samuelson, argue that the existence of advantages between states can also be explained through the variable of production (Negrescu, 2016). Rainelli (1997) refers to the theory of surplus disposal, which he considers appropriate for developing countries.

Through his theory, Mill differentiates between the direct and indirect advantages of international trade (Brasseul, 2008). Raymond Vernon (1966) further developed Mill's theory by introducing dynamic models of comparative advantages into production cycles. An additional improvement was brought by Bela Balassa (1965) to Mill's theory, as he introduced the dynamic model of successive stages of development. Rostow's linear theory of development is closely related to Vernon's and Balassa's theories (Negrescu, 2016).

Regarding development economics, Dimier (2006) argues that Official Development Assistance is an indispensable solution. Through the Harrod-Domar model, we can observe the level of economic development by analyzing the percentage difference between savings and investment, while also providing a calculation formula for this purpose.

This formula offers greater clarity when assessing the effectiveness of development assistance and, not least, the investments made by donor states towards beneficiary states (Negrescu, 2016).

Following the discussion of these concepts, the focus is placed on the theories of realism, where we can mention Richard Ashley (1984) with the theory of impossibility, Robert Jervis (1983) with the theory of reciprocity, Morgenthau with the five principles of realism (Roche, 2006) and the concept of the balance of power (Morgenthau, 2007), as well as Kenneth Waltz (2006) with what he refers to as the search for security.

Regarding the theories of liberalism, we aim to further discuss Robert Axelrod (1992) with the theory of cooperative behaviour, Michael Doyle (1983) with the theory of promoting democracy as a solution for maintaining peace, Andrew Moravcsik (1993) with the role of social actors, and Samy Cohen (2003), who highlights the dependence of social actors on states.

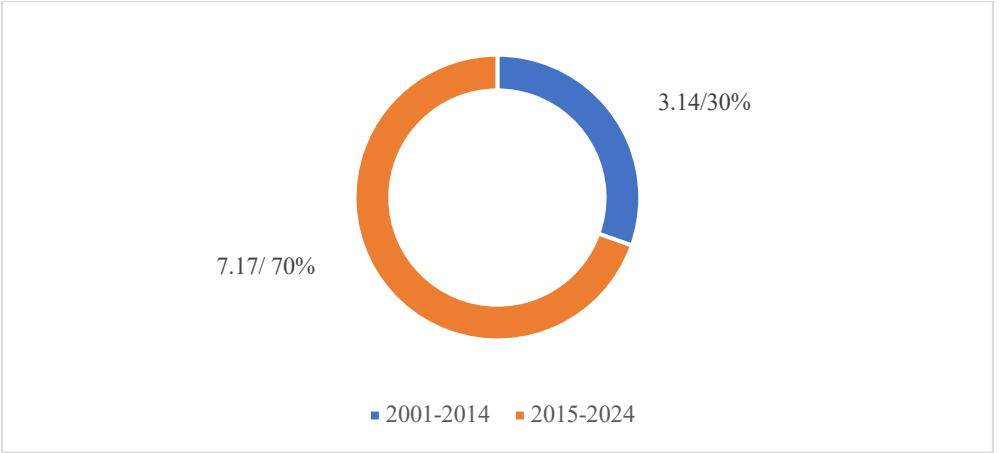
We also refer to Norbert Elias's concept of a society of individuals (Devin, 1995) and to James Rosenau (1990), who extends Elias's perspective by adding the political and private sectors.

3. CHINA AND FRANCE ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT WITH REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA THROUGH AN ANALYSIS OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S IMPORTS BY CN COMMODITY GROUPS FROM CHINA AND FRANCE DURING THE PERIODS 2001-2014 VS. 2015-2024.

3.1. Imports from China by CN

The analysis of the two distinct periods highlights the evolution of imports, showing that the first stage, 2001–2014, was characterized by a rapid increase in the value of imports and by the consolidation of industrial products within their structure, while the period 2015–2024 represents a new phase of expansion, marked by the growing predominance of highly processed goods with higher added value.

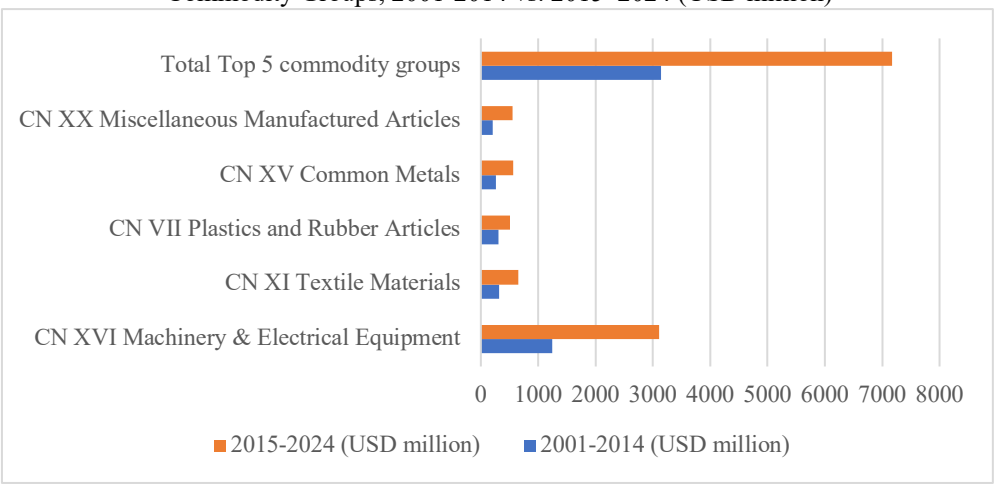
Figure 1. Republic of Moldova's Imports from China, by Combined Nomenclature (CN) Commodity Groups, 2001–2014 vs. 2015-2024 (USD billion)



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on data provided by NBSRM, 2026b)

Statistical data also highlights the gradual consolidation of China's position as a supplier of goods to the Republic of Moldova Imports followed a sustained upward trend across both periods, with the first period characterized by stronger relative growth and the second by a greater absolute increase. Overall, the findings indicate a persistent expansion of import activity over the entire period. This demonstrates the transition of trade relations into a phase of maturity, in which expansion occurs because of an already substantial volume of trade exchanges. This evolution is accompanied by a structural transformation of imports, characterized by the increasing share of industrial and technological goods.

Figure 2. Top 5 Republic of Moldova's Imports from China, by Combined Nomenclature (CN) Commodity Groups, 2001-2014 vs. 2015–2024 (USD million)



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on data provided by NBSRM, 2026b)

It can be observed that category CN XVI it becomes the dominant category and represents the most important group of goods throughout the entire analysed period. Imports in this category increased substantially throughout the analysed period, while its

share of total imports remained relatively stable. During the second period, the category recorded strong growth and represented the main contributor to the overall expansion of imports.

The second most important category is represented by CN XI. As a result, the share of textiles in total imports gradually decreased, even though their absolute value continued to increase. A similar evolution can be observed in the case of CN VII, with imports increasing substantially over the analysed period. Although growth was more moderate after 2015, the category strengthened and consolidated its position among the main products imported from China.

Imports of CN XV exhibited one of the most stable upward trends throughout the analysed period. Growth remained sustained after 2015, reflecting increasing demand for metallurgical products and semi-finished materials, particularly in the industrial and construction sectors.

CN XX also recorded significant growth throughout the analysed period. The substantial expansion observed during the second period reflects the increasing diversification of consumer goods imported from China.

Traditional product groups, including vegetable products, food products, wood and wood articles, paper and cardboard, as well as fats and oils, maintained relatively low import values throughout the analysed period.

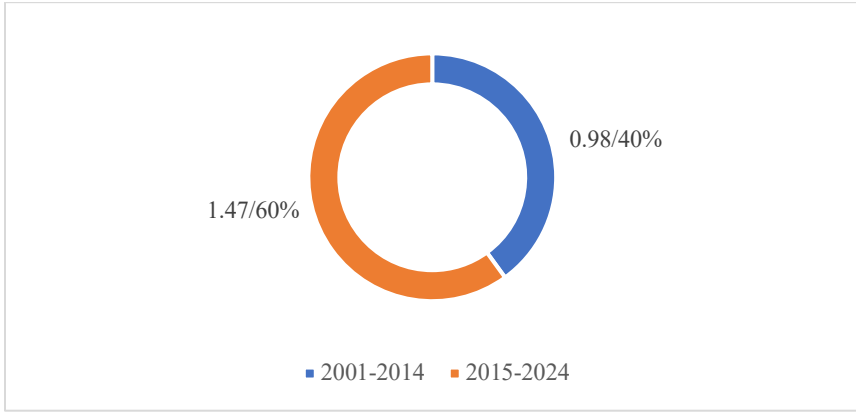
Despite some growth, their contribution to total imports remained marginal, generally accounting for only a small share of overall imports. In 2024, only four categories: CN XVI, CN XX, CN XV and CN XI together account for approximately 68–70% of total imports, demonstrating the increasing concentration of the trade structure.

3.2. Imports from France by CN

The analysis of the statistical data presented in the import table reveals a continuous and substantial expansion of the Republic of Moldova's imports from France throughout the analysed period.

Unlike trade flows characterized by strong fluctuations or dependence on a limited number of products, imports from France demonstrate a relatively diversified structure, with significant contributions from industrial, technological, chemical, agricultural, and transport-related product groups.

Figure 3. Republic of Moldova's Imports from France, by Combined Nomenclature (CN) Commodity Groups, 2001–2014 vs. 2015-2024 (USD billion)



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on data provided by NBSRM, 2026a)

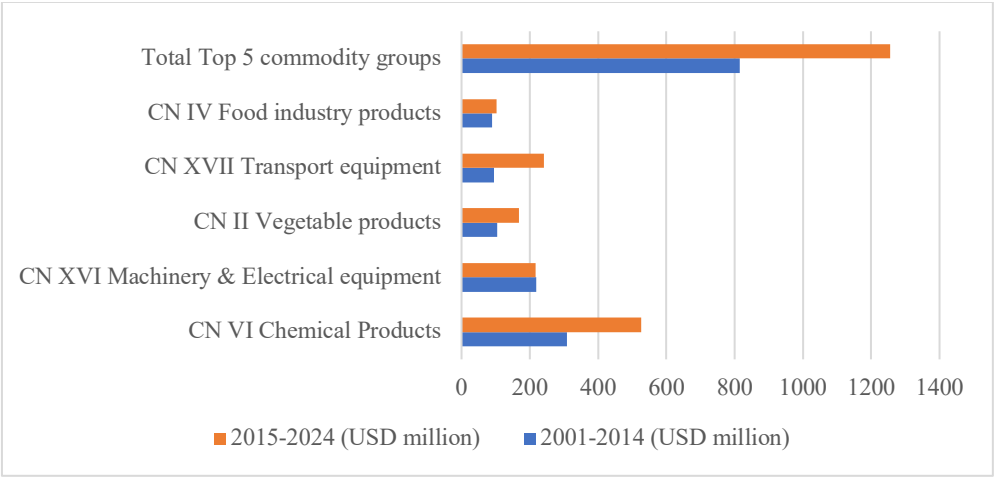
Imports from France exhibited an overall upward trend, although with periodic fluctuations. The first period was marked by dynamic expansion, interrupted by a temporary decline during the global economic crisis, followed by recovery.

The second period recorded higher trade volumes and a stronger expansion of bilateral imports, despite a short-term contraction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The subsequent recovery and sustained growth indicate a strengthening of France's position in the Republic of Moldova import market and a deepening of bilateral economic relations.

The structure of imports from France is considerably diversified, with several major product categories contributing significantly to total import values. The dominant categories throughout the analysed period were CN VI, CN XVII, CN XVI, CN IV and CN II.

Figure 4. Top 5 Republic of Moldova's Imports from France, by Combined Nomenclature (CN) Commodity Groups, 2001-2014 vs. 2015–2024 (USD million)



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on data provided by NBSRM, 2026a)

CN VI remained the largest and most stable component of Republic of Moldova's imports from France throughout the analysed period, confirming the sustained importance of chemical products in bilateral trade. CN XVI also exhibited substantial growth, particularly in the second period, reflecting increasing demand for machinery, electrical equipment, and technological products. The most pronounced expansion occurred in CN XVII, which recorded exceptional growth during the second period and became one of the major import categories. Overall, the evolution of these categories indicates a diversification and upgrading of Moldova's import structure from France, with increasing importance of chemical products, industrial and technological goods, and transport equipment.

CN II maintained an important position throughout the analysed period, with imports remaining relatively stable at a higher level during the second period. This persistence highlights the continued importance of agricultural and food-related products in bilateral trade. CN IV followed a moderate but generally upward trajectory, with stronger growth during the second period, indicating the increasing importance of France

as a supplier of processed food products and beverages to the Republic of Moldova market.

Manufacturing-related categories also recorded an overall positive development, although their growth was more moderate. CN XV gained importance during the second period, while CN XVIII showed sustained expansion, indicating a gradual diversification of Republic of Moldova's imports towards technological and precision-related products. Other categories, including plastics and rubber, paper, textiles, wood, glass, and ceramics, remained comparatively smaller but contributed to the broader diversification of the import structure. Overall, the evolution of these categories suggests a gradual expansion beyond traditional food-related imports towards a more diversified structure encompassing manufacturing, technological, and intermediate goods.

From a structural perspective, Republic of Moldova's imports from France demonstrate a relatively balanced distribution among several major categories. Unlike trade relations dominated by a single group of products, French exports to Republic of Moldova are characterized by a combination of industrial, technological, agricultural, and consumer-oriented goods. This indicates a more diversified trade relationship and a broader integration of French products into the Republic of Moldova economy.

The comparison between the two periods shows that the second stage was characterized not only by higher import values but also by qualitative changes in the composition of imports. Industrial and technological products gained importance, particularly machinery, electrical equipment, transport equipment, and chemical products. At the same time, agricultural and food-related imports maintained a stable role, contributing to the overall diversity of bilateral trade.

3.3. Comparative analysis of the Republic of Moldova's imports from France and China (2001-2014 vs. 2015-2024)

Imports from France are primarily concentrated in chemical products, which remained the leading category throughout the analysed period, increasing from USD 4.69 million in 2001 to USD 56.41 million in 2024. France also strengthened its position in machinery and electrical equipment, transport equipment, vegetable products, and food industry products, all of which recorded substantial growth after 2015. Compared with China, France's exports are characterized by a greater share of agricultural, food, and higher-value chemical products, while industrial goods account for a smaller proportion.

Imports from China are overwhelmingly dominated by machinery and electrical equipment, which expanded from USD 3.78 million in 2001 to USD 593.73 million in 2024. Other major categories include transport equipment, common metals, textiles, and miscellaneous manufactured articles, all of which experienced rapid growth during the analysed period. Compared with France, China's exports are far more concentrated in industrial and manufactured goods, reflecting its role as Republic of Moldova principal supplier of mass-produced industrial and consumer products.

Imports from China recorded a much more accelerated expansion compared with imports from France. During the period 2001–2014, imports from China increased from USD 8.41 million in 2001 to USD 481.17 million in 2014, representing an increase of more than 57 times. By comparison, imports from France increased from USD 25.60 million to USD 93.82 million during the same period, representing growth of approximately 3.7 times.

The difference became even more pronounced during the period 2015–2024. Imports from China increased from USD 366.43 million in 2015 to USD 1.25 billion in

2024, reaching a level more than five times higher than in 2015. Imports from France also expanded significantly, increasing from USD 81.02 million in 2015 to USD 225.28 million in 2024. However, despite this growth, the value of imports from China remained considerably higher, confirming China's stronger role as a supplier to the Republic of Moldova market.

Compared with France, China's trade expansion was characterized by a stronger concentration in industrial and manufactured goods, particularly machinery, electrical equipment, textiles, metals, transport equipment, and miscellaneous manufactured articles. French imports, although also industrially oriented, displayed a more diversified structure, combining chemical products, machinery, transport equipment, agricultural products, and food-related goods.

The comparison between the two countries highlights significant differences in trade specialization. During 2001–2014, China's exports to Republic of Moldova expanded much faster than France's exports. Chinese imports increased more than fiftyfold, while French imports increased less than fourfold. The main driver of Chinese growth was industrial manufacturing, especially machinery, textiles, metals, and manufactured goods.

During 2015–2024, the gap widened further. Imports from China exceeded USD 1.24 billion in 2024, compared with USD 225 million from France. China therefore became a substantially larger economic supplier for Republic of Moldova. However, the structure of imports differs significantly:

China's exports are highly concentrated in industrial manufactured goods, especially machinery, electrical equipment, textiles, metals, transport equipment, and consumer goods. France's exports are more diversified, combining chemicals, machinery, transport equipment, agricultural products, and food products.

The comparison demonstrates that China has a stronger quantitative presence on the Republic of Moldova market, while France maintains a more balanced and diversified export structure. From a structural perspective, China's relationship with Republic of Moldova is characterized by large-scale industrial supply and manufactured goods trade, whereas France's relationship reflects a combination of industrial specialization, agricultural products, and higher-value-added goods.

Overall, the statistical evidence indicates that both countries increased their economic importance for Republic of Moldova between 2001 and 2024. However, China achieved a much stronger expansion in terms of volume and market penetration, while France developed a comparatively smaller but more diversified trade relationship.

4. CHINA AND FRANCE ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT WITH REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA THROUGH AN ANALYSIS OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S EXPORT BY CN COMMODITY GROUPS TO CHINA AND FRANCE DURING THE PERIODS 2001-2014 VS. 2015-2024.

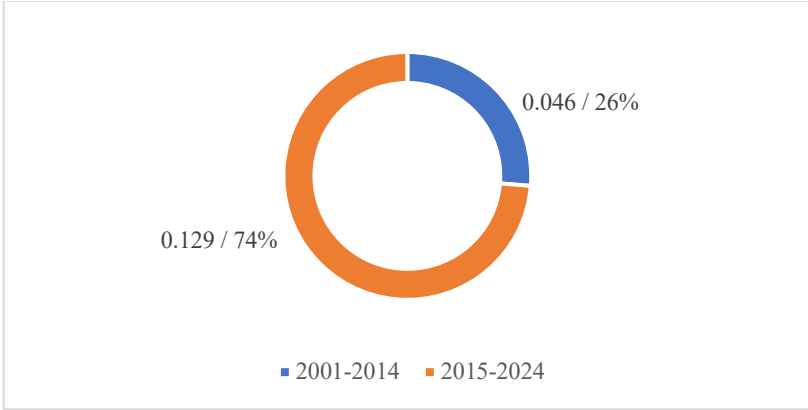
4.1. Exports to China by CN

The analysis of the statistical data presented in the export figures reveals a distinct trend compared to that observed in the Republic of Moldova's imports from China.

Whereas imports recorded sustained and accelerated growth throughout the entire period under review, Republic of Moldova exports to China followed a more heterogeneous trajectory, marked by a significant expansion up to 2017, followed by a downward trend in the final years of the analysed period.

Furthermore, the structure of exports demonstrates a considerably higher degree of concentration, being largely dominated by a limited number of commodity groups.

Figure 5. Republic of Moldova's exports to China, by Combined Nomenclature (CN) Commodity Groups, 2001–2014 vs. 2015-2024 (USD billion)



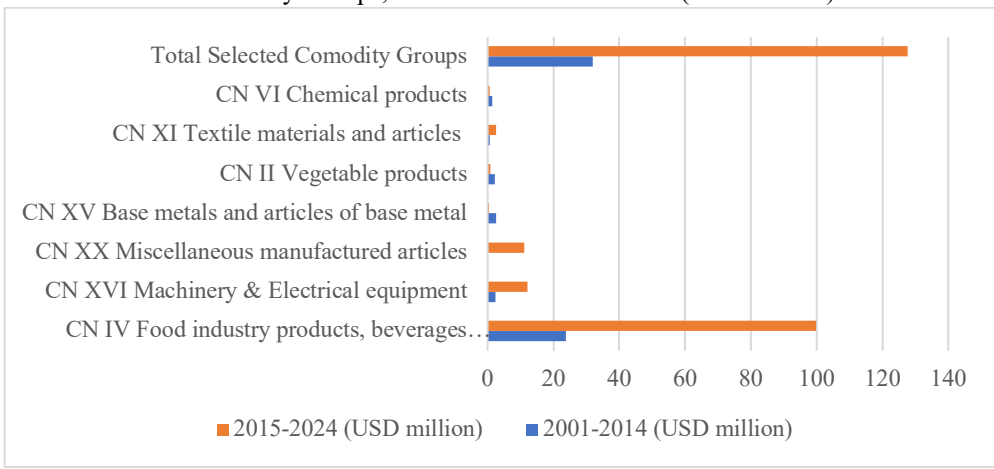
(*Source:* author's elaboration based on data provided by NBSRM, 2026b)

Exports to China exhibited a marked expansion over the analysed period, although the second period was characterized by substantially greater volatility. After reaching a pronounced peak in the second period, exports subsequently declined, indicating lower stability in export flows to the Chinese market.

The export structure was strongly concentrated in CN IV, which consistently represented the dominant category and accounted for a substantial share of the fluctuations in total exports. CN II, by contrast, gained importance temporarily during the first period but subsequently declined and became marginal in the export structure.

Overall, the evolution indicates a highly concentrated and volatile export relationship with China, dominated by products classified under CN IV and characterized by the declining relative importance of vegetable products.

Figure 6. Top 5 Republic of Moldova's exports to China, by Combined Nomenclature (CN) Commodity Groups, 2001-2014 vs. 2015–2024 (USD million)



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on data provided by NBSRM, 2026b)

Exports of CN XVI remained comparatively modest and fluctuating, contrasting with the stronger performance of this category on the import side. This pattern points to a

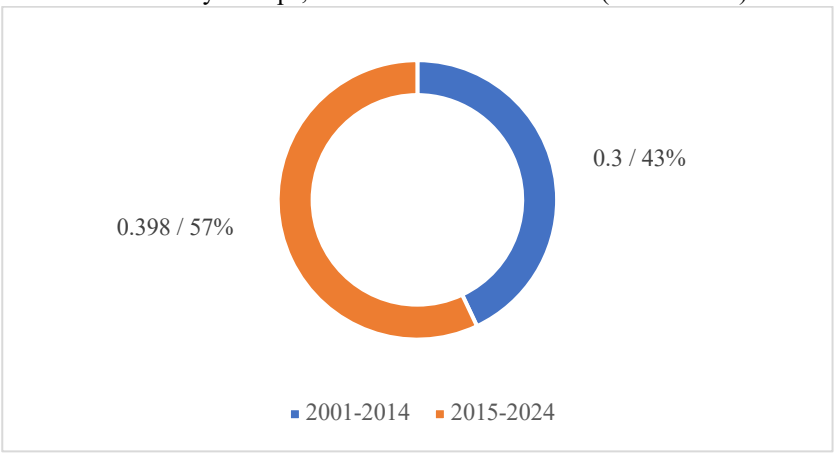
structural asymmetry in bilateral trade, with the Republic of Moldova remaining predominantly dependent on China for industrial and technological products. CN XX showed a more pronounced expansion during the second period, followed by a subsequent decline, indicating a degree of diversification in Republic of Moldova's exports to the Chinese market. CN XVIII also displayed considerable volatility, with a temporary increase during the second period but without establishing a sustained growth trajectory. Most other CN categories remained marginal throughout the analysed period, with chemical products, plastics, textiles, metals, wood, paper, footwear, and mineral products contributing only modestly to total exports. Overall, Republic of Moldova's exports to China remained highly concentrated, with limited and uneven diversification across other commodity groups.

From a structural perspective, the Republic of Moldova's exports to China are considerably less diversified than its imports from this country. While imports are distributed across numerous industrial categories, exports are concentrated in one or two main product groups, highlighting the limited specialization of Republic of Moldova supply on the Chinese market. After 2017, a decline in the total value of exports can be observed, without other product categories compensating for the reduction in food product exports. The structure of exports remains concentrated around agri-food products. Compared with the structure of imports from China, this reflects a structural imbalance in bilateral trade relations, characterized by imports dominated by industrial and technological products, while exports are concentrated in agri-food products and several categories with relatively low added value. This indicates the presence of a structural asymmetry. From the perspective of the statistics presented the data reveal a more pronounced consolidation of China's economic presence on the Republic of Moldova market than of the Republic of Moldova's economic presence on the Chinese market.

4.2. Exports to France by CN

Exports to France followed an overall upward trajectory, with substantially higher export volumes during the second period, despite increased year-to-year volatility and a decline after the mid-period peak.

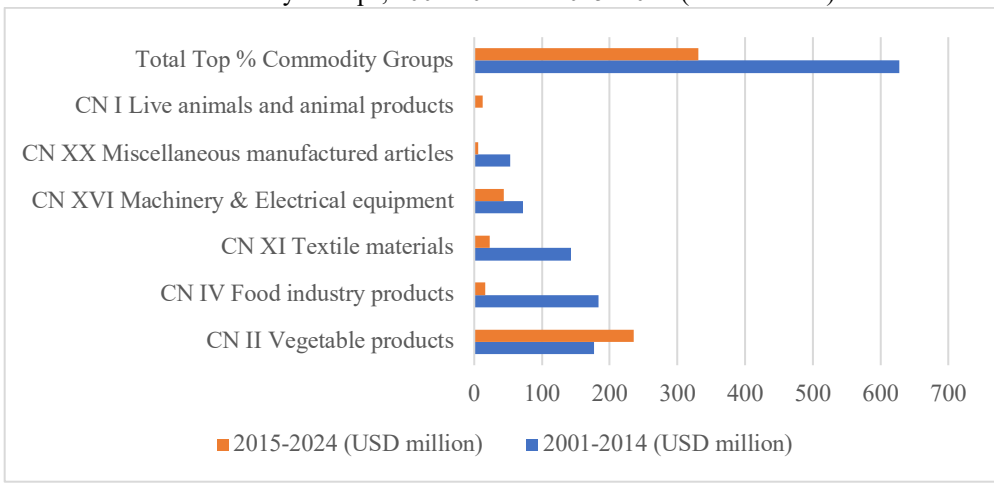
Figure 7. Republic of Moldova's exports to France, by Combined Nomenclature (CN) Commodity Groups, 2001–2014 vs. 2015-2024 (USD billion)



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on data provided by NBSRM, 2026a)

The export structure remained strongly dominated by CN II, although its relative contribution decreased towards the end of the analysed period, indicating gradual diversification. One of the most significant structural changes was observed in CN XVI, whose increasing importance during the second period reflects the growing participation of industrial and technological products in Republic of Moldova's exports to France.

Figure 8. Top 5 Republic of Moldova's exports to France, by Combined Nomenclature (CN) Commodity Groups, 2001-2014 vs. 2015–2024 (USD million)



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on data provided by NBSRM, 2026a)

CN IV and CN XX also recorded positive developments, particularly during the second period, contributing to the diversification of manufactured exports. CN XI maintained a relatively important position and exhibited sustained growth, highlighting the continuing relevance of the textile sector in Republic of Moldova's exports to France.

Overall, the evolution of the export structure indicates a gradual diversification beyond traditional vegetable products, with increasing contributions from industrial, technological, textile, and manufactured goods. This pattern contrasts with Republic of Moldova's exports to China, which remained considerably more concentrated.

By contrast, the period 2015–2024 was characterized by a broader export structure. Consequently, exports became more diversified than during the first period. Compared with the structure of imports from France, however, bilateral trade still exhibits a certain degree of structural asymmetry. French exports to Republic of Moldova remain dominated by higher-value-added products.

From the perspective of the statistics presented, the data indicate a more balanced economic relationship between the Republic of Moldova and France than between the Republic of Moldova and China. Although France continues to maintain a positive trade position in several industrial sectors, Republic of Moldova has demonstrated a stronger capacity to diversify its exports and increase the share of higher-value-added products on the French market.

4.3. Comparative analysis of the Republic of Moldova's exports to France and China (2001-2014 vs. 2015-2024)

The Republic of Moldova's exports to France were more diversified and stable than exports to China. This reflects the stronger integration of Moldovan producers into European production and value chains.

Total exports increased from USD 8.37 million in 2001 to USD 37.60 million in 2014, peaked at USD 50.83 million in 2017, and amounted to USD 35.08 million in 2024. The export structure was dominated by vegetable products, while machinery and electrical equipment, textiles, processed food products, and miscellaneous manufactured articles gained importance during 2015–2024, indicating increasing diversification and higher value-added exports.

The Republic of Moldova's exports to China remained much lower and considerably more concentrated than exports to France. Total exports increased from USD 14.5 thousand in 2001 to USD 8.22 million in 2014, reached a peak of USD 19.00 million in 2017, and declined to USD 8.46 million in 2024, reflecting greater volatility during 2015–2024.

Exports were overwhelmingly dominated by food products, while miscellaneous manufactured articles, machinery and electrical equipment, optical instruments, and vegetable products played secondary and generally more volatile roles. Unlike France, the export structure to China remained highly concentrated and less diversified. The comparison reveals two markedly different export structures.

Exports to France are larger, more diversified, and increasingly oriented toward industrial products, combining strong agricultural exports with growing machinery, textile, and manufactured goods. By contrast, exports to China remain highly concentrated in food products, while the remaining categories account for relatively small and volatile shares.

The contrast between the two periods is also evident. For France, 2015–2024 was characterized by greater diversification and stronger growth in machinery, textiles, and manufactured products alongside traditional agricultural exports.

For China, the second period brought higher export values than 2001–2014 but also increased volatility and an even stronger dependence on food products, while most other categories either stagnated or declined. Overall, the data indicate that the French market offers a broader and more diversified export structure for the Republic of Moldova, whereas exports to China remain concentrated in a limited number of product groups.

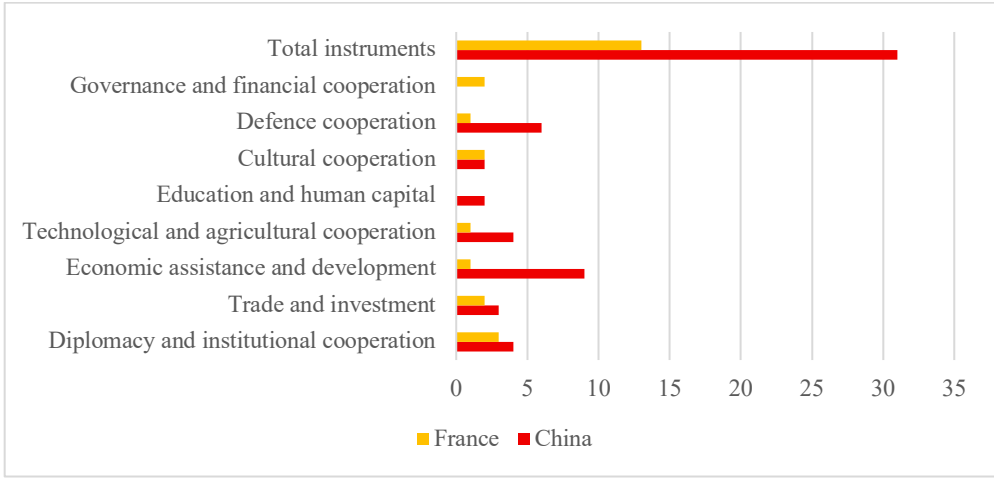
5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S BILATERAL AGREEMENTS WITH FRANCE AND CHINA BEFORE 2001, 2001-2014 VS. 2015-2024.

The evolution of the Republic of Moldova's bilateral agreements with France and China demonstrates two distinct models of external cooperation. While both partnerships were established in the early 1990s after Republic of Moldova gained independence, their legal frameworks developed according to different strategic priorities.

France's cooperation has been primarily oriented toward institutional development, European integration, governance, cultural diplomacy, and sustainable development, whereas China's cooperation has focused more strongly on economic

assistance, technical cooperation, infrastructure-related support, and sectoral development projects.

Figure 9. Selected France-Republic of Moldova vs. China-Republic of Moldova Bilateral Agreements by period (<2001 vs. 2001-2014 vs. 2015-2024)



(*Source:* author's elaboration based on data provided by MAERM, 2026)

During the first period, both France and China focused on establishing diplomatic relations and the legal and institutional foundations for bilateral cooperation. However, their approaches differed in scope and priorities. France adopted a broader institutional framework from the outset, emphasizing political dialogue, cultural, scientific, and technical cooperation, as well as investment protection and agricultural development.

China, in contrast, placed greater emphasis on establishing mechanisms for trade, investment, technical cooperation, and economic assistance. While both countries developed frameworks for cultural and agricultural cooperation, France showed a stronger orientation toward institutional and knowledge-based cooperation, whereas China focused more strongly on economic and technical instruments. Defence cooperation was also established earlier within the French partnership.

During 2001–2014, the differences between the two cooperation models became more pronounced. China significantly expanded its engagement through financial assistance, technical cooperation, agriculture, education, and defence, reflecting a multidimensional and project-oriented approach to bilateral relations.

Financial support through grants and technical assistance became an important component of Chinese cooperation, complemented by sectoral initiatives in technology, agriculture, education, and defence. France, by comparison, maintained a more institutionally oriented approach, with particular emphasis on taxation, financial governance, administrative capacity, and institutional cooperation. Thus, while China's engagement became increasingly sectoral and assistance-oriented, France continued to emphasize governance and institutional development.

The third period reflects the consolidation and further specialization of bilateral cooperation. France strengthened its role in development assistance, governance, sustainable development, infrastructure, environmental protection, cultural heritage, and

institutional modernization, increasingly linking bilateral cooperation to broader development and reform objectives.

China continued its established approach based on technical and economic assistance, while maintaining cooperation in education and defence. Overall, the two partnerships became more differentiated: French cooperation increasingly emphasized development, governance, and institutional capacity-building, whereas Chinese cooperation remained focused on technical assistance, sectoral development, education, and defence.

Overall, the comparison indicates that France and China developed distinct models of engagement with the Republic of Moldova. French cooperation evolved from a broad institutional and cultural framework toward development-oriented and governance-focused cooperation, while Chinese engagement progressed from economic and diplomatic foundations toward a more multidimensional model combining financial assistance, technical cooperation, education, sectoral development, and defence. These differences highlight the complementary nature of the two bilateral partnerships and their distinct approaches to supporting Republic of Moldova's economic and institutional development.

6. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of bilateral trade reveals two distinct patterns of external economic engagement in the Republic of Moldova. Between 2001–2014 and 2015–2024, imports from both China and France expanded significantly, yet their structures evolved differently. China strengthened its position primarily as a supplier of industrial and technological goods, resulting in a highly concentrated import structure. In contrast, imports from France became more diversified, combining machinery, chemicals, transport equipment, agricultural products, and processed food, reflecting a broader commercial relationship.

On the export side, Republic of Moldova's trade with France proved to be more diversified and stable, with growing shares of machinery, textiles, manufactured goods, and processed food alongside traditional agricultural exports. This development indicates a gradual structural transformation of Republic of Moldova's export profile and a stronger integration into European trade networks. By contrast, exports to China, although increasing over time, remained concentrated mainly in agri-food products and displayed greater volatility, limiting the diversification of Republic of Moldova's export structure.

Overall, the findings suggest that France and China represent distinct models of economic engagement with the Republic of Moldova. While China's role is characterised by large-scale industrial exports to Republic of Moldova and a comparatively limited absorption of Republic of Moldova exports, France exhibits a more balanced trade relationship, supported by a broader exchange of commodity groups. These results highlight structural differences in bilateral trade and provide empirical evidence for identifying different patterns of external economic engagement.

The comparative analysis of Republic of Moldova’s bilateral agreements with France and China shows two different models of cooperation that developed according to the strategic priorities of each partner. France’s approach has focused mainly on institutional development, governance, cultural cooperation, investment protection, and sustainable development. Through legal frameworks and development institutions, France has supported Republic of Moldova’s modernization, administrative capacity-building, and alignment with European standards.

China's cooperation model has been more oriented toward economic assistance, technical cooperation, financial support, and sectoral projects. Chinese agreements have provided Republic of Moldova with grants, technological cooperation, agricultural support, educational exchanges, and defence assistance, especially during the period 2001–2014.

After 2015, the differences between the two partnerships became clearer: France strengthened its role as a development and governance partner, while China continued to focus on technical assistance, economic cooperation, and specific bilateral projects. Overall, France and China have contributed to Republic of Moldova's development through complementary approaches. France has emphasized institutional strengthening and long-term reforms, while China has focused on practical assistance and economic cooperation. Together, these partnerships reflect Moldova's strategy of maintaining diversified external relations and using different forms of cooperation to support national development.

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THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE DEMOCRATIC COSMOPOLIS

Sotiris AMARANTOS*

Abstract: *This article seeks to clarify the crisis currently experienced by the European Union and to explore possible avenues for overcoming it. Taking Cosmosystemic Gnoseology as the method of analysis, the article presents three theoretical models considered pivotal for organizing post-state-centric reality, with the aim of addressing the challenge that the prospect of the democratic cosmopolis poses for the EU. It is argued that an axiologically neutral position presupposes liberating thought from the dominant political and constitutional ideology of modernity. This, in turn, requires that, before the article's central problem is addressed, reflexive questions be posed about how modern thought conceives the notion of politics, both at the intra-societal and at the inter-state level. The article then analyses, first, Thomas Hobbes's theoretical approach to the Christian commonwealth; second, Immanuel Kant's federation of free states; and third, Rigas Velestinlis's oecumenical state. These three models of political constitution are assessed for their points of similarity and difference with the present structure of the EU, as well as for the possibilities they open up for finding effective solutions to the crisis it faces. On this basis, the article determines whether any of these theoretical models can respond to contemporary political developments and to the fundamental challenge that European integration poses in terms of democracy. The analysis concludes that the pre-modern and early-modern horizons of Hobbes and Kant cannot resolve the EU's existential impasse, and that Velestinlis's cosmopolitical model offers the more promising constitutional orientation for a genuinely democratic European integration.*

Keywords*: European Union, crisis, anthropocentrism, democracy, state-centrism, cosmopolis.*

INTRODUCTION

The course followed by the EU, especially after the global financial crisis[1], has generated intense concerns and questions regarding its political character, its bureaucratic structures, and the role of the individual state entities and the peoples that operate within it[2]. These concerns have been intensified by the complex geopolitical environment of recent years, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the geostrategic confrontation between the United States and China. In other words, within this threatening and at the same time unstable environment, the EU is called upon, first, to survive, and second, to emerge stronger from a multi-factorial crisis. Naturally, both the question of survival and

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[1] On the phenomenon of the global financial crisis, its causes, and its consequences for Europe, see Varoufakis (2013).

[2] Certain issues concerning the mode of political organization and the power relations that develop within the institutions of the EU are analysed Habermas (2009). Also, on Jean Monnet's contribution to advancing the vision of the EU, see Troitiño (2017).

that of strengthening must be linked to an axiological object. If we take into account the historical origins of European civilization, which trace back to anthropocentric reality — that is, to societies that conquer freedom, a phenomenon that first appears in ancient Greece — this axiological object can be none other than freedom, indeed in its universal form (individual, social/economic, political). Consequently, the notion of the survival and strengthening of the EU must be dissociated from the survival and strengthening of the organized interests of the market economy and of bureaucratic mechanisms, and must instead be linked to the freedom of European societies[3]. In light of this, we could argue that the EU is perhaps living through the greatest existential crisis of its history. According to ancient Greek usage, the term crisis denotes that liminal moment at which an organism afflicted by illness will either perish or recover. Recovery, however, presupposes exact knowledge: first, of the organism that is ill; second, of its immediate and wider environment; and third, of the means available to help overcome the crisis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The recognition of the European Union's existential crisis, together with the prospect of overcoming it through democratic transformation, entails a substantial rejection of the definitions of concepts and typological categories advanced by modern political thought. Contogeorgis' (2006-2021) work lays the foundations for a new approach to social and political phenomena, based on the conception of the biological evolution of societies. From this perspective, social and political institutions are assessed according to the stage of development experienced by the cosmosystem. Consequently, the recognition of the crisis permeating the EU in its entirety could be interpreted as a consequence of the particular cosmosystemic variables governing our era, rather than through the superficial lens of purely economic or ideological variables, as some philosophers and economists such as Touraine (2014), Varoufakis (2016), and Stiglitz (2016) appear to believe. Such approaches, while capable of capturing certain dimensions of the crisis, are nevertheless unable to provide compelling reasons for its deeper causes.

Among the many bibliographic sources available to us, one should note the recently published work of (Rhinard et al. 2023). The authors argue that the combination of structural weaknesses and contingent events has caused significant shocks to the European project, for the management of which they propose a set of institutional reforms. Of particular interest in this respect is also Webber's work (2018), which focuses, among other things, on the weight of Germany's political conduct in the inability to address effectively the serious imbalances within the EU. Even if these reflective works contain diagnostic insights that describe, to a considerable extent, the multidimensional character of the European crisis, they lack a comprehensive and guiding theoretical perspective capable of linking the structural problems of European institutions with the dynamics of the cosmosystemic evolution of societies.

Judt's (2011) work regarding the future of the EU is one of lasting significance, since it identifies certain objective difficulties capable of undermining the European integration project. Judt's scepticism regarding the prospects of European integration appears to stem from his inability to view the EU's future, first, through the lens of its

[3] Certain authors argue that the EU is not the outcome of any idealist vision, but purely of self-interested and utilitarian priorities. See, indicatively, Judt (2011). Also, on the manner in which the European inter-state system was constructed, see the first two chapters of Kissinger (2014).

representative and democratic transformation, and second, through that of the post-statist cosmopolis.

Finally, Habermas' (2009) attempt to approach the problem of the EU crisis within an interpretive framework inspired by Kant, while presenting certain radical political elements absent from similar studies, is, in our view, ultimately confined within the conceptual boundaries of modern political thought. As a result, the notions of democracy and representation, which occupy a significant place in his argument, lose their dynamism and strategic value.

METHODOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS[4]

Wishing to move beyond the ideology that has, from time to time, been produced to legitimize the EU both at the level of values and at the level of pursued aims, we shall confine ourselves to factual, and therefore empirically verifiable/falsifiable, elements that define its reality ontologically. In this sense, we must distance ourselves from those theoretical approaches that judge the political systems of individual states, as well as the manner of governance of the EU, through the prism of modern ideology, which presents the monarchically-governed oligarchy of our time as democracy[5]. Consequently, this existential crisis is to be located not, as many claim, in a democratic deficit, but in the complete absence of democracy (Amarantos 2025a). We must therefore ask whether the democratic path, passing through the stage of representation, could lead the EU to overcome its existential impasses. Naturally, insofar as we are speaking of a supra-state entity such as the EU, we must also reflect on the constitutional character both of the individual member states and of the composite super-polity as a whole. At this point certain clarifications are needed. We define democracy as the possession by citizens of full political competence, which entails the constitution of society into a dēmos and the exercise by that dēmos of the legislative, governmental, and judicial functions. By contrast, elections for the selection of rulers who monopolize the political power of a society constitute, by definition, the polity of monarchically-governed oligarchy[6]. According to the method of Cosmosystemic Gnoseology that we follow here, we must reject as false the modern distinction between direct and indirect democracy. Democracy

[4] On the method of Cosmosystemic Gnoseology in general, see Contogeorgis (2017), Contogeorgis (2006–2021) and Amarantos (2022).

[5] *"One of the fundamental consequences of this development is modern thought's persistence — instead of occupying itself with the creation of general gnoseological categories on the basis of which it might evaluate the real, whether historical or lived, socio-political phenomenon — in elevating its own era into a general category, attributing to it universal properties, and then claiming for it the function of the culmination of the anthropocentric totality. This occurs with virtually the entire set of concepts pertaining to the nature of the modern world. Politics is defined not by its nature, but by virtue of the way it happens to be structured in our era: that is, as authority or as power. The political system is taken as the tautological equivalent of the state. One could enumerate countless examples with regard to concepts such as freedom, right, property, capital, labour, authority, power, democracy, representation, the nation, the world system, etc."* (Contogeorgis 2007, 21).

[6] We speak of monarchically-governed oligarchy insofar as, in contemporary Western regimes — whether prime-ministerial or presidential in character — the holder of governmental/executive power, assisted by power groups, exercises dominion over the political system as a whole, over the state, and ultimately over society. Citizens, for their part, are granted only individual freedom and specific social/economic and political rights.

constitutes a specific constitutional phenomenon and, like every real phenomenon, cannot possess indirect existence. This modern invention was designed to legitimize, in the consciousness of societies, monarchically-governed oligarchy by presenting it as a form of "indirect democracy" (Contogeorgis 2007). Likewise, the institution of elections does not constitute an exclusive characteristic of democracy, nor is it capable of defining it. We should recall that the principal method for the selection of magistrates in ancient Athenian democracy was not election but the lot. The institution of elections could be employed in a great many regimes without any of them, in any sense, being characterized as democratic. We could therefore argue that the political leaderships of the states that make up the EU bear the character of monarchically-governed oligarchy.

As for the EU itself, we shall adopt George Contogeorgis's observation that it "constitutes a political system without a state," while its organs — apart from the European Parliament, whose contribution to policy-making is not decisive — do not possess the electoral legitimation enjoyed by the political institutions found within the individual states (Contogeorgis 2019). Consequently, the functioning of the EU is significantly affected by the logic of power that generally governs the inter-state system during the phase of state-centrism (Mearsheimer 2014, Ifestos 2023). In other words, the power relations of the inter-state order are imported into the EU's political system, determining the framework of the policies pursued. In this way, the more powerful states that are members of the Union are able to impose their will on the weaker ones. Phenomena of this kind lead to a widening of inequalities among societies, resulting in a weakening of cohesion and the emergence of divisive tendencies. The overall situation is aggravated by the intense control exercised by the market economy over the groups of bureaucrats who staff the EU's institutions, owing to the fact that the final institutional arbiter of their action is not the societies themselves, but organized interest groups. Speaking overall, the supra-state institution of the EU, having adopted a model of pre-anthropocentric governance, appears to be cut off from the interests of European societies.

THE ISSUE OF SOCIAL EVOLUTION AND FREEDOM

At this point we must open a parenthesis in order to define the pivotal concept of anthropocentrism and, by extension, of the anthropocentric cosmosystem. According to Cosmosystemic Gnoseology, societies constitute organisms defined by a particular evolutionary dynamic in each case, associated with specific stages through which they pass in spiral fashion. The spiral evolution of societies, which encompasses not only progress but also regression and stagnation, is governed by the law of necessity (Contogeorgis 2017). In terms of freedom, we could distinguish two basic units of analysis for societies. First, we have the despotic cosmosystem, in which freedom is absent, and which is further distinguished into the stage of private despotism (feudal structures) and the stage of state despotism (the absolutist state). We also have the anthropocentric cosmosystem, which in its early stage is characterized by the emergence of individual freedom and the polity of monarchically-governed oligarchy, while in its mature stage it is distinguished by the conquest of individual, social/economic, and political freedom (universal freedom) and by the polity of democracy. The representative system is defined, in constitutional terms, as an intermediate stage between early and mature anthropocentrism. By representation we mean the relation whereby political personnel are obliged to conform to the will of society constituted into a dēmos. We could therefore argue that each stage of social evolution determines the totality of the material

and spiritual preconditions of a society — that is, it determines the axiological, institutional, and ideological spectrum within and through which social subjects are called upon to act.

THE POLITICAL NATURE OF THE EU

Having made these necessary clarifications, we are now in a position to pronounce on the nature of the EU's political reality, so as then to seek possible ways out of the existential crisis it is experiencing.

We shall thus venture the hypothesis that the political nature of the EU might resemble both the model of the "Christian commonwealth" envisioned in Leviathan by Thomas Hobbes, and the "federation of free states" advocated by Immanuel Kant. We consider these two theoretical undertakings to broadly delimit the possibilities of modernity's horizon of understanding with regard to the formation of a supranational order. Hobbes's proposal, although exceptionally early for our own time, we believe develops a system of ideas that still influences Western state and supra-state reality today. Kant's work Perpetual Peace, more elaborated with regard to its supra-state concerns, constitutes a point of reference, at least for Western thought. In what follows, through the development of the respective theories of Hobbes and Kant, we shall attempt to identify the central similarities of their theoretical models with the structure and functioning of the EU.

THE CHRISTIAN COMMONWEALTH OF THOMAS HOBBES

As we have argued elsewhere, in Hobbes's thought — irrespective of the degree to which he himself was conscious of this fact — three different world-images converge, each bearing the axiological weight of three different evolutionary stages: those of private despotism, state despotism, and early anthropocentrism (Amarantos 2025b). In this sense, Hobbes's thought belongs both to the past of the modern world and to its present[7]. Certainly, the dominant element of Hobbesian political thought is determined by the stage of state despotism, since it is guided by the pursuit of the philosophical legitimation of the absolutist state[8].

As the starting point of his approach, he posits human individuality within the so-called state of nature, in which universal war prevails[9]. At this point we should make certain clarifications regarding Hobbes's understanding of the state of nature. The human beings of the state of nature are beings characterized by natural equality with respect to

[7] Modern society, from the standpoint of Cosmosystemic Gnoseology, belongs to the stage of early anthropocentrism.

[8] Although Hobbes begins by presenting the possible forms of political organization that can arise through the social contract, remaining at a purely descriptive level of analysis, he subsequently departs from axiologically neutral description and takes a clear stance in favour of monarchy (Hobbes 1996).

[9] As Hobbes (1996) himself states, the reference to the concept of the state of nature does not imply reference to any specific, historically documented period. It is, rather, a philosophical device that allows Hobbes to develop his political thought. If, however, we were to insist on seeking a correspondence between the Hobbesian state of nature and some specific historical reality, we have the impression that our inquiry should be directed toward the sphere of Western feudalism, that is, of private despotism.

bodily and mental capacities[10]. They also possess the element of reason, through which they are able to decode the natural laws established by God the Creator. The natural laws were created by God to serve the ideal of peace and progress among human beings. In this condition of the state of nature, however, the natural laws merely exist and are in no way enforced. On the contrary, we might say that human passions lead toward their violation[11]. We could therefore argue that the consequences of natural equality among human beings, combined with the absence of state authority, form the ground upon which the phenomenon of universal war arises.

Universal war should not be understood so much as an ever-present state of armed conflict, but rather as a form of readiness for war, given that in the state of nature there is no all-powerful authority capable of instituting and, through sanctions, enforcing the law. The absence of an all-powerful authority capable of securing mutual respect among human beings, the observance of private covenants, and, finally, the prohibition of violence and fraud as means of resolving disputes and realizing individual will, constitutes the generative cause of universal war.

For the English philosopher, the overcoming of universal war can ideally be achieved through the constitution of the all-powerful state, Leviathan, in which the sovereign exercises authority of an absolutist type. We see that Hobbes chooses the name of a mythical monster from the Old Testament to represent that all-powerful state mechanism capable of imposing itself upon individual wills and setting the terms of lawful governance. The constitution of the state Leviathan can be achieved either through a social contract, in which natural individuals renounce their natural freedom and accept the sovereign's absolutist authority, or through conquest by another state entity (Amarantos 2025a). For Hobbes, as later for Hegel in the Phenomenology of Spirit, conquest essentially entails a contract of submission concluded in practice between the conqueror and the conquered, since otherwise the defeated party would choose death rather than submission. At this point we can identify an interesting point of interweaving between domestic politics and the field of the inter-state order, to which Hobbes will return when he discusses the Christian commonwealth.

The state Leviathan is placed under the absolute control of a sovereign, who may be either a democratic assembly, an oligarchic group, or, finally, an absolute monarch. The monarch constitutes the indicated political solution for the creation and preservation of a political community. Hobbes's philosophy deals primarily with the problem of intra-societal political organization. Nevertheless, he does not fail to develop certain ideas concerning the possible constitution of a supra-societal political entity, within which the individual monarchs, together with their states, might be subsumed, so as to safeguard the inter-state system from the negative consequences of the state of nature — that is, of

[10] Hobbes, of course, does not mean that natural human beings are ontologically identical, but that the differences in their capacities are not so decisive as to allow one to dominate the other definitively (Amarantos 2025b)

[11] "For the laws of nature (as justice, equite, modesty, mercy, and (in sum) doing of others, as we would be done to,) of themselves, without the terror of some power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions, that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge and the like. And covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strenght to secure a man at all. Therefore notwithstanding the laws of nature (which every one hath then kept, when he has the will to keep them, when he can do it safely) if there be no power erected, or not great enough for our security; every man will, and may lawfully rely on his own strength and art, for caution against all other men." (Hobbes 1996, 111)

universal war. Naturally, the model of supra-state organization that Thomas Hobbes has in mind is suffused with a philosophically elaborated Christian metaphysical perspective. Thus, this supra-state organization presupposes, first, that the monarchs and states to be housed within it will accept the truth of Christian doctrine, and, second, that they will have accepted their submission to the head of the universal Christian Church. From the manner in which Hobbes (1996) develops his argument, we can discern that the authority of the individual sovereign states will not cease to exist, but that supreme authority will certainly be held by the supra-state sovereign.

At this point it is useful to distinguish the differences, and above all the similarities, between the supra-state community envisioned by the English philosopher and the political nature of the EU. Beginning with the essential differences, we would say that the EU does not refer to a union of a metaphysical character, such as the one Hobbes envisioned. Likewise, in the Hobbesian "Christian political community," individual subjects lack, both at the level of the Leviathan states and at the level of the supra-polity, individual freedom and the totality of their political and social rights. By contrast, in both the EU and its member states, individual subjects possess individual freedom and are bearers of social and political rights[12]. The first common element concerns the total absence of societies from the process of political decision-making. We saw that, according to Hobbes's thought, individual subjects, from the moment they leave the state of nature and enter the state Leviathan, lose any right to involvement in politics. As for the participation of social subjects in the political processes of the EU and of the member states, this is limited, in the case of the former, to legitimizing the low political significance of the European Parliament, and, in the case of the latter, to legitimizing the system of monarchically-governed oligarchy as a whole — that is, citizens arbitrate among party organizations as to which will capture the state's political hegemony. As for the question of who exercises the substantive leadership of the EU, we could answer briefly and plainly: the more powerful states. In other words, just as in Hobbes's Christian community a form of super-authority is formed that possesses no legitimation whatsoever from society, so too in the case of the EU's leadership forms of arbitrary authority develop that are imposed on the states as a whole. Consequently, the type of sovereignty that develops at the level of the EU's leadership could be characterized as pre-modern, and as such akin to the model of Hobbesian constitutional conception. A second important similarity we can identify concerns the preservation of the internal power structure of the member states, even if this has entered a trajectory of weakening owing to the authority developing at the supra-state level.

THE FEDERATION OF FREE STATES OF IMMANUEL KANT

As we are able to observe, Immanuel Kant, like Thomas Hobbes, regards the state of nature as an extremely dangerous condition, in which the threat of war is

[12] At this point we must once again move beyond the dominant version of modern ideology, according to which rights are identified with freedom. By freedom we mean autonomy — that is, the capacity of the human subject to set the terms of life, both individual and collective. This is an achievement that presupposes the existence of anthropocentric societies. Rights, by contrast, constitute, in a sense, a kind of substitute within anthropocentrism in those fields where freedom has not yet been conquered, as for example in the economy and in politics during the stage of early anthropocentrism (Contogeorgis 2007).

constantly looming (Kant 1903). Evidently, the state of nature characterizes not only the pre-social reality of individual subjects, but also the state-centric condition, when a superordinate political authority is absent.

For Kant, the response to the problem of the state of nature and the constant threat of war at the inter-state level is the "federation of free states." The basis of this federation, for Kant, can be none other than republican-organized states. Republican society constitutes, for the German philosopher, the highest form of constitutional organization, since it secures the representation of the general will. Kant, in his effort to elevate the republican polity, is led to a misinterpretation of the democratic regime, which he classifies among despotic regimes, on the grounds that, unlike republicanism, in democracy the legislative and executive powers are not distinguished. In Kant's own words: "Of these three forms of a state, democracy, in the proper sense of the word, is of necessity despotism, because it establishes an executive power, since all decree regarding — and, if need be, against — any individual who dissents from them. Therefore the 'whole people,' so-called, who carry their measure are really not all, but only a majority: so that here the universal will is in contradiction with itself and with the principle of freedom" (Kant 1903, 125). At this point, Kant appears unaware that in democracy the political stake does not concern extensions of power but functions, since, owing to the conquest of universal freedom, the subject of sovereignty is absent. Nor does the German philosopher take into account the procedural prerequisite of democracy for decision-making. Decisions are not simply the product of the majority prevailing over competing opinions, since the democratic process presupposes the constitution of society into a dēmos, which, before proceeding to the use of the majority rule, deliberates and synthesizes differences. For this reason, in democracy what forms are not minorities in the modern sense, but dissenting minorities within a unified body. Kant, by contrast, overlooks the fact that in the republican polity, decision-making not only obeys the majority rule, but that this rule is exercised among the few holders of legislative power. Furthermore, we must regard as mistaken Kant's position that the republican regime is representative of the general will, insofar as citizens, beyond electoral legitimation, do not possess the right to recall, control, and punish their political rulers. In conclusion, we would argue that Kant, owing to the early anthropocentric era in which he lived, is unable to grasp something that the ancient Greek thinkers could perfectly well discern with regard to democracy: namely, that the dēmos of the polis was capable of shaping distinct fields of political function in order to serve universal freedom. From this perspective, in ancient democracy the assembly of the dēmos exercises the legislative function, magistrates chosen as a rule by lot exercise governmental power, and courts staffed by citizens exercise the judicial function (see Aristotle 1935, 2013).

Having offered this brief critique of Immanuel Kant's positions, we return to the core of his argument on the question of the free federation of states. According to his positions, then, the republican polity not only constitutes the best way of settling a society's internal affairs, but at the same time forms the foundation for promoting peace among states and, consequently, for building the federation of free states. His argument runs as follows: in the republican regime, the consent of citizens is required for the conduct of war. This means that, since it is the citizens who will bear the damages and cost of war, they will consent to a war far more reluctantly than would, for example, a monarch, who would incur almost no loss to his own well-being (Kant 1903). This argument is flawed on at least two counts. The first concerns the very functioning of citizens' consent within the republican polity. Consent is treated by Kant as logically

following from the supposedly representative character of the republican regime. This, however, is a logically mistaken inference insofar as, as we showed in an earlier paragraph, it rests on a false premise — namely, that representation is secured through election. Since elections alone do not guarantee that the will of society is represented, the whole argument must be judged unfounded. The second point concerns the very stance of citizens in the event of war when they possess the genuine capacity to participate in politics, as is the case in democracy. As George Contogeorgis showed in his study Democracy and War in Thucydides, democratic systems are actually more prone to war, because, owing to the development of universal freedom, economic demands increase to such a degree that the domestic economy is unable to satisfy them, with the result that these societies turn to the inter-state sphere to satisfy them, provoking polarizations that lead to war (Contogeorgis 2022). Having thus clarified the question of the appropriate constitutional organization for individual societies, Kant proposes that they preserve their independence while simultaneously entering into an alliance of peace whose central purpose will be to bring war to an end forever[13]. Kant considers that, while the desirable response to the phenomenon of war would be the creation of a world state of republican character, his realism requires the acceptance of a less radical solution — that of the free federation of states — since he himself expresses fears that a world state would inevitably lead to monarchical government and, from there, to anarchy (Kant 1903). Behind Kantian realism, of course, lies his philosophy of history, and in particular "the realm of the ends of nature," which, while it prevents the creation of a world state by dividing human beings through different languages and religions, at the same time unites them under the guiding principle of self-interest by means of the economy. Kant himself maintains that "this guarantee is given by no less a power than the great artist nature (natura daedala rerum) in whose mechanical course is clearly exhibited a predetermined design to make harmony spring from human discord, even against the will of man" (Kant 1903, 100). Thus, within this framework, between the condition of the state of war in inter-state relations and world monarchy, Kant favours the solution of an expanding alliance of republican states whose chief concern will be the prevention of war.

Returning to the comparison between the structure of the EU and the Kantian federation of free states, we could say that the kindred elements are even more pronounced than in the corresponding theoretical approach of Hobbes. The first kindred element concerns the preservation of the state independence of the federation's members. The second element relates to the particular importance enjoyed by the economic factor

[13] Hence there must be an alliance of a particular kind which we may call a covenant of peace (foedus pacificum) which would differ from a treaty of peace (pactum pacis) in this respect, that the latter merely puts an end to one war, while the former would seek to put an end to war for ever. This alliance does not aim at the gain of any power whatsoever of the state, but merely at the preservation and security of the freedom of the state for itself and of other allied states at the same time. The latter do not, however, require, for this reason, to submit themselves like individuals in the state of nature to public laws and coercion. The practicability or objective reality of this idea of federation which is to extend gradually over all states and so lead to perpetual peace can be shewn. For, if Fortune ordains that a powerful and enlightened people should form a republic — which by its very nature is inclined to perpetual peace — this would serve as a centre of federal union for other states wishing to join, and thus secure conditions of freedom among the states in accordance with the idea of the law of nations. Gradually, through different unions of this kind, the federation would extend further and further (Kant 1903).

(mutual self-interest) with respect to this union[14]. The third element has to do with the republican polity, which, if in Kant's time it constituted a vision, in our own time constitutes a reality for the greater part of the planet. Finally, the fourth element concerns the logic of the federation's progressive expansion, even if this is confined to the European continent.

As for the significant differences, we would say that Kant was not concerned with the constitution of a European federation of states, but of a world alliance, since his exclusive concern was to diagnose the basic preconditions for founding perpetual peace.

Having reached this point, we could argue that we now stand at a particularly pivotal juncture of our study, since we are now in a position to ask whether the classical models of inter-state organization that appear to define the climate of the horizon of understanding of the EU's structure and purposes are capable of leading it to overcome its existential crisis. As we have attempted to demonstrate through a series of constitutional and political arguments, this horizon of understanding is exceedingly outdated and unable to grasp the challenges of the twenty-first century. Let us not forget that Hobbes wrote Leviathan in the mid-seventeenth century, during the stage of state despotism, while Kant wrote his work Perpetual Peace toward the end of the eighteenth century, at a time when modern humanity was entering early anthropocentrism — that is, societies with individual freedom. A further question we may pose is whether it would be sufficient, in order to overcome the EU's existential impasse, to attempt to modernize these classical theoretical approaches, or whether we should instead seek the way out elsewhere.

We judge that, owing to the torrential pace of developments both within states and in the inter-state reality, the solution cannot be found in an attempt to modernize theoretical proposals that have been superseded by cosmosystemic evolution.

THE COSMOPOLITICAL PROJECT OF RIGAS VELESTINLIS

We must turn to an entirely different theoretical approach, whose organizing principles and logic (though not necessarily its content) we could put forward as a possible solution to the EU's existential crisis. Rigas Velestinlis does not merely, as several scholars claim, follow and disseminate some of the most radical ideas of the French Revolution, but, engaging in dialogue with them, surpasses them in progressiveness[15]. Whereas the ideas even of the most radical wing of the French revolutionaries called for the overthrow of monarchy and the establishment, at the level of the nation-state, of republicanism — that is, of monarchically-governed oligarchy — Velestinlis's thought was oriented toward the idea of the democratic polity projected onto an oecumenical/cosmopolitical framework.

To begin with, we should clarify that, unlike Hobbes and Kant, Velestinlis's supra-state project does not aim at a planetary reordering of inter-state relations, but at the re-founding of the Byzantine cosmopolis. Likewise, whereas for Hobbes and Kant the post-state-centric system they envision is constituted on the large scale of the nation-

[14] It should not be forgotten at this point that the EU's first steps were taken under the organizational framework of the European Coal and Steel Community (1951) and the European Economic Community (1958).

[15] On the dialogue that Rigas Velestinlis conducted with the ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and on the radicalism of his thought even in relation to the most subversive visions of the Western world, see Contogeorgis (2008).

state, for the Greek thinker the fundamental social unit is the commune (koinon) — that is, the city-state. Moving beyond these differentiations, significant in content but not in form, Rigas Velestinlis's constitutional project unfolds on two levels: on the one hand, the level of the communes and confederations of communes, and, on the other, the level of the cosmopolity as a whole. In other words, the communes and confederated communes, on the one hand, preserve their internal autonomy — and hence their plurality of forms — while, on the other hand, in their relations with other communes and with the metropolitan centre, they operate on terms of partnership. At the level of the cosmopolity as a whole, the preconditions are established for the overall oversight of the cosmopolitical state, for foreign policy, and for the harmonization of relations among the individual constitutional entities. The centre of cosmopolitical and constitutional function and cohesion is, according to Rigas Velestinlis (1797/2021), the "sovereign people" (αὐτοκράτωρ λαός), that is, the totality of those who inhabit the territory of the cosmopolitical state. We speak of a cosmopolitical state because the citizen holds political status both at the level of the city-commune and at the level of the cosmopolity as a whole; he is therefore at once a citizen and a cosmopolitan. More specifically, his political status is fully developed under the terms of democracy, while his cosmopolitical status develops under the terms of the principal in the system of representation (Contogeorgis 2008). Consequently, Rigas Velestinlis's constitutional project incorporates as basic constitutional parameters, first, democracy, as the direct participation of citizens in the decision-making process at the level of the cities. There, in accordance with Articles 11–20 contained in "The Principle of Legislated Action and the Soul of Administration," his positions on the development of democracy within the communes are set out, through the constitution of local assemblies of the dēmos, the so-called "primary assemblies," in which citizens convene, deliberate, and vote on matters within the competence of the commune (Velestinlis 1797/2021, 95-97). Second, representation — that is, he establishes the relation of society as principal and of political personnel as agent at the level of the oecumenical cosmopolis: the citizens who take part in the primary assemblies elect representatives to the cosmopolitical assembly, or, in Velestinlis's own words, the "Legislative Body" (1797/2021, 105). This body is composed of 750 members and is in turn divided into the Council of the 500, which submits legislative proposals, and the Council of Elders (250 in number), who either ratify or annul the proposed laws. Likewise, as stated in Article 59: "Article 59. — Forty days after the dispatch of the proposed law, if in half of the provinces plus one, a tenth of the primary assemblies (that is, sixty citizens) of each province, duly constituted, has not opposed it, the written proposed law is accepted and ratified, thenceforth to be known as Law" (Velestinlis 1797/2021, 115). The representative relation between society and central/cosmopolitical authority is further confirmed by Article 115, which provides that: "— If in more than half of the provinces of the Republic, a tenth part of the primary assemblies of each of them, convened according to the aforesaid rules (11, 12, 13), request that the act of legislative administration be reconsidered, or that some of its articles be changed, then the Legislative Body has the duty to convene the primary assemblies of all the other provinces of the Republic as well, in order to ascertain whether a General National Assembly should be convened" (Velestinlis 1797/2021, 135). We observe, then, that the cosmopolitical dimension in Rigas Velestinlis's thought does not constitute a mere rhetorical figure, but an essential facet of the political reality of his supra-state scheme. Consequently, society is able to determine, to a significant degree, the course of the legislative power's initiatives.

Finally, as for the executive power, this is constituted by the so-called Executive Directory, composed of five members, whose competencies are confined, under Article 65, to the execution of the laws of the Legislative Body. The election of the members and the duration of the Executive Directory's term follow the following procedure: Article 63. — The Executive Assembly of each province (37, 38) nominates one candidate, and the Legislative Body elects the members of the Directory from the general list of names. Article 64. — Half [the members] change every year. From this we understand that even in the election of the executive power of the cosmopolitical reality, society holds, in combination with the other parameters, a significant role.

CONCLUSIONS

Following all of the preceding analysis, we consider that Rigas Velestinlis's proposal contains the answers both to the appropriate mode of constitutional organization of the individual state entities, and to the prospect of a genuinely democratic European integration. Rigas Velestinlis places societies within the political sphere on the terms of democracy and renders them competent to determine their own future. Moreover, the introduction of the representative relation between societies and political personnel at the supra-state level can substantially weaken the power of organized economic interests and of the bureaucracy that significantly influence EU policies. It can also lead to greater cohesion among the peoples that make it up, since, through the cosmopolitical parameter — that is, the combination of intra-state democracy and supra-state representation — the conflict between the interests of the citizen of the member state and the citizen of the EU would be lifted. Indeed, given that, owing to technological progress, the communicative capacities of contemporary societies have acquired possibilities inaccessible in the past — such as, for example, that of remote political intervention — citizens organized into digital dēmoi will be able to convene, submit their opinions, deliberate, and decide on matters concerning their political reality. Consequently, Rigas Velestinlis's cosmopolitical project, modernized so as to respond to today's social needs and capacities, could contribute to the cause of European integration and thus render the EU a significant geopolitical factor within the planetary inter-state order.

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IV. INTEGRATION AND PUBLIC POLICIES

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INVESTOR CITIZENSHIP SCHEMES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE EU ENLARGEMENT

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Abstract. *The investor citizenship programmes have been the subject of intense legal and policy debates within the EU over the past decade. In light of the evolving case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, the Member State investor citizenship programmes conflict with the requirements arising from EU law, particularly the Union citizenship and principle of sincere cooperation. These requirements therefore significantly constrain the Member States' leeway, despite the fact that citizenship laws form a core part of Member States' domestic legal regimes. The paper considers investor citizenship programmes in the context of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and addresses the key question of whether strict EU law standards regarding investor citizenship schemes should be similarly applied to Western Balkan candidate countries regardless of the status or outcome of the accession negotiations. After the introduction, the first substantial part of the paper outlines the criteria by which EU law assesses these programmes, and the requirements with which Member States must comply. The second part examines the importance of investor citizenship programmes in Western Balkan states, the principles upon which these regulations were established and the effect of the EU accession process on existing programmes in recent years. In the conclusion the paper determines the policy and regulatory leeway of candidate countries, and the available alternatives to increase their ability to attract foreign capital on the path to European Union membership.*

Keywords*: Nationality law, Union citizenship, investor citizenship schemes, Western Balkans.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

"*Currently you are a citizen of nowhere*" says an immigration officer to the main character, Viktor Navorski in the Hollywood film 'The Terminal' (2004). Navorski, played by Tom Hanks, is a traveller from the fictional country of Krakozhia who becomes stranded at New York airport. His passport was invalidated by the officers because Krakozhia collapsed due to a coup d'état, leaving him unable to either enter the US or return home. This quote powerfully dramatizes how citizenship is not only a formal label but the condition of legal existence, mobility, and belonging (Brown Prener and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2024: 1301–1304; Chacón, 2018: 57–60). Nationality (citizenship) expresses a Széchenyi István University, Deák Ferenc Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, Győr, Hungary sense of belonging to a country, a community or a nation, which forms the basis of a person's identity (Bauböck, 2018a: 37–40). Citizenship – or its tangible manifestation,

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the passport itself – does not merely signify this sense of belonging. Citizenship also conveys a kind of underlying value that indicates the worth of this connection between the citizens – the passport holders – and their country. If this belonging implies a 'citizenship of nowhere', this connection has, of course, no value. However, if this citizenship links the person to a state that offers exceptional benefits, financial advantages, social services, or even enables visa free movement globally, its value is enormous.[1] However, if citizenship represents a value, then it is possible to 'trade' in citizenship on the basis of that value. The state can 'sell' its citizenship to those who wants to have all the benefits that this sense of 'belonging' promises.

In other words, the concept of citizenship involves also a kind of transactional logic, which leads us directly to the subject of the following paper. Countries can usually provide benefits and grant legal status to third-country nationals in exchange for a financial contribution within two mechanisms (Pitrová and Bindačová, 2024: 70). The investor citizenship programs ('golden passport' programs) allow individuals to obtain citizenship under simplified conditions in exchange for a specified investment or financial transfer. Investors often receive citizenship without a substantive background check and without having a genuine connection to the country in question (Džankić, 2015b: 5). Investor residency programs ('golden visa' programs) grant investors a residence permit, which allows them to settle in the relevant state (Surak and Tsuzuki, 2021: 3368). Thus, while a golden passport grants immediate citizenship, a golden visa 'only' grants the right of residence, although in many cases the latter can eventually lead to the acquisition of citizenship as well.

These programs are fundamentally relevant – primarily the golden passport programs – from an EU law perspective as well. In the case of EU Member States, the granting of national citizenship automatically results in EU citizenship, which ensures freedom of movement and residence throughout the entire EU. Over the past decades, the EU law implications of these programs have become a focal point of academic interest. Several Member States have come under scrutiny by the European Commission (EC) and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) regarding golden passport programs. Specifically, Cyprus, Malta, and Bulgaria have implemented investor citizenship programs that automatically granted citizenship – and thus EU citizenship – upon a specified level of investment. Moreover, Hungary is a notable example in the context of residency programs. The residency bond scheme operated from 2013 to 2017 and was criticized for exposing the program to corruption and security risks. Under the scheme, non-EU citizens who purchased special Hungarian government bonds worth at least 300,000 euros received a permanent residence permit in Hungary. This status not only ensured residence in Hungary, but also freedom of movement within the Schengen Area for the investors and their immediate family members. Investors did not purchase the bonds directly from the state, but rather through private intermediary firms. These firms were offshore-based and essentially channelled funds into the same political-business circle. The program was a loss for the state because it obtained funds at a higher cost than market interest rates (Nagy, 2023: 471–482). Meanwhile, the brokerage firms reportedly earned 192 million euros in profits from service fees (Romhányi, 2018: 4). Criticisms were raised regarding security

[1] In terms of the latter criterion, the Singaporean passport is currently the most valuable, granting Singaporean citizens visa-free entry to 192 countries. This is followed by the passports of Japan, South Korea and the United Arab Emirates, which allow visa-free travel to 188 countries. Third place goes to Swedish citizenship, with 187 countries accessible without a visa. (Henley, 2026).

risks, emphasizing that background checks on applicants were inadequate and that the origin of the invested funds was not thoroughly investigated.[2]

It is important to emphasise, however, that not only schemes introduced by EU Member States are relevant for the EU law. Any programme implemented by a third country could potentially have an impact within the Union if the EU grants visa-free travel or facilitated entry to nationals of that third state, including candidate countries. In such cases, an investor who acquires citizenship of that third state also gains easier access to the territory of the EU.

This paper focuses on investor citizenship in the context of candidate countries, particularly those in the Western Balkans. The European integration of these countries is shaped not only by the formal adoption of the acquis, but also by the extent to which they align their domestic policy choices with the European Union's broader legal and normative expectations. Candidate states' citizenship laws are relevant in this regard because they do not operate in complete isolation from the realm of the European Union. Western Balkan states generally benefit from visa facilitation or visa-free travel arrangements with the Schengen area. On the one hand, the visa liberalisation of the Western Balkan countries is considered one of the most successful aspects of the enlargement process (Džankić, 2015a: 138). However, if citizenship is granted in exchange for investment alone, without the usual criteria of residence, social integration or long-term commitment, the resulting status could be merely used to gain privileged access to the territory of the European Union. The paper therefore addresses the key question of whether strict EU law standards regarding investor citizenship schemes should be similarly applied to Western Balkan candidate countries regardless of the status or outcome of the accession negotiations.

In terms of methodology, the paper employs a non-empirical doctrinal legal approach. This traditional approach of legal scholarship is combined with conceptual and comparative analysis in the context of EU citizenship and the domestic nationality laws of Western Balkan EU candidate countries. Here, doctrinal legal research is understood as the systematic examination and interpretation of authoritative legal sources such as EU primary law, secondary legislation, CJEU case law and other components of the Union *acquis*, including Commission documents relating to accession negotiations or infringement procedures. To a certain extent, the analysis also extends to the domestic laws of EU Member States and third countries. The primary objective of this doctrinal legal research is to clarify the meaning, scope, and effects of EU law, and to shed light on the interaction between the EU legal order and national legal systems, including the domestic laws of candidate countries. In other words, the analysis reconstructs the legal framework governing citizenship and investor citizenship schemes by closely examining the aforementioned EU law and domestic legal sources using established methods of statutory interpretation and case law analysis.

After introducing the conceptual framework and literature review, the paper first presents the EU legal requirements and addresses the CJEU's landmark decision in the case of *Commission v Malta* delivered in 2025, which reaffirmed the obligations of member states regarding citizenship. Then, it examines the legal regimes of the relevant Western Balkan candidate countries in detail, and formulates conclusions.

[2] This allowed numerous sanctioned individuals to purchase residency bonds, including several members of the Russian elite – such as family members of the head of Russian foreign intelligence – and a banker associated with the Syrian Assad regime (Nagy, 2023: 479).

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant number of Member States applies specific criteria in naturalization procedures – such as cultural activities, scientific or sporting achievements, etc. – that allow third-country nationals to obtain Member State citizenship more easily. (Džankić, 2015: 5; Džankić, 2019: 181). These 'fast-track' routes typically reward individuals for exceptional achievements in specific fields or for providing extraordinary services to the state (Torpey, 2023: 236). However, most Member State naturalization rules take these criteria into account on a discretionary basis, meaning they allow for case-by-case consideration and offer a simplified path in cases where the Member State's national interest justifies. There are Member States where investment activities or economic impacts may also be taken into account. However, it is important to note that even in such cases, Member State regulations make the final consideration of these factors in the naturalization procedure. There are national regulations that ease certain prerequisites for acquiring citizenship in the case of investors (Džankić, 2019: 91–92; 182–187.). Compared to this approach, the investor citizenship schemes, which automatically result in citizenship upon completion of a specific investment activity, pose significantly greater risks. Following the aforementioned transactional logic, the Member State essentially 'sells' its citizenship for a 'price' determined by the level of investment.

For this reason, investor citizenship can be regarded conceptually as a significant topic and, as it was already noted earlier, the subject has come to the forefront of academic interest in recent decades. The paper examines the broader context of the research question, by situating it within three strands of the existing literature. The first layer of literature deals with investor citizenship in general, from a global perspective, the second one looks at the EU citizenship and investor citizenship within the context of EU law, examining, amongst other things, the requirements arising from EU primary law. Finally, given the specific focus of our topic, the strand of academic literature focusing specifically on the Western Balkan states is also relevant.

With regard to the general, globally focused literature, we must first and foremost refer to the works of Džankić and Surak, which represent the mainstream of legal scholarship in context with this topic. In their approach, they define investor citizenship as a form of *ius pecuniae* – the acquisition of citizenship through financial contribution –, which differs from the naturalisation criteria defined on the basis of the classical *ius soli* and *ius sanguinis*.[3] Džankić's monograph (Džankić, 2019) and numerous studies (e.g. Džankić, 2012; Džankić, 2015b) chart the emergence of investment-based citizenship (CBI) programmes within various national legal systems and analyse how states have codified regulations that grant access to citizenship on a financial basis. Similarly, Surak (e.g. Surak, 2016; Surak, 2021) also highlights the characteristic features of CBI programmes, contextualizes them within the broader field of investment migration, links their proliferation to geopolitical inequalities, and explores the emergence of the specific investor citizenship industry. In this narrative, therefore, *ius pecuniae* is a concept denoting the commercialisation of naturalisation and a wealth-based approach to entry into the political community. Although our analysis is non-empirical in nature, when mapping the broader academic literature, it cannot be ignored that, in recent years, the general literature

[3] It should be noted, however, that the concept of '*ius pecuniae*' was originally introduced by Joachim Stern, initially in reference to the rising bureaucratic costs of citizenship procedures (Stern, 2011), but the academic literature subsequently extended this concept to the issue of citizenship acquired through investment.

on investor citizenship has also been exploring the topic from an empirical perspective. The scale of these programmes is better understood through analyses that use data to estimate the impacts and profile of CBI programmes, highlighting that although only a dozen states regularly naturalise significant numbers of investors, CBI has become a multi-billion industry in certain regions (see, for example, Surak, 2024; Surak, 2025). Furthermore, numerous analyses examine the economic impacts of investment-based citizenship programmes, often focusing on their selective effects or those that have not materialised at the level of the society (Surak and Tsuzuki, 2021). In addition to this, other relevant publications take a holistic approach, discussing the legal, sociological, economic and historical aspects together (Kochenov and Surak, 2023). Finally, with regard to the general level sources, it is worth noting that numerous analyses sees a form of 'marketisation' or market transformation as the greatest challenge to the right to citizenship. In other words, the phenomenon whereby belonging to a community and the political status associated with citizenship become 'commodified' in accordance with market principles (Surak, 2016; Parker, 2017; Bauböck, 2018b; Surak, 2023). These research streams indicate that, due to the investor citizenship, the very concept of citizenship is shifting towards a functional and instrumental orientation, where membership no longer depends on participation or identity, but becomes a pure transaction based on a financial contribution.

The second strand of the literature relating to EU citizenship addresses the question at a theoretical level. From the very outset, shortly after the Maastricht Treaty introduced EU citizenship, these sources focused on the scope for manoeuvre available to Member States in shaping their own citizenship laws and naturalisation processes with regard to the application of various considerations of economic nature (De Groot, 2018). After the investor citizenship schemes introduced by several Member States in the 2010s sparked controversy and the European Commission began to examine the compatibility of these national regulations with EU law through infringement proceedings, the academic literature began to address, from a conceptual perspective, the question of what obligations EU Member States are subject to in relation to the design of these domestic programs. The fundamental question has therefore become the extent to which EU law may restrict national citizenship decisions (e.g. Džankić, 2019; Gyeney, 2023; Weingerl and Tratnik, 2023; van den Brink, 2025), whilst it was critically assessed how the European Commission attempted to intervene (Kochenov, 2020; Kochenov, 2023). The literature on EU citizenship therefore ultimately treats the dilemma as a question of the competence allocation and seeks to determine where the boundary between Member State sovereignty and the EU's interests lies.

Finally, the third specific strand of the literature provides an insight into the citizenship regimes and visa regulations of the Western Balkan states. Following the relative stabilisation of the region, the EU began negotiations with the states concerned on facilitated visa issuance for their citizens, and subsequently visa-free travel. In line with the requirements set out by the EU, the academic literature of the 2010s primarily examined various models of the so-called 'Europeanisation' of citizenship and visa issuance rules. National provisions typically met the technical conditions and expectations relating to border protection; however, in some cases, certain human rights standards continued to be applied only to a limited extent (Džankić, 2015a; Džankić and Keil, 2019). Since the introduction of visa-free travel, acquiring citizenship of a Western Balkan state has resulted in the right to free entry and residence in the European Union, which offers an attractive prospect for third country nationals to get the status. Taking advantage of this opportunity,

by the end of the 2010s most of the states in question had established their own investor citizenship programmes. These domestic law instruments were put under scrutiny by the academic literature in a global context and were addressed either tangentially or in connection with individual states' visa-free access to the EU and their accession processes (Twomey, 2023; Surak, 2023). However, no comprehensive analysis has yet been conducted that examines the legislative frameworks and practices of all the Western Balkan states concerned in the light of the latest EU law standards *vis-à-vis* the investor citizenship.

3. EU LEGAL REQUIREMENTS REGARDING INVESTOR CITIZENSHIP SCHEMES

It is important, however, that since the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, the acquisition of Member State citizenship has also resulted in the establishment of EU citizenship status. The Maastricht Treaty created a specific, sui generis legal status, which cannot be regarded as an independent category from national citizenship. EU citizenship is a subsidiary institution based on national citizenship: the founding treaties make it clear that every citizen of a Member State is an EU citizen (Džankić, 2019: 208–209; Gyeney, 2023: 120–121; Weingerl and Tratnik, 2023: 164; Pitrová and Bindačová, 2024: 68). This duality means that the rights arising from EU citizenship – such as the right to free movement – are directly and inseparably linked to the acquisition and loss of national citizenship. In this way, EU status complements, but does not replace, national citizenship.[4]

The close connection between EU citizenship and national citizenship has raised complex competence issues from the very outset. Based on the EU primary law and case law of the CJEU, it is fundamentally clear that the European Union does not possess an explicit competence that would allow for the direct regulation of citizenship requirements. Accordingly, the EU legislator's competence does not extend to determining who may become an EU citizen, as this issue must be decided exclusively in accordance with the national law of the Member States, pursuant to the declaration annexed to the Maastricht Treaty.[5]

This, however, gives rise to a legal dilemma: do Member States enjoy complete freedom in this area, and are they entirely free to determine the conditions under which they grant citizenship? Although the Union has no direct legislative power, this does not mean that EU law cannot impose certain limits on Member States' discretion. The subsidiary nature of EU citizenship imposes obligations on Member States that influence their citizenship policies. Landmark rulings by the CJEU have reinforced this sophisticated approach. In *Micheletti*,[6] the Court held that while Member States determine the conditions for naturalization within their own jurisdiction, they must do so in accordance with Community law. This principle was further emphasized in *Rottmann*,[7] which dealt with the loss of citizenship. The Court ruled that if a person loses the rights deriving from EU citizenship due to the revocation of their national citizenship, such a decision falls within

[4] "Citizenship of the Union is hereby established. Every person holding the nationality of a Member State shall be a citizen of the Union. Citizenship of the Union shall be additional to and not replace national citizenship." Article 20(1) TFEU.

[5] "[...] the question whether an individual possesses the nationality of a Member State shall be settled solely by reference to the national law of the Member State concerned…." Declaration on the Nationality of a Member State, Treaty on European Union, signed at Maastricht on 7 February 1992. OJ C 191, 29/07/1992 P. 0098.

[6] C-369/90 Micheletti v Delegación del Gobierno en Cantabria. ECLI:EU:C:1992:295.

[7] C-135/08 Janko Rottman v Freistaat Bayern. ECLI:EU:C:2010:104.

the scope of EU law. According to the Court's reasoning, the exercise of national competence is subject to review under EU law if it affects rights protected by the EU legal order. This means that Member States must act with a kind of 'EU loyalty' in their own citizenship matters, particularly when their decision results in the loss of EU citizenship. One of the most important tools elaborated by the CJEU is the requirement for a strict proportionality test. Based on the *Rottmann* case, national authorities must assess whether the revocation of citizenship is proportionate to the consequences of the decision. The test must consider the gravity of the offense, the time elapsed since naturalization, and whether the individual has a realistic chance of regaining their original citizenship. Later in *Tjebbes*,[8] the Court further developed this principle. It held that while a Member State may require a genuine link to retain citizenship, automatic loss of citizenship by virtue of law violates the principle of proportionality. Such regulations are acceptable only if the authorities and courts have the opportunity to assess the consequences under EU law on a case-by-case basis. If proportionality is not met, the Member State must, where appropriate, restore citizenship with retroactive effect.

This framework of conditions, which are also seen as prerequisites for candidate countries, was contextualised within the infringement procedures initiated by the European Commission against Member States due to their investor citizenship programs. From the perspective of the Member States, the most fundamental point arising from the above conditions is that, although they have retained their powers in relation to national citizenship law, every decision they take concerning citizenship – whether regarding naturalisation or revocation – has a direct impact on policies falling within the EU's competence, and therefore on other Member States as well. This interaction explains why the issue of citizenship cannot be treated as an isolated, exclusively national issue in the EU context.

Along with the above framework of conditions, two specific legal principles should also be highlighted that play a crucial role in disputes over the investment citizenship schemes of Member States. In connection with the infringement proceedings initiated against Malta and Cyprus, the European Commission has stated that selling EU citizenship in exchange for an investment undermines the principle of sincere cooperation and thus the integrity of EU citizenship. In accordance with this principle, the Union and the Member States shall respect and assist one another in the performance of tasks arising from the Treaties.[9] The principle of sincere cooperation imposes both active and passive obligations on Member States. To ensure fulfilment of their obligations under Union law, Member States must therefore take appropriate general or specific measures and assist the Union in performing its tasks. Furthermore, Member States must refrain from any measure that could jeopardise the achievement of the Union's objectives. The principle of sincere cooperation had already been raised in early literature on EU citizenship in this context. In the *Micheletti* case, it was questioned what underlying considerations in the Court's reasoning might have established for requiring Member States to take EU law into account when shaping their citizenship laws. One distinct argument has been that the principle of sincere cooperation applies (De Groot, 1998: 115). Following a similar line of reasoning, the opinion drafted by the Advocate General in the *Rottmann* case also addressed the relevance of this principle. According to this opinion, the principle of sincere cooperation would be violated if a Member State were to carry out unjustified mass naturalisation of

[8] C-221/17 Tjebbes and Others v Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken. ECLI:EU:C:2019:189.
[9] Treaty on the European Union, Article 4(3).

third-country nationals without consulting the Commission and the other Member States. Consequently, the principle of sincere cooperation may also play a role because an investor citizenship programme is not limited to the Member State in question. As a Member State's citizen automatically acquires Union citizenship, decisions made by the Member State within the investment scheme affect other EU Member States. Furthermore, it is argued that EU citizenship represents a value in itself, making the 'golden passports' of individual Member States more attractive. In other words, Member States operating investor citizenship programmes benefit from the very fact that acquiring their citizenship also entails EU citizenship. In many cases, it is not so much the national citizenship itself, but rather the additional rights arising from EU citizenship, that attract foreign investors.

In addition to the principle of sincere cooperation, there is an other legal argument, which came up intuitively even before the CJEU assessed the Member States' investor citizenship schemes. It is also questioned how Member State practices comply with the requirements arising from the prohibition of discrimination. Namely, 'golden passport' programs offer significant advantages to exceptionally wealthy, privileged foreign investors, in contrast to the stringent and restrictive standard conditions applied in naturalization procedures by the respective Member States. In contrast to this, the criteria applied usually in standard procedures such as *ius sanguinis* or *ius soli*, are underpinned by the idea of equality (Bauböck, 2018b: 40). These objective criteria treat those acquiring citizenship equally and apply the citizenship criteria to them in an equal manner, contrary to cases where e.g. the size of the investor's asset is the decisive factor in acquisition of citizenship.

The judgment of the CJEU in the case of *Commission v Malta* marked a milestone regarding the legal assessment of investor citizenship programmes under EU law.[10] The infringement proceedings were triggered by the 2014 investor citizenship programme, through which Malta made it possible for foreign nationals to acquire Maltese citizenship under an 'individual investor programme' in return for predetermined payments and investments (Surak, 2023: 62–75). In April 2020, the Commission initiated a dialogue with Malta, during which it objected to the fact that the Maltese 'golden passport' programme exploited the common implementation of EU citizenship, thereby infringing the principle of loyal cooperation between Member States. In 2020, Malta amended its legislation, whereby the Citizenship Act authorised the Minister to grant citizenship by naturalisation in cases of 'exceptional services' rendered to the Republic of Malta or where the state has an 'exceptional interest' in naturalisation, to issue a certificate confirming the acquisition of citizenship by naturalisation to a foreign national or stateless person. The legislation classified contributions by 'investors and entrepreneurs' within this 'exceptional' category, alongside cases involving scientists, researchers and sportspeople. The implementing regulation for the amended Act specified the monetary thresholds for what constitutes a direct investment. Among other things, this included a payment of either €600,000 or €750,000 to the Maltese government, as well as the purchase or rental of residential property worth at least €700,000, for a minimum annual rent of €16,000. The first amount was subject to the condition of residing in Malta for at least 36 months, which was reduced to 12 months in the case of payment of the second amount.

In its judgment, the Court placed EU citizenship at the centre of its reasoning. Referring to the provisions of the Treaty and the 1992 Edinburgh Decision of the European Council, it confirmed that the granting and withdrawal of nationality of a Member State fall

[10] Case C-181/23 European Commission v Republic of Malta. ECLI:EU:C:2025:283.

within the competence of the Member States, whilst, on the basis of relevant case-law, it emphasised that Member States may exercise this competence in compliance with EU law. In order to lay the groundwork for the substantive part of the judgment, it rejected Malta's position that reference to EU values or objectives is possible only in the event of a general and systematic breach thereof, as no such restriction can be inferred from the intention of the legislators based on the text and structure of the Treaties. It emphasised that, in accordance with the principle of sincere cooperation, Member States are obliged to refrain from jeopardising the achievement of these objectives, which means that the conditions for the granting and loss of citizenship are not unlimited either (Athanasiou, 2026: 3–4).

The Court recognised, on the one hand, that EU citizenship derives from national citizenship and, on the other hand, identified the common values set out in Article 2 TEU and the mutual trust existing between Member States as the basis for this legal status (O'Neill, 2025: 1). Recalling previous case-law, it noted that it regards Member State citizenship as a special relationship based on solidarity and loyalty between a Member State and its citizens, as well as on the reciprocity of rights and obligations. The crux of his argument was that, by 'commercialisation' of Member State citizenship, the Maltese scheme had infringed this special relationship, which is contrary to the Treaty provisions concerning Union citizenship and the principle of sincere cooperation; thereby undermining the mutual trust that forms the basis of citizenship. Finally, it analysed in detail the relevant national provisions and practice, focusing on the eased requirements of prior physical presence, and concluded that the 'golden passport' programme sets out substantially more favourable conditions than the 'ordinary' naturalisation procedure. With a 'transactional procedure' enabling the acquisition of citizenship Malta has infringed the provisions on EU citizenship and the principle of sincere cooperation (van den Brink, 2025: 1–2).

The judgment established clear standards regarding Member States' nationality rules; however, the reasoning has been the subject of considerable criticism in legal literature. The Court derived its conclusions from the principle of sincere cooperation and the protection of the Union's objectives and the values enshrined in Article 2 TEU; however, it did not specify which particular objective or value justified the finding that the Maltese rules were contrary to EU law (van den Brink, 2025: 3). The argument linked the above to the principle of mutual trust, which is also endowed with constitutional status and must be applied horizontally amongst the EU institutions, the Member States and citizens (O'Neill, 2025: 4). The application of this principle is also a contentious issue in terms of the division of competences between the Union and the Member States. A contradiction can be identified between the two statements that EU citizenship automatically follows from national citizenship, whilst at the same time the judgment identified the principle of mutual trust as the basis for citizenship and assessed the Maltese legislation as a 'breach' of this principle (van den Brink, 2025: 3). Court's classification of citizenship rules – which fall strictly within the power of Member States – essentially blurs the distinction between EU values and rules on competence, and may raise the issue of a breach of the principle of conferral (Athanasiou, 2026: 3–4).

4. INVESTOR CITIZENSHIP PROGRAMMES IN SEVERAL WESTERN BALKAN STATES

In the judgment outlined above, the CJEU laid down a clear prohibition regarding investor citizenship programmes operating in certain Member States; however, the question arises as to how this affects the 'golden passport' programmes of third countries, whose citizens are permitted to reside in the European Union as a result of a simplified procedure.

This point is particularly relevant because similar programmes have been established not only by EU Member States but also by sevaral Western Balkan states with candidate status (Džankić, 2015a: 138–142). The preferential arrangements affecting citizens of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia were decided at the EU–Western Balkans Summit held in Thessaloniki in June 2003, following which the European Union concluded agreements with the states concerned in 2007. These agreements have resulted in facilitated visa procedures for nationals of these countries, provided their intended residence does not exceed 90 days within any 180-day period. For certain categories of persons (journalists, students, etc.), the documents required for the issue of a visa have been specified, and the provisions authorise external representations of the Member States to issue multiple-entry visas valid for up to five years for the various groups.

The Commission has continuously monitored the operation of the visa facilitation scheme, and the adoption of Regulation (EU) 2018/1806, introduced a new chapter in this regard. The legislation already takes account of the significant number of third countries that have been granted visa exemption, whilst making the maintenance of this exemption contingent on factors such as illegal immigration, public security, tourism considerations, and the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Annex I to the Regulation lists the countries whose nationals are subject to a visa requirement when entering an EU Member State, whilst Annex II contains the list of countries whose nationals are exempt from the visa procedure. This includes the five Western Balkan states mentioned, provided that the persons concerned hold a biometric passport. At the same time, Article 8 of the Regulation provides a legal basis for the Commission to temporarily suspend visa exemption for a period of nine months, and imposes an obligation on EC to draw up regular reports in order to assess the justification for such suspension. The reports drawn up under the visa suspension mechanism clearly illustrate how the investor citizenship programmes of the Western Balkan states have come to the forefront of the Commission's attention.

In 2019, Albania drew up a draft amendment to its citizenship rules; in view of the potential risks and consequences, the Commission requested information from the authorities. None of this prevented the Albanian legislature from bringing into force, in July 2020, an amendment to the Citizenship Act that would allow for the creation of a 'golden passport' programme (Surak, 2023: 106). In 2022, the Albanian government issued a decree authorising the Ministry of the Interior to set up a public-private partnership project to implement the investor citizenship programme. The following year, Albania announced that it was suspending the initiative, after which the Commission called on it to repeal the legal basis for the programme as well (European Commission, 2023, 2025). In early 2026, information websites reported on amendments to Albanian legislation governing foreign nationals, under which a one-year residence permit could be obtained by purchasing securities worth at least 100,000 euros and property worth at least 300,000, which can be extended by continuing to invest. A permanent residence permit can be obtained after five years of lawful residence, whilst citizenship can be acquired after a total of at least seven years (Nagy, 2026).

In terms of its consequences, the investor citizenship programme that has raised the most concerns has been implemented by Montenegro since 2019. The Commission has warned on several occasions that the operation of this programme entails risks related to immigration and security, with particular regard to the dangers posed by money laundering, tax evasion, the financing of terrorism and organised crime (Surak, 2023: 124–125). In light of these reports, Montenegro announced that it would discontinue the programme by

the end of 2021, but the government ultimately decided to extend it until the end of 2022 and to continue processing applications submitted prior to that date (European Commission, 2022). Following the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the Commission issued recommendations for a more thorough vetting of applicants, which is justified not least because, in 2023, of the 701 people who acquired Montenegrin citizenship through the programme, 396, and in 2024, 709 out of 1,282 were Russian nationals (European Commission, 2023, 2024). According to press reports, Montenegro also amended its rules on foreigners in 2026; accordingly, a one-year residence permit – which is renewable – can be obtained by purchasing property worth at least 150,000 euros. Five years' lawful residence leads to the right of permanent residence, and citizenship can be obtained after a further five years (Daly, 2026).

North Macedonia laid the legal groundwork for the establishment of the 'golden passport' programme as early as 2012 by allowing citizenship to be acquired on the basis of the country's 'special economic interest'. Citing this legal basis, in the early 2020s approximately 110 people per year acquired North Macedonian nationality, prompting the Commission to point out that the programme allowed for the bypassing of EU rules on short-term stays and posed a security risk to Member States, for which reason it did not rule out the suspension of visa-free travel (European Commission, 2020a, 2022). According to the 2024 report, North Macedonia has not amended the relevant legislation; however, the number of people who acquired citizenship under the programme has fallen dramatically, with no positive decisions being made in 2023 and five applications still being processed.

Serbia does not operate an investor citizenship programme in the strict sense, but under the relevant legal framework it is possible to acquire citizenship without prior residence if this is 'in the interest of the Republic of Serbia'. In view of the Russia-Ukraine war, the fact that more than 200 Russian nationals have acquired Serbian citizenship in this way since 2022 may pose a security risk to the EU. In early 2023, the Serbian government proposed an amendment to the citizenship law which would have made it possible for self-employed individuals operating in Serbia or employees of local companies – who hold a higher education qualification obtained or recognised in Serbia – to acquire citizenship even after a short period of residence there. However, due to objections from the Commission, the government ultimately withdrew the initiative (European Commission, 2023, 2025). The sources cited also report on investment-linked residence permits in Serbia, which can be obtained on the basis of an investment of at least 50,000 euros in a Serbian company. Permanent residence may be obtained after three years of lawful residence, and citizenship after a further three years (Nagy, 2026).

The European Commission has expressed concerns regarding the investor citizenship programmes of the Western Balkan states involved ever since their inception. It has warned that the operation of 'golden passport' programmes could enable individuals who might pose a security risk to the Member States of the European Union to acquire citizenship, which calls into question the sustainability of the Schengen Area and, in the case of the states concerned, raises the prospect of the suspension of visa-free travel. These states not only have candidate status but have also commenced accession negotiations; consequently, compliance with EU law carries particular weight in their case. Both the 2025 enlargement reports and the visa suspension mechanism report for the same year classified investor citizenship programmes as contrary to EU law and called on the states to repeal the relevant legislative frameworks. The latter report referred to the judgment in the *Commission v Malta* case in relation to EU legal requirements, and emphasised that

granting citizenship in return for a predetermined payment or investment contravenes the provisions of the Treaty (European Commission, 2025). The new programmes launched by Albania, Montenegro and Serbia bear fewer of the hallmarks of 'golden passports', as they do not allow for the early acquisition of citizenship through investment. These initiatives fall more into the category of investor residency programmes ('golden visas'), which may, at the very latest, or in the event of a significant number of citizenships being granted, pose risks to the Schengen area similar to those of 'golden visa' programmes.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Citizenship (nationality) has traditionally been considered a core attribute of state sovereignty. The power to determine who belongs to the political community has long been regarded as one of the state's defining competencies, but, as the above analysis has shown, EU law has reshaped this traditional legal concept. The nationality of a Member State is the gateway to Union citizenship, as established by the Maastricht Treaty and Union citizenship is not merely symbolic: it provides several substantive rights, including the right to move freely within the European Union. In other words, citizenship (nationality) remains a competence of EU Member States, but national decisions on naturalisation can have effects that extend well beyond the granting state. Investor citizenship schemes highlight this issue particularly sharply because they remove citizenship from the traditional justifications of residence, social ties or a 'genuine connection,' replacing them with an overtly transactional logic. Based on these concerns, we claimed that 'selling citizenship' within these schemes is not only a domestic policy choice, but also difficulty for integration. This is because the investor citizenship programmes may directly affect the architecture of EU citizenship by conflicting with the principle of sincere cooperation and equality-based understandings of naturalisation, which prioritise economic wealth when granting citizenship to applicants.

The paper attempted to contextualise these EU legal standards within the ongoing EU enlargement process, particularly in relation to the candidate countries in the Western Balkans. It demonstrated that the EU should apply the same strict legal standards to candidate countries as it does to Member States, regardless of the status or outcome of the negotiations. The main reasons for this are that candidate countries mostly benefit from visa facilitation agreements, which allow their citizens to enter and stay in the Schengen Area under simplified procedures. Furthermore, their 'golden passport' schemes can be seen as a way of circumventing these preferential regimes. For the reasons set out above, the European Commission has consistently classified the investor citizenship programmes of candidate countries as contrary to EU law and has raised the possibility of suspending visa-free travel for the countries concerned. Essentially, as an alternative to 'golden passports', several Western Balkan states have recently launched investor residency programmes which do not pose a direct threat to the Schengen Area and its member states comparable to the former, whilst, without the possibility of visa-free entry to the EU, they are certainly less attractive to investors.

It should be emphasized, however, that Western Balkan candidate countries have a broad range of alternative tools to attract foreign capital that are both more compatible with EU accession standards. The region's economies are among the most open to FDI globally (OECD, 2025), which suggests that improving rule-of-law, governance, and anti-corruption frameworks is likely to yield more sustainable capital inflows than ad hoc investor-citizenship schemes. They can deepen classic FDI policies as primary drivers (e.g. stable macroeconomic frameworks, predictable regulation, and investment-friendly tax

regimes, classical investment protection tools etc.), but also specific infrastructure-focused strategies funded or co-funded by the EU can attract foreign capital successfully. Among the available instruments, currently the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans might have crucial importance, which mobilises up to 9 billion euros for transport, energy, digital and green investments (European Commission, 2026). Besides, the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and related platforms, such as the Western Balkans Investment Framework, aim to bring partners closer to the single market while supporting private-sector development, export capacity and integration into European value chains (European Commission, 2026).

These measures therefore have a twofold positive impact. By increasing the ability to attract capital, they are not only economically beneficial, but also promote the competitiveness of these countries and, consequently, their smooth integration into the EU's internal market, which is essential for their future successful EU accession.

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INCLUSIVENESS OF ELECTRONIC ELECTIONS AS A NECESSARY COMPONENT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: THE EXAMPLE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, UKRAINE, AND GEORGIA

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Abstract. *Ensuring inclusiveness during the digitalization of electoral and referendum processes – as required by international democratic electoral standards, particularly those regarding electronic voting – is a necessary component of Eurointegration. This involves ensuring equal, barrierfree, and full access to the electoral process for all citizens and groups across the political spectrum, creating conditions under which everyone can exercise their right to vote and be elected. We consider inclusiveness to be a core component of integrity, reliability, openness, transparency, voter awareness, security, and trust in electronic elections during the pre-election, election day, and post-election periods.*

For the border regions of South-Eastern Europe that have chosen a European integration development vector, balancing the security and inclusivity aspects of electronic elections is a complex task. The Council of Europe facilitates this process through institutional, organizational, and financial measures, particularly through international projects. Following the fullscale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, the implementation of these projects in Ukraine was suspended. At the same time, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova made maximum use of their opportunities during the first half of the 2020s. Studying their experience implementing new digital technologies across all stages of the electoral process will strengthen the democratic foundations of post-war societies.

Keywords*: inclusivity, digitalization, democracy, electronic elections, European integration.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia are states bordering the European Union, located in its South-Eastern borderland region. As actors within the European Neighbourhood Policy (Eastern Partnership), they are characterized by instability, rapid technological development, and intensifying hybrid threats. They are further united by: 1) a declared European integration trajectory; 2) periodic deviations from democratic principles governing the political system (Georgia's accession process was effectively halted by the EU in June 2024 due to democratic backsliding); 3) selectively inconsistent compliance with European integration requirements, where

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political elites strategically declared commitment to EU standards, drafted relevant reforms, enacted legislative acts, and established corresponding institutions, yet stalled their "implementation to maintain political control" (Bolkvadze, Machavariani, 2025); 4) low institutional trust, fragmented information environments, and competing international narratives within their political systems (Bolkvadze, Machavariani, 2025); 5) the impact of sustained, coordinated disinformation campaigns and cyber interference in political processes; 6) mass migration of citizens and the existence of a sizeable diaspora; 7) the presence of autonomous entities inhabited by voters representing linguistic minorities; and 8) the presence of territories that have been annexed or remain claimed by the Russian Federation, as well as being subject to oversight by EU Monitoring Missions.

It is precisely these latter five factors that have been accompanied by processes of legitimizing annexation through elections and referendums conducted by the Russian Federation over the past 35 years in these territories. Russia has increasingly declared the application of electronic voting while refining manipulative technologies and interference in electoral and referendum processes in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia – countries that have already joined the EU's "Digital Decade" program. Consequently, these states have become testing grounds for Russia's foreign policy manipulation and legitimization tactics.

Modern elections have long ceased to be purely political processes; they are now understood as complex systems in which the technological dimension is decisive. Ensuring inclusivity during the digitalization of electoral and referendum processes – as required by international democratic electoral standards, particularly those pertaining to electronic voting – is a vital component of European integration. Therefore, there is an urgent need to examine the inclusivity of the digital electoral process and to assess its competitiveness and equality of opportunity for all citizens and groups across the existing political spectrum.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary source materials for studying the inclusivity of electronic elections include UN documents (UN Human Rights 2026, Monitoring Mission in Ukraine); general policies and monitoring reports of the European Commission and the Council of Europe (CE 2022, CM/Rec(2022)12 Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers; EC 2023, Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2829; CE, Electoral Cooperation: Projects; CE, Electoral Cooperation: Parliamentary and Electoral Cooperation Division; EC 2022, European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade; EU 2021, COM(2021) 118 final, 2030 Digital Compass); documents of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CLRA 2024, CPL(2024)46-04); and OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission reports on elections in the Republic of Moldova and Georgia (OSCE 2024, International Election Observation Mission: Georgia; OSCE 2025, Election Observation Mission: the Republic of Moldova). Additional sources comprise EU project documentation, Eurostat data, materials from the Central Election Commissions of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia, as well as analytical reports and studies by non-governmental organizations, including several research papers by the Civil Network OPORA (OPORA 1, 2, 2026). Among the latter is „Every Voter Matters: Updating Ukraine's State Voter Register for an Inclusive Democracy", which combined a nationwide sociological survey of Ukraine's population with a survey of Ukrainians residing in Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland, alongside a study on

migration processes in Ukraine following the full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022 (OPORA 1, 2026). Opportunities for systemic reforms capable of elevating the inclusivity of political processes to a new level are discussed in the Ukrainian adaptation of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems publication, Inclusion and Full Political Participation (IFES 2020).

To analyze the relationship between political regime democratization and the pro-European integration foreign policy trajectory as a foundation for electoral inclusivity in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia, as well as to identify the specific features of electronic election inclusivity and define avenues of cooperation aimed at ensuring inclusive electronic voting among electoral actors in these states, the authors employed comparative and historical methods. Conclusions and recommendations based on the identified interdependencies and interrelationships were formulated using general scientific and specialized research methods, including political-legal analysis, expert evaluation, and content analysis.

3. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK. LITERATURE REVIEW

EU candidate status for the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia necessitates aligning their domestic digital governance with European standards. This entails adopting EU-wide legal frameworks governing electronic identification (eID), data privacy, and secure remote participation to meet international democratic standards. These frameworks evolve in tandem with the refinement of the concept of digital and technological sovereignty, which plays a pivotal role in how the EU positions itself regarding digital policy transforming internal legislation into a coherent external strategy, notably through the EU's International Digital Strategy 2025 (EC 2025, EU International Digital Strategy 2025), accompanied by the EU Open Source Strategy for EU Public Administrations (EC 2026, EU Open Source Strategy).

The "Digital Decade rights and principles" (EC 2022, European Declaration on Digital Rights), as a key component of the Digital Decade Agenda, focuses on fostering a digital society by connecting individuals residing in rural, mountainous, and remote areas to online opportunities for accessing key public services and administrative procedures. Today, the EU operates with the concept of "trusted connectivity," which reflects "shared values of openness, freedom, and human dignity" without "coercion, disruption, or attack during times of conflict" by authoritarian states. Collaboration between national authorities, civil society, and external partners – namely, institutional stability – has been recognized as crucial for exchanging best practices and bolstering threat-response capabilities. European integration is impossible without the highest level of institutional resilience, as Eastern Partnership states face persistent, coordinated disinformation campaigns and cyber interference, which jeopardize voter secrecy, digital manipulation safeguards, and public trust in elections.

Trust in elections hinges on the capacity of electoral management bodies to ensure their technological integrity. The focus of EU institutions on achieving digital and, by extension, technological sovereignty aims to reduce critical dependencies across the entire digital technology stack and enhance European competitiveness. The "2030 Digital Compass" adopted by the European Commission (EU, 2021, COM(2021) 118) provides grounds for anticipating the digitalization of all electoral processes in the near future, albeit in an inextricable link with security measures. "Political elections or referendums involving electronic voting" or digital media at one or several stages (CE, 2010) – now

generalized under the umbrella term "electronic elections" (CE, 2017, CM/Rec(2017)5) – were once considered a reliable safeguard against manipulation and a means of reducing technical errors. Today, however, they are acquiring a broader significance due to a deeper understanding of their inclusivity. In particular, several distinct stages in the evolution of this concept over the past decade can be identified:

2020–2022: A period of "democratic resilience," during which the EU focused on protecting democratic processes, countering disinformation, ensuring inclusive civic participation, and advancing legal frameworks for cybersecurity and digital services.

2023–2024: A stage of specifying approaches to electronic elections through recommendations on inclusive and resilient electoral processes, alongside the simultaneous strengthening of digital environment and artificial intelligence regulations in light of risks to democracy.

2025–present: The formation of a comprehensive AI regulatory system in the EU, aimed at minimizing risks to electoral processes and preserving democratic principles through the limited and controlled application of digital technologies.

Studying the provision of inclusivity within the functioning of formal (electronic elections) and informal institutions (dual citizenship, diaspora) was rendered possible through neo-institutionalism and the systems approach. Compliance with and integration of national and European values as the foundation of electoral inclusivity were examined using a values-based approach. The formation of an electorate community consisting of advanced digital users was analyzed through the lens of constructivism. Schematically, the study's terminological framework is reflected in the following formulas:

European integration = democratic governance + institutional stability + respect for human rights + legitimacy = electronic inclusiveness elections.

E-elections = "electronic voting" + "electronic participation" + "special identification system".

The theoretical and conceptual foundations of the study presented above are based on numerous publications by scholars, the number of which is quite significant; therefore, we highlight only the most essential ones for studying inclusion issues in the context of European integration. First of all, the authors turned to the conceptual analysis of digitalization, the evolution of this concept, and development perspectives, presented in the work of P. Hellsten and A. Paunu (Hellsten, Paunu 2020). The refinement of the concept of digitalization for electronic elections was facilitated by a generalized review of works on digitalization and its research methodology, conducted by J. Reis, M. Amorim, N. Melão, Y. Cohen, and M. Rodrigues (Reis, Amorim, Melão, Cohen, Rodrigues 2020). The majority of works by scholars in recent years are devoted to the possibilities of introducing digital tools into electoral and referendum processes, particularly to studying the experience, prospects, support, risks, and possibilities of applying electronic voting both worldwide and in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. The vast majority of them are based on the work of Council of Europe expert Ardita Driza Maurer, "Digital Technologies in Elections: questions, lessons learned, perspectives" (Maurer, 2020). Among the numerous studies on the digitalization of electoral processes, we highlight research on sovereignty in European international digital policy (Chloe, Teevan, Pearson, Sasha, Muscat, 2026) and works dedicated to the prospects and administration of electronic elections in Ukraine (Buchyns'ka 2022; Yuriychuk, Fesenko 2024).To understand the specifics of the Republic of Moldova reaching the level of compliance with EU inclusion criteria and counteracting external influences, the work of Isabelle Burmester and Ștefan Morar, "The role of external

interference in the politicisation of EU integration: Russian influence and the 2024 referendum in the Republic of Moldova" (Burmester, Morar 2026), was important. Clarifying the internal problems of inclusion in electoral and referendum processes in the Transnistrian region and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in a geopolitical context related to the start of negotiations on the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU became possible thanks to the works of Mircea Brie (Brie, 2022; 2025) and research on individual Eastern Partnership countries (Yuriychuk 2012; Yuriychuk 2018; Yuriychuk, Opinko 2023).

Understanding and uncovering the issues of Georgia's inclusion in the context of European integration processes is impossible without relying on the fundamental work of Ketevan Bolkvadze and Maia Machavariani, "Trust and social cohesion in Georgia's path to Europe: Navigating democratic aspirations amid authoritarian" (Bolkvadze, Machavariani, 2025). The authors also used the works of Georgian researchers analyzing such electronic election issues as the inclusion of women (Zurabashvili, Kakabadze, Kandelaki, Samkharadze 2023; Kandelaki 2023).

4. RESULTS / DATA ANALYSIS

Over recent decades, the European Union has applied a formalized institutional-procedural approach to embed democracy in the Eastern Partnership and EU Borderland countries, specifically the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. However, to varying degrees and at different periods, these states have experienced processes of "de-democratization." These were primarily manifested in the weakening of parliamentarism due to the breakdown of executive checks and balances, restrictions on media freedom and judicial independence, the suppression of civil society activities, and numerous human rights violations (Bolkvadze, Machavariani, 2025). Nevertheless, democratic elections remain the steadfast mechanism for the transfer of power (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Periods of "De-democratization" in Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine

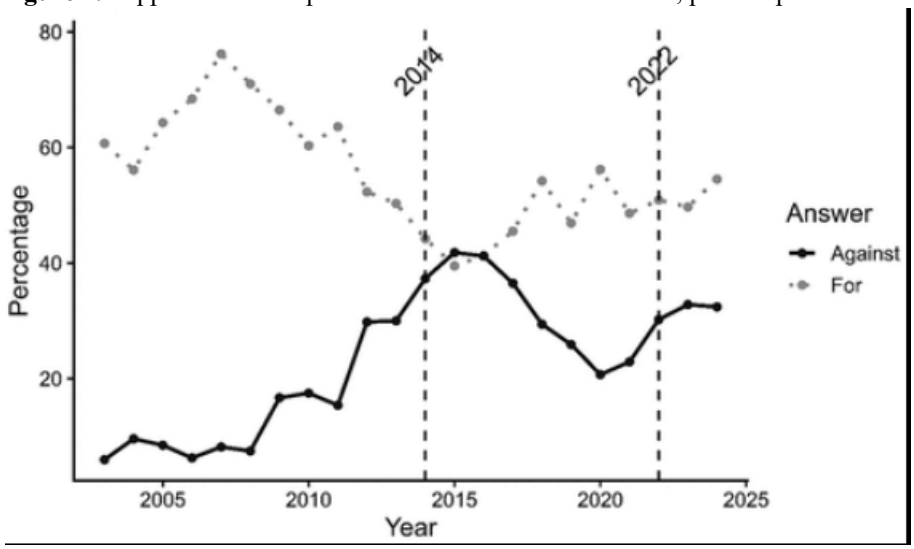
Country	Periods of Deviation from Democratic Standards			
	Political Leader	Dates	Name	Manifestations of De-democratization
Georgia	Eduard Shevardnadze	1992-2003	Period of "liberalized authoritarianism"	Executive control over the judiciary; censorship; persecution of opposition; high corruption; growing influence of clans.
	Bidzina Ivanishvili	2012 – present	"Georgian Dream" period	Systemic rollback of democratic institutions; usurpation of power and repressive laws; electoral crisis; abandonment of European integration.

The Republic of Moldova	Vlad Plahotniuc	2009 – 2019	Period of oligarchic influence and "state capture"	Oligarchic control; parliament, government, law enforcement, anti-corruption bodies, and courts acting in oligarchic interests; lack of independent justice; media monopolization; administrative resource abuse and vote-buying (2014, 2019); mixed electoral system adoption (2017) contrary to Venice Commission and EU recommendations; political repression and selective investigations; contradictory Constitutional Court rulings blocking opposition President Igor Dodon while expanding government powers.
Ukraine	Leonid Kuchma	1994-2004	Era of "Kuchmism" / "managed democracy"	Administrative resource abuse; censorship and "temnyky" (secret media guidelines); pressure on opposition; political assassinations.
	Viktor Yanukovych	2010-2013	Transition to authoritarianism, democratic rollback	Cancellation of the 2004 political reform (return to presidential-parliamentary system and expansion of presidential powers); politically motivated imprisonment of opposition leaders (Yulia Tymoshenko); pressure on independent TV channels; adoption of dictatorial laws on January 16, 2014.
	Volodymyr Zelenskyy	2019-present	Martial law and security restrictions	Constitutional restrictions imposed by martial law
Democratic elections remain the constant mechanism for the transfer of power				

(*Source:* compiled by the authors)

Populations in Georgia, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova aspire to join the EU, anticipating democratization, rule of law, economic development, and security. In the Republic of Moldova, public support for EU accession closely correlates with the foreign policy orientation of the state leadership (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Support for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession; public opinion trends



(*Source:* Burmester, Morar, 2026)

Internet voting is sometimes viewed as critical infrastructure of a democratic system and a key benchmark of e-democracy (Burmester, Morar, 2026). Compliance with the European Union criteria for candidate countries (Copenhagen criteria) is achievable provided there is stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, which in turn secures overall stability and safety. This entails providing equal, barrier-free, and full access to the electoral process for all citizens, regardless of their health status, physical abilities, or age; in other words, creating conditions under which everyone can exercise their right to vote and to be elected. Consequently, this involves removing barriers for traditionally marginalized groups, such as religious or linguistic minorities, women, youth, the elderly, persons with disabilities, LGBTI representatives, as well as members of opposition political parties and media outlets. Institutionally, this is ensured in a comprehensive manner, primarily through interaction among:

- The OSCE/ODIHR, which provides impartial assessments and concrete recommendations for addressing procedural gaps, vote secrecy, and transparency in elections;
- The Council of Europe, which supports projects aimed at strengthening the administrative capacity of election administration and promoting inclusive participation across all vulnerable groups;
- The European Parliament, which monitors democratic developments and regularly adopts resolutions detailing the required steps to bring the Republic of Moldova's, Ukraine's, and Georgia's electoral integrity in line with EU accession standards.

The previously established European integration course of the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine afforded them the opportunity to utilize training assistance from international organizations in accordance with the only existing

international standard for electronic voting – Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)5 on standards for e-voting, developed by the Council of Europe and the OSCE/ODIHR as a successor to Recommendation Rec(2004)11, designed to ensure that e-voting complies with the principles of democratic elections. Training centers under the Central Election Commissions were established in these countries and worked successfully on inclusivity issues in the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, implementing a series of targeted projects. Currently, Phase III of the Council of Europe project "Improving Electoral Practice in the Republic of Moldova" (IEPRM, 2025–2028) is being implemented, aiming to "increase public trust, authority, and legitimacy of elections and elected representatives by enhancing transparency, inclusivity, and integrity of the electoral process" (CE, Electoral cooperation: projects; CE, Electoral Cooperation: Parliamentary and Electoral Cooperation Division; CE, 2022; CE, 2026).

The guiding principles of these documents support:

- the registration of voters, observers, and media outlets via Information and Communications Technology (ICT) systems;
- the collection of electronic signatures in support of issues (e.g., initiatives or petitions), candidates, or parties;
- the online publication of election-related information;
- the electronic transmission of electoral data between local, regional, and central election management bodies;
- online training for election commission staff and other stakeholders, or the electronic accreditation of observers;
- the tabulation, processing, transmission, and publication of election results;
- the observation of various election-related activities, among others.
- compliance with these requirements necessitates the mandatory adaptation of EU digital legislation concerning electronic identification (eID), data privacy, and secure remote participation.

Currently, ensuring the inclusivity of electronic elections in the EU is envisioned through:

- physical accessibility of electronic equipment for voters with disabilities and addressing the specific requirements of e-voting operations for the elderly (as well as young voters aged 18–29), remote communities, and linguistic minorities;
- updated voter lists tailored for electronic elections;
- equal access to electronic identity credentials (eID) for voting purposes;
- addressing systemic legal issues, such as the disenfranchisement of citizens declared legally incapacitated by court decisions, which requires resolution at the ECHR level;
- overcoming distrust in e-voting and electronic voter verification devices (as highlighted, for example, by irregularities with electronic voting machines during the 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia);
- enabling e-election audits by key stakeholders and civic observers.

Let us examine the implementation prospects for several of these tasks, drawing upon the underlying data summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Most Vulnerable Types of E-Election Inclusivity
for the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia
(+ presence of a problem; – absence of a problem; –+ partial resolution)

Voting and election participation of citizens/representatives of:	The Republic of Moldova	Ukraine	Georgia
Diaspora (many labor migrants are undocumented)	+	+	+
Youth (aged 18–29)	+	+	+
Elderly population (55+)	+	+	+
Those unable to vote due to duty/shift work on Sunday: emergency/utility/security workers, doctors, firefighters, police, deployed military, sailors, etc.	+	+ "Under the legal regime of martial law, the list has been expanded."	+
Displaced persons: IDPs, war refugees, natural/technological disaster victims, labor migrants	–	+	+
Geographically isolated citizens	+	+	+
National minorities (via multilingual interfaces/guides)	–	+	+
Women	–+	+	+
LGBTQ+ community	+	+	+
Opposition political parties and media	+(before 2020) +– (2025)	+	+

(*Source:* compiled by the authors)

Equal Access to Electronic Credentials for Voting

The modern electoral process requires precise organization through a complex digital infrastructure that supports the organization of elections and promotes its integrity. The implementation of electronic systems assumes that all citizens, including marginalized groups, have equal access to the necessary electronic credentials for voting. The paramount requirement for ensuring inclusiveness in electronic elections is that electronic equipment must be physically accessible to voters with disabilities, which is extremely important and challenging for Ukraine, where due to military actions there is a large number of such persons – such as wounded Armed Forces of Ukraine servicemen, civilians affected by shelling, destruction, and man-made disasters (Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant dam destruction, etc.). According to official state leadership data, as of February 2025, the number of wounded Ukrainian military personnel since the start of the full-scale invasion reached approximately 380,000–390,000 people (N.V., 2025). According to the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, the number of injured civilians in Ukraine from February 24, 2022, to June 2026 across territories controlled by the Ukrainian government and occupied by the aggressor stands at 48,513 people (UN Human Rights, 2026). These figures are significantly underestimated, but

the core problem is that for participation in electronic elections, wounded individuals require special personal identification, which is extremely difficult to provide, as doing so without fingers, eyes, or with disfigured faces is virtually impossible, as is the registration or voting process itself. The Electoral Code of Ukraine (ECU) currently contains no norms regulating this type of inclusion. Confidentiality requirements preclude the establishment of special registries for persons with disabilities, and even the relevant designations permitted by the ECU within the general voter register require special regulation and scrutiny regarding human rights compliance.

Access to obtaining electronic credentials for participants in the electoral process is complicated in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia for representatives of opposition political parties, media, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals – primarily as candidates, since citizens must have the right not only to vote but also to be elected and to serve as members of election commissions at various levels. Unfortunately, in the ECU, inclusiveness in this regard remains largely declarative, as direct legal norms ensuring equal rights for all citizens are lacking.

The most radical cybersecurity and compliance measures aligning with EC and CoE recommendations to ensure democratic electronic elections were implemented in the Republic of Moldova. However, certain applied measures, namely "last-minute decisions" (OSCE, 2025), are considered by international organizations (OSCE) as reducing inclusiveness. This refers to the inability of representatives from four political parties – deemed successors to the "Șor" party declared unconstitutional in 2023 ("Șansa", "Renaștere", "Victorie", and "Forța de Alternativă și Salvare a Moldovei" [FASM]) – to participate in the 2025 parliamentary elections, following dissolution decisions passed by courts of general jurisdiction and upheld by the Court of Appeal. In June 2025, the Constitutional Court decided to dismiss the complaints filed by the "Forța de Alternativă și Salvare a Moldovei", "Inima Moldovei", and "Moldova Mare" parties regarding the unconstitutionality of certain provisions of the Law on Political Parties. These provisions allow restricting party activities upon lawsuit by the Ministry of Justice without a mandatory criminal conviction, thereby confirming the legality of the mechanism through which state bodies can suspend suspicious political structures. As a result, the registration of the "Inima Moldovei" and "Moldova Mare" parties was canceled on the grounds of campaign finance violations and ties to pro-Russian forces (Ilan Șor).

In Georgia, the Constitutional Court granted the demands of the "Georgian Dream" party's lawsuit to declare unconstitutional and ban three main opposition forces, including the "United National Movement," aimed at the complete elimination of the political influence of former President Mikheil Saakashvili's party. The 49 elected MPs from the three opposition parties, who refused to recognize the legitimacy of the parliamentary elections and the incumbent government, did not exercise their mandates; thus, non-compliance with inclusion requirements in the post-election period is observed. Inclusion is also restricted by a lengthy residency requirement, "restrictions on persons disenfranchised as candidates or sentenced to imprisonment by a court decision, regardless of the severity of the crime, and the lack of provisions for independent candidacies" (OSCE, 2024). On the eve of the elections, eight opposition figures were sentenced to 7–8 months of imprisonment and banned from holding public office for the following two years (EC, 2025, European Commission. SWD(2025) 757 final). Consequently, they were denied access to electronic voter identification credentials, as was M. Saakashvili himself. At the same time, an amnesty conducted prior to the

elections granted pardons to a large number of individuals for a wide range of crimes, providing an undue advantage not only in obtaining credentials but also in securing a mandate.

Certain restrictions on obtaining electronic credentials exist for women as potential candidates and members of election commissions. Having granted candidate status for EU accession, the Republic of Moldova is gradually ensuring compliance with gender requirements. A 40% gender quota and rank-order placement requirements on party lists were first applied during the 2023 local elections, contributing "to a small but significant increase in women's representation" (CLRA, 2024, CPL(2024)46-04). In the 2024 parliamentary elections, women accounted for 43% of the total candidates on party lists, and they headed 3 out of 19 political parties. However, gender balance was not maintained during campaign rallies (CLRA, 2024, CPL(2024)46-04).

In Georgia, we observe a gradual exclusion of women from political activity: during the recent 2025 parliamentary elections, they were not mentioned in party platforms, nor were they represented in their respective electoral campaigns. Although women constituted 73% of commission members in the majority of lower-level commissions, including 72% of commission chairs, they held only 4 out of 17 seats on the Central Election Commission (OSCE, 2024).

Regarding opportunities for voting and participating in the work of election commissions for representatives of other linguistic minorities, for the 2024 parliamentary elections, the CEC of Georgia prepared relevant materials in Armenian and Azerbaijani. However, PEC (Precinct Election Commission) members in areas inhabited by national minorities were trained predominantly in Georgian, with the option to receive materials written in other languages. The user interface of electronic devices was accessible only in Georgian, which could have limited the ability of PEC members and minority voters to fully understand and effectively use these devices. Furthermore, representatives of national minorities accounted for only 2% of DEC (District Election Commission) members (OSCE, 2024). At the same time, in 2023–2024, the Central Election Commission and the LEPL Electoral Systems Development, Reforms and Training Center of Georgia implemented a Council of Europe project under which certification exams were conducted for members and leadership of precinct election commissions, including representatives from 8 municipalities with compact ethnic minority populations; two exams were administered using tests translated into national minority languages (CoE, Electoral cooperation: projects). Additionally, 114 public school teachers from municipalities inhabited by ethnic minorities (Lagodekhi, Marneuli, Tsalka, Ninotsminda, and Akhalkalaki) participated in the "Democratic Elections and Electoral Environment" Project (2024–2026) (CoE, Electoral cooperation: projects). That is, the CEC of Georgia utilized opportunities provided by European structures. However, the results of a sociological study conducted in 2025 point to a critical level and the importance of education, generational experience, and access to reliable information in determining geopolitical attitudes in Georgia, which directly or indirectly relate to electronic elections. In particular, this refers to a generational divide regarding European integration, as over 90% of respondents aged 18–29 identify with the EU, and Georgian-speaking urban areas demonstrate a higher level of self-identification with the EU's democratic political identity. Researchers emphasize that regions with compact minority populations often neglect their relations or participation in decision-making processes or display indifference toward national political participation, citing language and information barriers (Bolkvadze, Machavariani, 2025).

National minorities constitute approximately 18% of the Republic of Moldova's population. As of 2026, there are no systemic barriers to the ability of national minorities to freely participate in the electoral process; minority candidates were represented on political party lists, indicating the absence of formal obstacles to their participation. At the same time, five candidates of Roma ethnicity were reported running for city and village councils in the 2023 elections, two of whom were women (CLRA, 2024, CPL(2024)46-04). OSCE observers noted the lack of immediate access for minorities to the CEC website in russian language, and consequently to the full range of official electoral information, as this language version was not updated simultaneously with the Romanian one (OSCE, 2025).

In Ukraine, official electoral legislation, state web resources, and documentation are maintained exclusively in Ukrainian, though translated information materials are occasionally distributed in areas with compact national minority populations. There are no comprehensive, nationwide multilingual public interfaces for voters. Non-governmental organizations, supported by international foundations, sometimes print brief brochures or guides for voters in Hungarian, Romanian, or Crimean Tatar.

Updated Voter Lists for Electronic Elections

Inclusive elections require maximum accuracy and updating of voter lists, particularly for the elderly, members of geographically remote communities, or linguistic minorities. This serves as a vital tool for safeguarding universal suffrage. However, a key problematic issue is access to electronic voting for individuals without a registered voting address, i.e., an actual place of residence. In Ukraine, such voters are divided into several groups: "officially registered internally displaced persons — about 4.6 million; ... citizens displaced without a formal status change (due to destroyed housing, security conditions, economic reasons, etc.); citizens who have gone abroad — estimated at between 5 and 9 million; citizens remaining in or displaced to temporarily occupied territories; citizens missing under special circumstances — over 90,000; and citizens involved in national defense — up to 1 million" (Bashtovyi, Romaniuk, 2026). According to the State Register of Voters (SRV), their number in Ukraine stands at 1,457,770, which accounts for 4.4% of the total voter count (33,167,345) (UNIAN, 2026). It is for this reason that the European Commission established priority tasks for Ukraine's first post-war elections: (i) safeguarding the political rights of Ukrainian citizens displaced within Ukraine and abroad, as well as the rights of military personnel; and (ii) auditing and updating the State Register of Voters; (iii) countering cybersecurity and disinformation threats, in particular by continuing to strengthen a transparent, further safeguarding media freedom, media pluralism and editorial independence; and (iv) reforming the rules on political advertising" (EC, 2025, SWD/2025/759 final). Regarding the requirements for electronic election inclusion, we consider the following measures necessary: prolonged informational preparation of society; training for participants and subjects of the electoral process; access to information resources; and the operation of electronic election infrastructure, but only after a set period following the end of military actions.

Regarding forcibly displaced persons from frontline areas, the Central Election Commission of Ukraine has already provided for their electoral participation upon submitting a temporary change of voting location. However, the problem of registering voters in occupied territories remains. Updating is impossible due to the lack of mortality data; as a result, a record number of centenarians remains in the register: 42,000 voters in occupied territories are listed as over 100 years old, and over 1,000 voters as 115 years

old (UNIAN, 2026). Nevertheless, the category of registered voters also requires SRV data updates, as 28.5% (nearly a third) of citizens do not reside at their registered address – rising to 44% in Kyiv (OPORA 2, 2026), on 31 May 2026, 4.38 million non-EU citizens, who fled Ukraine as a consequence of Russia's war of aggression, were under temporary protection in the EU (Eurostat, 2026). However, in the SRV (State Register of Voters), they continue to be listed at their former addresses in Ukraine; a significant portion of them is not registered on the permanent or temporary consular roll, which complicates forecasting the number of voters in a specific country. For instance, only 16% of potential Ukrainian voters in Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic are registered on the consular roll, which would ensure their inclusion in the voter list according to the current procedure (OPORA 2, 2026). Therefore, without synchronization with local IDP registries and the cross-border movement register of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, active voter registration abroad, and voters independently updating their own data in the SRV, a general update will not be effective, and the elections cannot be recognized as legitimate. Despite the popularity of digital services, legally regulated and secure tools for updating data in a voter's personal online account let – alone electronic or remote voting abroad – are currently absent. Furthermore, a significant portion of voters is unfamiliar with out-of-country voting procedures and changing their voting address.

In the future, it would be appropriate to synchronize data across electronic systems involved in organizing or conducting elections, such as: the State Register of Voters of Ukraine, the Unified Information-Analytical System "Elections", the Unified State Register of Civic Formations, the Financial Reporting System of Political Parties in Ukraine (Unified State Register POLITDATA), the Unified Information Database on Internally Displaced Persons, the Unified State Register of Conscripts, Persons Liable for Military Service, and Reservists "Oberih", among others. However, their security requires complex interaction, strategic planning, and coordination of security measures. And subsequently – with European registries.

The Republic of Moldova has also faced difficulties in updating its State Register of Voters and ensuring inclusiveness. As of the summer of 2024, out of 3,301,368 eligible voters in the register, over 600,000 were citizens residing abroad or lacking a fixed address. However, according to expert estimates, the actual number of such citizens reaches 1–1.3 million. As early as 2012, representatives of 29 the Republic of Moldova diaspora associations petitioned state authorities to implement electronic or absentee voting procedures to enable the exercise of their constitutional right to vote (Vîrtosu, Guceac, 2018). Only after the change in political leadership and the selection of a European integration vector did the realization of diaspora rights begin in practice: "since the integration of these overseas voters is a prerequisite for long-term democratic resilience, inclusive e-voting is considered a vital pillar of the country's broader European integration strategy" (Stoor, 2026).

However, in the parliamentary elections of September 28, 2025, the online voting system was not yet implemented. Instead, postal voting was expanded across four specially opened polling stations for the Republic of Moldova diaspora (in the USA, Canada, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand), which required the use of digital methods—voter pre-registration by August 2025 and identity verification on the dedicated Diaspora Votează platform (Voteaza.md) of the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Moldova. Improvements in the electronic verification of identity documents (scanning), electronic signatures, online

platforms for monitoring voter turnout and results, and managing a massive cyberattack on electoral infrastructure helped anchor the country's pro-European geopolitical trajectory. This occurred as diaspora participation—over 281,170 citizens (approximately 17.5–19% of the total voter turnout), the vast majority of whom (around 78.5%) supported the ruling pro-European Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) (MFA RM, 2025) – significantly influenced the parliamentary election outcomes.

Additionally, the opportunity to vote by mail and the increased number of polling stations for voters residing on the Left Bank of the Dniester River not only boosted voter turnout but also allowed for a substantial expansion of electoral participation. Long-standing issues regarding deceased individuals remain, particularly concerning voters from Transnistria, as the mechanism for removing deceased citizens from the registry relies on family initiative to report such changes (OSCE, 2025). However, a post-election analysis of the pre-registration digitalization revealed several challenges, notably the "multiple use of email addresses," which underscored "the need to enhance the security and accuracy of the digital tools used" (CEC MD, 2025).

The issue of updating voter lists was also pressing for Georgia, particularly during the 2024 parliamentary elections, when nearly 96,000 voters were registered abroad, but due to the small number of polling stations set up at diplomatic missions, only about 34,000 people voted (CG, 2025). Opposition parties secured victory at most overseas polling stations, in contrast to the ruling "Georgian Dream" party, which received approximately 13.5% of the vote abroad – substantially lower than its overall official domestic result of 53.92% (CG, 2025). More than 86% of emigrants who managed to vote supported various opposition coalitions (CG, 2024). The inability to exercise their constitutional right to vote and the lack of election accessibility to determine the geopolitical future of their country were cited by expatriates in the US as "a major issue requiring resolution" (Eurasianet, 2024). Their survey revealed deliberate measures implemented by the Georgian government to reduce diaspora voter turnout, as during the previous 2020 parliamentary elections, votes for the "Georgian Dream" party abroad were also significantly lower than at home. These measures included: a ban on postal voting; inclusion in the consular registry not always guaranteeing placement on the official voter list required for voting (which required potential voters abroad to verify databases across multiple institutions, including the Central Election Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Justice); removal of voters from consular registries for political reasons, particularly over critical Facebook comments; an officially registered number of legally residing individuals far below actual figures (9,000 out of 40,000); and the government's rejection of a petition to open additional polling stations (Eurasianet, 2024). Such actions stem from the ruling party's departure from Georgia's European integration course. Furthermore, the practice of disenfranchising citizens declared legally incapacitated by court decision and under guardianship fails to align with democratic electoral standards. At the same time, in cases of questionable legality regarding multiple registrations of individuals unknown to actual residents at the same addresses, the CEC responded to inquiries and permitted corrections, both in person and online (OSCE, 2024). We note that this was a widespread practice not only in Georgia but across other countries during periods of de-democratization.

We should separately highlight the problem of updating voting lists for the Roma population. According to the census, there were 48,000 Roma in Ukraine, though civil society organizations and Roma community leaders estimate the actual number at between 200,000 and 400,000. A significant portion of the Roma population, due to

various reasons (including lack of identity documents or Ukrainian passports, as well as reluctance or fear of self-identifying as Roma), is unable to exercise their right to vote in elections (Tyachiv Hromada, 2024). In the Republic of Moldova, according to census data, the Roma population stands at approximately 9,000–10,000 people (0.4% of the total population). The actual size of the ethnic community is estimated higher by non-governmental organizations (up to 20,000–25,000 people) (CLRA, 2024, CPL(2024)46-04). However, 25% of the Roma population lacks identity documents; thus, observers noted that their participation in the Republic of Moldova's 2023 local elections was constrained, as they were "more susceptible to illiteracy, lack of official residence, vote-buying, and internal migration. At the same time, five candidates of Roma ethnicity were reported running for city and village councils, two of whom were women" (CLRA, 2024, CPL(2024)46-04). Moreover, Roma living in rural areas often had to travel long distances to reach polling stations (OSCE, 2025). As of now, this problem persists.

In Georgia, the total Roma population according to the census and official information stands at around 604 people, but unofficial estimates range from 1,500 to 3,000 individuals (TDI. Tolerance and Diversity Institute). A significant portion of the Roma community faces a lack of proper identity documents, registered places of residence, and difficulties accessing voter lists, which restricts their actual participation in voting.

5. CONCLUSION

Democratization of the political regime is closely linked to the European integration foreign policy course and, accordingly, affects the deepening of inclusiveness in the electoral processes of electronic elections, as it serves as an "indicator of democratic maturity" – a core system-forming value of the EU. While the Republic of Moldova is systematically working on implementing the Monitoring Commission's recommendations regarding compliance with European integration requirements, a regression is observed in Georgia. In Ukraine, the processes of ensuring inclusiveness in electronic elections are hindered by the protracted Russo-Ukrainian war. For all three countries, inclusion in electoral processes closely depends on systemic changes, strengthening resilience, and public trust.

Summarizing the above facts regarding the analyzed tasks, we note the presence of an aspiration in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia to ensure the compliance of electronic elections with European standards; however, over the past five years – from 2021 to 2025 – the pace, direction, and substance of these processes have acquired a multi-vector character. The European integration aspirations and expectations of citizens in these countries are closely tied to the media content they consume; therefore, researching and continuously monitoring traditional media and social networks to identify and counter disinformation, fake news, etc., remains an urgent task. We conclude:

In *the Republic o*f *Moldova*: Thorough preparation for the implementation of e-voting for diaspora representatives during the 2025 parliamentary elections was postponed due to risks of external interference; nevertheless, the Republic of Moldova is gradually and confidently ensuring compliance with inclusive requirements.

In *Ukraine*: The Russo-Ukrainian war, triggered by Ukrainians' desire for European integration, and the full-scale invasion postponed the digitalization of election administration and staff training; however, it significantly accelerated the digitalization of state authorities, local self-government bodies, and citizens as users of digital services.

In *Georgia*: The use of electronic devices during the parliamentary (2024) and local elections (2025) facilitated the falsification of results and brought pro-Russian political forces to power, sparking protests among pro-European voters and once again initiating a process of de-democratization. In Georgia, the trajectory toward deepening the inclusiveness of electronic voting processes is moving in the reverse direction.

Common problematic areas for improving the inclusiveness of electronic elections in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia:

- ensuring a stable, peaceful environment (both internal and external) for conducting electronic elections;
- ensuring maximum participation in the electoral process for the diaspora, displaced persons including internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees fleeing military actions, natural or technological disasters, etc. and labor migrants;
- ensuring opposition access to receiving electronic voter identification credentials with the subsequent opportunity to participate in the electoral process (for the Republic of Moldova – maintaining a gradual approach in implementing legislation restricting opposition activities);
- promoting compliance with gender inclusion requirements in electronic elections (for Georgia – restoring it);
- developing critical thinking among adolescents and young people;
- enhancing trust and cybersecurity in electronic elections based on achieving the EU's digital and technological sovereignty;
- ensuring systemic synchronization of voter registries;
- building resilience against disinformation, among other measures.

Overall, to restore trust and advance along the path of European integration, the EU consistently calls for a constructive and inclusive political dialogue involving representatives across the entire political spectrum (EEAS, 2024).

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DIGITAL INCLUSION IN PUBLIC SERVICES: CHALLENGES, BARRIERS AND STRATEGIES FOR EQUITABLE DIGITAL ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract. *This paper analyses the phenomenon of digital inclusion in public services, starting from the observation that the accelerated digitalisation of public administrations risks deepening pre-existing social inequalities. Drawing on the framework of the digital divide with its three levels — access, skills and outcomes — it examines the technical, social and institutional barriers that hinder the equitable adoption of digital government services. The situations of the elderly, low-income individuals, rural populations and those with low levels of education are analysed. The research includes the European and Romanian contexts, highlighting Romania's persistent lag. The paper applies this framework in an original case study of the "Parking Oradea" platform of the Oradea City Hall, launched in February–March 2026 as a national first in the full digitalisation of residential parking, identifying structural tensions between transparency objectives and the principle of inclusion. The paper proposes a set of intervention strategies: tailored digital literacy programmes, public-private partnerships, user-centred design and hybrid service delivery models.*

Keywords*: digital inclusion, digital public services, e-government, digital divide, digital literacy, Parking Oradea.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of public administration is today one of the most far-reaching reconfigurations of the state-citizen relationship. The large-scale shift of public services to the online environment — from filing tax returns, to accessing medical services, obtaining identity documents or interacting with local authorities — promises a more efficient, transparent and responsive public sector. Nevertheless, this transition generates a major structural risk: leaving behind important segments of the population who lack the access, skills or trust needed to benefit from the new digital channels.

The concept of digital inclusion emerged precisely as a response to this dilemma. Pérez-Escolar and Canet (2022) explicitly prefer the term "digital inclusion" over "digital divide", arguing that the former formulation "more accurately captures the phenomenon of ICT gaps" and moves beyond a dualistic interpretation by integrating the intersection of class, ethnicity, gender, religion and disability (Pérez-Escolar & Canet, 2022: 3). In the context of public services, the stakes of digital inclusion are amplified by an essential feature: public services are not optional in the same sense as commercial ones. When a public authority eliminates traditional channels, citizens can no longer opt for an alternative; the lack of access or digital skills translates directly into the loss of fundamental rights.

Recent European data show how heterogeneous the reality is: according to the 2024 State of the Digital Decade report, the EU average for the indicator "digital public services for citizens" is 79.4 points, with Malta (100), Estonia (95.8) and Luxembourg (94.7) at the

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top, and Croatia (67.1), Poland (64) and Romania (52.1) at the bottom (Morte-Nadal & Esteban-Navarro, 2025: 2). While 98.6% of internet users in Denmark have interacted online with the administration, in Romania the figure is only 24.6%.

The paper aims to synthesise current knowledge on digital inclusion in public services, identifying both the complexity of the phenomenon and the solutions proposed in the specialist literature. The specific objectives are: (1) to clarify the theoretical framework of digital inclusion and the digital divide in relation to public services; (2) to identify the main barriers — technical, social and institutional — that affect the adoption of digital services; (3) to analyse the situation of vulnerable groups (the elderly, persons with disabilities, rural and low-income populations); (4) to examine the European context, with an emphasis on the situation of Romania; (5) to carry out an applied case study of the "Parking Oradea" platform, as a concrete example of local digitalisation with a direct impact on citizens; (6) to synthesise public policy strategies for addressing the digital divide.

The paper contributes to the debate on digital equity by linking the theoretical literature on digital inclusion with an applied local case. Its structure moves from conceptual clarification and the identification of barriers, to the analysis of vulnerable groups and the European and Romanian context, before applying these insights to the "Parking Oradea" platform and formulating policy recommendations.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research design that combines a narrative review of the specialist literature with an applied single-case study. The purpose of the methodological design is not to measure statistically the use of digital public services, but to explain how different dimensions of digital exclusion are produced through the interaction of access, skills, institutional design and outcomes.

The literature review covers works published between 2006 and 2025 and prioritises studies on digital inclusion, the digital divide, e-government adoption, trust in public services, accessibility and vulnerable groups. The selection of sources was guided by three criteria: direct relevance to public services and e-government; contribution to the three-level model of the digital divide or to the identification of barriers; and usefulness for interpreting the Romanian and European context.

The analytical framework is built around four categories: (1) the three levels of the digital divide — material access, skills and outcomes; (2) the typology of barriers — technical, social and institutional; (3) the main vulnerable groups identified in the literature; and (4) public policy strategies for inclusion, including digital literacy programmes, hybrid service delivery and user-centred design. This framework is subsequently applied to the case study in order to evaluate whether digitalisation improves access or reproduces existing inequalities.

The case study is the "Parking Oradea" platform, selected because it represents a recent and highly relevant local example of compulsory digitalisation in a public service with direct consequences for citizens. The empirical material consists of official documents and communications issued by Oradea City Hall, direct observation of the web portal and mobile application, and content analysis of local press materials published during the launch and early implementation period in February–March 2026.

The analysis proceeds through triangulation: official claims about transparency, efficiency and administrative simplification are compared with the actual user journey and with the difficulties reported in the local press. This makes it possible to identify tensions between the objectives of digital transformation and the principles of inclusion.

Nevertheless, boundaries must be acknowledged. The study does not include survey data or interviews with users, and it does not measure the medium-term evolution of the platform after its initial implementation. Consequently, the case study should be read as an interpretive analysis of the platform's inclusive design and early implementation problems, rather than as a statistically representative assessment of all users' experiences.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW: DIGITAL INCLUSION AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

3.1. Defining the concept of digital inclusion

Pérez-Escolar and Canet (2022) synthesise the literature, showing that digital inclusion means "much more than universal access to the internet or the use of digital technology", requiring "adequate support and the right digital skills", as well as "the availability of hardware and software, of relevant content and services; and of training for the digital literacy skills needed" (p. 3). The same source identifies the "five Cs" of digital inclusion: connectivity, capability, content, confidence and continuity.

This extended definition underlines that digital inclusion cannot be reduced to a technical problem. It incorporates cognitive, critical, motivational, creative and cultural dimensions (Pérez-Escolar & Canet, 2022: 3) — a multidimensional construct that simultaneously involves infrastructure, the individual and the social environment. Mesa (2023: 2) stresses that a central component is "digital citizenship", understood as "the set of rights, obligations and opportunities that take shape in the context of specific state organisations that develop digital infrastructure and services". This perspective places digital inclusion within a normative framework of citizens' rights, giving it a democratic stake.

3.2. The concept of the digital divide and its three levels

The term "digital divide" was initially used to refer to inequalities in access to ICT, but it has evolved significantly. Mesa (2023: 3) describes how the concept has been extended to include differences in digital skills, ways of using the internet and differences in outcomes.

Morte-Nadal and Esteban-Navarro (2025: 2) systematise this framework on three levels: the first divide refers to "material access to infrastructure, such as internet connectivity and up-to-date technological devices"; the second concerns "the possession of the digital skills needed to use the internet"; the third involves "obtaining meaningful opportunities, outcomes and benefits through the use of ICT". In the e-government context, "the digital divide can be influenced by all three levels of disparity", including through "the inability to interact effectively with public administration owing to the inherent complexity of electronic services".

Vassilakopoulou and Hustad (2023: 955–956), in a systematic review of the 2010–2020 period, show that "research has expanded towards digital inequalities that go beyond access". In countries with advanced infrastructures the access divides are closing, but "the inequalities that affect people's capacity to use digital resources effectively persist". Data from the International Telecommunication Union show that "in the least developed countries only 19% of individuals had online access in 2019, while in developed countries almost 87% access the internet".

3.3. Theoretical models of e-government adoption

Two theoretical frameworks stand out in the literature: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). TAM, developed by Davis in 1989, "identifies two key determinants of technology adoption: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use" (Morte-Nadal & Esteban-Navarro, 2025: 7). UTAUT extends this framework with additional factors: social influence, facilitating conditions and behavioural intention.

Djatmiko et al. (2025: 7) point out that TAM, in its traditional form, "does not fully capture structural barriers such as the lack of digital skills, infrastructure disparities and trust in technology", recommending its integration with Digital Divide Theory for a more complete perspective.

The Belanger and Carter (2008: 168) model is particularly relevant for explaining the adoption of digital public services. The authors argue that "trust in the internet and trust in government are significant determinants of the intention to use e-government services", suggesting a dual barrier: on the one hand, trust in technology as such (security and confidentiality risks); on the other hand, trust in the capacity of public institutions to deliver reliable online services. This dual nature of trust is essential for understanding adoption differences between countries with a similar level of technological development but different institutional histories — the case of post-communist countries, including Romania, being illustrative.

At the empirical level, Bokšová et al. (2021) confirm that the success of e-government depends not only on the existence of platforms, but also on the capacity and willingness of citizens to use them effectively. Their study, conducted on 1,613 respondents from the Czech Republic, compares the general public with active internet users and shows that people with more frequent internet use express higher support for the digitalisation of public services. In their sample, support for e-government is 86% among active internet users and 67% among the general public, indicating a gap of approximately 19 percentage points (Bokšová et al., 2021: 27, 33–35). This difference supports the idea that the adoption of digital services must be analysed together with the actual level of internet use, digital skills and the perception of personal usefulness.

4. BARRIERS TO DIGITAL INCLUSION IN PUBLIC SERVICES

The recent literature identifies three main categories of barriers that hinder the equitable adoption of digital public services: technical (related to infrastructure, devices, security), social (related to skills, trust, cultural perceptions) and institutional (related to the regulatory framework, service design and public policies). This typology, systematised by Djatmiko et al. (2025: 10-14), offers a useful framework for analysis, but the authors stress that the barriers intersect and reinforce one another — a person with limited access to infrastructure will develop digital skills with greater difficulty, and the lack of skills erodes trust, which in turn reduces the likelihood of use. This circularity makes partial interventions ineffective and argues for integrated public policy approaches.

4.1. Technical barriers: access, infrastructure and security

Djatmiko et al. (2025: 11) observe that "even in urban areas where internet connectivity is more widespread, high subscription costs and inadequate digital infrastructure disproportionately exclude low-income groups", and that "rural and marginalised communities often suffer from a lack of broadband infrastructure".

A crucial dimension is the accessibility of design. Many e-government platforms are not designed with the universal user in mind, "leading to exclusionary experiences for individuals with disabilities, low digital literacy or outdated devices" (Djatmiko et al., 2025: 11). "AI decision-making systems may fail to account for socio-economic disparities and accessibility needs", introducing a new form of algorithmic exclusion. Fear of online fraud, phishing and identity theft "discourages individuals with limited digital literacy from adopting e-government services".

Cybersecurity represents a dual barrier: on the one hand, the real vulnerabilities of public platforms expose citizens to concrete risks; on the other hand, the perception of these risks discourages adoption even where the systems are secure. Djatmiko et al. (2025: 18) recommend "robust cybersecurity frameworks" combined with "public education campaigns" in order to balance the two dimensions. Bilouseac (2025: 19) notes that, in Romania, "transparency regarding data protection has stagnated at 43.10 points" according to DESI 2024 — below half the EU score — suggesting that the security dimension is underdeveloped precisely in the country where the perception of risk is probably the greatest.

4.2. Social barriers: skills, trust and cultural perceptions

Mubarak and Suomi (2022: 3) stress that "even in developed countries, elderly people face challenges in learning ICT skills on their own and need training". An essential component is trust. Mesa (2023: 5), on a representative sample of 3,002 Italian citizens, demonstrates the complex relationship: "just over half of the respondents (54.6%) expressed a positive level of trust towards the administration. Among those who have never used digital public services, trust falls to 46.4%, while among beneficiaries of PA platforms it is 57.1%".

People with higher education show "a much higher level of trust, reaching 63.4%" (Mesa, 2023: 5). This correlation suggests a vicious circle: people with low education have less trust and use digital services less; and the lack of use reinforces their scepticism. "32.1% of the sample consider that the difficulties brought by digitalisation will outweigh the benefits".

Cultural perceptions also play an important role. Djatmiko et al. (2025: 13) observe that "many individuals continue to prefer face-to-face interactions with public officials". In the case of Italy, Mesa (2023: 9) refers to the concept of "Italian familism": "the major resistance of citizens to the digitalisation of the PA is cultural and stems from the attachment to the traditional approach of « proximity » to public institutions".

4.3. Institutional barriers: design, fragmentation and public policies

Djatmiko et al. (2025: 14-15) identify multiple institutional barriers: outdated regulatory frameworks, bureaucratic fragmentation, insufficient digital literacy programmes, deficient accessibility design and funding constraints. Many governments "prioritise digital infrastructure over policies that ensure equitable access", and "national e-government strategies do not adequately address the needs of persons with disabilities or those with low digital literacy".

Morte-Nadal and Esteban-Navarro (2025: 7-8), through 33 interviews with experts, find that "the [digital public] services are perceived as complex and inaccessible because of non-intuitive interfaces, the lack of user-centred design and technical jargon". "Only a few European countries (Ireland, Portugal, Malta) recognise the importance of broader stakeholder involvement in the design of digital public services".

Institutional fragmentation represents a specific barrier of complex administrative systems. Citizens are often forced to interact with several platforms, each with its own authentication system and its own interface, for services that, in the user's logic, ought to be integrated. Djatmiko et al. (2025: 14) recommend "interoperable e-government frameworks" to unify access. Another aspect is the absence of a systematic assessment of the social impact of digitalisation policies: in many cases, decisions to migrate services to exclusively digital channels are taken on the basis of administrative efficiency considerations, without a prior assessment of the populations that will be negatively affected. This problem recurs in the case study of the Parking Oradea platform, where the reduction of public-facing hours was decided concurrently with the launch of the digital platform.

5. VULNERABLE GROUPS AND DIGITAL INCLUSION

Pérez-Escolar and Canet (2022: 6), on the basis of a systematic review of 331 studies, identified a clear hierarchy: the elderly are in first place (32.56%), followed by persons with disabilities (20%), poor communities (18.14%), women (10.23%) and ethnic minorities.

5.1. The elderly and the grey digital divide

Mubarak and Suomi (2022: 3-4) established the concept of the "grey digital divide". "The most serious consequences of the grey digital divide are perhaps those related to healthcare", because "the elderly cannot benefit from mobile health services". The authors advance a structural perspective: "eHealth will dominate in the near future, but at the same time, the ageing of the population will increase" — a tension between demographic and technological trends.

Age is not one-dimensional: there are important differences between the "third age" (relatively active) and the "fourth age" (more vulnerable). "Instructors cannot use the same principles and techniques to deliver content to the elderly as to the young. The elderly need their own time to learn, often need excessive patience, repetition and empathy" (Mubarak & Suomi, 2022: 5).

European data confirm this: "the probability of internet use decreases by 8% for each additional year after the age of 65" (Kolotouchkina et al., 2024: 3359). Vassilakopoulou and Hustad (2023: 959) synthesise the key factors identified by the elderly themselves: "fear and anxiety in using technology, a negative attitude, the feeling of being too old to learn, a lack of knowledge, difficulties in understanding digital terminology". The authors stress the importance of "family support": "cognitive support from the family facilitates learning", and "emotional support based on patience, praise, encouragement and comfort can help the elderly avoid computer anxiety" (Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023: 961).

5.2. Persons with disabilities

For persons with disabilities, the accessibility of design is crucial. Djatmiko et al. (2025: 12) stress that "many e-government websites and applications are not optimised for users with visual impairments, non-native speakers or those with limited digital literacy". Recommendations include making accessibility standards mandatory (WCAG, ISO 30071-1), and integrating screen readers and AI-based accessibility tools.

Critical studies in the field of disability have drawn attention to the tendency to "design digital systems that compel persons with disabilities to conform to a world that marginalises them", instead of changing the systems to adapt them to diversity (Pérez-

Escolar & Canet, 2022). Global data confirm the scale: "a gap of 11% in access to internet use in developing countries; low rates of smartphone ownership; a lack of compliance with web content accessibility guidelines at 63% of national government portals and 98% of top websites" (Kolotouchkina et al., 2024: 3359).

Bokingkito et al. (2025: 19), evaluating 27 Philippine government websites, highlight a structural discrepancy: "web accessibility compliance obtained higher scores, with rates ranging between 62.32% and 97.1% and an average of 82.5%", but web presence compliance was much lower, "with an average of 53.43%". The conclusion: although the technical infrastructure for accessibility may be adequate, many government services are not yet available online at the transactional level, leaving citizens with disabilities without real access.

5.3. Rural and low-income populations

The rural-urban divide remains one of the most persistent. Djatmiko et al. (2025: 10) show that "rural and remote communities often face disproportionately higher costs for internet access". The case of Romania is illustrative: Şandor (2006: 157) documents that, in rural areas, computer access was 6.5% (vs. 29.9% urban), and internet access was 1.1% (vs. 11.9% urban). The knowledge gap was similar: 11.2% of rural inhabitants knew how to use a computer, compared with 38.6% in urban areas (Şandor, 2006: 159).

Djatmiko et al. (2025: 13) observe that "low-income populations often prioritise necessities such as food, housing and healthcare over investments in technology", and that "e-government adoption is significantly lower in households that struggle to afford smartphones". This highlights a vicious circle of digital poverty.

Ng et al. (2022: 1073) illustrate the problem through the case of Singapore — ranked first in the Roland Berger Digital Inclusion Index 2020. "In a modern urban society with a reported internet access rate of 98%, it came as a surprise when it was discovered that, during the COVID-19 lockdown, certain public rental flats for low-income households had no internet points" (Ng et al., 2022: 1078). More dramatically: "the agencies we studied found that certain parents had such deficient digital knowledge that they did not even know how to plug in and turn on a computer" (Ng et al., 2022: 1079). The authors propose "universal digital access" with digital resources "provided automatically and affordably as public utilities" (Ng et al., 2022: 1081).

The results of Bokšová et al. (2021) confirm, in a Central European context, the same vulnerability of the elderly and of low-income people. In the general-public sample, 44% of respondents over 60 consider that the digitalisation of public services is not beneficial for them, and 83% declare themselves insufficiently informed about the available e-government tools. The below-average income category is even more reluctant: 51% of respondents in this category consider the digitalisation of public services not to be personally beneficial (Bokšová et al., 2021: 42–45). Therefore income, age and the frequency of internet use operate cumulatively as factors of digital vulnerability.

5.4. The education and gender divide

Education appears as one of the strongest predictors. Mesa (2023: 5-7), on the basis of logistic regression on the Italian sample, identifies education as "the most important variable". Among respondents with tertiary education, the share of digital users ranges between 61.1% and 81.3%; among those with primary and lower-secondary education, between 43.5% and 69.2%. Education "gives individuals a greater possibility of acquiring cognitive tools to cope with the complexity generated by ICT".

The gender divide is more nuanced. Şandor's data (2006: 157) show relatively small differences between men and women regarding access, but in specific communities (elderly, rural, immigrant women) exclusion is disproportionately severe. Gender inequalities interact with other forms of inequality, generating situations of cumulative vulnerability.

6. THE EUROPEAN AND ROMANIAN CONTEXT

6.1. The strategic framework of the European Union

The EU has made digital inclusion a strategic priority. The "2030 Digital Compass" proposes four axes: digital skills, infrastructures, the transformation of businesses and the digitalisation of public services. The EU has set "the ambitious objective for 2030 of ensuring that 80% of its citizens acquire at least basic digital skills" (Morte-Nadal & Esteban-Navarro, 2025: 2).

The DESI 2024 indicator offers an updated picture: 55.56% of people aged 16-74 in the EU possess at least basic digital skills. The Netherlands (82.7%), Finland (82%) and Ireland (72.9%) are the leaders, while Poland (44.3%), Bulgaria (35.5%) and Romania (27.7%) remain behind. The "European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles" (Mesa, 2023: 2) "commits to promoting a model of digital transformation that puts people at the centre".

Yera et al. (2020: 6), analysing 767,691 Eurostat questionnaires from 26 EU countries, show that "between 2014 and 2019, the largest digital divide among the 28 EU countries grew by 2%, from 32% to 34%" (Yera et al., 2020: 2), and that "in 2019 the average use of e-Government in the 28 EU countries reached only 55%" (Yera et al., 2020: 3). The e-Government Use Index (EGUI+) places Romania in last position with 0.07, compared with Denmark (4.50) (Yera et al., 2020: 16).

6.2. The case of Italy: education as a key factor

Italy offers a valuable illustration. Mesa (2023: 1) describes that "the Italian public administration (PA) has always had problems with slowness and inefficiency. In 2021, the Italian government made a massive investment in the digitalisation of the PA as part of an extraordinary recovery plan, with over 200 billion euros". The research on 3,002 respondents reveals that "over three quarters of respondents have already used a public service at least once through an online channel".

Nevertheless, "over a third fear that the digitalisation of public services will worsen the situation of citizens". "With the exception of the police (70%), the president of the republic (68%) and schools (56%), all the country's public institutions fall below the 50% trust threshold". The central conclusion: "the educational and cultural dimension is a crucial aspect as a lever for counteracting the digital divide".

6.3. Romania: the challenges of an incomplete transformation

Romania is consistently in the lower part of the rankings. Romania records e-government service use of only 24.6% — the lowest in the EU after Bulgaria and Germany (Morte-Nadal & Esteban-Navarro, 2025: 2). Only 27.7% of Romanians possess basic digital skills.

Şandor (2006: 162) advances an explanation that remains valid: e-government services are not merely a technological problem, but an administrative-cultural one. "The administrative culture is still bureaucratic, every interaction with citizens or businesses requiring many paper documents. Without a drastic simplification of procedures, the electronic delivery of public services will remain science fiction". In the same logic, the

author observes that "interaction with public administration is still seen as a personal one. […] Romanians continue to prefer direct, personal, face-to-face contact with public officials" (Șandor, 2006: 162).

Yera et al. (2020: 13) identify, with 2009-2015 data, a Romanian particularity: "Romania was the only country where the two extreme levels of e-Government use […] were characterised by two rules involving a single factor, manual occupation: manual workers did not use e-Government tools, while those who were not manual workers used them". "Romania has a very imbalanced data set, with 94% of the questionnaires being of the null e-Government use type" (Yera et al., 2020: 9).

Bilouseac (2025: 14-19) carries out a critical analysis of the DESI indicators: "the score obtained in the category of digital public services (21/100) remains more than three times lower than the EU average, placing the country in last position". Romania comes close to the European average in access to electronic health records (75.10 vs. 82.70) and mobile optimisation (85.48 vs. 96.13), but the gap remains dramatic in actual users (26.91% vs. 74.71%) and pre-filled forms (24.38 vs. 70.98). Demand for digital services grew from 15.89% to 26.91% (2020-2024), but transparency regarding data protection stagnated at 43.10 points.

Cibian et al. (2022: 5–6), in the most detailed mapping of digital exclusion in Romania, highlight a paradoxical reality: Romania has connectivity above the EU average (10th of 27 in DESI 2021), yet "more than 10 million Romanians do not have basic digital skills", and "this number has increased by 3 percent over the last two years". The most exposed groups are "people living alone (55.5% of single-person households have no internet access), the elderly (approximately one in three pensioners have never used the internet), those with low levels of education (29% have never used the internet) and those living in rural areas" (Cibian et al., 2022: 5). The authors advance the concept of "functional digital illiteracy": "although certain basic digital skills exist, they do not allow a sufficient understanding of digital processes" (Cibian et al., 2022: 56).

A recent analysis of the digitalisation of Romanian public administration confirms the same discrepancy between strategic objectives and actual implementation. Burlacu et al. (2025) show that Romania has a strategic framework aligned with the Digital Compass 2030 and significant European funding, including through the NRRP, but progress is affected by the lack of clear coordination, an insufficiently adapted legislative framework and the low level of adoption of digital services by the population and SMEs (Burlacu et al., 2025: 289–290). In the SWOT analysis, the dominant weaknesses are the low level of digital skills in public administration, deficient inter-institutional coordination, fragmented digital infrastructure and the lack of interoperability (Burlacu et al., 2025: 292–293).

At the local level, Stoica and Ilas (2009: 173-177), in the first evaluation of 165 Romanian municipal websites, showed that Timişoara (39.66/100), Bucharest (39.36) and Arad (38.73) were the leaders, but "the national average was only 16.39". The least developed dimensions were security (average 0.62/20) and digital democracy (average 1.14/20). The structures observed then — an underdeveloped participatory dimension, formal security, an emphasis on information dissemination — remain visible in the DESI 2024 data presented by Bilouseac (2025: 16).

The local context can also be read through Șoproni's (2025) analysis of Oradea. The study presents the city as an example of how local leadership, participatory governance and community-driven branding can reinforce socio-economic inclusion. Șoproni argues that good governance is linked to responsibility, transparency, inclusivity and responsiveness, and that Oradea's development model draws legitimacy from stakeholder engagement and

civic pride (Șoproni, 2025: 110-111). This perspective is useful for the present paper because it makes the Parking Oradea case analytically more demanding: the platform should not be assessed only as a technical tool, but also against the city's broader claim to inclusive, participatory and citizen-oriented governance.

7. CASE STUDY: DIGITAL INCLUSION IN THE "PARKING ORADEA" SERVICE OF THE ORADEA CITY HALL

The elaborated conceptual framework — the three-level digital divide (Morte-Nadal & Esteban-Navarro, 2025: 2; Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023: 955), the taxonomy of barriers (Djatmiko et al., 2025: 10-14), the hierarchy of vulnerable groups (Pérez-Escolar & Canet, 2022: 6) — is applied to a relevant local case: the full digitalisation of the residential parking service of the Municipality of Oradea, launched in testing on 11 February 2026 and officially operationalised in March–April 2026.

7.1. Justification of the case and methodology

The choice of the case is justified by three arguments. First, it is a national premiere — the first system in Romania to allow the online allocation and auctioning of residential parking spaces, fully digitalised (Agerpres, 26 February 2026). Second, the scale is significant: 27,652 residential parking spaces inventoried, 20,500 allocated, ~4,500 available, with parking revenues exceeding 33 million lei in 2025. Third, the particularity of the case is that the service was transformed from a traditional relationship, mediated by owners' associations, into one mediated exclusively digitally — a feature that places the case in the "digital-only" category criticised by Djatmiko et al. (2025) and Mesa (2023).

The research question: to what extent do the architecture, design and implementation of the "Parking Oradea" platform reflect or contradict the principles of digital inclusion identified in the literature, and what adjustments are necessary for alignment with European standards?

The methodology triangulates three sources: (a) documentary analysis of the platform and official communications (oradea.ro, the dedicated sub-pages, press releases, regulations, video tutorial); (b) direct observation of the portal.parcari.oradea.ro portal and the Parking Oradea mobile application; (c) content analysis of the local press, which critically documented the implementation in February–March 2026: the investigations published by eBihoreanul, Bihon, Jurnalul Oradean and Observatorul Bihorean, plus the press conferences reported by Agerpres. Acknowledged limitations: in the absence of sociological field research, the evidence on the experience of citizens is mediated through press reports; the analysis does not cover a period long enough for a medium-term evaluation.

7.2. Description of the digital parking ecosystem

The system has three components with differentiated logics. The "Parking Oradea" mobile application (Android/iOS) is intended for on-street and off-street (multi-storey) parking; it allows the purchase of tickets by SMS or card, subscriptions, the payment of fines, and the real-time viewing of available spaces. The portal.parcari.oradea.ro web portal is dedicated exclusively to residential parking — account creation, document upload, allocation, electronic auctions. The interactive map provides geographical location and tariffs.

The crucial distinction concerns the compulsory nature of the digital channel. For on-street and multi-storey parking a dual-channel model operates: tickets can be bought by

SMS, by card at parking meters or via the application — compatible with the hybrid model recommended by Kaihlanen et al. (2022: 1) and Mesa (2023). For residential parking the model is entirely digital-only: enrolment, document validation, allocation and payment of the annual subscription of 160 lei are carried out exclusively online, without a parallel traditional procedure.

The user's actual procedure involves: creating the account, uploading scanned documents, validating the address from a predefined list, simultaneously validating two codes (e-mail and SMS) within an uninterrupted session, and associating an existing contract or registering for allocation. In the event of direct allocation or allocation by auction, the beneficiary has 48 hours to pay, and failure to do so entails a ban on participating in allocation for 12 months. At the level of institutional integration, the database is interconnected with the Romanian Auto Registry, Road Insurance, the DGASPC (for disability certificates) and the Cadastre Office — a technical level that is remarkable compared with the average of the DESI indicators (Bilouseac, 2025: 16).

7.3. Application of the three-level digital divide framework

At the first level — material access — Oradea is, compared with the national average, relatively favourably positioned; the North-West region is in the upper part of the regional rankings regarding household internet access (Cibian et al., 2022: 15). Nevertheless, the first level is not neutralised: 55.5% of single-person households nationally have no internet at home (Cibian et al., 2022: 5, 16). Applied to Oradea, this datum translates into a significant number of citizens — in particular elderly people living alone in inherited flats in central neighbourhoods where the concentration of parking spaces is highest.

The design aggravates the problem by requiring two validation channels simultaneously. The procedure requires the validation, in the same session, of an e-mail code and an SMS code, without the possibility of restarting. For a citizen without an active e-mail address (a frequent situation among the elderly), the first technical barrier is insurmountable without external help. The case reported by the press: residents who abandon the session before validating both codes remain blocked with an "unfinalised account", a situation from which they can no longer recover except by requesting deletion from the Parking Service — a procedure which, paradoxically, itself presupposes digital capacities.

At the second level — digital skills — the most visible part of the divide is concentrated. The procedure involves: scanning/photographing documents in compatible formats (JPG, PNG, HEIC), uploading them while respecting size limits, identifying the address in a list that, in many cases, does not contain the correct option, and entering the telephone number without the initial digit "0". This complexity validates the observation of Kaihlanen et al. (2022: 3): "the ability to use the internet does not necessarily imply a capacity to use digital services". Direct proof comes from the press: reporters who tested the platform concluded that "enrolment in the digital system will be a challenge for people who are not familiar with the digital system", while another article notes that "using the platform sometimes proves to be a « stumbling block » even for people who have good knowledge" (BIHON, 12 March 2026).

This observation places the case directly in the area that Cibian et al. (2022: 56) call "functional digital illiteracy". The concrete manifestation: the massive crowding of the Parking Service — approximately 280 people in a single day (4 March 2026) — and the emergency opening of Counter no. 9 in the Counters Hall ("Pyramid") starting on 9 March 2026, a measure that de facto contradicts the narrative of a fully digital service.

At the third level — actual benefits — a significant asymmetry appears. For those who manage to navigate the platform: transparency, the elimination of intermediation through owners' associations, automatic notifications, payment without travelling. For the others: the loss of an already-held space or the impossibility of accessing new ones. The 12-month penalty for non-payment within 48 hours represents the clearest example of disproportionate exclusion: an elderly citizen who, receiving the notification by e-mail (a channel he does not check daily), fails to pay online within 48 hours is administratively excluded for a year. The penalty contradicts the principle of proportionality and of digital citizenship (Mesa, 2023: 2).

The emergence of a private intermediation market — firms that offer, for 50 lei, the creation of the account (eBihoreanul, 21 March 2026) — represents a concrete economic indicator of the divide. In the logic of digital exclusion described by Cibian et al. (2022: 56), this is a vulnerability of the "functional digital illiteracy" type: the citizen may have minimal access to technology, but needs intermediation in order actually to complete a digitalised public service. The fact that the firm in question "is not doing very well, because instead of paying this money, the residents prefer to queue in the Pyramid" is, paradoxically, an encouraging datum: elderly citizens choose free public support over paid private intermediation — confirming Mesa's recommendation (2023: 10) regarding "digital facilitation centres".

7.4. The exposed vulnerable groups

The elderly represent, in accordance with the literature, the most exposed group. Three arguments: (a) they are the category most strongly anchored in the neighbourhoods where the concentration of parking spaces is highest; (b) they are the least technically prepared for a process that requires an active e-mail, SMS, document scanning, web navigation; (c) the "grey digital divide" intensifies with age. Official recognition came in a problematic form: the director of the Real Estate Patrimony Directorate stated that "residents who find enrolment difficult will have to ask for the support of a person familiar with working online, or come to ask for guidance at the City Hall" — externalising responsibility to the citizen. This position directly contradicts the recommendation of Djatmiko et al. (2025: 22) that "governments should move beyond the mere deployment of infrastructure and prioritise human-centred digital policies".

For the low-income segment, the burden is multiple: the necessary devices, internet and telephone subscriptions, plus the private intermediation option of 50 lei (equivalent to one third of the annual fee of 160 lei). The Romanian particularity identified by Yera et al. (2020: 13) — the occupational factor as a stronger predictor than in other EU countries — suggests that the population of manual workers, even after retirement, remains disproportionately excluded.

For citizens with low levels of education, the platform's terminology — "account validation", "contract import", "unfinalised status", "cache" — represents a substantial cognitive barrier. Error messages are formulated in jargon, without suggesting concrete actions. This problem reflects the conclusion of Morte-Nadal and Esteban-Navarro (2025: 8) regarding "the language used by public administration" as the second most important factor for inclusion ($M = 4.26$).

Persons with disabilities present a revealing paradox. The regulation explicitly provides for an exemption from payment for severe or pronounced disability — a measure that goes beyond many other municipalities. However, the exemption is conditional on enrolment on the same platform. In other words: persons with disabilities are not exempted

from the digital barrier, but only from the financial one. There is, in the official communications, no mention of compliance with web accessibility standards (WCAG, EU Directive 2016/2102 transposed through GEO 112/2018).

7.5. The typology of barriers and structural tensions

At the technical level, the design of the platform concentrates the most serious problems: validation in two simultaneous stages within a single session; the quality of the underlying database — missing addresses, inconsistent block numbers, contracts that do not associate ("An import contract was found in the database but it is currently not associated", BIHON, 12 March 2026); the reduced intelligibility of error messages; the absence of an accessibility audit. These problems reflect a prioritisation of security over usability and an incomplete migration process.

At the social level, the most visible barrier is the lack of confidence in one's own capacity — confirmed by the 280–300 people who turned up on peak days at the premises of the Parking Service (eBihoreanul, 5 March 2026). In addition, there is the cultural preference identified by Şandor (2006: 162) for personal, "face-to-face" contact. The fact that residents prefer queues of several hours to paying 50 lei for intermediation reflects an institutional resource — trust in public authority — that the municipality does not capitalise on in its design.

At the institutional level, the most criticisable decision was the reduction of the public-facing hours of the Parking Service from three days a week to a single day, exactly during the transition period. This runs counter to the recommendations of Kaihlanen et al. (2022: 1) and Mesa (2023) on maintaining traditional channels. The City Hall partly corrected this by opening, on 9 March 2026, Counter no. 9 — a reactive correction that confirms the central thesis of the literature: the digital transition requires additional investment, not reductions, in traditional support structures. A second institutional barrier is the 12-month penalty for non-payment within 48 hours — which disproportionately matches the penalty to the error. A third is the absence of a formalised digital inclusion strategy: there are no plans with measurable objectives, partnerships with civil society or collaborations with public libraries.

The case highlights three structural tensions. The transparency/accessibility tension: the official argument — eliminating suspicions of favouritism — is legitimate, but procedural transparency was obtained at a substantial accessibility cost. The efficiency/equity tension: digitalisation reduces administrative costs, but the gain is not distributed equitably. The universality/personalisation tension: the platform adopts a "one-size-fits-all" logic, contradicting the principles of user-centred design. A more mature approach would offer differentiated pathways — a fast option for experienced users and an assisted option (with explained steps, a "high contrast" mode, audio options, contextual tutorials) for vulnerable categories.

7.6. Recommendations specific to the Oradea context

On the basis of the analysis and with reference to the framework of Morte-Nadal and Esteban-Navarro (2025: 10-11), I propose eighteen recommendations organised across five dimensions.

On the access dimension: (R1) maintaining a parallel traditional allocation procedure for citizens who declare on their own responsibility the difficulty of using the platform; (R2) extending the public-facing hours of the Parking Service to at least three days a week, including afternoon hours; (R3) establishing assisted access points in public libraries

(the "Gheorghe Şincai" County Library, the neighbourhood branches), inspired by the model of the "digital facilitation centres" described by Mesa (2023: 10).

On the skills dimension: (R4) free "assisted enrolment" workshops in neighbourhoods, at the premises of owners' associations, run by mixed teams (officials and volunteers from pensioners' organisations); (R5) video tutorials adapted to different categories of users — with an emphasis on the scenario "I have no parking space and want one", omitted in the current official material; (R6) partnerships with the University of Oradea for "digital buddy" programmes between students and the elderly.

On the interaction dimension: (R7) auditing and certifying the platform in accordance with WCAG 2.1 AA, with publication of an accessibility statement; (R8) reformulating error messages in plain language; (R9) an asynchronous validation procedure (codes valid for 72 hours) to eliminate the requirement of a single session; (R10) a 24/7 assistance chatbot; (R11) a "high contrast" mode option and font enlargement; (R12) automatic pre-filling of fields on the basis of querying the already-interconnected databases (RAR, Cadastre, DGASPC).

On the social-factors dimension: (R13) mitigating the 12-month penalty — a progressive penalty (warning, 3 months, 12 months); (R14) formal partnerships with pensioners' and disability organisations in consulting on the design; (R15) an information campaign, with printed materials distributed in letterboxes.

On the outcomes dimension: (R16) the quarterly publication of monitoring indicators (the enrolment rate by age category, applications rejected for technical reasons, the average waiting time); (R17) an independent impact evaluation at 12 months, with interviews and focus groups; (R18) the integration of the effort into the municipality's Local Development Strategy.

The case study brings two original observations to the literature. The first: the emergence of a private intermediation market (50 lei for an account) as a concrete economic indicator of the digital divide — a phenomenon that manifests itself even in the local public services of a high-performing municipality in an EU country. The second: the prevalence of citizens' preference for the assisted public counter over private intermediaries — a valuable institutional resource that argues in favour of public investment in assisted support structures.

8. STRATEGIES AND POLICIES FOR DIGITAL INCLUSION

The recommendations are grouped into five main directions: digital literacy programmes, public-private partnerships, user-centred design, hybrid models and integration into the sustainable development goals.

8.1. Tailored digital literacy programmes

Djatmiko et al. (2025: 17) argue that "nations with structured digital education frameworks have higher rates of e-government adoption". The examples include the "Seniors Go Digital" programme in Singapore, which "offers free workshops and hands-on training for older adults, in order to boost their confidence in using online government services". Mubarak and Suomi (2022: 3) insist that "the precise training of the elderly is the most important factor", recommending "the creation of a mindset, in addition to the delivery of ICT skills". Pérez-Escolar and Canet (2022: 9) synthesise the essential components: health literacy, social interaction skills, computational skills, and the encouragement of online engagement. For the Romanian context, effective programmes must take into account

minority languages and the cultural specificity of rural communities, where the mere translation of existing materials is not sufficient.

8.2. Public-private partnerships and the third sector

Djatmiko et al. (2025: 19) stress that "multi-stakeholder partnerships can significantly improve accessibility, affordability and reach". The examples include the Google–Indonesian government partnership for rural small businesses, the Microsoft "AI for Accessibility" programme, and the EU-Microsoft partnership for sign-language interpretation AI. At the European level, Morte-Nadal and Esteban-Navarro (2025: 7) find that "the third sector is seen as fundamental, requiring more support and training for mediation agents".

8.3. User-centred design and accessibility standards

Djatmiko et al. (2025: 18) recommend that "governments mandate accessibility standards based on universal design principles, ensuring that all e-government platforms comply with WCAG", with "multilingual support, screen readers, adaptive user interfaces and AI-based accessibility tools".

Morte-Nadal and Esteban-Navarro (2025: 8) examined 602 Spanish intermediary leaders, identifying a clear hierarchy: data confidentiality and security (M = 4.34), the language used by public administration (M = 4.26), the simplification of procedures (M = 4.26), internet access (M = 4.24), education (M = 4.14), digital skills (M = 4), and the support of officials (M = 4.04).

8.4. Hybrid service delivery models

The transition to digital must not eliminate traditional channels. Morte-Nadal and Esteban-Navarro (2025: 8) identify the hybrid model as an important recommendation: "face-to-face channels and personalised support are essential to complement digital services". Mesa (2023: 10) describes a concrete initiative — the "digital facilitation centres" financed through the Italian NRRP: "physical access points, usually located in libraries, schools and community centres".

The study by Kaihlanen et al. (2022: 4), on 74 participants from five vulnerable Finnish groups, offers rigorous empirical validation: "for most participants, access to digital health services was hindered by insufficient digital skills, local language skills, or both" (Kaihlanen et al., 2022: 1). More significantly: "the ability to use the internet does not necessarily imply a capacity to use digital services" (Kaihlanen et al., 2022: 3). The conclusion: "while digital services are growing, traditional face-to-face services will still need to be offered alongside the digital ones in order to ensure equal access" (Kaihlanen et al., 2022: 1).

Ng et al. (2022: 1081) propose a framework of "universal digital access" with three components: devices (one device per person), an internet connection (as a public utility), and digital skills (online government services in the native languages of non-English speakers).

8.5. Integration into the sustainable development goals

Djatmiko et al. (2025: 21) argue that digital inclusion policies must be integrated into the UN SDGs. The most relevant are: SDG 4 (Education), SDG 9 (Industry, innovation, infrastructure), SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, justice, strong institutions). Pérez-Escolar and Canet (2022: 1) stress that "SDG 10 is particularly

connected with the objectives of our studies, because both are focused on reducing inequalities".

8.6. Inclusive governance in smart cities

Kolotouchkina et al. (2024: 3359) observe critically that "despite the potential inclusive benefits of digital innovation, certain critical aspects of everyday life in the city are reproduced and reinforced, because many are left behind owing to a lack of access, skills, resources or capacities". The authors add: "the rhetoric of smart digital change works much more to « sell » a city in the global economy than to effectively address urban inequalities" (Kolotouchkina et al., 2024: 3358). One of the structural problems is the passive role assigned to citizens: "residents are often regarded as data sources that feed urban platforms, consumers of digital services and/or investors in urban technologies" (Kolotouchkina et al., 2024: 3359).

9. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The synthesis of the literature and the case study highlight three structural tensions. The first: the tension between administrative efficiency and social equity — digitalisation promises cost reduction, but without compensatory measures it risks excluding the groups most dependent on services. The second: between universality and personalisation — European policies tend to set uniform objectives, but reality — as the Italian and Romanian cases illustrate — is that social structures vary considerably. The third: the tension of responsibility — should digital inclusion be a task of the citizen or of the state? The answer is a combination: personalised training programmes plus a design simple enough for users with limited skills.

For Romania, the recommendations of Şandor (2006: 161–162) remain current: targeted investment in rural areas, "lifelong learning" programmes, a change in administrative culture. The Parking Oradea case adds a specific lesson for local administrations: digitalisation without deliberate compensatory measures can deepen the divide, transforming citizens with access into excluded citizens.

Burlacu et al. (2025) complete these recommendations with a current institutional perspective: the transition to e-government cannot be treated exclusively as a technological project, but as an organisational and social transformation. The authors recommend strengthening inter-institutional coordination, developing the digital skills of officials, the interoperability of public systems, optimising the user experience and periodically monitoring digital progress through clear indicators (Burlacu et al., 2025: 294–296). For local administrations, this perspective is relevant because it shows that digital platforms can fail socially even when infrastructure and funding exist, if they are not accompanied by administrative leadership, common standards and support for users.

Mubarak and Suomi (2022: 5) draw attention to a fundamental limitation: "there is no arguable reason to assume that a complete elimination of the digital divide will ever be possible. State-of-the-art technologies will continue to be expensive for the majority of people". Digital inclusion is not a fixed destination, but a continuous process. Djatmiko et al. (2025: 11) draw attention to the new challenges related to AI: "algorithmic bias in AI-based public services can further disadvantage marginalised populations".

10. CONCLUSIONS

Digital inclusion in public services represents one of the great challenges of contemporary governance. The transition to e-government offers significant opportunities,

but if it is not managed with attention to equity, it can deepen social inequalities and exclude precisely those who have the greatest need of efficient public services.

The literature analysed allows five main conclusions. First, the digital divide is multidimensional, with three levels (access, skills, outcomes). Second, the most exposed groups — the elderly, persons with disabilities, rural populations, those with low income and low levels of education — present vulnerabilities that intersect. Third, the barriers identified are simultaneously technical, social and institutional, which means that solutions must be integrated. Fourth, the European context highlights important convergences (DigComp, the Digital Decade objectives), but also persistent divergences — with Romania remaining one of the countries with the largest divides. Fifth, effective strategies combine tailored literacy programmes, public-private partnerships, user-centred design, hybrid models and integration into sustainable development.

The case study of the "Parking Oradea" platform offers an empirical illustration of the tensions that the literature anticipates at the theoretical level. The case confirms: the elderly are the most exposed group, "digital-only" models generate paradoxical queues at physical counters, and the elimination of traditional channels entails the opening of parallel emergency channels. The Oradea case adds two original observations: the emergence of a private intermediation market (50 lei) as an economic indicator of the divide, and the prevalence of citizens' preference for the assisted public counter.

For the Romanian context, the specific agenda includes: massive investment in rural digital infrastructure; literacy programmes tailored to the elderly, the rural population and low-income groups; the simplification of administrative procedures; the preservation of traditional channels and the development of digital facilitation centres; and the transformation of administrative culture.

Future research could explore: the contextual dimensions of digital inclusion in Romania through qualitative studies; the systematic evaluation of NRRP initiatives; comparisons with similar cases from other Romanian municipalities; and qualitative studies with officials who work directly with vulnerable citizens. The paper highlights that digital inclusion is not merely a technological problem, but a profoundly political and ethical one — it concerns the fundamental right of every citizen to participate in public life on equal terms. Securing this right in the digital age requires a coherent commitment from the state, civil society and the private sector, as well as an awareness that technology must serve people, not the other way around.

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BORDERLAND EDUCATION AND MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES IN CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE

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Abstract. *This paper examines how borderland regions in Central-Eastern Europe shape educational interactions among ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities. Frontier areas such as Transylvania and Vojvodina function as historically layered "contact zones," where schooling continuously negotiates competing identities. Drawing on intercultural education theory, the concept of the contact zone, and models of bilingual and plurilingual instruction, the study analyzes the statistical landscape of minority education across Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, and Serbia, before turning to two in-depth case studies. The analysis identifies persistent challenges — linguistic disparities, monocultural curricula, and insufficient intercultural teacher training — alongside the structural tension in European Union policy between integration and the protection of minority identity. The paper concludes with directions for strengthening cross-border educational cooperation and closes the gap between European diversity discourse and local implementation.*

Keywords*: Borderland education, multicultural education, Central-Eastern Europe, minority education, intercultural competence, contact zone.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Over the centuries, the border regions of Central and Eastern Europe have been areas of ethnic, linguistic, and religious overlap, shaped by successive empires, repeated redrawing of borders, and population migrations. This historical legacy has created, in areas such as Transylvania and Vojvodina, structurally heterogeneous school communities where the educational process cannot be separated from the ongoing negotiation of competing identities (Thaler, 2001). Far from being mere administrative peripheries, these territories function as contact zones—social spaces where cultures meet, sometimes clash, and renegotiate one another, often under conditions of asymmetrical power (Pratt, 1991).

"Borderland education," as used in this study, refers to the set of learning processes that occur in contexts characterized by cultural diversity and intense intercultural contact. These regions are not merely places where multiple ethnic groups coexist, but veritable social laboratories in which schools mediate—with varying degrees of success and failure—between loyalty to one's identity of origin and integration into a broader national or European space (Örkény & Székelyi, 2016). In Central and Eastern Europe, the most relevant examples of this phenomenon are found in Transylvania,

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Vojvodina, and Galicia—regions that have experienced repeated changes in sovereignty over the past century and, along with them, successive reconfigurations of their educational systems.

This study aims to analyze these dynamics through three complementary lenses—historical, sociological, and pedagogical—to understand how border education both reflects and shapes interethnic relations in the region. The authors of this article have previously examined, from an institutional and comparative perspective, the architecture of education systems in the European Union (Barth & Țepelea, 2021), a context that revealed both the progress of European policies on educational inclusion and the persistence of significant disparities among national and ethnic minorities. The present study expands on this line of research, moving from the level of general European policies to the concrete level of border regions, where these policies are—or fail to be—translated into educational practice.

The structure of the article follows a progression from the conceptual framework to empirical analysis. After presenting the theoretical framework of intercultural education and the concept of the contact zone, the study reviews the statistical landscape of minority education in Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, and Serbia, in order to ground the discussion in a quantifiable context. Two case studies—Transylvania and Vojvodina—allow for an in-depth analysis of how the theoretical principles discussed are implemented at the regional level. The article concludes with a critical discussion of the challenges identified and concrete directions for the development of educational policies in the border regions of Central and Eastern Europe.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intercultural education, as a field of educational research, provides a necessary starting point for understanding the dynamics in border regions. James Banks proposes a conceptual framework of the "dimensions of multicultural education," in which content integration, the process of knowledge construction, equitable pedagogy, and the school's institutional culture are treated as interdependent elements, not as isolated initiatives (Banks, 2016). This perspective emphasizes that managing diversity is not merely a matter of adding content about minorities to the curriculum, but rather involves a structural transformation of how the school functions as an institution.

To complement this framework, research conducted under the auspices of the Council of Europe shows that schools can actively promote young people's intercultural competence through a specific set of actions—encouraging interethnic friendships, organizing study periods in communities different from their own, and explicitly fostering the attitudes, values, and skills associated with intercultural dialogue (Barrett, 2018). This approach, which focuses on concrete competencies rather than mere declarative tolerance, provides a useful tool for evaluating the educational practices in the border regions analyzed in this study.

The concept of the "contact zone," introduced by Mary Louise Pratt, remains one of the most influential theoretical tools for understanding educational spaces characterized by cultural plurality. A contact zone is defined as a social space where different cultures meet, clash, and negotiate, often under conditions of asymmetrical power (Pratt, 1991). Applied to the school setting, this idea suggests that a classroom in a border region is not a neutral space, but an active arena for identity negotiation, where practices such as autoethnography and transculturation become legitimate pedagogical tools, not merely anthropological curiosities.

The specific characteristics of Eastern European regions, however, require a nuanced interpretation of these theoretical frameworks, which were originally developed for Western contexts marked by recent migration. An analysis of intercultural education in post-communist Poland has shown that the only significant exception to the generic, context-disconnected treatment of this discipline was precisely the "border-type of intercultural education"—that linked to indigenous and secular ethnic communities, rather than to migratory flows (Bleszynska, 2008) . Along the same lines, more recent pedagogical explorations of the transformations of intercultural education in Central European border regions emphasize the need for theoretical models that integrate the specific historical heritage of these territories (Rembierz, 2021).

The identity theory of the border provides a second conceptual pillar of this study. Identities in Central European border regions are described as fluid, contested, and dependent on the political context, rather than fixed and primordial (Thaler, 2001). This fluidity is confirmed by empirical research on ethnic minorities located along the Central and Eastern European border, which shows how minority groups actively manage their dual status—as a minority in the host country and, simultaneously, as a community symbolically linked to a neighboring (Örkény & Székelyi, 2016). The territorial dimension of this issue is also analyzed from the perspective of self-determination in the cross-border regions of Eastern and Central Europe (Harris, 2017), as well as from the perspective of the dual function of borders—as both connectors and dividers—within the European Union (Schmidt, 2022).

This dual function of the border—both connecting and separating—is also reflected at the institutional level, within the European legal framework dedicated to the protection of national minorities. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe, 2001/2004) establishes specific obligations for signatory states regarding access to education in the mother tongue, without, however, imposing a uniform model for implementation, which leaves room for divergent national interpretations of the same principle. This normative flexibility partly explains why educational policies for minorities differ so greatly between Romania, Hungary, and Serbia, even though all three are signatories to the same international instruments—an aspect that will be analyzed in detail in Part 3 of this paper.

Historically, Central European border regions have often functioned as provinces with distinct administrative and cultural systems, giving rise to persistent cultural regionalisms that have survived repeated changes in political sovereignty (Livezeanu et al., 2019). This institutional continuity largely explains why the educational systems in Transylvania and Vojvodina still retain, to this day, structural features inherited from the Austro-Hungarian and interwar periods, which are analyzed in detail in the case studies section. Cultural regionalism should not be understood, in this sense, as mere historical nostalgia, but rather as an active factor that continues to influence local educational policy decisions today—from the way school networks are organized to the institutional status granted to minority languages within local government.

It should also be noted that identity-based theories of the border and theories of multicultural education generally stem from distinct disciplinary traditions—sociology and political history, on the one hand, and the educational sciences, on the other—and are rarely brought into direct dialogue. This study aims precisely to bridge this gap, treating border education not merely as a descriptive pedagogical category, but as a social phenomenon rooted in the region's political history, which cannot be fully understood

without the conceptual tools provided by the sociology of identity and the political geography of borders.

An additional theoretical dimension, often underestimated in the literature on frontier education, concerns the role of teachers as key actors in the implementation of any intercultural policy. The report "Fostering Teachers' Intercultural and Democratic Competences for a More Inclusive Society" (European Commission, Joint Research Center, 2023) shows that, no matter how well-defined the regulatory or curricular frameworks may be, the effectiveness of intercultural education ultimately depends on the teacher's actual intercultural competence in the classroom—a competence that requires specific training, not just good intentions. Empirical studies on initial teacher education, however, reveal a persistent gap between the stated objectives of training programs and the actual intercultural competence of program graduates—a gap that persists even in educational systems considered high-performing at the European level.

The final theoretical framework relevant to this study concerns models of bilingual and multilingual education. The literature distinguishes between additive approaches, which develop the second language without undermining the mother tongue, and subtractive approaches, which tend to replace the student's first language (García, 2009). This distinction is essential for border regions, where instruction in the minority language is not merely a pedagogical tool but a prerequisite for preserving community identity. Additive models typically require substantial bilingual teaching resources, teachers qualified in both languages, and explicit institutional recognition of the value of the minority language—conditions that are not uniformly met in the regions analyzed.

At the European policy level, the publication "Education Begins with Language" (European Commission, 2020b) sets the goal that all graduates of compulsory education should know, in addition to their mother tongue, two foreign languages by 2025, with an explicit focus on children from national minorities and disadvantaged families—a policy direction that will be critically revisited in Chapter 5, when we discuss the tension between integration and the protection of minority identity. It is important to note that this objective frames multilingualism more as an individual skill useful for European mobility than as a collective right tied to the identity of a minority community—a conceptual distinction that, in border regions, may generate tensions that are difficult to anticipate at the level of general European policy.

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks—institutional multicultural education, action-oriented intercultural competence, the contact zone, the identity theory of the frontier, the European normative framework for the protection of minorities, teachers' intercultural competence, and additive language models—provide the conceptual tools necessary for the empirical analysis that follows, which is structured around the available statistical data and the two regional case studies.

3. STATISTICAL DATA ON BORDER EDUCATION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The transition from the conceptual framework to empirical analysis requires a preliminary methodological clarification. Statistics on the education of national minorities in Central and Eastern Europe come from diverse sources—national statistical offices, reports from ministries of education, and European agencies—and are not always directly comparable across countries due to differing definitions of ethnic and linguistic categories. For this reason, where exact national data could not be independently verified

through a primary institutional source, they are presented below as indicative estimates, intended to outline general trends rather than definitive figures.

At the European Union level, the general trend shows a steady increase in the proportion of students with a migrant background or belonging to a national or ethnic minority, which is more pronounced in border regions than within the member states (Eurostat, Migrant Integration Statistics — Education, 2024–2026). This general trend, however, takes on a different meaning when analyzed separately for each of the four countries in the region under study—Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, and Serbia—since each has its own history of dealing with its national minorities.

Data on early childhood education provide a useful indicator of how European education systems, in practice, address the principle of inclusion that is affirmed in policy statements. At the European Union level, the average percentage of children enrolled in early childhood education, aged 4 to 7, has reached 94.8%, while for children from disadvantaged families or from the Roma minority, the percentage drops to 42% (European Commission, Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025, 2020a). This gap of more than 50 percentage points, which holds true across the entire Union, is also found—albeit to varying degrees—in the border regions analyzed in this study, where the overlap between socioeconomic vulnerability and ethnic background frequently exacerbates inequalities in access to quality education.

Romania is host to more than twenty officially recognized national minorities, and a significant portion of the school-age population attends classes in their native language—Hungarian, German, Ukrainian, Slovak, or Romani—with available estimates placing this proportion in pre-university education at just under a quarter of all students, with significant regional variations, particularly in Transylvania. Alongside these "historical" minorities, the Roma minority remains, statistically, the group most affected by educational exclusion throughout the European Union, not just in Romania: only 42% of Roma children participate in early childhood education, compared to a European average of 94.8%, and the dropout rate in secondary education reaches 72% among Roma children, compared to a European average of 10.2% (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey — Roma: Selected Findings, 2016; Eurostat, online data code [educ_uoe_enra10]). This gap, which is much wider than that reported for any other minority in the region, shows that ethnicity alone does not fully explain educational inequalities—socioeconomic status plays an equally important, if not more important, role than formal ethnicity.

Hungary operates a comprehensive bilingual education system; available estimates indicate a significant proportion of bilingual students nationwide, supported by a network of dozens of schools that offer partial or full instruction in Romanian, Slovak, Croatian, or Serbian, concentrated primarily in the regions bordering these countries. Over the past few decades, the national and local media in Hungary have consistently covered the topic of the border region with Romania as a space for active identity negotiation, rather than as a mere administrative issue (Baranyi, 2007), which suggests that public interest in cross-border education extends beyond the strictly technical sphere of school policies.

Prior to 2022, Ukraine represented a unique case in the region, with a significant number of students enrolled in educational programs in minority languages—including the Romanian and Hungarian communities concentrated in Transcarpathia and Chernivtsi. The Russian invasion of 2022 radically changed this landscape: a substantial

number of Ukrainian students were integrated into the education systems of European Union member states, including Romania and Hungary, creating additional logistical and pedagogical challenges for the education systems in border regions — challenges that go beyond the usual framework of education for national minorities and are more akin to that of education for refugees.

Serbia provides education in six officially recognized minority languages, with this diversity particularly concentrated in the autonomous province of Vojvodina, where the Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, and Croatian communities maintain their own school networks, often in parallel with those of the Serbian majority. Research on the educational migration of Southeast European minorities shows, however, that these parallel networks face constant demographic pressure caused by the emigration of young people from minority groups to neighboring countries of origin or to Western Europe, a phenomenon that threatens the long-term institutional sustainability of minority-language education in Vojvodina (Lendák-Kabók et al., 2020).

Beyond country-specific figures, the border regions of Central and Eastern Europe share a common structural feature: they often function as distinct administrative zones with their own regional identity, which influences the organization of school networks independently of general national education policy (Kukorelli et al., 2000). This informal regionalization of border education is also confirmed by research on border identity in the Republic of Moldova and the Western Balkans, which reveals similar patterns of institutional negotiation of linguistic diversity in a cross-border context, even beyond the borders of the European Union (Brie, 2021, 2023, 2024).

One additional methodological point is worth noting: direct comparisons between the four countries should be interpreted with caution, as their statistical reporting systems differ significantly. Romania and Hungary, as European Union member states, report harmonized data through Eurostat, which facilitates comparability. Serbia, which is still in the process of accession, and Ukraine, which is in the midst of an active conflict, often report through national channels or through international agencies such as UNICEF or UNHCR, using methodologies that are not always aligned with Eurostat standards. This methodological asymmetry is, in itself, an indirect reflection of the four countries' varying degrees of European integration.

Cross-border educational cooperation, however, offers a positive indicator that partially offsets the picture of disparities presented above. Across the European Union as a whole, international mobility among teachers and students reached, during the 2014–2020 period, 200,000, with over 1,000 universities and high schools benefiting annually; each monitored educational institution had at least four cooperation agreements with institutions outside the European Union (European Commission, Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025, 2020a). Although these figures are not available broken down by border regions, qualitative estimates suggest that regions such as Transylvania and Vojvodina, precisely because of their geographical location and multilingual tradition, benefit disproportionately from these mobility programs compared to monocultural regions within the same countries.

Taken together, these statistical data paint a mixed picture: on the one hand, the legal and institutional framework for the education of national minorities is relatively well developed in all four countries analyzed; on the other hand, actual implementation remains uneven, affected by demographic constraints, migration, and, in the case of the Roma minority, by a structural marginalization far more profound than that experienced by "historical" national minorities. This tension between the regulatory framework and

practical reality is explored in depth in the following parts through an analysis of two regional case studies—Transylvania and Vojvodina—which provide a more nuanced understanding of the specific mechanisms through which border education functions or fails to function.

4. CASE STUDIES: TRANSYLVANIA AND VOJVODINA

The two regions chosen for in-depth analysis—Transylvania and Vojvodina—were not selected at random. Both have experienced repeated changes in political sovereignty over the past century, both are home to large ethnic communities with well-organized institutions, and both have developed, over time, distinct multicultural educational traditions that set them apart from the rest of the national territory to which they belong. A comparison of the two regions allows us to identify both mechanisms common to border education and specific characteristics unique to each national context.

From the perspective of the linguistic models discussed above, both regions offer predominantly additive examples of bilingual education—students belonging to minority groups learn their mother tongue alongside, not at the expense of, the state's official language. This institutional choice, common to both Transylvania and Vojvodina, contrasts with the more subtractive practices observed in other European contexts, where the minority language is treated as an obstacle rather than as a pedagogical resource (García, 2009). However, as the following case studies show, the choice of an additive model at the level of declarative policy does not, in and of itself, guarantee the teaching resources and qualified teachers necessary for its effective implementation.

4.1. Transylvania

The multicultural tradition of Transylvanian education has deep institutional roots, the best-documented example being that of the Saxon minority. Historical analyses show that, beginning in the 19th century, the Transylvanian Saxons developed their own school system, structured according to Western European principles, which were introduced through German universities, and this system served as an early model of multicultural education based on European principles, long before this concept was academically theorized (Sassu & Stanciu-Păscărița, 2020). This institutional legacy largely explains Transylvania's reputation as a region with a particularly well-developed minority school infrastructure compared to other regions of Romania, an infrastructure that today supports parallel educational networks in Hungarian and German, alongside smaller communities—Ukrainian, Slovak, and Romani—with available estimates indicating over a thousand educational institutions operating partially or entirely in minority languages across the region.

Alongside the "historical" minorities—the Hungarian and German communities—an analysis of education in the border regions of Transylvania cannot overlook the situation of the Roma minority, which is the most vulnerable in terms of education. A recent study, conducted right on the Romanian-Serbian border, shows how the social construction of Roma "otherness" in multi-ethnic rural communities continues to be marked by persistent prejudices, even in the context of long-standing ethnic diversity that appears to be well integrated institutionally (Creţan, Covaci & Jucu, 2023) . This finding qualifies the often-idyllic image of Transylvania as a model of interethnic coexistence: the historical coexistence of several "recognized" ethnic groups—Hungarians, Germans, Romanians—does not automatically translate into a similar level

of inclusion for the Romani minority, which remains, statistically and socially, in a structurally different position.

The qualitative estimates available for the region suggest a significant minority school infrastructure—in the range of over a thousand educational institutions that operate partially or entirely in Hungarian, German, or Ukrainian, serving several hundred thousand students at the regional level. Although these figures could not be verified through a single, primary, and up-to-date statistical source, they are consistent with the order of magnitude reported by national sources regarding the total number of Hungarian-language schools in Romania, the overwhelming majority of which are concentrated in Transylvania. Regardless of the exact precision of these figures, the trend they confirm is clear: Transylvania remains, within the entire European Union, one of the regions with the densest institutional network of multilingual minority education.

Another specific feature of Transylvania is the role that education in the mother tongue plays in maintaining a symbolic connection with the neighboring nation-state, particularly in the case of the Hungarian community. This dynamic is concretely manifested through the existence of educational networks that, beyond their purely pedagogical function, play an active role in preserving Hungarian national identity at the regional level, a phenomenon documented by research on ethnic identities along the borders of Central and Eastern Europe (Örkény & Székelyi, 2016).

4.2. Vojvodina

The autonomous province of Vojvodina, located in northern Serbia, is likely the region's most complex multiethnic laboratory, home—according to available estimates—to communities belonging to more than twenty recognized ethnic groups, with a particularly high concentration of the Hungarian population in the northern districts. The roots of Vojvodina's current multi-ethnic educational structure, much like those in Transylvania, are deeply anchored in history: research on the construction of national identity through the teaching of history and geography during the interwar period shows how the redrawing of borders after World War I transformed the daily lives of the region's inhabitants, and schools became, even from that period onward, an active arena for negotiating the new Yugoslav national identity among children aged seven to ten (Koljanin, Šimunović-Bešlin & Čović, 2020).

This historical legacy explains the continued existence, to this day, of robust parallel school systems, supported by both the Serbian state and the home countries of the minorities—Hungary, first and foremost. Research on early childhood education among the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, however, reveals significant demographic pressure: successive censuses have recorded a steady decline in the Hungarian population in the region, calling into question the long-term viability of some of the Hungarian-language schools and kindergartens, despite the joint legislative efforts of the Serbian and Hungarian governments to counteract this decline (Mikuska & Raffai, 2018). The situation in Vojvodina thus confirms a tension already identified in Section 3: the existence of a legal framework favorable to minority education does not, in and of itself, guarantee the institutional sustainability of such education when demographic factors work against it.

A useful conceptual model for understanding the dynamics in Vojvodina is that of the "regional crossover," which shows how spatial proximity and cultural affinity among ethnic groups in an East-Central European border region give rise to specific forms of informal cooperation that transcend official institutional frameworks (Berceanu,

Popa & Creţan, 2023). Applied to education, this model suggests that the success of minority school networks in Vojvodina does not depend exclusively on Serbian or Hungarian national policies, but also on informal social networks, cooperation at the local community level, and shared cultural practices that transcend formal administrative boundaries — including educational initiatives based on artistic creativity, which are increasingly used as a tool for strengthening border identity in the region (Bieńkowska, 2021).

Available estimates for Vojvodina indicate that tens of thousands of students are enrolled in minority-language education systems, distributed across several dozen educational institutions, with a particularly high proportion from the Hungarian community, followed by the Slovak, Romanian, and Croatian communities. Compared to Transylvania, where the minority school system is overwhelmingly dominated by the Hungarian community, followed by the German community, Vojvodina presents a more fragmented ethnic picture, with six minority languages officially recognized in education—a structural difference that partly explains why the coordination of educational policies for minorities is, in Vojvodina, institutionally more complex than in Transylvania, where the number of communities with their own substantial school networks is considerably smaller.

In conclusion, a comparison of the two case studies reveals a common pattern: in both regions, the institutional infrastructure for minority education is relatively solid, stemming from a long-standing historical tradition, but its long-term sustainability depends on factors that go beyond the strictly educational sphere—demographic pressure, emigration, as well as the persistence of forms of exclusion that disproportionately affect the Roma minority, regardless of the region or host country analyzed. These findings set the stage for the critical discussion in the following section, which will explicitly examine the policy tensions generated by this situation.

5. CHALLENGES, POLITICAL TENSIONS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The theoretical and statistical analyses, along with the two case studies, point to a set of structural challenges common to the entire region under analysis, regardless of the host state. This part summarizes these challenges, places them within the broader context of European policy tensions regarding national minorities, and concludes by proposing concrete directions for the development of border education in Central and Eastern Europe.

A common thread linking the two case studies—and one that deserves to be explicitly highlighted before moving on to the analysis of specific challenges—is the dual nature of frontier education: on the one hand, a factor in preserving community identity, essential to the cultural survival of minorities; on the other hand, a potential factor in social fragmentation, when parallel school networks operate in isolation, without genuine bridges of communication between communities. The “contact zone” theorized by Pratt (1991) is therefore not a static feature of border regions, but rather a fragile balance that can evolve either toward a healthy form of intercultural coexistence or toward de facto educational segregation, depending on the specific educational policy decisions made at the local and national levels.

Several challenges have been identified, related to those presented earlier. The first structural challenge identified is linguistic disparity, specifically unequal access to high-quality educational resources in the minority’s native language. As illustrated by the

conceptual framework of the dimensions of multicultural education (Banks, 2016), an inclusive educational policy requires more than the formal recognition of the right to instruction in one's mother tongue—it requires the actual integration of curriculum content, up-to-date textbooks, and teaching materials appropriate for each minority language. In the regions analyzed, this condition is met unevenly: Hungarian communities, with a publishing and institutional infrastructure supported by the mother country, benefit from far more substantial resources than smaller communities, such as the Ukrainian community in Transylvania or the Croatian community in Vojvodina.

The second challenge concerns the often monocultural nature of the national curriculum, even in regions with a long tradition of multi-ethnicity. The history and geography curriculum, in particular, tends to reflect the dominant national perspective, downplaying or omitting the historical contributions of minorities to the region's development—a dynamic already documented for the interwar period in the case of Vojvodina (Koljanin, Šimunović-Bešlin & Čović, 2020), but which remains, in more subtle forms, relevant to the contemporary curriculum as well. For this reason, curriculum reform remains an area in which progress in European policies on educational inclusion is noticeably slower than in the area of formal access to education in the mother tongue.

The third challenge—perhaps the most persistent one—concerns the insufficient training of teachers in intercultural competencies. Recent analyses of teacher training in the context of international policy show that, although efforts invested in initial and continuing education programs have steadily increased, the gap between the stated objectives of these programs and the actual, assessable intercultural competence of graduates remains substantial (European Commission, Joint Research Center, 2023; "Intercultural Teacher Education in an International Policy Context: Challenges and Opportunities," 2025). This finding is particularly relevant for border regions, where teachers often find themselves teaching students from multiple linguistic and ethnic communities in the same classroom—a pedagogical complexity for which standard initial training, designed for monolingual classrooms, remains insufficiently adapted.

Beyond these three practical challenges, a critical analysis of European policies reveals a deeper structural tension, as previously anticipated in this article: the European Union's constant oscillation between an integration agenda—centered on mobility and transferable individual skills—and an agenda for the protection of minority identities—centered on collective rights and cultural preservation. The European goal of individual multilingualism by 2025 (European Commission, "Education Begins with Language", 2020b) illustrates precisely this tension: the policy is formulated in terms of individual competence useful for European mobility, not in terms of a collective right of the minority community to preserve its own language as a tool for school instruction. This choice of wording is not accidental—it reflects a broader European institutional preference for frameworks that do not raise issues of national sovereignty, thereby avoiding direct confrontation with the politically sensitive issue of the collective rights of national minorities.

This structural tension is also directly reflected in the gap between the European discourse on diversity—which is coherent, ambitious, and well-articulated in principle—and its implementation at the local level, where resources, national political will, and institutional capacity vary significantly from one country to another. The case of the Roma minority remains the most telling example of this gap: although the European legal framework for Roma inclusion has been in place for over a decade,

concrete educational indicators—such as the early childhood education enrollment rate and the school dropout rate—show a much slower improvement than what was promised in official statements.

The uneven level of institutional capacity development among the four countries analyzed further exacerbates this tension. Romania and Hungary, as members of the European Union, have access to structural funding explicitly dedicated to educational inclusion, including through programs such as Erasmus+, which enables them to engage in medium- and long-term institutional planning. Serbia and Ukraine, which find themselves in far more fragile geopolitical positions—the former in a protracted accession process, the latter in a context of active conflict—do not enjoy the same predictability of funding, which translates, at the level of schools in Vojvodina or in Ukrainian regions with minority populations, a greater reliance on bilateral funding provided by the minorities' home countries—a solution that works in the short term but is vulnerable to shifts in political priorities within those countries.

Based on these findings, we propose several concrete directions for the development of educational policy in the border regions of Central and Eastern Europe.

- The first direction concerns strengthening teachers' intercultural training through an initial training curriculum specifically tailored to the realities of multiethnic and multilingual classrooms, rather than relying solely on generic "education for diversity" modules—a recommendation explicitly supported by research on the intercultural competence of future European teachers.
- The second approach aims to expand bilingual and multilingual education programs beyond large "historical" communities to smaller communities, which are often neglected for purely demographic reasons, following the additive model discussed before (García, 2009).
- The third area, perhaps the most promising in the medium term, concerns cross-border university cooperation: the recent experience of European university alliances—41 such consortia were created in the 2019–2020 period alone, bringing together the resources of 280 universities across the European Union (European Commission, Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025, 2020a) — demonstrates an institutional model that can be replicated at the level of universities in border regions, capable of generating innovative curricula that are sensitive to the local context through direct cooperation between institutions on both sides of national borders.
- A fourth approach, complementary to the other three, would consist of systematically leveraging educational initiatives based on artistic creativity as a tool for strengthening border identity (Bieńkowska, 2021)—an approach that, unlike formal curriculum reform, can be implemented quickly at the local level without requiring major legislative changes.

These directions do not, in and of themselves, resolve the structural tension between integration and the protection of minority identity identified above—a tension that ultimately remains a political choice, not merely an educational one. They do, however, provide a practical framework through which educational systems in border regions can gradually bridge the gap between the European discourse on diversity and the everyday reality of multiethnic classrooms in Transylvania, Vojvodina, and similar regions in Central and Eastern Europe.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to analyze border education in Central and Eastern Europe through three complementary lenses — historical, sociological, and pedagogical — based on the premise that regions such as Transylvania and Vojvodina cannot be understood as mere administrative peripheries, but rather as contact zones in the sense theorized by Pratt (1991), where schools constantly mediate between community identity and integration into a broader national or European framework.

An analysis of the theoretical framework has shown that the literature on multicultural education—developed primarily for Western contexts marked by recent migration—requires significant adaptation when applied to Eastern European regions, where ethnic diversity is, in most cases, indigenous and long-standing (Bleszynska, 2008). Statistical data confirmed the existence of a relatively well-developed legal framework for the education of national minorities in the four countries analyzed, but also the persistence of significant gaps—the most pronounced of which affects the Roma minority, whose educational participation rates remain substantially below the European average (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016).

Case studies on Transylvania and Vojvodina have revealed a common pattern: a solid institutional infrastructure, inherited from a long historical tradition of multi-ethnic coexistence, but whose long-term sustainability remains contingent on factors that go beyond the strictly educational sphere—demographic pressure, the emigration of young people from minority groups, and the unequal institutional capacity of host states. The critical discussion placed these findings within the broader context of a structural tension in European politics, oscillating between an integration agenda centered on individual mobility and a less explicitly acknowledged agenda of protecting the collective identity of national minorities.

The proposed areas of development—strengthening intercultural training for teachers, expanding bilingual programs beyond major communities, cross-border university cooperation, and leveraging educational initiatives based on artistic creativity—do not constitute a comprehensive solution to the identified tensions, but they do provide a practical framework, applicable in the medium term, through which educational systems in border regions can bridge the gap between the European discourse on diversity and the local institutional reality.

Ultimately, this study confirms that frontier education remains a field in which progress cannot be measured solely by quantitative indicators—such as the number of schools, the percentage of students enrolled in bilingual programs—but requires an ongoing qualitative assessment of how these institutions succeed, or fail, to transform the contact zone from a space of latent tension into a space of genuine intercultural coexistence. Future research could explore this line of inquiry further through empirical field studies conducted directly in schools within the analyzed regions, which would complement the institutional and statistical picture provided by the present study with the concrete perspectives of the students, teachers, and parents involved daily in this negotiation of identity.

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FIGHTING CORRUPTION AND TRANSPARENCY OF POLITICAL PARTIES FINANCES AS PREREQUISITES OF THE EU'S ACCESSION: THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract. *Corruption remains a major challenge to democratic governance in the Republic of Moldova, despite substantial efforts to strengthen prevention, investigation and sanctioning mechanisms. Political party financing represents an important dimension of this problem because opaque funding foster clientelism, oligarchic influence and state capture, while effective public oversight contribute to greater political accountability. This article examines the evolution of political party financing regulation in Moldova and assesses the progress and remaining challenges in ensuring transparency and compliance, particularly in the context of European Union accession. The study uses a qualitative case-study approach based on documentary analysis of legislation, official institutional reports and civil-society monitoring, complemented by descriptive analysis of party-financing data for 2016–2024. The article indicates both substantial progress and persisting problems and concludes that the consolidation of the gains of last decade depends on effective enforcement, improved verification systems and continued efforts to ensure that public financing strengthens the connection between parties and citizens.*

Keywords*: corruption; political finance; political parties; clientelism; state capture; European integration; Republic of Moldova.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Corruption represents one of the major challenges to democratic consolidation and effective governance in post-communist countries. Although corruption may take different forms and affect different areas of public life, its political dimension is particularly significant because it can undermine the autonomy of public institutions, distort political competition and weaken citizens' trust in democratic institutions. Political parties occupy a central position in this process. As the main organizations linking citizens to the state and competing for political power, they require financial resources to organize their activities, participate in elections, communicate with voters and maintain their organizational structures. At the same time, the sources and regulation of these resources can create opportunities for clientelism, political influence and the capture of public institutions.

The relationship between political parties, state resources and corruption is especially relevant in the post-communist context. The relatively weak social anchoring of many political parties, combined with their dependence on state resources, has contributed to patterns of patronage, clientelism and state capture. In such circumstances,

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political finance is not simply a technical or administrative issue but an important component of democratic governance. Lack of transparency regarding the origin and use of party resources can facilitate the influence of wealthy private actors and oligarchic networks, while inadequate oversight can make illegal or undeclared financing difficult to detect and sanction.

The Republic of Moldova provides a particularly relevant case for examining these dynamics. Since gaining independence in 1991, the country has experienced significant political and economic transformations, but these have also been accompanied by institutional instability, poverty, non-transparent privatizations, limited administrative capacity and the persistence of networks of political and economic influence. The concentration of economic and political power in the hands of oligarchic groups contributed to the phenomenon of state capture and affected citizens' confidence in public institutions. For many years, the financing of political parties and electoral campaigns in Moldova was characterized by limited transparency and weak control mechanisms. The absence of substantial public funding and effective independent oversight increased the dependence of political actors on private financial resources and created conditions for clientelism and oligarchic influence. More recently, the regulatory and institutional framework has undergone significant changes. Public financing has become increasingly important, restrictions on private donations have been strengthened, financial reporting requirements have been developed, and the powers of the Central Electoral Commission and other control institutions have been enhanced.

The article examines the taken steps to combat corruption and increase the transparency of political party financing in the context of the country's aspiration to become a member of the EU. It addresses two questions: (1) To what extent have recent reforms improved the transparency and control of political party financing in the Republic of Moldova? and (2) What challenges remain in preventing illegal financing, clientelism and excessive dependence on state resources?

The article argues that Moldova has made significant progress in strengthening the regulation and transparency of political finance, particularly through the expansion of public financing and the strengthening of institutional oversight. Nevertheless, persistent problems of non-reporting, illegal financing and unreported expenditure demonstrate that formal rules do not automatically guarantee effective compliance. Moreover, growing dependence on state subsidies raises additional concerns regarding party autonomy, competition and the possible cartelization of the party system.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Political parties, state resources and post-communist politics

A substantial body of literature on the evolution of political parties in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe emphasize the fragile social roots of post-communist parties, taking into account a number of indicators, such as high levels of electoral volatility, low levels of party identification/affiliation or declining voter turnout (Mair, 1997; Rose and Mishler, 1998; De Waele, 2002; Van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014). While parties' relationships with citizens have often remained weak and unstable, their relationship with the state has developed in a markedly different direction. Many researchers show that, from the very beginning of the democratization process, political parties have "captured" the state (Grzymała-Busse, 2007; Smilov & Toplak, 2007; Roper & Istkens, 2008, Kopecký, 2008, Matiuța, 2021), and these close ties with the state are both a consequence and a cause of their

weak anchoring in society: "... a consequence because parties need the state for material resources in the absence of strong roots in the wider society and a cause because, once in possession of state resources, parties are significantly less obliged to engage in construction strategies based on popular mobilization and extensive organizational development" (Kopecký, 2008: 3).

Petr Kopecký analyzes three dimensions of the relationship of political parties with the state in the context of transition to democracy: 1). the extent to which parties depend on the state, expressed by public funding of parties, free access to the media, tax exemptions, as means of subsidizing or even surviving parties; 2). the extent to which parties are led/administered by the state, referring to the involvement of the state in the internal affairs of political parties by regulating their organization, activities and financing and 3). the extent to which parties colonize the state, expressed by the capture of the state apparatus through patronage, clientelism and corruption (Kopecký, 2008: 5-10). Party patronage involves the allocation of jobs and positions in the public sector, in state-owned companies, boards of directors, state agencies, even in schools, universities and research institutes. Access to state resources provides party leaders with the means to build and then maintain party organizations by distributing "selective incentives" to party activists and elites in exchange for their loyalty. Patronage thus becomes a resource for anchoring parties in the political system, compensating for poorly developed organizational networks and the lack of solid ties within society. Closely related to patronage, clientelism is an even more pervasive phenomenon, involving the selective transfer of parts of public material resources (contracts, subsidies, housing, sponsorships, etc.) to individuals or certain segments of society in order to secure electoral support. While in prosperous democracies both the scope and size of the public sector (and therefore the resources that parties could distribute to potential clients) and the number of marginalized people in society (who vote in exchange for material benefits) have decreased, in former communist states the demand for such benefits is high among the impoverished and isolated, disadvantaged rural communities.

2.2. Corruption, state capture and political finance

Both patronage and clientelism are corrupt practices, they are related to corruption, although they do not fully cover the concept. Corruption is most often defined as "the exploitation of public office for personal gain", of obtaining a personal benefit, directly or indirectly, for oneself or for someone else (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). Transparency International[1], an international non-governmental organization aiming to prevent and combat corruption in the world, classifies corruption according to the amounts of money lost and the sector in which it occurs: *grand corruption* - understood as the abuse of power at a high level, which helps a few to the detriment of others, causes serious damage to individuals and society and, moreover, often remains unpunished; *petty corruption* - the daily abuse of entrusted power by public officials in their interactions with ordinary citizens trying to access basic services in places such as hospitals, schools, police departments or other agencies; and *political corruption* - referring to the manipulation of policies, institutions and procedures/rules in the allocation of resources by political decision-makers who abuse their position to support their power, status, wealth.

[1] https://www.transparency.org/glossary/term/corruption (acessed on January 6th, 2026)

Political parties and politicians occupy the first two positions in a ranking of the perception of corruption by European Union citizens, according to a recent Eurobarometer[2]. When asked how widespread bribery and abuse of power for personal gain are in a range of public and private institutions and services, 51% of Europeans consider political parties as the most corrupt organizations, while 46% consider corruption as very widespread among politicians at national, regional and local level. There are significant variations between EU Member States, but overall, the vast majority of Europeans consider corruption as widespread in their country.

As for the Republic of Moldova, the country's experience illustrates the interaction between corruption, oligarchic networks and state capture (Volintiru, 2014; Ciobanu, 2020; Marandici, 2021). Weak institutional capacity, the survival of former elites and the concentration of economic resources facilitated the development of networks capable of influencing political parties and state institutions. Political finance is therefore relevant not only because of the legality of individual donations or expenditures, but also because it can shape the broader balance between private interests, political organizations and public institutions.

3. METHODOLOGY

The article employs a qualitative case-study approach focused on the Republic of Moldova, with the aim to evaluate the development of the political-finance framework, its implementation and the main challenges that remain. The research is based on documentary and secondary-source analysis. The first category consists of legislation regulating political parties and elections, particularly the Law on Political Parties and the Electoral Code. The analysis focuses on sources of party income, limits on donations, prohibited donors, financial reporting requirements, public subsidies, permitted expenditure and sanctions for violations. The second category consists of official institutional information, including reports of the Central Electoral Commission and the European Commission's assessment of Moldova. These sources are used to examine institutional responsibilities, enforcement activity and progress in the fight against corruption. The analysis is complemented by reports from civil-society organizations, especially Promo-LEX, whose monitoring provides evidence concerning actual compliance with party-finance rules.

The study also uses descriptive analysis of available party-financing data for 2016–2024. Changes in the relative shares of public subsidies, donations and membership fees are examined to identify major trends in the structure of party income. Compliance indicators include late or incomplete reporting, donations exceeding legal ceilings, unreported expenditure and institutional sanctions.

The analysis triangulates three types of evidence—legal provisions, official institutional information and independent monitoring—in order to distinguish between formal regulatory change and practical implementation. A limitation is that reported party finances and monitored irregularities cannot capture every form of hidden or illegal financing. This limitation is itself relevant to the research problem because incomplete reporting and unreported expenditure constitute important dimensions of the transparency deficit under examination.

[2] Special Eurobarometer 561 *Citizens' Attitudes towards Corruption in the EU in 2025*, available at: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3361 (acessed on January 6th, 2026)

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1. The evolution of corruption and state capture in Moldova

Corruption remains a big issue in the Republic of Moldova, despite the authorities' efforts to combat it. After gaining its independence in 1991, the economic chaos created by the transition from a centrally planned to a market economy, non-transparent privatizations, endemic poverty, unstable legislation, and the limited administrative capacity of state institutions created fertile ground for corruption at all levels of public life (OSCE, 2005). As in other former communist countries, part of the communist nomenclature penetrated the state structures with the transition to democracy. Studies indicate a high survival rate of old elites in positions of power and the preservation of corrupt practices in the first two post-communist decades: "The average continuity of elites in the Moldovan Parliament, for the period 1990-2005, is 68.4% for former members of the Communist Party and 34.4% for members of the former nomenklatura" (Volintiru, 2014: 218).

The winners of the economic transition, the so-called oligarchs, came to control state institutions through their networks. "Theft of the Billion", the banking scandal of 2014, when over a billion US dollars, equivalent to 12% of the country's GDP, were stolen from Banca de Economii (Savings Bank), Banca Socială (Social Bank) and Unibank, is illustrative for the exploitation of the state by oligarchs. The sophisticated fraud, which involved state and private banks, hundreds of offshore companies, and dozens of politicians and bureaucrats, further undermined citizens' trust in institutions (Marandici, 2021). Moldova has come to be considered a "state captured by oligarchic interests, with a concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a small group of people who exercise influence over the parliament, government, political parties, state administration, police, judiciary, and media".[3]

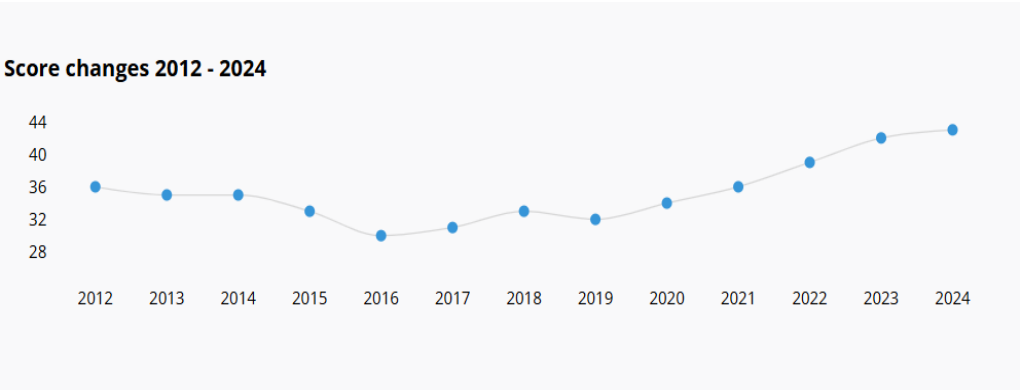
While in the case of former communist countries that joined the European Union, the fight against corruption was strictly monitored both in the pre-accession and post-accession phases, in the case of the Republic of Moldova there were no direct constraints and pressures like those applied by the EU to candidate countries or to the Member States (through the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, for example). With the submission of the application for membership of the European Union (in March 2022) and the opening of accession negotiations (in June 2024), the Republic of Moldova has committed to strengthening the mechanisms for preventing and combating corruption and aligning with European standards. A Report[4] published by the European Commission in 2025 notes the progress made in the fight against corruption and the strengthening of the competences of key institutions in preventing, investigating and sanctioning corruption (the National Integrity Authority, the National Anticorruption Center, and the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office). However, significant challenges remain in terms of prosecuting high-level corruption cases, asset recovery or the independence of the judiciary.

3 European Parliament, 2018, Resolution on the Implementation of the EU Association Agreement with Moldova, disponibil la: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0458_EN.html (Accessed on January 31, 2026).

4 European Commission, Republic of Moldova 2025 Report, available at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/23fa6af0-89b3-4532-a3d9-d1638727d14c_en?filename=moldova-report-2025.pdf (Accessed on January 31, 2026).

At the level of public perception, corruption remains an important issue, affecting the daily lives of citizens, as shown by opinion polls.[5] The annual indicator developed by Transparency International to measure the perception of corruption in the public sector (on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 = very high corruption and 100 = very low corruption) nevertheless indicates a slow improvement in the perception of corruption in recent years and an improvement compared to previous years (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Evolution of the perception of corruption in the Republic of Moldova (2012-2024)



Source: Transparency International: https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/moldova

An important dimension of corruption, which has fueled citizens' distrust in state institutions, political parties and politicians, is the non-transparent financing of political parties and electoral campaigns. Political parties in the Republic of Moldova have long managed to keep their revenues away from public scrutiny through permissive and unclear rules. Unlike other post-communist regimes, here political parties gained access to direct public funding only 25 years after the country gained independence, suggesting that significant political actors faced deeper disagreements over the size, access, and rules for distributing public party funding than elsewhere (Lipcean & Prohnitchi, 2024: 16). In the absence of public funding that would provide parties with minimal resources to participate in elections and of independent bodies to control funding and sanction irregularities, political parties worked more as electoral vehicles for oligarchs, dependent on their money, which fueled clientelism and state capture. Without limiting receipts above a certain threshold, strict control over the origin of funds and their spending, private funding can become a source of clientelism, and the Republic of Moldova is an illustrative example in this regard.

However, in recent years things have improved, both in terms of rules and actual practices. Public financing of political parties has gained ground, gradually becoming the main source of income for political parties, reducing their dependence on private donors. Private financing has been subject to stricter rules and control bodies have gained increased powers. The following section presents the regulations currently in force regarding the financing of political parties and the concrete situation of their financing

[5] iData Barometer, August 2025, available at: https://ipn.md/sondaj-coruptia-saracia-si-salariile-mici-principalele-probleme-ale-moldovenilor/ (Accessed on January 31, 2026).

based on the reports of the Central Electoral Commission[6] and the monitoring of some non-governmental organizations.

4.2. Current regulations on the financing of political parties in the Republic of Moldova

The Law on Political Parties[7], adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova in December 2007 and amended several times, regulates the establishment, activity and financing of political parties. Parties are considered essential organizations of the rule of law, which promote democratic values and political pluralism (art. 1), are organized on the administrative-territorial criterion (art. 2), respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity, democratic values and the rule of law of the Republic of Moldova (art. 3) and have at least 1000 founding members (art. 8, paragraph d; requirement reduced from 4000 founding members, in the initial version of the law).

A section of the law (Chapter VI) contains provisions related to the financing of political parties. Thus, the sources of income of parties are (art. 25, paragraph. 1): membership fees, donations from individuals or legal entities, allocations from the state budget and income from their own activities (such as editorial or the management of goods and assets owned by the party). Therefore, the income of political parties is both private and public (subsidies from the state budget); both types of financing cannot have the purpose of limiting their independence (art. 25, paragraph. 6). The amount and method of payment of membership fees (by bank transfer or in cash) are established by each party and specified in the party statute, while donations made to a party can be both in money and in the form of free goods or services. The law stipulates that a party's annual income from contributions and donations may not exceed the equivalent of 0.1% of the state budget income for the respective year (art. 26, paragraph. 3). Donations made in a year by an individual to one or more political parties may not exceed 6 average salaries in the economy[8], and those from a legal entity 12 average salaries (art. 25, paragraphs. 4 and 5). Donations from individuals whose income was gained outside the country, from foreign citizens and stateless persons, from public authorities and institutions or from any legal entity financed from the state budget, from legal entities that have debts to the state budget and those with foreign or mixed capital, from other states or international organizations, as well as from non-commercial, trade union, charitable or religious organizations are prohibited (art. 26, paragraph 6). Each political party is required to open a separate bank account to record contributions and donations and to communicate accounting data to the Central Electoral Commission, responsible for supervising and controlling the financing of political parties.

Public financing of political parties consists of annual subsidies from the state budget, transferred through the Central Electoral Commission. Their amount, approved

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[6] Available at: https://a.cec.md/ro/rapoartele-privind-gestionarea-financiara-ale-partidelor-politice-15316.html (Accessed on February 5, 2026)

[7] *Law No. 294 of 21-12-2007 on political parties*, published on 29-02-2008 in the Official Gazette No. 42-44, art. 119, with subsequent amendments and additions, available at: https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=148792&lang=ro# (accessed on February 3rd, 2026)

[8] According to the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, in the third quarter of 2025 the average gross salary in the economy was 15,487 Moldovan lei, the equivalent of approx. 780 euros. See: https://statistica.gov.md/ro/statistic_indicator_details/2 (accessed on February 3rd, 2026).

in the annual budget law, represents 0.1% of the state budget revenues for the respective year (in the previous version of the law the ceiling had been set at 0.2% of the state budget revenues) and is distributed as follows: 30% - to political parties proportionally to their performances in the parliamentary elections; 30% - to political parties proportionally to their performances in the local elections; 15% - to political parties proportionally to their performances in the presidential elections; 7.5% - to political parties proportionally to the women actually elected in the parliamentary elections; 7.5% - to political parties proportionally to the women actually elected in the local elections; 5% - to political parties proportionally to the young people actually elected in the parliamentary elections; 5% - to political parties in proportion to the youth actually elected in the local elections (art. 27, paragraph 1). Financial incentives granted to parties that promote women and youth in eligible positions have been introduced into the legislation in recent years in order to support the promotion of women and youth in politics.

The law specifically stipulates the destination of money from the state budget, from the maintenance of offices and personnel expenses or for political consultancy, to trips abroad and expenses for the press and promotional materials or the organization of political activities (art. 28). The use of the amounts received from the state budget will be reflected separately in the accounting records of political parties, and the Court of Auditors controls the legality of the use of these funds. At the same time, the Central Electoral Commission, whose attributions, stipulated in the Electoral Code, have been clarified and increased over time, is the body authorized to supervise and control the financing of political parties. Failure to comply with the provisions of the law (failure to submit financial reports within the deadlines provided for by law or incomplete submission, use of money for purposes other than those specified in the law, exceeding the ceilings established for contributions and donations, etc.) leads to the loss of the right to subsidies from the state budget (art. 31).

Parties also benefit from mechanisms for indirect financing of electoral campaigns, established by the Electoral Code[9] (Chapter V), consisting of interest-free loans and free broadcast time. Public media grant political parties, electoral alliances and independent candidates competing in elections free broadcast, 5 minutes per day on television and 10 minutes on radio, in the first 15 days from the start of the electoral campaign and one minute per day for electoral advertising (Electoral Code, art. 90). In addition, public radio and televisions organize electoral debates, thus increasing free broadcast and giving candidates the opportunity to become better known.

4.3. Between formal rules and actual compliance

A real problem remains the degree of compliance of political parties with legal norms. A monitoring carried out by the Promo-LEX Association[10], specialized in the analysis of party financing and electoral processes, shows that between June 2024 and May 2025, the Central Electoral Commission ordered the initiation of legal actions against 17 political parties that did not submit financial reports within the deadline and/or in the format required by law. Also, 12 legal actions were initiated against donors who made donations exceeding the ceilings and/or legal norms. The Court of Accounts was

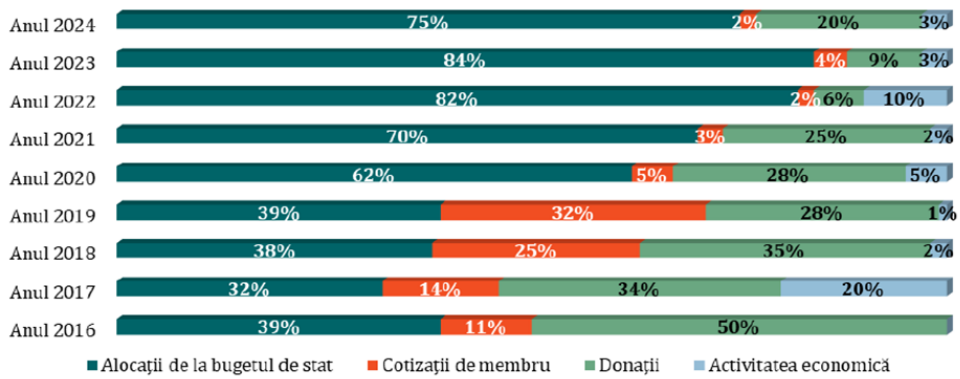
[9] Avaliable at: https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=148963&lang=ro# (accessed on February 3rd, 2026).

[10] Available at: https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/raport-finantare-partide-politice-2024-1.pdf.

notified to verify the way in which subsidies from the state budget were spent by 4 political parties and the Ministry of Justice was notified and has limited the activity of 6 political parties for violating the rules on financing. Also, during the monitored period (June 2024 - May 2025) the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office opened 16 criminal cases for illegal financing of political parties. All these data demonstrate that cases of evasion of the law are still numerous and that fiscal discipline is hard to learn.

If we turn the attention to the sources of financing of political parties in the Republic of Moldova, we find that subsidies from the state budget have constantly increased; from 39% of their total income in 2016 to 84% in 2023 and 75% in 2024 (see Figure 2). At the same time, the share of private financing in party budgets has decreased, both in donations (from 50% in 2016 to 20% in 2024) and in membership fees (from 11% in 2016 to only 2% in 2024). Since state budget allocations are distributed, according to the law, proportionally to electoral performance, large parties are the main beneficiaries. In 2024, 29 political parties received public subsidies (totaling 51,832,324 lei), but 74% of the total was transferred to 3 parties: the Party of Action and Solidarity - PAS (50% of total state subsidies), the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova - PSRM (17%) and the Our Party - PN (7%).[11] The remaining 26% was transferred to the other 26 parties, for 9 of them the budget allocations represented the only source of income, and for another 9 parties they represented over 80% of the total reported income. Therefore, over half of the political parties in the Republic of Moldova that reported income in 2024 are overwhelmingly dependent (over 80%) on state subsidies.

Figure 2. Income sources of political parties (2016-2024)



Source: Promo-LEX Report, p .25

The Promo-LEX report also reveals, based on data collected by monitors, a large volume of unreported expenses by political parties (over 20 million lei in 2024, representing almost a third of the total reported expenses), mostly for advertising on social networks (37%), organizing political events (21%) and offices maintenance and telecommunications (12%).[12] The most unreported expenses (81% of the total) were estimated for BP Victory, a pro-Russian political alliance, without legal status because the Central Electoral Commission rejected its registration, established in Moscow by

[11] Data source: Promo-LEX Report, pp. 26-27
[12] *Ibidem*, pp. 53-54.

fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, and consisting of 4 political parties registered in the Republic of Moldova (Renaissance Party- PR, Chance Party, Alternative and Salvation Force of Moldova -FASM and Victory Party -PPV). Despite the multiple and expensive activities carried out during 2024, the member parties of BP Victory declared no financial income and expenses, which indicates defiance of the rules and the persistence of illegal sources of financing.

5. CONCLUSIONS

It can be seen from this short description of the legal framework for political party financing that the Republic of Moldova has made significant progress in aligning its legislation on the matter with international practices. The autonomy of the Central Electoral Commission has increased as an institution with general competence in electoral matters and with responsibilities clarified and enhanced over time through successive normative acts. The transparency of the accounting activities of parties has increased by imposing the conduct of financial operations through bank accounts. Donations have been drastically capped (if we consider that in the initial version of the law, donations made in a year by an individual could reach up to 200 average salaries in the economy, and those from a legal entity up to 400 salaries), in order to reduce the dependence of parties on large private donors. Sanctions for illegal financing of parties have been tightened, going as far as imprisonment and confiscation of money from illegal financing. A new methodology for the financial audit of political parties has been developed, with the support of the Council of Europe, which establishes clear criteria for controlling financial reports, in line with international standards[13]. All these are obvious gains.

As part of the strategy to prevent and combat corruption, to reduce the dependence of political parties on oligarchs, interest groups, illegal sources of financing (domestic or foreign), the Republic of Moldova has allocated increasingly generous public subsidies to political parties in the last ten years. Budgetary allocations take into account the electoral performance of parties and inclusive criteria for the representation of women and youth. Their impact has generally been positive, allowing large parties to develop and small ones to subsist. However, the gradual increase in the dependence of parties on subsidies from the state budget entails the risk of their transformation into bureaucratic structures less connected to the electoral base and less concerned with attracting new paying members. Furthermore, the fact that the vast majority of the money goes to the major parties represented in Parliament and only a small part to the non-parliamentary ones remind us the theory of party system cartelization, according to which parties, being themselves responsible for the development, voting and implementation of the legislation in question and the amount of the allocated money, will impose rules that benefit them, using state resources to ensure their survival and to obtain a privileged position in relation to the newly created parties. In this way, the state becomes a structure supporting the parties in the legislative body and excluding the others (Katz & Mair, 1995). Therefore, correlating budget allocations with the capacity of political parties to

[13] See: https://www.coe.int/ro/web/chisinau/-/moldovan-s-electoral-administration-strengthened-with-new-political-parties-auditing-methodology (accessed on February 3rd, 2026).

attract money from dues and donations could lead to a more efficient use of public money, to strengthening the parties' ties with citizens and their fundraising capacity.

Other challenges are to fix deficiencies of reporting and verification information systems, increasing discipline in recording and reporting expenses, and limiting illegal financing practices (donations above the limits established by law, using the cover entities for financing from abroad, unreported expenses, advertising on social networks paid by third parties, corrupting voters by offering money or social assistance, etc.). Only through a collective effort of state institutions, political parties, and citizens the notable progress of recent years can be consolidated.

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ETHNIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT IN INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION. THE CASE OF INTERCOMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS IN ROMANIA

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Abstract. *Ethnic and political contexts may shape intermunicipal cooperation, especially where ethnic groups extend across administrative boundaries. Existing research suggests that economic development and improved public services are often associated with better minority integration by providing better living conditions and opportunities for social participation. In Romania, Intercommunity Development Associations are a form of intermunicipal cooperation through which local and county administrative units collaborate to provide public services and pursue shared local, regional or zonal development goals. This paper examines whether ethnic and political contexts have an influence on the formation and continuity of these associations, without presuming their effects on integration outcomes.*

Keywords*: Intermunicipal cooperation, Intercommunity Development Associations, Ethnic cooperation context, Political cooperation context, Romania.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intermunicipal cooperation in Romania started before there was a law dedicated to the cooperation of territorial administrative units (TAU). There are a few examples such as the Iași and Oradea metropolitan areas, that were initially created through the foundations and associations law from 2000 (OG 26 30/01/2000 - *Portal Legislativ*, n.d.), showing that some of the municipalities from Romania understood the potential of collaboration between administrative units early on. Yet, intermunicipal cooperation through intercommunity development associations is not always successful (Chiriac, 2026, p. 279). This leads to questions regarding the incentives that prompts territorial administrative units to seek to partner up with neighbouring units and what drives these cooperations move forward. Without a doubt, there may be many reasons, which could span political, economic, social or administrative dimensions. In the Bihor County, for example, higher density of IDA units seem to be found around main administrative units, as well as higher ethnic minority distributions (Chiriac & Țoca, 2024, p. 176). This study focuses on political and ethnic contexts, to understand whether they are reflected in TAU participation in intermunicipal cooperation through IDA, without exploring causality claims.

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Even though municipalities might be associated with an urban context, and, in Romania, a Municipality is a higher order urban locality, in this paper, the term inter-municipal cooperation refers to cooperation between any type of local administrative bodies, whether rural or urban. The Romanian legislation defines cooperation between two or more public territorial administrative bodies as Intercommunity Development Associations, as a solution for a highly fragmented local administrative structure, a common issue in many European countries (Bakoš et al., 2021, p. 1; R. Hulst et al., 2009, p. 275; Săgeată, 2012, pp. 96–98), with limited financial power.

Previous research shows that such cooperation is quite widespread in Romania, even though it is not always successful (Chiriac, 2026, pp. 280–283). This may happen for several reason, and it may depend on several contextual aspects, nevertheless, this study investigates whether the ethnic and political characteristics of the members of such associations might have an influence in their outcomes.

Thus, the main objective of this research is to understand whether and how, political and ethnic contexts influence the participation of local Territorial Administrative Units (TAUs) in Intercommunity Development Associations (ISAs) in Romania. Methodologically, this a quantitative secondary-data analysis of how political, ethnic, and demographic characteristics relate to TAU participation in Intercommunity Development Associations. Following the Introduction, in the Literature review section, the paper examines previous work on the topic of inter-municipal cooperation, looking for papers that discuss the context in which local administrative units operate, in various national settings. Additionally, the political context in Romania, at the national and local level, is examined, also considering the implications of ethnic minority specificities in electoral outcomes. Then, the Research process is presented, focusing on the preparation of the datasets, the statistical models used, and the limitations of the study, which focuses on patterns of association rather than causal effects. The section Local level political and ethnic context in Romania, relies on a few metrics to present the political and ethnic setting in Romania, in the relevant timeframe. The next section briefly presents Inter-municipal cooperation through intercommunity development associations in Romania. This is followed by the Data analysis and discussion next section, and the Conclusions section summarizes the results of the entire research process, which seem to suggest that the influence of the elected local councils does not have a significant influence on inter-municipal cooperation, and its outcomes, and ethnic context association is limited.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research in this study revolves around two topics: inter-municipal cooperation, and political context and ethnic context in Romania, approximately between 2008 and 2021. The selected timeframe is selected as such, so that it covers the timeframe of the analyzed datasets (see the *Research process* section for details). The current section investigates existing scholarly papers and relevant documents, to provide a picture of the existing research on these topics, to present the general political and ethnic context in Romania, to understand the various perspectives of inter-municipal cooperation in Romania or elsewhere, and the gap in the literature.

2.1. Inter-municipal cooperation context.

Inter-municipal cooperation in Romania fits a growing European trend, as local administrations try to find solutions to political and administrative problems (Persson, 2026, p. 344; Swianiewicz & Teles, 2018, p. 336). The incentives for cooperation may

be different for the involved actors, as municipality size may be a factor in the dynamics and outcomes of said cooperations, sometimes leading to more conflictual or competitive interactions (Persson, 2026, pp. 357–359).

There are several aspects that are relevant for inter-municipal cooperation, such as the types of involved actors, scope and the association types, which the Romanian legislation defines with much specificity (Chiriac & Țoca, 2024, pp. 172–173). Nevertheless, they fit all of the association types that Hulst and Montfort identify in inter-municipal cooperation in different national settings in western Europe: quasi-regional governments, planning forums, service delivery organizations and service delivery agreements (J. R. (Rudie) Hulst & Van Montfort, 2012, p. 7). The form of association depends also on the legislative tools that are at the disposal of local administrations, along with local traditions (Casula, 2020, p. 22).

Romanian *Intercommunity Development Associations* may cover either of the four categories mentioned above. However, those set up to develop zonal or regional projects, could function either as active, highly regulated, bodies that seek a common and coherent joint development, or as planning forums, that are not as constrained by formally defined regulations within these associations, or they may, simply, seek an association that facilitates access to development funds, even if there are no common plans for development.

The purpose for which inter-municipal cooperation can be set-up, in Romania, according to existing and previous legislation (Guvernul României, 2019; Parlamentul României, 2007), are limited to public services and the implementation of zonal or regional projects, or both. Thus, they define the scope of cooperation and cover different needs: satisfy the needs of their communities, and, respectively, help the communities grow.

Perceived benefits of IMC may range from increased administrative capacity, reduced costs, increased efficiency and wider range of public services, development potential and grant accessibility (Bakoš et al., 2021, p. 7). Nevertheless, there is empirical evidence that suggests that benefits may be greater for small municipalities, and that the advantages of cooperation may be greater for certain services and limited for others (Bel & Sebő, 2021, p. 21), while size asymmetry in participating members, in service delivery agreements, could create a setting for a trade-off between decision making power and service quality (Arntsen et al., 2021, p. 6). In fact, homogeneity, the number of members, and prior cooperation history, could all be an important factor in how committed local administrations are in inter-municipal cooperation associations (Camões et al., 2021, p. 17).

Stănuș (2018, p. 301) finds that, as IDAs in Romania are bottom-up voluntary associations, their likelihood to lead towards amalgamation is low, due to dependences on local political actors, though, in the municipality of Oradea, an actual merger attempt failed following a local referendum (Radio România Actualități, 2015).

Associations that provide the opportunity for frequent face-to-face interaction may also increase cooperation (LeRoux et al., 2010, p. 245), which could also be beneficial for IDAs that truly seek a common development strategy.

Though there is interest in the dedicated specialty literature regarding inter-municipal cooperation, the political context is analysed marginally, while the ethnic context does not seem to be present, at all. This research aims to fill that void.

2.2. Romania's political environment and ethnic context

The political environment in Romania is a complicated one. At the national level, Even though two parties were always present, in one form or another, on the main scene (Social Democrat Party/Partidul Social Democrat – PSD and National Liberal Party/Partidul Național Liberal - PNL), to larger or lesser extent, new parties appeared and disappeared, sometimes as spin-offs of the two dominant parties, that usually end up merging back or disappearing. Additionally, many alliances were formed, usually for short periods of time, many times splitting of long before the next round of elections. These alliances were not always the result of elections and were, instead, the result of fragmentation (Martin-Russu, 2022a). These frequent changes in the Romanian party system lead many times to cases of cohabitation (Manolache, 2013, pp. 433–435).

In fact, the relation of the two main parties was always complicated, whether they were together in the government, or in opposition of each other (Stan & Zaharia, 2021). Populist and nationalist parties have also appeared and disappeared on the Romanian political scene, that in the Central and Eastern European scene had positive turn-out effects on the elections, whether they aligned to left- or right-wing views (Leininger & Meijers, 2021, pp. 679–680). Even without populist parties, the actions of the main parties in Romanian politics have raised concerns regarding democratic backsliding (Müller, 2013, p. 139) and various policy domains evolve in diverging ways (Martin-Russu, 2022b, pp. 80–81).

These alliances have sometimes transferred to the local level as well, but that is not always the case, as agreement could not always be met at all levels of the political environment (National Democratic Institute, 2004), and appetite for such alliances decreased in time ('Regional Elections in Romania, 9 June 2024', n.d.). Another important aspect, though not investigated in this study, is that Romania, generally, manifests a high mayoral re-election rate, which may show some stability regarding the direction in which local territorial administrative units evolve (Iațu et al., 2024, pp. 14–15). This may be true even in the case of "indicted mayors that stand for re-election [which] are equally likely to hold their seat as unindicted mayors" (Bågenholm & Charron, 2020, p. 2; Charron & Bågenholm, 2025, p. 15).

Another important characteristic of Romanian politics is that it has always been guided more by "informal rules and practices" and lagged behind other Eastern European countries in implementing a healthy democratic system (Volintiru & Zgut-Przybylska, 2024, p. 75). This raises the question of whether the party structure in local, or national, governance actually matters, even though there is "widespread belief that the central governments and county councils disburse development funding based on politico–electoral motivations" (Stănuș, 2011, p. 203). The ethnic context influences the electoral offer proposed not only by minority parties, but also by major parties (Buta & Gherghina, 2023, pp. 2166–2167).

The Hungarian minority in Romania, which is the most important one demographically, is also represented within the Romanian party system, and has managed to mobilize its electorate when it mattered (Mutnansky, 2025, p. 159). Other minorities are also represented in local councils, through regional parties, especially in local administrations in which they are demographically relevant. Nevertheless, for example, Roma political parties face difficulties in capitalizing the votes of their own electorate (Buta & Farcas, 2025, pp. 47–49).

The local electoral landscape in Romania is, thus, characterized by fragmentation, instability, sometimes with a lack of alignment with the national party

system context, and varying ethnic influences, on which the political representatives do not always capitalize.

Considering the findings from the specialty literature on the political system and the political-ethnic context in Romania on the one hand, and inter-municipal cooperation on the other, there is a lack of research efforts directed towards the understanding of whether the political and ethnic make-up, at the local administrative levels, are associated with inter-municipal cooperation, which this study attempts to address.

3. RESEARCH PROCESS

As stated in the Introduction, the objective of the current research is to understand whether the ethnic and political contexts are associated with TAU participation in inter-municipal cooperation, materialized through Intercommunity Development Associations (IDA). Participation in inter-municipal cooperation is assessed through TAU membership and IDA activity.

To frame and clarify the research process two research questions are proposed:

Q1: How are the local political and ethnic contexts associated with TAU participation in IDAs?

Q2: How are the local political and ethnic contexts associated with IDA activity?

IDA activity, as previously shown, can be assessed either as administrative or operational. However, as previous research shows (Chiriac, 2026, p. 277), most IDAs are still administratively active so there is not enough variation in the data for a regression model to be informative. For this reason, only operational activity will be considered, evaluated through SEAP registered contract activity. Furthermore, most local TAUs are members in at least one public service IDA. For this reason, analysing the association of the political or ethnic context with TAU participation in IDAs, or with the operational activity of IDAs, does not make sense for public service oriented IDAs and will be restricted to development oriented IDAs.

To search for answers to the research questions, five hypotheses are considered:

H1: Political context, estimated through local council concentration, is associated with TAU participation in development oriented IDAs.

H2: Ethnic context, estimated through local ethnic composition, is associated with TAU participation in development oriented IDAs.

H3: Political context is associated with operational activity of development oriented IDAs.

H4: Ethnic context is associated with operational activity of development oriented IDAs.

All the analyses performed within this paper are observational and do not establish a causal relationship between the political and ethnic contexts and inter-municipal cooperation through IDAs and the historical processes through which IDAs were created.

3.1. Data sources and pre-processing

To evaluate the hypotheses and answer the research questions, four datasets are required: TAU political context data, TAU ethnic context data, TAU characteristics and IDA related data.

IDA related data includes the year when they were established, their most recent known members, whether they are still administratively active, how active they were, as reflected by public acquisition data obtained from the Public Acquisition Electronic System (SEAP), and the purpose for which they were created. This data was obtained, updated and verified in a semi-automated manner. All the details of the data acquisition process were already described in previous research (Chiriac, 2026, p. 273). One important note is that for several IDAs, even though some are still administratively active, data regarding their purpose or membership could be not collected. Consequently, they were excluded from the analyses in which these aspects were relevant. The IDA-level analysis reflects established, observable, inter-municipal cooperation arrangements, for which TAU members and sufficiently documented organizational information could be identified. This is significant as the association of the political and ethnic contexts with TAU participation in IDAs is evaluated only for observable cooperation agreements.

The political context was evaluated relying on election data obtained from the website of the Central Electoral Office (BEC) of Romania, specifically the number of mandates obtained in the local councils of all local TAUs from Romania by each party, or independent candidate, in the 2008, 2012 and 2016 local council elections. These three elections were considered relevant, as they cover the most important moments in which IDAs were established in Romania, specifically the year 2008, 2009, 2015 and 2016 (Chiriac, 2026, p. 278). The census data was obtained in Excel format (Rezultate 2011 – Recensamantul Populatiei si Locuintelor, n.d.; Rezultate definitive, n.d.) and was easier to clean and prepare for analysis, even though it wasn't necessarily straight forward. Once more, in the same manner, Python scripts were written to extract the data, and once more, the TAUs were mapped, both automatically and manually, to the correct SIRUTA codes. For both political and ethnic data, manual mapping was necessary for names containing dashes and/or Romanian special characters.

The ethnic context was evaluated using 2011 and 2021 census data. Even though certain methodological differences were introduced in the data collection process of the 2021 census, they were both used to understand whether any significant differences are identifiable in various parts of Romania, which would enrich the understanding of the ethnic context.

Considering the amount of data that was processed and the data sources, the data extraction efforts were significant and required several iterations, with subsequent verifications and improvements, mainly in the case of election data. The 2008 (https://beclocale2008.roaep.ro/documm/Consilierii%20Locali/Partide%20Localitatii/clpartpeloc.pdf) and 2012 (https://beclocale2012.roaep.ro/Consilieri%20locali.html) election data was obtained in PDF format, while the 2016 data was obtained in Excel format (https://locale2016.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/SIAL2016_CL_vve_mandate_loc.xlsx). In all cases, the data was formatted for presentation and not appropriately structured for data analysis. Thus, Python scripts were implemented, with the help of Github Copilot (several models) and Mistral (mistral medium 3.5), to streamline as much as possible the process. All local TAUs were matched to the most recent version of the SIRUTA code at the time the article was written (Registrul Unităţilor Administrativ-Teritoriale a României | Institutul Național de Statistică, n.d.), to facilitate the data analysis process.

The Municipality of Bucharest was not included in this research mainly due to its size, make-up, and administrative level, which matches the county level. Furthermore, its IDA related activity is limited.

3.2. Measures of political and ethnic context

The political context was measured primarily through the *Herfindahl concentration index* applied to the distribution of local council mandates. Higher values indicate a greater concentration withing the local council, while lower values indicate greater fragmentation.

The ethnic context was also measured through the concentration, or fragmentation, of ethnicities at the local TAU level, using the *Herfindahl concentration index*. Additionally, group-share measures were calculated, mainly for the Hungarian population, which has significant shares in several TAUs. For these measures, non-response categories were excluded from the denominator, while "other ethnicity" category was retained.

For IDA-level analysis, TAU-level political and ethnic context measures were aggregated across the IDA members, the values representing the average political and ethnic context of the territories participating in each IDA.

3.3. Hypothesis tests and statistical models

Two primary outcomes were considered at TAU level: a binary indicator, if a TAU belonged to at least one IDA (1), and the count of IDAs in which a TAU participated (2).

At the IDA-level, administrative activity was derived from the administrative status of the IDAs, as it was obtained from the already mentioned sources, nevertheless, it was not modelled as it was nearly constant throughout the dataset. Operational activity, on the other hand, was evaluated through registration in the SEAP system combined with the number of recorded procedures in the same system. Registration without any recorded procedures added is not enough to consider an IDA operationally active.

IDA purpose was classified as development-oriented, public-service-oriented, or mixed where classification was possible. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, for all hypotheses tests, only development oriented IDAs and TAUs participating in development oriented IDAs were analysed.

H1 and H2 were tested mainly through a binomial logistic model, with the binary participation indicator as the dependent variable, and local council political concentration, ethnic concentration, and logged population indicators as independent variables. The county and TAU type were excluded as they produced unstable uncertainty estimates. H1 was tested through political concentration while H2 through ethnic concentration. The Hungarian population share was evaluated separately as a measure of ethnic context. Operational activity intensity was not tested inferentially due to varied activity timeframe, limited number of development oriented IDAs with operational activity, and extreme variation in procurement counts. Consequently, a Poisson model was not suitable and a negative-binomial alternative did not converge and did not yield finite uncertainty estimates.

In a similar manner, H3 and H4 were also evaluated using a binomial logistic model at the IDA level, which tests whether any operational activity occurred. Tests to evaluate operational intensity were also considered, however, similarly, the Poisson

model was rejected due to extreme overdispersion, and a negative binomial model alternative optimization failed to produce finite uncertainty estimates.

The generalized linear models used to evaluate the five hypotheses were estimated using HC3 heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors, confidence intervals, and p-values, but not the fitted coefficients

The next sections present the descriptive findings and the results of the model estimates.

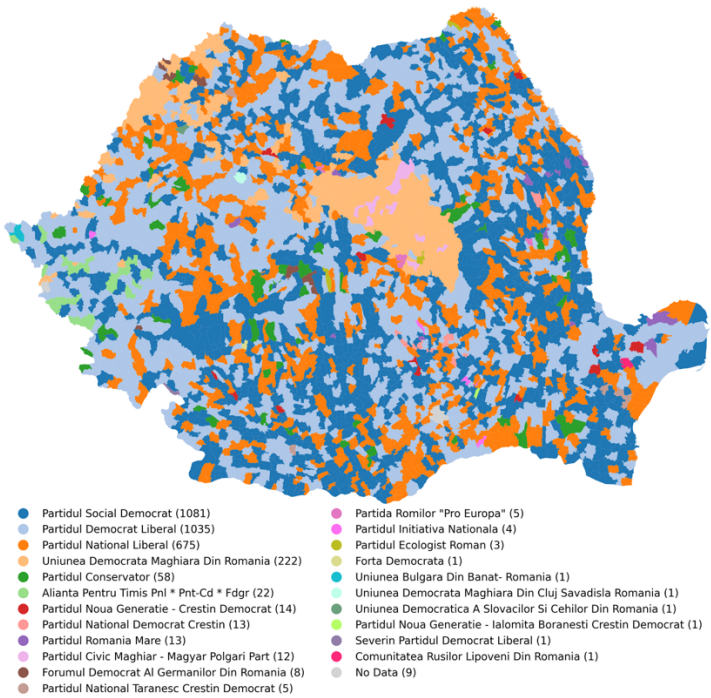
4. POLITICAL AND ETHNIC CONTEXT IN ROMANIA, AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The political context in Romania is complicated, as new parties are created all the time and alliances are made and un-made irregularly, but frequently. Thus, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to identify real changes through the years, for the Romanian electorate, at least in the matter of ideological preference. Nevertheless, certain changes in party distribution within the local councils can be obtained by identifying the dominant party, the level of fragmentation

4.1. Local council make-up in Romania, in the 2008, 2012 and 2016 elections

Romanian local councils displayed a predominantly competitive but concentrated political structure across the three electoral cycles. Local councils typically included several represented political actors, but mandates were generally distributed around one or two major parties or electoral coalitions rather than evenly across a large number of competitors. The median council included four represented parties or political categories in 2008 and three in both 2012 and 2016.

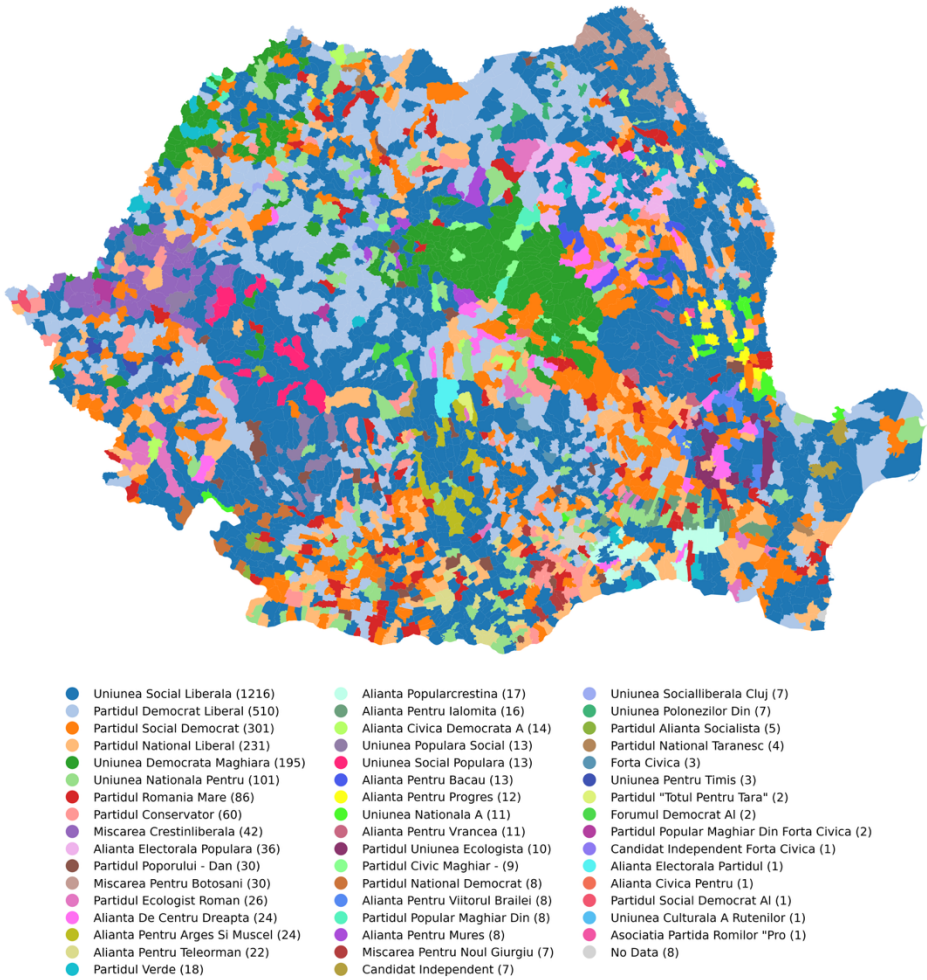
Figure 1. Dominant party per TAU local councils, after the 2008 local elections in Romania



Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

The 2008 councils showed the most pluralistic configuration of the period. The average effective number of parties was approximately 2.9, while the average dominant-party mandate share was about 51 percent. The principal political forces were the Social Democratic Party, the Democratic Liberal Party, and the National Liberal Party. Their prevalence as dominant actors indicates a broadly bipolar or tripolar local political environment in which competition was substantial, but councils were rarely fragmented into many equally powerful groups.

Figure 2. Dominant party per TAU local councils, after the 2012 local elections in Romania

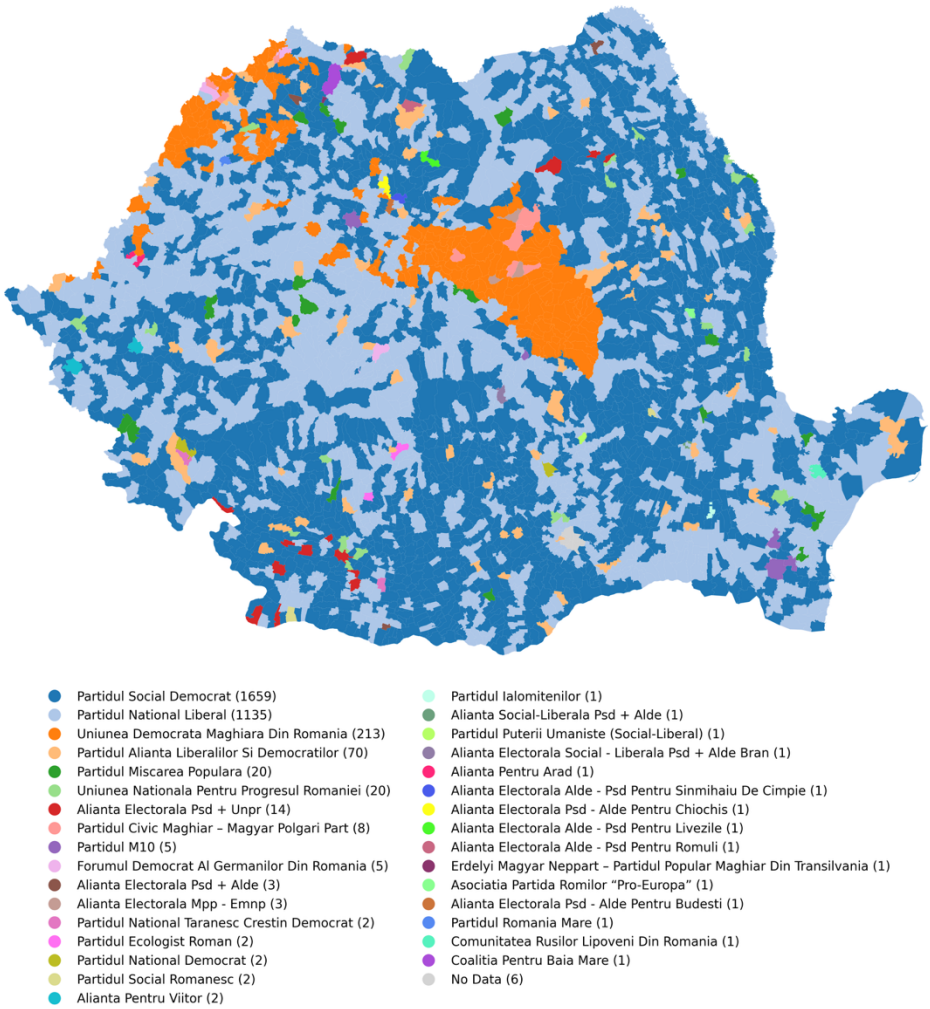


Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

The 2012 election marked a shift toward greater concentration. The average Herfindahl index increased from approximately 0.39 in 2008 to 0.44, while the effective number of parties declined from approximately 2.9 to 2.5. The average share held by the dominant political actor increased to approximately 56 percent, and the median dominant share reached approximately 55 percent. The most frequent dominant actor was the Social Liberal Union, an electoral coalition that consolidated the support of major centre-left and liberal parties in many local councils. The 2012 configuration therefore reflects

not simply stronger single-party dominance, but also the importance of electoral alliances in structuring local political control.

Figure 3. Dominant party per TAU local councils, after the 2016 local elections in Romania



Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

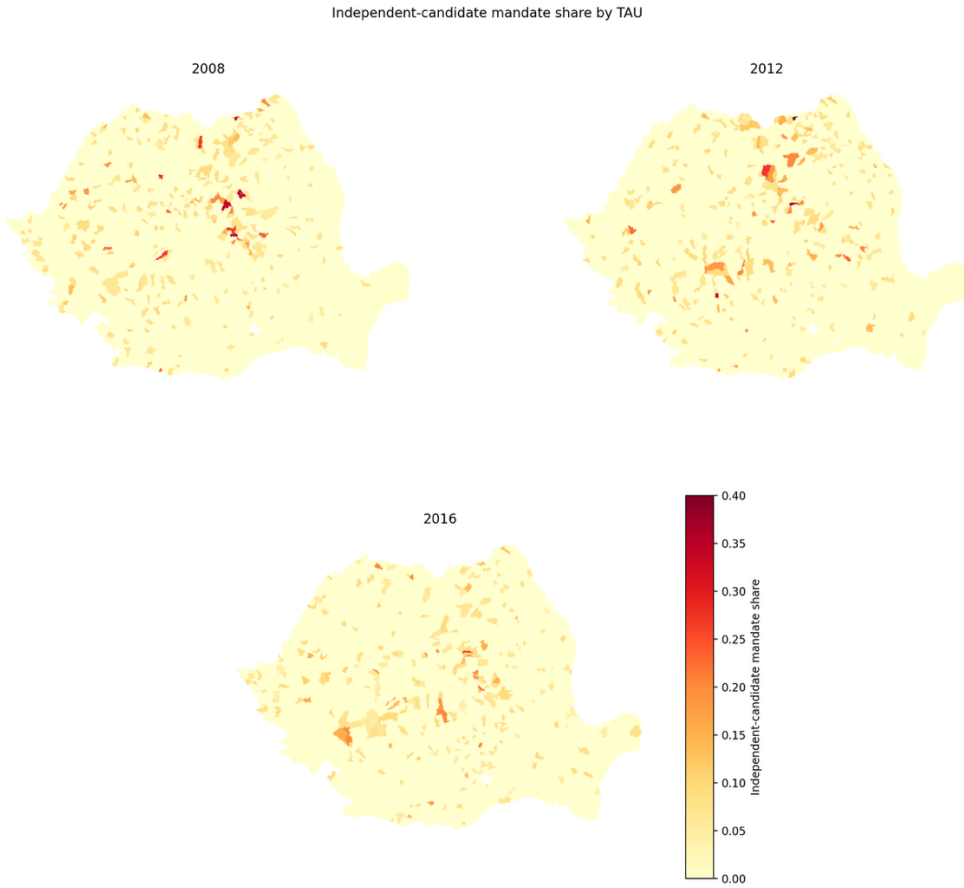
By 2016, the concentration observed in 2012 remained evident. The average Herfindahl index rose slightly further to approximately 0.45, while the effective number of parties remained close to 2.5. The average dominant-party share was approximately 57 percent, and the median was approximately 55 percent. The Social Democratic Party was the most frequent dominant actor, followed by the National Liberal Party. Compared with 2008, the 2016 councils were therefore characterized by somewhat fewer effective political competitors and a greater concentration of mandates in the leading party.

The dominant-party pattern also varied across the territorial and political structure of the country. The Social Democratic Party, Democratic Liberal Party, and National Liberal Party were the principal dominant actors in 2008, while the Social Liberal Union became especially prominent in 2012. By 2016, the main pattern was

organized around the Social Democratic Party and the National Liberal Party. The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania was also frequently dominant, reflecting the geographically concentrated political representation of Hungarian communities rather than a nationwide electoral pattern.

In the three analysed local elections, independent candidates generally represented only a small share of council mandates. Their average mandate share remained below one percent in each election year and decreased gradually (2008: 0.89%, 2012: 0.86%, 2016: 0.74%). Independent candidates therefore did not constitute a major structural alternative to party-based representation in local councils, at national level. Their importance was concentrated in particular local councils (especially in the Harghita, Covasna, Suceava, and Mureș counties) rather than reflected in the general composition of Romanian councils.

Figure 4. Independent candidate mandate share per TAU local councils, after the 2008, 2012 and 2016 local elections in Romania



Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

Overall, the three elections indicate a gradual movement from a relatively more competitive local political configuration in 2008 toward greater concentration in 2012 and 2016. This change is visible simultaneously in the increase in mandate concentration, the reduction in the effective number of parties, and the rise in the share of mandates held

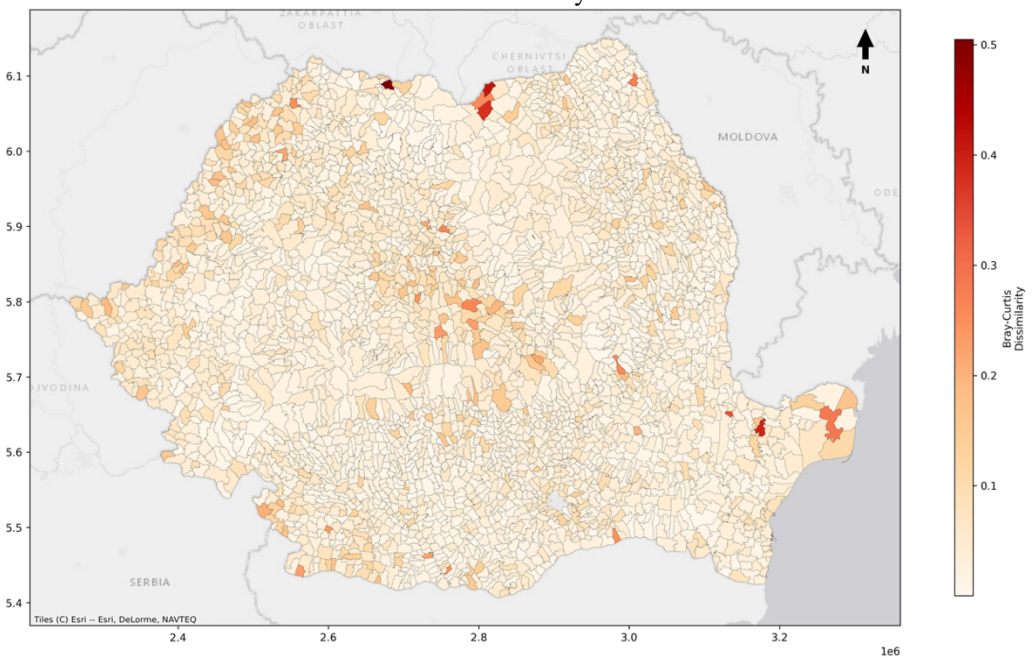
by the leading political actor. Nevertheless, the local political environment remained heterogeneous: some councils were strongly dominated by one party or coalition, while others retained meaningful multi-party competition.

This combination of concentration and territorial variation is important for understanding intercommunity cooperation. Local governments participating in the same IDA could be politically similar, particularly where one party or coalition dominated several member councils, but they could also combine councils with different dominant actors and different degrees of party fragmentation. The political context of IDA participation should therefore be understood as a structured but uneven environment in which both political alignment and political diversity were present.

4.2. Ethnic make-up of TAUs in Romania

Considering that ethnicity related data at the local level is only provided through censuses (2011 & 2021), to understand how the ethnic make-up at the local level evolved between the two censuses, ethnic volatility was calculated using the Bray-Curtis Dissimilarity index.

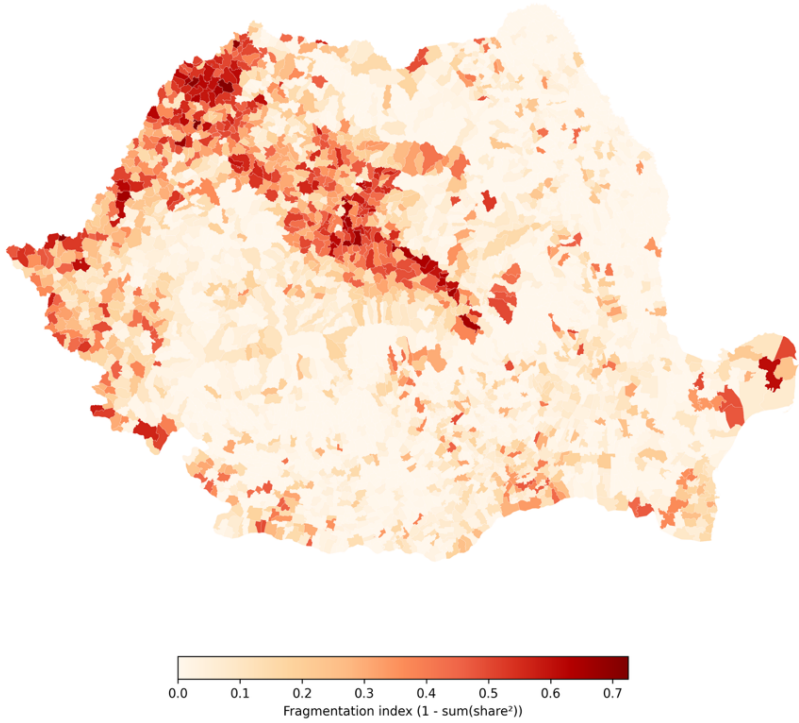
Figure 5. Ethnic volatility by TAU, between 2011 and 2021, in Romania, based on the Bray-Curtis Dissimilarity index



Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

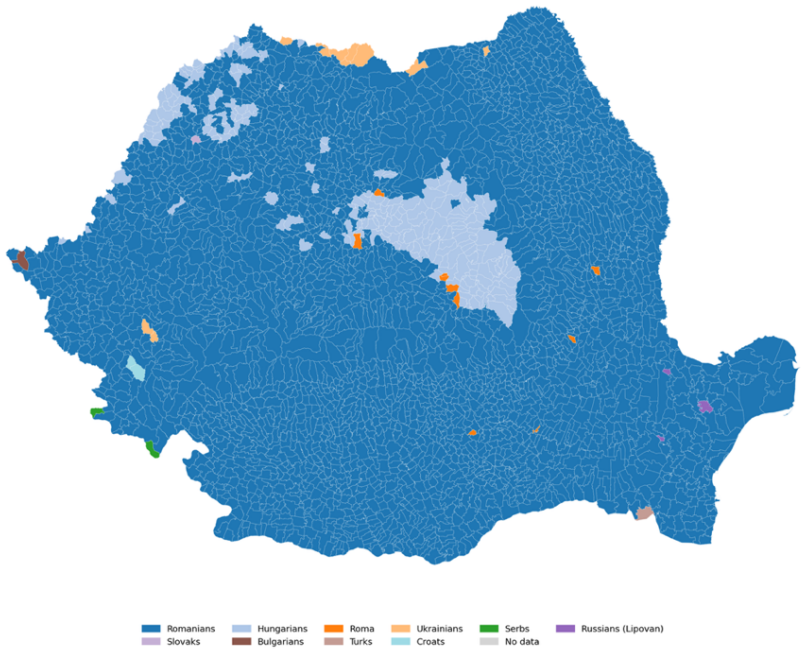
The map in Figure 4 shows that ethnic volatility is quite low in most of the country. The outcomes were split into four stability categories, which shows that most TAUs were stable (2517 TAUs, Bray-Curtis index < 0.05), a significant number of TAUs showed low volatility (614 TAUs, Bray-Curtis index between 0.05 and 0.15), a few showed moderate volatility (65 TAUs, Bray-Curtis index between 0.15 and 0.30) and 5 showed High volatility (Bray-Curtis index larger than 0.30). As mentioned previously, the Municipality of Bucharest was not included in this analysis.

Figure 6. Ethnic fragmentation by TAU, in 2011.



Source: Own computations based on electoral data (see the *Research process* section)

Figure 7. Dominant ethnic group by TAU, in 2011.



Source: Own computations based on ethnic population share data, for 2011 (see the *Research process* section)

The largest minority in Romania is the Hungarian one, which is dominant in several local administrative units, mainly in the central and the north-western part of Romania. The central and north-western part of Romania, along with several TAUs on the Western part of Romania, are also areas with moderate or high fragmentation values, nevertheless. Scattered around Romania, though not with that much frequency, the Roma, Ukrainian and other ethnicities dominate a few local TAUs.

Considering the above, from the point of view of the dominant ethnic group, the ethnic context is relevant mostly for the Hungarian ethnic group, and, generally, from the point of view of the fragmentation, to understand whether such context may inhibit, have no influence or, on the contrary, are favourable contexts for inter-municipal cooperation.

5. INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION THROUGH INTERCOMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS IN ROMANIA

The objective of the current section is to present the manner in which inter-municipal cooperation functions in Romania, as it is established by the legislation that defines IDAs. Previous research already analysed in more depth the legislative bounds of IDAs and the (Chiriac & Țoca, 2024, pp. 172–173). Consequently, this section is just a summary of that research effort.

The Local Public Administration law from 2001 (Parlamentul României, 2007), updated in 2006, applies to the analysed timeframe for Intercommunity Development Associations. Even though it was replaced by the Administrative Code (Guvernul României, 2019), the changes were not significative. A separate law was dedicated to Metropolitan Areas in 2022 , which introduced certain limitations and clarification regarding the TAUs that may create and join such an association (Parlamentul României, 2022).

Both legislative configurations include three types of IDAs: regular IDAs, Metropolitan Areas and Urban Agglomerations. Any type of local administrative unit (municipality, town or rural) may join any type of IDA, but a Metropolitan Area must be formed around a municipality, and is limited in space, while Urban Agglomerations must include at least one town. There is no limitation regarding the number of IDAs a TAU may join. IDAs may be established either to provide public services, to implement development projects of zonal, regional or local importance, or both.

Along with local TAUs, county councils can join IDAs, though they are not considered in the current analysis, as the focus falls on the local administrative level. Any type of local administrative unit may join.

According to the data collected so far, 684 IDAs were created in Romania. Aggregated by year, most were created in 2008 and 2009, followed by a much smaller secondary spike in 2015 and 2016 (Chiriac, 2026, p. 278). More than 80% still appear as administratively active, however, operationally, according to the SEAP activity, a little less than 50% are still active (Chiriac, 2026, pp. 277–278). Around 55% of IDAs were created for development projects, IDAs created to provide public services usually include most member TAUs of a county. Development IDAs that include are created around a municipality are usually the most operationally active ones.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis presented in the third section examines the association between local political and ethnic contexts and the participation in, or operational activity of, Intercommunity Development Associations. These entities represent inter-municipal

cooperation in Romania. The focus falls on development-oriented associations (1,115 of 3,221 TAUs, approximately 34.6%), since most TAUs are part of a public service oriented IDA (3,171 of 3,221 TAUs, approximately 98.5%). This shows that IDAs seem to be the solution TAUs revolve to in order to cover the basic needs of their communities. Consequently, there is no driver to look for in this case, besides the necessity to cover these basic needs. Furthermore, it makes no sense to keep public service oriented IDAs in the analysed dataset, as it will only affect the outcome without providing additional insights. And, as a final remark, development oriented IDAs seem to be the type of inter-municipal association that relies more on voluntary association, which is where political or ethnic contexts may be more relevant.

For the first two hypotheses, H1 and H2, the dependent variable is TAU participation in a development oriented IDA. The reduced binomial logistic model was estimated on 3096 TAUs with complete predictor data and determined development IDA membership. This reduced the dataset by 85 TAUs for which the orientation of the IDA they are part of could not be established. These TAUs were treated as indetermined and were not included in any of the The dataset contains 1,090 TAUs as participants in development-oriented IDAs and 2006 as non-participants.

For H1, political concentration is negatively associated with participation in development-oriented IDAs. An increase of 0.1 in the local council Herfindahl concentration index corresponds to an estimated odds ratio of 0.93. In other words, TAUs with higher political concentration have an estimated 7% lower odds of participating in development oriented IDAs, conditional on the other predictors in the model.

For H2, there was no clear association determined between ethnic concentration and participation in a development oriented IDA, considering an estimated odds ratio per 0.1 increase of 0.97 (95% CI: 0.92 - 1.01, $p = 0.159$), On the other hand, the Hungarian population share showed a positive association with TAU participation in IDA. Each 10-percentage-point increase corresponded to estimated odds 1.24 times as high (95% CI: 1.19 -1.29, $p < 0.001$), conditional on the model covariates. A potential explanation for this result is that the Hungarian share is the only one that has enough high ethnic share geographical coverage for this measure to significantly be associated with TAU participation in development oriented IDAs. Nevertheless, additional investigations would be required to consider this perspective.

For H3, a positive association was identified between average political concentration across the member TAUs of an IDA and the odds of operational activity. The result of the analysis determined that a 0.1 increase in average political concentration corresponded to an estimated odds ratio of 1.38 (95% CI: 1.04 -1.83, $p = 0.024$), conditional on the structural covariates.

For H4, average ethnic concentration amongst IDA member TAUs was not clearly associated with operational activity, as a 0.1 increase in average ethnic concentration corresponds to an estimated odds ratio of 0.93 (95%, CI: 0.76 -1.14, $p = 0.490$), as the confidence interval includes 1, which is compatible with no association. Once more, the Hungarian share, calculated as an average for the IDA member TAUs, was positively associated with operational activity, as 10% point increase in the average member-TAU Hungarian share corresponds with 1.16 odds of operational activity (95% CI: 1.03 - 1.31, $p = .013$).

Operational activity intensity, quantified as the number of SEAP registered procurements, did not produce meaningful results for H3 and H4. Consequently, no conclusions could be drawn regarding the association of political and ethnic

concentration and operational activity intensity. In the dataset, 64 development-oriented IDAs with positive procedure counts and complete covariates were identified. For this reduced dataset, the procedure-count data were highly overdispersed (the Poisson Pearson dispersion ratio was approximately 79.6). As an alternative, a negative-binomial distribution model was attempted but did not converge with finite uncertainty estimates.

To summarize, political concentration is associated with both TAU participation in an IDA and with operational activity of a development oriented IDA, even though the association is negative for the first one and positive for the second one, even though, in this second case, the result has a high level of uncertainty. The ethnic concentration index does not indicate a clear association with TAU membership in an IDA or with operational activity of an IDA, though the Hungarian share is positively associated with both outcomes. However, the estimates are imprecise and should not be treated as causal association. Additionally, these findings shouldn't be generalized to IDAs whose purpose was not established or treated as evidence about IDAs with undetermined membership.

Even though the focus falls strictly on concentration values for both local political and ethnic data, there are other aspects that were not analysed as this point, such as the relevance of the dominant political party. The intensity of operational activity might also deserve additional attention, but statistical methods might not be the best research alternative in this case. Also, caution is necessary regarding these associations, as IDA membership and purpose data is not complete for all the IDAs, and information regarding the timeline of changes to both aspects might highlight other interesting aspects regarding the implications to success in inter-municipal cooperation through Intercommunity Development Associations.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The current study examined whether political or ethnic composition of Romanian local governments is associated with participation in, and the activity of, inter-municipal cooperation. To this end, local electoral data, census-based ethnic composition data, characteristics of local territorial administrative units, and IDA membership, characteristics and activity data were analysed.

The specialty literature regarding inter-municipal cooperation reflects more on the joint provision of public services rather than on cooperation regarding common development strategies, even though this is an acknowledged potential scope for inter-municipal cooperation. Academic interest regarding political or ethnic contexts in inter-municipal cooperation seems to be absent, thus far, which is a gap that this paper tried to cover.

Participation in IDAs is widespread, though it seems to be mainly a general solution for the provision of public services to most local TAUs, and less a generalized solution for cooperation towards the common development of local, regional or zonal projects. Nevertheless, an interesting aspect to investigate further is whether the IDAs are a solution for certain public services, or for all, and how are these numbers reflected in the actual provision of these services to the communities that they provide for, especially considering that there is evidence that they seem to benefit more small communities than large ones, and efficiency may be greater for certain services than for others (Bel & Sebő, 2021, p. 21).

Even though there seems to be little interest in the specialty literature regarding the political environment at the local level, the national political context in which local administrations need to operate seems to be quite volatile in Romania. Furthermore,

informal rules and practices, at all levels, may render political context less relevant than one might expect it to be.

The local election data suggest an evolution from more towards less diversity in the dominant party in the local elections, between 2008 and 2016. Alliances were also an important part of the general political context at the local level. The importance of independent candidates was concentrated in particular local councils, though their share gradually dropped even in those instances. The data shows a move towards a less competitive local political cooperation from 2008 to 2016. The ethnic configuration shows, generally, little volatility between 2011 and 2021, in the ethnic make-up of the local TAUs. There is an geographic overlap between higher ethnic fragmentation values and the dominance of the Hungarian ethnicity, while the other ethnicities are dominant in very isolated instances. These data constitute the context within which IDA activity was analysed.

To evaluate the political context in inter-municipal cooperation, the current study focuses more on the concentration, or fragmentation, of local council mandates and doesn't investigate the implications of party ideologies, which may not be that relevant in Romania, considering the volatility of the Romanian political system, at least for the investigated timeframe. On the ethnic side of the research, the dominant ethnicity may be relevant, as the findings suggest a positive association between the Hungarian share within the population of local TAUs and TAU participation in an IDA. Additionally, a positive association, though loose, is identified regarding the Hungarian share within the total population of local TAUs and operational activity of the IDAs that they are a member of. Nevertheless, no association was identified between ethnic concentration and the two investigated outcomes.

The association of the political and ethnic contexts with operational activity intensity was not investigated either, as the available dataset would require a different approach.

Several limitations must be mentioned. First, the dataset would require further updates, to fill in the missing purpose and membership data for several IDAs. Nevertheless, in the absence of a centralized source of information, the only alternative would be to contact all TAUs that "hosted" the IDAs with missing data, which might be a failed enterprise. Additionally, these IDAs that lack information might very well be failed attempts to establish inter-municipal cooperation. From this perspective, the outcomes presented above are relevant for observable inter-municipal cooperation. Second, the analysis is observational and does not determine causality. Third, operational activity is measured through SEAP procurement data, which serves as a proxy and doesn't cover all potential IDA activities. The Hungarian-share analysis is exploratory and the relevance of the geographical distribution of this ethnicity needs to be investigated further.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a methodological contribution, as it presents an approach to examining how the political and ethnic contexts of member TAUs are associated with participation in, and operational activity of, development-oriented IDAs. The findings are mixed: some measures were associated with these outcomes while others show no clear association. Therefore, they do not establish that political or ethnic contexts drive inter-municipal cooperation, and other factors may also shape cooperation among Romanian local governments and require further investigation.

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